

Harmonizing the accounts of the burial

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The relevant passages are: Matthew 27:57-61, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56 and John 19:38-42.

1) Joseph of Arimathea was an important man in town. He was 'rich' (Matthew 27:57) and a prominent member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43). Any self-respecting governor would make it his business to know who were the important people within the area of his jurisdiction, so Pilate doubtless knew who Joseph was, whether or not he had ever met him—evidently Joseph experienced no difficulty in obtaining an audience. Joseph was 'a good and righteous man' (Luke 23:50) 'who himself had become a disciple of Jesus' (Matthew 27:57), but who had not declared himself openly 'for fear of the Jews' (John 19:38).

He had been waiting in the wings. Just as with the owner of the donkey, and the owner of the upper room, who were doubtless advised in advance that their services would be needed, Joseph had been prepared. He did not just 'happen' to have a tomb he didn't know what to do with, complete with a large stone just right for sealing. Since he had the wherewithal, he had purchased the divinely indicated plot and had the tomb carved into, or out of, the sedimentary rock (Matthew 27:59, Mark 15:46, Luke 23:53). According to Isaiah 53:9, Jehovah's Servant was to have a rich man's grave, not whatever the common criminals got (the Father did not allow the Son's body to suffer that humiliation).

2) Nicodemus was a Pharisee and 'a ruler of the Jews' (John 3:1), the one who 'came to Jesus by night' (John 19:39). Since he started his interview by declaring that Jesus was 'a teacher come from God' (John 3:2), he no doubt became a disciple. Since he defended Jesus openly (John 7:50-51), his sympathies were presumably well known. He also had been prepared to assist Joseph with the burial procedure. He had purchased 'a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' (John 19:39), which represented a significant investment, and had placed them within the tomb in time to help Joseph with the body. Although the Text does not mention it, he was presumably also the one who furnished the linen strips for wrapping the body. Obviously all preparations had to be completed before the time for the burial.

3) At the right moment, Joseph 'went boldly in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus' (Mark 15:43). As already mentioned, he was evidently given an audience without difficulty. "Well Pilate was surprised that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion he asked him when He had died" (Mark 15:44). As soon as Jesus died, the centurion most probably had left the scene, going back to headquarters (he had probably received special instruction about Jesus). He probably felt he should inform Pilate about the unusual events, but somehow Joseph got ahead of him (but evidently not by much—had the centurion arrived first, he presumably would have been already reporting to Pilate when Joseph arrived). Well, Joseph was primed for action, watching from a distance, and as soon as Jesus dismissed His spirit Joseph headed for Pilate. "Upon the centurion's confirmation, he granted the body to Joseph" (Mark 15:45).

4) Then Joseph and Nicodemus met at the cross and removed the body. Joseph had purchased a linen sheet for the purpose, and the two used it to transport the body to the tomb (Matthew 27:59-60, Mark 15:46, Luke 23:53, John 19:39). Obviously the tomb had been prepared beforehand, as already stated. Matthew and John say that it was 'new', while Luke and John add that it had yet to be used (Matthew 27:60, Luke 23:53, John 19:41). John adds that it was in a garden near Golgotha.

5) Once within the tomb, they prepared the body for burial. "Then they took Jesus' body and wrapped it in linen strips, with the aromatic spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews" (John 19:40). How many linen strips would it take to wrap up 100 pounds of spices? The result would have looked something like a cocoon, except that it did not include the head, which was covered with a facecloth (John 20:7).

6) When they had finished their task, they 'rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb and left' (Matthew 27:60, Mark 15:46). If they rolled it, it was in the form of a wheel; there would be a track in which it rolled, with a bit of incline, so that Joseph and Nicodemus could roll it down into place, where it would stop; but it would take several men to roll it back up and away, 'because it was very large' (Mark 16:4).

7) Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph 'followed along', saw where the body was placed, and sat down opposite the tomb (Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47, Luke 23:55). That is, they saw where the body was taken, but obviously had not looked in the tomb—there were 100 pounds of spices in there, with enough linen strips to tie it all in. This is clear from Luke 23:56, "Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes; but they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment." They evidently did not realize that the men had already done what there was to do.

8) Although subsequent to the burial itself, the guarding of the tomb is important; it is recorded in Matthew 27:62-66.

62 The next day, which is after the Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees went together to Pilate 63 saying: "Sir, we remember that that deceiver, while still alive, said, 'After three days I am going to rise'. 64 Therefore command that the grave be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him and say to the people, 'He was raised from the dead', and the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 So Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go make it as secure as you can!" 66 So they went and secured the grave with the guard, having sealed the stone.

Was Pilate happy? No he was not! And maybe, just maybe, he wasn't as stupid as some might like to think. From Mark 15:44-45 we know that he debriefed the centurion, who had to explain why Jesus died sooner than expected! "Make it as sure as you can." Right. Ironically, those great champions of the Sabbath had to violate the Sabbath to secure the tomb. They thought they were being shrewd, but only played into God's hand. Their effort only made the evidence for the resurrection all the stronger. Well, for starters, who removed the stone? The

soldiers would not touch a stone with a Roman seal, and they had no reason for doing it, in any case. The women were physically incapable of doing it. So who removed the stone?