

The Silent Years: Joseph of Arimathea: The Biblical Perspective: Claims the Body of Jesus; Removes Remains from the Cross; Prepares for Burial with Nicodemus; Inters in His Own Tomb, Matt 27:57-60; Mark 15:43-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42; Joseph of Arimathea: The Secular Perspective: Talmud: Joseph Was Mary's Uncle & Her Protector Once Widowed; Biblical Definition of a Widow, 1 Tim 5:3-4, 9

D. Joseph of Arimathea: The Biblical Perspective

Joseph is only mentioned in Scripture in passages dealing with the transfer of the body of Jesus to Joseph by a mandate from Pilate and the Lord's subsequent burial in Joseph's tomb. From these passages we learn the only authentic information available regarding this man.

Matthew 27:57 - When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.

v. 58 - This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

v. 59 - And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

v. 60 - and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.

1. Joseph is described as a rich man from Arimathea. We will note in this paragraph that he was a merchant who supplied the Roman Empire with tin, copper, and lead from the Cornwall and Somerset districts of Britannia, the Latin designation for Great Britain.
2. He was a disciple of Jesus which means he was a believer.
3. He had access to Pontius Pilate and had the necessary qualifications to receive the Lord's body for burial.

NOTE: According to 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.

4. Joseph buried the Lord's body in his own tomb.

Mark 15:43 - Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

v. 46 - Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

1. Joseph was a "prominent member" of the Sanhedrin and therefore a Pharisee.
2. He was a believer, having placed his faith in Jesus for salvation and therefore, was "waiting for the kingdom of heaven": he knew he would go to heaven when he died.

3. Joseph did not concur with the Sanhedrin's verdict and decision to execute Jesus. We learn in another passage that he did not make it known that he was a follower of Jesus and therefore his approach to Pilate for the body took courage in light of the Council's vicious opposition to Jesus and His disciples.
4. Upon receiving permission, Joseph was the one who actually removed the Lord's body from the cross. This is what is meant by the phrase, "took Him down."

Luke 23:50 - And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man

v. 51 - (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God;

v. 52 - this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

v. 53 - And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain.

1. Again, Joseph is identified as a member of the Sanhedrin and referred to by Luke as a "good and righteous man," another affirmation of his salvation.
2. When the Lord came before the Sanhedrin in the second and third of six trials, He was condemned by every member of the Council according to Mark 14:64. This means that Joseph was not in attendance but nevertheless, having learned of the Council's verdict, did not consent to it.
3. This passage confirms that Joseph was from Arimathea who was "waiting for the kingdom of God," and who approached Pilate for Jesus' body.

John 19:38 - After these things [**the crucifixion**] Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away the body.

v. 39 - Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night [**see John 3:1-21**], also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.

v. 40 - So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

v. 42 - Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation [**for Passover**], since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

1. This passage verifies that Joseph kept secret his discipleship of Jesus. Joseph was a very important man in Palestine and had a very profitable business as an importer of metals, especially tin from Britannia. His backing by Rome gave him courage to approach Pilate but he knew his acts of kindness toward Jesus could very well invite the Jews' wrath.
2. Nicodemus provides a second witness to the burial of Jesus in Joseph's tomb. He was converted by the exchange he had with the Lord in John 3.

3. Nicodemus's provision of myrrh and aloes fulfills the prophecy of the Messianic Psalm:

Psalm 45:8a - All your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia ...

4. You will recall that myrrh was one of the three spices presented to the Lord by the Magi in:

Matthew 2:11 - When they had entered the house they saw the Child and Mary His mother; they threw themselves down prostrate and worshipped Him. Then opening their treasures, they presented Him gifts of great wealth: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

5. Myrrh is the gum of an Arabian tree, *Balsamodendron Myrrha*, used for embalming the dead; burnt as incense; used as an unguent or salve.¹ It spoke of the destiny of the Christ Child in carrying out the salvation plan of God through substitutionary sacrifice.
6. Because it violated the Mosaic Law to bury the dead on a Sabbath, much more so during a major feast such as Passover, Joseph and Nicodemus needed to hurriedly get Jesus interred. Thus, Joseph chose his own new tomb which was nearby.

These four passages provide the only confirmed information about Joseph of Arimathea. Nevertheless, he is a central figure in the life of our Lord during the silent years. We are able to document his activities from ancient sources but the Lord's association with him is dependent entirely upon tradition.

Regardless, the scenario that we are able to construct around these sources provides enough intrigue to support a conceivable supposition of where the Lord may have spent a significant period of time between the ages of twelve through thirty.

E. Joseph of Arimathea: The Secular Perspective

The Bible does not provide any insight into the relationship Joseph of Arimathea had with Jesus and His family. Without further information we are left to wonder why Joseph took interest in acquiring the body of Jesus and burying Him in his own tomb.

A key piece of information that clarifies the question is found, oddly enough, in the Jewish Talmud where Joseph is identified as Mary's uncle and the younger brother of her father, 'Hli (*Hēli*). Thus, Joseph was the Lord's great uncle.

The Harlien Manuscripts in the British Museum (38-59f, 193b) further support the claims that Joseph of Arimathea was uncle to Mary the mother of Jesus.

Because there is no mention of Joseph, the husband of Mary and the legal father of Jesus, following the events of Luke 2, it is concluded that Mary became a widow.

¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, "σμύρνα," in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones and Robert McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1620.

As the mother of at least seven children, she could have been left without support before the Lord reached adulthood. The custom in the Jewish world was that at the death of a husband, the nearest male relative would protection, care, and support of the surviving widow and her children.

This duty fell to Joseph who not only was financially capable of supplying Mary's needs, but also, when Jesus achieved maturity at age twenty, the Lord's benevolent gifts from the Magi could well have become the source of provisions for His family.

Paul outlines the New Testament obligation to widows:

1 Timothy 5:3 - Honor widows who are widows indeed [not grass widows² or divorcées];

v. 4 - but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.

However, during the Incarnation, the rules relating to widows were in accordance with the Mosaic Law and tradition:

A woman who survived her husband was in a very difficult position. She could not inherit from her husband. She could remain in her husband's family if the next of kin would take her in marriage. More often the widow was without any financial support. The law therefore said that widows were to be protected (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17-21).

In the early church, money was set aside to care for widows (Acts 6:1), because in the society of the day, prostitution was about the only way for women to obtain money to live. Paul expected widows to be supported by their families (1 Timothy 5:3-4, 8). The local church was to put the names of widows who had lived good lives and were over the age of sixty on a charity list (1 Timothy 5:9-11.)³

1 Timothy 5:9 - A widow is to be put on the list if she is not less than 60 years old, having been the wife of one man.

Mary was dependent upon the help of her children and the compassion of others. The most likely initial source of support for Mary and her children came from the benevolence of her uncle, Joseph of Arimathea.

We have noted that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin during the Lord's public ministry. He was a disciple of the Lord's and he used his political connections with Pilate to obtain the Lord's body.

Those political connections were through Joseph's position as a metals merchant; he was the Roman Empire's agent with the tin, copper, and lead mines in the Cornwall and Somerset districts of Britannia.

² "There's a faintly dated sound to this phrase in a day when every second marriage ends in divorce. But in grandfather's day a *grass widow* was that comparative rarity, a divorcee. Earlier she had been rather less than that, for the term was first used as a euphemism for a lass who had been delivered of child without the benefit of matrimony. The *grass* in the phrase refers to the grass or straw of the bed or pallet on which the illicit behavior took place" (William and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977], 258).

³ Ralph Gower, *The New Manners & Customs of Bible Times*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2005), 70.

Several writers of antiquity mention Joseph with regard to his exploits in Britannia:

Gildas [Badonicus, (A.D. 516–570)], British historian of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain. A monk, he founded a monastery in Brittany known after him as St. Gildas de Rhuys. His *De excidio et conquest Britanniae* (“The Overthrow and Conquest of Britain”), one of the few sources of the country’s history in the 6th century, contains the story of the British leader Ambrosius Aurelianus and his defeat of the Saxons at Mons Badonicus.⁴

Gildas Badonicus, the earliest British historian, refers to Joseph of Arimathea as “nobilis decurio.” The same title, “Decurio” is used by St. Jerome in his translation of the Vulgate of St. Mark’s “honourable counselor” (Mark 15:43) and St. Luke’s “counselor” (Luke 23:50). In the Roman world, a “dcurio” 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. Such a position would require Joseph to spend a considerable amount of time away from his homeland. This would also account for the reason the Evangelists had so little to say about him. He was busy with the metal trade in Britain.⁵

Tin was a rare and precious metal during the time of incipient Christianity. It was a necessary ingredient in the making of bronze which was used for numerous applications throughout the known world. Merrill F. Unger provides details:

Tin (Gk. [κασσίτερος] *kassiteros*). This metal, though rare in its occurrence, was very early discovered and smelted, and played a most conspicuous part in the art and commerce of the ancient world. It is a remarkable fact that though its only ore, cassiterite or tinstone, while very heavy, has no metallic aspect and occurs at but a few and remote points, tin should have become known so early and its alloy with copper (bronze) become the great metal for all purposes of arts, arms, and ornaments during the entire extent of the Bronze Age B.C.). The source of the main supply is judged to have been Cornwall, where the Phoenicians procured it through many centuries, but its use was widespread, even in far earlier times. Either reduced tin, therefore, or the ore itself must have been a very early article of trade throughout prehistoric Europe. There are tin mines in both Saxony and Bohemia, and a little in the Iberian peninsula, but otherwise we know of no Old World sources between Cornwall and Malacca. To these extreme points, therefore, of the Eurasian continent, we must look for the main supply. There are evidences of important Phoenician tin traffic by sea with Cornwall, but the prehistoric use of bronze must probably go back to Indian sources, and to the earliest migrations from eastern and southern Asia. After the time of Julius Caesar, British tin was brought overland via Marseilles.⁶

⁴ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979), 4:541.

⁵ E. Raymond Capt, *The Traditions of Glastonbury*, rev. ed. (Muskogee, OK: Artisan Publishers, 1982), 22.

⁶ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 745.