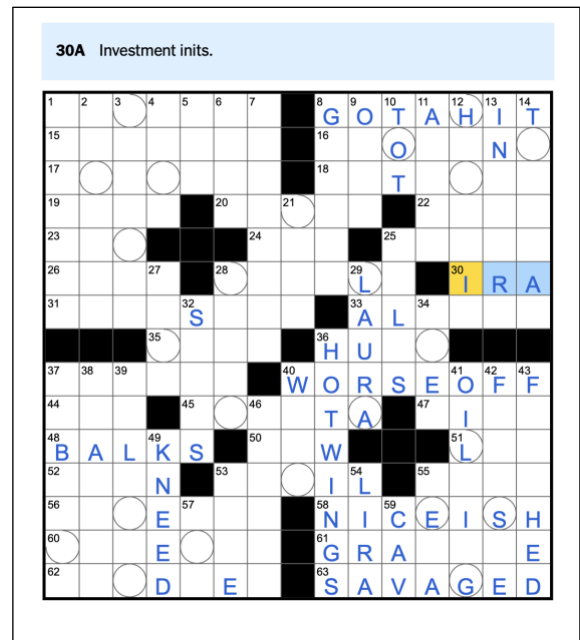


Reading the Old Testament Through John Jesus, God, and the Law John 5

Have you ever worked The New York Times crossword puzzles? If you come across one and just look at it, you might get a clue or two and find some level of success filling it in. Something happens, however, when you work them over and over. You learn certain unwritten rules. So, for example, if a clue has an abbreviation in it, you know the answer will be an abbreviation. In the example to the right, 31 across has the clue: “Investment inits.” An unwritten rule is that if there is an abbreviation in the clue, there is an abbreviation in the answer. (Here it is “IRA,” the abbreviation for “Individual Retirement Account.”)

Often you are able to almost get into the mind of the composer. Many of the clues aren’t what you might think. The partially completed puzzle on the right, for example, gave the clue for 10 down as “squirt.” While one might think of a juicy piece of fruit, the composer was looking for a nicknamish expression for a young’un! In other words, the “tot” was what was meant by “squirt.”

I find working a crossword puzzle an important metaphor for understanding some aspects of Biblical texts. The crossword puzzle way of thinking comes into play especially today, as I examine more carefully John 5.



Working carefully through the Gospel of John, parsing through the Greek text as well as the Old Testament allusions replete in the gospel, brings me to some different conclusions than some of the notable and well-authored commentaries in print. One must be careful to ever suggest renderings beyond those of incredible scholars, but such is the liberty I afford myself, albeit with trepidation.¹

Consider in this sense, John’s account of Jesus healing the paralytic detailed in John 5:1-9. Here is the text:

¹ One drawback of many commentaries, even many good commentaries is a result of how many are written. One peruses what others have said, and one gets into seeing through the eyes of others and sometimes the feel for the original author can get a bit lost.

After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

John includes some details that many have decided are simply “markers” that serve no importance in the message of John, but are just passing historical facts. For example, the “feast” John references isn’t specified. Was it Passover? Hanukah? Sukkot (The Festival of Booths)? Rosh ha-Shanah (Jewish New Year)? John doesn’t tell his readers. So maybe there is no significance to the comment, “After this there was a feast of the Jews...” But the feel I get from working through John since first translating his Greek in the late 1970’s is different. I find that over and over, John inserts such details on purpose. The details aren’t typically just “markers.” John seems to have a greater purpose for what he says.

I think one appropriately asks, “What is the significance to the fact that Jesus went up for a feast, as opposed to simply a visit?” Further to my concern is the way John treats the other feasts in his gospel. John frequently ties the movements and stories of Jesus to one feast or another, but each time the fact that the feast is mentioned gives a greater depth to the passage. Consider:

- In John 2:13ff where Jesus spoke of the temple as his body, it is tied to the Passover. The Passover was the feast that celebrated God taking Israel from the Egyptian slavery. The key to the angel of death “passing over” the Israelites and securing their deliverance to the Promised Land was the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. Further deepening the significance of the events at Passover is that the Passover brought Israel to Sinai. There God told Moses how to build the tabernacle, the predecessor to the temple. This tabernacle was also considered the “body of Christ” in John’s gospel in John 1:14 where John wrote that the Word “became flesh and dwelt among us.” John’s term for “dwelt” is the Greek word used for the tabernacle in the books of Moses.
- Similarly, in John 6:4ff, John specified that the Passover was again at hand when Jesus fed the masses with a few loaves. Here John mentioned the Passover feast so that the reader would not miss that Jesus had provided bread in a way reminiscent of God’s provision of manna to the Israelites of the exodus.

- In John 7:1ff, John ties Jesus teaching in Jerusalem to Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. Knowing that brought greater understanding to Jesus proclaiming in the temple on the last day of the feast, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” There are layers of significance to the Feast of Booths in Jesus’ statement. While I will detail these in the later lesson on John 7, it is notable now that the feast was celebrated with water poured out each day in the temple except the last. Jesus spoke of himself as that final day – the final source for the water.
- In John 10:22ff, John placed in the temple during Hanukkah (“the Feast of Dedication”). This is a feast that was placed into Jewish practice in the second century BC. The feast that celebrated the Jews rededicating their temple after its desecration at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes. John uses that feast time in contrast to Jesus whose concern wasn’t simply celebrating God’s work in the past (securing the temple), but *doing* God’s work in the present. As part of that God secures the believer! (“The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me.... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” Jn. 10:25-29)
- In John 11:55ff, John again specifies the Passover time as the time when Jesus again came into Jerusalem. This time Jesus came to be the actual Passover lamb that was slain for the people. John unveils the crucifixion narrative linking it to the festival during which it occurred.

So John shows attention to specific feasts over and over when those feasts link carefully to the story’s narrative and understanding. Yet in John 5, John doesn’t provide the specific feast, but still notes Jesus went for “a feast of the Jews.” This should at least signal to the reader a clue. The timing isn’t incidental to the story. *Which feast* is incidental, and thus isn’t given. But that there was a feast isn’t simply an add-on. I think it is fair to see in this a harkening to the Books of Moses, the Torah or “Law” that comprises our five English Bible books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Jewish feasts are set out in detail in those five books.²

Having set the stage with one clue – a Jewish festival – John then gives a second clue to understanding his story (or a second “incidental marker” in the event that it has no significance to the story itself, as several modern commentators note). John sets the scene of the story at a specific location interestingly described.

² It should be noted that the Feast of Dedication and the Feast of Purim come post-Moses and post-Torah. But the other main Jewish feasts are all set forth in the Torah.

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades (Jn. 5:2).

John wasn't writing a tour guide or brochure for those who might want to walk the steps of Jesus. John was writing a Gospel to confirm that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus was in Jerusalem at a pool. That would give the necessary details for the plot of the story. But John adds that the pool is called "Bethesda," an Aramaic term for those who might have been able to read, understand, or check out the term in John's day, they would have understood the pool's name to mean the "House of Outpouring."

Then John adds yet another important clue to filling in the understanding or significance of what is to come, or "incidental detail" if one doesn't care to read as I choose to read. John says that the pool called the house of outpouring "has five roofed colonnades." Five isn't an incidental number. Five is the number of Torah scrolls, or "books" that make up the Jewish Law. These are the books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, through which the Mosaic feasts were all given.

I think it is very appropriate and fair for the modern reader to see in these clues, especially in the overall vein in which John writes his gospel, that John is harkening to a scene that sets the stage of this miracle as one where Jesus encounters a paralyzed man who is living under all that was in the Law of Moses. His paralysis was in spite of all that was existent in his day – the feasts, the Torah, the outpouring. Yet even with those things, there was no healing for this man's condition. Enter Jesus.

Jesus does what the Law can't. Jesus pours out a Spirit unknown previously. Jesus offers a cause to celebrate, a feast for the soul, unlike any known to the Jews. Jesus declares the man healed.

I have written this lesson thus far trying to carefully set out my reasons for this understanding because several commentators do not see these clues as I have set them out. One in particular, D.A. Carson, is a friend, and an incredible scholar, so I have trepidation in simply saying, "Here is what I think..." without explaining carefully why. Consider what this scholar says in writing on the five colonnades:

A Bordeaux pilgrim visited Jerusalem in AD 333, and described a pair of pools with five arcades (though he called the pools 'Betsaida'). Sporadic excavations have probed the site for more than a century. It is located near the Church of St Anne, in the north-east quarter of the Old City (near Nehemiah's 'Sheep Gate'). There were two pools, lying north and south, surrounded by four covered colonnades in a rough trapezoid, with a fifth colonnade separating the two pools. This hard evidence excludes the

suggestion that the five colonnades are merely symbolic representations of the five books of Moses, now ineffective for healing and salvation.³

Now I will be quick to agree with Carson that the description by John is accurate. This did occur in a real place that was as described. But that doesn't mean that John doesn't add the details to help one reach the deeper conclusion to the story, deeper in that it isn't simply recounting the narrative of the miracle, but it has a significance of teaching beyond "Jesus heals." Hence Carson is right saying the five colonnades aren't "merely symbolic." Yet they *are symbolic* to the story in addition to being historically accurate. Carson's archaeological notes substantiate my view, rather than detract from it.

Carson notes there were *two pools*. The pools were surrounded by *four* colonnades. The fifth colonnade separated the pools. John purposefully counts all the colonnades around the two pools to get his number of five. John is accurate but still chooses to count in a way to get to the right number.

Into this story, then, John places a "a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed" who lay under the shelter of the five colonnades, or the Torah. John now adds another detail that Carson dismisses as unlikely. John notes that this man had been harboring hope for healing under these colonnades for 38 years.

One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years (Jn. 5:5).

Was John simply intent on giving the medical narrative for this man? Was the 38 years not to leave the reader confused that it had been "a long time – but not 39 years, only 38!" Was John wanting to make sure the reader didn't think it was 37 years? My suggestion is still like the crossword puzzle analogy at the beginning of this lesson. These are fair clues to understanding the fuller answer to the storyline. The 38 years is akin to the 38 years that Israel unnecessarily wandered in the wilderness because of their disobedience and disbelief. Deuteronomy 2:14 explains,

And the time from our leaving Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation, that is, the men of war, had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them.

With this set up, John then relates his story. Jesus asked the man whether he wanted to be healed, and the man's answer indicated he likely had no recognition that Jesus might be the healer. The invalid thought healing would lay in the power of the water. Evidently

³ Carson, D.A., *Pillar New Testament Commentary – John* (Eerdmans 1990), at 242.

there was a superstition that at times an angel would stir up the waters and the first one in after that would get healed.⁴ So the old man replied to Jesus,

“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.”

Jesus was not concerned about miracle water. Nor was he talking about an angelic healing. Jesus simply instructed the man to pick up his mat and walk, healing the man on the spot.

Importantly, these events occurred on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was set out in the Torah as God’s holy day. The Sabbath was a “holy day of solemn rest” (Ex. 16:23). God instructed Israel to do no work on that day (Ex. 20:10). It was the longest of the Ten Commandments, and one Israel was prone to violate over and over.

Jews challenged the healed invalid for carrying his mat on a Sabbath, and the man blamed Jesus! He explained that Jesus told him to carry it after Jesus healed him. Of course, to the Jews this meant that Jesus violated two Sabbath customs; Jesus healed on the Sabbath and instructed a man to carry his mat. The Jews sought Jesus’ identity from the man, but at that point, the healed man did not know Jesus’ name. The healed man was unable to affirm who had transgressed the Sabbath’s customs.

A bit later, the man bumps into Jesus in the temple courts. As John explained, however, Jesus *sought the man out*. The second encounter was no mere coincidence. Jesus saw the man again and instructed the man,

“See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” (Jn. 5:14).

In a manner reminiscent of what children call a “tattle tale,” the healed man then sought out the Jewish authorities and told them he could now identify Jesus as the healer. From this miracle, the Jews challenged and persecuted Jesus for breaking the Sabbath. It is in this context that we have a direct window in John’s teaching on Jesus as the Son of God.

As Jesus was answering the Jewish challenges, his response included the comment,

My Father is working until now, and I am working (Jn. 5:17).

⁴ This is suggested by verse seven in the text. There also was an insertion into John’s gospel in later copies to this effect. The later insertion assumed that an angel did in fact do such stirring producing a healing for the first one in afterwards. This would not have been in John’s original Gospel.

This was blasphemous to the Jews. It was a clear affirmation by Christ that God was his Father in the sense that Jesus was God's equal. In John 5:18, John makes it clear:

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

For John, Jesus was not simply God's unique Son sent by God as a proxy (the Nicodemus story), but Jesus was God's Son as an equal to God. Jesus offered the next step beyond the Law. Jesus did what the Law couldn't.

John then adds more narrative from Christ indicating that John did not merely come up with such an idea that Jesus was divine. Nor was Jesus' divinity simply a conclusion from the actions of Christ. The identity of Jesus came straight from the teachings of Jesus as well. John provided Jesus' extended narrative about what it meant that he was the Son of God.

- **Jesus worked God's works:** "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (5:19).
- **Jesus was privy to God's plans:** "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel" (5:20).
- **Jesus had God's power to give life:** "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will...For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." (5:21, 26).
- **This power is based on Jesus as the Son of God:** "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (5:25).

This will take on more direct significance when John later details Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

- **Jesus had God's authority:** "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (5:22).
- **Jesus was worthy of the honor due God:** "that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (5:23).

- **Jesus was attested to by Scripture:** “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (5:39-40).
- **Jesus was there on the Father’s behalf:** “I have come in my Father’s name” (5:43).

While many often claim that the deity of Christ was thrust on Jesus by a much later church, the truth according to John is that Jesus claimed his role as Deity, affirming it with works not otherwise explainable. Jesus was God’s Son, in a sense of one united with God in purpose, actions, will, power, honor, and authority.

Reading this, we are mindful that it is only one of the seven miracles John gave us, but it is apparent why this miracle fit John’s purpose:

these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (Jn 20:31).

The healing of the lame man passage has Jesus explaining not only his Sonship, but also the life found in his name.

- **Jesus was the source of life:** “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5:24).

Here in this story, John explained carefully that Jesus was God, the giver of the Torah, not one bound by it. Jesus is the answer to life’s problems in ways that the letter of the Law could never answer. Jesus wasn’t bound by the Law, Jesus fulfilled the Law. This whole story, which I believe begins by setting it firmly in the context of the books of Moses, ends with Jesus reclaiming who he is as written by Moses. John five concludes the story with Jesus boldly explaining:

if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (Jn. 5:46-47).

Points for Home

1. *Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed (Jn. 5:2-3).*

That's me! I'm in this story!!! No, by God's mercy, I'm not physically blind, lame, and paralyzed. But my sin in life has left me spiritually blinded. I have found myself paralyzed and lame, unable to do what I could to God's glory. I might try my hardest to live right, doing all the Law requires, but without the outpouring of Jesus into my life, I am bereft. I am miserable. I am unable to be who I could be under the blessing of Jesus. I need Jesus. He alone is the answer to what scares me, misleads me, and confuses me.

2. *Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'"* (Jn. 5:9-11).

"Unlawful"? Really? The Law said not "to work" on the Sabbath. That man shouldn't be seen as working. He was carrying a mat that indicated God, the Lord Jesus, had healed him! This wasn't work. That mat was no longer a cot for lying down on the ground. That cot had been transformed into a trophy of God's grace. That cot was a symbol of God's greatness and glory. That man should have told the questioning Jews, "I'm not working! I'm praising God!!! I am carrying something that shows that God has a love, a mercy, a compassion, an outpouring, a personal interest in ME unlike anything I had ever found before!

Yes, that is what I need to see in all that I do – a trophy to God's work in me.

3. *Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life* (Jn. 5:24).

Thank you, Lord! I need the life of Christ in me. Right now. Every day. Judgment doesn't sit well.