

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

By Chip Thompson

Miracle at the Bethesda Pool

Of all the archeological sites associated with Jesus, perhaps the Bethesda pool is the most intriguing. This story is found in chapter 5 of John's gospel (grab your Bible and read the story). In this chapter a puzzling description of the Bethesda pool is given. Jesus then heals a man who has been lame for 38 years. He does this miracle on the Sabbath day which caused the Jewish rulers to pass judgment on him. Following their condemnation Jesus spoke uncomfortable truths to these Jews who then made plans to put him to death. Yes, this is quite a story in the life of Jesus.



The Bethesda Pool is a complex archeological site. The archeology in this picture was built to commemorate Jesus and the miracle He performed here. This photo shows the depth of the pool, pillars that once supported a large Byzantine Church, and the ruins of a Crusader church. [Photo by Chip Thompson, 2016]

The Bethesda Pool is only known historically from this story written by John the Apostle. The discovery of this pool, therefore, is one of the best examples of archeology confirming a story of Jesus. John describes the Bethesda Pool as having five porticos/porches, a five-sided pool. Before its discovery, most scholars dismissed this description as an imaginary literary creation. Yet, in the 1880's, when the pool was discovered, archeologists found a large rectangular pool with a dam that divided it in two. All four sides of the pool, including the dam, had colonnaded porches, thus a pool with five porticos.

The pool was huge, it was 131 yards long, 55 yards wide, and about 50 feet deep. The dam in the center contained a shaft that

allowed a door to be opened and closed in the bottom of the dam. The south side was a public mikveh (ritual bath), the north side contained fresh water that was used to regularly flush the southern pool bringing in fresh clean water. Jewish worshippers were required to ritually cleanse themselves before entering the Jewish Temple precinct.



This photo taken at the Israel Museum Jerusalem Model shows the Jewish Temple (upper left) and the Bethesda Pool with its five porticos (lower right). [photo by Chip Thompson, 2017]

At this pool, Jesus healed a lame man. The story in John's gospel tells of a "spirit" that would supposedly heal while the waters were "stirred" (while the pool was being flushed). This superstitious practice was not biblical, in fact it was probably idolatrous. In the excavations, evidence was found for the worship of the Roman god Asclepius, the god of healing. It is interesting in this story that Jesus does not use the waters of the pool when he heals the man.

Jesus very simply shows mercy and says, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" and immediately the man was healed. Later in the story we read, "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." Was Jesus warning this man to cease from his idolatry and to seek only Yahweh, the God of Israel? It seems possible.

Unbelievably, after this amazing miracle, the Jewish rulers found fault with Jesus. They judged Jesus for healing a crippled man on the Sabbath. It was at this point that Jesus corrected their unbiblical thinking with several shocking statements. Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." If they thought to accuse Jesus for healing on

the Sabbath, Jesus informs them that it was God who did this work and healed this man on the Sabbath. Jesus tells them, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." In saying these things Jesus was claiming equality with God which infuriated the Jews.



The worship of Asclepius was associated with serpent worship. The Bible teaches that the "Serpent" is Satan himself. Throughout history, Israel was guilty of mixing both biblical and pagan worship. [photo: National Museums of Liverpool, Fair Use Act]

Jesus also told the Jewish rulers that he himself will one day raise all of humankind from the dead and judge them. He will give eternal life to those who have obeyed and honored him and condemn all those who have not honored him. Jesus said, "The Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form." Here Jesus claims to be the only person who was sent to earth by the Father. He alone had seen the Father and heard His voice. He alone was sent to earth with God's message of salvation. He says to the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life."

How many of us are guilty of these same things? Like the crippled man and like the blind religious rulers, we ignore the obvious statements made by Jesus in the Bible. Our own thinking or our religious prejudices cause us to disregard the clear teaching of God's written word, the Bible. We need to come to Jesus alone that we might have life. We need to throw away every belief that does not perfectly line up with the teachings of Jesus.

[Questions—Comments: ephchip@gmail.com]