



Mothers, Mentors and Muses- Pastor Carolyn Hetrick

Helena, Mother of Constantine May 22

Helena, later known as Flavia Julia Helena Augusta, was the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Although he lived much of his life as a pagan, and later as a catechumen, he joined the Christian faith on his deathbed, being baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia. On the evening of 27 October, 306, the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge, with the armies preparing for battle, Constantine had a vision which led him to fight under the protection of the Christian God. Some details of that vision, however, differ between the sources reporting it.

Lactantius states that Constantine was commanded in a dream to "delineate the heavenly sign on the shields of his soldiers." He followed the commands of his dream and marked the shields with a sign "denoting Christ". In his later *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius gives a detailed account of a vision and stresses that he had heard the story from the Emperor himself. According to this version, Constantine with his army was marching when he looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the Greek words "Εν Τούτῳ Νικά", En toutō níka. The literal meaning of the phrase in Greek is "in this (sign), conquer." At first he was unsure of the meaning of the apparition, but in the following night he had a dream in which Christ explained to him that he should use the sign against his enemies. Eusebius then continues to describe the labarum, the military standard used by Constantine showing the Chi-Rho sign.

Constantine's victory gave him total control of the Western Roman Empire paving the way for Christianity to become the dominant religion for the Roman Empire and ultimately for Europe." The following year, 313, Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity an officially recognized and tolerated religion in the Roman Empire. He called the First Council of Nicaea in 325, which produced the statement of Christian belief known as the Nicene Creed. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built on his orders at the purported site of Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem.

Constantine's mother, Helena, was born in about 250. Of humble origin, she was employed as a Stabularia, which might be rendered "barmaid." She became the wife, or possibly the concubine of Flavius Constantius, with whom she had one child, Constantius, or Constantine, in the year 272. Flavius Constantius moved up the ranks from soldier to Caesar in 293, which in

that time meant, deputy emperor. Upon achieving this rank he was obliged to divorce Helena to marry Emperor Maximilian's daughter Theodora. Helena disappears until her son, Constantine becomes emperor in the west, having taken control of Rome at the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

Back on the scene, Eusebius, one of the biographers of the day purports that her conversion to Christianity is because of Constantine. After Constantine gained control of the whole empire in 324, he elevates both his wife Fausta, and his mother to the rank of Augusta. Helena took the imperial names of Flavia and Julia, hence Flavia Julia Helena Augusta. Her image begins to appear on coins where she is "the most chaste wife of the late emperor Constantius." On a small scale, she is the reason that there was an exception for women who worked in taverns from Constantine's stern anti-adultery legislation, distinguishing this work from prostitution. More importantly, after some violent deaths in the imperial family, Helena set out on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her prayers at the holy places were presented as an act of thanksgiving got the triumph of the Christian empire according to Eusebius. Traveling via Syria she came to see the churches Constantine had ordered to be built in Jerusalem and to pray there for her son. In 327, in her late seventies, this was no small undertaking. Her journey was a royal passage as she provided money for the poor, released prisoners, and restored exiles, while also caring for churches in even the smallest of towns. Helena played a significant role in the building of churches at Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives, which Constantine personally dedicated a few years later to honor her memory.

Helena's name is associated in the history of the Church with the legend that she found the True Cross upon which Christ was crucified. Neither the author of the Pilgrimage from Bordeaux in 333, nor Eusebius who died in 339, mentioned relics of the Cross. However, a few years later, the Bishop of Jerusalem, refers several times in his Catechetical Lectures in 350, to pieces of wood from the cross scattered around the Mediterranean. As early as 359, a church in Mauritania had a collection of relics which included a fragment of the cross. Cyril, in his letter to Constantius II explicitly dates the discovery of the cross to the reign of Constantine when "through the favor of God's 'the holy places which had been hidden were revealed.'" It was believed that the fragments were discovered by building operations at Golgotha. The festival for the dedication of Constantine's new buildings and the date assigned to the finding of the cross were claimed to be September 14th. Regular veneration of the relics was established by the church in Jerusalem soon after.

The circumstances of the discovery and Helena's role began to crystallize well before the end of the fourth century. St John Chrysostom comments in 390 on the crucifixion, referring to the gospel of John 19:17-19 and then adding, "After the burial of the cross, it was likely that it would be discovered in later times, and that the three crosses would lie together, so that the cross of Our Lord might not go unrecognized, it would firstly, be lying in the middle, and secondly it was distinguished by its inscription- whereas the crosses of the thieves had no labels. In 395, St Ambrose of Milan spoke of "Helena of sacred memory, the bona stabularia

(the good barmaid) who visited the stabulum where the Lord was born. She had been moved by the Holy Spirit to search for the Cross: ‘she opened up the earth, scattered the dust, and found three crosses in disarray.’” In this version, the True Cross was not lying in the middle but was known by its inscription. Ambrose notes that Helena sent the nails of the Crucifixion to Constantine who used one in his diadem and one in his horse’s bridle, “thus fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (14:20) “in that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, HOLY UNTO THE LORD.” In 397, Rufinius of Aguilera, in his Ecclesiastical History, his account of the discovery dates Helena’s journey to the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325. Inspired by divine visions, she came to Jerusalem and made enquirers from the inhabitants about the site fo the Crucifixion. It was learned to be under the pagan temple to Venus’s which she ordered demolished. When the three crosses were excavated the bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, proposed a way to determine the True Cross. They took the three to the bedside of a distinguished lady who was dangerously ill. As the bishop prayed for a revelation, the touch of the True Cross immediately cured her. Helena ordered the construction of a magnificent basilica above the spot where the cross had been found and a piece of the cross was sent to Constantine in Constantinople. Rufinius also reports that Helena waited at table on the consecrated virgins in Jerusalem and founded a nunnery.

Subsequent historians embellished further, from Socrates to Gregory of Tours- It was a Jew named Judas who pointed Helena to the place and he was converted and became Bishop of Jerusalem. The True Cross didn’t merely cure the woman, it raised her from the dead. In Rome, Constantine’s basilica, endowed with the relics of the cross would become the Church of Santa Croc in Gerusalemme and perpetuate Helena’s miraculous find. In the 11th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth would propagate the story that Helena was the daughter of a British king, Coel of Kaelcolim, after whose death the Roman General Constantius seized the throne and married her whose “beauty was greater than that of any of the young woman in the kingdom.” Helena died in Rome in 330, not long after her pilgrimage, at about 80.

Prayer: Most loving and faithful God, in honoring the sites of your Son’s birth and Passion, you permitted Helena to enrich the memory of your church. By your mercy, in the cross, we share with Helena and all the saints in eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord in whose name we pray. AMEN

Sources: Pfatteicher, Philip H., *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations, A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints*
Birley, A. R. “Saint Helena, Discoverer of the True Cross (250-330).”