

Aloe and Myrrh: modern day analysis of two ancient herbs

By Arif Khan

ALOE AND MYRRH are mentioned in the Gospel as being present immediately after the body of Hadhrat Isa عليه السلام was tended to by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Their presence has often been explained by Christian scholars as being part of an embalming process, whereas Hadhrat Masih Maud عليه السلام in his treatise, “Masih Hindustein Meh” (Jesus in India) described how they were essential ingredients for an ointment applied to Jesus’ wounds. What role do these herbs play today? Can an exploration of their modern day uses throw light on possible events 2000 years ago?

The mention of the herbs appears in the Crucifixion story as it is recorded in the Gospel of John:

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. 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. Taking Jesus’s body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.”

Bible NIV, John (19:38–40)

Many encyclopaedic sources when talking of Aloe and Myrrh immediately link and associate the herbs with the events of the Crucifixion. Myrrh was also one of the gifts reported to have been presented to the baby Jesus by the three wise men who came to visit him travelling from the East. Thus, references to the properties of the herbs are often inseparably linked to the events narrated in the Gospels rather than a purely objective examination. An example of such association with biblical stories can be seen from the entry in

the Wikipedia, one of the most popular online encyclopaedias:

“Myrrh is a constituent of perfumes and incense, and was highly prized in ancient times. Myrrh was one of the gifts of the Magi to the baby Jesus in the story told in the Gospel of Matthew. Myrrh was used as an incense in funerals and cremations, a fact alluded to in the Christmas Carol ‘We Three Kings’”

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As shall be shown shortly these associations have clouded the role of these herbs in their true medicinal context. A similar confusion has been created around the Aloes family of plants. Sources outline how Aloe was thought to have been used during the embalming process of the Egyptians¹. Using this view of Aloe it would be expected to have no particular medicinal or healing properties, as its use appears to be post-mortem.

“Masih Hindustein Meh” by Hadhrat Masih Maud’s عليه السلام, however, presented what even the ancients had known for a long time. Aloe and Myrrh have excellent healing and antiseptic properties and this famous combination has been well documented over the years.

“A piece of evidence of great value with regard to the escape of Jesus from the Cross, which no one can help admitting, is a medical preparation known as Marham-i-Isa or the ‘Ointment of Jesus’ recorded in hundreds of medical books ... eminent physicians of all religions—Christian, Jew, Magian, or Muslim—have all mentioned this preparation in their books, and have stated that it was prepared for Jesus by the disciples”²

If this ointment was really utilising well known properties of Aloe and Myrrh then there should be evidence that such properties were known at the time of the Crucifixion. Surprisingly upon further investigation it becomes clear that knowledge of such properties of Aloes in particular was widespread as far back as 4,000 BC and was well known by the Greeks and Romans.

“Aristotle was aware that the healing properties of Aloe would be invaluable to soldiers wounded in battle and advised his student Alexander III (“the Great”) to conquer all lands that grew it, especially the island of Socotra off the coast of Eastern Africa ... Pedanius Dioscorides, a physician in the Roman army, mentioned medicinal Aloes in his encyclopaedic Greek herbal De Materia Medica (Approximately around 75 BC).”³

“The healing benefits of Aloe were recognized in the ancient Indian, Chinese, Greek, and Roman civilizations. It is traditionally used to heal wounds, relieve itching and swelling, and is known for its anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties.”⁴

Myrrh also is a herb that although often linked to Jesus and his burial was clearly recognised at the time as a healing agent. Aloe is talked about as having properties that help wounds heal and aid the reformation of skin,

whereas Myrrh is used more for anti-inflammatory and anti bacterial reasons:

*"In the past Myrrh was used by many cultures for religious ceremonies and as a healing agent. It was mentioned in the Bible as a gift at the birth of Christ. The Egyptians believed in its healing powers: they burned it every day as part of their worshipping rituals. In the Greek culture when soldiers went to battle is was an essential part of their combat gear because of Myrrh's extremely high antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. It was used to clean wounds and to prevent infection. It was also used to prevent the spread of gangrene in already infected parts of the body."*⁵

Embalming

Were the herbs not used for embalming the body of Jesus? From the sources seen so far the idea of embalming using Aloe has only surfaced in the Egyptian world. It is thought that pharaohs were buried along with Aloes. Was Jesus being embalmed?

To answer this question an examination of Jewish burial customs is needed. Jewish customs have clearly been restricted to washing the body and wrapping it in a clean cloth, there was no embalming. For a body to be embalmed, incisions needed to be made and the internal organs and entrails completely removed. This was understood by the people of the time, and for Jews to make such incisions would not be acceptable.

Evidence to illustrate this aversion to any incisions can be seen from the passing away of Judah, one of the ancestors of modern day Jews, he is recorded as having stated:

*"I die this day at the age of one hundred and nineteen years before your eyes. None shall bury me in a costly garment, nor shall ye cut my body to embalm it, but ye shall carry me to Hebron." Having spoken these words, Judah sank into death"*⁶

It seems unlikely that the Aloes present were for embalming. Having Myrrh there also in large quantities was

not consistent with this hypothesis. It appears far more likely that the excellent healing properties of these herbs were being utilised in an attempt to heal Jesus' wounds and allow him to recover from his ordeal.

Modern Day Use

Today there is an increasing amount of usage of Aloes in products. Gillette series shaving foam now contains what the can calls "soothing Aloes", and a wide range of Aloe-based creams and gels are available mainly for healing of the skin⁷.

Perhaps the most definitive answer on the properties of Aloes comes from a book written by medical experts. "Aloes: The Genus Aloe (Medicinal & Aromatic Plants—Industrial Profiles)" edited by Tom Reynolds. This text represents the most detailed study yet into this fascinating herb. Detailed analysis of the herb is presented and an entire part is devoted to exploring "therapeutic activity" and includes chapters on Aloe's role in wound healing, skin cancer, and the immune system.⁸

Another author, Diane Gage, has chosen to title her book on the subject "Aloe Vera: Nature's Soothing Healer" and her text discusses the biological properties of Aloe Vera, explaining its power to heal the human body, and traces the ways the plant has been used throughout history.

Further evidence appeared in August 2004 when the BBC News ran a story⁹ explaining that scientists at the University of Pittsburgh, through conducting experiments on animals, were able to demonstrate that juice from Aloe Vera was able to preserve organ function in animals that had lost massive volumes of blood. The article explained how high levels of blood loss can send a body in to shock and how extracts from Aloes were shown to be able to allow animals in the experiments to survive longer with low blood pressure.

Conclusion

Aloe and Myrrh appear to be ideal herbs for treating someone who had

suffered an ordeal such as the Crucifixion. Their reported presence at the Crucifixion is strong evidence that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea felt that Jesus could be revived and these herbs were employed to allow the healing of his wounds. The properties of these herbs was understood thousands of years ago and are employed even today in leading pharmaceutical medicines and ointments.

Modern day products, such as shaving foam, are a current testament to the truth in the account of Hadhrat Masih Maud عليه السلام writing in regards to these herbs and support his theory of Hadhrat Isa's عليه السلام survival from the Crucifixion and even describe the treatments used to restore his health. ■

Footnotes

1. asktom-naturally.com/naturally/aloenews.html — Egyptians
2. Ahmad, Mirza Ghulam, Masih Hindustein Meh, London Mosque 1978
3. www.aloe-spectrum.com/body_aloes.htm — Aristotle's view on Aloes
4. www.mapi.com/en/newsletters/aloe_vera.html — healing properties well known in the east.
5. mdmd.essortment.com/whatis-myrrh_riss.htm — myrrh properties explored
6. www.globusz.com/ebooks/LegJew2/00000056.htm — last testament of Judah
7. Reynolds, Barcroft, Myskia Aloe Vera: Nature's Silent Healer, ISBN 095450710X, BAAM Publishing Ltd, 2003
8. Reynolds, Tom Aloes: The Genus Aloe, ISBN 0415306728, Taylor & Francis, 2004
9. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3929471.stm — BBC News "Aloe vera may treat battle wounds"