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# Joseph of Arimathea: Biblical & Legendary Accounts

Written by Robert Jones  
Acworth, Georgia



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Robert C. Jones

# Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

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I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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## Introduction

Joseph of Arimathea is one of the more mysterious figures in the New Testament. He is mentioned briefly, by all four of the evangelists, and yet we glean little about him from the Gospel accounts.

"Not one of the twelve, but perhaps one of the seventy". ("Homilies of St. John Chrysostum on the Gospel of John")<sup>1</sup>

Yet, while little is written about Joseph in the Gospels themselves, he was a popular figure in both apocryphal (non-canonical) accounts ("Gospel of Nicodemus", "The Narrative of Joseph"), and in numerous medieval Arthurian epics, including Mallory's "Le Morte D'Arthur", and Robert de Boron's "Joseph d'Arimathie".

In legend, Joseph is a quite remarkable figure - his exploits (in various accounts) include:

- Founder of the first Christian Church in England
- Keeper of the Holy Grail, the Cup from the Last Supper of Christ
- Uncle of Mary, Mother of Jesus
- Merchant involved in the tin trade between the West coast of England, and the Mediterranean - took the boy Jesus to Cornwall and/or Somerset in England sometime between the ages of 12 and 30
- Ancestor of Sir Lancelot & Sir Galahad of Arthurian fame (Photo<sup>2</sup>)

This booklet will examine the life of Joseph from canonical, non-canonical (apocryphal), and legendary sources. No claims are made as to the authenticity of the latter two, but the mere fact of their existence adds to the mystery of Joseph of Arimathea.



In 2009, I added an extensive appendix entitled *King Arthur: Fact and Legend*, which incorporates a number of photos that I've taken over the years at potential Arthurian sites in England.

## Canonical Sources

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned by all four evangelists, in generally consistent accounts. Bible commentator Dwight Moody notes:

"Read the four accounts given, in the four Gospels, of Joseph of Arimathea. There is very seldom anything mentioned by all four of the Evangelists. If Matthew and Mark refer to an event, it is omitted by Luke and John; and, if it occur in the latter, it may not be contained in the former."<sup>3</sup>

By drawing on all four accounts, we can at least discern some basic characteristics regarding Joseph. The key passages are listed below:

Mat 27:57/60 "As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be

<sup>1</sup> The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series, Volume 14 by Philip Schaff, editor

<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1941 (AA size) [P&P]

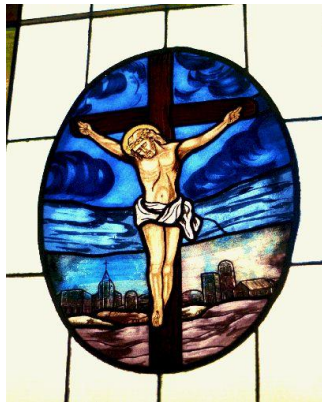
<sup>3</sup> "Bible Characters" by Dwight L. Moody, p. 115

given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away." (NIV)

Mark 15:43/46 "Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb." (NIV)

Luke 23:50/55 "Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it." (NIV)

John 19:38/42 "Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there." (NIV)



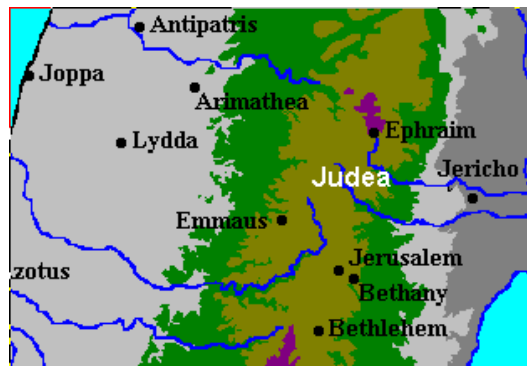
The Gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea took down the body of Jesus from the cross to prepare it for burial.

As can be seen from the canonical texts, little detail is given regarding Joseph of Arimathea, other than details of his involvement in the burial of Christ. No occupation is given (although we are told that he was a "rich man"), nor is his age or personal description revealed (although Joseph of Arimathea is often depicted as an elderly man by the time of the crucifixion). Even his place of origin is obscure - although the Gospels identify that he was from the "Judean town of Arimathea", there was no town of that exact name at the time of Jesus' earthly life. Many scholars identify Arimathea with the town of "Ramathaim", mentioned in 1 Sam 1:1. Other scholars view that the modern city of Rentis (located about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem) is the ancient Arimathea. However, the reference to "Arimathea" remains obscure.

## Characteristics of Joseph of Arimathea

The table below shows the main characteristics regarding Joseph of Arimathea that can be gleaned from the Gospel accounts.

Characteristics of Joseph of Arimathea	
Characteristic	Reference
Joseph was a rich man	Mat 27:57
He was from the Judean town of Arimathea (see map below)	Mat 27:57; Luke 23:51
He was a disciple of Christ	Mat 27:57
Joseph was probably a fairly influential man - he (boldly) asked Pilate for the body of Christ, and received it	Mat 27:58; Mark 15:43
He was rich enough to own his own tomb	Mat 27:60
Joseph was a prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin	Mark 15:43
He was "waiting for the kingdom of God"	Mark 15:43
He was a "a good and upright man"	Luke 23:50
He had not agreed to the Sanhedrin actions regarding Jesus	Luke 23:51
Joseph feared reprisals from the Jewish elders, so he was a secret disciple of Jesus	John 19:38



The traditional location of Arimathea - north of Lydda, east of Joppa<sup>4</sup>

## Involvement in the burial of Christ

The most detailed canonical descriptions regarding Joseph have to do with his involvement in the burial of Christ. The table below captures the highlights of this involvement.

Involvement in the burial of Christ	
Characteristic	Reference
He was a disciple of Christ	Mat 27:57
Joseph asked Pilate for the body of Christ, and received it	Mat 27:58
Joseph and Nicodemus prepared the body for burial by wrapping it in linen, along with 75 pounds of	John 19:40

<sup>4</sup> Map source: PC Bible Atlas for Windows, Parsons Technology

"myrrh and aloes"	
Jesus was buried according to Jewish burial customs	John 19:40
Joseph placed the body in his own new tomb, located in a garden at the place where Jesus was crucified, and rolled a stone in front of it	Mat 27:60; John 19:41

### ***Joseph of Arimathea - coward or saint?***

Through the ages, a theological debate has raged regarding whether Joseph of Arimathea was a coward, or saint. On the coward side, critics point out that Joseph, while being a disciple of Jesus, was afraid to announce so publicly "because he feared the Jews" (John 19:38). It appears to be just another case of a rich member of a ruling elite who is afraid to proclaim potentially socially unacceptable viewpoints, for fear of disturbing the status quo.

The alternate view of Joseph seems to have a stronger backing. While Joseph may not have revealed his discipleship of Jesus during the earthly ministry of the Savior, two acts would seem to strongly put him in the category of "defender of the faith":

- Joseph appears to have been one of (or perhaps the sole) member of the Sanhedrin "who had not consented to their decision and action" (Luke 23:51) regarding the trial of Jesus
- Joseph bravely went to Pilate, boldly requesting the body of Jesus, and (with Nicodemus), buried the body according to Jewish burial customs. This was an amazingly brave act, because it should be remembered that during this time, all of the apostles had fled (except, possibly, John), and Peter had denied he even knew Christ. And yet Joseph, at the seeming low point in the earthly ministry of Christ, bravely and openly took care of Christ's body, risking possible censor from both the Romans and the Jewish elders. Commentator Dwight Moody discusses the bravery of Joseph in asking Pilate for the body:

"I consider this was one of the sublimest, grandest acts that any man ever did. In that darkness and gloom — His disciples having all forsaken Him; Judas having sold Him for thirty pieces of silver; the chief apostle Peter having denied him with a curse, swearing that he never knew Him; the chief priests having found Him guilty of blasphemy; the council having condemned Him to death; and when there was a hiss going up to heaven over all Jerusalem — Joseph went right against the current, right against the influence of all his friends, and begged the body of Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church eventually made Joseph the Patron Saint of Undertakers. His feast day is March 17.

### **Non-Canonical Sources**

There are at least three non-canonical (apocryphal) references to Joseph of Arimathea which give additional (although not contradictory) information regarding Joseph's actions after the death and resurrection of Christ. Keep in mind that the early church father's did not consider these three sources to be authoritative enough to be included in the New Testament. On the other hand, they were not condemned by the early church fathers, either (they were not Gnostic texts, for example).

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<sup>5</sup> "Bible Characters" by Dwight L. Moody, p. 116



## ***The Gospel of Nicodemus***

Few scholars today view that this account was really written (or inspired) by Joseph's Sanhedrin colleague Nicodemus - some scholars would date it as late as the third century. (Gregory of Tours, writing in the 6th century, references this gospel). It is the major source of early, non-canonical information regarding Joseph of Arimathea.

A summary of the references to Joseph in the Gospel of Nicodemus follows, with certain key passages printed verbatim.

- Joseph asks for the body of Christ from Pilate, embalms the body (with the help of Nicodemus), buries the body in a new tomb, and rolls a stone in front of the tomb (totally consistent with the Gospel accounts)
- The Jewish elders express anger at Joseph for burying the body of Christ. Joseph replies indignantly:

"And likewise Joseph also stepped out and said to them: Why are you angry against me because I begged the body of Jesus? Behold, I have put him in my new tomb, wrapping him in clean linen; and I have rolled a stone to the door of the tomb. And you have acted not well against the just man, because you have not repented of crucifying him, but also have pierced him with a spear."<sup>6</sup>

- The Jewish elders capture Joseph, and imprison him. A seal is placed on the door to the cell, and a guard is posted. Before being imprisoned, Joseph warns the elders:

"The God whom you have hanged upon the cross, is able to deliver me out of your hands. All your wickedness will return upon you."<sup>7</sup>

- When the elders return to the cell, the seal is still in place, but Joseph is gone. The elders later discover that Joseph has returned to Arimathea. The elders have a change of heart, and desire to have a more civil conversation with Joseph.
- The elders send a letter of apology to Joseph via seven of his friends
- Joseph travels back from Arimathea to Jerusalem to meet with the elders. The elders question Joseph on how he escaped. Joseph tells his story:

"On the day of the Preparation, about the tenth hour, you shut me in, and I remained there the whole Sabbath in full. And when midnight came, as I was standing and praying, the house where you shut me in was hung up by the four corners, and there was a flashing of light in mine eyes. And I fell to the ground trembling. Then some one lifted me up from the place where I had fallen, and poured over me an abundance of water from the head even to the feet, and put round my nostrils the odor of a wonderful ointment, and rubbed my face with the water itself, as if washing me, and kissed me, and said to me, Joseph, fear not; but open thine eyes, and see who it is that speaks to thee. And looking, I saw Jesus; and being terrified, I thought it was a phantom. And with prayer and the commandments I spoke to him, and he spoke with me. And I said to him: Art thou Rabbi Elias? And he said to me: I am not Elias. And I said: Who art thou, my Lord? And he said to me: I am Jesus, whose body thou didst beg from Pilate, and wrap in clean linen; and thou didst lay a napkin on my face, and didst lay me in thy new tomb, and roll a stone to the door of the tomb. Then I said to him that was speaking to me: Show me, Lord, where I laid thee. And he led me, and showed me the place where I laid him, and the linen which I had put on him, and the napkin which I had wrapped upon his face; and I knew that it was Jesus. And he took hold of me with his hand, and put me in the midst of my

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<sup>6</sup> "Gospel of Nicodemus", translated by Alexander Walker, Esq.

<sup>7</sup> "Gospel of Nicodemus", translated by Alexander Walker, Esq.

house though the gates were shut, and put me in my bed, and said to me: Peace to thee! And he kissed me, and said to me: For forty days go not out of thy house; for, lo, I go to my brethren into Galilee."<sup>8</sup>

- Joseph stresses to the elders (specifically mentioning Annas and Caiaphas) that Jesus has risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven.
- Joseph says that others were raised from the dead at the resurrection of Christ (compare to Mat 27:52/53). He specifically identifies the two sons of the high-priest Simeon (see Luke 2:25/35). Annas, Caiaphas, Nicodemus, Joseph, and Gamaliel (under whom Paul studied) travel to Arimathea to interview Charinus and Lenthius, sons of Simeon.

As mentioned before, the account of Joseph in the Gospel of Nicodemus is certainly not canonical, but it is (at least) plausible.

### ***The Narrative of Joseph***

Another apocryphal account of Joseph's interaction in the passion story appears in the "Narrative of Joseph". In basic outline, the story told in "The Narrative of Joseph" coincides with the account in "The Gospel of Nicodemus", with some interesting additions. The account starts with the words:

"I am Joseph of Arimathea, who begged from Pilate the body of the Lord Jesus for burial, and who for this cause was kept close in prison by the murderous and God-fighting Jews..."<sup>9</sup>

The narrative then goes on to discuss the fate of the two robbers that were crucified with Jesus on Golgotha. Joseph refers to them as Gestas and Demas. It also gives an alternative version of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (identified as the son of the brother of Caiaphas), and the trial of Jesus. Also:

- The description of the arrest and imprisonment of Joseph by the Jewish elders is told. As in the Gospel of Nicodemus, Joseph receives a visit in the jail cell from Christ, who saves him from the prison. The saved robber (Demas) is with Jesus.
- Joseph spends three days with Jesus in Galilee

The narrative ends with the words:

"And I, having seen these things, have written them down, in order that all may believe in the crucified Jesus Christ our Lord, and may no longer obey the law of Moses, but may believe in the signs and wonders that have happened through Him, and in order that we who have believed may inherit eternal life, and be found in the kingdom of the heavens. For to Him are due glory, strength, praise, and majesty for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Passing of Mary***

A third non-canonical source, entitled "The Passing of Mary" is also attributed to Joseph. Joseph appears as an attendant of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and is present at her ascension (which is described in great detail). Joseph is not identified as the author until the last paragraph:

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<sup>8</sup> "Gospel of Nicodemus", translated by Alexander Walker, Esq.

<sup>9</sup> "The Narrative of Joseph", translated by Alexander Walker, Esq.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

"I am Joseph who laid the Lord's body in my sepulcher, and saw Him rising again; and who, before the ascension and after the ascension of the Lord, always kept his most sacred temple the blessed ever-virgin Mary, and who have kept in writing and in my breast the things which came forth from the mouth of God, and how the things mentioned above were done by the judgment of God. And I have made known to all, Jews and Gentiles, those things which I saw with my eyes, and heard with my ears; and as long as I live I shall not cease to declare them." <sup>11</sup>

## Legendary Accounts

While Joseph of Arimathea is a fairly minor character in the canonical Gospels (and even in the non-canonical sources), he achieves superstar status in later legendary accounts, most which date to the Middle Ages. In Medieval legend, Joseph is, variously, the founder of the first Christian Church in England, the keeper of the Holy Grail, the uncle of Mary Mother of Jesus, and the ancestor of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Sir Galahad. No Biblical figure (other than Christ) equaled the amount of popular press attention given to Joseph of Arimathea during the Middle Ages. A look at the primary legends follows.

### *Founder of the first Christian Church in England*

The most enduring legend regarding Joseph of Arimathea regards his foundation of the first Christian Church in England at Glastonbury, in the first century (37 A.D. or 63 A.D., depending on the source). The traditional view of the Christianization of England is that it didn't occur until the missionary efforts of St. Augustine late in the 6th century (other legends discuss a missionary journey to England in the 2nd-century, by Faganus and Deruvianus).



A March, 1997 stamp (copyright The Post Office 1997) from Great Britain, commemorating the traditional founder of Christianity in England - St. Augustine

The distinction between the Arimathean legend and the traditional Augustine view is a significant one - if Joseph really did bring Christianity to England as early as 37 A.D., it means that Christianity in England predates Christianity in other Western European nations such as Spain and France - and may even pre-date the establishment of Christianity in Rome itself. Thus, the claims of the papacy to be descended from the first apostolic church could be called into question.

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<sup>11</sup> "The Passing of Mary", translated by Alexander Walker, Esq.



There are two basic types of sources concerning the legends connecting Joseph of Arimathea to England in general, and Glastonbury specifically - histories, and Medieval (and later) literature. We'll examine entries from both types of sources in this discussion.

The basic legend regarding Joseph of Arimathea, and the establishment of the first Christian Church in Glastonbury, Somerset, England goes something like this:

- In the year 63 A.D. (or, possibly, earlier) Joseph is sent by the Apostle Philip from Gaul to England, with 11 (or 12, in some accounts) disciples, one of whom is his son Josephes
- Joseph lands in the British west country (Somerset), and is granted some land on the Island of Yniswitrin ("Isle of Glass") by a local King, Arviragus
- He places his staff in the ground on Weary-All hill, and a hawthorn bush (the "Holy Thorn") grows on the spot
- Joseph & his followers create an ascetic community
- At the bidding of the archangel Gabriel, they build a church of daub and wattle in honor of the Blessed Mary, 31 years after the resurrection of Christ. The church is built on the site that will later become the great Benedictine monastery of Glastonbury (Glastonbury Abbey is also associated with being the burial place of King Arthur).



The stark remains of St. Mary's Chapel (1186), said to have been built on the exact spot where Joseph built the first daub and wattle church in 63/64 A.D.

- After the death of King Arviragus, his son and grandson (Coillus and Marius, respectively) grant 12 additional hides of land (about 120 acres per hide) to Joseph and his followers

- Joseph brought with him (variously) two cruets "filled with blood and sweat of the prophet Jesus", collected when Joseph took Jesus down from the cross, or the Cup from the Last Supper (a.k.a. the Holy Grail, or the Sangreal)
- After the death of Joseph and his followers, the site is abandoned, but the church remains standing, to later be restored (possibly, in 170 A.D. by legendary papal missionaries Faganus and Deruvianus)

"We need not believe that the Glastonbury legends are records of facts; but the existence of those legends is a very great fact." - E.A. Freeman<sup>12</sup>

So, is there any historical evidence to back up the aforementioned legends? There is, but much of it is disputed.

First, is there any early evidence that Britain was evangelized in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as early as the first century? Various Early Church Fathers are quoted to make this claim, including Irenaeus (c. 125 - 189 A.D.), Eusebius (260 - 340 A.D.), St. Hilary of Pottiers (300 - 367 A.D.), and Origin (185 - 254 A.D.). One reference that seems especially relevant is by Tertullian (155 - 222 A.D.):

"All the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britons — inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ, and of the Sarmatians, and Dacians, and Germans, and Scythians, and of many remote nations, and of provinces and islands many, to us unknown, and which we can scarce enumerate? In all which places the name of the Christ who is already come reigns, as of Him before whom the gates of all cities have been opened, and to whom none are closed, before whom iron bars have been crumbled, and brazen gates opened."<sup>13</sup>

The above passage would seem to clearly indicate that Britain had been "subjugated to Christ" long before the papal mission of St. Augustine in 597 A.D. (one of the traditional dates for the foundation of Christianity in Britain).

An early British reference to the possibility of 1st century Christianization of Britain comes from a 6th century monk/historian named Gildas the Wise (500? - 572? A.D.), who reportedly spent some years at Glastonbury Abbey:

"These islands received the beams of light - that is, the holy precepts of Christ - the true Sun, as we know, at the latter part of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in whose time this religion was propagated without impediment and death threatened to those who interfered with its professors." ("De Excidio Britanniae" ("The Ruin and Conquest of Britain"))<sup>14</sup>

As Tiberius Caesar died in 37 A.D., this reference places Christianity in Britain even before the typical 63 A.D. date assigned in the Arimathean legends!

So where does Joseph come into the picture? There may be a reference as early as the 6th century, from a "bard" named Melkin (or, variously, Melchinus or Maelgwn). If a source document of this reference existed, it would provide strong evidence linking Joseph to England. Alas, the first existing reference to the Melkin document is in a 14th century document written by monk John of Glastonbury.

<sup>12</sup> "Avalonian Quest", Geoffrey Ashe, p. 131

<sup>13</sup> "An Answer to the Jews", Tertullian

<sup>14</sup> "The Grail - Quest for the Eternal", John Matthews, p. 87

Here are the relevant parts of Melkin's "Historia de Rebus Britannicis". Note that Avalon is traditionally connected with Glastonbury:

"Avalon's island...  
Amid there Joseph in marble,  
Of Arimathea by name,  
Hath found perpetual sleep:  
He lies in a two-forked [bifurcated] line  
Next the south corner of an oratory  
Fashioned of wattles  
For the adorning of a mighty virgin  
By the aforementioned sphere-betokened  
Dwellers in that place, thirteen in all.  
For Joseph hath with him  
In his sarcophagus  
Two cruets, white and silver,  
Filled with blood and sweat  
Of the prophet Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

If we can be comfortable that this document actually existed (and wasn't a literary creation of John of Glastonbury), it establishes several key points, from a 6th-century source:

- Joseph came to Avalon (Glastonbury) with 12 followers
- An oratory made of wattles was created, and was dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus
- Joseph had with him two cruets, "filled with blood and sweat of the prophet Jesus"

The legend assumes more form by the 12th century writings of historian William of Malmesbury (c. 1095 - 1143 A.D.), who, in two books, wrote much of the history of Glastonbury Abbey. In his "Gesta Regum Anglorum" ("Acts of the Kings of the English"), William comments about the "Old Church" in Glastonbury:

"The church of which we are speaking - from its antiquity called by the Angles, by way of distinction 'Ealde Chiche', that is the 'Old Church' of wattle work at first, savoured somewhat of heavenly sanctity even from its very foundation, and exhaled it over the whole country, claiming superior reverence, though the structure was mean..."<sup>16</sup>

While William stops short of linking the "Old Church" with Joseph of Arimathea, or even the first century, he does verify its antiquity, and the fact that the original church was built of wattle. William goes on to suggest that the Old Church was built in the second century by papal envoys Faganus and Deruvianus, but adds the following comment:

"There are documents of no small credit, which have been discovered in certain places to the following effect: 'No other hands than those of the disciples of Christ erected the Church of Glastonbury'. Nor is it dissonant from probability: for if Philip, the Apostle, preached to the Gauls, as Freulfus relates in the fourth chapter of his seventh book, it may be believed that he planted the word on this side of the channel also."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67/68

<sup>16</sup> "St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury" by Lionel Smithett Lewis, p. 68

<sup>17</sup> "King Arthur's Avalon" by Geoffrey Ashe, p. 42

In the above passage, the possibility of 1st century erection of the Old Church by the "disciples of Christ" is mentioned, as well as the possibility that the Apostle Philip sent missionaries from Gaul.



William of Malmesbury came to the great Medieval Abbey of Glastonbury early in the 12th century to research his books "The Acts of the Kings of the English", and "The Antiquity of the Church at Glastonbury"

Several years after William wrote "The Acts of the Kings of the English", he wrote a second book which was dedicated to telling the history of Glastonbury Abbey. The book was called "De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae" ("The Antiquity of the Church at Glastonbury"), and here is yet another blazing controversy - the earliest extant copy of this document (written c. 1130) dates to approximately 1240 A.D. The passages below, which give the first detailed history of Joseph and the establishment of the church at Glastonbury, were added as an introductory chapter written in another hand. So, this is either the definitive history of Joseph of Arimathea in the British Isles, written by the prominent and respected historian William of Malmesbury, or a later interpolation by an unknown author!

"St. Philip...coming into the country of the Franks to preach, converted many to the Faith and baptized them. Working to spread Christ's word, he chose twelve from among his disciples, and sent them into Britain. Their leader, it is said, was Philip's dearest friend, Joseph of Arimathea, who buried the Lord.

Coming therefore into Britain 63 years from the Incarnation of the Lord, and 15 from the Assumption of Blessed Mary, they began faithfully to preach the Faith of Christ. But the barbaric king and his people, hearing such novel and unaccustomed things, absolutely refused to consent to their preaching, neither did he wish to change the traditions of his ancestors, yet, because they came from far, and merely required a modest competence for their life, at their request he granted them a certain island, surrounded by woods, thickets and marshes, called by the inhabitants Ynys-witrin...

Thereupon the said twelve saints residing in this desert, were in a very short time warned by a vision of the angel Gabriel to build a church in honour of the Holy Mother of God and Virgin Mary in a place shown to them from heaven, and they, quick to obey the divine precepts, completed a certain chapel according to what had been shown them...

And as it was the first in the kingdom, God's Son distinguished it with greater dignity by dedicating it in honour of his Mother...

The said saints continued to live in the same hermitage for many years, and were at last liberated from the prison of the flesh. The place then began to be a covert for wild beasts - the spot which had before been the habitation of saints - until the Blessed Virgin was pleased to recall her house of prayer to the memory of the faithful..."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Avalonian Quest" by Ashe, p. 56

As can be seen, most of the basic legend of Joseph in the British Isles is contained in this (possibly interpolated) passage from "De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae". Only the legend of the Grail (see next section), and the Glastonbury Holy Thorn is missing.

The next major chronicler of the Joseph legends was 14th century monk John (Seen) of Glastonbury, who seemingly gathered all of the extant sources regarding Joseph of Arimathea's connection to his Abbey, and published them in one book, entitled "Cronica sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie" ("Chronicle of the Antiquities of the Church of Glastonbury"). A sample:

"In the fifteenth year after this he went to St. Philip in Gaul, taking with him Josephes, whom the Lord had consecrated a bishop in the city of Sarath...Then the apostle, desiring that the word of God should be spread abroad, sent twelve of his disciples to preach in Britain, placing at their head his favourite disciple Joseph of Arimathea, together with his son Josephes..."<sup>19</sup>

It was John, you'll recall, that published the 6th century Melkin poem that mentions the two cruets filled with the blood and sweat of Christ. The Grail has not yet made its way into the story.

The last part of the basic legend (sans the Grail, which deserves its own section) regards a hawthorn bush which grows in Glastonbury, now called the Holy Thorn. The bush (or tree, really) has the interesting property of blooming twice a year - in May, and at Christmas time! The type of thorn ("crataegus oxyacantha praecox"), seems to be native to Syria. Like many other things in Glastonbury, the tree is an unexplained anomaly.

The Holy Thorn isn't connected to the Joseph legend until the publishing of a 1520 anonymous poem (published by Richard Pynson, the royal printer), entitled "The Lyfe of Joseph of Armathia". While the poem discusses the hawthorn and its properties, the story of it growing from Joseph's staff is missing. (Note: this poem also refers to Joseph bringing two cruets with him, containing the blood of Christ - "Thys blode in two cruettes/Joseph dyd take". No Cup from the Last Supper, yet).

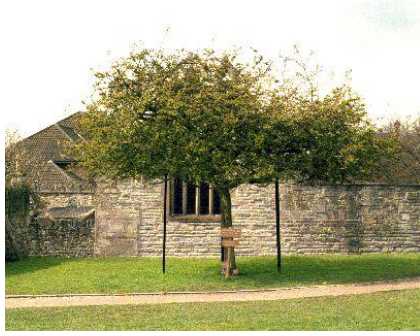
In 1677, a Dr. Plot refers to the thorn, and ascribes its planting to Joseph of Arimathea. Finally, in 1716, the full story of Joseph placing his staff on a hill at Glastonbury ("Wirral Hill", because Joseph and his companions were "Weary-All"), and having the thorn grow on the spot is published.

The original thorn was destroyed by Puritan fanatics during the English Civil War, but cuttings from the original have grown into trees in both Glastonbury, and other parts of England. And they continue to bloom at approximately Christmas each year.

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<sup>19</sup> Matthews, p. 69



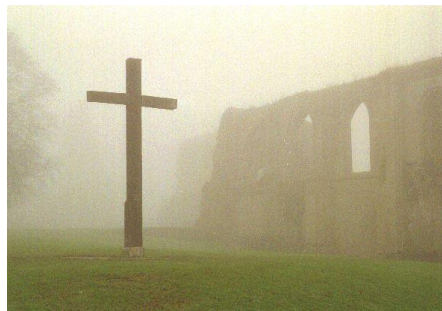


One of the surviving cuttings from the original Holy Thorn - at Glastonbury Abbey

The claim of England as the first Christianized Western country was taken quite seriously in the middle ages. The claim was advanced at four church councils: the Council of Pisa (1409), Constance (1417), Sienna (1424) and Basle (1434). Glastonbury was known as "Roma Secunda" in some circles during the Middle Ages.

Queen Elizabeth II, in 1965, erected a wooden cross at Glastonbury with the following inscription:

"The cross. The symbol of our faith. The gift of Queen Elizabeth II marks a Christian sanctuary so ancient that only legend can record its origin."



The Mists of Avalon - the cross at Glastonbury, erected by Queen Elizabeth in 1965

### ***Joseph and the Holy Grail***

Perhaps the most enduring legend regarding Joseph of Arimathea - his connection with the Cup from the Last Supper, or the Holy Grail - is even harder to pin down than the other parts of the Joseph-in-England legends. There is no reference connecting Joseph to the Cup from the Last Supper in either the canonical Gospels, the non-canonical sources ("Gospel of Nicodemus", "The Narrative of Joseph"), or the historical sources (William of Malmesbury, Melkin, John of Glastonbury).

If one accepts the validity of the aforementioned 6th-century document by Melkin entitled "Historia de Rebus Brittannicis", as translated by John of Glastonbury in the 14th century, Joseph is early identified, not with the Cup from the Last Supper, but rather:

For Joseph hath with him  
In his sarcophagus  
Two cruets, white and silver,  
Filled with blood and sweat

Of the prophet Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

The references connecting Joseph to the Holy Grail (and the later Arthurian-era quests for said Grail) are all from Medieval and later romances and literature. Thus, from a historical standpoint, they are the most difficult to verify.

The Medieval romances in question all have to do with one basic topic - the stories of King Arthur, and his band of chivalrous knights. Joseph of Arimathea comes into the stories as a key character, because of one of the greatest subplots in the Arthurian epics - the quest for the Holy Grail.



There is great argument over exactly what the Holy Grail is - a cup? a chalice? a stone? There are also learned treatises on the possibility that the model for the Holy Grail predates Christianity. However, many of the Medieval romances squarely associate the Holy Grail with the Cup from the Last Supper of Christ, and further identify that it was Joseph of Arimathea that brought the Cup to England in the first place (otherwise, there wouldn't have been anything in England for Arthur and his knights to search for!)

The first major romance that explicitly links Joseph to the Grail is Robert de Boron's (or Borron) "Joseph d'Arimathie" (c. 1190). Robert de Boron seems to start with the account from the Gospel of Nicodemus, and then adds his own slant to the story. Essentially:

- After Jesus is stabbed with the spear on the cross, Joseph captures some of the blood of Jesus in the Cup from the Last Supper (the Holy Grail)
- Joseph is imprisoned, and is taught the mysteries of the Grail by Christ himself
- Joseph spends 42 years in prison, and is released by Vespasian (!)
- Joseph and a group of fellow Christians travel to an unspecified foreign country. Joseph builds a table symbolic of the table used at the Last Supper. The place for Judas is kept empty - it will be filled someday by a descendent of one of the companions of Joseph (Brons). (In later romances, this seat will be called "The Siege Perilous", and will be occupied by Sir Galahad).
- A companion of Joseph (Petrus) travels to the "Vales of Avaron" (which, for the purposes of this discussion, is assumed to refer to Avalon-Glastonbury) to prepare a place for the Grail
- The Grail as the "Ark of the New Covenant"

Other Medieval romances with similar themes include:

- "Grand Saint Grail" (c. 1200)
- "Parzival", by Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1207)

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<sup>20</sup> Matthews, p. 67/68

- "Queste del Saint Graal (The Vulgate Cycle)" (c. 1210). In this account, the character of Sir Galahad appears for the first time. Galahad is identified in various romances as being descendent from Joseph of Arimathea (through his father, Sir Lancelot). Galahad is the only truly pure knight in the world, and is the only knight that can occupy the "Siege Perilous" on Arthur's Round Table. He is the only knight that completely attains the Grail.



"Sir Galahad, receives the Grail from Joseph of Arimathea"<sup>21</sup>

- "Perlesvaus" (1225)
- "Le Morte D'Arthur" ("The Death of Arthur"), by Sir Thomas Mallory (published 1485)

As "Le Morte D'Arthur" is the most well-known of the English versions of the Arthurian romances, I've compiled several quotes that refer to Joseph:

"And here followeth the noble tale of the Sangreal, that called is the holy vessel; and the signification of the blessed blood of our Lord Jesu Christ, blessed mote it be, the which was brought in to this land by Joseph of Aramathie." - Introduction to Book 13 (Mallory, p. 370)

"...it befell after the passion of our Lord Jesu Christ thirty-two year that Joseph of Aramathie the gentle knight, the which took down our Lord off the holy Cross, at that time he departed from Jerusalem with a great party of his kindred with him...And so by fortune they came into this land, that at that time was called Great Britian...And after that all the people were turned to the Christian faith." (Mallory, p. 380)

"...ye have heard much of Joseph of Aramathie, how he was sent by Jesu Christ into this land to teach and preach the holy Christian faith...and ever he was busy to be there as the Sangreal was..." (Mallory, p. 393)

"And therewithal beseemed them that there came a man, and four angels from heaven, clothed in likeness of a bishop, and had a cross in his hand; and these four angels bare him in a chair, and set him down before the table of silver whereupon the Sangreal was; and it seemed that he had in middes of his forehead letters the which said, See ye here Joseph the first bishop of Christendom...Then the nights marvelled, for that Bishop was dead more than three hundred year tofore. O knights, said he, marvel not, for I was sometime an earthly man." (Mallory, p. 442)

Note that Mallory is not at all shy about proclaiming that Joseph is "the first bishop of Christendom"!

Another famous literary reference that links Joseph to the Grail is from Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1859 "Idylls of the King" (idylls means "poems" or "songs"):

...What is it?

<sup>21</sup> Library of Congress LC-USZ62-133673 (b&w film copy neg.)

The phantom of a cup that comes and goes?

Nay, monk! what phantom? answer'd Percivale.

The cup, the cup itself, from which our Lord  
Drank at the last sad supper with his own.

This, from the blessed land of Aromat-  
After the day of darkness, when the dead  
Went wandering o'er Moriah - the good saint,  
Arimathea Joseph, journeying brought  
To Glastonbury, where the winter thorn  
Blossoms at Christmas, mindful of our Lord,  
And there awhile it bode; and if a man  
Could touch or see it, he was heal'd at once,  
By faith, of all his ills. But then the times  
Grew to such evil that the holy cup  
Was caught away to Heaven, and disappear'd.

To whom the monk: "From our old books I know  
That Joseph came of old to Glastonbury,  
And there the heathen Prince, Arviragus,  
Gave him an isle of marsh whereon to build;  
And there he built with wattles from the marsh  
A lonely church in the days of yore...

Notice that by the 19th century, not only was the Cup closely associated with Joseph (and Glastonbury), but also the hawthorn bush that blooms at Christmas time. Also of note in Tennyson's poem is the reference to "From our old books I know..." Most Medieval references to Joseph, whether from histories or literature, claim to have received the basis of the story from old or ancient books. Perhaps the most romantic such assignation comes from the anonymous 1225 A.D. epic "Perlesvaus" (or "The High History of the Holy Graal"):

"The Latin from whence this history was drawn into Romance was taken in the Isle of Avalon, in a holy house of religion that standeth at the head of the Moors Adventurous, there where King Arthur and Queen Guenievre lie, according to the witness of the good men religious that are therein, that have the whole history thereof." <sup>22</sup>

There is a well at Glastonbury named "Chalice Well". Some esoteric legends say that Joseph placed the Cup somewhere in the depths of the well. The well is a curious place - 25,000 gallons of red-tinted water pass through the well area per day. The red tint, caused by a high iron content, caused the Well to at one time be called the "Blood Spring", or the "Blood Well", seemingly in reference to the Blood of Christ.



The legends associating Joseph with the Grail seem weaker, and harder to grasp hold of, than the legends regarding his establishment of the first Christian church in England, at Glastonbury. The Joseph/Grail connection are not mentioned in any

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<sup>22</sup> "The High History of the Holy Graal", p. 250 (mysticrealms.org.uk edition)

early histories, and first appear in 12th century romances. However, if the 6th-century Melkin account is accepted as legitimate, Joseph is, at least, early-on associated with bringing some kind of container ("two cruets") containing the blood of Christ with him to Glastonbury.

So could Joseph have ended up with the Cup from the Last Supper? Could he have had in his possession drops of the blood of Christ? Certainly, the Gospels identify Joseph as a disciple (although not apostle) of Christ, and he is also identified as having taken down the body of Christ from the cross, and preparing it for burial. Assumedly, Joseph would have come in contact with Christ's blood - remember, Christ was speared on the cross, and bled:

John 19:34 "Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." (NIV)

Thus, while the idea that Joseph could have had in his possession the Cup and/or a container with Christ's blood is not implausible, there is no early source to verify this legend.

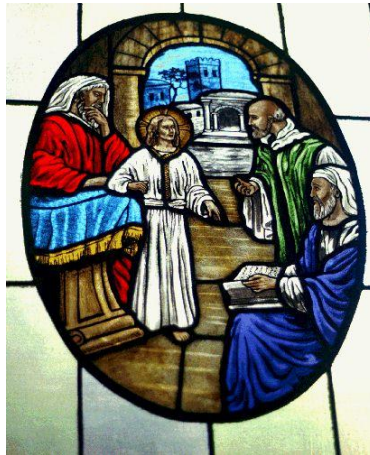
The table below traces the sources of the various legends regarding Joseph and his connection with England. Romances and other literary works are indicated in red.

Tracing the Legends		
Source	Date	Notes
Tertullian – <i>An Answer to the Jews</i>	193/216 A.D.	Britain was already “subjugated to Christ” in the late 2 <sup>nd</sup> century
Melkin the Bard	6 <sup>th</sup> century ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quoted by John of Glastonbury</li> <li>Joseph &amp; 12 followers in Avalon</li> <li>Wattled oratory</li> <li>Two cruets with blood and sweat of Christ</li> </ul>
Gildas <i>Ruin and Conquest of Britain</i>	c. 540	Britain received the “holy precepts of Christ...at the latter part of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (!)
William of Malmesbury – <i>Acts of the Kings of the English</i>	c. 1125	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Old Church, “of wattle work at first, savoured somewhat of heavenly sanctity even from its very foundation.”</li> <li>Mentions the possibility of foundation by the disciples of Christ, sent by the Apostle Philip</li> </ul>
William of Malmesbury – <i>The Antiquity of the Church at Glastonbury</i>	c. 1130	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story of Faganus &amp; Deruvianus, papal envoys, in 170 A.D., as builders of the Old Church</li> <li>Joseph referred to in a preface, written in another hand, dating to c. 1240. Almost the whole Joseph/Glastonbury legend is contained here, except for the Cup and the hawthorn</li> </ul>
Robert de Boron – <i>Joseph d’Arimathie</i>	c. 1190	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Joseph as keeper of the Cup from the Last Supper (the Holy Grail)</li> <li>The Cup brought to the “vales of Avaron”</li> </ul>

Tracing the Legends		
Source	Date	Notes
John of Glastonbury – <i>Chronicle of the Antiquities of the Church of Glastonbury</i>	14 <sup>th</sup> century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gathered all extant sources together to produce a book on Joseph</li> <li>Joseph as an ancestor of King Arthur</li> <li>Quotes Melkin manuscript (“two cruets”) – no mention of the Grail</li> <li>Joseph as an attendant of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and is present at her ascension</li> </ul>
Thomas Mallory – <i>Le Morte D’Arthur</i>	1485	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most famous English Arthurian romance</li> <li>Joseph as “first bishop of Christendom”</li> </ul>
<i>The Lyfe of Joseph of Armathia</i>	1520	Connects the Holy Thorn with Joseph
Alfred Tennyson – <i>Idylls of the King</i>	1859	Directly states that Joseph brought the Cup to Glastonbury

### ***And did those feet in ancient times...***

There is one more legend associated with Joseph of Arimathea that should be briefly explored, if for no other reason than its popularity. This is the legend that Joseph brought the boy Jesus to Cornwall and/or Somerset one or more times. This legend can't be directly traced to early histories or Medieval romances, although it appears that William Blake refers to it in his famous poem "Jerusalem" (see below).



There is a legend that Joseph of Arimathea, uncle of Mary, took Jesus to England. The canonical Gospels are mute regarding the activities of Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30.

The Bible is, of course, rather mysterious about the events that happened in the life of Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30 (when he began his ministry). As a result, many people have attempted on their own to define what happened in those lost years. India, North America, and England have all been posited as possibilities for where Jesus might have traveled as a youth/young adult. The Biblical references usually quoted to set the stage for theories regarding the travels of Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30 include:

- Luke 4:16/22 - Jesus preaches in Nazareth, where he doesn't seem immediately known, thus giving the impression that he had been away for a long time.
- John 1:29/31 - John the Baptist, although a relative of Jesus, seems not to recognize him when they meet in the river Jordan, thus causing some people to think that Jesus had been absent from Israel for a long time.

John 1:29/31 "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." (NIV)

The legends connecting Jesus and Joseph with Cornwall/Somerset go something like this:

- There is an Eastern tradition that Joseph was the Uncle of Mary, Mother of Jesus
- Further tradition states that Joseph was a merchant in the tin trade that flourished between the west coast of England, and Europe and the Mediterranean
- On one or more occasions, the legends state that Joseph brought his grandnephew Jesus with him on business trips to the mines in Cornwall/Somerset
- On one of those trips, Jesus and Joseph built the church in Glastonbury (later to be used by Joseph and his followers after the death and resurrection of Jesus). Jesus dedicated the church to his Mother (the niece of Joseph of Arimathea).

As stated earlier, there are no direct early historical, or even literary references to these legends. The earliest reference of any kind may be in William Blake's famous poem, "Jerusalem", which is now a much-loved hymn in England (watch the last 10 minutes of the movie "Chariots of Fire" to hear it sung):

Jerusalem (William Blake, 1757-1827)

And did those feet in ancient times  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the Holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?  
And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among those dark Satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!  
Bring me my arrows of desire!  
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of Fire!  
I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till I have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.

There is some background and indirect evidence that just prevent the legend from being totally implausible:



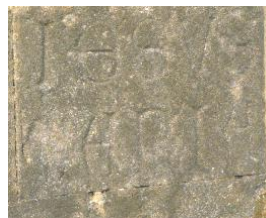
- There is no question that there were tin mines in Western Britain in the early first century. And there is no question that the tin was traded with other parts of the Continent. (For example: Greek historian Herodotus (5th century B.C.) refers to the tin trade in the "Isles of the West" (Capt, p. 23))
- Proponents of the legend point to several place names in Cornwall/Somerset that have Jewish names, or that refer directly to Christ ("Jesus Well", "Penzance" ("Holy Headland") etc.)
- There are several ancient references that claim that the church at Glastonbury was either built by God himself, or dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus by Jesus himself. Some examples include:

"There is on the confines of western Britain a certain royal island, called in the ancient speech Glastonia...In it the earliest neophytes of the Catholic rule, God guiding them, found a church, not built by the art of man, they say, but prepared by God himself for the salvation of mankind, which church the heavenly Builder himself declared - by many miracles and many mysteries of healing - he had consecrated to himself and to holy Mary, Mother of God." - from "Life of St. Dunstan", c. 1000<sup>23</sup>

"...the Son of God was pleased to grace it with particular dignity, dedicating it Himself in honour of His Mother..." - from the possibly interpolated c. 1240 edition of "De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae", by William of Malmesbury<sup>24</sup>

"The church of which we are speaking...savoured somewhat of heavenly sanctity even from its very foundation, and exhaled it over the whole country, claiming superior reverence, though the structure was mean..." - "Acts of the Kings of the English", by William of Malmesbury<sup>25</sup>

Proponents of the legend also point to the mysterious stone on the south side of the Old Church (St. Mary's Chapel), which says "Jesus Maria".



## Conclusions

Joseph of Arimathea remains an enigmatic character. While he appears to be a fairly minor player in the canonical Gospels, he, not Mary, Mother of Jesus, not Mary Magdalen, and not any of the apostles, is entrusted with the act of taking Jesus down from the cross, respectfully preparing him for burial, and donating a tomb for the body. These facts would seem to speak of some special significance accorded to Joseph's role as a disciple of Christ.

That being said, Joseph seems an unlikely character to have become one of the centerpieces of the Medieval literary craze which became the Arthurian legends. Likewise, he seems an unlikely character to create a story around as the founder of the Christian church in England. Why not pick Paul, or Philip, or another better known disciple than Joseph of Arimathea, if one was going to make up the story?

<sup>23</sup> "Avalonian Quest", Ashe, p. 23)

<sup>24</sup> Matthews, p. 97

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, p. 68



So, are the stories and legends true? In my personal opinion - The idea that Joseph brought a small band of followers to Britain in the 1st century, and started a church at Glastonbury seems reasonably credible (although not absolutely provable). The idea that, as the undertaker of Jesus, he might have saved some drops of blood also seems, at least plausible (but again, not provable). The legends regarding Joseph's connection with the Cup from the Last Supper, the hawthorn bush at Glastonbury, and bringing the boy Jesus to Cornwall/Glastonbury seem (in decreasing order) less credible.

However, I can speak quite personally that Glastonbury is a very eerie place, and if miracles could occur anywhere in the world, I could believe that they could occur there.

## Appendix: King Arthur: Fact and Legend

With the possible exception of Henry VIII, King Arthur is the most famous monarch in the history of England. The basis for countless books, poems, and musical compositions, Arthur has inspired some of the world's greatest cultural figures to compose some of their greatest works, such as Richard Wagner (*Parsival*), Alfred Lord Tennyson (*Idylls of the King*), Sir Thomas Mallory (*Le Morte D'Arthur*), and, more recently, Lerner and Loewe (*Camelot*), T.S. Eliott (*The Once and Future King*), and Mary Stewart (*The Crystal Cave*, and others). So King Arthur is a popular figure in literature – but did he actually exist?

After several hundred years of stable Roman rule, Britain in the 5th century was left exposed to attack. As the decaying Roman Empire began pulling back its borders, assaults on Britain came from both the North (Picts), and the Southeast (Saxons). It was into this power vacuum that our hero emerged, halting the advance of the invading forces in their tracks for over 50 years. If Arthur existed, he would have been the last British (or Celtic) king who successfully protected Britain from the invading hordes.

The legend of King Arthur, as we know it today, started with the publication of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, around 1135 A.D. The Medieval and later romances concerning Excalibur, Merlin the Magician, Camelot, Lancelot *et al* all are descendants of Geoffrey of Monmouth's book, which, in today's parlance, we might refer to as a "docudrama", in the sense that some of what he wrote was based on historical fact, and some of it was the product of a fertile imagination. Unfortunately, Geoffrey didn't leave us a guide as to what was real, and what was fantasy in his book.

To find the historical Arthur, we must look for older, more contemporary documents. And there is the rub - Arthur was a figure of the Dark Ages (late 5th century, early 6th century), and very little printed information from that period is extant. However, there are some pre-1135 A.D. snippets of information about Arthur.

A Welsh monastic chronology, the Easter Annals, written in the early 9th century, lists the following for the early 6th century:

Year 516: The Battle of Badon in which Arthur bore the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Britains were the victors.<sup>26</sup>

Year 537: Strife [or battle] of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut [Mordred] perished.<sup>27</sup>

Also from the early 9th century is the *History of the Britons*, by a Welsh monk named Nennius:

Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against them [Saxons? Picts?]. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their Leader of Battles, and was as often conqueror. The first battle in which he was engaged, was at the mouth of the River Glein. The second, third, fourth and fifth, were on another river, by the Britons called Dubglas, in the region Linnuis. The sixth, on the River Bassas. The seventh in the Celidon Wood, which the Britons call the Battle of Coit Celidon. The eighth was near Guinnion Castle, where Arthur bore the image of the Holy Virgin, mother of God, upon his shield, and through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Mary, put the heathens to flight, and pursued them the whole day with great

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/annales.html>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

slaughter. The ninth was at the City of the Legion, which is called Cair Lion. The tenth was on the banks of the River Trath Tribruit. The eleventh was on the Mountain Breguoin [Agned], which we call the Battle of Bregion. The twelfth was a most severe contest, when Arthur penetrated to the hill of Badon. In this engagement, nine hundred and sixty fell by his hand alone, no one but the Lord affording him assistance. In all these engagements the Britons were successful. For no strength can avail against the will of the Almighty.<sup>28</sup>

Another repository of Arthurian information may be found in a 5th century British king named Riothamus. Some of the actions attributed to Riothamus sound suspiciously Arthurian, such as a military expedition to France. Geoffrey Ashe postulates that "Riothamus" is a title meaning "High King", rather than a name. If this is true, then Arthur may have been Riothamus, or the "High King".

So while the Arthur of legend may have never existed, there is reasonable evidence that a 5th century Celtic chieftain or military leader successfully fought off the invading Saxons. This, then, is the Arthur of history.

As mentioned in the Joseph of Arimathea material in this course, many people feel that King Arthur was buried outside the "old church" at Glastonbury Abbey, and discovered in 1191. Sir Thomas Malory in *Le Morte D'Arthur* introduces a slightly mystical conclusion to Arthur's life:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say, here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: HIC JACET ARTHURUS REX, QUONDAM REX QUE FUTURUS.<sup>29</sup>

Whether we look at Arthur as a historical figure fighting the Saxons in 5th/6th century Britain, or as the Arthur of Romance, with the magical sword Excalibur, King Arthur continues to fascinate people 1400 years after his era.

## ***Sites associated with Arthur***

### **Cadbury**

The most likely claimant to being King Arthur's Camelot is the 18 acre hill fort Cadbury Castle, located about 15 miles southeast of Glastonbury Abbey. The climb to this iron age hill fort is long and arduous, and can be very muddy. It is obviously an excellent site for a fort! And in the early morning mist, it is easy to imagine Dark Age knights riding out through the entrance to do battle ...

There have long been local legends connecting Cadbury Castle with Camelot. In 1542, historian John Leland wrote:

"Right at the South end of South Cadbury Church stands Camelot. This was once a noted town or castle, set on a real peak of a hill, and with marvellously strong natural defences..... Roman coins of gold, silver and copper have been turned up in large quantities during ploughing there, and also in the fields at the foot of the hill, especially on the East side. Many other antiquities have also been found, including at Camelot, within memory, a silver horseshoe. The only information local people can offer is that they have

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/sources/nennius.html>

<sup>29</sup> *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Malory, Book 21, Chapter 7

heard that Arthur frequently came to Camelot."<sup>30</sup>

Archaeologists and scientists tended to ignore the legends, stating that the fort was abandoned long before the Arthurian epoch in the 5th century. However, a late-60s archaeological expedition, which included noted Arthurian historian Geoffrey Ashe, unearthed multiple artifacts and building foundations dating from the 4th to 6th century, on the summit of the hill. The debate rages on ...



On a clear day, one can see the Glastonbury Tor from the peak of Cadbury Castle.

### Old Sarum Castle

Old Sarum Castle, near Salisbury, is the possible site of Arthur's last battle, the Battle of Camlann. According to Malory in *Le Morte D' Arthur*:

And then King Arthur drew him with his host down by the seaside, westward toward Salisbury; and there was a day assigned betwixt King Arthur and Sir Mordred, that they should meet upon a down [hill] beside Salisbury.<sup>31</sup>



Old Sarum Castle, showing earthen walls and the remains of a later Norman Castle

### Pomparles (Perilous) Bridge

This bridge over the River Brue, between Glastonbury and Street (Somerset), may have been the site where Sir Bedivere cast Excalibur into the water after the death of Arthur at the Battle of Camlann (the movie *Excalibur* has a wonderful depiction of this moment, showing Arthur's funeral barge disappearing into the Mists of Avalon).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/archaeology/cadbury.html>

<sup>31</sup> *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Mallory, Book 21, Chapter 3

According to Mallory:

Therefore, said Arthur unto Sir Bedivere, take thou Excalibur my good sword, and go with it to yonder water side, and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou there seest...<sup>32</sup>

After Bedivere throws Excalibur into the lake (after two false starts), he returns and places Arthur on a barge:

...and there received him three queens with great mourning; and so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head...And so then they rowed from the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all those ladies go from him.<sup>33</sup>

Today, the River Brue is but a trickle, but in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the whole area would have been flooded, and Avalon (Glastonbury) would have been an island (isle).



Pomparles Bridge, near Glastonbury

## Glastonbury

Glastonbury has several Arthurian associations:

- Legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail here in 63 A.D.
- The Isle of Avalon, where Arthur was taken after his death, may have been Glastonbury. According to Mallory, the hermitage to which Arthur was taken after his death was “a chapel beside Glastonbury”.
- The graves of Arthur and Guinevere were said to have been discovered by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey in 1191, and re-interred in front of the High Altar of the monastery church

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, Book 21, Chapter 5

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, Book 21, Chapter 5

## Chalice Well and Glastonbury Tor

	
Chalice Hill in Glastonbury, taken from Chalice Well	A snow-covered Glastonbury Tor at sundown. Note the rings around the Tor. Some have postulated that the rings comprise a three-dimensional maze.

The area between these two hills (Chalice Hill and the Glastonbury Tor) may have been the location of the chapel that Arthur was taken to after his death. According to Mallory, Arthur was taken to a chapel “betwixt two holts hoar” (roughly, two ancient wooded knolls).

This area might also have been the site where Lancelot lived as a monk after the death of King Arthur. According to Malory:

And Sir Lancelot awoke, and went and took his horse, and rode all that day and all night in a forest, weeping. And at last he was aware of a hermitage and a chapel stood betwixt two cliffs; and then he heard a little bell ring to mass, and thither he rode and alit, and tied his horse to the gate, and heard mass. And he that sang mass was the Bishop of Canterbury.<sup>34</sup> (Note: The first Archbishop of Canterbury was St. Augustine in 597 A.D. Arthur died circa 537 A.D.)

In both cases, the described locations could describe the location of the later Glastonbury Abbey.

## Glastonbury Abbey

Below is a photo of the "Old Church" at Glastonbury Abbey, where legend says that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail in 63 A.D. The sign on the right marks the spot where Arthur's Grave was found in 1191 in a hollowed out oak log. The log was covered with an iron cross, which read:

Here lies buried the reknowned King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon.



St. Mary's (Joseph's) Chapel, Glastonbury

<sup>34</sup>Le Morte D'Arthur, Sir Thomas Mallory, Book 21, Chapter 10

In 1278, Arthur's bones were interred by King Edward I in a tomb located near the high altar of Glastonbury Abbey.



This sign used to mark the “Site of King Arthur’s Tomb”



View of Glastonbury Abbey with the Tor and Chalice Hill rising in the background.

## Tintagel

According to legend, King Arthur was born at Tintagel Castle on the coast of Cornwall. Mallory records:

Then spake Igraine...Merlin knoweth well, and ye Sir Ulfius, how King Uther came to me in the Castle of Tintagel in the likeness of my lord, that was dead three hours tofore, and thereby gat a child that night upon me. And after the thirteenth day King Uther wedded me, and by his commandment when the child was born it was delivered unto Merlin and nourished by him, and so I saw the child never after, nor wot not what is his name, for I knew him never yet.<sup>35</sup>

The two wonderful depictions of Tintagel Castle below were taken between c. 1890 and c. 1900, and were originally published by the Detroit Publishing Company

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<sup>35</sup> *Le Morte D'Arthur*, by Thomas Malory, Book 1, Chapter XXI



Tintagel Castle<sup>36</sup>



Tintagel Castle

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All photos by Robert Jones, unless otherwise noted

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## Notes

### About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. From 1984-2009, Robert worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.

Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study five times.



Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

Robert is available as a guest speaker on Christian history and theology topics in the Atlanta Metro area, and North Georgia. See <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/speaker.htm> for more information.

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Front Cover: 1) St. Mary's Chapel, Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset, England 2) Glastonbury Abbey 3) Communion Cup 4) Glastonbury Tor