
The Importance of the Balm of Gilead

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*Is there no balm in Gilead,
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no recovery
For the health of the daughter of my people?*

Jeremiah 8:22

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Bible we occasionally read of the “balm of Gilead”. It only appears, specifically, in seven texts, but the texts speak to the balm’s changing value. The “balm of Gilead”, a known but rare perfume, is a medicinal element that appears in specific contexts in the Old Testament. The Hebrew term that is usually understood as “balm” is “*sort*”. The word “balm” is a contracted form of “balsam,” a word derived from the Greek *balsamon*, which was adopted as the representative of the Hebrew words *baal shemen*, meaning “lord” or “chief of oils.”

Balms had several uses in the ancient world. They were harvested in the regions of Israel and Transjordan (Gilead). They flavored mummified meat, perfumed and preserved the bodies of those who had passed, and they were believed to have had healing properties. Archeologists have discovered hundreds of “meat mummies” in ancient Egyptian tombs. Most of them are joints of meat or poultry, prepared as if for eating, then wrapped. Dark residue that covers the bandages looks like the organic balms applied to human and animal mummies. Until now, however, researchers have not known whether those who prepared the mummies intentionally added the balms to the meat. Richard Evershed of the University of Bristol and his

team chemically analyzed the balm on some of these mummified meats. They believe the Egyptians used the balms for preservation and flavor enhancement. Their research appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The tree yielding this medicinal oil was probably the *balsamodendron opobalsamum* according to most botanists, and the *Amyris opobalsamum* of Linnaeus. It is an evergreen, rising to the height of about 14 feet. The oil or resin, exuding through an orifice made in its bark in very small quantities, is esteemed of great value for its supposed medicinal qualities.

There's some discrepancy as to the true geographical and botanical origins of the balm, however. In Jewish history, according to Roman/Jewish historian Josephus, the Queen of Sheba presented what they referred to as 'the root of the balsam' to King Solomon. In Islamic circles, it's described as the 'balsam of Mecca.' Over time, the expression balm of Gilead has come to figuratively signify a kind of universal cure.

Botanists claim that it is impossible to identify the bush with any certainty. It may represent the gum of the *Pistacia lentiscus*, or more probably that of the *balsamodendron opobalsamum*, allied to the *balm of Gilead*, which abounded in Gilead east of the Jordan. The trees resembled fig trees (or grape vines), but were lower, being but 12 to 15 feet high. It is now called the BALM OF GILEAD, or *meccabalsam*, the tree or shrub being indigenous in the mountains around Mecca. Hasselquist says that the exudation from the plant "is of a yellow color, and pellucid. It has a most fragrant smell, which is resinous, balsamic and very agreeable. It is very tenacious or glutinous, sticking to the fingers, and may be drawn into long threads." It was supposed to have healing as well as aromatic qualities.¹

¹ W. Smith, entry for "balm". Smith's Bible Dictionary, 1901.

We can gain an appreciation of its significance by looking at the texts in which references to the balm appears; Genesis 37:25, 43:11, 2 Chronicles 28:15, Jeremiah 8:21-22, Jeremiah 46:11, 51:8, and Ezekiel 27:17. We will suggest that the “balm of Gilead” had spiritual as well medicinal attributes. This particular balm was an element which spanned the Old Testament and held a powerful place in Biblical cultures. It is not mentioned often, but the texts in which it appears reveals the balm’s importance.

Part I: BALM OF GILEAD

The territory of Gilead is located in the Transjordan, a northern territory, immediately West of the Jordan River. According to McKenzie, it was known as a pastureland and was featured in the prophecies of the messianic restoration of Israel (Jeremiah 50:19, Micah 7:14, and Zechariah 10:10). Gilead was not one of the tribes of Israel, therefore its territory was shared among the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh. The geographic name, eventually, became a personal name. This can be seen in the Jephthah account (Judges 11:1). In the days before and during the early kingship, the territory was a point of resistance against the Philistines (Judges 10:7, 13-16, etc.). During the Maccabean period, Judas rescued the Jews in eastern Palestine, including Gilead, and evacuated them to western Palestine.²

Linguists have attempted to develop an etymology of the name “Gilead”. Gilead is explained in the Hebrew Bible as derived from the Hebrew word גִּלְעָד (*gal’êd*), which in turn comes from the words, *gal* ('heap, mound, hill') and *’êd* ('witness, testimony'). If that is the case, Gilead means 'heap [of stones] of testimony'. Such an etymology could be interpreted as meaning Gilead bears witness to vital events of history. There is also an alternative theory that it means 'rocky region'.

² J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce 1965) 311.

The balm of Gilead was celebrated for its medicinal qualities, and was circulated as an article of merchandise by Arab and Phoenician merchants. The shrub so named was highly valued, and was almost peculiar to Palestine.³ Some scholars cite the writings of Josephus, who claims the plant was not native to Israel, but imported from seeds from the Queen of Sheba. Josephus suggests that it was native to Arabia.⁴

Scientists believe that the “Balm of Gilead”, known also as the Judaeian balsam, grew only around the Dead Sea Basin in antiquity and achieved fame by its highly reputed aroma and medical properties, but has been extinct in this area for many centuries. The resin of this crop was sold, by weight, at a price twice that of gold, was the highest price ever paid for an agricultural commodity. This crop was an important source of income for the many rulers of ancient Judea; the farmers' guild that produced the balm of Gilead survived over 1,000 years. Currently, there is interest in a revival based on related plants of similar origin. There is evidence that the balm was known to have been combined with other ingredients to increase its potency, such as licorice and honey (among other ingredients) for solving chest congestion, to oil or lard for bruising, swelling, or damage to the skin. The cure of inflammation seems to be the main purpose of the balm of Gilead. It was and is used also for sunburns or arthritis. McKenzie describes the “balm of Gilead” as an aromatic resin from the Mastix tree, a bushy evergreen, with a main purpose of general healing.⁵ It is believed that the region of Gilead was rich in spices and gums, which had a tremendous commercial impact in the region, particularly with Egypt and Tyre.

³ G.M. Easton. “Entry for balm”. Easton’s Bible Dictionary, 1893.

⁴ W. Cooper, “balm”. *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Tenney, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 487-48.

⁵ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 78.

Part II: JEPHTHAH

The Charismatic Judge, Jephthah, is recorded as being from Gilead. The account of Jephthah appears in Judges 10:6-12:7 and stands as unique among the Judges' accounts. Jephthah is remembered as a "charismatic" Judge, one who received the "Spirit of the Lord", but the account has a conclusion that echoes those of the "minor" Judges, local magistrates who did not seem to have engaged in battles. The name "Jephthah" seems to mean "may God open (the womb)". It appears to be derived from the verb "*patah*" that usually means "open" or "release". Jephthah is known as an illegitimate son of Gilead, the name of the territory from he comes. The real name of his father is lost to history.

Jephthah's account is often overshadowed by the infamous "vow of Jephthah".⁶ Most scholars see this text as probably authentic, but as a throwback to the primitive religion of judge.⁷ R. Boling points out that "Jephthah" is also a town name, with the spelling "iphthah" (Joshua 15:43). The account of Jephthah, with its mention of the Philistines, seems to provide a literary link and introduction to the following Samson narratives.

Jephthah was made a "field commander", a common title in the era. The term "judge", *shopet*, occurs in 11:27 and it the only use of the term in the book. As such, it forms the theological key to the book.⁸ Boling argues that one of the purposes of the Jephthah account is that of "propelling the reader on toward the next focus of attention: Samson".⁹ Building on Boling's argument, we would suggest that not only did the Jephthah account introduce the Samson account, but it prefigures it. Scholars point out that Jephthah is part of the Major and Minor

⁶ J. Roskoski, "Jephthah's Vow: A Corruption of Yahwism in the Era of the Judges," *Bible and Spade* 25.1 (Winter 2012) 23-28.

⁷ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 419.

⁸ R. Boling, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols 3:681

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:682.

Judges, by virtue of his formalized burial notice (Judges 12:7). The Samson account mirrors this format, with a formal burial notice placed after the career of exploits (Judges 16:31

Although Jephthah is not explicitly connected with the famous balm, his development in the Bible seems to mirror, or parallel, the perception of the balm of Gilead. Jephthah was a “bandit chieftain” who accepted leadership “only on condition that he received chieftainship of Gilead”.¹⁰ It is only later in his account that we read of his Charisma (Judges 11:29).

Some scholars have argued that Jephthah is grouped with the ‘minor Judges’ due to a literary purpose. The purpose is a “condensing narrative effect, serving to focus attention on Jephthah for theological evaluation”.¹¹ Building on Boling’s theory, we see the first step in this evaluation occurring in 1 Samuel 12:11, wherein Jephthah, and other Judges, are presented as the foundation for King David. He was a heroic precursor to the King, as David was the King who followed God (v.14). Eventually, Jephthah became a “hero of faith”, in Hebrews 11:32, where he, and other Judges, were foundational to Christ Jesus and whose works were completed and perfected by Jesus.(Hebrews 12:2). Like the name “Gilead” suggests, Jephthah takes the role of a foundational witness to Salvation History.

Overall, the perception of Jephthah was similar to that of the balm, beginning on a mundane and monetary level and developing into a spiritual value. Gilead underwent a similar development. Gilead became a gathering place in the messianic age (Zechariah 10:10). It was a land outside of the tribes of Israel, yet became a key location which proves the Lord’s power and protection for His People. The balm is a tangible, historically verifiable, element that represents how the

¹⁰ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 419.

¹¹ R. Boling, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 3:681.

purposes of the Lord can transform even the most elemental of elements.

Part III: BIBLICAL TEXTS WITH THE ‘BALM OF GILEAD

There are several noteworthy texts which make reference to the “balm of Gilead” which points to its significance and its development as a witness to history.

Genesis 37:25. “As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.”

Most scholars think that the caravan was made up of Midianite merchants. It is interesting to note that the balm from Gilead is mentioned with other valuable commodities. This speaks to its monetary worth along the trade routes. It was a valuable commodity, well before any spiritual value became attached to the balm.

The Ishmaelites, descendants of Abraham through Hagar, were desert nomads “who frequently engaged in transporting from the East to Egypt. The caravan would have passed near Dothan and continued on to the coast”.¹² All of these products from the East were valued in Egypt. Their worth will be indicated in the account of Jacob presenting them to the governor in Egypt (Genesis 43:11). A general term, “spicery” is often used and this is thought to have come from India. It seems to be, a species of resinous gum, called storax, balm—“balm of Gilead,” the juice of the balsam tree, a native of Arabia-Felix, and myrrh—an Arabic gum of a strong, fragrant smell. For these articles there must have been an enormous demand in Egypt as they were constantly used in the process of embalming. Therefore, this

¹² E, Maly, “Genesis”, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy, eds (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1:38.

verse acts as an introduction to the Jacob-Joseph traditions. It also illustrates that Egypt was far ahead of other countries in the processes of embalming and mummification.

Scholars have noted the accuracy of the specification of the commodities that were being brought to the Egyptian market. Such specificity seems to indicate that these commodities were well-known and the demand in Egypt for them was just as well-known. The call for these items has been noted by Herodotus and he suggests that Egypt needed enormous amounts of these drugs for activities such as embalming. The readiness to purchase a slave also suggests a market for such in Egypt.¹³

Genesis 43:11. “Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift—a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds”.

This mention is couched in Jacob’s second journey into Egypt. Jacob brings “the customary gifts for the political rulers”.¹⁴ Skinner suggests that “rarer products, [serve] as a token of homage”.¹⁵ This also shows that Jacob is a shrewd businessman. This echoes the deal Jacob made with Laban (Genesis 30). He knows how to get things done and the things of value that will facilitate his goals. His shrewdness is shown in him specifying “the best” products. This is from the Hebrew ‘*zimrah*’, זִמְרָה, which is understood as “choice products”. This supports Skinner’s argument that this is homage to the powerful ruler. However, “choice” seems to be the better rendering, as this term encompasses the power of the ruler and Jacob’s shrewdness.

¹³ H. Groves, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1861) 345.

¹⁴ E. Maly, “Genesis”, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1:42.

¹⁵ J. Skinner, *Genesis*. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1901), 480.

Sori is mentioned six times in the Bible as a prestigious and well-known medical product. Often translated “balm,” it was a prized product of the Biblical lands, especially the region of Gilead (Genesis 37:25; Jeremiah 8:22). Its importance is reflected by its appearance at the top of a list of medicines and perfumes, as noted, called “the choice produce of the land” (Genesis 43:11). The balm was extracted by making cuts and grooves in the bark, allowing the sap to exude out and harden into droplets called “tears of balm.” These tears were scraped off and either powdered or used to make ointments and oils for medicinal purposes. In addition to its use as a salve or perfume, the balm was thought to have preservative qualities. Hence its appeal for use in embalming among the ancient Egyptians and others obsessed with securing immortality. This knowledge does not seem to have been lost on Jacob.

Overall, there is no doubt that the Biblical text reflects an authentic product, since *sori* also appears in a 14th-century BCE letter from the well-known Amarna archive: “The queen of Ugarit sent a small jug of *sori* as tribute to the queen of Egypt. Much later, in the Roman period, it became a term for the “balsam of Judah,” a perfume shrub. In earlier periods, though, it referred to something else entirely. But herein we see part of the transition, from merchandise to gift, which the balm underwent.

2 Chronicles 28:15. “The men designated by name took the prisoners, and from the plunder they clothed all who were naked. They provided them with clothes and sandals, food and drink, and healing balm. All those who were weak they put on donkeys. So, they took them back to their fellow Israelites at Jericho, the City of Palms, and returned to Samaria.”

The army is now releasing its spoils, both material and human. The caring of the prisoners by, what seems to be, the actions of

“good Samaritans” and seems to be a precursor to Luke 10:34.¹⁶ The commodities seem to “characteristic acts of social justice” (Isaiah 57:7 Ezekiel 18:5-9). Herein we see the beginning of the development of the perception of the balm from strictly merchandise. o help the weak is consistent with many instructions in the Torah, but seems to comply with Proverbs 24:17.¹⁷

Jeremiah 8:21-22. “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?”

This is part of a powerful lament of Jeremiah in which YHWH interrupts to explain the upcoming departure from Jerusalem. A lament is usually inspired by the imminent downfall of a nation or individual. Generally, the speaker laments over catastrophic misfortune and petitions YHWH for assistance and deliverance.¹⁸

It is part of classic mourning of the prophet. Most scholars see this as original to Jeremiah. Despite the clear prophecy of doom, the words show the sympathy and love Jeremiah holds for the people.¹⁹ It should be noted that the fabled balm of Gilead is mentioned as that which could heal the spiritual suffering and state of the people. In this lament, the development of the balm being seen as a spiritual element is complete.

Jeremiah 46:11. “Go up to Gilead and get balm, Virgin Daughter Egypt. But you try many medicines in vain; there is no healing for you.”

¹⁶ R. North, “2 Chronicles” Jerome Biblical Commentary 1:423.

¹⁷ R. Klein. 2 Chronicles: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress 2012) 401.

¹⁸ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 492.

¹⁹ G. Couterier, “Jeremiah”, Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1:311.

Jeremiah is, once again, invoking the powerful image of the balm of Gilead to make his point about the dire situation in Egypt. Egypt is looking to heal her wounds and, apparently, the wounds were so severe that the image of the Gileadite balm was, again, introduced. This is entirely consistent with the works of Herodotus, who wrote that the balm had become a widespread preoccupation in Egypt²⁰

Jeremiah 51:8. “*Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed: howl for her; take balm for her pain, if so, be she may be healed.*”

Jeremiah felt that Babylon was an instrument of the vengeance of YHWH. He warns that the exile will be long so Israel must pray for her and contribute to her welfare.²¹ The spiritual value of the balm is beginning to be seen in bold relief in the words of Jeremiah. Within the catastrophic “oracles against the nations” and in the wake of the destruction of Babylon, the balm is the entity and image which are invoked. The catastrophe is imminent and the exiled Israelites were told to flee quickly.²²

Ezekiel 27:17. “*Judah and Israel traded with you; they exchanged wheat from Minnith and confections, honey, olive oil and balm for your wares.*”

This has been called, by many scholars, a “learned piece of work”. It reveals extremely accurate knowledge of the commerce of the world in his day”.²³ Eichrodt terms this list a “systematic assemblage of material of purely practical interest”. The list of mentioned commodities “supplies [a] geographical

²⁰ Ibid., 1:333.

²¹ Ibid.,1:335.

²² Ibid, 1:335.

²³ W. Eichrodt. *Ezekiel; A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970. 387.

frame for the picture of the merchant city and shows Tyre's importance to the civilization of that day".²⁴

It is generally agreed among scholars that this was a foreboding oracle against Tyre. Tyre was a paragon of commerce and, therefore, power. Oracles were understood as information given from deities to humans, usually about questions or revelations of future events. They give direction for human actions in the present or near future.²⁵

The phrase "oracles of God" appears in various form throughout both Testaments of the Bible. In both Hebrew and Greek, the term seems to be understood as the "word of God". In Hebrew the term used to describe "oracle" is *dabar*, which is a common term for speech or word. However, to the Hebrew mind, the *dabar* was considered a living thing which remained alive until it was completely fulfilled. In Greek the term is rendered *logion* which can connote the word of the Lord as passed down in the Mosaic Law or any Divine utterance of God.

The contrast between the power of the oracle and the grandeur of Tyre gives the pronouncement its striking nature. Doom was to come to one of the most prominent cities known in this part of the world. Tyre was a "mighty commercial power" that dominated the eastern Mediterranean region.²⁶

Tyre's position made it the main "gateway" for trade between the Middle East and the lands that bordered the Mediterranean. The Ezekiel scroll has just listed some of the merchandise imported by Tyre and the areas from which the imports came (verses 12-24). It is in no sense a complete list of the

²⁴ Ibid., 388.

²⁵ R. Weis, "Ezekiel", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:28.

²⁶ A. Tkacik, "Ezekiel", *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1:358.

merchandise that passed through Tyre. Fittingly, Tyre has been likened to a stately ship (verses 3-11).²⁷

As a result, everyone wanted to do business with Tyre, as they were a port city. They had risen among the nations and made their name great, and scholars have attested about all the goods that Tyre had to offer. Heavy trade went through this city, and their economy flourished. For this reason, it would be a shock to many when the Lord caused the city to fall. There would be a great lament over the once great city of Tyre that has now fallen into the hands of the Almighty God. Ezekiel warned that their riches, balm included, and glory would not save them from the wrath of the Lord, and all would be lost in that day. They would meet their end, and be no more when the Lord poured out His full wrath on the city of Tyre.

Throughout the Tyrian oracles, Tyre is depicted as a stately ship in the midst of the sea. In Ezekiel 27, Tyre as the center of the world trade maintained her wealth through her trade and merchandise. Against their public transcript, Ezekiel highlights the center of Judah and the land of Israel in Ezekiel 27:17. In the trading list of Ezekiel 27:12–26a, Ezekiel omits Babylon. Rather, he locates Judah and the land of Israel in the center of the list. According to Mario Liverani's analysis of the trading list, the list reflects King Josiah's period. During the period of King Josiah, the economic status of the kingdom of Judah was developed. By evoking the restoration period by King Josiah, Ezekiel accentuates the reality that the center of the world is not Babylon, but Judah and the land of Israel.

Luke 23:56: “Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.”

Some have thought that the balm of Gilead was among the anointing elements. However, most likely the main ingredient

²⁷ M. Fallon, “Oracles Against the Nations, Ezekiel 25:1-32-32” Prophet-Commentary 55, 120.

was myrrh, which was popular and fulfills the gifts to Jesus by magi at His birth. Myrrh was extremely valuable, due to its scarcity, in the first century, possibly more than gold according to some scholars.

The main reason a dead body was anointed with spices was to control the smell of decomposition. Jews did not practice embalming, and the funeral spices were a way to help minimize unpleasant odors. At the tomb of Lazarus, when Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, Martha objected: “By this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days” (John 11:39). The spices the women brought to Jesus’ tomb were intended to eliminate such an odor and honor the body of Christ.²⁸

Historians have often pointed out that the great Roman general Pompey (106-48 BCE) paraded the Balsam tree through the streets of Rome as spoils of war after his conquest of Judea, and when Vespasian invaded the Holy Land, two battles took place at the Balsam groves of Jericho, with the last one being to prevent the desperate Jews from destroying the precious trees. After the Roman destruction of Judea, groves of Balsam trees provided a rich source of revenue for the Romans. The Roman appropriation of the trees may account for the conspicuous absence of the Gileadite balm in the Gospels.

CONCLUSIONS

Some modern writers have posited the proposition the Jesus is the true balm of Gilead. While this is an extremely spiritual interpretation, the hermeneutics might be forced a bit. Possibly, the strongest voice for this position is from Hope Bollinger, who writes;

“The balm of Gilead has a deeper symbolic purpose in Scripture. God shows Israel that they had turned to a temporary healing

²⁸ J. Fitzmyer, *Luke* (NY: Doubleday, 1985) 2:153.

solution, but they had far deeper spiritual cuts that needed ultimate healing. They needed the true physician, Jesus. . . The Israelites had turned to a temporary solution, and God makes that clear in [Jeremiah 46](#) passage. They had consulted other nations, other gods, and other methods to heal their sin problem. Babylon represented the consequences of that sin, but even after the Babylonian nation crumbled, and Israel returned after 70 years, they still had festering wounds from sin. They still needed an ultimate balm that could heal them. That is where Jesus steps in.

Jesus is considered, by many to be the ultimate physician who binds our wounds and makes us whole. Although we may attempt to turn to temporary solutions and balms, ultimately, we need the true balm of Gilead to heal our souls. While this balm may present a temporary, physical, healing solution, Jesus represents a healing of a deeper, spiritual nature. The balm of Gilead is of a physical, limited nature. Jesus is the “Lion of Judah” (Revelation 5:5) and the “Lamb of God” (John 1:39).

Therefore, the scope of the power of Jesus goes well beyond the famous balm. However, we would suggest that the title “balm of Gilead” should be understood as Jephthah, the Judge of Israel.

Jephthah, like Jesus, came from humble beginnings. However, unlike Jesus, Jephthah was a bastard son of Gilead. Jephthah had a mundane birth, a bastard son of Gilead, unlike Jesus who was always the Son of God. Like the balm, originally a commercial entity which was elevated to a spiritual element, Jephthah went through a similar development. Therefore, it could be argued that Jephthah paralleled the perception of the balm of Gilead.

The balm is not mentioned often in the Bible, but the references act as literary markers which help to guide the narratives. It began as a keystone for Jacob, as it was a significant part of the

exchange with the Egyptian ruler. During the Kingship it was made part of trade actions. The importance of the balm, perhaps, reached a peak with the Prophets wherein it took on spiritual qualities. By its rare occurrences and its significant contexts, the importance of the balm is strongly attested. Therefore, the balm's unique and powerful properties are not shown by a great number of occurrences, but by the use and placement of the references to the balm, which still captures the attention of scientists and scholars.

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