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## **Who and why will be “salted with fire” (Mk 9:49)?**

### **Kto i dlaczego zostanie „ogniem posolony” (Mk 9,49)?**

**Keywords:** the Gospel of Mark; the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem; the symbolic meaning of fire; the symbolic meaning of salt.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ewangelia św. Marka; podróż Jezusa do Jerozolimy; ogień: symbolika; sól: symbolika.

**Abstract.** The paper analyses one verse from the speech of Jesus which takes the central place both in the whole Gospel of Mark and in its section dealing with the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. This context helps to understand the difficult verse as an exhortation to maintain the peace inside the community of the disciples and benevolence towards those outside it, even if it requires sufferings and sacrifices. Various symbolic meanings of fire and salt are also presented, including their connection with the sacrament of baptism.

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł analizuje jeden wers z mowy Jezusa zajmującej centralne miejsce zarówno w całej Ewangelii Marka, jak i w jej środkowej sekcji, opisującej podróż Jezusa do Jerozolimy. Ten kontekst pozwala zrozumieć trudny do interpretacji wiersz jako wezwanie do utrzymania pokoju wewnątrz wspólnoty uczniów i życzliwości dla osób spoza niej, nawet jeśli oznacza to konieczność cierpienia i ofiary. Omówione też zostają różne symboliczne znaczenia ognia i soli, uwzględniając ich związek z symboliką chrzcielną.

The logion of Jesus from Mk 9:49 is one of the most obscure passages in the Gospels. It has been rarely commented; hardly has it been used in liturgy: the only moment when it appears in the present-day Roman Catholic liturgy is Thursday of the seventh week of the ordinary time (which is sometimes omitted, depending on the date of the Easter). As a result, this one of the most poetic expressions of Jesus is largely forgotten. There have been only few studies dealing specifically with this verse, and likewise the comprehensive commentaries on the Second Gospel have given little attention to v. 9:49, which was overshadowed by the neighbouring verses and often hardly treated at all.

## 1. Textual criticism

Mk 9:49 has been transmitted in three general versions:

a) *πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται* (“everybody will be salted with fire”). This version appears in the Vatican Codex (B), the maiusculæ codices L, Δ and 0274, and in many miniscule codices, among them the entire families *f*<sup>1</sup> and *f*<sup>3</sup>. It is also confirmed by the Syriac Synaiticus manuscript and by the Coptic translations (in Sahidic and, partly, in Bohairic tradition); it was also known to Didymus of Alexandria.

The Synaitic Codex (κ) differs in only one place: it has *ἐν πυρὶ* (“in fire”) instead of *πυρὶ* (this may have been an attempt to facilitate the reading), whereas the Washington Codex (W) has *ἀλισγηθήσεται* (“will be defiled”) instead of *ἀλισθήσεται*.

b) *πᾶσα γὰρ θυσία ἀλλὶ ἀλισθήσεται* (“every sacrifice will be salted with salt”). This is the version of the Beza Codex (D) and many witnesses of the Old Latin translation, among them the Codex of Verona from the fifth century.

c) *πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται καὶ πᾶσα θυσία ἀλλὶ ἀλισθήσεται* (“everyone will be salted with fire and every sacrifice will be salted with fire”). This is the version of the Codex Alexandrinus (A), and, with minor changes, codices C, Θ and Ψ. It has been accepted by the Byzantine Koine version and by the Vulgate (*omnis enim igne salietur et omnis victima sale salietur*); it is also confirmed by *Peshitta* and by some of the Coptic manuscripts in the Bohairic tradition.

We can be assured that the first version, confirmed by the oldest manuscripts, is the original one. The second version is a direct citation from Lv 2:13 (LXX). It proves that at very early stage this passage from the Old Testament was considered as an explanation of the mysterious logion of Jesus. The fragment from Leviticus, most probably added at first as a marginal gloss, either substituted the original words of Jesus (in the manuscripts of the Western tradition) or remained as an addition to the original text. The second version, on the other hand, has a greater number of witnesses to its advantage, and, since it became the *textus receptus* in both Latin and Greek traditions, it had an enormous impact on the subsequent exegesis of the passage<sup>1</sup>.

Substituting “salted with fire” with “destroyed with fire”, has been suggested by Weston W. Fields<sup>2</sup> on the basis of the possible Hebrew background of the lo-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> W.W. Fields, *Everyone will be salted*, pp. 301–303.

gion; it would solve the majority of interpretation problems, but does not seem a convincing proposition.

## 2. The symbolic meaning of salt

The reference to salt is very rare in the New Testament<sup>3</sup>. The verb ἀλίζω and the noun ἄλας appear outside Mk 9:49–50 only in the parallel synoptic texts of Mt 5:13 and Lk 14:34 and in Col 4:6, where salt is also presented as a positive factor, adding taste to the meal.

In Mk 9:50a Jesus says that “salt is good”. This expression follows immediately v. 49, making its interpretation more difficult: otherwise, it would be quite easy to assume that salt in v. 49 is a negative factor, having to do with suffering. It would be corroborated by numerous other biblical passages, in which salt has rather negative connotations. Salt, especially in large quantities, makes any life impossible, as it was seen in the Dead Sea, known also as the Salted Sea (Gn 14:3, Jo 3:16). Salt evokes images of death and desolation, and serves to inflict punishment, as it was used by God against the wife of Lot (Gn 19:26) and by Abimelek against Sychem (Jo 9:45). Fertile soil becoming a salted desert is a sign of God’s punishment (Ps 107:34, Dt 29:22), while Ezekiel, conversely, presents desalinating of the Dead Sea as a sign of messianic times (Ez 47:8f).

In impeding vegetation, however, salt has also some positive aspects: it preserves from decay. This particular function was mentioned in Bar 6:27, where also the expression “the covenant of salt” was used. The inviolability of the “salted alliance” is also mentioned in Nm 18:19 and 2 Chr 13:5). Therefore “the salt of God’s covenant” (Lv 2:13), with which every sacrifice should be seasoned (Ex 30:35, Ez 43:24, Jubilees 21:11), signifies the importance of the Covenant, its steadfast and life-giving nature. In this way the salt becomes in the Old Testament a positive symbol, referring to God. Salted sacrifice not only protected the life received from God, but it also linked it with God, the source of life. As belonging to God’s sphere, salt, the symbol of incorruptibility, was opposed to decay, which was the domain of demons. This connotation was at the root of the use of salt in exorcisms in Ancient Middle East<sup>4</sup>. The apotropaic character of salt has been widely acknowledged, as we can find its traces even in some of Polish folk customs<sup>5</sup>.

New born children were rubbed with salt (Ez 16:4), salt had also purifying and sanitizing properties (as in the healing of “bad water” by Eliseus in 2 Kgs

<sup>3</sup> See M.C. Paczkowski, *Metafora soli*.

<sup>4</sup> F. Hauck, *Halas*, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> J.S. Wasilewski, *Tabu*, p. 105.

2:19–22). Salt was of course valued in the first place for its dietary values: when a list of the things necessary for life is presented in Sir 39:26, salt takes the place right after water, fire and iron. It is also written in Talmud that the world could not survive without salt<sup>6</sup>. In Ezr 4:14 an expression “to eat the salt of the palace” in all likelihood means to be paid the salary by the king. Apart from all its usefulness, the salt simply tastes well: “Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt?” (Jb 6:6). This is probably also why Paul writes about seasoning speech with salt (Col 4:6)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. The symbolic meaning of fire

Fire is one of the most recurrent symbols in all human cultures. It has three principal functions: it gives off heat, it produces light, but it also has a tremendous force of destruction. The two former functions are widely used in everyday life, in fact the use of fire marks the beginnings of civilisation: this idea was encapsulated in the myth of Prometheus. In the catalogue of the things necessary for life (Sir 39:26), already cited above, the fire takes the second place, only after water.

Fire has also the devouring, destroying quality, used by humans at war (eg. Jgs 9:49, 1 Mc 5:5, Rv 17:16, 18:8). It was common to all religions of ancient Middle East, that the sacrifices placed on altars were consumed by fire, and thus transformed into a “pleasing smell” for their deities (Gn 8:21). Exact rules of holocaust offerings for God were given in Lv 1-7, including the command to salt the sacrifices (Lv 2:13).

The destructive force of fire can be also used for useful purposes, such as testing precious metals (Mal 3:2, Ob 18, 1 Pt 1:7) and restoring their purity (Nm 31:21–23, Rv 3:18). This image can be very easily used as an allegory in regard to humans, as it happens e.g. in Is 48:19 and Ps 17:3.

The “devouring fire” (Ex 24:17) is a recurrent element in the Old Testament theophanies. The most important one is the appearance of God in the burning bush in Ex 3:3. The tables of the Law were given “out of the midst of the fire” (Dt 9:10, cf. Ex 19:18). Also in the theophanies of the New Testament Jesus appears with “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rv 1:14, 19:12). In the entire New Testament the word πῦρ is used 71 times, 26 of which in Apocalypse alone and 23 in synoptic Gospels. In Mark, if we treat 9:44 and 9:46 as a later interpolation

<sup>6</sup> W.L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Lattke in his article (“Salz der Freundschaft”) analyses mainly the meaning of salt in 9:50c, coming to a similar conclusion that it is ambiguous and cannot be clearly determined.

(which results clearly from text criticism), we are left with only four occurrences of the word; one of those has no significant meaning (with reference to an epileptic thrown into fire), while others, in 9:43 and 9:48, definitely symbolize hell and destruction. Although this usage generally prevails in the Gospels (see eg. Mt 3:10.12, 5:22, 7:19, 13:40.42.50, 18:8–9.25.41, Lk 3:9.17, Jn 15:6), but since, we should not feel constrained to see the fire in 9:49 as a destructive symbol: the original link between 9:49 and 9:42–48 is not clear, and the metaphor of fire is used in New Testament also in other contexts, linked to Holy Spirit, baptism and the mission of Jesus.

Mt 3:11 seems crucial to understanding the role of fire in the New Testament. The verse concerns the baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire. It has been usually interpreted as a description of the same thing by two terms. However, J. Gnilka sees it differently: some will be purified by the Holy Spirit, and others will be destroyed by fire<sup>8</sup>.

The Holy Spirit descends on the Apostles in the form of fire in Acts 2:3. It may be seen as the realisation of the promise of Jesus from Lk 12:49 to "cast fire upon the earth". For Gregory the Great the double appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove and as fire serves to underline that all people filled with the Holy Spirit will preserve the benign simplicity of doves, but they will also burn with desire that justice be meted out to wrong-doers<sup>9</sup>. Also in the rabbinic tradition fire was linked to the Torah, because of the circumstances of the covenant of Mont Sinai<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. The meaning of "every"

There are two main ways of interpreting Mk 9:49. Although text criticism definitely rejects the authenticity of the gloss from Lv 2:13, nearly all contemporary Bible editors felt obliged to hint at this connection, which leads to understanding the logion as encouraging the followers of Christ to offer the difficulties of their life as a sacrifice for him.

Mk 9:49, however, is situated in the context of the widely commented passage on scandalous deeds and the punishment: the eternal fire. Therefore it is often linked to the preceding verse (which in turn is a repetition of Is 66:24) and interpreted as the promise of eternal punishment. Fire is thus interpreted as the hellfire, and salting should probably indicate some additional quality

<sup>8</sup> J. Gnilka, *Jesus z Nazaretu*, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Gregorius I, *Moralia in Iob*, I, 2, 36.

<sup>10</sup> H.L. Strack – P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT*, vol. 2, p. 23.

of the punitive suffering. “Every” would mean in this way, however strangely, “every condemned”.

The meaning of “every” in Mk 9:49 seems crucial to the proper understanding of the passage. The broadest interpretation will include even Jesus himself<sup>11</sup>. G. Schwartz suggested that salt is unsalted when it is unbroken, and in this way the logion would indicate the necessity of the death of Jesus on the cross<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, this interpretation can be easily disproved by turning to the text, where  $\pi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  is followed by  $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$ , which links the sentence to the precedent verse, which in turn describes the fire of Gehenna<sup>13</sup>. This still does not indicate clearly the scope of  $\pi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ . The apocalyptic visions of judgment and damnation usually refer to entire humanity (such is also the context of Is 66:24), but the teaching about scandalous deeds is evidently directed at the disciples alone. R.H. Gundry resolves the problem by explaining that “fire will fall on everyone without exception, as when salt is sprinkled indiscriminately, in order that true believers might pass the test of fire and apostates suffer the just-mentioned judgment of eternal fire and decay”<sup>14</sup>. In other words: the way to the communion with God comes through the judgement on the old man in oneself; whoever fails to do it, will encounter the well-merited wrath of God<sup>15</sup>. This is of course based on the assumption that  $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\iota\sigma\theta\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$  is a *passivum divinum*, and signifies the action of God<sup>16</sup>.

Some scholars maintain that there is a sharp distinction between Mk 9:48 and 9:49, and  $\pi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  from 9:49 means only “every disciple”, or even “every true disciple”. The authenticity of the discipleship would be tested during persecutions, when every disciple can give himself in offering for Jesus (following the theme of the Old Testament ritual offerings) and join Jesus in the mystery of his sac-

<sup>11</sup> See eg. T. Loska, *Ewangelia według św. Marka*, p. 109. D. Allison Jr, *The End of the Ages*, pp. 124–128

<sup>12</sup> G. Schwarz, *Jesus and Judas*, pp. 41–42. See also F. Lang, *Pyr ktl.*, vol. 6., p. 943: “Also besagt v. 49: Jesus wird ein Gerichtsfeuer auf die Erde kommen lassen, in das er selbst hineingezogen wird”.

<sup>13</sup> H. Fleddermann, however, says that  $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$  is only “a weak linking particule” (*The Discipleship Discourse*, p. 70); see also T.J. Baarda, “Mark IX.49”, p. 318: “There is a tendency to detach this logion from its context, and to deal with it as an isolated aphorism, which has been introduced to make easy the transition from fire to salt”.

<sup>14</sup> R.H. Gundry, *Mark*, p. 515. Similarly E. Best, *Following Jesus*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> F. Lang, *Pyr ktl.*, p. 943: “Wer dieses Gericht nicht jetzt durch Selbstverleugnung auf sich nimmt, verfällt dem zukünftigen Zorn“.

<sup>16</sup> See eg. S. Haręzga, *Jezus i jego uczniowie*, p. 256. Contrary: H. Lichtenberg, “Pyr”, col. 482: „Ist *halisthēsetai* als *Passivum divinum* zu verstehen, wird deutlich, durch wen das Gericht erfolgt“.

rificial death. If fire means the violence of persecution, and salt has preserving values, then those who are persecuted will show their fidelity to Jesus and will be preserved<sup>17</sup>. Separating Mk 9:49 from the context of the preceding verses works better with 9:50. The salt is then seen chiefly as a symbol of peace and love between God and humans (which explains the sacrificial context of the Old Testament), and between humans themselves. This peace should be defended at every cost, as Jesus showed in being himself “salted with fire” in his sacrifice on the cross. Therefore the fire would signify here purifying experiences, sent or permitted by God<sup>18</sup>. It may be remarked that Wellhausen saw in this logion the pre-announcement of purgatory<sup>19</sup>.

Mk 9:49 is the only case in Mark, where πᾶς appears independently (in singular, πάντες alone is more common) and not as a description of other words. Apart from the verse in question, πᾶς always refers to great human masses: πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία (“whole Judea”) in 1:5 and πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος (“the whole crowd”) in 2:13, 4:1, 9:15 and 11:18, or even the whole created world, however with the meaning clearly limited to humans alone: πᾶση τῇ κτίσει in 16:15 or “the whole flesh” from 13:20 (πᾶσα σάρξ).

## 5. Mk 9:49 in context

The words Mk 9:49 can be considered *ipsissima verba Iesu*. It is difficult to imagine a *Sitz im Leben* which would lead to such a paradoxical expression. It is clear that there were problems with the interpretation of this verse from the very beginning: it has not been accepted by Matthew and Luke, and the critical problems with the transmission of the text appeared very early. The rhetorical analysis proposed by Ian H. Henderson sees this verse as directed to Church leaders, however its rhetorical background was not understood even by the first readers, and this caused the omission by Matthew and Luke<sup>20</sup>.

The word “fire”, “salt” and “every” are all equivocal, and this leads to many, often contradictory, interpretations of the logion. We do not know in what context Jesus uttered this logion, so the context given to it by Mark remains for us the only interpretation key.

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<sup>17</sup> E. Best, *Following Jesus*, p. 87. See also: W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 349: “While verse 48 applies to the rejected, verse 49 has reference to those who are true to God in a hostile world”.

<sup>18</sup> T. Loska, *Ewangelia według św. Marka*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> See: J. Gnilika, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, vol. 2, p. 66, n. 15.

<sup>20</sup> I.H. Henderson, *Salted with Fire*.



Mk 10:1 is certainly the beginning of a new pericope, with a change in time and place of the action and with new characters appearing. Mk 9:50 marks therefore the end of a clearly delimited fragment which starts in 9:33: from this moment the action is continuous and the place remains the same (a house in Capharnaum). In Mk 9:35 Jesus calls the Twelve and speaks to them until 9:50. Inside this speech vv. 42–50 can be treated as a certain entity, built on the words “fire” and “salt”.

The Gospel of Mark is chiefly the gospel of facts and deeds, and not of words of Jesus. Apart from some short remarks and comments on current events, we find there only three longer speeches of Jesus: the speech in parables (4:1–34), the eschatological speech (13:5–37) and the speech from 9:35–50, which is the subject of this article. All these speeches are clearly delimited. Jesus is seated at the beginning of each of them (4:1, 9:35 and 13:3); the only other moment in Mark when Jesus is seated is when he observes those who give offerings at the temple (12:41)<sup>21</sup>. The seating position is a symbol of authority, it is the position of kings, judges and teachers – Jesus himself refers to this in Mt 23:2.

In all three speeches Jesus talks to a clearly defined audience, which is different at every occasion. In the speech in parables he talked to “a very large crowd” (4:2), explaining it later to “those with him, with the Twelve” (4:10), i.e. clearly to a larger group than the Twelve alone, whereas the speech Mk 9:35–50 is addressed only to them: ἐφώνησεν τοὺς δώδεκα καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς (9:35). The eschatological speech is addressed to an even more restricted group: only the four first disciples: Peter, Andrew, John and James of Zebedee (13:3, cf. 1:16–20).

The main theme of the first speech (with the parable of the sower in its center) is the very teaching of Jesus and the importance of accepting or rejecting it. The third speech concerns the end of the world. In this way, Jesus explains to everyone (“a very large crowd”), how they should act, and confides in four most trusted disciples about the eventual consequences of human choices. The second of the speeches seems to combine those elements, especially in the passage on scandals, where Jesus presents the absolute fidelity to his person and his teaching as the *conditio sine qua non* of the participation in eternal life<sup>22</sup>. The audience is also the resultant of other two cases: not the crowds listening to the parables and not the chosen four who learn about the apocalyptic events, but the Twelve, chosen and established in 3:13–19.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. K. Stock, *Boten*, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> K. Stock, *Il cammino*, p. 138: “Gesù chiede una fedeltà assoluta alla sua parola e persona, come condizione indispensabile per la partecipazione alla vita escatologica”.



It is interesting, if we consider that Jesus talked about the necessity of his passion to all the disciples following him in Galilee (9:30–31). In this way the question from 9:33 is addressed to all the disciples, but the teaching that follows is for the Twelve alone; of course, it is important only if we do not accept that the disciples are identical with the Twelve<sup>23</sup>. Anyway, whether the Twelve represent all the disciples of Jesus, or if they are a group of the superiors of the community, we are faced with a text of a nearly juridical character, a "teaching manual"<sup>24</sup> or "a catechism for the community"<sup>25</sup>, the only text of such character in the whole of the Gospel of Mark.

The fact that this teaching was not meant to be public is clear also from its setting: it is delivered in a house. Whereas in the first part of the Gospel of Mark houses are places where Jesus meets not only his disciples (1:29, 2:15, 7:17.24), but also other people (2:1, 3:20), during his way to Jerusalem a house is a place reserved for the conversations with his disciples (9:28, 10:10), while other people meet Jesus in open space (9:27.33.34, 10:17.32.52). H. Langkammer thinks that the scene in the house (9:33–34) which joins Jesus and his disciples, comes from the redaction and constitutes a background for the logion of 9:35, which existed separately before; otherwise it would be difficult to understand why Jesus has to call the Twelve, since he is with them under the same roof<sup>26</sup>. This problem, however, appears only if we do not make a distinction between the disciples and the Twelve. If we do, we can grasp the importance of the teaching that Jesus wants to address to a more restricted audience. According to Evans, 'calling' the Twelve has only formal character and serves to underline once more the authority of Jesus<sup>27</sup>.

Similarly to its position in the whole Gospel, Mk 9:33–50 has also central position in regard to other teachings of Jesus during his way to Jerusalem. The first of them (8:34–9:1) deals with the eschatological consequences of following Jesus, whereas the third (10:42–45) concentrates on the topic of service. The central speech refers to both topics: firstly with the service and possible reward (9:35–37), then with the final decisions on human fate (9:43–49). In this

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<sup>23</sup> The description of the discussion in: D. Kotecki, *Powołanie pierwszych uczniów*, p. 33. I think that we should follow K. Stock in his opinion that for Mark the circle of the disciples and the circle of the Twelve are not identical (K. Stock, *Boten*, p. 200).

<sup>24</sup> W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> H. Langkammer, *Jezus wprowadza uczniów*, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 175–176.

<sup>27</sup> C.A. Evans, *Mark*, p. 62.

way, the life of service is shown as the most important way of following Jesus, and in fact decisive in respect to one's fate after death<sup>28</sup>.

The final shape of Mk 9:33–50 is generally believed to result from the editor's work. The majority of logia included in Mark are confirmed by Matthew and Luke, but often in very different contexts. A proper look for the internal links and leitmotifs used by Mark to write this speech is therefore necessary<sup>29</sup>.

The motif of peace should definitely come as the first. The exhortation to preserve peace finishes the speech (9:50). This final accent may be considered as the most important message of the entire speech. A similar situation appears in the eschatological speech in chapter 13, when the core message is articulated in the last verse: “and what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (Mk 13:37). In this way, after the long speech directed to the chosen four disciples the conclusion is emphasised as pertinent to everyone.

Similarly, the Mk 9:35–50 speech comes in the context of a discussion among all disciples, but is directed to the Twelve alone. However, the command to preserve peace inside the community cannot be possibly limited to the Twelve! Therefore the last sentence may be seen as the conclusion of the whole speech, and, in analogy to 13:37, directed to a broader group.

Εἰρηνεύετε ἐν ἀλλήλοις (9:50) is usually translated as “preserve the peace *between* yourselves”. Peace cannot be provided by any of the disciples alone, it needs interpersonal relations. Salt is a different thing: the disciples are meant to have it *in* themselves (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς). The order of the commands seems to suggest that a certain internal quality of every of the disciples, symbolised by salt, is necessary for maintaining peace inside the community.

Using ἐν ἀλλήλοις is a proof that the whole admonishment of 9:35–50 is provoked by the events from 9:30–34. These last words of Jesus refer us to the beginning of his speech, when the disciples did not answer his question, because they had argued about who was the greatest among them – πρὸς ἀλλήλους (9, 34). In this way ἀλλήλοις brackets the whole speech of Jesus, which tackles the relations between those who want to follow him.

Between 9:35 a 9:42 we are faced with constant dividing people: these who want to be first and all the others, children and those who accept them, “we” (i.e. the Twelve) and “those who are not following us”, these who belong to Christ and those who help them, “these little ones who believe” and those who

<sup>28</sup> Cf. K. Stock, *Il cammino*, p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> D.J. Harrington believes to the contrary, that “The use of keywords suggests a process of memorization prior to the composition of Mark's Gospel. The passage is evidence for both oral tradition and Mark's incorporation of pre-existing material in his gospel” (J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 290).

cause them to sin. The commands from 9:42–48, formulated in the second singular, are probably addressed to the last group. This makes the appearance of the universal quantificator  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$  in 9:49 unexpected, but it indicates the generalizing character of the sentences that follow. Salting with fire refers to all groups enumerated above, and the conjunction  $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$  joins the verse not to 9:48 alone, but to the whole block 9:35–48.

Being salted with fire refers to all people, without distinction. It is also suggested by the very act of salting – it is rather difficult to discriminate in process of showering food with salt. As we have shown in the previous paragraph, the philological analyses also hint at the wide meaning of “every” from Mk 9:49: “the whole crowd, all people, the entire creation”.

If we accept this reading, the verse will be seen as reminding the disciples by Jesus about the elementary equality between all people, which in his eyes is much more important than their arguments about who was the greatest among them. What does it matter that someone is (or wants to be) greater than others, if every man and woman will be salted with fire? It does not resolve, however, the question of what this symbolic act really means. The meaning should be something common to all people.

Being subject to the judgment of God is certainly something that unites all humans. This interpretation goes well with the precedent verses (9:42–48) but requires a reinterpretation of 9:50, where salt is something definitely positive (“salt is good”). However, if we follow the traditional link between salt and peace, Jesus’ apprehension about the salt losing its taste would sound very well in context, being a reference to the argument between the disciples at the beginning of the passage.

If the salt means simply peace, two things must be noted. Firstly, it is not the result of human efforts, but it is the gift of God: this is indicated by the passive form ( $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\iota\sigma\theta\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ ) from 9:49, which should be read as *passivum divinum*. On the other hand, maintaining this peace is up to the disciples of Jesus, since they are admonished by him for failing to do so.

Maintaining peace, however, is not all that easy and requires effort. Jesus acknowledges this in speaking about salting *with fire*, which has connotations of suffering, pain, persecution and purification. Nevertheless, it is better to suffer this than to be subject to eternal punishment of hellfire mentioned in 9:42–48. This punishment is in the first place the sanction for scandal, that is a sin against others, which can be treated as breaching the peace: when there is peace inside a community, there is no space for scandals, and if there are scandals, peace is impossible.

This brings us back to the community of the disciples, leaving unresolved the problem of the universal application of 9:49, indicated by  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ . The key to

its understanding may lay in the use of the future tense. Salting *everyone* with fire refers to the eschatological times. At the moment of speaking, the disciples are those who have salt in themselves and therefore are obliged to preserve the peace, so that through the testimony of their life this peace will be spread in the world. If we accept this interpretation, the whole speech Mk 9:35–50 will be read as even more reproachful towards the disciples. Instead of being witnesses of peace, they become its anti-witnesses. Therefore Jesus reminds them that *everyone* will be salted with fire, so there is no need to boast, compete for the first places or create divisions against others. The disciples should be more open to each other and to other people, motivated by the love of Jesus and should not seek their own fame or profits.

## 6. Alegoric interpretations

The Fathers of the Church rarely commented on the Gospel of Mark. However, when they did, they tried to understand Mk 9:49 in the context of Mk 9:42–50, joining the symbolism of salt and fire. Gregory the Great, followed by Bede the Venerable read salt as “the wisdom of the Word”<sup>30</sup> Pseudo-Jerome noted that without the knowledge of the Word of God one becomes stupid, as the body without salt decays<sup>31</sup>. Bede sees in salt the symbol of the sweetness of wisdom, and in the fire, the grace of the Holy Spirit, received by men and women by the baptism “of the Holy Spirit and fire”<sup>32</sup>. It is worth noting that the connection of salt with baptism was maintained by the Roman liturgy until the reform after II Vatican Council: catechumen received a grain of salt in the mouth, with the words: “Accept the salt of wisdom, may it give you favour in eternal life”<sup>33</sup> A commentator from the eleventh century, Bruno of Segui applied the parallel of salting the sacrifices to the leaders of the Church who should be “conditioned with salt” that is to do everything according to reason and order<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Gregorius I, *Liber regulae pastoralis*, II, 4. Cf. Beda Venerabilis, *In Marci evangelium expositio*, sent. 1659: *Per sal quippe verbi sapientia designata*.

<sup>31</sup> (Pseudo-)Hieronymus, *Expositio quattor evangeliorum: In evangelium secundum Marcum*, PL 30, 564: *sicut vormis caro perit sine sale, ita et omnis homo sine scientia Dei infatuetur*.

<sup>32</sup> Beda Venerabilis, *In Marci evangelium expositio*, sent. 1640–1.

<sup>33</sup> *Accipe sal sapientiae; propitiatio sit tibi in vitam aeternam. Pontificale Romanum*, 1962, Appendix, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bruno Astensis, *Commentaria in Marcum*, PL 165, 323: *Omnis Ecclesiae rector et doctor talis esse debet, qui et sale sit conditus, et sapiens et discretus; qui utiliter cuncta pro-*

The same Bruno tried to disarm the paradox of “salting with fire” by explaining that in fact both salt and fire signify the same thing, that is wisdom<sup>35</sup>. On the other hand, both fire and salt preserve against worms, mentioned in Mk 9:48, and in the Vulgate version also in 9:44 and 9:46; the triple repetition of the same, shocking verse from Is 66:24 must have had a serious impact on the interpretation of the neighbouring passages. Already in the second century the whole pericope was applied to the baptised who were not faithful to their vocation<sup>36</sup>. The worm itself was later read as the sin, especially the desires of flesh<sup>37</sup>.

Another line of interpretation saw salting with fire as testing (in analogy to testing metals). In the eleventh century such was the explanation of Theophylact of Ohrid<sup>38</sup>. According to Bede, this test will be performed by Jesus himself, who baptizes in the Holy Spirit and fire<sup>39</sup>.

Today, when attempts are made to interpret Mk 9:49 outside its context, and without the reference to the gloss from Leviticus, fire and salt tend to be seen as positive symbols, associated with wisdom, peace, self-denial and the Holy Spirit. In this way Mk 9:49 can be seen in connection with the words about “the baptism by fire and Holy Spirit”. The whole block Mk 9:33–50 contains the teaching addressed to the community of the disciples, so it can be treated as a manual for the future Church. What makes Christians different from other people? It has always been the baptism: on one hand, a fundamental act permitting calling oneself a disciple of Christ, on the other hand, the sacrament of equality, from its very nature the same for all Christians. Being baptised

*videat, cuncta secundum rationem et ordinem faciat. Quod quidem lex ipsa significat, quae omnem victimam salire jubet.*

<sup>35</sup> Bruno Astensis, *Commentaria in Marcum*, PL 165, 323: *Numquid enim ignis est sal, ut eo aliquid saliat? Sicut enim sapientia sal dicitur, quia mentes nostrae ex ea condiuntur, ita et ignis vocatur, quia ab ea illuminantur. Si igitur ignis est sapientia, et sapientia sal; ergo et ignis est sal. Igne ignis salietur, quod sapientia salitur.*

<sup>36</sup> 2 *Clementis*, VII, 6: “For as concerning them that have not kept the seal, He saith: «Their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched»” (tr. J.B. Lightfoot).

<sup>37</sup> Beda Venerabilis, *In Marci evangelium expositio*, sent. 1636: *Caro et sanguis vermes creat, quia delectatio carnalis cui condimentum continentiae non resistit poenam luxoriosis generat aeternam.*

<sup>38</sup> Theophylactus, *Enarratio in Evangelium Marci*, PG 123, 593: Πᾶς γὰρ, φησὶ, πῦρ ἀλισθήσεται, τουτέστι, δοκιμασθήσεται.

<sup>39</sup> Beda Venerabilis, *In Marci evangelium expositio*, sent. 1650: *Ignis autem qui sacrificia in altari consumet ille est utique de quo Iohannes ait, ipse vos baptizabit in Spiritu Sancto et igne, per quem nostra bona opera (...) perfici valeant, (...) vel ignis tribulationis, quo patientia fidelium (...) exercet.*

is a great distinction, but it comes with two dangers: the first is being content with what has been achieved already and the lack of further spiritual development, the other is the contempt for other people.

The reminder that *everyone* will be salted with fire should serve as a warning against both these dangers. It cannot mean that everyone will be baptized, but rather that everyone (baptized and non-baptized alike) will be somehow tried and purified. The community of the disciples of Christ should be based on baptism, and not on seeking honours and distinctions, especially because great rewards may be given to the people mentioned by Jesus who do not belong to this community: children and other people assisting the disciples, whereas Christians by their sins and by breaking the peace inside their community risk being thrown into “inextinguishable fire”.

During his entire journey to Jerusalem Jesus explains to his disciples what it means to follow the suffering Messiah. The poetic expression about fire and salt was meant to strengthen their awareness of the need for suffering, sacrifices and self-denial. The trials and persecutions will come both from outside their community and from within, but they are obliged to defend its unity, based on baptism, which is the sign of the eschatological gathering of humanity around Jesus Christ.

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