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The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-18): A Study in Light of the Archaeological Evidence from Bethesda, Jewish and Greco-Roman Practice, and the Johannine Narrative

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Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18

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R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey

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The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–18):

A Study in Light of the Archaeological Evidence
from Bethesda, Jewish and Greco-Roman Practice,
and the Johannine Narrative

CRAIG R. KOESTER

The account of Jesus healing a man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1–18 is intriguing and yet puzzling. The literary description of the setting evokes associations from three interrelated fields of meaning. On one level the setting seems quite Jewish, since it takes place in Jerusalem during a Jewish festival. On another level, picturing people gathered under colonnaded walkways beside a pool has affinities with Greco-Roman therapeutic baths. On a third level, depicting the people beside the pool as sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed is reminiscent of a sanctuary of the healing god Asclepius. Recent studies in archaeology show that the material evidence has evoked a similar range of associations. Many argue that the findings show that the pool of Bethesda was a Jewish ritual bath, which was used by pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. Others maintain that in the first century it was the location of a healing cult, similar to the cult of Asclepius, which the Romans then adapted to their own healing cult of Serapis in the second century.

The way we consider these different perspectives will inform the way we respond to broader questions pertaining to the Bethesda episode: How do we reconstruct the world behind the text? In other words, how do the archaeological and literary sources contribute to our understanding of the situation at Bethesda in the first century CE? Next, how can attention to the different types of material enhance our understanding of the world within the text? That is, how might the exercise shape the way we see the Bethesda story within John's narrative? Finally, how do we envision the world in front of the text? How would the interplay between different associations evoked by the Bethesda passage engage various types of ancient readers? To address these issues I will first consider the literary and archaeological materials pertaining to the Jewish aspects of the Bethesda story. Then I will do the same with the Greco-Roman materials. Finally, I will bring the results together around the broader interpretive questions noted above.

1. Bethesda and Jewish Ritual Cleansing

The literary setting of the healing at Bethesda places it first in the context of Jewish practices. The timeframe is “a festival of the Jews,” and Jesus goes up to Jerusalem as he does for other Jewish festivals (5:1; cf. 2:13; 7:10; 10:22–23; 12:12). On his previous visit, which took place at a “festival” (2:23) – in that case, Passover – he went to the temple where sheep (πρόβατα), oxen, and doves were being sold for sacrifice (2:14). Now he goes to a pool near “the Sheep (προβατικῇ) Gate” (5:2). Although the syntax of the sentence is unclear, using the word “sheep” in a festival context creates a literary impression of proximity to the temple and its sacrifices, so that after the healing it seems appropriate that Jesus would meet the man in the temple (5:14).¹ The narrator then states the place name “in Hebrew,” or rather Aramaic (5:2). Manuscripts give the name in different forms, which reflect various Aramaic roots.² The Gospel does not assume that readers know Aramaic, since Semitic names and words are explained when the meaning is important (1:38, 41, 42; 20:16). What is notable here is that giving the place name in Aramaic, as is done for other locations in Jerusalem (19:13, 17), adds to the literary impression of a Jewish perspective on the context.

1.1. Archaeology of a Ritual Bath at Bethesda

Archaeological studies by Urban C. von Wahlde, Shimon Gibson, and others have made a strong case that in the first century CE there was a large Jewish ritual bath or *mikveh* at Bethesda, which would have been used for purification by the many visitors coming to Jerusalem.³ The site is located in a valley north of the temple mount. In the

¹ The sentence in John 5:2 is incomplete. The options are to translate it “by the Sheep [Gate] there is a pool” or “by the Sheep Pool there is a [place].” Early Christian sources regularly refer to the Sheep Pool, whereas most modern translations supply the word “Gate,” recalling Neh 3:1; 12:39. Here the point is simply that forms of the word “sheep” in John 2:14 and 5:2 might suggest a connection between the pool and temple practice.

² Bethesda (A C Θ 078 f^{1,13} 𐤁𐤕𐤕𐤕) could be “place of mercy” (בית חסדא). Others suggest that the name is based on the root 𐤁𐤕 (“flow”), so that the name would be “place of flowing.” The variant Bethzatha (א L 33) could be “place of olive trees” (בית זיתא). Other variants are forms of the name Bethsaida (P^{66,75} B T W^s), which is probably drawn from 1:44; 12:21. Interpreters have sometimes thought that a form of the name was included in the Copper Scroll (3Q15 XI, 12), but recent studies of that Dead Sea text have shown that such a reading is improbable. See Émile Puech, *The Copper Scroll Revisited*, trans. David E. Orton, STDJ 112 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 103. On these and other proposals see Max Küchler, *Jerusalem: Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zur Heiligen Stadt*, vol. 4/2 of *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 315, and 2nd ed. (2014), 237.

³ Urban C. von Wahlde, “The Pool(s) of Bethesda and the Healing in John 5: A Reappraisal of Research and of the Johannine Text,” *RB* 116 (2009): 111–36; idem, “The Puzzling Pool of Bethesda: Where Jesus Cured the Crippled Man,” *BAR* 37 (2011): 40–47; Shimon Gibson, “The Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem and Jewish Purification Practices of the Second Temple Period,” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 55 (2005): 270–93; idem, “The Excavations at the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem: Preliminary Report on a Project of Stratigraphic and Structural Analysis (1999–2009),” in *Le projet Béthesda (1994–2010): La Piscine Probatoire de Jésus à Saladin*, ed. Claudine Dauphin (Proche-Orient Chrétien, Numéro Spécial 2011), 17–22, esp. 22–29; cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Rediscovery of Bethesda: John 5:2*, New Testament Archaeology Monograph 1, ed. Jerry Vardaman (Louisville, KY: Southern

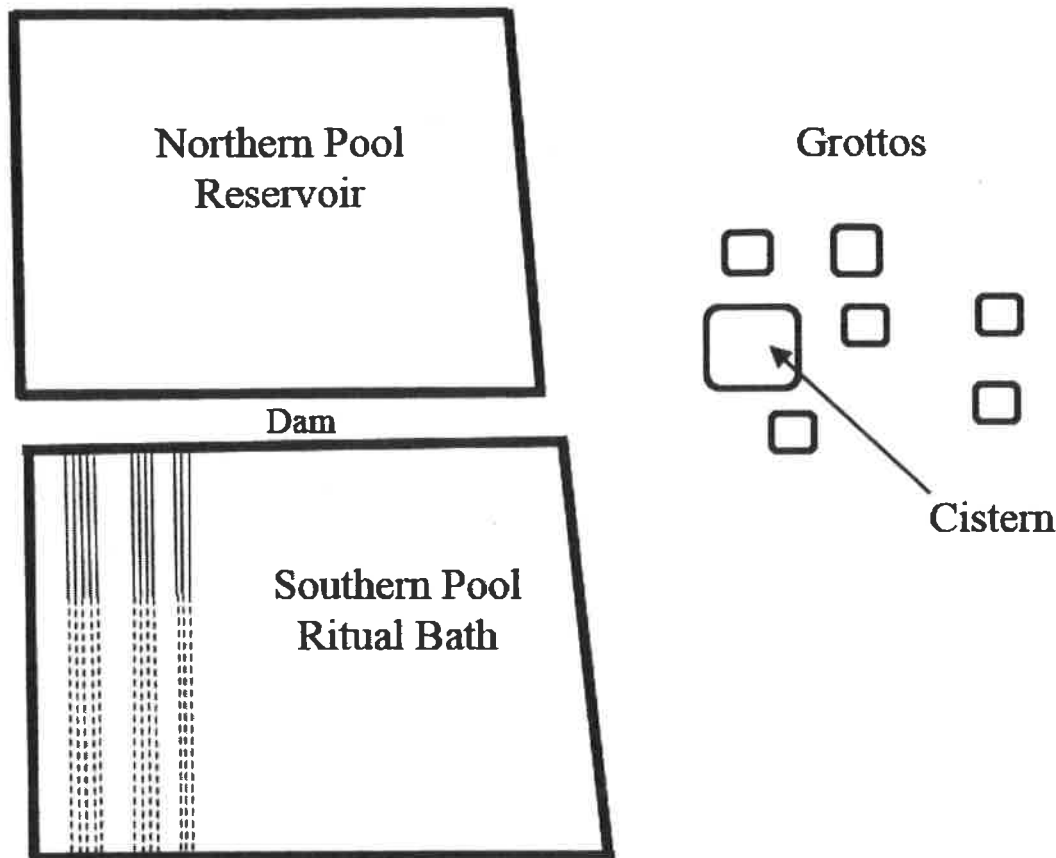


Figure 1: Diagram of the archaeological site at Bethesda.

first century there were two large pools separated by a dam (fig. 1). The double pool fits the pattern of a two-chambered Jewish ritual bath that included an immersion pool and an adjacent reservoir (*’otzer*) in which rainwater was collected so that it could be released into the immersion pool as needed.⁴

The southern pool was structured in a manner suitable for ritual immersion. It measured about 45 x 50 x 65 x 47 meters in size. The steps along the western edge would have enabled people to descend into the water. Although the area has only been partially excavated, it seems likely that the steps ran across the pool’s entire

Baptist Seminary, 1966), 17–18, 36; Gary Burge, “Siloam, Bethesda, and the Johannine Water Motif,” in *John, Jesus and History*, vol. 3: *Glimpses of Jesus through the Johannine Lens*, ed. Paul Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 259–70; Michael Theobald, “‘Steh auf!’ – Erweckung zum Leben hier und jetzt (Die Heilung eines Gelähmten), Joh 5,1–18,” in *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, vol. 1, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 2013), 690–704, esp. 695.

⁴ Most *mikva’ot* constructed before 70 CE had only the pool for immersion, but there are examples of the two-chambered ritual bath from this period. See Ronny Reich, “They Are Ritual Baths: Immerse Yourself in the Ongoing Sepphoris Mikveh Debate,” *BAR* 28 (2002): 50–55; Jonathan D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature*, *AcBib* 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 165–68.



Figure 2: Steps and landings along the western edge of the immersion pool at Bethesda. Photo by Craig R. Koester

western side, making it feasible for a large number of people to access the pool. The steps were built in several courses. After every few steps there was a broad step or landing that was about 2.5 meters wide. People would have gone down the stairs to the water level, which would have varied as some water evaporated and more water was added from the reservoir. Then they would have stood on one of the landings to bathe (fig. 2).

The northern pool was a reservoir measuring about 50 x 40 x 53 x 40 meters in size. During the rainy season, water was apparently channeled from the slopes of the valley into the reservoir. A dam, which was six meters thick at the top and thirteen or fourteen meters high, separated the reservoir from the immersion pool. When additional fresh water was needed in the bathing pool, the water stored in the reservoir could be released through a vertical conduit that was built into the side of the dam. The water would flow down through the conduit and out of a gate at the bottom.⁵

The massive scale of the pool of Bethesda distinguishes it from most ritual baths, which were usually constructed on the lower level of private dwellings and were large enough for one person to immerse. In some communities a ritual bath was shared by multiple households. By the first century CE, ritual baths or *mikva'ot* were common in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the region but not in the Diaspora.⁶ Jerusalem is distinctive in that it had a number of large pools, which were constructed in the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. Studies of the pools and their social function suggest that they were built in order to meet the high demand for water during Jewish pilgrim festivals, when thousands of visitors came to Jerusalem.⁷

Of the large pools at Jerusalem, those at Bethesda and Siloam were apparently public ritual baths, which could accommodate the crowds of pilgrims who needed to undergo purification in order to take part in worship. The two pools were designed in a similar way with steps and landings that provided access to the water. Comparison of the Bethesda (fig. 2) and Siloam pools (fig. 3) shows the similarity. Where the immersion pool at Bethesda was fed with rainwater collected in a reservoir, Siloam received water from the Gihon spring, which flowed through an underground channel. Some have questioned whether it is plausible to think of such large pools being used for immersion because of Jewish scruples about being seen unclothed in public, but it seems likely that some light clothing was worn by those undergoing purification rites at Bethesda and Siloam, allowing bathers to retain the desired level of modesty.⁸ John's Gospel assumes that people could wash in each of those pools (5:7; 9:7).

⁵ See von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda," 114–21.

⁶ On ritual baths see Lawrence, *Washing in Water*, 155–83; Andrea M. Berlin, "Jewish Life Before the Revolt: The Archaeological Evidence," *JSJ* 36 (2005): 417–70, esp. 451–53.

⁷ David Gurevich, "The Water Pools and the Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Late Second Temple Period," *PEQ* 149 (2017): 103–34.

⁸ Note the objections by Yoel Elitzur, "The Siloam Pool – 'Solomon's Pool' – Was a Swimming Pool," *PEQ* 140 (2008): 17–25, esp. 17–18. See the response by Urban C. von Wahlde, "The Pool of Siloam: The Importance of the New Discoveries for Our Understanding of Ritual Immersion in Late Second Temple Judaism and the Gospel of John," in *John, Jesus, and History*, vol. 2: *Aspects of Histo-*

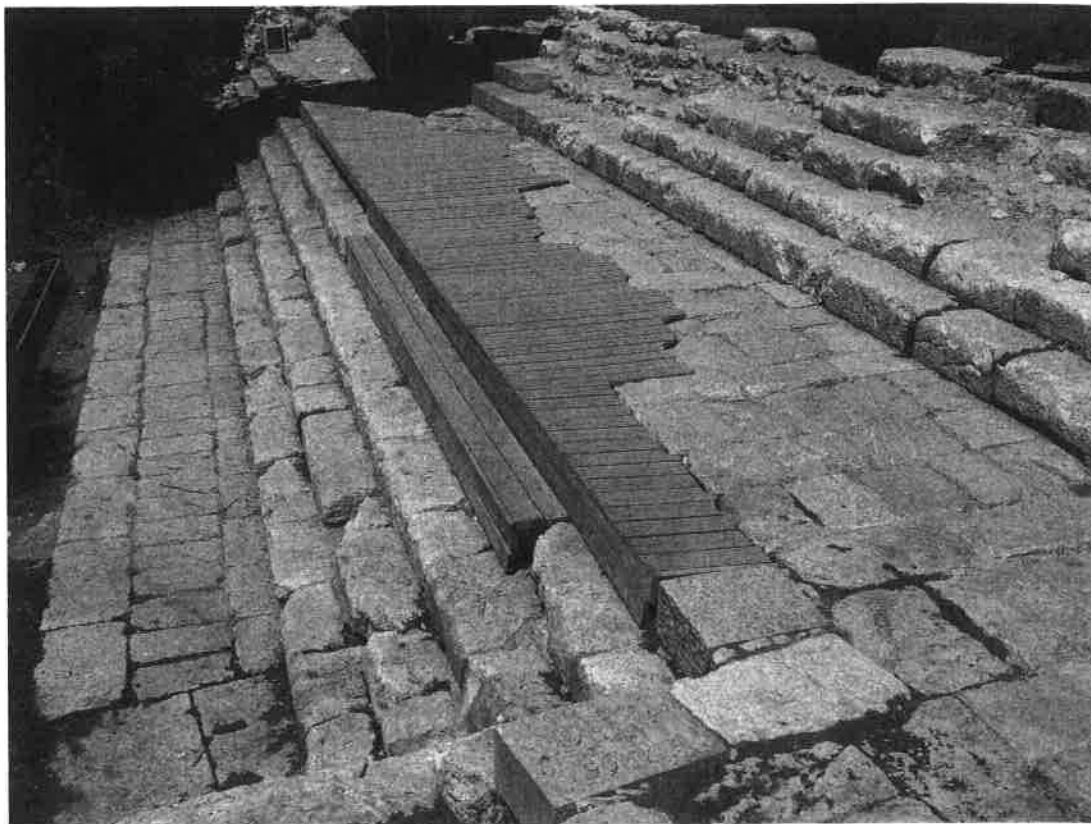


Figure 3: Steps and landings at the pool of Siloam. Photo by Craig R. Koester.

1.2. Issues of Relating Archaeological and Literary Evidence

Archaeologically the double pool at Bethesda was almost certainly a Jewish ritual bath, but correlating this evidence with the Gospel narrative is problematic because there is no reference to ritual washing in the description of the site in John 5. The absence of any reference to purification is striking because the Gospel's opening chapters do refer to forms of ritual washing, including baptism and Jewish rites of purification (1:24–28; 2:6; 3:22–26; 4:2). The comment that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” stems in part from Jewish concerns about purity and the expression “living water” was used for the water most valued for purification (4:9–10).⁹

Given the comments about purification in previous chapters, readers might assume that the pool of Bethesda was used for ritual cleansing. They might picture Jesus visiting the pool with the crowds of pilgrims who arrived in Jerusalem before a festival in order to purify themselves, because those who were unclean could not take

ricity, ed. Paul Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher, ECL (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 155–74, esp. 167–70.

⁹ For rabbinic sources on Samaritan uncleanness see *m. Nid.* 4:1; *b. Shabb.* 16b; *y. Shabb.* 3c. “Living water” was used to purify from skin disease (*Lev* 14:5–6, 50–52), bodily discharges (*Lev* 15:13), and corpse defilement (*Num* 19:17). Cf. *m. Miqw.* 1:8.

part in the celebration (11:55; cf. 18:28). Yet it is striking that not even the Torah-observant characters in John 5 refer to purification but focus on Sabbath observance and issues of blasphemy (5:10, 18).

Instead of mentioning ritual cleansing, the description of Bethesda in John 5 centers on people needing healing. At the same time, there are details in the text that do suggest connections with the material finds at the pool. The invalid in John 5 indicates that people would step down into the pool, which fits the pattern of steps and landings in the immersion pool (5:7). He also says that healing could occur when the water in the pool was mysteriously troubled. That detail fits the mechanics of the double pool at Bethesda, because when water was periodically released from the northern reservoir through the conduit, it would flow into the southern immersion pool and trouble the water there.¹⁰ The Gospel also says that a crowd (ὄχλος) was present at Bethesda (5:13), which may suggest that readers are to picture not only the multitude (πληθος) of sick people but a larger crowd – perhaps like the crowds of pilgrims that appear in other scenes at festivals (7:10–12; 12:12). Yet the absence of any explicit reference to ritual cleansing, along with the focus on healing, warrants exploration of other factors that have shaped the Gospel's depiction of Bethesda.

1.3. Bethesda and Jewish Folk Belief

A helpful perspective on the views of healing reflected in the narrative can be seen by comparison with patterns of ancient folk belief. By folk belief I mean beliefs and practices that fall outside the forms of observance considered normative by society and often pertain to miracles and magic. It is not always easy to distinguish between beliefs that a society deems acceptable in contrast to what is seen as superstition, or to differentiate what a society regards as good medical practice from what might be seen as magical attempts to make supernatural powers serve one's own ends. For our study of John 5 we can make the distinction by contrasting the viewpoints ascribed to the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, whose interest centers on Torah observance, with the viewpoints of those whom they consider to be ignorant of the Torah (7:49).

The invalid at Bethesda voices a perspective on healing that focuses on the mysterious movement of the water in the pool. He says, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down ahead of me" (John 5:7). His comment assumes that the water is efficacious for healing when it is troubled but apparently not at other times. The man does not actually say what makes the water move, but a plausible inference is that he alludes to divine agency.

What is striking is that he apparently assumes that what brings healing is a well-timed entry into the pool and that latecomers will not be helped. By the late second or early third century, some ancient readers concluded that it was God who sent an angel to stir up the water in the pool of Bethesda, signaling the prospect of divine healing, and this idea is made explicit in the gloss at 5:3b-4. Although the gloss does

¹⁰ Gibson, "The Pool," 287; von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda," 114–15.

not appear in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel, it shows how readers could construe the invalid's comment about the water as an allusion to divine agency.¹¹ At the same time, there is no mention of prayer or medical treatment in the passage. Instead, the invalid assumes that a well-timed entry will make healing automatic, an idea that borders on the magical.

There is evidence that in first-century Jewish circles there were quasi-magical perspectives on healing that existed alongside the forms of religious practice associated with Torah observance. The books of Luke and Acts depict people going to Jerusalem and its temple to offer prayers and sacrifices and to observe festivals like Passover, which were part of Torah observance.¹² At the same time, it tells of Jewish people who thought that they would be healed simply by touching the hem of Jesus' garment (Luke 8:44) or having Peter's shadow pass over them (Acts 5:15). Such ideas were not limited to Jewish circles, since people in Ephesus, apparently including Jews and non-Jews, sought healing by touching Paul's skin with pieces of cloth and then pressing the cloth on those who were sick (19:12). The writer of Acts assumes that divine healing could occur in that way, although he insists that it differs from magic, which could be seen as quite similar (19:13–20).

Jewish folk beliefs could be attached to pools of water and other places. Valuable sources are the legends in the *Lives of the Prophets*, which probably date from the first century CE, although the final forms include some Christian expansions.¹³ The section on Isaiah deals with the pool of Siloam, which archaeological studies have shown to be a Jewish ritual bath, as noted above. Yet the legends collected the *Lives of the Prophets* say nothing about Siloam's importance for purification. Instead, they focus on the mysterious intermittent flowing of water into the pool as a sign of divine agency.

The story is that when Isaiah felt faint, he prayed for water and it was sent to him as a "sign" (σημεῖον) of God's favor. Later, when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem, the prophet prayed again and water came out. Then when Jewish people approached the pool the water would flow, but when foreigners approached it would not flow. "Where-

¹¹ The tradition about the angel is attested in Tertullian (*Bapt.* 5.5) by the late second or early third century. The gloss at John 5:3b–4 is found with minor variations in A C³ K L Γ Δ Θ Ψ 078^{vid} f^{1,13} 565 579 700 892 1241 1424 and some early versions. The gloss is missing from ℙ^{66,75} ⱼ B C* T W^s 33 and some early versions. Most assume that it is a later addition, but see Tobias Nicklas and Thomas J. Kraus, "Joh 5,3b–4. Ein längst erledigtes textkritisches Problem?" *Annali di storia dell' esegesi* 17 (2000): 537–56. Raymond E Brown recognizes that the gloss is a late addition, yet finds it consistent with the kind of belief associated with the pool (*The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970], 1:207).

¹² Luke 1:8–10; 2:22–24, 41–42; Acts 3:1; 21:26.

¹³ On the first-century date for the traditions discussed here see Anna Maria Schwemer, *Studien zur frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden* Vitae Prophetarum, 3 vols., TSAJ 49 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 1:68–69, 156–157. For commentary on the Isaiah legend see pp. 122–40; on Jeremiah and healing see pp. 177–80. Schwemer offers a critique of the late dating of the *Lives of the Prophets* proposed by David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets*, SVTP 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

fore to this day it comes out intermittently, in order that the mystery may be manifested” and that through the prophet’s “prayers even after his death they might enjoy the benefit of the water” (Liv. Pro. 1:7–8; trans. Hare). In this story about Siloam, the movement of the water is a sign of divine favor. The Fourth Gospel ascribes similar traits to the pool of Bethesda.¹⁴

Another Jewish legend illustrates beliefs in the miraculous healing power of a certain place. In this case the story is about Jeremiah, who ended his prophetic career in Egypt. The tradition was that sometime before his death the prophet prayed and saved people from asps and crocodiles. Therefore, “those who are God’s faithful pray at the place to this very day, and taking the dust of the place they heal asps’ bites” (Liv. Pro. 2:4). Such quasi-magical perspectives on healing are similar to what was attested in Luke and Acts as noted above.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the dominant use of the pool of Bethesda in the first century was by pilgrims to Jerusalem, who were undergoing the Jewish rites of purification. At the same time, readers who did not have that information from sources outside the Gospel would have no reason to assume that Bethesda was a place for ritual cleansing, since John 5 connects the pool to a folk belief in which the intermittent flow of water was said to have an almost magical ability to heal. We find a similar phenomenon in connection with the pool of Siloam. There too archaeological study indicates that it was used for purification, whereas the *Lives of the Prophets* only mentions the mysterious intermittent flowing of water, which was considered a sign of divine agency. After turning to practices in the wider Greco-Roman world, we will ask whether the archaeological and literary evidence can be combined. If so, it would suggest that patterns of Torah observance and folk belief operated side by side at the pools.

2. Bethesda and Greco-Roman Baths

A second dimension in the Gospel’s literary description of Bethesda is its affinity with common types of therapeutic baths in antiquity. For readers who did not have direct information about the pool of Bethesda, the literary depiction of people lingering under colonnades beside a pool would be suggestive of scenes at public baths. In

¹⁴ The *Lives of the Prophets* and Gospel of John seem to have access to similar kinds of local lore. Both explain that the name “Siloam” means “sent.” The older form is probably that God “sent” the water to quench the thirst of Isaiah (Liv. Pro. 1:2), and this idea is developed christologically to identify Jesus as the “sent” one in John 9:7. See Schwemer, *Studien zur den frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden*, 127–29. Some scholars propose that in an early form of John’s Gospel the healing was set at Siloam and in a later edition it was changed to Bethesda. See Luc Devillers, “Une piscine peut en cache rune autre: à propos de Jean 5,1–9a,” *RB* 106 (1999): 175–205; Marie-Émile Boismard, “Bethzatha ou Siloé?” *RB* 106 (1999): 206–18. I assume that Bethesda and Siloam are different locations and want only to show that the legends linked to Siloam show a pattern of belief in miracle that is also reflected in the invalid’s comments in the Bethesda story.

many cities and towns in the Roman Empire, wealthy patrons provided funds for the construction of baths. People of all social classes gathered there; they were accessible to rich and poor alike. Baths were valued because they were physically renewing and a place for social gathering. Many people assumed that going to the baths contributed to good health and that it could be therapeutic.¹⁵

2.1. *Bathing in Relation to Health*

The Gospel's description of Bethesda says that people were gathered around one large pool (κολυμβήθρα, 5:2). Roman bath complexes sometimes had a large pool called the *piscina* or *natatio*. Such pools were usually located in a courtyard and were a meter or meter and a half deep.¹⁶ Architecturally, the rest of a Roman bath complex generally consisted of structures with multiple rooms, one of which was kept hot, another that was tepid, and another that was cold. During the bathing process a person would move from one chamber to the next. Nothing about those structures, however, is mentioned in John 5.

What the narrative does say is that near the pool there were five covered walkways or colonnades (στοαί), which were typical of bath complexes. The covered walkways provided sheltered places for people to move about or gather out of the heat of the sun. The walkways often enclosed an open yard called the *palaestra*, which traditionally was used for exercise, and in some locations the large pool was located within the *palaestra*. Given local differences in architectural design, covered walkways could also be arranged in other ways within the complex. In some cases a colonnaded walkway adjoining the bath created a means of access to other public areas in the city.¹⁷

The relationship of bathing to health could be seen at several levels, which involved the quality of the water and the act of bathing itself. First, bathing at mineral and hot springs was highly regarded for its therapeutic value. People seeking relief from many ailments would visit hot springs throughout the Roman Empire, from Italy and Central Europe to Asia Minor, Tiberias in Galilee, and Callirrhoë by the Dead Sea.¹⁸ Second, there were some locations where the water was lukewarm or cold rather than

¹⁵ Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 1–7. On the therapeutic dimension see Ralph Jackson, “Spas, waters, and hydrotherapy in the Roman World,” in *Roman Baths and Bathing*, ed. J. DeLaine and D. E. Johnston, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplement 37 (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 107–16. On baths in Jewish circles see Ronny Reich, “The Hot-Bath House Balneum, the Miqweh and the Jewish Community in the Second Temple Period,” *JJS* 39 (1988): 102–7; Ehud Netzer, “Herodian Bath houses,” in *Roman Baths and Bathing*, 45–55.

¹⁶ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 37–38, 58–59, 63, 68, 122–23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46, 63, 67. References to benefactions often mentioned a bath and colonnaded walkway together. See Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2:272, 279, 333.

¹⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 32.59; Vitruvius, *Architecture* 8.3.4. On the baths at Tiberias and Callirrhoë see Josephus *J. W.* 2.614; 4.11; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 5.15.71–72. On sites in Judea and Galilee see Esti Dvorjetski, “Social and Cultural Aspects of Medicinal Roman Baths in Israel according to Rabbinic Sources,” in *Roman Baths and Bathing*, 117–30. On those who traveled to places with reputa-

hot, and yet it was considered therapeutic. Bathing at those sites was said to be of help for sinews, feet, wounds, skin disease, and problems with eyes, ears, and head.¹⁹ Third, bathing at an ordinary bath was considered beneficial for many physical problems. Bathing was not considered curative in itself, but it was done along with treatments that gave attention to diet, exercise, and medications.²⁰

Bathing was a therapeutic practice for most of the ailments John ascribes to the people at Bethesda.²¹ The narrative mentions the sick (ἀσθενοῦντες, 5:3), and in other passages that expression is used for a person with a fever (4:46), for someone who could not walk (5:5), and for other types of sickness (6:1; 11:1–6). Ancient medical literature included bathing as a treatment for fevers and problems with the feet and hips.²² Next, the Gospel mentions the blind (τυφλοί). People understood that washing could be therapeutic for many of the eye problems that impaired a person's ability to see.²³ Finally, the Gospel mentions people who were lame (χωλοί) and had withered or paralyzed limbs (ξηροί, 5:3). It was said that bathing in aluminous waters was an especially good treatment for paralysis.²⁴

2.2. Greco-Roman Baths and Archaeological Evidence from Bethesda

Comparison of Greco-Roman baths to proposed reconstructions of the pool of Bethesda underscores one of the problems in relating the archaeological and literary evidence from the Gospel. John 5:2 says that at the pool there were five colonnaded walkways (στοαί), and interpreters regularly picture the colonnades flanking each side of the massive double pool. The problem is that excavations have not yielded any evidence of such colonnaded walkways. The issue is complicated because older structures were destroyed during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The area was rebuilt under Hadrian in the second century with further changes occurring when a Byzantine basilica was constructed. Yet the absence of any clear evidence for the colonnades has raised questions as to whether they actually existed or were a literary invention of the writer.²⁵

tions for therapeutic water see Ido Israelowich, *Patients and Healers in the High Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015), 117–24.

¹⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.2.4; 31.6.10.

²⁰ Jackson, "Spas," 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 108–09.

²² Celsus, *Med.* 2.17; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.2.4; 31.3.6.

²³ Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.3.12; Celsus, *Med.* 6.16.1.

²⁴ Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 32.59; Vitruvius, *Architecture* 8.3.4.

²⁵ For critical comments see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, review of *Sainte-Anne de Jérusalem. La Piscine Probatoire de Jésus à Saladin. Le Projet Béthesda (1994–2010)*, ed. Claudine Dauphine, *RB* 119 (2012): 429–33; Max Küchler, "Zum 'Probatischen Becken' und zu 'Betsda mit den fünf Stoën'," in Martin Hengel, *Judaica, Hellenistica et Christiana: Kleine Schriften II*, WUNT 109 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 381–90, esp. 381. Those who ascribe the lack of archaeological evidence for the colonnades to later building on the site include von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda," 123–25; Theobald, "Steh auf," 696–97.

The most common reconstruction is based on Cyril of Jerusalem (348–386 CE), who said: “In Jerusalem was the Sheep Pool, which had five colonnaded walkways. Four ran around [it], while the center one was the fifth, in which lay a multitude of the sick.”²⁶ (Some attribute this view to Origen [ca. 185–254], but that is probably not correct.²⁷) Following Cyril, modern scholars have treated the two pools as a unit, conjecturing that there was a colonnaded walkway along each of the four sides with the fifth colonnaded walkway across the dam that separates the pools.²⁸ This approach is problematic, in part, because the first-century structures had long been destroyed, and what Cyril saw was from the second century or later. Moreover, other writers from the fourth century speak as if the colonnaded walkways were no longer standing.²⁹

More importantly, the usual reconstruction does not make architectural or social sense. Colonnaded walkways provided shelter from the sun and rain, while permitting easy access to adjacent areas. In the Jerusalem temple, for example, colonnades encircled the open central plaza and people could move easily from one area to the other. Similarly, Greco-Roman bath complexes often had colonnaded walkways on three or four sides of an open space, and sometimes a colonnaded walkway led from a street into the area where there was a pool. Structures could vary according to local topography, but a common aspect was that they provided shelter and access.³⁰

The usual function of colonnaded walkways seems clear in John’s narrative. The Gospel pictures people in the colonnaded areas, where they had easy access to the pool. Nevertheless, that typical function does not correspond to the usual reconstructions of the five colonnades at Bethesda. Note that the northern pool was a reservoir that was thirteen or fourteen meters deep. No one would enter the northern

²⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Homily on the Paralytic at the Pool” 2: ἐν γὰρ τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις ἦν προβατικὴ κολυμβήθρα, πέντε στοὰς ἔχουσα, τέσσαρας μὲν περιτρεχούσας, μέσσην δὲ τὴν πέμπτην, ἐν ἣ κατέκειτο πλῆθος ἀσθενούντων. The English translation is my own. A similar statement was later made by Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Marco Conti, ed. Joel C. Elowsky; Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 45.

²⁷ Erwin Preuschen included a statement about the five colonnaded walkways as fragment 61 of Origen’s commentary on John. See *Origen: Der Johanneskommentar*, Origen’s Werke, vol. 4, GCS 10 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903), 532–33. Nevertheless, the fragment should probably be ascribed to Theodore of Mopsuestia. For a critique of Preuschen on John 5:2 see Jeremias, *Rediscovery*, 18 n. 39. For a broader critique of Preuschen see Ronald E. Heine, “Can the Catena Fragments of Origen Be Trusted?” *VC* 40 (1986): 118–34.

²⁸ Jeremias, *Rediscovery*, 36; Gibson, “The Pool of Bethesda,” 286; “The Excavations,” 23; idem, *The Last Days of Jesus: The Archaeological Evidence* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), diagram after p. 80; von Wahlde, “The Pool(s) of Bethesda,” 123–25.

²⁹ Eusebius says that Bethesda “formerly” (παλαιόν) had five colonnaded walkways. See Eusebius, *Onomasticon* in E. Klostermann, ed., *Eusebius Werke* 3.1, GCS 11.1 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904), 59. Jerome’s edition of the *Onomasticon*, done later in the fourth century, concurs with Eusebius (*ibid.*). The Pilgrim of Bordeaux (333 CE) says that in Jerusalem “is a twin pool that has (*habentes*) five colonnaded walkways,” but the passage does not say whether they were still standing or how they were arranged. For additional ancient sources see Jeremias, *Rediscovery*, 18 n. 38.

³⁰ Yegül, *Baths*, 17. On the colonnaded walkways at Pergamum see Wolfgang Radt, *Pergamon: Geschichte und Bauten einer antiken Metropole* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1999), 221.

pool to bathe, so there was no reason to build a colonnaded walkway along that side. The southern immersion pool had steps along the western edge, but on the other three sides there was no point of access to the water, only tall vertical walls; so there was no reason to build colonnaded walkways on those sides. The most problematic idea is that a colonnade extended across the central dam, which had a sheer drop of thirteen or fourteen meters on each side. No one would enter the water from the dam – and certainly not the sick and infirm as Cyril imagined.

Given the lack of archaeological evidence for the five colonnaded walkways, some have concluded that their mention in John 5 is to be understood primarily as an allegory. For example, the five colonnades might signify the five books of Moses, and the invalid's helplessness would show the inability of the Mosaic law to bring life to people.³¹ Nevertheless, this kind of numerical symbolism is not characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, as I have shown elsewhere.³² Baths and other public areas often had three or four colonnaded walkways rather than five, yet the writer ascribes no special significance to the unusual number, as we might expect if it were a literary creation.³³ Given that literary details like the size of the pool – which attracted a multitude (πλήθος) and required that people step down into the water – can be correlated with archaeological findings, and given that Gospel shows familiarity with multiple sites in Jerusalem that are attested in other sources, it seems plausible to think that the narrative does preserve information about the colonnades.³⁴ Yet the usual reconstruction of the colonnaded walkways does not seem plausible. Given the current state of research, the possible arrangement of the colonnades remains an unresolved question.

2.3. Bethesda and Greco-Roman Folk Belief

Scenes at bath complexes would have been broadly familiar to ancient readers, yet the way the Gospel focuses on the invalids gathered at Bethesda also differs from most baths, which were used by the healthy more often than by the sick. Moreover, nothing is said about the pool of Bethesda's water's temperature or mineral quality, which would be typical of most descriptions of therapeutic bathing locations. The way the Gospel's description of the setting centers on those seeking healing suggests connections with ancient sites that were known for their curative powers.

³¹ Küchler, "Zum 'Probatischen Becken,'" cf. Marie-Joseph Pierre and Jourdain-Marie Rousée, "Sainte-Marie de la Probatique, état et orientation des recherches," *Proche-Orient chrétien* 31 (1981): 23–42, esp. 33–35.

³² Craig R. Koester, "Numerical Symbolism," in *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 311–16.

³³ A rare instance of five colonnaded walkways in one place was the Hellenistic harbor at Piraeus. Callicrates or Menecles said, "in a circle around the harbor are five colonnaded walkways" (κύκλω τοῦ λιμένος στοαὶ πέντε; *FGH* 3b no. 370 frg. 1).

³⁴ Other locations in Jerusalem mentioned in John include the temple treasury (8:20), the pool of Siloam (9:7), Solomon's colonnaded walkway (10:23), the Kidron valley (18:1), Gabbatha (19:13), and Golgotha (19:17).

Greco-Roman sources tell of folk beliefs about the miraculous healings that took place at certain places, especially springs of water. Local traditions attributed the water's healing effect to nymphs and various deities, and the practices used to access the water's healing capacity differed from place to place. In the west, Frontinus tells of the folk beliefs attached to springs near Rome: "Esteem for springs still continues, and is observed with veneration. They are believed (*creduntur*) to bring healing to the sick, as, for example, the springs of the Camenae, of Apollo, and of Juturna" (*Aqueducts* 1.4, trans. Bennett). Frontinus's words suggest that these are vestiges of older beliefs, which he himself does not share, although they remain popular. He also shows that the curative power of the springs was variously ascribed to Apollo and the nymphs. Similarly, Pliny the Elder refers to springs that were reputed to have an almost miraculous quality to heal. The most notable was the spring that suddenly burst forth on the estate of Cicero after his death. The spring had "healing power" and could "give sight to the eyes" (*Nat.* 31.3.8; cf. 31.4.9, trans. Jones).

Local variations are apparent in the stories that Pausanias tells about sites further east. He says that the spring at Herakleia was associated with the nymphs, and those "who bathe in the spring are cured of all sorts of aches and pains" (*Descr.* 6.22.7, trans. Jones). At the springs of Pamisus the distinctive element was that "little children find cures" (4.31.4). Those with skin disease went to Samicum. There one "first has to pray to the nymphs and to promise some sacrifice or other, after which he wipes the unhealthy parts of his body. Then, swimming through the river, he leaves his old uncleanness in its water, coming up sound and of one color" (5.5.11). By way of contrast, those bitten by a rabid dog would seek help from the spring of Alyssus, and there the practice was to drink the water rather than to bathe in it (8.19.2).

What is important for our study is that the phenomenon of healing was associated with each site, but specific practices varied from place to place. They were not uniform, and the distinctive aspects of each location contributed to the popular appeal of the place. If we relate this pattern to John 5, then the invalid's assumption that the pool could provide healing would make Bethesda comparable to other healing sites, even as the belief about the pool's mysterious moving water would be a distinctive feature of Bethesda. The invalid voices perspectives that were part of a broader cultural pattern.

3. Bethesda and Greco-Roman Healing Sanctuaries

A third dimension in the Gospel's description of Bethesda concerns affinities between the beliefs ascribed to the invalid and healing practices associated with Asclepius and Serapis. To consider this aspect we will initially focus on the literary descriptions of the Asclepius cult and then turn to interpretations of the archaeological evidence from Bethesda in relation to John 5.

3.1. Literary Descriptions of the Cult of Asclepius

A scene in which people with various ailments gather under colonnaded walkways by a pool of water and await healing through divine agency is reminiscent of what one might expect at a sanctuary of Asclepius. It was said that healthy locations with springs of water were chosen for temples of Asclepius and other gods of healing (Vitruvius Pollio, *Architecture* 1.2.7). One of the most famous was at Epidauros, where Asclepius, “who is believed to cure diseases of every kind . . . always has his temple full of the sick” (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.15, trans. Jones).³⁵ At Kyros, “cures of patients are effected by the god. Here too there is a copious supply of water, and at the largest of the springs stands the image of Asklepios” (Pausanias, *Descr.* 7.27.11). Similarly, the temples to Asclepius at Athens, Corinth, Delos, and other places were built near water sources.³⁶

The sanctuary at Pergamum had a spring-fed well. It was said that the water “flows from a place which is both healthy and the supplier of health, since it rises from the temple and the feet of the Savior,” Asclepius (Aelius Aristides, *Orations* 39.6, trans. Behr). People could tell that the water at the sacred well was special because it flowed up to the brim but never overflowed, and its temperature felt cool in summer and warm in winter (39.10, 12). Asclepius was said to use water from the sacred spring as a kind of coworker, so that “the Well has often assisted many people in obtaining from the god what they desired” (39.14). Reports of specific cures ascribed to Asclepius’s action through the water are like those mentioned in connection with Bethesda: “For many by bathing in it have recovered their sight”; it has “cured one man’s feet and another part of the body for someone else,” and thus to the sick the water is “an antidote and a cure” (39.15).

At the same time, the curative practices in the Asclepius cult gave greater attention to dreams than to water. Washing was mainly important for preparatory rites.³⁷ When people sought healing, they would undergo initial rites of purification with water at the shrine. Next they would wash with water during the cleansing rituals that prepared them for the practice of incubation, in which they sought divine healing through dreams. Testimonies to the power of the god include some in which people tell of being miraculously cured during the dream itself. In other cases they say that the god appeared in the dream and gave instructions about what to do after

³⁵ Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium Johannes*, 5th ed., THKNT 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische, 2016), 140; idem, ed., *Neuer Wettstein*, vol. I/2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 274–76

³⁶ Israelowich, *Patients*, 117; cf. Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.4.5; 3.21.2, 8.

³⁷ On the respective importance of water and dreams in the Asclepius cult see Israelowich, *Patients*, 118–19; Louise Cilliers and Francois Pieter Retief, “Dream Healing in the Asclepieia in the Mediterranean,” in *Dreams, Healing, and Medicine in Greece: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Steven M. Oberhelman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 69–92; Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context: of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 158–66. Also see Bronwen L. Wickkiser, “Asklepios in Greek and Roman Corinth,” in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*, ed. Steven J. Friesen, Daniel N. Showalter, and James C. Walters, NovTSup 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 37–66.

waking. For example, a lame man dreamed that he was told to wash in cold water, which he did, and was healed. Significantly, however, many miraculous cures ascribed to Asclepius make no use of water. People suffering from illness or blindness were said to be cured by making hand gestures, eating certain foods, and making salves.³⁸

Eventually the cult of Asclepius came to include bathing as part of a therapeutic regimen. In the second century CE, Aelius Aristides said that at Pergamum patients made regular use of the baths, which were regarded as therapeutic (*Orations* 47.5–7). At the same time, patients continued seeking divine assistance through incubation. The dreams sometimes directed a person to bathe in water from the sacred well, or to try a hot or cold bath, or to bathe in a river or spring; and sometimes the dreams instructed the person not to bathe (48.45, 49–55, 71–76, 80, 83).³⁹

The main similarity between the perspective ascribed to the invalid at Bethesda and those of the Asclepius cult is that water could play a role in healing through divine agency. Yet the practices depicted in John 5 also differ in key respects from those in the cult of Asclepius. The inscriptions from Epidaurus and the testimonies of Aelius Aristides repeatedly tell of Asclepius giving instructions about healing privately through dreams, and the specific steps in the curative process were often distinctive to each patient (cf. Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.1.44). By way of contrast, John portrays an invalid whose assumptions about the pool seem to be based on publicly available knowledge. The impression is that everyone at Bethesda seeks healing in the same way, by entering the pool when the water is troubled, and that differs from what was common in the cult of Asclepius, despite the common interest in healing.⁴⁰

3.2. Archaeological Evidence of the Serapis Cult at Bethesda

Some scholars have argued that the archaeological findings at Bethesda show that the god Serapis was venerated at the site in the second and third centuries CE.⁴¹ First, they maintain that the healing practices were not located at the large double pool that was discussed above as a ritual bath but were centered in the small grottos to the east (fig. 1). Second, the material finds include votive offerings, some of which were prob-

³⁸ On the lame man using water see Klauck, *The Religious Context*, 164. Cures that do not use water range from the fourth century BCE (Lynn R. LiDonnici, *The Epidauran Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Texts and Translations 36 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1995], 97, 99, 101, 111, 113) to the third century CE (Naphthali Lewis, *Greek Historical Documents: The Roman Principate 27 B.C. – 285 A.D.* [Toronto: Hakkert, 1974], 135).

³⁹ See also Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 83–93.

⁴⁰ On the relationship of the crowd of sick people to the invalid who speaks see D. Francois Tolmie, "The Ill and the Sick: Those Who Were Healed and Those Who Were Not," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 332–36.

⁴¹ Antoine Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs: a propos de Jean V*, CahRB 12 (Paris: Gabalda, 1970), 38–43; Pierre and Rousée, "Sainte-Marie de la Probatique," 26–27; Küchler, "Zum 'Probatischen Becken.'"

ably dedicated to Serapis, who was revered for various reasons, including healing. The argument is that if Serapis was venerated at Bethesda in the second century CE, and if Serapis was said to heal, then one can infer that John 5 shows that a similar Greco-Roman healing cult was already practiced at Bethesda in the first century. We will consider each aspect of the argument in turn.

3.2.1. *The Area East of the Large Double Pool*

Five grottos have been found at Bethesda, most with a few steps leading down to a small basin (fig. 4), as well as a small bath that was suitable for one person. Water was stored in a central cistern that was about 8.5m deep and 6m wide. Coins and pottery found on the site led to the conclusion that it was in use from the time of Alexander Jannaeus (104–78 BCE) until it was destroyed in 70 CE. In the second century CE the area was rebuilt as part of Hadrian's Roman city, Aelia Capitolina.

Archaeological finds from that period include a small altar and a votive offering in the shape of a foot, which could be a symbol of Serapis. Another votive depicts a shrine with a serpent, which has also been linked to Serapis. Since Serapis was sometimes said to be a healer like Asclepius, the votive offerings are construed as evidence of a healing cult in Roman Jerusalem of the second and third centuries CE. The grottos have been pictured as places where suppliants might wash when preparing for incubation while seeking divine help. Other finds include eleven cubic stone basins, which some propose might have been used for cultic washings or libations (fig. 5).⁴²

Antoine Duprez used a pattern from the history of religions when arguing that something similar to a Greco-Roman healing cult was already present at Bethesda in the first century CE. He pointed out that certain places in the Middle East have been regarded as sacred over long periods of time, even when the specific religious designations have changed. After building a case that there was a Roman healing cult at Bethesda in the second century CE, he proposed that the healing cult essentially continued what was already there in the first century – namely, the healing cult depicted in John 5. Although it might seem unthinkable for there to be pagan practices so near the temple, he argued that Jews might have tolerated it because Bethesda was outside the city wall and near the Antonia fortress, where Roman troops were stationed.⁴³

One problem with the theory, however, is that locating healing practices in the grottos does not fit the literary evidence in John 5. The Gospel pictures a crowd of invalids gathered around a single pool, not around multiple grottos (5:2). The word *κολυμβήθρα*, which is used in John 5, indicates a large pool, such as a reservoir or swimming pool, and not a small basin suitable for only one person.⁴⁴ For example,

⁴² Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 53.

⁴³ Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 43–54, 85–97.

⁴⁴ For the use of *κολυμβήθρα* for a reservoir see 2 Kgs 18:16; Eccl 2:6; Josephus, *J. W.* 5.145; 5.467–68; for a pool large enough to swim in see Josephus, *Ant.* 15.54; Plutarch, *Mor.* 487F; Pausanias, *Descr.* 3.21.4; 4.35.9.

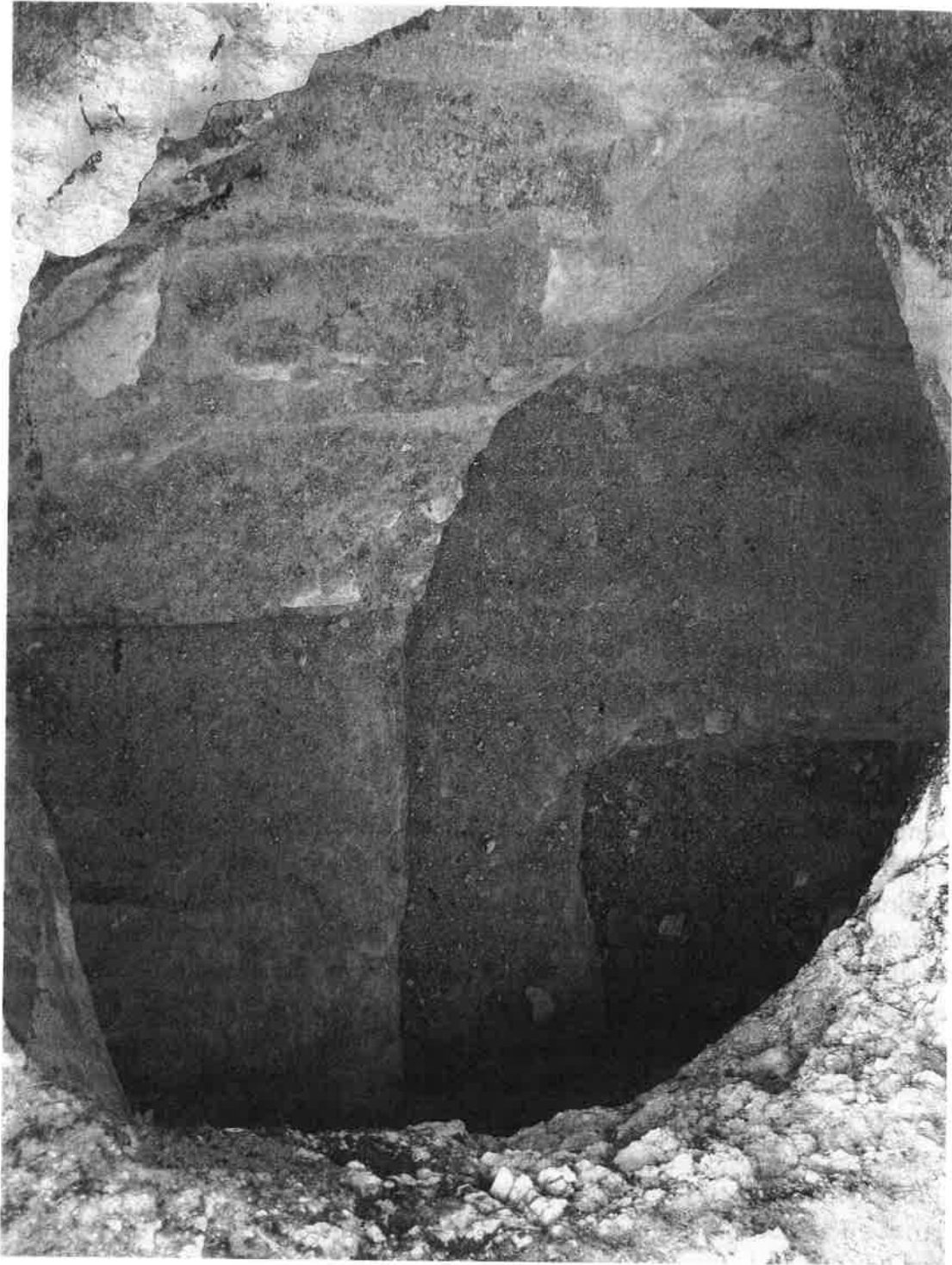


Figure 4: Grotto in the eastern part of Bethesda viewed from above. Steps on the left lead down to a small bathing basin at the bottom. Photo by Craig R. Koester.



Figure 5: Cubic stone basins in the eastern part of Bethesda. Photo by Craig R. Koester.

when Galen discussed therapies that involved bathing, he contrasted the large swimming pool (κολυμβήθρα) with the smaller basins (μικρῶν πυέλων) one would find in a bath complex, and he emphasized the therapeutic value of the large pool (*Method of Medicine* 7.6 [473K]). It is also difficult to imagine a multitude (πλῆθος) waiting for the mysterious movement of water in one of these grottos with their small shallow basins rather than in the larger pool.

Archaeologically, there is no clear evidence that the grottos were used for religious rites in the first century. A recent proposal, which needs further testing, is that they were part of a large building, perhaps a private dwelling, which had rock-cut rooms and vaulted basements that included areas for personal washing.⁴⁵ Moreover, the cubic stone basins found on the site almost certainly had no religious function. Their design shows that they were probably stone troughs that were used for feeding animals and not for ritual lustrations or libations.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda," 127–29; Gibson, "The Excavations," 28–29; Theobald, "Steh auf," 697; cf. Küchler, *Jerusalem* (2014), 240.

⁴⁶ Gibson, "The Excavations," 28 n. 31.

3.2.2. Interpretation of the Votive Offerings

The most crucial link between Bethesda and a Greco-Roman healing cult in the second and third centuries CE is the discovery of votive offerings on the site.⁴⁷ It seems likely that some of these attest the worship of Serapis. What I challenge, however, is the idea that the archaeological evidence shows that Serapis was venerated at Bethesda primarily as a healer. This is the crux of the issue: If the evidence for a healing cult in the second and third centuries is unclear, then it is problematic to project the existence of such a cult back into the first century and to relate it to John 5.

One of the votives is in the shape of a right foot with a sandal strap (fig. 6). The foot is inscribed, "Pompeia Lucilia has dedicated (it)."⁴⁸ Interpretation of the votive has two parts: First, many propose that the votive was dedicated to Serapis, since the god was frequently represented by a foot; and this is plausible, though not certain. Second, they assume that the foot suggests that the god was being honored as a healer. There were cases in antiquity where votive offerings in the shape of body parts were clearly linked to healing. A good example is the temple of Asclepius at Corinth, where there are votive offerings shaped like feet, arms, hands, ears, and other body parts that needed healing. At Bethesda, however, only one foot-shaped votive has been found, and no other parts of the body are represented, as one might expect in a cult of healing.

More importantly, other evidence of Roman devotion to Serapis in the second and third centuries CE emphasizes the god's role as a tutelary deity rather than as a healer. In Roman Jerusalem of the second century CE, Serapis was explicitly equated with Jupiter the sovereign and not with Asclepius the healer. An inscription from the period states that the reason for honoring Serapis was that he provided victory and ensured the welfare of the emperor and the city. This broadly beneficent role is clear in the inscription, which was dedicated by a group of Roman soldiers, who were stationed in Jerusalem in 116–117 CE. At the time there were Jewish uprisings in the Diaspora, and the soldiers served under the governor Lusius Quietus, who was to ensure that unrest did not spread to Judea:

To Jupiter the best and greatest Sarapis, for the welfare and victory of the Emperor Nerva Traianus Caesar, the best Augustus, (with the victory titles) Germanicus, Dacicus, Parthicus, and of the Roman people. The detachment of the third legion Cyrenaica erected (this).

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Pol Vonck, curator of the museum at Saint Anne's church in Jerusalem, for allowing me to examine the items in their collection.

⁴⁸ Πονπημία Λουκίλια ἀνέθηκεν. For photos, text, and commentary by Leah Di Segni see *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, 1/2, *Jerusalem*, Hanna Cotton, et al. eds. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 6–8. For the theory that the votive foot shows that Bethesda had a healing cult of Serapis see Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 46–50, and the other scholars noted by Di Segni (*ibid.*), 7–8. A second marble foot at Bethesda is mentioned by Gibson, "The Excavations," 30 n. 38. Nevertheless, it is a left foot rather than a right foot and seems to be a fragment of a statue rather than a votive offering in its own right.



Figure 6: Replica of the votive foot from Bethesda (original 2nd–3rd cent. CE). Photo by Craig Koester with permission of the White Fathers, Jerusalem.

The editor, Werner Eck, notes that this inscription was probably on the base of a statue of Serapis seated on a chair and showing his foot, or on the base of a sculpture of a foot entwined with a snake. Eck comments that such a foot could be an object of veneration, representing the god himself, and symbolizing the deity's bond with his soldiers.⁴⁹ What is important for our study is that the emphasis is on the emperor's "welfare and victory" (*salute et victoria*) rather than on healing.

Serapis's role as a tutelary deity is reflected in coinage from Roman Jerusalem of the second and third centuries CE. Throughout this period coins portrayed Serapis with a beard in the style of Jupiter or Zeus. Moreover, he regularly was depicted wearing a modius, the crown shaped like a cylindrical grain measure, which signified earth's

⁴⁹ See the text and comments by Werner Eck in Cotton et al., eds., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palestinae* 1/2, 1–2. I use a modified form of Eck's English translation. It is helpful to compare the Serapis inscription with another inscription dedicated by a detachment of a Roman legion that was stationed in Jerusalem in the late second century CE. It too reads, "For the welfare (*salute*) of the emperor" (ibid., 2–3). Yet this inscription is dedicated to the Genius of Africa and again has no apparent connection to healing.



Figure 7: Serapis on coin Aelia Capitolina. Reign of Antonius Pius (138–161 CE). Courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group (cngcoins.com)

bounty (fig. 7). The coins paired his image with that of the emperor and the name of Hadrian's redesigned Jerusalem: Colonia Aelia Capitolina.⁵⁰ Such portrayals fit a context in which Serapis was revered for ensuring the wellbeing of the emperor and the city. Yet neither coins nor inscriptions from Roman Jerusalem focus on Serapis's role as a healer. Interpreters have noted that a few third-century coins depict Hygieia, who was the daughter of Asclepius and the goddess of health, and have suggested that her cult was connected to that of Serapis. Yet there are no coins, inscriptions, or other forms of evidence from Roman Jerusalem that link Hygieia with Serapis.⁵¹

Additional evidence for Serapis's broadly beneficent role may be suggested by another inscribed foot, which was found at Bethar, seven miles southwest of Jerusalem.⁵² Bethar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Bar Kochba revolt, which was captured by the Romans in 135 CE. The dedicator's name is inscribed on the sole of the foot, rather than on the ankle, as on the votive from Bethesda. The inscription gives the name as Πατρικίς, a form of the Latin name Patricius. The foot probably came from a Roman living in the area during the second century CE. The presence of Romans is attested by an inscription that centurions from the legions V Macedonica

⁵⁰ Ya'akov Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1989), 25–26, 32, 36.

⁵¹ On the suggestion that the cults of Hygieia and Serapis were connected see Gibson, "The Excavations," 31. On the coins depicting Hygieia see Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina*, 56–57.

⁵² On the votive foot see Bellarmino Bagatti, "Un inedito piede votivo di Palestina," *OrAnt* 9 (1970): 113–14 and plate VIII; idem, *Ancient Christian Villages of Judaea and the Negev*, trans. Paul Rotondi (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2002), 28. See also *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, 4/1, *Iudaea/Idumaea*, Walter Ameling, et al. eds. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 603–04. I am grateful to Pol Vonck, curator of the museum of Saint Anne's church, and to Eugenio Alliata of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem for information about the votive foot from Bethar.

and XI Claudia placed beside a water channel at Bethar.⁵³ Whether the inscribed foot was dedicated to Serapis is not clear, but Bethar is not known to be the site of a healing cult, which cautions against assuming that a votive foot should be interpreted primarily in connection to healing.

The most important comparative evidence comes from Caesarea Maritima, where seven foot-shaped votives have been found. One has an image of Serapis's head sculpted onto the ankle. Several other votive feet are entwined with serpents and could have been dedicated to either Serapis or Isis. Another votive foot has a Greek inscription indicating that it was dedicated to the goddess Kore by someone with the Roman cognomen Barbarus ([τ]ῆς Κόρης [Β]άρβαρος). Together, the votives show a blending of devotion to Serapis, Isis, and Kore.⁵⁴

The foot-shaped votives from Caesarea had more to do with sporting events than with a healing cult. Five of the votives were found in or near a shrine in the hippodrome and the others were probably from that location. Religious rites at the shrine would have been connected to athletics and chariot racing. Studies of the foot-shaped votives suggest that they were offered by those seeking divine help for success in the race.⁵⁵ Other evidence from Caesarea also emphasizes Serapis's role as protector and provider. Like the coin from Jerusalem shown above, coins and figurines from Caesarea depict the god wearing the modius or grain measure, which reflects his broadly beneficent role. Although Serapis could be revered as a healer and lord of the underworld, evidence from Caesarea shows that both Isis and Serapis were "honored as *Agathoi Damimones*, as patron deities of the city and of domestic prosperity."⁵⁶ Taken together, the foot-shaped votive offerings from Bethesda, Caesarea, and perhaps Bethar express devotion to Serapis and other deities. They are honored as providers and protectors, but there is nothing that specifically links the foot-shaped votives to Serapis's role as a healer.

A second votive object from Bethesda is a plaque that consists of two parts, which most interpreters now assume belong together. The lower part pictures a serpent in a shrine with pillars, while the upper part depicts the shrine's gabled roof. The gable is adorned with a rounded arch and a seashell, and below it are two heads of wheat (fig. 8). Duprez interpreted the serpent as Serapis and stressed the god's role as a healer, akin to Asclepius.⁵⁷ More recently, Caroline Arnould-Béhar has shown that the

⁵³ The inscription reads, "et Victor[--] centur[--] vexil[lat(io)/lar(ii)] leg(ionum) V Mac(edonicae) et XI Cl(audiae)." See *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, 4/1, 601–03; Menahem Mor, *The Second Jewish Revolt: The Bar Kochba War 132–136 CE*, BRLA 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 303–04.

⁵⁴ Walter Ameling et al., eds., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 2, *Caesarea and the Middle Coast 1121–2160* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 39–43; Joseph Patrich, *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Caesarea Maritima: Caput Iudaeae, Metropolis Palaestinae*, AJEC 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 103–04, 200; Avner Rabban and Kenneth G. Holum, *Caesarea Maritima: A Retrospective after Two Millennia*, DMOA 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 310–16.

⁵⁵ Patrich, *Studies in the Archaeology*, 200.

⁵⁶ Rabban and Holum, *Caesarea Maritima*, 313.

⁵⁷ Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 46–50.

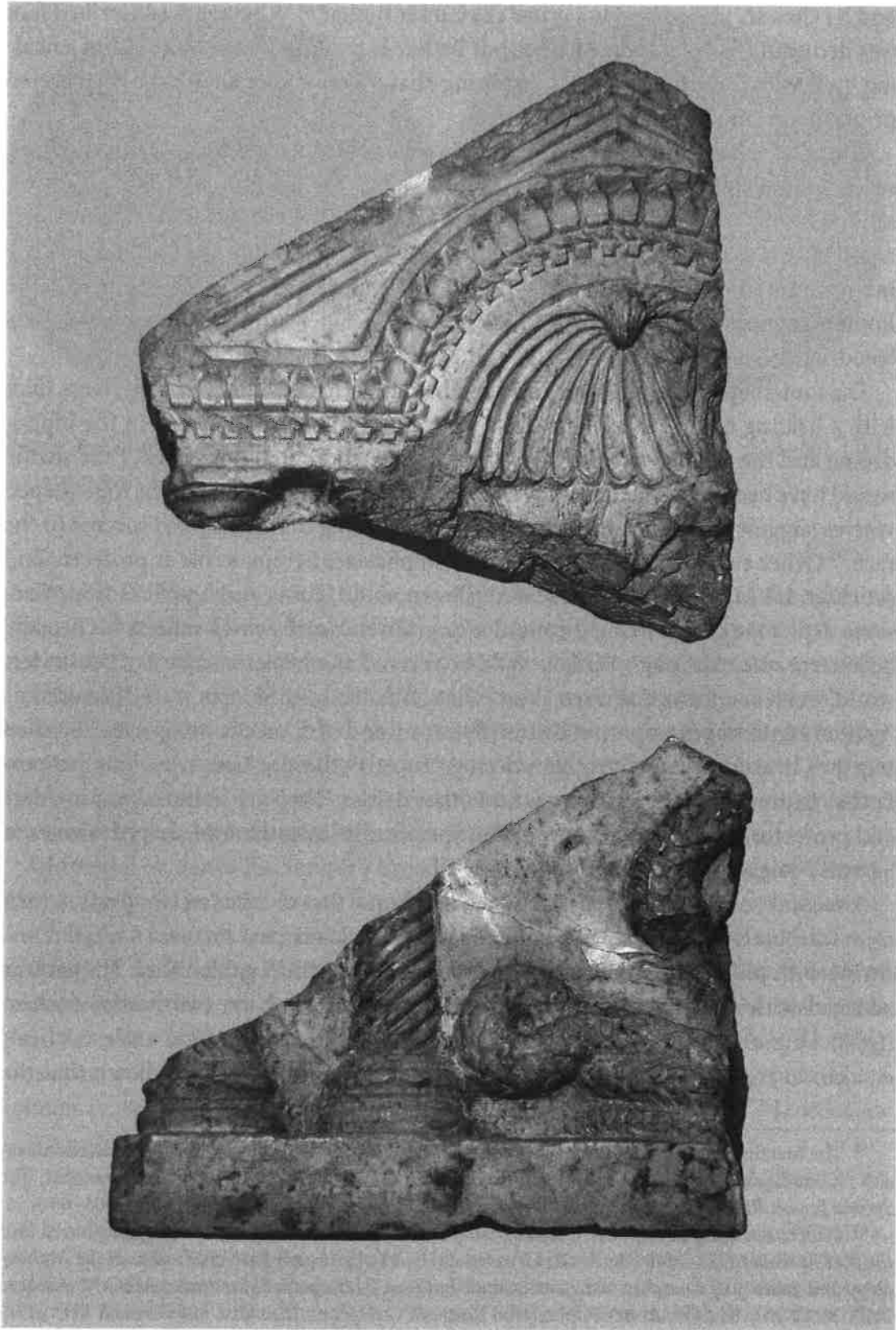


Figure 8: Votive plaque to Agathodaimon or Agathodaimon-Serapis (2nd–3rd cent. CE). Photo by Craig Koester with permission of the White Fathers, Jerusalem.



Figure 9: Agathodaimon Serapis on coin from Alexandria. Reign of Antonius Pius (138–161 CE). Courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group (cngcoins.com).

gable of the sanctuary has a distinctive Syrian form that was used for tutelary deities, who provided protection and wellbeing, such as Tyche. Using the design on the plaque did not mean that there was a shrine with that shape at Bethesda; rather the architectural form was a symbolic way to show that the god depicted on the plaque was a tutelary deity.⁵⁸

Arnould-Béhar proposes that the serpent figure signifies the deity known as Agathodaimon, who was sometimes identified with Serapis. We noted above that at Caesarea both Serapis and Isis were regarded as *Agathoi Daimones*, who provided for domestic prosperity and oversaw the welfare of the city. The serpent plaque from Bethesda suggests that Serapis was also seen in this role in Roman Jerusalem of the second to the fourth centuries CE.⁵⁹ The character of Agathodaimon-Serapis as a provider is symbolized by the heads of grain depicted on the plaque from Bethesda and on second-century coins from Alexandria (fig. 9). The grain imagery points to the god's role in ensuring prosperity, but it does not have specific connotations of healing.

A third type of votive offering found at Bethesda may honor Serapis as a protector of maritime commerce. There are two objects in the form ships, one of which is decorated with a floral pattern (figs. 10–11). These objects probably express gratitude for a safe journey by sea and could have been dedicated to Serapis, who was considered one of the guardians of the seas. Inscriptions sometimes mention Serapis alongside

⁵⁸ Caroline Arnould-Béhar, "La stèle 'au blé et au serpent' de Béthesda: Étude iconographique," in *Le projet Béthesda (1994–2010): La Piscine Probatoire de Jésus à Saladin*, ed. Claudine Dauphin (Proche-Orient Chrétien, Numéro Spécial, 2011), 45–56. See also Michal Pietrzykowski, "Sarapis – Agathos Daimon," in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren*, ed. T. A. Edridge and Margreet Boer, 3 vols., RGRW 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 3:959–66.

⁵⁹ Rabban and Holum, *Caesarea Maritima*, 311–12; P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1:209–11, 2:356–60.

Jupiter and Neptune, and seafarers could call upon him as their patron. Similar boat-shaped items dedicated to Serapis have been found in Italy and Egypt.⁶⁰

What is striking is that Jerusalem was an inland city and not a hub for seafarers. Therefore, these boat-shaped objects can best be interpreted by comparison with religious life in a port like Caesarea. If the boat-shaped votives were dedicated to Serapis, they again point to his broader role as protector rather than more specifically as a healer.

A fourth votive object is a fragment of a plaque depicting a woman. She is nude and is turned toward the right, perhaps lying down. The complete plaque also depicted a figure standing near the woman, although all that is now visible is a forearm and hand extending toward her and slightly upward (fig. 12). Duprez interpreted the scene as one in which the woman was ill, and he proposed that the arm and hand to her right signified divine help coming in the form of healing. He compared the plaque to Greek relief sculptures that picture Asclepius helping a patient lying on a couch, although other scholars have been less sure about this interpretation.⁶¹

Further comparison of the plaque from Bethesda to sculptures associated with Asclepius makes it unlikely that it depicts healing. In healing scenes the patients regularly wear some clothing. As they lie on a couch they are at least partially turned toward the viewer, and it was common to picture the god or a physician touching them.⁶² By way of contrast, Arnould-Béhar has pointed out that the upper body of the woman on the Bethesda plaque is nude, which would be more typical of a goddess like Aphrodite or Venus. The way the woman faces away from the viewer might suggest a banquet scene, since guests were sometimes pictured lying on a couch and turning to the side; or it could be a scene in which Ariadne is asleep or lying beside Dionysus. The significance of the arm and hand at the side of the plaque would depend on the way the central scene is understood, so that the hand could be that of a banquet guest, or perhaps Eros or another deity, or possibly Dionysus or a member of his thiasus. Further research would be needed to determine what the plaque from Bethesda depicts. What is important for our study is that the plaque probably does not signify healing.⁶³

⁶⁰ On Serapis as protector of navigation see Sarolta A. Takács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*, RGRW 128 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 180, 189. On the boat-shaped votives see Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 51–53; Küchler, *Jerusalem* (2014), 242, 244. For an illustration of a boat-shaped dedication to Serapis see Wilhelm Weber, *Die Aegyptisch-griechischen Terrakotten* (Berlin: Curtius, 1914), pl. 1 nos. 12a and 12b.

⁶¹ Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 46. Küchler includes a sketch of the Bethesda plaque and notes Duprez's interpretation, but he adds a question mark in the caption to indicate that he is not sure whether the hand of the unseen figure to the right signifies healing (*Jerusalem* [2007], 326, 329, fig. 159). Gibson says only that the plaque could have cultic significance ("The Excavations," 31 n. 38).

⁶² For a helpful collection of Greek healing reliefs, see Gil H. Renberg, *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman World*, 2 vols., RGRW 184 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 2:634. See also LIMC II/1, pp. 876–77.

⁶³ I am indebted to observations about the Bethesda plaque made by Caroline Arnould-Béhar in private correspondence.



Figure 10: Votive offering in the shape of a boat. Photo by Craig Koester with permission of the White Fathers, Jerusalem.

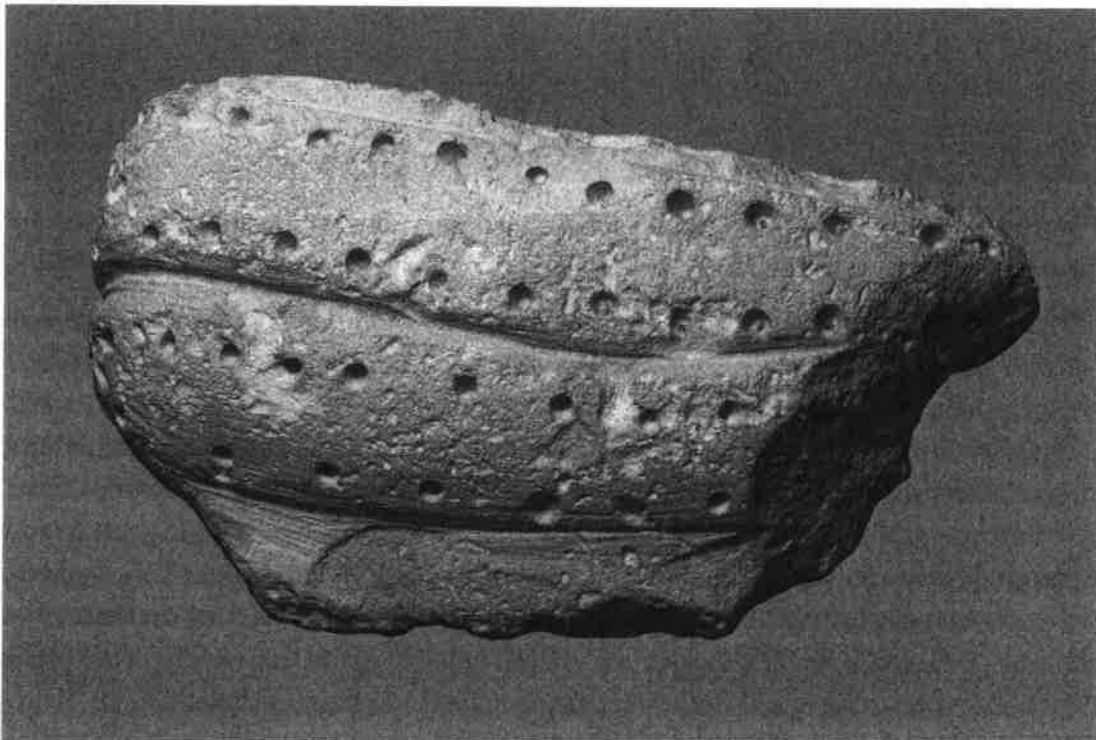


Figure 11: Votive offering in the shape of a boat. Photo by Craig Koester with permission of the White Fathers, Jerusalem.



Figure 12: Plaque from Bethesda depicting a woman. The arm and hand of a second figure are visible at the right. Photo by Craig Koester with permission of the White Fathers, Jerusalem.

Finally, the material finds at Bethesda include a statuette of Aphrodite, which might suggest a connection to the plaque depicting the woman, which was discussed above. The statuette pictures Aphrodite standing with her left hand covering her genitals and her right hand covering her left breast in a pose known as *Venus pudica*.⁶⁴ The goddess was revered for various reasons, including love, fertility, and protecting mariners, but she was not known for healing. This figurine, helps to show the variety of religious devotion in the area around Bethesda in the second to fourth centuries CE.

⁶⁴ For a photo see Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, pl. XVII.2. Cf. Küchler, *Jerusalem* (2007), 329, fig. 160. For other examples see *LIMC* II/2, p. 39 no. 414; p. 40 no. 419; p. 74 nos. 748, 751; pp. 156–57 nos. 10–11, 14–24.

To summarize, the material finds from Bethesda show devotion to Serapis for providing protection and wellbeing. Inscriptions and coins from Aelia Capitolina show that the Romans considered Serapis as a deity who oversaw the public welfare, and the votive offerings from Bethesda fit this pattern. Although studies of Bethesda have interpreted the second- and third-century votive offerings as evidence of an ongoing tradition of healing that could be linked to the first-century setting depicted in John 5, it is more helpful to compare them to other material finds from the second and third centuries, like those from Caesarea, where the foot-shaped votive offerings had more to do with strength and success rather than with healing, and where mariners would thank the god for safe travel on the sea.

4. Archaeological and Textual Interpretation

We can draw together our results around the questions noted at the beginning of this study. One concerns the world behind the text and how the available evidence contributes to historical reconstruction of the situation at Bethesda in the first century CE. On the one hand, the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that prior to 70 CE the large double pool was a public ritual bath that was used by Jewish pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. In the second century the area was rebuilt under Hadrian, and there is evidence of devotion to Serapis as a deity who provided for the welfare of the Roman city and the personal wellbeing of the god's devotees. Yet there is no clear archaeological evidence of a healing cult on the site either before or after 70 CE. On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel does depict the pool of Bethesda as a site noted for healing. Yet John 5 makes no mention of the pool's use for ritual cleansing, despite comments about purification in other chapters of the Gospel.

One approach to dealing with the differences would be to conclude that John 5 is a purely literary creation that does not reflect actual first-century practice at Bethesda. But as noted above, some details in the Gospel's description of Bethesda do fit the archaeological evidence, including a pool large enough to attract a multitude, who would have to step down into the water. Given the Gospel's familiarity with various sites in Jerusalem, which are also attested in other sources, it seems plausible to think that the narrative does preserve information about Bethesda in the first century.

Accordingly, an alternative would be to give some historical weight to both the archaeological and literary evidence, and to combine both types of evidence in a composite reconstruction of the first-century site. If we follow this approach, we have to assume that people went to the pool of Bethesda for different reasons: some for ritual purification and others for healing. That result would fit a social pattern in which the normative practices involved Torah observance, while alongside these were folk beliefs about the quasi-magical healing power of the water. In Jewish and Greco-Roman circles the normative and folk beliefs could exist side-by-side, as noted above.

Traces of a dual social pattern could be reflected in the way the invalid who is healed later goes to the temple and shows deference to the Torah-observant Jews in the story, even though folk belief shapes his approach to healing. We might also see a trace of this social situation in the presence of the invalids seeking healing (5:3) along with a larger crowd, suggesting the presence of pilgrims there for the festival (5:13). Yet we must also recognize that John 5 explicitly connects the pool only to healing and not to ritual cleansing, so the picture of Bethesda that we create by combining the literary and archaeological evidence is historically possible but not certain.

Next, we can ask how the description of Bethesda fits the world within the text, that is, how it functions in the narrative. The healing episode repeatedly speaks of what it means to become healthy (ὕγις, 5:6, 9, 11, 14, 15), and the discourse that follows develops this theme into a case for seeing Jesus as the agent of God. By commanding the paralytic to “rise” (ἐγείρε) and walk, Jesus exercises God’s own life-giving power, for “just as the Father raises (ἐγείρει) the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes” (5:21). Despite the opponents’ charge that healing on the Sabbath violates the will of God, Jesus counters by saying that his action carries out the will of God, since God gives life each day, including the Sabbath.

The portrayal of the invalid’s folk belief in turn contributes to the Johannine critique of those who are preoccupied with miracles. The Gospel recognizes that miracles can be construed in very different ways, depending on one’s frame of reference. When Jesus was previously in Jerusalem for a festival, many believed when they saw the signs that he did, which seems positive; yet the narrator cautions that such miracle-based faith is unreliable (2:23–25), and similar comments appear elsewhere.⁶⁵ The episode in John 5 fits the pattern because the invalid assumes that the water in the pool has a miraculous ability to heal, but Jesus makes no use of the pool’s water, even though he will later send the man born blind to wash and be healed in the pool of Siloam (9:7). Instead, Jesus heals the invalid at Bethesda simply by speaking a word (5:8–9). Accordingly, Jesus’ action does not confirm the invalid’s folk belief about the pool but is an alternative to it.

The narrative develops the Johannine critique of a misplaced reliance on miracles by showing that the man who is healed exhibits no ongoing loyalty to Jesus. When others fault him for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he shifts responsibility to his healer (5:10–16), and Jesus later warns him, “Do not persist in sin, in order that nothing worse happen to you” (5:14). In the Fourth Gospel, sin is the manifestation of unbelief, and the point is that the man’s persistent unresponsiveness to his healer will lead to something worse than a reprimand for a Sabbath violation; it will lead to judgment from God. That theme is then developed in the discourse, which identifies Jesus as the one whom God has empowered to judge (5:22, 27). In short, the narrative dis-

⁶⁵ John 7:21–23, 31; 9:16; 11:47–53; 12:9, 18, 32. On the theme see Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 163–70.

tinguishes the kind of folk belief associated with the pool from what the writer considers to be genuine faith, centered in Jesus' life-giving power.

Finally, we can ask about the world in front of the text and how the depiction of Bethesda would engage various ancient readers. Describing a pool with colonnaded walkways, where people gather seeking to become healthy, gives the story broad appeal. The associations evoked by the narrative were considered in three overlapping dimensions, including the distinctly Jewish aspects, the Greco-Roman therapeutic bath complexes, and the sites that were reputed to have water with special curative properties.

The *Lives of the Prophets* show that in Jewish circles the mysterious movement of water in a pool could be seen as evidence of divine favor, and that a place could be known for special healing power. Similarly, Greco-Roman sources tell of popular beliefs about healing springs associated with nymphs and various deities, and the practices at each location would vary. Water was also used in the healing cult of Asclepius, but at shrines of the god the usual practice was that devotees would seek private instruction through dreams, and treatments were often distinctive for each person's condition. Some cures involved water, while others did not. John 5, however, describes a situation in which all the sick apparently look for healing in the same way, by entering the pool at the auspicious moment when the water is troubled. Therefore, instead of construing the Gospel's depiction of Bethesda primarily in terms of the Asclepius cult, we should see it reflecting a broad pattern of folk belief that links water to miraculous cures in a variety of ways, which are evident in both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions.

Against that backdrop of the widely experienced need for healing, the Gospel shows the divine response coming through Jesus. His gift of health to the invalid points to the Gospel's understanding of life as physical but not only physical. In the Fourth Gospel, life also involves the renewal of relationship with the God who is the source of the life that Jesus provides, a central point that will be developed in the discourse that follows (5:19–29, 39–40). The multiple dimensions of the setting at Bethesda enhance the narrative's ability to engage multiple types of readers with the Gospel's central message of life.