

Coronavirus Vaccines and the Pool of Bethesda

In our antiquity, my wife Annie and I have been in the upper tier of eligible recipients for the Covid-19 vaccine for many weeks. The good news is that we have no side effects. The bad news is that we have not actually received the first shot—despite daily visiting multiple websites many times and making numerous phone calls. Some sites indicate available appointments, only to have them totally filled by the time we complete the lengthy, qualifying form.

We feel like the guy on his mat beside the Pool of Bethesda, at least according to his story in the Textus Receptus (TR) of the Gospel of John. The TR or “received text” is the 16th century Greek text of the New Testament, derived from the editorial work of Erasmus, that was the basis of several important English and other translations of the time, including the King James Version. Because the TR was edited from only late and, generally considered to be inferior, manuscripts, it is not held by most scholars to always be reliable.

The setting of the story in John 5 is a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda (KJV) or Bethzatha (NRSV), around which many infirmed people lay. Our guy was one of them. He had been sick for thirty-eight years! On this particular day, Jesus happened to be there and, noting that the guy had been lying around for a long time, asked him if he wanted to be made well. The guy said, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus simply told him to get and walk away, and, cured, he did. This is the story according to the NRSV, based on the preferred, critically edited NT Greek text.

In the KJV, based on the TR, the story includes the reason why infirmed people were lying around the edge of the pool, they were “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.” Of course, this explanation, even if not in the original story, seems to provide some background to our guy’s lament that because of the crowd he could never be first into the stirred-up water and, thus, be cured.

Well, that’s what Annie and I feel like—eligible and waiting for a vaccine but never able to get to the front of the line. Of course, we are not anticipating a legendary, supernatural event to stimulate the rush of masses to the few needles. Nor are we expecting a messianic figure like Anthony Fauci to come by and assure us that we won’t get sick with the coronavirus even without the vaccine. No, this is not a matter of magic or miracles. It is the science of viruses, infection, prevention, and cure. It includes the role of vaccines. We want one; we need one. But we are tired of eligibly waiting around the Pool of Bethesda and being unable to get into the water in time.

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