Prelude: Jesus Christ, foundation of Christianity

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The Jesus of early imperial Christianity

The death of Jesus by crucifixion, together with his resurrection from the dead, lies at the heart of Christianity. In about 326 CE, at the end of the period covered by this volume, Helena, mother of emperor Constantine, made a legendary pilgrimage to the Holy Land and is purported to have found the true cross, as well as the tomb in which Christ's body had been laid. By exploring this story at the very beginning of this history of Christianity, we shall both open up the particular tensions surrounding the figure of Jesus, who may be regarded as at once the historical instigator and the foundation of Christianity – tensions often captured in the distinction between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' – and also illustrate with an instructive parallel the problems of reconstructing the life and teaching of a historical figure around whom apparently legendary features have clustered.

To this day, visitors to Rome may make their way to the basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, just inside the remains of the Aurelian walls of the ancient city, and there find relics of the crucifixion of Jesus and associations with Helena's pilgrimage. Entering a doorway to the left of the altar, the eye is first caught by the supposed crossbeam of the righteous robber (crucified with Jesus, according to Luke 23:39–43). Pilgrims may then follow the traditional Stations of the Cross before turning to the right and entering a twentieth-century chapel. There, standing on the altar are various elaborate reliquaries, and just visible within are what purport to be minute fragments of the true cross, a thorn from the crown of thorns, and part of the board (generally known as the *titulus*) on which Pilate had inscribed in various characters that the one there crucified was Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. Given the measures taken to keep people at a secure distance, the marks scratched on

this fragment of wood are barely visible, let alone legible. Yet the story of this unprepossessing piece of board is intriguing.

In 1492 repairs were being made to a mosaic in a niche above the triumphal arch inside this church,[1] and here this fragment was found, sealed behind a brick inscribed with the words *TITULUS CRUCIS*. The mosaic behind which this unexpected discovery was made (now long since gone, though a fifteenth-century copy of it can be found in the chapel of St Helena) went back to the fourth century, the same sort of date as the historians who first recorded the tale of Helena's discoveries. The church is in fact built on the site of a Roman imperial palace, which originated in the early third century, as is evident from certain inscriptions and the fact that the Aurelian walls of 276 CE cut across it, but later was owned by Constantine's mother, the empress Helena. One of the palace halls was adapted into the original fourth-century church, and externally its masonry is partially visible despite the elaborations that have taken place over the centuries. In a crypt chapel, which was once part of the palace, Helena is supposed to have prayed on earth which she brought back from the Holy Land. There too the relics were once housed. The rough writing on the fragment of the *titulus* is curious, for the characters all run from right to left: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. They look hastily inscribed by someone who was familiar with the Hebrew or Aramaic convention while apparently regardless of the fact that Greek and Latin run from left to right. So, could these treasured fragments actually have some connection with events that took place nearly 2,000 years ago, despite the gaps in the evidence and the hidden 300 years between the time of Christ and the purported discoveries of Helena?[2]

Needless to say, scepticism has reigned since the time of Gibbon's *Decline and fall of the Roman empire* (1776–88). He noted the absolute silence of Eusebius of Caesarea with respect to the discovery of the true cross. Now Eusebius was a Palestinian bishop, and a contemporary of Helena who rhetorically celebrated both her pilgrimage and the founding of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, so naturally his silence has convinced most scholars that the story is a legend – indeed, legendary elements, such as miracles and visions, have clearly entered the story in the 100 years between the event and our first written accounts. Scepticism has seemed the appropriate stance for the post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment historian, especially given the trade in largely spurious relics that seduced Christendom in the medieval period.

1 For details about this building, see Webb, *Churches and catacombs*, 52–5.
2 The case has been made by Thiede and d'Ancona, *Quest of the true cross*, though against the general trend of scholarship. The most important study is Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.

The full story is told by four church historians who, in one way or another, produced continuations of the first ecclesiastical history to be compiled – the work of the same Eusebius of Caesarea, which covered the period from church origins to his own day.[3] Rufinus translated Eusebius' work into Latin and continued the story through the fourth century, writing about 402 CE. Some thirty or forty years later, Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen and Theodoret continued Eusebius' work in Greek. According to Rufinus[4] and Socrates,[5] Helena went to Jerusalem in response to divinely directed dreams in order to find the sepulchre of Christ. She discovered that a mound had been piled up to cover it, and on the mound a temple to Venus had been erected, a fact attributed to hostility to Christians venerating the tomb. She had the statue thrown down, the earth removed, and the ground entirely cleared, and there she found three crosses in the sepulchre, together with the *titulus*. By a miracle of healing, it was determined which was the cross of Christ. A portion of the true cross was left in the church she built over the site; another part was sent to Constantine who enclosed it in a statue of himself that was erected in Constantinople. The nails she found were used to make a helmet and bridle bits for the emperor.

Sozomen,[6] writing perhaps a little later than Socrates, provides a largely corroborative account, though differing in some details. He indicates that some attributed the discovery to information from a Hebrew who had inherited some relevant documents, though Sozomen himself preferred divine communication through signs and dreams to human information! He also distinguishes between the discovery of the cave where the body was buried and the place where the crosses were found,[7] and notes that the *titulus* had been wrenched from the cross so that it provided no clue as to which was the cross of Christ – hence the need for a miracle. Theodoret[8] attributes to Helena the making of a helmet and bridle bits from the nails to protect her son. In other words, although the story is essentially the same, there are variations and additions.

It was long supposed that the earliest witness to the story is Ambrose of Milan, who tells it as a generally known fact in 395 in *De obitu Theodosii*,

3 Thus Eusebius' history, still a vital resource, covered the same ground as this volume.
4 *HE* 10.7–8.
5 *HE* 1.17.
6 *HE* 2.1.
7 Sozomen's version corresponds better with what one is shown today on a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.
8 *HE* 1.18.

his funeral oration for the emperor Theodosius.[9] Unlike the other sources, Ambrose attributes the identification of the true cross to the *titulus*, which was placed there by providence for this purpose. Does he perhaps know of the fragment of the *titulus* brought back to Italy by Helena? A comment by John Chrysostom,[10] again dating from the 390s, also appears to link the *titulus* with the identification of the true cross, though he does not attribute the discovery to Helena. So how far back can we trace Helena's connection with the discovery? It is now generally agreed that the lost history of Gelasius, bishop of Caesarea from 357 CE, was the source for all the other historians, and what Rufinus added to Eusebius was, at least in books 10 and 11, largely a translation of Gelasius.[11] Prior to Gelasius, however, there is nothing to link the discovery of the true cross with Helena's well-attested pilgrimage in 326–7, a gap of some thirty years. Eusebius makes much of her involvement with the building of churches in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives, but does not in any way connect her with the discovery of the Holy Sepulchre or the building of the church in Jerusalem. Besides, his silence about the discovery of the true cross is absolute. It is time to consider his evidence.

The important work is his *De vita Constantini* ('Life of Constantine'). Written soon after the death of the Emperor, it celebrates Constantine's deeds and his character, and focuses among other things on his church building programme in the Holy Land. Eusebius[12] confirms the discovery of the sepulchre under a pagan temple at the heart of the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina, and quotes the letter from Constantine to bishop Macarius of Jerusalem, instructing him to build a church there. It has been pointed out,[13] however, that, while Eusebius emphasises 'the memorial of the Resurrection', Constantine wrote of a 'token of that holiest Passion', and that Constantine focuses on the basilica (or Martyrion) associated with Christ's death, while Eusebius is largely interested in the resplendent courtyard constructed around the tomb (the Anastasis). Eusebius, then, may appear to suppress the story of the finding of the cross, while betraying himself, both by recording this letter and also in hints elsewhere – speaking before the emperor[14] he states that the basilica was constructed to honour the 'saving sign', which naturally means the cross.

9 *Ob. Theo.* 43–8.
10 *Hom.* 85 *in Jo.*
11 For a discussion of the reconstruction of Gelasius' history, and Rufinus' debt to it, see Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 96–101.
12 *V.C.* 3.25–47.
13 Drake, 'Eusebius on the true cross'.
14 *L.C.* 9.16; this text is Eusebius' address on the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine's reign, appended to the *V.C.*

Political and theological reasons have been proposed to explain Eusebius' silence[15] – there is plenty of evidence that elsewhere he suppressed material that did not suit his purpose. Alternatively, it is not impossible that he doubted the authenticity of the find – his predecessor, Origen, was quite prepared to use the ancient critical techniques of *kataskeuē* and *anaskeuē* to consider the historicity of stories in the gospels.[16]

Nevertheless, by 348 CE, Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem, was telling his catechumens that 'the holy wood of the cross, shown among us today . . . has already filled the entire world by means of those who in faith have been taking bits from it',[17] and in a letter to the emperor Constantius II he referred to the discovery of the saving wood of the cross in the time of Constantine.[18] Inscriptions and casual references in other fourth-century literature confirm that relics of the cross spread rapidly, and were even worn as jewellery.[19] Despite protests from preachers, in the popular mind fragments of the cross had become amulets, capable of protecting the wearer from harm. Turning the nails into a bridle and a diadem for Constantine reflects the same kind of belief in the potency of the cross, as does the story of the healing miracle. Yet, there is little trace of the cross as a symbol in pre-Constantinian art[20] – something has changed! For Constantine,[21] the standard of the cross was like a trophy ensuring victory – purportedly a cross of light above the noonday sun had been revealed to him on the eve of his battle for the empire. It was claimed that with this sign he had conquered.[22] Through the cross the supreme God had shown himself Constantine's patron, while Christ, his Son, had been Constantine's preserver and aid in battle against the forces of evil, polytheism, and idolatry. So it is not entirely inconceivable that Helena had motives for seeking the true cross, or that Constantine should have taken a personal interest in the building of a basilica over the place where the wood was found.

Historically speaking, of course, the plausibility of the full story depends on such inferences, not on solid data. Furthermore, there are bound to be questions about the identification of the site and the authenticity of the cross

15 Discussed by Drake, 'Eusebius on the true cross'; cf. also Hunt, *Holy Land pilgrimage*; and Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.
16 Grant, *Earliest lives of Jesus*; see pt v, ch. 27, below.
17 *Catech*. 10.19.
18 *Ep. Const*. 3.
19 Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 89–93; also Gibson and Taylor, *Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, 83–5.
20 Snyder, *Ante pacem*; but, cf. Hurtado, 'Earliest evidence'.
21 See pt VI, ch. 30, below; the history surrounding Constantine's vision and conversion is likewise contested, of course.
22 Euseb. *V.C.* 1.28–31.

and tomb which were uncovered. Recent discussion has tended to be more sympathetic to the idea that a continuous tradition identified Golgotha and the site of the tomb beneath the pagan temple erected when Hadrian founded the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina.[23] Be that as it may, it would seem that Helena could have had political reasons for specifically searching out the cross. But what else did she know of the historical Jesus? What picture of Jesus Christ shaped her Holy Land pilgrimage?

That question is not easy to answer directly, but we can make some inferences. If Helena was a convert, as seems likely,[24] she would have recited a creed at her baptism. The statement about Christ would have gone something like this:

> [I believe] in Christ Jesus, [God's] only Son, our Lord, who was born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried, on the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended to heaven, he sits at the Father's right hand, thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.

What is immediately noticeable is the absence of any information about the historical life and teaching of Jesus, apart from the fact that he was born of Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate. Helena is associated in the sources with the founding of churches in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives to mark the sacred locations of the birth and ascension of Jesus, both important events in the creedal summary of who he was.[25] Nevertheless, Helena must have been familiar with the gospels, though the stories would have been heard episodically in the liturgy; it is worth asking how they were understood and what kind of perceptions of Jesus she had gleaned from them.

Constantine's *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* ('Oration to the assembly of the Saints'), a text appended to Eusebius' *De vita Constantini*,[26] might provide clues. From this text we may deduce that Helena, like her son, was aware of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan where, 'from infancy possessing the wisdom of God', he was gifted with 'the spirit of universal intelligence, with knowledge and power to perform miracles'. She would have admired his teaching, instilled

23 Hunt, *Holy Land pilgrimage*; Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*; Gibson and Taylor, *Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*; Taylor, 'Golgotha: a reconsideration'; and Biddle, *Tomb of Christ*, 54–70.

24 According to Eusebius she was converted by her son, Constantine. Discussion in Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.

25 E.g. Euseb. *V.C.* 3.41–3.

26 Appended in Greek, it was delivered in Latin on a Good Friday between 321 and 324 at Serdica or Thessalonica, and probably distributed as propaganda. Discussion in Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 73–6.

with prudence and wisdom, as well as the benefits he bestowed – 'for blindness, the gift of sight; for helpless weakness, the vigour of health; in place of death, restoration to life again . . .'. She would know also of incidents such as 'the abundant provision in the wilderness, whereby a scanty measure of food became a complete and enduring supply for the wants of a mighty multitude', and the stilling of a raging storm at sea; but like her son she might also have regarded his loving kindness to be the chief thing to be noted. She would have remembered that he told his followers to endure injury with dignity and patience, that he came to associate with the lowly, and prepared people for contempt of danger, teaching them genuine confidence in himself, and that he restrained one of his followers, telling him to return his sword to the sheath.[27] She would have taken it for granted that he provided a model for people to follow. It is noticeable how little the language actually reflects that of the gospels themselves!

Her over-riding sense of Jesus Christ, however, would not belong simply to the past. For her, he would be the King of kings, the regent providentially governing the whole universe on behalf of the transcendent supreme God. She would probably be aware of the flattery that turned her son into the earthly imitation of that heavenly ruler. She would certainly have accepted that the ascended Lord Jesus Christ shared God's sovereignty and divine majesty.[28] Almost certainly she would have believed that his divine life was communicated to her when she partook of his body and blood in the sacrament. Christian belief in Helena's time meant receiving immortality through physical contact with the material realities that had been transformed and sanctified by the presence of the divine. Even the cross had its talismanic power because it was a sign of immortality, a trophy of the victory over death gained in time past when the Son of the one and only God had sojourned on earth.[29] Eusebius tells us she wanted to pray in the places where Christ's feet had touched the ground[30] – indeed, as noted before, she is reputed to have prayed in Rome on earth she had brought back from the Holy Land. She needed to be in touch with the Jesus of history because he was more than a merely historical figure. He represented not just the historical origins of Christianity but was the foundation of her faith. Helena's faith in Jesus, on the one hand, moves him beyond the reality of a first-century Jew condemned to death as 'king of

27 Abstracted from Const. *Or. s.c.* 11, 12, 15.
28 The classic example of how the Hellenistic 'king ideology' was Christianised is found in Euseb. *L.C.*, from which these sentiments are drawn, along with Const. *Or. s.c.*
29 Euseb. *V.C.* 1.32.
30 *V.C.* 3.42–7. For discussion of the importance of touch, see Wilken, *Land called holy*, 114ff.

the Jews' (this much, at any rate, can be inferred from the *titulus*), and, on the other hand, stimulates an interest in being in touch with that very concrete reality. Even if legendary, her story is a kind of quest for the Jesus of history.

The purpose in telling Helena's story has been twofold – to illustrate what people knew and thought about Jesus at the end of the period covered by this volume, and to provide a parallel to the historical problems associated with Jesus himself. If we review the preceding paragraphs we observe the following difficulties in reconstructing what really happened:

- Post-Enlightenment questions about the perspectives and beliefs of those who told the story, not least the belief in miracles and supernatural power
- The nature of the sources and the question of their mutual compatibility
- Considerable time-spans between the events and the accounts
- Questions about the validity of oral traditions
- Gaps in the evidence
- Issues about the authenticity of material remains
- Post-Reformation rejection of relics and their veneration.

Such factors likewise affect the quest of the historical Jesus. Since the nineteenth century,[31] there have been repeated attempts to reconstruct the facts behind the gospels, to distinguish the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith'. Thus, the case of Helena exemplifies the dilemma for anyone approaching the subject of Jesus at the start of a history of Christianity. It may be customary to open the history of a movement with a biography of its founder, but is Jesus the founder and can we write his biography? Even if we could, would that explain the rise of Christianity?

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour

It is said that the early Christians used the symbol of the fish because in Greek the word for fish (*ichthus*) is an acronym of 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour';[32] so here was a handy secret sign of the full significance of Jesus. The aura accorded to Jesus through devotion and doctrine parallels the blend of history and fantasy that made up the legend of Helena. In Helena's time the fiercest battles over the nature of God's Son and the manner of his incarnation in Jesus still lay in the future, though the turmoil of the Arian controversy[33] was their

31 Historical scepticism prior to this was largely identified with the opponents of Christianity such as Celsus and Porphyry; Origen's critique of gospel stories (n. 16, above) served his spiritualising agenda, and its motivations were quite different from those of the modern quest for the historical Jesus, for which see further below.
32 Snyder, *Ante pacem* finds little evidence to confirm this.
33 See further pt VI, ch. 31, below.

harbinger. The resulting dogma became problematic for post-Enlightenment historians: as in the case of Helena, they wished to remove the veil of legend, or in this case, doctrine, so as to find the facts about Jesus. Yet it is precisely Christology, the dogmas concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ, which have made Christianity what it is. The clarification of these doctrines, against all the variant forms of Christianity around in the earliest period, was impelled by the 'cult' of Jesus, and by the fact that his story was quickly incorporated into an over-arching cosmic narrative. Both of these features belong to the period of this volume.

The overarching story is best presented in the *Epideixis tou apostolikou kērygmatos* ('Demonstration of the apostolic preaching'), a work of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons at the end of the second century.[34] It begins with creation and culminates in the call of the Gentiles to faith in resurrection and eternal life. It tells how Adam and Eve were innocent, like children, how they failed to keep God's commandment, were misled by a fallen angel (known as Satan, or the devil), and so were excluded from paradise. A summary of biblical stories reinforces the sense of humanity's fall, and God's repeated attempts to put things right: Cain and Abel; Noah and his sons; the tower of Babel; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses and the giving of the Law; the promised land and the temple; the prophets. The most important function of the prophets, however, was to be 'heralds of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, announcing that . . . he would be, according to the flesh, son of David, . . . while according to the Spirit, Son of God'. So the story turns to 'the Word made flesh'. We have already been told that the Word and Wisdom of God were God's 'two hands', the instruments of creation, and that the Son of God and the Spirit were to be identified as God's very own Word and Wisdom. Now we read that 'He united man with God and wrought a communion of God and man'. He 'recapitulated all things' in himself: he was obedient where Adam was disobedient, and 'the transgression which occurred through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree', for 'the Son of Man, obeying God, was nailed to the tree' (= the cross). 'In this way, He gloriously accomplished our salvation and fulfilled the promise made to the patriarchs', namely, that

> to those who believed and loved the Lord, and <who lived> in holiness, righteousness and in patience, the God of all would offer eternal life by means of the resurrection from the dead, through him who died and rose, Jesus Christ, <to whom> He has entrusted the kingship over all things, the authority over the living and the dead, and the judgement.

34 See further pt III, ch. 13, below; ET quoted here, Behr, *On the apostolic preaching*.

With this narrative in mind, the gospels have been read within the Christian tradition, not as biographical accounts of a Jew named Jesus, but as epiphanies.[35] The divine has shone through the earthly story, because it is about the Son of God, who pre-existed creation, yet, for love of the human race, emptied himself of divinity, became human by being born of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, lived a human life marked by miracles and healings, gave his disciples the supreme ethical teaching, towards which seers and philosophers had aspired but never reached, and above all, took upon himself the sins and sufferings of the human race and overcame them by dying and rising again. In Christ human nature is united with the divine: the image and likeness of God, once granted to Adam, is restored to humanity, and the gift of immortality made available. Thus the time-scale of this story is not simply the span of Jesus' human life, but the whole providence of God from the beginning to the end. Believers are taken up into this narrative, which gives meaning to their lives. Everything about Jesus is seen through these cosmic perspectives.

Early Christian texts reveal writers[36] revelling in the rhetorical paradoxes of the invisible God becoming visible in Jesus Christ, the intangible being touched, the incomprehensible made comprehensible, the impassible suffering, the immortal dying – patterns of liturgical and homiletic rhetoric that would live on in Christian discourse over the centuries. This presupposes the whole cosmic story into which the story of Jesus was taken up. Melito concludes his *Homilia in passionem Christi* ('Homily on the passion of Christ'; perhaps the Haggadah for a Quartodeciman Passover)[37] as follows:

> This is he who made the heavens and the earth, and formed humanity in the beginning, who is announced by the Law and the prophets, who was enfleshed in a virgin, who was hanged on the tree, who was buried in the earth, who was raised from the dead and went up to the heights of heaven, who is sitting on the right hand of the Father, who has authority to judge and save all things, through whom the Father made the things which exist, from the beginning to all the ages. This one is 'the Alpha and the Omega', this one is 'the beginning and the end' – the beginning which cannot be explained and the end which cannot be grasped. This one is the Christ. This one is the king. This one is Jesus. This one is the leader. This one is the Lord. This one is he who has risen from the dead. This one is he who sits on the right hand of the Father. He bears the Father and is borne by the Father. 'To him be the glory and the power to the ends of the ages. Amen.'

35 See pt III, ch. 8, below.
36 E.g. Ign. *Eph*. 7.2, *Pol*. 3.2; Mel. *Pass*. 2 and *Fr*. 13; Iren. *Haer*. 3.16.6.
37 Stewart-Sykes, *Lamb's high feast*; for the Quartodecimans see pt IV, chs. 17 and 22, below.