

FRAGRANCE IN THE MAKING OF SACRED SPACE.
JEWISH TEMPLE PARADIGMS OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP.¹

© Margaret Barker, 2004

Gold, frankincense and myrrh were the gifts brought to Jesus by the wise men. They were also the three symbols of worship in the original temple. The vessels and furnishings of the temple were made of gold; frankincense and myrrh were the main ingredients of the two perfumes used in the holy of holies. The specially blended incense - known as the incense of spices [*qtrt smym*]- was based on frankincense, and the specially blended anointing oil [*smn msht qds*] was perfumed mainly with myrrh.

In addition, the original temple represented the Garden of Eden, and the lost Garden of Eden was remembered as the original temple which had been destroyed at the end of the sixth century BCE. This temple had been destroyed in two ways: in the reign of King Josiah, much of the older cult had been purged, and twenty five years later, the Babylonians sacked the temple and deported many of the priests. Others fled. People never forgot what had been lost in the time of Josiah - including the perfumed oil². They said that the time of the Messiah, that is, when the oil was restored and there could again be an Anointed One, the original temple and its furnishings would be restored³

The story of the temple perfumes is linked to memories of the lost temple and the lost Garden of Eden. Adam was remembered as the original high priest, and the Garden he left was the lost temple, a garden temple where the Lord had walked and talked with Adam, and where Adam had worn garments of glory and not the skin of a mortal body. When Adam left Eden, they said he took with him gold, frankincense and myrrh, the symbols of Eden and the temple.

Early Church tradition claimed that Adam's disaster had been put right, and the faithful could now return to the Garden of Eden. When St John wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor, he said that faithful Christians would return to Paradise and eat again from the tree of life (Revelation 2.7;

¹ This paper was read at the conference on Sacred Spaces convened by the Research Centre for Eastern Christian Culture, Moscow, 2004

² B. Horayoth 12a

³ Numbers Rabbah XV.10: the lamp, the ark, the Spirit, the fire and the cherubim .

22.14). Returning to Eden, and thus to the original temple, must have been an important part of early Christianity, one of the ways this was expressed was through the perfumes.

The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh which the Magi brought to the infant Jesus symbolised the restoration of the original temple. There is a curious silence in later Jewish texts, which say nothing about Adam taking the gifts from Eden even though this is found in earlier Jewish texts. Josephus, who was from a priestly family in the second temple, does not mention it in his *Antiquities*, even though he knows several stories about Adam that are not in the Bible.⁴ Nor is it found in the Midrash Rabbah, nor in any of the Targums.

The earliest reference to Adam taking the perfumes from Eden⁵ is in the *Apocalypse of Moses*, a pre Christian Jewish text from the end of the second temple period⁶. *In other words, this was originally a Jewish tradition.* Adam begged to take the seeds of incense shrubs when he left Paradise. Without them he would not be able to make an offering to God, and God would not hear his prayers. The perfume invoked the presence of God, and became a sign of the presence of God.

There are several accounts of Adam taking gold, frankincense and myrrh from Eden, but all the later accounts are from Christian hands. It seems that Jewish sources did not preserve this tradition about the old temple after it had been adopted by the Church. The oldest account is in the prophecy section of the *Testament of Adam*.⁷ In its present form this is a Christian text, probably compiled by the mid third century, but it includes older, pre Christian elements. Adam took gold, frankincense and myrrh from Eden and hid them in a cave which became known as The Cave of Treasures.

The story also appears in *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* which says that the cave was lower down the mountain of the Paradise, and that Adam consecrated the cave as a house of prayer for his

⁴ For example, the story in the *Testament of Adam* that Adam made a prophecy which was hidden in the Cave of Treasures, together with the gold, frankincense and myrrh

⁵ In the *Book of Jubilees* were are told only that he burned the blended incense as he left Eden (Jubilees 3.27).

⁶ *Apocalypse of Moses* 29; this is a Greek text with parallels to Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*, from [Hebrew original from end of second temple period],

⁷ Extant in several languages but probably a Syriac original

family. A longer version in *The Book of Adam and Eve*⁸ tells how the three archangels were sent to Eden to bring the gifts for Adam: Michael brought the gold, Gabriel the incense and Raphael the myrrh.

Adam was not, however, permitted to take the oil from Paradise; when he was dying, Eve and Seth returned to the gate of Eden to ask for some of the oil, and the archangel Michael told them that the oil would not be given again until the last days⁹. In the undateable Christian text known as *The Acts of Pilate*¹⁰ Adam rejoiced when he heard that Jesus had been baptised in the Jordan, because he knew that the oil could at last be offered to all who were baptised, and the oil would restore them to eternal life. Adam would also have access again to the tree which was the source of the oil, the tree of life.

The perfumes, then, transmitted the memory of a lost temple and a older faith. They reminded of a time when Adam had a body of glory and walked with the Lord in Eden, in the state before he fell to mortality. All he could do in his fallen state was make incense to invoke the presence of the Lord. He had the perfume of the sacred oil; but the oil itself was no longer available.

In Hebrew tradition, all the instructions for worship were revealed by God. King David received a writing from the hand of the Lord about building the temple (1 Chronicles 28.19), and Moses had been told on Sinai exactly how the tabernacle was to be built and furnished, how the priests were to be vested and how the perfumes were to be blended (Exodus 25.9). [The rules for the tabernacle and the temple were almost the same, and for our purpose today, there were no important differences]. Moses was told to copy what he had seen in his vision on Sinai.

The holy place was furnished only with gold: the lamp, the table, the ark, the mercy seat and cherubim were all gold. Outside in the temple court, the vessels and furnishings were made of bronze. The anointing oil was blended from *myrrh*, cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia, and the

⁸ Probably 5/6th century but known in 11th C Arabic MS

⁹ *Life of Adam and Eve* 36-42; *Apocalypse of Moses* 9.13

¹⁰ Also known as *The Gospel of Nicodemus* extant in Greek and, mainly, Latin

incense was blended from *frankincense*, stacte, onycha, and galbanum. Each of these two blended perfumes had its own meaning, and neither of them could be used outside the temple or tabernacle. Anyone who misused these perfumes was ‘cut off’ from his people (Exodus 30.33,38). In other words, it was a very serious offence. Using the temple perfumes for the wrong purpose was a sin for which there was no forgiveness.

Let us look first at the incense. A simple incense of pure frankincense was used in the outer part of the temple, set with the shewbread (Leviticus 24.7). The blended incense, however, was only used in the holy of holies (Exodus 31.11). Since the holy of holies was the place of the presence of God, the blended incense must have been associated with the presence of God. In fact, both the perfumed oil and the incense were entrusted only to the high priests (Numbers 4.16). The blended incense was ‘most holy’ (Exodus 30.36), which means that it imparted holiness. Anything touched by the incense became holy, consecrated.

The high priest took the blended incense into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, and the smoke from the incense covered the mercy seat above the ark. It was there, in the cloud of incense, that the Lord appeared to the high priest. The perfume of the incense summoned the presence of the Lord, and presumably that is why it was not to be used for other purposes.

When Solomon consecrated the temple, according to Josephus, a huge amount of incense was burned, ‘until the very air was filled so full of these perfumes... that it was sign of the presence of God... and of his dwelling with them in this newly built and consecrated place.’¹¹ Since Josephus was from a high priestly family, this is important evidence for the meaning of incense. It invoked the presence of God.

This is confirmed by the literal translation of Amos 5.21b. Condemning the insincere worship of his time, Amos declared that the Lord would not give forth perfume in the solemn assemblies of the temple. This is usually translated: ‘I take no *delight* in your solemn assemblies’, but the Hebrew word used is ‘perfume’. If worship was insincere, the Lord would not be present and there would

¹¹ (*Antiquities* 8.4).

be no perfume. We do not know if this was the perfume of the oil or the incense; but Amos, in the eighth century BCE, associated perfume with the presence of the Lord.¹²

The anointing oil had another meaning: it was the sacrament of *theosis*. The oil did not simply consecrate, it transferred the power to make other things holy. Anything touched by the oil became itself a source of holiness; the temple furnishings became *most holy* once they had been anointed. Any person anointed with the special blend of myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia *became divine*. This is why the Messiah, the Anointed One, was called the Lord; he was human and divine. Those who received the perfumed oil were restored to the state that Adam had lost when he was driven from Eden, because it transformed mortals back into angels. The oil had been lost since the time of King Josiah, which means there was no truly anointed person in the second temple. Everything we know about the oil must have been memories of the first temple.

The *Slavonic Enoch* - a text preserved by Christian scribes - described how Enoch became an angel, in other words, how a high priest was anointed. We know from later texts that the perfumed oil had been kept in the holy of holies¹³. Enoch stood before the heavenly throne, that is, he stood in the holy of holies, and the archangel Michael took off his earthly clothes, the symbol of his mortal body. Then he anointed him with the sweet myrrh oil, which shone and was like dew. Enoch saw that he had become an angel. *He no longer had a mortal body so he was resurrected*. He was then instructed by an angel and taught all the secrets of the creation. In other words, he acquired Wisdom. (2 Enoch 22).

This anointing with Wisdom is what underlies Isaiah 11.2-3:

‘The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,

¹² Incense was also used to make atonement, which in the temple meant healing and restoring the creation. When sin had damaged the great covenant bonds which held the creation in place, and danger threatened, the high priest had to make atonement and repair the damage, in order to protect the people from danger. After the rebellion of sons of Korah, when wrath threatened the Israelites in the wilderness, Aaron the high priest took incense and made atonement, in order to stop the wrath, that is, to repair the covenant and protect the people from the consequences of sin (Numbers 16.46-50).

¹³ Tosefta Kippurim 2.15, or perhaps on the shewbread table, T.N. Exod 25.29-30 gloss.

the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his perfume shall be the fear of the Lord’.

Anointing changed the human mind and gave Wisdom.

The high priest was anointed on his eyelids (b.Horayoth 12a) as a sign that his eyes had been opened, which explains the figurative language in the *1 Enoch*. When the Holy Wisdom was abandoned in the time of King Josiah, and the oil was hidden away, those in the temple lost their sight (1 Enoch 93.8). There was no longer any holy oil to open their eyes and show them the vision of God. There was no way for mortals to become angels.

The perfumed oil was extracted from the tree of life, one of the symbols of the Holy Wisdom (Prov. 3.18). Later tradition said the tree of life in the temple had been the seven branched lamp, the menorah, and you will recall that the true menorah had disappeared from the temple but would be restored in the time of the Messiah. Both the perfumed oil and the lamp had been a part of the older temple but were missing from the second temple. Both had been symbols of the Holy Wisdom.

The Holy Wisdom had, in fact, been represented by the oil and the incense: she was described in the *Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira* as the blended incense and as the perfumed anointing oil (Ben Sira 24.15).

Like cassia and camel’s thorn I gave forth the aroma of spice,
And like the choice myrrh, I spread a pleasant odour,
Like galbanum, onycha and stacte,
And like the fragrance of frankincense in the tabernacle.

Memories of the gift of Wisdom in the perfumed oil survive in several early Christian and Gnostic texts. St John wrote in his first letter: ‘You have the chrism from the Holy One and you know all things (or ‘and you all know’)... you have no need for anyone to teach you anything’ (1 John2, 20, 27). *The Odes of Solomon*, early Christian hymns, also use the imagery of the perfumed oil, but here the oil is the sacrament of *theosis*, entering the angel state: ‘My eyes were enlightened, and my

face received the dew, and my breath/soul was refreshed with the pleasant fragrance of the Lord' (Ode 11. 14-15). Or: 'He anointed me with his perfection, and I became as one of those who are near him' (Ode36.6). Both these texts are similar to the description in 2 Enoch.

Teaching attributed to St Peter explained how Christ had been anointed:

'The Son of God, the beginning of all things, became Man. He was the first whom God anointed with oil taken from the wood of the tree of life'. The text continues: 'In this present life, Aaron the first high priest was anointed with a blended oil, made after the pattern of the spiritual oil... If this temporal grace, blended by men, was so effective, how potent is the ointment extracted by God from a branch of the tree of life.'¹⁴

Pope St Leo (Pope 440-461), in one of his Christmas sermons, said that the myrrh brought to the infant Jesus was this perfumed myrrh oil, a symbol of God's Son uniting himself to man's true nature' (Sermon 6) – which is exactly the meaning of the oil in the older temple. The Anointed One was Immanuel 'God with us.' In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, there is thanksgiving for the fragrance of the oil and for the immortality made known by Jesus.¹⁵ St Dionysius devoted a whole chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* to the Rite of Ointment, and emphasised the illumination given by Wisdom: 'It spreads its sweet fragrance into their mental reception... the transcendent fragrance of the divine Jesus distributes its conceptual gifts over our own intellectual powers.'¹⁶

The so-called Gnostics knew the traditions about the oil: Irenaeus described a Valentinian initiation in which the initiate was anointed with myrrh oil to represent the perfume which is above all things. The entire ceremony clearly derived from a temple ritual in the holy of holies, when the Father and the Mother gave the Spirit in the oil, and thus transformed the initiate into a child of Wisdom¹⁷. Origen knew of Ophite Gnostics who were transformed into Sons of God when they were anointed with white oil from the tree of life¹⁸.

¹⁴ *Clementine Recognitions* 1.45-46

¹⁵ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.27

¹⁶ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 476c, 477c

¹⁷ *Irenaeus Against Heresies* 1.21.3

¹⁸ *Origen Celsus* 6.27

There are echoes, too, in the Zohar, the Jewish mystical text which has preserved so much ancient temple material. This is how the Zohar explains the link between Wisdom, the perfumed oil and the tree of life, expounding Psalm 36.7: 'For with thee is the fountain of life, and in thy light we see light'.

The fountain of life is the supernal oil which flows continually and is stored in the midst of the most high Wisdom, from which it never separates. It is the source which dispenses life to the supernal tree, and kindles the lights. And that tree is called the tree of life because it is planted on account of that source of life¹⁹

The fragrant tree of life appears in the Enoch traditions, standing near the heavenly throne, with a fragrance beyond all fragrance.²⁰ After the great Judgement, it would be restored to the temple, and its fruit would be given to the righteous and holy ones. This is what St Paul meant when he spoke of the fragrance of Christ being a fragrance from life for life²¹ In 2 Enoch, the fragrant tree is gold and crimson, like fire²², a memory of the menorah, the tree of fire, the ancient symbol of Wisdom.

The perfumes recalled a lost temple: Eden, Wisdom, and Adam's life before he fell and became mortal. The incense invoked the divine presence, and the oil conferred divine state. Both of these had been part of the older temple cult in Jerusalem, the original Eden from which Adam the high priest had been expelled. Both remained as part of Christian worship after the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed, because the Church restored the ways of the first temple. The faithful returned to Eden

And what did Matthew mean by his story of the wise ones who brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus? Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of the gospels. There is evidence that it was originally written in Hebrew²³, and if so, the wise ones from the east could have been something rather different. The Hebrew word *qedem* can mean both 'east' and 'ancient times'. Was Matthew

¹⁹ *Zohar* Leviticus 34b

²⁰ 1 Enoch 24.4

²¹ 2 Corinthians 2.16

²² 2 Enoch 8.4

²³ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.11.1

telling us about *wise ones from ancient times* who brought back to Jesus the three symbols of the original temple: the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh? ²⁴

²⁴ The spice box at the end of Sabbath; similar idea of memory.