

*THE POOL OF BETHESDA.*

THERE are not many passages in the New Testament which are so rich in difficulties of all kinds as the incident of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda, and the resolution of the difficulties has been unusually slow and protracted. In the first place, the problem presented by the text which describes the incident was sufficiently complex; there appeared to be at least three strata of textual deposit upon the original narrative; and although there was a fair consensus amongst the critics as to the duty of removing the references to the descent of the angel, and the descriptions which have gathered round the descent, and which are comprised in the various traditions of the fourth verse of the fifth chapter of John, there was still a residual disagreement as to whether we ought to remove altogether the reference to the moving of the water which commonly stands at the end of the third verse, and leave the narrative to stand with a statement of a gathering of sick people at the pool, and no reason why they should be there, except what is disclosed in a subsequent conversation in the seventh verse. Nor was it agreed, in the next place, what the pool was named; nor, until quite recently, where it was topographically to be recognized. Dean Burgon, in his first attack on the Revised Version, made much sport of the various spellings of the name of the pool, and counts them up ironically, though perhaps this is no great assistance to the critic who wants to know what the name really was; but then it is not much better, on the other hand, to follow the method of the modern disciples of Dr. Hort, who imagine they have advanced the science of textual criticism and settled a difficult problem by writing Bethzatha for Bethesda.

If the place to which the incident referred was, until

recently, hard to identify, it was still more difficult to decide what was the time to which the miraculous healing was to be referred. An examination of the commentaries upon St. John will show that the unnamed "feast of the Jews" to which our Lord went up has been located at almost every festal centre in the Jewish calendar; and here the uncertainty was even more irritating than that which attached to the name and place of the pool, for the solution had a bearing upon the number of passovers in the Johannine account of our Lord's ministry, and so upon the chronological duration of His period of active service. I hope to be able, *inter alia*, to throw some light upon the time at which the miracle was wrought, in the course of the present paper.

After the questions of text, time and place have been settled, if they can be finally settled, we have to face the miracles involved, and here also there is a good deal of perplexity. I do not mean simply the miracle produced by our Lord's word; this miracle is only the top stratum on a legendary deposit of miracle: whatever the angel did or did not, the people came to the pool for healing, and it is not sufficient to say that it was an intermittent spring, or that there was iron in the water. The fact is that, on any showing, we are face to face with an Asiatic Lourdes; the angel is the healer in the one case, just as the Blessed Virgin is in the other; they are put there by legend makers more or less honest; but even Lourdes is a problem of psychology, apart from the question whether the Blessed Virgin consecrates the waters or not; and Bethesda has still to be studied on the side of the supposed healings, even when we have dissected the angel out of the text.

It was intimated above that progress had been made on the archaeological side of the question. The pool, which had moved about the city much in the same way as the

feast had run round the calendar, was run to earth (literally) in an excavation some years since in the north-east corner of Jerusalem, which brought to light not only the pool with its five arches, but the memorial church built over it in early times, with five dummy arches in its north wall and an interesting fresco of the angel stirring up the water, which at all events might assure us that the received text, when the church was built, had its proper accretion on the side of supernatural machinery. I was in Jerusalem in the month of January, 1889, not long after the discovery of this interesting church and the pool beneath it, and the impression made upon my mind was that, however doubtful many of the accepted Jerusalem sites may be, here was something which was the best identification of all those that could claim any degree of acceptance. For it is certain that this is the pool described by the pilgrim of Bordeaux in A.D. 333, and almost as certain that it is the pool described in the Gospel of John. The conclusion is an important one in its bearing upon the question whether the author of the Fourth Gospel was personally acquainted with Jerusalem. But I do not wish to diverge into that question at present. What I propose to do is to take the text of the first verses of the fifth chapter of John, print them in a modern editorial form, and then, at the side, print the account of the angel as a marginal gloss. Assuming the gloss to be uncanonical, I shall prove it to be of the nature of folk-lore, and perhaps identify the angel; the question must then be asked whether this folk-lore gloss is pure imagination on the part of some ingenious scribe or whether it may fairly be taken to represent the opinions of the people who came to the pool for healing as to the way in which the miracle was commonly accomplished. For convenience we will print the Westcott and Hort text in this way, *plus* the gloss, and it will be seen

at once that the interpretation of the gloss has a real weight in the interpretation of the text, that is, if the gloss were a correct record of contemporary opinion. But even if it belong textually to a later historical period, if we can show that it is genuine folk-lore, it may still be valid evidence for interpreting the story, because folk-lore is not like textual accretions, which have nothing corresponding to them in the original text ; we are practically certain of the antiquity of a folk-lore element, even when we cannot be certain of the antiquity of the text that carries it. The importance of this consideration is often overlooked by those whose chief study lies in written documents.

We have then the following text and accompanying gloss :

## JOHN V.

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| <p>1. μετὰ ταῦτα ἦν ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων, καὶ ἀνέβη Ἰησοῦς</p> <p>2. εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα. ἔστιν δὲ ἐν τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις ἐπὶ τῇ προβατικῇ κολύμβηθρα ἢ ἐπιλεγομένη Ἐβραϊστὶ Βηθζαθά,</p> <p>3. πέντε στοᾶς ἔχουσα· ἐν ταύταις κατέκειτο πλήθος τῶν ἀσθενούντων, τυφλῶν, χωλῶν, ξηρῶν.</p> <p>5. ἦν δέ τις ἄνθρωπος ἐκεῖ τριάκοντα καὶ ὀκτὼ ἔτη ἔχων ἐν τῇ</p> <p>6. ἀσθενείᾳ αὐτοῦ. τοῦτον ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς κατακείμενον, καὶ γνοὺς ὅτι πολλὴν ἤδη χρόνον ἔχει, λέγει αὐτῷ.</p> | <p>4. ἐκδεχομένων τὴν τοῦ ὕδατος κίνησιν· ἄγγελος γὰρ κατὰ καιρὸν κατέβαινεν ἐν τῇ κολυμβήθρᾳ καὶ ἐτάρασσε τὸ ὕδωρ· ὁ οὖν πρῶτος ἐμβὰς μετὰ τὴν ταραχὴν τοῦ ὕδατος, ὑγιῆς ἐγένετο ὧς δῆποτε κατείχετο νοσήματι.</p> |
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Now the marginal comment which we have printed brings at once into relief, that the supposed troubling of the water was regarded as *an annual phenomenon* ; the early fathers saw that this was involved in *κατὰ καιρὸν* and interpreted accordingly. But if this be a correct comment, it makes an end of the theory of the intermittent spring, and almost as certainly of the rationalistic explanation of a healing chemical virtue in the water. If the

pool of Bethesda is the parallel of Lourdes, it is Lourdes on a particular day of the ecclesiastical year, such as, let us say, the Assumption of the Virgin. And now for the proof that this *is* folk-lore, and that from another point of view, it can be seen to have nothing to do with hydrostatics or chemistry!

In the year 1903 I crossed the centre of Asia Minor from Persia to the Mediterranean, and spent some time in the city of Harpoot and its neighbourhood. In the plain of Harpoot (a very rich and fertile plain containing scores and scores of villages, once prosperous enough, but now much devastated by Turkish oppression and misgovernment) there is a village named Habusu, which is on New Year's night the scene of a peculiar practice of some early cult. On this night the water of the village pool is believed to be stirred up by an angel, and the angel is identified with Gabriel. The result of his descent is that the waters become sanific. All the population, both Turkish and Christian with the exception of the Protestants, who regard the practice as superstitious, go out at midnight to bathe in the consecrated pool. On the previous afternoon the water is dammed up, so as to leave a greater space for bathing. Some people carry off the consecrated water in pitchers and buckets to their houses at the stroke of midnight; they believe that if they catch it at the right moment, when the angel descends, it will turn to gold and silver.

Here, then, I had stumbled upon a close parallel to the gloss in the fifth chapter of John: here was the crowd of people watching the water for the elect moment when the angel should descend, the supposition of healing virtue, the annual miraculous display, and instead of the first man that stepped in being healed, there was the suggestion of material wealth for the one that collected the water at the right moment. It was only a variation of wealth in the

place of health. No doubt the angel could do either grace or both.

The first suggestion that arose in one's mind was that perhaps the custom might have arisen from some pious feeling provoked by the reading of the Scripture : in that case it would be artificial folk-lore for the plain of Harpoot, but not what we commonly denote by the term. But it need scarcely be said that the improbability of the suggestion is on its very face. Customs do not arise that way in any ordinary community : we have innumerable examples of old customs varied to suit the requirements of a change of religion, very few of deliberate invention. Moreover, it was clearly a very old custom, for otherwise the Turks and the Christians would not be keeping it side by side. And it could hardly have been influenced by an early Armenian Gospel text, for in the oldest of these the legendary passage is wanting.

But there was another consideration which proved that the hypothesis of borrowing was unequal to explain the facts.

There is a famous Burmese festival, when the King of the Nats, or Burmese angels, descends to inaugurate the New Year. The festival takes place at midnight, and is described as follows by Monier Williams : " When the day arrives, all are on the watch, and just at the right moment, which occurs invariably at midnight, a cannon is fired off, announcing the descent of the Nat-king upon earth. Forthwith men and women sally forth out of their houses, carrying pots full of water consecrated by fresh leaves and twigs of a sacred tree, repeat a formal prayer and pour out the water on the ground. At the same time all who have guns of any kind discharge them, so as to greet the New Year with as much noise as possible. Then, with the first glimmer of light, all take jars of water, and

carry them off to the nearest monastery. First they present them to the monks and then proceed to bathe the images."

The account goes on to say that when they have drenched the Buddhas and Bodhisatvas the water-throwing becomes universal; and it is quite evident that from these features alone we could determine that it was a water festival whose object is to secure fertility in the year upon which the people have just entered. I need not enlarge on this point, nor illustrate further the bathing of images of saints and the throwing of water. Such rain charms are still practised in many parts of Europe.

But now we have to compare this festival with the custom of the Armenian villagers, and we shall see that the parallels are striking. The descent of the King of the Nats answers to the descent of Gabriel; the time is the same, the midnight of the new year; and the carrying of jars of holy water occurs in both centres, though there is some difference of detail in the method of consecration of the water, and the Burmese angel is not said to descend into a pool or fountain. The parallels are sufficient to prove that the Burmese and Armenian customs are related pieces of folk-lore, and that the object aimed at is the same, the securing of fertility for the lands by sympathetic magic on New Year's Day. And since it cannot be held that the Burmese have borrowed anything from the Gospel of John, the only conclusion is that from three separate quarters we have come upon the traces of a primitive water festival. We may put down some of the points in a parallel diagram.

<i>Jerusalem.</i>	<i>Armenia.</i>	<i>Burma.</i>
A festival not named, and a popular gathering almost certainly annual.	A new-year festival.	A new-year festival.
An angel descends.	The archangel Gabriel descends.	The King of the Nats descends.

*Jerusalem.*

The instant is not specified.

The place is a sacred pool, or a pool that becomes sacred.

Healing virtue appears in the waters for the first man that takes advantage of the descent.

Nothing about carrying off the holy water.

*Armenia.*

The time is midnight.

The place is a pool that becomes sacred.

Healing virtue appears in the waters : and the waters turn to gold and silver, for the lucky people who catch them at the right moment.

The holy water is carefully collected.

*Burmah.*

The time is midnight.

It is not said to be a descent of the King of Nats into a pool.

The water is a charm for fertility.

The consecrated water is used for ritual purposes, and for throwing on one another.

Assuming these parallels to be valid, we have established our statement that the gloss in John is a folk-lore gloss, and we may surely say that the festival in the mind of the writer was the Jewish new-year festival (*Rosh Ha-shanah*). Was the glossator right ? It is agreed that the folk-lore was not his own invention ; he must have drawn from very early primitive custom still extant in his own day, and it is beginning to look as if he were giving us correct comment, for it has been shown that the folk-lore, or the main elements of it, are very ancient, whatever may be the date of the written gloss.

Let us then see what can be said for the supposition of a New Year's Festival at the Pool of Bethesda, from the point of view of the critics. Let us turn to Westcott's Commentary on John. He points out how perplexed the Church Fathers have been over the identification of the festival. " It has been identified with each of the three great Jewish Festivals—the *Passover* (Irenaeus, Eusebius, Lightfoot, Neander, Greswell, etc.), *Pentecost* (Cyril, Chrysostom, Calvin, Bengel, etc.), and the Feast of *Tabernacles* (Ewald, etc.). It has also been identified with the Day of *Atonement* (Caspari),

the Feast of *Dedication* (Petavius ?), and more commonly in recent times with the Feast of *Purim* (Wieseler, Meyer, Godet, etc.).”

Westcott then endeavours to make out the proper sequence of the events in the early chapters of John, and examines which of the Jewish Festivals fits in best with the scheme for the beginning of John v. Then he makes the following statement :

“It is scarcely likely that the *Day of Atonement* would be called simply a festival . . . but the *Feast of Trumpets* (the new moon of September) which occurs shortly before, satisfies all the conditions that are required. This ‘beginning of the year,’ ‘the day of memorial’ was in every way a most significant day. . . . On this day, according to a very early Jewish tradition, God holds a judgment of men (Mishnah, Rosh Ha-shanah, § 11 and notes); as on this day He had created the world. . . . In the ancient prayer attributed<sup>1</sup> to Rav (second century) which is still used in the Synagogue service for the day : ‘This day is the day of the beginning of Thy works, a memorial of the first day.’ . . . And on the provinces it is decreed thereon; ‘This one is for the sword, and This for peace; This one is for famine, and This for plenty!’”

So it seems that we have come to the same conclusion as Westcott with regard to the day of the Bethesda miracle. This is very valuable confirmation, on either side : and it will be possible now to go on with more confidence in the historical treatment of the events recorded in John. Notice in passing the allusion of the Jewish prayer book to the determination which is made on New Year’s Day as to whether it is to be a year of peace and plenty or of war and famine ; and compare what was said above as to the connexion of the Water Festival with annual fertility,

We may say further that, if the glossator has given us

a story of a New Year's Water Festival and some of the popular beliefs about it, he must have been in close touch with Jerusalem, either by residence or by visiting the place, or he must have drawn on Jerusalem sources. Scribes out of Palestine are hardly likely to have been able to make such an addition. It is a Palestinian gloss, and I can imagine some one asking me whether I am quite sure that it is a gloss at all. Here, again, Westcott's comment is very striking: "the words from *waiting for . . . he had* are not part of the original text of St. John, but form a very early note added to explain, v. 7, *while the Jewish tradition with regard to the pool was still fresh.*" The words italicized are very near to my own statement that the gloss must have had a Palestinian origin.

There are several other questions which at once present themselves if this view be accepted. It will be a question to examine in connexion with what has been said whether the New Year's Day and the Sabbath fell together about this time, for the Fourth Gospel is very decided that the events it relates occurred on a Sabbath. It is to be inquired in what relation the New Moons of September and Sabbaths stand to one another. But this I cannot at present throw any light upon.

Inquiry must also be made on a line suggested by Westcott, whether and how far the Jewish ritual of the New Year has influenced the discourses of the Fourth Gospel between our Lord, the man he had healed and his opponents, the Pharisees. But this also I cannot treat with advantage at present. If it is really conceded that the New Year is the Festival of John v., we shall have taken a forward step in the understanding of the Gospel.

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