

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

(Continued)

Prof. F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

II. Jesus Revealed Himself to the World (John 1:19-12:50)

(c) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND BY THE LAKE

(John 4: 43-6: 71)

(ii) *The Pool of Bethesda* (John 5:1-18)

Ch. 5, v. 1—*After these things there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem*—The central chapters of the Gospel are chronologically arranged by reference to various festivals of the Jewish year—cf. John 6:4 (Passover); 7:2 (Tabernacles); 10:22 (Dedication); 11:55 (Passover again). They are described as 'feasts of the Jews', for the Evangelist has been resident for years in a mainly Gentile community, which is unfamiliar with the sacred seasons of Israel. (We may compare the explanatory reference to 'the Jews manner of purifying' in John 2:6.) But when it comes to identifying the festival mentioned here, the task is none too easy, and almost every festival has been suggested at one time or another. To complicate the situation, there is a variant reading which says 'the feast of the Jews' (so the Codex Sinaiticus and a number of later authorities; cf. R.V. margin); and when 'the feast of the Jews' is named in this absolute way, the reference is usually to Tabernacles. However, the weight of the evidence rather favours the reading which lacks the definite article, and this leaves the identification of the festival open, so far as the wording is concerned. Some attractive arguments have been advanced for identifying it with the New Year (the Feast of Trumpets of Lev. 23:23-25): of these two may be mentioned. (i) It has been demonstrated that the discourses of our Lord recorded in the central chapters of this Gospel are closely related to those passages of the Old Testament which were prescribed for synagogue reading at the festivals to which these discourses are attached. This has been worked out in detail by Dr Aileen Guilding of Sheffield University in a thesis (to be pub-

lished before long) for which she was awarded the Oxford doctorate in philosophy. In it she shows how the judgment-theme of the discourse which follows the 'sign' of this chapter is characteristic of the Scripture lessons prescribed for the season of Trumpets (the beginning of Tishri). (ii) The popular belief to which the interpolation of verse 4 refers belongs to a class which is widely associated with the New Year in the folklore of many nations (as we shall see when we come to it). Neither of these arguments is conclusive, of course. And therefore we need not take too seriously attempts to rearrange the order of John's material here (more particularly, to place Chapter 5 after Chapter 6) so as to improve the chronological sequence of his narrative. If the chapters as they stand are in chronological order, and our tentative identification is right, then we have now reached a point roughly midway between the Passover of John 2:13 ff. and that of John 6:4. And if the variant reading, 'the feast of the Jews', referring to Tabernacles, be accepted, it will make little difference, since Tabernacles began only a fortnight later than Trumpets, and Jesus could well have gone up to Jerusalem for the earlier feast and stayed over for the later one.

v. 2—*Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porches.*—R.V. 'sheep gate' is a more probable interpretation of Gk. *probatikē* than A.V. 'sheep market'; although the sheep gate would in any case lead to the sheep market. A few commentators have treated the Greek noun *kolymbethra* ('pool') as dative, in agreement with *probatikē*; the sense would then be: 'there is in Jerusalem by the sheep pool the place which is called in Hebrew Bethesda'. This, however, is less likely; the R.V. rendering is best. According to the Book of Nehemiah, where the sheep gate is mentioned three times (Neh. 3:1, 32; 12:39), it appears to have been an opening in the north wall of the city, a little way west of the 'upper chamber of the corner' (Neh. 3:31), i.e., the north-east corner of the wall.

John says 'there is in Jerusalem'; Jerusalem had lain in ruins for about a quarter of a century at the time when he was writing, but he envisages the city as he knew it so well in earlier days.

In any case, the pool would still be in existence. A pilgrim from Bordeaux, who visited Jerusalem in A.D. 333, notes that 'inside the city there are a pair of pools, having five arches, which pools are called Betsaida'. In 1888 excavations near the Church of St Anne, in the north-east corner of the old city, brought to light the remains of an ancient church. Beneath the church lay a crypt, whose north wall was divided into five compartments, imitating arches; on this wall were also the remains of an ancient fresco representing the angel troubling the water. Clearly those who were responsible for the structure believed that it marked the site of the pool of Bethesda. And that they were justified in this belief was evident when further excavations beneath the crypt revealed a flight of steps leading down to a pool with five shallow porticoes on its north side, right underneath the five imitation arches on the north wall of the crypt. There are few sites in Jerusalem, mentioned in the Gospels, which can be identified so confidently.

The proper name Bethesda is spelt by our manuscripts and versions in a variety of ways. R.V. margin mentions two variants, Bethsaida and Bathzatha; the former of these (compare the Bordeaux pilgrim's 'Betsaida') is plainly due to confusion with the Galileean place-name Bethsaida. Eusebius, who knew Jerusalem (being bishop of Caesarea), writing about the same time as the Bordeaux pilgrim, says that the proper form of the name was Bezatha. Now, this name appears in Josephus (with such variant spellings as Bezetha and Betheza) as that of the district north of the temple area, and he gives its meaning as 'Newtown' (Heb. *Beth-hadash*), because this north-eastern corner of Jerusalem was the latest quarter of the city to become a built-up area before the disaster of A.D. 70. So 'the pool of Bethesda' (or Bezatha, or whichever spelling one prefers) is the pool which lay in 'Newtown'; the concurrent testimony of Josephus and archaeology leads to a satisfactory conclusion.

v. 3—*In these lay a multitude of them that were sick, blind, halt, withered*—'In these'; i.e., in the five porticoes. The specific terms 'blind, halt, withered' probably amplify the more general term 'sick'; this is clearer in A.V. ('a great multitude of impotent

folk, of blind, halt, withered'). The word translated 'withered' (Gk. *xēros*) may mean 'paralysed' (so R.S.V.).

[*waiting for the moving of the water*—These words, together with the whole of verse 4, constitute an early addition to the original narrative, first appearing in manuscripts of the Western and Caesarean texts.

v. 4—*for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole, with whatsoever disease he was holden*—Such is the wording of R.V. margin. While the statement is an interpolation, it is probably based on reliable information concerning the current explanation of the water's healing properties in the days when the city was still standing. The Evangelist (perhaps to our relief) cannot be charged with accepting this popular belief in sporadic angelic activity, but the added words bear witness to the existence of the belief. The 'troubling' (i.e., bubbling) of the water suggests that the pool was fed intermittently by a spring, possibly a chalybeate spring (which would account for the healing properties ascribed to the water, and also for Eusebius's description of the 'remarkably red' colouring of the water). If, as Westcott says, the New Year festival, or '*Feast of Trumpets* . . . satisfies all the conditions which are required' by the narrative, then the belief that the first person to step into the pool after the troubling of the water was healed can be linked with similar 'first-footing' ideas associated with the New Year which are variously attested in many parts of the world. There is a most interesting discussion of this and other questions raised by these opening verses of John 5 in J. Rendel Harris, *Side-lights on New Testament Research*, pp. 36-80.]

v. 5—*And a certain man was there, which had been thirty and eight years in his infirmity*—It is not said that the man had lain there for this length of time; we should understand rather that he was brought down regularly at the season of the 'troubling' of the water, in hope that he might one day be able to step in first. What his trouble was we are not told; it may have been a form of paralysis, since he was unable to step into the pool

without assistance (v. 7), and later on there is a hint that it was due to some sin of his own (v. 14). Some commentators have taken the thirty-eight years as significant, and linked them with the thirty-eight years of Deut. 2:14, as though the man symbolized the people of Israel in their wilderness wanderings. This may strike us as far-fetched. It may well be, however, that the contrast between the precarious chances of healing in the pool and the efficacious word of Christ is intended to illustrate the contrast between the rites of the Jewish religion or even the divinely-given law, and the salvation brought near in the gospel. In that case the water of Bethesda plays a similar rôle to the stone waterpots of John 2:6.

v. 6—*When Jesus saw him lying, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wouldest thou be made whole?*—Jesus' question went right home to the heart of the trouble. Was the man *willing* to be healed? If the water, in the Evangelist's mind, represents the law, the point may be that while the law can show men the way of life ('This do and thou shalt live'), it cannot impart the will to choose life, still less impart life itself.

v. 7—*The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me*—This is the first mention of the troubling of the water in the best authenticated text. No doubt the man's answer presupposes the belief in the efficacy of stepping into the water first after it was 'troubled'; but that is not the same thing as presupposing the presence of verse 4 in the original text. The man replies to Jesus' question with the affirmation that his continued infirmity is due to lack of opportunity, not to lack of will. To say that his reply was 'a feeble excuse' (C. H. Dodd) is to go beyond what is warranted by the narrative.

v. 8—*Jesus saith unto him, Arise, take up thy bed, and walk*—The healing of this infirm man plays a part in John's narrative comparable to that played in the Synoptic narrative by the healing of the paralytic of Capernaum (Mark 2:1 ff., etc.); and the healing words of Jesus to both were the same. But the man at Bethesda

did not receive the assurance that his sins were forgiven (contrast Mark 2:5); a reason for this may be suggested by verse 14. The 'bed' (Gk. *krabattos*) was a mat or straw pallet, easily rolled up and carried on the shoulder.

v. 9—*And straightway the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked*—Here, as in the previous verse, the verb 'walk' means literally 'walk about' (Gk. *peripateo*). The sequence of the verbs is significant; of course the man had to be 'made whole' before he could get up, shoulder his mat, and begin to walk. What then made him whole? The obedience of his will, surely, in response to the enabling command of Christ. And immediately he received the power to do what previously he was unable to do.

(*To be continued*)

GUIDANCE

W. GRAHAM SCROGGIE, D.D.

In 1 Thess. 3:11-13, we find one of the many prayers of the Apostle Paul; so short, and yet so long. He makes request first, on his own behalf, for guidance; and then, on the Church's behalf, for perfection. Let me call your attention to the personal request:

'Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way unto you.'

I. The Guidance

In this brief text it is implied that

1. *Guidance is needed*

Were this not so, it would not be sought. But a moment's reflection will serve to convince us of this necessity. Think, for instance, of the (*a*) limits and defects of our foresight. The Apostle himself said, 'I go bound in the Spirit to Jerusalem, *not knowing* the things that shall befall me there.' Who among