

NARD

The following explores the story of the anointing of Jesus with Nard. I'll begin in chronological order with Matthew 26. In order to put it in context, I'll include the verses that go just before, and go right afterwards.

“When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples. ‘As you know the Passover is two days away-and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the Palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked. ‘This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.’

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’

Then one of the Twelve-the one called Judas Iscariot-went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand over to you?’ so they counted out for him 30 silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.”

What I would like to do is to begin by assuming that all the narratives about the anointing with nard are describing the same event, and look at the distinct information that each one provides. In the above narrative we learn from what immediately precedes it that the anointing takes place two days

prior to the Passover. We know that the event took place in Bethany. We also know that the disciples were “indignant.” We also see here and Jesus describes what happened as the perfume having been poured on his body. With the word “then,” we get a sequential connection or time frame or chronology, perhaps even a causal connection to Judas Iscariot going to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus.

The following narrative in Mark is essentially the same as Matthew; two days prior to the Passover; in Bethany; at Simon the Leper's house; Nard poured on Jesus head; The Chief priest's out to get Jesus, Judas immediately afterward looking to betray Jesus; Jesus interpretation being a preparation for His burial; a number of those present indignant, for reason of the cost of the Nard.

“Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and chief priests and the teachers of law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. ‘But not during the feast,’ they said, ‘or people may riot.’

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume? It could've been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor.’ And they rebuked her harshly.

‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them anytime you want. But you'll not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body before hand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also told, in memory of her.’

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the 12, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.”¹

¹ Mark: 14:1-11

Here in Mark we learn that the cost is a year's wages.

The next narrative is in Luke 7:29-8:3:

“(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

‘To what, then can I compare the people of this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘he has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But wisdom is proved right by all her children.’

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's House and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived the sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's House she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind woman she is—that she is a sinner.’

Jesus answered him, ‘Simon, I have something to tell you.’

‘Tell me, teacher,’ he said.

‘To men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?’

Simon replied, ‘I suppose the one had bigger debt canceled.’

'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said .

Then he turned toward the woman said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came in to 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 sin have been forgiven-for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'

Then Jesus said to her, 'your sins are forgiven.'

The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. The 12 were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary called Magdalene from whom 7 demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Coups the, the manager of herds household; Susanna and many others. These women were helping to support them of their own means."

Here we see that, if this is the same event, Simon the Pharisee must once have been Simon the leper. We also see Jesus, himself saying that the woman has poured the perfume on His feet. Matthew and Mark have her pouring it on Jesus head, if this is the same event, then she must have poured it on Jesus in more than one place. Also here in Luke 7 Simon himself seems to be the only one offended, no mention of the others or Judas Iscariot. We also note that here in Luke, a great deal takes place after the event. Luke is apparently inspired by the Spirit to write the chronology of this event prior to Jesus traveling from one town and village to another. This would strongly suggest that this is a separate event from the one that took place only two days before the Passover as described in Matthew 26. Thus, it may not be Martha's sister Mary, but Mary Magdalene who is mentioned in the entourage of Luke 8. So in spite of the similarities, there are many differences in the story. Head versus feet, Pharisee versus leper, two days before the Passover versus traveling from town to town after the event, Jesus

assessment of the significance of the outpouring, response to forgiveness versus preparation for His Burial, every one offended versus just Simon being offended, the reason for the offense being misuse of resources versus the woman being a sinner. It may be that Luke's second hand perspective may have picked up a slightly different spin from what seemed to be happening to those who were eyewitnesses to the event, but that would make Luke a very troublesome witness.

John, chapter 12

“Then Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment. Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.”²

The question we have to ask, where this passage is concerned is, could the four writers possibly have come away from this incident, if indeed it is the same incident, with such different perspectives on what happened, why it

² John 12:1-13

happened, and such a different read out on who resented what the woman was doing, and why?

That John identifies the event as being at the house of Lazarus, could certainly be due to his rather more intimate identity with Jesus, "*the disciple who Jesus loved,*" and therefore His friends. Clearly Jesus felt a deeper bond with Lazarus, Mary, and even Martha than he did with Simon the Pharisee, and if Simon the Pharisee was formerly Simon the leper, then even the curing of his leprosy did not give Simon the grateful heart that his forgiveness gave to the "*sinful woman*" of Luke 7. John also identifies the timing of the anointing relative to Jesus entry into to Jerusalem. It was the "*day before,*" verse 1. The time frame in Luke is so different that we can only think the narratives had to be describing two separate events.

We must also wonder if Martha's sister Mary, is also known as Mary Magdalene. If so then there is the question, Did Mary anoint Jesus twice, the first time early in His ministry as indicated in Luke, and out of a great sense of gratitude, and love, and then later in preparation for His Burial? Quite possibly. If Martha's sister is the "*sinful woman*" of Luke 7, then quite possibly she had less inhibition about such a show of affection, involving such a sensuous outpouring, and lingering fragrance. Where a lingering fragrance is concerned, in our own day there are other ways of leaving someone with a remembrance, a picture, a tape, a note, but in that day, the possibilities were not so great, though shorter lasting, Jesus could take the perfume with Him for the time he had left. Unlike a picture a tape or a note, it could not be taken from Him in the terrible trials of that week that transcended time and space, heaven and hell.

If Martha's sister is a different Mary, then we are left to wonder why she was not there at the cross with all the other Marys. "*Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.*"³ Three Mary's "*Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.*"⁴

It is unlikely that Mary, the sister of Martha would have thought to pour the nard on Jesus just prior to the cross, and then not have been there for the

³ John 19:25

⁴ Mark 16:9

ordeal and the resurrection. That is difficult to imagine. It is easier to believe that she anointed Jesus on two separate occasions. Luke thought of her as a sinful woman, and included that in his narrative, John may have had more grace to overlook her background in his narrative. In any case, between the four writers, we have it all.

*“Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and scribes sought how they might kill him; for they feared the people.”*⁵

It is interesting to note that the language here in Luke is so close to the other two synoptic Gospels where the context of the later anointing of Jesus is concerned. One finds oneself feeling around between verse two, and verse three, trying to find this last anointing of Jesus. Could Luke have left it out, because he already told a story of a similar anointing, one that was separate and happened earlier in the ministry of Jesus? Clearly women were among Jesus earliest most devoted financial supporters.

*“And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him, And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.”*⁶

Perhaps it was enough to tell us that much without the same writer giving us multiple accounts of women anointing Jesus, and being there at the cross and grave, while his male admirers were somewhat more retiring. Perhaps the Holy Spirit inspired the writers to preserve for us some of the biases of the culture in which the events took place.

“Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve. And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. And they were glad, and covenanted to give him money. And he promised, and sought opportunity to

⁵ Luke 22:1, 2

⁶ Luke 8:1-3

*betray him unto them in the absence of the multitude.”*⁷

Finally, we are left to wonder what became of Mary, the sister of Martha, why was she not at the cross, or at the tomb. Is it that she was also reserved? When Jesus came to her house on the occasion of the death of Lazarus, it was Martha who first greeted Him, Mary hanging back in the house: *“Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.”*⁸ One wonders if perhaps Mary might have been a little coy with Jesus.

*“She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.”*⁹ Perhaps, Jesus saying what He did about her anointing him for Burial struck her very deeply, and, having already done her part in that preparation, it was just too painful for her to be there and see what happened to Him.

“She has done what she could:” One way of understanding this is that she couldn't do any more. She couldn't go to the crucifixion, she couldn't bear to be there, and see what was done to this one for whom she cared so much.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, *“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”*¹⁰

Is it possible to be tempted in every way a man is tempted, and not know the chemistry that is so compelling between a man and a woman? To experience that chemistry is already one temptation. To know that it is reciprocated is yet another temptation, and Jesus was tempted with it all, yet without sin. One is left to wonder if Mary, was one with whom Jesus had experienced this chemistry, and for her part, how she handled it.

Mary Magdalene was another, who appears to have handled it in a different way, less retiring, more aggressive, so that, in her case, Jesus had to say, *“Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and*

⁷ Luke 22:3-6

⁸ John 11:20

⁹ Mark 14:8

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:15

to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.”¹¹

¹¹ John 20:17, 18