

Appendix 11b: Joseph of Arimathea and the Line of Nathan-The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future

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Thus, we return once again to Joseph of Arimathea. Perhaps, besides being a Davidic lord and a noble council member, he was also a merchant prince—made rich through the trade of metal from Britain and, in turn, pottery and glass from the Middle East. Among his distinctions, this one would have given him the greatest standing with the Romans and may well have put him in regular contact with Pontius Pilate.

Furthermore, if all of this is true, it provides a good reason for Joseph's being in Britain after the death and resurrection of Christ. He could have been continuing in his former trade, all the while spreading word of what had happened in Judea. Or perhaps he was strictly an evangelist at this time—yet went to this place familiar to him, where he had important contacts.

Apostolic journeys

And there are other good reasons why Joseph and even others of Christ's original followers may have gone to Britain. When Jesus first commissioned His apostles, He told them: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6; compare 15:24). Now this likely applied in part to the spiritually lost Jews in the Holy Land. But it would seem to primarily identify the 10 "lost tribes" of Israel. Of course, Jesus later told His apostles to take His message to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20), and salvation was opened to the gentiles (Acts 10–11). But still the gospel message was to be "for the Jew [Israelite] first and also for the Greek [gentile]" (Romans 1:16). All of this seems to indicate that the primary target for evangelism was to be the Israelites. Even Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, was also commissioned to preach to "the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

In any case, to the people of Christ's day, "all nations" would certainly have applied to the breadth of the Roman Empire and beyond. And the lost tribes of Israel were at that time located along the entire length of the northern border of the Empire, stretching from Parthia and Scythia in the east all the way to Spain, France and Britain in the west.

In the early 300s, the renowned church historian Eusebius wrote in his well-known History of the Church: "The holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the whole world. Thomas, tradition tells us, was chosen for Parthia, Andrew for Scythia, John for Asia [Minor], where he remained till his death at Ephesus. Peter seems to have preached in Pontus, Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia [Minor], to the Jews [or, rather, Israelites] of the Dispersion" (Book 3, chap. 1). Paul specifically mentioned his intention to go to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). Might he have gone?

In another of his works Eusebius wrote, “The apostles passed beyond the ocean to the isles called the Britannic Isles” (*Demonstratio Evangelica* or *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3, chap. 7). He didn’t mention which apostles, but is it so fantastical to imagine that some did? After all, going from Judea to Britain was nothing more than traversing the Empire. Consider that myriads of people moved from the eastern United States to the western territories in pioneer days by wagon. And travel was accomplished by stagecoach. Yet travel from the Holy Land to Britain would have been far easier and faster—because the distance could be covered over water by sailing ship and over land by Roman roads, which were well maintained.

The earliest generally acknowledged historian of Britain, Gildas the Wise, already mentioned, writing around 550, stated, “We certainly know that Christ, the true Son, afforded His light, the knowledge of His precepts, to our Island in the last year of Tiberius Caesar” (*De Excidio Britanniae* or *On the Ruin of Britain*). Tiberius died in March of A.D. 37. So Gildas says that within six years of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the gospel was already planted in Britain. This was well before the apostles dispersed throughout the known world and established congregations outside the Holy Land. But it does correspond to the terrible persecution brought on the church by Paul prior to his conversion around A.D. 35.

But was Joseph of Arimathea among those who arrived? In four Catholic councils of the early 1400s, it was determined that France and Spain had to yield in points of antiquity and precedence to Britain, as its church was founded by Joseph of Arimathea immediately after the death and resurrection of Christ.

Legends in perspective

Catholic Cardinal Cesare Baronius, who was appointed curator of the Vatican Library in 1597, mentions Joseph in an interesting context. In his monumental *Annales Ecclesiastici* (*Annals of the Church*), under the year A.D. 35, he describes a sea voyage in a boat “without oars” by the disciples Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Martha, their servant Marcella and another disciple name Maximinus—who eventually put ashore at Marseilles in southern France (Vol. 1, year 35, sec. 5). For this information Baronius footnotes “Acts of Magdalen and associated works.”

Indeed, as David Mycoff states in his introduction to *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Martha: A Medieval Biography* (1989), this basic story was evidently contained in a number of documents going back to at least the ninth century (pp. 5-6)—many of which have Lazarus and Mary Magdalene then spreading the gospel in southern France.

These and other traditions came together to form the document he translates in his above book—attributed in a manuscript from around 1408 to the ninth-century abbot Rabanus Maurus (p. 7), but believed by scholars, including Mycoff, to date from the late 12th century (p. 10). This document lists the passengers of the boat as “Maximinus the archbishop, along with the glorious friend of God, Mary Magdalene, her sister the blessed Martha, and the blessed archdeacon Parmenas, and the bishops Trophimus and Eutropius, together with the rest of the leaders of the army of Christ” (chap. 37, lines 2141-2145).

Baronius goes a step further. Citing in a footnote what he refers to as a “historical English manuscript that is held in the Vatican library,” he says that this party separated, some then accompanying “Joseph of Arimathea the noble decurio” to Britain. While the cardinal had not originally mentioned him with the others, it is interesting that Joseph shows up in the narrative (sec. 5).

But did this really happen? There’s no way to know for sure of course. It does fit the time frame of Gildas regarding the gospel coming to Britain at the end of Tiberius’ reign. Yet there are problems with the scenario. For one, the traditions connecting Lazarus to southern France are rather questionable—likely to have actually derived from a fifth-century bishop of the area named Lazarus who spent time in the Holy Land before returning to live out his days in Marseilles (see “St. Lazarus of Bethany,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1910, Vol. 9, Online Edition, 1999, www.newadvent.org/cathen). However, it is possible that this person was intentionally following in the footsteps of his namesake, so to speak.

Furthermore, one might wonder why the Catholic councils of the early 1400s considered the British church to be older than that of France if evangelizing began first in southern France? This reason alone makes it appear that Joseph was not associated with the “boat without oars” at the time of these councils. What seems more likely is that Baronius conflated two traditions into one—or took his information from an earlier conflation. This does not take away from Joseph’s early arrival in Britain. Indeed, it is remarkable that, even considering these traditions regarding Lazarus and Mary Magdalene in southern France at an early date, the church councils still decided that Joseph’s early presence in England gave Britain the honor of oldest congregation outside the Holy Land.

Certain of the apostles are also reported by tradition to have visited Britain over the course of the next few decades following Tiberius’ death—among them Simon the Zealot, Peter and Paul. Yet of all the traditions, Joseph’s are the most prominent, mainly because of their involvement with the “holy grail” of the Arthurian romances.

What was the grail? There are several interpretations. It is likely that the grail legends sprang from a number of sources that became interwoven, some of them pagan. Yet the most popular form of the grail in legend is that of the sacred cup of the “last supper,” with which Joseph is said to have caught drops of Christ’s blood from the cross—and that drinking from this cup brought healing and perpetual life. Perhaps we can recognize in all this a rather obvious corruption of something scriptural.

On the night before His death, at His final Passover with His disciples, Jesus presented a cup of wine as representative of His “shed blood” for sin to initiate the New Covenant. He elsewhere said that whoever drank His “blood” would have eternal life. Consider that if Joseph conducted a Passover in the midst of a pagan land, word could easily have gotten around to this effect: “Joseph has a cup that has Jesus’ shed blood in it. If you drink from it, you’ll live forever.” Possibly in Joseph’s repeating of Christ’s words, “This cup is the new covenant in my

blood” (1 Corinthians 11:25), some mistakenly thought He was using the very same cup. And thus was perhaps born the grail legend—or at least the most well known version of it. Of course, we must be very cautious about accepting anything from legend as having any real substance—though legends do often contain a kernel of truth.

Reconciling dates

Returning to events, in what has already been referred to as the 13th-century interpolation in William of Malmesbury’s text we are told that Joseph crossed from France to Britain in the year 63 at the behest of the apostle Philip. While this could be entirely fictional, it could also indicate a genuine tradition, even if it were inserted into William’s text by the monks of Glastonbury, as scholars argue. It would not necessarily mean that Joseph had not earlier been in Britain. Indeed, perhaps he did arrive in Britain around 37 but later went back to the European continent and perhaps even all the way back to the Holy Land before later being sent out to Britain again. It could be that he even went more than once. This would not be too surprising considering that Joseph, if the traditions be true, had made such journeys numerous times before. It is also possible that Joseph didn’t come with a larger company until 63. Joseph could even have been a traveler on the “boat without oars” after all—albeit at a later time than he originally came to Britain.

E. Raymond Capt, favoring the early arrival of Joseph’s company in Britain and basing his comments on other recorded traditions, says: “Joseph and his companions were met by King Arviragus of the Silurian dynasty of Britain. He was the son of King Cunobelinus (the Cymbeline of Shakespeare) and cousin to the renowned British warrior, Caradoc, whom the Romans renamed ‘Caratacus’” (p. 39). Capt infers: “Undoubtedly, Arviragus and Joseph were well known to each other; Joseph’s business as a metal merchant for the Romans would have brought him in contact with the king on more than one occasion. Later, King Arviragus was to play an important role in the struggle against Roman dominance of Britain” (p. 39). According to the timeline laid out in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, Arviragus would have been king at this time. However, Arviragus, who is mentioned by the later Roman satirist Juvenal, seems to be a later king reigning in the time of the Emperor Domitian—around 50 years after Joseph’s supposed arrival (to better see the difficulty of sorting out the period, see Luke Stevens, *Speculations on British Genealogy and History in Antiquity and the Literary Transmission Thereof*, chap. 3: “The Heirs of Caratacus,” on-line at www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/2444/specs).

Yet some have proposed Arviragus as a title—similar to *ard righ*, the Irish Gaelic term meaning “high king”—and see it as applicable to all the early British high kings, including Caradoc. Others have made Arviragus and Caradoc cousins—even co-rulers. Of course, the various British tribes had their own lesser kings at this time. Exactly who was reigning when and where during this murky period of Britain’s past is uncertain, records then being a matter of bardic oral traditions.

Joseph is said to have converted “Arviragus” to Christianity, whichever ruler he was. Of course it could be that nothing of the sort actually happened—or perhaps he converted some important person and this was later reported to be the king. Amazingly, there is actually scriptural evidence, in light of known history, that seems to verify that some members of the British royal family of this period actually were converted—but whether this happened in Britain or not is uncertain.

Royal converts

When Paul later lived as a prisoner in Rome around the early 60s A.D., he mentions those of “Caesar’s household” who were members of the Church in Rome (Philippians 4:22). He also mentions Pudens, Linus and Claudia as prominent members there (2 Timothy 4:21). From Roman history it appears these verses are referring to the same people. Claudia, the adopted daughter of former emperor Claudius (who died in 54), had been converted—along with her husband Pudens and brother Linus.

Claudia, whose birth name was Gladys, was the daughter of the British high king Caradoc, who was captured in the Romano-British war. Her extraordinary beauty (celebrated later by the Roman poet Martial) and her keen intellect so affected Claudius that he adopted her as his own daughter. Her husband, Rufus Pudens Pudentius, commonly called Pudens, was a Roman senator and former aide-de-camp of Aulus Plautius, one of the most famous and brilliant military commanders of his day, and the commander Claudius sent to Britain in A.D. 43 to reduce the island to submission.

When did these people become Christians? Some say it was due to Paul’s preaching in Rome, but a good case is made that they were already Christians in Rome when Paul first arrived there (see Morgan, *St. Paul in Britain*). Thus, it is possible that they were converted previously while still in Britain—where Joseph of Arimathea is said to have interacted with the British high king.

In fact, Joseph is associated in the medieval romances with another British ruler called Brons, who is often identified as Bran the Blessed, believed by some to also have been a Christian convert. It should be mentioned that many scholars consider Bran to be mythical because of outlandish legends surrounding him—and they identify him as a Celtic god. Yet this is often the fallback of modern academia when it comes to sorting out ancient Celtic rulers—usually a reasonable position but one that often proves incorrect since there certainly were important people throughout those times, and traditions did accumulate around many of them. Bran appears in genealogies that many consider generally legitimate.

Morgan explains: “In the clan times . . . the preservation of a pedigree meant the preservation of all that was valuable in blood, station, and property. Without it a man was an outlaw; he had no clan, consequently no legal rights or status. Genealogies were guarded, therefore, with extreme jealousy, and recorded with painful exactitude by the herald-bards of each clan. On the public reception, at the age of fifteen, of a child into the clan, his family genealogy was

proclaimed, and all challengers to it commanded to come forward. Pedigree and inheritance, indeed, were so identified in the ancient British code, that an heir even in the ninth descent could redeem at a jury valuation any portion of an hereditary estate from which necessity had compelled his forefathers to part” (pp. 42-43).

Morgan then gives Caradoc’s genealogy from the Welsh Pantliwydd Manuscripts of Llansannor: “Caradoc ab [of] Bran Fendigaid [i.e., “the Blessed”] ab Llyr Llediath [Shakespeare’s King Lear], ab Baran [etc.] . . .” (p. 43). He also quotes the medieval Welsh Triads of the isle of Britain: “Bran, son of Llyr Llediath, who first brought the faith of Christ to the Cymry [the Welsh] from Rome, where he had been seven years a hostage for his son Caradoc, whom the Romans put in prison . . .” (p. 84). Further, Morgan quotes from an ancient Welsh proverb: “Hast thou heard the saying of Caradoc, the exalted son of the noble Bran? ‘Oppression persisted in brings on death’” (quoted on p. 85). Bran, then, was very likely the father of Caradoc and grandfather of Claudia and Linus—and, as mentioned, he appears to have interacted with Joseph of Arimathea.

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