

Spices, Myrrh, and Aloes

by

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The words: Spices, Myrrh, and Aloes occur in the Bible in various places, most notably in the verses associated with the entombment of Yeshua, the Anointed.

The context of the verses infer that Spices, Myrrh, and Aloes are fragrant substances. This is essentially true. Are there misunderstandings associated with these materials? Yes, there are at least two things commonly misunderstood and one thing given little or no regard.

- (a) The word translated “spices” has caused some to incorrectly assume that the women in the Gospels who intended to anoint Yeshua’s body, bought and prepared culinary spices such as Cinnamon.
- (b) The word translated ‘aloes’ has caused some to incorrectly assume it was the familiar garden plant.
- (c) The value of Nicodemus’ provision is not realized.

The information that follows was obtained from: Aid to Bible Understanding, The New International Dictionary of the Bible, Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, and PC Bible computer software.

To put this subject into perspective, one first searches Strong’s for the verses where the words Spice(s), Myrrh, and Aloes occur, then read the definition of each. This alone provides significant understanding into the matter.

Spice (s) Strong’s has several words translated spice(s): 1313- to be fragrant, 1314 - *fragrance*, by implication *spicery*; also the *balsam* plant: smell, spice, sweet, (odor); 5219 - a *smitting* an aromatic gum [perhaps *Styrax*] (as powdered): spicery (-ces), 5561 - a *libation*: -drink offering, 759 - ar-o-mah (in the sense of *sending* off scent) - an *aromatic*:-(sweet) spice.

Specifically the word ‘spice(s) applies to any of a variety of fragrant plant products, including aloe, balsam, calamus, cassia, cinnamon, frankincense, galbanum, labdanum, myrrh and stacte.

In Ex. 30:23 - 25, 34 - 37 ‘spices’ were employed in making the holy anointing oil, and, the incense designated exclusively for sanctuary use.

In 2 Chron. 16:14 referring to the burial of King Asa of Judah, there was an extraordinarily great funeral burning, however it was not a cremation, but a burning of ‘spices’.

Anciently certain ‘spices’ were added to wines to increase their “headiness” - Song of Sol. 8:2.

In Song of Solomon 5:1, 13; 6:2 the garden spice or spice plants referred to may denote fragrant herbs generally, or, as suggested by some scholars it was balsam (*Balsamodendron opobalsamum*).

Although condiments such as Cummin, Mint, Dill and Salt are mentioned in the Bible - the various original-language words translated as “spice” and ‘spices’, are not applied to food seasonings.

The same word, ‘spice(s)’ was translated to refer to substances used in preparing bodies of the dead for burial. In John 19:30, 40; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56; 24:1, myrrh and aloes are specifically mentioned in Yeshua’s entombment.

Myrrh (Strong’s has several words for Myrrh: 3910 - a gum (from its sticky nature) probably *ladanum*, 4753 - distilling in drops and also as bitter, 4666 - *perfumed oil*: ointment, 4669 - *to tincture with myrrh*, i.e. *embitter* (as a narcotic):-mingle with myrrh.

Myrrh is an aromatic gum resin, generally believed have been obtained from the low-growing thorny shrub or tree known as *Commiphora myrrha* (*Balsamodendron myrrha*) or the related variety *Commiphora kataf*. Both thrive in rocky areas particularly on limestone hills.

The wood and bark of such plants have a strong odor. Although the resin exudes by itself from the stem or the thick and stiff branches of either variety, the flow can be increased by means of incisions.

Initially the clear, white, or yellowish-brown resin is soft and sticky, but upon dripping to the ground to the ground it hardens and turns dark red or black.

It is collected and is marketed as a spice, medicine, or cosmetic (Song of Songs 5; Matt 2:11; Mark 15:23; John 19:39).

In Genesis 37:25 and 43:11 the Hebrew word ‘lōt’ is generally translated as “myrrh.” However, some question whether *Commiphora myrrha*, now native to Arabia and east Africa, was known in Palestine during the patriarchal period.

A better translation for lōt word is considered to be “labdanum,” a gummy resin produced by the small labdanum scrub (*Cistus creticus L.*), growing abundantly in the rocks and sand in Palestine.

References to myrrh are in Prov. 7:17 - “perfumed my bed with *myrrh*, [likely as a sprinkled powder]” Song 5:5 - “my hands dripped with *myrrh*” [perhaps myrrh dissolved in oil or wine], Matt. 2:11 - “gold, frankincense, and *myrrh*,” Mark 15:23 - “wine mingled with *myrrh* ...” [indicates the resin is soluble in water and alcohol.

Aloes (Strong’s has two word translated aloes: 174 *aloe* wood, 250 (al-o-ay’-the gum).

The OT reference to aloes in: Num. 22:5, 24:6 (lign aloes), Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17; and Song of Sol.

4:14.

Aloes is a name applied to a variety of trees containing a fragrant or aromatic substance described in the scriptures as a perfume.

However, most commentators consider the aloe tree of the Bible to be the *Aquilaria agallocha*, sometimes called the “eagle wood tree,” now found principally in India and neighboring regions. The tree is large and spreading at times reaching a height of over 100 feet.

The inner core of the trunk and branches are impregnated with resin and an odoriferous oil from which is made the highly prized perfume.

Apparently the aloes tree attains its most aromatic state when in decay, so the wood is sometimes buried in the ground to hasten the decaying process.

Aloes wood is sold commercially in a powdered condition simply as “aloes.”

In Num. 24:6 the prophet Balaam’s comparison of the tents of Israel with “aloe plants that Yahweh has planted, like cedars by the waters,” may relate to the spreading shape of these lofty trees, a cluster of aloe trees resembling an encampment of tents.

This text however, has occasioned some discussion by commentators, since the *aloes wood* tree usually identified with the aloes of the Bible, are not now found in Palestine. Their absence today, of course, would not necessarily prove that such trees were not present in that land over 2,500 years ago.

On the other hand, Balaam’s reference to the trees does not require that they be growing right in the area where he spoke. If the “cedars” mentioned immediately afterward in this text were cedars of Lebanon, then they would be growing outside that area, and the same could be true of the aloes wood tree.

Balaam could have been acquainted with them from the place of his residence near the Euphrates River (Num. 22:5), although they are evidently not now indigenous to that region either.

Whatever the case, the other texts dealing with aloes refer only to their aromatic qualities . This would allow for them to have been foreign imports.

Following the death of Yeshua the Anointed, Nicodemus brought “myrrh and aloes” weighing about a hundred pounds to be used in preparing Yeshua’s body for burial (John 29:39).

Since Herodotus, the Greek historian, states that aloes wood at one time was worth its weight in gold, Nicodemus’ contribution represented a considerable outlay of money on his part, although the proportion of the less expensive myrrh included in the one hundred pounds is not stated.

One must digress at this point to examine the word Pound. The pound, as a unit of weight, is mentioned only in John 12:3 and 19:39.

Webster's dictionary says of the word pound: "...of Latin origin *pondo*; akin to *pondus*. The Greek term in verses usually equated with the Roman *pondus*, is where the English abbreviation for that unit of weight "lb" pound is drawn).

The Interlinear Bible -Hebrew, Greek, English has the same Strong's number used differently in two places. In John 12:3 it has "... a pound of ointment ..." (Strong's 3046 - Litra, *lee'-trah*; [*libra*]; a *pound* in weight:-pound).

In John 19:39 it has "...a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about Litrae a hundred...". In the margin the translator's smoothed text reads: "about a hundred Roman pounds".

This would have been a heavy weight for the elderly Nicodemus to carry if all the mixture were in one container. It seems likely that the mixture was in more than one container, and was borne by servants of the wealthy Nicodemus.

The short time period between the execution and death of Yeshua infers that the mixture was already available. Likely the mixture would have been powdered considering the nature of myrrh and aloes wood.

Nicodemus may have already possessed it, perhaps for his own burial, in his own tomb which he also provided for Yeshua.

It also seems logical that the mixture would have been put into the shroud enveloping Yeshua's body. The mixture of myrrh and aloes would mask the odors of petrification in multi-occupant tombs.

Some assume the word "aloes" in this text is the plant of the lily family which bears the botanical name of *Aloe vera* or *Aloe succotrina*. From this common plant a thick juice is obtained from its fleshy leaves. The juice contains Aloin which is mainly employed as a purgative. It is used today by veterinarians for treating horses.

TNDB conjectures that John 19:39 may probably be the only biblical reference to *aloe vera* whose juice he mentions were used by the ancients for embalming (and as a purgative), but does not give references to support it.

OTHER AROMATICS

Frankincense. Strong's has two words for Frankincense: 3828 - (from its whiteness or perhaps that of its smoke);, 3030 - the *incense*-tree, i.e. by implication *incense* itself).

Frankincense is a product of incense trees of the genus *Boswellia* (family Burseraceae), which are related to the Turpentine or Terebinth tree and also to trees producing balsam and myrrh. The trees are large, the leaves glossy with serrated edges, the flower white or green tipped with rose, and are star-shaped.

The trees are native to India, Arabia, parts of Africa and the East Indies. The song of Solomon mentions “the hills of frankincense,” apparently in a figurative way, but may indicate the cultivation of incense trees in Solomon’s royal parks (Song of Sol. 4:6, 12 - 16; Eccl 2:5). It may indicate piles of the frankincense in a Treasure room.

Frankincense was a principal item carried by the caravans of Oriental traders who traveled the spice routes out of Southern Arabia up to Gaza near the Mediterranean and to Damascus. Isaiah. 60:6 and Jeremiah 6:20 indicate frankincense was imported in this way into Palestine from Sheba (Recall the Queen of Sheba?).

Frankincense is obtained by making successive incisions in the tree bark or by peeling off the bark at intervals. This causing a white juice (after several incisions it is spotted with yellow or red) to flow and form into tear drops about one inch in length.

When gathered, frankincense consists of a fragrant gum resin in small chunks or beads. It has a bitter taste and produces an aromatic odor when burnt (Song of Sol. 3:6).

Frankincense is regularly mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection with worship (Compare 2 Cor. 2:14 -16). It was an ingredient of the holy incense burned at the sanctuary (Ex. 30:34 - 38), was used on grain offerings (Lev. 2:1, 2, 15, 16; 6:15; Jer. 17:26; 41:4, 5), and on each row of the show bread of the sanctuary (Lev. 24:7).

But frankincense was not to be included on the sin offerings (Lev 5:11), nor on the “grain offering of jealousy”(Num. 5:15).

The reason was doubtless because the latter offerings had to do with sin or error, and, were not offered up as a sacrifice of praise or thanksgiving to Yahweh. Such would have been far from being an offering of a sweet savor.

Frankincense is mentioned as being stored in the rebuilt temple buildings, following the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile (1 Chron. 9:29; Neh. 13:5, 9).

Frankincense is mentioned as one of the items of commerce sold to ‘Babylon the Great’ before her destruction (Rev. 18:8 - 13).

The Greek term for the heavenly incense vessel, at Revelation 8:3, 5, is *li.ba.no.tos*’ and is derived from the Hebrew word *Lebana* (*leb-aw-naw*’) for “frankincense.”

The prophet Isaiah records Yahweh’s displeasure and disapproval of gifts and the use of frankincense when offered by those who reject his word (Isa, 66:3).

About a year after the birth of Yeshua, the Anointed, the Magi presented to him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt. 2:11). These precious gifts were customary to a new king by ambassadors of other countries.

Although presented in homage, may well have helped to finance his family's sojourn in Egypt (Matt. 2:11, 15).

Stacte. Strong's has two words for stacte which is mention in the scriptures: 5198 - a drop; specifically an aromatic gum (probably stacte):-drop, stacte. It is from 5198 to *ooze*, i.e. *distill* gradually; by implication to *fall in drops*; figuratively to *speak* by inspiration:-drop (-ing), prophesy (-et).

Stacte is a strongly perfumed gum resin that drips from the incised bark of the small, shrubby Storax tree (*Styrax officinalis L.*). It was used in biblical times as a component of the perfume formulated for use in the tabernacle (Exo. 30:34). The NIV has "gum resin."

It can be assumed that the women at the entombment knew of the myrrh and aloes that is mentioned in the scriptures as being brought by Nicodemus. It seems clear the 'spices' the women bought and prepared were something different and for a different purpose, namely to anoint Yeshua.

The inference is they prepared an aromatic ointment intended to anoint Yeshua's head and perhaps other surfaces. If so, only a small quantity would be required which any of them could easily carry.

As related to Yeshua, an entombment occurred and an anointing was to be performed. Accordingly, use of the word embalm (-ing) is misleading. There was no embalming, as performed by the ancient Egyptians, and now.

Regrading the comments earlier about the word 'pound,' some bible versions render the Greek word *mna* in Luke 19:18 as 'pound,' but it is more appropriately rendered "mina" because pound is a measurement of weight, whereas "mina" is a monetary weight indicating a specific value of gold or silver.

And lastly, it is not known if the 'pound' in 31 AD was the same as ours today, but if Nicodemus had brought 100% aloe, at today's price of gold, the value of what he provided would have been about \$500,000.

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