

THE POOL OF BETHESDA

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Although the following article is not primarily concerned with translation, it will help translators to visualize the Pool of Bethesda with its five colonnades, which may lead to a clearer rendering of the passage. Ed.

In the Gospel of John there are many puzzles. Not the least among the many riddles which the Gospel of John provides the modern interpreter is the account of Jesus' healing the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2-9). It is only in recent years that Biblical students have been able to bring satisfactory meaning out of this account. The Dead Sea Scrolls are responsible for some of our fuller understanding today. But the vital place which has been filled by patient archaeological research over the last century cannot be overlooked.

For years, Biblical commentators misunderstood the location, arrangement, name, and the function of the Pool of Bethesda. For centuries, visitors to Jerusalem would be shown two or three conflicting places by avaricious guides who ignorantly informed their patrons that they were seeing the Pool of Bethesda! Certainly all of these localities could not be correct! Older commentators argued that the Pool was shaped like a pentagon or had a series of porches lined up one behind the other. Such explanations were offered as solutions to the problem raised by the curious statement, "having five porches" (KJV). The text was interpreted to mean either "sheep pool," "sheep gate," or "sheep market." The name, Bethesda, was interpreted to mean "house of mercy."

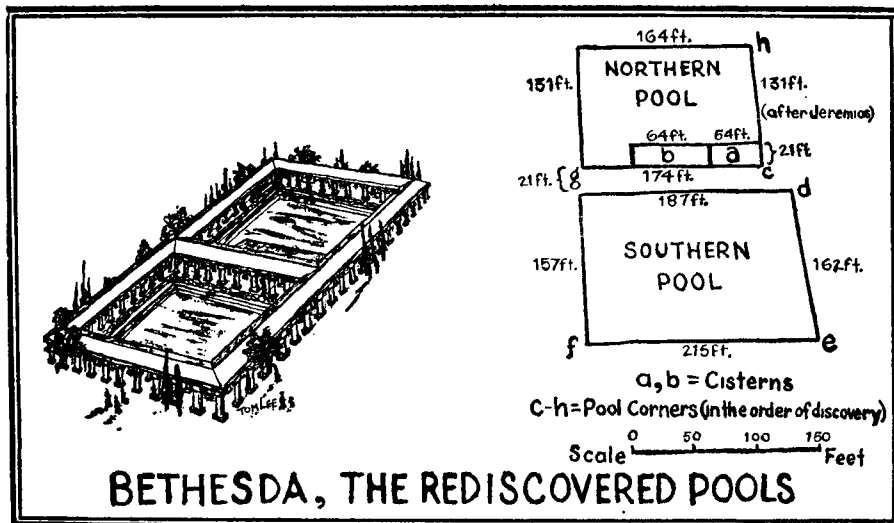
Certain Biblical manuscripts have corrupt readings and some commentators preferred variants which gave the name as Bethzatha (cf. RSV), Bethsaida, or Belzetha. Older copyists had even corrupted the text further by adding the passage about the angel stirring the water, which passage has been properly omitted in the Revised Standard Version. Early patristic authors confused the issue further by maintaining that the Pool of Bethesda was used for purposes of slaughtering the sheep used in the Temple sacrifices. Other misunderstandings could be mentioned if space permitted.

Much of the confusion about the passage would have been avoided if Bethesda had been located and precisely described by ancient historians or other Biblical writers. Josephus, for example, gives us much detailed information about other places in Jerusalem but does not refer to "Bethesda." For that matter, besides the Gospel of John, no other ancient source gives any mention of Bethesda. At least this was the situation until the recent discovery of the Copper Scroll which significantly enough does mention Bethesda in its original Hebrew form.

Approximately one hundred years ago, in the course of repairing constructions in the Church of St. Anne's (property immediately adjacent to St. Stephen's Gate, north of the Temple area), some ancient cisterns were partially excavated. These cisterns were found to be a part of a larger reservoir system and area by area the excavations were gradually enlarged. Soon, a few archaeologists brilliantly conjectured that this newly found system was to be identified with the Pool of Bethesda mentioned in John's Gospel.

The discovery was kept a close secret as long as possible in order to permit the surrounding property to be purchased at a more reasonable price. If word leaked out that the Biblical Bethesda lay underneath St. Anne's, it was wisely realized that the adjacent land would soar in value beyond the ability of the excavators to purchase it. Unfortunately, word did leak out and one of the reasons for the excavations of Bethesda moving so slowly is due to the long expensive process of acquiring the ground so that the work could be done. In spite of the extra financial problems, however, the work of clearing Bethesda has continued until our own day.

What the excavations revealed was that Bethesda actually consisted of two pools located next to each other. This fact explains why five porches were located there. One porch was constructed on the intervening strip of ground between the two pools. This middle colonnade joined to the sides of an enclosing colonnade which took in all four sides. The accompanying illustration might serve to clarify these details.¹



¹This diagram, prepared by Thomas L. Lee, is somewhat simplified here. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Die Wiederentdeckung von Bethesda*, Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949, p. 19.

Inscriptions (one a grafitto) uncovered in the excavations helped to demonstrate that the pool system dated back to the New Testament period. Moreover, in the newly discovered Copper Scroll, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Cave III just north of Qumran, the expression "Beth Esdatain" occurs as the spelling for Bethesda.

This is important for several reasons. It shows that the identification of the St. Anne excavations with Bethesda is absolutely right. The Hebrew name for Bethesda, given above, is a dual which shows that double pools were located at Bethesda! If the Copper document dates from around A.D. 100 as the most reliable authorities suggest, the Pool of Bethesda could have survived the destruction of Jerusalem and this would explain the present tense in John 5:2, "there is at Jerusalem."² Furthermore, the location of these two pools just north of the Temple area, helps us to understand how John 5:14 reflects accurate history when Jesus again encounters the man who was healed, this time in the Temple which would be nearby.

Moreover, there is every reason to believe that "Bethesda," as given in many of the most reliable ancient manuscripts, and followed by King James Version, was the correct reading. In this respect, the Revised Standard Version editors have followed a less reliable reading in preferring "Bethzatha" instead of the more accurate "Bethesda." Accordingly, *The New English Bible* goes back to "Bethesda" as the preferred reading here.

JABALPUR TRANSLATORS' CONFERENCE

In connection with the report of the Jabalpur Translators' Conference which was published in the April 1962 number of *The Bible Translator*, Mr. G. E. Marrison who serves as linguistic adviser with the Bible Society of India and Ceylon, has prepared an "Index of Sanskrit and other Indian Terms" to that report. This index should be of great help to those who wish to make a more detailed use of some of the articles in that number. The British and Foreign Bible Society has had this index mimeographed and will make it available to any *TBT* readers who apply for it. It can be obtained from the Translations Department of the BFBS, 146, Queen Victoria Street, London, E.C. 4.

²Opinion differs on the exact date for the composition of John's Gospel. Most students date this Gospel in the closing decade of the First Century A.D.