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**Title** “She Hath Wrought a Good Work”: The Anointing of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel

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**Abstract** In silence, an unnamed woman approaches Jesus and pours ointment on his head. Responding to criticism from his disciples, Jesus not only defends the woman’s actions but states that wherever the gospel is preached, her story will be told as a memorial of her (Mark 14:9). This enigmatic story has, surprisingly, received very little comment from biblical scholars over the centuries. Yet it is a veritable treasure trove of insight into the person of Jesus and his ministry: (1) anointing was, as Jesus himself explains, a preparation for his burial. Both Jesus and the woman who anoints him understand that he will soon die; (2) anointing was also, in the biblical tradition, part of the coronation ritual for kings (see, for example, 1 Samuel 10:1)—both Jesus and the woman who anoints him understand that he is the King of Kings; (3) at a point where the disciples seem to understand only the glorious aspect or the suffering aspect of Jesus’s mission, the anointing woman’s actions show that she understands that both aspects must be integrated in the atoning mission of Jesus Christ; and (4) the Joseph Smith Translation of Mark 14:8 on first reading does not appear to add much to the story but on closer examination reveals a chiasmus that strengthens and nuances Jesus’s praise of the woman.

## “SHE HATH WROUGHT A GOOD WORK”: THE ANOINTING OF JESUS IN MARK’S GOSPEL

Julie M. Smith

Without saying a word, a woman—unnamed and unbidden—enters a private home and anoints Jesus’s head. Some complain that the oil cost a year’s wages and suggest that the money may have been better spent on the poor. Jesus says to leave the woman alone because she has done a good work and that “this [act] . . . shall be spoken of for a memorial of her” (Mark 14:9).

When we call Jesus the Christ, we are using the Greek word meaning “anointed” (Greek *christos*). When we call him the Messiah, we are doing the same with the Hebrew word for “anointed” (Hebrew *meshiakh*). The anointing story can teach us what it means when we say that Jesus is the Christ or the Messiah. This paper considers that story, its immediate and larger contexts, and its Joseph Smith Translation in order to explore what the anointing teaches us about the Anointed One.

An indicator of its importance is that the story of Jesus’s anointing is one of only very few incidents from Jesus’s life to be included in all four Gospels (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; and John 12:1-8). While these four anointing stories have an intriguing combination of shared themes and differing details that invite further reflection (e.g., Was there one anointing, or more than one?

Which Gospel preserves the most historically accurate account?), this paper will consider only the anointing story found in the Gospel of Mark in order to focus on Mark's unique perspective on the event. Each writer presents the story in a slightly different light in order to emphasize different facets of the event; focusing just on Mark's account will permit us to see how this story explains what it means to be the Anointed One.

### **The Anointing**

Anointing was performed in the ancient world for a variety of reasons, from the sacred to the mundane. In Mark's story, Jesus's anointing has several distinct purposes. We know it is a burial anointing because Jesus says that the woman has "anoint[ed] [his] body to the burying" (Mark 14:8). So one function of this anointing is as a typical burial ritual—premature, but prophetic. This woman recognizes—at a time when the disciples still have a hard time accepting the idea (see Mark 8:31–32)—that Jesus must die.

But the anointing also fits the pattern for a royal anointing, which is the coronation of a king. The story is in a context of profuse royal imagery that begins with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. Zechariah prophesied of the triumphal entry (see Zechariah 9:9), which we find recounted in Mark 11, and later associated the Mount of Olives with the coming of the Lord (see Zechariah 14:4). The royal imagery reaches its ironic climax in the mockery during Jesus's trial and crucifixion (see Mark 14:61; 15:2, 9, 12, 17–20, 26, 32), where the ignorant unwittingly proclaim Jesus's royal nature through their taunts.

A major textual parallel to the anointing at Bethany, the anointing of Saul by Samuel, is also a kingly anointing. The account in 1 Samuel 10:1 reads: "Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured it upon [Saul's] head, and kissed him, and said, Is it not because the Lord hath anointed thee to be captain over his inheritance?" Most modern translations add the following to this verse, based on the manuscript evidence: "And you shall reign over the people of the

Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies round about. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage” (1 Samuel 10:1 RSV).<sup>1</sup> The sign is a very specific prophecy that is immediately fulfilled (see 1 Samuel 10:2-9). After the anointing at Bethany, Jesus commands the disciples to make arrangements for the Passover, and they find everything to be as he said it would. In both Saul’s and Jesus’s anointings, the quickly filled prophecy authenticates the anointing, and the similarities between the two accounts suggest that both are royal anointings.

The anointing at Bethany does violate some expectations since royal anointings were normally performed by a prophet. But when Jesus says that the woman “is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying” (Mark 14:8), he implies that she is acting prophetically since she knows of his impending death. The fact that Jesus’s head is anointed also supports the idea that this is the anointing of a king; as Ben Witherington notes, “royal figures are anointed from the head down.”<sup>2</sup> So there is ample evidence that this anointing fits the pattern for the coronation of a king.

Additionally, the anointing also echoes the priestly anointing as described in the book of Leviticus (see Leviticus 8:12).<sup>3</sup> Again, some expectations are violated: according to the law of Moses, priests are to be anointed in the tabernacle or temple; however, the Bethany anointing occurs in a leper’s house. But J. Duncan M. Derrett argues persuasively that Mark has structured the Gospel in such a way as to suggest that the temple has become a leper’s house and

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1. The additional material is found in the Septuagint but is missing from the Masoretic Text. Because the phrase *hath anointed thee* occurs twice in the verse, it is probably an instance where a scribe’s eye skipped from the first instance of the phrase to the second and accidentally omitted the intervening material. See Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 83.

2. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 368.

3. See Eric D. Huntsman, *God So Loved the World: The Final Days of the Savior’s Life* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book, 2011), 44-45.

the leper's house has become a temple.<sup>4</sup> The procedure outlined in Leviticus for cleansing a leprous house consists of four steps, and each step finds a thematic parallel in Mark's gospel. Leviticus prescribes, first, a cleansing of the leprous home (Leviticus 14:39-42), which is echoed by Jesus's cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-19). Next, the priest will return to inspect the house (Leviticus 14:44); Jesus inspects the temple through his discussions with religious authorities that showcase the corruption of the temple system (Mark 11:27-12:40). The final evidence of corruption comes when the widow donates her mites: as a widow, she has claim upon the religious leadership for her maintenance, but instead she is supporting them in their decadence (Mark 12:41-44). This inversion of responsibility becomes the consummate evidence of corruption and leads to the end of Jesus's discussion with the authorities—that is, the end of his examination of corruption—and his prophecy of the temple's coming destruction. If the house is still leprous, the priest "shall break down the house, the stones of it, . . . and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place" (Leviticus 14:45). This is echoed in Jesus's pronouncement that "there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2). It is very difficult to understand that statement in any context other than a comparison to a leprous house: while the temple was destroyed, some stones were left one stone upon another, so we cannot take the statement as simply literal.

If Derrett's analysis is correct, the implications are profound. Mark has condemned the temple as hopelessly leprous and therefore incapable of fulfilling its functions. At the same time, it is in the actual house of a real leper that the anointing occurs. Mark has made the temple into a leper's house and the leper's house into a temple. The anointing of one's head in a temple connotes that this is, at least on a symbolic level, a priestly anointing.

Although it might seem that we must select one meaning—a burial or a royal or a priestly purpose—for the anointing, not only

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4. J. Duncan M. Derrett, "No Stone upon Another: Leprosy and the Temple," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 (1987): 3-20.

can we find all, but we must. We must keep them simultaneously in mind in order to understand Mark’s portrait of Jesus. Jesus is not one-dimensional: in his life and mission, he weaves together all the strands of prophetic teachings about the coming Messiah. Austin Farrer wrote: “It is no diminution of its royal significance when Jesus declares the anointing to be for his burial, for it is precisely the paradox of Christ’s royalty that he is enthroned through being entombed.”<sup>5</sup> When we call Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, or the Anointed One, we should, as this story teaches us, keep in mind that that is not a simple designation but rather a many-layered declaration of Jesus’s salvific death, his royal status, and his priestly power because it is only through the combination of those elements that he was able to atone for sins.

### The Immediate Context

Next we will consider the details of the anointing story. We are told that the dinner is held in the house of Simon the leper, which would have been quite puzzling to Mark’s ancient audiences. So many questions arise from this simple phrase: Was Simon present? Was he healed, or was he still a leper? Was he even still alive?

Some scholars suggest that his leprosy must have been cured since the law of Moses mandated the exclusion of lepers from society. This would have been particularly important since Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, which required him to be ritually clean (see Numbers 9:6-12). But it is also possible that Simon has not, in fact, been healed; much as Jesus allowed an unclean woman to touch him in Mark 5:27, he might have intentionally dined with a leper. But this, too, is speculation, so let us consider what the phrase *in the house of Simon the leper* contributes to the story regardless of Simon’s actual condition.

Perhaps the point is to compare Simon the leper and Simon Peter. As the head of the disciples, Peter should be providing hospitality

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5. Austin Farrer, *A Study in St. Mark* (Westminster: Dacre, 1951), 129-30.

and comfort to Jesus but instead is nowhere to be found in this story, unless we assume that he is included in the “some” who object. Maybe the reference to the leper prepares the hearer for something unusual to follow, as indeed the anointing is. The preservation of Simon’s name—which is not as important to the story as the woman’s name—might be ironic. Simon is remembered by his disease (which apparently is not very important since we do not hear anything definitive about it), while the woman is left nameless despite her immortalizing act. The reference to the leper also contributes to the theme of death and burial that Mark develops throughout the anointing story. According to tradition, lepers were equivalent to the dead,<sup>6</sup> so Jesus’s statement about his burial garners new meaning if we understand it to have taken place in the realm of the dead. Perhaps Mark is intentionally toying with the audience’s inability to determine whether Simon is recovered in order to emphasize the life-and-death themes of the anointing: the infected leper casts the pall of death while the likely conclusion that the leper is healed suggests a return from the dead.

We now turn our attention to the theme of poverty. The poor were likely on the minds of all present that night because they were given special gifts at Passover.<sup>7</sup> Since the cost of the woman’s anointing oil was about a year’s wages for a common laborer (see Matthew 20:2), her act does seem outrageously extravagant, and we are not surprised when some of the dinner guests ask, “Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor” (Mark 14:4-5). The “some” who object to the anointing are among the most sympathetic of all Jesus’s opponents; after all, they merely recommend following Jesus’s own suggestion to the wealthy young man that he “sell whatsoever [he] hast, and give to the poor” (Mark 10:21). Yet in this story, Jesus sharply disagrees with them when he replies, “Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought

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6. See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 3.11.3.

7. See William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 493.

a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always” (Mark 14:6-7).

Unfortunately, Jesus’s statement has been used by some people to justify their neglect of the poor. But the real division is not between “Jesus” and “the poor” but between “not always” and “always”: Jesus’s words suggest that there will be other occasions when the poor can be helped, but this will be the last chance to anoint him. Perhaps Ecclesiastes 7:1 lurks behind his statement: “A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth.” This verse is particularly appropriate since the anointing has the function of naming Jesus—of explaining what it means when we call him “the Christ.” Also, as Jesus’s words indicate, the woman is credited for having actually done her good deed, while her objectors are merely talking about the possibility of giving to the poor.

We might also think of the “poor” and the “waste” as metaphorical. The woman has committed an incredible act of devotion, represented by the fact that her gift cost an entire year’s wages. Those who complain that the cost is too great represent those who are willing to sacrifice only up to a point. They see her gift as excessive and wonder if one can be a true follower but give a little less. Jesus answers negatively; her gift is appropriate and necessary, no more extravagant than the death and kingship that it acknowledges. Because of the way the statement is phrased, the anointing oil, at “*more than* three hundred pence” (Mark 14:5, emphasis added), has immeasurable, limitless value. The same could be said of Jesus’s death.

Although the objectors seem to be advocating an ethical cause, what they are actually doing is focusing on the economic aspect of the anointing instead of its spiritual implications. This fits a pattern in Mark’s gospel where people focus on the wrong thing. For example, when Jesus proposes that they feed the multitude, the disciples wonder if they should spend two hundred pennyworth on bread (Mark 6:37). Instead of seeing the metaphorical meaning

of the “leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15), they contemplate their own lack of bread (Mark 8:16). There are three references in Mark to the monetary unit *denarii* (which the KJV renders as “pence” in Mark 14:5): the anointing, the feeding miracle discussed above, and the controversy over paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17). In all three cases, money is the concern of those who do not understand Jesus. It may not matter whether the objectors to the anointing are charitable or greedy; the real issue is that their concern with money blinds them to spiritual realities.

Jesus’s statement about the poor has a very close parallel in Deuteronomy 15:11: “For the poor shall never cease out of the land.” But note what follows that statement: “Therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.” The context of this verse is the practice of the sabbath year, or seventh-year release, which is designed to alleviate economic inequality in Israel (see Deuteronomy 15:4). This text focuses on one’s motivation for lending money—which should not be to gain wealth by accumulating interest but rather to assist someone in need—in light of the knowledge that the sabbath year is impending. The text suggests that one who refuses to lend money because of the coming release of debts is sinful (Deuteronomy 15:9-10). By alluding to this text, Jesus is teaching that the woman, although aware that his death is near and that she will not have her kindness repaid, has still chosen to give to him freely. The motive of the objectors is comparable to those who do not lend money for fear of the impending year of release. Of course, in a reversal typical of Mark’s gospel, the woman is compensated by Jesus’s praise.

We now turn our attention to the anointing woman herself. All we know about her is that she is female and that she anointed Jesus; we do not know to whom she is related, where she is from, her marital status, or even whether she is a Jew or a Gentile. It is possible that Mark leaves out her name in order to spare her dishonor. But Mark is not particularly concerned with this type of social norm, so it is perhaps ironic that he omits her name (which is usually done to

protect a woman’s modesty) in a situation where she is boldly acting and where Jesus proclaims that the entire world will know of her.

Adele Reinhartz’s discussion of the use of anonymity in the books of Samuel<sup>8</sup> is insightful here, especially given the links we have seen between 1 Samuel 10 and the anointing. Reinhartz notes that a proper name has two functions: as a unifier to which one can attach all the information known about a person and as a tool for distinguishing that person from others. This suggests that the woman is not strongly differentiated from other characters and emphasizes the parallels between various texts in Mark. This is in line with the function of characterization in ancient novels: the woman is more a type of the ideal follower than she is a distinct character.

Reinhartz discusses the three nameless women in Samuel (1 Samuel 28:7-25; 2 Samuel 14:1-24; and 2 Samuel 20:14-22). They have many parallels to the anointing woman. Significantly, communication is the key function for all the women; the anointing woman communicates Jesus’s identity to the audience. Furthermore, the passages in Samuel emphasize the women’s professional functions; her namelessness enhances the anointer’s prophetic functions by not distracting the audience with other information about her that is less relevant. Finally, the women are crucial to the advancement of the plot.

Likely, the lack of a name makes the woman paradigmatic of a woman completely devoted to Christ and exercising the gift of understanding. As Mary Ann Beavis notes, “Jesus’s comment on the woman’s prophetic anointing is his lengthiest and most positive pronouncement on the words or deeds of any person preserved by the evangelist Mark.”<sup>9</sup> Her anonymity may be a necessary counterpart to her high praise.

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8. Adele Reinhartz, “Anonymity and Character in the Books of Samuel,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 117-41.

9. Mary Ann Beavis, “Women as Models of Faith in Mark,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18/1 (1988): 7.

## The Larger Context

The anointing stands out from the rest of Mark's gospel in two significant ways, giving hints as to its importance. First, many scholars have noted that the frequent use of the word *immediately* (Greek *euthys*) tends to give the text a hurried quality; over forty occurrences in just sixteen chapters can definitely leave the audience feeling as if they have been on a whirlwind tour.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of this rushing narrative are only two concrete time references; they come immediately before (Mark 14:1) and immediately after (Mark 14:12) the references to the betrayal of Jesus and therefore bracket the story of the anointing. So the anointing and betrayal are the only precisely timed acts in the Gospel and therefore form a break in the rushing narrative, used much as slow motion might be used to emphasize a particularly important scene in a film.

The anointing story is also the narrative bridge between Jesus's life and death; we might consider it either the last story relating events from his life or the first part of the story of his death. In either case, it is the hinge between the accounts of his life and his death. Its location in the text mirrors its theological function since, as we have seen, the anointing story explores the link between Jesus's life and death.

We now consider the anointing in relation to several other events in Mark's gospel. First, comparing the anointing with the story of the widow's mite presents many intriguing points:<sup>11</sup> both reference the poor twice (Mark 12:42, 43 and 14:5, 7), and both mention wealth (Mark 12:41 and 14:3). Jesus proclaims that each woman has given all that she has (Mark 12:44 and 14:8), and there is a solemn "verily I say unto you" statement in each (Mark 12:43 and 14:9). Note the huge disparity in the value of the anointing oil and the widow's mites: a mite (Greek *lepton*) was the smallest coin in circulation, but three hundred pence (Greek *denarius*) would have been about

10. See Mitchell G. Reddish, *An Introduction to the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 77.

11. See Joseph A. Grassi, "The Secret Heroine of Mark's Drama," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18/1 (1988): 10-15.

a year’s wages for a laborer (see Matthew 20:2). While scholars differ in assigning precise conversion values to ancient currency, the value of the anointing oil is between 10,000 and 20,000 times that of the widow’s mites. This shows that the actual worth of the gift is not crucial; what really matters is giving all that one has. The widow’s gift of all her living parallels Jesus’s gift of his life, and the anointing woman’s gift defines what it means for Jesus to give his life. However, the widow’s act is in accord with the traditions of her society while the anointer violates these norms. We might conclude that the point is not to violate social norms for the sake of violating them—or to follow them for the sake of conforming—but rather to make an appropriate response to Jesus regardless of the expected practices of society. Perhaps the most important parallel between the two women’s stories is the irony that the widow’s gift is to a doomed temple and the anointer’s gift is for a doomed Jesus.

The widow’s story and the anointing form a frame around chapter 13:

A evil scribes denounced (Mark 12:38-40)

B the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44)

C Jesus’s teachings (Mark 13:1-37)

B’ the anointing (Mark 14:1-9)

A’ the plot to kill (Mark 14:10-11)

Since chapter 13 focuses on the task of true followers in the difficult last days, this textual arrangement shows two positive examples of following Jesus—the widow and the anointer—juxtaposed against the negative examples of the corrupt scribes and the death plotters. The stark evil of the men and the vivid goodness of the women are emphasized through their contrast. And much as the particular crime of “devour[ing] widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40) is mentioned at the time of the widow’s offering, the plot to kill Jesus (Mark 14:10-11) emphasizes the death motifs of the anointing.

The next story with important implications for understanding the anointing is Judas’s betrayal of Jesus. Framing the anointing by the treacherous murder plans emphasizes the goodness of the

woman's deed. The terseness of Mark 14:1-2 and 10-11 contrasts sharply with the details of the anointing and, while the anointing is primarily concerned with actions instead of words, the murder plot is merely talk at this point. The furtiveness of the plotters is weighed against the openness of the woman's actions. Jesus's prophecy that the woman's act will be remembered throughout the whole world sharply conflicts with the desire that the plan to kill Jesus be kept from the people (Mark 14:1). Finding out about the anointing is a part of the "good news"; finding out about the death plot would cause a tumult (Mark 14:2).

There is an odd multiple naming of Judas in Mark 14:10, where he is "Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve." (The Greek reads "*the* one of the twelve," with the first *the* being just as awkward in Greek as it would be in English.) Unlike the woman, he is amply named. Additionally, there is a double naming in the first part of the plot, where the festival is given two names: "the feast of the passover, and of unleavened bread" (Mark 14:1). The double holiness of the festival contrasts with the double duplicity of Judas. Because he has already been identified as one of the twelve in Mark 3:19, this repetition does not provide the audience with any new information but rather emphasizes his nefarious nature. Judas functions as a foil for the nameless, laudable woman. In the only two instances in the Gospel where money is spent on Jesus, the woman sacrifices for him while Judas profits from his betrayal.

If we assume that Judas is one of the "some" who witnesses the anointing, then we find another contrast between the woman and Judas: she has entered the house to show her devotion to Jesus, but Judas leaves the house to commit his awful task. It may have been the very act of the anointing—with its messianic connotations and flouting of social norms—that pushed Judas to betray Jesus.

On the other hand, it may be that Judas is not with Jesus in the house of Simon the leper; perhaps the anointing and the plot to kill Jesus should be read as occurring simultaneously, similar to the way that Peter's betrayal occurs at the same time as Jesus's trial

(Mark 14:53-72). It might be instructive to compare the trial and the anointing, including their frame stories. In both, Jesus is inside and the issue of his identity is raised, either by the woman who anoints him and therefore proclaims his identity or by the high priest who questions Jesus’s identity (v. 61). In the anointing, silent deeds proclaim the truth; while in the council, spoken lies conflict (v. 56). In both cases, a disciple stays outside to betray Jesus by his words in a scene that sandwiches the confession of Jesus’s true identity. Interestingly, in this reading there is a parallel drawn between the woman and Jesus.

Our third text to compare with the anointing is the last supper. When preparing for the Passover meal, Jesus tells the disciples to look for “a man bearing a pitcher of water” (Mark 14:13). This would have struck Mark’s audience as unusual since carrying water was considered women’s work (see, for example, Genesis 24:13). This unexpected situation calls attention to one aspect of the anointing that immediately preceded it: both the anointing woman and the water-carrying man are violating cultural gender roles and also performing an important service for Jesus.

There are also verbal similarities between the two scenes. The woman pours out (Greek *katacheo*) the contents of her broken flask (v. 3), much as Jesus pours out (KJV “shed”; Greek *ekcheo*) his blood from his broken body (v. 24). Jesus explains that the woman has anointed his body for burial (Mark 14:8) and then shares his body with the disciples (v. 22); both incidents are made possible by completely pouring out the valuable liquids blood and nard. The phrase *my body* appears in Mark only in these two contexts (vv. 8 and 22), emphasizing the physicality of Jesus’s work and foreshadowing his impending death. Also, both incidents include a “verily” saying (vv. 9, 25), the former concerning the future of the gospel and the latter concerning Jesus’s own future. In the anointing, the woman’s act is prophetic; in the last supper, Jesus’s act is prophetic. Death looms over both stories as Jesus’s identity is physically established through breaking and pouring for those perceptive enough to understand. Surprisingly, Mark’s version of the last supper does

not include a command from Jesus to institute a similar meal as a memorial, such as is found in Luke's gospel (Luke 22:19) and the ensuing Christian tradition. In Mark, the only memorial that Jesus mentions is the anointing: his followers are to remember the woman's deed. In fact, the same Greek word for *memorial* is used in the Septuagint of Exodus 12:14 and 13:9 for the institution of the Passover as is used for the memorial of the anointing.

### The Joseph Smith Translation

The Joseph Smith Translation for Mark 14:8 is, upon first reading, rather puzzling. Unlike most JST revisions or expansions, this one does not correct false doctrine, add information, harmonize the text with other passages, or clarify the text. In fact, it just seems to repeat words that are already in the passage. But what it achieves is the creation of a chiasmus that is not in the KJV text:

A she has done what she could . . . had in remembrance  
 B in generations to come  
 C wheresoever my gospel shall be preached  
 D for verily she has come beforehand  
 E to anoint my body to the burying  
 D' verily I say unto you  
 C' wheresoever this gospel shall be preached  
 B' through out the whole world  
 A' what she hath done . . . for a memorial of her

This structure adds depth to the anointing story by first clarifying that the main point of the story, the E line, is the anointing, not the objection and response. It is easy to get sidetracked into a debate regarding whether the woman exercised wise stewardship over some very expensive oil, but the real point of the story is the anointing of Jesus's body. Second, note the phrase *verily I say unto you* in the D and D' lines. This saying, used to emphasize not only the importance of the words that follow but also the central point of the chiasmus by literally surrounding it, also encourages us to

compare Jesus’s words with the woman’s actions. The theological implications of comparing her actions and his words are profound. Third, the B and B' lines are also noteworthy in that they explain that “whosoever my gospel is preached” means not just geographically but also through time. While we often think of chiasmus as part of the apologetics toolkit—and it certainly can be—it can also yield rich literary insights; in this case, it ensures that we don’t miss the key ideas that this story *is* about the anointing—not the objection—and that the woman’s deeds parallel Jesus’s words. The mere fact that a JST version exists also tells us that this story was a focus of attention for Joseph Smith.

## Conclusion

Christology, the study of the nature of Jesus and his identity, has traditionally involved examination of the titles applied to Jesus, such as Son of God, Son of David, and the like. But in Mark’s gospel, titles applied to Jesus are often untrustworthy. For example, Peter states, “thou art the Christ” (Mark 8:29), but then he rebukes Jesus (v. 32), and Jesus’s response makes the characterization of Peter clear: “Get thee behind me, Satan” (v. 33). Peter might have used the right words to describe Jesus, but at that point he does not understand who Jesus is, or he would not have rebuked him. In Mark’s gospel, the devils also have the ability to use the correct titles to identify Jesus (see Mark 1:34), but that does not mean that they are to be emulated! The perverse proliferation of abused and abusive titles during Jesus’s trial also shows the unreliability of titles and names in Mark (14:61; 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32, and possibly 39).

Even though the anointing story does not mention any titles for Jesus, we need not dismiss it as a source for Mark’s Christology. Jesus is named not with a title, but through the silent action of a faithful follower. This type of naming is most appropriate to the Gospel of Mark where more traditional methods of naming fail. And the layered truth that Jesus must be simultaneously understood

as a dying and a royal and a priestly Messiah simply cannot be expressed in one small word.

What of Jesus's statement that the woman's story will be told wherever the gospel is preached? The gospel cannot be preached if the multifaceted nature of Jesus's life—his humility, his priesthood, his royal lineage—is not conveyed, whether through this story or another. If the listener does not understand that only through complete devotion does one really follow Jesus—that only complete devotion gives one the knowledge to truly understand who Jesus is—then the teacher has not truly preached the gospel.

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