

12 HEALING OILS OF THE BIBLE

There is a strong appeal in connecting with our ancient past, and that connection can be a major draw into the world of remedies. Knowing that countless generations have turned to the same healing properties is comforting, and even more so when we can connect it to Biblical times and “prescriptions,” for lack of a better term. When the Author of Life writes a prescription, you take it! With that said, there are conflicting opinions on the topic of essential healing oils of the Bible.

The bottom line for me is that God gave us these healing oils of the Bible for our use and benefit – as God’s Medicine. Let’s walk through the historical record and each oil itself to see how these essential healing oils of the Bible were used then and how that wisdom might benefit us now.

LET’S DEBUNK A COMMON MYTH

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard people say, “If it’s good enough for Baby Jesus, then it’s good enough for me!”

Well, here’s the bottom line: Jesus didn’t use frankincense oil. Or any essential healing oil for that matter.

How can I be sure about this?

Because essential healing oils as we know the today didn’t exist!

Truth is, the magi gave the Christ child gold, frankincense, and myrrh resins. Essential healing oils as we know them didn’t exist back then. Simply put, the essential healing oils of the Bible that we all love and use today require highly advanced distillation techniques that weren’t yet invented.

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HISTORICAL USE OF HEALING OILS

Essential healing oils of the Bible are a component of botanical matter, evident with a simple walk through of a fragrant garden. The aromatic properties escape a rose with the brush of a hand. So there’s little question why or how the ancients would have noticed this and utilized it in some form. Oils themselves are discussed in ancient literature dating back thousands of years, with Rome known for its baths, territories of Greece for their perfumes, and anointing oils mentioned in the Bible.

Largely, these were extracts, with many writings indicating the use of olive oil and pressing the oil out. There are indications of crude distillation methods, though, with discoveries of clay-made distillery equipment not unlike our own. (1) While these early distilled oils would have been closer to our modern hydrosols – steam distillation that creates an aromatic water – the idea of extracting, distilling, or otherwise capturing and using the fragrant component of a plant is of old.

MODERN USE OF HEALING OILS OF THE BIBLE

In more recent decades, the science of distilling essential healing oils of the Bible as pure, concentrated components has been honed. As researchers and chemists learned more about chemical composition in the early 1900s, they were able to perfect the ability to isolate these compounds and, later, analyze their exact composition to understand more about their specific benefits. Unfortunately, with that ability came the appeal of synthetics and attempts to mimic the art of harnessing nature from the predictable parts of a laboratory.

As the ancient practice of perfumery began to meld with the newly confirmed healing actions of aromatic oils, the temptation has been to synthesize the fragrance in an attempt to replicate the benefits. There is no replacement for creation, however. As we walk through the commonly cited oils of the Bible, we should remember to honor their intended purpose rather than trying to recreate them as we see fit.

BREAKING DOWN THE HEALING OILS OF THE BIBLE

You won’t find your favorite blend listed alongside your favorite verse, but there are plenty of botanicals and oils listed in the Bible. Twelve healing oils of the Bible in particular have been singled out as potential essential healing oils or aromatic extracts and can even be purchased as such today! Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, common names of the time are used rather than scientific names. Some, like frankincense, you probably have on your shelf, while others you might not even know how to pronounce. So which are the most likely to connect us to the past, and which are just a throwback tribute? Let’s look at each to find out.

1. ALOES

Wondering why the cactus-like plant is here? Merriam-Webster has a similar thought, by highlighting aloe first as the tropical plant with a healing gel. But then, the bigger picture emerges: plural : the fragrant wood of an East Indian tree (Aquilaria agallocha) of the mezereon family When the Bible refers to aloes, it’s the aromatic extract (or mash) of a tree’s heartwood, used for healing and especially embalming. Old English borrowed the word, then applied it to the spiky plant we know now. The Bible lists aloe(s) as:



A symbol of abundance and provision (Numbers 24:6)

A perfume (Psalm 45:8, Proverbs 7:17)

An incense (Song of Solomon 4:14)

Burial ointment for Christ (John 19:39)

While some claim that aloes or aloewood are the same as sandalwood, the direct connection – A. agallocha – has a powerful healing oil component itself. Used as an incense and cosmetic oil, aloewood (or eaglewood or agarwood) is known for its benefits as a stimulant and cardiac tonic and can even have some digestive wellness benefits, too! (2)

2. CASSIA

Unlike the herb senna, whose proper name begins with Cassia, the cassia of the Bible resembled our cinnamon more than anything. According to an etymology breakdown by BibleHub online, cassia is likely “the inner bark of Cinnamomum cassia, a plant growing in eastern Asia closely allied to that which yields the cinnamon of commerce. It is a fragrant, aromatic bark and was probably used in a powdered form.” (3) The Bible lists cassia as:



An anointing oil (Exodus 30:24)

A perfume (Psalm 45:8)

Precious commodities (Ezekiel 27:19)

Like cinnamon, Cinnamomum cassia is rich in cinnamaldehyde when derived from the bark. (4) If C. cassia is not available, cinnamon essential healing oil would be a fair switch.

3. CEDARWOOD

Mentioned most commonly as a burned wood for ceremonial purposes, cedarwood is associated with cleansing and purification. (5) These majestic, ancient trees – likely the cedar of Lebanon (C. libani) – are still around today, and are a source of antioxidant essential healing oil. According to an analysis of both C. libani and the more commonly used C. atlantica. The Bible lists cedarwood as:



A ceremonial tool for cleansing leprosy and (Leviticus 14, Numbers 19)

A perfume (Psalm 45:8)

A symbol of abundance and provision (Numbers 24:6, Psalm 92:12, Ezekiel 31:3)

A symbol of security and stability (Song of Solomon 1:17; 8:9; Zechariah 11:2)

The choice wood for building, trading and currency (referenced by several verses in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra 3, Jeremiah 22, Ezekiel 17)

Mentioned by Solomon in his proverbs and sacred writings (1 Kings 4:34)

There are several uses of cedarwood oil. In the cleansing of the Leper... The oil extracted from the cedars of Lebanon was used to embalm the ancient Pharaohs of Egypt and modern scientists have demonstrated the antioxidant properties of the cedarwood oil. (6)

4. CYPRESS

Mostly mentioned as a companion to cedar, cypress is celebrated in the Scripture as a symbol of strength and security. One Bible dictionaries states this about Cypress (Hebrew word tizah): “The Hebrew word is found only in (Isaiah 44:14) We are quite unable to assign any definite rendering to it. The true cypress is a native of the Taurus. The Hebrew word points to some tree with a hard grain, and this is all that can be positively said of it.” (7) Most modern Bible translations, however, lists cypress several times as:



The choice wood for building, trading and currency (referenced by several verses in 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah 41)

A symbol of dowry and symbol of security & stability (Isaiah 44:14)

A symbol of prosperity (Isaiah 60:13, Hosea 14:8, Zechariah 11:2)

The choice wood for weaponry (Nahum 2:3)

Cypress is the chosen translation likely due to the Mediterranean cypress (Cupressus sempervirens), an evergreen from which we derive an essential healing oil. Known simply as cypress oil, it is comprised largely of pinene and limonene and is an effective antibacterial essential healing oil. (8) Whether this is the tree spoken of or anyone burned it for its fragrant release of oil remains to be seen.

5. FRANKINCENSE

If you know me at all, you know this is one of favorite oils because of all the research support its used as a natural healer. And if you know the Christmas story, you already know at least one place where frankincense is mentioned in the Bible. Elsewhere, in Exodus 30:34 and Revelation 18:13, frankincense is mentioned as part of incense for a priestly rite and as indication of wealth and prosperity in spice trade. The Bible lists frankincense as:



A part of ceremonial offerings (Referenced several times in Leviticus 2, 5, 6, 24; Numbers 5, 1 Chronicles 9, Nehemiah 13)

A holy ceremonial perfume (Exodus 30:34)

A perfume (Song of Solomon 3:6; 4:6)

A precious commodity – potential currency (Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20; Revelations 18:13)

The gifts of the Magi to the Christ child (Matthew 2:11)

As a healing remedy, frankincense oil is not only antimicrobial but also an immunostimulant. (9) Could God have been protecting His priests (and Son!) through the use of frankincense?



6. GALBANUM

One of the more unfamiliar of the oils, galbanum was listed in the recipe for incense to be used in the heart of the temple. We don’t know the exact species referred to, but we know it was a gum that likely came from a plant in the Ferula family. (10) The Bible lists galbanum as:

A holy ceremonial perfume (Exodus 30:34)

Today, Ferula gummosa is collected and sold as galbanum. It has exhibited antimicrobial effects and potential for use in oral health. (11)

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7. HYSSOP

The modern hyssop, Hyssopus officinalis, has been used for antifungal, antibacterial, larvicidal and insect biting deterrent activities. (12) However, according to the International Bible Encyclopedia, this hyssop is not native to the area of Palestine and is not likely to be the oil mentioned throughout the Bible for cleansing and rituals. (13) The Bible lists hyssop as:



A part of ritual cleansing and ceremonial offerings (Referenced several times in Exodus 12; Leviticus 14; Numbers 19; Psalm 51; Hebrews 9)

The sponge that soaked up the sour wine that was given to Jesus on the cross (John 19:29)

Mentioned by Solomon in his proverbs and sacred writings (1 Kings 4:34)

While H. officinalis does seem to accomplish similar purposes, I personally find it more interesting that the strongest contenders for actual hyssop would be an even closer fit for such purposes: thyme and marjoram.

8. MYRRH

With well documented use throughout the ages, myrrh is easy to identify and enjoy. It by far, the most decorated oil in the Bible being listed as:



A precious commodity – potential currency (Genesis 37:25)

Anointing oil (Exodus 30:23)

An ointment (Song of Solomon 5:5)

A perfume (Psalm 45:8, Proverbs 7:17, Song of Solomon 1:13, 4:14, 5:13)

An incense (Song of Solomon 3:6; 4:6)

A with mixed edible spices to be eaten (Song of Solomon 5:1)

The gifts of the Magi to the Christ child (Matthew 2:11)

Mixed with wine and given to Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:23)

Burial preparations Nicodemus used for Jesus’ in the tomb (John 19:39)

Unlike other products from trees, it isn’t the wood that is used but the resin that comes from it. Once exposed to air, it hardens and can be powdered, used as-is, or now, distilled for a healing oil. Interestingly, myrrh and frankincense essential healing oils have a synergistic effect when combined, each improving the others’ antimicrobial benefits. (14)

9. MYRTLE

Myrtle isn’t mentioned frequently, but its presence indicates growth and abundance. It likely refers to the Myrtus communis plant, which is grown around Jerusalem to this day. (15) The Bible lists myrtle as:



The choice wood for building ceremonial booths (Nehemiah 8:15)

A symbol of provision (Isaiah 41:19; 55:13)

A symbol of protection (Zechariah 1:8, 10-11)

Myrtle is a low growing plant with flowers that produce an intense, lovely aroma. This is said to be the meaning of Esther’s Hebrew name – and she would have likely enjoyed her namesake as a perfume in the king’s palace! Today, the essential healing oil specifically has undergone a fair amount of research, revealing itself as antimicrobial and an antioxidant, among other benefits. (16)

10. ONYCHA

Perhaps the most obscure on the list, onycha was mentioned in the holy anointing oil “recipe” and nowhere else. While some sources claim onycha is the resin of the Styrax benzoin tree, there is little to substantiate the claim. The more commonly accepted view is that it refers to the shell of a mussel, which would have been scraped or powdered and burned. (17) Still others attribute it to balsam or laudanum, a fragrant flowering plant. (18) The Bible lists onycha as:



A holy ceremonial perfume (Exodus 30:34)

Both Styrax benzoin and Cistus labdanum are developed into essential healing oils now and can be added to blends and diffused. Neither have been researched thoroughly, though labdanum seems to have good antioxidant capabilities. (19)

11. ROSE OF SHARON

A rose may not simply be a rose in this case, as the Rose of Sharon is another disputed for its identity. Usually referred to in a metaphorical sense, it could actually refer to any flower that grows well in unfavorable circumstances. (20) It has been said that the “Rose of Sharon” first appeared in the 1611 King James Version of the Bible. The Bible lists Rose of Sharon as:



A reference to the “Beloved” (Song of Solomon 2:1)

Contenders include a crocus, tulip, or lily, while there are some who contend that it is the Rock Rose, Cistus ladanifer, which is very closely related to labdanum. Without a clear connection and no Biblical “recipe” to indicate ancient use, we are left to imagine the potential of this beautiful, fragrant life in the midst of harsh, thorny crags.

12. SPIKENARD

First introduced in the Old Testament, spikenard is probably most well known as one of the expensive perfumes that the woman anointed Jesus with in Bethany. Spikenard – Nardostachys jatamansi – was highly prized as a perfume and very precious. It’s still used in some beauty treatments to this day. (21) The Bible lists spikenard as:



A royal fragrant aroma A symbol (Song of Solomon 1:2)

A prized, desired plant (Song of Solomon 4:13-14)

An costly ointment/perfume used to anoint Christ (Mark 14:3; John 12:3)

Although there isn’t much available yet on the benefits of spikenard (beyond perfumery) as an essential healing oil, an isolated compound has shown promising effects as an anti-inflammatory. (22)

ANOINTING OF HEALING OILS OF THE BIBLE FOR MODERN TIMES

“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:14) While not all healing oils of the Bible are identifiable, available, or used now as they were, then, the study of ancient botanical preparations is fascinating. When we see threads of benefit – antimicrobials as anointing or temple oils, for example, keeping the population healthy – we begin to deepen our understanding of creation and the order that God set into place. The anointing oil, for example, contains fragrant ingredients that would contain at least some of the volatile (essential) healing oils of the Bible no matter how it was produced. “Then the Lord said to Moses, “Take the following fine spices:

500 shekels of liquid myrrh [about 6g]

Half as much of fragrant cinnamon [about 3g]

250 shekels of fragrant calamus [about 3 kg]

500 shekels of cassia [about 6g]

And a hin of olive oil [about 5 quarts]

“Make these into a sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be the sacred anointing oil. Then use it to anoint the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant law, the table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the basin with its stand. You shall consecrate them so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy.” (Exodus 30:22-29) For your own fragrant, daily anointing, oil, combine these essential healing oils of the Bible and carrier oil. The antimicrobial and immune effects, fragrance, and connection to sacred rituals of long ago make a perfect combination to carry you through your day healthy and at peace.

1 tbsp olive oil (or other liquid carrier)

2 drops myrrh

2 drops cinnamon (for the cinnamon and cassia)

2 drops sweet orange (for the sweet reed calamus)

1 drop frankincense (for good measure!)

Diffuse these healing oils of the Bible periodically or apply topically in sparing amounts when praying over people.