Landas 37:2 (2025) 19–44

THE BRIDE FROM BETHANY[1]

Adonis G. Saclolo

Abstract. This study explores the nuptial motif as a hermeneutical key to interpreting the Gospel of John, emphasizing its theological and narrative significance. One figure that arises in this spousal theme is Mary of Bethany, whose intimate actions and symbolic gestures position her as a representative of the ecclesial bride. The Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as both the Lamb of God and the Bridegroom Messiah reveals a deliberate intertwining of Passover and nuptial imagery, which the anointing at Bethany prefigures. Through detailed exegesis and intertextual analysis—particularly with the Song of Songs and other Old Testament texts with marital symbolisms—the paper demonstrates how Mary's grief, her posture at Jesus' feet, and her use of fragrant nard prefigure the sacrificial death and glorification of Christ. Her role not only anticipates the "hour" of Jesus' Passover but also embodies the bridal community's union with the Messiah in love, death, and resurrection. Thus, the nuptial theme emerges as a vital lens for understanding Johannine theology, revealing the Gospel's vision of restored Edenic intimacy between God and humanity.

Keywords: bridegroom king on the couch; betrothed bride**,** spikenard; hair/tresses**;** feet symbol of the person; fragrance of paradise; Passover hour; Death and Resurrection

[1] This article is an excerpt from the dissertation of the author on *The Passover of the Bridegroom Messiah: A Biblical Theology of the Nuptial Language of Jesus' Passover in the Fourth Gospel*, SThDdiss. (Loyola School of Theology, 2023), 203-231.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Introduction

The Lamb of God and the Bridegroom Messiah are titles that reveal two very important motifs in the Fourth Gospel – the Nuptial and Passover themes. At the onset of the Gospel, the witness of John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29,36). This seems to correspond to one exclusive characteristic of the Fourth Gospel which is the three Passovers that contextualize the ministry and public life of Jesus (Jn 2:13-25; 6:3-14; 13:1; 18:28,39; 19:14). This Passover of Jesus as the paschal lamb is the "hour" that fulfills the Baptizer's words about Jesus the messianic bridegroom who takes the bride community to himself (Jn 3:28-30). The Gospel narrative seems to intentionally adopt a scheme to gradually reveal the Passover of Jesus as the nuptial "hour."[2]

However, the taking of the bride seems to be foreshadowed by the encounters of Jesus with several personages, especially with women (Jn 2:1-11; 4:3-42; 8:1-11; 12:1-11; 20:1-18), as representative figures of the bride community.[3] These meetings and the inherent discourses therein create a gradual trajectory toward the nuptial Passover "hour" when Jesus sleeps on the cross and as a New Adam, brings forth the bride from his opened side (Jn 19:34). Consequently, his resurrection and ascension to the house of the Father (Jn 13:1; 20:17) resemble the bridegroom's duty to prepare the dwelling for the bride and take her there at the appointed time (Jn 14:1-3).

One of these women is Mary of Bethany, a bridal figure who ushers Jesus the Bridegroom Messiah into his nuptial Passover. Mary's anointing sends Jesus off from Bethany to Jerusalem, where Jesus will

[2] Cf. Jocelyn McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God: Marriage in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104.

[3] Cf. Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 169-180.

https://publications.lst.edu/

be immolated as the paschal victim with a pleasing odor.[4] The reference to the weight of about a hundred pounds of choice fragrances that are brought during the burial of Jesus (Jn 19:39-40) fulfills what occurred in Bethany days before (Jn 12:3,7). Jesus says that Mary may keep the perfume for the day of his burial (Jn 12:7), indicating that the anointing at Bethany is also a prelude to Jesus' death (Jn 12:7; Mk 14:8). Whereas the anointing pre-announces Jesus' demise and burial, the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house in Bethany manifests the plenitude of Jesus' victory over death.

At the Feet of the Bridegroom

John 11 is about the sickness, death, and raising of Lazarus. Jesus arrives when Lazarus is already in the tomb. Though the story of Lazarus certainly foreshadows the Passover death and resurrection of Jesus, Mary of Bethany's figure gives it a nuptial meaning. The centrality of her character manifests that she represents the bride of the nuptials to come. When Martha meets Jesus and they speak together about Lazarus' passing (Jn 11:20-27), Mary of Bethany appears disinterested and in a state of inactivity as she lingers in her solidarity with death. Mary's sitting inside the house is an explicit expression of her suffering and bitterness. After the exchange with Jesus, Martha goes immediately to Mary and announces: "The Teacher has come and is calling for you" (Jn 11:28). The designation "the teacher" (*ho didaskalos*) is very important because it presents Jesus as a rabbi who speaks with women. Rabbis normally declined to instruct women disciples because it was seen as a disgrace to speak to women publicly (*bBer* 6: 5-6 [43a]),[5] but Jesus took a radically different approach. However, the title "rabbi" was also an affective term and could be used by a woman for her

[4] Cf. Ramón Domínguez Balaguer, "La Eclesiología esponsal en el Evangelio de San Juan: A La Luz del Cantar de Los Cantares," tesis doctoral (Facultad de Teología San Vicente Ferrer: Valencia, 2004), 367, 370.

[5] Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*: *An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, trans. F. H. and C. H. Cave (London: SCM Press, 1969), 360.

https://publications.lst.edu/

husband.[6] This is what Magdalene, another bridal figure, calls Jesus in the resurrection account (Jn 20:16).[7] Thus, Jesus the Bridegroom Messiah is calling Mary through her sister Martha.

The verb "to call" (*phoneo*), means to call either by one's own voice or through another.[8] The call of Jesus is reminiscent of the voice of the bridegroom inviting the bride to awaken from quasi-sleep (Song 5:2). The voice of Jesus and the voice of the bridegroom in the Song are both addressed to a woman who is half awake and lying down. This is reflected in Mary's remaining in the house, half-asleep because of her inconsolable grief. She is seated down, burdened by sorrow. The half-slumbering bride of Song 5:2 also refers to Israel, who is sleeping because God is absent.[9] She is a woman in a fallen state (Song 5:2). However, the bride of the Song, Israel, "is not entirely insensible and awakens when the Lord summons her."[10] Similarly, when Mary hears the voice of Jesus (Jn 11:28), she arises (*egeiro*) quickly and goes to him (Jn 11:29). Mary's rising up quickly (*egeiro*) from sitting and weeping is not merely a physical act, but also an allusion to the resurrection in the Gospel of John.[11]

Moreover, a further aspect of the matrimonial framework is seen in the fact that Mary remains sitting in the house (Jn 11:20) while Martha is with Jesus. This presents her as a "dutiful betrothed/bride, who waits

[6] Cf. Frédéric Manns, *Sinfonia Sponsale nel Vangelo di Giovanni* (Napoli: Chirico, 2018), 211.

[7] Infante sees these parallelisms between the two women that in the Fourth Gospel both carry a nuptial symbolic role. "*La figura di Maria di Betania è in stretto parallelo con quella di Maria di Magdala*."Cf. Renzo Infante, "Maria di Betania e L'Unzione di Gesù: Gv 12: 1-8," *VetC* 37 (2000): 54-55.

[8] Cf. *Strong, s.v.* "φωνέω, ἐμφωνέω," 1: 77.

[9] Cf. James Luther Mays, *Song of Songs* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 54.

[10] Mays, *Song of Songs*, 54.

[11] For the thirteen times that *egeiro* appears in the Fourth Gospel, eight of these refers to the rising from death (John 2:19,20,22; 5:21; 12:1,9,17; 21:14).

https://publications.lst.edu/

until her bridegroom calls her."[12] This is the modesty expected of a woman in the time of Jesus.

> A woman who conversed with everyone in the street could, like the woman who worked at her spinning in the street, be divorced without the payment prescribed in the marriage settlement. It was considered preferable for a woman, and especially an unmarried girl in general, not to go out at all… It is suitable for women to stay indoors and to live in retirement...[13]

When Mary meets Jesus, she immediately throws herself at his feet, just as she does on the day of the anointing (Jn 11:2; 12:3). In the time of Jesus, it was customary for wives to sit at their husbands' feet during suppers (*deipnon*).[14] This gesture portrays Mary as "the picture of the faithful bride."[15] It also evokes images of the bride in the Song of Songs sitting under the apple tree, which symbolizes the bridegroom. "I sat down in his shade with great delight" (Songs 2:3). This is an image of an intimate relationship: "She [the bride] not only looks at the apple tree from afar, but she places herself, figuratively, under his protecting and comforting branches."[16] In Hosea 14:8 (MT 14:7), Israel is dwelling under the shade of God (*yoshbe bezilo*), described with the same words as in Song 2:3 (*bezilo hammadti veyashabti*), where both "sitting" and "shade" are present.

Furthermore, this action is also associated with the scene in the Book of Ruth, where Boaz is asked to take the responsibility of a kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 1:21; 2:20; 3:4-8). Ruth is to stay at the feet of Boaz and raise the issue of the Levirate Law (Ruth 3:8-9). In the first

---

[12] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom,* 95.

[13] Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 360. See also *Spec* 3:169.

[14] Cf. K. Corley, "Were the Women around Jesus Really Prostitutes? Women in the Context of Greco-Roman Meals," in *SBL 1989 Seminar Papers*, ed. D. Lull (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989): 490–94.

[15] Jeremy Lee Painter, "*The Bridegroom's Perilous Bride: A reading of Jesus' Encounters with "his own" in John's Gospel*," PhD diss. (Radboud University Nijmegen, 2020), 243.

[16] Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 112.

https://publications.lst.edu/

meeting of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 2:13), she introduces herself as a lowly female slave or *shiphah*. However, when she is lying at his feet and pleads for him to honor his role as the *go'el* (Ruth 3:9), she introduces herself as a maidservant (*amah*). The *maidservant* (*amah*) implies a higher status than that of the "lowly female slave" (*shiphah*). But more significantly, the maidservant (*amah*), is a woman "eligible for marriage."[17] The identification of someone worthy of marriage is strengthened when Ruth asks Boaz "spread your cloak over your maidservant (*amah*)" (Ruth 3:9). This is an OT idiom for saying "marry me."[18] It also goes back to Ezekiel's prophetic vision of God finding Israel as a young foundling woman, whom he marries through a covenant pact: "I spread the edge of my cloak over you … and entered into a covenant with you" (Ezek 16:8; Deut 22:30 [MT 23:2]; 27:20; Mal 2:16).[19] Ruth's words are "probably a dramatic request that she be taken under his protection as his wife (*ishshah*)."[20] "Take your maidservant under your wing" (Ruth 3:9). The word "garment-corner" (*kanaph*) can also mean "wing."[21] The use of the term "*kanaph*" triggers a beautiful link with the concept of the "wings of refuge" (*kenaphayim*), as Boaz wishes for Ruth to be under God's protection (Ruth 2:12).[22] This likewise corresponds

[17] Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 211.

[18] E. John Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth*, ITC (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1996), 45.

[19] Hubbard connects this to the marital tradition of the Arabs when a man takes a wife "by throwing a garment-corner over her." Hubbard, *Ruth*, 212 n. 33.

[20] Abigail also identifies herself as David's "servant-*amah*" (1 Sam 25:24). When David later sends for her to become his wife, she is identified as "wife-*ishshah*" (1 Sam 25:40). In humility, Abigail refers to herself as a "maidservant" (*amah*) willing to act as a "(female) slave" (*shiphhah*) and wash the feet of the "(male) servants" (1 Sam 25:41). In calling herself first of all David's *amah* who would be willing to do the work of a *shiphhah*, Abigail may have been accepting his invitation to become his wife (*ishshah*). Cf. Hamlin, *Ruth*, 44-45.

[21] Cf. *DBLH, s.v.* "כָּנָף," 4053, #2. See also John N. Oswalt, "כָּנָף," in *TWOT*, 446.

[22] The Hebrew term *kanaph* symbolically connotes the "wings" of Yahweh that symbolize protection and care. In Ruth, the same word is utilized in Hebrew but

https://publications.lst.edu/

to putting the marriage of Ruth and Boaz under God's providential guidance. In the Psalms, God's loving-kindness is repeatedly described as the reason why his bride Israel takes refuge "under the shadow of his wings" (Ps 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 91:4). Thus, by covering Ruth with his cloak, Boaz's role as the *go'el* embodies "the protection of Yahweh's 'wings.'"[23] In light of these parallelisms, the act of Mary of Bethany's sitting at the feet of Jesus is seen to bear various nuptial overtones, as a woman placing herself under the shadow of her bridegroom's protective covenant love.

Furthermore, Mary's throwing herself at Jesus' feet manifests her desire to unburden her grief on her Lord. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11:32). This expression emphasizes the possessive pronoun "my" (*mou*) to underline that it is her brother who died: not just anyone, but someone she deeply loved.[24] Such "emphasis would have been significant to a first-century reader who perceived Mary as the betrothed/bride of the messianic bridegroom."[25] "It was not just anyone who died because of Jesus' absence. It was the brother of his betrothed/bride who died."[26] And Jesus shows that he is in solidarity with her as his beloved bride as he too cries in sympathy with Mary's outburst of emotion. The grieving bride "deeply moves Jesus in spirit and troubles him emotionally, even to the point of weeping himself" (Jn 11:33-35).[27] Indeed, it is impossible not to shed tears before a dear person who is crying helplessly. Adeline Fehribach says that "Jesus, as God's agent, likewise is moved to tears and action by the deep emotion that the community of faith and the woman who represented that community of faith felt at the death

translated as "cloak" in many English versions. Cf. Hubbard, *Ruth*, 212.

[23] Cf. Hamlin, *Ruth*, 45.

[24] Cf. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 96.

[25] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 96.

[26] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 96.

[27] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 97.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of a loved one."[28] This seems to portray Jesus as a bridegroom who expresses his love not only in life but also in death.

The voice (*phone*) of Jesus raised Mary from being dead in spirit through sadness. That same voice now calls a physically dead person back to life. When Jesus calls (*phoneo*) Lazarus from the tomb with a loud voice (*phone*): "Lazarus, come forth" (Jn 11:43; 12:17), the emphasis is on the "voice" of Jesus. It is a voice that can "awaken [someone] from the place of the dead, from Hades…"[29] The noun "voice" (*phone*) comes from the same root word as the verb "to call" (*phoneo*) and in Johannine usage, those who listen to this voice are like the flock of the Good Shepherd, whose voice makes the listener one with him (JwS/Xn 10:3-5,16). The voice of the Bridegroom Messiah resounds beyond death to reach the one he loves, as the Song of Solomon states: "For love is *as strong as death*" (Song 8:6). Despite Mary's tragedy, she as the betrothed/bride becomes the reason for the foreshadowing of the power of the messianic bridegroom in conquering death when he resuscitates Lazarus. Lazarus and Martha listen to the voice of the bridegroom, and they become part "of the family of Jesus"[30] through "their kinship to Mary."[31]

The Bridegroom King on the Couch

In the narrative of the raising of Lazarus, at the very start of the chapter, we find an "intrusive statement" about Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus and wiping them with her hair, referring to an event that has not yet occurred (Jn 11:2).[32] This "intrusive

[28] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 96.

[29] Cf. Otto Betz, "φωνή, φωνέω," in *TDNT,* 9:303.

[30] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 85.

[31] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 85, 87.

[32] Scholars perceive that this might be a later redaction. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AYB (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1: 433; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (Wellwood: Burns and Oates, 1968), 2: 322.

https://publications.lst.edu/

statement" permeates the Lazarus story with marital imagery. And Mary the bride from Bethany is the central reference in this spousal theme. The intensity of nuptial symbolism increases with the act of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with perfume. Primarily, anointing in the OT was normally for prophets, priests, and kings. But anointings could also be given in the context of marriage. In the wedding song of a king meeting his bride, the bridegroom-king is said to have been anointed with the oil of gladness, which was composed of fragrances such as myrrh, aloes, and cassia (Ps 45:7-8).[33] The kingly character of Jesus in the Gospel makes Mary's action a royal anointing.

However, the nuptial language becomes clearer if perceived as an allusion to Song 1:12: "While the king is at his table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance." Some translations simply describe the king sitting at the "table," perhaps feasting. Others underline the reclining position (*anaklisei*) of the LXX version. In the Hebrew text, it is implied that the king is feasting or in the circle of feasters (*mesab*).[34] Thus, he is reclining, since the usual position in feasting is to recline. John 12:2 speaks of those who are in the supper, including Jesus, as reclining (*anakeimai*).[35] However, some bible versions indicate the detail that the king is on the couch (NAB, NRS). Hence, Jocelyn McWhirter proposes a connection and asserts that "the royal element lies not in the anointing [alone], but rather in Jesus' role as the king on the couch."[36] "The reclining man of Song 1:12 and the reclining Jesus in John 12:3 imply an unstated correspondence: like the man in Song 1:12, Jesus is a king:"[37] This parallelism strengthens the marital imagery of Mary's anointing of Jesus.

Four features associate the Song with the anointing at Bethany: "the king sitting on the couch," "the specific mention of the nard,"

[33] Cf. Marinus De Jonge, "Messiah," in *AYBD*, 4: 777-788.

[34] Cf. *Holladay*, s.v. "מִסֵּב," 203.

[35] *BDAG*, *s.v.* "ἀνάκειμαι," 65.

[36] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 86 note 18.

[37] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 85.

https://publications.lst.edu/

"the presence of the loving woman with perfume," and "the fragrance." These characteristics are marked with significant verbal correspondence.[38] The first link is to the bridegroom of the Canticle, who is also a king who reclines "*anakliseî*" on a couch (Song 1:12; Jn 1:49; 6:15; 12:13,15; 18:33–19:22). The fact that both Jesus and the bridegroom-king are reclining is a "resemblance… [that] is hard to mistake."[39]

> According to Song 1:12, the man on the couch is 'the king ((Basileus),' the royal bridegroom introduced in Song 1:1–4. That Jesus is a king is never stated in John 12:1–8, but that Jesus is the Messiah constitutes one of the major concerns of John's narrative. Furthermore, John 2:1–4:42 has established that Jesus is a bridegroom. Both Jesus and the king of Song 1:12 are portrayed as royal bridegrooms.[40]

Jesus reflects the imagery of the bridegroom-king of the Canticle whereas Mary is the bride, whose "spikenard sent forth its fragrance" (Song 1:12). The passage of Song 1:12 is the first reference in scripture to "nard."[41] In the Song of Solomon, perfumes are not something outside or separate from the one wearing them but an expression of their very person.[42] Thus, the woman in the Canticle says "my nard-*nardos mou*" (νάρδος μου), which perhaps explains that the perfume

[38] Cf. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 80-88.

[39] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 84-85.

[40] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 85; See also Ann Roberts Winsor, *A King Is Bound in the Tresses*, Studies in Biblical Literature 6 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 22.

[41] Nard is considered an aromatic and odorific plant from India and perhaps brought to the Mediterranean by Persian traders. The term has its possible origin in Sanskrit *nalada* from which the Persian *nardin* and Greek *nardos* originated. It was the most preferred perfume in antiquity. In some biblical versions, it is "spikenard" and its prefix "spike" pertains to the shape of the plant. Nard has a long history of romantic meaning. In the Hindu religion, nard is a perfume of love (Atharva Veda VI, 102, 5-6). Cf. Johns Varghese, *Imagery of Love in John*, AnBib 177 (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2009), 155 n. 395-397.

[42] Cf. Varghese, *The Imagery of Love*, 157.

https://publications.lst.edu/

symbolically comes from within her or represents her whole person.[43] In the text of the Song, the bride is often identified with fragrances, especially those of flowers or plants (Song 2:12; 3:16; 6:11; 7:8,14), "the aroma of which signifies the person open to union."[44] Above all, the distinct "red-white color of the species of nard suggests love and purity."[45] Nard is mentioned again twice in Song 4:13-14.[46] These texts make the marital imagery of the anointing at Bethany more interesting because the bride who brings the nard to the bridegroom-king is also portrayed as an enclosed garden that contains the nard within her.

> A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices (Song 4:12-14).

Nard, as one of the plants from an enclosed garden, suggests that she is the garden and the perfume that she carries is from within her. J. Luzárraga beautifully explicates this interpretation in relation to Mary of Bethany.

> The nard begins to exert its aromatic force only after it has been used on Jesus. Mary, like the Shulamite, appears as the figure of perfume bearer, which emanates from her (Cant 4,13) and in reality, is her very self (Cant 8,14). At the same time the Shulamite as a garden (Cant 4,15) belongs completely to her bridegroom or beloved and he is reserved for her (Cant 4,12; 7,14) and for this, he retakes from her the aroma as from his garden (Cant 4,16-5,1) and he becomes perfumed by her, by her aroma, which in reality is the bride herself (symbolized by the nard), transforming himself into the nard of his bride who had come to him with her nard. In a similar way, the aroma of Mary begins to

[43] Cf. Vargehese, *The Imagery of Love*, 158.

[44] C. Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece* (New York: Princeton, 1999), 161-164.

[45] Vargehese, *The Imagery of Love*, 158.

[46] In Song 1:12, it is singular and the other two verses render the term in plural. Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 354; McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 83; Winsor, *A King Is Bound*, 23.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> be felt starting from the anointing of Jesus. Because it is from Jesus, transformed by the nard, that the nard realizes its symbolic function of releasing its aroma. And the first person on whom this aroma is felt is Mary, who is impregnated with the aroma in the act of drying the feet of Jesus. If Mary with the perfume has brought out her love for Jesus, Jesus with his perfume transfers himself to Mary presenting her as the Shulamite. There is a deep exchange and union between them.[47]

"In the imagery of the Song, the garden is also the bride… [as] eastern wives would also be secluded from the public gaze and kept for their husbands' eyes alone… [it is] regarded as a token both of protection and affection."[48] The garden is enclosed because the bride is exclusive to the bridegroom. "The garden of the Song is, however, like the garden of Eden, infinitely discreet."[49] This "suggests just the 'paradise' …that the lovers provide for each other, the paradise of the first garden in Eden. It also suggests the singlemindedness of love, as the garden is separated from all other earthly locations and the lovers are intent on each other."[50] In this interpretation the garden in Song 4:12-5:1 portrays the consummation of the lovers' marriage.[51] In this vein, Jesus and Mary of Bethany are "a couple embraced in a wonderful Eden breathing delicious aromas."[52] Hence the gardens of the Song

[47] Varghese translated this citation coming from the work of J. Luzárraga. Cf. J. Luzárraga, "El Nardo y La Sulamita en la Uncion de Maryam (Jn 12,1-8)," *Gregorianum* 83 (2002): 693; Varghese, *The Imagery of Love*, 158.

[48] Brooks, *Song of Songs*, 110. See also Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 106.

[49] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron,* 106.

[50] Winsor, *A King Bound*, 54.

[51] The author brings to the reader's attention the plentiful *double-entendres* and metaphorical use of garden terminology in the Song of Solomon. In Song 6:2 f., the seeking and finding theme could be also paralleled to the seeking of Mary Magdalene of Jesus in the Garden. Cf. G. Lloyd Carr, *Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 65.

[52] Vargehese, *The Imagery of Love*, 157.

https://publications.lst.edu/

and Eden are embodied in the relationship between the Bridegroom Messiah and the bride from Bethany.

> The garden of the Song and the garden of Eden have often been compared… If the garden of Eden story is about dislocation and exile,… the Song on the other hand simply sings of love, and in so doing, initiates a process of restoration and return… love transforms all things…The garden, which in the Genesis story becomes an inaccessible place from which humanity is exiled, in the Song is rediscovered in the woman; it is in union or communion with her that her lover rediscovers the bliss of which the Eden story spoke. As a result, the world around is also recreated; it too becomes a garden, a garden of love...[53]

"[W]hereas, in the latter, woman is a secondary figure and the initiator of Adam's fall, in the Song, she represents the original garden and is the agent of his provisory return."[54] If Mary of Bethany brought the fragrant nard to the reclining bridegroom-king like the bride in Song 1:12, then, following the interpretations above, Mary the bride is the reason why the bridegroom-king wants to restore the paradise of love. To restore Eden is to undo the fall of the first human couple, and Jesus and Mary of Bethany stand for the new spouses that will re-establish access to the garden. For this, nard, apart from being a symbol of marital love, also signifies death,[55] particularly when mixed with myrrh, a combination that suggests a funeral context.[56] The nard in Mary's hands is not only to perfume the feet of the king-messiah; its true purpose is revealed by the lips of Jesus: "keep it for the day of my burial" (Jn 12:7). "The scent that Mary has so lavishly poured on Jesus' feet will be saved for use as his embalming fluid. It serves as a shocking

[53] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, 106.

[54] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, 109.

[55] Martelli follows some studies on the relation between death and love. She writes about the Mesopotamian lore of the goddess Ishtar and her lover Tammuz. Ishtar goes to the place of death because of her love for Tammuz and this tradition was celebrated every year. Cf. Luna Martelli, "Unzione di Betania: Per La Resurrezione di un Re e di un Dio (Gv. 12, 1-8)," *EIKASMOS* XX (2009): 13.

[56] Cf. Martelli, "Unzione di Betania," 13.

https://publications.lst.edu/

reminder that this royal bridegroom will die."[57] The episode "aptly foreshadows the death of the Messiah as portrayed in John 12:12–36; 18:33–19:22 by alluding to Song 1:12 in this anointing story."[58] While the nard's fragrance stands for marital union, it also speaks of Jesus' death. Hence, anointing Jesus with nard likewise foretells that his death is the bridegroom's demise.[59]

The Passover death of the royal bridegroom, signified by the nard, seems to have a connection with the Edenic Paradise. In the Targum of Song 1:12, nard is one of the spices of Eden, a fragrant perfume that comes from paradise.[60] In Jewish belief, the nard is one of the trees in Paradise and is related to the Tree of Wisdom or Knowledge of Good and Evil (*1 En* 32:1-4).[61] The Apocalypse of Moses recounts that when Adam is cast out from Eden, he asks the angels guarding the entrance of Paradise to let him take with him the fragrant herbs and spices, and they grant his request. He takes crocus and nard, calamus, cinnamon, and other seeds (*ApMos* 29:1-6). When Adam dies, God mandates his angels to get the same fragrant herbs and spices from paradise to prepare his corpse for burial, together with the body of Abel, and both of them are buried inside Eden, at the same spot where God first took the dust to form him (*ApMos* 40:1-7).[62]

As nard is associated with Paradise, consequently, it is also linked with creation. In Jewish tradition, nard is believed to be one of the ten

[57] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 86. n. 18.

[58] McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 88.

[59] McWhirter explains that "John's association of the reclining Jesus with the Song's king on the couch reaffirms Jesus' royal identity, while Mary's fragrant nard heralds his impending crucifixion. Jesus, the bridegroom-Messiah, is anointed with perfume intended for his burial." McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 88.

[60] Cf. Manns, *Sinfonia Sponsale*, 159.

[61] Cf. Frederic Manns, *L'Evangile de Jean a la Lumiere de Judaisme*, (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1991), 276-277; R. H. Charles and W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Enoch*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), 2.

[62] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 277.

https://publications.lst.edu/

objects created between the two evenings during creation (*TgSong* 4: 13-14; *ApMos* 29:5-6).[63] When Jesus says that Mary "kept" (*tereo*) the nard for the day of his funeral (Jn 12:7), it means that it is conserved even from the time of Creation.[64] The fragrance of the nard in the anointing scene alludes to a restored paradise. Because the symbol of nard does not stop in death, it also speaks of immortality. Nard's characteristic as an "evergreen" plant makes it a symbol of incorruptibility and eternal youth.[65] It becomes a metaphor for longevity and immortality.[66] Thus, the anointing of the Messiah evokes not only the perfume of his burial but also immortality. Mary's keeping the nard, symbol of the perfume of Paradise, signifies immortality in Christ, who by his Passover death and resurrection opens the doors of Paradise.[67] Hence, the nard that is used to anoint Jesus incorporates all its meanings in his person and mission. Like the nard, the messianic bridegroom is a figure of marital love, self-giving death, and immortality. The anointing at Bethany prefigures the nuptial mission of the Bridegroom Messiah. The only way to conquer death is to die because of love. Christ is to restore humanity to immortality in paradise, where the intimate relationship of love between humanity and God is to be relived as in the days of Eden.

The Lovers' Bond

Another feature unmistakably present in both John 12 and Song 1:12 is that both Jesus and the bridegroom of the Song "are the object of a woman's intense loving attention."[68] In John 12:3, the scene seems

[63] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 277.

[64] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 277.

[65] Cf. Martelli, "Unzione di Betania," 13.

[66] This is a Hindu belief, a culture from where the nard originated. Cf. *Atharva-Veda* V, 4.

[67] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 277-278, see note 48 on different themes that the Fourth Gospel takes from Genesis.

[68] Cf. André Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism in Second Temple Writings, the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (Boston: Brill, 2016) Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 168.

https://publications.lst.edu/

to evoke the hair of the bride in the Song: "Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses" (Song 7:5[6]). The Song speaks of the bride's locks of hair, the tresses of which bind the bridegroom-king, while Mary manifests her love to Jesus by drying his feet with her hair.[69] Thus, both in John 12:3 and Song 7:5(6), the bridegroom-king is subject to an action involving the bride's hair. Although there is also an occurrence of hair in the Song that portrays not only the beauty of the bride (Song 4:1; 6:5) but also that of the bridegroom (Song 5:11), the emphasis on Mary's hair makes her a personification of the Canticle's bride (Song 4:1; 6:5; 7:6).[70]

Wiping Jesus' feet with her hair presents Mary of Bethany's intimate relationship with Jesus.[71] In the culture of first-century Palestine, the way a woman presented her hair described her status. To maintain their dignity, women typically braided their hair (1 Cor 11:4; 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). A woman's unbound hair was a scandalous sight (*Ant* 3:270) and could provide grounds for divorce (*mKet* 7:6; *yGitt* 9:5). It could even impede a woman from getting married (*mKet* 2:10).[72] She could, however, let down her hair before a man with whom she had a relationship (*mBabKam* 8:6).[73] "In her wedding procession

[69] Many authors have asserted this possible interpretation. Cf. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 82; Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 20–22; Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 355 n. 62; Luis Antonio Schökel, *Simbolos Matrimoniales en la Biblia* (Navarra: EVD, 1999), 54-57.

[70] Cf. Luzarraga, "El nardo y la Sulamita," 695; Renzo Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa: Percorsi di Analisi Simbolica tra Sacra Scrittura e Cristianesimo delle Origini* (Milano: San Paolo, 2004), 184; Luis Alonso Shökel, *I Nomi dell'Amore: Simboli Matrimoniali nella Bibbia*, Trad. Marco Zappella (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1997), 55.

[71] Cf. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 90-91.

[72] The only scene in the OT close to this imagery is Judith 10:3.

[73] Jeremias relates that "[w]hen the Jewess of Jerusalem left her house, her face was hidden by an arrangement of two head veils, a head-band on the forehead with bands to the chin, and a hairnet with ribbons arid knots, so that her features could not be recognized." Cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 359. See also B. Witherington

https://publications.lst.edu/

was a bride seen with her head uncovered, and only if she were a virgin, not a widow" (*mKet* 2:1).[74] A woman worthy of respect would be conscious of the fact that only "her husband had the right" to see her hair.[75] In the strict implementation of this cultural convention, a woman never uncovered her hair in public because this was done only in the intimacy of the matrimonial chamber.[76] Mary's gesture speaks of the nuptial character that she assumes in herself. In this context, the highly unusual gesture of Mary drying the feet of Jesus with her hair has only one comprehensible meaning, it is a manifestation of a spousal relationship.[77]

The symbolism of the feet also suggests marital imagery. Looking at the OT, feet are often used as a metaphor for the action of the person (Gen 30:30; Ps 119:101; Pro 1:15-16; Sir 6: 24,36). Moreover, the feet also allude to the genitals (Ex 4:25; Is 6:2; 7:20) and are often mentioned in a nuptial context (Ruth 3:4,7-8,14).[78] Similarly, "washing the feet" bears marital symbolism (Song 5:3; 1 Sam 25:41; 2 Sam 11:18). In Jewish Literature, the text of Joseph and Aseneth is perhaps the closest to the marital scene in John 12. Aseneth invited Joseph to her house and while he was sitting down, she brought water and washed his feet. This later led to their marriage (*JAA* 20:1-5). Thus, the choice of the "anointing of the feet" under the light of the ancient customs shows the intimate union between Jesus and Mary of Bethany.

The feet also stand for the whole of the person (Jn 13:8-10). The anointing of the feet of Jesus is thus understood as the anointing of his whole person. Not only does Mary anoint Jesus with perfume but

---

III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 113. n. 209.

[74] Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 360.

[75] Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 360.

[76] Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 365.

[77] Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 357.

[78] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 182.

https://publications.lst.edu/

she also establishes a bond with him through her hair. This seems to convey that Jesus in his wholeness is being bound to a woman by her hair. The term used for being captive or bound in the LXX of Song 7:5(6) is "*dedemenos*" (δεδεμένος), a perfect passive participle of the verb "*deo*" (δέω). If "*deo*" is used in a spousal context, it refers to the bond of mutual commitment to the marriage vow (Rom 7:2).[79] Going to his nuptial mission, Jesus the Royal Messiah is "literally bound."[80] "The Jewish guards seized Jesus and bound him" (Jn 18:12), "Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest" (Jn 18:24),[81] and the body of Jesus is bound with burial cloths along with the spices (Jn 19:40).[82] Thus, Jesus' being bound to Mary's hair with the spices of nard prefigures his Passover, the "hour" of giving himself for his own.

The spousal context of the episode "sees Mary as the betrothed/bride of Jesus, and the meal that he shares with her and her family at Bethany as a betrothal meal in preparation for his subsequent passion and death as his messianic wedding."[83] The gesture of anointing is a "prophetic action," the meaning of which lies beyond the act itself and has a "theological purpose."[84] Likewise, "it is conceivable that the anointing could have been understood as a romantic action."[85] However, biblical scholars agree on the close relationship between the "washing of the feet" and the "anointing of the feet." These actions express that Christ is laying down his own life for the bride. The drying of his feet with her hair, by which the bridegroom becomes bound

[79] The term used in the Epistles to the Romans is "*dedetai*", the perfect passive indicative of "*deo*". Cf. *Friberg, s.v.* "δέω," 107.

[80] Cf. Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 22.

[81] In John 18:12, the term used is "*edesan*" (ἔδησαν) and in 18:24 we find "*dedemenon*" (δεδεμένον), the perfect passive participle accusative form of "*deo*" (δέω).

[82] The term used is "*edesan*", the aorist active indicative form of "deo" (δέω). Cf. *Friberg, s.v.* "δέω," 107.

[83] Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 172.

[84] Brown, *John*, 1: 454.

[85] Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 171.

https://publications.lst.edu/

to the bride, expresses that Jesus lets himself be tied up out of love for "his own." Whatever romance exists in this text, it is not a merely human love story but one that is divine.

The Fragrance of the Bridegroom

Another characteristic of the anointing in Bethany associated with the Song of Solomon is the fragrance of the perfume "*osme murou*" (ὀσμὴ μύρου) that fills the house.[86] In the LXX, the fragrance "*osmē*" (ὀσμὴ) appears 72 times. The term is used to signify a bad odor, and one example is the stench of death (Is 34:3), or a smell produced by a repugnant sickness (2 Mac 9:9). But the word also connotes a pleasing odor, like the sacrifices acceptable to the Lord. The NT also receives this meaning 6 times, as a pleasing odor is mentioned in reference to the liturgical aspect of offerings worthy of the Lord.[87] Moreover, fragrance or odor (*osme*) also represents the person, his breath, or his clothes.[88] In Genesis 27:27, the smell of Esau's clothing deceived the already blind Isaac to give the blessing to Jacob. Also, in the Song of Solomon, the fragrance that comes from the bride's dress is described as an aroma stronger and more intense than all the fragrances and perfumes of Lebanon put together (Song 4:10-11). In Song 7:9, the fragrance of the bride's breath is compared to that of freshly harvested fruits. Such an association reaches a point where the presence of the odor is indistinguishable from the bride.[89] Fragrant perfume also identifies the bridegroom of the Song. "Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the young women love you!" (Song 1:3). The name of the bridegroom is

[86] For fragrances of various perfumes in the Song of Solomon see Song 1:3–4; 2:13; 4:10–11; 7:9,14. Cf. Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 168.

[87] Cf. Barth, *Ephesians,* 2: 559.

[88] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 187.

[89] Cf. Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 52-53.

https://publications.lst.edu/

an aroma that flows out,[90] which means that his person releases this odor, indistinguishable from who he is. Thus, the perfume and the fragrances are inseparable from the identity of the person.

> The personal aspect of the fragrance is important, as a sign of a presence and recognition of the beloved person that is known through his/her perfume, it is an expression of the personal intimacy towards the one to whom it is directed. This relationship between the perfume and the person is very much underlined in the Song of Songs, in which the person as such is characterized by the perfume. The bride is for the bridegroom as also his myrrh and its balsam (Song 5:1), while the bridegroom is for the bride like a bag of myrrh or a cluster of henna (Song 1:13-14). The perfumes permeate one another up to the point that they cannot be distinguished from one another.[91]

Like the bridegroom and his fragrance, the nard also represents the bride's whole person (Song 1:12; 4:13-14). As Mary's perfume stands for her whole being, it is likewise not applied only to a part of Jesus' body but to the totality of his being, since the feet stand for the entire person (John 13:10). Even in the Song, the bridegroom and the bride personify the perfume they share as an expression of the love between them (Song 1:3,12; 4:11; 7:8). André Villeneuve concludes that "[t]he Johannine text also seems to echo Cant 1:3 with its description of the beloved's name as a poured ointment and the love of the maidens for him."[92] "[W]hen Mary of Bethany goes with her nard and with it anoints Jesus, one could see it as a union of both of them, especially in the perfume and the aroma that remains therein."[93]Mary's wiping dry the feet of Jesus leaves the "king bound in the tresses" (Song 7:6).

---

[90] In Hebrew, there is a very close assonance between perfume "*shemen*" (שֶׁמֶן)and name "*shem*" (שֵׁם). Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 188 n. 219.

[91] The translation is mine. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 356.

[92] Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 168.

[93] Translated by Varghese from Luzárraga. Cf. Luzárraga, "El Nardo y La Sulamita," 693; Vargehese, *The Imagery of Love*, 158.

https://publications.lst.edu/

And by drying Jesus' feet with her hair**,** she herself is anointed, not only with the perfume of the nard but with the fragrance of Christ.[94]

> The effect of this is that part of the ointment which had been poured on the feet of Jesus gets attached to the hair of Mary. Thus, the hair of Mary now partakes of the perfume from the feet. She is enclosed with its perfume. From this moment the perfume used on Jesus becomes the perfume of Mary.[95]

"Mary anoints Jesus with the best of what she had. Jesus is surrounded or enclosed with the abundance of the nard and returns the perfume that is now transformed. Thus, Mary herself participates in the perfume" of Jesus.[96] Mary's hair becomes pervaded by the same fragrance of the perfume that the Lord has; and her hair, which is the crowning pride of a woman, is enriched by this bouquet that she shares with him. Mary now wears the perfume of the Bridegroom Messiah; he is bound to her and she to him.[97] She is now indistinguishable from Christ as the perfume creates a symbolic nuptial unity between the messianic bridegroom and the bride. The nuptial union effected by the fragrant perfume will be fulfilled on the Passover of Jesus, for the nard is conserved for this very hour.[98] The nard on the feet of Jesus will be applied to his whole body as an embalming fluid.[99] The body of Jesus will be prepared with an enormous quantity of fragrances, that seem

---

[94] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 192 n. 234.

[95] Varghese, *The Imagery of Love*, 157.

[96] Varghese, *The Imagery of Love*, 158.

[97] With this woman's action, the bridegroom is already bound with his own. Cf. Secundino Castro Sanchez, *Evangelio de Juan: Comprension Exegetico-Existencial* (Madrid: Desclée De Brouwer, 2001), 276 n. 16; Juan Mateos y Juan Barreto, *El Evangelio de Juan* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1979), 540.

[98] Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 356.

[99] McWhirter says that scholars consider this as a royal anointing but her view is that the royal aspect is "Jesus' role as the king on the couch." McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 86; See also Brown, *John*, 1: 454; Lindars, *John*, 414; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*: *An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 341.

https://publications.lst.edu/

no longer the funeral bath of a corpse, but rather the preparation of a bridegroom before entering his "matrimonial bed."[100]

Studies also connect the fragrance of the perfume "*osme murou*" of John 12:3 with the gloomy oracle of Jeremiah 25:10 about the demise of the bridegroom. The LXX version changes the "sound of millstones" in the Masoretic text to "fragrance/scent of ointment/perfume:"

> And I will destroy from among them the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the fragrance/scent of perfume/ointment (ὀσμὴν μύρου), and the light of a candle (Jer 25:10 LXX).

Villeneuve comments on the interrelation of LXX variant of Jeremiah 25:10 to the Fourth Gospel and infers:

> As we have seen, this is one of the prophet's oracles about the voice of the bridegroom and the bride that is possibly alluded to in John 3:29. Could John's ὀσμὴ μύρου be an allusion to Jeremiah's ὀσμὴ μύρου accompanying the voices of the bridegroom and bride? Second, the word ὀσμή in the LXX usually refers to the pleasing odor of a sacrifice, and only four times does it refer to the fragrance of perfume (with three of these four references found in Cant 1:3–4 and Jer 25:10). Could the evangelist be hinting at the impending sacrificial death of Jesus by emphasizing the pleasing ὀσμή of the sacrifice filling the house? This seems all the more likely since the narrative specifically tells us that Mary's anointing is oriented towards Jesus' death: The scene takes place six days before the Passover on which he would die (Jn 12:1), and Jesus himself defends the woman's action by announcing that she has kept this for the day of my burial (Jn 12:7).[101]

The modification of Jeremiah 25:10 to "fragrant perfume" in the LXX, associated with John 12:3, in all likelihood alludes to the reversal of the doom announced by the prophet, and the fragrance of the perfume symbolizes the return of the wedding feast restored by the messianic bridegroom: "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."[102] As John the Baptist hears again the "voice of the

[100] Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 351-352.

[101] Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 170.

[102] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 188.

https://publications.lst.edu/

bridegroom" (Jn 3:29), the smell of the "fragrance of the perfume" that comes from the bride and the bridegroom likewise return (Song 1:3,12; 4:13-14).[103] As the baptizer is filled "*peplerotai*" (πεπλήρωται) with joy upon hearing the voice of the Bridegroom, the house[104] of Bethany is also filled "*eplerote*" (ἐπληρώθη) with the presence and fragrance of the bridegroom.[105] The miserable atmosphere of the house following the death of Lazarus (Jn 11:39) is transformed by Mary's devoted action, which fills the house with fragrance.[106] The house is no longer filled with the unpleasant smell of the deceased but with the fragrance of the perfume of Mary and Christ.

The perfume in the hair of Mary (Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam 14:2; Ps 23:5; 45:7) signifies the Jewish anointing of "the hair profusely with fragrant ointments, especially in seasons of rejoicing" (Mt 6:17; Lk 7:46).[107] The perfume of the nard in John 12 does not only project Christ's death, but more significantly, the joyous event of his resurrection. That is why Jesus requested this perfume to be conserved (Jn 12:7), and brought out once again for another meeting with a woman in the garden of the resurrection (Jn 19:41; 20:14-16). It is possible that John 12:3 is likening the perfume, which comes from the body of Jesus, to the pleasing odor of his sacrifice (Phil 4:18; Eph 5:2).[108] Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet was to prepare him for the "Passover hour." In this manner, Mary represents the bride of Christ when she binds

[103] Cf. Mateos-Barreto, *Juan*, 540; Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 188.

[104] The term "house" (*bayit-oikos*) indicates the material house, but also signifies figuratively the family, the descendants, and even the body. This may mean that the whole community of faith is filled with the love of the Bridegroom Messiah, who is like a fragrant perfume (Psa 133:1-3; John 13:34-35; Acts 2:44-45). Cf Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 186; Mateos-Barreto, *Juan*, 540.

[105] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 188.

[106] Cf. Dorothy A. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 222 n. 2.

[107] Cf. *EBD*, *s.v.* "Hair."

[108] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 187.

https://publications.lst.edu/

her whole being to Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, but also anticipates the "hour" when this love offered for the bride becomes the glorification of the bridegroom.[109]

The Passover sacrifice indicates that Jesus needs to die like a grain of wheat falling to the ground (Jn 12:24) to fill the house of God with children born not of human seed (Jn 1:11).[110] Jesus' body falls to the ground in his burial so that the house will be filled with his perfume. The perfume that is not contained merely in his physical body, but his body that has been prepared by those who have faith in him, that is, the ecclesial bride.[111] Thus, filling the house with this pleasing scent means that the Passover death and resurrection of Jesus establish the house community (Jn 2:19-21; 1 Pt 2:5) of those who have faith and will believe in him.[112] Therefore, the nuptial and Passover context of the anointing presents Mary as the betrothed bride representing the people who believe and will have faith in Jesus. In the Passover death and resurrection of Jesus as the Bridegroom Messiah, he reopens the access to the perfume of Paradise. His anointed body on earth is associated with the glory of his divinity and the immortality alluded to by the perfume of the nard, which reaches back as far as the primal Eden and the Tree of Life.[113]

Summary

This study has brought to light the rich nuptial symbolism woven throughout the Gospel of John, asserting that the spousal theme is not peripheral but one of the central threads to its theological vision.

[109] Cf. Balaguer, *Eclesiologia Esponsal*, 371.

[110] Jesus is the *aner-erchomenos* who will generate the children of God not by human flesh. Cf. Painter, *The Bridegroom's Perilous Bride*, 233 n. 546; Cf. Schökel, *Simbolos Matrimoniales*, 119.

[111] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 278.

[112] Cf. Infante, *Lo Sposo e La Sposa*, 186.

[113] Cf. Manns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumiére de Judaisme*, 278.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus' feet stands as a climactic moment in this spousal narrative—a deeply evocative act that echoes ancient conjugal actions and the romantic language of the Song of Songs. Her posture at the feet of Jesus, her lavish offering of fragrant oil, and her intimate touch all speak the language of covenantal love, positioning her as the ecclesial bride who recognizes and honors the Bridegroom in the moment before his sacrificial glorification. This act prefigures the bridal Church's participation in Christ's death and resurrection, marking the Passover hour as a nuptial event in which divine love is consummated.

The contribution of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach—blending literary, historical, and theological analysis—to foreground the nuptial theme as a key to Johannine hermeneutics. By highlighting Mary of Bethany's role within this framework, the study expands existing scholarship and offers a compelling vision of the Gospel as a love story between the Messianic Bridegroom and his Ecclesial Bride. It affirms that the Johannine narrative is not only a proclamation of salvation but an invitation to intimate communion in faith—a restored Eden, the paradise of love where the Bridegroom and bride are bound together in eternal covenant.

About the Author. **Fr. Adonis G. Saclolo** is a Filipino Catholic priest ordained in 2010 for the Archdiocese of Manila. He currently serves as Formator and Prefect of Studies at the Redemptoris Mater Missionary Seminary of Manila. He completed his philosophical studies at Christ the King Mission Seminary and earned his Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology from the University of Santo Tomas. He later pursued advanced theological formation at the Loyola School of Theology, where he obtained both his Licentiate and Doctorate in Biblical Theology. Fr. Saclolo teaches Sacred Scripture in San Carlos Seminary Graduate School of Theology, Don Bosco School of Theology, and Loyola School of Theology. He also serves as the Archdiocesan Minister for the Ministry on Biblical Apostolate of the Archdiocese of Manila (RCAM). As part of this ministry, he anchors the radio program *Ang Bibliya Ngayon* on Veritas 846.