

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Theology Faculty Publications

Theology

2007

The Gift of Myrrh to a Church that Smells

Martin F. Connell

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mconnell@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/theology_pubs



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Connell, Martin F. "The Gift of Myrrh to a Church that Smells." *Studia Liturgica* 37, no. 2 (2007): 217-233.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

The Gift of Myrrh to a Church That Smells

by

Martin F. Connell*

I. The Aroma of Christ to God

Near the start of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes:

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2:14-16)

This passage is memorable for its sharp images of the “fragrance” and “aroma of Christ to God,” yet these are nearly always interpreted as metaphorical, not as actual smells of and among the Corinthians, but merely the thought or image of smell. Yet in this earliest stratum of Christian worship—the letter was written just a generation after the death of Jesus, somewhere in the years 55 to 57—might smell actually have been a corporal, communal phenomenon of Christian experience and worship? If the worshiping community in ancient Achaia smelled, that social aspect of their ritual life would have been the hook for Paul as he connected his theology of salvation to the corporal and liturgical life of the Corinthian church.

In the first chapter of Diane Ackerman’s *A Natural History of the Senses*, the first sentence is, “Nothing is more memorable than a smell.”¹ Nothing more anamnetic, a liturgist might add. More than the other four senses, smell vitally revives emotions and experiences of one’s past, a harkening that precedes thought. Smells transport us to other places, terrestrial and celestial. Some anthropologists, Ackerman writes, posit that the joy we get from kissing is as much from the smell of the other person’s body as from the tactile sensation of one’s lips on flesh,² which

*Dr. Martin F. Connell is Associate Professor in the Department and School of Theology at Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. He may be contacted at MConnell@csbsju.edu.

¹ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 5.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

itself lends a new appreciation for the imperative to “Greet one another with the kiss of love” as in 1 Peter 5:14 and “Greet one another with a holy kiss” at the end of Paul’s letters.³

Coming upon a particular smell, even before any words describe or explain it, we are brought back automatically to the place where we last, or first, smelled it, whether it is the smell of the housedress of a grandmother as she hugged a toddler, an unfiltered cigarette smoked on the front steps by a neighbor, or the soiled diaper of one’s daughter. In Ackerman’s words, “Hit a tripwire of smell, and memories explode all at once,” for “smell is the most direct of our senses.”⁴ The depth and complexity of the phenomena of smell, then, is engraved on human life and so might it have been in early Christian worship. The physical sensations of worship confirm the transformations, by preaching and ritual, that happen there, and this is no less so of smell than of hearing, sight, taste, and touch. The counsels of the gospel of Jesus Christ are united with the efficacy of smell’s tenacity in human society. Yet smell is rarely, if ever, taken up in Christian theology as manifesting God’s proximity and presence.

Just a generation after Columbus sailed westward in search of, among other things, new and exotic aromas of the New World, the Reformation was underway. Thereafter in mainline Protestant traditions, hygiene and censoring the body and its senses were appraised as bringing believers closer to the divine. A century after Columbus, philosopher-knight Francis Bacon (1561–1626), in his *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Human and Divine* (1605), wrote with a historical sweep that “cleanness of body was ever deemed to proceed from a due reverence to God.”⁵ The link between hygiene and God was then wrought into a popular phrase by Anglican priest and Methodist founder John Wesley (1703–1791), who, preaching on apparel and jewelry at the end of 1786, used the familiar adage, “Cleanliness is indeed next to Godliness.”⁶ So in much of Christian practice in the West thereafter, restraint of smell gradually became a testament to proximity to the divine.

Studying closely how authors in the New Testament wrote of myrrh (μύρρον), I will raise the question of whether the Christian aversion to smell is true to the canon’s testimony. Though myrrh is usually known only as one of the three gifts

³ For “holy kiss,” see Rom 16:16, 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, and 1 Thess 5:26. For studies of the kiss, see L. Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship*, Alcuin Grow 36 (Cambridge: Grove, 1996), and Michael Philip Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

⁴ Ackerman, 5, 10.

⁵ *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed, s.v. “Bacon, Francis, English philosopher and statesman.”

⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 88, “On Dress” (based on 1 Pet 3:3-4) in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3: Sermons III, 71-114, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 248-61, here at 249.

of the magi (Matt 2:1-12), it is mentioned in other narratives, with myrrh's smell as the cardinal quality of its use in New Testament literature. By looking at these narratives, one can reconsider the gift of myrrh and with it the sense of smell as an essential component of Christian experience in society and worship.

A secondary issue considers how the unique sensory qualities of myrrh are blurred by vernacular translations of the Bible, which have in general combined the three oils of the Greek New Testament—olive oil (έλαιον), chrism (χρίσμα), and myrrh (μύρον)—as they are rendered by the generic words “oil” or “ointment,” obfuscating the unique qualities and uses of the particular ointments.

II. Myrrh in the Ancient World

Appreciation of the sense of smell in the earliest Christian tradition pivots around recognizing the importance of myrrh within New Testament narratives and theology. The odd English word “myrrh” is merely the transliteration of the Greek μύρον, made from tree sap, and used millennia ago in making perfumes and as an ingredient in soap and aromatic oils.⁷ Native to South Arabia and northeastern Africa, to Somalia and Ethiopia in particular,⁸ myrrh was commonly found in the eastern Mediterranean world, in the Palestinian lands of Jesus' life and ministry, and in the communities around the Sea for which the books of the New Testament were written.⁹

One of the reasons why the mentions of myrrh in the Bible are not as memorable as in the narrative of the magi is because, except for the narrative of Matthew's itinerant astrologers, translators have usually chosen a generic word. Appreciable for accessibility to hearers and readers of the gospel, they erase how the qualities of one *particular* oil, myrrh, are different from those of other oils used in societies of antiquity, especially when ointments were incorporated into social rituals generally or Christian rituals in particular. Moreover, as the magi's myrrh sticks in the imagination because of its poetic specificity, more accessible vocabulary does not so engage the imagination. As people remember “German Shepherd” more than “dog,” “Dutch elm” more than “tree,” “Hamlet” more than “Everyman” or a “play by Shakespeare,” Christians have remembered “myrrh” more deeply than “ointment.”

⁷ On the geography and transport of myrrh in the ancient world, see Gus W. Van Beek, “Frankincense and Myrrh,” *Biblical Archeologist* 23 (1960) 70-94.

⁸ William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 481.

⁹ Matt 2:11, 26:6, 26:9, 26:12; Mark 14:3, 14:4, 14:5, 14:8, 15:23; Luke 7:37, 38, 46, 23:56; John 11:2, 12:3, 12:5, 19:39; and Rev 18:13.

Because of its source from trees, myrrh is made with vegetable oil rather than animal fat, and sweet-smelling minerals or spices were added to enhance the body's reception and memory's recognition of it. Myrrh was used primarily in cultic contexts for embalming a corpse or at times as medicinal ointment for the still-living sick.¹⁰ Before Christianity, myrrh was used by Jews for the same purposes, sometimes for religious reasons, as illustrated in the Book of Exodus, where the Lord prescribes to Moses how to prepare myrrh and what it would mean:

The LORD said to Moses, "Take the finest spices: five hundred shekels of *liquid myrrh*, half as much of sweet-smelling cinnamon, that is, two hundred and fifty, and two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, five hundred of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hint of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. . . . You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. And you shall say to the people of Israel, 'This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured upon the bodies of ordinary men, and you shall make no other like it in composition; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people.'" (30:22-25, 29-33, RSV)

The prescriptions of the Torah reveal here that among Jews in antiquity myrrh was a fine spice, used ritually in liquid and solid forms. The Jewish regulations for the composition of holy myrrh determined how such an oil was blended "by the perfumer," so that, as repeated in the passage, the *smell* of myrrh was a cardinal aspect of its employment in rites. One person was deputed by the community for making the anointing oil of myrrh and another for performing the rite on non-priests, the tasks prescribed by the Lord through Moses.¹¹

III. Myrrh-Bearing Magi (Matt 2:1-12)

For Christians, myrrh is most commonly recalled as one of three gifts carried by the wise men to the temporary shelter of Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus.¹² In a narrative depicted only by the evangelist Matthew, one hears, "Opening their

¹⁰ *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), s.v. "μύρρον, μυρίζω."

¹¹ Propp, 481-84.

¹² On the ancient, pre-Christian use of myrrh, see *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 1620.

treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (2:11). A staple prop in Christmas pageants throughout the Christian world, the magi’s gift of myrrh is often mentioned in Christmas memories and hymns, as, for example, in “We Three Kings,” written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (1820–1891), Episcopal church musician and teacher at the General Theological Seminary in New York City.¹³

1. We three kings of Orient are,
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Refrain

O star of wonder, star of light,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light!

4. Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.¹⁴

Hopkins’s summary of myrrh in this fourth stanza of the hymn captures the juxtaposition of life and death in the Christian tradition generally, but also in the theology of the first Gospel’s ominous infancy narrative. For while the use of myrrh in the birth story of Matthew at first seems odd because of the ointment’s usual employment in preparing dead bodies for burial, a close reading of the infancy narrative reveals that the evangelist’s tale is not really as bright as the cheerful scene staged in churches and schools and thereby lodged into imaginations.

¹³ *The Hymnal 1940 Companion*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1951) 468-69.

¹⁴ *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America 1940* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1940, 1943) no. 51. The hymn adds characters to the narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, which neither numbers nor names the magi. In the hymn, stanza two is given to the first magus (traditionally identified as Gaspar or Caspar), stanza three to the second (Melchior), and the third gift, myrrh, accorded to the third magus (Balthasar). Though not reflected in Hopkins’ text, after the eighth century continents were also assigned to the three: the first magus from Europe, the second from Asia, and the third from Africa. So the myrrh is usually in the hands of the black magus, Balthasar, who—at times indicating an anti-black racism—is usually depicted at the back, farthest from the infant and the salvation his advent occasions. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Magi.” See also Martin Connell, *Eternity Today*, vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 2006) 147-98, and on the races of the magi in particular, see 186-91; and id., “That Negro Balthasar,” *GIA Quarterly* 16.1 (Fall, 2005) 11-12.

In its first two chapters, the Gospel of Matthew describes the baby's father's initial decision to divorce his pregnant wife quietly (1:19), Herod's scheme to destroy the newborn infant (2:13), the family's flight to Egypt to escape the king's "furious rage" (2:13-15), and the slaughter of all male children in Bethlehem two years old or under (2:16-18). The joy of the birth of Jesus to Joseph and Mary, a joy more evident in Luke's story,¹⁵ is set in a context of destruction, death, and terrorism in the Middle East, making the evangelist's employment of myrrh, the ointment of death, in the narrative of the magi fit the context and anticipate the other end of the first Gospel, where King Herod's earlier designs to take the life of Jesus in Bethlehem are realized by the machinations of another ruler, Pilate.¹⁶

Juxtaposed to the sobriety of Matthew's tale, the "sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying" of Hopkins's hymn is true to the theology of the gospel from which it drew, which, like the hymn's myrrh, recognizes the element's "bitter perfume," that "breathes a life of gathering gloom."

IV. The Anointing at Bethany in the Gospel of Mark (14:3-9)

After the popular story of the visit of the magi, the next story of the New Testament in which myrrh is featured appears earliest in the Gospel of Mark. The Greek words for myrrh— three nouns, one verb—appear in italics:

While he [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of *ointment* of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the *ointment* thus wasted? For this *ointment* might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has *anointed* my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Hearers cannot recognize correspondence between Matthew's infancy narrative and this synoptic anointing because the word is translated differently, covering up the ritual significance of myrrh, as it is relegated to the same functions—physical, social, theological—as other oils, different oils, which are also translated by "ointment."

¹⁵ See Luke 1:14; 1:44; 1:47; 1:58; 2:10; 2:13-14; 2:20, for example.

¹⁶ Matt 27:1-2, 11-54.

The frequency of “myrrh” in the story above—four times in seven verses—reveals the importance the author accorded it in his literary, theological art. More consequential liturgically is the *verb* of the penultimate verse, that “she has *anointed* my body” (14:8). Although grammatically awkward—for there is no English verb to convey an action using myrrh—the verse would be literally (if badly) translated as “she has *myrrhed* my body beforehand for burial.” This captures two important elements: first, and again, that the oil in the social action was not generic, but a particular kind of oil with ancient ritual and theological carriage; second, that myrrh was not only a thing, an object, in the early church, but an active *social* medium of religious significance related to the proximate death of Jesus, the “Christ,” that is, the “Anointed.”

This verb form of Mark 14:8 is important also because it indicates that at the earliest stages of Christian ritual development sacred rituals were depicted as social actions—described with verbs, as $\mu\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ here—and later evolve in Christian literature, even in the span during which the New Testament is being written, into objects, or holy things, that is, $\mu\acute{o}\rho\omicron\nu$, “myrrh.”¹⁷ Mark 14:8 is the only place in the New Testament where “myrrh” appears as a verb. It is not mere happenstance that only the earliest gospel has “myrrh” as a verb, for as Christian rituals developed, their sacred character was accorded objects rather than the dynamic actions in which they were used.

The story of this anointing of Jesus was proclaimed and received in other late first-century communities, in the communities of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in particular; yet in Matthew’s version, the importance of the social implications of myrrh seem to have diminished, for, as mentioned, the verb and its action are gone and only the object, “myrrh,” was included in Matthew’s version (26:6-13). Moreover, the number of uses of the word “myrrh” was cut in half, from the evangelist Mark’s four to Matthew’s two (at 26:7 and 26:12).

V. The Anointing at Bethany in the Gospel of John (12:1-8)

The story of the woman anointing Jesus’ body before death also appears in the Gospel of John with much of the same vocabulary as in Matthew and Mark, including mention of the alabaster jar and myrrh (the latter in italics).

¹⁷ As with many liturgical objects in the early period, their original manifestation was not as an object but as a social action—“preaching” before “gospel,” “being clothed” before “garment,” “baptizing” and “being baptized” before “baptism,” “giving thanks” ($\epsilon\upsilon\chi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\epsilon}\omega$) before “bread” and “wine” ($\epsilon\upsilon\chi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\iota}\alpha$)—and generally so for all three oils in this taxonomy of anointing and oils in the New Testament, $\mu\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ before $\mu\acute{o}\rho\omicron\nu$, $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omega$ before $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\alpha\iota\omicron\nu$, $\chi\rho\acute{\iota}\omega$ before $\chi\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\mu\alpha$.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the *ointment*. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, “Why was this *ointment* not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

Here the smell of myrrh is explicit, bearing the religious, communal, olfactory experience as in the Old Testament, for “the house was filled with the fragrance of the *ointment*” (12:3), revealing the ritual significance of the engagement of the senses and the potency of the smell, enough to fill the dwelling.

Myrrh is mentioned three times—twice at 12:3 and once at 12:5—all of them nouns, *μύρον*. One difference in John’s version is that while the story happens in the same place as in Mark and Matthew, that is, in Bethany, it is not in the same residence; no longer in the house of Simon the leper, it is now in the house of Lazarus, whom Jesus just raised from the dead (11:1-44). The woman anointing Jesus is no longer without a name, as in Matthew and Mark, but she is Mary, the sister of Lazarus (12:3), with whom the community would have been familiar either personally or ritually from her role in the story proclaimed at worship; it is the dwelling of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha that is suffused with the smell of myrrh.

Another difference in the Johannine account is that Mary anoints not Jesus’ head, as in Mark (14:3) and Matthew (26:7), but his feet. Perhaps this reflects a ritual difference between how myrrh was employed in the rites of the communities of John’s Gospel and those of Mark and Matthew. Such a suggestion is merely conjectural, not established by the story itself, though the ritual significance of feet to the community of John is apparent in the narrative of the following chapter, in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples (13:1-20).

VI. The Anointing in the House of a Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50)

While the anointing of Jesus by the woman appears in the Gospel of Luke (the longest of the four versions), there the woman, as in John, anoints Jesus’ feet rather than his head (7:38). Luke depicts the anointing woman uniquely, however, for

she is “a sinner” (7:37), poignant especially because the scene takes place in the house of a Pharisee. Moreover, the Lukan narrative takes place not just before the death of Jesus, as in the other three Gospels, but relatively early in Jesus’ ministry (that is, in the seventh of the Gospel’s twenty-four chapters).

The confrontation with Jesus in Luke is not because the myrrh is expensive and squandered in the woman’s ministry to Jesus—emphasized in Matthew 26:7, Mark 14:3, John 12:3—but because Jesus does not recognize the anointer as a sinner, which causes the host Pharisee to doubt Jesus’ prophetic gift (7:39), and his claim that he is able to forgive her sins (7:48-49). Jesus’ ministry of forgiveness of sins and commensality with outsiders, like the woman here, are characteristic of the third Gospel. In the narrative, as before, “myrrh” (μύρρον) is highlighted:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house, and took his place at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of *ointment*, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the *ointment*. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “What is it, Teacher?” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with *ointment*. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The story has enough ingredients in common with the two above to know that it clearly drew from the same narrative source (or sources); yet the evangelist

Luke, whose storytelling skills are often better than those of his gospel-writing peers, edited the story for his own christological purposes, revealing who Jesus was for the community.

Regarding the context of the ritual act of anointing the woman performs for Jesus, the immediately apparent change from the other Gospels is that the story does not take place in the house of Simon the leper or in the house of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, but now in the house of a Pharisee (7:36), who at first welcomed Jesus to his table, but then questioned his knowledge of the “kind of woman” who kisses and touches him.¹⁸

Myrrh is mentioned three times (7:37, 38, 46), and the alabaster container for the expensive ointment is also mentioned, but, as with the translations already included, English translations use generic words—“oil” and “ointment” usually—rather than the more specific “myrrh,” thus yet again abandoning the unique significance of this particular oil.

VII. Myrrh after the Death of Jesus (Luke 23:55-56; John 19:39-40)

The only other narrative of the New Testament in which the smell of the myrrh is important is at the tomb of Jesus, with myrrh mentioned in the accounts of the Gospels of Luke and John. In Luke, just after Joseph of Arimathea has wrapped the body of the dead Jesus “in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid,” on the day of preparation, at the beginning of the sabbath (23:54), one hears: “The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments” (23:55-56).

The words for “spices and ointments” are ἀρώματα and μύρον, or “things that smell” and “myrrh.” The passage recalls Luke’s “woman of the city, who was a sinner” (7:37), who had anointed Jesus’ feet with myrrh much earlier in the Gospel. Indeed, myrrh is not mentioned in the Gospel of Luke between the story of the anointing in the house of the Pharisee (7:46) and here at the tomb after Jesus is dead (23:56). The juxtaposition of “myrrh” and “things that smell” is not odd, for, as noted above, in antiquity myrrh was often prepared with other aromatic oils and spices, contributing to its aroma; and so too at the tomb of Jesus.¹⁹ (In some circumstances, particularly in warm times and places, when dead bodies would

¹⁸ See François Bovon, *Luke 1*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 289-98.

¹⁹ Regarding a Christian theology of myrrh as related to its use as a preparation of a body for death, we recall that in the narrative of the woman who anoints Jesus with myrrh at Bethany (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13), Jesus mentions explicitly that “she has anointed my body beforehand for

decompose more rapidly—as, for example, one finds in the stench at the raising of Lazarus, John 11:39—the potent aroma of myrrh had the practical effect of covering up the odor of a decomposing corpse.)

In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus, having just secured permission from Pilate to take away the corpse of Jesus, came to the body “bringing a mixture of *myrrh* and aloes, about one hundred pounds weight” (19:39). Like myrrh, aloes were made from tree sap and used for burials. Unlike Mark and Matthew, with myrrh at the anointing at Bethany and not at the burial, or Luke, with no myrrh at the anointing but rather at the burial, the fourth Gospel mentions myrrh explicitly both at the anointing (12:3) and burial (19:30).

In summary, of the eighteen uses of “myrrh” words in the New Testament, thirteen are used in the four gospel versions of the woman anointing Jesus.²⁰ The remaining five are: one with the magi’s gold and frankincense (Matt 2:11); one referring to the soldiers offering the crucified Jesus “wine mixed with myrrh” to drink (Mark 15:23); two referring to the anointing of the body of Jesus after his death (as immediately above); and one, the last of this list and in the Bible, as the only mention of myrrh outside the Gospels, at Revelation 18:13, in which the author records evidence of the fall of Babylon. In the catalogue of the fallen city is an inventory of lavish items that are no longer purchased in Babylon, and myrrh is one of the items in the list.²¹

VIII. Myrrh, a Smell that Endures: A Hypothesis

The perceptibility of myrrh’s smell in the narratives and theology of the New Testament opens up the chance that other passages referring to smells, fragrances, or aromas had myrrh as a material link between the authors and the olfactory experiences of the communities for which they wrote. In the anointing of Jesus by Mary in the Gospel of John, the word the evangelist uses for the “fragrance”

burial” (Mark 14:8) and that “she has done it to prepare me for burial” (Matt 26:12); yet in neither of these synoptic gospels is the myrrh explicitly mentioned at the burial. (In Matthew no spices or oils are mentioned at the burial site, and in Mark only “aromatics” are mentioned, not myrrh.) The two evangelists who have Jesus mention explicitly that the woman anointed him with myrrh to prepare his body for burial do not complement this by mentioning myrrh at the burial with Joseph of Arimathea and the women. Yet in Luke, where the narrative of the anointing does *not* have Jesus explain the woman’s anointing with myrrh as a preparation for burial, the myrrh is named explicitly in the narrative at the tomb.

²⁰ One of the thirteen, John 11:2, does not happen at the anointing but refers to Lazarus’s sister as the one who anointed Jesus’ feet with myrrh by using her hair.

²¹ For commentary on myrrh among this list of things in the fallen Babylon, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, Word Biblical Commentary 52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 961-1021, with references to other such catalogues of antiquity, at 978-83, and on myrrh in particular, at 1001.

with which the “house was filled” is οσμή.²² The choice of οσμή is important when its use elsewhere in the New Testament is considered, for this is the word translated as “fragrance” in the passage of 2 Corinthians at the beginning of this essay, where the apostle gave “Thanks to God, who . . . through us spreads the *fragrance* of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2:14).

Because the word for “fragrance” in Paul’s letter is the same word as in the Gospel of John (οσμή), it seems unlikely that Paul or the evangelist John would have used the word in such significant parts of their works had smell not been a common sensory, social phenomenon in the communities for which they wrote.²³ In John, οσμή depicts the result of the action of Mary, who anointed Jesus’ feet, by which “the house was filled with the *fragrance* of the myrrh.”

A further indication toward this tentative suggestion of a link between the smell of myrrh in the Gospel of John and the fragrance mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians is the rhetoric of the passage, in which Paul mentions that the aroma was both “among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a *fragrance* from death to death, to the other a *fragrance* from life to life.” At first this seems to be an odd parallelism, matching “those who are being saved” with “a *fragrance* from death to death,” and “those who are perishing” with “a *fragrance* from life to life.” Yet it is less odd when readers know that myrrh was used to anoint a body when death was near or after death had already taken place, and that the former was true of Jesus at the moment in the Gospel of John when the woman anoints Jesus’ feet, which happens just before the Johannine passion narrative is about to begin.

The presence of the risen Christ in the assembled church smelling the liturgy serves to deepen appreciation of myrrh in particular and the sense of smell in general as a cohering social agent in acts of communal thanksgiving.

IX. Translations Erasing the Body and Its Smells

The word “fragrance” (οσμή) appears only six times in the New Testament, half of them in the 2 Corinthians passage above, with one of the remaining three in the Johannine story of the anointing of Jesus’ head (12:3). The other two are

²² See *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1261, which states that οσμή frequently referred to foul smells.

²³ The association of smells and myrrh is explicit in the words of Wisdom in the Old Testament, where she speaks of herself: “Like cassia or camel-thorn I was redolent of spices (οσμή); I spread my fragrance (εὐωδία) like choice myrrh” (Sirach 24:15). The juxtaposition of οσμή and εὐωδία here has a rub, for the former was usually associated with a foul smell and the latter with a pleasant smell. So, too, as below, are the two juxtaposed in New Testament usage, though translations generally erase the rub by making one English word of the two Greek words oddly juxtaposed, as here in Sirach.

significant for assessing the meaning of smell in the rites of early Christian communities. Paul, in the Letter to the Ephesians, commands the church to “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a *fragrant* offering and sacrifice to God” (5:2).²⁴ In 2 Corinthians the fragrance was the community, while here in Ephesians it is Christ, who, by the apostle’s qualifiers, “loved us and gave himself up for us.”

The final (sixth) appearance of “fragrance” is also in a letter of Paul, where, at the end of his Letter to the Philippians, he thanked the community: “I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a *fragrant* offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (4:18). In Ephesians and here, there is a link between the fragrance and “sacrifice.” These indications do not make the link between the “fragrance” and myrrh sure, but they admit this as a possible explanation for the apostle’s use of “fragrance” in 2 Corinthians.

A final indication about the gravity of smell and how it is diminished in translations is wrought from consideration of the word “aroma,” εὐωδία. Although in English it is similar to and perhaps interchangeable with “fragrance,” the word “aroma” is distinguishable in Greek. It appears only three times in the New Testament, but all three are in (or near) the very verses in which Paul mentions “fragrance” (οσμῆ). Below the translations are mine, for English translations of these verses generally merge the two words “fragrance” (οσμῆ) and “aroma” (εὐωδία) into one English word:

- “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the *fragrance* of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the *aroma* of Christ to God” (2 Cor 2:14-15).
- “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a *fragrant aroma* and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2); the RSV elides “fragrant aroma” into “fragrant” and adds “offering,” which is not present.
- “The gifts you sent [were] a *fragrant aroma*, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (Phil 4:18), which has the same elision and addition in the RSV here as in Ephesians, from “fragrant aroma” to “fragrant offering,” omitting εὐωδία, “aroma.”

²⁴ Below I argue that the insertion of “offering” here without warrant from the original text obscures the author’s emphasis on smell by reducing two words of smell to one. This reduction is complemented by an augmenting of the notion of “offering” and “sacrifice,” for the translator inserts two words of sacrifice where the Greek author used only one. *Contra* Gerhard Delling, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, s.v. “οσμῆ,” no. 2 in particular.

Though Paul used two words to emphasize smell in the experience of the community, translators—perhaps catechized and formed in communities with people and things that did or do not smell, unlike those in Corinth—merged the apostle’s double dose of smell, assuming that this was sufficient for comprehension by less odorized Anglophones.²⁵ I am arguing that the redundancy in each of the three passages was not a result of the apostle’s carelessness, for he carries this from the Jewish tradition and its scriptures; the two Greek words referring to fragrance and aroma—οσμὴ and εὐωδία, respectively—appear in all three places in Paul’s letters even though English translators generally settle for the corporally straitened, less emphatically odiferous rendering.

X. Conclusion

In itself, perhaps, the foregoing argument about how smell might have been a cardinal aspect of Christian worship in some first-century churches seems of minor consequence. But with the Bible still as the church’s guide to help humanity discover and respond to the life of God, the investigation and its queries bear on Christian worship, preaching, and life today.

First: about oils and their smells in worship. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox liturgical traditions, oils are still a vital part of communities at prayer. For Catholics, oils are consecrated annually at the chrism mass, ordinarily celebrated by the bishop on Holy Thursday morning at the cathedral. The New Testament reflects the variety of oils used in antiquity; and there is still a variety of oils used in the church: the oil of the sick (for anointing in the sacrament of the sick), the oil of catechumens (for anointing in exorcisms of those being formed for initiation), and chrism (for anointing after baptism and at the ordination of priests and bishops).²⁶ The visibility of oils at the cathedral and in parishes helps Christians appreciate their unique and long-standing significance in the liturgical tradition.

Preaching and catechesis about oils and their smells in worship form the church. This presupposes a lavish use of oil to assist church members, neophytes and others in appreciating the ancient sign and its tradition. Catechesis about the smell of the oil would be particularly apt for preaching in the Easter season, when in the early church bishops taught retrospectively about the physical experience of the Easter rites, emphasizing sensory experience, which included teaching about smell when

²⁵ The phrase juxtaposing the two words for smell was not original in Paul, for it appears in a number of passages in the Old Testament; see Exod 29:18, 25, 41; Lev 1:9, 13, and Ezek 20:41, as from Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco: Word Books, 1983) 206-7.

²⁶ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., s.v. “chrism mass.”

they reflected with the neophytes on the just-past experience of the rites and the use of oil after baptism.

Preachers today might carry on that august practice of early leaders who taught from the physical matter and behaviors of the rites. The ancients emphasized the smell of the oil more than any other aspect of the anointing tradition, as in the preaching, for example, of Saint Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), who referred to the anointing after baptism as the “smell of the resurrection,”²⁷ or, even more, in the *Hymns of Paradise* by Saint Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), in which the smell of salvation is described beautifully and frequently.²⁸ The very smell and sight of the oil used in the post-baptismal anointing would evoke memories of God’s providence and care, and bring together symbolically the people of God whose bodies and vocations were marked with it.

In the same traditions, the smell of incense is associated with prayer and with incense’s smoke ascending to heaven as prayer rising to God. Christian traditions in the West that use incense at worship decrease over time, yet worship that curbs the corporeal, sensory participation by excising the engagement of the sense of smell—of the assembly, of oils, of incense—curbs the act of celebration of thanksgiving as the Body of Christ, the church.

Second: hearing of people dressed in their “Sunday best,” one imagines baptized believers ready for church, clothed in fine raiment, men in suits, women dressed and bedecked with jewelry, many enveloped in clouds of cologne and perfume as they make their way to prayer and worship. Such finely dressed, assembling church-goers might blithely accept that commercially developed and engineered scents—advertised and marketed for sales to the masses—are somehow apt for Christian worship, even more fitting than collective scents of human bodies, individual or communal. Attention to the witness and theology of the New Testament churches on myrrh and its aromas would lend the church criteria for assessing the appropriateness of scents in church, particularly as they consider the application of artificial, commercial scents, masking natural aromas by adding non-natural aromas to the body.

²⁷ The phrase used by Ambrose was *ut odorem resurrectionis haurirent*; see his *De mysteriis* 6.29, as in O. Faller, ed., *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 73 (Vindobonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1955) pt. 1, 211.

²⁸ In particular, aromas and perfumes are mentioned in Hymn 1.5; 2.8; 4.7; 5.5, 9; 6.4, 6, 24; 7.3, 10, 21; 9.6, 17, 27; 11.9, 12, 14; and 15.10, 17, as in *Hymnes su le Paradis*, Sources Chrétiennes 137, trans. René Lavenant, intro. and notes François Graffin (Paris: Cerf, 1968) passim. Some of Saint Ephrem’s “Hymns on Paradise” are available in English translation in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist, 1989). For a study of this aspect of the work of Ephrem, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “St. Ephrem on the Scent of Salvation,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 49 (1998) 109-28.

Third: on the relation of worship and the Bible. On the popular level and in scholarly interpretations of the Bible, the general stance regarding the origins of Christian rituals is that the Bible records what Jesus and his followers did, and the ritual tradition carries on those behaviors in worship. In fact, for the most part, the New Testament did not inform worship at that earliest time, but the other way around: the New Testament was shaped by worshiping communities among whose members were authors of works that were eventually accepted into the Bible. The early church worshiped with its behaviors and symbols not because the stories are in the New Testament, but the stories and symbols are there, at least in part, as fruits of memories of the life of Jesus combined with the experience of early worshiping churches.

Though the positive contribution of late nineteenth and early twentieth century biblical scholarship to liturgical studies and pastoral theology over the past century is immense, at times the disciplines of biblical studies have, as here, interpreted something as merely metaphorical based on no discernible criteria or method. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians (11:23-24), that “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body.’” Biblical scholarship generally finds “bread” here to be historically reliable, rather than metaphorical. It cannot be overlooked that bread is still part of the liturgical tradition of American Christian churches, with biblical commentators and translators in them. Commenting on “We are the aroma of Christ,” however, the same coterie of scholars interprets the apostle’s use of “aroma” as a metaphor. The criteria for “bread” as history and “aroma” as metaphor are to me not methodologically distinguishable by sciences of biblical criticism, and appear to be drawn in part from the contemporary liturgical and corporal experience of critics. It might be simply that commentators like bread in church, but smells not so much, a fine discernment, perhaps, but one that would more candidly be grounded in our cultural aversion to smell in social and communal life together rather than on biblical precedent and criticism.

A biblical discipline of liturgical criticism—which would see the texts of the Bible as sometimes manifesting the ritual lives of worshiping communities for which they were written—has never really been consistently employed in scholarship except when it sanctions rites that mainline Protestant churches still celebrate, namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But there are many passages of the New Testament that reveal ritual practices of the late first and early second centuries, though they are generally not deemed “real” or “historical” in criticism.

Fourth: the gift of biblical criticism from the academies of Protestant churches and their scholars was and remains immeasurable, a gift for which Catholics can

offer only comparatively meager thanks. But the bodily stoicism of some mainline traditions, cultures, and populations are reflected in the lack of corporal and sensory values in biblical criticism, manifested, in the matter of this essay, by the translation of the three Greek words for “myrrh,” “chrism,” and “olive oil” as one word, “ointment.” As a historian of Christian worship, I suggest that members of churches with anthropologies that manifest God’s presence in individual and social bodies persist in biblical criticism and translation so that the church and its canonical anthropologies are not thwarted. Gnostic, anti-body theologies rob the church of the truth that by grace the human Body is the common denominator of salvation, the primary, inescapable matter of salvation in Christ, a foundation of any theology of the Incarnation and the church’s sacraments. The truth and inerrancy of God’s word are in jeopardy when churches that celebrate the Body of Christ as made up of living, smelling bodies are silent.

“Glorify God in your Body,” the apostle Paul commands (1 Cor 6:20b), a Body that celebrates “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved” (2 Cor 2:14). As an imperative of the canon of Christian faith, the apostle’s words reveal that the Body of Christ has an aroma; it is a Body that smells, “thanks”—to close with the apostle’s words with which we began—“be to God.”