Miszellen

The Name of the Pool in Joh 5,2.

A Text-Critical Note Concerning 3Q15*

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1. The Textual Evidence

For a long time the proper name¹ of the pool in Joh 5,2 has been subject to discussion. According to the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the text reads Βηθζαθα². Since this name is a biblical hapax, a priori one has to be skeptical about this reading. The critical apparatus to NA²⁷ demonstrates that this proper name indeed is not without problems. Already the sheer number of variants is illustrative for the problem. Moreover, the uncertainty concerning this place name has arisen early, which is denoted by the “alten Papyri als Zeugen für eine aus inneren Kriterien als unmöglich auszuschließende Lesart”³.

Although Βηθζαθα is chosen in the editions, there are other variants which are attested far more strongly. Βηθσαιδα for example has a very strong attestation, but is suspect as an assimilation to the town of Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilea, mentioned twice in John (1,44 and 21,12) and also a couple of times in the synoptic Gospels. Evidently, the Βησσαιδα given in Ψ is related. Though the second alternative too, Βηθεδδα, is widely supported, it is also suspect as a scribal alteration originally introduced because of its “edifying etymology” (בֵּית חַסְדָּא, ‘House of [Divine] Mercy’)⁴. The fact that it can have this symbolic meaning has made it suspect as a scribal guess. A possible objection can be that the name is extrapolated from the miracle itself: the word חֲסִיד is an allusion to the act of Jesus. Clearly this place name can be considered a *lectio facilior* because of its etiological grounds, and thus can be

* My thanks are due to Florentino García Martínez, Gilbert Van Belle, Michael Labahn, and Martijn Steegen.

¹ Since it concerns Hebrew/Aramaic names, written in Greek, I write them without accents.

² *Novum Testamentum Graece* post Eberhard et Erwin Nestle editione vicesima septima revisa communiter ediderunt B. Aland et al., Stuttgart 2001 [= 271993], 259.

³ M. Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender. Untersuchungen zu einer Geschichte der johanneischen Tradition anhand ihrer Wundergeschichten* (BZNW 98), Berlin/New York 1999, 217.

⁴ Cf. B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (Third Edition)*, London/New York 1971, 208. For the brief description of the variants, I rely on this page, next to Labahn, *Lebensspender* (see n. 3), 216–217.

ruled out. Yet, due to a connection to a verse in the Copper Scroll from Qumran (3Q15), in the course of time more credit is given to this reading Βηθεσδα (cf. infra).

According to Metzger and others, the least unsatisfactory reading appears to be Βηθζαθα⁵, a reading which is not attested uniformly. Most likely, Βηζαθα, *Bethzatha* and *Bezatha* are variant spellings. The variant Βελζεθα too could also be a misreading of Βηθζαθα, yet this is doubtful⁶. In this group of variants, Βηθζαθα is attested the best and can be identified as the pool *Bethzatha*. *Be(th)zatha* is attested relatively well as the northern city expansion of Jerusalem (cf. 1 Makk 7,19 Βηθζαιθ; Josephus, Bell. 2,328.530; 5,149.151 Βελζεθα and 5,246 Βελζεθα). This could be a hint as to the location of the pool⁷.

To summarize: when one eliminates those variants which seem to be misreadings of others (viz. Βησσαιδα; Βηζαθα; *Bethzatha*; *Bezatha*; Βελζεθα [?]), three possibilities remain: Βηθσαιδα, Βηθεσδα and Βηθζαθα. Possibly being a harmonization, Βηθσαιδα can be doubted, as can be Βηθεσδα, because of its possible etiological motives. One can agree then, *pace* Metzger, that Βηθζαθα is the least unsatisfactory reading, although it is attested less strongly.

2. The connection to 3Q15 11,12

Although NA²⁷ chooses Βηθζαθα, throughout the years a considerable body of scholarly opinion has spoken in favor of the reading Βηθεσδα⁸. Very recently, Hartwig Thyen for example, concluded in this way⁹:

[Es] erscheint uns nach dem zuvor Gesagten am plausibelsten, [Joh 5,2] so zu übersetzen: "In Jerusalem befindet sich aber nahe beim Schaft(tor) ein Badeteich mit dem hebräischen Beinamen 'Beth-Esda' [...]."

When considering this translation it appears as if Thyen argues in favor of the variant Βηθεσδα¹⁰. Moreover, it is not only in the field of Johannine exegesis that this reading has been supported. One also runs into it when consulting other scholarly writings. This can be illustrated with one remarkable example. In 2005, a new translation appeared of Eusebius' onomasticon of biblical place names (Εὐσεβίου περὶ τῶν τοπικῶν ὀνομάτων τῶν ἐν τῇ θείᾳ γράφῃ)¹¹. Eusebius also comments on the name of the pool mentioned in Joh 5,2, to

⁵ Metzger, Commentary (see n. 3), 208.

⁶ Even if this is not the case, the variant Βελζεθα is not attested strongly in the manuscripts.

⁷ Cf. F.W. Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, Chicago/London, 32000, s.v. Βηθζαθα.

⁸ For an easy-reference *status quaestionis* on the matter one can turn to e.g. Labahn, Lebensspender (see n. 3), 216–217, and more recently H. Thyen, Das Johannesevangelium (HNT 6), Tübingen 2005, 297–298 (both with ample bibliography).

⁹ Thyen, Johannesevangelium (see n. 8), 298.

¹⁰ As he does in his overall comments to this verse.

¹¹ The standard edition is that of Erich Klostermann: Eusebius, Das Onomastikon der Biblischen Ortsnamen, hg.v. E. Klostermann (GCS 11.1), Hildesheim 1966 [= Leipzig 1904]. It is this edition which was used by the editors of the new 2005 translation: Eusebius, Onomastica. The Place Names of Divine Scripture. Including the Latin Edition of Jerome. Translated into English and with Topographical Commentary by R.S. Notley / Z. Safrai (JCPs 9), Boston/Leiden 2005.

which he refers as Βηζαθα¹². Yet (without adducing any arguments) R. Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai add this comment: “the Bethesda pool, which is called Bezatha here [...]”. This illustrates the preference for the Βηθεσδα reading, and is all but contradictory to the text of NA²⁷ and even to the lemma of Eusebius¹³.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons for the fact that this reading Βηθεσδα is embedded that much, can be found in one verse from the Copper Scroll (3Q15), discovered at Qumran¹⁴. This scroll contains a reference to a certain pool (viz. 3Q15 11,12), which is often linked to the pool mentioned in Joh 5,2. Equally often this verse has been interpreted as “corroborating the reading Βηθεσδα”¹⁵. The reason for this was the reading of the 3Q15 verse as edited in the standard edition, provided by J.T. Milik in 1962¹⁶.

For 3Q15 11,12 Milik edits **בבית אשדתין** (translated as “à Bet Ešdātin”), and adds this comment¹⁷:

Après בבית vient un aleph cursif, récrit à la suite sous sa forme calligraphique. אשדתין: la troisième lettre est dalet ou reš, la quatrième taw ou het. Je crois pourtant apercevoir en bas du jambage gauche de cette quatrième lettre un fin trait horizontal qui serait le pied du taw.

In his notes¹⁸, Milik explains that, notwithstanding the strange ending of the flexion of **אשדתין בבית**, “on reconnaîtra aisément le même nom de lieu” in other instances. The first parallel which Milik gives is Joh 5,2, for which he reads (against e.g. NA) Βηθεσδα (**אשדה בית**). This place name has the second element in singular, whereas in 3Q15 the second element is in dual, because there it concerns two basins. Milik concludes by saying that the Greek proper names Βεζαθα (Josephus, Bell. 2,328.530; 5,149.151.246, with variants Βεζεθα and Αβισσαθη) and Βηζαθα (Eusebius, Onom. and variant readings for Joh 5,2 Βηθσαθα, *Bethzetha* and *Bethzeta*) can be traced back to *Bet Ešdātā*, with the second element in plural, because referring to the entire surrounding area.

Furthermore Milik¹⁹ connects the name of the region or pool, which then would have been *Bet Ešda* or the like, to the root **שדא**, ‘to flow, to pour out’, with Βηθεσδα being an accurate Greek rendition of the singular form of the name, and Βεζαθα (and thus Βηθζαθα?) of the Aramaic emphatic plural of the name.

¹² Thus edited in Klostermann, *Onomastikon* (see n. 11), 58 (and earlier in P. de Lagarde, *Onomastica sacra*, Hildesheim 1966 [= Göttingen 1887], 240) and reprinted in Notley/Safrai, *Onomastica* (see n. 11), 59.

¹³ Additionally, the testimony of Eusebius is one of the witnesses for the Βη(θ)ζαθα reading! Cf. The Greek New Testament, edited by K. Aland *et al.*, Münster/Stuttgart 1994, 329.

¹⁴ In the course of years the Copper Scroll has generated a very extensive scholarly interest. For a brief *status quaestionis*, one can consult F. García Martínez, Greek Loanwords in the Copper Scroll, in: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome. FS Antonius Hilhorst (SJSJ 82), Leiden/Boston 2003, 119–145, esp. 119–121, supplemented with the bibliography of the new 3Q15 edition quoted infra (n. 22).

¹⁵ Metzger, *Commentary* (see n. 3), 208.

¹⁶ Les ‘petites grottes’ de Qumrân. Exploration de la falaise; les grottes 2Q, 3Q, 5Q, 6Q, 7Q à 10Q; le rouleau de cuivre. Textes, par M. Baillet et alii (DJD 3), Oxford 1962, 201–317.

¹⁷ Cf. Milik, *Petites grottes* (see n. 16), 214 (translation) and 297 (edition and comment).

¹⁸ Cf. Milik, *Petites grottes* (see n. 16), 271–272.

¹⁹ Cf. Milik, *Petites grottes* (see n. 16), 214.271.

This edition of 3Q15 11,12, and the comments as expressed by Milik, in combination with ideas like those of Joachim Jeremias²⁰ and others, have marked a trace in the text-critical analysis of Joh 5,2, and have been applied as supporting the variant Βηθεσδα²¹. However, the reading is not entirely certain.

3. A new edition of 3Q15, and the consequences for Joh 5,2

Very recently, a new impressive two-volume restoration of the Copper Scroll appeared, the first volume of which contains a new edition²². In this edition, 3Q15 11,12 runs thus: **בבית א/האשר(ו)חין** (translation: “in the building of the two reservoirs”). In comparison to the former edition, the 2006 editors denote²³:

*[Milik] corrige quelques lettres de cette entrée, afin de retrouver un toponyme connu par ailleurs, mais de trait fin en bas du jambage gauche du het il n'y a point. La lecture **אשרחין** {א} n'est donc certainement pas à retenir. On doit lire [...] le [...] mot **אשרח** [...] au duel ou au pluriel et précédé de l'article en forme de aleph cursif ou mieux de he non fini: **א/האשרחין**. Cette graphie avec le waw cursif en forme de reš (ce ne peut être dalet) [...]*

The Qumran text does not feature a *dalet* or *reš* with *waw*, but only a cursive *waw* in the form of a *reš*. Thus, according to the new edition, this line only mentions some sort of installation (building) with two reservoirs, and contains no proper name²⁴. This directly contradicts the assertions of Milik, who drew a parallel to the place name Βηθεσδα, which he regarded the text of Joh 5,2. This means that the Copper Scroll cannot be of any use when trying to answer the text-critical questions concerning this Johannine passage. Thus the reason for supporting the reading Βηθεσδα is significantly weakened; in the future this variant should not deserve the *maximum momentum* which it received in the past (cf. supra).

Since 3Q15 11,12 offers no external evidence²⁵, one has to rely on the internal criteria for establishing the correct text of Joh 5,2. As stated above, Βηθεζαθα then is the least unsatisfactory reading.

²⁰ J. Jeremias, *Die Wiederentdeckung von Bethesda. Johannes 5,2*, Göttingen 1949.

²¹ Compare to Thyen, *Johannesevangelium* (see n. 8), 298: “Für ‘Bethesda’ könnte auch eine Passage aus der ‘Kupferrolle’ [...] sprechen”.

²² *Le Rouleau de cuivre de la grotte 3 de Qumrân (3Q15). Expertise – Restauration – Epigraphie I*, par D. Brizemeure et alii (STDJ 55.1), Leiden 2006.

²³ Brizemeure et alii, *Rouleau* (see n. 22), 200 (édition), 203 (comment) and 215 (translation).

²⁴ Cf. 203: “la localisation à Bethesda n’est pas absolument certaine [...]”.

²⁵ Furthermore, the only external parallels one could apply, are those offered by the instances of 1 Makk and Josephus quoted supra.