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IMAGE OF MARY OF BETHANY AN INSPIRATION FOR MYSTICISM

Summary: The purpose of this article is to attempt to interpret Mary's gesture at the feast in Bethany, that is, anointing Jesus' feet with precious nard and rubbing them with her hair (John 12:3). The act of Martha's sister and Lazarus is logically incomprehensible; moreover, it breaks the conventions of the time. In the following steps, we will discuss the closer and further context of the pericope John 12:1-11, followed by the ritual of anointing in the ancient world. Analysing the Johannine text from an exegetical and theological angle will allow us to reveal Mary's role in the narrative as servant and disciple. Recognising the bridal metaphor in John 12:1-11 brings out the meaningful depth of the text, its mystical dimension. In this light, the contemplative Mary appears as a representative of the Church, the bride of Christ the Bridegroom.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Jesus, Mary of Bethany, anointing of the feet, nard oil, the bridal metaphor.

Mary of Bethany is venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. On 26 January 2021, Pope Francis ordered Mary to be placed together with her siblings, Martha and Lazarus, in the general Roman Calendar, and their joint memorial falls on 29 July.

Mary of Bethany is a biblical figure. She is mentioned by the evangelists St. Luke (along with Martha; cf. Luke 10:38-42) and St. John (along with Martha and Lazarus; cf. John 11:1-53; 12:1-11). When, in Luke's account, Martha busies herself with the many household chores to receive Jesus with honours, her sister sits at the feet of the Visitor to absorb his word (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus, in the face of Martha's apparent opposition to her sister's passive attitude, explains that Mary has "chosen the best part", of which she will not be deprived (Luke 10:42). After all, this 'one' is enough. In John's Gospel, Mary appears twice, first in the account of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-53), then at the feast in Bethany (John 12:1-11). Where in the resurrection narrative the active Martha comes to the fore, in the anointing pericope the opposite is true.

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The author emphasises Mary's attitude, barely mentioning Martha (Nalewaj, 2014, p. 145–146). It is worth noting that whenever the inspired authors mention Mary, it is always in direct contact with Jesus, at his feet (Luke 10:39; John 11:32; 12:3). This position is not without significance. In the biblical tradition, it symbolises the disciple of the Torah (Schneiders, 1982, p. 42).

The description of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet at the reception in Bethany (John 12:1–11) is one of John's most surprising and mysterious texts. One does not, after all, rub in a costly perfume in order to immediately wipe them off, in addition with one's hair (Kitzberger, 1995, p. 580). The objection of Judas, who was present at the feast, seems understandable, but Jesus sharply rebukes the disciple by praising Mary's unusual behaviour. The purpose of this study is to try to answer the question of the meaning of the puzzle, even provocative act of the woman and her role in the narrative. Does the image of the silent Mary, bending over Jesus' feet to anoint them, contain a deeper meaning? Can it provide inspiration for mysticism?

1. The context of Jn 12:1–11

The solemn supper in Bethany prepared six days before Passover to celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus provides the immediate context for the description of Jesus' anointing (12:1–11). The information about the proximity of the annual feast is significant, integrating the event into the wider Passover context (v. 1). This is the third Passover explicitly marked by the evangelist. Where in the case of the two earlier Passovers in Jn 2:13 and 6:4 the term 'Passover of the Jews' appears, in 12:1 the term 'Passover' is left unspecified. Presumably the narrator wants to emphasise that we are dealing with a special Passover. This is the Passover of Christ (Mędala, 2010, p. 838).

The anointing narrative anticipates the description of the washing of the feet of Jesus' disciples on the eve of his passion and death (13:1–20).

The common elements are:

	John 12	John 13
– time of event:	learning six days before Passover	before Passover
– participants:	Jesus and the disciples	Jesus and the disciples
– feet:	Mary anoints Jesus' feet	Jesus washes the feet of the disciples
– wiping feet:	with Mary's hair	sheet
– objector:	Judas	Peter
– Jesus' departure:	"You do not always have me"	the hour of his departure from this world

Because of the similarities between the two events, Okure speaks of “a relay, as it were, of perfect love that boldly breaks with all conventions (12:3; 13:4–5.13)”. Mary of Bethany passes the baton to Jesus so that the latter will soon pass it on to His disciples (Okure, 2001, p. 1348)¹.

The participants at the supper in Bethany are: Jesus, His friendly siblings and the disciple Judas. The ceremony betrays some eucharistic features. It has the character of thanksgiving for the resurrection of Lazarus, and Jesus is the guest of honour. This may have been the feast known in biblical tradition as *Havdalah*. It was celebrated at the end of the Sabbath with wine, amid fragrant herbs and light. The Hebrew term *havdalah* means ‘separation’/‘parting’ (de Vries Mzn., 1999, 106–107). As the Shabbat Queen has departed and the first three stars shining in the sky herald the beginning of a new week, Martha can minister at the table. However, in the absence of sufficient data on the celebration of *Havdalah* in the first century after Christ, no firm position can be taken on the nature of the banquet at Bethany (Brown, 1966, p. 447). Significantly, according to John’s chronology of the Passion (19:31), the feast prepared six days before the Passover falls on the first day of the week, i.e. Sunday. This is the time when the early Church celebrated the Lord’s Supper (Schneiders, 1982, p. 41–42).

2. The ritual of anointing in the ancient world

Anointing, the sprinkling and rubbing of the body or objects with oil or oils, was a well-known practice in the ancient world. The activity could have been cosmetic/hygienic, medicinal or religious in nature.

In Egypt, Greece and Rome, the heads of guests arriving at a party were sprinkled with fragrant oil. The anointing of the feet rather than the head, especially during a meal, was rather rare, although it seems more justified as it allowed the fragrance used to be inhaled (Keener, 2010, p. 863). Foot anointing is mentioned by: Homer (*Odyseja*, p. 292), Polybius (*Dzieje XXVI/1*), Petronius (*Satyrikon*, 70,8), as well as Aristophanes, Athenaeus, Pliny, Curtius (Coakley, 1988, p. 246–248). The author of the *Odyssey* describes an old woman who washed the title character’s feet and ‘rubbed them with greasy oil’. The earlier mention of bringing water to his feet makes it possible to assume that this is precisely the anointing of Odysseus’ feet. Curtius, citing the history of Alexander the Great and the customs of the kings of India, points out that the monarch’s feet, after removing his sandals, are drenched with fragrant oil. Athenaeus, on

¹ M. Biskup speaks here of “feminine genius”, which means sensitivity, empathy and attentiveness to the other: “Maria z Betanii, nie mogąc przewidzieć gestu Jezusa z Ostatniej Wieczerzy, wykonuje go wobec Jezusa, niejako pokazując, że rozumiała nauczanie Mistrza” (Biskup, 2023, p. 19).

the other hand, speaks of a certain custom prevailing among Athenians, especially those living in superfluity, who anoint 'even their feet with perfume' (Coakley, 1988, p. 247).

Biblical tradition bears witness to the use of fragrances for hygienic purposes after bathing, which demonstrated luxury and gave joy (Pauritsch, 2016, p. 786). The body was not anointed in times of mourning and as a sign of repentance (2 Samuel 14:2; Daniel 10:3). The soothing properties of oil meant that it was used in healing procedures (Luke 10:34; James 5:14). The anointing of the corpse (Mark 16:1) was one of the elements of the funeral ritual. The gesture showed respect for the deceased person; moreover, the fragrant anointing neutralised the bad smell of the decaying body. In the religious practice of Israel, the rite of anointing has an established place. Holy oil was used to anoint the heads of rulers, priests and prophets (cf. Exodus 29:7; Leviticus 8:12; 21:10; 1 Samuel 10:1; 15:17; 26:11.16; 2 Samuel 1:16; 2 Kings 9:3.6; Psalms 23:5; Matthew 6:17; Luke 7:46; also Polybius 26.1.13–14) and objects of worship (Genesis 28:18; Exodus 30:22–38).

The act of anointing kings was practised throughout the Orient. It was an essential element of enthronement, surpassing even the imposition of the royal insignia (Laws, 1997, p. 546). With the birth of the monarchy, the anointing ceremony was practised in Israel, as the history of Saul (cf. 1 Samuel 9:16; 10:1), David (cf. 2 Samuel 2:4; 2 Samuel 5:3 cf. 1 Samuel 16:13), Solomon (1 Kings 1:39) and other rulers attest. The anointing symbolised the monarch's special bond with Yahweh and the receipt of the gift of His spirit. Henceforth, the king became a holy person, God's 'anointed one', a mediator between God and the people (Nalewaj, 2017, p. 148).

3. John's description of the anointing at Bethany (John 12:1–11)

The description of Jesus' anointing is reported by all the Evangelists, but because of the differences in the descriptions, there is no consensus among commentators as to whether the inspired authors had the same event or two others in mind (Mark 14:3–9; Matthew 26:6–13; Luke 7:36–38; John 12:1–11). According to Mark and the dependent Matthew, the act of anointing was performed by an anonymous woman in Bethany just before Jesus' death. In Luke's account, it was done by an openly sinning woman, and the episode took place in Galilee. According to some critics, Mark and John present the same story, but certain details in the fourth evangelist's account are the same as Luke's (Brown, 1966, p. 449–459). It remains an open question whether John drew on any original material or rewrote the synoptic source (Nalewaj, 2017, p. 132–135).

The fourth evangelist depicts the gesture of Martha's sister and Lazarus as follows: "And Mary took a pound of precious and noble nard oil (Gr. *myrou nardou*) and anointed Jesus' feet, and with her hair she wiped them. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil" (12: 3).

3.1. The true nard

The Greek term *litra* (Latin *libra*; pl. *pound*) is a unit of weight equivalent to 326, 4 g (Metzger, Coogan, 1997, p. 793). The amount of oil used by Mary to anoint Jesus' feet is enormous, ten times the content of the alabaster flask (about 30 g) referred to by the synoptics (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37). "Myrrh" (Gr. *myron*) is an aromatic ointment or oil extracted from a tree that grows in southern Arabia and eastern Africa. According to Genesis 37:25 and 43:11, myrrh was brought to Egypt from the land of Canaan. In its liquid form, it was used for cosmetic purposes (Esther 2:12; Deuteronomy 5:5) or cultic purposes, as an ingredient of the holy oil (Exodus 30:23–25). In the Infancy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the Wise Men from the East bring the Newborn as a gift of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). Myrrh mixed with wine relieved pain (Mark 15:23), and it was used to anoint a corpse (John 19:39) before being placed in the tomb (Greene, 1997, p. 520). The term "nard" (Gr. *nardos*) or 'spikenard' is of Sanskrit origin and means an exquisite aroma extracted from one of the varieties of valerian, a grassy plant found in the north-eastern part of India (Ravasi, 2005, p. 59). Nard was enriched with other substances to obtain a fragrance with exceptional qualities. One of its characteristics was that when the container was opened, a beautiful fragrance permeated the interior of the house (John 12:3). Due to the high price of the perfume, few Mediterranean residents could afford such an extravagance (Keener, 2010, p. 863). The oil used to anoint Jesus' feet is what the evangelist calls "true nard", that is, the original oil, not adulterated. Judas values the cosmetic at three hundred denarii (12:3.5). This was an exorbitant sum, almost equivalent to the annual earnings of an unskilled labourer². Jesus, according to the accounts of Mark 14.8 and John 12.7, sees in the gesture of anointing an anticipation of his own death.

3.2. The role of Mary in the description of the anointing

Mary of Bethany unexpectedly anointed the feet of Jesus during the feast, who entered Jerusalem the next day as Messiah-King (John 12:12–19). A few

² The denarius was a Roman coin minted from 3.85 grams of silver and corresponded in value to the Greek drachma. At the time of Jesus one denarius was the wage for a labourer's work (Matthew 20:2).

days later, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, and this act symbolises his death for them (13:1–20).

3.2.1. Mary as a servant and a disciple

Mary bending down to Jesus' feet fulfils the role of a servant (cf. John 1:27; 13:5) given that only servants were allowed to touch the feet of their master or teacher (cf. 1:27) and to wipe excess water and also oil from the heads of the participants at the feast. The use of her hair for a non-female service seems to testify to her devotion and love for Jesus. The scene at Bethany conceals the entirety of the Paschal mystery (Schneiders, 1982, p. 42). It is the last with the disciples whom Jesus loves (cf. 11:5), and the beloved disciple, Lazarus, rests at table with the Master. Among those present is also Judas Iscariot – a participant in the Last Supper. Mary exposes herself to the disciple with her generous gesture, coming from the depths of her heart. The one who betrays his Master (cf. John 6:64.71; 12:4; 13:2.11.21; 18:2.5.36; 21:20) proclaims that instead of wasting the costly fragrance, it should have been sold and the payment received distributed to the poor. In fact, Iscariot had no interest in the needy; he sought only his own benefit. Jesus knows his heart; he knows that the disciple epitomises the evil that is born in the heart of man. After the dialogue about the living bread and Simon Peter's confession of faith in the synagogue in Capernaum (cf. 6:68–69), Christ refers to Judas by the epithet "the devil" (6:70). The father of lies and murderer "from the beginning" (cf. 8:44) is an inspiration to the disciple (Fausti, 2005, p. 337). The Rabbi of Nazareth links Mary's generous gesture made at the table in the hospitable house in Bethany and Judas' defiance with his imminent burial. This dramatic announcement climaxes the feast scene.

The anointing and the words about Jesus' imminent death recall the events of Maundy Thursday. The washing of the disciples' feet not only symbolises the death of the Teacher for them, but is a glimpse into the future. Christ gives his closest associates an example of love realised in service. It is not He but the disciples who should wash His feet. Mary resting at Jesus' feet to anoint them for the day of the funeral appears as a disciple. By her attitude, she expresses devotion and respect towards the Master. Jesus, calling his disciples to follow, commanded them to wash each other's feet (John 13:14–15). The sister of Martha and Lazarus realises discipleship to the full. She listens to the Master's word (Luke 10:39), but also expresses her love for him in action. In the earlier account of the resurrection of Lazarus (cf. John 11), Martha, after making a profession of faith, runs to her sister with an appeal: "The Teacher is there and is calling you" (11:28). Mary immediately sets out to meet Jesus with a bow at his feet (John 11:32). In John 12:3, the woman anoints the Master's feet and this

act – because of the rubbing of the oil with her hair – is reminiscent of the event in the Upper Room when the Teacher wiped the disciples' feet with the sheet girdling His loins.

For the fourth evangelist, being a disciple is a category of great importance (Nalewaj, 2021, p. 320). Unlike the Synoptics' account, John's Jesus does not call for carrying a cross, but encourages them to abide in His word (8:31) and bear fruit (15:1–8). Undoubtedly, Mary of Bethany fulfils the concept of discipleship assumed by the theologian John. She belongs to the community of the beloved disciple, whose members studied the inspired texts and engaged in academic theological discourse. Mary does not express her relationship to Jesus in a conventional way. In making the gesture of anointing, she does not ask anyone for permission, not even Lazarus, who was probably the head of the family. As a disciple, she decides for herself what form of action she should take, even against the opposition of another male disciple.

3.2.2. Mary as a bride

The Fourth Gospel is permeated with a bridal metaphor. It can be recognised in many places (Kubiś, 2023). The Messiah appears in its light as the Bridegroom, and the community gathered around Him is the bride. This original Johannine Christological conception alludes to the image of Israel as Yahweh's spouse, familiar from the prophetic texts (Isaiah 62:4–5; Hosea 2:14–20). In the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple, the bridal idea first appears in a text dealing with a dispute over baptism between John the Baptist's disciples and a certain Jew (3:22–36), is developed in the dialogue at the well (John 4:1–42), and continues in subsequent texts (Mędała, 2010, p. 439).

Ann Roberts Winsor recognises the bridal metaphor in John 12:1–11 through literary allusion and intertextuality. According to the scholar, the Song of Songs provides the background for the description of the anointing at Bethany. Common motifs in both inspired texts are hair, resting at table, costly nard oil, anointed feet and fragrance. The author of the Old Testament poem, when describing the beauty of the bridegroom and bride, refers to the hair several times (4:1; 5:2.11; 6:5; 7:6). It is clear from John's description, though not explicitly, that Mary of Bethany's hair is loose and flows down to Jesus' feet. This image recalls the hair of the girl in the Song prepared into braids or curls that entwine with the bridegroom-king (Song of Songs 7:6). Jesus resting at the table in the house in Bethany by his physical position resembles the king from the canticle (Song of Songs 1:12) also seated at the table (Kubiś, 2018, p. 40). The oil used by Mary to anoint Jesus' feet is described by the narrator with the adjective *pistikēs*, which means 'true', 'authentic', and in a literal sense, 'faithful'.

The term *pistikēs*, apart from the parallel in Mark 14:3, does not appear again in the New Testament. In Aramaic, on the other hand, the term *quštā*, translated – ‘faith’, ‘faithful’ is often found in conjunction with the term ‘nard’. The term *pistikēs* may be a contamination of the word *tēs stakēs*. *Stakte* is the name of an essential oil made from the bark of the styrax bush. It is worth noting that the king-beloved in Deuteronomy 1:13 is referred to as a ‘knot’ – *tēs stakēs*, spending the night between the breasts of the bride. Women wore such a *tēs stakēs* pouch around their necks so that its fragrance would envelop their entire body (Nalewaj, 2009, p. 282).

The mention of Jesus’ anointed feet is reminiscent of the image of the bride’s feet in Proverbs 5:3 and 7:2. In the first text, the girl does not open the door to her beloved because, as she points out, she is ready for sleep, has taken off her clothes and washed her feet, which she does not want to get dirty. The second verse speaks of her feet in motion, they are steps or dancing feet. In Song of Songs 5:5, on the other hand, the hagiographer states that when the bride opened the door to her beloved, her hands and fingers dripped with myrrh. This image may evoke Mary’s fingers anointing the feet of Jesus (Kubiś, 2018, p. 41). The scent of oil enveloping the interior of the house in Bethany where the feast was held alludes to the bride’s words about the fragrance of the bridegroom-king’s oils, which surpasses the fragrant balms in Song of Songs 1:3–4. An interesting observation is made by Origen. Analysing the text of Song of Songs 1:12 in the Greek version, he notes that the bride, after saying the words: *nardos mou edōken osmēn autou*, anointed the beloved with her oils. Her gesture had an unexpected effect. Well, the *nardos*, which, being in the possession of the girl, had no fragrance, began to smell the moment it touched the bridegroom. (Origen, 2005, p. 114–115). Thus, it was not the oil that gave its fragrance to the man, but the oil itself that took over the fragrance from him. In Greek, the term ‘nard’ is of the feminine gender, and thus the personal pronoun *autou* does not refer to the fragrance, but to the bridegroom-king mentioned earlier: “My nard gave forth the fragrance of him” (the king). From the grammatical construction of Song of Songs 1:12 in the Septuagint version, something even more remarkable emerges. Well, the odourless oil took over the scent of the beloved and returned to the bride. Through the medium of the nard with which the woman anointed the man, she received the fragrance of her betrothed as a gift. According to an old Christian writer, the girl’s words should be read as follows: “My nard, with which I anointed the bridegroom, returned to me and brought me his fragrance; having overcome his natural fragrance, he gave me the delight which the fragrance of the bridegroom himself brings” (Origen, 2005, p. 115). Mary of Bethany, through the hair with which she wiped the anointed feet of Jesus with fragrance, received back the aroma imbued with the characteristics

of the body of the Bridegroom of Jesus. By anointing the Lord with the precious nard, she did not smell the fragrance of the perfume, but through her hair she experienced the aroma of the Word of God, of Christ. The fragrance that enveloped the whole house signifies the fragrance of the teaching coming from Christ and the aroma of the Holy Spirit. The whole house is the Church and even the world (Origen, 2005, p. 115). Now, following the Apostle Paul, a woman can confess: *For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing* (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Critics point out another aspect relevant to marital symbolism. Mary's letting her hair down in the presence of an unrelated man(s) breaks Jewish conventions. It appears as an immoral, provocative or – according to rabbinic interpretation – dishonouring act for a woman. Married women were obliged to cover their hair and only uncovered it for their husbands. Thus, Mary's unbound hair, with which she rubs His feet, can be seen as a gesture of seduction belonging to the marital context (Kubiś, 2018, p. 42). Jesus is the Messiah the Bridegroom, Mary represents the Bride the Church who responds to the Bridegroom's love. The same nard oil that anointed the feet of the Bridegroom anoints the head of the bride. The Bridegroom has been conquered, entrapped in the bride's hair (Fausti, 2005, p. 336). He can confess: *You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart* (Song of Songs 4:9).

3.2.3. Mary as a mystic

Mary's gesture at the banquet at Bethany has mystical features. The woman is completely focused on Jesus, she does not utter a single word. He seems to be contemplating. Her contemplation takes on the face of a very concrete person. This is a mysticism that seeks faces; a mysticism in which you have to lean out, take risks and cross the threshold of your comfort in order to reach out to the other (Biskup, 2013, p. 22–24). Mary, staring and listening to the Lord, forgets herself. He doesn't pay attention to Judas' protest, he doesn't calculate. She had already understood that the mission of the Master of Nazareth was to serve. This is a service "to the end". With the act of anointing, Mary anticipates the events of Holy Week. By his generous, even extravagant actions, he joins in God's own generosity and in a certain way gives glory to God's generosity. The need to be close to others is mercy and "mystique with open eyes" (Biskup, 2023, p. 23).

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Six days before Passover, at the feast celebrating the return to life of Lazarus (12:1–2), Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet with precious nard and rubs them with her hair. The next day, the anointed Messiah-Bride enters Jerusalem as

King to bring salvation to the world. In the light of Luke and John's account, Mary of Bethany, rests at the Lord's feet, listens to his words (Luke 10:39) and again at his feet "squanders" everything she owns (12:3). Although the Evangelists do not mention visions or raptures of Mary, which are a feature of many Old Testament prophets or Christian mystics, but, if Thomas L. McClellan's opinion is correct that a mystic is a person "directly experiencing God's presence, close and transforming communion or union with God", then Mary of Bethany is a mystic in the full sense of the word (McClellan, 1997, p. 770).

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Obraz Marii z Betanii inspiracją dla mistycyzmu

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba interpretacji gestu Marii w czasie uczty w Betanii, czyli namaszczenia stóp Jezusa drogocennym nardem i otarcie ich włosami (J 12, 3). Czyn siostry Marty i Łazarza, z punktu widzenia logiki jest niezrozumiały, nadto łamie konwenanse ówczesnej epoki. W kolejnych krokach omówiony jest bliższy i dalszy kontekst perykopy J 12,1–11, a następnie rytuał namaszczenia w starożytnym świecie. Analiza tekstu Janowego pod kątem egzegetyczno-teologicznym pozwala ukazać rolę Marii w narracji, jako sługi i uczennicy. Rozpoznanie w J 12,1–11 metafory oblubieńczej wydobywa głębię znaczeniową tekstu, jego mistyczny wymiar. W tym świetle kontemplacyjna Maria jawi się jako reprezentantka Kościoła, oblubienica Chrystusa Oblubieńca.

Słowa kluczowe: Ewangelia Janowa, Jezus, Maria z Betanii, namaszczenie stóp, olejek nardowy, metafora oblubieńcza.

