

## THE POOL OF BETHESDA.

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THE Pool of Bethesda is one of those Biblical sites about which there is much uncertainty, although in recent years many have been tempted to accept without doubt a site, which, as we shall see, has little to support it but ecclesiastical tradition. The materials for identification of the site are very scanty, and we are never likely to reach more than a high degree of probability. I propose to consider, first, what the Pool of Bethesda was; secondly, the suggested site; and, thirdly, to balance the evidence and see which site most satisfactorily answers to the requirements.

1. *What was the Pool of Bethesda?*—All the first-hand information we have about it is contained in a few verses in John Chapter v: “Now there is at Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a multitude of them that were sick, blind, halt, withered.” (John v, 2, 3.)

We gather first of all that it was a *κολυμβήθρα* (“swimming-pool”) in Jerusalem, at which was gathered a multitude of sick persons. It is never mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, nor in Josephus, nor in other histories. Its name, as we shall see, must have been an unfamiliar one, for it has many variations in the ancient manuscripts. How can this be reconciled with the “multitude” which assembled there? In explanation we may notice, first, that the occasion was a feast,<sup>1</sup> and that many of the sick had assembled at this time, not only to secure healing, if possible, at the pool, but also, as with such unfortunates to-day, to ask alms of the many passing travellers. All visitors to Jerusalem know how the “blind, halt and withered” congregate when there is any special excitement in Jerusalem; this is no modern custom, but the practice all over the Orient from early times. The tradition of the healing virtues of the pool was far more universally known among the sick mendicants than among the healthy. In Palestine to-day

<sup>1</sup> The “unknown feast” as commentators call it, was very probably Purim.

there are places considered by the ignorant to be endowed with marvellous properties, but such traditions are largely despised by the educated native or foreigner, and the knowledge of these can be obtained only by patient inquiry among the curious and sympathetic. For example, one may mention the shrines dedicated to El-Khudr at Jerusalem, on Mount Carmel, and at Joba near Damascus; all these are, by a large section of the common people, credited with miraculous virtues. Numbers of such places have without doubt been scattered about the land of Palestine in all ages, but unless some outstanding incident occurred at any one of them, there is little likelihood that it would be referred to by an historian.

Unfortunately, the name of this pool varies greatly in different manuscripts, and gives us no clear indication of its situation. So many variations suggest that the name was little known, and it has even been claimed that it was not a name in general use, but one given to the pool by the evangelist himself. Were this the case, then, the common interpretation that the Greek word *βηθεσδά* corresponds to an Aramaic word meaning "house of mercy" is the most likely and the most generally accepted. But others have suggested that it is from the Hebrew **בֵּית הַשֶּׁדָּה** "place of overflowing water." This derivation is supported by Conder, who quotes it from Reland, but it is considered improbable by philologists. There is, however, much variation in the Greek, and both Bethsaida (*βηθσαΐδα*), "place of fishing," and Bethzatha (*βηθζαθά*), "place of olives," are considered more probable than Bethesda. Eusebius has again the variation Bezatha (*βηζαθά*) which would appear to be simply Bethzatha with the *θ* dropped out, though it naturally suggests Bezetha (*βεζεθά*) the name which Josephus gives to the hill north of the temple. This is not the place to discuss the many translations of these various readings, but we get "house of excrements," "house of porches" (Delitzsch), and "house of sheep" (Cramer), all put forward. From the point of view of topography, the two meanings which might be helpful, and therefore important, though each supporting an opposing theory, would be "house of overflowing water" and "Bezetha."

The third point to notice is that there was some connection between the pool and sheep. What this was we can but speculate, the word *προβατικὴ* ("relating to sheep") standing alone. The A.V. supplied *market* after sheep, and the R.V. put *gate*—an addition

made in reference to the "sheep gate" mentioned in Neh. iii, 1; xii, 29. The exact position of this gate is doubtful, but it certainly stood north of the temple and probably not far from the present St. Stephen's Gate. Eusebius, and all the writers that followed him, supplied *pool*; we should thus get: "There is in Jerusalem by the sheep pool a pool," etc. On the whole, "sheep pool" or "sheep place" seems the most reasonable view.

The reference to the angel troubling the water, John v, 4 (A.V.), does not occur in the best manuscripts and is omitted from the R.V. We have, however, the statement that the sick people waited for the "moving of the water," and the words of the impotent man: "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool." It has long occurred to students of the Bible that a state of things such as that described as "moving" or "troubling" of the water is just what obtains in an intermittent spring. In such a spring the water rises either from the ground or from the bottom of the pool in periodical gushes—it may be every few minutes, or it may be once or twice daily. The "Virgin's Fountain" in Jerusalem (the ancient Gihon), *el-Fuwarah* in the Wady Kelt about half-way between Jerusalem and Jericho, and '*Ain ej-jinn* near Safed are three intermittent springs I have visited. The sudden "troubling" of the water is a most striking and wonderful spectacle. For example, at *el-Fuwarah* ("the bubbler") the water rises in some seasons two or three times an hour in a group of natural stony basins. The rise is heralded by rumblings and gurglings. The water then rapidly fills the pools, and soon the whole valley resounds with the music of running water; a few minutes more and this gradually subsides, until the extraordinary stillness calls attention to the fact that all the spring-heads are empty and dry. When the water bursts forth in a confined area, as it does to-day in the cave of the Virgin's Fountain, the rise is often considerable, amounting to several feet in a few minutes.<sup>1</sup>

Mysterious as these phenomena are they are readily explained. Throughout much of Palestine layers of soft rock underlie the hard rock, and all over the land this soft layer, where it is exposed, has

<sup>1</sup> "When we first entered there was not more than a foot depth of water in the pool, but the rush of water was now very rapid, and the depth increased, just after we had reached the foot of the steps which lead down to the pool, to four feet seven inches." Conder, in *Memoirs of the Palestine Exploration Fund*, "Jerusalem" Volume, p. 357.

been hollowed out by nature into caverns, and by men into tombs and rock-dwellings. In the intermittent springs we have a cavity, formed by erosion of the water, from which a crooked passage capable of acting as a siphon leads into the open air. The time taken for the water slowly to collect corresponds to the interval, and the shorter time, in which the siphon like passage empties the cavity, corresponds with the sudden gushing out of the water. These natural conditions, however, must always have been, as they are still to the vast majority of mankind, a constant source of wonder; in the Orient to-day they are associated with stories of jinns and dragons under the earth. In the case of the Virgin's Fountain there is a folklore tale that a dragon sits at the underground source and swallows the water; but at times he sleeps, and then the water escapes. At the period of the New Testament such wonders would among the Jews be associated with angels instead of jinns.

Another point to be considered is the nature of the "five porches" mentioned in the narrative. The best light we have on this is that afforded us by the excavations of Dr. F. Bliss<sup>1</sup> at the corresponding "swimming pool" of Siloam. Here were found clear traces of a kind of arcade around the pool, making a sheltered place of four porches where bathers could undress or spectators sit. In the museum attached to the Greek-Catholic College at St. Anne's (adjoining the traditional Pool of Bethesda) there used to be (and may be still) an interesting model reconstruction of the Pool of Bethesda, showing just such an arrangement of arcades all around, with an added fifth arcade built upon a division in the centre of the pool. This is expressly stated by Cyril of Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> (A.D. 370) to have been the arrangement of the "five porches." In the model referred to the maker calls the pool on one side of the division the "Sheep Pool" and the other the "Pool of Bethesda," but he makes out that the pool now shown as the Pool of Bethesda at St. Anne's is only a very small portion of the original pool.

We have seen, then, that a pool which would satisfactorily answer to the Pool of Bethesda should, if possible, have the following features: It should be a likely place for a multitude of sick mendicants to assemble; it should have some sort of connection with a sheep "place" or "pool"; it should throw some light on the expression

<sup>1</sup> See *Q.S.*, January, 1897.

<sup>2</sup> *Hom. in Par.*, 2.

“moving of the waters”; and it should furnish remains of “five porches.” Unfortunately we know of no site answering to all these requirements. Two other points are worth consideration. First, it would surely be a help could we find any spot in Jerusalem which, apart from ecclesiastical tradition, is credited with healing properties. Secondly, Bethesda must have been a site which was outside the walls of old Jerusalem. The “impotent” man was deliberately told by Jesus to do something which was not allowable according to the traditional interpretation of the law, viz., to carry off his *lehaf* on which he lay. This was a very necessary thing, and one which is certainly done by Jews on many a Sabbath in Jerusalem to-day. Where was the offence? It was because it was done outside the city wall, *i.e.*, outside those Sabbath boundaries where, by the Pharasaic interpretation of the law, nothing must be carried on the Sabbath under any circumstances, certainly not a bed. Some of the suggested sites are no longer possible if the above conclusions are correct.

2. *The Suggested Sites for the Pool of Bethesda.*—From the thirteenth century until recent years the large pool known as the Birket Israel<sup>1</sup> was pointed out as without much doubt the Pool of Bethesda. In most of the older illustrated volumes on Jerusalem pictures of this pool appears so labelled. This reservoir is about 360 feet long by 126 feet wide; formerly it was 80 feet deep, but within the last few years it has become the dumping-place of rubbish from all over the city, so that at the present time it is almost filled up. The reservoir is constructed in the breadth of a deep natural valley which runs under the city from a little east of the Damascus Gate, and passing south-east joins the valley of Jehoshaphat 140 feet south of the north-eastern angle of the temple area. It is a valley so filled with rubbish that only excavations can demonstrate its existence. The ends of the pool, lying to the east and west, being against the valley sides, are therefore largely of rock, while the north and south sides are of masonry. The pool when full probably contained 22 feet of water, and its purpose was quite as much to act as a protection to the northern end of the temple inclosure as to supply water. It does not at all answer to the requirements of a *κολυμβήθρα*, nor are there any evidences of porches—*i.e.*, arcades—around it. The place, indeed, seems to have been selected for the

<sup>1</sup> According to Conder the change took place about 1230.  
(1630x)

site of the Pool of Bethesda in rather a haphazard way, and for years students of Biblical topography felt the unsatisfactory character of the identification, especially in the light of the description given by Eusebius, who states: "Bethesda, a pool in Jerusalem, which is the sheep (pool), formerly having five porches. It is now identified with the twin pools, of which one is supplied by the periodic rains, while the water of the other is of a muddy colour—a trace, they say, of carcasses of the sacrifices which were formerly cleansed in it before offering, whence also it was called *προβατικῆ* (sheep pool)." Numerous pilgrims refer to this twin pool between A.D. 330–370, but some time after this it appears to have been lost sight of altogether. The reference to a "twin pool" caused the early explorers of the Palestine Exploration Fund to identify the twin pool under the buildings belonging to the "Sisters of Zion" as the lost pool, while others on other grounds suggested the well-known Hamam esh-Shefa. With regard to this latter, its name "bath of healing" is practically its only serious claim. It is an underground tank near the Bab el-Kattanin, one of the gates of the Haram or temple area, and it supplies the Turkish bath there. It contains only dirty water, greatly impregnated with sewage, which runs down there under the rubbish of the city; it has no true spring and is quite unfit for use, either as drinking water or for a bath. In no way does it answer to the description of a traditional pool; there are, it is true, some arches about it, but no definite five porches, and it was certainly inside the old city walls.

The twin pools under the convent of the Sisters of Zion are both over 100 feet long, and were supplied by an important aqueduct with surface water collected over a large area to the north of the city. They would probably never have been suggested had it not been that when first found they were supposed to be the twin pools of Eusebius, the Bordeaux Pilgrim, and Jerome. But since the discovery of the pool next to be described, near the church of St. Anne, this suggestion is untenable. They satisfy none of the necessary conditions so well as the St. Anne's pool which, as we shall see, was certainly considered the sacred site. It is indeed probable that they did not exist at all until the capture and destruction of the city by Titus, for they are made inside the great moat of the fortress Antonia.

We must now consider the claims of the pool which is visited by most travellers to Jerusalem, and is popularly accepted as the

Pool of Bethesda. There can be no doubt that when discovered in 1888 this pool was the one which had long been looked for in this situation—namely, in close proximity to the church of St. Anne. This pool is 55 feet long and 12 feet wide, but with its “twin” pool immediately to the west, from which it is divided by a thick wall of masonry, is over 100 feet long. Many think, though it is extremely doubtful, that the pools extend laterally towards the north. Both these pools are filled only by surface rainwater, and have no spring nor any evidence of their ever having had one. The western pool is used as a reservoir, and after the rainy season contains more than 20 feet of water; the eastern pool being a show place, is not so filled and usually has only a few feet of water at most. A flight of twenty-four steps leads from the opening at the eastern end to the water level. Over the pool there are remains of a double tier of buildings. We have first the roof of the pool itself, supported on five arches—possibly as a reminder of the five porches; they are reconstructions of older arches. This roof forms the floor of what was apparently a church at the western end of which, where probably the font was situated, there was a fresco, now much defaced and fast fading, representing the angel troubling the waters. Most of the building has disappeared, but it would seem to have been a church of the fourth or fifth century. At a later period—probably Crusading—when the accumulated rubbish of the city had raised the general level—a church was built on the top of the older building, of which a good deal of the rounded apse is visible to-day. In addition to the testimony of the ruins to the sacredness of the site, various objects were found among the rubbish, indicating that this was a place where cures had been supposed to occur. Especially noticeable was the marble model of a foot with a Greek inscription, which had been placed there by one Pompeia Lucilia in thankfulness for the cure of some disease.

There can, I think, hardly be a doubt that we have here the mediaeval pool, and also that of earlier centuries—of Eusebius, the Bordeaux Pilgrim, and many subsequent writers; but their notices of it are rather obscure. The positive evidences are the fact that the church, and probably two churches superimposed, have been built over it, that the pool is described by some of these writers as close to the church of St. Anne, “where the illustrious Anna brought forth Mary,” the representation of the miracle on the fresco, and the finding of objects ascribing cure to the sacred waters. How

this site came to be lost and the Birket Israel to be identified from the thirteenth century as the real pool is a mystery, and one that does not inspire us with great respect for the broken reed of tradition.

To summarize the claims of this to be the Pool of Bethesda, we notice: (1) fairly early tradition from the fourth century, a time, however, let us remark, when there was a great activity in finding sites for everything; (2) the fact that there was certainly a sheep gate in this neighbourhood—though, as we have noticed, it is only supposition which places *gate* after *sheep* in John v, 2; (3) that this pool was on the hill Bezetha, and if the readings Bethzetha or Bezetha are correct, then the pool might well be called after the hill on which it lay; (4) “the house of Hannah” may be translated as “house of mercy”—the most usual explanation of Bethesda; and (5) there is some evidence that “cures” took place here. Against this site we have the facts that this is only a deep rain-filled cistern, with no sign of fountain, much less an intermittent fountain, to explain the “moving” of the water, that there is no sign of porches; and, lastly, that it is very difficult to see how sick people could ever have got down into it without being drowned, unless it was purposely kept, as it is to-day, almost empty.

One further site remains to be mentioned—the Virgin’s Fountain. This was, I believe, originally suggested by the learned Dr. Robinson in 1832,<sup>1</sup> and Colonel Conder,<sup>2</sup> was a great supporter of this view. The Virgin’s Fountain, known to the Moslems as ‘Ain Umm ed-Deraj (“fountain of the steps”) to the Christians as ‘Ain Sitti Miriam (“spring of the Lady Mary”), and to the Jews as Aaron’s Bath, is the one true spring in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament it was undoubtedly Gihon—“the pourer”—and the first settlers on the hills of Jerusalem were attracted to the spot through its copious waters. Here, too, according to tradition, the Virgin Mary washed the clothes of the infant Jesus. The water bursts forth inside a natural cave, 20 feet long, at the southern end of the hill generally recognized by modern scholars as the original fortress of Zion. In olden days it must have flowed out of the cave mouth down the valley, but now, because of the vast accumulation of the *débris* left by the many destructions of Jerusalem, the valley has become so filled with rubbish that its approach is down a double

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, *Researches*, Vol. I, p. 342; Vol. II, p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> *Handbook of the Bible, P.E.F. Memoirs, Hastings' Dictionary, etc.*

flight of steps, twenty-six in all. At the back of the cave, some 4 feet 7 inches above the floor of the cave, is a large passage leading into the famous Siloam tunnel which carries the surplus water into the Siloam pool. As has been mentioned the flow of the water is intermittent at intervals, varying from an hour or two to, in the dry season, twice or thrice in the twenty-four hours. The water can reach the Siloam tunnel only when it stands over  $4\frac{1}{2}$  feet deep in the pool inside the cave. The water of to-day is not of good quality, being undoubtedly contaminated with sewage; but this may be a comparatively modern defilement, as the sewage to-day flows unchecked all over the surface from which much of the water derives its supply.

The suggestion that this is a site for the Pool of Bethesda is, I take it, not that the cave pool was itself the site, but that at the entrance to this cave, on a spot now 20 feet below the present surface, there was a rock-cut pool like the one at present existing, half buried, at the other end of the Siloam tunnel, and that just as at this latter were four "porches" or arcades around the pool, so here there were five in the manner described. Now, it must, I think, be admitted by all that there is a very strong probability, amounting in my mind to a certainty, that there was a pool in this situation. That there should be a pool at the other end of the tunnel, where the supply of water must necessarily have been much less, and none at the source itself, which one may say was certainly more plentiful in early times, would be contrary to the arrangements everywhere in the land. Further, from what we read of what is called the "Old Pool" in the Old Testament,<sup>1</sup> I gather that it may well have been in this situation. There is a small pool to-day under the steps of the Virgin Fountain. To-day there is, in front of the entrance to the Virgin's Fountain, an open space which may well correspond with the area of the buried pool; there is abundance of room for a large pool, or pools, in the situation, allowing for a wide highroad down the valley at the same time.

Admitted that there was a pool here we have strong reasons for believing this must have been the lost Pool of Bethesda. (1) The pool was connected with an intermittent fountain; indeed, it is likely that, as at the Fuwarah, a branch of the spring may have risen in the pool itself. (2) At this fountain there has been preserved

down to modern times a tradition that the rising waters are beneficial to the sick. "The modern Jews believe the water of this pool to be a sure cure for rheumatic complaints. They often go in numbers, men and women together, and stand in their clothes in the pool, waiting for the water to rise."<sup>1</sup> Only a few years ago the Turkish government had to station a soldier at the fountain to prevent quarrels between the sick Jews visiting the springs for their health, and the village women from Silwan coming to draw water. (3) The situation outside the city walls, and upon what must have been a popular highway on a feast day, *i.e.*, along the valley of the Kedron and through the irrigated gardens that for many years have laid there—are just the conditions required by the narrative—a place of public resort some distance outside the city where sick mendicants could pursue their business. (4) Whether the connection with "sheep" was "sheep place" or "sheep pool" (and most of the early Christian writers assumed the latter), where do sheep more commonly resort than at the town or village fountain? Here the sheep would naturally be brought for watering and washing, and the nearness of the temple precincts would make this a peculiarly suitable spot.

In balancing up the evidence, it seems to me the most definite statement is the one connected with the "moving" of the water; therefore a site which explains that fact has a strong presumption in its favour. The local non-ecclesiastical tradition, and the other points, all go to confirm it. Excavations no more extensive than those undertaken by the "White Fathers" of St. Anne's in the clearing out of their pool would in all probability afford fresh evidence in its favour.

<sup>1</sup> *P.E.F. Memoirs*, "Jerusalem" Volume, p. 366.

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