

Joseph of Arimathea – Part 2

Unusually, this article must of necessity look for its authority to historical evidences outside of the Bible, which is quite exceptional for this website, if we are to gain any indication at all of where Joseph of Arimathea went after the death of Christ, why he came to Britain and how his arrival introduced Christianity into the British Isles long before the Roman Catholic church existed.

To find this information I have used the work of Leslie Hardinge with his book 'The Celtic Church in Britain', Steven M. Collins' writing, especially his book, 'Parthia', The Forgotten Ancient Superpower And Its Role In Biblical History', and the writing of E. Raymond Capt, especially his 'The Traditions of Glastonbury'.

However, to set the scene, let us examine Acts 8:1-3, *'And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.'* This of course refers to the death of Stephen, which was the beginning of a persecution upon the early church and which drove many of the Christians away from Jerusalem. James the brother of John was killed and Peter was temporarily imprisoned. (Acts 12:2-4)

Cardinal Caesar Baronius (AD 1538-1609) in his "Ecclesiastical Annals" writes about Joseph of Arimathea, the two Bethany sisters, Mary and Martha, their brother Lazarus with other disciples who were cast adrift off the coast of Caesarea by the Jewish Sanhedrin. Raymond Capt writes that they drifted with the wind and the currents, eventually arriving on the shores of Northern Africa, where they gained oars and sails. He quotes the Cardinal's Annals in which "The Acts of Magdellen, the original manuscript of which was compiled by Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mayence (AD 766 – 856) a copy of which is in the Magdalen College library in Oxford University, states that "Leaving the shores of Asia and favoured by an East wind, they went roundabout, down the Tyrrhenian Sea between Europe and Africa, leaving the city of Rome and all the land of Italy to the right. Then happily turning their course to the right they came near to the city of Marseilles, in the Viennoise province of the Gauls, where the river Rhone is received by the sea...." At Marseilles the Bethany family remained to preach the gospel in the South of France.

There are several other manuscripts, some older, which all agree on the essential facts. Lazarus is reported to become the first Bishop of Marseilles, while the names of some of the other Saints are found in the records of the early Gallic church. Roger of Hovedon (AD 1174-1201) the English chronicler, writing of Marseilles, says "Marseilles is an Episcopal city under the dominion of the King of Aragon. Here are the relics of Saint Lazarus, who held the Bishopric here for seven years after Jesus had restored him from the dead." (vol. 3.p.51)

Joseph, meantime, traditionally with Mary and eleven other companions, travelled North to the sea coast of Brittany, and from there the refugees sailed to Falmouth, England,

before continuing on to Cornwall. Joseph's destination was the Isle of Avalon which he knew well, suitable as a quiet retreat and a base for his work in Britain. Several ancient manuscripts indicate that after the death of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea had been commissioned by Phillip the Apostle to take the gospel to Britain. Gildas Albanicus writes in the "Victory of Aureus Ambrosius" that Britain received the gospel during the reign of Emperor Tiberias, from Joseph, who was to build a foundation of the Christian religion in Britain. He also writes that Joseph remained in Britain for the rest of his life.

Arriving in Avalon, we are told in a 15th century writing entitled "Hardyng's Chronicle", based upon much earlier works, that,

Joseph converted this King Arviragus
By his prechying to know ye laws divine
And baptised him as write hath Nennius
The chronicler in Britain tonque full fyne
And to Christian laws made him inclyne
And gave him then a shield of sylver white
A crosse and long end overthwart full perfete
These armes were used through all Britian
For a common syne, each man to know his nacion
And thus his armes by Joseph's Creacion
Full long afore st George was generate
Were worshipt here of mykell elder date

King Arviragus was thenceforth to carry the banner of the cross throughout the battles between the Britons and the Romans. This king is recorded as having granted to Joseph and his followers 'twelve hides' of land (about 1,900 acres), tax free, around Avalon, probably having known Joseph for years. This gift is confirmed in the official Domesday Book of Britain AD 1086, commissioned by the Normans, which states: "**The domus dei** in the great monastery of Glastonbury, called **the Secret Of The Lord**. This Glastonbury church possesses, in its own villa, X11 hides of land which have never paid tax." (Domesday Survey Folio page 249b), a most unusual circumstance.

On this land given to them by King Arviragus, the refugees then erected what may have been the first Christian church above ground. The central building may have incorporated or covered an earlier structure which legends insist was built by the hands of Christ Himself. Testimony to such an early 'church' is found in a letter of 'St Augustine' to Pope Gregory (AD 600) which states: "In the Western confines of Britain there is a certain royal island of large extent, surrounded by water abounding in all the beauties of nature and necessities of life. In it the first neophytes of Catholic law, God beforehand acquainting them, found a church constructed by no human art, but by the hands of Christ Himself for the salvation of His people." (Epistolae AD Gregorium Papam)

Augustine had arrived in AD 597, expecting the whole island to be pagan. However in the Western parts into which the Celtic Britons had been driven he found a powerful British church with its own bishops.

Augustine, the early Roman Catholic missionary to Britain, confirms the existence of the British church long before his arrival and he soon found out that its bishops refused

obedience to the Bishop of Rome, as they had their own Christian beliefs and doctrine. The English historian Bede (672 – 735) writes in his “Ecclesiastical History of The English Nation” ‘ For they did not keep Easter Sunday at the proper time, but from **the 14th to the 20th moon** ...besides, they did several other things which were against the unity of the church ... After a long disputation they did not comply with the entreaties, exhortations or rebukes of Augustine ... But preferred their own traditions.”

Gildas, the first British historian, AD 516 -570, cites an event which occurred during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, “Christ ...afforded His Light, the knowledge of His precepts, to this island during the height of or the last year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.”

Tiberius Caesar died in AD 37 and Gildas’ statement is commonly regarded as referring to the preaching of Joseph of Arimathea and his companions, though Capt writes that prior to his ministry Jesus would have met with the Druids in Avalon and pointed out that both the Druids and the Jews looked forward to the coming Saviour under the same name, Hesus the Druid form, and Jesus the Jewish. In fact Druidism never opposed Christianity and was quietly merged with it subsequently. Once again we are reminded that Christ required his Apostles to go to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’, Matthew 10:6, **‘but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’**

In Steven M. Collins book ‘Parthia’ page 168, he writes “The Celtic Christian Church found by St Augustine observed the 7th Day Sabbath, commemorated Passover on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, (Abib) and observed many customs based on the Old Testament,” which Christians today would think of as Jewish doctrines.

They would be wrong however, because in fact the Celtic Church followed all the doctrines and practices we find in the New Testament Church of the Apostles, including the gentile churches founded by Paul. They were in fact carefully keeping the teaching and example of Christ and the instructions of Christ’s brother Jude, in Jude, verse3, *‘Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.’*

Of course they would keep the 7th day Sabbath which God had instituted for all men, long before Israel or the Jews existed, Genesis 2:3, *‘So God blessed the **seventh** day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.’* They kept Passover rather than the Roman Catholic Easter because of the New Testament instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:24, because Christ died on Abib 14 as the lamb of God (Compare Exodus 12:6). *‘and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.**”’and you shall keep it **until** the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.’* The only twilight that occurs in any one day occurs just after that day starts at sunset.

Writing of the Sabbath, an early Celtic Christian, St. Columba wrote, “This day is called in the sacred books Sabbath, which is interpreted ‘rest’. And truly the day is for me a sabbath .. in it after my toilsome labour I keep Sabbath.’

Hardinge stresses the scriptural foundation of the Celtic Christian Church : ‘ The Celtic Church developed a deep love of the Bible, and from the Epistles of Paul developed their theology. The Psalms were used in worship ... the legislation of Moses pervaded social,

economic, and legal relationships to an extent seldom seen in other branches of the Church ... Celtic teachers stressed the Bible. (page 51, *The Celtic Church in Britain*).

In fact, what the Celtic Church shows is that it had been founded long before Roman Catholicism arrived in Britain on a foundation laid perhaps by Jesus Christ Himself at Glastonbury, but built upon by Joseph of Arimathea after Christ's death, among the descendants of the "Lost sheep of the house of Israel," who included the Celts of Europe, the Sacai/Saka, Scythians and Parthians in Asia, and even portions of India at the Eastern edge of Parthia's empire.

It is significant to note that Hardinge writes on page 5, "With little centralised control communities would develop their own emphases and views ... as teachers developed., they interpreted the scriptures as they felt best". Here was a church diametrically opposed to the unbiblical hierarchical control of Rome; where the scriptures were paramount and the individual churches independent, each under the guidance of a Bishop, according to the *scriptural* definition in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Obviously, the teaching and example of Joseph's experience had persisted, for he had heard Jesus Christ Himself warn against dominion in the Church, Matthew 20:25-27, '*But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave."*

No wonder then, that when Augustine arrived from Rome, his authority was disputed and the Celtic bishop (ministers) refused to recognise him as their Archbishop. Used to coming to their own conclusions about the scriptures and following their traditional biblical ways, they were not prepared to change.

Hardinge writes on page 18 of his book, 'At their second meeting the rift between the two parties widened. The Celtic leaders consulted "A wise and prudent hermit", who told them that Augustine must meet his Celtic brethren as equals by rising to greet them. Should he fail to do this, the hermit warned, "Do not comply with his demands". It turned out that the Italian remained seated and submitted four demands. The Celtic "Bishops refused these things, nor would they recognise Augustine as their Archbishop".

The true religion had been quickly recognised by the Druids of Britain as similar to their own teaching of the resurrection and inheritance of eternal life, for they even used the same name, "The Ancient of Days (religion of Ancient Britain by G. Smith. Chapt. 11, pg. 37)

Tertullian (AD 155-222) wrote in his "Tertullian Def. Fidi" pg.179 " The extremities of Spain, the various parts of Gaul, the regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by Roman arms have received the religion of Christ.

Eusebius (AD 260-340) Bishop of Caesarea, and church historian, wrote: "The apostles passed beyond the ocean to the isle called the Britannic isles" (*De Demonstratione Evangelii Lib 111*)

While from the dates provided and the fact that English bishops were present at the Council of Arles, (314) and the Council of Rimini (359), it is apparent that, as Polydore Virgil, a learned Italian historian wrote - " Britain, partly Joseph of Arimathea, was of all kingdoms, first, that received the gospel." This was recognised by four church councils - those of Pisa, (1409) Constance, (1417) Sienna, (1424) and Basle, (1434) which held that : "The churches of France and Spain, must yield in point of antiquity and precedence to that of Britain, as the latter church was founded by Joseph of Arimathea immediately after the Passion of Christ".

Though the evidence may be circumstantial, it is both secular and ecclesiastical, and it is hard to deny that Christianity flourished in Britain from approximately AD 36-39, the same kind of Christianity we find in the New Testament.

These Celtic Christians also had regular annual Feasts including Passover and Pentecost, though Passover observers eventually were stigmatised as "Quarto decimans"). The Celts themselves declared that they followed the Apostle John, by keeping Passover on the full moon on the 14th of the first month, and eventually they were to be driven out of the Catholic Church so that the Celtic Church declined after the Norman invasion in 1066, and only survived in the far Western Isles of Scotland, until the 20th century, as I learned when I visited a very old lady in Melbourne some time ago who had been brought up in that church with those beliefs.

Were it not for the great fire, which consumed Glastonbury Abbey, including the ancient wattle church on May 24th 1184, with its famous library and records covering a thousand years, we may well have had the writings of those who had personally known Joseph and maybe even Jesus, before His ministry.

As it is, we are left with little physical evidence except for Joseph's tomb. In 1345 AD the Abbott gave permission to search for the body of Joseph. A monk, Roger de Boston in the Lincolnshire monastery records, "The bodies of Joseph of Arimathea and his companions were found in Glastonbury".

The bones of Joseph were placed in a silver casket and enclosed in a stone sarcophagus and many pilgrims witnessed of its presence. In 1661, fearing another wave of puritanical destruction, the sarcophagus was buried in an unmarked spot in the church grounds and forgotten.

It was then lost for 266 years, when a vicar of Glastonbury accidentally stubbed his toe on a stone object protruding from the ground, possibly lifted by frost.



This very elaborate tomb now rests in St John the Baptist Church in Glastonbury, bearing the initials 'JA' with a caduceus, the symbol of a Roman messenger of the gods. Roger de Boston the 14th century monk, also records that the tomb had an epitaph attached to it which read, in Latin, 'Ad Brittanos Veni Post Christum Sepelivi. Docui, Quievi'. (To the Britons I came after I buried the Christ. I taught, I have entered my rest.)

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