

The Pool of Bethesda

John 5.2-4



*Examination
of a disputed passage*

“...waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.”



Trinitarian Bible Society

*Founded in 1831 for the circulation of
Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God*

The Pool of Bethesda

²Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep *market* a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. ⁴For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

John 5.2-4

Most of the modern versions either omit or place in brackets the last few words of verse ³ and the whole of verse 4, and it is often asserted that these words are of doubtful authority or that they are spurious. The Revised Version of 1881 dropped the words to the margin with a note acknowledging that the omitted words were supported by “many ancient authorities”. In the Revised Standard Version the “*many*” are reduced to “*other* ancient authorities”. In the New English Bible these have ceased to be “*ancient*” and have lost their “*authority*”, and are referred to merely as “*some witnesses*”. Ferrar Fenton’s note alludes to “Some very old manuscripts, but of no recognised authority”. The New International Version puts “Some less important manuscripts”.

Confusion among the modern versions

The 4th edition of the Berkeley Version in 1960 included the disputed words in the text without any note, but the New Berkeley Version of 1969 adds a note – “The manuscript evidence for the words in vss. 3 and 4 that are enclosed in brackets is so slight that it is virtually certain that they were not in the original Greek text”. It is difficult to understand by what strange process of criticism the identical manuscripts which were described in 1881 as “many ancient authorities” can thus be stripped of their number, antiquity and weight between 1960 and 1969.

Other versions have footnotes referring to the manuscripts which omit the words, and these exhibit the same variety of opinion regarding their age, number and authority. In 1905 Lloyd’s note read, “omitted by *many* ancient authorities”. Spencer’s Roman Catholic version had a note – “*some* notable *mss.* omit”. The Confraternity Version remarks that while the words are “wanting from *many* Greek *mss.* the text was known in the 2nd century and is *otherwise well attested*”. The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Diaglott says that the words are rejected by five of the most ancient *mss.* Alford’s New Testament – “The words are not found in the great majority of the ancient *mss.*”. Again the reader observes a strange inconsistency in the description of the documents which omit the words: “*some*” – “*many*” – “*five*” – “the great majority”.

Rejecting the evidence

The New Scofield Study Bible goes a step further and says dogmatically – “The oldest and best Mss. omit ‘waiting for the moving of the water,’ and all of v. 4”, and brushes aside the testimony of a great array of ancient authorities. It should not be assumed that the “oldest” are necessarily the “best”, as in many instances this is far from true.

Cunnington says, “it is easy to understand the insertion, but difficult to account for the omission, if the words were in the original text”. Reuss, on the other hand, says – “For the spuriousness of these words there is much less evidence; moreover it is easy to explain their omission from some documents”. Brown and Fausset comment to the same effect and add – “The internal evidence against it is merely the unlikelihood of such a miracle – a principle which will carry us a great deal farther if we allow it to weigh against positive evidence”. Bishop Wordsworth’s commentary on the Greek asserts that “the words are found in the vast majority of the copies. The evidence of the manuscripts being on the whole so strong in favour of the words, it seems rash to reject them”.

Rejecting the miracle

It has been objected by some that the miracle in verse 4 is not in keeping with other miracles recorded in the Bible and that in this respect it does not comport with the spirit of Scripture. This evidently did not occur to Calvin, Poole, Bengel, Goodwin, Newton, Gill or Ryle, who all made good use of the disputed words, accepted them as Scripture, and drew spiritual lessons from them. One of Newton’s hymns includes the words –

“Beside the Gospel pool
Appointed for the poor,
From year to year my helpless soul
Has waited for a cure.
How often have I seen
The healing waters move;
And others round me stepping in,
Their efficacy to prove.”

Bishop Ryle comments in his *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* –

To condemn the passage as not genuine, is a lazy way of cutting the knot, and not at all clearly warranted by the authority of manuscripts. – To say that St. John only used the popular language of the Jews in describing the miracle, and did not really believe it himself, is, to say the least, irreverent and profane. Here, as in many other instances, the simplest view, and the one which involves the fewest difficulties, is to take the passage as we find it, and to interpret it as narrating an actual fact: viz., a standing miracle which actually was literally wrought at a certain season, and perhaps every year.

After all there is no more real difficulty in the account before us, than in the history of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness, the various cases of Satanic possession, or the release of Peter from prison by an angel. Once admit the existence of angels, their ministry

on earth, and the possibility of their interposition to carry out God's designs, and there is nothing that ought to stumble us in the passage. The true secret of some of the objections to it, is the modern tendency to regard all miracles as useless lumber, which must be thrown overboard, if possible, and cast out of the Sacred Narrative on every occasion. Against this tendency we must watch and be on our guard.¹

Some commentators have observed that the miracle recorded in verses 3 and 4 was not accompanied by any message from God as all other miracles were. If the unique character of the miracle in this respect is to be regarded as a ground for its exclusion, the cursing of the fig tree would also have to be rejected, as there was no other occasion when our Lord addressed Himself to a tree. The record of our Lord walking upon the water would also be rejected on this ground, as there is no parallel elsewhere in Scripture. The application of such a principle would lead to a considerable erosion of the inspired record.

The manuscript evidence

The disputed words are in fact supported by many ancient authorities, namely fourteen Greek uncial manuscripts (5th-10th century in date), nearly all the Greek cursive manuscripts (more than a thousand in total), all the Greek lectionaries, the Old Latin version (in eight copies), the Latin Vulgate (part), the Syriac (Peshitta, Palestinian and Harclean), the Bohairic (part), the Armenian, the Diatessaron (2nd century), ten early Fathers (3rd-5th century, including Tertullian AD 220). Some of these sources contain variations of wording or presentation.

The authorities which omit all or most of the disputed words comprise two papyri (3rd century), seven uncials (4th-10th century, including Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus), about five cursives, the Old Latin (in four copies), the Latin Vulgate (part), the Curetonian Syriac, the Sahidic, the Bohairic (part), the Georgian, and one early Father (4th century).

The copy quoted by Tertullian was certainly written more than a hundred years earlier than Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. The evidence shows that very early in the 3rd century there were in existence some copies which included and some which omitted these words. The evidence also makes it quite clear that in the following centuries the majority of copies and versions over a wide area retained the disputed words as an authentic part of the inspired text.

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¹J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, (Carlisle, PA, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1.272-3.

This article has been slightly edited from its earlier publication in *Quarterly Record* No. 440, July-September 1972 and as Article No. 51.

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ISBN 1 86228 015 0

