

The Puzzling Pool of Bethesda

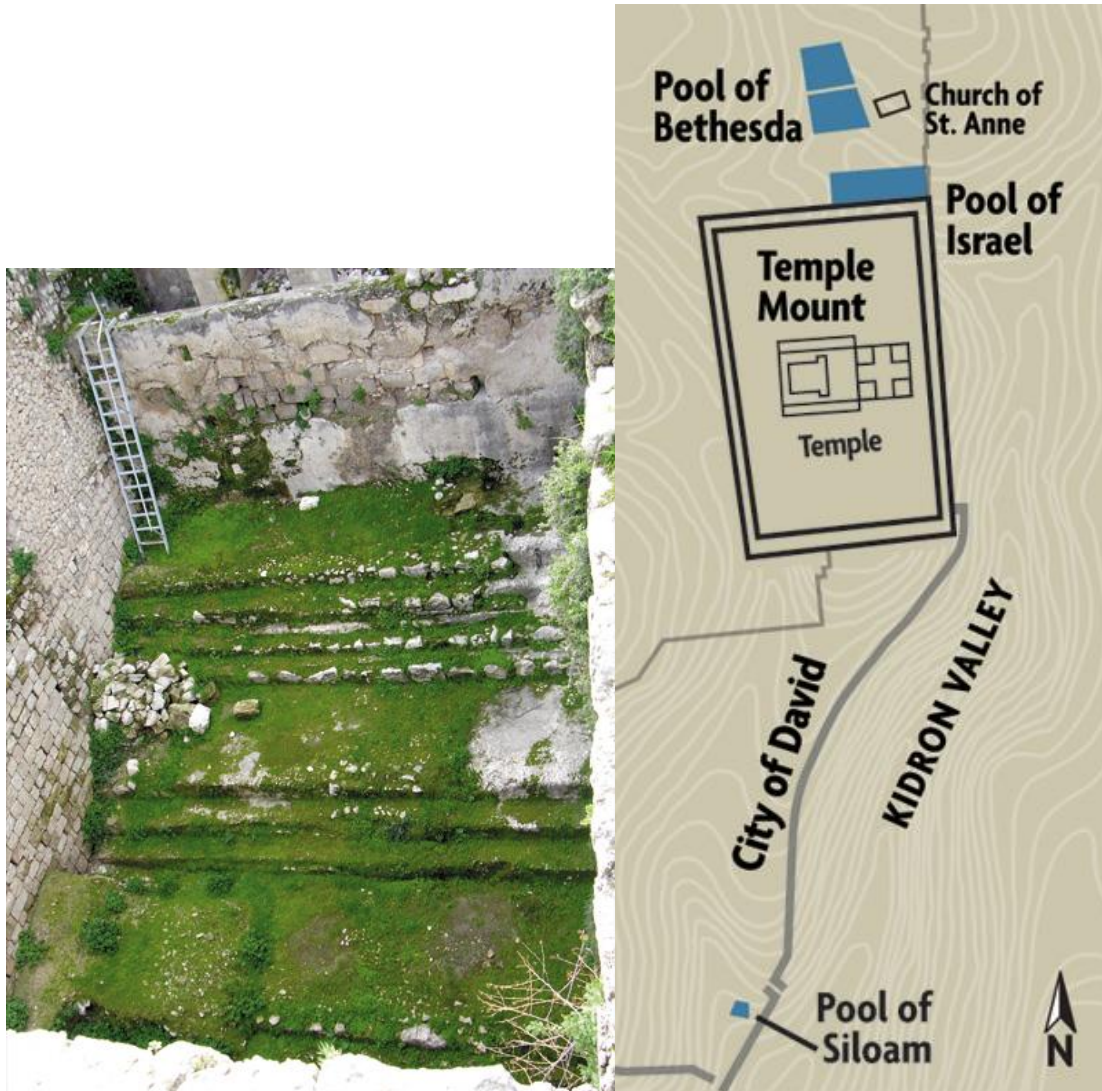
By [Urban C. von Wahlde](#)



The Gospel of John recounts two healing miracles Jesus performed in Jerusalem. In one, Jesus cured a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus mixed his saliva with mud, applied the mixture to the blind man's eyes and told him to bathe in the Pool of Siloam. When the man did so, he was healed ([John 9:6–7](#)).

In the other, Jesus cured a crippled man lying on a mat who had been unable to walk for 38 years. This occurred at another Jerusalem pool, the Pool of Bethesda (or Bethzatha or Bethsaida, according to various manuscripts), where invalids—blind, lame and paralyzed—would gather in the porticoes. According to some ancient manuscripts,¹ an angel would stir up the waters of the

pool and whoever would enter the water first would be cured. The canonical text goes on to say that by the time the crippled man got to the pool, as he recounts to Jesus, “Someone else steps down ahead of me.” So the crippled man cannot get to the curative waters in time. But Jesus simply declares to the man, “Stand up, take up your mat, and walk.” The text goes on: “And at once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” ([John 5:2–9](#)).

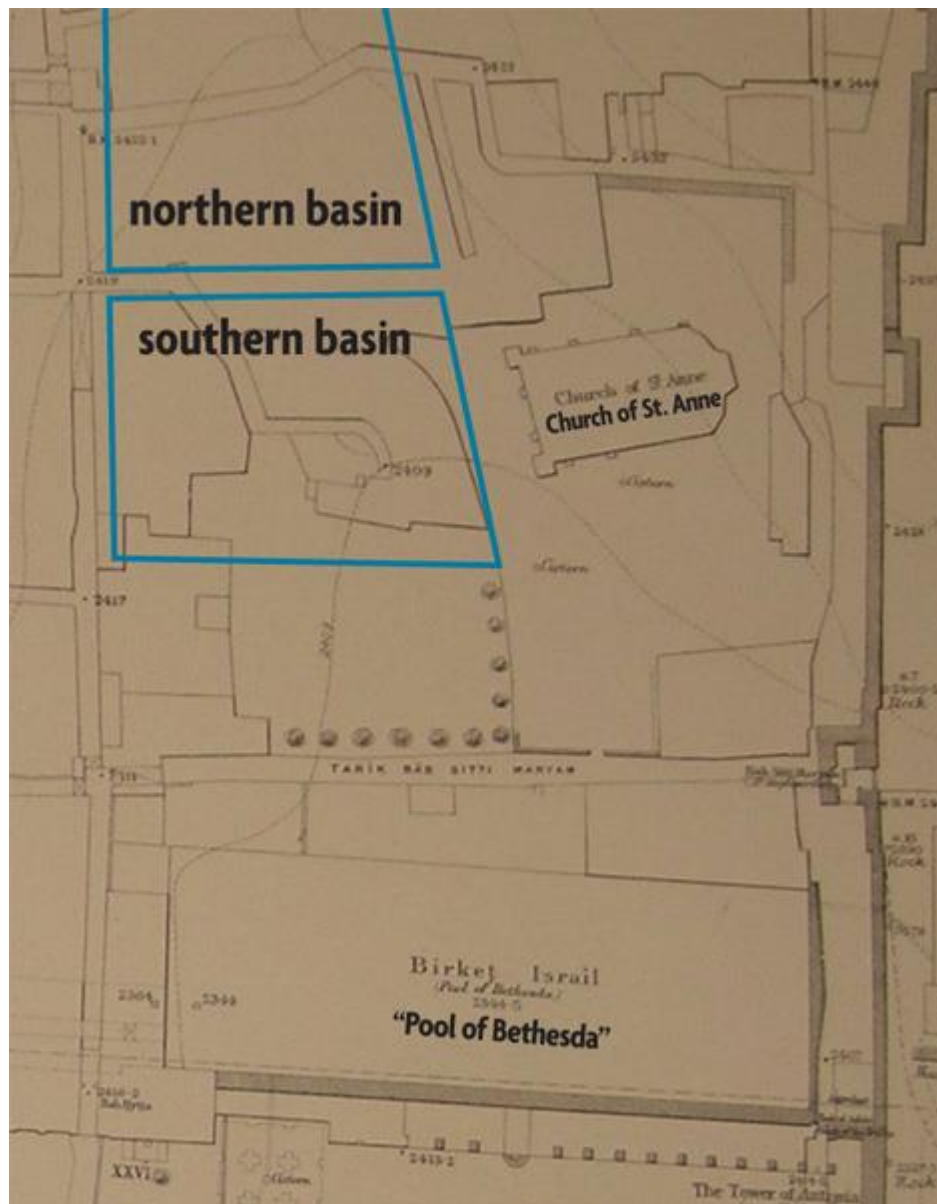


The Pool of Siloam, where Jesus cured the blind man, has recently been discovered and partially excavated by Israeli archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron.^a Reich, a foremost authority on Jewish ritual baths (*mikva'ot*, singular *mikveh*), identifies the newly discovered Pool of Siloam as a large public *mikveh*.

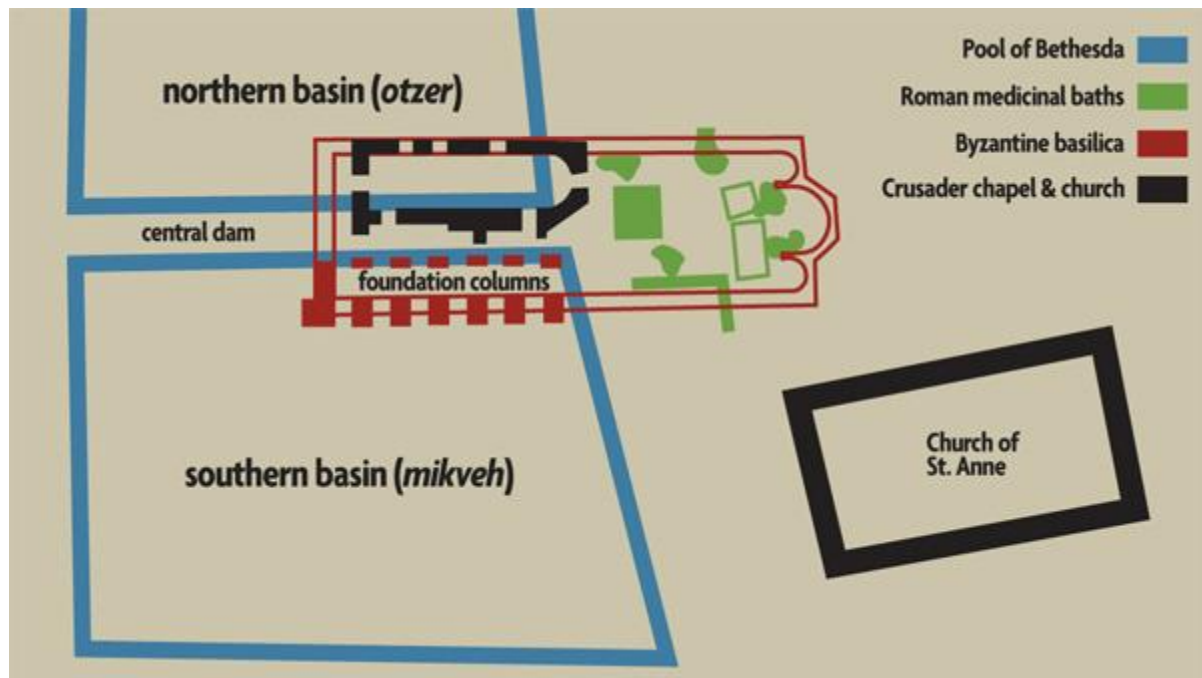


His views also have relevance for understanding the Pool of Bethesda, as we shall see. But the Pool of Bethesda is a much more complicated site archaeologically. Is it, too, a *mikveh*? And, if so, what does this tell us about Jerusalem in Jesus' time?

As late as Charles Warren's famous survey of Jerusalem in the 1860s, the ancient Pool of Bethesda was identified not as the one that goes by this name today, but rather as the Birket Bani Isra'il (Arabic for "The Pool of the Children of Israel"), which lies about 100 yards south of the one currently identified as the Pool of Bethesda.²



In [John 5:2](#) the Pool of Bethesda is described as having five porticoes or colonnades. For centuries, scholars thought that the notion of a five-sided pool was purely symbolic, intended to represent the five books of the Torah that were somehow superseded by the miracle of Jesus. Beginning in the 1880s, however, archaeologists discovered the remains of a pool north of the Pool of Israel, and continuing excavation ultimately exposed a rectangular pool with a wall in the middle that divided it in two. With porticoes on the four sides of the pool and on the central wall, this was indeed a “five-sided” pool.



It is not an easy archaeological site to see—or, more precisely, to understand. Because of its importance to the early Christian church, a Byzantine basilica was built over the eastern end of the pool, with great foundation columns extending to the bottom of the pool. Later a Crusader

chapel was built on the central wall, somewhat to the north but overlapping the remains of the Byzantine structure. In addition, directly to the east of the pools are a number of pagan baths, dedicated to the Roman god Asclepius, the god of healing. Finally, a magnificent Crusader church, still in use today, was built slightly southeast of the pool.



All this is further complicated by the fact that only half of the southern pool has been excavated. Houses on three sides (all but the east) have made it difficult, if not impossible, to extend the excavations.

There is also another problem. The area surrounding the site was given to France in 1856 by the Ottoman rulers in gratitude for France's aid during the Crimean War. However, since the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel has claimed control of the site and will not allow French archaeologists to work there.

Tucked away in a quiet, peaceful setting off the traditional Via Dolorosa, near St. Stephen's Gate in the Old City, the site is administered by the Missionaries of Africa (known as the "White Fathers" because of their religious dress), a Catholic religious congregation. A visit to the site makes it subtly clear that the White Fathers are more interested in spiritual things than in archaeology. The archaeological site that sits at the rear of the property is nevertheless quite remarkable.

An earlier study of the pools described them as two large pools, both intended as reservoirs.³ Recent research and archaeological discoveries, however, strongly indicate that this is incorrect.

As archaeologist Shimon Gibson has recently argued, during the late Second Temple period, from about the mid-second century B.C. to 70 A.D., when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, it was a *mikveh*, a Jewish ritual purity bath.⁴ However, before that, the northern pool was probably a reservoir, a conclusion I reach simply because it is difficult to believe that a valley as deep as the Bethesda Valley would not have been used to capture and store water much earlier in Israelite history than the second century B.C.

The first clue that what we see today is a *mikveh* is that steps in the southern pool extend across its entire width. Such steps allowed large numbers of individuals to undergo ritual bathing at the same time. Wide steps like those at Bethesda never occur in reservoirs since they considerably diminish the capacity of the pool.

Although the western end of the pool has been disturbed by construction of a wall from a later period, it is nevertheless clear that the steps continued beyond this wall.

Another clear indication that the southern pool is a *mikveh* is that the steps are interspersed with landings. Three sets of steps and landings lead down to the bottom of the pool. After an initial landing, there are four steps, followed by another landing and three steps, then a landing and a final two steps leading onto the floor of the pool. The landings (simply broader steps) allow a person room to stand comfortably while immersing. As the water level within the pool gradually dropped from time to time, the bathers would descend farther to immerse themselves.

The wall that divides the pool in half in effect creates two pools and provides the wall for the fifth portico referred to in the Gospel of John. This wall is actually a dam. It is set on bedrock and built without mortar. Each course is set back approximately an inch from the one below it. A chimney (a vertical opening) was built into the dam, with an entrance on the top of the dam. On both interior sides of the chimney (east and west), blocks protrude to form a kind of ladder

allowing ascent and descent inside the chimney. At the bottom of the dam, a large “doorway” permits water from the northern pool to enter into the southern pool. Finally, a channel leads out from the base of the chimney underneath the southern pool.⁵





Ritual bathing occurred only in the southern pool. The northern pool functioned as an *otzer*, a kind of reserve pool (literally, “storehouse”) of the *mikveh*. According to Jewish law (*halakhah*), the water in a *mikveh* must be “water given by the hand of God,” as opposed to “drawn water.” The former is water that flows into the *mikveh* directly from a natural source, such as rain or a stream. Impure or drawn water, however, can be purified by *contact* with the pure water, that is, the naturally collected water. Even if the *mikveh* became impure, it could be purified by *contact* with the naturally collected water of the *otzer*.⁶

The Pool of Bethesda is a large public *mikveh*. Because it was used by so many people, the level of the water in the southern pool would gradually diminish. The northern pool would be used to resupply the water of the southern pool; it would also assure the purity of the southern pool by contact with the pure water of the northern pool. The various means for permitting contact of this pure water from the northern pool (the *otzer*) at various levels of water in the southern pool assured the purity of the water in the southern pool.

This identification of the northern pool as the *otzer* of the southern pool further demonstrates that what we have here is a *mikveh* and not simply a reservoir, despite what the older explanation provided at the site suggests.

The historical context is also right for a *mikveh*: As the Tosefta says, referring to this period, “Purity broke out in Israel.”⁷ In the second century B.C., continuous ritual purity, which had previously been prescribed only for the priests, was deemed important for all Jews. All the people of Israel were to keep to a state of purity all the time, especially within the city of

Jerusalem. Not only the Temple Mount but all of Jerusalem was considered holy and to be honored with ritual purity.

Another sizable *mikveh*, although smaller than those at Siloam and Bethesda, was discovered by Benjamin Mazar just south of the Temple Mount. This one may have been reserved for use by Temple priests. In Jerusalem, small *mikva'ot* were also often located in private residences. However, during the three great pilgrimage festivals (*Pesach* or Passover, *Sukkot* or Tabernacles, and *Shavuot* or Weeks), larger *mikva'ot* were needed to accommodate the crowds.



As noted earlier, the excavators of the large Pool of Siloam, where Jesus cured the blind man, have interpreted it as a public *mikveh* for the festival crowds. The same was true of the Pool of Bethesda. These are in fact the two largest *mikva'ot* in Jerusalem.

That both of these pools are mentioned only in the Gospel of John in the New Testament reflects John's intimate knowledge of Jerusalem. Jesus frequented sites such as Bethesda and Siloam because large numbers of people would be there. Both the blind man and the crippled man were hoping for healing. Jesus demonstrates his powers in both episodes, at the Pool of Bethesda simply by saying so. Bathing in the pool was unnecessary. His word was sufficient.