The Siloam Pool

Where Jesus Cured the Blind Man

By Hershel Shanks

Few places better illustrate the layered history that archaeology uncovers than the little ridge known as the City of David, the oldest inhabited part of Jerusalem. For example, to tell the story of the Pool of Siloam, where Jesus cured the blind man, we must go back 700 years before that—to the time of the Assyrian monarch Sennacherib and his siege of Jerusalem.

Hezekiah, the Judahite king at that time, could see the Assyrian siege coming. Protective steps were clearly called for, especially to protect Jerusalem’s water supply. The only source of fresh water at this time was the Gihon Spring, near the floor of the adjacent Kidron Valley. So Hezekiah decided on a major engineering project—he would construct a tunnel under the ridge on which the City of David lay to bring the water of the spring to the other, less vulnerable, side of Jerusalem. It was dug by two teams of tunnelers working from opposite ends, meeting in the middle—it’s still a mystery how they managed to meet, but they did. A memorial plaque was carved in the tunnel wall to commemorate the feat—the famous Siloam Inscription, now in the Istanbul Museum (it was discovered in Ottoman times). Water flowed through the tunnel from the spring to the Pool of Siloam at the other end. It is still known as Hezekiah’s Tunnel, and it is still a thrill for tourists to walk through its 1750-foot length.
The waters of Siloam are mentioned by the prophet Isaiah, a contemporary of Hezekiah’s, who refers to “the gently flowing waters of Siloam” (Shiloah in Hebrew) (Isaiah 8:6). When the exiles returned from Babylon and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah tells us that a certain Shallun rebuilt “the wall of the Pool of Shiloah by the King’s Garden” (Nehemiah 3:15).

In Jesus’ time the Pool of Siloam figures in the cure of a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus spits on the ground and mixes his saliva with the mud, which he smears on the blind man’s eyes. He then tells the man “to wash in the Pool of Siloam.” When the blind man does so, he is able to see (John 9:1–7).

We still haven’t found the Pool of Siloam from Isaiah’s and Hezekiah’s time. We’re not even sure where it was. The same is true regarding the pool in Nehemiah’s time. In the Byzantine period the empress Eudocia (c. 400–460) built a church and a pool where the water debouches
from Hezekiah’s Tunnel to commemorate the miracle of the blind man. Early in the last century archaeologists found the remains of that church, over which today sits a mosque. The church and the pool are mentioned in several Byzantine pilgrim itineraries. Until last year, it was this pool that people meant when they talked of the Pool of Siloam.

Now we have found an earlier pool, the pool as it existed in Jesus’ time—and it is a much grander affair.

As with so much in archaeology, it was stumbled on, not part of a planned excavation. In June 2004 archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron were digging in the area of the Gihon Spring where Hezekiah’s Tunnel begins. Far to the south, between the end of the rock ridge that forms the City of David and a lush green orchard that is often identified as the Biblical King’s Garden, is a narrow alley through which a sewer pipe runs carrying waste from the valley west of the City of David into the Kidron Valley east of the City of David. The city authorities needed to repair or replace this sewer and sent workers with heavy equipment to do some excavating. Eli was watching the operation, when suddenly he saw two steps appear. He immediately halted the work and called Ronny, who came rushing down. As soon as Ronny saw the steps, he exclaimed, “These must be steps going down to the Pool of Siloam during the Second Temple Period.” He took a few pictures and wrote a report to Jon Seligman, the district archaeologist for Jerusalem. A quick response was called for because the winter rains were fast approaching and the sewer pipe had to be repaired or replaced. Ronny and Eli were quickly authorized to excavate the area
on behalf of the Israeli Antiquities Authority. The more they excavated, the more steps they found, and the wider the steps became.

They have now excavated the entire length of the steps on the side adjacent to the rock ridge of the City of David. There are in fact three short segments of descending stairways of five steps each. The first leads down to a narrow landing. The second leads to another landing and the third leads down to the final level (so far). The size of the pool itself would vary, depending on the level of the water. When it was full, it probably covered all of the steps. The landings served as a kind of esplanade for people to stand on when the steps were submerged in water.
The archaeologists also uncovered the two stepped corners at either end of these steps. So we know how wide the pool was at this point: more than 225 feet. We also know that the steps existed on at least three sides of the pool.

The corners are not exactly at right angles, however; they are a little more than 90 degrees. The pool appears to have been a trapezoid, widening apron-like as it descends into the valley. How far into the valley the pool extended, the archaeologists are not sure. Ronny’s best guess is that it is about the same as the width of the pool on the side they have uncovered.

Many times archaeologists are unsure of the date of what they find. But in this case, there is no question. Ideally, archaeologists want two dates: the date of construction and the date when the facility went out of use. Here the archaeologists are fortunate to have both.
The pool had two phases. The stone steps are part of the second phase. Under the stone steps and in places where the stones are missing, the excavators were able see that in the first phase the steps were plastered. Only in the second phase were the steps faced with stones. The excavators went over the early steps with a metal detector, and in four places it beeped, revealing four coins in the plaster. These coins would date the first phase of the pool.

They were all coins of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.), one of the later Hasmonean (Jewish) kings who were succeeded in 37 B.C. by Herod the Great. The excavators cannot be sure precisely how long these coins were in circulation before being embedded in the plaster of the first phase of the Pool of Siloam. But they can say with some assurance that the pool was constructed in the late Hasmonean period or early Herodian period. They may know more precisely if they dig under the steps and find a coin from Herod’s time. Then the pool would be Herodian.
We also know from coins how long the pool was in use. Near one corner of the pool they excavated part of a plaza or terrace and found nothing but late Second Temple pottery (which ended with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.). Most significantly, they found a dozen coins from the period of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome. The revolt lasted from 66 to 70 A.D. The excavated coins date from years 2, 3 and 4 of the revolt. The pool was therefore used until the end of the revolt, after which it was abandoned.

This area, the lowest spot in all Jerusalem, was not inhabited again until the Byzantine period. Every year the winter rains flowing down the valley deposited another layer of mud in the pool. And after the Roman destruction of the city, the pool was no longer cleaned. Over the centuries a thick layer of mud accumulated and the pool gradually disappeared. The archaeologists found it under nearly 10 feet of mud in places.
When Byzantine Christians returned to the area in the fourth century, they assumed the Pool of Siloam referred to in the New Testament was at the end of Hezekiah’s Tunnel, so they built their pool and a commemorative church where the tunnel comes out of the rock. This pool figures in numerous 19th-century engravings. As late as the 1970s, Arab women still washed clothes in this pool. It is well worth a visit.
What function the Pool of Siloam served in Jesus’ time is not entirely clear. Undoubtedly, thousands of pilgrims would come to Jerusalem on the three Biblically ordained pilgrim festivals—Passover, Weeks (Pentacost, or Shavuoth) and Tabernacles (Succoth). They may well have camped in the adjacent Kidron Valley and been supplied with drinking and cooking water from the pool. The water in the pool would also qualify as a *miqveh*, for ritual bathing, points out Reich, who is a leading expert on *miqvaot*. Indeed its naturally flowing spring water was of the highest level of sanctity. The water in a *miqveh* is usually standing water, even though it is required to flow into the pool naturally. But here the spring flowed continuously, refreshing the water. However, ritual bathing in a *miqveh* must be in the nude. Perhaps there was some means of providing privacy.

Whether the Pool of Siloam in Hezekiah and Isaiah’s time was located in the same place as in Jesus’ time remains a question. Even if it was in the same spot, it may have been a different size. Ronny and Eli would like to make a cut under the steps, which would give some indication of an earlier pool. If they find Iron Age pottery (tenth-sixth century B.C.), they can conclude that the Pool of Siloam from Hezekiah’s and Isaiah’s time was in this same location. However, Ronny and Eli do not want to dig into the verdant orchard that now fills the unexcavated portion of the New Testament-era Pool of Siloam. Besides, it belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church, which,
like Ronny and Eli, would not want the orchard destroyed. But they would like to make a very small cut through the trees to see how deep the pool is and to learn whether there are Iron Age remains beneath. Perhaps the church, appreciating the significance of this place, will permit this. The church’s orchard suddenly has great significance for the history of its faith.