

THE HOLY ANOINTING OIL
Armenia 2008
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I was invited to Armenia in September 2008 to be present at the ceremony of the holy muron, which takes place every seven years. The new perfumed oil is blended and consecrated, and the old oil that remains is mixed with it. The oil is then distributed to all the Armenian communities in the world, and is the great bond that joins them together. To prepare for this, Bishop Geoffrey Rowell suggested that I should read Gregory of Narek's [950-1003CE] Prayer of Instruction on the Holy Chrism¹. As I read this, I realised just how ancient was the rite. This paper was my gift to my Armenian hosts.

In the Bible, the story of the holy oil begins with Moses at Mount Sinai. After he had received the ten commandments, Moses went up Sinai again, and this time he waited for six days before entering the cloud of the Lord's presence. In those six days, according to Jewish tradition, he received a vision of the six days of creation. Then he entered the cloud, and the Lord told to build a tabernacle to represent all that he had seen in the vision of creation²

Moses received detailed instructions for building the tabernacle: each part had to correspond to a part of the creation. The curtain, for example, represented the firmament that separated heaven and earth, and the table for the bread and incense offerings represented the plants and trees. Moses was told to make a special type of incense to use only in the tabernacle, and he was told to make the holy anointing oil. The oil was perfumed with myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia, and could only be used in the tabernacle. Everything used for worship was anointed with this perfumed oil: the table for the bread offering, the seven branched lamp, the altar of incense and the altar of sacrifice, and all the vessels for incense, wine and cereal offerings. The high priests - Aaron and his sons - were also anointed.

The oil was kept in the holy of holies³, and the mystery of the oil, along with all the other mysteries of the holy of holies, was known only to the high priests. Everything 'within the veil' was only for the eyes and ears of the high priests, and anyone else who came near would die.⁴ The mystery of the oil was one of the unwritten teachings passed down by the high priests. Origen knew of these unwritten priestly teachings: 'The Jews used to tell of many things in accordance with secret traditions reserved to a few, for they had other knowledge than that which was common and made public.'⁵ He knew that this knowledge was represented by the tabernacle furnishings, because, he said, the Levites who carried the tabernacle in the desert were never allowed to see what they were carrying. The high priest had to wrap each object, to conceal it, because it was the key to their secret teaching.⁶

¹ St Grigor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart. The Armenian prayer Book of St Gregory of Narek*. Bilingual Classical Armenian English edition, English Translation and Introduction by Thomas Samuelian, Vem Press, Yerevan, 2001.

² Exodus 24.15-25.9.

³ Tosefta *Kippurim* 2.15

⁴ Numbers 18.7, also Lxx Numbers 3.10

⁵ Origen, *Commentary on John*, 19.22

⁶ Origen, *On Numbers*, Homily 5

St Basil took up this theme of the unwritten teachings, ‘which we have received, delivered to us in a mystery by the unwritten tradition of the apostles’. ‘Is not our authority silent and mystical tradition?’ One of the teachings he mentioned was the custom of anointing ‘By what written word is anointing with oil taught?’ He then related these unwritten teachings to the holy of holies, which only the high priest could enter⁷. [*“We have received your mercy Lord,” and “your hidden and invisible secrets you have revealed though your wisdom.”*, p.699]

In Christian teaching, the holy anointing oil gave life, light and the gift of wisdom from the Holy Spirit. St Dionysius set the holy oil at the heart of his teaching. It was, he said, forbidden to use it outside the temple, because only within the world of the temple could the holy oil be understood. The oil itself was hidden under veils, because not everyone would understand the mystery. ‘For the ray of the most holy things enlightens the men of God, who belong to the Light, purely and directly. It spreads its sweet fragrance openly into their minds. But this fragrance does not spread in the same way to those in lower places...’ ‘So it is that the composition of the oil is symbolic, giving a form to what is without form. It shows figuratively that Jesus is the rich source of the divine perfume.’⁸

In this short paper, I shall trace the link between the command given to Moses to make the perfumed oil, and the complex Christian teaching about the oil. Since the earlier teachings were largely unwritten, the story has to be reconstructed from a variety of materials, none of which gives the complete picture, but all of them are related to the story of the holy oil.

Jewish texts from the time of Jesus said that the holy anointing oil had been hidden away for more than 600 years, and so there had been no anointed high priest in Jerusalem for many years.⁹ In the seventh century BC, during the reign of King Josiah, there had been a revolution in Jerusalem, and many of the treasures of Solomon’s temple that had been kept in the holy of holies were hidden away. The ark disappeared, the manna disappeared, Aaron’s rod disappeared, and the holy anointing oil disappeared. All, they said, would all be restored in the time of the Messiah.¹⁰ Indeed, there could be no Messiah until the oil was restored, and no holy temple.

Moses was given detailed instructions for making the tabernacle and its furnishings, but the Bible never explains why they had to be made in that way. There is no passage saying why the oil had to be perfumed and blended in that special way, or how it was prepared, but the early Christians knew that the oil represented the perfumed oil of the tree of life. The Son of God, they said, before he became incarnate, was anointed with oil from the wood of the tree of life, and that is why he was called the Messiah, the Anointed One. He Himself anoints everyone who comes into his Kingdom, so that their light may shine, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are given eternal life.¹¹ [*This miraculous oil brings the blessing of the light to (all) baptizing them in your name, dedicating them to your Holy Spirit and adopting them as the true sons of your Heavenly Father, p.707.*]

⁷ St Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 66

⁸ Dionysius *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 473B, 476B, 477C.

⁹ Mishnah *Megillah* 1.9

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud *Horayoth* 12a

¹¹ Clementine *Recognitions* 1.45

Aaron the high priest and his sons were anointed with a perfumed oil that represented the perfumed oil from the tree of life. Just as the ritual of the priests on the day of atonement showed the meaning of the crucifixion¹², so too the anointing of the high priests showed the meaning of the anointing given to Jesus and then to all Christians. According to teaching attributed to St Peter, Christians were to receive again the oil from the tree of life, and not an imitation. 'If the oil blended by men had such power, think how great is the oil that was extracted by God himself from a branch of the tree of life.'¹³

This link between the holy oil and the tree of life is not clear in the Bible, but it is found in both Jewish and Christian writings. The Zohar is a collection of ancient Jewish temple tradition, preserved compiled in Spain in the twelfth century. It claims to give the mystical teaching of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who had lived in Palestine at the same time as Jesus. In the Zohar, the holy oil has two roles in the temple: it is the oil *of the light*, which means the heavenly source of light that never ceases, and the oil *for the light*, which burns in the seven branched lamp in the temple, the symbol of the tree of life.¹⁴ The tree of life was remembered as a tree of fire; Enoch described it as beautiful and perfumed, gold and red like fire.¹⁵

The oil was the sacrament of Wisdom. The Tree of Life was the symbol of Wisdom, and the heavenly oil flowed from Wisdom into the tree of life. This is why the Psalmist sang: 'With thee is the fountain of life, and in thy light we shall see light.'¹⁶ Moses anointed Aaron the high priest so that he was joined to the source of life and light, and it was the duty of the high priest to tend the lamp in the temple, to make sure that it was always burning.¹⁷ The anointed ones were themselves lights to their people. The hymns found among the Dead Sea Scrolls praise God who has appeared to his people as perfect light and has, through them, given light to others.¹⁸ Jesus gave the same teaching. He said 'I am the light of the world,'¹⁹ and he also said to his disciples: 'You are the light of the world'²⁰. The oil gave light to the anointed, and they became lights in the world. [*This light filled fluid, O Christ, is the venerated gift of your hand... p. 715. By your grace may we be set on fire by it, be filled with it, be enlightened though it... p. 727*]

Once we know that the oil was given by the tree of life, traces of the ancient tradition can be found in the Bible. Isaiah described the effect of the holy oil when he spoke about the Spirit of the Lord resting on the one who had grown as a branch from the roots of the royal house. The Spirit was described as the many gifts of Wisdom: it was the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. In the Hebrew text, the next verse says: 'His *perfume* shall be the fear of the Lord'²¹, but many translations give a different meaning for the words, and so the link to the perfumed oil is lost. The person anointed with the perfumed oil received the gift of the Spirit that gave wisdom and transformed his way of knowing. This is why, when the oil was hidden away, people said that the priests could no longer see.

¹² Hebrews.9.1-14

¹³ Clementine *Recognitions* 1.46

¹⁴ *Zohar* Exodus 148a and Leviticus 34b

¹⁵ 2 *Enoch* 8

¹⁶ Psalm 36.9

¹⁷ Exodus 27.20-21.

¹⁸ *Thanksgiving Hymns*, Column 12

¹⁹ John 8.12

²⁰ Matthew 5.14

²¹ Isaiah 11.2-3

The oil anointed the kings as well as the high priests. The Davidic king was anointed and given great power. He was called a son of God. In Psalm 89 we read of the newly anointed one:

‘He shall cry to me, “Thou art my Father, my God and the Rock of my salvation.”
And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.’²²

Other texts about anointing the king are now damaged and difficult to read, but a mysterious verse in Psalm 110 describes how the king became a son of God in the glory of the holy ones, that is, among the angels in the holy of holies. He received the dew and became a priest like Melchizedek²³. The dew was the holy oil, and linked to Melchizedek. Lost in this damaged text of Psalm 110 is the mystery of how the human and the divine were united by means of the oil, how a human being became a son of God. This was originally one of the mysteries of the high priests, and the damaged text makes it even more difficult to read. This aspect of the oil was, however, known to Pope St Leo in the fifth century, as we shall see. [*This oil takes hold and does not let go, and thorough it you were united and joined with us, Lord Jesus Christ, joining the inner substance with the outward form... Turning your name into reality, you mixed yourself into this pure oil, making it radiant with heavenly light, p. 703.*]

The holy anointing oil gave the Christians their name and their status as children of God, and they used this image of perfumed knowledge. St Paul, writing to the church in Corinth said: ‘Through us, Christ spreads the perfume of the knowledge of him everywhere.’²⁴ St John also knew that the anointing oil gave special knowledge; in his first letter, he wrote: ‘You have been anointed by the holy one and you know all things... His anointing teaches you about everything.’²⁵

The oil did not just consecrate and illuminate the mind; it transferred the power to make other things holy. Anything that touched the oil became a source of holiness. The temple furnishings became most holy because they had been anointed, and anyone or any thing that touched them became most holy. Any person anointed with the oil became a son of God, and was restored to the state that Adam lost when he left the Garden of Eden. As we shall see, Adam leaving the garden of Eden is an important theme in the story of the perfumed oil. [*For the first created man, my forefather, who, scarcely created, tragically lost the greatest gift, the breath of eternal life, and forever withering in the hands of sin, became a captive of death...p.685 The splendour of Aaron’s priesthood was fulfilled by anointing him... When the oil was poured down over his head and beard, he was miraculously transformed, regaining the original glory of Adam, and receiving your life-giving Holy Grace through union with our nature. p. 689*]

The perfumed oil from the tree of life gave Wisdom, and the tree of life in the garden of Eden was the symbol of Wisdom. During King Josiah’s revolution, Wisdom was rejected, and everything associated with Wisdom was banished from the temple. The Book of Proverbs describes how Wisdom called out to her people when they had rejected her. ‘I have called to you and you have refused to listen... you have ignored all my counsel.’²⁶ Wisdom longed to

²² Psalm 89.26-7

²³ Psalm 110.3

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 2.14

²⁵ 1 John 2. 20, 27

²⁶ Proverbs 1.24, 25

pour out her Spirit on her people, but they did not want it.²⁷ They had rejected the gifts that came with the anointing oil.

There is a short poem in the Book of Proverbs that describes these gifts: they are better than gold and silver, more precious than anything a person can want. Wisdom gives a good life, with honour, pleasantness, peace and happiness.²⁸ Foolish people, however, had rejected Wisdom, the precious oil was hidden away, and the priests could no longer see. Jesus restored this sight. When He healed the blind man, St John says He ‘anointed’ his eyes and then told him to wash in the pool of Siloam.²⁹ When He appeared to St John, and gave him letters to send to the seven churches, He offered the Church at Laodicea the gifts of Wisdom: true riches, white garments, that is, the resurrection body, and ointment for their eyes so that they could see.³⁰ [*...this priceless treasure and irreplaceable wealth...p. 683*]

One of the Jewish mystical texts written in the time of Jesus, but preserved only by Christians, describes the experience of the high priest as he was anointed. Enoch, whose name means ‘the consecrated one’, entered the holy of holies to be anointed³¹. He said he had entered heaven, because in the temple, the holy of holies represented heaven. Enoch stood before the Lord, and then St Michael the archangel came to take away his earthly clothes, which represented his mortal body. He clothed Enoch with garments made from the Glory of God. These were the high priest’s vestments, which Exodus says were made ‘as the beauty and the glory.’³² They showed that the high priest brought the Glory of God into the world, and the garments represented Enoch’s resurrected body.

Then St Michael anointed him with the oil, which Enoch described as ‘greater than the greatest light... like sweet dew, and its fragrance is myrrh.’ This was the oil described in Psalm 110 - the dew that made the king a son of God - and in Psalm 133: the precious oil on the head and the beard of Aaron that was like dew. [When Enoch had been vested and anointed, he realised he had become like one of the angels, and he described their singing. Then one of the great angels instructed him is all the wisdom of the creation.³³ The anointed one was given special knowledge and became wise. The oil restored him to the state that Adam had lost; he was resurrected, no longer condemned to return to the dust.

[Grant us healing. Clothe us in grace. Endow us with bliss. By being anointed with this oil, this heavenly shower of light, may I be found sinless. P. 725 This light filled fluid, O Christ, is the venerated gift of your hand... p. 715. This oil of salvation, sanctified with light, is poured on us to anoint our outer temple, and enters us in secret and unseen, whereby the inner man is born again. p. 687]

²⁷ Proverbs 1. 23

²⁸ Proverbs 3.13-18

²⁹ John 9.6

³⁰ Revelation 3.18

³¹ 2 Enoch 22

³² Exodus 28.2

³³ 1 Enoch 22

Philo, the Egyptian Jewish scholar who lived at the same time as Jesus, knew that the oil transformed the high priest so that he was no longer a mortal, but a son of God. His mind was illuminated with brilliant light, and he was worthy to wear the robes of the high priest.³⁴

In Jewish writings, the anointing oil was often described as dew, and ‘the dew of resurrection’ is mentioned in the second and third centuries CE. When the rabbis explained the story of Sinai as it appears in Psalm 68, they said that the rain was the dew of resurrection.

‘The earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain at the presence of God...

Rain in abundance, O God, did you pour forth, to restore your heritage...³⁵

[*The dew of this life-giving oil... p 693 Having anointed my head with the heavenly oil of incorruptibility, I come before you with joy...p. 705.*] Rabbi Judah ben Ilai, who was teaching in the middle of the second century, said: ‘The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the clouds of Glory: “Drip down the dew of life on my children” as it is said: “The earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain at the presence of God” and “Rain in abundance, O God, did you pour forth.” One hundred years alter, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi repeated this teaching: ‘God brought down the dew that will resurrect the dead.’³⁶

This too is a belief that can be found in the Old Testament, but without the later evidence, we should not link the dew and the oil. When Isaiah proclaimed the resurrection, he said that God’s dew would fall on the dead:

Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise,

O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy.

For your dew is a dew of lights, and you will let it fall onto the land of the departed spirits.’³⁷

The high priest was anointed on his forehead with the shape of a cross³⁸, the ancient symbol for the Name of the Lord. The prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of angels coming to destroy the wicked city of Jerusalem, but before they entered the city, another angel went and marked a cross on the foreheads of all those who had been faithful to the Lord. They wore the Name of the Lord, and it protected them.³⁹

The high priest was also anointed on his eyelids⁴⁰, to show that his eyes had been opened, that he had received Wisdom’s gift of sight. When Wisdom was abandoned in the time of King Josiah, the priests were no longer able to see.⁴¹ They had lost the perfume of true anointing, but the oil was not forgotten. Jesus ben Sira, who lived in Jerusalem about more than 400 years after King Josiah’s revolution, described the perfumed oil as Wisdom herself, who perfumed the temple with spices and the finest myrrh.⁴²

The loss of the perfumed oil was remembered in many ways. In the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve tells how the Lord gave them every tree in the Eden for their food, except the tree of

³⁴ Philo, *On Flight and Finding*, 109-110

³⁵ Psalm 68. 8, 9

³⁶ Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 88b, quoted in I Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, Berlin and New York, 1982, pp 36-7.

³⁷ Isaiah 26.19

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud *Horayoth* 12

³⁹ Ezekiel 9.4

⁴⁰ Babylonian Talmud *Horayoth* 12

⁴¹ 1 Enoch 93.8

⁴² Ben Sira 24.15

the knowledge of good and evil. This means that Adam and Eve could eat from the tree of life. They disobeyed and chose the forbidden tree, and when they were driven from the garden of Eden, they were no longer able to reach the tree of life. They had lost everything that the tree of life gave them, including the oil that gave them wisdom, life, honour, peace and happiness. Jewish legend said that the angel who barred their way back to the tree of life was Uriel, whose name means ‘the light of God.’ Adam and Eve had lost their source of divine light.

The story of Adam and Eve, as it was told in the time of Jesus, gave more details about their later life. When he was sick and dying, Adam asked Eve and their son Seth to go back to the gate of Eden and ask for some of the oil to anoint him. St Michael met them and said that the oil would not be given again until the last days, and so Adam died.⁴³

A Christian text developed this story. When Seth was at the gate of Eden, St Michael told him that he could not have the oil until the Son of God came on earth and was baptised in the Jordan. ‘And when the Son of God comes forth from the Jordan, he shall anoint with the oil of mercy all that believe in him, and that oil of mercy shall be for all generations of those that are born of water and the Holy Spirit, for eternal life.’⁴⁴ Everything that Adam had lost would be restored.

Nobody knows the exact date of that text [perhaps it was written in the fourth or fifth century], but the Book of Revelation shows that the first Christians told the same story. Jesus promised his faithful followers that they would return to the tree of life. Adam had been driven out, but the Christians could return: ‘To him who conquers, I will grant to eat of tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’ ‘Blessed are those who keep his commandments, so that they may have the right to the tree of life.’⁴⁵ In his vision of the heavenly city, St John saw the throne of God and the tree of life, whose leaves would heal the nations. [...*thanks to this great mystery, united us with the tree of life.* p. 687].

Adam and Eve leaving the garden of Eden was remembered in many ways, and all of them were linked to the ancient priests leaving Solomon’s temple during Josiah’s revolution. In the Book of Jubilees [a Jewish text known in the time of Jesus] Adam burned the special temple incense as he left Eden⁴⁶, and the Apocalypse of Moses, another pre-Christian Jewish text, says that when Adam left Eden, the angels allowed him to take seeds to grow food, and also seeds to grow the plants needed to make incense, so that he could continue to invoke the presence of God.⁴⁷

These traditions were preserved by the Church, but abandoned by most of the Jews. Christians gave thanks for the holy oil and the effect of anointing. In the Apostolic Constitutions, they gave thanks for the perfume and the immortality made known by Jesus⁴⁸, and in the hymns known as The Odes of Solomon they sang of the mystery of the perfumed oil.

⁴³ *The Life of Adam and Eve* 40-43.

⁴⁴ *The Acts of Pilate*, 18.3 Latin text.

⁴⁵ Revelation 2.7 and 22.14

⁴⁶ *Jubilees* 3.27

⁴⁷ *The Apocalypse of Moses*, also known as the Greek text of the *Life of Adam and Eve*, 29

⁴⁸ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.27

My eyes were enlightened; and my face received the dew
And my soul/ my life was refreshed; with the pleasant *fragrance* of the Lord.⁴⁹

Fragrance here is the word that Isaiah used to describe the anointed one who had received the gift of the Spirit.

He anointed me with his perfection;

And I became like one of those who are near him.⁵⁰

This is very similar to the description of Enoch's anointing, and how he was transformed into an angel.

Legends grew around the story of Adam and the garden of Eden. The oldest text is in the Testament of Adam, which was probably compiled by Christians in the third century, based on earlier Jewish material. Adam took three treasures from Eden: gold, frankincense and myrrh and hid them in the cave of treasure. 'And the sons of kings, the magi, will come and take them to the Son of God, to Bethlehem...'⁵¹ The magi brought the symbols of the lost temple to Jesus; they restored the oil.

This story appears in many ancient texts: the Book of the Cave of Treasures says that the cave became a house of prayer for Adam's family; the Book of Adam and Eve says that the three archangels gave Adam the gifts: Michael gave him the gold, Gabriel gave him the incense and Raphael gave him the myrrh. These were the symbols not only of the garden of Eden, but also of the temple, and when the magi brought them to Jesus, it showed that he was the new Adam who would restore the true temple and open the way back to Paradise.

The Gospel of Philip, an early Christian text rediscovered in Egypt about 60 years ago, knew that the two trees in Eden led to two different states of life, the life of a mortal or the life of an angel. Temple tradition distinguished between mortals and angels by describing mortals as animals and angels as 'men'. Knowing this, it is quite clear what the text is saying. 'There are two trees growing in Paradise. The one produces animals and the other produces men. Adam ate from the tree that produces animals and he became an animal. His children were animals.' The text is damaged here, but the comparison suggests that those who ate from the other tree became 'men' that is, angels. The tree of life gave Adam his angel state. There follows another passage about the trees of Paradise: 'The tree of life is in the midst of Paradise, and from the olive tree comes the anointing oil, and from the anointing oil comes resurrection.'⁵² This recently rediscovered gospel book shows that the Christians in Egypt knew the meaning of the oil from the tree of life. [*Having anointed my head with the heavenly oil of incorruptibility, I come before you with joy...p. 705*

The Church Fathers also taught about the perfumed oil, and I give here just three examples: St Cyril of Jerusalem explained to the newly baptised Christians that they had been made 'Christs' because they had received the antitype of the holy Spirit. 'This holy oil' he said, 'is no longer simple oil... after invocation, but, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, is made fit to impart his divine nature.'⁵³ This is the temple tradition.

⁴⁹ *Odes of Solomon* 11.14-15. *ryh*' means fragrance or smell, and *nsm*' means breath or soul.

⁵⁰ *Odes of Solomon* 36.6

⁵¹ *Testament of Adam* 3.6

⁵² *Gospel of Philip* 71, 73

⁵³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 3

Pope St Leo spoke of the myrrh in his Epiphany sermons: the magi, he said, offered frankincense to the God, myrrh to the Man and gold to the King.⁵⁴ He added: 'He who offers myrrh, believes that God's only-begotten Son united to himself man's true nature.'⁵⁵ This is further proof - were any needed - that the temple understanding of the holy oil had passed in to the Church. [*Turning your name into reality, you mixed yourself into this pure oil, making it radiant with heavenly light, p. 703*]

And last, St Dionysius, who set the holy oil at the heart of his teaching. Read in the original temple context, and knowing the secret teaching about the mystery of the oil, his words need no further explanation. It was, said St Dionysius, forbidden to use the holy oil outside the temple, because only within the world of the temple could the holy oil be understood. The oil itself was hidden under veils, because not everyone would understand the mystery. 'For the ray of the most holy things enlightens the men of God, who belong to the Light, purely and directly. It spreads its sweet fragrance openly into their minds. But this fragrance does not spread in the same way to those in lower places...' 'So it is that the composition of the oil is symbolic, giving a form to what is without form. It shows figuratively that Jesus is the rich source of the divine perfume.'⁵⁶

⁵⁴ St Leo the Great Sermon 5 *On the Epiphany*

⁵⁵ St Leo the Great Sermon 6 *On the Epiphany*

⁵⁶ Dionysius *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 473B, 476B, 477C.