

Religious symbols . . . reek of meaning

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### A Martyr's Scent

Around the year 155 A.D., the elderly bishop Polycarp was martyred in the city of Smyrna on charges of refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Christian witnesses to Polycarp's execution wrote a letter reporting the event to their neighboring church in the city of Philomelium in Phrygia. But they addressed their letter further to "the holy Church in every place;" it quickly circulated throughout the Christian communities of the Roman Empire and beyond. By their epistle the Christians of Smyrna intended to render account of the hardships they had suffered in persecution, culminating in the death of their renowned and beloved leader. They also needed to make sense of his death, for themselves and for Christians everywhere.

Accordingly, the letter abounds with allusions to the rich literary traditions surrounding the classical concept of the "noble death,"<sup>2</sup> amply demonstrated with descriptions of Polycarp's serenity, steadfastness under torture, and calm acceptance of execution. More importantly, the writers declared that Polycarp had chosen his death on behalf of all believers and not simply for his own salvation. Overt parallels were drawn between Polycarp's final days and the passion narratives of Jesus of Nazareth. Such presentation depicts Polycarp's death in unequivocal terms as a true martyrdom honorable to divine as well as human eyes.

A further interpretive strategy of the letter was the Smyrneans' use of familiar sensory impressions to articulate what had taken place. The witnesses told

of Polycarp's arrest, his brief trial, and his execution in the public stadium of the city in the presence of the gathered populace. Then they described their own experience of Polycarp's martyrdom:

. . . the men in charge of the fire started to light it. A great flame blazed up and those of us to whom it was given to see beheld a miracle. And we have been preserved to recount the story to others. For the flames, bellying out like a ship's sail in the wind, formed into the shape of a vault and thus surrounded the martyr's body as with a wall. And he was within it not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being purified in a smelting furnace. And from it we perceived such a delightful fragrance as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume.

At last when these vicious men realized that his body could not be consumed by the fire they ordered a *confector* to go up and plunge a dagger into the body. When he did this there came out such a quantity of blood that the flames were extinguished.<sup>3</sup>

The experience these Christian witnesses claimed was one in which their senses redefined the event. The fire they saw enshrined rather than destroyed their bishop. The air they breathed billowed with the aroma of baking bread—the comforting promise of daily sustenance, and for Christians the center of (sacrificial) fellowship in the name of Christ. Moreover, the fire seemed not to destroy Polycarp's body, but rather to purify it as in a crucible, until the air no longer carried the stench of burning flesh, but instead a fragrance as sweet as frankincense, the precious savor of sacrifice pleasing to God. The dove recalled the presence of the Holy Spirit at Christ's baptism (Mk 1:10; Mt 3:16; Lk 3:22), and blood pouring from the martyr's side recalled Christ's own crucifixion (Jn 19:34). Visuality framed this scene, starting with fire and ending with blood. But olfactory experience marked its meaning, as the smells of bread and frankincense signalled the supreme moment of Christian offering ("This is my body . . . broken for you"). With a few, deft, sensory images—a glimpse, a fragrance, a texture—Polycarp's followers rendered a deeply traumatic event into a theological teaching that would become foundational for the emerging Christian identity. Their bishop's death was neither meaningless nor a defeat. Rather, it had been a pure and holy sacrifice acceptable to God. Like the death of Jesus Christ to which it conformed in style and manner, it heralded the promise of salvation, eternal life, for all believers.

Of all the imagery that laced the Smyrneans' letter, that of frankincense carried particular poignancy because of its universal association with sacrificial offering.<sup>4</sup> In the religious systems of the ancient Mediterranean world, sacrifice

was the central component of community order and identity. In its most basic sense, sacrifice was a relational activity. The ritual processes of sacrifice established and maintained the relationships that bound the human order to the divine one. Moreover, through ritual roles, functions, and sequenced actions, sacrifice articulated the ties that constituted the human social order. It demarcated distinctions and connections within the local community, and of the local community in relation to larger political and ethnic structures. Sacrifice maintained an ordered cosmos, inclusive of human and divine domains.<sup>5</sup>

From the simple to the complex, Mediterranean sacrificial practices could be—and in ancient texts almost always were—characterized by the smells they generated. Incense was burned along the route the ritual procession would follow, and at the location where the rite was held. Flowers, wreaths, and perfumes adorned altars, cult statues, sacrificial victims, ritual leaders, ritual garments, and participants. Libations added the scent of (perfumed) wine. On the occasions of animal sacrifice, the smell of blood and roasting or boiling meat deepened the multiple aromas.<sup>6</sup> Because fire was a frequent component, these smells were associated further with their accompanying smoke. In the smoke, the combined smells of the ritual process could be seen to pass, literally, from earth to heaven. Lucian described animal sacrifice in just such terms, as olfactorily visual: “A godly steam, and fit for godly nostrils, rises heavenwards, and drifts to each quarter of the sky.”<sup>7</sup>

The “scent” of sacrifice was thus diverse, comprised of the offering and all that attended and adorned the sequence of ritual actions. It might be as simple as frankincense alone; it might carry the grand fragrances of extravagant ceremony.<sup>8</sup> But to the ancients—whether Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, Jew—the savor of sacrifice required “beauty” if it was to be worthy, or even appropriate, for the deity to whom it was offered. Fragrance was itself an attribute of divinity, and of everything characterizing the divine. Gods and goddesses could be recognized by the perfumed scent they wafted; their divine abodes were redolent with sweet scents.<sup>9</sup> Rich flora and fauna adorned the places dear to them in the natural world,<sup>10</sup> and the marvelous utopias of legend where the inhabitants dwelt always in the gods’ favor.<sup>11</sup> Those humans whose lives demonstrated exceptional blessing themselves exhaled a wondrous scent, near to the divine as they were.<sup>12</sup> Altars, devotees, and sacrificers bedecked with flowers were known to be especially cherished by the gods.<sup>13</sup> The stench of wounds or illness—marks of human mortality—could invalidate religious activities: in Greek myth, Philoctetes had been exiled on the island of Lemnos when Odysseus and his men feared the stink from his wound would pollute their sacrifices.<sup>14</sup>

Incense was not necessarily the only offering, nor the most important or powerful one, but it was a general accompaniment to sacrificial rituals of all kinds.

Its scent was a marker of the occasion, and in any context “incense” could be a term equivalent to “sacrifice.” Unlike animal sacrifice, which provided meat for the priests and community to eat, incense offerings left no usable product. Hence incense was the quintessential example of the whole burnt offering, the holocaust—a cheaper, simpler alternative to animal holocaust, and one that effectively represented the sacrificial process in larger terms. In Roman times especially, it gained exalted status for just this reason. Eunapius described the “poor and humble” house of the philosopher Julian of Cappadocia as so fragrant with incense that it resembled “a holy temple.”<sup>15</sup> Apollonius of Tyana offered only frankincense, but could tell from the path of the smoke and the qualities of the fire as it burned that his prayer was accepted.<sup>16</sup> Plutarch spoke with admiration of the Egyptian practice of offering incense three times daily to the sun: resin in the morning, myrrh at noon, and a compound of sixteen spices at evening. The last, he noted, was “not put together haphazardly, but whenever the unguent-makers are mixing these ingredients, sacred writings are read out to them.”<sup>17</sup>

The burning of incense was understood to be transformative rather than destructive. It changed the ordinary matter of resin or gum into exquisite fragrance, a substance intangible yet perceptible both by scent and by sight of the fragrant smoke. Altered or “purified” by burning, incense travelled heavenward: a physical image of ascent that mirrored both polytheistic and Jewish cosmologies. The image of prayer rising up like incense to the deity was common across religious traditions. Christians themselves cited Psalm 141.2 (LXX 140.2) on innumerable occasions: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, / and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!” At the same time, sacrificial incense was not only itself a transformed substance. It had the capacity to transform the human worshipper who offered it, or even encountered it, into a state of exceptional piety. Its lingering scents attuned the mind to devotion and adoration both before and long after the act of sacrifice had taken place. Thus the extraordinary beauty of the temple to the Syrian Goddess in Phoenician Hierapolis was measured by its fragrance: a fragrance that marked the faithful indelibly thereafter:

An ambrosial fragrance comes [from that temple], such as they say comes from the land of Arabia. And as you approach even from a distance it sends forth a scent that is very pleasant. And as you depart, it does not leave you. Your clothes retain the scent for a long time, and you remember it forever.<sup>18</sup>

Incense carried similar significations in the various religions of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>19</sup> Christians, however, took scripture as their conceptual guide.

They drew their imagery from the elaborate traditions of ancient Judaism where the smells of burnt sacrifice were remembered as part of their earliest cultic activities, and textually represented in such terms.<sup>20</sup> Cain and Abel had made the first burnt offerings, Abel's acceptable to God and Cain's not (Gen 4:3–5). When Noah offered sacrifice “of every clean animal and every clean bird” after the flood subsided, “the Lord smelled the pleasing odor” and granted divine blessing in return (Gen 8:20–9:1). Incense offerings were prominent in the cultic system institutionalized in the First Temple.<sup>21</sup> In the Second Temple period, the prescriptions of Exodus 30, Leviticus 2 and 16 were taken as programmatic and upheld as the ideal in any depiction of proper Jewish worship thereafter.<sup>22</sup> Jews used these passages as their guides, whether opposing the Jerusalem Temple cult, as did the Qumran communities on the grounds that the priestly line was corrupt; or, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., when envisioning its reestablishment at some future time.<sup>23</sup> These same passages would also prove foundational for Christian incense imagery, and later, for Christian incense practices.

In their representations of the ideal temple and its ideal use, the biblical texts set incense among a complex of fragrances that served to demarcate sacred space, sacred action, and sacred identity. Exodus 30 gave instructions for building the incense altar, which was to be made of the odoriferous acacia wood. Set in place before the veil of the ark of the covenant, the altar was to be used for incense offerings only; other burnt offerings, or cereal offerings, or libations, were to be performed elsewhere. Incense was to be burned by the priest twice daily, at morning and evening, as “a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations” (Ex 30:8). Instructions follow for making the holy oil with which to anoint the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the ritual furniture and implements, and the incense altar, as well as the priests. It should be composed of liquid myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic cane, cassia, and olive oil, “blended as by the perfumer” (Ex 30:25). In turn, the holy incense was to be composed of sweet spices in equal parts: stacte, onycha, galbanum, frankincense, and salt. Both the holy oil and the holy incense were to be utterly exclusive in their usage: “This shall be my holy anointing oil [God commands]. . . . It shall not be poured upon the bodies of ordinary men, and you shall make no other like it in composition. . . . [This incense] you shall not make for yourselves; it shall be for you holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”<sup>24</sup> It was this holy incense of which the high priest was to take two handfuls, “beaten small,” to offer once a year at the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement, that its clouds might protect him in the presence of God.<sup>25</sup>

In whatever forms these prescriptions were enacted, holy oil and holy incense gave unique fragrance to the Temple and its rituals. Other fragrances

heightened the sensory quality of cultic activity. Cereal and bread offerings were spiced with frankincense.<sup>26</sup> Lamps scented the air with their oil; the cleansing rituals mandated for the Temple area, the priests, and their garments would also have contributed distinctive smells. While animal slaughter and cooking meat are often thought to be the primary odors of sacrifice, Jewish tradition—like that of their Greek and Roman neighbors—set its sacrifices in the midst of air already dense with complex and pungent ritual aromas.

Although we may rightly expect that there was diversity in practice, the ideal paradigm formulated during the Second Temple period restricted burnt sacrifices, including incense, to the Jerusalem Temple. The role of sacred smells in Jewish ritual practices performed in other locations is not entirely clear. Spices were set out for the Sabbath observance, but there is no evidence that they were burned as an incense offering.<sup>27</sup> Archaeological evidence from synagogues of the Roman period may indicate incense use despite the Temple restriction. Whether or not certain implements found in excavations were incense shovels or burners, and whether or not they were employed as such as part of sacred rituals, remain contested questions.<sup>28</sup> Since, as we will see, the burning of incense was also a standard means of cleaning buildings, the presence of implements for that purpose need not indicate more than hygienic usage—which, in a special building, could well have been conducted with special utensils even when not part of sacred ritual. Nonetheless, the centralization of the priestly cultic system during the Second Temple period meant that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. forced dramatic changes in Jewish ritual practices. While certain rituals were eventually relocated to the synagogues, the sacrificial system as a cultic one was not reconstituted in another form. Other activities emerged in Jewish practice as sacrificial in nature. But Jews did not cease to understand themselves as belonging to a religion that practiced Temple sacrifice involving burnt offerings. Instead, burnt sacrifice was understood to be suspended until such time as the Temple would again be built and consecrated. In the meantime, holy tradition upheld the memory of the richly scented Temple: “. . . from Jericho they could smell the smell at the compounding of the incense. R. Eleazar b. Diglai said: My father’s house kept goats in the mountain of Machwar, and they used to sneeze from the smell of the compounding of the incense.”<sup>29</sup>

Within the ideal put forward in Exodus 30 and Leviticus 16, incense as a component of Jewish sacrificial ritual is shown to have had certain characteristics. Most often (but not always), it was an accompaniment to the sacrificial system and not a central focus. Varieties of offerings were mandated in the Torah: incense, libations, grains, birds, animals. Varieties of functions were identified for those sacrifices: they expiated sins, propitiated blessings, offered

thanks, offered praise, marked covenants, defined identity and location. Overall, however, animal sacrifice held a certain primacy. Blood—its shedding, collection, sprinkling, and pouring—was a major concern.<sup>30</sup> Animal sacrifice allowed for offerings shared between God and God's people, when certain portions were burned and others cooked for consumption by the priests or the community.<sup>31</sup> For ancient Israel, its most potent form was the holocaust, or whole burnt offering: that offering wholly destroyed and thereby wholly given to God. In biblical texts, incense offerings were often contributions to sacrifice, rather than its constituent element.

Even so, incense appears to have been uniquely significant in function. Biblical texts apart from those related to the Temple cult refer to incense as a sweet savor pleasing to God. Within the cultic system proper, the Jerusalem Temple itself could not operate as required without it. Incense offerings demarcated temple space as sacred, yielding fragrance unique to the God whose temple it was; incense offerings enshielded and protected its priests at its most sacred ritual, the annual Day of Atonement. The mere scent of incense could image the cultic tradition as a whole.

Alone of the ancient Mediterranean religions, early Christianity followed the customs neither of animal sacrifice nor of incense offerings. These omissions of practice are striking because both were integral to Jewish Temple cult as well as to the many pagan cults of the Mediterranean world out of which Christianity emerged. Yet Christians assumed themselves to be, and presented themselves as, a sacrificing people. Biblical literature provided them a ready means to do so. Clement of Alexandria could give a "spiritual" reading of a biblical text, interpreting it in ethical rather than literal terms, and his reading assumes an audience already familiar with such modes of interpretation: "If anyone object that the great High Priest, the Lord, offers up to God incense of sweet odor, let this not be understood as the sacrifice and good odor of incense, but as the acceptable gift of love, a spiritual fragrance on the altar, that the Lord offers up."<sup>32</sup> Again, Origen could offer a "symbolic" reading, likening the composition of holy incense in Leviticus 24:7 to the diverse virtues that, when compounded together, constitute pure prayer. The relationship was typological. Certainly, he admonished, God had not commanded such elaborate instructions simply to encourage the international spice trade:

The type of incense symbolizes prayer. . . . For do not think that the omnipotent God commanded this and consecrated this in the Law that incense be brought from Arabia. But this is the incense that God seeks to be offered by human beings to him, from which he receives a "pleasing odor," prayers from a pure heart and good conscience in which God truly receives a pleasing warmth.<sup>33</sup>

Yet Christians had no reason to think of themselves as other than a sacrificing people. Jesus and his followers had been active participants in the Jerusalem Temple cult. Jewish biblical traditions provided ample means for interpreting the death of Jesus in sacrificial terms, and allusions to the Psalms or the Prophets that carried such sense were sprinkled through gospel accounts, particularly in the passion narratives.<sup>34</sup> Epistolary admonitions drew on the same motifs, as in Ephesians 5:2: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The Letter to the Hebrews directly negotiated the sacrificial heritage of Judaism when it relocated Temple cult into the person and action of Jesus Christ, sacrifice and sacrificer.<sup>35</sup> Revelation 5:8 and 8:3–5 presented incense offerings as continual in the heavenly sanctuary.

The apostle Paul filled his letters with allusions to the Temple practices that he himself observed along with others of the apostolic community, prior to the Temple’s destruction in 70 C.E.<sup>36</sup> Thus he described the gifts the Philippians sent to him as “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”<sup>37</sup> So, too, did he describe the consequences of his work: “Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.”<sup>38</sup> In one particularly trenchant passage, Paul used the olfactory dimensions of sacrifice to indicate the critical epistemological qualities carried by the experience of smell. In 2 Corinthians 2:14–16 he wrote:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance (*osmen*) of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma (*euodia*) of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance (*osme*) from death to death, to the other a fragrance (*osme*) from life to life.

Scholars have long debated Paul’s use of imagery in this passage, and the degree to which its sacrificial language drew more strongly from Jewish or pagan practices.<sup>39</sup> Some have wished to see it as evidence for distinctive ritual anointings in the earliest Christian communities, although there is little evidence to support such a view.<sup>40</sup> Rather, in literary terms, Paul engages a number of *topoi* familiar from both biblical and philosophical traditions: the notion that divine Wisdom gives forth a fragrance, or that virtue itself yields fragrance;<sup>41</sup> that divine knowledge yields moral transformation in the one who receives it, and so, too, that the wise person’s speech or character has a transformative impact on his or her followers; the belief that inhaling the breath of a divinity, or of a wise person, can instill wisdom or virtue.<sup>42</sup> These were the same *topoi* to be used, for example, when Ignatius of Antioch instructed the Ephesians, “For this reason did the Lord receive ointment on his head (Mt 26:6–7) that he



might breathe immortality on the Church. Be not anointed with the evil odor of the doctrine of the prince of this world.”<sup>43</sup> These motifs will appear often in the course of this book, and I will consider their resonances in different contexts in due course.

At this point, however, it is worth noting how Paul’s imagery in 2 Corinthians 2:14–16 engaged the simple processes of olfactory encounter to represent the progression of divine revelation in human history.<sup>44</sup> Here Paul takes the essential action of sacrifice, the forging of relationship through an offering; that action he characterizes by its resulting smell. The smell is a “good odor” (*euodia*) because it is yielded by the action that binds Christ to God. By this “good odor” alone, one can recognize God—have “knowledge of him”—even in the absence of any visible or explicit presence. Further, as with any smell, this “good odor” travels afar (“everywhere”), spreading its signification (“knowledge of him”) as it goes. The apostles are the bodied enactment of this olfactory process, for they travel abroad spreading the gospel of Christ’s sacrifice in exactly the same way that the aroma of a sacrifice wafts far beyond altar or temple precinct, invisibly yet tangibly encountered. But Paul does more with these images, using a further, crucial aspect of olfactory experience to express the difficulties of the apostolic effort: smells are ambiguous in their effects. Perception of a smell, reception of its qualities, will not be uniformly experienced. A sweet odor to one person will be malodorous to another. To some people, then, the “aroma of Christ” will seem foul, a perception that proves the falsity of their understanding and will lead therefore “from death to death.” To others, this aroma will be experienced as truly “good”: already open to God’s initiative, these people will be led “from life to life.” Paul’s statement here identifies the importance of Christ’s relationship to God, the revelatory quality of that relationship, and the nature of apostolic activity, all by invoking fundamental aspects of ancient olfactory experience—its indication of relationship (sacrifice), its capacity to convey knowledge, and its ambiguous effect upon those receiving it. As we will see, this text more than any other scriptural passage provided the ancient Christian paradigms for considering the experience of smell.

The New Testament rhetoric of sacrifice was formulated in a context actively engaged in Jewish sacrificial traditions. When the Temple was destroyed, there was no immediate conviction of change to the nature of the Jewish ritual activities, but rather the suspension of cultic practices until such time as the Temple would be reconstituted. As Christians and Jews clarified and hardened their separate religious identities, Christians already had a biblical inheritance in which the sacrificial language and imagery of the Hebrew Bible were recast for their use through the writings of the earliest Christian communities. As in the Letter to the Hebrews, Christians could—and did—see traditional sacrificial

practices, whether Jewish or pagan, to be superseded by the actions of Christ. Paul's letters gave Christians models for seeing their biblical inheritance embodied in their own activities on behalf of the gospel message. Sacrifice was one theme used to characterize the communion ritual of bread and wine that Christians celebrated, and by the third century had become its dominant motif. The flexibility and variety of sacrificial imagery available to early Christian writers is as evident as it is pervasive in the extant texts, demonstrating that sacrificial motifs could allow for wide variations in application. Christians understood themselves to belong to a religion in which sacrifice was a central activity.

Most poignantly, sacrifice was the obvious language by which to eulogize those Christians who died in persecution, as in the case of Polycarp. Paul had used it for himself; so, too, did Ignatius of Antioch employ its imagery for his own pending death in the letters he wrote en route to his trial and death in Rome.<sup>45</sup> Provoked by capricious circumstance and at the whim of local governor or imperial decree, persecution was a sporadic but always terrifying threat for Christian communities of the Roman Empire prior to their legalization in 312/3 by the emperor Constantine.<sup>46</sup> Outbreaks brought the arrest and torture of Christians, and sometimes their execution. The order to participate in sacrificial rites was the usual test to which accused Christians were put. As early as Pliny's limited execution of Christians in Bithynia around the year 112, the refusal to offer incense to the Roman gods was a criterion for condemnation.<sup>47</sup> Apostates who succumbed to threats or torture became known as "incense-burners" (*turificati*).<sup>48</sup>

The death of Jesus at the hands of Roman officials and the martyrdoms of Christians that followed were events that lent dramatic force to the rhetoric of sacrifice that Christians employed as the religion began to form its own distinctive identity and practices. Such rhetoric was concise in expression and effective in its significance: Polycarp was one of many whose deaths were said to have scented the air with a "sweet savor pleasing to God." To represent the martyr as the incense offering was not only to appropriate an ancient religious practice, but further to make the symbolic reading a starkly physical one.

While there was neither occasion nor means by which early Christians could have arrived at consensus on the issue, abstinence from incense offerings in their own rituals seems to have marked the first three centuries of Christian worship. Not until long after their legalization in the fourth century did Christians begin to burn incense in their liturgical gatherings and private devotional practices. The abstention is notable not only for its singularity in Mediterranean religious practice, but further in light of the lavish incense piety that late antique Christianity would subsequently develop. Yet from the view of discourse, at least, there was no discontinuity in Christian rituals whether incense was used or not. The language by which Christians characterized themselves and their religious

practices across these first centuries was consistently one that used the rhetoric of sacrifice—and often the imagery of incense—to express identity and meaning.<sup>49</sup> Commenting on Malachi 1:11, “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering,” Irenaeus wrote:

The oblation of the church, therefore, which the Lord commanded to be offered throughout the world, has been accounted by God a pure sacrifice and is acceptable to Him. . . . And the class of oblations in general has not been done away with, for there were oblations then, and there are oblations now; there were sacrifices among the People, there are sacrifices in the church. Rather, the kind alone has been changed.<sup>50</sup>

Christians were indeed a sacrificing people. The aroma of bread adorned their altars; the odor of burning flesh accompanied their martyrs. Christians used these smells to explain their actions and interpret the events they experienced; they articulated them specifically as the smells of sacrifice. What could be accomplished through such a sensibility?

### Sacrifice: The Aroma of Relation

When Polycarp stood in the stadium of Smyrna, the presiding Roman officials accused him of “atheism.” His refusal to participate in the traditional sacrifices meant exactly that in Greco-Roman culture, not because it was wrong to criticize sacrifice as a religious practice but because Polycarp failed to render due honor to the gods.<sup>51</sup> The polytheism of the Roman Empire was for the most part a flexible system; local cults and practices could generally be accommodated into its framework. Imperial religious policy was built upon practices that required the mutual respect for and veneration of local deities, as a reciprocal action between Rome and other cities of the Empire. In Rome itself, the Palatine Hill received numerous shrines and altars for the divinities of the Empire’s peoples. In turn, provincial cities and towns performed rites to the genius (guardian spirit) of Rome, to Rome’s gods, and on behalf of the emperor.<sup>52</sup> Jews carried a legal exemption from participation in sacrifice because the Empire recognized them as a sacrificing people in their Temple cult, and because of the antiquity of their religious traditions. Jews were legally bound to pray for and offer sacrifice on behalf of the emperor and Empire, a distinction in practice they could accept. Christians were not part of that exemption, and as animosity grew between Christians and Jews their bitter opposition towards each other disallowed the possibility of Christians’ being accorded that

honor. Whatever other circumstances contributed to the persecution of Christians in specific instances, in Roman eyes a serious matter was their blunt impiety with respect to traditional religious practices.<sup>53</sup> At the trial of the Scillitan martyrs in 180, the proconsul Saturninus admonished the Christians at the hearing, "We too are a religious people. . . . If you begin to malign our sacred rites, I shall not listen to you."<sup>54</sup>

That sacrifice marked the relation between humanity and divinity was a generally unquestioned assumption in antiquity. But what was the nature of that relationship, and what was the appropriate means of marking it? Ancient religions were not uncritical of their own practices. Christianity emerged in an era when Jewish thinkers as well as Greco-Roman philosophers had written at length on the subject. Under the pervasive influence of Hellenistic philosophy, there was common agreement that by nature divinity could not require sacrifice out of any need, since the divine was wholly self-sufficient. Material offerings—food, wine, spices, temples and their ornamentation—were superfluous as far as the gods were concerned. Yet when offered with the proper moral disposition, traditional sacrifices could provide disciplinary or didactic activities for the human community; sacrifices could work to foster greater human virtue—their "requirement" by the gods was for our sake, not that of the divine. Instead, what mattered was to offer a pure heart, a virtuous life. External rituals were meaningful only in their capacity to indicate the genuine offering of the self. Spiritual sacrifice, the *logike thusia*, was a theme that flourished abundantly in pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings of the Roman Empire.<sup>55</sup>

Such discussions included the argument that bloodless sacrifice was morally superior to that of animal slaughter, and served to raise the significance of incense as an accoutrement of religious ritual.<sup>56</sup> The Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo of Alexandria captured the significance of what incense could represent:

Even the least morcel of incense offered by a man of religion is more precious in the sight of God than thousands of cattle sacrificed by men of little worth. For as gold is better than casual stones and all in the inner shrine more sacred than what stands outside, so and in the same measure is the thankoffering of incense superior to that of the blood of beasts. And therefore the altar of incense receives special honor. . . . The symbolical meaning is just this and nothing else: that what is precious in the sight of God is not the number of victims immolated but the true purity of a rational spirit in him who makes the sacrifice.<sup>57</sup>

Two aspects of Philo's statement are noteworthy. First, he argues that expense or ostentatious ceremony were illusory qualities of religious ritual, for they were mere external components. As such they were deceptive coverings of the heart of

the matter, the disposition of the one who sought to approach God. Secondly, then, the purity of that disposition would be the effective—and the only effective—offering to God. Incense could best represent such an offering: it could be simple (frankincense alone, with no other spices), inexpensive, and burned without elaborate trappings. Its primary trait was its scent. Elsewhere Philo scorned the “wearisome labors” of the one who made protracted ritual purifications, followed by profligate adornment of a temple, culminating in a vast bloodbath of victims for the altar. Cultic ritual was no substitute for holiness, nor was God interested in bribery or flattery. Philo exhorted, “Authentic worship is that of a soul bringing the plain truth as its only sacrifice; counterfeit are all exhibitions made by means of external abundance.”<sup>58</sup> It was a position shared by the sectarian communities of the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose objections to Temple sacrifice were based on their belief that the priesthood of their present age was corrupt: “And prayer rightly offered shall be as an acceptable fragrance of righteousness, and perfection of way as a delectable free-will offering.”<sup>59</sup>

The same sentiments were commonplace among Greek and Roman thinkers, even from otherwise divergent philosophical schools. The Epicurean philosopher Lucretius excoriated the trappings of religious ritual:

It is no piety to show oneself often with covered head, turning towards a stone and approaching every altar, none to fall prostrate upon the ground and to spread open the palms before shrines of the gods, none to sprinkle altars with the blood of beasts in showers and to link vow to vow; but rather to be able to survey all things with mind at peace.<sup>60</sup>

In his treatise *On Abstinence*, Porphyry, a third century C.E. Neoplatonist, had cited Theophrastus, disciple and successor of Aristotle, in support of the argument that animal sacrifice marked the decline of human civilization.<sup>61</sup> Its appearance in human history was late, Porphyry argued, and due to the accident of famine.<sup>62</sup> Even incense was not original to religious practice, emerging only after civilization had become complex and desirous of elaborate needs; as incense was an intricate compound of spices, so had it seemed an appropriate offering in such circumstances. Instead, the first offering had been the simplest available—the burning of grass, since by Porphyry’s reckoning grass was the first and simplest plant to appear on earth.<sup>63</sup> Again citing Theophrastus as his authority, Porphyry admonished that it was not the expense or lavishness of sacrifice that mattered to the gods, but rather the disposition of the one who made the offering: “Hence the sacrifice which is attended with a small expense is pleasing to the Gods, and divinity looks more to the disposition and manners of those that sacrifice, than to the multitude of things which are sacrificed.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus when Christians sought to discredit the sacrifices of others, resources were easily at hand. The Hebrew Bible abounded with critiques of the Temple cult; God's rejection of sacrifice was a consistent theme in the prophets and in Psalms.<sup>65</sup> Such passages stood side by side with Temple practice in Jewish tradition, not as a call to abandon sacrifice and sacrificial practices but rather to prevent the view that such practices were a mechanical process to appease God. Instead, the life of the community must accord with God's command; the prescriptions for sacrifice were inextricably bound to ethical precepts. Christians were fond of quoting Psalm 51:17 (LXX 50:17), "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." In the Hebrew Bible such statements presumed that a "right spirit" could in fact offer sacrifices pleasing to God, and that these were best expressed through the processes of the Temple system performed with the proper disposition. In the hands of Jewish critics, whether philosophical or sectarian, that view was reiterated often in early Christian times. But when Christian writers utilized these statements, they did so as part of a supersessionist view that saw Temple tradition wholly replaced by the work of Christ, and now fulfilled in the ritual gatherings of Christians.<sup>66</sup> Origen, for one, would write, "our altars are the mind of each righteous man, from which true and intelligible incense with a sweet savor is sent up, prayers from a pure conscience."<sup>67</sup> Such usage allowed Christians to draw on the shared cultural codes by which olfactory experience marked a moral cosmology as much as it marked religious ceremony. Hence Origen again: "What better gift can a rational being send up to God than the fragrant word of prayer, when it is offered from a conscience untainted with the foul smell of sin?"<sup>68</sup>

In like manner, when Clement of Alexandria attacked Greek sacrificial practices, he did so by quoting at length from the critiques that peppered Greek comedies. These had openly mocked the Greek custom of burning the inedible portions of an animal for the offering to the gods, while cooking the edible parts for the community feast that followed the sacrifice. Was this "sacrifice," and if so, for whose benefit?<sup>69</sup> Clement satirized the implications of Greek ritual both in terms of performance (should not the cooks be deified? And the stoves be understood as altars?), and in terms of what such an offering must mean about the nature of the gods (if they have no need for nourishment, how and in what way was the smoke useful for them? Do the gods breathe?). Scorning these caricatures as silliness, he replied to his own questions:

But if the Deity, being by nature exempt from all need, rejoices to be honoured, we have good reason for honouring God by prayer, and for sending up most rightly this sacrifice, the best and holiest of sacrifices when joined with

righteousness. . . . For the Church's sacrifice is indeed speech rising, like incense, from holy souls, while every thought of the heart is laid open to God along with the sacrifice.<sup>70</sup>

Early in the fourth century, Arnobius of Sicca provided a detailed denunciation of incense and wine offerings in pagan rituals, drawing from the whole spectrum of the critique tradition. How could pagans account for the relatively late emergence of such offerings in human history: had the ancients lived in unbroken sin because they had not known these practices? Incense and wine libations implied an anthropomorphism that delimited and degraded the nature of divinity: Do the gods have noses through which they breathe? Can they feel thirst? How exactly could burning incense render honor to the gods—"we are not asking about your point of view but about that of the gods . . . how great is that honor or just what does it consist of, made as it is from the sweat of wood and manufactured from the resin of a tree? . . . Does this, then, honor and magnify those dignities on high?" Wine was poured on the burning incense coals to intensify the sweet fragrance, but to what end: "What, indeed, has a god to do with wine, or what or how great is the power that goes with its essence that, when it is poured out, his sublimity is enhanced, and his authority is supposed to be honored?" Most questionable of all, in Arnobius's view, was the dubious emphasis on olfactory experience by which these offerings were justified. On what basis could people think that odors pleasing to their noses should also be pleasing to deities? "May it not be possible that what brings pleasure to you, may seem to them on the other hand harsh and disagreeable?" And since deities are of diverse natures amongst themselves, how could we suppose they all should have the same likes and dislikes? Finally, what possible effect could "reeking fumes" have on beings who are by nature incorporeal, and thus incapable of sensation or physical relation? Surely these practices prevailed by custom rather than rational examination of truth; as he saw it, the entire enterprise was preposterous.<sup>71</sup> Around the same time, Eusebius of Caesarea also drew on the tradition of using pagan self-criticism to support Christian claims. He cited Porphyry for the view that material offerings were wholly superfluous, if not impure, when approaching the divine.<sup>72</sup>

Often such critiques—pagan, Jewish, or Christian—depicted sacrificial ceremonies in lurid caricature, relying on the variegated olfactory elements that the different components of the rituals would yield to evoke scenes of ridiculous and ineffectual excess.<sup>73</sup> The results were presented as literally suffocating for the participants, who were as likely to choke as to hallucinate from the fumes, according to Tertullian.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Tertullian commented, while it seemed that some cults worked best through the agency of blood, and others

through the agency of odors, the burning of incense was the original and apparently still the most popular form of servicing both divine types; hence the necessity of incense merchants in the marketplace, “For idolatry can more easily do without an idol than without the wares of the incense-dealer.”<sup>75</sup>

One such passage appears in the Christian portion of the Sibylline Oracles, but could have been written in Christian, Jewish, or pagan circles. Despite its derogatory stance, it gives account of the intensive sensory—and especially olfactory—qualities of traditional Mediterranean practices:

Having a remembrance of joy in worship,  
We walk the paths of piety and truth.  
We are never allowed to approach the sanctuaries of temples  
Nor to pour libations to statues nor to honor them with prayers,  
Nor with delightful scents of flowers nor with gleams  
Of lamps, nor even to embellish them with offerings,  
Nor with breaths of incense sending up a flame on altars,  
Nor with libations from the sacrifice of bulls, rejoicing in gore, to send blood  
from the slaughter of sheep as propitiatory offerings for earthly penalty;  
Nor to defile the light of the sky with smoke from burnt offerings,  
And polluted breezes from a fire that burns flesh.  
But rejoicing with holy minds and glad spirit,  
Abundant love and hands that bring good gifts  
With gracious psalms and songs appropriate to God,  
We are bidden to sing your praises as imperishable and pure from all deceit,  
God, wise begetter of all.<sup>76</sup>

Christians drew on these discussions for their own purposes. Sacrificial critiques allowed Christian apologists to justify Christian ritual practice with its culturally discordant lack of animal or incense offerings, and to claim philosophical superiority in the process. The argument about the self-sufficiency of the divine explained Christian abstention from traditional sacrifice, an abstention which had come about by happenstance rather than conscious choice, as already noted. Still, as the philosophical critique of sacrifice pervaded religious writings, Christians used it to render their practices deliberate and distinct. Irenaeus wrote, “God did not seek sacrifices and holocausts, but faith, and obedience, and righteousness.”<sup>77</sup> Clement expressed this in more explicitly philosophical terms, “It is for this reason [the self-sufficiency of God] that we [Christians] fitly refrain from making any sacrifice to God, who has provided all things for all, being himself in need of nothing.”<sup>78</sup> The position was argued most vehemently, and most effectively, with the assistance of olfactory imagery



to signify what philosophers had identified as the intrinsic distortions of traditional sacrifice. Athenagoras explained,

As to our [Christians'] not offering sacrifices: The Fashioner and Father of the universe has no need of blood, nor of the savor of fat, nor of the fragrance of flowers and incense. He is Himself the consummate fragrance, in need of nothing and self-sufficient. . . . What to me are whole-burnt-offerings of which God has no need? Indeed to offer sacrifices is necessary, but to offer an unbloody sacrifice, a spiritual worship (Rom 12:1)!<sup>79</sup>

Clement joined philosophical and biblical proof-texts to explicate how Christian worship fulfilled scriptural requirements despite the absence of traditional sacrifices. First citing Theophrastus, he then interprets Exodus 30:25 on the composition of holy incense for the tabernacle:

"It is not then expensive sacrifices that we should offer to God, but such sacrifices as are dear to him," [quoting Theophrastus as cited in Porphyry] viz. that composite incense of which the Law speaks [Ex 30:25], an incense compounded of many tongues and voices in the way of prayer, or rather which is being wrought into the unity of faith out of divers nations and dispositions by the divine bounty shown in the Covenants, and which is brought together in our songs of praise by purity of heart and righteous and upright living grounded in holy actions and righteous prayer.<sup>80</sup>

Clement explained the apparent austerity of Christian worship by applying sacrificial rhetoric to the ritual practices Christians did employ, and to the mode of life they pursued. The compound incense mandated by scripture was replicated in the prayer offered by the Christian community: just as holy incense was composed of various and fine spices, so, too, was the prayer of the church "compounded of many tongues and voices," "wrought into the unity of faith out of divers nations and dispositions." This united offering composed out of diversity was offered in ritual ("our songs of praise"), with proper disposition ("purity of heart"). It was offered further in the virtuous lives conducted by the faithful ("righteous and upright living grounded in holy actions and righteous prayer"). As Athenagoras said, sacrifice was necessary. Hence Clement presents the whole of Christian activity, collective or individual, as sacrifice. The same could be said for the functioning of the ecclesiastical community. It became commonplace for Christians to explain the choice of virginity as a sacrificial offering, for example.<sup>81</sup> Special roles within the church structure could also be identified in such

terms, as when the *Apostolic Constitutions* enjoined, “Let the widows and orphans be esteemed as representing the altar of burnt-offering; and let the virgins be honored as representing the altar of incense, and the incense itself.”<sup>82</sup> Traditional critiques of sacrificial practices allowed Christians to appropriate sacrificial rhetoric in the establishment of their own religious system.

Like Clement in the passage quoted above, Origen interpreted incense to represent aspects of the sacrificial process and the relationship it effected between the human community and its God. In his *Homilies on Leviticus*, Origen cites Leviticus 16:12 in this form, “And he will take up a censer filled with coals of fire from the altar that is before the Lord and he will fill his hands with finely composed incense.” On this reading he comments:

Indeed, our Lord did that more fully [than the high priest Aaron]. For he ‘filled his hands with fine incense’ about which it was written, ‘Let my prayer be directed as incense in your sight.’ [Ps 141 (LXX 140):2] Therefore, ‘he filled his hands’ with holy works which were done for the human race. But why does it say ‘finely composed incense’? Because it is not one kind of work, but rather what is pleasing to God is made up of justice and piety, of chastity, of prudence and of all virtues of this sort.<sup>83</sup>

Like Clement, Origen interprets the offering of incense to mean prayer, and the composition of incense to be the compounded offering of good works. In the Levitical mandate, the incense is more precious because of the variety of its ingredients. So, too, is the offering of good works most pleasing to God when it is made up of many and diverse virtues. Origen’s treatment of sacrifice, then, focuses on the actions that constitute the offering and its presentation to God. He uses the rhetoric of sacrifice to talk about what Christians should do with their bodies; he does not engage the sensory qualities that sacrificial rhetoric makes available. Hence his discussion of the whole burnt offering follows closely the model he presents for the incense offering. If the incense should be composed of diverse virtues and good works, the whole burnt offering is the giving of the whole self: “Each of us has in himself his whole burnt offering and he himself lights the altar of his whole burnt offering that it may always burn.” The total embrace of Christianity is that offering: renunciation of the world, martyrdom, suffering, or asceticism. “[If I have done any of these] I have offered a whole burnt offering at the altar of God and myself become the priest of my offering.”<sup>84</sup> From this offering, Origen declares, Christ will “fill his censer with coals” to offer a “pleasing odor” to God. The Christian offers the self as sacrifice; Christ the High Priest takes the choicest of sacrifices and in turn offers them again on the heavenly altar.

Blessed is he whose coals of his whole burnt offering [Christ] finds so living and so fiery that he may judge them worthy to be placed upon the 'altar of incense.' Blessed is he in whose heart he finds so subtle, so fine, and so spiritual an understanding and so composed with a diverse sweetness of virtues that he sees fit 'to fill his hands' from it and to offer to God the Father the pleasing odor of his understanding.<sup>85</sup>

Here Origen names the essential quality of sacrifice to be its offering, an action effected by burning. The burning binds the one offering to the One receiving. The image is vivid and, in Origen's hands, urgent. He links the Levitical mandates to the encounter with Christ on the road to Emmaus, an encounter realized when the apostles remembered "Did not our hearts burn within us?" (Lk 26:32) By burning was Christ revealed, and by burning is sacrifice made; the offering of the self must be a continual act of self-immolation: "Whence will you burn? . . . From where do you glow? Whence is the fire kindled in you?" Heaven forbid, Origen admonishes, that one should burn with the excitement of the circus, or with wrath, or with love of the flesh. "All this is an 'alien fire' and contrary to God."<sup>86</sup>

For Origen, then, sacrifice must be constituted of ethical actions as well as the "spiritual" element of "rational understanding" ("the fragrant word of prayer"). Spiritual sacrifice for him is in fact a concrete activity, an offering of the self that is expressed inwardly through the understanding and outwardly through the actions one performs. The activity of good works declares and displays a right relationship with God: it functions precisely as sacrifice. Hence it is fitting that Christ should take up such offerings to compose his holy incense.<sup>87</sup>

The olfactory dimensions of incense offerings were not in themselves significant in such discussions. Rather, what was important was how one component of sacrificial ritual, the scent of incense or the savor of burnt offering, could stand for the whole process of effecting a relationship between humanity and the divine. That process was discussed by Christians in its traditional representation (the biblical injunctions for the cultic system) and as redefined through the practices and conduct of the Christian community. Incense was an image that could be used to signify the activity of sacrifice, the elements that constituted that activity, or the relationship it denoted—a relationship maintained through the continual repetition of sacrifice as an offering. Most often in Christian critiques of traditional sacrifice, or Christian discussions of spiritual sacrifice, incense imagery was used in this way. Its olfactory qualities were not the point of consideration, although olfactory imagery was often used to evoke sacrificial meaning or signification. Instead, incense marked an activity, a

process, and a relationship. For early Christian writers, incense offerings were important as offerings and not because they yielded a distinctive smell.

## Daily Smells: Powers and Promises

For the social world in which Christianity existed, however, smells were extremely important. They were not byproducts of an object or action whose worth lay in some other of its qualities. Smells were effective agents in and of themselves, whether as qualities exuded or perceived or experienced. Origen acknowledged the situation when he continued his discussion of Christ as the Levitical High Priest who seeks to fill his hands with fine incense. To make sense of the passage in Leviticus and of his own reading of it, Origen had to treat the ingredients prescribed for holy incense.

Therefore, our high priest, the Lord and Saviour, opens his hands and wants to receive from each one of us 'a finely composed incense.' We must inquire into the kinds of incense.

We must seek 'frankincense' and not just any kind of frankincense but [that which is] clear. The high priest does not want to take something dark and sordid; he seeks something clear. But he also demands from you 'galbanum' whose nature is to chase away harmful serpents by the strength of its odor. He also seeks 'myrrh'; for he wants both our words and our deeds to be purified and cleansed. He also seeks 'onyx' [Ex 30:34], with which a certain animal is covered as by some shield and remains unharmed. So also he wants you to be protected 'with the shield of faith with which you may extinguish all the fiery darts of the evil one' [Eph 6:16]. Therefore, he wants all these to be set in order by you . . . <sup>88</sup>

On just such considerations did the Roman marketplace conduct its business. Aromatic products were essential for every aspect of daily life, as Origen's passage indicates. Available in different forms, grades, and potencies, aromatics were used as pesticides to ward off insects, rodents, and snakes; they were cleaning agents, used for objects, places, and persons; they were effective medications or strong poisons; they protected from illness. They sweetened the air of the household, adorned the person with rich scents, flavored foods and wines, anointed rulers, and dressed the bodies of the dead.<sup>89</sup> As ancient writers were not loathe to note, the smells of daily life were strong and thick: serious effort was required to render the person, the home, or the city agreeable.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, olfactory environment provided a measure for distinguishing social classes in the ancient world: the degree to which one could control that environment indicated levels of wealth, status, and power.<sup>91</sup> Athenaeus observed

that gender, social class, and moral disposition were all marked by distinct smells.<sup>92</sup>

In the fourth century B.C.E., Theophrastus expressed his frustration that previous scientists and philosophers had failed to provide an adequate account of smell. “Odors (*osmai*),” he wrote, “are due to mixture (*ek mixeōs*): for anything which is uncompounded has no smell, just as it has no taste: wherefore simple substances have no smell, such as water, air and fire.”<sup>93</sup> The observation says much about what made olfactory experience compelling for Greco-Roman society. What Theophrastus understood to be causative—the mixing of substances, resulting in smells being emitted—in fact captures the olfactory qualities that intrigued Mediterranean cultures: their invisible complexity, their production by blending, their elusive presence. Clement’s image of incense as the symbol for the prayer of the church, united out of diverse voices and peoples; or Origen’s of incense denoting the compound of virtuous acts; even the witnesses to Polycarp’s martyrdom who described both the aroma of baking bread and the sweet spice of frankincense—such images (or metaphors, or interpretations) relied on this cultural sensibility that mixture creates something unique from its constituent elements.

Further, as Theophrastus went on to explain, odors vary in strength, some “indistinct and insipid” and others of “distinct character.” Yet they elude proper classification. The very process that produced smells—the mixing or encounter of substances—also yielded a protean result. Smell, he notes, is always ambiguous. While the experience is undeniable, its exact nature escapes any stable sense of order.

But the various kinds of good or evil odour, although they exhibit considerable differences, have not received further distinguishing names, marking off one particular kind of sweetness or of bitterness from another: we speak of an odour as pungent, powerful, faint, sweet, or heavy, though some of these descriptions apply to evil-smelling things as well as to those which have a good odour.<sup>94</sup>

Despite, or rather because of, this elusive complexity, smells could map an ordered cosmology.<sup>95</sup> As Theophrastus charted them, smells conveyed an orientation underlying the basic pan-Mediterranean olfactory codes throughout antiquity:

Putridity however is a general term, applied, one may say, to anything which is subject to decay: for anything which is decomposing has an evil odour . . . things that have been cooked, delicate things, and things which are least of an earthy nature have a good odour (odour being a matter of exhalation).<sup>96</sup>

The pattern of linking bad things with bad smells and good things with good smells was a common sensibility throughout the ancient world. Its associations are most easily demonstrated in the realm of myth, legend, and folklore, where this coding corresponds to the realms of mortality (wetness, coldness, decay, rot, illness, wounds, disintegration, death, destruction) and immortality (dryness, heat, preservation, vitality, health, bounty, beauty).<sup>97</sup> The pattern was reinforced, for example, by religious practices that utilized different smells, fair and foul, for ritual purposes; and justified by scientific analysis, as here by the observations of Theophrastus. Indeed, elsewhere Theophrastus would note that the “most excellent and fragrant” plants grow in sunny, hot climates; while nothing useful for perfumes can be grown in Europe (notoriously cold and wet in climate) except the iris flower.<sup>98</sup> Yet any consideration of how the ancients used smells for practical purposes quickly confronts the fact that this scheme is most often a muddled one. In the elusive ambiguity of smell—the trait that allowed the same descriptions for odors both pleasing and repulsive—lay its distinctive capabilities. Smell was potent because it defied control: it could not be confined in space any more than it could be classified into unequivocal categories.

Nor did anyone doubt the power of smell as an effective agent. Simply breathing bad air was known to be noxious to one’s health.<sup>99</sup> Odors were critical indicators in medical diagnosis;<sup>100</sup> both foul and sweet-smelling substances were essential to cure the disordered female body.<sup>101</sup> Spiced wine mingled with frankincense could drive elephants mad, even if militarily trained;<sup>102</sup> wild beasts could be lulled to sleep with flower petals and aromatics.<sup>103</sup> Perfume was lethal to vultures, a bird that lived on putrid carrion, but could tame an entire flock of doves.<sup>104</sup> Panthers could emit a sweet scent by which to beguile their prey.<sup>105</sup> The ancient industry of aromatics was less an attempt to harness the powers of smells than to participate in their abundance.

In his treatise *On Odors*, Theophrastus discussed the different processes by which scents were made for use: aromatics were blended into spices or perfumes or incense in the form of powders, unguents, ointments, or liquids. Added to wine, perfume enhanced its taste; added to food, cooked or not, perfume spoiled the flavor, making it astringent and bitter. The composition and preparation of perfumes aimed entirely at making odors last; oil bases best preserved the scent (especially olive oil), and myrrh oil was the longest lasting. The scent of flowers was particularly short-lived. Perfumes could be compounded from various parts of a plant: flowers, leaves, twigs, roots, wood, fruit, and gum or resin. Different recipes had rules based on the character of the season, the time of gathering (whether before or after spices were in their prime), and the consideration that some spices needed time to ripen after being collected.

Proper containers were crucial in the matter of preserving fragrances. Periodically Theophrastus notes the medicinal and hygienic qualities of different spices, a topic he would treat extensively in his larger work, *Enquiry into Plants*.<sup>106</sup> In that work, he provides a “general list” of plants most often used in perfumes—and this well before the expansive spice trade of the Roman Empire: cassia, cinnamon, cardamon, spikenard, nairon, balsam, apalathos, storax, iris, narte, kostos, all-heal, saffone-crocus, myrrh, kyperion, ginger-grass, sweet-flag, sweet marjoram, lotus, and dill. “Of these, it is the roots, bark, branches, wood, seeds, gum, or flowers which in different cases yield the perfume.”<sup>107</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate the ancient love of aromatic products.<sup>108</sup> Centuries before Theophrastus wrote, the Egyptians had achieved great sophistication in the production of perfumes, scented cosmetics, unguents, and oils.<sup>109</sup> The ancient Near East accounted spices as treasure worthy of royalty.<sup>110</sup> Thus legend had it that spices were prominent among the gifts brought to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:2); and the women who served King Ahasuerus of Persia spent twelve months perfuming themselves in preparation, “six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women” (Est 2:12). Perfumes were the biblical means of deceit no less than of love.<sup>111</sup> Scholars have argued that the Aramaic terms behind the gospel story about the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus signified a third aromatic spice in addition to frankincense and myrrh, misidentified as “gold” in the Greek version recorded in Matthew 2:1–11.<sup>112</sup> Continuity in the plant species of the Greco-Roman world led to immense longevity in the medical and domestic use of plants.<sup>113</sup> Modern scholars have attempted to identify the plants named in ancient sources with those now known, and further, to replicate the perfumes or medicinal substances of various ancient cultures as well as their processes of production.<sup>114</sup> The results vary: as Theophrastus noted, fragrances are as fragile as they are powerful. There remain uncertainties, but clearly the practical uses, including medical ones, were sometimes well founded.

The spice trade that had laced the ancient Mediterranean world to the east through India to China, and to the south through the Arabian peninsula and well into east Africa, grew to mammoth proportions during the Roman Empire.<sup>115</sup> Its ramifications were already evident in the first century C.E. when Pliny the Elder composed his exhaustive *Natural History*.<sup>116</sup> Pliny describes more than sixty aromatics in detail, used for hygienic purposes, for medicines, for luxuries, for worship. Citron, for example, was especially good as a pesticide when storing garments; its medicinal value was great, and the Parthian nobles used its fruit pips to sweeten their breath.<sup>117</sup> The durability of the larger

variety of cedar made it a choice (and appropriately fragrant) wood for statues of the gods.<sup>118</sup> Soaking books in citrus oil protected them from moths.<sup>119</sup> Wine kept better when stored in jars and cellars that were frequently fumigated with myrrh.<sup>120</sup> Papyrus flowers were used exclusively for wreaths to crown cult statues.<sup>121</sup> Styrax could be burned to keep snakes away from perfume-producing trees.<sup>122</sup>

Two topics of concern to Pliny are particularly helpful for understanding the olfactory context of early Christianity: the perfume industry, and the incense market dominated by frankincense and myrrh. As so often in ancient olfactory culture, distinctions between perfume and incense according to criteria of secular or religious uses are difficult to sustain. Perfumes, which Pliny disdained as wasteful luxury, were everywhere present in ancient religious practices: cult statues and ceremonial wreaths were anointed with fine perfumes, cultic garments were specially scented, and fragrant waters were used in religious rites.<sup>123</sup> Spices were burned to clean and freshen household air. Myrrh was a primary ingredient in many medications and cleansing products, apart from its addition to sacrificial incense or its roles in burial rites. Frankincense was so closely identified with sacrificial rites that the term “incense” could denote this spice alone. But fumigations with frankincense were also among the common treatments for gynecological problems; and the gum was a staple for ophthalmological conditions.<sup>124</sup> Béatrice Caseau has argued persuasively that such practical use of odors was the key to their religious signification and usage.<sup>125</sup> However, the aesthetic qualities of fine scents that ancient Mediterranean cultures valued were also those that made them effective signifiers in religious practices. In both contexts, the salient qualities were beauty, transience, and invisibility (or incorporeality) in addition to their potency as agents. While scenting the body could be done simply—just as incense could be as simple as the fragrance of a single spice (or even the sweetness of grass alone, as Porphyry had argued)—perfumes, like incense, were more valued when complex. Compounds of multiple scents signified exceptional worth, not only in wealth but in effort: their redolence bespoke exotic ingredients obtained through difficult means and arduous transport, and elaborate processes of preparation.<sup>126</sup>

Pliny was appalled by the traffic in luxuries, among which perfume was “the very climax of luxury and the most important example.”<sup>127</sup> According to him, the invention of perfume had been the product of human incontinence and greed: the Persians had started it all (decadent race!), and Alexander had introduced its pleasures to the Greeks and Romans.<sup>128</sup> In Pliny’s eyes, it had become a ridiculous obsession: people used different perfumes for different parts of their bodies, even the soles of their feet (“how could it be noticed or give any pleasure from that part of the body?”); people sprinkled it on bathroom walls;



emperor and slave alike added it to bathtubs; military standards were anointed with it, and soldiers even used perfumed hair oil beneath their helmets.<sup>129</sup> “Good heavens! nowadays some people actually put scent in their drinks, and it is worth the bitter flavor for their body to enjoy the lavish scent both inside and outside.”<sup>130</sup>

Disdainful as he was, Pliny nonetheless named the source of perfume’s power: “The first thing to know about [perfumes] is that their importance changes, quite often their fame having passed away.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, perfumes were ephemeral in every sense.

Perfumes serve the purpose of the most superfluous of all forms of luxury; for pearls and jewels do nevertheless pass to the wearer’s heir, and clothes last for some time, but unguents lose their scent at once, and die in the very hour when they are used . . . and their cost is more than 400 denarii per pound! All that money is paid for a pleasure enjoyed by somebody else, for a person carrying scent about him does not smell it himself.<sup>132</sup>

Pliny complained bitterly that by the lowest possible reckoning, the spice trade in his day robbed the Empire of “a hundred million sesterces every year, that is the sum which our luxuries and our women cost us: for what fraction of these imports, I ask you, now goes to the gods or to the powers of the lower world?”<sup>133</sup>

In Pliny’s eyes—and those of his society—the trade in frankincense and myrrh was as important as that of perfume, the more so because these two spices were as essential to health and hygiene as they were to the right practice of religion. The demand was such that two harvests a year were extracted for both frankincense and myrrh in the south Arabian peninsula. For both, elaborate rituals accompanied their cultivation, harvest, and transport. Of the Sabaei, the tribe that harvested the two, Pliny wrote that they used the wood of these spice trees for their cooking and in their homes, “so that the smoke and vapor of their towns and districts is just like that which rises from altars. In order therefore to remedy this smell they obtain styrax in goat-skins and fumigate their houses with it.”<sup>134</sup> Clearly, as Theophrastus had warned, smells sacred in one culture could be problematic in others. Pliny indicates a minimum of 1300–1700 tons of frankincense carried annually into the Roman Empire, in 7000–10,000 camel loads; while a minimum of 211 tons of myrrh, or 1184 camel-loads, entered annually. He estimated that the trade in frankincense and myrrh alone cost the Roman Empire at least 50 million sesterces per year.<sup>135</sup>

The trade in foreign spices would fluctuate and then drop dramatically after the fourth century. But it is worth keeping Pliny’s figures in mind, as well as his

observations and complaints. I have not lingered on Theophrastus and Pliny because they tell us all there is to know about the use of scents in the Greco-Roman world. Instead, I cite them at length because they represent the contours of the olfactory culture in which Christianity struggled to establish itself. That struggle is evident, in part, in the significance Christian writers of the second and third centuries attributed to their abstention from incense offerings or other ritual scents in their worship practices. But the challenges of daily life during the same period were more difficult. With religious meaning pervasive in every context—hinted in every scent—how could Christians establish their identity apart from their austere religious ceremonial?

Tertullian, for one, argued that Christian and pagan alike must recognize that aromatic products could be validly used without signalling pagan participation in either social or cultural terms. By this position he did not mean a notion of secularity, an understanding alien to antiquity. Rather, Tertullian insisted that Christians could use aromatics on terms appropriate to their own religious identity. As products from nature, aromatics were fruits of God's created order and therefore intended for human use and enjoyment. But the use determined the meaning. Flowers, or for that matter all fragrant substances,

. . . are pure as being creatures of God and, to that extent, they are fit for common use. Yet it is the application of this use that makes all the difference. . . . if I find the odor of a place unpleasant, I burn some Arabian incense, but without the same ceremony, the same dress, and the same pomp with which it is done to idols.<sup>136</sup>

The razor's edge on which Tertullian stood lay precisely in the problematic territory of ceremony. On the one hand he stated flatly, "Of course we [Christians] do not buy incense."<sup>137</sup> By this he joined his fellow apologists in insisting that Christians abstained from incense in their worship and devotional activities. Yet where was the line drawn? For on the other hand, he mentions more than once the abundance of spices that attended Christian burial rites—indeed, that usage was his defense for the position that Christian practices did not harm the trade economy: "If the Arabians complain, let the people of Saba know that more of their wares and dearer ones are spent on burying Christians than on fumigating the gods."<sup>138</sup>

Tertullian labored to provide guidelines for Christian living that would recognize religious integrity at the most mundane level. "It is immaterial to me, if the same wares—I mean incense and the other exotic articles, which are a sacrifice to the idols—are also used by men as healing ointments and by us, moreover, for solace at a funeral."<sup>139</sup> Nonetheless, extreme vigilance of habit was

required. Valid uses of aromatics must be carefully observed lest the Christian inadvertently approach pagan practices; rather, Christians must “avoid even from afar every breath of [idolatry] as if it were a pestilence.”<sup>140</sup> To be sure, Christians could not isolate themselves altogether. Private festivals, then, could be celebrated in the familiar pattern even though this would mean abundant scents. In addition to the burial practices he cites elsewhere, he lists the gaining of the white toga, espousals, nuptials, and name-givings as ceremonial occasions at which “no danger can be noticed in the breath of idolatry which is mixed up with them.”<sup>141</sup> These were occasions, Tertullian insisted, at which the participants rendered honor to the human person whose celebration it was, and not the divine. Hence one could be present since one would be merely an observer of the required sacrifices and not a participant in their performance. This position posed considerable difficulties for those Christians who were slaves, freedmen, or holders of civic offices, as Tertullian recognized. The painstaking care with which he demarcated what actions could and could not be acceptable for such persons graphically underscores the delicacy of the Christian position in Roman society.<sup>142</sup> Fourth-century church canons would also explicitly address this problem.<sup>143</sup>

Tertullian urged the recognition that among one’s most treasured possessions, one should “count also the distinctive religious observances of your daily life.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, he argued that daily life was the reason that marriage between Christians and pagans should not take place. Constituted of numerous religious practices, daily life was a continual exercise of religious identity. One could not be a Christian wife to a pagan husband and fulfill either the duties of household management or the obligations of marital service without serious harm to one’s faith. The feasts of paganism would clash with the fasting observances of Christianity; prayer requirements would have the wife at vigil when her husband expects to have her in bed; the Christian duty of visitation to the poor and sick would have her in neighborhoods offensive to her husband’s moral code. Her every move would betray the deity to whom her life is dedicated: fasting before communion, making the sign of the cross over her bed or body, exsufflation to cast away demons (and since the pagan gods were held to be demons by Christians, such warding off of evil would be constant). In turn, her every sensory experience would implicate her in pagan practices. Tastes, sounds, and sights would not be extricable from their religious contexts. Most difficult to avoid would be the olfactory assaults. Incense offerings would burn in the house on the first of every month and at the new year; laurel wreaths and scented lamps would adorn the front door to celebrate the imperial cult. Mixed marriage was a series of sensory hazards, wherein the delectable odors (and sights, sounds, textures, and tastes) of false religion would tempt or deceive or

taint the Christian partner at every turn. A Christian marriage, however, depends upon two spouses working together as partners in the common tasks of a life of faith. Together they pray, worship, fast, visit the sick and poor, suffer persecution, instruct one another, exhort one another, and sing the praise of God. They are “one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice.”<sup>145</sup> Tertullian makes no reference to the sensory aspects that would attend such a marriage. Thus he characterizes them: one type by sensory experience and the other by works.

But there was no escaping the world outside. What jobs could Christians hold without compromising their religious identity? Here, too, extreme care was needed, particularly in jobs at the marketplace. Tertullian insisted that there were certain professions Christians simply could not pursue without irrevocable harm to their religious integrity. Selling frankincense was one. For while Christians might insist that they themselves burned frankincense for no untoward reason (as Tertullian had noted, medicinal or hygienic use was valid), pagans would not, indeed could not, purchase frankincense without servicing their religion at the same time. How could a Christian seller of frankincense do what a Christian was required to do when encountering pagan sacrifices—spit upon the fumes, blow and spit upon the evil powers, exorcise himself—when it was his own supply of frankincense that fuelled the smoking altars?<sup>146</sup> Tertullian shared the view, attested by other writers of the era both pagan and Christian, that sacrificial smoke was never harmless. It might be ineffectual in any attempt to influence the divine, as all our writers have agreed, but it was the food upon which demons fed—the sustenance that kept demons alive. Origen reminded his audience in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* that performing sacrifice was not an empty gesture or “a matter of indifference.” Rather, sacrifice rendered the participants just as guilty as the demons themselves for the evils that would afflict the world, “since demons could not hold out without the rising smoke.”<sup>147</sup>

Tertullian identifies the hazards posed to Christians in a non-Christian society. Like Aristides’ *Apology* or the *Letter to Diognetus* earlier in the second century, Tertullian insisted that Christians were indistinguishable (most of the time) within the normal workings of society, save by the stringency of their ethical conduct.<sup>148</sup> But when he warns about the dangers of fumes or fragrances wafting from pagan rites—the dangers of what could be breathed in during the course of one’s day—he touches a more basic difficulty. One could conduct oneself differently, even follow alternative practices, but one could not prevent sensory experience. Of this problem smell offered the best articulation, for while one could avert the eyes, block the ears, avoid touch or taste, one could not stop breathing. And breathing included olfactory encounter.

Clement of Alexandria was blunt on this point: the senses were problematic whether or not paganism was anywhere within reach. The true Christian (for Clement, the Christian “gnostic”) must be focused on the unchanging realm of God. Physical experiences—more precisely, physical pleasures—could fix one’s attention to the physical world, distracting the soul and turning it towards the ephemeral. Self-control was the only solution, and that meant control of the senses.

Otherwise, we may reopen the doors of the soul without being aware of it, through the senses as through unfortified doors, to the very dissipation we had put to flight. . . . The man without self-control is easily led about by anything: eating, sleeping, social gatherings, as well as by his eyes and ears and stomach, and particularly to the point, by his sense of smell. Just as cattle are led by rings through their noses and by ropes, so, too, the self-indulgent are led by odors and perfumes and sweet scents rising from their wreaths.<sup>149</sup>

From this perspective, Christian activities were no less dangerous than pagan ones. Clement was deeply concerned, for example, that the Agape meals Christians celebrated should be simple affairs, and not an excuse for “sumptuous” feasting. For if the host served a meal “exhaling the odor of steaming meats and sauces . . . he desecrates [the Agape’s] name by his drinking and self-indulgence and fragrant odors.”<sup>150</sup> The Agape should be a repast of heavenly food, “a banquet of the Word.” What could be worse than that love or charity, the “agape” proclaimed in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, should be brought to naught “among all these dainty seasonings!” No, the food should be “plain and restrained,” its serving in quantities appropriate for health; then there would be ample amounts left over to distribute among the poor, and the “feasting” would indeed have nurtured love.<sup>151</sup>

Clement was keenly aware that the physical world and its sensory pleasures had been created by God, intended for our good use and especially for our health. Total rejection of these experiences was the rejection of God’s good will. The requirement, then, was to live with the gifts God had granted, appreciating but using them in such a way that the self was continually conforming towards its divine goal. From this perspective, Clement admonished, no situation was more challenging for the Christian than that of the dinner party. Good manners were not simply a socially expedient form of behavior: they were the best method of self-discipline in a situation where self-control was tested from every side.<sup>152</sup> Clement was not exaggerating: the Roman dinner party was a feast for every sense. Foods and wines would be judged by their spicing as much as by their flavors, varieties, and appearance; wine would be served in cups made of

clay mixed with spices.<sup>153</sup> (On wines, Clement himself noted, “There is the Thasian wine, which is sweet-smelling; Lesbian wine, which is fragrant . . . and Italian wine that is redolent of flowers.”)<sup>154</sup> Eating was accompanied by music and often dance from performers themselves as bedecked and adorned as the table: sights and sounds must be as delicious as the meal itself.<sup>155</sup> The good host would punctuate the courses with scented water for washing, perfumes to enrich the air and freshen the banqueters, fragrant wreaths to adorn the guests, and frankincense burning at the table altar.<sup>156</sup> As Clement emphasized, every detail of the occasion was marked by enticing smells: “the devil of gluttony leads by the nose.”<sup>157</sup> The olfactory experience was the most difficult part of the situation for a guest to control, and the one quickest to lead astray. The art of good manners lay in moderate enjoyment of the goods without being driven to boorishness. One’s behavior made clear the state of one’s soul.

Only a fool will hold his breath and gape at what is set before him at a public banquet, expressing his delight in words. But it is only a greater fool who will let his eyes become enslaved to these exotic delicacies, and allow self-control to be swept away, as it were, with the various dishes. Is it not utterly inane to keep leaning forward from one’s couch, all but falling on one’s nose into the dishes, as though, according to the common saying, one were leaning out from the nest of the couch to catch the escaping vapors with the nostrils?<sup>158</sup>

Clement writes at length about proper dinner manners: how to recline in seemly form, how to take bites of food and to chew with restrained dignity, how to drink wine, in what size sips (never gulps!) and what quantities, how to position the neck and head, how to shape the mouth into a demure and modest smile, how to belch without offense. Even in the midst of utter decadence, the Christian must radiate the serenity of one who is in no way disturbed by the tumult of sensory experiences that assaulted the diner at every moment. “We have been created, not to eat or drink, but to come to the knowledge of God.”<sup>159</sup>

Clement’s discussion of Christian comportment contains a fascinating account of the culinary trends of his day. When he turns to fragrances and perfumes, however, he faces a more daunting task. On the one hand, he can flatly state that sweet scents (“of wreaths, of perfumes”) were not a necessity for Christians.<sup>160</sup> And he can follow this statement with an excursus on the right reading of the gospel story from Luke 7:36–50, on the Sinful Woman who came to anoint Christ’s feet with fine ointment, washing them with her tears and wiping them with her hair. The excursus follows the model Clement had used in treating biblical texts on holy incense: the ointment symbolizes divine teachings

and holy works, whose good odor is wafted abroad by Christ and the apostles (drawing on Paul's image from 2 Corinthians 2:14–16). Clement also plays with the word for “oil,” *elaion*, as a symbol for mercy, *eleo* (to have mercy), as a kind of divine pun. Throughout his discussion of perfumes, he returns time and again to the theme of spiritual sacrifice, calling for the “good odor” of holy works and the “spiritual fragrance” of love. “Men of our way of life should be redolent, not of perfume, but of perfection, and women should be fragrant with the odor of Christ, the royal chrism, not that of powders and perfumes.”<sup>161</sup>

Yet Clement admits that Christians cannot abstain altogether from aromatic products, since these were known as necessary for hygiene and health. He points out that scented oils are good insecticides, and strengthen the disposition; they soften the skin, relax the muscles, and remove offensive body odors. Myrrh can be a stimulant for the weary, and effective in the treatment of catarrh, chills, and other dispositions. Rubbing the feet with a salve of warming or cooling oil helps with sinus congestion. But “there is all the difference in the world between rubbing oil on oneself and scenting oneself with it.”<sup>162</sup> Of course, he chides, there are so many perfumes, available in such a variety of forms—oils, liquids, dry powders, ointments—that one could inadvertently be drawn into profligate use of them. And by the use to which one put scents, one's moral nature could be discerned. “There are women who always exude extreme vulgarity; they keep scenting and sprinkling their bed covers and their houses, and, in their daintiness, stop short only of making their chamberpots fragrant with myrrh.”<sup>163</sup> Men, too, could find their noble characteristics emasculated by soft myrrh oil.<sup>164</sup>

Like Tertullian, Clement argues that everything depends on how the products are used. But in a more moderate view than Tertullian's, Clement advocates that there is a right use of perfumes for Christians—a right use that includes sensory pleasure as its justification.

Yet let us not develop a fear of perfume, like vultures and scarabs who are said to die if anointed with the oil of roses. Let the women make use of a little of these perfumes, but not so much as to nauseate their husbands, for too much fragrance suggests a funeral, not married life. . . . Since we make no allowance for pleasure not connected with a necessity of life, surely let us also make distinctions here and choose only what is useful. There are perfumes that are neither soporific, nor erotic, suggestive neither of sexual relations nor of immodest harlotry, but wholesome and chaste, and refreshing to the mind that is tired and invigorating to the appetite.<sup>165</sup>

Here Clement shows the pragmatism as well as force of custom that worked against an advocacy for olfactory austerity: the protection against predators that

perfume provided, and again the custom of (clearly lavish) aromatics in funeral practices. But he argues further a fine distinction between the dangers of erotic desire that heavy scents were thought to incite, and the healthful refreshment that sweet fragrance could bestow. In fact, he noted, God permitted fragrant oils as a relief from the harsh labor of human lives. The pleasure as well as the physical benefit was to be valued and appreciated, although it was pleasure for pragmatic purposes.<sup>166</sup>

In this view, Clement's is a rare voice among early Christian authors. But he does not push the distinctions too far and he is careful to delimit the boundaries of pleasure. Clement, like Tertullian, wrote extensively on the moral decadence of personal adornment, on the hazards of fleshly pleasures, on the lusts easily awakened by any sensory indulgence.<sup>167</sup> He, too, contributed to the rhetorical tradition, shared among the philosophical schools, that utilized sexuality and sexual activity as the trope for desire gone awry or, more fundamentally, lack of self-control.<sup>168</sup> The challenge he raises is his insistence that sensory experience is a good we have received from God, and its pleasures, rightly engaged, a gift divinely granted.

Tertullian joins Clement on this point when both expound the theme in their treatments of wreaths and crowns.<sup>169</sup> Woven of flowers and fragrant leaves, wreaths were a frequent adornment for places and persons in Roman society. They were a mark of honor or veneration, as well as an ornament of beauty. As already noted, they were set at doorways to mark religious festivals; they were awarded the victors in competitions, games, and military exploits; they were worn in civic and imperial ceremonial; they were worn on festive occasions, like banquets. Indeed, Tertullian complained, "the world places crowns upon brothels, latrines, bakeshops, elementary schools, and the very amphitheater; they crown, too, the place where the clothes are stripped from the slain gladiators, and the very biers of the dead."<sup>170</sup> The sheer frequency of wreaths, as well as their association with honor, belied the dangers they presented.

For both Clement and Tertullian, the problem with wreaths was that they distorted the right use of the senses. God had created flowers and fragrant plants for our benefit—for our health—and by their beauty, to be a reminder of the goodness of God's creation. But flowers or leaves could only serve these functions if they could be seen (for their beauty) and smelled (for their effects). When used in pagan rites, wreaths led Christians astray by their fragrance, which marked pagan and not Christian divinity. When used for personal adornment, the dangers were more insidious still. For the wearer could not partake of the benefits available by sight and smell: worn on the head, a wreath could not be seen or properly smelled except by others. Its effect, then,



was no different from that of decorative perfume, distracting others with sensual delight and drawing undue attention to the wearer. The wearer thus violated the purpose for which God had made the flowers and given the senses with which to perceive them. Rather than turning one's attention to the Creator, wreaths turned one's attention to fleshly delights only. Clement stressed the essential good of flowers for health and medicine—benefits brought by the sensory impact of plants. Tertullian emphasized the importance of utilizing the senses as God created them to be used: to be filled with the beauty and goodness of creation. Both insisted that Christians should be ashamed of the frivolity of wreaths when considering the crown of thorns by which Christ had won their salvation; and Tertullian summoned the vision of the heavenly diadem that awaited the faithful Christian, of which the scriptures spoke (Rev 2:10, 6:2, 10:1).

In an interesting contrast, Tertullian here argued the significance of sense perception as a means of important religious knowledge. He stressed that God created the senses so that humanity could know and participate in the goodness of the created order as an indication of its Maker.<sup>171</sup> Clement, for his part, lists the medicinal qualities of the different flowers from which wreaths were made, and points out that these qualities are only therapeutic when the plants are properly used for that purpose.<sup>172</sup> His interests are consistently practical. Enjoyment of plants or flowers through their sensory effects was "useful" only insofar as it contributed to the awareness that God had created this world as a benefit for humanity.

Elsewhere, however, Clement discusses the right use of the senses as a means to discipline the self into continual awareness of God. Sensory awareness, properly directed, points beyond this world to its Maker. One should receive sensory experiences and utilize each one as a reminder of the divine; each sensory encounter then becomes first of all an acknowledgment of God, and thus a spiritual sacrifice of thanksgiving. Clement describes this process when answering the question of how the Christian gnostic can pray without ceasing:

[The gnostic] is far from surrendering himself to the mob-government which tyrannizes over the theaters. . . . he repudiates both these spectacular pleasures and the other refinements of luxury, such as costly perfumes flattering the sense of smell, or combinations of meats and the attractions of various wines enticing the palate, or fragrant wreaths of a variety of flowers which enfeeble the soul through the sense. Enjoying all things soberly, he refers his enjoyment in every case to God as its author, whether it be of food or drink or ointment, and offers to the Giver first-fruits of the whole, using the speech which he has bestowed, to thank him both for the gift and for the use of it.<sup>173</sup>

Clement here highlights the role of olfaction both as an experience affective in its own right, and as an aspect necessarily attendant to the full experience of the other senses. In addition to its own impact on the person, he writes, smell enhances taste and intensifies beauty as experienced through sight or touch. Its perception, or received experience, allows the Christian to remain continually focused on God, for smell therefore affects its recipient even when the recipient does not indulge the other senses (by eating, for example, or touching, or looking). Tertullian had worried about the power of smell to endanger Christians by inadvertently exposing them to pagan practices through inhalation of sacrificial smoke or other fragrances with sacred meanings; simply breathing the smells implicated a person as participating in their offering. The pervasive presence of smell made it a carrier of continual danger. By the same means, Clement draws out the potential of smell to be a constant mode of discipline, an ever-present reminder of God.

These discussions by Tertullian and Clement are of great significance. They provide a rare, early glimpse of how Christian writers will begin to explore the nature and function of the senses in the post-Constantinian period. For here we have the consideration of how the experience of smell in *and of itself* might be important as a means of religious knowledge. In pre-Constantinian texts, as I have tried to show in this chapter, we most often see the body, its senses, and olfaction in particular, treated with respect to how they could be used to live a Christian life. While affirming God as Creator of all, Christians yet understood themselves to be living in a non-Christian world. In the early Christian view, the model Christ had offered was to use the body as the instrument through which to seek eternal life; its purpose was not to focus on this temporary, ephemeral world. The *Letter to Diognetus* had described Christians in these terms: “Their lot is cast ‘in the flesh,’ but they do not live ‘after the flesh.’ They pass their time upon the earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven.”<sup>174</sup> Within this view, the instructions churches gave their members called them to live as simply as possible and to do good works as they waited quietly for a future life in God’s kingdom. Such a life, as we have seen repeatedly in this chapter, should be sensorily austere lest sensory pleasures shackle one to this world. The body was important not for what the senses perceived, but for how one lived in it, for the actions by which one expressed one’s faith: fasting, chastity, voluntary poverty, and service to others. As Methodius had exhorted, “whether we act virtuously or commit sin, it is through these our senses that our deeds, both good and evil, are strengthened.” Therefore, he urged, “chastity” must be a condition of each of the senses, “causing holiness to shine forth from every one of them.”<sup>175</sup>

In contrast to Tertullian and Clement, consider Origen once again on the right use of the senses. Origen, we have noted, viewed ethical action as the

valid use of the body by the Christian, and as the proper means of offering sacrifice. His discussion of the “smells” of sacrifice was in fact a prescription for sacrificial relation brought into effect through bodily activity, with little attention to sensory aspects of that activity. So, too, in his *Homilies on Genesis*, Origen admonished his audience to “take up the circumcision worthy of the word of God in your ears and in your lips and in your heart and in the foreskin of your flesh and in all your members together.”<sup>176</sup> Declaring that “circumcision” was a relationship with God rendered by a virtuous soul and ethical activity, Origen called further for the circumcision of each of the senses. For smell, this meant: “If someone acquires ‘the good odor of Christ’ and seeks ‘a sweet odor’ in works of mercy, his sense of smell is circumcised. But he who goes about ‘anointed with the chief perfumes’ must be said to be uncircumcised in his sense of smell.”<sup>177</sup>

Further on, Origen offers a convoluted etymology by which he parses “Cetura,” the name of Abraham’s second wife (Gen 25:1–2), to mean *thymiamata*, the Greek term he explains to signify “incense or a good odor.” He continues his exegesis in kind:

But let us see how someone becomes the ‘good odor of Christ.’ Sin is a foul affair. In fact, sinners are compared to pigs who wallow in sins as in foul dung. And David, as a repentant sinner, says: ‘My sores have putrified and are abscessed.’ [Ps 37 (LXX 38).6]

If there is, therefore, anyone of you in whom there is now no odor of sin, but an odor of justice, the sweetness of mercy, if anyone, by praying ‘without ceasing’ always offers incense to the Lord and says, ‘Let my prayer be directed as incense in your sight, the lifting up of my hands as evening sacrifice,’ this man has married Cetura.<sup>178</sup>

Other virtues that would indicate a Christian’s “marriage to Cetura,” Origen continues, are hospitality, care for the poor, patience, gentleness, and the like. These actions constitute the “sweet odor” of sacrifice that the story of Abraham’s second marriage is meant to convey. Indeed, in his *Homilies on Leviticus* Origen advocates right usage of the senses in precisely these terms: the Christian must “restore these five [senses] to holy deeds and religious ministries.” Further, Christians ought to add “five others which are the senses of the inner man,” the “senses” which will allow the Christian to see, hear, taste, and touch God, and to “take that ‘odor’ about which the Apostle says, ‘for we are the pleasing odor of Christ.’”<sup>179</sup> I will discuss Origen’s notion of the interior senses more fully in chapter 4. What matters here is that in the *Homilies on Leviticus* Origen presents the “inner senses” as a condition of openness to God’s

teachings brought about by a “restoration” or correction of the physical senses, a correction instilled through ethical activity.

Recall the letter about Polycarp’s martyrdom. There, the Smyranean witnesses used their sensory experiences of the event to direct their attention away from this world, away from the earthly experience of suffering and injustice enacted before them. Instead, their senses turned them towards their relationship with the divine, a relationship recalled in the sacrificial scents of bread and frankincense. Subsequently, as hinted by Tertullian and Clement, Christians came increasingly to use their senses to direct their attention to this world as God’s world. During the fourth century, the world from which early Christians had been alienated in bearing witness to their God would become the world that expressed that witness. After Christianity’s legalization in 312/3, bodily experience and bodily engagement will become increasingly prominent in the behavior and discourse of late antique Christians over those of their earlier counterparts. In collective and individual worship, in public works and private piety, in civic, domestic, and monastic contexts, and in the texts that discuss all these, it will be not simply the actions one performs with one’s body that matter, but further, the experiences received and known with the body that are valued. The body gained worth for Christians as a means for knowing God.

Dramatic changes in olfactory piety will mark and accompany this shift in Christian sensibility. The rest of this book treats those changes, how they happened and why they mattered. Before we can turn to late antique Christianity, however, one further consideration remains. In general, Christianity of the pre-Constantinian period can be characterized by its sensory austerity, whether in olfactory terms or otherwise. Its rituals and practices did not involve elaborate sensory engagement, and simplicity was encouraged in every context. Discussions bearing upon human physicality stressed bodily activity rather than sensory experience. But Tertullian and Clement raised the question of how sensory experience might be religiously significant in daily life, in the city, in the household, and in the natural world. For them, smells could point to God as Maker of this world, providing a knowledge of God’s work and through that, perhaps, a knowledge of God’s own self. Smells contained more than the eye could see. How might smells lead to God?

### God’s Perfume: Imagined Glory and the Scent of Life

The letter reporting Polycarp’s martyrdom had drawn on the smells of sacrifice to construct a particular understanding of what had taken place in that event. Other martyr accounts mention smells of an altogether different ilk. When a

group of Christians were martyred in the Gallic cities of Lyons and Vienne in the year 177, their churches, too, wrote a letter about the tragedy that occurred. One of the martyrs, Attalus, was burned to death in an iron chair, the smoke filling the air with “sacrificial savor” as when Polycarp had died. However, when the Christian prisoners had entered the stadium to receive their execution by grievous torture, the witnesses reported this experience:

[The Christians about to be martyred] went forth gladly; glory and great grace were mingled on their faces, so that they wore even their fetters as a becoming ornament, like a bride adorned with golden lace of many patterns, and they were perfumed with the sweet savor of Christ [2 Cor 2:15], so that some supposed that they had been anointed with worldly unguents.<sup>180</sup>

Here the witnesses saw their companions shining with joy, prepared to leave this world and enter God’s Kingdom. The prospect transformed the martyrs, who bore a radiance fit for a wedding celebration rather than the funeral that would shortly take place. The image was apt since Christians received baptism as betrothal to Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom.<sup>181</sup> Death by martyrdom was the relocation of the believer from this world to the next, to that longed-for nuptial union in the heavenly bridal chamber. The witnesses turned attention to what awaited these martyrs beyond their suffering deaths by eliciting a sensation of that to which they were going. The smell of execution was rendered “sweet” by virtue of its meaning as Christian sacrifice to God. But here the “sweetness” denoted more than the action of offering and the relationship it signified; it exuded the beauty of where the martyrs soon would be. Those who watched presented this sensibility as tangible in its effect: heaven’s beauty could not be seen in the horrid squalor of the stadium, but it could be sensed—inhaled—as surely as if the martyrs had been anointed with earthly perfume.

Christians, too, shared the Mediterranean perception that divinity was redolent with fragrance. The favorite text, shared by Jews and Christians, was Sirach 24.1–21, in which Wisdom describes how she came forth “from the mouth of God” to dwell throughout creation and take her place among the people of God. Rooted and flourishing like trees, God’s Wisdom brought forth her fruits:

Like cassia and camel’s thorn I  
gave forth the aroma of spices,  
and like choice myrrh I spread  
a pleasant odor,  
like galbanum, onycha, and stacte,  
and like the fragrance of  
frankincense in the tabernacle. (24.15)

So, too, the author exhorts, must the true devotee also conduct himself:

Listen to me, O you holy sons,  
and bud like a rose growing by  
a stream of water;  
send forth fragrance like  
frankincense,  
and put forth blossoms like a lily.  
Scatter the fragrance, and sing a  
hymn of praise;  
bless the Lord for all his works. (39.13–14)

The “sweet fragrance of God”<sup>182</sup> was a scent that Christians knew, and they knew its source. For there was one context in which early Christians savored an intensity of sensory awareness and delight. It was not in thisworld, a place where sensation was transient and deceptively ambiguous, a place where the stench of tortured death might mean true beauty, or the pleasure of fine scents might mean the destruction of the unwitting soul. Instead, it was where God dwelt, or where God presided. Biblical literature presented early Christianity with another world to explore: a biblical world of immense imaginal proportions. For there was a counterpart to the learned exegesis of Jewish or Christian theologians and scholars. Biblical texts made available to the religious imagination a treasure store of characters, sagas, stories, and traditions. These were explored in the exuberant narrative literature that emerged among Jews and Christians alongside the core of sacred texts that would come to comprise the defined canons of these two religions. Such works fleshed out the skeletal stories, filled in the silences, and worked out the puzzles that abounded in biblical literature. Widely read and tremendously popular, extracanonical texts were a primary means of disseminating the foundational teachings of ancient Judaism and early Christianity in an accessible form. The second century B.C.E. through the fourth century C.E. was a period in which this literature flourished throughout the Mediterranean regions.<sup>183</sup>

It can be difficult to date these “apocryphal” or “pseudepigraphical” works with precision, and in instances based on the Hebrew Bible it is often difficult to establish whether a given text was originally Jewish or Christian. Often these works circulated widely amongst Christians and Jews alike, and in a variety of languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin for the older texts; Syriac, Coptic, and other languages of the Christian Orient as time went on). For early Christians, however, these works provided a narrative world wholly unlike that in which they lived. In stark contrast to the austerity of life and worship that dominated the

rhetoric of early Christian sermons, treatises, and letters, extracanonical literature offered a feast for the sensory imagination. Thick with sensory descriptions, patently moral in the implications such descriptions carried, these texts allowed the ancient sensory imagination full rein as a means of religious instruction. From the wealth of examples, I take three to illustrate the profound richness of olfactory meaning, in particular, that informed the early Christian sensibility.

1 Enoch appears to have been written between the second century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., by numerous authors at different times. The text contains various eschatological themes, including Enoch's tour of heaven with the archangel Michael as his guide. The Tree of Life and others like it were among the wonders Enoch saw. In the midst of the seven mountains of northwest heaven, he tells us, there sat a throne "surrounded by fragrant trees." The sight alone was astonishingly beautiful, but the scents were overwhelming. Among the fragrant trees,

. . . there was one tree such as I have never at all smelled; there was not a single one among those or other (trees) which is like it; among all the fragrances nothing could be so fragrant; its leaves, its flowers, and its wood would never wither forever; its fruit is beautiful and resembles the clustered fruits of a palm tree. At that moment I said, 'This is a beautiful tree, beautiful to view, with leaves so handsome, and blossoms (so) magnificent in appearance.'<sup>184</sup>

To Enoch's wondering query, the archangel replied that this very mountain was the throne of God, on which God would sit when he descended to visit the earth with goodness. As for the tree of ineffable fragrance, it was forbidden that any human being should touch it before the Judgment Day when God would bring history to its conclusion. Then the tree would be given to "the righteous and the pious."

And the elect will be presented with its fruit for life. [God] will plant it in the direction of the northeast, upon the holy place—in the direction of the house of the Lord, the Eternal King.

Then they shall be glad and rejoice in gladness,  
and they shall enter into the holy (place);  
its fragrance shall (penetrate) their bones,  
long life will they live on earth,  
Such as your fathers lived in their days.<sup>185</sup>

Trees of diverse scents filled Enoch's sight as well as his breath as he travelled through heaven. To the east he was brought near the Tree of Judgment, exuding

“the smell of rubbish” despite an appearance like frankincense and myrrh (29.2).<sup>186</sup> Throughout the mountains, there wafted from the trees fragrances that seemed like mastic, cinnamon, nectar, sarara (a kind of balsam?), galbanum, aloe, almond, sweet scented fruits, nard, fragrant bark, cinnamon, and pepper (chs. 30–32). Arriving at last at the Garden of Righteousness, Enoch saw beyond these extraordinary trees many others, “their fragrance sweet, large ones, with much elegance and glorious.” In their midst, one stood apart: “And the tree of wisdom, of which one eats and knows great wisdom, (was among them). It looked like the colors of the carob tree, its fruit like very beautiful grape clusters, and the fragrance of this tree travels and reaches afar.” This tree, the archangel Raphael informed the prophet, was the tree of wisdom of which Adam and Eve had eaten, causing their expulsion from Eden.<sup>187</sup>

The lushness of this account is conveyed by its olfactory descriptions as much as by its visual imagery. Taste is implicated by the mention of fruits; some of the spices listed were common in cooking, also, but the lists ring more of perfumes, incense, and the aromatics of luxury than they do of culinary delights. The richness of texture defies touch, articulation, or even visual form: it is the scents that overwhelm the prophet, that pervade the celestial realm, and that will permeate the very bones of the righteous with life when the End Time brings the conclusion of temporal reality. Drawn from the descriptions of Eden in Genesis 1–2, the account embellishes a beauty far more sumptuous than had there been related, especially in the lengthy attention to fragrances. But the focus on the smells carries a critical association, for the fragrances of these trees will be the source of life at the end of time as Enoch sees it. The breath of life, once granted in Eden’s glory, would be provided again and anew, with irresistible power and a sweet delight unimaginable in the limited world known in history. All this Enoch saw, smelled, sensed, and experienced on his celestial journey. The descriptions stand in vivid relief compared with the discussions of sensory experience we find in other early Christian texts. It is as if the capacity for sensory engagement had been funnelled into an otherworldly sensibility.

And yet the descriptions from 1 *Enoch* assume the reader will understand, because they rely on scents familiar and cherished in ancient culture. The first century C.E. versions of the *Life of Adam and Eve* resolve this paradox by presenting spices and aromatic plants as the one element in the inhabited world that had its direct source in Eden’s splendor. Again, the text is one of multiple versions, circulated broadly among Jewish and Christian communities.<sup>188</sup> The story’s context is Adam’s final illness as he lies dying in suffering grief. His son Seth is certain Adam longs for the fruit of paradise; he begs his father to allow him to go in penitence and smeared with dung to beg for some of this fruit to



soothe his father's pain. The stench of mortality in its sinful nature is at once counterposed to the delicious sweetness of the divine garden. But Adam exhorts Eve to go with Seth, with dust on their heads, to prostrate themselves in abasement and supplication in God's sight. "Perhaps he will have mercy and send his angel to the tree of his mercy, from which flows the oil of life, and will give you a little of it with which to anoint me, that I might have rest from these pains by which I am wasting away."<sup>189</sup> However, when Eve and Seth arrive at paradise and plead their cause, the archangel Michael comes to tell them on God's behalf that humanity cannot take from the oil of mercy until the Last Days. Instead, they are to return and stay with Adam as he dies. Yet Seth and Eve do not go back empty-handed, for they take with them aromatics spices, nard, crocus, calmine, and cinnamon.<sup>190</sup>

In the Greek version, the story continues as Adam has the family gather round his deathbed while Eve recounts the story of their Fall. In Eve's narrative, wherever and whenever God appears in Eden the garden suddenly blooms forth with plants and flowers in ever greater abundance; again, the sweet fragrance of the air of paradise denotes the gift of blossoming beauty, fecundity, and life. Eve recalls the horror as they received their sentence from God in the presence of the cherubim and prepared for their exile from the garden. In desperation, Adam had wept and besought the angels for mercy, "See, you are casting me out; I beg you, let me take fragrance from Paradise, so that after I have gone out, I might bring an offering to God so that God will hear me." Adam's request is in fact religious. He does not request the fragrance of paradise to keep as a comfort, nor to heighten the nourishment they will seek from the meager sustenance of their lives outside of Eden. Adam requests Eden's scent so that he may approach God in the future with sacrificial offering, and the sweet aroma might incline God to a favorable response. The angels must beg God to grant this request, for the fragrances are not theirs to give. As Eve recalls the episode, God's compassion is wide: he grants the gift of spices to be both a means of nourishment and of sacrificial relation. "And God ordered Adam to come that he might take aromatic fragrances out of paradise for his sustenance. When the angels allowed him, he gathered both kinds [i.e., for sacrifice and for food]: crocus, nard, reed, cinnamon; and other seeds for his food." And so Adam and Eve left to make their home in the harsh earth beyond Eden's gate.<sup>191</sup>

Eve's narrative continues, portraying Adam's death and heaven's response. God himself came in his chariot with the cherubim to escort the body to its resting place in paradise, where it would await the general resurrection at the end of time. The celestial entourage is cloaked in the aromas of worship, befitting God's presence but also honoring the one who had died. The religious desires that had compelled Adam's request for spices are here justified, for in

this scene the scents of worship, honor, adoration, and life swirl and entwine in billowing waves. Eve describes it, “I myself saw golden censers and three bowls, and behold, all the angels with frankincense and the censers and the bowls came to the altar and breathed on them, and the fumes of the incense hid the sky.”<sup>192</sup> When the body had been properly prepared, the angels gathered in their ranks with censers and trumpets, mounting up with God upon and above the winds, carrying Adam’s body into paradise. “And they came into Paradise and all the plants of Paradise were stirred, so that all those born of Adam became drowsy from the fragrance.”<sup>193</sup> Laying the body to rest, God commanded Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael to enshroud it and pour over it “oil from the oil of fragrance.” In a final act of mercy, “God sent seven angels into Paradise and they brought many fragrances and set them in the earth.”<sup>194</sup> The scents of the occasion were dizzyingly multifold, as Eve’s narrative had indicated. So rich were the fragrances of paradise’s garden that mortals could not endure them undiluted; Adam’s family was lulled by the intensity of the scents. God honored and mourned his first created by anointing him with perfumed oil of the very fragrance itself. And God’s compassion abounded further, to the granting of spices to the world.

If 1 Enoch identified the singular power and beauty of heaven by its distinctive fragrances, the *Life of Adam and Eve* went further. Here the scents of paradise are combined from its natural beauty (blossoming plants and flowers) and the actions that joined its inhabitants in their relationships. Incense was the vehicle of heavenly worship, just as it was definitive for human access to God; it offered glory, it indicated sacrifice (or the relationship of human to divine), it bestowed honor. Oil from the fragrances of paradise—from its trees, from its air—could soothe illness, or adorn a mortal corpse with inexpressible beauty. By granting spices to the earthly world, God expressed surpassing mercy: in their earthly form, the spices of this world could yet give a portion of the unattainable beauty and comfort of paradise. As Adam had known, spices were the necessary means for the right human relationship to God, even as they were essential for mortal sustenance. In their fragrances, the spices of paradise joined heaven and earth, mortality and immortality, alienation and reconciliation, human and divine. This was a story that accounted for the unique significance of spices in religious usage and meaning, even as it diminished the importance (and beauty) of earthly life in comparison with that of heaven. The vehicle for expressing this complex of meanings—indeed, for comprehending the vicissitudes of humanity’s relation to God—was above all the experience of smell. In this story, olfactory encounter exceeded all that the other senses could convey; it exceeded what the mind could grasp. Where 1 Enoch used olfactory sensation to indicate its scenes of culminating glory, the

*Life of Adam and Eve* uses it to reconsider the whole panorama that constitutes the created order as it functions in its fallen state. The sensory intensity of these texts, and above all their olfactory richness, have no counterpart in other Christian literature of the pre-Constantinian era.

Following the model articulated in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, when early Christian writers wished to evoke divine presence in concrete terms they did so with olfactory imagery. Here the invisible and uncontainable qualities of smells made such imagery especially effective. Unseen yet perceived, smells travelled and permeated the consciousness, transgressing whatever boundaries might be set to restrict their course. How appropriate, then, to imagine them crossing the divide between heaven and earth, carrying a whiff of paradisiacal beauty, elusive yet lingering in the encounter they caused. Odors could transgress the chasm that separated the fallen order from God; they could elicit an unworldly sensation of beauty. The Christian witnesses at Lyons and Vienne described the sweet savor of Christ exuded by the martyrs as surely as if they had been anointed with earthly perfume. In so doing, they evoked a sense of the place where the martyrs would soon be with God, its fragrance already spilling over into this world in honor of their glorious witness. This exact sensation was expressed by the Carthaginian martyr Saturus, when he described experiencing a vision in which he and his fellow martyrs entered heaven. There, "All of us were sustained by a most delicious odor that seemed to satisfy us"—the fragrance was beauty and food both, as it had been in the *Life of Adam and Eve*.<sup>195</sup> In like manner, Syriac tradition speaks of the Holy Spirit's arrival at the baptismal water of the Jordan as marked by sweet aroma, and Pentecost, too, as characterized by a drenching sweet scent; the powerful and unearthly beauty of the fragrance indicated divine presence in either instance.<sup>196</sup> In the *Odes of Solomon*, the ecstasy the Odists experiences in worship results in a similar sensation, "My eyes were enlightened, / And my face received the dew; / And my breath was refreshed / By the pleasant fragrance of the Lord."<sup>197</sup>

Within this perspective, whatever was truly beautiful in the sensations of this world came in fact from beyond it, while the beauty of the created world was pale by comparison, if not altogether false. The tale of Joseph and Aseneth represents the contours of this piety when the biblical imagination located its stories in the human realm rather than in heaven.<sup>198</sup> Before meeting the mysterious Hebrew Joseph, Aseneth, a young pagan virgin, delights in the beauty of her home, its trees dripping with delicious fruits, its paving stones scented with perfume, and every luxury hers. But Joseph disdains her life, declaring her "anointed with the ointment of perdition," while he himself was "anointed with the blessed ointment of incorruptibility."<sup>199</sup> Chastened and pierced with compunction, Aseneth secludes herself in bitter penitence, seeking to purify

her soul until it might be worthy of acceptance by Joseph's God. After eight days of fasting, mourning, and keeping vigil in sackcloth and ashes, Aseneth prays a long and fervent confession to the Lord. In response a heavenly messenger appears, promising Aseneth that she will be made new, nourished with the bread of life and cup of immortality, and "anoined with the ointment of incorruptibility."

Aseneth begs the messenger to accept her hospitality, offering food and good wine "whose perfume wafts unto heaven." But the messenger orders Aseneth to bring him a honeycomb that has miraculously appeared in her chamber, "white as snow, and full of honey, and its fragrance was like the scent of life." Aseneth is puzzled and confused, asking, "Might it not have come from your mouth, since its fragrance is like the fragrance of perfume?" In compassion and blessing, the messenger explains that it is for her to eat, "For this honey the bees of the paradise of delight have made, and the angels of God eat of it, and all who eat of it shall not die for eternity." After placing a piece of the honeycomb in each of their mouths, the messenger burns the rest. The comb is consumed, exuding a sweet odor.<sup>200</sup> Shortly thereafter Aseneth emerges from her chamber, transformed and radiant, worthy of her holy bridegroom Joseph.

Here the true fragrances of beauty are those of worship offered to God as sacrifice (the wine whose odor wafts heavenward), or those out of heaven itself (the messenger, the honeycomb). A life of pure devotion to God renders one redolent with the ointment of incorruptibility; the honeycomb perfumes the air with the "scent of life." In Joseph's initial rejection of Aseneth, it would seem that every earthly beauty is nothing but perdition, of which Aseneth herself reeks; in her penitence she must rid herself of her adornments, her luxurious food, her offerings and libations for her gods. Beauty—life itself—is brought from heaven, its scent travelling from that realm to the earthly one. It wafts from the messenger, from his words, from his gifts. It heralds a life incorruptible, and Aseneth, too, soon exudes its blessing.

Whatever was near to God, whatever was sent or given by God—these were known by their wondrous smells, exquisite fragrances that bestowed life upon all they touched. From God had come such a breath of life. Adam had breathed it. In the early Christian understanding, its scent tinged the created order, renewed each time God caused the separation of earth and heaven to be breached. The stench of mortality, of sin, of decadence or suffering filled the air as humanity inhabited life apart from God. Yet that stench could be penetrated and overpowered by the scent of life that wafted from heaven, or poured forth from God's mouth. This scenario pervades apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, as consistently as reticence and austerity regarding the senses characterize early Christian writings. They are compatible views: both insist the

wealth of sensory experience lies in what can be experienced of God. In the earthly world and in the earthly life, early Christians claimed, that wealth could be encountered only faintly. Nonetheless, its experience was real, for it could be sensed and thereby known.

The biblical imagination of early Christianity thus shared fully in the olfactory codes of the ancient Mediterranean world. Smells could be deceptive, misleading, dangerous; they could be revelatory, therapeutic, and true. They were essential and basic in religious practices because they indicated what was most essential and basic in human experience: life itself. Hence the association of “good things” with “good smells” and “bad things” with “bad smells” mapped a cosmology that ordered human life and experience in relation to a divine realm perceived as ultimately beneficent (and fragrant). This cosmology yet allowed for immense flexibility and ambiguity, vividly conveyed in the elusive and protean qualities that smells carried or provoked.

The smells that marked ancient Mediterranean religious practices represented and upheld this cosmology, a representation Christians would come to appropriate in their own ritual developments in the course of late antiquity. Indeed, it was because Christians both understood and identified with the intersection between religious ritual and cultural imagination that they could Christianize one of the more haunting ancient myths of the Mediterranean world, that of the phoenix.<sup>201</sup> Once every five hundred or one thousand years, so the story went, the phoenix prepared for its death by building its own funeral bier out of an extraordinary blend of spices: cinnamon, amomum, balsam, cassia, acanthus, frankincense, spikenard, and myrrh, as one version told it.<sup>202</sup> Writers of the Roman Empire added the epilogue that the phoenix then regenerated from its own ashes, and Christians were quick to find here a paradigm, and even a proof-text, for the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.<sup>203</sup> The crux of the story, of course, were the spices the phoenix chose, for even its shortest telling identified these as frankincense and myrrh, the two spices that encapsuled the entire spectrum of ancient Mediterranean sacrifice. Nature and culture, ritual and myth, life and death—all were held together in the tale of the phoenix, whether in its pre-Christian versions or in its Christian form. To Christian ears this was not only because these were the spices of sacrifice and perfume; it was so because these were the scents that grew in paradise, that God had granted to Adam as a comfort in his fallen mortality, and that heavenly messengers might continue to bestow upon the blessed. Whether in biblical or mythical imagination, whether in Roman or Christian culture, incense and perfume provided the paradigms for human-divine relations.

Pre-Constantinian Christianity existed precariously in a hostile world. Yet it shared fundamental sensibilities with that world. To balance the tension, early

Christian writers most often relegated positive exploration of sensory experience to the realm of religious imagination. The place where the senses could be filled with God's presence was a place located elsewhere than the world in which Christians lived. This historical situation would change. When it did, in the course of the fourth century, Christians would find themselves reorienting their senses to a changed world order. Once again, smells and their meanings would prove crucial guides to mark the course.