

Who was Joseph of Arimathea?

Joseph of Arimathea was a biblical figure who played an important role in the burial of Jesus Christ. His account can be found in each of the four Gospels: Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53; and John 19:38-42. He is called “Joseph of Arimathea” because “he came from the Judean town of Arimathea” (Luke 23:51) and to distinguish him from other Josephs in the Bible.

While there is not much information in the Bible about Joseph of Arimathea, there are certain things we can glean from the text. In Luke 23:50, we learn that Joseph was actually a part of the Council, or Sanhedrin—the group of Jewish religious leaders who called for Jesus’ crucifixion. However, as we read on to verse 51, we see that Joseph was opposed to the Council’s decision and was in fact a secret follower of Jesus (see also Mark 15:43). Joseph was a wealthy man (Matthew 27:57), although the source of his wealth is unknown. In addition, the Bible refers to Joseph as a “good and upright man” (Luke 23:50).

After Jesus’ death on the cross, Joseph, at great risk to himself and his reputation, went to the Roman governor Pilate to request Jesus’ body. Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had visited Jesus at night to ask questions about God’s Kingdom (John 19:39; cf. John 3), accompanied Joseph. The two men were granted custody of Jesus’ body, and they immediately began to prepare the body for burial. Following Jewish custom, they wrapped the body in strips of linen and mixed in myrrh and aloe. However, it was the Day of Preparation—the sixth day of the week, just before the Jewish Sabbath—and it was late in the day. So Joseph and Nicodemus hurriedly placed Jesus in Joseph’s own tomb, located in a garden near the place of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Unbeknownst to Joseph and Nicodemus, their choice to put Jesus in Joseph's tomb fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy spoken hundreds of years before Jesus' death: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Isaiah 53:9, emphasis added). This is one of the many prophecies that have confirmed Jesus' identity as the Messiah and Son of God.

The day after Jesus' burial, the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate to request that the stone Joseph had placed in front of the tomb be sealed, and a guard posted, for three days. They cited Jesus' assertion that He would rise after three days and claimed the disciples might attempt to steal the body in order to fabricate a resurrection (Matthew 27:63-64). Their precautions were for naught, as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, just as He had predicted (Matthew 28).

Many spurious stories and legends have arisen regarding Joseph. Some purport that Joseph of Arimathea was the uncle of Jesus' mother, Mary. However, the Bible makes no such connection, so the claim is unsubstantiated. In addition, Joseph supposedly made many trips to Britain for trade and is said to have eventually brought the gospel to that country. Again, though, the Bible is silent about Joseph after Jesus' burial, so we cannot know for sure what path he took later in life. What we do know is what we find in the Scriptures: Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man and part of the Sanhedrin, and he procured Jesus' body and laid it in his own tomb—from which Jesus would rise again in power three days later.