

# 49 Bethesda

## Names (also known as)

Asclepieion (healing baths associated with a Roman god).

## Etymology

Name formed from two Hebrew words – *bayith* meaning house, and *chesed* meaning kindness or mercy. It was known as the house of mercy and thought by many to have healing waters.

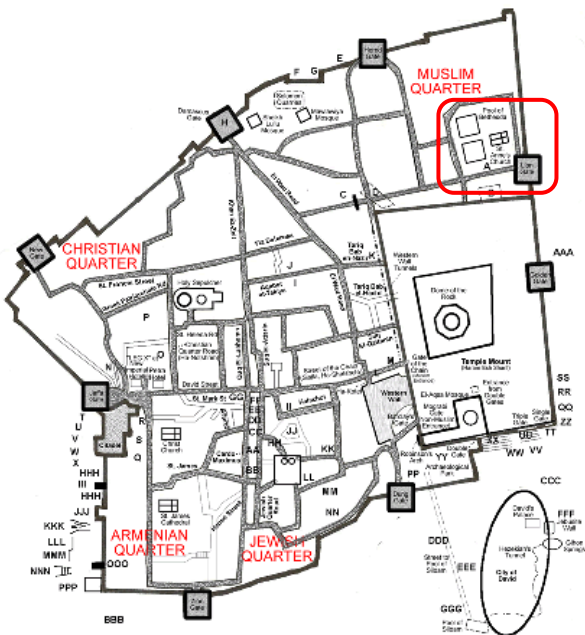
## Location/Description

The pool of Bethesda is located in the Muslim quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, north of the temple mount and 50 metres inside St. Stephen's or the Lion's gate. In Christ's time this gate was called the sheep gate, and was the place where animals were brought to the temple for sacrifice.



## Brief history

The pool at Bethesda was actually two large water reservoirs built to supply water for the temple. The first was built for Solomon's temple by constructing a large dam that collected and stored rain water. There are 3 references to an upper pool in the OT that may refer to this very pool (2 Kings 18:17; Isa. 7:3, 36:2). The second pool was added around 200 BC to the south of the dam. When the Roman's appeared on the scene they converted two nearby natural caves into healing baths, one dedicated to Asclepius the god of healing, and one to Fortuna the god of good fortune. The Byzantine empress Eudocia had a church erected over the area calling it the "church of Mary where she was born". After that church was destroyed by the Persians another was built over it by the crusaders called the church of the Paralytic. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ottomans in an act of gratitude offered Queen Victoria the choice between Bethesda or Cyprus. Even though the Anglican church lobbied for Bethesda, Queen Victoria chose her island getaway and Bethesda was subsequently given to the French who own it still today. They erected a 3<sup>rd</sup> church on the site over the other two and called it the church of St. Anne, dedicated to Mary's mother.



## Scriptural references

### New Testament

John 5:2 – Details the story of a man lame for 38 years whom Jesus healed and told to take up his bed and walk.

## Famous characters

Jesus Christ

The man with an infirmity 38 years

## The Third Sign of John's Gospel

The miracle of the lame man by Christ showed all of the city who truly had the power to heal. Traditionally many people would gather at these waters hoping to be healed by Asclepius. The impotent man had been hoping for a miracle for 38 years. Christ showed them that only one power could bring about healing, the power of God which will in the future bring about the healing of all nations and all creation.

But there was something much more significant couched in this miracle for Christ's own people.

There are 8 signs in John's Gospel. The first sign (John 2:1-11) concerns the development of Christ's spiritual family as he begins his ministry and leaves his natural family behind. The second sign (John 4:46-54) emphasises the need for faith in the word of God. The nobleman is sent away with a promise, but not the physical presence of the healer. It was this faith that was lacking in Israel, as it had been in the wilderness under Moses.

The third sign illustrates the consequences of a lack of faith throughout the history of Israel. The impotent man is a microcosm of the whole race. They were spiritually lame and impotent to save themselves like the wilderness generation who wandered aimlessly for 38 years after the condemnation of all over 20 years of age (Num. 14). There is the clue to this sign – a cripple for 38 years with no one to assist him at the mythical “moving of the waters” is a classic type of Israel reaching the Jordan after 38 years of helpless wandering. They too were waiting for the moving of the waters of Jordan (Josh. 4) so they could enter at last the land promised to the fathers.

The Scripture is always precise and never adds any detail without purpose. Why do we want to know that the Pool of Bethesda had 5 porches (John 5:2)? That seemingly irrelevant architectural detail is another important clue to this sign. As noted above, the two Hebrew words *bayith* and *chesed* form the name Bethesda. *Chesed* is the word chosen by Yahweh to best represent the merciful and compassionate qualities of His character (Ex. 34:6) towards His people. The number 5 is the Biblical number for grace. Hence, here in the “house of mercy”, the Son of God demonstrates that the covenant's of his Father are sure and certain. Israel will be redeemed in due time, but they like the impotent man need one essential quality – a willingness to be healed. ““Do you want to be healed?” John 5:6 RSV).

Far too many in Christ's day were unwilling to be healed. We need to have the spirit of willingness to be healed, and faith that it is possible, but must recognise that the healing will only come on ‘the Sabbath day’ (for us, the beginning of the Millennium), as it did for the impotent man on a Sabbath day (John 5:9).

## Sources:

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(Compilers – Dan Leadbetter/Jim Cowie)