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# The Fragrance of Her Perfume

## The Significance of Sense Imagery in John's Account of the Anointing in Bethany

Dominika A. Kurek-Chomycz

*Leuven*

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### Abstract

The limited number of olfactory images in the NT has tempted interpreters to read them all along similar lines, without paying sufficient attention to individual contexts. Another tendency, especially with regard to the account of the anointing in Bethany in the Fourth Gospel, has been to concentrate on the question of its historicity and its relationship to the Synoptic parallels, while neglecting one of the important characteristics of John's version, namely its heightened attention to the sensory aspect and its implications for the portrayal of Mary of Bethany in the FG. In this essay I discuss the specific features of the Fourth Evangelist's adaptation of the anointing story, highlighting the sensory elements and pointing out that they are an important, albeit often neglected, indication of the Johannine redaction.

### Keywords

olfaction; anointing in Bethany; sense imagery; Gospel of John; John 12:3

### 1. Introduction

The New Testament does not abound in olfactory imagery, yet the motif of fragrance is prominent in some memorable passages. The most explicit scent metaphors are found in the Pauline literature, in 2 Cor 2:14-16, Phil 4:18 and Eph 5:2 in particular. The Evangelists appear to have less interest in scent. Even though all the four Gospels contain some version of the anointing of Jesus by a woman, where the olfactory aspect is implicitly present, only the author of the Fourth Gospel explicitly comments on the aroma of the anointing oil. Notably, John 12:3 is the only

place in the New Testament where the substantive ὀσμὴ occurs outside of the Pauline corpus.

The scarcity of olfactory images and the fact that except for Phil 4:18, they are all in some way associated with Jesus, has made it easier for interpreters to conflate them, with little regard for individual contexts. We find this tendency already in patristic literature. Contemporary scholars are more cautious in this respect, yet even nowadays there are authors who treat all the passages which mention fragrance as if they all referred to the same concept. This seems to be the assumption of Rivka Nir, according to whom the concept of the death of Jesus as “earthly incense sacrifice,” which establishes paradise on earth, supposedly underlies the various NT texts on aroma.<sup>1</sup>

The association between various NT olfactory traditions can scarcely be justified from the historical perspective. The link Nir makes between passages such as 2 Cor 2:14-16, Eph 5:2, and the Fourth Gospel, more specifically John 12:3 and 19:38-40, disregards the fact that in John’s text there is no reference to sacrifice. Similarly, Nir’s assumption that John’s version of the anointing in Bethany is essentially in line with the Synoptic accounts of anointing fails to pay sufficient attention to the peculiarities of the Johannine narrative. Nir’s presumption that there was an early Christian, unified tradition of understanding Jesus’ death as “incense sacrifice,” on which both Paul and later the Gospel writers relied, is rather questionable. While 2 Cor 2:14-16 and Eph 5:2 may indeed be read against sacrificial background, we may at most speculate whether Paul could have depended on some earlier Christian olfactory tradition. Paul’s metaphor in 2 Corinthians is best understood as echoing the image of the odoriferous Wisdom in Ben Sira, including its cultic setting, but not limited to it,<sup>2</sup> and Paul’s imitator in Ephesians could have been inspired both

<sup>1</sup> R. Nir, “The Aromatic Fragrances of Paradise in the Greek Life of Adam and Eve and the Christian Origin of the Composition,” *NovT* 46 (2004) 20-45, esp. 39. Rivka Nir made use of, among others, NT evidence, to argue that the references to aromatic substances in the *Greek Life of Adam and Eve* constituted evidence of its Christian origin. Peter-Ben Smit subsequently took issue with Nir’s thesis, voicing a number of sound criticisms with respect to her arguments. Cf. P.-B. Smit, “Incense Revisited: Reviewing the Evidence for Incense as a Clue to the Christian Provenance of the Greek Life of Adam and Eve,” *NovT* 46 (2004) 369-375.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see D.A. Kurek-Chomycz, “Making Scents of Revelation: The Significance of Cultic Scents in Ancient Judaism as the Backdrop of Saint Paul’s Olfactory Metaphor in 2 Cor 2:14-17” (PhD dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven,

by 2 Cor 2:14-16 and Phil 4:18. Yet there is no reason to suppose that the olfactory images in the Gospels should be interpreted along the same lines.

In the present contribution I propose to look closer at the specificity of John's adaptation of the anointing story, with a particular emphasis on his heightened attention to sensory elements. I argue that John's reworking of the tradition, including his use of more explicit olfactory terminology in comparison with the Synoptics, is well integrated in his narrative and consistent with his interest in sense imagery. An earlier tradition *with a focus on the aroma* is highly unlikely, and conversely, it is rather implausible that John, when composing his Gospel, was in any way influenced by the Pauline metaphors. I begin with the discussion of John 12:3 in its immediate as well as broader narrative context. Next I consider the relationship between the Fourth Evangelist's account and the Synoptic stories of anointing during Jesus' lifetime. Finally, I briefly comment on the different Gospel accounts of (failed/alleged) anointings after Jesus' death, in order to show how John's version is consistent with what I earlier identified as characteristic elements of the Johannine story of the anointing in Bethany.

## 2. Mary of Bethany in John's Narrative Context

The Fourth Gospel is a particularly "sensual" Gospel. It should not come as a surprise that the Risen Lord could tell Mary Magdalene not to touch him, if indeed μή μου ἅπτου in 20:17 refers to touching.<sup>3</sup> Touch, however, is certainly not as prevalent as the senses of sight and taste. The importance

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2008); on the sapiential background of the scent metaphor, cf. also D.A. Kurek-Chomycz, "The Sweet Scent of the Gospel in the *Didache* and in Second Corinthians: Some Comments on Two Recent Interpretations of the *Stinoufi* Prayer in the Coptic *Did.* 10.8," *VigChr* 63 (2009) 323-344.

<sup>3</sup>) Among recent publications devoted to this issue, the following essays by Reimund Bieringer may be mentioned: "Nader Mij niet': De betekenis van *mê mou haptou* in Johannes 20,17," *HTS* 61 (2005) 19-43; "Noli me tangere and the New Testament: An Exegetical Approach," in *Noli me tangere: Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (ed. B. Baert, R. Bieringer, K. Demasure and S. Van Den Eynde; Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 13-27; "I Am Ascending to My Father and Your Father, to My God and Your God' (John 20:17): Resurrection and Ascension in the Gospel of John," in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (ed. C.R. Koester and R. Bieringer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 209-235.

of sight is illustrated, among others, by John's proclivity for contrasting the light and darkness and by the significance of the verbs of seeing.<sup>4</sup> As for taste, the motif of eating and drinking is recurrent in John's Gospel.<sup>5</sup>

Sense of smell may not be as prominent as some other senses, yet olfactory imagery does play a role in the narrative, even if it does not often come to the fore and if this takes place predominantly in the pericopes with parallels in the Synoptic accounts. It is in the manner in which the author of the Fourth Gospel creatively reworks these stories that his proclivity for sense imagery can be seen.

In all the gospel accounts of Jesus' anointing *μύρον* is mentioned, implying an olfactory connotation,<sup>6</sup> for in the ancient world a fragrance-free unguent would be considered an oxymoron. Mark's reference to "genuine nard" (14:3), further reinforces such a connotation, for presumably everyone in the first century would be aware of how strong-scented nard was. In view of this, John's explicit comment on the aroma of the ointment may appear superfluous. Yet this is precisely why we need to understand it as more than just a piece of factual information, supplied allegedly by an eye(nose?)-witness.<sup>7</sup> Before we comment on the significance of smell, let us first review the setting of the pericope.

John situates his anointing story in Bethany, six days before the Passover (12:1). Like in the Synoptics, the context is that of a meal, yet in John 12:1-8 it is a particularly joyful celebration, given that it follows the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. We are not told in whose home the feast takes place, but the presence of the three siblings whom Jesus loved (cf. 11:5), Martha, Mary and Lazarus, is mentioned. It is meaningful that Jesus' ministry both opens and concludes with a feast. The meal

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G.L. Phillips, "Faith and Vision in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. Cross; London: AR Mowbray, 1975) 83-96; C. Traets, *Voir Jésus et le Père en lui selon l'évangile de Jean* (Analecta Gregoriana 159; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, J.S. Webster, *Ingesting Jesus: Eating and Drinking in the Gospel of John* (SBL Academia Biblica 6; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); cf. also P. Maritz and G. Van Belle, "The Imagery of Eating and Drinking in John 6:35," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (ed. J. Frey, J.G. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 333-352.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mark 14:3, 4, 5; Matt 26:7, 12; Luke 7:37, 38, 46; John 11:2; 12:3, 5.

<sup>7</sup> This is what J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 236, suggests. Yet it is unwarranted to claim that the fact that smell is the "most reminiscent of the senses" means that mentioning it must imply a recollection of someone present.

in Bethany, with its profusion of scent, is reminiscent of the wedding festivities at Cana, where, following a temporary dearth, wine in abundance was provided by Jesus. Even though in Bethany the sense of profound celebration prevails, it “is not escapist; it does not run away from the reality of life, least of all from death.”<sup>8</sup> The narrator, by referring to Lazarus as being raised from the dead (v. 1), and even more so in Jesus’ response to Judas in vv. 7-8, ensures that the sense of the imminent danger is not forgotten. Lazarus is twice characterized as the one whom Jesus “raised from the dead,” in 12:1, 9. This points to the connection between the story of the anointing and that of the raising of Lazarus. This link is strengthened by the proleptic identification of Mary in 11:2 as the woman who “anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair” (ἡ ἀλείψασα τὸν κύριον μύρῳ καὶ ἐκμάξασα τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς).<sup>9</sup> At that point in the narrative the reader would wonder about the cryptic reference, for until then no such event has taken place.

There are other correspondences between chapters 11 and 12. In 11:32 Mary is reported to have greeted Jesus in a prostrate position (ἔπεσεν αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας). In 12:3a she takes a pound of unguent of a very precious genuine<sup>10</sup> nard and anoints his feet (Ἡ οὖν Μαριάμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου ἤλειπεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ). She then (v. 3b) wipes his feet with her hair (καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ). The reference to Jesus’ feet thus evokes Mary’s position in 11:32 even as it anticipates Jesus’ washing of the feet of the disciples and wiping them in chapter 13. Anointing of the feet by some commentators was judged “unparalleled,”<sup>11</sup> but James Coakley lists several

<sup>8</sup> T.L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York—Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 407.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the comment of J. Kügler, “Duftmetaphorik im Neuen Testament,” in *Die Macht der Nase: Zur religiösen Bedeutung des Duftes. Religionsgeschichte—Bibel—Liturgie* (ed. J. Kügler; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000) 123-171, 162: “Die Lazaruserweckung und die Salbung Jesu sind also durch Vorverweis und Rückverweise miteinander verzahnt.”

<sup>10</sup> The precise meaning of πιστικός is debated, yet the derivation from πίστις, suggesting the meaning “trustworthy,” or “faithful,” and in the case of nard, “genuine,” is probably most reasonable. Cf. BDAG, s.v. πιστικός 1: “genuine, unadulterated.” See *ibid.* and the commentaries for other possible interpretations. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 511, notes that “Nard was apparently adulterated on occasion, and this would mean that this specimen was of the pure type.”

<sup>11</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 451, following A. Legault, “Application of

parallels from ancient literature.<sup>12</sup> He hastens to comment that “such few and diverse passages as these do nothing to suggest that anointing of the feet was an everyday occurrence in Jesus’ day in Palestine.... But they suggest that it could be a natural and spontaneous act of extravagance in any society that set store by the use of oils and perfumes.”<sup>13</sup> Mary’s gesture may be viewed as extraordinary not only because she anoints the feet rather than the head, but also in view of the large quantity and the price of the unguent (cf. v. 5). No wonder that the aroma of this precious perfume would fill the house, as we read in 12:3c (ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὀσμῆς τοῦ μύρου). Abundance is a recurring *topos* in the Johannine narrative, present also, as we shall see in a moment, in another pericope concerned with aromatic substances, namely in the account of Jesus’ burial. To invoke again the Cana narrative, it is noteworthy that Mary’s deed appears to emulate the point made by Jesus’ miraculous change of water into wine, just as *his* wiping of the feet of the disciples will soon repeat *her* gesture of wiping his feet. With respect to the role of the senses, it is interesting that as the sense of taste introduces Jesus’ ministry, so does smell set the stage for the transition to another phase.<sup>14</sup> What is more, the role the senses play in the respective narratives underscores the image of Jesus who, in spite of the awareness of the impending death, appreciates

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the Form-Critique Method to the Anointings in Galilee and Bethany (Mt 26, 6-13, Mk 14, 3-9, Jn 12, 1-8),” *CBQ* 16 (1954) 131-145, 138.

<sup>12</sup> J.F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *JBL* 107 (1988) 241-256, here 247-248. The quotation from Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists* 12.553 suggests that anointing one’s feet may have been associated with particular extravagance: “There was a custom at Athens, among persons who lived in luxury, of anointing [ἐναλείφειν] even the feet with perfumes.”

<sup>13</sup> Coakley, “Anointing,” 248.

<sup>14</sup> The role that the sense of smell plays in the passage rites has been noted by anthropologists. D. Howes, “Olfaction and Transition,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (ed. D. Howes; Toronto—Buffalo—London: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 128-147, 128, argues that there is a “universal association between olfaction and transition.” According to Howes, p. 143, such a relationship is intrinsic at “the logical level (smells are most noticeable at boundaries), the psychological level (given the effect of odours on memory and discursive reason), and the sociological level (smells synchronize the emotional and physical states of the members of the congregation).” He further notes that “there is also a connection between smell and liminality, the transitional phase of life-crisis rites.... Smell is the liminal sense *par excellence*.... it is in the rites and representations which attach to the events of birth and death that the connection between smell and liminality emerges most clearly.”

the sensory delights characteristic of earthly life, even as taking them to be signs of another reality.

The fact of filling the house with fragrance by the copious amount of unguent may not surprise us, but John's stress on this is by no means self-evident. Rudolf Bultmann points to the traditional interpretation of the aroma in John 12:3, linking the image of the spreading of the fragrance with the notion of the Gospel which was soon to fill the entire world.<sup>15</sup> Yet this reading of John 12:3, rather than by internal considerations, is more influenced by Mark 14:9 (= Matt 26:13) on the one hand, and 2 Cor 2:14 on the other. In the Fourth Gospel, interestingly enough, the comment connecting the proclamation of the Good News with the woman's act (cf. Mark 14:9) is missing.

In order to establish the significance of John's comment in 12:3c we should rather search for clues in the text itself. The interpretation of Mary's deed, but not explicitly of the olfactory effects, is included in Jesus' words in v. 7: ἄφες αὐτήν, ἵνα εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ μου τηρήσῃ αὐτό. The seemingly final clause constitutes a well-known exegetical conundrum, and none of the solutions suggested thus far are entirely satisfactory. Mark 14:8 has a more straightforward: "She undertook it to anoint my body for the entombment" (προέλαβεν μυρίσαι τὸ σῶμά μου εἰς τὸν ἐνταφιασμόν), while the Johannine formulation reads literally: "leave her, so that she might keep it for the day of my entombment." In the Byzantine text the problematic phrase was changed into "she has kept" (τετήρηκεν) to alleviate the difficulty. Raymond Brown proposes to translate the phrase thus: "The purpose was that she might keep it for the day of my embalming," commenting that the secondary reading probably provides "the correct *interpretation*."<sup>16</sup> Yet in spite of the difficulties involved in retaining the literal meaning (Mary of Bethany, who features prominently in chapters 11-12, afterwards disappears from the narrative), it is possible that Mary did not use the entire ointment on that occasion.<sup>17</sup> It certainly does not contradict John's text, for John, in contrast to Mark,

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK 2/14; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956) 317: "alsbald wird die εὐωδία τῆς γνώσεως die Welt erfüllen."

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *Gospel of John* 1:449.

<sup>17</sup> The objection of C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1965) 345, that to "suggest that only a small part of the ointment had been used and that the rest might be preserved is...to ignore v. 3c," suggests that he never had a chance to sniff nard oil.



does not mention the breaking of the jar (cf. Mark 14:3), and even a smaller amount of nard would have provided ample olfactory effects. The issue need not detain us, for it is important for us only insofar as it links Mary's deed with Jesus' death, implying also Mary's foreknowledge, or rather forescent, of the impending events.<sup>18</sup>

The identification of Judas as the one who voices his disapproval of Mary's gesture, also peculiar to the Fourth Evangelist, further reinforces the connection with what is about to happen. As regards the aroma of the unguent, Judas' comment (v. 5) is significant in that Judas is singled out as the person who fails to appreciate the prophetic dimension of Mary's act. Judas is thus envisaged as associating death only with the reeking smell of the decomposing corpse, while his nose remains blind, or rather anosmic, to the aroma of death which ultimately leads to life.<sup>19</sup> For, however we interpret Jesus' comment in v. 7, in light of his statement in 11:25-26, the link he makes with his death by referring to the entombment, ultimately points further, to the resurrection. The scent signifying death-which-leads-to-resurrection is in this way juxtaposed with the stench of death, to which Martha referred to in the comment on her brother's corpse (ἡδὴ ὄζει) in 11:39. It is interesting that the phrase put into Martha's mouth constitutes the only explicit reference to an unpleasant smell in the New Testament,<sup>20</sup> yet another indication of the Fourth Evangelist's awareness of sensory effects. If Mary in chapter 12 is presented as the only person who, as Francis Moloney puts it, "got it right,"<sup>21</sup> challenging thus the popular opinion that Martha's statement in 11:27 is to be regarded as a "fully Johannine confession,"<sup>22</sup> 11:39 and 12:3 may indeed be read as indicating the juxtaposition of the two sisters. Otherwise

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F.J. Moloney, "Can Everyone be Wrong? A Reading of John 11.1-12.8," *NTS* 49 (2003) 505-527, 525: "For the first time in the narrative, Jesus' proximate death is recognized. Mary is the first to accept that the illness and death of Lazarus will be the means by which the Son of God will be glorified (11.4)."

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the comment of Kügler, "Duftmetaphorik," 163: "Der Duft jeder Bestattungssalbung war entsprechend dem gängigen kulturellen Wissen der Antiken Welt als Hinweis auf Leben über den Tod hinaus zu verstehen."

<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that no other disagreeable smells are implied in NT. For example, the olfactory sensation that the reference to Simon the Tanner in Acts 10:6, 32 would elicit was most likely also rather unpleasant.

<sup>21</sup> Moloney, "Everyone," 525.

<sup>22</sup> Moloney, "Everyone," 514.

we may wonder why John would ascribe to Martha the comment about Lazarus' stench *following* what is taken as her confession of faith.

The connection with death and resurrection, albeit the most overt one, does not exhaust the possible range of meanings evoked by the reference to the aroma in 12:3c. In the Hebrew Bible the abundance of odours characterizes the garden, or "paradise"<sup>23</sup> of the Song of Songs. Interestingly, nard, absent in other books of the Hebrew Bible, is mentioned three times in the Song (1:12; 4:13, 14). Of these three occurrences the first one is most significant in that it calls attention to the odour (ὄσμή) given forth by the woman's nard, simultaneous with the king's reclining. The references to smell in the Song are exceptional in comparison with other books of the Hebrew Bible in that they have no sacrificial connotation. The significance ascribed to fragrance is in the Song emphasized by their association with the lovers' identity, most expressly stated in Song 1:3. Even though in the poem no actual anointing is described, in 1:3 the male lover's name is envisaged as ointment poured out. Furthermore, in the LXX, besides Jer 25:10, only in Song 1:3-4 do we have the explicit reference to the "scent of the ointment," albeit in the plural (ὄσμη μύρων). With regard to the setting, as André Feuillet comments, "dans le Cantique le parfum est destiné à un roi qui, étendu sur un divan . . . , prend part à un festin ; même situation dans Jo. 12,3 (avec le participe ἀνακειμένων qui rappelle ἀνάκλισις du Cantique) : Jésus prend part à un festin, et c'est comme Roi qu'il est gratifié à ce-moment là d'une onction, car celle-ci ne fait que préluder à la sépulture véritablement royale de 19, 39."<sup>24</sup>

The interpretation of the Johannine scene in light of the Song of Songs, popular in patristic literature, is now only occasionally brought forward by exegetes. Yet Feuillet is not the only author to have argued that there are a number of elements common to John 12:3 and Song 1:12, especially in the LXX translation.<sup>25</sup> From our perspective it is most interesting that

<sup>23</sup>) Cf. the reference to סַרְסַר/παράδεισος in Song 4:13.

<sup>24</sup>) A. Feuillet, "La recherche du Christ dans la Nouvelle Alliance d'après la Christophanie de Jo. 20, 11-18: Comparaison avec Cant. 3,1-4 et l'épisode des Pèlerins d'Emmaüs," in *L'homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au père Henri de Lubac. Exégèse et Patristique* (Paris: Aubier, 1963) 107. Feuillet finds in John 12:3c "une référence très probable à Cant. 1, 12."

<sup>25</sup>) Cf. N. Calduch Benages, "La fragancia del perfume en Jn 12,3," *EstB* 48 (1990) 243-265, 259: "La escena de Cant 1,12 (según la version de los LXX) y Jn 12,3 presentan una situación análoga y comparten algunos puntos de contacto en el nivel del vocabulario: durante un banquete, una mujer derrama perfume de nardo en honor del rey (el esposo) o de Cristo. En ambos textos se insiste en la fragancia que despiden el nardo." See also A.R.

in both cases there is an explicit comment on the aroma given forth by nard.

In the Song of Songs, the aromas, even as they identify the two lovers, create an additional bond between them. Such an olfactory connection may ultimately result in the admixture of aromas, wherein it may no longer be feasible to distinguish between the individual odours. From this perspective it may be noted that Mary's extravagant gesture in John 12:3 is not devoid of sexual undertones, yet the intimate bond between Mary and Jesus is expressed in the union of their scents.<sup>26</sup> By wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, she mixes her odour with that of Jesus, and in this way all the three scents: that of nard, of Mary's hair, and of Jesus' feet, create yet another, new fragrance.

Given the reference to the king in Song 1:12, in addition to reinforcing John's interest in Jesus' kingship,<sup>27</sup> an allusion to this text in John 12:3 could support the messianic interpretation of the passage. It would suggest that Mary, like her sister in 11:27, also recognized Jesus as the Messiah,<sup>28</sup> or even, if Moloney's interpretation of Martha's behaviour in

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Winsor, *A King is Bound in the Tresses: Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (Studies in Biblical Literature 6; New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 17-33, who argues that not only the comment about fragrance, but also all the other "puzzling elements of the Johannine anointing" can be best explained on the assumption that they "mark allusions to the Song of Songs" (ibid., 17). She focuses mostly on Mary's unusual use of her hair, noting the scarcity of references to hair in the Hebrew Bible in general as contrasted with the five times hair is specifically mentioned in the Song. For another possible scriptural echo in John 12:3, cf. the comment of Moloney, "Everyone," 525: "Given John's focus on *δόξα* (see 11.4, 40), there may also be an allusion to the image of the cloud enveloping the tabernacle at the end of Exodus."

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the comment of Kügler, "Duftmetaphorik," 169, on what he refers to as the "Duftgemeinschaft zwischen Maria und Jesus": "Die Gemeinschaft zwischen Maria und Jesus im duftenden Öl ist...eine Gemeinschaft des Glaubens. Als solche ist sie auch eine Gemeinschaft der Liebe. Das entspricht dem johannischen Verständnis des Glaubens (und auch den erotischen Untertönen der Erzählung)." In light of this it is not entirely clear why he dismisses the possible reference to Song 1:12 in John 12:3 (cf. ibid., p. 164).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. also Kügler, "Duftmetaphorik," 162, who calls attention to the association between the death on the cross and kingship in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Calduch Benages, "Fragancia," 254: "Maria ha realizado un verdadero *acto de fe* paragonable a la solemne *profesión de fe* de su hermana Marta en 11,27. Las dos hermanas testimonian la fe en Jesús, el Hijo de Dios, el Rey-Mesías de Israel." Commentators tend to reject the allusion to the royal/messianic anointing in 12:3 on the grounds that such an anointing would be administered on the head, as in the Synoptic accounts, not on the feet. To state this, however, is to underestimate the Johannine irony: just as Jesus' death

11:20-27 is correct,<sup>29</sup> that Mary's act *surpasses* her sister's words in 11:27. By anticipating Jesus' proximate death with her multivalent gesture, Mary acknowledges that his messianic dignity may entail a different scenario than what may have been envisaged in traditional messianic expectations.

In the ancient world there was a clear relationship between one's social status and scent, hence between power and scent.<sup>30</sup> Even if one rejects the royal/messianic connotation therefore, Mary's act can still be interpreted as ascribing a special position to Jesus. Her reverence is thus expressed not only in the anointing of Jesus' *feet*, as is usually asserted, but perhaps even more so in imparting to him the remarkable fragrance.

### 3. John 12:3 and the Synoptic Accounts of Anointings

As J.K. Elliott observes, the fact that the story of Jesus' anointing is enshrined in all the Gospels, puts it "on the same level as the miraculous feedings or the crucifixion."<sup>31</sup> This attests the importance of the tradition, which is often considered as an attempt by Jesus' followers to make up for the "historical deficiency of any anointing rite at Jesus' burial and Jesus' foreknowledge of his passion and death."<sup>32</sup> Yet while all the four accounts may go back to the same tradition, they also differ in a number of details.

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will constitute his glorification, so his royal anointing may be performed by a woman, not a priest or a (male) prophet, and oil may be applied to his feet rather than his head. Yet another objection, namely that instead of the verb *χρίω*, the term *ἀλείφω* is used, is not an insurmountable problem, either. Even though *χρίω* occurs much more frequently in the LXX, *ἀλείφω* is also present there, among others in reference to the anointing of priests (cf. Ex 40:15; Nu 3:3). The fact that Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, during which Jesus is acclaimed the "king of Israel" (cf. 12:13) almost immediately follows the anointing story, provides yet another hint that Mary's act could be interpreted as a royal anointing. It is not without reason that, as Barrett, *Gospel of John*, 341, notes, John "reverses the Markan order of these two events."

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Moloney, "Everyone," 513-515.

<sup>30</sup> For the significance of scents in determining one's social location in the Roman World, see D.S. Porter, "Odor and Power in the Roman Empire," in *Constructions of the Classical Body* (ed. J.I. Porter; Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) 169-189.

<sup>31</sup> J.K. Elliott, "Anointing of Jesus," *ExpT* 85 (1974) 105-107, 105.

<sup>32</sup> M. Sabbe, "The Anointing of Jesus in John 12,1-8 and Its Synoptic Parallels," in *Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. Van Segbroeck, C.M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden; Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 2051-2082, 2080.

In Mark 14:3-9 and Matt 26:6-13 we come across strikingly similar accounts of anointing. More detailed comparisons are readily available,<sup>33</sup> so I only note the main points. Matthew's version is generally regarded as a rewriting of the Markan one,<sup>34</sup> as it differs from it mostly in details, owing in large part to Matthew's shortening of Mark's text. This includes the omission of certain elements, such as the identification of the perfume as nard, its exact price as well as the reference to the breaking of the jar. The less concrete information we receive about the episode, the less vivid it becomes, and the failure to mention nard weakens the olfactory overtones of the pericope. Yet albeit weakened, the reference to ointment, *μύρον*, ensures that such a connotation is not completely lost. On the other hand, Matthew spells out that those who complained were Jesus' disciples (cf. 26:8), rather than some unspecified *τινες* (Mark 14:4). In spite of those differences, Mark and Matthew agree in the essentials: in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, during a meal, an unnamed woman is reported to have poured expensive ointment on Jesus' head. Some of those present object, but Jesus defends the woman, referring to his burial and "opposing the ongoing presence of the poor to the imminent absence of Jesus himself."<sup>35</sup>

John's story differs from Mark and Matthew in several respects. The most important differences pertain to (1) his identification of the anonymous woman as Mary of Bethany, (2) the part of Jesus' body which was anointed (feet not head), as well as the fact that he mentions (3) the wiping of the feet with the hair, and (4) the subsequent filling of the house with fragrance. In the discussion which ensues (5) the one to protest is identified by John as Judas. Finally, (6) the comment mentioning the lasting memory of the woman in the future preaching of the Gospel (Mark 14:9) is missing in John.<sup>36</sup> There are, nonetheless, a number of verbal

<sup>33</sup>) See especially Sabbe, "Anointing."

<sup>34</sup>) Cf. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. 3: Commentary on Matthew XIX-XXVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 441; U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. 4: Mt 26-28* (EKK 1/4; Düsseldorf—Zurich / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger / Neukirchener, 2002) 57.

<sup>35</sup>) Sabbe, "Anointing," 2053.

<sup>36</sup>) Sabbe, "Anointing," 2068, suggests the following explanation: "John never uses the word *εὐαγγέλιον* . . . in his theological view he preferred another vocabulary such as manifestation, knowledge, eternal life; his preoccupation is not, in the first place, a missionary one."

parallels between John and the two other Evangelists, especially Mark.<sup>37</sup> Most interesting is the reference to the genuine nard (cf. μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς in Mark 14:3 and John 12:3), especially in view of the infrequency of the adjective πιστικός.

The relationship between the Lukan story of a “sinful” woman anointing Jesus feet and the other Gospel stories is even more complex. In Luke 7:38 a woman who is referred to as a “sinner” (cf. ἁμαρτωλός in v. 37) washes Jesus’ feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. She then anoints them with the ointment (ἤλειφεν τῷ μύρῳ) she had brought in an alabaster jar. The episode is placed at the beginning of a more elaborate scene (Luke 7:36-50) in the house of a certain Simon, but a “Pharisee,” not a “leper” like in the other Synoptics. The Pharisee does not voice his protest aloud, but Jesus nonetheless becomes aware of it. The whole story provides for Luke an occasion to make a point about repentance and forgiveness.

The fact that the interpretation suggested by Luke, linking the incident with forgiveness of the sins as a consequence of the woman’s love and faith (cf. vv. 47 and 50), is at odds with what we find in the other Gospels, have led a number of authors to distinguish between two different episodes.<sup>38</sup> Since Luke has even less interest in olfactory effects than Mark (Luke does not mention nard),<sup>39</sup> it is not of ultimate importance for us whether he could have been inspired by a different story. Regardless of whether some other tradition is not likewise reflected in the Lukan

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the list in Sabbe, “Anointing,” 2053.

<sup>38</sup> Thus for example C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 162-173; Legault, “Application”; Brown, *Gospel of John* 1, 450-451; C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 359. Many others, however, take it for granted that the four narratives ultimately reflect the same event. See again Sabbe, “Anointing”; Elliott, “Anointing”; cf. also the detailed discussion of Luke 7:36-50 in J. Delobel, “L’onction par la pécheresse: La composition littéraire de Lc., VII, 36-50,” *ETL* 42 (1966) 415-475.

<sup>39</sup> Curiously enough, it is Luke’s version of the anointing by the “Sinful Woman” that particularly inspired the olfactory imagination of the Syriac writers. In Syriac literature, the element of scent was not only made explicit, but it was further elaborated in a myriad of ways. See especially the excursus “On the Sinful Woman in Syriac Tradition,” in S.A. Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 42; Berkeley—Los Angeles—London: University of California Press, 2006) 148-155. As Harvey, p. 150, observes, “Syriac writers on this episode develop the role of the woman’s perfume as an instrument of agency, an epistemological tool, and a sacramental indicator.”

narrative, his dependence on Mark in the way he sketches the setting (private house, a meal, a woman with an alabaster jar entering to anoint Jesus, praise of the woman by Jesus following the critical reaction of someone present) does make it quite likely that Luke's account is dependent on Mark.<sup>40</sup>

More importantly, it is plausible that some of the elements in which John differs essentially from Mark, such as the anointing of the feet rather than the head and the wiping of Jesus' feet with the woman's hair, are taken from Luke.<sup>41</sup> They are, however, integrated in his theological scheme, as argued above. Thus the anointing of Jesus' feet, even if in both stories it implies humility, not only is used by John to elaborate a "parallel to his narrative of the washing of the disciples' feet,"<sup>42</sup> but it is just as meaningful for the image of Mary as John presents it throughout chapters 11-12.<sup>43</sup> Also the wiping of the feet *after* the anointing is not as pointless as is sometimes assumed. Besides the practical consideration, noted by the commentators, that the vast quantity of unguent could not have been all rubbed in Jesus' feet,<sup>44</sup> the closeness with Jesus and the transmission of scents which ensues are yet another consequence of John's inversion of the Lukan order. Furthermore, there is no reminiscence in John's version of what is most conspicuous in Luke's narrative, namely the woman's past "sinful" life, and there is no reason to suppose that John intended any such connotation.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the comment of Sabbe, "Anointing," 2069, that there are "several striking terminological and compositional agreements" between Mark and Luke.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Sabbe, "Anointing," 2072-2073.

<sup>42</sup> Sabbe, "Anointing," 2081.

<sup>43</sup> It is striking that Sabbe tends to play down the possible links between chapters 12 and 11, including the connection between the stench of Lazarus' corpse in 11:39 and the aroma in 12:3 (cf. "Anointing," 2062). Sabbe himself agrees that "the interest of the Johannine account is not limited to the perspective of Jesus' death and burial but also implies Jesus' future resurrection." Yet his subsequent acknowledgement that he "does not see how this applies to the perfume itself," implies that he fails to notice the connection between fragrance and life, universally attested in the ancient world. Some elements of Caldach Benages' interpretation (cf. n. 25), so outright rejected by Sabbe, might indeed sound "fanciful," to use his term (she attempts to bring almost all the symbolism of fragrance in the Hebrew Bible, the Pseudepigrapha, the Pauline letters, as well as later rabbinic exegesis to her understanding of John 12:3). Yet as I argued earlier, the association between John 12:3 and Song 1:12; in which Caldach Benages follows a number of ancient and some modern exegetes, must not be dismissed too easily.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Coakley, "Anointing," 251.



Sabbe's careful discussion makes a good case for John's dependence on the Synoptics. He was of course not the only author to have considered the issue, as the episode offers a delightful playground for all those involved in the debate concerning John's possible dependence on the Synoptics. The problems that the account raises are succinctly summarized by Rudolf Schnackenburg: "Wie ist das Verhältnis zur markinischen und matthäischen Erzählung? Welche Beziehungen bestehen zur lukianischen Geschichte von der salbenden Sünderin, die trotz erheblicher Abweichungen einige gemeinsame Züge mit dem joh. Bericht aufweist? Was hat der vierte Evangelist von sich aus hinzugetan oder weggelassen?"<sup>45</sup> A variety of responses have been offered to explain the similarities and differences between the Johannine and the Synoptic accounts, reflecting in general the scholarly positions concerning John's relationship to the Synoptics. Besides the assertion that John relied on the Synoptic accounts, supported by the adherents of the "Leuven hypothesis," it has been suggested that John was drawing on oral tradition,<sup>46</sup> or that he used some other written sources.<sup>47</sup> Some authors prefer not to take their position in the debate.<sup>48</sup>

The proposals of those who put forward alternative sources of John's account, at least with respect to John 12:1-8, are not particularly compelling. Curiously, even though everyone agrees that the anointing accounts are of extreme importance for determining the relationship between John and the Synoptics, the discussion in some of the contributions aimed at demonstrating John's independence of the other Gospels gives the impression that the preconceived result guides them more than common sense. While they play down obvious similarities, they tend to exaggerate even minor differences.<sup>49</sup> For example, Craig Keener asserts that John's failure to mention the alabaster jar reinforces the picture that John is

<sup>45</sup> R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium. II: Kommentar zu Kap. 5-12* (HTKNT 4; Freiburg—Basel—Vienna: Herder, 1971) 458.

<sup>46</sup> This seems to be assumed throughout the outright critique of the attempts to demonstrate John's dependence on the Synoptics in P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938). See also Dodd, *Tradition*, 171-173.

<sup>47</sup> This opinion is advanced by the commentators who most forcefully argue for John's dependence on written sources other than the Synoptic Gospels, most famously Rudolf Bultmann.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kügler, "Duftmetaphorik," 160.

<sup>49</sup> Gardner-Smith, *Saint John*, 44-49, is a point in case.



independent of the Synoptics.<sup>50</sup> Why would John necessarily need to retain a detail apparently judged irrelevant for his purposes is unclear to me, and much less plausible than its omission. Similarly, the argument of Rudolf Bultmann that John's identification of the anointing woman as Mary rather than Martha proves that John was dependent on a source other than Mark and Matthew is not persuasive,<sup>51</sup> especially in view of *Mary's* portrayal as the one consistently at Jesus' feet. The assumption of exegetes that John's logic must have followed what *they* consider logical reasoning, is quite astounding. The presumption that John must have slavishly copied his sources is likewise evident in Schnackenburg's reasoning. In evaluating what he finds to be the special Johannine features, he denies any creativity to John: "Wenn die wörtlichen Anklänge an Mk an eine literarische Kenntnis dieses Ev durch Joh denken lassen, sind es jene joh. Sonderzüge, die in eine andere Richtung weisen."<sup>52</sup> As a consequence, he posits John's dependence on an independent source, asserting that "Die in der Quelle vorgefundene Perikope paßte so gut zu seinen theologischen Absichten, daß er sie im wesentlichen einfach übernehmen konnte."<sup>53</sup>

It is not my intention to determine here the complex issue of John's sources. It is evident, however, that regardless of whether the "Leuven hypothesis" is valid for all of the Fourth Gospel, it is certainly plausible in the case of John 12:1-8. The issue of historical accuracy is beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Cf. C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 2:862.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Bultmann, *Johannesevangelium*, 316.

<sup>52</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium* 2:465.

<sup>53</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium* 2:467.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Coakley, "Anointing," who argues for the historical priority of the Johannine account. Yet while Coakley is correct to note that Mary's act of anointing the feet rather than Jesus' head "was not unthinkable," as opposed to what some authors have claimed, the conclusion he draws from this observation is unwarranted. According to him, "Mark's account, in which Jesus' *head* is anointed, thus loses much of its claim to antecedent probability over against John's" (ibid., 248). Yet that Mary's deed was not inconceivable, rather than implying its historicity, can just as well be interpreted as making it more likely that the changes are to be attributed to John. With regard to the "historicity" of the variant narratives, it is plausible that Mark's version reflects a more primitive tradition, subsequently reworked by John, yet this is not to imply that Mark's story must be historically accurate. For a comprehensive study putting forward the hypothesis of the priority of the Fourth Gospel as historically more reliable than the Synoptics, see Robinson, *Priority*. Coakley's essay is intended as an attempt to strengthen Robinson's thesis.

To return to the saying on fragrance in 12:3c, as already noted by Sabbe, it is “a perfect Johannine redaction. It stresses the quality of the ointment complementing its abundance of 12,3a.”<sup>55</sup> In spite of the apparent concession Sabbe makes with regard to the symbolic significance of the narrator’s comment concerning the fragrance filling the house,<sup>56</sup> he then rather vigorously plays down any such symbolism, allowing at most that “ointment... refers to incorruptibility.”<sup>57</sup> And yet a glimpse at the role of olfaction in ancient Jewish literature as well as in the Greco-Roman world<sup>58</sup> should suffice to make one realize that Sabbe largely underestimates the importance attached to smells and olfactory experiences in the ancient world.<sup>59</sup>

In our discussion of the significance of fragrance in v. 12c above we already indicated how the phrase fits John’s overall scheme. The emphasis on smell is not only in keeping with John’s interest in sense images, but what is more, it is a not-so-subtle allusion to Martha’s comment on Lazarus’ stench in 11:39. The inhabitants of the first-century Greco-Roman world need not be reminded that nard was a strong-smelling aromatic, so the seemingly redundant comment could be inspired by the explicit association made between nard and smell in Song 1:12. The remark in John 12:3c can be read in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also, quite possibly as an allusion to his kingship or at least his elevated position. Finally, rubbing the oil in Jesus’ feet, and then in Mary’s hair, would surely cause its fragrance to waft throughout the room, and possibly even the entire house. There is therefore no need whatsoever to presume that John must have found the comment about the aroma in the hypothetical source, as Schnackenburg does.<sup>60</sup> Nor, for that matter, does

<sup>55</sup> Sabbe, “Anointing,” 2061. Sabbe further comments on the use of πληρώω, observing that apart “from the fulfilment of the scripture or the word of Jesus πληρώω is also used to express the fullness of joy (3,29; 15,11; 16,24; 17,13) or sorrow (16,6) or of time (7,8).”

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Sabbe, “Anointing,” 2061: “Perhaps it [12:3c] also has a symbolic meaning.”

<sup>57</sup> Sabbe, “Anointing,” 2061-2062.

<sup>58</sup> For a good introduction, see J. Kügler (ed.), *Die Macht der Nase: Zur religiösen Bedeutung des Duftes. Religionsgeschichte—Bibel—liturgie* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000). Ancient Jewish sources are discussed in more detail in Kurek-Chomycz, “Making Scents of Revelation.”

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Kügler, “Duftmetaphorik,” 161: “Angesichts der antiken Duftsymbolik ist damit zu rechnen, daß hier nicht nur eine Aussage über das Salböl gemacht wird, sondern eine weitere symbolische Sinnenebene gegeben ist.”

<sup>60</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium* 2:466.

this entail that the pericope is based on an eye-witness' account, as John Robinson suggests.<sup>61</sup>

In short, the major differences between John and Mark can be explained either on the grounds of the redactional features characteristic for him, or as due to his reliance on Luke. The objections voiced by its critics, on the other hand, are not substantial enough. Rather than assume the existence of hypothetical sources for John 12:1-8, it is more plausible to presuppose that John's sources were the Synoptic Gospels. The saying on fragrance in 12:3c can with no special difficulty be attributed to John, and it is perfectly integrated in his overall agenda, there is thus no rationale to look for it in some earlier source.

#### 4. Olfaction and the Gospel Burial Narratives

Before I conclude, I would like to comment briefly on some elements of the burial narratives in the different Gospels, for in this context John's interest in olfaction once more comes to the fore.

As mentioned above, the stories of Jesus' anointing before his death are often interpreted by exegetes as an attempt to make up for the deficiency of any such rite after his death. Indeed, at least in the Synoptic Gospels the only references to anointing following the crucifixion are to unsuccessful attempts to anoint Jesus' body. In Mark 15:46 Joseph wraps the body in a linen cloth, and when the Sabbath is over, three women are reported to have bought aromatic spices (ἀρώματα) in order to anoint (ἵνα ἀλείψωσιν) Jesus (16:1). Yet when they arrive at the tomb, the body is no longer there. Also in Luke 23:53 Joseph wraps Jesus' body in a linen cloth and lays it in a tomb. This time the women prepare aromatics and ointments (ἀρώματα καὶ μύρα; 23:56) beforehand, yet they do not apply them immediately. They come to the tomb only on the first day of the week, carrying the spices that they had prepared (φέρουσιν ἃ ἡτοίμασαν ἀρώματα; 24:1). Like in Mark, when they arrive at the tomb, Jesus' body is no longer there. In spite of the difference with regard to the preparation of the spices, the narrative can be plausibly explained as "resting on Mark's account."<sup>62</sup> Matthew appears to ignore the issue altogether. In 27:59

<sup>61</sup> Robinson, *Priority*, 236.

<sup>62</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 878.

Joseph wraps Jesus' body in a "clean linen cloth," but on the Easter morning the Evangelist "has the women visit the tomb . . . merely as sightseers"<sup>63</sup> (cf. 28:1).

It is sometimes asserted that in the Gospel of John, by contrast, the anointing *does* take place after the death of Jesus. In fact in 19:39-40 we only read that Nicodemus brings "a mixture of myrrh and aloes of about a hundred pounds" (μίγμα σμύρνης καὶ ἀλόης ὡς λίτρας ἑκατόν), and that subsequently he and Josephus wrap the body "in cloth wrappings" with the spices" (ὀθονίοις μετὰ τῶν ἀρωμάτων). The view of Raymond Brown, who translates ἀρώματα as "aromatic oils," on the grounds that "it was customary for the Jews to use oil,"<sup>65</sup> is not persuasive. In the LXX ἀρώμα is customarily used in reference to spices, and as a rule it renders the Hebrew term מִשְׁחָה. The fact that it sometimes appears in the lists where oil is also mentioned (cf. 4 Kgs 20:13; 1 Chr 9:29), makes it clear that it should be distinguished from it. In the account of Asa's burial the king's body is laid on a bier filled with spices, and it is interesting that the Hebrew מִשְׁחָה וְכָל סוּדֵי (literally "spices and all kinds/sorts") was rendered as ἀρωμάτων καὶ γένη μύρων. This supplies the somewhat elliptical Hebrew text, but at the same time again shows that ἀρώματα were not to be confused with ointments. The only place in the LXX where the term could refer to aromatic oils in Est 2:12, but even there this is not clear. Also in Flavius Josephus ἀρώματα regularly refer to spices. In Mark 16:1 women are reported to have brought their aromatic spices "in order to anoint" Jesus' body, which could mean that their ἀρώματα were in a liquid form. Yet the fact that Luke in 23:56 has ἀρώματα καὶ μύρα may suggest his attempt to correct Mark's imprecision. As a result, it is most reasonable to take ἀρώματα in John 19:40 as referring to aloes and myrrh, mentioned in v. 39, which were probably in crushed or powdered form.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Elliott, "Anointing," 106.

<sup>64</sup> On the uncertain meaning of ὀθόνιον (all the Synoptics have Josephus wrap Jesus body in σινδών; but cf. Luke 24:12), see R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 941-942.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Gospel of John* 2:942. Brown admits that the "word can mean 'spices,' in which case it is probably another way of describing the previously mentioned myrrh and aloes" (ibid.), but in spite of this he opts for the much less likely reference to aromatic oils.

<sup>66</sup> Thus correctly Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 2:349: "von Öl wird nichts gesagt . . . Das ist wichtig, weil dadurch von einer Ölsalbung oder Einbalsamierung keine Rede sein kann. Die Salbung in Betanien (12,3) ist also ein anderer Vorgang, der für Joh mit dem Tun des Nikodemus nicht konkurriert." Similarly, Robinson, *Priority*, 283, rightly

Myrrh and aloes are mentioned together also in Ps 45:9 and Song 4:14, and apparently also in Pr 7:17, although it is not certain if in all these texts the same plant is meant, nor that John has the same plant in mind. The term ἄλōη is in any case a *hapax legomenon* in the NT and it is absent from the LXX (in Song 4:14 ἄλωθ renders the Hebrew term). The kinds of spices named in John 19:39 were surely known for their fragrance, and it is notable that John takes care to identify them, rendering the imagery more vivid than Mark's and Luke's general references. Even more importantly, however, he again calls attention to the extraordinary quantity (more than thirty kilograms!). As Mary honoured Jesus' body in his lifetime with the abundance of nard oil, now tribute is paid to it after Jesus' death,<sup>67</sup> again in olfactory terms, even though this time John does not make any additional comments about the aroma ensuing from the copious amount of spices.

## 5. Conclusion

All the four Gospels include the story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman, yet only in the Gospel of John do we come across an explicit remark on the aroma of the anointing oil filling the house. The comment on the fragrance of Mary's perfume in 12:3c, rather than being an indication of John's dependence on sources other than the Synoptic Gospels, is much more likely due to the Johannine redaction. It may bespeak the author's particular sensitivity and awareness of the symbolic meanings of fragrance, including the association between social order and smell, possibly implying also an intertextual allusion to the Song of Songs. It is in line with the author's interest in sense imagery elsewhere in the Gospel and is well integrated in his narrative and theological scheme. Among others, it contributes to the positive portrayal of Mary of Bethany, and her special relationship with Jesus. Olfaction in chapter 12, like gustatory imagery in chapter 2, serves as a boundary marker, introducing the

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observes that the body was underlaid with spices and "perhaps packed around, as their binding in *with* the ὀθόνια suggests," but that it was not anointed.

<sup>67</sup>) Cf. the comment of Keener, *John*, 1164: "In a setting where Jesus has been condemned for treason as a messianic claimant, Nicodemus lavishes gifts on him as a true king in his death."

transition to the last stage of Jesus' earthly life, his death, and ultimately, the resurrection.

The contrast between the Fourth Evangelist and the Synoptics is evident not only in the accounts of anointing, but also in the burial narratives. Even though John does not comment on the aroma, the vast amount of spices he mentions, including their specification, is again in contrast with the failed attempts to anoint Jesus in Mark and Luke, where only a general reference to spices (and ointments in Luke) appears.