



HELENA c.250 - 335

Much of the life of Helena, Mother of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine (274-337), is obscure and unknown, including the date and place of her birth. Some theorize that the town in Asia Minor known as Helenopolis was named by then Emperor Constantine because his mother had been born there. However, in British tradition, it is believed that Helena was actually the daughter of King Coel of Colchester. King Coel was immortalized in the Mother Goose rhyme, "Old King Cole was a merry old soul." There was a Christian church in Colchester in 250 A.D. about the time Helena was born, and it is possible she became a Christian as a young person.

It is also unclear when Helena met or married the Roman soldier Constantius Chlorus. What is certain is that Constantius and Helena were Constantine's parents. When Constantius became Caesar of Gaul, Spain, and Britain in 292, he divorced Helena in order to marry Theodora, daughter of his patron Maximian. It was an obvious and cold political move, designed to promote his career.

Constantine, Helena's son, spent much time at the court of the Emperor Diocletian and became a soldier like his father. When his troops later proclaimed Constantine Emperor in 306, one of his first acts was to call his mother from political exile to be honored as the mother of the Roman Emperor. When Constantine embraced Christianity, Helena gave her strong support and encouragement. For reasons shrouded in darkness, Constantine had his oldest son Crispus and his wife Fausta executed in 326. Later he was plagued with guilt over this decision. Possibly Helena convinced him that this was sin and his need for repentance may have caused Constantine to send Helena on her mission to the Holy Land.

Almost eighty-year-old Helena traveled throughout Palestine and the eastern provinces, encouraging the spread of the Christian faith. She sought out the original locations associated with the life of Jesus, and oversaw the construction of churches Constantine had ordered built at such sites as Bethlehem, Calvary, Olivet, and Bethany. A pagan temple to Aphrodite had been built on the tomb site of Jesus' resurrection. So it was torn down and replaced by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Later legends arose that Helena also discovered the actual cross of Christ in the tomb beneath the church.

Helena's tour became a pattern for Christian pilgrims throughout the Middle Ages and into our own day. Today "Manger Square" in Bethlehem is thronged by pilgrims, seeking to worship at the Church of the Nativity at Christmas time. At Easter, Christians follow the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Both of these ancient churches are accredited to the Empress Helena and her pilgrimage to honor the places where Jesus had lived.