

THE INCREDIBLE HISTORY OF GOD'S TRUE CHURCH - (3)

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CHAPTER THREE - DID JESUS VISIT BRITAIN?

AT least four entirely separate traditions exist in the West of England relating to Jesus as a boy or young man having visited this part of Britain prior to His ministry.

This tradition has even been set to music in Blake's famous hymn "*Jerusalem*":

*"And did those feet in ancient time
walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?"*

The question is, did He really visit England, and if so, for what purpose? One cannot be dogmatic about this subject because the Bible is silent concerning the matter.

At the end of John's gospel, however, we find the intriguing remark that most of the activities of Jesus Christ were never recorded in the Gospels, (**John 21:25**). This included all of His activities between the ages of 12 and 30.

There is nothing in the entire Bible to suggest that Jesus could not have visited foreign parts prior to His ministry. Indeed, it plainly states that He spent time in Egypt with His family shortly after His birth (**Matthew 2:13**).

Many assume that Jesus became a world famous figure only after His death, that His human life was lived out in obscurity, that He was known only by a handful of followers and local officials.

History records, however, that the "*historical Jesus*" was well known even in the more remote regions of the known world of His day. Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, records that the fame of Jesus and the knowledge of His healing miracles spread far beyond the borders of His own nation.

Being a bishop and historian of considerable reputation, Eusebius had access to official archives and written records. He was writing some 150 years before the fall of the Roman Empire and during his day many original first century documents were still extant.

He records two letters from the official archives of Edessa, a city state in Mesopotamia. The king or ruler of the area had heard of the healing miracles of Jesus, and being afflicted by a disease, wrote a letter to Him requesting that Jesus should visit him and heal the disease. Eusebius quotes the letter as follows:

"Agbarus, prince of Edessa, sends greeting to Jesus the excellent Saviour, who has appeared in the borders of Jerusalem. I have heard the reports respecting thee and thy cures, as performed by thee without medicines and without the use of herbs.

For as it is said, thou causest the blind to see again, the lame to walk, and thou cleanseest the lepers, and thou castest out impure spirits and demons, and thou healest those that are tormented by long disease, and thou raisest the dead.

And hearing all these things of thee, I concluded in my mind one of two things: either that thou art God, and having descended from heaven, doest these things, or else doing them thou art the Son of God. Therefore, now I have written and besought thee to visit me, and to heal the disease with which I am afflicted. I have, also, heard that the Jews murmur against thee, and are plotting to injure thee; I have, however, a very small but noble state, which is sufficient for us both."

The letter was delivered to Jesus by the courier Ananias who also took back to the king the letter written by Jesus in reply to the king's request. Eusebius quotes this as follows:

"Blessed art thou, Agbarus, who, without seeing, hast believed in me. For it is written concerning me, that they who have seen me will not believe, that they who have not seen may believe and live.

But in regard to what you hast written that I should come to thee, it is necessary that I should fulfill all things here, for which I have been sent. And after this fulfillment, thus to be received again by Him that sent me.

And after I have been received up, I will send to thee a certain one of my disciples, that he may heal thy affliction, and give life to thee and to those who are with thee." (1)

Eusebius, who it seems examined the original documents, adds the following points:

"To these letters there was, also, subjoined in the Syriac language: 'After the ascension of Jesus, Judas, who is also called Thomas, sent him Thaddeus, the Apostle, one of the seventy.'"

Eusebius then proceeds to relate the various miracles and other works of Thaddeus, including the healing of King Agbarus. Following this the king assembled all the citizens together that they might hear the preaching of the Apostle.

Although Eusebius considered this material authentic, the view of some later scholars is that the letters were third century forgeries. Although this could well be the case, it is far from impossible that the publicity which the miracles of Jesus aroused could have spread far from the borders of His own country.

Later in his history, Eusebius relates the fact that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not just an obscure event mentioned only by the Gospel writers. He records that the event was well known to the Roman Emperor Tiberius and the Senate.

"The fame of our Lord's remarkable resurrection and ascension being now spread abroad, according to an ancient custom prevalent among the rulers of the nations, to communicate novel occurrences to the emperor, that nothing might escape him, Pontius Pilate transmits to Tiberius an account of the circumstances concerning the resurrection of our Lord from the dead, the report of which had already been spread throughout all Palestine.

In this account he also intimated that he ascertained other miracles respecting him, and that having now risen from the dead, he was believed to be a God by the great mass of the people."(2)

It was said that Tiberius was so impressed with the report that he tried to have Jesus ranked among the Roman gods. The Senate, however, rejected his proposition.

It must be remembered that the Roman Empire was still in existence when Eusebius wrote. Had he been in error in his writings the facts would have been exposed by reference to the official Roman archives. The Romans took great care over the preservation of official records.

At the time of the crucifixion we read that *"there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour"* (Luke 23:44).

In far off Ireland, Conor Macnessa, king of Ulster, who died in A.D.48, is said to have inquired of his Chief Druid as to the meaning of the event. The Druid, after consulting the Druidic prophecies relating to the Messiah then gave the king a correct explanation for the darkness. (3)

It might seem strange that the Irish Druids should have prophetic knowledge of Christ until we realize that the Druids were closely related to the *"Magi"* or *"wise men"* who visited Jesus shortly after His birth.

The word *"Magi"* is merely the Latin equivalent of *"Druid."* In many Celtic records the word Magi is used instead of Druid. In some early Irish histories Simon Magus (Acts 8:9) is known as *"Simon the Druid."*

The impact that Druidism had on the ancient world is often not fully realized. Because of the influence that this religion had on the early generations of the Church

of God in Britain, it will be dealt with in some detail in a later chapter. It would be good at this point, however, to note the following point concerning Druidism.

"Westward of Italy, embracing Hispania, Gallia, the Rhenish frontiers, portions of Germany and Scandinavia, with its headquarters and great seats of learning fixed in Britain, extended the Druidic religion. There can be no question that this was the primitive religion of mankind, covering at one period in various forms the whole surface of the ancient world." (4)

Other sources show that the Druidic religion stretched from India in the East to Britain in the West, including the territory of the "*wise men*" of **Matthew chapter 2**. Interestingly, one of the meanings for the word "*Druid*" is "*wise men*."

Some have speculated that when they "*departed into their own country another way*" (**Matthew 2:12**) they returned via Britain.

The darkness at mid-day which occurred at the time of Christ's crucifixion was not only observed in Britain; the third century "*Church father*" Tertullian, a native of North Africa, in addressing his pagan adversaries, makes the point that "*at the moment of Christ's death, the light departed from the sun, and the land was darkened at noonday; which wonder is related in your own annals, and is preserved in your archives to this day.*" (5)

West Country traditions associate several sites with a visit from Jesus. Among these are St. Michael's Mount, St. Justin Roseland, Redruth, Glastonbury, and Priddy. The tradition appears to have been the inspiration for naming districts of Jesus' Well in Cornwall, and Paradise in Somerset.

Across the English Channel in Brittany the same tradition has lingered for many years. The source of the French version is not difficult to trace. Following the Saxon invasions of Britain from the fifth century onwards, many Britons fled from the Western parts of Britain to nearby Brittany, taking much of their history in written and spoken form with them. The stories relating to Jesus appear to be of considerable antiquity.

As Jesus spent most of His early life in Galilee, one would expect that the people of that area would have retained some information relating to a local man who later became famous.

Indeed, this is exactly what has happened. Among the Marionite and Catluei villagers of Upper Galilee lingers the tradition that Jesus as a youth became a shipwright on a trading vessel from Tyre, one of the biblical "*ships of Tarshish*."

According to the story, He was storm-bound on the Western coasts of England throughout the winter. The location of the visit is given as "*the summerland*," a name often used in ancient times for the modern county of Somerset. A district associated with this visit to Somerset is known as "*Paradise*." This place is sometimes found on old maps of the area.

In the book of Isaiah from chapter 41 onwards, one of the major themes is the first and second comings of Christ. An interesting point relating to this section is that no fewer than SEVEN references are made to "*the isles*" and "*the isles afar off*."

Ancient Indian writers employed similar terminology when writing of Britain. They used terms such as "*isles of the West*" and "*isles of the sea.*"

During Roman times, at least some of the Jews believed that Isaiah was speaking not of "*isles*" in general but a specific group of islands, i.e. Britain.

In the "*Sonnini Manuscript,*" an ancient document translated from the Greek, we read that "*certain of the children of Israel, about the time of the Assyrian captivity, had escaped by sea to 'the isles afar off,' as spoken by the prophet, and called by the Romans Britain.*"

On one occasion Isaiah links "*the isles*" with "*the ships of Tarshish.*"

Jeremiah also mentioned "*the isles afar off*" in his writings.

The Jewish scholar, Dr. Margouliouth, made the point in his *History of the Jews* that:

"It may not be out of place to state that the isles afar off mentioned in the 31st Chapter of Jeremiah were supposed by the ancients to be Britannia, Scotia and Hibernia."

That Jeremiah had these areas in mind when he wrote seems likely, as early Irish records indicate that he probably visited Ireland - the ancient name for this country being Hibernia - towards the end of his life.

The gospels relate that Jesus followed the profession of his legal father Joseph and became a carpenter. Nowhere are we informed of the exact nature and extent of such training. It is entirely possible that at least a part of that training could have involved work as a shipwright or ship's carpenter.

The fact that Phoenician trading vessels visited Britain in ancient times is beyond question. The existence of the tin trade between Britain and Phoenicia is often mentioned by classical writers such as Diodorus Siculus and Julius Caesar.

Herodotus, writing about 445 B.C., speaks of Britain as the Tin Islands or Cassiterides. Some authorities believe that this trade existed as early as 1500 B.C.

Creasy, in his *History of England*, writes: "*The British mines mainly supplied the glorious adornment of Solomon's Temple.*"

Ancient pigs of lead bearing official Roman seals have been discovered in the West of England dating from the time of the first century emperors Claudius and Nero.

An interesting point indicated by the gospel writers is that Jesus was more relaxed and confident at sea - the Sea of Galilee incident - than the disciples who were trained fishermen (**Mark 4:35-41**).

This could be a further indication of his experience at sea if He had been to sea prior to His ministry.

A man who, according to the traditions, had experienced sailing in the Mediterranean Sea and Bay of Biscay, would have considered a storm on a mere *"lake"* to be a matter of no great consequence.

In many of the traditions relating to Jesus coming to Britain, He is brought by Joseph of Arimathea. According to Eastern tradition, Joseph was an uncle of the Virgin Mary and thus a relative of Jesus.

The gospel record of Joseph burying the body of Jesus in his own sepulchre strongly supports this tradition. A casual reading of the account would lead one to assume that Joseph claimed the body from Pilate on the grounds of being a friend or follower of the dead man.

This is far from being the case, however. The chief priests, with the permission of Pilate, had made special arrangements regarding the security of the body of Jesus for the express purpose of keeping it out of the hands of His followers (**Matthew 27:62-66**).

We are told that Joseph did not reveal at that time that he was a follower of Jesus. He was a disciple *"secretly for fear of the Jews"* (**John 19:38**).

If Joseph did not approach Pilate on the grounds of being a disciple, what exactly was his status?

The only grounds which he could have had, which would be in agreement with Jewish and Roman law and at the same time avoid giving offence to the chief priests, would be as the nearest relative of the dead man.

Under both Jewish and Roman law it was the responsibility of the nearest relatives to dispose of the dead, regardless of the circumstances of death.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, would clearly be in no fit emotional state for such a task, which would have been considered *"man's work"* anyway. The brothers of Jesus as young men or teenagers would have lacked the maturity to perform such a duty, leaving Joseph (according to tradition the uncle of Mary) the next in line.

Unless Joseph had had strong legal grounds, as described, for claiming the body, the Jews would have resisted the idea of a man whom they hated and had caused to be executed given the honour of being buried in a private sepulchre, instead of the official burial place for criminals.

The last time that Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, is mentioned in scripture is when Jesus is twelve years old (**Luke 2:44-52**). From then on the Bible speaks only of His mother and brothers. The clear implication is that Joseph died when Jesus was a young man or teenager. The people of His home town of Nazareth asked the question, *"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"* (**Mark 6:3**). A son would only be spoken of in this way if the father were dead.

Under Jewish law the nearest male relative would have the clear responsibility to assist the widow and her children. As we saw earlier, this role would almost certainly be taken up by Joseph of Arimathea.

Luke records of Joseph that *"he was a good man, and a just"* (**Luke 23:50**). Someone who was likely to go far beyond the letter of the law in this matter, especially as he was also rich (**Matthew 27:57**), and in a strong position to aid the bereaved family.

In the Latin Vulgate version of the gospels Joseph is described as *"Decurio,"* and in Jerome's translation as *"Nobilis Decurio"* - the noble decurio.

The term *"decurio"* was commonly used to designate an official, under Roman authority, who was in charge of metal mining. The office seems to have been a lucrative and much coveted one. Cicero remarked that it was easier to become a Senator of Rome than a Decurio in Pompeii. The office is also known to have existed under the Roman administration in Britain.

In the Greek, **Mark 15:43** reads *"Joseph - of rank a senator;"* a further indication of his holding office under the Romans.

To go *"boldly"* (**Mark 15:43**) to Pilate, the highest authority in the land, and to obtain immediate access and agreement to the request put forward is further proof of the man's position and influence.

Virtually all early records and traditions concerning Joseph associate him with the mining activities of Cornwall and the Mendips. Is it really so incredible that he may have had commercial interests in this part of the world?

For centuries the Hebrews and Phoenicians were trading partners, and in Solomon's time shared the same navy (**1 Kings 10:22**). Among the merchandise imported by these traders was tin and lead (**Ezekiel 27:12**).

The British mines were a major source of these metals, and in Roman times, because tin was used in the making of alloys, the metal was in great demand. It is entirely possible that Joseph obtained his wealth from this trade.

A large community of Jews existed in Cornwall during ancient times, called by the local people *"Saracens."* They were engaged in the trade of extracting and exporting metals.

In a work published in 1790 by Dr. Pryce on the origin of the Cornish language, he states that *"Cornish and Breton were almost the same dialect of a Syrian or Phoenician root."* (6)

Modern historians who tend to be sceptical of the origin of the tradition relating to Joseph, will readily admit that a wealthy Jewish merchant could more easily have traveled from *"Palestine to Glastonbury"* during the thirty years following the Crucifixion than at any later time until well into the nineteenth century. It should also be noted that trading links between the two areas existed long before the Roman invasion of Britain in A.D.43.

According to local tradition, Joseph taught the boy Jesus how to extract Cornish tin and purge it of its wolfram. Is it not perhaps significant that in his prophecy and analogy of Jesus, the prophet Malachi casts Him in the role of a refiner of metals (**Malachi 3:2-3**)? The prophet

mentions silver, and interestingly enough silver was often extracted from Mendip lead during the time of Christ.

The common factor it seems in almost all the West Country sites which involve the tradition is the metal mining industry. Priddy, for example, with its quaint proverb "*as sure as our Lord was at Priddy*," was the centre of the Mendip mining district in Roman times and even before.

A point not commonly realized is the extensive use that was made of metal in its various forms in the construction of both buildings and ships during the time of Christ.

In the houses of the wealthy, plumbing involving the use of pipes and valves was commonplace.

If Joseph had assisted the family of Jesus after the death of His legal father, the education of the eldest son of the family would have been a point of considerable importance.

A man with Joseph's wealth could have provided a fine education for the young man, including foreign travel.

The gospels make it very plain that Jesus did not begin His ministry as a penniless vagabond. He conducted His ministry on a full-time basis for three-and-a-half years. His disciples too were, for the most part, full-time students.

The cost of maintaining thirteen people for this period of time must have been considerable. Although the disciples and probably some of His other followers contributed to the common fund from time to time, it is likely that the bulk of this fund was provided by Jesus. Although Judas was treasurer for the group, Jesus was the one who determined how the money was to be spent.

He paid taxes, contributed to the poor, may have owned His own house, and attended banquets along with the social elite of His day. One of His own parables showed the necessity of wearing clothing appropriate to the occasion. His wardrobe must have been an adequate one.

In order to do all these things, Jesus must have been a successful and prosperous young man. He must surely have been more than just an ordinary tradesman. The occupation of "*carpenter*" given in the gospels probably obscures the fact that He was closer to the modern equivalent of a general contractor, involved in the total construction of buildings.

Britain, during the first century A.D., would have been an ideal place to study and develop skills in various aspects of the building industry. Eumenius states that British architects were in great demand on the Continent during his day. Several writers mention the skills of British craftsmen, especially in the metal working industries.

The enameling process was invented in Britain. A superb example of the local "*La Tene*" art is the famous Glastonbury bowl which was produced about the time of Christ. There is little doubt that Jesus could have developed many skills from British craftsmen.

As a public speaker Jesus had a tremendous impact on the crowds that gathered around Him. The primary reason for this was clearly His teaching, which was utterly unlike anything that the people had heard before. Another important factor was His style of public speaking. In the Greek, **Mark 1:22** reads:

"And they were struck with awe at his mode of instruction."

He was also an educated speaker. It is recorded that the people of His home town of Nazareth were astonished at His preaching.

"And all bare him witness and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22).

It is very clear that not all of His formal education and public speaking training had been received at Nazareth. If His training had been merely the product of a local school or college then the people would not have been so astonished.

It is unlikely that higher education of that calibre was even available in a provincial town such as Nazareth. Nathaniel implied this in his remark:

"Can any good thing proceed from Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Jerusalem was the academic headquarters of the nation, yet Jesus had not trained among the professional public speakers here either. Mark relates that:

"he taught them, as possessing authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22).

The Jews were deeply puzzled by this very fact. They asked the question:

"How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15).

The Weymouth translation renders this:

"How does this man know anything of books," they said, "although he has never been at any of the schools?"

Here was an educated man and superb public speaker who had not received any such training within any college of Galilee or Judea. If such training had been received by Jesus they would have known about it and not remarked, *"having never learned."*

Although such training may not have been obtained in Palestine, it most certainly could have been in Britain. If Jesus had visited Britain, according to the traditions, as part of His education He would have found forty colleges or universities.

The educational standards were such that students came not only from the British nobility but also from several foreign nations. It is said that even Pontius Pilate, as a young man, studied in Britain.

A very high standard in oratory or public speaking was often attained by first century Britons. Tacitus records on a word by word basis the speeches of several high ranking Britons of his day.

Such speeches were often colourful, stirring and inspiring, much like, in some ways, the speeches of Jesus.

A few hundred years before the time of Christ, the Greek writer Strabo described an educated Briton of his day, Abaris, as follows:

"He was easy in his address; agreeable in his conversation; active in his dispatch and secret in his management of great affairs; diligent in the quest of wisdom; fond of friendship; trusting very little to fortune; yet having the entire confidence of others, and trusted with everything for his prudence. He spoke Greek with a fluency that you would have thought that he had been brought up in the Lyceum." (7)

It may be mere coincidence but Jesus had far more of the qualities and talents of an educated Briton than He ever did of an educated Jew of the same period.

One might wonder if Jesus would have had a language problem in Britain. He almost certainly spoke Greek in addition to His local Aramaic. The Greek renders

John 7:35 *"is he about to go to the DISPERSION OF THE GREEKS? and to teach the GREEKS?"*

The Jews would obviously not have made this remark unless they were aware that He spoke the language.

Mark relates a conversation that Jesus had with a woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon, adding the point that *"the woman was a Greek"* (**Mark 7:26**).

The disciples or students of Jesus when writing the New Testament wrote in Greek, a clear indication that their *"teacher"* also understood the language.

Julius Caesar stated that the Britons used Greek in their commercial transactions. Many of the educated classes in Britain spoke the language fluently. A few, such as Pomponia Graecina, were among Europe's leading scholars in the language.

If Jesus had visited Britain He would have had no language barrier to overcome.

A final indication that Jesus may well have been abroad for some years prior to His ministry is the curious relationship that He had with John the Baptist.

In comparison to the intimate rapport that Jesus had with His own disciples, His relationship with John was somewhat formal and distant. A clue to the reason for this is given by John when he mentioned:

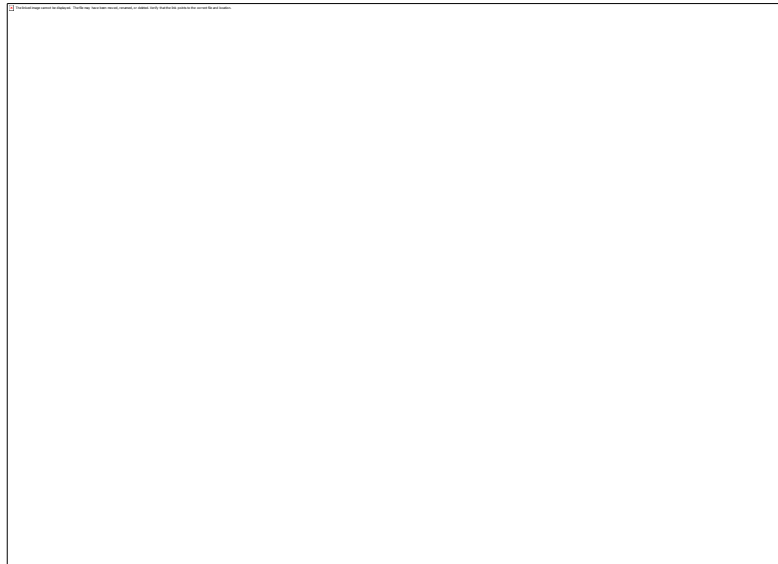
"And I did not know him" (John 1:33).

Although the two men were related and their mothers seem to have been close friends (**Luke 1:36-45**), they appear to have had little or no contact as adults. Is this an indication that Jesus had been absent from the area for several years prior to His ministry?

Having related the traditions of Jesus' visit to Britain to the considerable circumstantial evidence from the gospels and other sources, one could well say that there may indeed be a grain of truth in the idea that those feet in ancient times did "*walk upon England's mountains green.*"

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 3

- (1). *The Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius Pamphilius, Book 1, chapter 13.*
- (2). *The Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius, Book 2, chapter 2.*
- (3). *Chronology of the Olympiads, Phlegon, Book 13.*
- (4). *St. Paul in Britain, R.W. Morgan, chapter 1, page 9.*
- (5). *Tertullian, Apologia c. 21, emphasis mine.*
- (6). *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica.*
- (7). *Hecant. ab. Diod Sicul, Lib III Avienus.*



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