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## The “Messianic” Anointing of Jesus (Mark 14:3–9)

*Santiago Guijarro and Ana Rodríguez*

### Abstract

Two peculiar elements of the Markan account of the anointing of Jesus in Bethany—the anointing of the head and the mandate to remember—suggest that the evangelist has transformed this memory into a rite by which Jesus is anointed as Messiah. This new ritual redefines the traditional rite of royal anointing to give new significance to the messianic character of Jesus. The mandate to remember the woman’s gesture and the critical moment in which Mark has placed the scene reveal that this new understanding of what it means to be the Messiah is key to the true identity of Jesus and of his followers.

*Key Words: Markan Christology, Messianism, Anointing, Ritual, Memory, Identity*

The Markan account of the passion begins with a triptych whose central scene is the anointing of Jesus in Bethany (Mark 14:3–9). At the outset of the decisive and dramatic events at the end of Jesus’ life, the narrator expressly directs the reader’s attention to a simple act on the part of a woman which happens in the interior of a house. The relevance of the event is underlined emphatically by the solemn declaration of Jesus, which demands that the actions of this woman be remembered wherever the gospel is announced. This is a mandate which gives to the scene a unique status in Mark’s Gospel. There is no other episode in the life of Jesus in which an exhortation to remember appears so explicitly. Nonetheless, it is not easy to understand exactly why an act such as this should be recounted time and again in the proclamation of the good news. The mandate to remember what the woman did for Jesus is an invitation to discover the message hidden in her gesture.

Likely for this very reason, the scene in Bethany has awakened considerable interest among scholars. Its origin and composition have been amply discussed (Coakley;

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Bultmann: 114–119; Breytenbach; Dibelius: 60–72; Elliot; Holst; Legaut; Malzoni), and its message set in relief, usually in terms of the values of discipleship which the anonymous woman ostensibly incarnates or the way in which she becomes a model for those who would receive the gospel (Graham: 153; Grassi: 11–13; Miller: 128–144; Malbon: 39–40; van Iersel: 418; Navarro: 101–13; Swartley: 20). But the different approaches have been unable to clarify convincingly the significance and the symbolic implication of the woman's act (the anointing of Jesus' head), which differs from that described in the parallel versions in Luke 7:36–50 and John 12:1–8 (the anointing of Jesus' feet). Neither have the conventional readings of the episode clarified sufficiently the role of the solemn "mandate to remember" (Mark 14:9), found only in Mark and in Matthew. Is this merely the redactor's attempt to reinforce the sense of the passage, or do we have here an important datum for the interpretation of the Gospel?

The unprecedented character of this mandate reveals that, from the point of view of the evangelist, this episode was important for the memory of the group or groups for whom the account was intended. Now the fact that the exhortation to remember is found only in the Gospel of Mark (and the Gospel of Matthew, which depends on Mark) implies the possibility that the author of the Markan narrative has modified a story received in the tradition by giving it a more precise orientation. For this reason, before exploring the significance and implication of this mandate in more detail, it will be necessary to specify whether, in fact, it is a redactional modification, and to clarify the relationship of this mandate to the anointing of the head, which is the other characteristic element of the Markan account.

### The Markan Version of Jesus' Anointing (Mark 14:3–9)

The four evangelists each include a scene in which Jesus is anointed by a woman during a meal, but they tell the story very differently (Mark 14:3–9; Matt 26:6–13; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8). The four versions agree occasionally in the details of the story, but, at the same time, they show marked differences, including the transposition of some of the story's more significant elements. An analysis of these similarities and differences suggests that the Matthean version depends on that of Mark, but it also re-

veals that the other three cannot be explained by means of a literary relationship of dependence (Holst: 433–36; contra: Dundenberg). Thus, in order to explain these similarities and differences, we will have to keep in mind the process of transmission of this anecdote, without excluding the possibility that its oral performances could have coexisted with the written versions.

Our main purpose in this article is to clarify the origin and the meaning of the two most characteristic features of the Markan account: the anointing of the head and the mandate to remember. But to do it we need also to have an idea of how the tradition was passed on. We suggest that the most probable hypothesis is the one that explains the independent accounts in Mark, Luke and John on the basis of a single anecdote which, in the course of oral transmission, was amplified in two different ways, resulting in the two versions which can be identified underlying the three accounts: one transmitted by Luke, and the other recalled by Mark and John (Mack: 89–104; Lücking: 73–75).

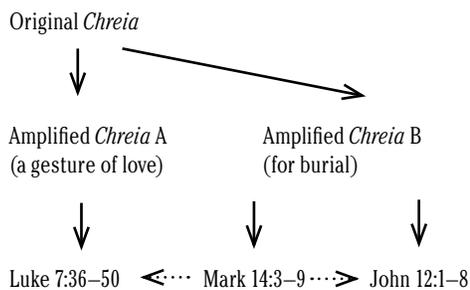
The original anecdote may have contained these three basic elements:

- A woman anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume in the course of a meal;
- This action provoked shock or surprise among the guests.
- Jesus responded to the reaction of the guests by approving the woman's act.

The discomfort with this *chreia*, in which Jesus seems to accept the woman's inappropriate advance, would have occasioned elaborations of an apologetic sort. One of these, preserved in Luke's version, seems to have identified the woman clearly as a "sinner," interpreting her gesture as an act of repentance and Jesus' approval as an act of pardon or forgiveness. The other, preserved by Mark and John, is centered on the waste of pouring out such expensive or valuable perfume, interpreting the gesture of the woman as an anticipation of the anointing of Jesus' body for burial (Miquel: 308–29). Most likely it was these two amplified versions of the *chreia* that circulated in the oral tradition. Luke, although he knew Mark's version, chose the other, which he found more appropriate to his interests.

Thus the history of the tradition can be represented with the graph at the top of the following page (with the dotted arrows representing not dependency but the probability that Luke and John also knew the Markan version).

## Guijarro & Rodríguez, "The 'Messianic' Anointing of Jesus: Mark 14:3–9"



According to this reconstruction, the Markan version can be considered a re-elaboration of the amplified *chreia* in which the gesture of the woman was interpreted in relation to the typical funeral rites. The inconsistency between the act of the woman, which affects only one part of Jesus' body (the head or the feet), and its interpretation, which refers to its entirety (anointing his body for burial), reveals that this interpretation, which Mark and John share, is a development of the original anecdote (Dibelius: 66; Bultmann: 96–97). At the same time, this elaboration reflects an argument that is alien to the original *chreia* insofar as it introduces a typical rabbinic discussion concerning the precedence of the "works of love" over alms (Jeremias). This development leaves the woman's gesture in the background, stressing instead its significance for the impending burial of Jesus.

Given this reconstruction of the history of the tradition, we must consider now whether the two features characteristic of the Markan version of the scene were actually introduced by the evangelist. We consider, first, the peculiar description of the woman's act, the pouring of the perfume over the head of Jesus.

This is an arresting feature, given that in Luke as also in John the woman anoints Jesus' feet instead. The coincidence of Luke and John in this matter shows that in the two amplified *chreias*, as also in the original, the gesture of the woman consisted in anointing the feet of Jesus. Although it is not impossible that John may have known the Lukan version of this episode, it is not likely that he would have recalled it only in this detail. It is much more plausible that his version of the scene reproduces the second amplified *chreia*, namely, the one which related the anointing with the burial of Jesus, which is the same elaboration that Mark appears to have known. Accordingly, if we compare how Mark and John describe the action of the woman, we will be able to identify more easily the various modifications which each has introduced, especially if we compare both versions with the parallel (and presumably

Luke 7:37–38	John 12:3	Mark 14:3
a woman... sinner... alabaster jar of ointment...	<i>Mary</i> took a <i>pound</i> of costly ointment made of pure nard,	A woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of pure nard <i>and she broke open the jar, and poured the ointment over his head</i>
began to bathe his feet with her tears and she dried them with her hair, and she kissed his feet and she anointed them with the ointment...	anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair	

**Table 1: The Two Versions Compared**

independent) version of Luke (see Table 1).

If Mark and John knew a version of the *chreia* different from the one that Luke seems to have used, then their various agreements with Luke, when they do not agree with each other, may reveal the formulation of the original *chreia*. By contrast, the points at which one of them diverges from the other, when the other agrees with Luke, serve to identify the modifications which each one has introduced. In the above synopsis, these modifications appear in italics. In the Markan story, in addition to the change already mentioned of the specific part of Jesus' body that is anointed by the woman (the head instead of the feet), we notice also the detail that the woman breaks the alabaster flask which contains the perfume.

Having thus clarified the origin of the first detail proper to the Markan account, we turn now to consider whether the mandate to remember the woman's action is also the work of the evangelist. The fact that it is found only in Mark and in Matthew and the presence here of vocabulary which is typically Markan (*kerusso, euaggelion*), suggests that this may indeed be the case. But what speaks most clearly in this regard is the distance that exists, from the perspective of the narrative, between the mandate (Mark 14:9) and the preceding verses. As M. Fander has shown (1992: 424), the preceding scene (Mark 14:2–8) exhibits the traits of a well-known literary form: it is a prophetic sign (*ot*) by which is realized in part something which God will realize more fully in the future. The conclusion to this scene, introduced as it is by the solemn formula *amen lego hymin*, does not actually belong to the form and for this reason should be considered an addition, at least from the perspective of the literary genre (Neiryneck: 161; Gnlika: 260). Narrative analysis suggests

the same conclusion, insofar as Jesus' words are superimposed on the preceding discourse as a para-text which has the effect of interpreting the sense of the text to which it has been added. In fact, the inclusion of the verb in the future tense (*lalethesetai*) and the reference to the spreading of the gospel throughout the whole world (*eis holon ton kosmon*) effectively situate the account vis-à-vis the subsequent development after Jesus' death.

Thus we can conclude with a high degree of probability that both the change of the anointing from the feet to the head and the mandate to remember were introduced by the author of the Gospel of Mark, who shows in this way a definite decision to reformulate the amplified *chreia* received in the oral tradition. The elements that stand out, in Mark, emphasize in many ways the symbolic importance of the scene, especially in relation to the identity of Jesus:

- By situating the scene at the beginning of the Passion account, the evangelist underlines the episode's relation to Jesus' death.
- By shifting the anointing to the head, he gives new significance to the woman's action.
- By adding a mandate to remember, the redactor makes of the final saying of Jesus the episode's interpretive key.

By these modifications, Mark intended to make the woman's gesture both more precise and more recognizable. Quite likely, Mark has her pour the perfume over Jesus' head to evoke a gesture that was well-known to his audience. The anointing of feet finds hardly a significant parallel in Jewish literature, but the same cannot be said of the anointing of the head. In the Scriptures of Israel this act was closely related to the anointing of the king. Mark does not use the word *alepho*, but he does describe the act of anointing, which consisted of pouring perfumed oil over the head of the future king.

This interpretation of the woman's gesture against the background of the messianic ritual is not the majority view, although it has been proposed with good arguments by several scholars (Fander 1990: 120–34; Lücking: 110–11; Sawicki: 149–259). Others have entertained the possibility, but find the fact that the anointing is performed by a woman, and not a priest, a serious difficulty (Fander 1992: 427). Nonetheless, the ritual character of the act, reinforced by Jesus' mandate to remember what the woman does, invites us to consider this possibility more seriously. The modifications Mark introduced give the account an ambiguity which is lacking in the versions in Luke and John. The clear allusion

to the royal anointing, in particular, produced a shift in the significance of the gesture, even before it was interpreted by Jesus. This symbolic opening situated the woman's act within a new horizon (Hearon: 112), inviting the conclusion that, by means of this modification, Mark has intended to give the woman's action a new meaning.

As it turns out, the two details proper to the Markan version of the scene—the anointing of the head and the mandate to remember—are key to an adequate understanding of this meaning. For this reason, before determining the function of the episode within Mark's narrative, it is necessary to consider more precisely the intention of the mandate to remember and the significance of the anointing of the head.

### The Account of the Anointing in the Memory of the Group

The mandate to remember included in this scene ties the episode in Bethany with the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world (Mark 14:9). In this way, a concrete relation is established between an event in the ministry of Jesus and an activity of his disciples after Easter (Maunder: 80). The exemplary character of the woman's act is likewise underlined most clearly. Granted, the evangelist describes the woman in terms of the values of discipleship, by contrast with Judas, and transforms her in this way into a model for the groups of followers to whom he addressed his account. But he also shows a special concern that this event should not be forgotten. As we have suggested, this relationship between exemplarity and memory is unique in the Gospel of Mark. For the evangelist it was important that the account remain a living memory, both to recreate the identity of the community and to remind it of its mission.

Now, to understand this scene adequately as a significant memory of the group or groups of disciples to whom the Gospel of Mark was addressed, it is necessary to articulate the function memory plays in groups that find themselves in similar situations. This seems a possible and even promising discussion because the passage offers several indications that allow us to situate it within a rather precise theoretical frame.

- The oral context in which this memory was transmitted and in which the Gospel was composed lends to it a character related to the various practices of memory.
- The appearance of the word *mnemosynon* transforms the woman's act into a fundamental element of the group's

memory.

- The ritual character of the gesture of the anointing makes this a memory more likely to be remembered.

These references serve, effectively, to situate the mandate to remember within the framework of social memory, the study of which has attempted to articulate the internal structure of collective memories, the ways in which these are transmitted, the role of cultural bias in the selection of images of the past, and the way in which these memories serve to configure and nourish group identity (Halbwachs; Conner-ton; Kirk; Fentress-Wickham; Olick-Robbins).

In his studies concerning the role of memory in societies of the ancient world, J. Assmann has elaborated a model that distinguishes between collective memory and cultural memory. The latter can be defined as "a body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assmann: 132). Cultural memory is the result of a long process in which foundational memories are interpreted and expressed in different ways (Kirk: 5). This type of memory is elaborated over a lengthy period of time during which the knowledge shared is crystallized in accounts, symbols, rituals, or monuments that, by transmitting it and actualizing it, give to the group a sense of stability and strength.

At the time when the Gospels were written, a "Christian" cultural memory did not yet exist. In fact, the Gospels themselves embody an initial phase in the formation of a collective memory, for in them the memories about Jesus were selected, transmitted and elaborated in different contexts (Mendels 2004: 33; Kirk-Thatcher: 34). But this process itself was inscribed within a powerful cultural memory: the cultural memory of Israel, which is present, inescapably, in the background of the memories evoked and, likewise, in their elaboration. In this way, the identity the groups of disciples were acquiring is set within a complex of values and identities whose framework is the cultural memory of Israel, to which these groups established simultaneously a relationship of continuity and of rupture.

As a group emerging in the midst of a society with a strong shared memory, part of the original formative process of the groups of Jesus followers was to assume that memory and to reformulate it in conformity with their new experience. This process occurred in conflict with other interpretations and appropriations of the same common memory. After the death of Jesus, in particular, his followers began to preserve

their past, to create their own traditions, and, in effect, to forge a collective memory distinct from that of other groups and from society at large. If it was to be comprehensible, though, it was still necessary that this new memory fit plausibly within the frame of the cultural memory of Israel.

On the other hand, in the ancient world, the recollection of "the beginnings" was almost always sacralized or ritualized. After all, given its strong relation with group identity, ritual is an ideal instrument for the transmission of the significant past for a group (Mendels 2007: 143–67). This was often realized by means of the sort of ceremonies that united word and deed in order to preserve the elements that sponsored the group's identity. The key events of the past were always remembered in a ritual context. In this way, the past did not remain merely cognitive; rather it acquired a performative character and an exemplary importance. By transmitting this past in commemorative activities, memory was transformed into action and acquired the power to legitimate the significance and the function of the group in the present (Poole: 162).

The relationship of collective memory and cultural memory, and the function each serves in the construction of group identity, provide a framework within which several aspects of the scene of anointing can be better understood. It is a story in which the interest in memory is explicitly underlined. At the same time, the scene refers to mnemotechnical practices related to a ritual action by which a normative behavior is proposed for the group. The combination of these elements is significant because, as we have seen, memory tied to a rite is a powerful means to define and preserve group identity.

We suggest that the anointing scene recalls an anecdote in the life of Jesus which was carefully re-elaborated in order to underline the ritual character of the woman's action. This memory was advanced as a fundamental part of the memory of the group of disciples to whom the Gospel of Mark was addressed. This group memory, in turn, was defined against the background of the cultural memory of Israel, in which the rite of royal anointing played an important role. We also suggest that the account presupposes an audience sufficiently attuned to this memory so as to recognize the rite of the anointing of the king without need of more explicit indication. In fact, the rhetorical organization of the narrative around this element creates a density without which the scene becomes abstract or incomplete (Le Donne: 164). The allusion to a well-known rite, with enormous symbolic

freight, situates this scene against an evocative backdrop. The way in which this is done, however, reflects unmistakable distance from the ancient rite (Fander 1990: 130–34; Fander 1992: 423–27).

### The Ritual Character of the Account and Its Relationship to the Cultural Memory of Israel

At the beginning of the scene, Jesus is reclining at table in the house of Simon the Leper. Without a word, a woman abruptly interrupts proceedings with an ambiguous gesture. Norms of hospitality included washing the feet of the invited guest as a sign of welcome (Plato, *Symp.* 175a; Plutarch, *De Mul. Virt.* 242e–263c; Curtius Rufus, *Hist. Alex.* 8.9.27; B. Malina & R. Rohrbaugh: 223; J. González Echegaray: 201–04), but this is not what the woman does. The anointing of the head is also attested as a gesture of hospitality, but the examples known to us show that the gesture tended to be performed by the owner of the house, and with oil, not perfume (Luke 7:46; Ps 22:5). The woman's gesture, at least as Mark relates it, squares with neither practice.

In fact, the way in which the narrative develops in Mark does not imply that hospitality is present in the immediate context in any other way either, by contrast with the Lukan parallel where such is clearly implied. This gives to the scene in Mark a certain ambiguity; its meaning is not immediately clear. For this reason, it seems reasonable to suggest that it may be evoking the less than everyday ritual of royal anointing. This rite belonged to the cultural memory of Israel and it is well attested in the Ancient Near East (Kutsch). But to establish this relationship, namely, that the anointing of the head be understood as a direct reference to royal anointing, we will need to explore in more detail the parallels between the woman's action and the royal ritual.

The passages in the Scriptures of Israel which describe the ritual of anointing speak of a sacred act which takes place at the enthronement of the king (1 Kgs 1:32–48; 2 Kgs 11:12–20). On the basis of the texts that give some indication of location, officiating figures, gestures and/or effects (1 Sam 9:16; 10:1; 2 Sam 16:13; 1 Kgs 1:39; 2 Kgs 9:3, 6; 11:12) we can define the rite as one of status transformation by which the anointed would acquire publicly a new social role (McVann: 335–41). The change is symbolized by the act of pouring perfumed oil over the head of the future king. By means of this rite, the new king

is invested with a power that comes from God. From this point on, he can be called “the Anointed One of Yahweh” (1 Sam 24:7; 26:16; 2 Sam 1:14,16; 19:22; Lam 4:20). He answers directly to God and on this basis receives the charge of governance.

With the decline of the monarchy, this rite was no longer practiced; but it would seem that interest in the figure of the Anointed remained a live concern throughout the whole period of the second temple, becoming increasingly popular at the beginning of the second half of the second century BCE (Horbury: 406–19). The end of the Hasmonean dynasty and the Roman invasion in the year 68 BCE, in particular, created a climate in which the hope of a Messiah who would occupy the throne of David acquired renewed strength. This desire is voiced in the Psalms of Solomon (17:32; 18:5, 7) where it is hoped that Yahweh will raise his Anointed to liberate the people. Various other writings of this period likewise reintroduce this figure (1 Enoch 48:8–10; 2 Bar 29:3; 30:1; 4 Ezra 12:32; 4Q BendPatr) thus showing that the symbolism associated with the Davidic Messiah endured from the first century BCE through the first century CE and played an active role in the Jewish uprisings before and after the year 70 CE (Collins: 199–204). Although the figure of the Messiah was not conceived always in Davidic categories, the complex of ideas surrounding the traditions of the monarchy was present in the various messianic images and seems to have given them a certain unity (Horbury: 423–32). It is clear that the majority of Judeans in the first century who conceived of a Messiah in priestly categories or with eschatological overtones, including those belonging to marginal groups, thought of a Davidic figure when they used the title of “Anointed.” This is also the consistent indication of the Psalter, where the term *anointed* refers explicitly to the king: LXX Ps 2:2–6; 17:50–51; 44:8; 88:21; 131:10.17.

Both the frequency with which these texts refer to the ritual of royal anointing and the centrality of the image of the Messiah-king in later literature suggest that this ritual belonged to the cultural memory of Israel and was part of its symbolic heritage in the first century CE. This is indicated all the more by the lengthy discussion in the Babylonian Talmud concerning the specific composition and use of the oil of anointing (bKer 5a–6a; Epstein: 31–38). This discussion contains various *baraitot* that hand on oral traditions from the period of the *tannaim*, themselves very close in time to the composition of the Gospel of Mark. The specific details

of this discussion allude to aspects which appear also in the Markan story of the anointing. The composition of the oil, for instance, is described on the basis of various aromatic ointments including myrrh (5a), among others. Almost all the discussion focuses on the anointing of kings (5b), although the anointing of the Tabernacle and the High Priest is also mentioned. There is also an interesting discussion concerning the order in which the central acts of the ritual should be performed: the pouring of the oil over the head and the anointing of the forehead (6a). The Markan account of the anointing accords well with the ritual of royal anointing presupposed in this discussion: the use of perfume, the close connection of the rite with the enthronement of the king, and the description of the act of pouring perfume over the head as fundamental to the rite.

We can presume that the audience of the Gospel of Mark might have been sensitive to these reverberations; but if the woman's gesture reproduces the rite of royal anointing, it does so in a way so radically new that the ancient rite is also completely redefined.

### The Rite of the New Messianic Anointing of Jesus

Read against the background of the cultural memory of Israel, the scene as narrated by Mark is at one and the same time an evocation of the rite of anointing and a completely new interpretation of it. By means of the dissonant elements, in particular, the evangelist has produced a careful redefinition of the messianic character of Jesus. The effect is a process of appropriation and reinterpretation of the cultural memory of Israel, the point being to underline a fundamental aspect of the identity of Jesus and his disciples.

Both the common elements and the radical novelty of the woman's gesture can be observed by comparing the ancient ritual of royal anointing with the scene at Bethany (see Table 2).

In the new ritual, the spatial location has been changed, indicating in this way a polemical attitude toward the Temple. In this regard it should also be noted that the scene is closely related to other Markan episodes in which Jesus questions the Temple's validity even more explicitly (Mark 11:15–17) and challenges the teaching of the scribes concerning the expected Messiah (Mark 12:35–37). Much the same might be said of the scenes of betrayal and decep-

tion (Mark 14:1–2, 10–11) between which the anointing in Bethany is interpolated. By contrast, the new rite occurs in a distant and unofficial place—the interior of a house—which becomes in this way an adequate space to reveal the new messianic identity of Jesus.

In the Markan story there is a second change that reflects an inversion of social and religious roles. The celebrant of the rite is not a prophet but a woman, enacting a function

	ANCIENT ACCOUNTS OF ROYAL ANOINTING	ANOINTING AT BETHANY
Location	House of Jesse (David: 1 Sam 16:13). Sanctuary of Gihon (Solomon: 1 Kgs 1:33-34). Temple (Jehoash and the kings of Judah beginning with Solomon).	House of Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3)
Officiant	Prophet (Saul and David are anointed by Samuel: 1 Sam 10:1; 16: 13; Jehu is anointed by Elisha: 2 Kgs 9: 3, 6). Priest (Solomon is anointed by Zadok: 1 Kgs 1:39 and Jehoash by Jehoiada: 2 Kgs 11:12).	Anonymous woman (Mark 14:3)
Subject	Candidate for the throne (1 Sam 9:16; 2 Sam 2:4; 5: 3; 2 Kgs 23:30; 2 Kgs 6:3).	Jesus (Mark 14:3)
Rite	Take a special container (1 Sam 16: 13: <i>keras</i> ) which has olive oil with various additives (1 Sam 10: 1; 1 Sam 16: 13; 2 Kgs 9:3.6: <i>elaion</i> ) and pour it over the head of the candidate for the throne.	Break open a jar of perfume and pour it over the head of Jesus (Mark 14:3; <i>alabastron, myron</i> ).
Witnesses	People (1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 2:4; 1 Kgs 1:39; 2 Kgs 11:12).	Guests (Mark 14:4)
Effect	Symbolically, the candidate receives the Spirit of God (1 Sam 16: 13). The effect is charismatic; it bestows new status as leader of the people with political, social and military power (2 Kgs 9:6-9).	New status: Jesus is Messiah by means of his passion and death. (Mark 14:8)

Table 2. Anointings Compared

which, for a woman, would have been all but unthinkable in first-century Judaism. Presented in this way, the new rite stands in direct contrast with the typical values of society and of the dominant religious group. This is, perhaps, the most notable characteristic of the redefinition of the rite of messianic anointing and, in fact, it is occasionally found so radical as to make this interpretation too difficult to accept (Fander 1992: 427).

The surprise the woman's gesture occasions in scholars is reflected in the reaction of the disciples and the other guests. Nonetheless, Jesus' response in her favor is an invitation to consider the meaning of her action more closely and, in particular, to discover its relationship with his own death. For the effect of the ritual action is directed to the body of Jesus. He occupies the center of the symbolic interpretation. In this way what the woman does is turned into an instrument of recognition and legitimation of Jesus.

A new interpretation of the ritual corresponds to this transformation. Here messianic expectation is redefined in a most radical way. The evangelist has placed this episode at the beginning of the passion account to explain by means of a narrative his understanding of the messianic character of Jesus—not by words or abstract concepts, but by redefining an inherited rite.

To be sure, this new definition of the messianic identity of Jesus is not reflected solely in the ruptures or changes perceived in the new rite. In the final verse (Mark 14:9), Jesus' words identify the woman as a model and place her at the heart of the memory of the Markan audience. In this way the meaning of her action is explained. It is not a rite that must be repeated, but rather an action that must be remembered and recounted "in memory of her." The gesture not only discloses the identity of Jesus; it also carries implications for the group of his disciples and for their mission to the world. In other words, the Markan story reflects a high degree of interest in defining not only the identity of Jesus but also that of the group of his followers.

The fact that this mandate to remember appears in Mark 14:3–9 reveals that the scene has a foundational character. The present situation of the community is projected onto a past reference to the person of Jesus; a link is established to be preserved and developed. This suggests that the ritual action of the woman is highly relevant for the identity of the group; that is why it cannot be forgotten. The mandate refers to the proclamation of the gospel in every part of the

world, but the focus is on the woman herself and on her act, which means that those who announce the good news need to remain always in touch with this action and its significance. Her action encapsulates what needs to be proclaimed about Jesus according to Mark: that he is the Messiah not in a triumphal sense but by means of suffering and death. This is the memory of Jesus which must be maintained and proclaimed as good news.

The Markan scene of Jesus' anointing presents a ritual action in which the perceptions, symbols and images that give new significance to the messianic character of Jesus are brought to the fore. At the root of the scene is a traditional rite of Israel radically transformed to express the way in which Mark would affirm that Jesus is Messiah. Mark has modified the traditional *chreia* quite intentionally to demonstrate that Jesus is Messiah, not in power but in suffering, thus encouraging his audience to redefine their own messianic expectations. As we will see, the importance of the episode for Mark's addressees is reflected also by the place it occupies in the literary plot of the Gospel.

### The Messianic Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

The question of Jesus' identity plays a central role in the Gospel of Mark. It is an open question, in fact, which does not find a conclusive answer until its final episode. The emphatic and categorical affirmations about Jesus' identity—the title of Messiah (Mark 1:1) and Son of God (Mark 1:11) in particular—are in this regard only a point of departure for a process of clarification and refinement. To be sure, the narrator assumes these two affirmations initially. But, by the end of the narrative, it will be clear that an adequate understanding of their significance is not easy to come by, neither for the characters in the story nor for the readers of the Gospel, because the way in which Jesus acts and his teaching alike reveal a profound departure from the images these titles traditionally evoke. The uncertainty around the person of Jesus only grows as the narrative progresses, which leaves the reader always more interested in the search that so evidently occupies the characters of the story.

It is true that the two basic affirmations concerning the identity of Jesus that appear in his initial presentation (Mark 1:1–13) are present implicitly throughout the entire narrative. By means of this presentation, the narrator has placed

the reader in an advantageous position with respect to the characters in the story, who know nothing of this initial revelation. In these opening scenes, the affirmation that Jesus is Messiah (Mark 1:1) is subordinated to the heavenly revelation of his identity as Son of God (Mark 1:11). Indeed, it is possible to trace the trajectory of each of these two titles, although the two are closely related, and in this way to discover how the narrator values each one. It is this evaluation that presents a normative point of view by which it is possible to articulate the rhetorical intention of the account and to know the true identity of Jesus.

From the outset, it is apparent that to discover this identity it will be necessary to recognize Jesus as Son of God (Mark 1:11). Subsequently, this title appears at several key points in the Markan narrative (Mark 9:7; 14:62–63; 15:39), but it is also present implicitly in the way in which Jesus acts and in his words (Mark 2:5–7:28). The narrator's point of view concerning this title is always positive, even though in almost every case the revelation involved is veiled (Chronis). The same is not the case with the characterization of Jesus as Messiah, for when this title appears and is applied to Jesus it is necessary to articulate its meaning as precisely as possible. The narrator seems to suggest in this way that an inadequate understanding of this title can lead to an inaccurate vision of Jesus.

In the chapters that narrate the first phase of the public ministry of Jesus (Mark 1:14–8:26), his words and actions raise different questions concerning his identity (Mark 1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:3). His fame precedes him, but nobody knows, precisely, who he is. The suspense which this creates about his person is only heightened by the prohibition to speak about him (Mark 1:25; 3:12; 5:8; 8:30).

The question regarding the identity of Jesus finds its first explicit answer in the opinions of the people and of Herod (Mark 6:14–16). But it is clear that the narrator considers these opinions insufficient and inadequate. For this reason, at the conclusion of the first phase of his public ministry, Jesus himself asks openly about the opinion of the people (Mark 8:27–28) and that of his closest disciples (Mark 8:29–30).

Peter's response, "You are the Anointed," (Mark 8:29) would seem to indicate that the disciples have discovered Jesus' true identity. In effect, this affirmation coincides with the opinion the narrator has expressed at the outset (Mark 1:1). Noticing this agreement, the reader might suspect that Peter and the other disciples have interpreted the ministry

of Jesus correctly, for their point of view now matches that of the narrator. But Jesus' reaction shows immediately that this is also an insufficient answer, for the command of silence refers expressly to his own identity: "he charged them to tell no one about him" (Mark 8:30). The passion prediction and the teaching that follows reveal that Peter's affirmation must also include Jesus' suffering and his death on the cross. Granted, the narrator does not reject his confession; but both Peter and the other disciples are instructed not to speak further about Jesus, at least for the moment, in the hope that the teaching which follows immediately after will help them to understand in what sense it is right to say that Jesus is the Anointed One (Vironda: 143–46).

In the teaching that follows (Mark 8:31–9:1), Jesus' identity is even more effectively linked to his death. As long as the disciples do not understand that suffering and death are an essential part of the Messiah's fate, they will be unable to understand who he is. Even though Jesus speaks in all clarity (Mark 8:38) and the prediction of his passion is subsequently repeated twice more (Mark 9:30–32; 10:32–34), the reaction of the disciples reveals repeatedly their inability to understand (Mark 9:35; 10:37). Thus, it is no surprise that when the moment of the passion arrives, all abandon him (Mark 14:50) and Peter denies him (Mark 14:66–68). Peter's trajectory, in particular—exemplar, to begin with, for the promptness with which he leaves everything to follow Jesus (Mark 1:14–16; 2:14) but ultimately an inadequate one—invites the reader to reflect on his or her own understanding of the messianic identity of Jesus.

This invitation to the Gospel's audience continues in the following chapters which record the activities of Jesus in Jerusalem. On the road to the holy city and, indeed, at the moment of his entrance, Jesus is acclaimed "Son of David" first by a blind man (Mark 10:47–48) and later by those who accompany him (Mark 11:9–10). This affirmation evokes the earlier response of Peter, but it is now a much broader group that echoes this understanding of the messianic character of Jesus. Further on, in the context of his public teaching in the temple, Jesus himself will make it known that this vision of the Messiah reflects the opinion and the teaching of the Scribes (Mark 12:35). Jesus is quick to distance himself from this sort of dynastic messianism by an argument from Scripture (Mark 12:35–37) and to do so quite radically. So the reader discovers that the title "Son of David" does not express adequately the messianic identity of Jesus, and,

at the same time, that the confession “Jesus is the Messiah” needs to be correctly understood (Marcus 1992:139–45; Vironda: 149–54).

After these critical observations concerning the meaning of the title Messiah, in one of the most notable and surprising scenes in the Markan story, the narrator presents Jesus himself acknowledging his identity as Messiah before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:61–62). When the High Priest asks if he is “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed,” Jesus responds in the affirmative, “I am,” provoking in this way his own condemnation (Mark 14:64). This plain answer, which echoes the revelation of the name of God in the Sinai (Exod 3:6), is followed immediately by an important clarification that announces Jesus’ enthronement at the right hand of God and his future manifestation in glory. In this declaration placed almost at the end of the Markan account, the two titles appearing at the outset in Jesus’ initial presentation come together again. And with this the narrator brings to an end the ambiguity running through the entire Gospel about the identity of Jesus. Now that the plot of the narrative is oriented toward the cross, Jesus can acknowledge openly that he is the Messiah, for in this context that title can be understood only in relationship to his death.

The radical redefinition of the title Messiah which the narrator has been preparing throughout the second part of the public activity of Jesus may explain the surprising change in attitude implied in Jesus’ confession before the High Priest. It might be that Jesus could acknowledge that he was the Messiah only after it had been established that this statement included the necessity of suffering and rejected the dynastic understanding as insufficient. But there remains a certain discontinuity between Jesus’ critical comments, previously, and his acceptance, without reserve, of the title before the Sanhedrin. Nonetheless, the discontinuity disappears when we discover, in the scene at Bethany, that Jesus has been anointed as Messiah with a new rite which embodies in itself the novelty of his messianic character.

As we have already argued, Mark has situated the scene of the anointing quite intentionally at the beginning of the passion. It belongs to a triptych composed by the evangelist (Edwards: 208–09), by which he means to relate the anointing to the conspiracy which sets the passion in motion (Broadhead: 35–36). Now, in the Markan narrative, the passion account plays a very precise role which in ancient rhetoric is known by the name *anagnórisis*. This consisted in the discovery of

the hidden truth concerning one of the characters, usually the protagonist, occasioned by an important change in the course of the action (Aristotle, *Ars Poet.* 1452b). In Mark, the discovery of Jesus’ true identity, his *anagnórisis*, takes place in the passion narrative. In this sense, the climax in the Markan narrative is not actually Peter’s response to Jesus’ question (Mark 8:29), but rather the response of Jesus to the question put to him by the High Priest (Mark 14:61–62). After all, it is in this answer that the true identity of Jesus is finally revealed (Lücking: 108–11).

Attached precisely at the beginning of the passion account, the scene of anointing has, in a certain sense, a “mystagogic” function. It is the key required to adequately understand the subsequent account, for from the start it is clear that the woman who anoints Jesus is the only one to have understood the meaning of what is about to happen to him. That meaning is revealed in what she does, particularly in the act of anointing Jesus’ head, a gesture that, as we have seen, would have evoked the ritual of messianic anointing, though it has also clearly defined it in a new way. In this new understanding of the rite, the anointing no longer has to do with glory and power, but rather with the surrender of life itself (Mark 10:45), which takes Jesus to the tomb. The anticipated anointing announces that Jesus will become Messiah in his death. This understanding of his messianic character recalls the passion predictions with which Jesus had tried to explain to his disciples what it meant to confess him as Messiah. Now that same conviction finds expression not discursively, by means of a pronouncement, but in a ritual that embodies precisely what it means.

The mandate to remember what the woman has done makes most sense when that action is understood as a ritual gesture expressing the true identity of Jesus. The ritual character of the woman’s act makes this memory much more eloquent than mere word or teaching. At the same time, the close connection of this gesture with the revelation of the authentic messianic identity of Jesus explains why it should be remembered wherever the gospel is announced. From the point of view of the narrator, the foundational conviction of the gospel is the confession that Jesus is Messiah (Mark 1:1), but the meaning of this statement can be understood only after the true identity of Jesus is revealed plainly in his passion. The gesture of the woman must be remembered because in it this new identity is expressed as nowhere else.

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