

The 'Joseph of Arimathia' of Arthurian Tradition

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Joseph of Arimathia and his son, Josephés, play a major role in the *Lancelot-Grail* stories. Their identity, as characters of Arthurian fiction, is investigated both on the basis of apocryphal narratives from the Byzantine East and in the context of History.

Years like days

Joseph of Arimathia is freed from prison by Vespasian. He looks perplexed when he comes out, he cannot recognize the people around him, not even his wife and his son, Josephés. Vespasian asks him (Ponceau, 1997, vol. 1, p.34; Chase, 1993, p. 13):

"Joseph, combien quidiés vous avoir esté en cheste prison?" Et Joseph li dist: "Sire, je i quit avoir demouré des venredi jusch'a hui et je quit qu'il soit hui diemenches et venredi despendi jou le vrai Prophete de la crois, pour qui je fui en prison mis." Et quant il eut che dit, si commenchierent a rire tout chil ki estoient entour lui, car il quidoient ke il fust ensi estourdis.

["Joseph, how long do you think you remained in this prison?" Joseph replied, "My lord, I think I remained here from Friday until today, and I believe it is Sunday today. Friday, I took the true Prophet down from the cross, and for that I was put in prison." After he had said this, everyone who was around began to laugh, for they thought he had come out dazed.]

Vespasian explains to him that 42 years had elapsed since the moment of his imprisonment, when Tiberius reigned in Rome. Vespasian's father now governed, as fourth successor of Tiberius.

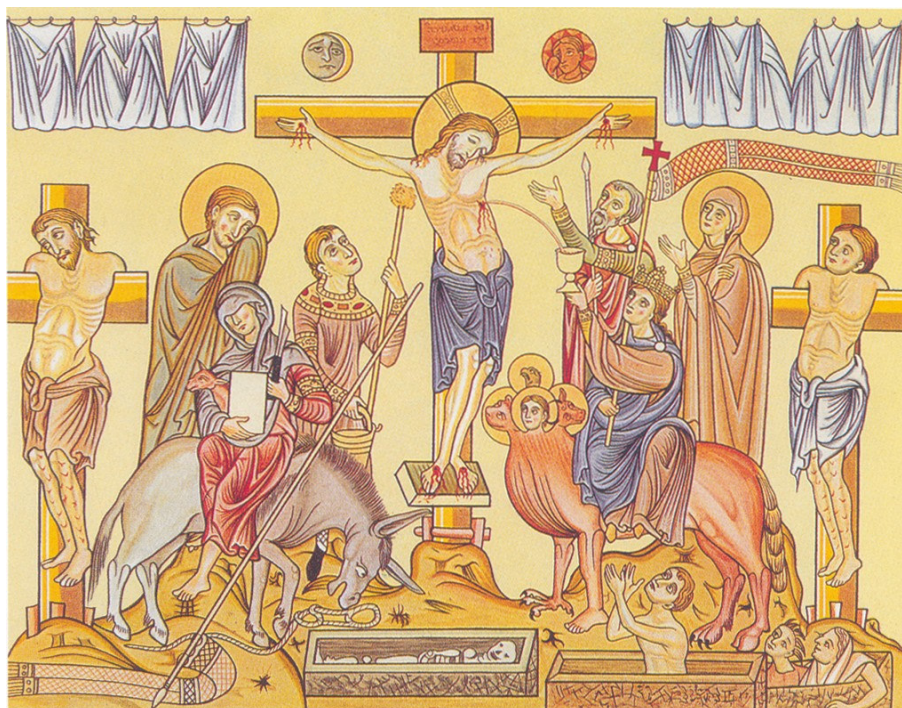
In what follows, we shall try to understand the cause of this laughter, the strange confusion of three days with forty two years, found in this XIIIth century Arthurian work called *L'Estoire del Saint Graal* (*The History of the Holy Grail*). The investigation will take us, initially, to examine the Arthurian narratives proper, passing next to their well-established biblical sources, both canonical and apocryphal. But it is in History that we shall find a viable hypothesis – supported by a curious linguistic comparison.

Grail stories

The Grail, as wondrous object, appears for the first time in *Le Conte du Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes. Since he died before completing the poem, Chrétien did not fully reveal the nature of the object. He merely lets us know that it is such a saintly thing ('sainte chose') that, by its virtue, it keeps alive a recluse whose only sustenance, for twelve years, has been a single wafer brought in it, at unspecified occasions. Continuator of Chrétien would associate the Grail with objects related to the Passion of Christ (Riquer and Riquer, 1989, p. 411).

The poem that initially incorporated Joseph of Arimathia to the Arthurian tradition, *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*, ascribed to Robert de Boron, inaugurates this interpretation: the Grail was a vase ('veissel') used by Jesus for sacramental purposes, wherein Joseph would collect his blood while taking him down from the cross (Nitze, 1999, p. 20; Micha, 1995, pp. 24-25). The gesture of collecting Christ's blood in the Crucifixion scene was in fact a

recurring pictorial motif in medieval times; the image shown here appears in a manuscript (XIIth century, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale) of the *Hortus Deliciarum*.



According to Robert de Boron, Joseph was imprisoned by the Jews immediately after he placed the body of Jesus in a stone sepulcher. Christ himself appears in the prison, bringing along the Grail, which would comfort him until the day of liberation, similarly to what it did for the secluded man in Chrétien's romance. Robert's narrative focus shifts to the leprosy afflicting Vespasian, son of the emperor, and tells how the infirmity was healed in the moment when Veronica brought in and showed before his eyes the cloth upon which the face of Christ had been reproduced.

As soon as he is cured, Vespasian swears to avenge the death of Christ. He marches to Judea, where he determines the execution of the culprits. And he frees Joseph of Arimathia from prison.

The *History of the Holy Grail*, which, as said at the beginning, contains the intriguing passage that motivated this article, is the first out of five parts of the vast XIIIth century prose compilation known as the *Lancelot-Grail* or *Arthurian Vulgate*. It adopts Robert de Boron's elucidation about the origin of the Grail, and reworks it into a much larger narrative. One of the novelties is to wrongly identify Titus as father of Vespasian. Another is the inclusion, for the first time to the best of our knowledge, of Josephés, the son of Joseph of Arimathia (Ponceau, 1997, vol. 1, p. 23; Chase, 1993, p. 9):

Ichist Joseph estoit en Jherusalem et sa feme et uns siens fiex qui ot non Josephés. Et sachiés ke che ne fu mie chil Josephés qui l'Escriture trait si sovent a tesmoing, anchois fu uns autres qui ne fu mie mains letrés de chelui.

[This man Joseph was in Jerusalem with his wife and a son named Josephus, not the one the Scripture relies upon so often as a witness, but another one who was no less lettered.]

leaving us wondering about the identity of this first Josephs, illustrious man of letters and bearer of such a relevant testimony.

The man from Arimathia

Joseph of Arimathia figures in the four Gospels: Mathews 27:57, Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50, John 19:38. They describe Joseph as a man of some importance, secretly a believer in Jesus, who asks from Pilate the body of the Crucified and entombs it in a sepulcher of his property. The city of Arimathia is possibly the same as Ramataim, birthplace of the prophet Samuel (Galbiati and Aletti, 1991, p. 245).

Apocryphal second- to eighth-century texts from the Byzantine East have appropriated and expanded the theme (Scavone, 1999, p. 6). The *Acts of Pilate* (first part of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*) adds the imprisonment of Joseph by the Jews (Otero, 1963, p. 425), but shows him kept in captivity only until the resurrection. He is then freed in a marvelous way, as he informs his tormentors (Otero, 1963, p. 435):

And Joseph said: "On the preparation, about the tenth hour, you locked me up, and I remained all the Sabbath. And at midnight, as I was standing and praying, the room where you locked me in was hung up by the four corners, and I saw a light like lightning into my eyes. And I was afraid, and fell to the ground. And some one took me by the hand, and removed me from the place where I had fallen."
(<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-08/anf08-77.htm>)

explaining that it was Christ who had come to his succour.

Neither the canonical nor the apocryphal texts refer to a vessel or to any other recipient that might be associated with the Grail. However, it has been noted (Scavone, 2003, pp. 115f), as providing a very likely source for Robert de Boron's characterization of the Grail, that the apocryphon, *I, Joseph*, a Georgian text of the eighth century, possibly from a fifth-century model, features Joseph of Arimathia capturing Jesus's blood "in a headband and a large sheet", as his body was hanging from the cross. Robert substitutes the Grail for the headband and sheet.

The punishing expedition against the Jews is narrated in another apocryphal text: *The Vengeance of the Saviour*. In it there are two separate reports of miraculous cures: first of Titus, mentioned in the apocryphon as regent of a city of Libya, and later of Tiberius (Otero, 1963, p. 513). Having decided to harass the Jews, Titus solicits the help of Vespasian – who is not said to have any family ties with him. Joseph of Arimathia and Nicodemus are shown relating to Velosianus, Tiberius's emissary, the facts about the death of Jesus and about Joseph's captivity and release at the moment of Jesus's resurrection.

Rome against Judea

History does not record such infirmities, neither with respect to Vespasian nor Titus. But there are indications that Tiberius had a disfigured face, alleged cause of his deliberate isolation in Capri. It was said about him (Tacitus, 1947, vol. 1, pp. 392-393):

There were those who believed that, in his old age, he was ashamed of the figure of his person; for he was very lean, long and stooping, his head bald, his face ulcerous, and for the most besmeared with salves. (<http://isis.library.adelaide.edu.au/cgi-bin/pg-html/pg/etext05/8rtib10.txt>)

Vespasian and Titus acted as commanders of Roman troops, ordered to subdue a rebellion in Judea, during the time when Nero was emperor. As we know, Titus was Vespasian's firstborn son; the mistake in the text of the Arthurian *Vulgate*, making Vespasian a son of Titus, admits however an extenuating circumstance: both were called Titus Flavius Vespasianus.

The Roman campaign in Judea is told in detail by a Jew, Josephus, a fascinating mix of man of religion, military leader, and writer. According to what he tells in his book *The Wars of the Jews*, originally written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek, he commanded a Jewish force at Jotapata which, for more than 40 days, resisted Vespasian's siege. When defeat was imminent, Josephus's soldiers declared to prefer suicide rather than yielding to the enemy. He, however, convinced them to establish by some sort of lottery a scheme whereby each man would kill the next, so that only the last one would incur, forgivably, the sin of committing suicide. Either by arrangement or by sheer luck, Josephus happened to be in the final pair and, with his notorious eloquence, persuaded his companion to surrender. Vespasian intended to dispatch the defeated leader to Nero, who would certainly have him executed. Josephus resorted to a clever expedient: he predicted to the general his future accession to the throne, and stressed the value of keeping in his company, even as prisoner, a 'prophet' of such auspicious predictions.

Not much later, Nero died and, in the time of troubles that saw the violent termination of three brief reigns, part of the army proclaimed Vespasian emperor. Remembering the 'prophecy', Vespasian hastened to release its author, proclaiming in front of his men (Josephus, 1995, p. 694):

"It is a shameful thing (said he) that this man, who hath foretold my coming to the empire beforehand, and been the minister of a divine message to me, should still be retained in the condition of a captive or prisoner."

Titus promptly seconded these words. Accompanying Titus, Josephus would later watch the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and the total ruin of Judea, which precipitated the dispersion (diaspora) of the Jews throughout the world (Josephus, 1995, p. 740).

The destruction of Judea by Vespasian and Titus is undoubtedly historical, therefore, although not as vengeance for the death of the Saviour, since its sole objective was to suffocate an insurgence against the power of Rome. And also historical is the liberation by Vespasian of the man – Josephus – who would witness and report this devastation! Thus it is appropriate to ask whether there are other coincidences between fact and fiction here. Would Josephus have anything to do with the Josephés designated as son of Joseph of Arimathia in the Arthurian *Vulgate*? In fact, Josephus is a good candidate to that other so very illustrious 'Josephés', "the one the Scripture relies upon so often as a witness", since his testimonial, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, would sound precious as lay confirmation of the Gospels. He says, in a passage that Eusebius would copy verbatim in the fourth century in his *Ecclesiastic History* (I.XII.7-8), and which, however, is generally rejected today as an interpolation (Josephus, 1995, p. 480):

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

It is worth mentioning that similar words are attributed to Joseph of Arimathia, in the second Greek form of the *Acts of Pilate*, chapter 11:

Likewise also, Joseph lamented, saying: Ah, me! sweetest Jesus, most excellent of men, if indeed it be proper to call thee man, who hast wrought such miracles as no man has ever done.
(<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-08/anf08-77.htm>)

In the XIIIth century *Perlesvaus*, a strangely crude treatment of the Grail quest, the author claims (branch one) that he is basing his narrative on writings of Josephus. The translator comments, in a footnote, that the borrowed authority of the famous man would serve to imply that the work "was history rather than fiction". And Joseph of Arimathia is soon mentioned, almost in the same breath (Bryant, 1996, p. 19):

Josephus tells us this holy tale about the family of a good knight who lived after the crucifixion of Our Lord ... And a good knight he should have been, for he was descended from Joseph of Arimathea.

The son of Matthias

'Josephus' or, at full length, 'Flavius Josephus', was not his original name, but a Latinized form of 'Joseph', adopted after he rose in favour with Vespasian and Titus, born of the Flavian family. According to Jewish custom, Joseph's name was complemented with that of his father, Matthias, joined by the particle 'ben' (son of) in Hebrew, or by the Aramaic form, 'bar', then more widely used.

We are now in a position to formulate the thesis of this work:

- Joseph of Arimathia was the man confined to prison. But he who was freed was Joseph son of Matthias...

The conflation of the two characters was facilitated by the remarkable similarity of their names. This becomes clear from the outset if we try to rewrite 'de Arimathia', replacing the French preposition 'de' ('from') by the Latin preposition 'ab'. Such freedom was common during the medieval era, as a reminiscence of the reading of biblical texts. The title of a Portuguese translation of the first part of another French compilation, the now largely lost *Post-Vulgate*, exemplifies this substitution: *Liuro de Josep Ab aramatia* (Carter, 1967; Toledo Neto, 1993). Pronouncing aloud the two names may indicate how close they already are:

- (1) Joseph ab Arimathia
- (2) Joseph bar Matthias

The similarity increases, as will be seen, when altered forms of (1) are observed in a succession of texts, suggesting a gradual transition from (1) to (2). To begin with, it was permitted to write 'ab Arimathia' without the intervening space, which explains the spelling 'Josep Abaromacie' registered in the *First Perceval Continuation* (Roach, 1993, p. 494). Next, confronted with an agglutinated form like 'Abarimathia', a careless scribe might eventually drop the initial 'A', as evidenced in the following verses from *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal* itself (Nitze, 1927, p. 49):

Tout li Giué en Beremathye
S'assemblent a grant compeignie.

Showing how easily the absorption of preposition 'ab' could be forgotten, at least one manuscript (Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale 867, second half of the XIIIth century) of the Old French translation of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* intercalates a 'de', patently unaware of the redundancy, thus adding the variant 'ioseph de barimachie' (Ford, 1973, p. 102). And even closer to (2) is the form of the place name appearing in the non-cyclic version of the prose *Lancelot* (Kennedy, 1980, vol. 1, p. 292):

Ce est li fruiz par coi Josep de Barimathia et si compaignon furent sostenu quant il s'an venoient de la terre de promission an ceste estrange païs par lo comendement Jhesu Crist et par son conduit.

To the *conflation* consummated in the work of Robert de Boron, one must contrast the *doubling* introduced in the Arthurian *Vulgate*: the invention of the son of Joseph of Arimathia, Josephés, who – the author warns us – should not be confused with his namesake, the man of letters so reputed at the epoch. Quite naturally, however, the negation achieves the inverse effect of inducing us to think of him. Would the author of the *Vulgate* be conscious of the ambiguities of the 'Joseph of Arimathia' of Arthurian lore? If so, we should discern, behind the laughter of the crowd at the forty-two years that seem three days, the mischievous smile of the author, who deliberately offers a clue and challenges us to trace it.

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