

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHAEA

BY WILLIAM WEBER

THE account of the death of Jesus in John xix. 31-37 has revealed two different versions of how Jesus was buried. The first tells us that he was treated exactly as all other Palestinians that were crucified. That is to say, his legs were crushed and his remains thrown into a nearby natural or artificial cave whose entrance was closed with a stone. That agreed with the Mosaic law and satisfied the Jews.

But in verse 33 ff., Jesus is handled differently. His legs are not broken. Only his side is pierced to make sure of his death. But the spear is driven into his heart so carefully that not a single rib was broken.

The strange behavior of the Roman soldiers is explained in verse 35-37. They had to fulfil two Old Testament predictions which told what was to happen to the body of the Messiah after his death. Unfortunately the Old Testament does not contain such prophecies. The author of verse 33 ff had to invent them. He also had to leave out the last words of the original Johannine account. The latter read: "The soldiers therefore came and broke *their legs and took them away.*" The underscored words have been omitted.

The thus mutilated text causes it to appear as if Jesus alone was buried as described in verse 38-42 whereas the corpses of the evil-doers were left lying at the foot of their crosses. That was of course considered as perfectly proper by Gentile Christians but not by the Jews of Palestine. According to them, no crucified criminal could be left on the cross or on the ground over night. The chief priests and the Pharisees would therefore see to it that the Roman soldiers removed the three victims from the cross and interred them so as to satisfy the law of the Jews. They certainly did not go into the

house of Pilate nor to the place of execution in a body. For that would have rendered them unclean so that they could not have eaten the Passover. But they may have sent one of their men to the governor to obtain from him a written order for the centurion to crush the legs of the evildoers and have their bodies inhumed at the regular burial-ground.

Verse 38-42 continues and ends the story begun verse 33. Both parts have been written by the same man and at the same time about the year 150. They form one whole and are distinguished by the same characteristic idea. All that is done with the body of Jesus is the literal fulfilment of some Old Testament prophecy and, what is even more important, these prophecies are spurious inventions.

Isaiah lii, 13-liii, 12 contains a poetic description of *The Servant's Martyrdom and its Reward*. The poem was understood early as referring to the Messiah. Stanza 9 reads in the Authorized Version wrongly:

They made his grave with the wicked
And with a *rich* man in his death;
Although he had done no violence,
Neither was any deceit in his mouth.

The author of John xix, 38-42 followed this corrupt text and put the body of Jesus in a new tomb which as such was bound to belong to a rich man.

But in *The Servant's Martyrdom and its Reward*, as in other ancient Hebrew songs and poems each two successive verses and sometimes three, form as Bishop Lowth discovered in 1753, the so-called *parallelism of members*. That means: The leading thought of the first verse is repeated in the second verse. If three verses form a unit, the same idea is expressed three times in different words.

A grave with the wicked is not identical with a grave of a rich man. For as far as our civilisation reaches back, neither all rich men were wicked nor all wicked men rich. Besides, rich people at Jerusalem would hardly have chosen the immediate neighborhood of a golgotha for a family tomb.

The Rev. T. K. Cheyne has restored the original text in his *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, New York, 1898. It reads according to him:

And his grave was appointed with the rebellious
And with the wicked his tomb,
Although he had done no injustice,
Nor was there deceit in his mouth.

In footnote 125, he states: "One so grievously afflicted must (as people thought) be a grievous sinner, and was therefore buried apart from other men, beside notorious criminals. The well known rendering of AV, *and with the rich in his death*, is more than probably based on a corruption of the text. To be with the rich after death would moreover be a distinction inconsistent with the context.

Jesus was crucified because the chief priests and the Pharisees had accused him before Pilate of being a pretender to the throne of David and, accordingly, a dangerous enemy of the Romans. As such he was crucified and treated exactly as the notorious criminals who died together with him. When the governor sent orders to break the legs of the three and remove the carcasses to the place where all such bodies were interred, Jesus was treated just as his fellow-victims of the justice of Rome. None of the friends and disciples of Jesus had influence enough to be admitted to the presence of the governor. Even if they had been prominent enough, their petition for the body of Jesus would have brought them to the cross as his fellow-conspirators.

Under such circumstances, we are compelled to admit: Jesus has found indeed his grave with the rebellious and his tomb with the wicked as the prophet had foretold. Consequently, John xix, 38-42, just as John xix, 32b-37, offers fiction, not fact, and is of post-apostolic origin, based upon a corrupt text of the Book Isaiah. As John xix, 38-42 is connected organically with John xix, 32b-37, it has to be credited to the author of the first passage which belongs to the middle of the second century. This date will have to be verified as a matter of course.

The three Synoptic Gospels contain also the story of the interment of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathaea. The three versions have been derived in spite of minor differences from a common source. That in turn is based upon John xix, 38-42 although certain changes were made. In the first place, Nicodemus is omitted. Neither he nor his ointment are mentioned in the first three Gospels. The Syn-

optics have the body of Jesus wrapped only in one linen cloth. In John, not only linen cloths but also a surprisingly large quantity of spices are used. Nicodemus furnishes about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes.

The Synoptic Gospels, at least, Matthew xxvi, 12 and Mark xiv, 8, had a very good reason for rejecting Nicodemus and his ointment. Shortly before the death of Jesus, a woman of Bethany emptied an alabaster cruse of exceeding precious ointment upon the head of Jesus. The disciples criticized that extravagance, but Jesus defended the woman and said: In that she poured this ointment upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Verily, I say unto you: Wherever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, that also what this woman has done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.

Jesus therefore was certain of finding his last resting place on earth with the wicked. He foresaw that no service of love and devotion could be given to his mangled remains. The more thankful he was for what the woman had done. It was as if he had told his disciples:

O, love as long as love you can!
 O, love as long as love you may!
 Too fast the fatal hour draws nigh
 When with the cursed I must stay.

John xix, 38-42 is clearly not based upon the corresponding passages of the Synoptic Gospels. It is moreover without doubt the original continuation of the immediately preceding verse 32b-37. The assistance of Nicodemus was suggested by John iii, 1 ff. Thus if one of the two parallel burial accounts has been borrowed from the other, the Fourth Gospel holds the original text. In adapting it to the Synoptics, the phantom "ruler of the Jews" who threatened to usurp the praise belonging to the woman of Bethany, was sent back to the shadows of the night from which he had come and took along his one hundred pounds of embalming ointment.

The three Synoptic versions do not differ very much from each other. Mark and Luke introduce Joseph of Arimathaea as a counciler, whatever that may be, in order to explain why he could ask Pilate for the body of Jesus. Matthew presents Joseph as a rich man and owner of the new tomb in which Jesus was laid.

That was a protest against the disgraceful fact that the three other Gospels put Jesus into a stolen tomb. Fairy tales, however, are not subject to the rules of ethics. The leading idea was to have the burial of Jesus agree exactly with the corrupt text of Isaiah liii 9.

If Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus had been really secret disciples of Jesus, they would have come forward after his death and their names would be found in the Acts. For the period of the first unfolding of *the grain of mustard seed*, The Acts are very complete and perfectly reliable if we take care to remove the post-apostolic, legendary additions. For instance, the legend of the twelve apostles has been especially harmful. For it causes us to consider the book which could treat only of two apostles, Peter and Paul, as a very incomplete account of what was achieved from 29 to about 60 A. D.

The absolute silence of Acts as to Joseph of Arimathaea proves him to be a person that never existed. If John xix, 38-42 should be accepted as source of the Synoptic story, the question would arise from whom Polycarp obtained his knowledge of Joseph. Certainly not from John! For Joseph of Arimathaea does not belong to the Johannine account of the burial of Jesus. Moreover, Polycarp cannot have visited Anicetus, the bishop of Rome, before the year 157. That renders it more than doubtful whether he was even born when John visited Smyrna in the year 70.

So near the beginning of the 15th of Nisan when the Passover was eaten, no Jew would have lingered at the place of execution. If any one, except John, has watched the interment of the three crucified men, that man could have been only the orator, or interpreter of the high priest. It was a vital question for Caiaphas, not Pilate whether the remains of the three men were committed to the ground or not. It might therefore be not impossible that the orator carried the written order of Pilate to the centurion at Golgotha and stayed there until the bodies had been put into the charnel-house.

That representative of the high priest had no sympathy with any Jew who had become obnoxious to the chief priests. He knew little about the Jews of Palestine. For he had to be a native of Rome, the son of a wealthy Jewish family who had received a

thorough Roman education, was familiar with the Roman law, and could act as diplomatic middleman between the high priest and the governor.

Clearly, only a Jew born, raised, and educated at Rome, could fill that important position. The one mentioned Acts xxiv, 1 called himself Tertullus. If the orator's name when Jesus was crucified, was Joseph, his full name must have been Joseph of Rome, not of Arimathaea. The Syriac noun Arimathaea would not exclude that. For it may mean Rome. But Joseph of Rome would never have placed the corpse of Jesus into any tomb and least of all into another man's tomb. He was present only to watch whether the Roman soldiers satisfied the Jewish law concerning the burial of criminals.

But here again, we have to face the question: Who told Polycarp of that man. Such information cannot have come from an eyewitness. We have therefore to regard Joseph of Arimathaea as a legendary figure, invented in all probability by Polycarp himself.