



“Fire from Hell,” or “You are the Salt of the Earth.” On the Interpretation of Matthew 5:13

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Abstract: This essay is an attempt to explore different contexts of the phrase “you are the salt of the earth” found in Matt 5:13, one of the most confusing expressions used in the whole of the New Testament. The author deals with its original meaning, exposing in the process the earliest layers of transmission of Jesus’ sayings. Versed in the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus combined the meanings of *MLH* in Exod 30:35 (incense salted is potent/good/pure/holy) with that in Isa 51:6 and Jer 38:11–12 (something *MLH* might vanish away/wax old/become rotten) and put it in a new context. Jesus’ pun – loaded with multiple layers of meanings and shades of meanings – was lost in translation as simply “salt.”

Keywords: Matthew 5:13, Gehenna, fire of Hell, Babylonian Talmud, Judeo-Aramaic and Palestinian Arabic, Dead Sea, Salt Sea, Trito-Isaiah, Sermon on the Mount

1. The Problem

“You are the salt of the earth” is an expression that resonated within almost any culture – regardless of language – where people have had significant exposure to Christianity and the text of the New Testament. By the late 19th century, the expression even entered modern Hebrew, via the Christian usage, and now people in Israel quarrel over who is “the salt of the earth” and who isn’t! Actually, “salt of the earth” sounds decidedly awkward in Hebrew, just as it does in other languages, if one thinks about it for a second. Salt, in fact, is generally *not* good for the earth, and ancient, destroyed cities were sometimes punished unto eternal damnation by pouring salt, at least symbolically, over their ruins (cf. Judg 9:45).¹ Nevertheless, it is obvious that the ultimate source of this phrase was in a Semitic language, and that the expression is a typical case of an original meaning being “lost in translation.”

¹ As Barry G. Webb (2012, 289) noted, Abimelech’s act of “sowing the site with salt” in Judges 9:45 is “unparalleled in the Old Testament, and its significance is not clear. Traditionally it has been viewed as an act intended to render a site infertile, or place it under the ban (*hērem*) of total destruction, or to purge it of the spirits of the dead.” See also Honeyman (1953, 192–95) who prefers the last of these three options.

2. The Goal

The cases of such expressions, those that make little literal sense today, are valuable, since they can lead us, more or less directly, back to the times when these words were first uttered, sometimes completely outside of what we might perceive as their “context.” Here my intention is to explore in some depth the archaeology of the expression “salt of the earth.” It is not my intention to deal with theological aspects of “the salt of the earth,” especially since a recent Pope wrote a book on the topic (Ratzinger 1997) and Carl G. Vaught’s work, *The Sermon on the Mount* (2001), has become a modern classic. And I must admit that a small article by George Shillington, “Salt of the Earth?” (2001), gave me a clue as to my own solution. As Shillington did, I was thinking about this illogical “salt of the earth” for decades.

3. A Talmudic View about Hell under Jerusalem

It is relatively rarely that we find genuine Second Temple traditions in the Babylonian Talmud, but one such case will be discussed below. First, however, we must stress that this tradition is quoted in the context of discussing an arcane ritual matter, the question of whether the branches of a certain sort of palm tree (ציני הר הברזל, the stone-palm from the Iron Mountain in Moab) are *kosher* for purposes of being used as a *lulab*. Our real purpose, however, is to examine the underlying language, as a window into ancient Judaic thought and imagery. We read in the Babylonian Talmud, treatise *Erubin* 19a:²

And Rabbi Yirmeya ben Elazar also said: There are three entrances to Gehenna,	ואמר רבי ירמיה בר אלעזר שלשה פתחים יש לגיהנם
one in the wilderness, one in the sea, and one in Jerusalem.	אחד במדבר ואחד בים ואחד בירושלים
There is one entrance in the wilderness, as it is written with regard to Korah and his company:	במדבר דכתיב
“And they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit [<i>She’ol</i>], and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the congregation” (Num 16:33).	וירדו הם וכל אשר להם חיים שאולה
In the sea there is a second entrance to Gehenna, as it is written about Jonah in the fish’s belly: “Out of the belly of the netherworld [<i>She’ol</i>] I cried, and You did hear my voice” (Jonah 2:3).	בים דכתיב, מבטן שאול שועתי שמעת קולי

² The translation after Weinreb 2012–2019. In smaller font are explanatory additions by the English editors.

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And there is a third entrance to Gehenna in Jerusalem, as it is written:	בירושלים דכתיב
“Says the Lord, Whose fire is in Zion, and Whose furnace is in Jerusalem ” (Isa 31:9).	נאם ה' אֶשֶׁר אור לוֹ בְּצִיּוֹן וְתַנּוּר לוֹ בִּירוּשָׁלַם
And it was taught in the school of Rabbi Yishmael:	ותנא דבי ישמעאל
“ Whose light/fire is in Zion, ”	אשר אור לו בציון
this is Gehenna;	זו גיהנם
and “ Whose furnace is in Jerusalem, ”	ותנור לו בירושלים
this is an entrance to Gehenna.	זו פתחה של גיהנם
The Gemara asks: Are there no more entrances?	ותו ליכא
Didn't Rabbi Maryon say in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi,	והאמר ר' מריון אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי
and some say it was Rabba bar Maryon who taught in the name of the school of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai:	ואמרי לה תנא רבה בר מריון בדבי רבי יוחנן בן זכאי
There are two date trees in the valley of ben Hinnom, and smoke rises from between them, and with regard to this statement about date trees that differ from other palms we learned:	שתי תמרות יש בגי בן הנום ועולה עשן מביניהן וזו היא ששנינו
The palms of Har HaBarzel are fit for the <i>mitzva</i> of palm branches [<i>lulav</i>] (b. <i>Sukkah</i> 32b),	ציני הר הברזל כשירות
and this is the entrance to Gehenna.	וזו היא פתחה של גיהנם
The Gemara answers:	
This is not difficult, for perhaps this is the entrance in Jerusalem.	דילמא היינו דירושלים

So, Hell is localized as being under Jerusalem, as might be suggested to anyone living in that city, since the Valley of Gehinnom lies immediately southward from Jerusalem in a deep gorge. Thus the word אור in the verse of Isa 31:9 (אֶשֶׁר אור לוֹ בְּצִיּוֹן), “whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem”), as quoted in the Talmud, was understood as “fire” (אור) by the Sages. The same word or root, however, carries the meaning of “light” (אור) in Matt 5:14, אתם* אור העולם, “You are the light of the world.”

4. Isaiah 31 > Isaiah 66 > the Sermon on the Mountain

This ancient *midrash* survived in both the Babylonian Talmud (*Erubin*) and in the Sermon on the Mountain in the Gospel of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mountain itself is based on [Trito-]Isaiah 66, which was composed as a *responsum* to

Isaiah 31 (but cf. Russell 2017). With these linkages in mind, we propose the following: Isa 66:1 was understood by the Second Temple sectarians, as well as in the Primitive Church, in an anti-Temple sense; Isa 66:2 was the model for “Blessed are the meek...”; Isa 66:19 can be seen as referring to the missionary activities of the Primitive Church; and Isa 66:24 stands as a reference back to Isa 31:9 (which appears in the Talmudic section quoted above).³

<p>Isa 66:1</p> <p>Thus saith the Lord, The heaven <i>is</i> my throne, and the earth <i>is</i> my footstool: where <i>is</i> the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?</p>	<p>א פה אָמַר ה' הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּסֵּאִי וְהָאָרֶץ הֵדָם רַגְלֵי אֵי זֶה בַּיִת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְנֶנּוּ לִי וְאֵי זֶה מְקוֹם מְנוּחָתִי</p>
<p>Isa 66:2</p> <p>For all those <i>things</i> hath mine hand made, and all those <i>things</i> have been, saith the Lord: but to this <i>man</i> will I look, <i>even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.</i></p>	<p>ב וְאֵת כָּל אֱלֹהֵי יְדֵי עֲשֻׂתָהּ וַיִּהְיוּ כָל אֱלֹהֵי תְּאֵם ה' וְאֵל זֶה אֲבִיט אֶל עֲנִי וְנִכְבָּה רוּחַ וְתִרְדַּע עַל דְּבָרַי</p>
<p>Isa 66:19</p> <p>And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those that escape of them unto the nations, <i>to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, that draw the bow, to Tubal, and Javan, to the isles afar off, that have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles.</i></p>	<p>יט וְשִׁמְתִי בְּהֵם אוֹת וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי מִהֵם פְּלִיטִים אֶל הַגּוֹיִם תַּרְשִׁישׁ פּוּל וְלוד מִשְׁכֵּי קִשְׁתׁ תַּבַּל וְנוּן הַאֲיִים הַרְחֹקִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶת שְׁמִיעִי וְלֹא רָאוּ אֶת כְּבוֹדִי וְהִגִּידוּ אֶת כְּבוֹדִי בְּגוֹיִם</p>
<p>Isa 66:24</p> <p>And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcases of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.⁴</p>	<p>כד וַיֵּצְאוּ וַיִּרְאוּ בְּפִגְרֵי הַאֲנָשִׁים הַפְּשָׁעִים בֵּי כִי תוֹלַעְתָּם לֹא תָמוּת וְאֵשָׁם לֹא תִכָּבֵה וְהָיוּ דְרָאוּן לְכָל בֶּשָׂר</p>

It is worth noting that the language of Isa 66:24, “for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched,” is quoted in Mark 9:45–50:

And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet **to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched** (βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον): **Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.** And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes **to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire** (πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται / כל בשר בשרו ימלח), and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. **Salt is good:** but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.

³ All the biblical texts after KJV translation.
⁴ Cf. *As. Mos.* 10: “and thou shalt look from on high and shalt see the enemies in Gehenna.”

As one can see, the context speaks of the fire of hell, by which “every one shall be salted” as in a sacrifice, and this “salt is good,” but the good salt also carries some “devilish” or “hellish” element in it.

5. MLH 1,2,3

The link between smoke, the verbal root *MLH* (though it is another *MLH* root), and the theme of destruction can be seen in Isa 51:6:

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,	שִׂאוּ לְשָׁמַיִם עֵינֵיכֶם
and look upon the earth beneath :	וְהִבִּיטוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת
for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke (<i>kā ‘āšān nimlāhū</i>),	כִּי שָׁמַיִם כְּעָשָׁן נִמְלָחוּ
and the earth shall wax (tibleh) old like a garment ,	וְהָאָרֶץ כְּכֹהֵד תִּבְלֶה
and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner:	וְיִשְׁכְּבוּ כָמוֹ כֹּחַ יָמוּתוּן
but my salvation ⁵ shall be for ever,	וְיִשׁוּעָתִי לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה
and my righteousness shall not be abolished.	וְצַדִּיקוֹתַי לֹא תִחַת

The same root *MLH* (again, etymologically unrelated) and vestments appear in Jer 38:11–12:

So Ebed-melech took the men with him,	וַיִּקַּח עִבְדֵי מֶלֶךְ אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים בְּיָדוֹ
and went into the house of the king under the treasury,	וַיָּבֹא בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל תַּחַת הָאוֹצָר
and took thence old cast clouts and old rotten rags (<i>u-bloyē mālāhīm</i>), ⁶	וַיִּקַּח מִשָּׁם בְּלוּיֵי הַסַּחֲבוֹת וְבְלוּיֵי מְלָחִים
and let them down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah.	וַיְשַׁלְּקֵם אֶל יַרְמְיָהוּ אֶל הַבּוֹר בְּחֻבְלִים
And Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah,	וַיֹּאמֶר עִבְדֵי מֶלֶךְ הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֶל יַרְמְיָהוּ
Put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags (<i>ham-mālāhīm</i>) under thine armholes	שִׁים נָא בְּלוּאֵי הַסַּחֲבוֹת וְהַמְּלָחִים תַּחַת אַצְלוֹת יָדֶיךָ
under the cords.	מִתַּחַת לְחֻבְלִים
And Jeremiah did so.	וַיַּעַשׂ יַרְמְיָהוּ כֵן

⁵ Apparently, understood by Christians as referring to Jesus.

⁶ Two roots used are the same as in Isaiah 51:6, *kā ‘āšān nimlāhū* + *kab-beged tibleh*. The idea in Mt 5:13–14 that salt can have lost its savour / saltiness is derived from the (non-exact) understanding of *MLH* in these two verses from Jeremiah and Isaiah.

6. Erubin 19a versus Matt 5:13-14

The parallel in Matt 5:13-14 has no “hellish” elements, but refers to that city set over the Hell of the Valley of Gehinnom:⁷

Ye are **the salt of the earth** (Υμείς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς / רְיָרָא מַלְחַן אַרְעָא אֲדָמָא): but if the salt have lost his savour (ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆ / מַחְדָּח רְיָרָא אֲדָמָא⁸), wherewith shall it be salted (ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται / בְּכִיכָהּ אֲדָמָא)? it is thenceforth **good for nothing** (εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ἔτι / אֲדָמָא לֹא יוֹכֵחַ), but to be cast out (εἰ μὴ βληθὲν ἔξω / אֲדָמָא לֹא יִבְרַח), and to be trodden under foot of men (καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων / אֲדָמָא לֹא יִבְרַח). Ye are **the light of the world** (Υμείς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου / תְּשִׁיבוּ אַרְעָא אֲדָמָא רְיָרָא). A city **that is set on an hill** cannot be hid (οὐ δύναται πόλις κρυβῆναι ἐπάνω ὄρους κειμένη / אֲדָמָא לֹא יִבְרַח אֲדָמָא אֲדָמָא אֲדָמָא אֲדָמָא).

This text is notoriously difficult. First, the salt of the earth can be good, under certain conditions, and is, more or less, the same as the light (but we remember that this “light” comes from “fire” of Isa 31:9).

7 Cf. Berger 1980; Betz 1995, 161 (“The observation that cities often are situated on the top of mountains is true of many ancient cities, but one can hardly have any doubt that here it refers to Jerusalem.”); Shapira 2013. The reference to the city of Jerusalem is only one of several possibilities. For instance, Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck (1956, 238) proposes Sepphoris referring to *Pesiq. Rab.* 8 (29A) and *b. Meg.* 6A: “Zeira has said, ‘Qitron (Judg 1:30) is Sepphoris; and why was the name of the city called ‘Sepphoris’? Because it lies on top of a mountain like a bird (שיישבת בראש ההר כציפור).” Ulrich Luz (2007, 207) argued: “The absence of the article shows that the thought is hardly of *the* city of God, Jerusalem on Mount Zion, but simply of a city located on a mountain. All metaphorical or allegorical interpretations of the city are to be avoided; the issue is only that the city is visible from a distance.” As an example of an allegorical exposition, one should refer to Gerhard von Rad’s proposal (1966, 242): “The saying about the city which is visible to all is closely bound up with that concerning the light of the world: the eschatological congregation of the faithful is the city set on a hill, and their light will be visible to the whole world. The saying thus takes up an ancient eschatological theme, re-echoing that already sounded by Isaiah in the Old Testament.” For the discussion on the identification of the city see also Campbell 1978.

8 Greek μωρανθῆ is formed from μωρός, “dull, moron.” The Syriac verb *tpkh* ܛܦܚܟܐ translates Hebrew תפל in Job 6:6 (הֲאֵכָל תֵּפֵל מִבְּלִי מֶלַח אִם יֵשׁ טַעַם בְּרִיר תִּלְמֹות) / “Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt? or is there any taste in the white of an egg?” and is related to Mandaic “to turn stupid” (cf. Drower and Macuch 1963, 367b; compare Häberl 2023), Hebrew פכה “fade, evaporate”; Arabic فَكَّه “to be tasty.”

7. Salt is Good

One may think that *καλὸν τὸ ἅλας*, “salt is good” (Luke 14:34⁹ and Mark 9:50¹⁰), is a pun on the root *MLH*, “be good, be beautiful.” This homonymous root is badly preserved in Hebrew (but cf. *b. Qiddushin* 29b, זרז וממולה), with *malāḥa-t*, *malīḥ* surviving in Arabic (in Palestinian Arabic, as well as in some other varieties, **malīḥ* > *mnīḥ* is **the** word for “good,” possibly, due to contamination with **m[ē]nīḥ*, “providing rest / peace of mind”). So, **melaḥ malīḥ* or **milḥā mālīḥ*!¹¹ The expression used in Matt 5:13 *might* go back to a lost understanding of Exod 30:35:

and make an incense blended	ועשית אתה קטרת
as by the perfumer,	רקח מעשה רוקח
seasoned with salt / good / potent,	קמלקח
pure	טהור
and holy	קדוש

In this text the last three words are used as synonymous, not through commas. Something with salt is pure, potent, and holy. The idea that salt can become not salted (*un*-potent, “if the salt have lost his savour”) is strange, for salt never loses its chemical qualities.

⁹ Remember the context in Luke 14:33–35: “So likewise, **whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple**. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. **He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.**”

¹⁰ Set in the context of transfiguration on Mount Tabor, with its light identified by some Eastern Christians with the Fire of Hell. The Polish Pope, John Paull II, was somehow sympathetic of this view; I was both amazed and happy to learn about this fact in the course of writing this small essay.

¹¹ The expression was not understood even by the first-generation Christians and was thus mis-translated by all the following generations (in passing, this is the proof that *this* passage was translated into Syriac from Greek, while there are multiple examples of keeping the original text better in Syriac; cf. Weitzman 1999), which reminds me how some thirty years ago, on the first class of his university course “Jewish Origins of the New Testament,” the late Professor David Flusser asked us: “Who can tell me, what language Jesus spoke?” First there fell silence, then some voices saying “Hebrew” or “Aramaic,” and then I said: “Yiddish.” Flusser gave me a deep look, paused for a while, and then he said firmly: “Correct. Jesus spoke Yiddish.”

8. Salt is Good?

As George Shillington (2001, 120–121) noted, “The Greek word (*mōranthē*), translated ‘lost its taste,’ is not usually related to taste at all.¹² The basic idea of *mōranthē* is to make foolish, as in Rom 1:22 (cf. the English derivative ‘moron’).”

Shillington (2001, 121) continues:

the parallel metaphor in Luke 14:34, which reads in the NRSV: ‘Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away.’¹³ The translators of this text become even more absurd in their translation of *halas* in Luke’s context. The substance *halas* is still, according to the translators, tasteful table salt that can lose its taste, even though the rest of the text boldly contradicts this notion: the *halas* substance is good for ‘soil’ (*gē*) and a ‘manure pile’ (*kopria*), but can lose its potency (*mōranthē*), not its taste as the NRSV states.

Shillington tended to believe that “the salt of the earth” was some kind of fertilizer, like potash, phosphate or ammonium, abundant in the Salt Sea (Dead Sea) area.

Note that mixtures of some geological elements, including those mentioned above, are called “salts,” while not being “table salt,” i.e. sodium chloride (NaCl) chemically. Phosphorus (whose name is the same as that of Lucifer in Isa 14:12¹⁴) occurs in phosphates, or in bone ash, and was called “the Devil’s element.” Basically, what Jesus is intending to say in Matt 5:13–14 is “you are the fuel of my revolution, you are the fuel of my punishment of the wicked in Hell.”¹⁵

It seems to me that the author of Mark 9:45–50 was thinking that the destruction of Sodom by burning phosphorus (“salt of the earth”) was a good idea, that everyone would deserve it, and that hearers of this passage (“you”) would be the agents of this fire. “Watch out, thou city set on the hill above the Valley of Gehinnom, the new Sodom of Jerusalem, this time thou canst not be hid,” thought the Author of Matt 5:14.

Jesus was never a Gesenius, that German Professor of Semitology, but he was thoroughly versed in the Hebrew scriptures. He could not have known that Hebrew lexicographers now identify two or more distinct *MLH* roots. Nevertheless, Jesus seemingly combined the meanings of *MLH* in Exod 30:35 (incense salted is potent

¹² But remember Job 6:6; see note 8 above.

¹³ כֶּחַךְ has “Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:34–35) [note by D.S.].

¹⁴ Cf. 2 Peter 1:19: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.”

¹⁵ Ascribed to Lenin or to Trotsky: “Jews are the fuel for the revolution”; Hannah Szenes’ saying: “Blessed is the Match (אֲשֶׁרֵי הַגִּפְּרִיור).”

/ good / pure / holy) with that in Isa 51:6 and Jer 38:11–12 (something *MLH* might vanish away / wax old / become rotten) and placed it withing the context of his world revolution.

The misunderstood, and then mistranslated, expression used by a Galilean mesiah was, first, remembered by his followers, and was then mis-placed into different contexts and hagiographical settings by the later generation[s]. But it *was* remembered, and, in this author’s opinion, there is no doubt that Jesus *did* pronounce something like that.

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