

Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea (ar-i-me-thē a [Gk *Iōsēph apó Arimathaias*]) (Mt. 27:57, 59; Mk. 15:43, 45; Lk. 23:50; Jn. 19:38). In all four Gospels the man who steps forth to bury Jesus' body is Joseph of Arimathea. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph was undoubtedly a resident of Jerusalem at this time, but he was born and had lived previously in the Judean village of Arimathea.

Joseph is described in both Mk. 15:43 and Lk. 23:50f as being a member of the Sanhedrin, although he did not consent to their plot and action against Jesus. He was a rich man (Mt. 27:57) with good social standing (Mk. 15:43). His wealth is shown by the fact that he possessed a new tomb freshly cut out of stone. This undoubtedly indicates that he had made a permanent move from Arimathea to Jerusalem and expected to use this new tomb for his family burial plot in his new city. All four Gospels agree that Joseph became a disciple of Jesus, although John emphasizes that this was done secretly (Jn. 19:38). John seems to indicate that there were many such disciples (12:42). Mk. 15:43 and Lk. 23:51 disclose that he was "expecting the kingdom of God," thus indicating that he expected the Kingdom to come through Jesus. In addition, Luke stresses that he was a good and just man (Lk. 23:50). His desire to bury the dead despite personal risk shows that he was a pious Jew.

The four Gospels record that Joseph went to Pilate requesting that Jesus' corpse be given to him for proper burial. Although it was customary for the Romans to leave the crucified body on the cross for the birds to destroy, they seem to have respected the requirement of Dt. 21:23 that the bodies of executed criminals be taken down and buried. Normal Jewish practice allowed that such bodies be buried in a common tomb supplied by the court (Mish *Sanhedrin* vi.5). Joseph broke this practice by stepping

forth to bury Jesus in his own tomb. None of the Gospels reports that Jesus' followers had anything to do with the burial but only that they followed and observed the tomb in which he was laid (Lk. 23:55).

In the act of burial itself Joseph was accompanied by Nicodemus. Such an act brought with it the risk that neither man would be able to participate in the festivities of the Passover because of the ceremonial uncleanness caused by contact with a dead body (Nu. 19:11). It is probable that slaves performed the actual burial. According to Jewish custom the body was anointed with a spiced oil, in this case myrrh and aloes, wrapped with a linen sheet, and placed in the unused tomb. It was Jewish custom to lay a body on a shelf in the tomb until it had thoroughly decomposed. Then the skeleton was broken apart and placed in an ossuary, a small box for the bones, with an inscription to identify the deceased. The time for Jesus' burial was short, as only two or three hours remained between His death and the setting of the sun (the beginning of the sabbath).

NT apocryphal literature portrays Joseph as a friend of Pilate. The Assumption of Mary shows him as caring for Mary, Jesus' mother, from Christ's ascension until her death.

Legends from a later period report that Joseph of Arimathea was sent by the Apostle Philip from Gaul to England, that he built the first church in Glastonbury and became its patron saint, that he brought the Holy Grail to England, and that he freed Ireland from snakes. Many legendary details of his life are found in the fifth-century Gospel of Nicodemus.

D. W. Wead