

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #38: JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

By John Temples

An especially interesting person mentioned in Scripture is Joseph of Arimathea. He is famous for securing the body of Jesus after His death and furnishing the tomb in which the Lord was laid. He is called Joseph “of Arimathea” because he came from that Judean town (Luke 23:51), and to distinguish him from the other Josephs in the Bible. Arimathea had a rich history, being the Ramah of the Old Testament, about eight miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was the birthplace of Samuel. It still exists as Ramallah, under Palestinian control.

IN TIMES OF CRISIS, GOD HAS ALWAYS RAISED UP A JOSEPH

In the Old Testament, Joseph, the son of Jacob, preserved his family and saved Egypt from starvation. In the New Testament, Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, protected and provided for the baby Jesus and His mother; and Joseph of Arimathea did two providential things just when they were needed:

- *He took custody of the body of Jesus.* Along with Nicodemus, Joseph went and asked Pilate for the Lord’s body (John 19:38,39). If he had not done so, the body would have been thrown into a mass grave, and the evidence of the resurrection would have been compromised--the “chain of custody” of the body would have been broken.
- *He loaned Jesus his new tomb.* See John 19:41,42 and Matthew 27:57-61. “New” is very significant. That means there would have been no bones of other people in it, to get mixed in with the remains of Jesus. That also helped ensure that the chain of evidence of the Lord’s resurrection would be ironclad.

Unbeknown to Joseph, his choice to put Jesus in his own new tomb fulfilled a prophecy spoken hundreds of years before Jesus’ death: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (Isaiah 53:9, NIV). Evidently the

soldiers who crucified the Lord intended to bury him with the wicked; but, because of God's determinate counsel and foreknowledge, He was buried in a rich man's grave. This is one of the many prophecies and outcomes proving Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God.

BIBLICAL FACTS ABOUT JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

1. He is one of only a few persons mentioned in all four gospels (Matthew: 27:57-60; Mark 15:43-46; Luke 23:50-55; John 19:38-42).
2. He was a good and just man who "waited for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43) and was a disciple of Jesus, albeit in secret (John 19:38).
3. He was a rich and powerful member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews; however, he did not go along with their condemnation of Jesus (Luke 23:50,51).
4. He was accustomed to moving in the highest circles. (John 19:38 says he went to Pilate and gained permission to take the body of Jesus. Not just anybody got to see Pilate, especially on short notice.)

TRADITIONAL AND POST-BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

The Biblical accounts lead us to honor and appreciate Joseph for what he did; but even more fascinating are the secular historical accounts about him.

Much of what these extra-Biblical sources say about Joseph is fanciful and legendary; you truly have to separate the wheat from the chaff. Here are some of the traditions about him, part of which may or may not be true:

- He was said to be an uncle of Jesus, and after Mary's husband Joseph died, he became Jesus's legal guardian. If true, that would explain Pilate's readiness to turn Jesus's body over to him.

- Being a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus, he supposedly took young Jesus with him on business trips to faraway places.
- After the resurrection, Joseph became an evangelist and took the gospel to Spain, France, and England.
- He is said to have been the custodian of the “Holy Grail.”
- He is venerated as a “saint” by the Catholic, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox, and some Anglican churches.
- There is an apocryphal book, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, which contains many fanciful details of Joseph’s legal troubles and subsequent imprisonment because of his role in preserving the body of Jesus.

In spite of the legendary nature of much of the extra-Biblical traditions about Joseph, a few things can be more or less reliably established:

It is probable that he was the uncle of Mary and great uncle of Jesus. “He was a relative of the Lord Jesus Christ as he was uncle to the Virgin Mary, being the younger brother of her father, Joachim, confirmed by a document showing the family tree of our Lord from the time of Adam held in the Herald ‘s Office at the English College of Arms (London). This is also substantiated by the Harl. MSS held in the British Museum.”

(<https://ensignmessage.com/articles/joseph-of-arimathea-who-was-he/>)

Another authority explains, “The Sanhedrin had declared Jesus a criminal. According to both Roman and Jewish law, unless the body of an executed criminal was immediately claimed by the next of kin, the body of the victim was cast into a common pit, where as with others, all physical record of them was completely obliterated. Certainly, the fanatical Sadducean element of the Sanhedrin who sought the total extinction of Jesus, even in death, would have allowed nothing short of a legal claim on the body of Christ (E. Raymond Capt, *Traditions of Glastonbury*, 1983, p. 20). The Jewish authorities, who hated and despised Jesus, would surely have resisted his being given an honorable burial in a private

tomb—unless there were irrefutable grounds in favor of Joseph receiving the body. Therefore, we may infer from these verses that Joseph was a close relative of Jesus.”

(<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/ebooklet/the-throne-of-britain/appendix-11-joseph-of-arimathea-and-the-line-of>)

He made his wealth as a tin merchant and made many trips to Spain and Britain where there were large tin mines. “It is believed that he owned certain tin mines in Cornwall and Somerset.” (Ibid.) Another source says, “We know that for hundreds of years prior to the first century A.D. there was a well-established tin trade between Cornwall and Phoenicia. Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C. Greek historian, calls the British Isles the Cassiterides, or Tin Islands. The fourth-century B.C. navigator Pytheas visited the British Islands and mentions the tin trade.... Joseph could have even been more than a merchant—a Roman official in the trade. Gildas the Wise, a British monk who lived A.D. c. 500–570, refers to him as ‘nobilis decurio.’ According to Capt, the title ‘decurio’ denoted an important Roman office, usually connected with the general management of a mining district. The implication is that Joseph was a provincial...Roman Senator and in charge of Rome’s mining interests in Britain.”

(http://encyclopedia.summitlighthouse.org/index.php/Joseph_of_Arimathea)

Tradition says he was instrumental in taking the gospel to Britain, and established a church in Glastonbury on the southwest English coast. In fact, tradition says he is buried there. One historical reference says, “Regardless of whether you subscribe to the apocryphal stories of Joseph of Arimathea, archaeological and historical evidence supports Glastonbury's importance as an early Christian site. The remains of a wattle-and-daub structure dating to the 1st century have been found, and pilgrims traveled to the church since at least the 5th century, when St. Patrick visited. A stone church was constructed at Glastonbury in the 8th century by King Ines, and St. Dunstan served as abbot in the 10th century.”

(<https://classroom.synonym.com/orthodox-history-of-joseph-of-arimatheas-burial-place-12086242.html>)

Put Joseph of Arimathea on your list of “people to meet” in the hereafter! --John Temples