

## The Balm of Gilead

### Introduction

The 'Balm of Gilead', 'salve', or 'balms' are mentioned seven times in the Bible. After looking at these then consider how this applies to us today:

Genesis 37:25

*Then they sat down to eat a meal. But as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying labdanum resin (gum), balsam (balm), and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt.*

Genesis 43:11

*Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the best products of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man as a gift, a little balsam and a little honey, labdanum resin and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds.*

2 Chronicles 28:15

*The men who had been designated by name got up and took custody of the captives. From the spoils they provided clothing for all those who were naked. They clothed them and provided them with sandals, with food and drink, and with salve for their wounds. They transported all those who were weak on donkeys. They brought them to Jericho, the City of Palms, to their fellow Israelites. Then they returned to Samaria.*

Jeremiah 8:22

*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?*

Jeremiah 46:11

*Go up to Gilead and obtain balm,  
O virgin daughter of Egypt!  
In vain have you multiplied remedies;  
There is no healing for you.*

Jeremiah 51:8

*Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken;  
Wail over her!  
Bring balm for her pain;  
Perhaps she may be healed.*

Ezekiel 27:17

*Judah and the land of Israel, they were your traders; with the wheat of Minnith, cakes, honey, oil and balm they paid for your merchandise.*

## Background

The word used for *balm* or *salve* each time in these passages is *Zori*. It is an authentic product mentioned in non-Biblical sources; the queen of Ugarit sent a small jug of it as tribute to the queen of Egypt in a 14<sup>th</sup>-century BC letter found in the Amarna archives. In the Roman era, it was known as the *balsam of Judah*.

We, of course, know that Gilead did exist. It was a region east of the Jordan River. This particular land's topography was mountainous and fertile. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh inherited this land (Joshua 13:24-31).

The Atlantic pistachio tree, also named Atlantic terebinth, is a large tree with a thick trunk and massive foliage. Its nuts are rich in oil and eaten (Hebrew: *botnim*). Today there are a few very large, old pistachio trees in the eastern bank of the Jordan River above the mountains of Gilead in the nation of Jordan.

Balms had several uses in the ancient world. They flavored mummified meat, perfumed and preserved the bodies of those who had passed, and they had healing properties. The ancient salve mixtures could contain a number of ingredients from beeswax to balsam and poplar tree juices.

Pistachio resin is sold today in Jordan and the UAE for medicinal purposes: relieving throat infections, lowering cholesterol, treating stomach ulcers, and alleviating stress.

## Experimental Archaeology

In the Summer 2023 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Zohar Amar of Bar-Ilan University identifies the biblical "balm of Gilead" with the resin from the Atlantic pistachio tree. He explores the reasons for this identification in his article, "Balm of Gilead." But his research didn't stop there. After identifying the tree, he and his student Elron Zabatani engaged in some experimental archaeology and successfully harvested some of the biblical balm.

They reconstructed the traditional method of resin extraction from the Atlantic pistachio tree. Below, they share photos of the process.

Amar and Zabatani harvested resin from 80 trees in Israel. They based their method of extraction on the resin production in Chios, Greece, and Iraqi Kurdistan. In both those locales, residents harvest resin during the summer season.

### Step 1

They cut the trees to allow the resin to flow down the trunks.



### Step 2

To facilitate the collection of resin, they attached clay bowls under the cuts in the tree trunk. The resin slowly dripped into the bowls.



### Step 3

After a month, they returned to the trees. By then, the sticky liquid resin had dried and crystallized. To collect it, they scraped it off the trunk, and they siphoned the resin from the clay bowls into a basin.



Amar and Zabatani calculated that 50 trees produce around 33 pounds of resin per season. The high yield makes this industry particularly desirable. Amar explains, “Although it is not possible to estimate how much resin was actually collected every year and how many people were involved in the process, the large amounts of resin we obtained confirm that this was indeed a profitable industry in the past.”

After collection, the resin is cooked in water until it becomes a white liquid to dissipate the bitterness. Then wax is added to create a consistency that is easy to chew; it is called *alka*.

### Conclusion

No matter what ingredients the particular balm of Gilead contained, we know they believed it could heal the wounded.

The Israelites had turned to a temporary solution, and God makes that clear in the Jeremiah 46 passage. They’d consulted other nations, other gods, and other methods to heal their sin problem. Babylon represented the consequences of that sin, but even after the Babylonian nation crumbled, and Israel returned after 70 years, they still had festering wounds from sin. They still needed an ultimate balm that could heal them.

Jesus is truly the “balm of Gilead” for all the hurting people of the world. God’s grace is always greater than our sin:

There is more in the balm to heal than there is in guilt to wound; for there is more in grace to save than there is in sin to destroy. If we know Jesus, we’re going to heaven because his grace is far greater than our sin. His blood is the balm that heals the deepest wounds of sin. When we have fallen hard, he lifts us up and restores our soul.

In the same way, do we trust in temporary balms? Do we apply them to festering spiritual wounds? Or have we turned to the ultimate healing physician, who can truly cure our ailments?

Is there no Balm in Gilead? Yes, there is. Jesus is the name that makes the wounded whole.

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Refrain:

There is a balm in Gilead  
to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead  
to heal the sin sick soul.

1. Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
and think my work's in vain,  
but then the Holy Spirit  
revives my soul again.

(Refrain)

2. Don't ever feel discouraged,  
for Jesus is your friend,  
who, if you ask for knowledge,  
will never fail to lend.

(Refrain)

3. If you cannot preach like Peter,  
if you cannot pray like Paul,  
you can tell the love of Jesus,  
who died to save us all.

(Refrain)

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Have you decided to follow Jesus, the *Balm of Gilead*? If not, why not? If you have left Jesus and his healing *balm*, it is time to repent and return to him.