

Craig S. Keener
Why Did Disciples Anoint with Oil for Healing in Mark 6:13?

Abstract:

This short essay explores the cultural meanings behind the practice of anointing people with oil for healing within the context of scripture. This work is the result of research which is not being published elsewhere due to space limitations, but is considered significant and of interest to many in the Global Church today. While it does not fit the full definition of an academic article, it remains an essay which can clarify and illuminate the issue of anointing with oil for many leaders and laity in the church.

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Craig S. Keener is the M.F. and Ada Thompson Chair of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, KY.

When Jesus's disciples anointed the sick with oil for healing (Mark 6:13) they set precedent for following generations of Jesus's followers (James 5:14-15). But would people have understood why they were being anointed? What kind of oil was it, and what was its symbolic or literal function?

What kind of oil was it?

Along with grain and wine, oil was one of the dominant staples of ancient Israelite agriculture; the trio appears at least 18 times in the OT.¹ Ancients considered oil an absolutely necessary staple.² Olive oil characterized Mediterranean agriculture³ and supplied most dietary fats.⁴ Judea and Galilee produced olive oil for export,⁵ not least for Egypt and Arabia, which had fewer olive trees.⁶ By contrast, due to purity concerns, first-century Judeans and Galileans avoided buying oil from gentiles.⁷ Once mature, each olive tree can produce as many as fifteen gallons of oil biennially for centuries.⁸

Uses of oil

Oil was used in cooking, both to fry with and as an ingredient in the food itself.⁹ No one being anointed with oil, however, would have envisioned a culinary ritual, as anointing with oil was a regular part of hygiene. People in the Middle East also regularly lubricated their skin with olive oil, which is cool and soft, to protect against dryness.¹⁰ This was considered a natural part of caring for one's health,¹¹ often performed during bathing,¹² and Greek bathers normally brought their own olive oil to the baths.¹³ Although soaps of a sort existed,¹⁴ Romans used olive oil instead, after hot baths opened the pores.¹⁵ (Other substances were sometimes substituted for olive oil,¹⁶ and some condemned excess anointing as luxury.)¹⁷ Lacking soap in the modern sense, Greeks and Romans until late antiquity used oil and sometimes utensils for rubbing to clean their skin.¹⁸ Greeks regularly oiled their bodies also before exercises.¹⁹ After exercise or bathing they could scrape off their sweat and dirt with a strigil.²⁰

Judeans and Galileans also used oil to clean and anoint their skin,²¹ especially on their heads,²² not least to lubricate dry scalps. Some Galileans seem to have followed the Greek practice of scraping off sweat after activity.²³ One would abstain from anointing as well as washing as part of self-humiliation during fasting.²⁴ Along with washing, anointing could be used by a bride at her wedding²⁵ or for other special occasions.²⁶

Medical anointing

Related to its lubricating use, oil also was used on wounds.²⁷ The medicinal use seems a natural extension of its use in bathing, which was often combined with massage.²⁸ Herod the Great's physicians tried in vain to restore him from his deathbed by bathing him in warm oil.²⁹ Ancient pharmacists often used various oils in ointments, especially for external application.³⁰ Ancient thinkers prescribed oil for a much wider range of ailments than we would expect today, including hip pain and headaches,³¹ lung problems,³² malaria,³³ snake bite,³⁴ paralysis,³⁵ and epilepsy.³⁶ Gentiles also (at least sometimes) used it against spirit possession.³⁷ These practices were so widespread as to render suspect any ill-informed claims of narrower associations such as magic.

While this medical use of oil could well inform how people would understand the healing aspect of disciples anointing them, however, they would not envision the disciples as mere physicians treating them medically. Medicinal use would not normally yield such immediate results as to provide substantial and visible effects during the apostles' quick travels (Mark 6:30).

Symbolism

People traditionally used oil to consecrate someone for a special work for a deity. Symbolic anointings for office appear in the OT and in ancient Syria and Canaan.³⁸ Israelites used anointing to consecrate priests;³⁹ kings (by priests or often by prophets);⁴⁰ altars;⁴¹ sanctuaries;⁴² and so forth. Early Jewish followers of Jesus continued the practice of anointing with oil when praying for healings in their congregations (James 5:14).⁴³ While anointing to symbolize healing differs from anointing to consecrate for special service, it could still communicate entrusting the person to God.

Seeking to separate divine from natural treatments, however, may be more a modern Western preoccupation than an ancient one. In the ancient world, both were compatible and often appear together.⁴⁴ Divine healing often used physical instruments, such as laying on hands (e.g., Mark 1:41), spittle (e.g., 7:33), a staff (2 Kgs 4:29), washing (2 Kgs 5:10-14) or a poultice (2 Kgs 20:7; Isa 38:21). In subsequent history and recent times, even what we might today deem medically worthless remedies, applied alongside faith that God worked through them, have sometimes have proved effective.⁴⁵

People anointed themselves or others for various purposes. Because they often used olive and other oils in medicinal ointments, anointing could communicate concretely the idea of a healing substance. Given OT precedent for anointing for consecration, it could also communicate the sense of invoking God for healing.

Conclusion

Because of its widespread use in ancient health and hygiene—the first association that would occur to most people in Mediterranean antiquity—anointing readily communicated the idea of health. Because scripture already used oil for consecration, in the context of ministry, it also communicated the sense of invoking God. Just as Jesus communicated his intentions to a man who was deaf and partly mute by touching his ears and tongue and looking to heaven (Mark 7:33-34), so would anointing with oil communicate to those who were sick the disciples' intention to heal them in Mark 6:13. James 5:14-15 shows that early Christians carried on this practice, concretely expressing and embodying (as they did also through such physical practices as healing touch, holy kisses, and the Lord's Supper) what their accompanying faith intended.

End Notes

¹ See Deut 7:13; 11:14; 12:17; 14:23; 18:4; 28:51; 2 Chron 2:10, 15; Neh 5:11; 10:39; 13:5, 12; Jer 31:12 [LXX 38:12]; Hos 2:8, 22 [LXX 2:10, 24]; Joel 1:10; 2:19, 24; Hag 1:11; Jdt 11:13; Jub. 13:26; 26:31; Sib. Or. 3.243, 745; Philo *Spec. Laws* 1.141, 179; 4.98; *Virt.* 95; *Rewards* 107; Josephus *Ant.* 8.57, 141, 247; 10.162; 11.16; 14.408; *War* 1.299; 1QHa 18.26; 11Q14 f1.2.10; 11Q19 38.4; 60.6; along with other produce, 2 Kgs 18:32; 2 Chron 32:28; Ezra 7:22; Tob 1:7; Josephus *War* 7.296; cf. Jdt 10:5; Rev 6:6.

² Pliny *Nat.* 14.29.150; 23.34.69; Plutarch *Love of Wealth* 2, *Mor.* 523F; *Sib. Or.* 3.243; Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12-14 (where available); Helmuth Schneider, "Nutrition: Greece and Rome," *Brill's New Pauly*, 9:916-21 (here 919); David A. Fiensy, *The Archaeology of Daily Life: Ordinary Persons in Late Second Temple Israel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 145 (noting m. Peah 8:5; Ket. 5:8).

³ R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (9 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1955-64), 3:101-2.

⁴ Forbes, *Technology*, 3:101.

⁵ John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, *Jesus and his World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 220 (noting Josephus *War* 2.590-92); Michael Patella, "Seer's Corner: Food and Drink," *Bible Today* 41 (5, 2003): 302-7. For oil production around Jerusalem, see Lee I. Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B.C.E.-70 C.E.)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 346-47.

⁶ Rousseau and Arav, *World*, 221.

⁷ Fiensy, *Archaeology*, 282 (citing Josephus *Life* 74-76=*War* 2.591; cf. *Ant.* 12.120). Cf. Fiensy, *Archaeology*, 279, regarding Essenes (Josephus *War* 2.123; CD 12:15-17). The Mishnah may liberalize the prohibition (m. 'Abod. Zar. 2:6; Jordan D. Rosenblum, "Kosher Olive Oil in Antiquity Reconsidered," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 [3, 2009]: 356-65).

⁸ Rousseau and Arav, *World*, 220. On olives and olive oil, see further e.g., Pliny *Nat.* 15.1.1-15.8.34.

⁹ Galen *Properties of Foodstuffs* 1.3, K.490; 3.21, K.707.

¹⁰ F. Nigel Hepper, *Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Plants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 109; Fiensy, *Archaeology*, 279. See Ps 23:5 (LXX 22:5); 104:15 (LXX 103:15); cf. Philo *Dreams* 2.58. It was supposed to regulate skin temperature (Pliny *Nat.* 15.5.19). Anointed skin was visibly distinct from what was not (Thucydides 4.68.5; Matt 6:18).

¹¹ E.g., Pliny *N.H.* 14.29.150; Dio Chrysostom 52.1; Fronto *Eloquence* 1.4; *Ad M. Caes.* 4.5.3.

¹² E.g., Homer *Od.* 6.219-220; 6.227; 8.454; 10.364, 450; 17.88; 18.179; 23.154; Plutarch *Cimon* 1.6; cf. Pausanias 9.39.7. For washing and anointing hair, see Rolf Hirschmann, "Hygiene, personal," 6:604-5 in *Brill's New Pauly*, 604; Alexandra T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Charleston, S.C.: Tempus, 2000), 105.

¹³ Theophrastus *Char.* 30.8.

¹⁴ Martial *Epig.* 14.26-27.

¹⁵ Bronwyn Cosgrave, *The Complete History of Costume and Fashion from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (New York: Checkmark, 2000), 77.

¹⁶ In regions where such oil was less available people substituted other substances (Xenophon *Anab.* 4.4.13; Galen *Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.14, K.684; or, for a goddess, ambrosial oil in Homer *Od.* 8.364-65); on oil from other plants, see e.g., Pliny *Nat.* 15.7.28-32; cf. 12.60.130. One could also bathe and anoint oneself with aromatic or other substances (e.g., Jdt 10:3).

¹⁷ Pliny *Nat.* 15.5.19; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 77/78.41 (though cf. Dio Chrysostom's personal use during leisure in *Or.* 52.1). Self-disciplined Apollonius welcomed anointing and massage but insisted on cold water for his subsequent bathing (Philostratus *Vit. apoll.* 1.16).

¹⁸ F. Sherwood Taylor and Charles Singer, "Pre-Scientific Industrial Chemistry," 347-74 in *The Mediterranean Civilizations and the Middle Ages, c. 700 B.C. to c. A.D. 1500* (vol. 2 in *A History of Technology*; ed. Charles Singer, E. J. Holmyard, A. R. Hall and Trevor I. Williams; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 355.

¹⁹ See e.g., Aeschines *Timarchus* 138; Thucydides 1.6.5; Virgil *Aen.* 3.281; Philo *Names* 84; Epictetus *Disc.* 3.22.88; Dio Chrysostom 18.6; Plutarch *Cimon* 16.5; Crates *Ep.* 20; Diogenes *Ep.* 35.

²⁰ Cosgrave, *History of Costume*, 77; see e.g., Lucian *Lexiphanes* 2.

²¹ See Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 122, citing Ruth 3:3; Sus 1:17; POxy. frg. 840 2.8; b. Sabb. 41a.

²² t. Shebiit 6:9; Ab. R. Nat. 3A; b. Sanh. 101a; Shemuel Safrai, "Home and Family," *JPFC* 728-92 (here 743); cf. Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam 12:20; Ps 23:5; 141:5; Eccl 9:8; Ezek 16:9; Luke 7:46. The Essenes' reported aversion to oil is noted as exceptional (Josephus *War* 2.123) but seems confirmed archaeologically (Magness, *Stone*, 125).

²³ Ronny Reich, "A Note on the Roman Mosaic at Magdala on the Sea of Galilee," *SBFLA* 41 (1991): 455-58; Richard Bauckham, "Magdala as We Now Know It: An Overview," 1-67 in *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Period* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 34.

²⁴ M. Taan. 1:6; Yoma 8:1; y. Shab. 9:4; M.S. 2:1; cf. Apoc. Ab. 9:7; Byron R. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 38, citing *Sem.* 6:1. Cf. going without bathing or anointing during mourning in P.Oxy. 528.9-11; Croom, *Clothing*, 71. The prohibition of some rabbis during a sabbatic year (t. Ter. 10:10) pertained only within the bathhouse (y. Shebiit 8:2, §7).

²⁵ L.A.B. 40:6.

²⁶ Cf. Ps 45:7 (LXX 44:8). Mediterranean peoples sometimes employed anointing oil on special occasions (Martial *Epig.* 3.12; Josephus *Ant.* 19.239; b. Ket. 17b).

²⁷ Isa 1:6; Luke 10:34; m. Shab. 14:4; t. Shab. 12:12; Gen. Rab. 80:9; Celsus *Med.* 7.1.2; 8.4.19; 8.10.1E; Pliny *Nat.* 28.9.41 (with hair); Rousseau and Arav, *World*, 200, 221; Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (2d ed.; New York: Routledge, 2013), 189. For medicinal uses, see further Pliny *Nat.* 23.34.69—23.39.79 (esp. 23.39.79).

²⁸ Cf. Cosgrave, *History of Costume*, 50: Greeks used oils “for therapeutic reasons (both during massage and as medicine).” For proper Sabbath observance, rabbis separated everyday and medicinal uses (Str-B [ET] 2:13-14, noting m. Shab. 14:4; t. Shab. 12:12). Anointing could continue even when bathing proved inadvisable (Celsus *Med.* 4.5.3).

²⁹ Josephus *War* 1.657; *Ant.* 17.172.

³⁰ E.g., Dioscorides *Mat. Med.* 1.29-30 (in Udo Schnelle, with assistance by Manfred Lang and Michael Labahn, *Texte zum Markusevangelium: Neuer Wettstein; Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechenland und Hellenismus* 1.1.1 [New York: de Gruyter, 2008], 280); Celsus *Med.* 1.1.1; 1.2.7; 1.3.10; 1.4.2; 2.14.1, 4; 3.7.2A; 3.11.2; 3.18.8; 4.6.3-4; 4.31.8; 7.1.2; 8.4.19; Aretaeus *Therapeutics of Acute Diseases* 2.4, pp. 186, 187; 2.10, p. 199; 2.11, p. 201; *Cure of Chronic Diseases* 1.5, p. 223; 1.8, p. 223; 1.14, p. 226; 2.12, p. 236; Hippocrates *Fistulas* 10 (460); *Excision of the Fetus* 1 (514); 5 (518); *Ulcers* 22 (426); 24 (428); *Regimen in Acute Diseases* 65 (18L.); *Diseases* 3 (148); *Diseases of Women* 1.74.3 (156); 1.91.10 (220); 1.106 (230); 2.36 (320); 2.96.7 (394); 2.96.8; Hippocrates *Affections* 42 (252); *Nature of Women* 74 (404); 81 (406); 108 (424); cf. *Nature of Women* 97 (414); cf. L.A.E. 40:1. The physician may anoint hands before inserting them (Hippocrates *Diseases of Women* 2.38 (324; 147L.)). For use of oil internally as an emetic, see e.g., Aretaeus *Therapeutics of Acute Diseases* 2.5, p. 189.

³¹ Pliny *Nat.* 20.48.121 (with basil); Str.-B., 1:428-29; 2:11-12; followed in H. Schlier, “ἀλείφω,” *TDNT*, 1:229-32 (here 230; see further references in Schlier, “ἔλαιον,” *TDNT*, 2:470-72, here 472); Safrai, “Home,” 743 (citing t. Shab. 12:11-12; Ab. R. Nat. 12 A). For headaches, Celsus *Med.* 3.10.1.

³² Hippocrates *Internal Affections* 7 (184); *Places in Man* 17 (310). For a cold, cf. Celsus *Med.* 4.5.3-9.

³³ E.g., Celsus *Med.* 3.6.16; 3.11.2; 3.12.5; 3.14.1; 3.20.3; 3.22.5.

³⁴ Pliny *Nat.* 20.9.18 (along with turnip and wine).

³⁵ Celsus *Med.* 3.27.1D; cf. 3.27.2A.

³⁶ Celsus *Med.* 3.23.6-8.

³⁷ Schlier, “ἀλείφω,” 230, cites Celsus *Med.* 3.23. The evidence does not seem abundant, however.

³⁸ For the latter, see F. Hesse, “משח and משיח in the Old Testament,” (from χρίω), *TDNT* 9:496-508 (here 497).

³⁹ Exod 28:41; 30:30; 40:13; 4Q375 f1.1.9; 4Q365 f9b.2.2; 4Q376 f1.1.1; 4Q493 f1.5; L.A.B. 13:1; 48:2; 51:7.

⁴⁰ 1 Sam 9:16; 16:12-13; 1 Kgs 1:34; 19:16; 4Q458 f2.2.6; 11Q5 28.8, 11, 13; Ps 151:7; Josephus *Ant.* 6.83, 157, 159, 165; 7.355-57, 382; 9.106, 149; L.A.B. 51:6; 57:3; 59:1-4.

⁴¹ Exod 40:10; Ps 154h:11; Philo *Mos.* 2.146.

⁴² Exod 29:36; 30:26; Philo *Mos.* 2.146.

⁴³ Cf. later T. Adam 1:7; 2:10.

⁴⁴ Sir 38:1-9; b. Ber. 60a; y. *Qid.* 4:12, §2; *Exod. Rab.* 21:7; Pliny *Nat.* 20.100.264; Quintilian *Decl.* 268.21; Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 42, 285-86 (citing e.g., Artemidorus *Onir.* 4.22; *ILS* 2194); Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (ed. Jürgen Roloff; trans. John E. Alsup; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981-82), 1:141; cf. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (trans. Brian McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 166-67; idem, "Von Ärzten und Wundertätern. Heil und Heilung in der Antike," *Bibel und Kirche* 61 (2, 2006): 94-98; cf. Asclepius shrines near healthy springs in Vitruvius *Arch.* 1.2.7.

⁴⁵ See e.g., John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (ed. Percy Livingstone Parker; Chicago: Moody, 1974), 198-99 (Nov. 28, 1753); Philip Hanson Jones, *Wonders, Signs, Miracles ... Why Not? Tales of a Missionary in China* (New York: Exposition Press, 1966), 110; Bruce Olson, *Bruchko* (rev. ed.; Lake Mary, Fla.: Creation House, 1995), 148.