

BETHESDA POOL

In John 5:1-9, we read the wonderful story of Jesus' miraculous healing of a man who was paralyzed:

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

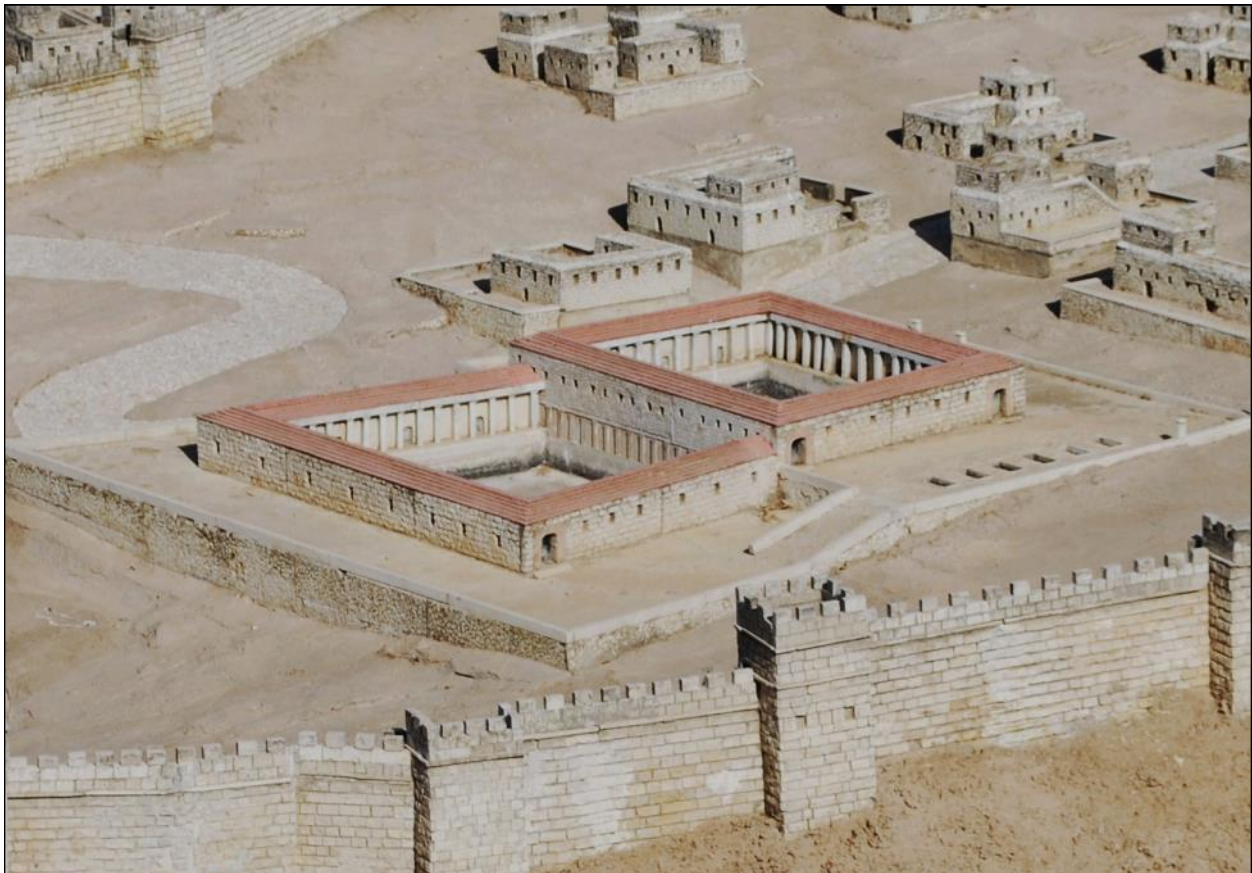
This reading indicates that a pool existed in Jerusalem called Bethesda (Jn. 5:2). It was the location where Jesus healed a lame man. The pool was in an area designated in Greek as the *probatike*, which has been translated as the “sheep place,” “sheep market,” “sheep pool,” or “sheep gate.” The last option occurs in most English translations. It seems to have been a gate in the northern city wall of Jerusalem or the northern wall of the temple mount (see Neh. 3:1).

There are also variants in the Greek manuscripts for the name of the pool: Bethesda, Bethzatha, and Bethsaida (not to be confused with the town in Galilee). Nevertheless, the name Bethesda appears to be the original reading; this name derives from the Aramaic language and means “house of mercy” or “house of outpouring.” It reflects God's grace in healing the sick at this place.

John 5:7 describes the waters of the pool as being “stirred up.” It has been suggested that the stirring of the water was caused by divine intervention, natural causes, or a combination of the divine using nature. Later Greek manuscripts add verses 3b and 4 to explain this stirring, but these have been relegated to a footnote in the NIV: “And they waited for the moving of the waters. From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever

disease he had.” The comment was intended to clarify that the stirring was performed by divine action; an angel was involved. It also explains why the paralyzed man had not yet been healed; he was never the first one in the waters.

The Bethesda Pool was located on the northern side of the temple mount. Excavations in this area have exposed twin pools. They both have a trapezoid shape, and the one to the south is larger than the one on the north. The southern pool measures 215 feet wide at its lower base, 190 feet at its upper base, with each side being 160 feet long. The northern pool is 175 feet wide at its lower base, 165 feet wide at its upper base, with equal sides of 130 feet. Since they shared the colonnade in the middle, these two pools had five porches altogether. This agrees with John 5:2, which says that the Bethesda Pool was “surrounded by five covered colonnades.” Disabled people used to gather there underneath the colonnades, waiting for the waters to be stirred. John McRay noted, “Many fragments of column bases, capitals, and drums were found, which probably belonged to the five porches” (McRay, 187).



Bethesda Pool
Model of Jerusalem in the 1st Century A.D.
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



Original Steps of the Southern Bethesda Pool
(Muslim Quarter, Jerusalem)

The historical existence of the Bethesda Pool is further corroborated by the discovery of the Copper Scroll, one of the finds from Qumran. The scroll originated between A.D. 25 and 68. It lists several places in Jerusalem and specifically mentions the “house of the twin pools.” In later centuries, Eusebius referred to the Sheep Pool (*Onomasticon* 58), and the Bordeaux Pilgrim mentioned the “twin pools” (McRay, 187).

The exact date the Bethesda Pool was built is subject to debate. It has been suggested that its history goes back to the “upper pool” of the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 18:17; Is. 7:3). Perhaps more work was done, and a second pool was added about 200 B.C. (Sirach 50:3). An additional thought is that the actual pools were built in the first century B.C., in the time of King Herod.

After A.D. 135, when the Romans controlled Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina), a temple was added to this area, and credit for healing was given to Serapis (= Asklepius). A healing complex existed there until the Roman Empire became Christianized.

In the fifth century A.D., a large church building was constructed over the pool. It commemorated Jesus' healing of the paralytic (Jn. 5) and was dedicated to Mary. This structure was destroyed in the eleventh century A.D.

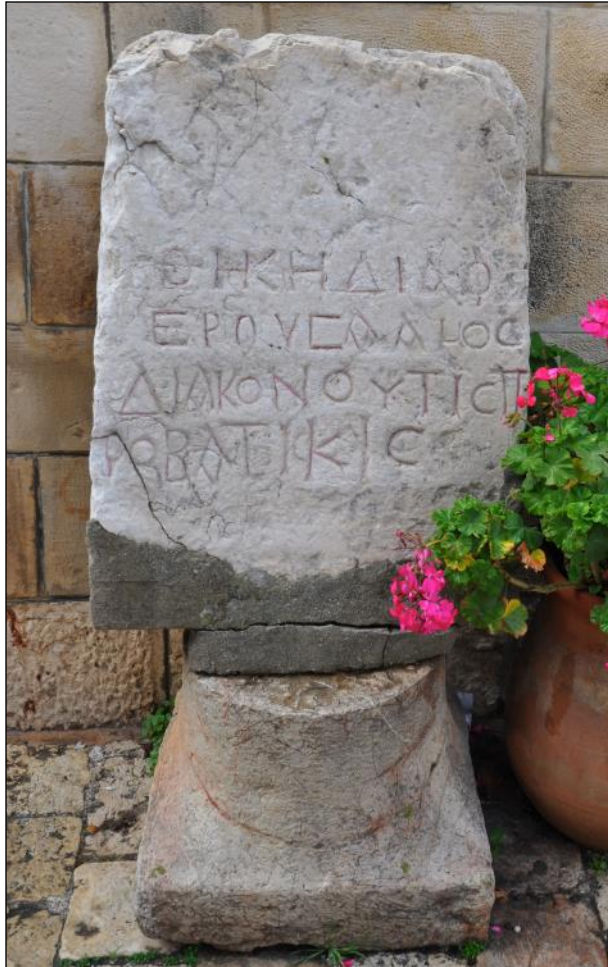


Ruins from the Church Dedicated to Mary and Built over the Pools
5th Century A.D.



Ruins from the Church Dedicated to Mary and Built over the Pools





Tombstone of a Deacon
Attached to the "Probatik"

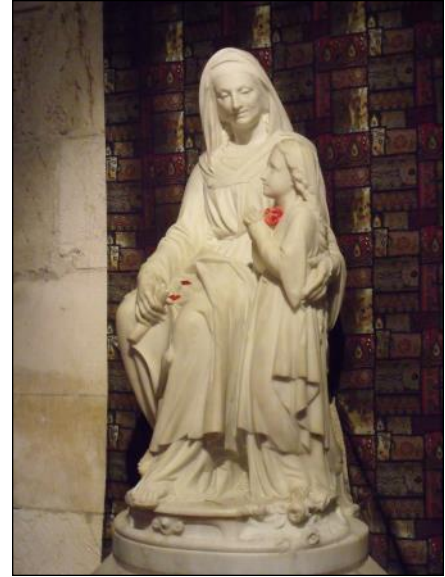


Column Base Adorned with a Cross

In the twelfth century A.D, a small basilica was built over the place where the north pool had been located, within the area where the Byzantine building once stood (see the schematic in Murphy-O'Connor, 32). Not long after, the larger Church of St. Anne (traditionally named after the mother of Mary) was constructed. This building was taken over by the Muslims and used as a theological school for a time. In the 1850s, the Ottoman Turks gave it to France in gratitude for their assistance in the Crimean War. The present day location of the site is in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem, the northeastern sector of the city.



Basilica of St. Anne
Known for Its Excellent Acoustics



Statue of Anne and Mary

Note: Catholics have elevated certain exceptional individuals as "saints," whereas the Bible teaches that every true Christian is a "saint," a "holy one" set apart to God (see 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1). Further, the use of statues has often led to idolatry. Catholics have often worshiped the saints, rather than Christ. They have prayed through Mary instead of Jesus, who is the "one mediator between God and men" (1 Tim. 2:5).