









The Anointing of Jesus at Bethany

The anointing of Jesus at **Bethany** is one of the most theologically rich and symbolically significant events recorded in the Gospels. However, **anointings of Jesus** are found in **multiple Gospel accounts**, and they differ in **timing, location, characters involved, and purpose**. Some accounts are of **the same event** (e.g., Matthew, Mark, and John), while others (like Luke 7) refer to a **different event altogether**.

SUMMARY OF THE BETHANY ANOINTING

| Gospel | Matthew 26:6–13 | Mark 14:3–9 | John 12:1–11 |
|--|--|---|--|
|  Location | Bethany, House of Simon the Leper | Bethany, House of Simon the Leper | Bethany, Town Lazarus lived in |
|  Woman | Unnamed woman | Unnamed woman | Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha & Lazarus) |
|  Substance | Expensive perfume | Pure nard (very expensive) | A pint of pure nard |
|  Action | Poured on Jesus' head | Poured on Jesus' head | Poured on Jesus' feet and wiped with her hair |
|  Objection | Disciples indignant | Some present object | Judas Iscariot complains |
|  Cost complaint | "Could've been sold for a high price" | "Wasted; could have helped poor" | "Could've been sold for 300 denarii" |
|  Jesus' Response | "She has prepared Me for burial" | "She did a beautiful thing... for My burial" | "Leave her alone... it was intended she should save this for My burial" |
|  Additional Note | Her act will be remembered wherever Gospel is preached | Same as Matthew | Crowd gathers because of Lazarus too; chief priests plan to kill Lazarus |

INTERPRETATION & CONTEXT

Purpose of the Anointing

- **Preparation for burial** – Jesus interprets this act as a prophetic symbol of His coming death.
- **Act of worship** – The woman (Mary in John) expresses **extravagant devotion** and **deep insight** into who Jesus is.

Objections







- The **disciples** or **Judas** objected to the apparent waste, emphasizing their **misunderstanding of Jesus' mission** or their **ulterior motives** (John says Judas was a thief).

Jesus' Defense

- Jesus honors the woman's act and **connects it to His imminent death**, contrasting **eternal significance** with **temporary charity**.
- He does **not devalue caring for the poor** (see Deut. 15:11), but highlights the **uniqueness of the moment**.

OTHER ANOINTING STORIES COMPARED






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| Feature | LUKE 7:36–50 | JOHN 12:1–11 (Bethany) | MT 26:6–13 / MK 14:3–9 (Bethany) |
|---|--|---|--------------------------------------|
|  Location | House of Simon the Pharisee | Bethany, House of Lazarus | Bethany, House of Simon the Leper |
|  Woman | Sinful woman | Mary of Bethany | Unnamed |
|  Timing | Early in Jesus' ministry (Galilee) | 6 days before Passover | 2 days before Passover |
|  Act | Washed feet with tears, wiped with hair, kissed feet, anointed with ointment | Anointed feet with perfume, wiped with hair | Anointed head with expensive perfume |
|  Response | Pharisee: “If He were a prophet...” | Judas: “Why not sell the perfume?” | Disciples: “Wasteful!” |
|  Jesus' Lesson | Forgiveness, love, and hospitality | Burial, honor | Burial, memory, gospel legacy |

✅ **Conclusion:** Luke 7 is a **different anointing**, possibly much earlier, in **Galilee**, involving a **repentant sinner**. The others in **Matthew, Mark, and John** are **parallel accounts of the same event in Bethany**, just before Jesus' crucifixion.



SYMBOLISM & THEMES

| Symbol / Motif | Meaning |
|---|--|
|  Perfume (Nard) | Extreme value, sacrificial worship |
|  Hair wiping (John 12) | Humility , intimacy, and service |
|  Anointing | Messianic act (Messiah = “Anointed One”), burial preparation |
|  Rejection | Those around misunderstood the value of worship |
|  Immortalized act | Jesus says her story would be told “ wherever the gospel is preached ”—a unique honor |



CONNECTIONS TO OLD TESTAMENT & FEAST TIMING

- **Burial anointing** aligns with Jewish custom to honor the dead (e.g., spices for burial – cf. Nicodemus in John 19:39).
- **Bethany** was close to Jerusalem, and the timing (6 days before Passover in John) indicates this occurred at the **start of Passion Week**.
- Anointing the **head and/or feet** echoes Psalm 23:5 (“You anoint my head with oil”) and anticipates Jesus' **kingly and priestly roles**.

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How much pure nard did she bring?



John 12:3 (ESV) says:

“Mary therefore took a **pound** of expensive ointment made from **pure nard**, and anointed the feet of Jesus...”



Greek Word: “litra” (λίτρα)

- A **litra** was a Roman pound, equivalent to about:
 - **327 grams** (\approx **11.5 ounces** or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a modern pound)
 - So, **almost 12 fluid ounces** of oil—more than a small vial. It would’ve been **very noticeable and lavish**.



What is pure nard?



Greek term: “μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς” (*myrou nardou pistikēs*)

- **μύρου** (*myrou*) = ointment, perfume
- **νάρδου** (*nardou*) = nard
- **πιστικῆς** (*pistikēs*) = likely “pure” or “genuine” (possibly related to the Greek word *pistos*, faithful or trustworthy)



What is Nard?

- Also called **spikenard**
- A **very aromatic oil** extracted from the **root of the *Nardostachys jatamansi*** plant
- Native to **northern India and the Himalayas**



Properties:

- Thick, reddish-brown, and intensely fragrant
 - Used in **ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures** for:
 - Perfume
 - Medicine (calming agent)
 - Burial preparation
- Very expensive** due to long-distance transport and scarcity



How valuable was it?

John 12:5:

Judas says: “Why wasn’t this perfume sold for **300 denarii** and the money given to the poor?”

- **300 denarii** = about **a year’s wages** for a working man
- This anointing was **extravagantly generous**—it was like someone today pouring out a **\$40,000 bottle of perfume** (if we calculate based on U.S. median income)



Symbolic Meaning

| Symbol | Meaning |
|---------|---|
| Cost | Sacrificial devotion—nothing held back for Jesus |
| Purity | Jesus is being honored with what is most genuine and untainted |
| Burial | Perfume used to prepare the body for burial—a prophetic act |
| Worship | Mary's act represents true worship : humble, costly, public, and unashamed |