

**HELENA OF THE CROSS, THE QUEEN OF ADIABENE,
AND ROYAL MYTH-MAKING IN THE HOLY CITY**

The questions raised in the following pages link back to the very first papers in the 2009 symposium in celebration of Prof. Medaković.¹ These discussed religion as a tool of state ideology: particularly official representations and popular perceptions of Constantine and his family as promoted in public policy. The questions here also complement the overall theme of the symposium series, since they concern Constantine's mother, and we meet here each year to celebrate the Day of St Constantine and St Helena.

At the 2008 symposium the present writer explored the likely resonance of Helena's name in her lifetime and later, and whether her reputation was enhanced by public awareness of the heroic and divine aspects of the Greek Helen, deliberately encouraged by state propaganda.² Specifically, he wondered aloud if Constantine's self-promotion as Apollo and Sol Invictus might have been complemented by ideas of presenting Helena which invited awareness of aspects of the Greek Helen, including Selene, the Moon.

This paper moves on to raise a potentially significant point about Helena's famous visit to Jerusalem.³ Her supposed discovery there of the so-called True Cross ('a tradition more cherished than trustworthy,' as Hans Pohlsander has put it⁴)

¹ I would like to renew my thanks to Miša Rakocija, the University of Niš, and the civic authorities, for inviting me to address this symposium.

² Graham Jones, 'The power of Helen's name: Heritage and legacy, myth and reality', in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Seventh Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2008. The Collection of Scientific Works VII* (Niš, University of Niš, 2009), hereafter Jones. 'Helen's name', pp. 351-70.

³ Hans J.W. Drijvers and Jan Willem Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross. The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac. Introduction Text and Translation*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 565, Subsidia 93, Louvain 1997; Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, 1992), hereafter Drijvers, 'Helena', and 'Helena Augusta: Exemplary Christian Empress', *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993), pp. 85ff.

⁴ Hans A. Pohlsander, author of *The Emperor Constantine*, Lancaster Pamphlets in Ancient History (2nd edn, London, Routledge, 2004), and 'Constantine I (306-37 A.D.)', 'De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopaedia of Roman Emperors', <<http://www.roman-emperors.org/conniei.htm>>, accessed December 11, 2009.



Fig. 1 The kingdom of Adiabene is shown near the centre of this map of Armenian-dominated areas during the reign of Tigran the Great, 95/96 BCE ('Maps of Armenia', Armenica.org: <http://www.armenica.org/>, accessed December 17, 2009).

Сл. 1 Краљевство Адиабене приказано је у близини централног дела ове мапе са областима којима су доминирали Јермени у време владавине Тиграна Великог (Tigran the Great), 95/96. године пре нове ере ('Maps of Armenia', Armenica.org: <http://www.armenica.org/>, accessed December 17, 2009).

together with the instruments of Christ's Crucifixion,⁵ provided the central propagandist image of Constantine as Christian ruler. Shown standing with his mother and with her holding the Cross, the image was destined to be found in practically every Orthodox church, whether in wall-paintings or on icons.

What was Helena doing in Jerusalem? She would die soon afterwards, in 'the eightieth year of her life',⁶ so perhaps she was there purely as a pilgrim

⁵ *Constantine and Christendom: the oration to the saints; the Greek and Latin accounts of the discovery of the cross; the Edict of Constantine to Pope Silvester*, trs. with an introduction and notes by Mark Edwards (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2003).

⁶ Eusebius of Caesaria, *The Church History*. The text is online at 'NPNF2-01. Euse-



Fig. 2 Aerial photograph of present-day Arbil in Kurdish Iraq: the core of ancient Arbela lies beneath the central mound of the inner city (photo by Sefti, reproduced under Creative Commons licence).

Сл. 2 Фотографија из ваздуха данашњег Арбила (Arbil) у курдском Ираку: језгро антике Арбелје (Arbela) лежи испод централног насипа унутрашњег града (фотографију снимиио Сефти (Sefti), лиценцу за репродуковање издао Creative Commons.

and the discovery, if it ever happened, was a lucky coincidence.⁷ Perhaps her supposed hand in the building of Holy Land churches, that of the Nativity at Bethlehem and the Church on the Mount of Olives (Eleona),⁸ was simply an act of sincere or ostentatious piety – or even a posthumous attribution to her of a programme actually carried out by her son. However, the first two papers in this year’s symposium pointed out that imperial acts were deliberately crafted to manipulate public opinion. Nothing changes, clearly, but if imperial policy was involved here, what was the purpose?

Jan Willem Drijvers has suggested that Helena’s visit, ‘the most memorable event of Helena’s life’, and her tour of the eastern provinces (in

bios Pamphilius, *The Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.toc.html>>, hereafter Eusebius, ‘Church History’, ‘Life of Constantine’, ‘*De Laudibus*’/‘Oration’, accessed December 17, 2009.

⁷ For a general introduction to devotional travels to Palestine, see E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982), hereafter Hunt, ‘Pilgrimage’, and for the religious, political, and cultural context, P[eter] W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?: Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁸ Hunt, ‘Pilgrimage’, Chapters 1-2.

327-28) of which this was part, was ‘a political act of conciliation’. He has written that it is generally looked upon as a pilgrimage because of Eusebius’ description of this journey:⁹ ‘Eusebius only had eyes for the religious aspects of her journey. He depicts Helena as driven by religious enthusiasm: she wants to pray at the places where Christ’s feet had touched the ground, she cares for the poor and needy, she only does good deeds and is generous, and she builds churches. However, people living in the East may have been dissatisfied with Constantine’s radical (religious) reforms, which included, for example, the replacement of many officials by Christian dignitaries and the rigorous suppression of non-Christian cults. Furthermore, Constantine’s popularity may have suffered severe damage from murdering his wife Fausta and his son Crispus in 326. A reason for Helena’s tour East may therefore have been to appease the inhabitants of the eastern regions.’¹⁰

However, there may be an additional factor. It arises from a coincidence which is easily overlooked, that Helena was not the first royal person of that name to enter the annals of public devotion and benefaction in Jerusalem.

Equally well-known in another branch of academe, to students of Jewish religious and cultural history, is the visit and eventual burial in the Holy City of Queen Helena of Adiabene. (The name-form ‘Helene’ is generally used today, and will be used here to distinguish between the two women). Her ancient Assyrian, semi-independent kingdom lay in northern Mesopotamia between the Upper (Lycus) and Lower Zab (Caprus) rivers (Fig. 1), its capital surviving beneath the ancient core of Arbil, present-day capital of the Kurdish Regional Government in present-day northern Iraq (Fig. 2).¹¹ Her activities, three centuries before those of Constantine’s mother, resemble them very closely. Both women were converted to a new faith and both probably influenced their sons’ conversions – in Helen of Adiabene’s case, to the Jewish faith. Both built public monuments in the Holy City. Both adorned holy places. Both were long remembered for their piety.

The queen of Adiabene’s conversion during the reign of the emperor Claudius in the first century of the Common Era is known from the pages of Josephus,¹² described recently as ‘the most elaborate textual passage about

⁹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, ‘Life of Constantine’, most recently translated in print as Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, trs Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), 3:42-47.

¹⁰ Jan Willem Drijvers, ‘Helena Augusta (248/249-328/329 A.D.)’, ‘De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopaedia of Roman Emperors’, <<http://www.roman-emperors.org/helena.htm>>, accessed December 11, 2009.

¹¹ Adiabene has been described as ‘probably a small province lying between the Tigris, Lycus, and the Gordiæan Mountains (see Dionysius Cassius, 68), but before the time of Pliny, according to Vaux (in Smith’s *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*), the word was used in a wider sense to indicate Assyria in general (see Pliny, *H. N.* VI. 12, and Ammianus Marcellinus, 23:6). Helena was queen of Adiabene in the narrower sense.

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, Bk 20, Chs 2-4: W. Whiston (trs), *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1987), revised by L. H. Schiffman in consultation with H. St. J. Thackeray, Ralph Marcus, Allen Wikgren, and L. H. Feldman, trans., *Josephus: in Nine Volumes*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, 1976-79).

a conversion to Judaism from ancient literature'.¹³ Josephus refers to her as Helena, but this is not the case on her sarcophagus, one of six, all now in the Louvre, which were found in 1863 when her mausoleum was rediscovered outside Jerusalem, about three-quarters of a mile north of the Damascus Gate (Fig. 3).¹⁴

Here (Figs 4 and 5) it is her Semitic name and title which appears,¹⁵ first in Estrangelo¹⁶ and below that in Aramaic¹⁷ (both, of course, reading from right to left). A standard manual of texts from the period transliterates the two versions into Hebrew as *הַדַּבְּ הַתְּכַלְמִי* and *הַדַּבְּ הַתְּכַלְמִי* respectively,¹⁸ which in Roman script (reading the words from right to left) can be represented as Estrangelo (Syriac) *srn mlkt*, 'Saran the Queen', and Aramaic *sdh mlkth*, 'Sadah the Queen' (the *s* is hard, represented in standard Israeli transliteration as *ts*).¹⁹ However, the queen's personal name has also been read in a recent survey of Jewish funerary practice of the period as 'Sadah [or Sadan]', with the names modernised a *הַתְּכַלְמִי הַדַּבְּ*, 'Syrian' *sdn mlkth*, and *הַדַּבְּ הַתְּכַלְמִי*, Aramaic *sdh mlkt*, thus apparently ignoring the different middle letter form evident in the first, Syriac line of the inscription.²⁰ Some present-day references, for example a tourist guide to Jerusalem and the International Council of Jewish Women *Newsletter*, interpret the name in a different way again, passing over the Aramaic version and abbreviating the Syriac to speak only of 'Sara Melaka' (Queen Sarah). The inference is clear for a Jewish audience: an implicit indication that Helen adopted the Jewish name biblically borne by the wife of Abraham, who

¹³ Michal Marciak, University of Leiden, describing his four-year research programme: see below.

¹⁴ Paris, Louvre, Inv. AO 5029, 'Sarcophagus 8' in Helen Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period*, Supplements to the *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (Leiden, Brill, 2005), hereafter Hachlili, 'Funerary customs', and shown on pp. 121, Fig. III-33, and 168, Fig. V-4, with a bibliography of scholarly descriptions on p. 123.

¹⁵ The inscription is *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* (3 vols, Paris, French Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1889-1929), hereafter 'CIS', 2 (pub. 1911), No. 156.

¹⁶ Estrangelo: the oldest variety of written Syriac, itself an eastern dialect of Aramaic (see next footnote) spoken in the lands between the Roman and Parthian empires until the twelfth century CE. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, *The World's Writing Systems* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), hereafter Daniels and Bright, 'Writing Systems', pp. 499-504.

¹⁷ Aramaic: a Semitic language which was the *lingua franca* of much of the Near East from about the seventh century BCE until the seventh century CE, when it was largely replaced by Arabic. Daniels and Bright, 'Writing Systems', pp. 96-98, 499-504.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts: Second century B.C. to Second Century A.D.*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 34 (Rome, Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1978, 4th repr. 2002), hereafter Fitzmyer and Harrington, 'Aramaic Texts', No. 32, p. 180.

¹⁹ For the letter forms and translation of her title see Stanley A. Cook, *A Glossary of the Aramaic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1898), p. 74 for 'queen' and p. 100 for her personal name.

²⁰ Hachlili, 'Funerary customs', p. 168.

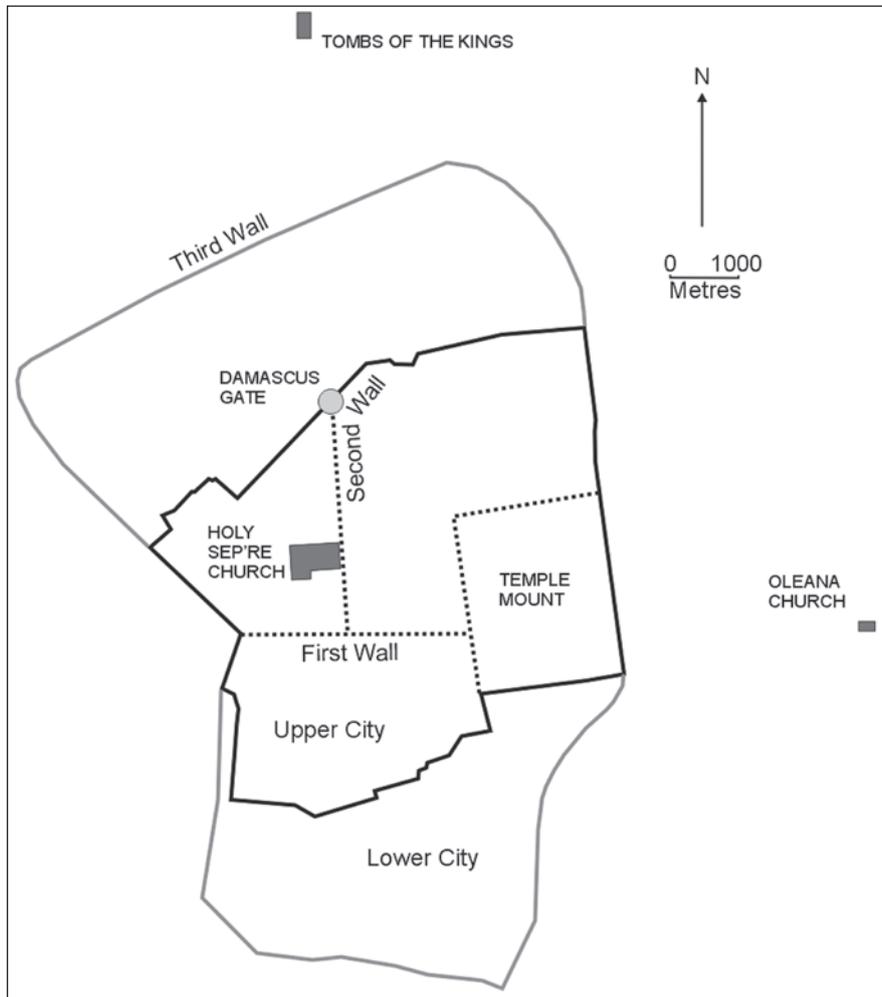


Fig. 3 Plan of Jerusalem based on the British geographer Bruce House's map of 1883 (Toledo, Ohio, H. H. Hardesty, 1883), and Martin Biddle, 'Tomb of Christ', Fig. 60 B and D, p. 59. Solid line shows the circuit of the medieval wall, and the internal dotted lines show the first and second walls and also the boundaries of the three quarters, clockwise the Jewish (Old City), Christian, and Muslim (west and north of the Temple Mount). Map by the author.

Сл. 3 План Јерусалима на основу мапе британског географа Бруса Хауса (Bruce House) из 1883. год. (Toledo, Ohio, H. H. Hardesty, 1883), и Мартин Бидловог (Martin Biddle) „Христовог гроба“ ('Tomb of Christ'), Слика 60 B and D, стр. 59. Пуна линија приказује круг средњовековног зида, а унутрашње тачкасте линије приказују први и други зид као и границе „три четвртине“, у смеру кретања казаљки на сату, јеврејске (Стари град), хришћанске и муслиманске (западно и северно од Храмове горе (или Брда храма). Мапу приредио аутор.

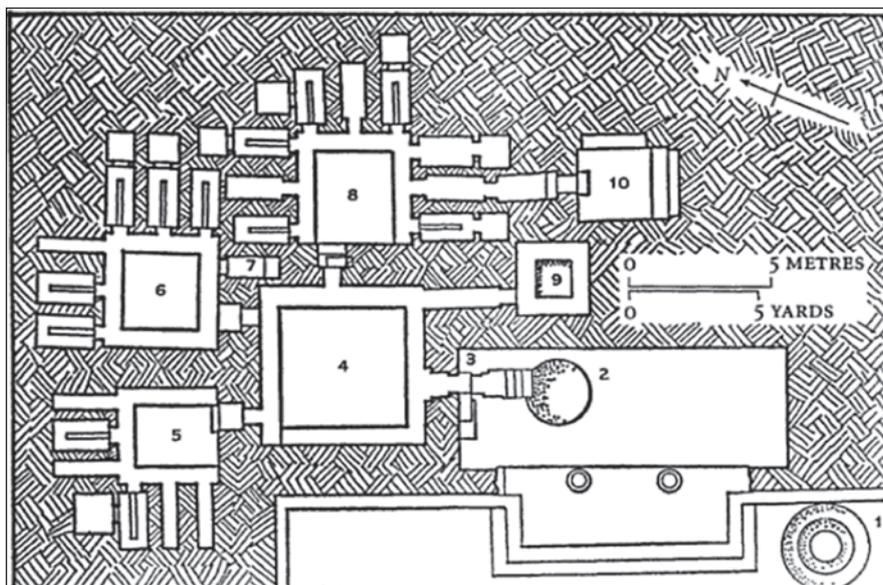


Fig. 4 Plan of the ‘Tomb of the Kings’ after Vincent (1954) and adapted from Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Holy Land’, Fig. 42, p. 160: 1-2 Basins, 3 Entrance, 4 Antechamber, 5-6 Burial chambers, 7 Secret stairway, 8 Burial chamber, 9-10 Unfinished burial chambers.

Сл. 4 План Гробнице краљева након Винсента (Vincent) (1954) и адаптирано из Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Holy Land’ (Света земља), сл. 42, стр. 160: 1-2 Базени, 3 Улаз, 4 Предворје, 5-6 одаје за сахрањивање, 7 Тајно степениште, 8 Одаја за сахрањивање, 9-10 Недовршене одаје за сахрањивање.

like her travelled to the Holy Land from Mesopotamia.²¹ This follows a reading as ‘Persian’ /*srn*/ (‘Tsaren’ or ‘Saran’) or *Tzara Malchata*,²² depending on an alternative scholarly reading of the two forms as ‘Saran’ and ‘Sarah’,²³ and the Hebrew form of the inscription given in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1901-6.²⁴ However, the latter combines the given name on the top line with the form for ‘queen’ on the bottom, so seems to be a misreading.²⁵ The Hebrew letters ט and ט are certainly hard for the untrained eye to tell apart. The most recent reading of the inscription, by the epigrapher Rachel Hachlili, acknowledges its difficulty

²¹ ‘Planetware: Jerusalem – Tombs of the Kings’, <<http://www.planetware.com/jerusalem/tombs-of-the-kings-isr-jr-jtk.htm>>, accessed December 19, 2009. Judy Telman, ‘Historic women of Jerusalem’, *International Council of Jewish Women Newsletter*, April 2009, pp. 4-5. Sara(h) means ‘a woman of high rank’ (but not the highest).

²² ‘History of Syriac Texts and Syrian Christianity’ at <http://www.syriac.talktalk.net/chron_tab1.html>, accessed December 19, 2009, citing Fitzmyer and Harrington (see next footnote).

²³ Fitzmyer and Harrington, ‘Aramaic Texts’, pp. 180, 243, No. 132.

²⁴ Richard Gottheil and M. Seligsohn, ‘Helena’, in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London, Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-6), published online at <<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>>, accessed December 17, 2009), hereafter ‘Jewish Encyclopedia’.

²⁵ The reading ‘Tzara Malchata’ is followed by the author of the Wikipedia article on Helen at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena_of_Adiabene>, accessed December 19, 2009.

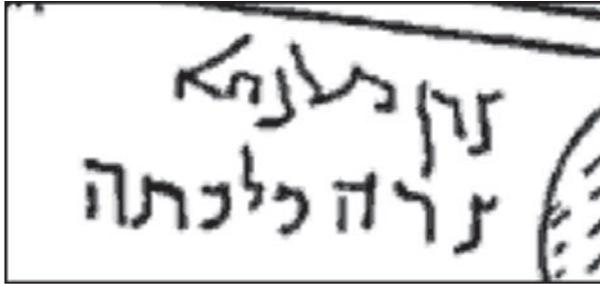


Fig. 5 The inscription on Queen Helen's tomb: Hachlili (2005) Fig. V-4 after Avigad (1956), p. 341.

Сл. 5 Натпис на гробу краљице Јелене: Hachlili (2005) Сл. V-4 након Авигада (Avigad) (1956), стр. 341.

– ‘The meaning of the name is not clear’, she writes – and while scholars have no problem with identifying the person buried with the Queen of Adiabene,²⁶ the uncertainty continues. Tal Ilan, a scholar of Jewish women's history in Antiquity, referring only to the first line, concludes ‘From this, we may infer that the queen's Persian [*sic*] name was Sadan’,²⁷ while another source gives ‘Queen Tseddah’.²⁸

Presumably Helena was her Greek name, the region's elites being of course thoroughly Hellenised by this time. It is possible that she took another name on conversion to the Jewish faith, but if so Josephus, a Jew, says nothing of it. Double names, one Hebrew, one Greek, are found on several funerary inscriptions of the period.²⁹ Uncertainty over naming extends to her burial place, too. The complex of rock-cut tombs which she had built outside the city³⁰ became traditionally but erroneously known as The Tombs of the Kings (*Qubûr es-Salatîn* in Arabic) and by the Jews as The Tomb of Kalba Sabua.³¹

According to Josephus, Helene is described as the sister and wife of king Monobazus³² and mother of a god-chosen younger son, Izates. She protected him from his older, jealous brothers (her own sons and those of other wives) by sending him into the custody of the king of Charax-Spasini, modern

²⁶ Hachlili, ‘Funerary customs’, p. 168. She cites Lidzbarski 1898, 117; Avigad 1956, 341; and Kutscher 1956, 351, as well as Fitzmyer and Harrington's alternative reading of ‘Saran’ and ‘Sarah’ (see above).

²⁷ Prof. Tal Ilan gives the Syriac letters in reverse sequence as they read from right to left, אהכלמ ןדצ: ‘Helene, Queen of Adiabene’, in ‘Jewish Women, A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopaedia’, ‘Jewish Women's Archive’ (2005), <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/helene-queen-of-adiabene>>, accessed December 14, 2009. The variant ‘Tseddah’ is given in a tourist guide to Jerusalem's tombs, at <<http://www.jewishmag.com/47mag/jerusalem-tombs/jerusalem-tombs.htm>>, accessed December 20, 2009.

²⁸ The Center for Online Judaic Studies, <http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Tomb_of_Queen_Helene_of_Adiabene,_c._50_CE>, accessed December 19, 2009.

²⁹ Hachlili, ‘Funerary customs’, p. 195.

³⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, Ch. 20, 4:3, described it as just outside the walls, where Helen had erected three pyramids.

³¹ Conrad Schick, ‘The (So-Called) Tombs of the Kings at Jerusalem’, *Palestine Exploration Fund. Quarterly Statement* 29 (1897), pp. 182–88, correctly identified the tomb as that of the royal Adiabene household. Talmud tradition associated the tomb with one of three wealthy merchants, known as Ben Kalba Sabua, whose storehouses were burned by Zealots, causing the famine described below. ‘Kalba Sabua’ means ‘satisfied dog’.

³² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20, 2, § 1.

Basra, and said that the remains of Noah's Ark were shown there.³³ During Izates's absence, a Jewish merchant and sage named Ananias was introduced to the king's wives and began teaching them about Judaism.³⁴ This led in turn to Izates' conversion and has recently been dated to 'about 30CE'.³⁵ At about the same time, Helene, in Adiabene, was converted by another Jew. Returning home with Ananias in his entourage, Izates was eager to be circumcised but Ananias advised him that it was not necessary. However, another Jew named Eleazar arrived from Galilee and persuaded Izates to go through with it. At a later stage Helene's elder son, also Monobazus, who eventually inherited Izates's kingdom, having earlier acted as its guardian during his absence, followed their example and similarly embraced Judaism. It is related that he supplied golden handles for all the vessels used on the Day of Atonement in the Temple, that he sent assistance to the Jews in their rebellion against Vespasian and Titus in 66-70 CE, and that two of his relatives died in the Jewish ranks.³⁶

Josephus further told how Helene made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 46-47 CE. Confronted with a famine in the city, probably that reported in *The Letter to the Romans* attributed to St Paul, she is said by Josephus to have assisted the Jews of Jerusalem by buying grain in Egypt and dried figs in Cyprus and importing them into the country in large quantities.³⁷ Again according to Josephus, her benefactions were warmly welcomed. She stayed on for about eight or nine years until, on Izates's death in 55 CE, she returned to Adiabene to see her elder son Monobazus crowned king. She died shortly afterwards, perhaps in 56. The bodies of both Helene and Izates were then transferred to Jerusalem and buried in the royal mausoleum she had built while in the city, 'the pyramids' as Josephus described it.³⁸ There seems little reason to question the historicity of the account as broadly laid out. It has been observed that most of Josephus's narrative was doubtless drawn from the Adiabenean royal chronicle, since he devoted much space to Izates's reign and exploits.³⁹

Renewed interest in Helene of Adiabene followed the discovery in 2007 of remains of a mansion in the lower part of the Old City, the 'City

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20:25.

³⁴ An event recently reexamined by John P. Dickson, *Mission-commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The shape, extent and background of early Christian mission*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 159 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2003), hereafter Dickson, 'Mission', pp. 33-36. See also G. Gilbert, 'The making of a Jew: "God-fearer" or convert in the story of Izates', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 44 (1991), pp. 299-313.

³⁵ Dickson, 'Mission', p. 33.

³⁶ Robert Eisenman, *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran: a new hypothesis of Qumran origins*, Studia post-Biblica 34 (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1983).

³⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20: 51. Cf. Romans 15:26.

³⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20, 4:3.

³⁹ Abraham Schalit, 'Evidence of an Aramaic Source in Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*', *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 4 (1975), pp. 171-81, links the story of the Adiabene royal conversion with another story about Babylonian Jews found in Josephus *Antiquities*, vol. 20. He asserts that the source was in Aramaic and circulated in the eastern Diaspora and that the story of Helen and Izates was part of a royal chronicle.

of David' area, the poorer part of Second Temple Jerusalem. The building included storerooms, living quarters, and ritual baths, and had been destroyed, presumably along with the rest of the city in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt of 70 CE. The archaeologist Doron Ben-Ami is reported to have said that the structure likely belonged to one of the mansions in Jerusalem which belonged to the Adiabenean royal family, and that Josephus, in his description of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, implied that Helene's was the only wealthy family to live in this part of the city.⁴⁰ 'Simon held the upper city, and the great wall as far as Cedron, and as much of the old wall as bent from Siloam to the east, and which went down to the palace of Monobazus, who was king of the Adiabeni, beyond Euphrates; he also held that fountain, and the Acra, which was no other than the lower city; he also held all that reached to the palace of queen Helena, the mother of Monobazus.'⁴¹ Even more recently, in 2008, a new excavation was undertaken in the Tomb of the Kings by archaeologists from the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française*. In the same year a four-year interdisciplinary project was begun in the Leiden Institute for Religious Studies by Michal Marciak, 'Izates and Helena of Adiabene', to reexamine the literary and archaeological sources for their story under the supervision of Professors J. K. Zangenberg and E. Dabrowa.⁴²

Marciak has observed that the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene was called by Emil Schürer 'the greatest triumph of Jewish proselytising' and as such has always attracted the attention of scholars dealing with the literature and history of the Jewish people during the Roman Period. 'The revival of interest should not surprise anyone due to the importance of this topic which lies in the fact that this event is not only documented by... Josephus... but also that many other topics (theological debates about righteous kingship or God's providence, stereotypes about conversion to Judaism and Judaism in general, as well as fundamental historical, archaeological, political and cultural implications) are connected to the topic of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene.' Marciak's research will assess the archaeological finds which have been linked to the family against events related in ancient literature and the socio-historical context.

Interest in Helene has also been revived recently as a result of three hypotheses by Robert Eisenman. First, Eisenman identifies Ananias, the Jewish merchant and teacher who tried to persuade Helene's son Izates that circumcision was not essential for conversion, with Ananias of Damascus who converted Saul to Christianity under his new name, Paul.⁴³ Paul, it will be remembered, worked for the decision of the Council of Jerusalem that circumcision was not required for membership of the embryonic church, a decision promulgated by James (Acts 15, esp. vv. 19-20). Second, he identifies Helene's provision of help for victims of the Claudian famine in Judaea with the relief which, ac-

⁴⁰ The Center for Online Judaic Studies, <http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Queen_Helene_of_Adiabene%27s_Mansion%2C_1st_century_CE>, accessed December 19, 2009.

⁴¹ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Bk 5, Ch. 6, v. 1.

⁴² Contact: michal.marciak@gmail.com

⁴³ Acts 9: 12-17.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas took to Jerusalem from Antioch (Acts 11:28-30). Third, Eisenman asserts that the eunuch of the 'Queen of Sheba' converted by the apostle Philip (Acts 8:26-40) was in fact an agent of Helene.⁴⁴

There are criticisms to be made of Eisenman's hypotheses,⁴⁵ though these identifications stop well short of some attempted reconstructions of first-century events, for example that Helene was Mary the mother of Jesus and her sons Jesus and James were adopted by king Agabus of Edessa,⁴⁶ or even that Helene was Mary Magdalene.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the whole story of the Queen of Adiabene requires us to take note of the very long tradition involving powerful women called Helen and the deep symbolism of the name⁴⁸ – reaching back to Troy, and to the moon deity Selene whose personality was claimed by a contemporary and namesake of Helene of Adiabene, Helena the companion of Simon Magus.⁴⁹ As the present writer has shown in an earlier paper, Helen's name was fairly widespread in the Greek-Roman world⁵⁰ and may have carried special significance even as far east as Adiabene at the turn of the first century of the Common Era and likewise in the third century when Helena, spouse of Constantius, gave birth to Naissus' most famous son, Constantine.

Though three centuries separate the two women, the lifetime of Helena mother of Constantine fell within the very period when the story of Helene of Adiabene's conversion, piety, and benefactions was being taken up by those writers in the Rabbinical tradition who were constructing what is still the recognisable form of orthodox Judaism.⁵¹ It was said that Helen conducted

⁴⁴ Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London, Watkins, 2002), hereafter Eisenman, 'James'.

⁴⁵ Robert M. Price, 'Robert Eisenman's *James the Brother of Jesus*: A Higher-Critical Evaluation', <<http://www.depts.drew.edu/jhc/rpeisman.html>>.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., 'The Tomb of the Nazarite Queen', an Internet discussion site to which Eisenman himself has contributed, <<http://osdir.com/ml/culture.templar.rosemont/2006-12/msg00006.html>>, accessed December 19, 2009.

⁴⁷ As reported at <<http://www.an-2500.org/actualite-antiquite-118.html>>, and a mystical, 'Templar' site, <<http://rennes-le-chateau-la-revelation.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=7927>>, both accessed December 19, 2009.

⁴⁸ Jones, 'Helen's name'.

⁴⁹ For a recent discussion of Simon Magus, see David R. Cartlidge, *The Fall and Rise of Simon Magus*, *Bible Review* 21, No. 4, Fall 2005, pp. 24-36.

⁵⁰ Jones, 'Helen's name'.

⁵¹ Isaiah Gafni, 'The Conversion of the Adiabene Kings in Light of Talmudic Literature' (Hebrew), *Niv Hamidrashia* (1971), pp. 204-12, describes the sources on the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene in the light of halakhic rulings and rabbinic references. Lawrence H. Schiffman, 'The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources', in L. H. Feldman and G. Hat (eds), *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 293-312, deals with the story of the conversion of Izates and Monobazus as it is recorded in *Genesis Rabbah*. Schiffman demonstrates that the rabbis did not connect this story with Helene, whom they knew from elsewhere, and that they were not aware that she was a convert. (References given by Tal Ilan, 'Helene'.)

herself like a saint.⁵² Rabbi Judah said that Helene's *sukkah* (temporary shelter erected for the Feast of Tabernacles, symbolic of God's care of the Israelites during their wanderings in the Wilderness after liberation from Egypt) which she erected for herself in Lydda (Biblical and present-day Lod, 15km south of Tel Aviv), was frequented by the rabbis and was higher than twenty ells or cubits (about 4m), a ritually significant architectural measurement.⁵³ Her charitable giving found mention in the Mishnah, the first written redaction of the rabbinic oral traditions, made *circa* 200 CE,⁵⁴ and both the Jerusalem and Babylonian versions of the Talmud, the central legal and traditional text of Judaism, completed between late in the fourth century CE and the end of the fifth, noted that she made gifts to the Temple.⁵⁵ One was a gold candelabrum, or menorah, in front of the Temple, which reflected the first rays of the sun and thus indicated the time of reciting the Jewish liturgical text known as the 'Shema'.⁵⁶ A carving of Helene's menorah was made over the doorway of temple's inner sanctuary, the Kodesh. The morning service could not begin before sunrise, but since the Temple was surrounded by high walls it was not possible to see the rising sun. After Helene donated the menorah, it was no longer necessary to send a priest outside the Temple to see if it was time for the service to begin. As the sun rose in the east it shone against the menorah and the reflected light was cast into the Azarah, the temple courtyard. The priests then knew that the morning service could begin.

Helene's gift is listed after that of Monobaz, who was remembered by the rabbis for having 'had all the handles of all the vessels used on the Day of Atonement made of gold'.⁵⁷ The Talmud then adds that she also made a golden plate on which was written the passage of the Pentateuch⁵⁸ which the High Priest read when a wife suspected of infidelity was brought before him for the 'ordeal of bitter water' known as *sotah*.⁵⁹ In the Jerusalem Talmud the menorah and the plate are confused,⁶⁰ and it is said that these two institutions are frequently combined in rabbinic literature.⁶¹ However, in the Mishnah the story of Helene includes both the *sotah* ritual and that concerning her period as a Nazarite (a person who vows themselves to God for a certain period),⁶² and does

⁵² Me'am Loez on Lech Lecha: Circumcision, <http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=1053>

⁵³ *BT Sukkah* 2:2. Another reference gives Suk. 2b.

⁵⁴ Reflecting debates among rabbis in the intervening decades since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

⁵⁵ Talmud, Yoma 37a. Yoma is that section of the Talmud which deals with the laws and services during the holiday of Jom Kippur.

⁵⁶ Talmud, Yoma 37b; Tosefta (a supplement to the Mishnah), Yoma 82. <<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=599&letter=S>>

⁵⁷ Talmud Yoma 37a.

⁵⁸ Numbers 5:19-22.

⁵⁹ Numbers, 4; Mishnah Yoma 3:10; Yoma l.c.

⁶⁰ Talmud Yerushalmi: Yoma 3:8.

⁶¹ They occur together in Numbers 4:21-7:89.

⁶² As prescribed in Numbers 6:1-21.

so in what has been described as a ‘startling’ and ‘extraordinary’ way.⁶³ The Talmud offers the Nazarite strictness with which Helene observed the Jewish law as an example to others: ‘Her son [Izates] having gone to war, Helena made a vow that if he should return safe, she would become a Nazirite for seven years. She fulfilled her vow, and at the end of seven years went to [Rabbi] Judah ha-Nasi [135-219 CE] [for her formal release]. [But] The Hillelites [followers of the disputant Rabbi Hillel] told her she must observe her vow anew.⁶⁴ Towards the end of the second seven years she became impure [ritually defiled], and had to repeat her Naziriteship, thus being a Nazarite for twenty-one years though [Rabbi] Judah said she was a Nazirite for fourteen.’⁶⁵

Eisenman suggests that Helene’s concern about Nazariteship, which was often a penance, coupled with her concern about the *sotah* ritual may have had something to do with her incestuous marriage – a widespread custom among Near Eastern dynasties at the time, including the Herodians. John the Baptist paid with his life for attacking them over the practice (Mark 6:17-29). It is one of the aspects of the story which leads him to suggest that the variety of Judaism to which Helene was attracted was the strict form of Jesus’ message as preached by the apostle James when ‘bishop’ in Jerusalem, in opposition to the more open form preached by Paul. Tal Ilan has concluded rather differently, that the rabbis had clearly been impressed by the queen, her piety and her benefaction, and that their sympathetic portrayal of her may suggest that her conversion was to the Pharisee/rabbinic variety of Judaism.⁶⁶

Whichever is correct, Jewish interest in Helene continues. While her high profile on the Internet partly reflects the archaeological and tourist attraction of the Tomb of the Kings, it also reflects the depth of interest around certain current political and polemical issues. Foremost among some émigré and religious groups in Israel and elsewhere is preoccupation with the transplanting of the Jewish faith among gentile nations, and the modern migration to Israel of the descendants of these converts.

What is important for present purposes is that the reputation of Helene of Adiabene and her son Izates was largely a product of rabbinical rhetoric current at precisely in the same era in which Constantine and his mother were active in Jerusalem. Helena’s visit has its possible ramifications within contemporary Imperial politics, as previously noted, and certainly it is necessary to be aware of the strategic importance of Adiabene on the long-contested frontier between the Roman Empire and Persia.⁶⁷ However, it may not be unreasonable to inquire whether it is possible that Constantine’s mother’s visit to Jerusalem, or at least

⁶³ Eisenman, ‘James’, pp. 896-900.

⁶⁴ The Mishnah account of Helene’s Nazariteship follows on from a comment that ‘if a man vows a Nazariteship of long duration and completes it and then arrives in the land [of Israel], [Rabbi] Beit Shammai said that he must continue a Nazirite for 30 days, but [Rabbi] Beit Hillel said that his Nazariteship commences again as at first.’

⁶⁵ Mishnah Nazir 3:6. Another reference has Nazir 19b.

⁶⁶ Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen, 1999). Ilan further argues that Helen was a follower of the school of Bet Shammai.

⁶⁷ Broad themes of the city’s history are discussed at <<http://www.khazaria.com/adiabene/lissner1.html>>.

the later account of it, embraced an additional intention to counter-balance this rabbinical rhetoric within Constantine's overall policy of visibly incorporating Jerusalem within his new Christian world-order.

Even though the chapel over Christ's supposed place of Crucifixion bears the patronal name of Helena, it was the emperor, not his mother, who seems to have been responsible for the enveloping church known to us as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or of the Resurrection, the start of whose construction is dated to 325/6.⁶⁸ According to Eusebius, Constantine ordered the building of a church 'in the holy place of our Saviour's Resurrection' as 'an object of attraction and veneration to all', placing the costs of this 'noble' structure on the governors of his eastern provinces, and telling the Bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, to ensure that it excelled 'the fairest structures in any city of the empire'.⁶⁹ The place of Christ's burial, Eusebius remarked, had been deliberately covered by 'rubbish', which in turn had been paved and over it built a temple of Aphrodite – or as Eusebius wrote, Venus, substituting her Latin counterpart.⁷⁰ It may have been Macarius who first proposed the excavation, asking Constantine, when both were at the Council of Nicaea in June/July 325, for permission to demolish the temple in search of the tomb.⁷¹ The temple having been razed, Constantine then ordered a second phase in which the site was dug up 'to a considerable depth, and the soil which had been polluted by the foul impurities of demon worship transported to a far distant place'.⁷² 'Contrary to expectation', this uncovered 'the holy cave', Christ's place of burial.⁷³ Constantine's church was to be a 'new Jerusalem', facing across the valley the 'guilt-stained' old city of its 'impious' people who had suffered Divine judgement (i.e. Hadrian's destruction of the Jewish city) because of Christ's 'murder'.⁷⁴

Before turning to the other churches associated with Helena, it will help to outline what had happened to Jerusalem since Helene's day. After the failure

⁶⁸ Charles Couasnon, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem*, Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (London, British Academy, 1972); *Egeria's Travels, newly translated with supporting documents and notes by John Wilkinson* (3rd edn, repr. with corrections, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 2002), hereafter Wilkinson, 'Egeria', pp. 37-45 and 164-71; Virgilio C. Corbo, *Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme: Aspetti archeologici dalle origini al periodo crociato* (Jerusalem, 1982); Dan Bahat, 'Does the Holy Sepulchre Church Mark the Burial of Jesus?' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12 (1986), pp. 26-45; G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, 'The Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, History and Future', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1987, pp. 187-207; Joseph Patrich, in Yoram Tsafrir (ed.), *Ancient Churches Revealed* (Jerusalem and Washington, D.C., Israel Exploration Society, 1993), pp. 100-17; Martin Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ* (Stoud, Sutton Publishing, 1999), pp. 65-70. I am grateful to Hans Pohlsander, *Helena: Empress and Saint*. (Chicago, 1996), for these references.

⁶⁹ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine' [written 337-9], Bk 3, Chs 25, 30, 31.

⁷⁰ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Ch. 26.

⁷¹ Walker, 'Holy Land', p. 276, referring to recent discussions.

⁷² Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Ch. 27.

⁷³ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Ch. 28. For a detailed assessment of the authenticity or otherwise of the tomb's location, see Martin Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ* (Stroud, Sutton, 1999), pp. 54-70.

⁷⁴ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Ch. 33.

of the revolt in 70 CE, the city had been razed: the old Upper and Lower City within Jerusalem's First Wall, south-west of the Temple Mount, the extension within the Second Wall north-west of the Temple, and the New City beyond up to the Third Wall, whose line ran past the site of the Adiabenean mausoleum. Two generations later, in 130/1, following the second disaster of the Bar Kochba revolt, Hadrian established a colony for army veterans, *Ælia Capitolina*, across the southern half of the New City and the area within the Second Wall. It was the monumental infrastructure of Hadrian's *colonia* which Constantine aimed to transform into a reflection of his Christian monarchy.

Notwithstanding Constantine's own genius behind the transformation of the supposed place of Christ's burial and resurrection, his additional adornment of the cave-church of the Nativity at Bethlehem and the Church on the Mount of Olives (Eleona) was subsequent to their initial erection by his mother, according to Eusebius. His benefactions 'eternalised' the memory of his mother, who had been 'the instrument of conferring so valuable a benefit on mankind'.⁷⁵

It is puzzling that the account left by the anonymous 'Bordeaux pilgrim', who travelled to Jerusalem in 333 (a precise date because he named that year's Roman Consuls), ascribed these churches to Constantine. Helena is not named. 'On the Mount of Olives, where the Lord taught before his passion, a basilica has been built by command of Constantine...' and again 'Bethlehem, where the Lord Jesus Christ was born, and where a basilica has been built by command of Constantine'.⁷⁶ The pilgrim's account has its own textual problem, since both churches, described by him as finished, were in fact not yet dedicated; the Nativity church not until May 31, 339.⁷⁷ A simple explanation is that the pilgrim, who was of sufficient rank to travel by the imperial post carriages,⁷⁸ and therefore perhaps a member of Constantine's bureaucracy, wrote in a style which came easily to him, crediting all political decisions to the fount of sovereignty. Another is that Constantine did indeed commission these churches and sent Helena to attend the laying of the foundations.⁷⁹

'Helena's' church on the Mount of Olives was built over the cave where, tradition held, Jesus taught his disciples, and commemorated in particular his foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:1-3, Mark 13:1-4).⁸⁰ The late fourth-century pilgrim Egeria described the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem from the Eleona Church. Along with most Christian places in Jerusalem, it was destroyed by the Persians when they swept through Palestine in 614. Although the basilica was rebuilt in later years, it was finally destroyed by Caliph al-Hakim, the Fatimid ruler of Egypt, in 1009.

⁷⁵ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Chs 41 (CCEL adds a footnote: 'Compare Prolegomena, p. 411'), 43.

⁷⁶ Wilkinson, 'Egeria', pp. 32, 33 (The Bordeaux Pilgrim, Chs 595, 598).

⁷⁷ Wilkinson, 'Egeria', p. 33, fn. 7, citing J. T. Milik, *Revue Biblique* 67 (1960), p. 572.

⁷⁸ Wilkinson, 'Egeria', pp. 22-23.

⁷⁹ Wilkinson, 'Egeria', p. 11.

⁸⁰ [Jerome] Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Time to 1700* (4th edn, rev. and expanded, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998). SACKLER F1 1, 215 M.120

While crediting Helena with the Bethlehem and Eleona churches, Eusebius made no mention of her discovering Christ's cross.⁸¹ Egeria wrote (between 381 and 384) that the wood of the Cross was kept in the Martyrium, that part of the Golgotha (Holy Sepulchre/Resurrection) church which enclosed the remains of the cave in which Christ was buried, that it was venerated on Good Friday, and that the day of its discovery was remembered on the Dedication Day of the Church of the Anastasis ('Resurrection') and the Martyrium.⁸² She also reported that the Golgotha church, whose 'decorations really are too marvellous for words', 'all you can see is gold and jewels and silk', was built by Constantine 'under the supervision of his mother'.⁸³ This is as close as she gets to linking Helena and the Cross, but it opens up the possibility that Helena's visit coincided with excavations on the quarry site east of the Tomb site which became linked with the place of Crucifixion and the discovery of the Cross and over which the Chapel of St Helena was in time erected.

Writing to the Emperor Constantius in 351, the recently appointed bishop of Jerusalem, Cyril, said merely that the Cross had been discovered under 'your father, Constantine'. Cyril grew up in the city and would have been about 13, of an age receptive to public excitement, when work on the Golgotha church began. In about 347, still only in his mid-thirties, he spoke about 'the holy wood of the Cross... which is seen among us to this day, and because of those who have in faith taken thereof, has from this place now almost filled the whole world'.⁸⁴ (An inscription dated 359, mentioning a relic *DE LIGNO CRUCIS*, was found at Tixter, near Sétif in Algeria. St Macrina, who died in 379, used to wear a piece of the Cross in a locket, and John Chrysostom fifteen years later said that this was a widespread practice.⁸⁵) *Circa* 389 Chrysostom commented that when the Cross was found it was distinguished from that of the Thieves, but when, six years later, Bishop Ambrose of Milan explicitly attributed its discovery to Helena, his account differed from John's.⁸⁶ John Wilkinson has concluded that the discovery may be best dated after Helena's death, to 340x47, but for many the issue remains unresolved.⁸⁷

⁸¹ On the problematic account of the discovery and what has been called 'its intricate history', see esp. Drijvers, 'Helena Augusta', and Stephan Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross Was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend* (Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991).

⁸² Wilkinson, 'Egeria', pp. 170-1, citing Egeria 37.1-2, 48.2.

⁸³ Wilkinson, 'Egeria', p. 147 (Egeria 25.9).

⁸⁴ Cyril, *Cat.*, 10.19. Wilkinson, 'Egeria', p. 172, fn. 3, is among those who have concluded that 'there is no clear reason to doubt the authenticity of these words'.

⁸⁵ For the Tixter inscription, see xxxxxx. Gregory of Nyassa, *Vita St Macrinae*, PG 46.989. John Chrysostom, *Contra Jud. et Gent.* 9, PG 47.826.

⁸⁶ John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Joh.* 85.1. Ambrose, *In Ob. Theod.*, 46. See also Hunt, 'Pilgrimage', pp. 38-49.

⁸⁷ Eusebius's silence and the differences between his writings about the site and those of Cyril, have attracted extensive academic comment, most recently H. A. Drake, 'Eusebius on the True Cross', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), pp. 1-22; 1985, and Walker, 'Holy Land', pp. 235-81. J. E. Taylor, 'Review article: Helena and the Finding of the Cross', *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 12 (1992-3), pp. 52-60, provided a useful

Eusebius wrote his *Life of Constantine* not long before Cyril's texts, in about 338. Though silent on the matter of Helena and the Cross, Eusebius did describe her acts of charity during her tour of the eastern provinces: 'Especially abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor. To some she gave money, to others an ample supply of clothing: she liberated some from imprisonment, or from the bitter servitude of the mines; others she delivered from unjust oppression, and others again, she restored from exile'.⁸⁸

On one level an account of conventional largesse, this report by Eusebius echoes his earlier description of Helena's namesake, Helene of Adiabene, which by its very presence in his 'Church History' demonstrates that awareness of Helene and her works was alive in Constantine's own day.⁸⁹ Following Josephus, Eusebius described how Helene, 'Queen of the Osrhoenians'⁹⁰, 'having purchased grain from Egypt with large sums, distributed it to the needy' during 'the great famine' which occurred in Judea during the procuratorships of Cuspius Fadus and Tiberius Alexander. Eusebius added: 'You will find this statement also in agreement with the Acts of the Apostles, where it is said that the disciples at Antioch, "each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren that dwelt in Judea; which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Paul."' ⁹¹

It is hardly credible that Constantine's mother was not shown her namesake's tomb, shared with her son. Today it constitutes 'the largest and most impressive tomb in Jerusalem', found on the corner of the Nablus road and Salah ed-Din street.⁹² Eusebius said these 'splendid monuments' were 'still shown in the suburbs of the city which is now called Ælia', and Jerome, writing in 404 about the Holy Land pilgrimage of his friend Paula, reported them standing 'on the left' as one entered Jerusalem, that is, on the eastern side of the road leading to the Damascus Gate.⁹³ The second-century Greek

overview of the debate as it then stood. Recent studies also address the differences in Eusebius' own writing as his career progressed: in the *Theophony* shortly after 324, T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1981), pp. 186, 367 fn. 176, and cf. Walker, 'Holy Land', pp. 84-86, 273, 274 fn. 136; the dedication sermon of the Holy Sepulchre Church (September 17, 335), *De Sepulchro Christi* ('Life of Constantine', Chs 11-18), his greetings to the Emperor on the latter's thirtieth jubilee in July 336 (*De Laudibus Constantini*, 'Life of Constantine', Ch. 1-10), and his writings for those coming after him (again, 'Life of Constantine', written 337-9).

⁸⁸ Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk. 3, Ch. 44.

⁸⁹ Eusebius, 'Church History', Bk. 2, Ch. 12, 'Helen, the Queen of the Osrhoenians', hereafter Eusebius 'Helen'.

⁹⁰ A name for the inhabitants of that part of northern Mesopotamia.

⁹¹ Acts 11, vv. 29, 30.

⁹² Rachel Hachlili. *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden, Brill, 2005), p. 36. The site lies within the area of the American Colony founded in 1881.

⁹³ Eusebius, 'Helen', v. 3. Jerome, 'Letter 108. To Eustochium', in Philip Schaff and Henry Waces (eds), *Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, 6 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1892), text online at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.iii.html>>, accessed December 17, 2009. Jerome himself visited Jerusalem in 386.



Fig. 6 The entrance to the 'Tomb of the Kings'.

Сл. 6 Улаз у Гробницу краљева.

geographer Pausanius was also impressed by them and compared them to the tomb of Mausolus.⁹⁴ He mentioned particularly an ingenious mechanism involving a heavy rolling stone, which opened the tomb automatically at certain times and sealed it at others. Palestine was noted for its elaborate and ornate rock-cut vaults and rock-cut tombs were the norm in the Jerusalem cemeteries of the Second Temple period.⁹⁵ Nebuchadnezzar is said to have been persuaded to conquer Jerusalem because the mausolea in the Holy Land were superior to the king's palaces in Babylonia.⁹⁶ Fig. 6 shows the monumental stairs to the tombs,⁹⁷ which were rediscovered in 1863 by the French archaeologist Louis Félicien Caignart de Saulcy while conducting the first systematic archaeological dig in the Holy City and its environs. De Saulcy, who had some of the remains shipped to the Louvre museum in Paris, including Helene's sarcophagus and five others, was responsible for dubbing it 'The Tomb of the Kings' because, though it proved to be dated historically to the Second Temple or Herodian

⁹⁴ Pausanius, *In Arcadicis*, hereafter 'Description of Greece', Bk 8, Ch. 16, vv. 4-5.

⁹⁵ As pointed out by Biddle, 'Tomb of Christ', p. 110 and fn. 2 citing H. Geva, 'Tombs [of the stp around Jerusalem]', in E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 747-9, at p. 747.

⁹⁶ Cyrus Adler and Judah David Eisenstein, 'Family Vault', in 'Jewish Encyclopedia', <<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=34&letter=F>>, accessed December 17, 2009, citing Sanh. 96b.

⁹⁷ <<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/sbf/escurs/Ger/11escursEn.html>>

period (first century BCE to first century CE), he identified it with the tombs of the last kings of Judah (eighth to seventh centuries BCE). The site was acquired by a French Jewish woman in 1874 and after her death passed to the French government.

Plan and sections give an idea of the monument's structure and size.⁹⁸ Descending 26 broad steps, visitors find themselves in a vast, rock-cut, square courtyard with sides of about 28 metres. Though the two central pillars of the portico are lost (and the three 'pyramids', conical embellishments on the facade, perhaps, imitating the customary style of Jewish burial monuments), what mostly remains includes the decorations which are finely sculptured in the same rock. The deep-lying courtyard outside the monument was originally a quarry for marble; cutting the stones left the regular steps. Water which ran down the steps was collected in two cisterns and used to purify the dead. To the left is a round-arched doorway in the rock leading into a spacious courtyard with the rock-cut facade of the tombs. Three steps lead down into an antechamber with a Doric frieze, and in the left-hand corner of this is the low entrance to the interior, once sealed by a round stone (which is still there). Beyond this is a central chamber giving access to a number of burial chambers on two levels.

De Saulcy found that looters had robbed the tomb but had missed the sarcophagus of Helene. Officials of her household appear to have decided not to place it in the main chamber designed for it – it has been suggested that they sensed the imminence of the First Jewish Revolt and the risk of damage was too great. To get it into one of the lower chambers, it was necessary to knock off the corners of the sarcophagus lid, and masons disguised the entrance so well that it escaped casual notice.⁹⁹

Bearing in mind the scale of Constantine's constructions in Jerusalem, it is entirely probable that there were architects or officials of the imperial public works in Helena's entourage, who would have taken a professional interest in her namesake's mausoleum. An obvious object of curiosity was the rolling stone. While the use of roughly-dressed stones to seal the entrance was a common feature in Jerusalem's Second Temple period cemeteries, only four tombs, all of high status, are known to have been closed by a geometrically perfect circular stone rolling in a specially prepared groove.¹⁰⁰ Pausanias reported that the engineers had 'contrived to make the door of the tomb, which is stone like all the rest of it, so that it opens only on a certain day of the year; at that moment the machinery opens the door on its own, holds it open for a little while, and then closes it up again. At the time you can get in like that, but if you tried to open it at any other time it would ever open – you would have to break it down first.'¹⁰¹ There is no reason to assume that Christ's tomb (whether or not that was what Constantine's engineers uncovered) was closed by a stone of the same quality, but given the prominence of the stone in the gospel narrative, it is difficult

⁹⁸ From the same web-site.

⁹⁹ Murphy-O'Connor, 'Holy Land', pp. 158-9.

¹⁰⁰ Biddle, 'Tomb of Christ', p. 110.

¹⁰¹ Pausanias, 'Description of Greece', trs. P. Levi, Bk 8, Ch. 16, v. 5. The stone is illustrated in Biddle, 'Tomb of Christ', p. 110, Fig. 75.

to believe that there was no inherent interest in the constructional principle. When Helena and her team visited, experts had already been dispatched to the city in connection with her son's instructions regarding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre/Resurrection and were engaged on the project when Helena arrived. Constantine named his deputy Praetorian Prefect, Drasilianus, to take charge of its construction.¹⁰² In any case, Helena's visit, falling between the start of that project and its completion, together with that of the Nativity and Eleona churches, is easiest to understand as an integral part of Constantine's deliberate appropriation of Jerusalem, what has recently been described as 'the brilliant Holy Land plan of Constantine'.¹⁰³

It is impossible to consider these churches of Constantine and Helena without taking into account the state of Christian-Jewish relations at this period. Though added later, the final act of what became the standard story of Helena's visit develops seamlessly out of early fourth-century political realities. It tells how the Jewish community keeps secret the place of the wood of the Cross, fearful that its traditions will be destroyed and its Law annulled.¹⁰⁴ Helena orders its leaders to be burned to death for refusing to reveal the spot, so they put forward a spokesman, pointedly named Judas, who in turn is threatened with death by Helena unless he gives up the information and is then thrown into a dry well to starve. After six days he agrees to give up the secret, helps to dig out the Cross, abjures his Jewish faith and converts to Christianity, in time becoming bishop with the name Quiriacus. The point of giving him his earlier name is underlined by an episode during the digging, when the Devil appears and asks 'Oh Judas, why are you doing this? My own Judas did the opposite.' All this is the product of later fantasy. Nevertheless, Oded Irshai has recently written that 'the painstaking process of adorning Jerusalem with a Christian garment was carried out through an ingenious mechanism of appropriation with touches of supersessionist ideology. Central to the idea of transformation was the conception of just what had to be achieved: the easing of the Jews' grip on the land. The ways that Christian pilgrims digested and represented Jewish experience both past and present (such as Julian's abortive attempt to rebuild the Temple) were instrumental in the formation of the newly Christianized City'.¹⁰⁵ Andrew Jacobs has further asserted that in Palestine, representatives of 'imperial Christianity' were able to cast the Jew into the role of the 'colonial 'subaltern''.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Eusebius, 'Life of Constantine', Bk 3, Ch. 30.

¹⁰³ Oded Irshai, 'The Christian appropriation of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century: The case of the Bordeaux pilgrim', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, Pt 4, Fall 2009, pp. 465-86, hereafter Irshai, 'Jerusalem', at p. 465. Sarah Basset, *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge, 2004), 22-36, compares the three construction enterprises carried out by Constantine in the three main urban centres of Rome, Jerusalem, and Constantinople.

¹⁰⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trs. by William Granger Ryan (2 vols, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), 1, p. 281.

¹⁰⁵ Irshai, 'Jerusalem', p. 469.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew S. Jacobs, *The Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 9. See also Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth*

An earlier scholar, Marcel Simon, has argued that throughout the critical period 135-425 CE, Jews and Christians confronted one another as religious rivals, attracting converts from each other and vying for the commitment of pagans. The development of each religion was decisively influenced by the presence of the other. The gradual decline of universalism and proselytising in Judaism and its turning inward upon its rabbinic tradition stemmed in considerable part from the existence of Christianity. And, on the other side, Christianity came not only to claim the title and prerogatives of 'the True Israel', but out of its contacts with Jews it acquired a legalism in morality and patterns of worship which made it into 'another Israel' (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 123.5). In contrast to the generally favourable attitude of the pre-Constantine Empire toward Judaism, after Constantine Christianity was chiefly responsible for the escalation of legislation against the Jews.¹⁰⁷

Marcus has commented that 'The Middle Ages, for the Jew at least, begin with the advent to power of Constantine'. He was the first Roman emperor to issue laws which radically limited the rights of Jews as citizens of the Roman Empire, a privilege conferred upon them by Caracalla in 212. Already in 315 Constantine enacted a 'Law concerning Jews, Heaven-Worshippers [a closely allied sect], and Samaritans' which declared 'to the Jews and their elders and their patriarchs that if... any one of them dares to attack with stones or some other manifestation of anger another who has fled their dangerous sect and attached himself to the worship of God [Christianity], he must speedily be given to the flames and burn, together with all his accomplices... Moreover, if any one of the population should join their abominable sect and attend their meetings, he will bear with them the deserved penalties'.¹⁰⁸

A decade after Helena's visit, a further law of 339 forbade Jews from performing the rite of circumcision on slaves or owning Christian slaves, while a separate edict annulled marriages between Jews and Christian women employed in imperial weaving factories, widening the prohibition in future on pain of death. Hostile language colours these laws, with Judaism spoken of as an ignominious or bestial sect ('*secta nefaria*' or '*feralis*').¹⁰⁹ We have no means of knowing what Helena's perspective on Christian-Jewish relations was, nor to what extent she supported discriminatory laws. The words put into her mouth by the compilers of the account of the finding of the Cross may be entirely fictional. At the same time, it is difficult not to expect her to have been curious

Century (Edinburgh, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ David Hay, 'Jewish-Christian relations: questions of definition', *Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins*, Minutes, 8, Set 1 (1970-1), at <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/psco/archives/psco08-min.txt>>, accessed December 17, 2009, describing the thesis of Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel, a study of the relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135-425)*, trs. H. McKeating ([French original 1948, 2nd edn 1964], Oxford, Oxford University Press for the Littman Library, 1986).

¹⁰⁸ Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (New York, Union of American Hebrew Congregations (JPS), 1938, repr. Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), hereafter Marcus, 'Sourcebook', pp. 3-7.

¹⁰⁹ Marcus, 'Sourcebook'; Richard Gottheil and Hermann Vogelstein, 'Constantine I', in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed December 17, 2009).

about her namesake, at the very least. Jews had been prohibited from entering Jerusalem since Hadrian's time, but the rural population must have changed very little. Assuming Bishop Macarius to have had the necessary intellectual and politics to carry out his role, he will have been aware of Queen Helene's story, and her significance for the developing rabbinical teaching which was giving Judaism its distinctive character. He or someone in the empress's entourage may have briefed her about her namesake's importance, perhaps before or after a visit to Helene's mausoleum. What she will have made of their similar experiences is impossible to gauge. She might well have been advised that the opportunity existed, and should be seized, for the second Helen to outdo the first in adorning Jerusalem with the triumphal monuments of the New Israel. This might even have been a factor in the later construction of the narrative in which Helena is the agent for uncovering the Cross. There was a further opportunity to reconstruct Helene as a prefiguring of Helena – as appears to have been the purpose behind the similar story of Helen of Edessa, to be discussed on another occasion.

If, in the end, the parallel trajectories of the two women's stories, the Empress's and the Queen's, prove to be no more than a series of coincidences, their comparison remains wholly appropriate. It requires us to be aware of the Jewish element in imperial and Christian religious history, and the complex interweaving of the two faiths in Christianity's earliest centuries, a problematic which Constantine could ignore but not expunge. Moreover, one interpretation of Constantine's building programme in the Holy City sees it as part of an 'overall scheme to tilt the political and religious centre of gravity from the Occident to the Orient – from Rome the *civitas aeterna* to *Roma Nova*'.¹¹⁰ Partly as a result of that, Europeans tend to overlook the significant developments of Christianity in Mesopotamia and eastwards into Persia. Adiabene's evolution into a centre of Christianity shadowed the evolution of Christianity itself out of its Jewish roots. The first Christian bishop at Arbela is dated to 104 CE, and the second to fifth bishops bore Jewish names: Samson, Isaac, Abraham, Noah. Tatian, born in Adiabene, may have written there before 172 CE the famous *Diatessaron*, a composite version of the gospels. By the time that the Roman empire declared Christianity its official religion, most of the inhabitants of Adiabene were Christians and the kingdom sided with Christian Rome rather than with the Zoroastrian Sassanids, though remaining under Persia's ultimate control. It is ironic that at the time of writing, the number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4 million in 1987 to 550,000 or even as low as 400,000 in a country of 28 million of all faiths,¹¹¹ and that Jerusalem remains a contested city.

¹¹⁰ Irshai, 'Jerusalem', p. 466.

¹¹¹ 1987 Iraq government census, and 2009 figures from the United States State Department and the German Catholic relief organisation Kirche in Not respectively.

Грејем Џоунс
ЈЕЛЕНА ОД КРСТА, КРАЉИЦА АДИАБЕНЕ,
И НАСТАНАК КРАЉЕВСКОГ МИТА У СВЕТОМ ГРАДУ

У сврху свог доприноса Симпозијуму одржаном 2008. године аутор се бавио истраживањем вероватног одјека имена Царице Јелене за време њенога живота, као и да ли је због тога уживала већу репутацију, било међу својим савременицима или касније, након своје смрти, а све због тога што је у јавности била присутна свесност о херојским и божанским аспектима Грчке Јелене. За хришћане на истоку, постајала су још два могућа поређења. Прво, Јелена није била прва особа краљевског порекла са тим именом која ће ући у анале побожних у Јерусалиму. Овај рад се поново враћа на тему утицаја на сећање јавности на краљицу Јелену од Адиабене, чије активности, три века пре појаве њене имењакиње, тако блиско подсећају на царичина. Попут Константинове мајке, и она је вероватно утицала да се њен син преобрати у другу веру (у овом случају, у јеврејску), да изгради јавне споменике у Светом Граду, и била је дуго запамћена по својој побожности. Еволуција Адиабене у центар хришћанства засенила је и сам развој хришћанства из његових јеврејских корена. Као друго, настала је читава традиција око принцезе Јелене из Одесе, појављујући се у дванаесто-вековном опису Марутиног (Maruta) живота, који је био владика Маиферката (Maipherkat). Према овој традицији, Константин је био син месопотамске племићице, а не крчмареве кћери из Битиније (Bithynia). У овом раду поставља се питање који су то аспекти који би могли да представљају везу између ове две интерпретације и од какве су они важности за ширу перспективу серијала нашег симпозијума, као што је подстакнуто од стране професора Дејана Медаковића.

