

Biblical Pool of Siloam uncovered in Jerusalem

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By Thomas H. Maugh II, Los Angeles Times

Workers repairing a sewage pipe in the old city of Jerusalem have discovered the biblical Pool of Siloam, a freshwater reservoir that was a major gathering place for ancient Jews making religious pilgrimages to the city and the reputed site where Jesus cured a man blind from birth, according to the Gospel of John.

The pool was fed by the now-famous Hezekiah's Tunnel and is "a much grander affair" than archaeologists previously believed, with three tiers of stone stairs allowing easy access to the water, according to Hershel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archeology Review, which reported the find yesterday.

"Scholars have said that there wasn't a Pool of Siloam and that John was using a religious conceit" to illustrate a point, said New Testament scholar James H. Charlesworth of the Princeton Theological Seminary. "Now, we have found the Pool of Siloam ... exactly where John said it was." A Gospel that was thought to be "pure theology is now shown to be grounded in history," he said.

The discovery puts a new spotlight on what is called the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a trip that religious law required ancient Jews to make at least once a year, said archaeologist Ronny Reich of the University of Haifa, who excavated the pool.

"Jesus was just another pilgrim coming to Jerusalem," he said. "It would be natural to find him there."

The newly discovered pool is less than 200 yards from another Pool of Siloam, this one a reconstruction built between A.D. 400 and 460 by the empress Eudocia of Byzantium, who oversaw the rebuilding of several biblical sites.

The site of yet another Pool of Siloam, which pre-dated the version visited by Jesus, is still unknown.

That first pool was constructed in the eighth century B.C. by the Judean King Hezekiah, who foresaw the likelihood that the Assyrians would lay siege to Jerusalem and knew that a safe water supply would be required to survive it.

He ordered workers to build a 1,750-foot-long tunnel under the ridge where the City of David was located. The tunnel connected Gihon Spring in the adjacent Kidron Valley to the side of Jerusalem less vulnerable to an attack.

The first Pool of Siloam was the reservoir holding the water brought into the city. It presumably was destroyed in 586 B.C., when Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar razed the city.

The pool of Jesus' time was built early in the first century B.C. and was destroyed by the future Roman emperor Titus about A.D. 70. The pool was discovered last fall by a repair team, supervised by Eli Shukron of the Israel Antiques Authority, that was excavating a damaged sewer line.

As soon as Shukron saw two steps uncovered, he stopped the work and called in Reich, who was excavating at the Gihon spring. When they saw the steps, Shukron said, "We were 100 percent sure it was the Siloam Pool."

With winter approaching rapidly, the two men had to hurry their excavation, so the sewer could be repaired before the rainy season.

As they began digging, they uncovered three groups of five stairs each, separated by narrow landings. The pool was about 225 feet long, and they unearthed steps on three sides.

They do not yet know how wide and how deep the pool was because they have not finished the excavation. The fourth side lies under a lush garden -- filled with figs, pomegranates, cabbages and other fruits -- behind a Greek Orthodox Church, and the team has not yet received permission to cut a trench through the garden.

"We need to know how big it is," Charlesworth said. "This may be the most significant and largest 'mikvah' [ritual bath] ever found."