



## Essential Oil Healing – From Antiquity to Modern Times

BY Sana Turnock

*Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant? Song 3:6*

No quality text on aromatherapy is considered complete without exploration of essential oils' role in ancient human civilisations. Such historical references are important if a thorough, well-rounded, appreciation of the field is to be achieved.

Skin care, general health and wellness, pregnancy and childbirth are among the ancients' more practical applications of essential oils, while their use in ceremonies, for spiritual and purification purposes, perfumery and even the embalming of royalty are also widely recorded.

The anointing of prophets and kings, and poisoning, are perhaps not so widely known, but oils were certainly used for these reasons.

Essential oils have also had their fair share of admirers among the wealthy and influential. For example, it is said that Egyptian Queen Nefertiti bathed in aromatic oils and kept her face soft with the use of milk, honey and aromatic plants. Cleopatra had her own perfume garden so as to indulge her passion for fragrances. So confident was the Ptolemaic Queen of the power of aroma that it's claimed she wooed her lover Mark Antony to Egypt by soaking her barge sails with an alluring aromatic perfume. From all accounts it worked.

But an intimate moment shared between Mary Magdalene and her beloved Jesus Christ tells us that it was not only the wealthy and powerful who used essential oils for healing and health. Using the costly oil of Spikenard, Mary anointed the feet of Christ and wiped his feet with her wet hair. One can only assume the slightly pungent aroma that enveloped them.

Today, we refer to the liquid essences distilled from plants as essential oils. In ancient times, however, essential oils were used interchangeably with incense, resin, perfume, aromatic oil, ointment, spice, fragrance and aroma.

In their various guises, these sacred plant elixirs have been revered throughout history, arguably in no 'historical text' more so than the Bible.

According to prolific author, internationally renowned aromatherapist, and educator, Dr David Stewart, there are more than 500 references to essential oils (in their aforementioned forms) in the holy book. Those to feature most often include Frankincense and Myrrh, as well as Cedarwood, Cassia, Calamus and Galbanum. Cypress, Hyssop and Spikenard are also included among the top dozen or so.

Among his many qualifications Dr Stewart has a Doctorate in Natural Medicine, which was awarded to him in 2004 by the World Organisation of Natural Medicine Practitioners. But it was in his role as a part time United Methodist Pastor in the 1990s that he first became aware the healing power of essential oils as written in the Bible.

This discovery, and subsequent study, prompted Dr Stewart to develop and facilitate education programs on the subject. In 2003 he published his book, *Healing Oils of the Bible*.

His own faith in the healing power of essential oils was tested soon after when an old knee injury flared up and was diagnosed as osteoarthritic. Rejecting suggestions of knee replacement surgery, Dr Stewart instead turned to prayer, asking for God's guidance.

"As I had already been using essential oils in my work I asked God to help me use the gifts that had been given to me in a way that would heal the osteoarthritic pain," he said.

"Cypress and Wintergreen were the oils revealed to me. After rubbing these oils neat on the knee, twice daily for two months, there was no more pain."

Although the healing wasn't instant, the injury was healed nonetheless.

"When people read the Bible there is an impression that when healing took place it was instant. This is not the case," Dr Stewart said.

"The word *iaomai*, which means 'instant healing' in Greek, is mentioned 30 times in the New Testament. The word *therapeuo*, also mentioned in the New Testament, means 'gradual healing'. This is mentioned some 50 times. Such healing comes about from nurturing yourself and being cared for by others. This is important for people to understand when using essential oils. In order to heal, you need to do the work to get to the cause as well as apply essential oils."

Dr Stewart is a firm believer in the linkages between physical illness and emotional states of being. His interpretation of 'sin' so often found in both the New and Old testaments, is that this not so much a reference to negative action, but

rather mind-disturbing emotions such as anger, pride and jealousy.

To illustrate his point, Dr Stewart paraphrases a passage from the Book of Proverbs. "A merry heart doeth good like medicine, a broken heart is like dried up bones. Think about what is in bone – blood and marrow. When this dries up, immunity decreases. This then manifests as illness," he said.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lavender and Tea Tree are known around the world for their potent relaxation and antiseptic/antibacterial properties respectively. Arguably, Eucalyptus (*radiata*) would be considered high on the list of essential oils (in Australia anyway) used in the home due to its fragrant aroma and strong antiseptic and antiviral properties. Mixed with solubiliser and water and then placed in a spray bottle, this fresh scent makes for an excellent kitchen bench and toilet spray.

While the kitchen bench tops and toilets of biblical times might bear little resemblance to those of today, there certainly was a single essential oil that served a multitude of purposes – Frankincense. Considered expensive back then as it still is now, Frankincense was used "from gout to a broken hip and everything in between", according to Dr Stewart.

It was commonly used as an antiseptic and for helping to improve eyesight.

Dr Stewart also claims the sacred oil of Frankincense was used to anoint the body of baby Jesus. It was an accepted practice and common knowledge that when a baby was anointed with a renowned oil like Frankincense, such a child was the son of a king.

Along with Myrrh, Frankincense was used to treat diseases of the feet. What we term as 'athlete's foot' was among them. Not to be outdone by its resin cousin, Myrrh was used to decrease the stretch mark lines on pregnant bellies and to clean the umbilical cord after birth. It was also frequently used in general skin care.

According to Dr Stewart there was a role for Myrtle in the domestic lives of those in the Holy Lands some 2000 years ago. Domesticated livestock played an important part in the lives of the people in Jesus' time and shepherds commonly crushed Myrtle leaves into the palms of their hands to heal the cuts and grazes they routinely received while tending their flocks. The leaves' antiseptic properties quickly worked to repair damage and protect from infection.

While the production may be more high-tech, and the commercialisation and packaging more sophisticated, essential oils today in many ways perform roles similar to those of two millennia ago. All you need to do is walk into department stores, natural health shops, markets and specialist boutiques to see how popular aromatherapy-based cosmetic products have become. From face, bath, hair and body care for all members of the family, through to pet care and domestic uses, these products have

become integrated into how we choose to care for our wellbeing – in a superficial commercial way at least.

Just as they were in biblical times, essential oils today are still rubbed, massaged, anointed and applied to the body.

Researchers and those more generally associated with the essential oil industry continue to use, adapt, and learn from methods developed by our ancestors. Aromatherapy is a vast field and over the past decade some institutions, both here and overseas, are now offering a degree status qualification in the subject. Gone are the days when the knowledge passed on from generation to generation provided enough kudos for industry employment.

A broad range of options is now available to students of aromatherapy, from a career in education, manufacturing, consulting, product development, distillation or research. Practitioners can choose to work with essential oils holistically (taking into consideration all aspects of a human being including the spiritual), medically (choose your field of interest), psychologically and energetically (using essential oils for chakra reflex and meridian balancing for instance).

One of the most exciting modern developments in aromatherapy has been in the study of essential oil compounds. This has opened the door for essential oils to be recognised as a complementary health discipline, able to assist with medical conditions. A rather powerful example is given by Dr Stewart.

"I have known a couple of incidences where Frankincense has healed a serious head injury. In one case a boy entered hospital after sustaining severe head injuries in an accident. The mother continued to use Frankincense neat on the head for an hour. The boy survived and ended up becoming a valedictorian."

Dr Stewart believes a combination of the sesquiterpene compounds contained in Frankincense, which are known to oxygenate the brain, and the mother's regular application of the oil in the first hour, was responsible for the successful outcome in this case. Sesquiterpenes are also recognised for their calming, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and spasmolytic (ease spasms) properties.

It seems the Egyptians were onto something when they used plant oils internally for embalming. It is a relief to know that the internal use of essential oils did not remain buried with the mummified bodies of ancient pharaohs and royalty. With technology, a growing interest in phytotherapy and substantial funding by large cosmetic companies, aromatic plant compounds are being studied at a microcosmic level, with much of this research currently taking place within European universities.

French aromatic medicine specialist Dr Daniel Penoel claims important discoveries have been made by studying essential oils with strong phenolic and limonene molecules.

Phenolic molecules exhibit potent anti-infectious and anti-inflammatory properties, and there is hope they could be used alongside, or in time replace, synthetic antibiotics in destroying virulent bacterial strains.

The limonene molecule, having been rejected by the perfume industry as being mundane, has made a name for itself by preventing the formation and continued growth of cancer, according to Dr Penoel. Although there is much debate over the internal use of essential oils currently, in a few short years, it is bound to change. And it needs to.

Where to next? Have you heard about hydrosols? They are, essentially, the waters left over from a distilled essential oil. Fragrant and filled with useful compounds not picked up during distillation, hydrosols are safe, effective and more gentle to use than essential oils. However, as space is short, I'll leave the hydrosol story for another time.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Bibliography**

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