



Anointing of Jesus: A Comparative–Analytical Study of the Gospel Accounts

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ABSTRACT

This study challenges the conventional belief that the anointing of Jesus in the four Gospels represents a singular event. The purpose of the study was to provide a nuanced understanding of these accounts and their theological significance. Using a comprehensive biblical textual analysis, the study examined Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:36–50, and John 12:2–8, highlighting key differences in context, timing, and participants. The findings revealed that Jesus was anointed on multiple occasions by different women, with each Gospel writer emphasizing distinct theological and cultural implications. These anointings symbolize devotion, sacrificial giving, and humility—foundational principles in Christian stewardship. The study recommends that future research should analyze each Gospel narrative within its historical and cultural setting, integrating biblical textual approaches with contemporary applications. Furthermore, it advocates for the inclusion of cross-cultural perspectives to enhance the understanding of anointing practices. Recognizing these anointing events as symbolic acts of devotion rather than mere ritual practices enriches discussions on Jesus' identity and mission. The study also underscores the role of repetition in biblical teaching, reinforcing the importance of anointing as a theological motif. Ultimately, these insights provide a foundation for further exploration of anointing in contemporary Christian practice, encouraging scholars and theologians to engage with the text critically and contextually. This research contributes significantly to biblical studies by clarifying the distinctiveness of each anointing account and its implications for early Christian thought and modern theological discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the anointing of Jesus from the perspectives of the Four Gospels. It highlights the different levels at which the Word of God may be studied today. After all, God’s Word is given to address the different levels of humanity, in forms that every reader may understand. Some elements of the story are similar, while some are not. These different versions have become the basis of arguments among scholars on whether the story was one event or more than one event. The story has received differing scholarly interpretations as well. Comparison of the four Gospel narratives reveals that the anointing of Jesus which is one of the momentous events in the Passion Narratives and recorded in

Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:37-38, and John 12:1-8 should not be identified as one and the same, as long held by Christian tradition but recently challenged, and likewise, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman in Luke 7 are not and should not be seen as the same person but different individuals.¹ The paper takes a Bible textual approach, which is considered suitable, given today the rampant move away from a textual approach to mere thematic presentations, which often rely very little on the faithful interpretation of the text of scripture. The anointing of Jesus is one of the momentous events that characterized the Passion Narratives as recorded in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:37-38, and John 12:1-8. Each iteration varies in detail while assigning importance to the anointing of Jesus with perfumed nard oil.² The story occupies the attention of many Biblical scholars, rendering it an important area of study since there is much confusion in the commentaries concerning the reports as given in these Gospels. Consequently, while many have attempted to draw up an account of the anointing of Jesus from different perspectives, quite often, such efforts do not undertake it from a biblical textual approach. Some have also presented the subject, but only from one particular Gospel account, leaving out the records of the other three.

Again, many have taken their approach from theological reflections with only interpretations devoid of application. This paper is rather based on a biblical textual approach with an attempt to provide contemporary applications. Although for a research of this nature, it is expected to give much detail being a paper relating to textual study, this does not, however, contain all the expected detail of the narratives because the work is not intended to be a commentary. The paper also reflects four separate accounts of the anointing of Jesus presented from four distinct points of view. On many occasions, these accounts look like repetition. However, there is probably no tool of teaching more powerful than repetition. Scriptures constantly repeat terms, phrases, and clauses to emphasise their importance.³ It must be remembered that when God really wants to emphasise a truth, He repeats it in the Scripture and so, having these repetitions in itself readily signals that God thought that the anointing of Jesus was very important.⁴

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in the study of the anointing of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels encompasses a comprehensive textual analysis of the biblical narratives. The research approach involved the following key steps outlined below.

Comparative Textual Analysis: A critical evaluation of the specific passages pertaining to the anointing of Jesus from the four Gospels (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, and John 12:2-8) was conducted. This included identifying the contextual differences, such as the location, characters involved, and the responses of those present during each account. Contextual Exegesis: Each Gospel was examined within its historical and cultural context, drawing parallels to Jewish customs surrounding anointing and hospitality practices. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the significance of anointing within the ministry of Jesus and its implications for contemporary Christian stewardship.

Literary Analysis: An exploration of the narrative structure, themes, and motifs within each Gospel account was undertaken. This helped to discern the unique contributions of each Evangelist and to recognize how they shape the understanding of Jesus' identity and mission.

Cross-Cultural Reflection: The study integrated insights from cross-cultural perspectives on anointing practices, particularly comparing biblical customs with traditional African rituals. This

¹ H. Pope, "St. Mary Magdalen." *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1910).

² James, Hastings, Frederick C. Grant, and H. H. Howley, "Anointing among the Ancient Hebrews, Egyptians, and Greeks," in *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), <https://www.librarycat.org/lib/keylawk/item/134639122>.

³ H. G. Hendricks and W. D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991).

⁴ Danny McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2018).

served to highlight universal themes of devotion, humility, and sacrifice inherent in the act of anointing.

Practical Application: The research not only focused on the theological implications of the anointing accounts but also sought to derive contemporary applications for Christian life. This involved linking the lessons learned from the Gospel narratives to modern practices of stewardship and service within the church.

THE CONCEPT OF ANOINTING

The word “*māsha*” in Hebrew is the verb the Old Testament employs universally to convey the theologically significant phenomenon of anointing and is applied primarily to three classes of people, namely, prophets, kings, and priests.⁵ The basic meaning of the word is simply ‘to spread’ a liquid like oil or paint over water (Ex. 29:2), shield (Isa. 21:5), and house (Jer. 22:14).⁶ It could also mean ‘to smear’ (house with colour) or to solemnly set apart (consecrate) to an office, always by the use of oil poured on the head as a prophet (Num. 35:25; Amos 6:6; Isa. 61:1).⁷ Quite often in the Old Testament, the word is used to anoint or consecrate someone or something to be king in Israel (1 Sam. 16:12, 1 Kings 1:34, 39), priest (Exodus 28:41), or prophet (1 Kings 19:16). The Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ, (*māšīaḥ* or *mashiach*) gives us the term ‘messiah’ meaning the ‘the anointed one’ and in Greek as *Khristós* (Χριστός) and anglicized Christ (the Anointed One). The practice and the purpose of anointing in the Bible are also similar to those found among traditional Africans. Kunhiyop notes that “Anointing, which is the practice of rubbing oil, perfume, water or some other substance onto the body, has long been practiced in traditional Africa as part of religious ceremonies confirming someone’s spiritual authority, or as a cleansing ritual when commissioning someone for an assignment, or simply as a medicinal ritual.”⁸ Furthermore, it is important to state that the exact meaning of the adjective *pistikes* (pure) is difficult to determine. However, it is frequently understood as deriving from *pistis* and referring to the purity of the oil of *nard* (NIV, NRSV, NET “pure nard”), but more likely it is sometimes like a brand name, “pistic nard”, the precise significance of which is unknown.

However, Kent, in his own words, submitted that “nard is extracted from the spike of the nard plant, which grows near the foothills of the Himalayas. Spices and ointments, being expensive perfumes, had to be imported probably through the spice markets of India by ship to Arabia, then by camel train to Jerusalem.”⁹ The anointing oil was valued at approximately a year’s wages for a labourer. Pure nard, not mixed with cheaper substances, would be worth a working person’s wages for a year (300 denarii). One can only imagine the personal cost of earning this as a prostitute. It was a sign of sacrifice, humility and devotion.

The Anointing of Jesus in the Gospels

There are a number of references which show that Jesus was regularly associated with social outcasts, including lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and those considered to be at the lowest levels of society. He showed them love and acceptance without any discrimination. For the sake of clarity and understanding, the account of the anointing of Jesus shall be presented based on the viewpoint of the individual evangelists responsible for the writing of the Gospels. This becomes imperative as the account of each gospel writer might be vitally connected to the general or specific motif (s) behind the composition of their writings.

⁵ Stephen D. Renn, *Exposition Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006).

⁶ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988).

⁷ Francis, Brown, S. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014).

⁸ S Waje Kunhiyop, “African Christian Ethics, Nairobi,” *Kenya: Word Alive Publishers*, 2008.

⁹ Grenville J Kent, “Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?,” 2010.

The Matthean Anointing

In its Matthean form (26:6-13), the story of the anointing of Jesus is presented in the Passion narrative. The story happened after the Triumphal Entry or two days before the Passover. The venue was Bethany in the house of Simon the Leper. Simon in Matthew and Mark was a leper, but Simon in Luke was a Pharisee. This is unreconcilable because a leper, whether cleansed or uncleansed, was not normally enlisted as a Pharisee. So, the anointing accounts in Matthew and Mark can not be the same as the one in Luke. An unnamed woman anointed Jesus' head (and not His feet). Jesus said that what this woman did would be told as a memorial wherever the gospel is preached. This account is different from the one in John's gospel because it is not likely that Jesus would mention her name if this were Mary, the sister of Lazarus. His disciples were not comfortable with what they perceived as waste and so they complained about it (Matthew 26:8, 9), but Jesus had to rebuke them for their attitudes and told them that the anointing was done in memorial for His burial (vv. 10-13). This silent gesture calls Matthew's readers to authentic faith, lived in practice and in the service of love for their neighbour. Through the practice of love, Jesus' disciples will be recognized (13, 35; 15, 12), because he loved them to the end (13, 1).¹⁰

The Markan Anointing

The gospel of Mark has been described as "the oldest, most vivid and authentic Life of Christ, and both Matthew, Luke and John copied from him liberally."¹¹ The story in Markan form, as presented in Mark 14:3-9 is presented again in the Passion narrative as Matthew also does. The venue of the dinner was the house of Simon the leper in Bethany, a village in Judea on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives, which suggests that Mary and her siblings had a close relationship with Simon the leper. It was on this occasion that a woman came and anointed Jesus. In Mark's record, Jesus reclined at the table in the house of the host, Simon the Leper and a woman abruptly interrupted proceedings with an ambiguous gesture. According to Santiago Guijarro and Ana Rodríguez, guests were normally accorded a warm welcome where their feet were washed as a form of hospitality, but in this case, the woman did not do that.¹² The anointing of the head with oil is also attested to as a gesture of hospitality which was usually provided by the owner of the house (Luke 7:46; Psalm 22:5). The woman's gesture, at least as Mark relates it, squares with neither practice.

The Lukan Anointing

In Luke's Gospel, there are several references which portray Jesus' concern for the socially stigmatized in the society. For instance, the reference to the immoral woman in this story (Luke 7:36-50) and the repentance of the robber in Luke 23:39ff attest to this fact. The anointing of Jesus in the Lukan passage is coming nearly at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is a similar story intended to be a teaching on forgiveness, but presented in an entirely different context. The service was rendered by an unnamed sinful woman who came to Jesus from behind, knelt down, and began to cry. The woman spilt ointments over Jesus, and washed and wiped His feet with her tears and hair. She also kissed Jesus' feet, but no mention is made of anointing his head.

It has been observed that "One does not anoint the feet of a living person, but one might anoint the feet of a corpse as part of the ritual of preparing the whole body for burial."¹³

However, the only time feet were anointed in Jewish culture was as a funeral ritual.¹⁴ At that time, it was a Jewish tradition that when anointing a dead person, the neck of the ointment bottle should be broken, perhaps as a symbol that it would not be used again, or as a sign of loss, and later the bottle would be put into their burial cask.¹⁵ According to Kent, this action was the reason the anointing woman broke the box, even though it was made of alabaster (Mark 14:3), which presumably had resale

¹⁰ Sixbert Sangwa, "The Anointing of Jesus Christ at Bethany. A Narrative Analysis of John 12," n.d.

¹¹ Frank S. Mead, *Who's Who in the Bible: 250 Bible Biographies* (New York: Galahad Books, 1980).

¹² Santiago Guijarro and Ana Rodríguez, "The 'Messianic' Anointing of Jesus (Mark 14:3—9)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 41, no. 3 (August 13, 2011): 132–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107911413210>.

¹³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I.-1.31* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

¹⁴ Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?"

¹⁵ A. M. Hunter, *St. Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1948).

value.¹⁶ None of the disciples objected to the cost of the ointment at this anointing, but Simon the Pharisee, who hosted Jesus, was upset that He would allow a notorious sinner to touch Him. Some opined that Mary of Magdala, the honored friend of Jesus, was a sinful woman. Whereas, though, Mary was a wealthy and honored citizen of Magdala, there is no indication in the Bible that she was either a sinful woman or the one who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7.¹⁷ The anointing was not carried out in memorial for Jesus' burial, but was carried out as a thanksgiving offering, and her sins were forgiven.

The Johannine Anointing

John places this same story shortly before Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (12:1-8). Six days before the Passover, Jesus went back from Ephraim (John 11:54) to Bethany, where He had miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead. He sets the occurrence in Bethany in the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, who anointed Jesus' feet. At this place, a dinner was organised in His honour by Martha and Mary, probably as an act of gratitude to Jesus who had restored Lazarus their brother (John 11).¹⁸ Mary and her siblings ate with Jesus as Martha served (John 12:2). The dinner must have been a wonderful time of fellowship and a joyous occasion. Another striking feature of this account is the fact that only Judas complained about Mary's perceived waste of resources. The anointing was done as a memorial of Jesus's burial.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE ANOINTING ACCOUNTS IN THE GOSPELS

Each of the four Gospels uses two major literary relationships, which are comparison and contrast, in order to narrate each particular story. Therefore, it is important to give a brief description of the contents of anointing by looking at the four Gospels together.

Similarities in the anointing accounts in the Gospels

The records in Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 are almost similar. It was an anonymous woman, with an alabaster bottle full of wealthy ointment, who went inside Simon the Leper's house (in Bethany) where Jesus was having lunch. As the woman spilled the ointment over Jesus' head, His disciples gossiped, saying that it would have been much more useful to spend the cost of the perfumes in helping poor people. However, Christ stood up for the woman, stating that when she poured this perfume on His body, she did it to prepare Him for burial. The account in the third gospel provides more information about the anointing. According to Luke, the event features an unknown sinful woman, anointing Jesus when He was invited by a Pharisee for dinner. The woman not only spilled ointments over Jesus but also washed His feet with her tears, wiped them up with her hair, and kissed them (7:36-38). According to Hornsby, the honorific anointing with perfume is an action frequently mentioned in other literature from the time; however, using long hair to dry Jesus' feet, as in John and Luke, is not recorded elsewhere, and should be regarded as an exceptional gesture.

Simon, the Pharisee who hosted Jesus, was not comfortable, and so he grumbled that Jesus could allow such a sinful woman to come close to Him (Luke 7:39), but Jesus said to him, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:44-47). Afterwards, Jesus forgave the sins of the woman. He hung out with this woman and many other outcasts because he was creating an example for the Church. He did not operate within the parameters dictated by his Jewish culture. As a matter of fact, he did not condemn the woman, but instead, he admitted to her sinful condition. In the same

¹⁶ Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?"

¹⁷ John Oakes, "How Can We Reconcile the Different Accounts of the Anointing of Jesus?," Evidence for Christianity, July 2020, <https://evidenceforchristianity.org/how-can-we-reconcile-the-different-accounts-of-the-anointing-of-jesus/>.

¹⁸ Bock observed that the term "dinner" 'deipnon', could be a reference to an everyday meal, it could also mean a formal meal with guests or a cultic meal like the Passover, Darrell L. Bock, *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: The Gospel* (Colorado: David Cook, 2002).335.

manner, Jesus was seeking those the society had deemed unworthy and the ragtag group of sinners. Furthermore, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) maintain that the anointing took place in the absence of Judas Iscariot because by that time Judas had gone out to conclude his betrayal plans.

Differences in the anointing accounts in the Gospels

Despite the fact that similarities exist between the two anointing accounts, the differences are so glaring that the two can hardly be taken to be the same story. In short, this is why some scholars opine that there were two separate instances of anointing: the one performed by a penitent woman in Galilee at the house of a Pharisee and another one by a woman in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper as a mark of her love for Jesus.¹⁹

It seems some have always mistaken the anointing accounts in the Synoptic Gospels to be different from the one described in John 12:1-8, while some, on the other hand, opine that the stories are the same event because they have a few things in common. However, Olowola cautions that this anointing has nothing in common with that given by Luke, except that a woman anointed the Saviour's feet, and the name Simon, which was common. The former was in Galilee, which is at Bethany, near Jerusalem. There, the host despised the woman who anointed him; her brother is one of the guests, and her sister is an active attendant. There, the woman was a sinner, 'a notoriously bad woman'; here, it is the devout Mary who 'sat at the Lord's feet and heard His word' months before. There, the host thought it strange that Jesus allowed her to touch Him; here, the disciples complain of the waste. There, the Saviour gave assurance of forgiveness; here, of perpetual and worldwide honour. Here, the woman who anoints is anticipating his speedy death and burial, of which at the former time he had never distinctly spoken.²⁰ He concluded that it would be absurd, in view of all the differences pointed out, to represent the two fashions of the anointing as the same and outrageous on such slender ground to cast reproach on Mary of Bethany.²¹

Moreover, a considerable number of debates have discussed the identity of the woman, the location, the timing, and the message of the action.²² Although the accounts of the four gospels are generally considered to be independent events, when conflating the account of the anointing, it is often discovered that there are missing details between what each evangelist reported. This type of ambiguity, no doubt, often leads to different interpretations by readers. For instance, it is often assumed that Mary of Bethany was a prostitute and is interpreted as Mary Magdalene.²³ This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that there are a number of women in the New Testament who are called 'Mary'. Some examples include Mary, mother of Jesus (Matthew 1:16); Mary Magdalene (Matt. 27:56, 61); Mary, mother of James the younger (Mark 15:40); Mary of Bethany (John 11:1, 2); Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25); Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12); and Mary of Rome (Romans 16:6). This probably accounts for the reason some scholars considered the anointing in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and John 12 to have taken place on Wednesday of Holy Week while to some, it was a Saturday event.²⁴

Again, despite the fact that the Synoptic Gospels maintain that the anointing took place in the absence of Judas Iscariot, John in the Fourth Gospel offers a new version of the story. He states that Jesus had lunch at Bethany, in the house of Lazarus, Marta, and Mary. At this place, a woman named Mary took about a pint of pure *nard*, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair (John 12:3). Guests reclining at the table with their feet furthest away could be anointed on any part of their body.²⁵

Judas Iscariot clearly objected to this waste of resources (John 12:4). He stated that using such an expensive perfume to anoint Jesus was a waste of money. The resources could have been channelled

¹⁹ Jey J. Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Pradesh: OM Books, 2005).

²⁰ Cornelius Abiodun Olowola, *The Last Week: A Study in the Last Week of Jesus Christ on Earth* (Jos: Challenge Press, 1989).

²¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1922).

²² Teresa J. Hornsby, "Anointing Traditions," in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amyjill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 339-42.

²³ Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?"

²⁴ Samuel S. Alamu, *The Final Days of Jesus Christ on Earth: A Synopsis of the Gospels* (Ibadan: John Archers, 2022).

²⁵ Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?"

into a more profitable act, such as helping poor people. Jesus argued for Mary, saying: “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” Thus, according to John and Luke, it seems that the woman spills the ointment over Christ’s feet and not over His head. Matthew and Mark record that she anointed Jesus’ head. John records that she anointed his feet, as does Luke. Kent examines possible ways to harmonize these. According to him, “It’s possible she anointed his head with so much oil when she cracked her jar that it dripped down to his feet. The host didn’t provide anything for cleaning feet, so she used her hair.”²⁶ The differences in the Gospel accounts suggest that this story circulated independently, without any indication of where it occurred in Jesus’ ministry. However, the evangelists agree together in all their details and reveal the guiding hand of an unseen Author.”²⁷

Furthermore, there was indignation among the disciples over this “waste” according to Matthew and Mark. However, only the Gospel of John reveals that the indignation was generated by Judas Iscariot (John 12:4-5). This statement of objection could not have come from any other person among the twelve other than Judas who was their treasurer and a thief – John 12:6. His motive was quite glaring; “He used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6). In Judas’ own opinion, Jesus did not deserve the kind of service given to him by the anointing woman. In short, he felt there were some other needs that were so pressing and, therefore, demanded more attention than wasting such expensive resources on Jesus. In his conclusion, it is more valuable and rewarding to give to the poor than to waste such expensive oil (John 12:4-6). The attitude of Mary can only best be illustrated by a Yoruba adage which says, *eni t’o mo yi obi lo n ja ‘we si i* (one who appreciates the value of kola nut plucks leaves to wrap it).²⁸ Judas does not know ‘the value of the kola nut’ and so he could not ‘pluck leaves’ to dress it.

The response to this statement reads, “Leave her alone. Jesus said (It was intended) that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (John 12:7-8). The Greek verb for ‘leave’ is in the second person singular, that is ‘you leave her alone’. Whereas, when Jesus says, ‘you have’ and ‘you have not’, he uses the second-person plural verb *have*. From the foregoing, it can be said that Jesus was addressing Judas in the first statement because he (Jesus) uses the first-person singular verb, whereas in the second statement, he was now addressing the crowd, not just Judas.²⁹ Nonetheless, whether the statement is credited to Judas as in John 12:4, 5 or to a group of people as in Matthew 26:8-9 and Mark 14:4-5, the most important thing is that Christians need to realise that opportunities may only come once to do good; hence, the need to act promptly and rightly.

LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH

The church in Nigeria and Africa at large have a lot of lessons to learn from the anointing of Jesus as presented by the four Gospel writers. The differences and similarities in the reports of the writers make it robust and there lie the strength and the lessons for the church.

Example of Great Sacrifice

Mary poured “a pint” of pure nard on Jesus (John 12:3), showing an example of sacrifice.³⁰ Nard was a sweet-smelling oil that came from India and was exceedingly expensive.³¹ This is a great sacrifice. The two Gospels agree on the price as 300 denarii. Matthew does not give the figure, but a year’s wages is indeed a high price for perfume.³² Judas himself estimated the value of this oil to a year’s wages (John 12:5). His objection to “waste” fits with this and is not without substance. One might

²⁶ Kent, “Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?”

²⁷ Johnson M. Cheney, *The Life of Christ in Stereo* (Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1984).

²⁸ Tope Babade, *Akojopo Ijinle Owe Yoruba Pelu Itumo Ati Ilo Won Ni Ede Geesi Akojo Kin Inni [A Collection of Yoruba Proverbs with Their Translation and Usage in English Language]*, vol. 1 (Lagos: Abos Press, 2008).

²⁹ Samuel M. Ngewa, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary for Pastors and Teachers* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 2003).

³⁰ Nard’ (nardou) was an extremely fragrant oil made from the root and head (or spike) of the nard plant from northern India, Bock, *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: The Gospel*.

³¹ Ngewa, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary for Pastors and Teachers*.

³² Kent, “Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?”

possibly think that Judas had a sincere concern for the poor when he said, “Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?” (John 12:5). However, he said this because he was a thief and as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it (John 12:6). He would pocket some of the benevolent money for himself.³³ Although it might not be too far from reality, however, this valuation might be an exaggeration from Judas.³⁴ Then again, no matter what the value might be, it was expensive oil, and it meant a lot of money, which represented many hours of hard work. “A Denarius was a Roman coin representing a day’s wage for a labourer and the daily cost of living for an ordinary person. It would take one man eight months (John 6:7) to earn two hundred *denarii*.”³⁵ Mary did not count it a waste to have sacrificed such an amount of money to honour her Lord, who raised Lazarus, her brother, from the dead.

Example of Great Humility

The service Mary rendered unto Jesus was also an uncommon example of humility. In Jewish custom, washing a guest’s feet with water was primarily the responsibility of a slave who had been appointed by the one hosting the guest. Therefore, to do this, Mary demonstrated humility not only by sacrificing expensive oil to anoint Jesus but also by using her hair to wipe the oil off Jesus’ feet. She humbled herself like a “slave” appointed to wash feet. What an uncommon humility! It was a common practice in Jewish culture for the guests’ feet to be cleaned before serving dinner. It was the responsibility of the host to make available water for this purpose and to also station a slave, not necessarily a disciple. The reason for this gesture was glaring. According to Martin, most roads were impaired, and the normal foot attire was sandals. Therefore, it was common for people’s feet to be dusty or muddy.³⁶ This is a good lesson for the church today. Humility is a virtue that belongs only to those who already have their heart circumcised. The opposite of humility is pride. Christians must learn to humble themselves under God’s mighty hand so that they might be lifted up in due time (1 Peter 5:6).

Example of Great Devotion

Another important lesson here is the example of devotion. Mary used her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus. Her action undermined the whole elaborate system of ritual observances of laws regarding purity within Judaism (see Leviticus 11-16). It was an unacceptable practice among the Jews for a responsible woman to leave her hair open in public. It was even more unacceptable for her to unbind it. This is similar to the African culture as well. A responsible woman in African society must not unbind her hair in public. In Africa, for a woman to cover her hair in public testifies to the decency and dignity that befits her. Nevertheless, Mary used her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet. It was a common practice in Jewish Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean generally to wear a face veil. However, it could be argued that Mary was unmarried since only her brother (Lazarus) and her sister (Martha) (but not her husband) were mentioned.³⁷ This could probably suggest that she was young, widowed, or divorced. The marital status of Mary is not the concern here, but what she did, that is, to unbind her hair and wipe the feet of Jesus with it. In doing this, she was not distracted by whatever anybody might say but concentrated on what she was doing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations are proposed.

Further Research: Theological institutions should encourage scholars to pursue additional research on the anointing of Jesus, exploring lesser-known perspectives and emphasizing the significance of each Gospel's narrative in shaping Christian doctrine and practice.

³³ Edwin A. Blum, “John ,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Canada: Victor Books, 1984), 316.

³⁴ Ngewa, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary for Pastors and Teachers*.225.

³⁵ Ngewa, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary for Pastors and Teachers*. 102.

³⁶ John A. Martin, “Luke,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Canada: Victor Books, 1984), 223.

³⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Integrative Curriculum Development: Theological institutions should develop curricula that integrate textual analysis with practical applications of the anointing narratives, emphasizing how these stories inform contemporary Christian ethics and community service.

Cross-Cultural Studies: The Church should promote interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural studies that investigate the similarities and differences in anointing rituals across cultures, thereby enriching the understanding of sacred practices and their meanings.

Congregational Workshops: Local Churches should organize workshops that focus on the themes of devotion, humility, and sacrificial giving, illustrated by the anointing accounts, fostering greater engagement and practical implementation within congregational life.

Literature and Resource Creation: The Church and other faith-based institutions should further encourage the production of literature that addresses the anointing of Jesus from a variety of perspectives, making the findings accessible to a broader audience and enhancing the theological education of church leaders and members.

By implementing these recommendations, both scholarly investigation and practical church life can be enriched, fostering a deeper understanding of the significance of the anointing of Jesus within the Christian tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to challenge the long-held belief that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' anointing refer to a single event. By closely examining Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:36–50, and John 12:2–8, it becomes clear that Jesus was anointed on multiple occasions by different women, each in unique contexts and with distinct theological messages. The results show that merging these narratives into one event overlooks the important textual and historical differences among them. Luke focuses on themes of forgiveness and devotion at the start of Jesus' ministry, while John highlights Mary of Bethany's act as one of gratitude and preparation for burial. In contrast, Matthew and Mark describe an anointing that is closely linked to Jesus' approaching death, emphasizing themes of sacrifice and remembrance. Each account offers a unique perspective on Jesus' identity, mission, and the core values of Christian discipleship—such as devotion, humility, and selfless giving. The recurrence of this theme across the Gospels is not merely repetitive; it underscores the theological importance of anointing in both ancient Jewish and early Christian traditions. Furthermore, this study emphasizes that recognizing these differences is crucial for accurate biblical interpretation and for enriching contemporary applications, particularly within the African church and the broader Christian community. Finally, the evidence suggests that the anointings of Jesus are not a single event but rather several distinct occurrences. Acknowledging their uniqueness enhances our theological understanding, enriches Christian practice, and respects the Gospel writers' deliberate portrayals of Jesus' life and mission. This study thus highlights the necessity of careful textual engagement and encourages ongoing scholarly and ecclesial reflection on these foundational moments in the Gospels.

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