

How Many Times was Jesus Anointed by Women?

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It is generally agreed that Matthew 26:6ff and Mark 14:1ff are parallel accounts of the same incident - the anointing of Jesus by a woman at Bethany two days before his crucifixion. It is also generally agreed that the anointing of Jesus in Luke 7:36ff is from much earlier in Jesus' ministry.¹ Many scholars have advocated that the anointing of Jesus in John's gospel is the same as that found in the first two gospels. However, this is not the case.

Our text: John 12:3ff

Chronologically speaking, John's account represents the second anointing of Jesus by a woman. The first was earlier in his ministry (Luke 7:37). The third and final anointing happens 4 days later (Matthew 26:6ff and Mark 14:1ff).

We know this event in John's gospel is different from that in the gospels according to Matthew and Mark for a few reasons:

1. The chronology is different.
 - a. John records an event that happens 6 days before the Passover (John 12:1), while Matthew and Mark record an event that happens 2 days before the Passover (Matt. 26:2, Mark 14:1).
 - b. The anointing in John's gospel happens before the 'triumphal entry', while Matthew and Mark record an anointing that happens after the triumphal entry. While it can be argued that John's gospel does not always record things in their chronological order, it is obvious from John 12:12 that the triumphal entry was after this anointing.
2. In John's gospel Jesus' feet are anointed, while in the other two gospels his head is anointed.
3. In the other two gospels, the disciples/others react to the perceived waste of valuable perfume, whereas here Judas reacts.
4. The home is different. While it is possible that Mary and Martha and Lazarus all went to Simon's house, it is a more natural reading of the text to believe that this event was in their own house and not Simon's home.

The reasons that some people suppose that the anointing recorded by John is the same as that recorded by both Matthew and Mark are as follows:

1. First: the place name is the same - Bethany. However, there is no reason to presume that because two separate events happen in the same village, they are therefore the same event.² Mark 11:12 makes it clear that Jesus was spending the

¹ The man named Simon in Luke's gospel is not 'Simon the Leper' in the first two gospels. Simon was a very common name at that time. For example we also have 'Simon Peter' the apostle.

² Compare the healing of the blind in Luke 18:35ff (cf Mark 10:46ff) with that in Matthew 20:29ff. In the former Jesus heals one blind man on his way into Jericho, and in the later he heals two blind men on his way out of Jericho. I maintain that these are two different events despite many similarities.

nights in Bethany and then going to Jerusalem each day - thus he probably dined in several different homes in Bethany.

2. Second (and the only partially convincing argument) is that the three gospels show some agreement from the point in the story when there begins to be complaining about the waste of the 'nard'. Mark agrees with John about the value of the perfume (300 denarii) AND that the woman was the one rebuked for the supposed waste AND that Jesus' reaction was similar.

One explanation for point #2 is that the woman in the first two gospels and Mary in John's gospel were both rebuked for wasting a standard size bottle of perfume that was priced at 300 denarii (i.e. this was the going rate for that size bottle of perfume, which was common and happened to be the size they both owned). Different groups of individuals who were at only one of the two different anointings would likely each have complained about the apparent waste.³ Finally, that Jesus would use the same defense twice is not unusual since teachers of the day would repeat their teachings over and over again (see for example Matthew 12:39 and Matthew 16:4).

Another explanation that keeps the two stories separate is that either John or Mark conflated the two stories at just this point in the text. Mark was very young when he witnessed these events and probably didn't write them down for at least another 15 years. John however was very old when he wrote them down, and he wrote a long time after their occurrence (perhaps 50 years or more afterwards). Either one of the authors could have mixed details from the two stories. After all, the two separate events happened within a few days of each other and under similar conditions. However such an idea is unsupported by any evidence and therefore should be rejected.

A final possible explanation for these similarities is that a later editor/copyist added (accidentally or on purpose) the words from one of the gospels into the other. For example a scribe may have read Mark's gospel and then later, while copying John's gospel by hand, added a note in the margin that the perfume was valued at 300 denarii (information the copyist had gained from reading Mark's gospel). This marginal note could then have crept into the main text of John's gospel. However I am unaware of any evidence supporting this theory.

My belief is that the first explanation is correct and that in John's gospel Judas complains to Mary when she anoints Jesus' feet, mentioning the value of the perfume. Then 4 days later some of those at the dinner (Matt: 'His disciples') complain about the same value to some unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head. Jesus' reaction was similar but not exactly the same in both cases.

In conclusion, to claim that these two events are the same REQUIRES saying that there are blatant errors in John's gospel concerning the chronological issues mentioned above. Whereas maintaining that the stories are two different events, only requires one to believe that some of the details are coincidentally the same. If the Bible is inerrant, then it is impossible to say that both stories are records of the same event.

Chronology of the final week:

³ It must be remembered that at this time Judas was still esteemed as one of the apostles. Followers of Jesus would have looked up to Judas, and therefore may have even copied his words when Jesus is again anointed only 4 days later.

The events of the last six days before Passover would have happened as follows:

Friday evening Jesus is at Martha and Mary's house for Shabbat Dinner. Lazarus is also there and Mary anoints Jesus feet. Saturday they all rest in accordance with the law. Sunday Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a Donkey. (Sunday is called the 'next day' because it is the day after the Sabbath, which started on Friday night⁴). Monday Jesus curses the fig tree and cleanses the temple (Mark 11:12ff). Tuesday Jesus is at the house of Simon the Leper when an unnamed woman comes in and anoints his head. Wednesday he eats the Last Supper with his disciples. Thursday he is crucified⁵, Friday is the special 'high' Sabbath after Passover, Saturday is the regular weekly Sabbath and the following Sunday he rises again.⁶

David and Jesus

A few interesting comparisons can be made between the anointings of Jesus and the anointings of David.

David was also anointed three times: By Samuel (1 Sam 16), by the men of Judah (2 Sam 2:4), by the elders of Israel (2 Sam 5:3, 1 Chron 11:3).

The similarities are interesting: Jesus was first anointed At Simon's house. Simon and Samuel share the same Hebrew root word in their names: שמעון. Simon and Samuel were both religious leaders.

Jesus' second anointing was in front of Judas. 'Judas' is pronounced 'Judah' in Hebrew. Judas was apparently the only disciple from the area of Judah, while the others were from Galilee. While David's second anointing was by the elders of Judah who accepted him as king, Jesus second anointing was rejected by Judah, and he was rejected as king by the people of Judah.

Jesus' third anointing was at Simon the Leper's house where the rest the disciples complain. These other disciples were from the Northern tribes of Israel and represent the rest of Israel. While David's third anointing was his acceptance by the rest of Israel as

⁴ John 12:1 states "six days before the Passover". This was Friday night. Friday night was 'Erev Shabbat' - the start of the Sabbath. This is still a traditional night to invite guests over. Verse 12 has Jesus riding on a donkey the "next day". However that was Sunday and not Saturday. For the Jews, the day started at sundown, therefore Friday night was considered part of Saturday (the Sabbath). Riding a donkey on the Sabbath would have been a direct violation of the law and would have made Jesus a sinner.

Martha and Mary would have prepared the Sabbath dinner before sundown, so as not to violate the Sabbath and then everyone would have been reclining and eating as the Sabbath started at nightfall. Mary then would have anointed Jesus' feet after dark while everyone was still around the table.

Is it possible that the triumphant entry was Saturday night after sundown? Possibly, since it may have been late in the day when Jesus entered the city and looked around (Mark 11:11). Due to the almost full moon, there would have been sufficient light to get around. However it is more likely it happened during the day on Sunday, especially since Matthew and Luke's accounts seem to indicate he cleansed the temple on the same day.

⁵ Matthew's gospel has Jesus saying that the 'son of man' would be in the earth for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40), which puts the crucifixion on Thursday. Both Friday and Saturday of Passover week were Sabbaths, during which no one traveled to the tomb. Indeed at Matthew 28:1, the Greek word for 'Sabbath' is plural.

⁶ Note that there is no 'Silent day' in the midst of the crucifixion week, as many have proposed who believe in a Friday crucifixion. This solves the problem of all four gospel writers failing to record anything at all about an entire day.

king, Jesus' third anointing was complained about by the disciples from the Northern tribes.

All three times the anointing of Jesus was rejected. First by the religious Pharisee representing the law, second by Judas, representing those of the tribe of Judah, and finally by the eleven, representing the other tribes of Israel.

David was anointed with olive oil, Jesus with expensive perfume. Part of the Old Testament concept of anointing was to waste precious and valuable oil on the one being anointed. In the case of Jesus, the anointing was with something many times more valuable than regular anointing oil.

It is also interesting that God gave the honor of anointing Jesus to women, instead of to the elders who were already rejecting Jesus.