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"EARLY CHRISTIANS-- BRITAIN"

by

Allen Manteufel and Clifford E. Anderson

How and when did Christianity first come to western Europe? Was it brought to England and France from Rome? Was Bishop Augustine of Canterbury (597-604) the first missionary to preach in England? The answers to these questions are fascinating and intriguing.

Contrary to orthodox historical beliefs, the gospel was not brought to England from Rome. It was first taken to the British isles c. 38 A.D. by Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy Jew who supervised the burial of Jesus Christ! Early traditions reveal that Joseph and his family left Palestine c. 35 A.D. with twelve disciples, and several other acquaintances. eleven prominent Christian friends. His companions included such famous Biblical personages as Lazarus, Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, Zachaeus, Mary Magdalene and Salome.

WHY WOULD JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA AND HIS FRIENDS WANT TO LEAVE PALESTINE AND GO TO FRANCE OR BRITAIN? Why did they not preach the gospel to their Jewish brethren in Palestine? Why did they not witness to the Jews scattered throughout many lands of the eastern Mediterranean? Why would they go to heathen peoples in the West, far off on the periphery of the Roman world?

There are at least FOUR IMPORTANT REASONS why Joseph of Arimathea and his associates left Palestine and went to France and Britain to preach the gospel.

PERSECUTION IN PALESTINE

First, Joseph and his friends left Palestine for the West because c. 35 A.D. a severe persecution broke out against Christians in the holy land. According to Acts 8:1, "there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

This persecution was aimed at those who had been close to Christ during his earthly ministry. This included Joseph of Arimathea, the man who assumed responsibility for the burial of Jesus. It also included Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from death: "The chief Priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus" (John 12:10-11). Mary and Martha were also on the "hit" list, because they were Lazarus' sisters and had ministered to Christ's needs (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-59).

ISRAELITES IN BRITAIN

Secondly, Joseph left Palestine to preach the gospel in the West because it was God's will that Israelites everywhere should hear the good news. "Go not into the way of the Gentiles..." Christ had told his disciples, "but go rather to the lost sheep [tribes] of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6). Following Jesus' instructions, his brother James addressed an epistle "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (James 1:1). The responsibility of witnessing to the Gentiles, it will be remembered, was given to the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:7).

Joseph and his companions travelled to France and Britain because there were many Hebrews in the area. Although it is true that the Anglo-Saxons (who were among the "lost tribes" of Israel) had not yet arrived in England, the earlier Celtic inhabitants of the West were generally of Hebrew blood. Some had fled to that region during and after the Exodus from Egypt. Others had come later, including those of the Trojan line of King Brutus who were descended from Judah through Zerah. And, as will be seen shortly, there was a group of Jewish merchants trading in France and England by the time of Christ.

Expelled from Palestine c. 35 A.D., Joseph of Arimathea and his associates sailed to Marseilles in southern France. Not long after they arrived, Philip the apostle asked Joseph and his friends to assist in preaching the gospel in France and England.

As Joseph travelled northwards up the Rhone river from Marseilles en route to Britain by way of Eritanny, France, many of his companions remained behind to preach in France. French traditions say that Lazarus remained in Marseilles (or returned later) and became its first bishop. Trophimus, it is said, became bishop of Arles near Marseilles. Mary Magdalene is reported to have settled and died in Aix of Provence; Martha in Tarascon. Many other members of the party settled at other towns in France where they bore witness of the Kingdom of God. Joseph himself stopped briefly in Limoges (central France) and Morlaix (Britanny) before sailing to England with his disciples.

JOSEPH AND THE TIN TRADE

Thirdly, Joseph of Arimathea went to France and England from Palestine because that is where his business connections were. The Scriptures reveal that Joseph was a rich man (Matt. 27:57). WHERE AND HOW DID HE ACQUIRE HIS WEALTH? What was the sources of his income?

Ancient accounts from western England reveal that Joseph was a tin merchant trading between Palestine and Britain. Greek and Roman authors-- such as Herodotus, Pytheas, Polybius and Didorus Siculus-- agree that tin, lead and copper were mined in the British isles, which were known as the "tin islands." From Britain tin was shipped across the English channel and then taken by pack animals to Marseilles on the Mediterranean coast of southern France. From Marseilles the tin was shipped to the eastern Mediterranean, including Palestine.

Joseph of Arimathea is said to have made repeated visits to Britain in connection with the tin trade. At Marazion ("bitter zion") in Cornwall, stories were told for centuries of the coming of Joseph to trade for tin. Such phrases as "Jew's houses," "Jew's tin," "Jew's leavings," and "Jew's pieces" were common terms in and around the Cornish tin mines. The oldest pits, containing smelted tin, were called "Jew's houses."

Indeed, one author notes that "amongst the old tin workers, who have always observed a certain mystery in their rites, there was a moment when they ceased their work and started singing a quaint song beginning, 'Joseph was a tin merchant'" (L. S. Lewis, St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury, 1955 ed., 51-52; Glastonbury-- Her Saints, 66).

DID JESUS VISIT BRITAIN?

Not only is Joseph of Arimathea said to have been a tin merchant trading to France and England, he is reported to have been the great uncle of Jesus Christ. It is generally agreed that Jesus' mother Mary was much younger than her husband Joseph and that she was widowed early in life. If Joseph of Arimathea was her uncle (younger brother of her father Heli), as eastern tradition suggests, then the guardianship of the holy family may have devolved upon him. This would explain why he assumed the responsibility of burying the body of Jesus after the crucifixion.

More than that, Joseph must have been a man of considerable influence in order to walk in on the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and ask for the body of a crucified criminal. Normally a criminal would have been buried ignominiously outside of the city. The Scriptures (Luke 23:50-52; Mark 14:53) reveal that Joseph of Arimathea was a "councillor." In other words, he was a member of the prestigious Jewish Sanhedrin, the elite national council of the Jews.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that Joseph is said to have taken Jesus (and Mary) to Britain on one or more of his business trips. This is quite possible; the Scriptures reveal very little about the life of Jesus from age three to age thirty.

The evidence for Jesus' visiting Britain comes mainly from the following sources: (1) four local but independent traditions in Cornwall and Somerset, (2) a vague statement by the Druidic bard Taliesin, (3) an ambiguous statement by the reputable monk Gildas, and (4) a startling letter written by Augustine, the first Catholic bishop of

Canterbury. This evidence is discussed by C. C. Dobson (Did Our Lord Visit Britain, as They Say in Cornwall and Somerset?) and H. A. Lewis (Christ in Cornwall).

The evidence, if authentic, indicates that Jesus not only visited Britain with his great uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, but that he also built a house there out of mud and wattle. When Augustine came to England in 597 A.D. to introduce Roman Catholicism, he was astonished by the remarkable traditions concerning Joseph of Arimathea and Jesus. Writing to Pope Gregory I in Rome, Augustine declared:

"In the western confines of Britain there is a certain royal island of large extent, surrounded by water, abounding in all the beauties of nature and necessities of life. In it the first neophytes of Catholic law, God beforehand acquainting them, found a Church constructed by no human art, but by the hands of Christ Himself, for the salvation of His people" (Dobson, 16-17).

Is the last sentence to be interpreted literally (that Christ built a church with his own hands)? Does Augustine's mention of western England refer to Cornwall and Somerset? Does his mention of the "royal island" refer to the island of Avalon that existed at Glastonbury before the marshes were drained? Are the "neophytes" to be identified as Joseph of Arimathea and his disciples?

If so, Augustine does seem to say that Jesus came to England and built a structure at Glastonbury. Augustine says it was a church; other traditions make it a house. Perhaps he built both, or used his house as a meeting hall. The reader will have to draw his own conclusions from the evidence available in the works cited.

JOSEPH'S WITNESS IN BRITAIN

Fourthly, Joseph went to Britain because he reportedly had a daughter living there. Joseph's daughter Anna was married to Belinus, younger brother of the famous British King Caratacus ("Caradoc" in Celtic). Caratacus, Anna's brother-in-law, was king of Siluria (south Wales), became high king ("Arviragus") over much of England in 43 A.D., and was elected commander-in-Chief ("Pendragon") over the English forces fighting Rome. Many writers make Caratacus and "Arviragus" two separate individuals, but there are good reasons for believing they are one and the same person.

Caratacus (Arviragus) is reported to have given Joseph of Arimathea twelve hides of land, one hide for each of Joseph's twelve disciples. A hide of land, in this part of England, amounted to about 160 acres, enough to support one man and his family. This land was located at Glastonbury (Avalon), in what later became the county of Somerset. There, on the beautiful crystal island of apples (Avalon), Joseph is stated to have built a Christian church. Over 1000 years later (1087-88), the great Domesday survey of England still credited the church of Glastonbury with twelve hides of tax-exempt land!

Joseph preached the gospel in Britain for about thirty eight years, from c. 38 A.D. till his death c. 76 A.D. As a result of his ministry-- and visits by Paul, Peter, Simon Zelotes, Aristobolus, and James the son of Alphaeus-- many of the British Celts were converted to Christianity. For further information about the ministry of the apostles, consult the article by Dr. Herman L. Hoeh, "Where Did the Twelve Apostles Go?" (Plain Truth, May, 1964).

WHO WERE THESE BRITISH CONVERTS? Were they simple folk or high class people? The amazing answer is, they included members of the royal family of South Wales as well as their humble subjects. Among the converts were such notable persons as Caratacus' sister Gladys, his daughters Eurgan and Gladys, and his second son Linus (who later became the first bishop of Rome following the martyrdom of Paul and Peter).

Caratacus himself, his other sons Cyllinus and Cynon, and his father Bran, were not converted until after they were taken captive to Rome. Bran-- who had resigned the throne of Siluria to his son Caratacus c. 36 A.D. in order to become Archdruid of the college of Siluria-- is said to have returned to England c. 58 A.D. Along with other members of the royal family who accompanied him, Bran helped Aristobolus preach the gospel in Wales.'

Some sources indicate that Joseph of Arimathea's son Joseph accompanied his father to England in 38 A.D. Other sources state that the younger Joseph was the son of Anna and hence the grandson of Joseph of Arimathea. Perhaps both Joseph and his daughter Anna had a son whom they named Joseph.

Whatever the truth, Anna and the younger Joseph intermarried with the native British aristocracy. They are said to have become the progenitors of famous English heroes of later times. Tradition makes Anna and Joseph the ancestors of King Arthur and the twelve knights of the round table, of the Tudor monarchs (who were of Welsh descent), and of Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine "the great."

JOSEPH AND THE HOLY GRAIL

What does the holy grail have to do with Joseph of Arimathea? What was the holy grail? How did it become famous? The answers to these questions are simple but interesting!

According to tradition, the holy grail was the cup or chalice used by Christ and the disciples at the last Passover supper. Joseph of Arimathea is stated to have taken the grail with him when he left Palestine and came to England. The chalice became a treasured heirloom of Joseph's family; it was moved several times over the centuries for safe keeping.

Eventually, after the holy grail had become lost, the people of Glastonbury began to look for it. The quest for the missing chalice may have occurred in the time of Joseph's illustrious descendent King Arthur (Late fifth and early sixth centuries). Possibly the search took place in the late twelfth century, when King Arthur's body was discovered, exhumed, and reinterred. In any event, the quest was attributed to King Arthur and his knights of the round table.

At the hands of superstitious and romantic bards, the quest for the holy grail became a symbolic enterprise as well as a real undertaking. It became a spiritual quest for holiness and salvation for those who undertook it. Many fantastic feats and exploits, patterned on those of pagan mythological heroes, were attributed to King Arthur, Joseph of Arimathea, and the knights of the round table.

THE SOURCES

HOW DO WE KNOW ALL THIS? Where does all this information come from? Is it reliable? The answer is, the information is as reliable as its sources. The data comes in bits and pieces from scores of old records. Much of it comes from medieval monks and chroniclers who had access to manuscripts long since destroyed or lost. In some cases the monks recorded oral traditions that had been passed down for centuries.

The most famous of these medieval sources are the two English chroniclers, William of Malmesbury (Antiquities of Glastonbury, c. 1121) and Geoffrey of Monmouth (History of the Kings of Britain, c. 1139). Another important source is Cardinal Caesar Baronius, the famous Catholic historian and hagiographer (Ecclesiastical Annals, 1588-1607), who discovered an old manuscript in the Vatican library dealing with this subject.

The information contained in these and scores of other sources has been assembled by a host of later writers. These include the nineteenth century English clergyman and scholar, Richard Williams Morgan. In his work, St. Paul in Britain, Morgan did much to publicize these forgotten or neglected traditions of English church history.

Following Morgan's pioneering work, a number of other ecclesiastical scholars became interested in the subject and published the results of their research. The most important of these church historians was the late vicar of Glastonbury, Lionel Smithett Lewis; he wrote three important works: The Apostolic Church of Britain,

Glastonbury-- Her Saints, and St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury. Other important contributions were made by: John W. Taylor (The Coming of the Saints), Andrew Gray (The Origin and Early History of Christianity in Britain) and Isabel Hill Elder (Joseph of Arimathea).

Many of these writers, it is true, were patriotic English clergymen who wished to prove that the English church was founded before the church of Rome. In other words, they wanted to prove that the church of England was independent of Rome. Nevertheless, they were careful scholars who handled the evidence with skill and caution. Although their theology is suspect because they retain many medieval errors and superstitions, they deserve a great deal of credit for their historical research.

MODERN CRITICS

Modern secular scholars, hostile to anything Biblical or supernatural, reject these traditions. They dismiss the stories as mere myths and inventions of medieval monks. They are skeptical, and rightly so, of the many miracles contained in many of the sources. For example, one fanciful source reports that Joseph of Arimathea and 150 companions crossed from France to England on Joseph's shirt!

The Catholic church today rejects these traditions, now that Britain is no longer under its spiritual jurisdiction. But it was not always that way. Indeed, a substantial amount of the evidence comes from Catholic sources. Moreover, the Catholic church councils of Pisa (1409), Constance (1414), Siena (1422) and Basel (1432) officially recognized the Glastonbury traditions. On the basis of

these traditions the church councils granted the British bishops precedence for purposes of protocol.

Therefore, in spite of the usual errors, discrepancies and vagueries found in early historical sources, it would seem that the hard core of the Glastonbury traditions is based on facts. In short, when due allowance is made for the superstitious and heroic mentality of medieval writers, it still appears that Christianity was indeed brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea and his disciples.

LOSS OF THE FAITH

On the basis of religious developments in England after the death of Joseph of Arimathea, it seems that the true faith ("primitive Christianity") outlived him by less than one hundred years. In the second half of the second century, Bishop Eleutherius of Rome had to send missionaries to England to instruct and baptize King Lucius (the great grandson of King Caratacus). By this time Roman Christianity had deviated markedly from the faith of Joseph of Arimathea.

During the Anglo-Saxon invasions of England (450-600 A.D.), Christianity in Britain became further paganized. In 601 Pope Gregory I instructed Mellitus, who ^{later became} ^Λ bishop of Canterbury, to compromise with heathen practices in order to make conversions easier. Finally, at the Council of Whitby in 664 A.D., King Oswiu of Northumbria chose Roman Catholicism as the official religion of England ^{rather} ^Λ than the decadent remains of Celtic Christianity.

MORE TO COME

In the next article the scene will shift from Britain to Rome, the capital of the Roman empire. In discussing the origin of Christianity in that city, British hostages in Rome will play an important role. As will be seen, these English converts had marital connections with prominent Romans-- Romans who had political connections with the household of Caesar!

NOTE: *

If this paper should be published, a word of thanks (acknowledgement) should be included on behalf of Mr. Kenneth C. Herrmann for helping me prepare this paper. Mr. Herrmann offered many constructive ideas and criticisms along the way and proof-read the final draft.

The original research and writing was done by Mr. Allen Manteufel, who died suddenly in September, 1978, at the age of 43. I completely revised and rewrote Allen's paper (which he had abandoned in 1974), adding a great deal of new material and deleting many details that can be found elsewhere.

Clifford B. Anderson

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HOUSE OF DAVID AND THE BRITISH ROYAL FAMILY OF SILURIA

Adapted from the following sources:

The Holy Scriptures. (Matt. 1:1-16; Luke 3:23; I Chron. 2:4-6) etc.

W. M. H. Milner, The Royal House of Britain

L. S. Lewis, St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury

