

THE SILOAM POOL

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.

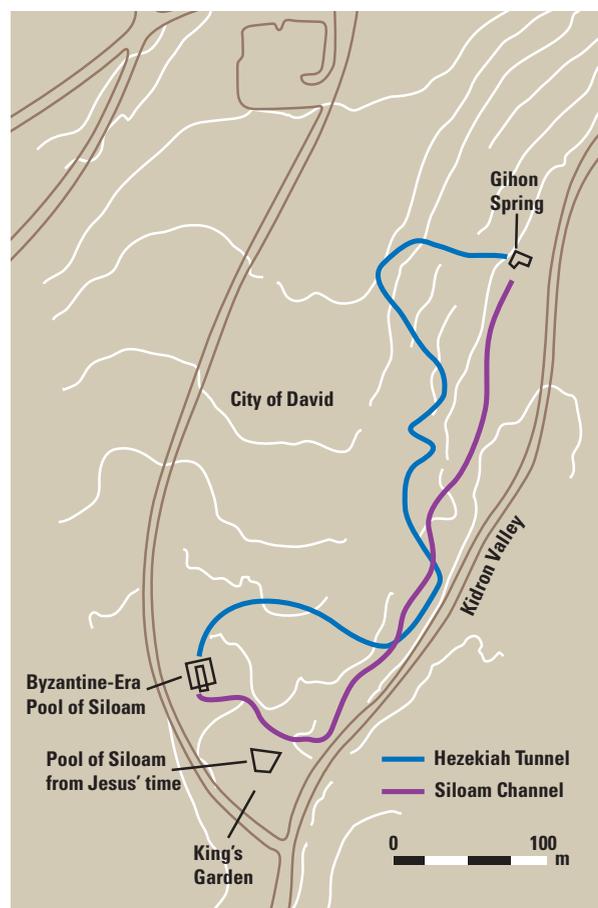
Hezekiah, the Judahite king at that time, could see the Assyrian siege coming. Protective steps were clearly called for, especially to protect Jerusalem's water supply. The only source of fresh water at this

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Where Jesus Cured the Blind Man

HERSHEL SHANKS





PRECEDING PAGES: While watching municipal workers replace a sewer pipe in the City of David, south of Jerusalem's Temple Mount, archaeologist Eli Shukron noticed that the construction equipment had revealed two ancient steps. Shukron quickly notified his colleague Ronny Reich, who identified the steps as part of the Pool of Siloam from the late Second Temple Period (first century B.C.-first century A.D.), as further excavations soon confirmed. It was at the Pool of Siloam, according to the Gospel of John, that Jesus cured the blind man (John 9:1-11). The newly discovered pool is adjacent to an area referred to as the King's Garden and is just southeast of what had long been called the Pool of Siloam (see plan above). The other pool, however, does not date to Jesus' time but to the fourth century (a photo of this later Pool of Siloam appears on p. 22).

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 tell 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



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THREE SETS OF STAIRS (above), each with five steps, have been uncovered at the New Testament-era Pool of Siloam. The excavators have exposed an area 225 feet long on one side of the pool and have reached both corners of that side (one corner is shown at right). The corners are somewhat greater than 90 degrees, indicating that the pool was not a square but a trapezoid.

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



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RONNY REICH was the first to identify the steps as part of the Pool of Siloam from the time of Jesus. Now the leading archaeologist specializing in Jerusalem, Reich worked with the late Nahman Avigad in the Old City's Jewish Quarter and has also dug at the western wall of the Temple Mount. His excavations at the Gihon Spring have revolutionized our understanding of the city's ancient water supply system.

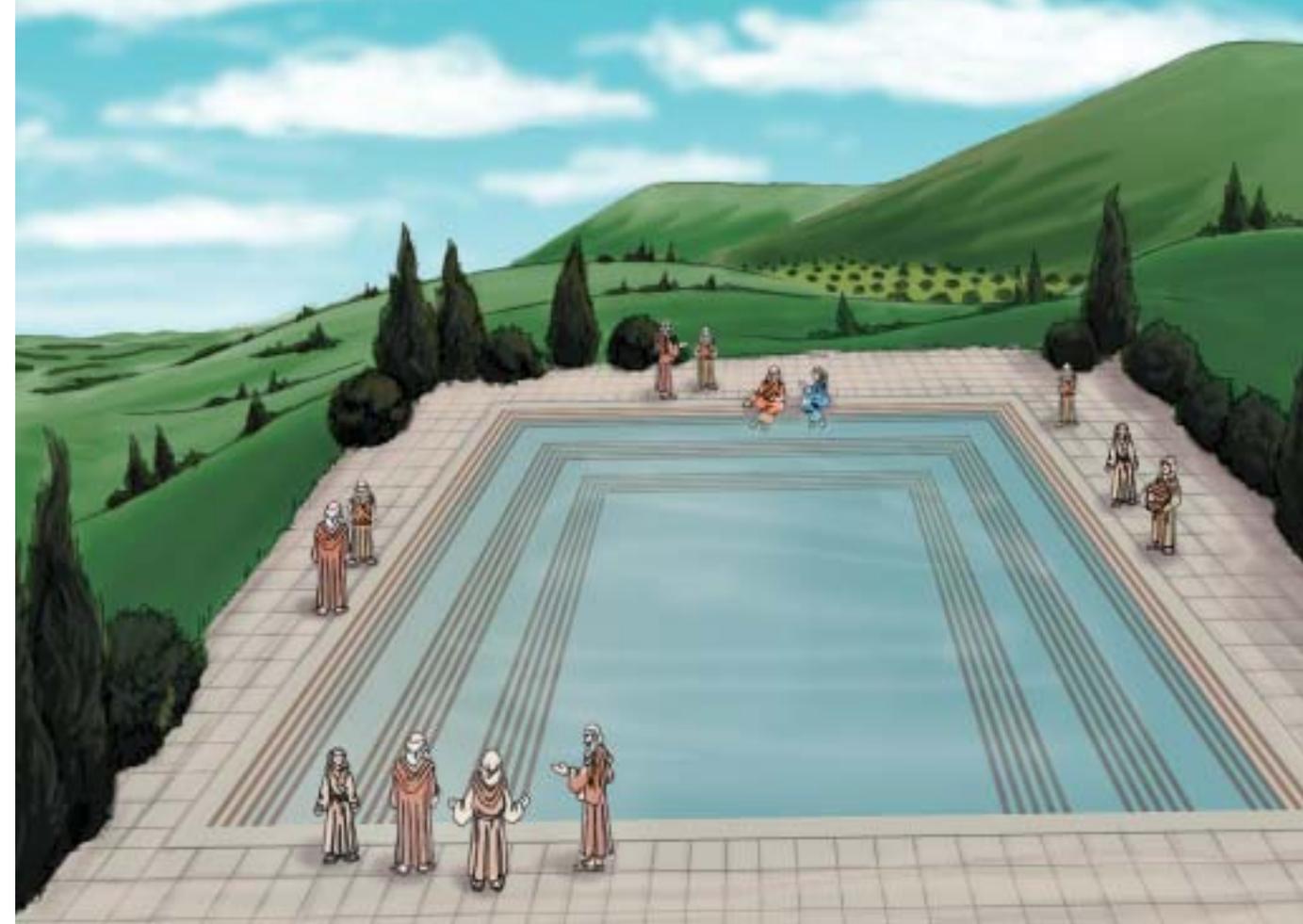
level (so far). The size of the pool itself would vary, depending on the level of the water. When it was full, it probably covered all of the steps. The landings served as a kind of esplanade for people to stand on when the steps were submerged in water.

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 to see that in the first phase the steps were



JASON CLARKE

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 SILOAM POOL as it might have looked during the New Testament era is shown here in an artist's rendition. Bathers would have enjoyed a view of the Kidron Valley, just east of the City of David. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus cures the blind man, he tells him, "Go to Siloam and wash" (John 9:11). The pool probably served as a *miqveh*, a Jewish ritual bath.

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 (Pentecost, or Shavuoth) and Tabernacles (Succoth). They may well have camped in the adjacent Kidron Valley and been supplied with drinking and cooking water from

JESUS CURES THE BLIND MAN (JOHN 9:1-11)



ARALDO DE LUCA/CORBIS

AS HE WALKED ALONG, HE SAW A MAN BLIND

from birth.² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud on the man's eyes,⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"⁹ Some were saying "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."



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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 WOMAN KNEELS to do her laundry (photo at left) in what had long been known as the Pool of Siloam. Byzantine-era Christians assumed this pool was the Biblical Siloam and built a church here; this pool was a popular destination for pilgrims and was the subject of a 19th-century illustration by W.H. Bartlett (below). Thanks to the recent discovery, we now know that the Biblical Pool of Siloam was just southeast of this site.



HOW HISTORICAL IS THE GOSPEL OF JOHN?

THE GOSPELS, THE FIRST four books of the New Testament, tell the story of the life of Jesus. Yet only one—the Gospel of John—claims to be an eyewitness account, the testimony of the unnamed “disciple whom Jesus loved.” (“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” [John 21:24]). Matthew, Mark and Luke are so alike in their telling that they are called the Synoptic Gospels, meaning, “seen together”—the parallels are clear when they are looked at side by side. Matthew and Luke follow the version of events in Mark, which is thought by scholars to be the earliest and most historically accurate Gospel. John, however, does not include the same incidents or chronology found in the other three Gospels, and the fact that it is so different has spurred a debate over whether John's Gospel is historical or not.

Several hypotheses have attempted to explain why so much of Jesus' life not portrayed in the Synoptics is present in John and vice versa. One hypothesis claims that John recorded many of the events that occurred before the arrest of John the Baptist, while the Synoptics all have Jesus' ministry beginning only after the arrest. Another holds that John was written last,

by someone who knew about the other three Gospels but who wished to write a spiritual gospel instead of an historical one. There is also the possibility that the author of John did not know of Mark and hence did not have the same information.

One of the facts in dispute among the four Gospels is the length of Jesus' ministry. According to the Synoptics, it lasted only about a year, while John has Jesus ministering between two and three years. The Jesus of John's telling also knew Jerusalem well and had traveled there three or four times. The Synoptics, however, have Jesus visit Jerusalem only once. In John, Jesus had friends near Jerusalem, including Mary, Martha and Lazarus of the town of Bethany, which is just outside of the city on the east slope of the Mount of Olives.

The author of John also knew Jerusalem well, as is evident from the geographic and place name information throughout the book. He mentions, among others, the Sheep Gate Pool (Bethesda), the Siloam Pool and Jacob's Well. The geographic specificity lends credence to the John's account.

Another aspect of John that may be more historically accurate than the Synoptics is the account of the crucifixion and the events that led up to it. The Synoptics say that Jesus' Last Supper was the Passover

meal—held that year on a Thursday evening (Jewish holidays begin at sunset)—and they would have us believe that the Sanhedrin, the high court, gathered at the beginning of a major holiday to interrogate Jesus and hand him over to the Romans. John, in contrast, has Jesus handed over for crucifixion on “the day of Preparation of Passover week, about the sixth hour.” According to John, the Last Supper is not a Passover meal (because the holiday that year did not start until Friday evening), and Jesus is crucified and buried before Passover begins. In John's account Jesus becomes the Passover sacrificial lamb, which was offered the afternoon before the Passover holiday. Some scholars suggest that John may be more historical regarding the crucifixion than the other three Gospels.

Given John's familiarity with Jerusalem and its environs, it is very possible that he had visited the Pool of Siloam, which he mentions in connection with the story of the curing of the blind man (a story that appears only in John's Gospel). It is that pool that has only recently been uncovered, as described in the accompanying article.

For more on the question of John's historical reliability, see D. Moody Smith, *John: Historian or Theologian?*, Bible Review, October 2004.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS

TWO GROUPS OF COINS helped date the newly discovered Pool of Siloam. Four coins, embedded in the pool's plastered steps, date to the rule of the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.), while a dozen coins (including the one shown here) found in one corner of the pool date to the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66-70 A.D.).

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. 