

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 Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

parity between the believer and Christ. It was probably one of the latest, as it is certainly one of the most beautiful developments in his system of Christian thinking.

A. B. BRUCE.

CHRIST AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA.

JOHN V. 1.

THIS miracle drew after it the gravest consequences. The dispute which it entailed led Jesus to assert that His working was parallel with that of God; and since His Father, while resting from creation, continued His providential benevolence, He would for His part do the same. It led the hierarchy at Jerusalem to resolve upon His death, as the raising of Lazarus forced them to precipitate it.

It has therefore an immense significance which lies beyond the object of these papers. Their aim is to examine the miracles themselves, the spiritual harmonies which bind them to each other and to the discourses, the mind and character to which they bear witness, and which is identical with what we find in the portion of the narrative that is allowed by all moderate scepticism, and to show how the unbelieving theories neglect or outrage these all-important considerations.

In treating the present miracle there are several preliminary points of interest.

It is well known that the question, at what feast was it performed, affects gravely the chronological arrangement of the ministry of our Lord. If this was a passover, as many have always believed, then we find four passovers during His public work. At one He first cleansed the temple, and a little before another He fed the five thousand (John ii. 13, vi. 4). At another He suffered; and if

this be added to the number, it will involve a minimum duration of three years and a half for His public labours.

On this subject, patristic opinion was divided, largely by considerations entirely outside the passage itself; some desiring to justify by the narrative the half week of Daniel (ix. 26), which is three years and a half, and others to reduce the ministry to a single year, taking too literally Isaiah's "acceptable year of the Lord." But the latter is quite irreconcilable with the mention of three passovers which we have already found in this Gospel.

It was apparently the belief that this feast was a passover which introduced the article into the opening verse—"the feast," instead of "a feast of the Jews."¹ But it is more than doubtful whether a Jew would acknowledge the Passover, and not rather the Feast of Tabernacles, as being pre-eminently "the feast," the supreme feast of all. The early Greek church supposed that Pentecost was intended, and in modern times nearly every festival has had its advocates, many of them upon the slenderest grounds. Perhaps, however, the choice lies between the divinely instituted feast of Passover and that of Purim, which commemorated the deliverance of the Jews from the snares of Haman. On both sides, many inconclusive arguments have been relied upon. Of what avail is it to urge that Jesus would not have attended a feast of merely human institution, when it is certain that He attended the feast of the dedication? On the other side, what weight is in the objection that if this were a passover we have a whole year without any events recorded, when it is admitted that in any case we have a silence of ten months? There would be much weight in the argument that only Purim,

¹ But the absence of the article is not decisive: cf. Matt. xii. 24, Luke ii. 4, Acts viii. 5, and also Deut. xvi. 13, 2 Kings xviii. 15, LXX. Tholuck says that without the article it may be the passover, and with the article it must be so; but this is an overstatement. *Vide* Westcott *in loco*.

which fell in March, lies between the fixed limits of time within which this miracle must be placed (namely, December or January, when Jesus passed through Samaria, and the passover in the sixth chapter), if it did not beg the question at both ends. No person who takes this for a passover will agree that the previous January and the passover in the next chapter belong to the same year. Nor is it at all certain that the phrase "four months and then cometh harvest," gives any clue to the season when it was uttered." Nothing surely could be tamer and less in the manner of Jesus than an expression of surprise because the time of the spiritual harvest did not coincide with that of nature. The point is not that four months must *now* elapse, but that one must always be prepared for such a delay after sowing. Why ask the question "Say not ye," unless to introduce a proverb, meaning "The husbandman waiteth patiently?" In this case it could be used with equal propriety at any season, just as we might say in autumn or midsummer that one swallow does not make a spring.

Perhaps the argument which deserves most weight is that all the other passovers are so distinctly named. It is hard to explain the vague and undefined introduction of this feast, unless its name would have fallen strange upon Gentile ears, and entailed irrelevant explanations. Especially if it were the second in a series of passovers, we cannot see why it should not be named plainly like the rest. And this consideration acquires added force when we remember St. John's carefulness about such matters, so that from his Gospel only we can obtain some approach to a chronological framework into which the history may be fitted.

We may weigh in the other scale Bishop Westcott's comment upon the ninth verse, "on that day was a sabbath." "The form of the phrase is very remarkable," he says, "and suggests the idea that the sabbath was a day of

rest other than the weekly sabbath." This would be much more consistent with the notion of a passover than either Purim or the Feast of Trumpets which he prefers. Edersheim will probably continue to be the only advocate of the Feast of Wood Offering, and on the whole the question remains quite unsettled, with some balance of probability in favour of Purim, and a decided inclination of the scale against the Passover.

It is quite recently that the Palestine Exploration Fund solved another long-disputed question, namely, where is the real pool of Bethesda? The traditional site, known as Birket Israel, did not answer the conditions; and neither did the Pool of the Virgin, further south, to which a preference has been generally given since Robinson suggested it. These conditions were two-fold, those required by scripture, and those which came, with some authority, from the early Christian writers. The former taught us that it should have five porches, and should lie on the east side of the city, which because it was nearest to the pastures would certainly contain the sheep gate.¹ The latter told us that it was a double pool, and that a Christian church had been erected over it. But very lately some Turkish houses close to Birket Israel were demolished, and the ruins of a Christian apsidal church were discovered below. Under this church was found a crypt, consisting of two tiers of porches, five porches in each tier; and these covered a double cistern hewn out of the solid rock, and answering exactly to the description in Eusebius of "twin pools." The church was of course a later erection which had utilized the old porches as a crypt, itself commemorating what had happened there. And not only is every condition of the problem thus satisfied, but the conviction of the early church is very plainly expressed, for in the crypt, among several frescos of the usual type, is found the

¹ This gate is mentioned three times by Nehemiah (iii. 1, 32, xii. 39).

genius of the spot, the angel in the act of troubling the waters.

The expression "there is in Jerusalem a pool" claims a little attention for the emphatic verb. It scarcely proves that the city was standing when the present tense was used; but if not, it expresses the clear vision of one who recalls a scene which he has looked upon. Who that had not been familiar with Paris before the war could possibly now write, There is beside the Rue Rivoli the Tuileries? How much less, if both had been demolished.

The feast of Purim appears to have had little of sacredness in its observance, which was wild and boisterous. But this does not justify the inference that Jesus would have felt no patriotic interest in the celebration of a great national deliverance. It was neither His policy nor His habit, like that of some who follow Him, to reject what is inherently good because it was ill-treated by unworthy hands. And the Church, being the leaven and the salt of the world, must always carefully consider what things are hopelessly soiled and tainted by their associations, and what others retain, even in their degradation, a core of good worth vindicating.

But if it was indeed this too riotous feast which He attended, how suggestive is the place in which we find Him, a home of sorrow, itself most probably named (though none of the derivations offered is entirely satisfactory) from the emotions which it evoked, the House of Pity.

Jesus knew how much more blessed it is to go to the place of mourning than of feasting; and at a feast-time, when selfishness most easily forgets the wretched, He came where lay a multitude of sick, blind, halt and withered,—the first of which epithets must not be divided into the other three, but taken as an additional statement.

They were attracted thither by a curious superstition, very easy to account for. When a medicinal spring is

intermittent in its flow, the water is most efficacious while freshly welling up. Such a spring was here, and its effects were not only most real at the moment when the spring was troubled, but were greatly heightened by credulity and hope, for since it availed for some and not for others, and chiefly during the mysterious movement in its depths, a belief grew up that it was an angel who thus stirred it, and the first who then entered the waters received a miraculous cure "of whatsoever disease he had." How wild was the rush that ensued we know by the complaint of the impotent man that he had no man to throw him in [*ὄνα...βάλη με*, which however the R.V. renders "put"]; and in such a struggle the cases which received no benefit would never be supposed to have entered the water first. Such was the popular belief, and as it is implied in the speech in v. 7, an explanatory comment quickly found its way into the text.

But the weight of evidence against its authenticity is so preponderant that the contention of some sceptics like Strauss and Reuss for its genuineness is not very creditable to their candour. It simply betrays their determination to assume, even against the evidence, whatever hypothesis is most damaging to their opponents.

To the sufferers who thus lay beside the pool, enslaved by disease while a national deliverance was celebrated, tortured and miserable while the streets resounded with festivity, came Jesus with His merciful heart on fire.

As He read the lamentable story of the woman of Samaria, as He knew from the first who should betray Him, so He at once discerned the most unhappy creature in all this concourse of the forlorn. This man had suffered infirmity for eight and thirty years, and now that either the resources of medicine had failed, or, like the woman who touched Jesus, he had reduced himself to poverty in pursuit of them, he lingered here, and even here was without hope. Others could hire some one to hurry them at

the good moment into the pool, while he crawled feebly toward the water's edge, mocked by the sight of what he supposed was health for him, and tantalized by the exultation of his rivals.

A long train of such experiences ends in a benumbed and torpid mood, which is perhaps of all tempers the most alien to spiritual influences. When hope has died down into a vague wish, and even desire is scarcely more than a dull recollection of better things, it is hard then to quicken expectation into life again. Yet, whenever in the nature of things it was possible, Jesus required some co-operation from those whom He would bless. He could not do many mighty works because of unbelief. He said, What wilt thou that I should do for thee? and again, Believest thou that I am able to do this? It was doubtless to develop expectation by demanding action that He often sent men to a distance. And we shall find Him conveying to the deaf and dumb, by a most vivid sign, some expectation of the help He would bestow. The importance of faith is taught by Him in acts as well as in words.

Peter and John had learned this lesson, when, in order to work their earliest miracle after His ascension, they caused the impotent man to fasten his eyes upon them.

It was therefore in profound harmony with the inner principles on which He acted, that Jesus began by stirring a more vivid emotion in the half-frozen heart of this poor sufferer by asking whether he had any real and active desire to be made whole (*θέλεις*, not *βούλεις*). The question and the divine bearing of the questioner availed at least to establish sympathetic relations between the two so strangely contrasted, and the man poured out a long despondent verbose statement of his miseries. With what a voice and look Jesus bade him arise and walk we may judge by the electrical effect, as hope rose at once to belief, and belief made the effort and succeeded. He took up his

bed and went on walking. The imperfect tense *περιπατεί* reminds one of the energetic exercise of his new powers by the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, walking and leaping and yet holding the apostles all the while—not running, therefore.

Some one has written, "There was nothing urgent in the malady: the miracle was therefore wrought, not *although* it was the sabbath, but *because* it was the sabbath." But this entirely ignores the most potent impulse in the deed, the compassion in the breast of Him who argued, in a similar case, that since one would not expose an ass or an ox to a day of suffering, a daughter of Abraham *ought* to be loosed from her bond upon the sabbath day. It was the nobility of heart in that reply which made all the people glorify God. And the same motive was sufficiently "urgent" here.

But why did Jesus order him to carry off his humble bed, his "pallet"? Because he was a poor man and should not lose it, and because Jesus habitually attended to small economies, bidding His disciples gather up the broken and undistributed pieces of bread in order that nothing should be lost. Here then, as in so many places, we discover deep harmonies between actions in themselves unlike.

When the Pharisees called the man to account, he supposed himself to have a conclusive defence; his benefactor, "He that made me whole," had so directed it. And the answer of the Pharisees is quite dramatic in its evasive surliness. They pass over altogether the question of the miracle (which deserved some attention, one would have supposed), and in asking who gave the presumptuous order, they place the strongest emphasis on the expression, "What *man* is he?"—a mere man contradicting a divine precept!

Jesus, upon working the miracle, had promptly conveyed

Himself away; and it was natural that this impotent creature could not identify Him, having had no chance to gaze upon celebrities. But why had the Master so very abruptly withdrawn Himself?

It is scarcely enough to say that He shrank from merely curious observation, especially when the connection is remarked which St. John makes between the multitude in that place and the rare word, ἐξένευσεν, conveyed Himself away, which is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Archbishop Trench rather oddly explains the word by that side-long movement which slips most easily through a crowd, and quotes Beza, connecting the word with *νέω*, and thinking of a swimmer gliding through the waves. But Bishop Westcott rightly explains it as literally meaning "to bend the head aside to avoid a blow," which is entirely consistent with its use in the Septuagint. Now when we consider what kind was the "multitude in that place,"—the unhappy crowd that was described a few verses earlier—remembering also that it was no part of the design of Jesus to anticipate the restoration of all things by working wholesale and indiscriminate healings, we understand well what "blow" He thus avoided, even the importunities of the miserable, falling heavy upon His heart. But why should not myth or legend have sent all these sufferers away rejoicing?

Again therefore we find a deep fitness underlying actions and even words which have caused misunderstanding or perplexity.

There is a marked and appropriate difference between our Lord's spiritual treatment of this man and the paralytic who reached Him through the roof. The faith of the latter was as keen and eager as the heart of the other was apathetic. Therefore Jesus, who connected the disease of both with sin, if not with special sin, said frankly to one Thy sins are forgiven thee, and to the other spoke in solemn and earnest warning: Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon

thee. It is clear that He was far from being satisfied with this man's condition ; but it does not follow that a mean desire to ingratiate himself with the priests led him to betray Jesus by reporting His identity. This notion was perhaps suggested by that misunderstanding of the Lord's abrupt disappearance from Bethesda which has just been dealt with. But it is quite inconsistent with the man's persistence in using the unwelcome instead of the malicious phrase ; not, It was Jesus who had bidden him to carry his bed, but it was Jesus who had made him whole.

We are now in a position to appreciate aright the attack of Keim upon this narrative. For him it is a mere variant upon that of the paralytic at Capernaum. "The illness, the culpability, the helplessness, the call of Jesus, the controversy with the Pharisees on the subject of blasphemy, as well as the period—in the early part of Jesus' ministry—are the same" (iii. 216). The illness and the helplessness are the same thing reckoned twice, and too common to prove anything, as also is the period. The controversies are as different as possible, both as to the accusation, the reply, and the pivots of thought round which they turn. In one case it is not certain that there was any special culpability at all, and the treatment of the two sufferers in respect of sin is not only quite different but most suitably so, and in a manner which admirably displays the same person, dealing on the same principles with cases which widely diverge.

Keim admits that "of the faith which achieves its object in spite of all hindrances, nothing remains but the vexation of one who is deprived of his bath by swifter feet." A marvellously small residuum of faith is vexation, and this is an admission that the very inspiration and motive of the two works is different. He claims to identify "the call of Jesus" in both cases, as if in one Jesus was not turned aside from His discourse by the admirable urgency of a believer, while in the other He Himself arouses an utterly torpid sufferer,

impotent in the heart as in the limbs. The calls are precisely the reverse of one another. The fault of such exposition, which is radical, lies in fixing the attention upon petty and external points, and failing to recognise the grand and spiritual resemblances and variations which at once identify the agent and distinguish the acts.

When we have grasped these realities we need only smile at freaks like those of Strauss, for whom the story is a parable, the sufferer is the Jewish nation, the thirty-eight years are those of his penal wandering in the wilderness, and the five porches in which he vainly sought for health are the pentateuch.

The resemblances relied upon by scepticism and by the church are as different as a frosted window-pane and a forest of palms: in the one all is external, superficial, unreal, and evanescent; the other has roots and organic cohesion and the flow of sap. The miracle according to Strauss has crystallized in the frost of a German study; the other is worthy of an apostle, and has helped to convert mankind.

G. A. CHADWICK.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE ON THE NEW TESTAMENT.

INTRODUCTION.—For the most instructive work in this department during the last few months, one must look to the pages of this Magazine, in which the researches of Professors Sanday, Ramsay, and Smith have appeared. For an account of the newly published fragments of the Book of Enoch, and of the Gospel and Apocalypse of St. Peter, the enquirer will also turn to this Magazine. And it may suffice to say in addition that Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton have published in a handy form *A Popular Account of the Newly Recovered Gospel of St. Peter* from the competent hand of Prof. Rendel Harris. In this convenient shape may be read an English translation of the recovered portion of the Gospel, together with such an account of its origin and use in the primitive Church, and