

John 12:1-19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 12 verses 1 to 19. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Martha therefore took a pound of expensive ointment, made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, said, Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me. When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

[1 : 0 4] So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel. And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness.

The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.

In John chapter 12, the Passover has nearly arrived and Jesus goes to Bethany where there's a meal celebrated in his honour. He's hosted by Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, whom he raised in the preceding chapter.

[2 : 1 5] As at the end of Luke chapter 10, Martha is serving Jesus, the honoured guest, while Mary is found at his feet. On this occasion, however, she's not listening to him teach. She's performing this dramatic symbolic act upon him, pouring out precious ointment upon him and drying his feet with her hair.

We find an account of a similar event in each of the synoptic gospels. In Matthew chapter 26, verses 6 to 13. In Mark chapter 14, verses 3 to 9. And in Luke chapter 7, verses 36 to 50.

The accounts in Matthew and Mark are particularly similar to the account of John. All occur at Bethany in the run-up to the Passover. Matthew and Mark both mention an alabaster flask. Mark and John both record the fact that the ointment could have been sold for 300 denarii.

And the fact that the ointment was pure nard. Matthew, Mark and John all relate it to the coming burial of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and John all mention an objection to her actions.

But John alone attributes the objection to Judas in particular. Matthew and Mark both relate the event to Judas' betrayal, which immediately follows it. The woman in Luke's account is a sinful woman.

[3 : 22] And the issue is not the costliness of the ointment, but the fact that the woman was a sinner. And Jesus, although he was supposedly a prophet, allowed this sinful woman to come near him and to perform this act upon him.

Luke's account occurs in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It's likely an event that occurs much earlier in Galilee, rather than in Bethany in the days immediately prior to the last Passover.

It provides the occasion for a parable about forgiveness. Luke's account seems to refer then to a different event, earlier in the ministry of Jesus. There are some similarities, but the differences are quite pronounced.

Matthew, Mark and John's accounts, however, clearly relate to the same event. But there are problems. Matthew and Mark's accounts seem to be dated two days before the Passover. John's account, by contrast, appears to occur six days prior to the Passover.

To harmonize these accounts, we could argue that one or more of the accounts are placed out of chronological sequence. Perhaps Matthew and Mark's account is out of sequence, designed to connect the occasion of Judas' decision to betray Jesus with the plotting of the Jewish leaders that surrounds both of their accounts.

[4 : 26] Alternatively, we could argue that John's account has an unclear chronological sequence. Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover, but stayed there over the days prior to the crucifixion.

While the meal occurred after the triumphal entry, John chooses to mention it at this point in connection with Jesus' arrival in Bethany, perhaps in order to create a clearer narrative progression from the raising of Lazarus, which Mary's action looks back to, and the movement towards Jesus' own death as he enters Jerusalem.

Particularly important in the sequence of John's Gospel is the way that the action of Mary here anticipates Jesus' own act of washing his disciples' feet in the following chapter. There are other differences between John's account and the accounts in Matthew and Mark.

Neither Matthew nor Mark mention that the woman who performed the action was Mary. Reading both of their accounts, we might think that the woman was just a random person at the feast, not the hostess. That noted, however, Mary and Martha are not characters in Matthew or Mark, but only in Luke and John.

Matthew and Mark also focus upon the woman's action in pouring the ointment on Jesus' head, not mentioning his feet. For John, though, the action focuses upon his feet, and unlike the others, involves wiping his feet with her hair.

[5 : 38] In this regard, it has a strong similarity with the action of the woman in Luke chapter 7, who wept, wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with the hair of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them then with the ointment.

At least on the surface of things, Mary's action here in John seemingly makes less sense, as she seems to be wiping off the ointment with which she is anointing the feet. The differences between these accounts can be harmonised.

It's easy to imagine Mary anointing Jesus' head and anointing his feet too as a secondary action, anointing him from head to toe. The chronological tensions between the accounts could also be resolved in a number of different ways.

However, this still leaves us with the challenge of accounting for why the gospel accounts of such incidents would have so many tensions between them, and why their different accounts would give hearers rather different impressions of what actually took place, impressions that are also rather at odds with the way that we might harmonise them.

Here I think it is very important to recognise that while the gospel writers were recording actual historical events, and their accounts can be harmonised, their accounts are doing much more than simply telling the readers what happened in blow-by-blow eyewitness descriptions.

[6 : 47] Rather, each of the accounts have theological purposes, and the literary structure and setting and the framework of these different texts are designed to highlight theological connections. In the description of the wiping of Jesus' feet while he is sitting at table, with expensive nard for instance, the attentive hearer who knows the Hebrew scriptures, might observe an allusion back to Song of Solomon chapter 1 verse 12, While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

This allusion would present Jesus as the king and the bridegroom of his people, themes that are important elsewhere in the Gospel of John. The fact that Mary is identified here, and the action that she performs is associated with Jesus' feet rather than his head, might also draw to mind the way that Mary is associated more generally with Jesus' feet.

In the preceding chapter, she falls at Jesus' feet weeping after he visits following the death of Lazarus. In Luke chapter 10, she is learning at Jesus' feet, and now she is anointing Jesus' feet.

The person who knows the story of Luke chapter 7 and the sinful woman who weeps and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and then anointing the feet with oil, might recognize that Mary is now performing this action in two different stages.

In chapter 11, she wept at his feet, and now she is anointing his feet. The way that the event is presented also creates a connection between the death and the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus' coming death and burial.

[8 : 10] In her action, Mary is expressing her deep gratitude for Jesus' raising of her brother Lazarus. She is also anticipating Jesus' own death and coming burial. Why focus on the feet in particular?

We have already observed the connection between Mary and the feet of Jesus. Beyond this, in the chapter that follows, Jesus washes his own disciples' feet and wipes them with a towel. If, as in Matthew and Mark's Gospel, the action of the woman only focused upon anointing Jesus' head, and his feet were absent from the picture, no strong connection would be formed between the woman's anointing of Jesus' feet and Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet.

However, by focusing upon what Mary does to Jesus' feet, John can invite reflection upon the parallels between what Mary does and what Jesus does. We might also contrast the fear of the stench of the body of the dead Lazarus in the preceding chapter, and the glorious smell of the anointed body of Jesus in this one.

The stench of Lazarus' dead body is now replaced with the fragrant oil that's placed over a living person, but a living person in anticipation of his death. The house is described as having been filled with the fragrance.

We might see a possible reference to places like Isaiah chapter 6 verse 4, where the smoke of the incense fills the temple. Alternatively, we might think of the way that the Spirit of the Lord, represented by the cloud, fills the temple.

[9 : 29] Mary of Bethany, in both Luke's Gospel and in John's, seems to have a very strong connection with Jesus' presence. In the preceding chapter, she came across as a woman who felt some sort of betrayal at Jesus' absence and distance at the time of her loss.

Now, however, she expresses her gratitude with this remarkable act performed upon his body, expressing the immense value that she places upon his presence. Her extravagant act is contrasted with Judas' betrayal and wickedness.

Judas' love and fixation upon money contrasts with the extravagant gift of someone who truly recognises a value beyond price. The oil in question would have cost an immense amount of money, more than many women would have inherited.

This was a remarkable act to perform. Jesus sees it as a preparation for his death, but it also has overtones of a coronation. It's an anointing, and in the resurrection, these two themes can be reconciled.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' movement towards death and burial is not just a movement down. It's a movement towards being glorified. In the rest of the chapter, there are various references to Jesus being glorified by the Father.

[10:34] At this point, it is not just Jesus who is drawing the attention of the crowds, but Lazarus too. It is a remarkable thing to see a man who has been raised from the dead, and the Jews are concerned to stop the attention that Lazarus is drawing towards Jesus.

Their attempt to kill a man who has been raised from the dead shows the way that they are siding with death. Resurrection itself is a threat to their power, and the power of death is part of the means by which they sustain their rule.

Here we also see the way that the servant becomes like the master. The disciple Lazarus, as he manifests something of the power and the life of Christ, is persecuted on account of Jesus.

The next day, Jesus is surrounded by a great crowd that take branches from palm trees and go out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.

This is a great welcome to the city, as a returning king or a military deliverer. We might even see this as an image of God returning to his people. John points the attention of the heroes of the gospel to the prophecy of Zechariah at this point.

[11:33] In Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. The other gospel accounts give a lot of attention to the finding of the donkeys.

Here, however, there is more attention to the witness of the crowd. The way that they declared Jesus to be the king of Israel, the one who has come in the name of the Lord. He is the Messiah, and the crowd are described as bearing witness to him.

Witness language is very prominent and important throughout the gospel of John, so it is not surprising that it should be highlighted at this point. A question to consider.

Beyond the fact that Judas was a thief who wanted the money for himself, why might his argument that the ointment should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor be an inappropriate one to make?

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