

## The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda

<sup>1</sup> After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep (Gate) a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. <sup>3</sup> In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. <sup>4</sup> .... <sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" <sup>7</sup> The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." <sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." <sup>9</sup> Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath. <sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." <sup>11</sup> He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" <sup>12</sup> They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk'?" <sup>13</sup> The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. <sup>14</sup> After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." <sup>15</sup> The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." <sup>18</sup> For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.

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### Context

The Gospel according to John is traditionally considered as two major sections:

- the Book of Signs (chapters 1-12) and
- the Book of Glory (chapters 13-20).

The pericope (fancy word for "narrative") of the "Healing at the Pool of Bethesda" occurs midway through the first major section of the Book of Signs. Its immediate context are chapters that contain miracles and discourses by Jesus that point to the authority of Jesus' words and works—the wine miracle at Cana (2:1–11); the cleansing of the Temple (2:13–22); two healing miracles (4:46–54, the healing of the royal official's son; 5:1–9, the healing at Bethesda), as well as Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus (3:1–21) and the Samaritan woman (4:4–42). It is in this section that Jesus fulfills his promise to his disciples that they would see "greater things" (1:50). Yet this section also contains the first story of Jesus' conflict with the Jewish authorities (5:9–47), a conflict that includes the decision to kill Jesus (5:18).

### Commentary

The healing story of John 5:1–18 follows the conventions of the miracle story form—vv.1–5 prepare for the miracle; vv. 6–9a narrate the miracle. External attestation of the miracle is provided indirectly by the controversy of vv. 9b–18, because it is the "Jews'" encounter with the healed man who is carrying his bed around on the sabbath that incites them against Jesus.

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**Geography and a Missing Verse.** Verse 1 provides the temporal and geographical location for the story: in Jerusalem during one of the Jewish festivals. The text gives no clues as to which of the three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, or Tabernacles) it might be; vv.2–3 provide a detailed description of the setting in Jerusalem (cf. 4:4–5).

These two verses (2 and 3) have lots of variations in the many manuscripts available to scholars – most notably surrounding the name of the pool (e.g., Bethzatha, Bethsaida, Bethesda). But the most noticeable

variation occurs in v.4 – which you might have noticed is “missing.” When you see | <sup>4</sup> .... <sup>5</sup> *One man...* | it is an indication that there is a significant textual variation. In this case, later manuscripts have a description of the angel stirring the water. Whereas, the oldest and most reliable witnesses do not contain these verses. You will generally see the text printed in the footnotes of the Bible. All that being said, the texts all agree there was pool located near the Sheep’s Gate which was visited by a wide variety of people seeking cures.

***A View of Sickness.*** Malina and Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*) note that the ancient Mediterranean society had a different view of sickness than Western society.

In non-Western medicine, the main problem with sickness is the experience of the sick person being dislodged from his/her social moorings and social standing. Social interaction with family members, friends, neighbors, and village mates comes to a halt. To be healed is to be restored to one's social network. In contemporary Western medicine, we view disease as a malfunction of some organism that can be remedied, assuming cause and cure are known, by proper biomedical treatment. We focus on restoring a sick person's ability to function, to do. Yet, often overlooked is the fact that health and sickness are always culturally defined and that in many societies the ability to function is not the heart of the matter. In the ancient Mediterranean world, one's state of being was more important than one's ability to act or function. Thus, the healers of that world focused on restoring a person to a valued state of being rather than to an ability to function....Anthropologists therefore distinguish between disease (a biomedical malfunction afflicting an organism), and illness (a disvalued state of being in which a person's social networks have been disrupted and social significance lost.) ... [pp. 113-114]

The central character of the healing story (other than Jesus) is introduced in v.5: a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. The verse does not specify the man’s illness. The figure “thirty-eight years” is mentioned to indicate the seeming permanence of the man’s affliction (cf. Mark 5:35; Luke 13:11).

The man in our text has no one to put him in the water when it is stirring. He has no friends. He has no family. There is no one to help him. It is also likely that he was lying by the side of the pool not just for healing, but also to beg. Malina and Rohrbaugh state, "It is difficult to imagine a beggar in that position [without family or friends] surviving for any length of time" [p. 111].

### ***Immediately he became well***

<sup>6</sup> *When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be well?”* <sup>7</sup> *The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.”* <sup>8</sup> *Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk.”* <sup>9</sup> *Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath.* 5:6–9a.

The healing miracle is initiated by Jesus. His insight into the man’s condition resembles his insight into Nathanael (1:47–48), the crowd in Jerusalem (2:23–25), and the Samaritan woman (4:16–18). Jesus asks the man if he wants to be “made well” (*hygiēs genesthai?*). This expression will function as a refrain throughout the rest of the story (vv. 9, 11, 14–15).

The man responds to Jesus’ question the same way Nicodemus responded to Jesus’ offer to be “born *anōthen*” (“from above”/“again”; 3:3–4)—with protests that Jesus’ suggestion is impossible. The man interprets Jesus’ question through his own presuppositions about how healing can be accomplished and, therefore, can only lament his predicament (v. 7). Jesus responds to the man’s complaint with three imperatives: rise, take up your bed, walk (v. 8), the same three imperatives in Mark 2:9. Although there are similarities between this Johannine story and the story in Mark (cf. Mark 2:9–10; John 5:14), there are also significant differences. For example, the miracle in Mark 2 is enacted in response to the faith of the friends (2:5), whereas in John 5 there is no demonstration of faith. Verse 9 demonstrates the effectiveness

of Jesus' healing words. The man was "made well" and does exactly what Jesus commanded him. The miracle story proper thus ends on a note of triumph.

### ***The Aftermath***

<sup>9</sup> Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath. <sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." <sup>11</sup> He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" <sup>12</sup> They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk'?" <sup>13</sup> The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. <sup>14</sup> After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." <sup>15</sup> The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." <sup>18</sup> For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.

Here John focuses on the aftermath of the miracle. In v.9 we learn that the healing took place on the Sabbath. This shifts the focus of the story from a miracle story to a conflict story. The concern with Sabbath violation reflects an issue current in Jesus' time and in John's time. First-century Judaism defined community identity around three practices: circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance. In Jesus' time, a challenge to the sabbath meant a challenge to the definition of covenant membership. This issue of community identity became even more sharply joined in the last quarter of the first century, because with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (70 CE) and the rise of early Christianity, Jews and Christians found themselves increasingly in conflict over religious systems and structures.

***A Change in Understanding.*** Robert Capon in *Between Noon and Three* is writing about Jesus' actions in Matthew 12, but his insights are pertinent to this pericope also. Capon writes:

...his breaking of the sabbath seems pointless and unnecessary. He is not performing a good deed that, if delayed, would become unperformable. This is not a man who needs immediate rescue, not a man laying unconscious in a burning house. This is not even a man whose case is like the one Jesus cites to justify the healing -- a sheep fallen into a pit who would drown if left till sundown. The Pharisees are reasonable men. of course they would pull out the sheep. If you care to make a rather Latin-style theological argument for them, you might have them reason that since the sabbath is the chief sacrament of the order of creation, it may lawfully be broken only if some significant individual instance of that order is in danger of imminent and irreversible disordering.

But that is not the case here. This man has had a withered hand for years [or being ill for 38 years]. Why in God's good name can't Jesus wait out the afternoon and cure him without flying in the face of the Torah? Why can't he sit with him till sunset and use the time to fix the man's mind on the graciousness of God? Why can't they search the Scriptures together and set the stage so that the healing will be seen in all its unquestionable rightness? What is the point of this unnecessary muddying of the water? ...

Whenever someone attempts to introduce a radically different insight to people whose minds have been formed by an old and well-worked-out way of thinking, he is up against an obstacle. Their taste, as Jesus said, for the old wine is so well established that they invariably prefer it to the new. More than that, the new wine, still fermenting, seems to them so obviously and dangerously full of power that they will not even consider putting it into their old and fragile wineskins.

But try to see the point of the biblical imagery of wine-making a little more abstractly. The new insight is always at odds with the old way of looking at things. Even if the teacher's audience were to try earnestly to take it in, the only intellectual devices they have to pick it up with are the

categories of the old system with which it conflicts. Hence the teacher's problem: if he leaves in his teaching a single significant scrap of the old system, their minds, by their very effort to understand, will go to that scrap rather than to the point he is making and, having done that, will understand the new only insofar as it can be made to agree with the old – which is not at all. [pp. 140-142]

Jesus constantly announces the coming kingdom in words and deeds that run counter to the people's expectations for the kingdom. He comes from Galilee, where no prophet comes from. He talks with a Samaritan woman, which no decent male Jew would do. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He dies as an accursed criminal on a cross.

We want to "see" Jesus through the lens of our own understanding of what a savior should be like. As long as we "see" in this way, we cannot see. Capon again:

He [Jesus] instructs them with a constant awareness that the one thing they must not do is see, because they would see wrong, nor understand, because they would only misunderstand. For he knows that the only thing that can save them -- himself, in the mystery of his death and resurrection -- is the one thing they cannot accept on their present view of salvation. Accordingly, he gives them not one scrap to confirm their present view -- or, more accurately, he always includes one solidly unacceptable scrap on which their minds will gag. [p. 143]

The real "crime" in this healing is Jesus' command, "Take your mat." It was the carrying of the mat on the sabbath -- an act that others could easily see -- that led to the controversy. Jeremiah had stated: "Thus says the LORD: For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors" (Jer. 17:21-22).

Jesus could have avoided the offensiveness of this healing by (1) waiting until after the sabbath; or (2) not commanding him to take his mat. Jesus did both. He seems to be purposely offensive.

Jesus also confronts an attitude held by some that God was still "resting" after finishing the work of creation. Jesus declares that God is working (5:17), even on that sabbath day! And "like Father, like son -- the son is also working.

**The Jewish Leaders.** A shift in characters also occurs at this juncture. Verse 10 introduces "the Jews" into the story, and Jesus disappears until v. 14. The use of the phrase "the Jews" (*hoi Ioudaioi*) in this passage is a banner example of the distinctive Johannine use of this term. It cannot refer to the Jewish people in general, since the man Jesus heals is certainly a Jew himself. Scholars accept that John uses the term to refer to the Jewish authorities who oppose Jesus.

**Violating the Sabbath.** The "Jews" accuse the man who has been healed of violating Sabbath law; carrying a pallet constituted work. It is commonly assumed that the man's response in v.11 is intended to shift the blame for Sabbath violation from himself to Jesus, but nothing in the man's requires such a conclusion. He simply gives a straightforward account of what happened to him and how he came to be carrying his bed. Moreover, his words present the leaders (and the reader) with the two competing foci of this story: that he was "made well" and that healing is linked to a Sabbath violation.

The Jews focus on only one of the two, the Sabbath violation. They are concerned only to identify the person who instructed the man to pick up his bed and walk. The Fourth Evangelist reminds the reader of both dimensions of the story, however, by repeating the epithet "*the man who was healed*" (v. 13). The man can give no answer to the Jews' question, because he knows only that he was healed, not who was responsible. The question of Jesus' identity, one of the key questions of the Gospel (e.g., 6:42; 7:28; 8:25), hangs unanswered.

**Jesus Reenters.** Jesus, reentering the story, takes the initiative and finds the man in the Temple (cf. 9:35). Jesus' words to the man are in two parts. First, Jesus confirms the reality of the healing, "*you are well*" (v.14). Second, Jesus speaks to the man about sin. In John, the verb "to sin" (*hamartanō*) occurs elsewhere only in 9:2–3. In Mark 2:5–10, Jesus links his healing of the paralytic man with the forgiveness of sins, yet in John 5:1–9a the healing does not seem to involve forgiveness of sins; so it seems wrong to read Jesus' words in v.14 as embracing the traditional linkage of sin and illness (e.g., Job 5:17–18; Sir 38:15; 1 Cor 11:29–30; cf. John 9:2–3, where Jesus explicitly rejects that linkage). That is, v.14 does not address the man's pre-healing condition. Jesus does not speak of what was required for healing but of the response to the healing already received; he urges that the man's healing should be more than physical. The man needs to be spiritually healthy also, as the expression "be made well" suggests. In chap. 9, physical blindness and sight will be played off against spiritual blindness and sight (9:39–41), and that dynamic is prefigured here.

**Announcing Good News.** <sup>15</sup> *The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well.* Sometimes this verse is read as an indication of the healed man's ingratitude; he responds to Jesus' healing by "turning him in" to the Jews. Such a reading, however, judges the man's words by their consequences, not by the words themselves. A careful study of v. 15 suggests a different interpretation of the man's actions. The verb used to describe the man's speech is "to announce" (*anangellō*). This verb occurs only four other times in the Fourth Gospel, and all four uses are positive. It is used once of the Messiah (4:25) and three times to describe the activity of the Paraclete (16:13–15). It is possible, then, to read the man's words as a positive announcement to the Jews. The Jews wanted to know who told the man to carry his bed around—that is, who encouraged him to violate Sabbath law—but that is not what the man announces to them. Rather, he tells the "Jews" that "it was Jesus who had made him well." The man does not turn Jesus in for violating the Sabbath law, but announces him as the man who has made him well.

The Jews remain uninterested in the healing, however. Although life-saving healing would be permissible on the Sabbath, the healing of a disease that had lasted thirty-eight years could surely wait until sundown. Their sole concern remains the violation of Sabbath law (v.16). The man's announcement gives the Jews the evidence they need to persecute Jesus, but the man is not responsible for that outcome. At the very worst, the man is an unwitting pawn, unable to assess what the real issues are for the Jews (this is consistent with his attitude toward his healing in v. 7). Yet the man's actions in v.15 may be an attempt to enact Jesus' words of v.14—to live a whole life.

Two conversations have been taking place simultaneously. The Jews have been doggedly pursuing a conversation about Sabbath violation (vv. 10, 12, 16), while the healed man and Jesus have been discussing healing and being made well (vv. 11, 14–15). Jesus' words in v. 17 address both conversations. He addresses the issue of work, the pivot of the Jews' concern about Sabbath violation, but he does so to speak about his relationship with God, not to teach about the Sabbath. If God continues to work on the Sabbath, giving and sustaining life, so does Jesus. Jesus' response to the Sabbath controversy is thus quite different in John than in the Synoptics. It provides an occasion for Jesus' self-revelation, not for teaching about the law (cf. Mark 2:27–28).

Jesus' words in v. 17 escalate the Jews' opposition from persecution to a decision to kill Jesus (v. 18). To Jesus' Sabbath violation has been added the ultimate blasphemy: Jesus has made himself equal to God. The Jews have heard rightly the content of Jesus' words; he does speak of his unique relationship to God ("my father," v.17) and does equate his work with God's work (cf. 4:34). They wrongly interpret those words, however, to be Jesus' assertion of his independence from God, of himself as another God, when Jesus means the exact opposite. His words in v. 17 stress his dependence on God.

The claim Jesus makes for himself in 5:17 mirrors the christological confessions that led Johannine Christians into conflict with the synagogues. Also, Johannine Christians who confessed Jesus to be the

incarnate Word, sharing fully in God's identity and work, were met with charges of blasphemy. Jesus' assertion of his identity with God in 5:17, even in the face of death threats, provided support to the Johannine community in their struggles.

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## Notes

**John 5:1 *a feast of the Jews*:** The reference in Jn 5:45–46 to Moses suggests that the feast was Pentecost. The connection of that feast with the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai, attested in later Judaism, may already have been made in the first century. The feast could also be Passover (cf. Jn 6:4). John stresses that the day was a sabbath.

**John 5:2 *Sheep's Gate*:** There is no noun with Sheep. "Gate" is supplied on the grounds that there must have been a gate in the NE wall of the temple area where animals for sacrifice were brought in; cf. Neh 3:1, 32; 12:39. Hebrew: more precisely, Aramaic. **Bethesda:** preferred to variants "Be(th)zatha" and "Bethsaida"; bêṭ-ʿesdatayin is given as the name of a double pool northeast of the temple area in the Qumran Copper Roll. **Five porticoes:** a pool excavated in Jerusalem actually has five porticoes.

**John 5:3:** The Caesarean and Western recensions, followed by the Vulgate, add "waiting for the movement of the water." Apparently an intermittent spring in the pool bubbled up occasionally (see Jn 5:7). This turbulence was believed to cure.

**John 5:4:** Toward the end of the second century in the West and among the fourth-century Greek Fathers, an additional verse was known: "For [from time to time] an angel of the Lord used to come down into the pool; and the water was stirred up, so the first one to get in [after the stirring of the water] was healed of whatever disease afflicted him." The angel was a popular explanation of the turbulence and the healing powers attributed to it. This verse is missing from all early Greek manuscripts and the earliest versions, including the original Vulgate. Its vocabulary is markedly non-Johannine.

## John 5:14

**John 5:14 *Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you*:** While the cure of the paralytic in Mk 2:1–12 is associated with the forgiveness of sins, Jesus never drew a one-to-one connection between sin and suffering (cf. Jn 9:3; Lk 12:1–5), as did Ez 18:20.

**John 5:17 *sabbath*:** Sabbath observance was based on God's resting on the seventh day (cf. Gn 2:2–3; Ex 20:11). Philo and some rabbis insisted that God's providence remains active on the sabbath, keeping all things in existence, giving life in birth and taking it away in death. Other rabbis taught that God rested from creating, but not from judging (=ruling, governing). Jesus here claims the same authority to work as the Father, and, in the discourse that follows, the same divine prerogatives: power over life and death (Jn 5:21, 24–26) and judgment (Jn 5:22, 27).

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