

ANOINT, ANOINTING

In considering how to translate the word “anoint”, it is necessary to know something about the Jewish customs concerning anointing people, and also what significance anointing may have in the receptor-language culture.

The word “anoint” has two senses in the New Testament:

- 1. To put oil (or some similar substance) on somebody**
 - (a) For personal care
 - (b) To welcome a guest
 - (c) To honour someone
 - (d) To prepare a body for burial
 - (e) When praying for the healing of a sick person
 - (f) To apply a substance to somebody's eyes
- 2. To appoint someone to a special position, appointment to a special position**

The second of these senses is figurative. It developed from the Jewish custom of anointing a person with oil as a sign that he had been appointed for a special position, as king or priest or (more rarely) as prophet. For example, Samuel anointed Saul to show that God had appointed him to be king (1 Samuel 10:1). Later the word “anoint” was used to refer to the appointment of someone to a special position even when no oil was put on him. This second sense occurs in the New Testament both in the verb form “to anoint” and the noun form “anointing”.

1. To put oil (or some similar substance) on somebody

Unless stated otherwise the Greek word is *αλειπρω*.

In Jewish culture, this action of anointing people was done for a number of different reasons:

(a) For personal care

The Jews rubbed oil into their hair and skin for daily personal care. The oil was often sweet smelling, like pomade (pleasantly scented oil or ointment to rub on the body).

Matt. 6:17 . . . when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

Matthew 6:17 teaches that when a person fasts, he should take the usual care of his body so that there is no outward sign that he is fasting. This teaching was necessary because of the behaviour of some of the Pharisees when they

were fasting. So that everyone would know they were fasting and would think they were holy people, they deliberately did not wash themselves or anoint their heads.

✍ Suggestions for translating Matthew 6:17:

If it is customary for the people in your area to rub oil on themselves for personal care, then you will probably have no difficulty in translating this passage. But if this is not customary, then you may have to translate in a more general way to make the teaching clear.

When you fast, wash your face and	†	prepare yourself as usual	†
	†	tidy yourself	†
	†		†

(b) To welcome a guest

Amongst the Jews, when a host received a guest into his home, it was the custom for the host to give the guest water to wash (or to have a servant wash his feet for him) and then to pour some oil over his head. This oil (Greek *ελαιον*) was made from the fruit of olive trees and may sometimes have been slightly scented.

In Luke 7:46, the Pharisee had failed to show normal politeness to his guest:

Luke 7:46 You did not anoint my head with oil . . .

NIV You did not put oil on my head . . .

(c) To honour someone

On two occasions women anointed Jesus with perfume to honour him. They used expensive perfume (Greek *μυρον*), pouring it over his feet, thus showing special devotion and respect.

Luke 7:38 . . . [she] kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

NIV . . . [she] kissed them [his feet], and poured perfume on them.

Luke 7:46 . . . but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

NIV . . . but she has poured perfume on my feet.

John 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair

NIV Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

See also: John 11:2.

RSV uses the word "ointment" to translate the Greek *μυρον*. In modern English, "ointment" refers to a kind of medicine, but in these biblical contexts, the substance was not a kind of medicine but a perfume, a kind of oil that smelled sweet. NIV translates it well as "perfume".

Suggestions for translating “to anoint” in senses 1b and 1c:

In many receptor-language cultures, there may be no custom equivalent to anointing a guest with oil to welcome him, or to pouring perfume over someone to show him honour. In translating these passages, it may be that the situation and context will be sufficient to communicate the purpose for which the action was done in each case. This is something to find out when testing the translation. (Ask, “Why did Mary pour the perfume over Jesus’ feet?”) If it is not clear, then it may be necessary to make the purpose explicit.

A note on Hebrews 1:9

In Hebrews 1:9 “anoint” is used in a similar context. The verse is part of a quotation from Psalm 45, which is a wedding song for the king. The writer of Hebrews applies it to the triumphant Son of God. Apparently God anoints him with oil in order to celebrate the righteous actions he had done on earth.

Heb. 1:9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy. (NIV)

TEV . . . and has given you the joy of an honor far greater than he gave to your companions.

lit. . . . God has anointed you with the oil of joy above/in-preference-to your companions.

Suggestion for translating Hebrews 1:9:

Although this is not a literal anointing but a symbolic action, the symbol may best be retained together with an explanation:

. . . That is why God, the one you serve, has poured oil on your head, it shows that all are rejoicing at what you have done, (in this way) he has honoured you, and not (*or*: he has not honoured) your companions.

(d) To prepare a body for burial

It was the custom among the Jews that when a person died, the body was washed and anointed by women in preparation for burial. In Mark 16:1, the anointing was done by pouring perfumed oil (Greek *αρωματα*) over the body. The purpose was to show respect for the person. The word *αρωματα* is translated in many English versions as “spices”, but note that the reference is to perfumed oil, not to herbs used to flavour food.

Mark 16:1 Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

REB Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought aromatic oils, intending to go and anoint him;

Mark 14:8 . . . she has anointed my body beforehand for burying.

Mark 14:8 has a different Greek verb, *μυρίζω* (related to the noun *μύρον* “perfume”), but the meaning in this context is the same.

 Suggestion for translating “to anoint” in sense 1d:

to pour pomade/(perfumed) oil over someone

(e) When praying for the healing of a sick person

The disciples of Jesus and the early Christians often anointed sick people with oil when they asked God to heal them. Most commentators think they poured or smeared oil on the forehead of the person as a symbolic action. But rubbing or massaging a person’s body with oil was practised routinely as a medical treatment in the ancient world, as indeed it is still practised today in some cultures. However, it is clear that Christians did not believe the oil had magical properties, but that it was by praying to God in faith that the miraculous power of God was released to heal the person.

James 5:14 . . . let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

See also: Mark 6:13.

 Suggestions for translating “to anoint” in sense 1e:

In translating these passages, consider again the receptor-language culture. Is there any comparable custom or ceremony in which a sick person is “anointed” with some substance? This may provide an appropriate word, but it is important to make sure that it will be appropriate for speaking of God’s healing power not magical or demonic powers.

Some translators have wished to specify that it is the head or forehead that was anointed, but there is no firm evidence of this.

(f) To apply a substance to somebody’s eyes to heal them

A common medical treatment for eye infections was to apply an ointment. This is referred to in Rev. 3:18:

Rev. 3:18 . . . [buy from me] salve to anoint (Greek *εὐχρησιω*) your eyes, that you may see.

TEV . . . buy also some ointment to put on your eyes, so that you may see.

The word “salve” (TEV “ointment”) means an ointment for medical treatment.

When healing people who were blind, Jesus sometimes applied his saliva to their eyes.

John 9:6 . . . he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle [i.e. a paste made of the spittle and earth] and anointed (Greek *επιχρητω*) the man's eyes with the clay.

NIV . . . he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.

See also: John 9:11.

 Suggestion for translating “to anoint (eyes)”:

smear, apply (something) (to the person's eyes)

2. To appoint someone to a special position (Greek *χρητω*),
appointment to a special position (Greek *χρησιμα*)

In Jewish custom, a very important function of anointing a person with oil was as a sign of his divine appointment to an official position. This custom is illustrated by a number of passages in the Old Testament. In the great majority of these, the reference is to appointment **as a king** (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13) or **as a high priest** (Exodus 29:7). There is one passage where the reference is to appointment **as a prophet** (1 Kings 19:16).

In the New Testament, however, the word is used only figuratively. That is, no actual action of pouring oil takes place. Rather, the word means to appoint a person for a special task.

Acts 4:27 . . . against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint.

TEV . . . against Jesus, your holy Servant, whom you made Messiah.

See also: Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38.

In 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, which speaks of God's faithfulness, the apostle Paul refers to Christians as having been anointed by God.

2 Cor. 1:21–22 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us [NIV anointed us]; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

i.e., ²¹ it is God who keeps us secure together with you as those who belong to Christ; he has appointed us to represent him (*or*: he has given us the sign that we are his representatives); ²² he has put his seal/mark on us to show that he owns us, he has given us the Spirit as a pledge (of the good things to come).

In 1 John, in a passage where John warns his readers about false teaching, there are several references to Christians having an “anointing” (Greek *χρησιμα*).

1 John 2:20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One . . .

lit. But you have an anointing from the Holy One . . .

TEV But you have had the Holy Spirit poured out on you by Christ . . .

1 John 2:27 the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.

NLT But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true.

In this passage in 1 John the word “anointing” is used figuratively, perhaps in contrast to pagan religions in which people believed that by being anointed with oil they were initiated into secret knowledge. John says any person who puts his faith in Christ receives an “anointing”. Just as in Old Testament times, priests and prophets were anointed with oil as a mark of their appointment, so in the New Testament, all believers receive the Holy Spirit as the mark of their calling. The Holy Spirit communicates to God’s people, revealing the truth about Jesus Christ to them and preventing them from being led astray by false teaching. See also the article on advocate, counsellor.

 Suggestions for translating 1 John 2:20:

As for you,

†	†		†	†		†	†
†	†	The Holy One	†	†	has put his Spirit within you	†	†
†	†	Christ himself	†	†	has sent his Spirit to stay with you	†	†
†	†	You have received the Holy Spirit from (the hands of) Christ	†	†		†	†

(to show that you belong to him)

 Suggestions for translating 1 John 2:27:

(1) The Holy Spirit whom you have received from him is living/staying within you, and you do not need anyone else to teach you anything. The Holy Spirit (who is) within you teaches you everything.

(2) You have received the Holy Spirit and he lives within you. Therefore you do not need anyone else to teach you, because he will teach you everything.

 **Suggestions for translating “anoint” in sense 2:**

It is important to consider whether, in the receptor-language culture, there is any comparable ceremony of anointing a person with oil to show that he has been appointed for an important position and to perform a special task. If so, it may be possible to keep the word “anoint”. But test carefully to find out whether the meaning of “specially appointed” is being communicated.

In most languages it will be preferable to drop the idea of “pour oil on” and translate the essential meaning of “appoint, choose for a special position/task”.

Note on a related form

The word “Christ” (Greek *Χριστος*) is related to the Greek verb *χρηιω* “anoint”. It means “the anointed one”, that is, “the one who is specially appointed (by God)”. See the article on CHRIST.

For further study

Brunotte, W. and D. Müller, Article ‘Anoint’ in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, pages 119–124.

