

# BIBLICAL HORIZONS

## Thirty-Eight Years by the Sheep Pool

*By Jeffrey J. Meyers and James B. Jordan*

In the fifth chapter of John's gospel we read of a man who had been ill for 38 years and who was lying by a pool located by the Sheep Gate of Jerusalem. This sheep waited, as did many other infirm people, for an angel to stir the waters, for each time this angel stirred the waters the first person to enter the pool was healed.

The information about the angel's stirring the waters is found in the second half of verse 3 and in verse 4. Many ancient manuscripts do not contain this part of the text, and thus many modern commentators deny its authenticity. At the same time, however, in verse 7 the sick man mentions the stirring of the waters, and his statement makes little sense if the information about the angel is omitted.

Moreover, the parallel between Jesus and the angel is hard to miss. The angel heals only one of the people lying by the pool, and so does Jesus. Clearly, Jesus is the new angel. As we shall see, this correspondence becomes even clearer when we consider that the man had been ill for 38 years.

Additional evidence that the statement about the angel is authentic comes from a consideration of the literary structure of John 5:1-18, to wit:

- A. Feast of the Jews and a healing pool, 1-2
- B. Crowd of ill sheep, 3
- C. An angel stirs the waters and heals, 4
- D. A sick sheep, 5
- E. Jesus sees him in the crowd, 6a
- F. Jesus' question, 6b
- G. The sheep replies: No one to help him, 7
- H. Jesus says: Rise up, 8
- I. The sheep healed on the Sabbath day, 9
- H' Jews say: It is not lawful, 10
- G' The sheep replies: The man helped me, 11
- F' Jews' question, 12
- E' Jesus slips into the crowd, 13
- D' A sheep forgiven and warned, 14
- C' Jesus made him well, 15
- B' Jews persecute Jesus, 16
- A' The Father's Sabbath and the Son's work, 17-18

In this structure, the two "C" sections match, and indicate a parallel between Jesus and the angel.

It has to be said, though, that the statement about the angel is missing from many early manuscripts and versions. Yet, who knows how many early manuscripts have still to be dug up? All in all, we are persuaded by the theology and literary structure of the traditional text that it provides the most authentic version of this passage.

## **Cleansing and New-Age Life**

Cleansing and resurrection are governing motifs in this section of John's gospel. We can begin with the story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus took six waterpots that were for cleansing, filled them with water, and turned that water into wine (John 2:1-11). The six large, man-sized waterpots seem to relate to the six disciples Jesus had with Him at the time, and the meaning seems to be that cleansing leads to new-age life as water turns to wine.

This event is followed by Jesus' first cleansing of the Temple from its "house leprosy" (John 2:13-22), which Jesus explains in terms of His own resurrection. Cleansing leads to the resurrection (new-age life) of the true Temple of God.

In John 3:1-21, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, using the language of baptismal cleansing; and in 3:22-36, when a dispute arises about baptism and cleansing, John the Forerunner explains that the Bridegroom has arrived to bring new and eternal life.

In John 4:1-38, the Bridegroom meets a Samaritan woman at a well. Jesus is like Abraham's servant, like Jacob, and like Moses, who found wives at wells. Jesus offers the woman water of eternal, new-age life, and she believes Him. Following this, in 4:46-54, Jesus raises the son of a nobleman to life. In both of these cases, the new life comes when the person believes the words of Jesus.

Now we come to John 5. Again we find a pool of water and a person who believes Jesus' words and acts upon them, and is given new life. This time the focus is not on Jesus as Bridegroom, offering Himself as a new Husband to a woman at a well. Rather, the focus is on the sheep who are gathered at the well. Again, when we go back to Jacob and Moses, we find that when they encountered their wives at wells they also watered the women's sheep. Jacob opened the well so that the sheep might be watered, and Moses not only watered the sheep, but drove away the wicked shepherds. (See Genesis 24 & 29 and Exodus 2.)

Jesus now waters a sheep at a pool, and then fights the wicked shepherds, the Jewish "guardians of orthodoxy." In the speech that

follows, Jesus tells us that He as the Son has the power to bestow new life, not only new-age life in this world (John 5:19-24), but also life in the resurrection (5:25-29).

As He concludes His speech, Jesus informs the Jews that He is really saying and doing nothing new. Moses had told them all about this long ago, but they did not believe Moses (5:45-47). Thus, it might be enough to see Jesus as the New Moses, watering sheep and opposing evil shepherds. But there is more.

## **Entering the Sabbath Land**

Overlooked by most modern commentators is something that would have leaped out at any ancient Jewish reader or hearer of this text: The man had been sick for 38 years. Israel had wandered in the wilderness for 38 years (Deuteronomy 2:14). No synagogue-educated Jew would fail to make this obvious connection. And it would start him to thinking about the rest of what is going on in John 5.

None of the following commentators even take notice of this: Calvin, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, Hendriksen, Beasley-Murray, Tasker, and Lenski. Others, like Meyer, Morris, and Brown, mention the connection only to dismiss it. After all, what do numbers mean? The only reason we are told that the man was sick for 38 years is so that we will know he has been sick for a long time. It does not occur to such expositors that if this is all the Spirit had intended, the text would say that he had been ill for "many years."

Westcott, however, notes that the connection is often made by ancient and pre-modern commentators, though he doesn't do anything with it. We found only Arthur Pink taking it seriously, as a symbol of Israel "under the law," but he does not link it to the events that follow.

Yet, the connection is obvious and pregnant with meaning. It explains everything that follows: Jesus, whose very name is the same as Joshua, is the New Joshua who is leading His people into Sabbath rest. Hebrews 3-4 makes this point, and if the author of Hebrews could figure it out, so could John; and so could Jesus. As angels, under the Angel of Yahweh, guided Israel to the promised land in the wilderness era, so now

Jesus, the New Joshua, the Son of Man, leads the new Israel in the new era.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Jesus performs this miracle on the Sabbath day. We notice that Jesus tells the man to take up his bed and walk back into the community. He is told to re-enter the Promised Land, carrying his possessions with him. And, as soon as he enters the Land, he meets the new Canaanites, the Jews, who tell him he has no business doing what he is doing.

The fact that it was a bed that the man was to carry with him on the Sabbath day back into the land is also doubtless significant, for a bed is a place of rest. What more fitting symbol of Sabbath? Indeed, as a follower of Jesus this man is in a sense bringing Sabbath into the land with him, for both his testimony (word) and the sign given to him (bed) are testimonies of new life through Jesus.

Joshua was Moses' successor. He completed Moses' work. And in doing so, Joshua departed neither to the right nor to the left from what God had taught through Moses (Joshua 1:7). Moses had been similarly obedient. Jesus, the New Joshua, says the same thing when He says that He does nothing except what the Father has told Him to do (John 5:19ff.)

Jesus links John the Forerunner with Moses in 5:33-35, 45-47. As Moses came before Joshua, so John came before Jesus. The Jews rejoiced (somewhat) in John as they rejoice in Moses. They reject, however, the testimonies of Moses and of John, for Moses pointed to Joshua, and John points to Jesus. Moreover, by rejecting Moses, they reject the God who commanded Moses, just as they reject the God who commanded John and the Father who commands Jesus.

In conclusion, the great clue to John 5 lies precisely in the statement that the man had been ill for 38 years. This detail sets up the typology that is used throughout. The period of the wilderness, the time of Moses and of John the Forerunner, is coming to an end. It is now time to enter the true Sabbath of eternal life, following the New Joshua.

### **Additional Notes**

Jesus' sermon in John 5 receives due attention in the commentaries, though without any mention of the Joshua-Sabbath motif.

There are some additional interesting features of the miracle itself, however, which are worth mentioning.

A pool leading into the holy city of Jerusalem is itself interesting. The laver of cleansing led into the Tabernacle and also to the Altar: priests and sacrifices had to be washed there before moving to either place. Since Jerusalem was a holy city, lepers and other unclean persons were not allowed into her. Those who were "sick, blind, lame, withered" might enter the city, but symbolically we are invited to see this pool as a place of cleansing that would permit such damaged people into the city in a better way, so that they might *enjoy* the city. It seems that the sick man went into Jerusalem after his cure.

Moreover, damaged sheep might not be offered as sacrifices, except as peace offerings (Leviticus 21). The Sheep Gate was the gate through which offerings were routinely brought. The people gathered here are clearly sheep. But they are unacceptable offerings. By healing this sheep, Jesus made him into an acceptable offering to God and then tells him to live rightly, as a "living sacrifice, which is your acceptable service" (Romans 12:1).

Interestingly, the text does not say "Sheep Gate" but only "sheep." The emphasis is on the sheep, though no one doubts that the Sheep Gate is the actual locale. A more accurate translation might be "the place of sheep."

Five porticoes, or covered colonnades (covered rows of columns), surrounded this pool, evidently to shelter the people gathered around it. We are told this for some reason, but why? Possibly because the number five in the Bible is associated with power: the five fingers of the hand; the five-in-a-rank way that the Israelite army marched "by fives" when they left Egypt (Exodus 13:18, in Hebrew). Are these five porticoes an ironic symbol of the powerlessness of these people, or is this five-fold gathering another reminder of the exodus and wilderness wanderings? The latter seems more likely since we are told that this was at a feast of the Jews, and feasts were gatherings of Israel instituted up during the wilderness time.

The fact that this took place at such a feast connects, of course, to the Sabbath day, which is the first feast discussed in Leviticus

23, where all the feasts are laid out. But we can also link it to the fact that these people are damaged sheep, unacceptable in some deep sense to come to the feast either as worshipers or as sacrifices. Jesus restores the man to the Great Feast of God, the Great Sabbath.

Which feast was it? We are told only that it was a feast of the Jews, and when John wants us to know the particular feast Jesus attended, he tells us which it was. Yet, there are several features of the Feast of Booths here, and whether it was that feast or not, John apparently intends us to make a connection to it. Later on, at the Feast of Booths, Jesus announces that He has living water (John 7:2, 38). When the angel stirred the waters, he was making the normally still water into “living” water, according to the provisions of Leviticus that cleansing had to be done by such moving water.

Moreover, at the Feast of Booths the people of Israel gathered under leafy shelters, analogous to the five colonnades under which these multitudes of human sheep gathered. We can associate these colonnades with the leafy shelters of the Feast of Booths, and behind that with the various oasis sanctuaries at which the patriarchs of Genesis worshiped.

Finally, the Feast of Booths, as the seventh and climactic feast of Leviticus 23 and of the Israelite year, is the great Sabbath feast. And this provides another link to the Sabbath theme in this passage.

As a last note, we observe that Jesus healed only one sheep, like the angel who stirred the waters. We might expect Him to heal them all, but Jesus says that His disciples will do greater things than He did. His work is only the beginning of the Kingdom.

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