ONYCHA, INGREDIENT OF THE ANCIENT JEWISH INCENSE:
AN ATTEMPT AT IDENTIFICATION

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The composition of the ancient holy incense is given to us in Exodus 30:34/5 of the Jewish Publication Society Bible as follows: "And the Lord said to Moses: Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum: these sweet spices with pure frankincense, of each there shall be a like weight. And thou shalt make of it incense, a perfume, after the art of the perfumer; seasoned with salt, pure and holy."

With rare exceptions, spices and components of incense are of vegetable origin. With regard to the Tabernacle incense, most scholars agree that the term "stacte" is of Latin and Greek origin, and that stacte represents myrrh, the oleoresin from various species of Commiphora trees, indigenous to northwest Africa and Arabia. Myrrh occurs as yellowish to reddish-brown tears, with vanilla-like odor. The French Bible expert Rashi (acronym for Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1045–1105), whom the German theologian Johann Buxtorf (1564–1629), himself a leading commentator on Bible and Talmud, called "consummatissimus ille theologiae judaicae doctor," equates "stacte" with the Hebrew "nataph," meaning to drip. This meaning is identical with that of the Latin "stacte" and the Greek derivation "stakt6," all suggesting the bleeding of the substance from the tree.

Galbanum consists of the gum-resin contained in the roots of Ferula galbaniflua and related Ferula species, large, stout perennial umbelliferous plants with interlacing leaves. Commercial galbanum supplies come primarily from the Levant, and occasionally from Iran. Galbanum occurs as friable masses of loosely agglomerated tears, yellowish to brown, with a somewhat terebinthinate odor.

Frankincense, commercially known as olibanum, is a sweet-smelling, balsam-like oleoresin, obtained from several Boswellia species, small trees, growing in Nubia, Egypt, Arabia, and Somaliland. Olibanum appears as yellowish-brown tears, with a sweetish, balsamic odor. Common names are male incense and gum thus. Nowadays the resin is used mainly in incense formulations and in perfumery. The German "Weihrauch" means sacred incense. The same meaning is expressed by frankincense, though somewhat less precisely.

We turn now to onycha, the remaining fourth ingredient. Its identity is as uncertain as it is controversial. The author of this paper offers his conclusions, based upon a lifetime study of the Bible and of the plants and plant derivatives which are contained in it.

Due to the fact that various Septuagint translations and interpretations appeared in the third century B.C. in Palestine, later in Greece, and finally in Alexandria, the effort to identify onycha meets with "confusion worse confounded." Nowadays the most universally accepted definition of onycha is that it was obtained from the claw-like operculum, or from the shell of a mollusk belonging to the genus Strombus, which is indigenous to the Red Sea. The Spanish Bible (1) refers to it as "uña," meaning claw. The French Bible (2) translates onycha as "l'ongle odorant," meaning fragrant claw. In the New World Translations (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Jehovah's Witnesses) the German Bible records onycha as "Raeucherklaue," identical in meaning with the above French "l'ongle odorant," while the French Bible of the New World Translations carries

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onycha as "'tonyx,'" leaving it up to the reader to choose between mineral and plant. Most English Bibles support the mollusk interpretation, among them The Standard Edition of the Holy Bible, the Moffat Bible, The New English Bible, and the New Oxford Bible. The mollusk translation is also followed by 12 prominent American Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias which were consulted. According to The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, a similar product is still being used in Upper Egypt for fumigation.

This wide-spread interpretation is based on the original Greek term "'onyx'" of the Septuagint. It means fingernail or animal claw. In this sense it is also a medical term, onycha meaning inflammation of the nail matrix. The term onyx relating to a fragrant substance is found in the Ecclesiasticus book 24:15 of the Apocrypha, where wisdom is being compared with the pleasant odor of galbanum, onyx, and storax.

It should be pointed out here that nail or claw is actually an extended connotation of onyx, derived from the translucent and sometimes veined appearance of the gemstone onyx, its familiar meaning.

The widely held mollusk hypothesis becomes quite perplexing if one considers that the mollusk was counted among the unclean animals in the Bible. Chapters Leviticus 11:9 and 12 of the Jewish Publication Society Bible read as follows: "'These may ye eat of all that are in the waters: whatsoever hath fins and scales in the water, in the seas, and in the rivers, them may ye eat (9), and whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that is a detestable thing unto you (12).'"

It seems highly unlikely that the use of the mollusk or of parts of the mollusk was intended or permitted for rites in the Holy Tabernacle, and this is indeed confirmed by the famed theologian Nachmanides, who emphasized that the commandment concerning unclean animals pertained not only to dietary rules, but to the temple service as well.

Martin Luther must have had exactly the same view as Nachmanides. In Luther’s Protestant Bible, translated from the Greek text of Erasmus (1466–1536), and published in 1534 as Die Heilige Schrift, he translates onycha into the German “'Balsam,'” equivalent to the English balsam or balm, meaning an exudation from a plant, usually an oleoresin like Balsam Fir (Canada Balsam), Balsam Tolu, or Balm Gilead. With this Luther pointedly rejects the mollusk idea for onycha. Apparently unable or unwilling to be more specific, Luther nevertheless felt that onycha was a plant product.

It should be mentioned at this point that Luther in his momentous undertaking had the faithful cooperation, that is the counsel and wisdom, of Philipp Melanchton, German Reformer and Bible expert. Luther’s co-worker was so immersed in his work and so enamored with the Greek language, that he Hellenized his German name of Schwarzert into Melanchton.

As already pointed out, onyx in its familiar and probably original meaning denotes a translucent gemstone, often with parallel bands of different color shades, best known as onyx marble or Mexican onyx. This mineral is valued in the making of cameos and in the crafting of ornamental objects. Some Biblical writers have used the term onyx for translating the Greek “'onyx,'” leaving the true meaning uncertain: they include Winifred Walker, author of the excellent book “'All the Plants of the Bible.'” The author of the Apocrypha chapter quoted above, however, left no doubt that he meant onyx as a fragrance. A far-fetched explanation for the use of the mineral onyx would be that in powdered form it could have acted as a filler in the incense mixture, in order to keep it from compacting. However, like the mollusk interpretation, this one also seems highly unlikely.