

ANOINTING IN BETHANY

Theme: Jesus anointed in Bethany, the Remorse of the Sinful Woman, or Mary (Magdalene) anointing Jesus' feet¹.

Keywords: Old Testament, Public Life, Anointing, Mary Magdalene, Christ, Remorse, Forgiveness.

Summary: A woman, probably reformed after having sinned many times, goes towards Christ, who has lunch in public, and anoints his feet, so that she brings forward the future ointment in the tomb.

The story, which was told by the four gospels, has many differences regarding its details. According to Matthew and Mark it was an anonymous woman, with an alabaster bottle full of wealthy ointment, who went inside Simon the Leper's house (in Bethany). There was Christ having lunch. The woman spilled the ointment over his head. His disciples gossiped since they believed that it would have been much more useful to spend the money 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*.

Luke gives more details and affirms that Christ was having lunch in Simon the Pharisee's house². He also states that the woman, who was a sinner, not only spilled ointments over Christ but also washed his feet with her tears, wiped them up with her hair, and kissed them. Simon gossiped that the woman was a sinner, but Christ said: *"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."* Afterwards Christ forgave the sins of the woman. There is no mention to his tomb.

John offers a new version of the story. He states that Jesus had lunch in Lazarus, Marta and Mary's house, in Bethany. There *Mary took about a pint[a] of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair*. Judas Iscariot said that he considered the perfume a waste of money, which could have been employed in helping poor people. Jesus stood up 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.

Primary sources: generally speaking, the events of the Public Life of Christ are the best examples of the creation of Christian iconography thanks to the combination of the four gospels of the New Testament. The canon of the New Testament, which was set up in the 4th century, accepts the four gospels, all of them employed in the iconography of the Anointing in Bethany.

¹ In the section *precedents, transformation and projection* why this story is linked to Mary Madeleine, although there is no specific mention to her, is explained.

² The Pharisees were a group among the Jews who followed strict religious rules and austerity. During his Public Life, Christ usually faced the Pharisees, since that strictness seemed to him a lack of sense. In fact, Christ made healings on Saturday (see Mathew 12, 9-14, Marc 1, 21-28, Marc 3, 1-6, Luke 4, 31-37, Luke 6, 6-11, Luke 14, 1-5, John 5, 1-9) and saved a woman from dying by lapidation (see John 8, 1-11), something that encouraged the criticism of the Pharisees.

In fact, the New Testament was not one single homogeneous and consistent story, but at least a combination of four testimonies written by four different authors. However it was understood as one single message sent in different ways. Two of these gospels are traditionally believed to have been written by two apostles (Matthew and John) and the other two by two disciples (Mark and Luke). Additionally, the gospels written by Matthew, Mark and Luke were called *synoptic* by the German author Griesbach in 1797, since he considered that a general overview of the events can be extracted by reading these three texts together. By contrast, the gospel of John is surrounded by another atmosphere, more dogmatic and less narrative.

Concerning their chronology, Mark is believed to be the oldest one, written about 70 A.C., and to have inspired Matthew and Luke, written a few years later. The gospel of John was not written by the very apostle, who had died about 44 A.C, but by an anonymous author living in the 2nd century (ca. 115-145)³, so it should be the latest one.

The Church tried to keep a balance among all of them. In fact, Christian authors look for similarities among the four gospels and tried to reconstruct Christ's life by making a summary of all the events told by the four writers. That aim encouraged the "*Diatessaron*, which was a compendium of the four gospels, written either in Greek or Syrian around the end of 2nd century by Tatian, widely spread among the Syrian Church, with a central role in the liturgy until the 5th century"⁴ and a key role in medieval iconography creation.

Here are the original primary sources of the Anointing in Bethany⁵:

- **Mathew 26, 6-13:** "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 will 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.*"
- **Marc 14, 3-9:** "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 have been sold for more than a year's wages[a] 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 any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.*"

³ There must have been at least three different Johns: John the Apostle (James' brother), John the Evangelist (the author of the Gospel), and John from Ephesus (the author of the Book of Revelations), although for Christian people all of them were the same person and for that reason had the same iconography.

⁴ SEPÚLVEDA GONZÁLEZ, M^a de los Ángeles (1989): "Los inicios de la iconografía cristiana: la sala bautismal de Dura Europos (Siria)", *Lecturas de historia del Arte. Número II (Actas del I Congreso de Iconografía "La Literatura en las Artes", Ephialte*, Vitoria, 1990, p. 197.

⁵ All the texts come from <http://www.biblegateway.com> (last access on 26-10-2010).

- **Luke 7, 36-50:** “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 a 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 a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.* Jesus answered him: *Simon, I have something to tell you.* “Tell me, teacher,” he said. *Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,[d] and the other fifty. 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 who had the bigger debt cancelled.* “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon: *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.* 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.”*
- **John 12, 1-8:** “Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint[a] of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected: *Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.* He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. *Leave her alone,* Jesus replied. *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.”*

Other sources, non written sources: *non written sources* (i.e. liturgy, oral traditions, popular religious practices, etc.) do not seem to have had a strong influence on the iconography of the Anointing in Bethany.

Geographical and chronological framework: The Anointing in Bethany was not included in the compendium of Early Christian Art; thus it does not appear in catacombs, sarcophagus, mosaics, or ivories of that period. Neither was it included in the repertoire of the Byzantine First Golden Age (6th- 7th century) nor in the one of the Iconoclasm Period (8th-9th century). It was in the 9th century, when the Second Golden Age began, that the scene was clearly included among Christian iconography of the Byzantine Church (see for ex. the *Gregory of Nazianzus' Homilies*, 9th century, BNF). From the 9th century onwards this theme saw a great projection not only in the East but also in the West, over all the Romanesque art (see for ex. the wall paintings of the Church of Maderuelo, Segovia, 12th century, today in the Prado Museum), since it was used to insist on the central role of remorse and forgiveness in the way towards the redemption. It continued to be present in the Western Late Middle Ages, when it was sometimes linked to other events such as the Last Supper (for more details see section *typology and related themes*).

Artistic media and techniques: From the 9th century onwards the Anointing in Bethany was depicted by using numerous artistic media and techniques: wall painting (ex. Maderuelo),

mosaic (ex. Monreale), illuminated manuscript (ex. Gregory of Nazianzus' Homilies), wooden sculpture (ex. Cartuja de Miraflores Altarpiece by Gil de Siloé), stone sculpture (ex. Capital of the cloister of Saint Pons de Thomières), panel painting (ex. Madeleine and John the Baptist Altarpiece by Jaume Serra in the Prado Museum), etc.

Precedents, transformation and projection: the Anointing in Bethany did not have any clear precedents in Antiquity. It seems to have been a new topic created in the Middle Ages.

For medieval artists the main problem was to conciliate the differences and possible contradictions among the four gospels. They usually depicted a woman spilling perfume over Christ's feet, washing them with her tear, and wiping them away with her hair. By contrast, they seldom depicted the woman spilling the perfume over Christ's head.

The most frequent scenery was Simon the Pharisee's house, instead of Lazarus, Marta and Mary's house which was significantly less used. A good example of the second scenery is one panel painting made by Albrecht Bouts in the 15th century which was inspired in John's gospel. Consequently it set the story in Lazarus and his sisters' house and included red-haired Jude Iscariot close to Christ.

Artists usually identified the *anointing woman* as Mary Madeleine, although not any written source had mentioned her clearly. In fact, several biblical figures had been traditionally identified as Madeleine. Thus, Madeleine had assumed the biography of Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and the reformed sinful woman⁶. That would explain why the Anointing of Bethany was sometimes included among Mary of Magdala cycles; see for ex. wall paintings in Rinuccini Chapel of Santa Croce Church in Florence, made by Giovanni da Milano in 1365.

Concerning the shape of the table, some differences could be reported. Although Mark states that guests had lunch *leaning* in a *triclinium*, as the Romans did, that detail was not usual. It barely appears in certain Byzantine examples or in some Modern images which tried to remain close to archaeological veracity.⁷ In western medieval art it was much more common to depict Jesus and his disciples sitting around a rectangular table, so that the furniture seemed to be contemporary to the artist's life.

The Anointing of Bethany continued to be present in Modern Times. Not any iconographical change was necessary to adapt it to new Post- Council of Trent mentality.

Typology and related themes: the Anointing in Bethany did not have any precedents in the Old Testament, so it was outside the iconographical typology system.

By contrast, it was linked to a central topic of the New Testament, the Last Supper. Thus, the food on Simon's or Lazarus' house could acquire Eucharistic connotations; see for ex. the panel painted by Albrecht Bouts where bread, fish, and wine replaced other possible menus.

⁶ According to the New Testament, Mary Madeleine was one of Christ's disciples. She was healed by him because she had seven devils inside (Luke 8, 2). She must have been with Christ during his Passion, his Crucifixion, and his Burial (Matthew 27, 55 and 27, 61; Marc 15, 40 and 15, 47; John 19). She was also the first person who saw Christ after his resurrection (Matthew 28, 1-10; Mark 16, 1-9; Luke 24, 1-10; John 20, 1-2 and 20, 11-18).

Mary Madeleine and Mary of Bethany (Marta and Lazarus' sister) were usually believed to have been the same person. Mary of Bethany (Luke 10, 38-40) preferred listening to Christ instead of making *female* housework. She begged Christ to save his brother Lazarus, who had died four days before (John 11, 33-44). Time later, she spill a wealthy perfume over Christ (John 11, 2 and 12-1-3).

⁷ RÉAU, Louis (1955-1959): *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, vol. II- part II, p. 327.

Moreover, in the Last Supper we could find a supplementary guest, the reformed sinful woman who is anointing Christ's feet; see for ex. the Miraflores Altarpiece by Gil de Siloé.

The iconographical *contamination* between the Anointing and the Last Supper must have been supported by three different reasons. First, because Jesus insisted on his future death, both during the Anointing and during the Last Supper. Second, because Jude Iscariot was described as a miser man confronted to Christ, who would later denounce him, both in the Anointing and in the Last Supper, according to John's gospel. Third, because Madeleine had been so important among Christ's disciples that she could be included in cycles consecrated to the Public Life and Passion without the necessity of specifically mentioning her.

Images:

- Anointing in Bethany, Gregory of Nazianzus's Homilies, BNF, Paris (France), illuminated manuscript, 9th century.
- Anointing in Bethany, Monreale Cathedral (Italy), mosaic, 12th century.
- Anointing in Bethany, Church of Sant'Angelo in Formis (Italy), wall painting, last quarter of 12th century.
- Sinful woman anointing Christ, Church of Vera Cruz de Maderuelo in Segovia, today in the Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain), wall painting, mixed technique, 12th century.
- Anointing in Bethany, Capital of the facade of San Nicolas Church in Soria, today facade of San Juan de Rabanera (Spain), stone sculpture, last tierce of 12th century.
- Anointing in Bethany, Stained glass of Chartres cathedral (France), beginning of 13th century.
- Stained glass consecrated to Mary Madeleine life in the ambulatory of Bourges' cathedral (France), beginning of the 13th century.
- Madeleine Master, Saint Mary Madeleine's biography, Academy Gallery, Florence (Italy), ca. 1285
- Madeleine Chapel in Asis Church (Italy), wall painting, ca. 1315-1320.
- Taddeo Gaddi, Refectory of Santa Croce in Florence (Italy), wall painting, ca. 1335-1340.
- Jaume Serra, Saint John and the Madeleine Altarpiece, detail of the Anointing in Bethany, Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain), tempera on panel, 1359.
- Giovanni da Milano, Mary of Magdala's Cycle, Rinuccini Chapel in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence (Italy), wall painting, ca.1365.
- Lukas Moser, Madeleine Altarpiece, Church of Saint Mary Madeleine, Tiefenbronn (Germany), 1432.
- Albrecht Bouts, Anointing in Bethany, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, Berlin (Germany), panel painting, ca. 1445-1450.
- Nicolas Froment, Resurrection of Lazarus Triptych, detail of the right wing, Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Italy), 1461.
- Gil de Siloé, Cartuja de Miraflores Altarpiece in Burgos (Spain), wooden relief, end of 15th century.
- Selection of illuminated manuscripts of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Hague (the Netherlands).

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