

QUESTION:

Tangential to the discussion here but what do you think of the idea symbolized by the Joseph of Arimathea character that there may have been closeted sympathizers or even fellow travelers of the Jesus movement among members of the Sanhedrin?

RESPONSE:

It's a good question. My sense is that it is virtually inconceivable that there were followers of Jesus, closeted or otherwise, in the Sanhedrin. For a lot of reasons. The main one is that according to our earliest accounts, Jesus' entire public ministry was spent teaching in Galilee. He was unknown in Jerusalem (I know that John puts him there earlier on several occasions, but that's a later conceit). I think the first time anyone in Jerusalem had ever even heard of Jesus was when he caused the ruckus in the Temple the last week of his life. So he almost certainly had no followers among the aristocratic elite there.

In addition to that, I think the later Christians who told stories about Jesus wanted their hearers/readers to "know" that Jesus had a wide and deep influence. And there developed an entire tendency to show that even among his enemies (both Jewish leaders and Romans) there were closeted or not-so-closeted believers among them, either ones who believed in secret or who came to believe once they had an experience of his presence. Off the top of my head, there is the following:

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