

John 19:38-42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] John chapter 19, verses 38 to 42. After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission.

So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight.

So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

So because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. At the end of John chapter 19, after Jesus has died, secret supporters of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, come and take Jesus' body away and bury it.

Nicodemus is taking a risk at this point. He originally came to Jesus at night to avoid being seen, and he's already come under suspicion in previous chapters. But now he is doing something on a grander scale and more openly.

[1:10] None of the disciples or even the women seem to be directly involved at this point. The women come later on, as in the other gospel accounts. They see where the body is laid, and they come to bring more spices.

Of course, this is not the first time in the gospel that there has been reference to spices in association with Christ's burial. In chapter 12, Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus' feet with nard, and he declared that this was for the day of his burial.

But yet the quantity of spices that are brought here are fit for a king. Some have estimated that they would be even 100 times more costly than the nard used to anoint him. There are other accounts from this period of people bringing such costly spices for a burial.

But this really stands out. This is the sort of thing that you would have expected for one of the rulers of the Jews. Jesus is here being given treatment, fitting for the king of the Jews, by figures who are themselves rulers of the Jewish people.

The purpose of the spices was not to preserve the body, but to mask the smell and to honour the deceased person. With the reference to spices and a garden here, a background from the Old Testament is being evoked.

[2:14] The term used for garden is not the one that we typically find of the Garden of Eden in the Septuagint, but is a word that is commonly used in the Song of Songs. Here we might think of a passage like Song of Songs, chapter 4, verses 12 to 16.

A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates, with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes with all choice spices.

A garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind. Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow.

We find references to spices in connection with royalty as well, in places like Psalm 45, verses 6 to 9. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces, stringed instruments make you glad.

[3:28] Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour. At your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. Myrrh and aloes, then, are connected not just with death and burial, but also with these themes of love.

The garden and the spices remind us, I think, primarily of Song of Songs. This is the king entering into his spiced garden chamber, a chamber from which he will later come forth with the wind that awakes these spices, and the fountain that has opened up so that its life is brought outside.

The opening up of the garden so that its living waters will flow out is something that should recall a number of Jesus' statements already in this Gospel of John. He is the one who will let the spices flow out into the world, as the wind awakes and blows them out.

The wind, of course, is the wind of the Spirit. These are all themes that the evangelist delicately evokes at this point, by the way that he describes Jesus being laid to rest. Reading the Gospel, we have also seen a number of cases where there are references to love.

Themes of love taken from the Song of Songs, for instance, the allusion to Song of Songs, chapter 1, verse 12, the king on his couch, and the nard of the woman filling the room, in the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany.

[4 : 39] Jesus began his ministry at a wedding feast. He was announced by the friend of the bridegroom, John the Baptist. He's the bridegroom, the one who comes to the woman at the well, and speaks about himself as the man who is to come.

He's the true Messiah, the true bridegroom of Israel. He's the one who will later meet with Mary in the garden, in another scene that evokes marital themes. I think, then, that we should see the Song of Songs in the background here.

Jesus is the royal lover, and this is preparing his bed, preparing the room of the king, the room of the royal lover, from which he will later come forth. Throughout the book of John, the glorification of Christ is focused upon his death and his burial, not just upon his ascension.

And so it seems appropriate to see in the way that the burial of Christ is described, these themes of glory. He's being buried like a king. He's being brought into this chamber, this garden.

This garden that's going to release its spices and its living water, filling the world. We should have a sense of expectation here. When is the bridegroom going to come forth and open up the garden, allowing its spices and living water to flow out?

[5 : 45] We might also faintly hear the way that John is setting things up for a birth event. This is nowhere near as strong as it is in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, we see the parallel between Jesus being wrapped in linen garments and laid in a manger, and then wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb.

There's a Joseph and a Mary at Jesus' birth, and then a Joseph and some Marys at his death and resurrection. There are a Joseph and a Mary here. But yet the theme that is more prominent, I think, are the themes of love.

These themes look back to the Song of Songs, and perhaps beyond that also to the Garden of Eden. In John, the proximity of the cross and the tomb is mentioned. I think this highlights the connection between the two of them.

These aren't detached things. They belong very closely together. And Jesus' burial is not just appended to the story of the cross as something purely incidental to the main event.

In John, as in the other Gospels, the burial itself is charged with symbolism. It too is an integral part of the story of Jesus' bringing of salvation. A question to consider.

[6 : 48] We're told that no one was previously laid in the tomb. What other things in the Gospel might this remind us of? And what significance could be found in the fact that this is a tomb for Jesus and Jesus alone?

A question to consider.