

John 5:1-15. The Healing at the Pool

Introduction

This miraculous sign is so presented by John as to expose a startling reality. The hostility of the Jews to what Jesus does reveals that they themselves have a perverted view of God's power and how it operates which approximates to the deplorable magical view of the paralytic.

In Context

There are two major sections in John's Gospel: Chapters 1-11 and Chapters 12-21. Chapters 1-11 are frequently termed "The Book of Signs" and Chapters 12-21 "The Book of Glory." The healing of the lame man by the pool is the third of seven miraculous signs set out in Chapters 1-11.

There is some difference of opinion about what constitutes the seven signs. The following listing is common:

1. Jesus changes water to wine (2:1-11)
2. Jesus heals the royal official's son (4:46-54)
3. Jesus heals the man by the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15)
4. Jesus feeds the 5000 (6:1-15)
5. Jesus walks on water (6:16-24)
6. Jesus heals the man born blind (9:1-41).
7. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

Girard, followed by Rae, does not include Jesus walking on water as one of the miraculous signs, and one argument for excluding this event is that unlike the others it was not a public act. In Girard's schema, the raising of Lazarus from the dead becomes the sixth sign and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus becomes the seventh sign.¹ This results in the following listing:

- 1 Jesus changes water to wine (2:1-11)
- 2 Jesus heals the royal official's son (4:46-54)
- 3 Jesus heals the man by the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15)
- 4 Jesus feeds the 5000 (6:1-15)
- 5 Jesus heals the man born blind (9:1-41).
- 6 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)
- 7 Jesus is crucified and rises from the dead (19:17-20:31)

As will become clear below there are strong points of correspondence between the third and fifth signs. Similarly, the second and sixth signs correspond, both being concerned with God's gift of life. The official's son is close to death and is given life and Lazarus is actually raised from the dead. The first and seventh signs correspond because of emphasis on Jesus' hour. Both signs point to the fact that Jesus' death is crucial to the giving of life.

Along very similar lines see O'Donnell's broad structure for the entire Gospel²:

- A - Narrative of Chap 1b to 4a - Jesus as Israel's defiled Bridegroom.
- B - Narrative of Chap 4b - Life to Royal Official's Son.
- C - Narrative of Chapter 5 - Sabbath Healing with weak belief.
- D - Narrative of Chap 6-8 - Jesus Nourishes His Family
- C' - Narrative of Chap 9 - Sabbath Healing with strong belief
- B' - Narrative of Chap 11 - Life to Lazarus.
- A' - Narrative of Chap 12-19 - Jesus as Israel's defiled King.

John makes it clear from the very last verse of this epistle that he has made a very careful and intentional selection in presenting these particular seven signs. The fact that he presents seven of them indicates that together these signs speak of completion, perfection. It is to be remembered that the Gospel begins with, "In the beginning was the Word...." Jesus is to be understood with reference to creation and John has evidently chosen to present seven signs as an allusion to the seven days of creation, carrying the fundamental implication that the signs concern new creation.³ As signs each of these events point beyond themselves and reveal a key aspect of Christ's identity. Faith is not a prerequisite for the performance of the sign, but each sign either leads to faith or involves a challenge to believe in Jesus or express commitment to him. In the case of the healing at the pool, Jesus heals the lame man without the man making any expression of faith or commitment to Jesus. But afterwards there is an implicit challenge issued to the man to express commitment for he is warned that dire consequences will follow if he does not stop sinning.

Each sign involves a revealing of who Jesus is that in some sense goes beyond the sign that has preceded it, the climax being the raising of Lazarus from the dead, foreshadowing Jesus' own resurrection. Together the signs underscore the reality that Jesus is the ultimate Source of Life in all its fullness.

The signs are also fundamentally eschatological. That is, they all form part of the build up toward Jesus' 'hour', the time when he is lifted up on the cross and his glory there revealed.

It is notable that none of these signs involves an exorcism, even though we know from the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus performed many exorcisms.

There are some strong points of correspondence between the third and sixth signs:

<i>The Healing of the Lame Man</i>	<i>The Healing of the Blind Man</i>
"The day on which this took place was the Sabbath" (5:9)	"Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath" (9:14)
Healed while lying near the pool of Bethesda	Healed after washing in the pool of Siloam
This man is a complete outsider, with no one to help him	This man has family and synagogue connections
This man has a magic view concerning the operation of God's power and the Jews similarly treat the miracle as if God's power can be wielded as an impersonal force, even contrary to God's will.	This man teaches the Jewish leaders that it is inconceivable that Jesus should perform such a great miracle independent of God's will.
Betrays Jesus after he is healed (5:15)	Believes in Jesus and worships him (9:38)
This man is only healed physically, not spiritually	The work of God is displayed in the life of this man (9:3), because he is healed and now sees not just physically, but spiritually as well
Jesus warns the man, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (5:14), indicating that judgment is pending.	Jesus speaks encouragingly to this man, revealing himself to him as the Son of Man, the one who brings judgment into the world (9:35-38)

Conclusion: seeing does not necessarily lead to believing. Rather believing leads to seeing.⁴

Don't miss John's skilful development of the water motif. The first sign involves the replacement of water used by Jews for ceremonial purification - the old order - with wine, symbolising the new order. Jesus introduces himself to the woman of Samaria as the source of living water. In the healing

of the man by the pool it is as though the water of the pool, useless to effect healing, are replaced by the source of living water. Jesus' walking on the water and the washing of the healed blind man in the pool of Siloam perpetuate the water motif, along with other material in the Gospel.

The Text (5:1-15)

We don't know which feast Jesus was attending and attempts to identify it are purely speculative. It is for the benefit of Gentile readers that John speaks of "a feast of the Jews." The implication may be that Jesus was a devout Jew who made it his standard practice to observe Jewish festivals in Jerusalem.

Another implication of this reference to the feast is brought out by the very nature of Jesus' visit to the Bethesda pool, namely that there were many Jews, such as these disabled persons, who were not able to participate in the feast.⁵ John tells us that there were "a great number of disabled people" lying near the pool. Modern archaeology may have uncovered the pool. A site has been unearthed which lay to the north of the Jerusalem temple. It was in fact as big as a football field and more than 20 feet deep. As Bruce says, it was "a virtual lake."⁶ On the sides of the pool stood four porticoes and a fifth ran across its middle, dividing the pool into two. It is likely that half was used by men and the other half by women.⁷ However, Duprez has proposed an alternative site.⁸ The bottom line is that we don't know for sure where this pool was exactly located or what it looked like.

There has been some speculation that this pool was a pagan sanctuary, a so-called *asclepion* (associated with the Roman cult of Asclepius) or *serapeum* (associated with the Roman cult of Serapis), but there is no solid evidence to back this up.⁹ John shows no interest in forging any such connections and so what becomes central to his story are competing views of how God's power works.

Feasts were communal events with people attending as households. By contrast, those lying by the pool are far from communal. Instead of helping each other, they compete with each other. The man targeted by Jesus is a case in point. He is isolated from all family connections and is in a situation where he cannot count on anyone to help him.

This incident is significant because in John's Gospel it is this healing miracle that triggers deep-seated hostility from "the Jews", those of Jesus' opponents who are convinced that by healing this man Jesus has violated the Sabbath. It seems certain that Jesus chose to do this miracle on the Sabbath so as to highlight the chasm between himself and his opponents.

It would also seem that Jesus has deliberately chosen to heal a man at this place in order to contrast the futility of seeking healing from this pool with the instant assured healing that he himself provides. The fact that the man Jesus chooses to heal has been an invalid for 38 years accentuates how hopeless his condition is.

Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to get well?" The word translated "well" in the NIV is *hugiēs*. It is sometimes rendered "whole." We are told what happened when Jesus told him to get up: "And immediately the man was made whole (*hugiēs*), and took up his bed, and walked..." (v9). When interrogated about doing this on the Sabbath he answered, "He who made me whole (*hugiēs*), said to me, 'Pick up your bed and walk' (v11). And, indeed, in verse 14, when Jesus finds this man at the temple, he says to him, 'See, you have been made whole (*hugiēs*) again...' Jesus refers back to this same miraculous sign at 7:23, "Why are you angry with me for making a man whole (*hugiēs*) on the Sabbath?"

From this we can see that Jesus' question simply concerns whether the man wants to experience physical healing. It is over-reading Jesus' question to think that Jesus is asking the man whether he wants to be 'whole' in a fuller sense, including spiritual wholeness. This does not seem to be involved in any of the other uses of this word in John's Gospel, which all concern this miraculous sign. The idea of 'wholeness' has to do with new creation, pointing backwards and forwards to the unblemished state of everything in God's perfect creation.¹⁰

Jesus' question seems to get to the heart of where this man is in his thinking. Consider his answer: "Sir I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." This indicates that the man has given up. Evidently, the common belief was that the first person to get into the water when it was stirred was the first person to benefit from the magical healing properties of the stirred water. 38 years, without anyone to help him, have taught this man that his prospects of ever experiencing healing are zilch. It would seem that he has resigned himself to his fate. His answer to Jesus' question suggests that he did not know who Jesus was and that he did not interpret the question to mean "Do you want me to heal you?" His answer is to the effect, "What does it matter whether I want to get well or not? It's never going to happen, anyway."

The lame man's answer reveals that he has a worldview which involves belief in magic.¹¹ Whatever agent he considered to be responsible for stirring the water he was clearly looking to an impersonal power to bring him healing and he saw that power "appropriated in a way that appears purely arbitrary – entering the water before the power was depleted."¹² It is ironic that after he has been healed he goes to the temple, the place where God dwelt among his people, the one place he should have gone to receive God's power to bring healing. It is further ironic, given the fundamental identification of Jesus' with God's temple in this Gospel (see 1:14; 2:21), that effectively the ultimate Temple had come to him to bring him healing.

This issue concerning a magical understanding of God's power is of immense importance to this narrative, as Bryan shows in his article on this passage. It is highly significant that the Jews do not question the fact that Jesus has appropriated God's power in effecting the healing of this paralytic. Their complaint is that he should do this on the Sabbath. But in holding this view they betray that, like the paralytic, they too have a grossly erroneous view as to how God operates. For they believe, in effect, that Jesus could wield God's power in a way that violated God's will. And this is to treat God's power as if it was an impersonal force, much like the paralytic himself. It is this fundamental error in their thinking which helps explain why notwithstanding the undeniable reality of Jesus' miraculous signs, culminating even in the raising of a man from the dead, they fail to believe, to see these miracles as an outworking of God's will.

In this context, therefore, Jesus' question has a decided edge: "Do you really want to be healed, because, if so, what in the world are you doing here, hoping for a magical cure instead of genuinely seeking God for healing?"

Jesus' question also invites the man to consider whether he would be ready for the new way of life that would be his if he were to be healed.¹³ The narrative which follows indicates that he was not in fact ready for this, given that he evidently seeks to ingratiate himself with the Jewish authorities ("the Jews") by deciding to tell them that it was Jesus who had healed him.¹⁴

Jesus' healing of the man, therefore, is totally sovereign. It does not presuppose that the man even wants to be healed. It certainly involves an immense contrast between the sovereign grace of Jesus'

healing and the false approaches to seeking wholeness which are characterised by foolish superstition and competitiveness.

Jesus' warning to the man is also intriguing. Jesus tells him, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." It is agreed by commentators that there is no implication whatsoever that this man's paralysis was due to his own sin (cf. 9:1-3). "Stop sinning" is a present imperative and can be taken as implying "that the man must stop doing something that he is currently doing." But, if so, the question arises as to what the man was doing that was adjudged by Jesus to be sinful. As Bryan recognises,

"In John's Gospel 'sin' is closely associated with the unwillingness to believe that Jesus is the one in whom God is revealed and through whom God's power works (e.g. 8:23; 16:9). In 15:24, the essence of sin is to see the power of God at work through Jesus and yet refuse to acknowledge that power as evidence of the self-revealing action of God in Jesus. The admonition to 'stop sinning' must thus be understood as an admonition to cease regarding God's power as operating in impersonal independence from the working of God. Apart from an acknowledgement of the self-revealing God directly working in Jesus, the healed man could only expect 'something worse' than his thirty-eight year infirmity – the prospect of final judgment. The fact that the man immediately goes and reports Jesus' identity to the Jews indicates not only that his views of God's power remain unchanged but ties those views to the Jews and their subsequent persecution of Jesus."¹⁵

References

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¹ Murray Rae, 'The Testimony of Works in the Christology of John's Gospel' in Richard Bauckham & Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2008) 303-306.

² Hugh O'Donnell, "The Great Inverted Parallel Structure (Chiasm) of John's Gospel." <http://village.hcc-nd.edu/hodonnell/JohnBTB.htm> Viewed 22/6/17.

³ Rae, 303-306.

⁴ See Ben Witherington, "The Seven Signs in the Gospel of John." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErefQks4eAM> Heard 22/6/17.

⁵ Patricia Bruce, "John 5:1-18. The Healing at the Pool" in *Neotestamentica* 39/1 (2005) 44.

⁶ Op. cit., 45.

⁷ Bruce, 45.

⁸ Steven M. Bryan, "Power in the Pool: The Healing of the Man at Bethesda and Jesus' Violation of the Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-18)" in *Tyndale Bulletin* 54/2 (2003) 13.

⁹ See Bryan, 12-14.

¹⁰ See Bruce, 47.

¹¹ Bryan, 9.

¹² Bryan, 9.

¹³ Bruce, 47.

¹⁴ Not all see this man as a traitor, e.g. see Bruce, 49.

¹⁵ Op. cit., 17.