

Exegetical Brief: John 19:39— A Mixture Of Myrrh And Aloes

John F. Brug

The account of Jesus' burial in John's gospel reports that Nicodemus brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes" (μίγμα σμύρνης και ἀλόης) to prepare Jesus' body for burial. (The term "embalming" used in many commentaries for this process is misleading since the Jews did not "embalm" by replacing organs of the body as the Egyptians did). This brief phrase raises a number of exegetical questions.

The first question is the identification of the perfumes. The same combination occurs in Psalm 45:9, where the two words are joined by a *vav*, suggesting a mixture of the two perfumes (מִרְיָאֵן הַלֹּוֹת). The two are also associated in Proverbs 7:17 and Song 4:14.

Myrrh is a fragrant, reddish gum or resin made from the sap of shrubs that grow in Arabia and in the horn of Africa (*Commiphora myrrha*, formerly *Balsamodendron myrrha*). There are a number of varieties. The most valuable myrrh is that which is secreted naturally by the plant, not that induced by slashing. Myrrh seems to be closely related to frankincense.

"Myrrh" appears earlier in John's gospel in chapter twelve when Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus in anticipation of his death with a "liter of myrrh, pure or genuine nard, very expensive" (λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου). "Myrrh" (μύρου) here seems to function as a generic word for perfume, not as a name of a specific type of perfume. The Latin *murra* and the English "myrrh," which refer to the specific perfume/incense, seem to be derived from μύρου rather than from σμύρνα. The specific type of perfume in John 12 was nard or spikenard, a fragrant oil from the root or spike (hair stem) of a plant which grows in the mountains of northern India (*Nardostachys jatamansi*). Judas evaluated the value of the nard as 300 denarii, a year's wages for a laborer.

In the Old Testament aloes probably refers not to the variety of succulent plants with fleshy sword-like leaves, which are used medicinally, but to a fragrant substance from a large tree that grows in India and other parts of south Asia. In English this tree (*Aquilaria agallocha*) is called eaglewood or aloeswood or sometimes sandalwood. This tree produces a protective resin when it is infected by a fungal parasite. This resin is used as an incense/perfume either by burning the wood or by distilling an oil from it. The fragrance is applied to clothes either by having the wearer stand in the smoke of the burning wood or by applying the distilled oil to the clothing. The fragrance can last through several washings of the clothing. In contemporary Arab culture aloes is considered to be a masculine fragrance. The best oil costs up to \$850 dollars an ounce. There is, however, some disagreement as to the identity of the New Testament "aloes." Some believe that the aloes used in Jesus' burial may be "the other aloes," the succulent plant grown on the island of Socotra, south of Arabia (*Aloe barbadense*, also known as *Aloe vera*). I accept the premise that the New Testament aloes is the same as that of the Old Testament. Nicodemus may have had the powder form of this fragrance to be placed in the wrapping of Jesus' body.

The second problem is the "container" of the perfume. There are four variants. The UBS text has μίγμα, mixture. The three variants are 1) ἐλιγμα \aleph^* B W 2) σμιγμα Ψ 892^s *pc* 3) σμηγμα *pc*. *Ελιγμα* means some sort of folder or wrapper. *Σμηγμα* means soap or unguent, perhaps a base that contained the fragrance. *Σμιγμα* apparently is a synonym (by itacism). The UBS textual commentary believes that μίγμα is the preferred reading since it has the best textual support ($\mathbf{P}^{66\text{vid}}$ \aleph^c A D^s L Θ $f^{1.13}$ 33 **m** sy^h).

The third problem is the weight of the perfume, ὡς λίτρας ἑκατόν, about 100 "liters". A Greek or Roman liter is about .65 to .75 pound. The NIV translates λίτρας ἑκατόν as 75 pounds. This seems like a huge amount of perfume for a burial. One liter was an extravagant amount for anointing Jesus. If myrrh was comparable to nard in cost, the perfume Nicodemus brought would be 100 years wages for an average person. Few commentators say much about this, other than to say it was a huge amount.

In Kostenberger's commentary on John reviewed in this issue [WLQ 104:1 – WLS Library Staff] the translation says, "myrrh and aloes, a litra each" (apparently reading ὡς λίτρας ἑκαστόν). In brackets this amount

is defined as sixty-five pounds. But a "liter" is not 65 pounds but .65 pound. A liter each would total 1.3 pounds. Kostenberger's commentary on this verse refers to 100 "liters" or 65 pounds. This made me wonder whether the reading "one liter each" was a brilliant conjecture or just a mistake. This led to the investigation reported in this article.

I checked 14 translations directly and several others in the *New Testament in 26 Translations*. All of them translated either 100 pounds or 75 pounds. The Nestle text records no variant for ἑκατόν here. So where does "one pound of each" come from? It seems to be either a conjecture or a misreading.

We are extremely reluctant to emend the New Testament text on the basis of conjecture. I found no textual basis for Kostenberger's translation, but it explains a lot. It is hard to imagine Nicodemus coming to the tomb carrying 75 pounds of perfume. It is hard to imagine using that much even in a most extravagant burial. There was no need for such a quantity. A "liter" was probably a standard sized package of this perfume. Bringing one package of each to make a mixture of the two would make good sense. Could the text have gone wrong here at such an early stage that the correct variant is nowhere preserved?

Ⲙ* identifies the original reading of Alexandrinus when a correction has been made.

B 03, Century: IV, Vatican

W 032, Century: IV/V, Washington, Smithsonian

Ψ 044, Century: IX/X, Athos

892 Century: IX, London, Brit. Libr.,

s (= *supplementum*) indicates a reading derived from a later addition to a manuscript,

pc = *pauci*: a few manuscripts,

P = Papyrus.

66 P⁶⁶, ca. 200. Cologny, Bibl. Bodmer., P. Bodmer II; Dublin, Chester Beatty Libr.,

vid (= *ut videtur*) indicates that the reading attested by a witness cannot be determined.

c identifies a correction made by a later hand, but sometimes also by the first hand.

A 02, Century: V, London, Brit. Libr.

D 05, Century: V, Cambridge, Univ. Libr., D 06, Century: VI, Paris, Bibl. Nat., Gr

L 019, Century: VIII, Paris, Bibl. Nat.; L 020, Century: IX, Roma, Bibl. Angelica

⊖ 038, Century: IX, Tbilisi

f¹ = folio.

33 Century: IX, Paris, Bibl. Nat.,

m (= *Majority text, including the Byzantine Koine text*) indicates readings supported by the majority of all manuscripts.

sy Syriac Versions

h sy^h (= Harklensis). The version made by Thomas of Harkel in A.D. 616 is the only Syriac version containing the entire New Testament