WASHING IN THE POOL OF SILOAM—
A THEMATIC ANTICIPATION
OF THE JOHANNINE CROSS

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Introduction

The Fourth Evangelist certainly intended his account of the blind man’s healing to develop and enhance several ongoing literary motifs in his gospel. Above all else, this healing dramatically validates Christ’s claim within the pericope itself to be the “light of the world”. The “light versus dark” motif, begun in the prologue, is strikingly illustrated as the spiritual dimension of the man’s restored sight is juxtaposed against the forboding darkness of the Pharisees’ unbelief.

Yet alongside the more “obvious” symbolism of this healing pericope, one might argue that the Evangelist intended a more subtle, if not more complex, literary motif. To wit, it appears that a symbolic anticipation of the believer’s salvific “bath” was intended by the Evangelist in the story. Christ’s command to wash in the pool of Siloam, directed at the blind man, would thus become a universal command to all unbelievers to wash in the fountain of cleansing waters at Calvary.

To demonstrate this exegetical proposal, it will first be necessary to explore the various ways in which the Jews—influenced by Rabbinic speculation—regarded the symbolic role of Siloam’s waters, both in their past history and their prophetic future. Thereupon it will be possible to explore the ways in which the Fourth Evangelist might have exploited such symbolism to serve his own literary ends. Specifically, it appears likely that the account of the blind man’s washing, with the attendant symbolism attached to Siloam’s waters, produces a sensus plenior that nicely accommodates the Evangelist’s developing “living water” motif—a motif which culminates in the effluence of water from the crucified Christ.
Jewish Speculation about Siloam’s Symbolic Role

The cultic dimension of Siloam’s waters

The original audience which heard the instructions of Jesus to the blind man, as well as the Jewish segment of the Fourth Gospel’s readership, would have regarded the pool of Siloam in a cultic sense. Its waters would have been revered as waters suitable for a ritual bath of purification, capable of affecting cleansing within the cultus. Within Judaism, the origin of such ritual deference towards Siloam’s waters is obscure. However, Rabbinic speculation about the meaning of Isaiah 8:6 offers a clue. In the 16th pisqa of Pesiqta Rabbati,1 the Rabbis puzzle over the location of the destination of Siloam’s waters, given in the MT as “At” (אֶת). Disregarding the most natural contextual solution—i.e., “At” is not a place but, in combination with the prefixed ב, an adverb, “gently”—their geographical search is in vain. Thus, resorting to their oft-used hermeneutical device gematria, they solve the puzzle numerically. The term יטב ‘אב adds up’ to forty,2 which is precisely the number of se’ahs of water prescribed in Rabbinic thought for a ritual immersion bath.3 Quite clearly then, the Rabbis reason, the inspired text is alluding to Hezekiah’s intention that the pool of Siloam be used to promote sexual purity and restraint. Unfortunately, however, as Isaiah 8:7 points out, the Jews did not avail themselves of these purifying waters, receiving for their obstinacy the flood waters of the Euphrates.

Significantly, Jesus’ original audience and the earliest readership would have regarded Siloam’s waters as not only cultic, but living as well. Their status as ‘living water’, again a product of Rabbinic speculation, was especially prominent during the feast of Tabernacles, the backdrop for the John 9 episode. During each of the feast’s seven water ceremonies, water from the pool of Siloam was ceremonially transported in a golden flagon up the altar ramp in the temple.4 This ‘water of expiation’ (הַיְלַת נֹעַר) from Siloam, as spelled out in the highly embellished Rabbinic commentary on

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2 ב(30) + ב(1) + ב(9) = 40.
3 For a Rabbinic discussion of what does and does not constitute a prescribed immersion bath, see m.Par. 5-11 and m.Mikw. 1-8.
4 m.Sukk. 4: 9-10. See further Str-B., 2: 490-93.