

Joseph of Arimathea

Long ago as a schoolboy, one of the most popular songs we sang in our school assembly each day, was a poem set to music, by the famous romantic poet, William Blake. At the time I puzzled over the words of that stirring anthem, in which Blake asks questions of a legend that, as a boy, Jesus of Nazareth visited England with his great uncle Joseph of Arimathea, who was a sailor and a trader:

“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?”



Glastonbury Tor, Somerset

Of course, the skeptics dismiss Blake’s poem as a romantic myth without foundation, but later I was to find that Blake was deeply interested in the Bible, with a deep understanding of Satan’s rebellion, which remains unknown to most Christians, and there existed many clues about the poem which centered on Glastonbury in Somerset, and its connection to Joseph of Arimathea.

So, who was Joseph of Arimathea, and could there be any truth in that legend? How and why could it come about?

First, we must recognise that, after Christ's escapade in the Temple at the age of twelve, the Bible tells us nothing more about Christ's life until Luke 3:23, '*Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli,*' so the Bible is silent about those missing eighteen years. As Luke 2:52 tells us though, Jesus continued to grow in favour with God and men, and His questions in the Temple to the priests had revealed His brilliance at that early age, so it is unlikely that He would have remained unknown if He had remained in Judaea. There was also a danger that this could have brought Him into conflict with the rulers of the land before His time.

Matthew 13:54-56 shows us that *after* those missing years, Jesus was scarcely known in His own home town - '*and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did **this man** get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"*' If He had been a carpenter there during all those years they would have known His name and exactly who He was. Note that verse 55 explains that Christ was '*the carpenter's son*', not a carpenter.

We see here that He had brothers and sisters. Matthew 1:25 tells us that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus, so they were younger than Jesus - '*but knew her not **until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus***'

It is obvious that some time during those years, Joseph, the husband of Mary, died, and as a result the nearest male relative would become the legal guardian of the family. The Sanhedrin had declared Jesus a criminal, and in those days when a criminal was executed, the body was cast into a refuse pit unless it was immediately claimed by the next of kin, but Christ's body was immediately and '**boldly**' claimed by Joseph of Arimathea. It is recorded in the Jewish Talmud and in other sources that Joseph was the great uncle of Jesus, the uncle of Mary, Jesus' mother.

By this incident we see also that Joseph of Arimathea was a well known and powerful figure in Jewish society and the Sadducees could not object, which they surely would have done were it not a legal claim. Now we can understand why a carpenter's son had easy access to the Temple hierarchy at the age of twelve – He was also under the guidance and patronage of His uncle, a man well known as an international merchant with ships that served the Roman empire. Gildas Bardonius, a 6th century AD British historian, refers to Joseph of Arimathea as a 'Nobilis Decurio'. In his book 'The Traditions of Glastonbury' E Raymond Capt writes -

"The same title 'Decurio' [applied to Joseph of Arimathea] is used by St. Jerome in his translation of the Vulgate of St. Mark's 'honorable counsellor' (Mark 15:43) and St Luke's 'counsellor' (Luke 23:50). In the Roman world, a 'decurio' denoted an important Roman office, usually connected with the general management of a mining district. The implication is that Joseph was a provincial (Britain?) 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 is why Joseph was so well known to the Roman rulers of Judaea, and could gain so swift access to Pontius Pilate at such a critical time, after the crucifixion.

In Matthew 17:24, Peter is asked if Christ had paid the tax, '*When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"*' The next few verses and the fact that this was Roman coinage rather than the Jewish shekel, tells us that it was the 'strangers tax' that was in question. Christ chooses to pay the tax to avoid giving

offense though obviously He had returned to Palestine. So, where had Christ been during those missing years?

Now we come to the fact that those sceptics who would so readily dismiss this ‘legend’, like many unbelievers, are completely in ignorance of the historical evidence that ancient Israel, the ten Northern tribes, rather than the Jews, had migrated North and West after their captors the Assyrians fell to the Babylonians, 700 years before Christ. By the time of Christ, Britain had long been settled by the earliest of these arriving Israelites, known as the Celts, and the West of Britain was not yet under Roman rule. So, there was good reason why Jesus Christ would spend time there learning from His heavenly Father in preparation for His ministry – they were His people. Matthew 15:24, *‘But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto **the lost sheep** of the house of Israel.’*

Jesus obviously went *somewhere* during those years, and ancient traditions in the Eastern Orthodox church and the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum (38-59f, 193b) support the claim that Joseph of Arimathea was Christ’s mother Mary’s uncle. He was also a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin until 36 A.D. Luke 23:50,51, *‘Joseph, a counsellor;...(The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them).*

Diodorus Siculus (a Roman historian), writing in the first century BC, Pytheas, dates 353 -323 BC, and Polybeus 160BC, writes about the metal trade with Britain. The tin mines of Cornwall were the source of the world’s main supply of tin (the chief metal for making alloys like bronze in the first century AD).

Fragments of ancient poems and Cornish miners songs refer to Joseph, and Cornwall tin mines still have some Hebrew names around their sites. Camden, in the first volume of Britannica, 1808, states “The merchants of Asher worked the tin mines of Cornwall, not as slaves, but as masters and exporters.’ Sir Edward Shepherd-Creasy, eminent British historian 1812–1878, wrote in his “History of England: “The British mines mainly supplied the glorious adornment of Solomon’s temple.”

Several legends link Joseph of Arimathea and the young Jesus with these mines. One story relates how Jesus taught the miners how to extract tin and purge it of the ore wolframite. Another tells how they often anchored their ship in the mouth of the Camel river to collect water, where there still exists a well which since ancient times has been known as ‘Jesus’ Well.’

Jesus' well.



In the West of

were two rich of tin, recorded on the old Ordinance survey maps as 'Corpus Christi' (body of Christ) and 'wheel of Jesus' (an old Cornish word for 'mine').

Cornwall lodes, or veins

Associated with the mines of Cornwall are the mines of the Mendip hills, north of Glastonbury. These mines produced lead, copper and other metals which form alloys with tin. Traditions have it that Joseph came to the Mendips with Jesus several times and at Priddy, high in the Mendips, at the parish church, they have an old saying: "As sure as our Lord was at Priddy," and sing a carol which begins: "Joseph was a tin merchant, a tin merchant, a tin merchant," and goes on to describe him arriving from sea in a boat.

What more natural than that Jesus should be taken by his uncle Joseph on his trading vessels to visit the source of his business? Legends speak of their arrival by sea through the Bristol channel and the then the Isle of Avalon, (Now inland Glastonbury) an area unconquered by the Romans and still remote from Roman authority.

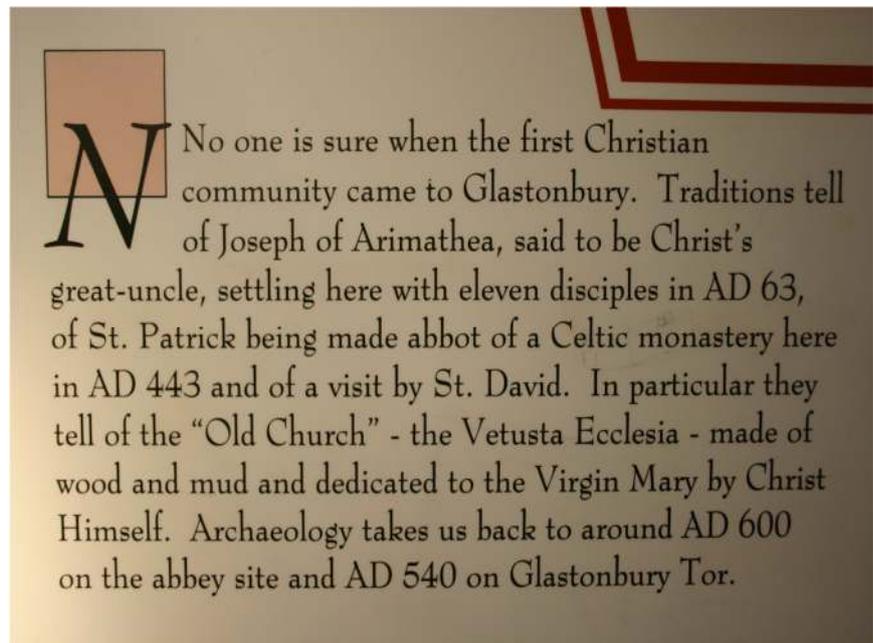
The map to the right shows that the pale blue area was shallow sea and marsh in those days and it possible to sail in a ship to the Isle of Avalon, now we find the region of Glastonbury, and its



area was where Tor.

Perhaps Jesus did visit various parts of the country as Blake's hymn asks, even taking the opportunity to teach some of the principles He would later expound in Palestine by discussing with the Druids what Julius Caesar wrote: "The Druids teach that by none other way than the ransoming of man's life by the life of man is reconciliation with the Divine Justice of the Immortal Gods possible," and they looked forward to the coming Saviour of the future, who would be called "Yesu."

None of this would have been possible without Joseph of Arimathea, and we will learn more about him and the part he played in the early British Church according to tradition, in this dark period in Christian history in a further article, which helps us to understand why, when the Roman Catholic Church arrived in Britain hundreds of years later, they found true Christianity already well established. The following notice was photographed at Glastonbury Abbey.



To be continued in Part Two.