

John 5:2–9—Healing at Beth-zatha

John 5:2–9 describes the miraculous healing of a man at a pool that is variously called Bethesda (KJV) or Beth-za´tha (RSV) or Beth-zatha (NRSV).

Although there are some text-critical issues regarding which parts of the story were in the original Gospel manuscripts, the versions that became best known throughout church history tell of a marvelous pool in Jerusalem where an angel would periodically stir up the water in order to give it healing power:

Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches.

In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.

For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?

The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me in the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me.

Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.

And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath. (John 5:2–9 KJV)

“Wade in the Waters”: The reference in this story to the water being “troubled” (i.e., “stirred up”) would inspire one of the most famous Spirituals in the canon of American music:

Wade in the water . . .
Wade in the water, children . . .
Wade in the water . . .
God’s a-going to trouble the water.

Although the refrain of the song derives from the story in John, the verses relate the concept of “healing waters” to the story of the exodus (Exod. 14:19–29) and to the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11).

William Wordsworth (1780–1850): The English Romantic poet would compare the pool to the human heart:

Words that can soothe, more than they agitate;
Whose spirit, like the angel that went down
Into Bethesda’s pool, with healing virtue
Informs the fountain in the human breast
Which by the visitation was disturbed.

“Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone,” lines 124–28

Herman Melville (1819–91): The American writer best known for his novel *Moby Dick* compared the beggars around the docks at Liverpool to the sick who surrounded the healing pool in John’s Gospel. In his novel *Redburn*, the title character prays that “some angel might descend, and turn the waters of the docks into an elixir, that would heal all their woes, and make them, man and woman, healthy and whole as their ancestors, Adam and Eve, in the garden” (chapter 38).

Stephen King (1947–): The popular American author best known for horror-fiction created another dimension in his 2006 novel *Lisey’s Story* in which there is a body of water that will heal all injuries and diseases. Those possessed of a special gift or of secret knowledge can will themselves into this dimension and bathe in the healing waters—but there are rules, and things do not go well for those who break them!

Other authors have developed the imagery of John 5:2–9 in a more despairing tone.

Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) laments the angel’s delay:

Thousands lie round the pool,
weeping and despairing,
to see it, through slow years, stagnant.
Long are the times of Heaven:
the orbits of angel messengers

seem long to mortal vision.

Villete, chapter 17

African American poet **Arna Bontemps** (1902–73) sees delayed healing as a metaphor for the unfulfilled promise of racial equality:

The pool that once the angels troubled does not move.

No angel stirs it now, no Savior comes

with healing in His hands to raise the sick

And bid the lame man leap upon the ground.

“Nocturne at Bethesda,” lines 6–9