

Joseph of Arimathea and Talpiyot Tomb B

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The “Resurrection Tomb Mystery” documentary attempts to suggest that Talpiyot Tomb B was the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Hardly any evidence for this is actually provided. The only point at which some reason for the identification is given is this:

“The two [Talpiyot] tombs were found on what had been in the first century a rich man’s estate, complete with wine press and ritual bath. And the area is dominated by two hills. Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man and his name, in Hebrew, means “Two Hills.”

This comment obviously depends on the usual explanation of Arimathea as representing the Hebrew place name Ramathaim (1 Sam 1:1), and correctly notices that this is a dual form of the word *ramah*. The latter means ‘height’ but is scarcely used except in place-names, either alone, as Ramah (there are 4 or 5 towns so-called in the Hebrew Bible), or in compounds, such as Ramoth-Gilead. In such cases, it designates *a town built on a high place*. For the Arimathea/Ramathaim from which Joseph is named, there needs to be a town, not just an estate ‘dominated by two hills’. That there was a town, or even small village, called Ramathaim, so close to Jerusalem but mentioned nowhere else in our sources, seems unlikely.

The most likely identification of Joseph’s place of origin is with the Ramathaim (textual variant: Rathamin) mentioned in 1 Macc 11:34 as the headquarters of a toparchy transferred in 145 BCE from Samaria to Judea. This Ramathaim is clearly not near Jerusalem, but near the borders of Judaea and Samaria. Eusebius’s *Onomasticon* places it at the village of Remphis (Israel map grid 151159), which is about 30 km north-west of Jerusalem. It should be noticed that the dual form of Ramathaim is an archaic form, which has survived unusually in this place name (otherwise only in 1 Sam 1:1, which may refer to the same place, evidently called Ramah later in the narrative of I Samuel). It is therefore very distinctive (unlike the common Ramah) and we should not multiply Ramathaims unnecessarily.

The makers of the documentary perhaps assume that, since Joseph appears in the Gospel narratives in Jerusalem and has a tomb near the city, Arimathea must be near Jerusalem. But this is a mistake. Like many aristocrats in the ancient world, Joseph had estates in the country (not necessarily at all near Jerusalem) but lived most of the time in the city. This is the most obvious way of explaining why he has a *new* tomb, not yet occupied, near Jerusalem. His aristocratic family would surely already have a tomb – back in Arimathea. But Joseph has decided that he would like to be buried near the holy city, rather than having his body transported back to Arimathea. We now have a nice parallel in the case of the Caiaphas family, another aristocratic Jerusalem family. They had the now well-known tomb in north Talpiyot, where the high priest Caiaphas himself was interred, together with other family members. But from the ossuary inscription

that was made known to the public only last year (the ossuary of Mariam daughter of Yeshua of the Caiaphas family), we now know that there was also a family tomb elsewhere, somewhere in the vicinity of the Elah valley (where the ossuary is said to have been found), plausibly at Khirbet Qeiyafa. This will have been where the family estates were located. (See my article, 'The Caiaphas Family,' *JSJH* 10 [2012] 3-31.)

So the only shred of evidence presented in the documentary for identifying Talpiyot Tomb B as that of Joseph of Arimathea is entirely without value.