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## Pleasant and Unpleasant Smells in the Bible

*Prijetni in neprijetni vonji v Svetem pismu*

**Abstract:** In the Bible and in various religions in general, odour appears in connection with ritual scents, offerings to God, devotion to God, the body odour of anointed bodies, and as a protective agent in the ritual fumigation of rooms. In religious texts, the deities are also described as having a pleasant smell. Incenses, which produce and spread a pleasantly fragrant smoke when burned and are used in religious ceremonies, can be divided into those of plant origin (frankincense, myrrh) and those of animal origin (ambergris), depending on the source of production. Frankincense and myrrh are the fragrances most frequently mentioned in the Bible, but they were also used in cosmetics and medicine due to their pleasant odour and disinfectant effect. Ambergris is not mentioned in the Bible, but its occasional ritual use in Christianity can be deduced from other sources. In addition to frankincense, the Bible also mentions other fragrant substances, mainly of plant origin (galbanum, mastic, cassia, cinnamon, aloe, cypress, sweet flag, saffron), various plant mixtures (nard, balsam), and mineral fragrances. On the other hand, the sacred texts also mention the stench, which is always associated with impurity and immorality. In the article, the author uses examples from the Bible to show the binary nature of odours according to their function.

**Keywords:** smell, malodour, religion, Bible, symbolism

**Izveček:** *V Svetem pismu in nasploh v različnih verstvih se vonj pojavlja v povezavi z obrednimi vonjavami, darovanjem Bogu, predanostjo Bogu, telesnim vonjem maziljenecv in kot zaščitno sredstvo pri obrednem pokajevanju prostorov. V verskih besedilih so božanstva opisana tudi kot prijetno dišeča. Kadila, ki pri gorenju proizvajajo in širijo prijetno dišeč dim ter se uporabljajo pri verskih obredih, lahko glede na izvor pridelave razdelimo na tista rastlinskega izvora (kadilo, mira) in živalskega izvora (ambra). Kadilo in mira sta dišavi, ki ju Sveto pismo največkrat omenja, a so ju zaradi prijetnega vonja in razkužilnega učinka uporabljali tudi v kozmetiki in medicini. Ambra v Svetem pismu ni omenjena, vendar je o njeni občasni obredni uporabi v krščanstvu mogoče razbrati iz drugih virov. Poleg kadila Sveto pismo omenja tudi druge dišavne snovi, predvsem rastlinskega izvora (galbanum, mastiks, kasija, cimet, aloja, cipresa, pravi kolmež, žafran), različne rastlinske mešanice (narda, balzam) in mineralne dišave. Nasprotno pa sveta besedila omenjajo tudi smrad, ki je vedno povezan z nečistostjo in nemoralnostjo. Avtorica v članku prikaže binarnost vonjav glede na njihovo funkcijo na primerih iz Svetega pisma.*

**Ključne besede:** *vonj, smrad, religija, Sveto pismo, simbolika*

## Introduction

Within the complex web of human sensory experience, the interplay of smell and religion proves to be a fascinating area of research.<sup>1</sup> By illuminating the subtle complexities underlying the olfactory aspects of religious experience, the complex relationships between scent and ritual, sacred spaces, and spiritual beliefs in different civilizations, especially in the Bible, we better understand the symbolic significance of scent and its function in religious devotion.

According to Jonathan Reinartz, who has written about the history of the senses, smell plays an important role in various religious traditions (Reinartz 2014, 25). He summarizes the studies on the relationship between smell and religion and divides religious smells into several categories: sacrificial smells, incense, holy oils, and other fragrant scents in the presence of the divine; the smells of saints and martyrs; and the stench of hell.

Reinartz emphasizes that as part of rituals and ceremonies, odours could cleanse, purify, heal, ward off, or initiate communion with God; they could also contaminate, pollute, and endanger; at the very least, they could serve as a warning of potential dangers and evil inclinations. Smells have permeated religious practices and are central to deciphering their various meanings (Reinartz 2014, 25).

The earliest associations between perfume and religious practice, for example, come from Egyptian culture, where many fragrant plants were known as »fruits of the eye of Re« (or Ra), which sprang from the eye of the Sun god; others were believed to have come from the bones of deities. In the Buddhist tradition, some of these plants were referred to as »beloved by a particular god«. Although the senses were not embedded in early Christianity, by the 4th century, even Christian practices became deeply sensual and the importance and use of smells increased dramatically. The emergence of »a lavishly olfactory piety« dates from the 5th century in Christian expressions, rituals, and associated devotional experiences.

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Incense, which had previously been condemned for its association with pagan rituals, quickly became a part of every private and public Christian ceremony. Fragrant oils were also gradually used sacramentally. They were applied to individuals during paraliturgical rites as well as baptisms and other rituals in order to distinguish a select group from others and, at the same time, link them to a single God. The hagiographic literature of this period also began to emphasize smell. Scents and smells were increasingly mentioned in hymns, sermons, and other texts and manuals. Christianity spread its aromatic message throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. When the Germanic tribes invaded the empire, the heavily perfumed rituals were thoroughly dismantled and corrupted by the foul-smelling hordes (Reinarz 2014, 26). By the 8th century, prayers, then the liturgy itself, and all religious occasions were immersed in the scent of incense. Aromatic scents enveloped every Christian house, every shrine, every tomb, every church, every pilgrimage site, and every monk's cell, transforming these earthly spaces into ceremonial ones. Although the sense of smell was no more important than the other senses, it became an integral part of religious life at the time. This is also true of the aromatic metaphors used in rabbinic interpretations of biblical stories, which evoke a variety of scents and meanings when reflecting on themes such as love, death, and the divine (Reinarz 2014, 27).

## 1 Smells, mentioned in the Bible

There are various views on the relationship between religion and smell. For example, the Zondervan *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, edited by Tenney in 1976, contains terms that refer to ritual odours, perfumes, aromatic substances of natural origin, vessels, places of worship and symbolic function of smell in religion. Among the biblical scents, incense, and frankincense are the ones that receive the most attention, and therefore most entries refer to these scents (e.g. altar of incense, censer[incense-burner], perfume, smoke, myrrh, spikenard, stacte [storax], galbanum, cassia, and cinnamon).

*The Encyclopedia of the Bible* provides a comprehensive exploration of various aspects related to aromatic substances in the Bible. The entry on *Incense* looks at the etymology of incense, its historical use in the



ancient Near East, the various sources from which it originated, the different types of incense and their methods of preparation, its importance in daily life, its religious applications, the symbolic references to incense, and the purpose of offering incense. A thorough examination of the multifaceted nature of incense highlights its cultural, religious, and symbolic dimensions. It defines incense as a material burned to produce a fragrant smoke, or the fragrant smoke produced in that way, and states that it was used by the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Arabs, and Canaanites from the earliest times for which there are records of worship. The Canaanites, the closest neighbours of the Hebrews, have left various incense stands, altars, censers, and spoons in cities dating to the second millennium BC. Egyptian depictions of sieges of Canaanite cities sometimes show a man on the wall holding a stand in which incense is smoking, doubtless to reinforce the prayers of the men standing behind him with arms raised. Incense came from southern Arabia (frankincense, myrrh), Somaliland (frankincense), Palestine (saffron, stacte), the Red Sea (onycha), Persia (galbanum), India (nard), and Ceylon (cinnamon). The Arabs controlled much of the incense trade (Genesis 37:25; 1 Kings 10:10; Ezekiel 27:22), and this trade brought wealth to Sheba and other kingdoms in southern Arabia (Tenney 1976, s.v. »Incense«).

The incense most often mentioned in the Bible is frankincense, sometimes used alone and also in the holy incense. It was mixed in equal parts with stacte, onycha, galbanum and some salt to make the holy incense for the altar of incense (Exodus 30:34-35). This recipe was not to be used for secular purposes (Exodus 30:38). The offerings provided incense for use in the sanctuary (Numbers 7:14-86; Jeremiah 17:26; 41:5), and it was kept in the Temple (Nehemiah 13:5.9).

The writer of Jubilees reflects the Jewish practice of the 2nd century BC by attributing incense offerings to the patriarchs: to Adam: frankincense and galbanum (3:27), to Abraham: frankincense, galbanum, stacte, nard, myrrh, spice and costus (16:24), and to Jacob: incense (32:6). Josephus says that in the temple of his time (1st century AD) thirteen elements were used for the holy incense. According to the Talmud, the following ingredients were used in the production of the holy incense of the Second Temple: resin (corresponding to the stacte in Exodus 30:34), onycha, galbanum,



frankincense, seventy manehs<sup>2</sup> each; myrrh, cassia, spikenard, saffron, sixteen manehs each; costus, twelve manehs; aromatic bark, three manehs; cinnamon, nine manehs; lye from leeks, six kabs; Cyprus wine, three seahs and three kabs; salt of Sodom, a quarter kab; smoke-raiser, a small quantity; and also Jordan resin, a small quantity. The Egyptian incense called »kyphi« had sixteen elements, and in the Babylonian and Assyrian incense offerings, several materials were combined. The priestly family of Abtinas was responsible for pounding and mixing the holy incense, and only they knew the secret of making incense whose smoke rose straight up. Incense is described in ordinary life as »perfume« that brings joy (Proverbs 27:9). It could be burned by a prostitute at a banquet (Ezekiel 23:41) and passed around in bowls after a banquet. It perfumed the litter of Solomon (Song of Solomon 3:6) and was an element of luxurious living in Rome (Revelation 18:13). Numbers 16:46-48 illustrate the use of incense for fumigation to stop a plague. Incense was burned at the funerals of kings (2 Chronicles 16:14; 21:19; Jeremiah 34:5), and perhaps Amos 6:9-10 indicates the same custom among common people. As for the religious use of incense, the worship of Baal, the Queen of Heaven, and other foreign gods by means of incense is frequently condemned in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kings 11:8; Jeremiah 44:17.19.25). Also condemned are the pagan »altars of incense«, usually »images« (Leviticus 26:30), and the »altars for burning incense« (2 Chronicles 30:14). The burning of incense at the shrines on »high places« is also often criticized (e.g. 1 Kings 22:43), either because these high places were associated with idolatry (14:23) or because they contradicted the centralization of worship in Jerusalem (3:2). The prophetic criticism of the offering of incense in the worship of the Lord (Isaiah 1:13; 66:3; Jeremiah 6:20) is not an absolute denial but only part of the prophets' condemnation of empty formalism. The bronze serpent (Numbers 21:9) was worshipped with incense until Hezekiah removed this temptation to idolatry (2 Kings 18:4). It was apparently believed that incense would help drive out demons (Tobit 6:7; 8:2, 3). According to the law, only priests descended from Aaron were allowed to offer incense (Leviticus 2:2). Those who attempted to usurp the priestly function of offering incense were punished with death (Numbers 16:31-32) or disease (2 Chronicles 26:19), and even priests who improperly offered incense

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2 *Māneh* or mina (Hebrew), an ancient unit of weight and value equal to 1/60 talent.



were killed (Leviticus 10:1-2). In the special case of a plague, Aaron offered the incense with a censer, not in the sanctuary as usual, but in the camp (Numbers 16:46-47). Frankincense was added to various meal offerings on the altar of burnt offering (Leviticus 2:1-2.15-16; 6:15). It was also added to the bread of the Presence (Leviticus 24:7) in two dishes, which were made of gold. After a week, this frankincense was burned together with the bread on the altar of burnt offering. The priest offered the compound holy incense morning and evening on the gold-covered altar in front of the curtain. According to Exodus 30:1-10, Aaron, the high priest, did this; later the priests were chosen by lot to fulfil this task (Luke 1:9). On the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered the compound incense in a censer on the ark or, in the second temple, on a stone in the Holy of Holies (Leviticus 16:12-13) (Tenney 1976, s.v. »Incense«).

Zondervan *Encyclopedia of the Bible* also mentions figurative references to incense. The beauty of wisdom and the memory of Josiah are compared to incense. In the New Testament, incense is used as a symbol for the knowledge of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14), for the offering of the Philippians to Paul (Philippians 4:18), and for the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4). The various materials of holy incense are interpreted allegorically as a symbol of God's ownership of the whole world. The main purpose of incense, like other offerings, was to honour God (Malachi 1:11). Incense symbolized and expressed prayer (Psalm 141:2; Judith 9:1; Luke 1:10; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4). The incense offering served as atonement for sin (Numbers 16:46, 47). The smoke of the incense on the Day of Atonement veiled the mercy seat from the eyes of the high priest so that he would not die from seeing God's glory (Leviticus 16:13). Hyrcanus and Zechariah were given divine revelations (Luke 1:5-21) while offering incense. Maimonides, a physician, suggested that the incense also had the practical value of counteracting the odour of the bloody sacrifices (Tenney 1976, s.v. »Incense«).

According to Jütte (2012), the symbolic value of smell is repeatedly emphasized in the Bible in the sense that smell carries the seal of the Lord, and that Jesus was sweet-smelling, which explains the great importance of smell in Christian worship, e.g., in the cults around saints and in the ritual use of incense, myrrh, and scented chrism. In Judaism, there are spice boxes with fragrant herbs that are consumed at the end of the Sabbath

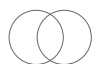


as a sign of distinction between the secular weekday and the sacred day of rest. Considering the widespread use of fragrances in world religions, we must not overlook the fact that the missionary early Fathers of the Church considered fragrances as a source of temptation, and were only prepared to accept them, if at all, in a purely spiritual form, purged of the dross of profanity (Jütte 2012, 315–316).

In early modern visual representations of the five senses (e.g. those of the Dutch painter Marten de Vos, 1532–1603) we find painted scenes in which God breathes soul into Adam (»Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being« [Genesis 2:7]) or in which Mary Magdalene anoints the feet of Jesus (»Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.« [John 12:3]). These examples show how breath and fragrance were seen as symbols of divine proximity or presence. Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780–856) points out that Jesus was sweet-smelling, a reading for which there is much support in the New Testament: »But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing to the one group a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life.« (2 Corinthians 2:14–16) This also explains why Francis of Sales (1567–1622) used images such as »odeur« (smell), »onguents« (ointment) or »parfums« in his vocabulary of devoutness. Fragrances can also be a sign of paradise, especially in the medieval veneration of saints and relics (Jütte 2012, 316).

In the Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic, Maronite Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Armenian Apostolic, Oriental Orthodox, some Lutheran, Old Catholic, Methodist, Reformed, Presbyterian, and Anglican churches, and various other spiritual or ritual traditions, including some Gnostic churches and Freemasonry, a portable censer on one or more chains is used in the performance of ceremonies in which the altar server burns incense on burning coals.

Frankincense occurs fourteen times in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament. Most of the references in the Old Testament are



instructions on how to and how not to use this fragrance (Leviticus 2:1; 5:11). Song of Solomon 3:6 refers to frankincense as a perfume. The references in the New Testament are Matthew 2:11, where frankincense is one of the gifts brought by wise men, and Revelation 18:13, which deals with the fall of Babylon. Frankincense is obtained from the resin of the *Boswellia* tree. There are three species from which the resin can be extracted, namely *B. carterii*, *B. papyrifera* and *B. thurifera*. The gum is collected in the summer. It is customary to first peel the bark back and then make a deep cut with a sharp knife (Tenney 1976, s.v. »Frankincense«).

Until the early 19th century, our knowledge of frankincense and myrrh and their role in the economy of ancient southern Arabia was based exclusively on mentions in the Bible and Greek and Roman literature. The biblical authors made it clear that the incense trade was one of the pillars of the South Arabian economy, and to this general picture, classical authors added a wealth of information. Unfortunately, their testimonies are not equally reliable and often contradict each other, as their sources contain legendary material and were obtained second- or third-hand, and these conflicts could not be resolved until new data came to light. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, several researchers and investigators discovered important clues to the production and distribution of incense. Although some scholars have looked at various aspects of this material, the first thorough evaluation of the ancient sources in the light of modern data was undertaken by Adolf Grohmann. According to van Beek, Grohmann's study, which was published in two parts in 1922 and 1933 (*Südarabien als Wirtschaftsgebiet I, in Osten und Orient*, Vienna, 1922; *Schriften der Philosophischen Fakultät der Deutschen Universität in Prag*, 13, Brünn, 1933), remains the standard work in this field (van Beek 1958, 141).

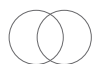
When the incense, the resin of some trees, such as frankincense or olibanum tree (*Boswellia sacra*) and myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*), melts, it emits a pleasant fragrance (Thurible 2021). Sacred frankincense is the tree resin of the *Boswellia sacra* plant, a 2–8-metres high, deciduous semi-desert tree that grows in Yemen, Oman, Somalia, and on the Yemeni island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean. The sacred frankincense is the incense resin used in Christian religious services. The trees start to produce resin when they are about 8–10 years old. The resin is obtained





by making a small, shallow incision in the trunk or branches of the tree or by removing part of the bark. The resin comes out in the form of a milky substance that coagulates in contact with air. The resin is collected by hand. Frankincense was an important commodity in the Middle East and the source of its great wealth. Frankincense has been traded on the Arabian Peninsula for over 5,000 years. The ancient frankincense route led from present-day Yemen through the former Kingdom of Saba to Egypt and via Aqaba to Gaza. Over time, this land route became less important, and trade was carried out by sea. During the Silk Road period, incense was also traded from the Horn of Africa. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that frankincense was harvested from trees in southern Arabia. He reported that collecting the resinous ooze was dangerous because of the winged snakes that guarded the trees and that the smoke from the burning resin drove the snakes away. Incense is also mentioned by Pliny the Elder. Crusaders and other Western Europeans brought it with them to Western Europe on their journeys to the Eastern Roman Empire, where incense was commonly used in religious services. In ancient times, southern Arabia was an exporter of frankincense, which was traded as far away as China. Incense can also mean a mixture of different resins burned for ritual purposes (Shintoism, Buddhism, Orthodox, and Catholic churches). Christian ritual incense burning has its origins in pagan rituals that served to ward off evil spirits, secure the favour of unknown powers, and ensure a rich harvest. Christianity replaced this with its blessings, sacramentals, and offerings such as incense, which later became a symbol of prayer ascending to God. Frankincense is mentioned as one of the gifts that, according to the biblical story, the wise men from the East who came to worship the newborn Jesus brought with them. This was intended to symbolize the divinity of Jesus (Boswellia sacra 2023; Frankincense 2023; Fiebach and Grimm 2000, 7). When offering a Grain Offering to God, the Bible advises believers in several places to take a handful of flour and oil together with frankincense and the priest should burn it on the altar as a memorial offering. It is an offering for a sweet fragrance to God (Leviticus 2, Grain Offerings).

The price of incense used to be high, but today it is more affordable. But the high price is justified because it takes twenty years, from the time the tree is planted, for it to secrete enough resin. During this time, it must be cared for and watered, and the collectors of resin drops must be paid.



This resin must then be dried and turned into an essential oil. The price of frankincense resins on the market includes all of these things. You also need to think about ethical cultivation. The user must remember that a small piece of incense on a burning coal is enough for a religious or other spiritual ceremony.

Another fragrance used in Christian worship is myrrh. Myrrh is a natural gum or resin obtained from small, thorny African-Arabic trees of the genus *Commiphora*. It is obtained by cutting the tree several times so that the resin flows out. Myrrh is waxy and hardens quickly. After picking, it becomes firm and shiny. The resin is yellowish and can be clear or opaque. The older resin is darker and has white streaks. Myrrh is often harvested from the *Commiphora myrrha* tree. Another common name, *Commiphora molmol*, is now considered a synonym of *Commiphora myrrha*. It is native to parts of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, and eastern Ethiopia. The granular, reddish-yellow mass contains gum, resin, essential oil, and bitter substances; it has a pleasant aromatic smell and a bitter taste. In the past, it was used as an incense, perfume, and anti-inflammatory agent (e.g., in the form of a bandage to treat wounds or as a painkiller for toothache), but now it is also used in dental care products as an antiseptic for rinsing the mouth, gargling, toothpaste, and ointments. It is also used in pain-relieving poultices and healing balms as a poultice for abrasions, bruises, sprains, pain, and skin diseases. The uses of myrrh are similar to those of *Boswellia sacra*, with which it is often combined in poultices and ointments and as incense. Its use was already attested in ancient Egypt, where it was one of the ingredients for embalming. Today, it is used as incense for liturgical purposes and is mixed with frankincense and other fragrances in the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the traditional Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican Episcopal Church. Myrrh is also used in the preparation of sacramental chrism (Myrrh 2023).

The chrism (Gr. *khrisma*) is consecrated holy olive oil with a fragrant balsam containing, among other things, myrrh. The priest uses it to anoint the believers during certain Christian ceremonies, e.g., the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, ordination to the priesthood, and the sacrament of consecration. A chrism container is a chrismarium. Chrism is prepared by the bishop on Maundy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter) in a special Chrism Mass. Holy oils were also used to anoint kings during the



coronation ritual (e.g., Napoleon was anointed with chrism by Pope Pius VII). In the Middle East, the Eastern Orthodox Church traditionally uses oil scented with myrrh (and other fragrances) to perform the sacrament of Chrismation (Chisholm 1911; Chrism 2023).

Since olive oil is naturally rich, diffuse, and persistent, it is suitable as a symbol of the abundant flow of sacramental grace, and balsam, which exudes very pleasant and fragrant odours, stands for the sweetness of Christian virtue. Balm protects against corruption, while oil gives strength and flexibility to the limbs. Therefore, the term »anointing with chrism« precisely describes the fullness of grace and the spiritual strength that enables us to ward off the spread of sin and bear fruit that is both delicious and virtuous (Morrisroe 1908).

In the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, myrrh is mentioned as a body odour or a gift, namely in the Book of Psalms in the Royal Wedding Song (Psalm 45), which is characterized by a rich figurative style and is dedicated to the worship of God: »You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions« (Psalm 45:7); and »Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad.« (Psalm 45:8)

Myrrh is further mentioned in the Song of Songs. First in the Solomon's Song of Songs, when the betrothed worships King Solomon of the Jews (Song of Songs 1): »While the king was on his couch [in his enclosure or garden], my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts.« (Song of Songs 1:12-13) However, Zondervan *Encyclopedia of the Bible* states that the words »a bag of myrrh« could not refer to *C. myrrha*. Botanists doubt that it could have been in one of King Solomon's gardens (Tenney 1976, s.v. »Myrrh«).

And the betrothed, in the most famous part of the Song of Songs (Song of Songs 4), after admiring her fiancé, calmly concluded, »Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.« (Song of Songs 4:6-7) »How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance



of your oils than any spice! Your lips distil nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon. A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed. Your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices – a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.« (4:10-15) With these words, he metaphorically opens the door to her fiancé's paradise garden, for she answers him, »Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden that he may eat its choicest fruits.« (4:16) And further, »I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt« (5:5).

The Song of Songs is a love song to a flamboyant eroticism, a celebration of the privileged relationship of a people to its God or an anticipation for others of their spiritual union with Christ. The diffusion of perfumes or aromatics and their power of attraction extend to both carnal and spiritual relations. People did not make use of the same products in everyday life, but fragrant oils and perfumes, as the Song of Songs reminds us, were commonly used to seduce a lover, welcome visitors, or anoint the dead (Le Breton 2017, 155). The Song of Songs calls it »pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant« (3:6).

The Book of Esther (Esther 2) tells the story of the adopted and imprisoned Jewess Esther who saved the Jews in Persia from the massacre prepared by the scheming royal advisor Haman. In the part about Esther becoming queen, it says: »Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics.« (Esther 2:12)

In the New Testament, myrrh is mentioned in connection with the offering of the Magi to Jesus, which was brought at his birth in the Gospel according to Matthew, Visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12): »On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down



and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.«

The fragrances that accompanied Jesus at his birth also accompanied him at his death. The apostle John (John 19), Jesus' favourite disciple, describes the burial of the latter as follows:

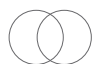
Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds [or about 34 kilograms] Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:38-42)

The New Testament ends in Revelation (Revelation 18) with the fall of Babylon:

The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves. (Revelation 18:11-13)

## 2 Malodour, mentioned in the Bible

In contrast to the good smell of Christ, sin was foul affair, and the correspondence between bad smells and evil was widespread in religious literature. In Mesopotamian mythology, the descent of Ishtar into the underworld was noted for the absence of pleasant odours in the realm of the dead. Sinners were often described as the human equivalent of pigs, wallowing in their sins as if in dung. They took on an unpleasant odour



associated with their offensive activities, and by the 14th century, they had become stinking to God. The lecherous and the heretics supposedly smelled like boars or pigs and carried their stench everywhere. The physical consequences of immorality, such as illness, physical decay, and decomposition, were also regularly interpreted as direct consequences of sin. These and the presence of smell announced the presence of sin. That is, to be mortal was to reek of sin; in other words, life on earth stinks, while heavenly scents come only after death (Reinarz 2014, 43).

The Bible mentions the connection between sin and stench in several places, for example, in relation to hatred: »The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked make themselves a stench and bring shame on themselves« (Proverbs 13:5); or, by refusing to believe in God: »I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.« (Amos 5:21-22)

The stench was not caused by God, neither as a sign of punishment nor of disfavour. Its source was always the work of Satan. It was the result of human sin and the condition brought about by sin. Wherever such odours occurred, whether sulphurous or faecal, they proclaimed the continuing presence of Satan and his threat to the community. Moreover, candidates for sainthood were occasionally warned of sweet odours of diabolical origin. It is not surprising that reports of hell were more often associated with bad odours and hateful exhalations (Reinarz 2014, 43-44).

Sulphur odour, which actually smells like rotten eggs and is usually associated with a natural gas leak, is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments as »burning sulphur« (Genesis 19:24; Deuteronomy 29:23; Job 18:15; Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 30:33;34:9; Ezekiel 38:22; Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8). In the Bible, the smell of sulphur stands for death, immorality, the devil, God's wrath, the punishment of the wicked, and destruction.

The geologist Salomon Kroonenberg (2013) explains that many biblical stories can be explained by geological phenomena. Biblical stories in which sulphur does not come out of the ground but falls from the sky like rain could be a reference to the eruption of Thera around 1600



BC, or perhaps come from one of the volcanoes on the Golan Heights, although they are actually too old, or from the sulphur deposits in Be'eri on the coast, but certainly not from Gehenna or sheol. What hell actually was in the Bible remains unclear. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word sheol is translated as »hell«, but also as »grave« or »pit«. From the texts, it is hard to tell much more than that it was deep underground and that fire blazed there. There is no indication of where sheol was located, and it did not smell of sulphur (Kroonenberg 2013, 19).

In Revelation (20:10), there is the explanation of the punishment, which tells us how the devil was first thrown into the abyss for 1,000 years, after which he was released. Then the beast, the false prophet, the devil himself, and finally »the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur, where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever« (Revelation 20:10; 21:8). So the abyss, the lake of fire, and brimstone are different places, indicating that there is some spatial planning in the underworld. And there is sulphur, which comes from a lake that, according to Kroonenberg, represents the end of a geological mystery that is only revealed at the end of Revelation (2013, 19).

## Summary

In various religious traditions, pleasant odours are often associated with purity, holiness, and spiritual well-being, while bad odours can be associated with impurity, sin, and moral corruption. Despite the seemingly binary nature of scents, their meanings can vary greatly depending on the specific beliefs and practices of each religion. The only way to understand the differences is to read sacred texts and place them in contexts that are known and taken for granted today but were not in the past.



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