

**Constantine** was the first Christian emperor of Rome but was he Christian?

Rome from times of old had split rule between two proconsuls (Roman Republic's version of balance of power) and as the empire grew large they became ruled by a single emperor. But the old dual custom never died. It became, "may the strongest man win." Constantine was the Western Roman Emperor's son by a concubine, Helena, a Christian. In 306 he was proclaimed by the northern army to be Emperor. The Praetorian Guard (Emperor's private guard) declared natural son, Maxentius, ruler. The night before the two armies prepared for battle outside Rome, Oct. 26, 312, Constantine dreamed of a flaming cross in the sky with Greek words, "in this sign conquer." So Constantine had his soldiers paint their shields with *chi and rho*, first two letters of 'Christ'. This spurred on his many foot soldiers who were secretly Christians. Meanwhile Maxentius was saying rituals to Roman gods. The battle pagan vs. and Christian forces.

Maxentius chose the spot for the fight right in front of the Milvan bridge, a mile from Rome's gates. Constantine's outnumbered army advanced and drove the pagan army across the bridge. In such close confines, the odds were equalled and Constantine's inspired forces prevailed in fierce hand combat. Maxentius was thrown into the Tiber River along with many of his troops and were defeated. Constantine was now unopposed Emperor of the West.

The following year Constantine and Licinius, Emperor of the East met and issued the edict of Milan, granting Christians freedom of practice and compensation for confiscated Church property that had been seized by Diocletian. Licinius married Constantine's half sister who was pagan. The two Emperors had an uneasy peace. In 323 they met in battle and Constantine won sole emperorship. Thereupon he moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople (Istanbul).

Constantine passed more laws that allowed bishops to settle civil lawsuits, banned gladiatorial games and had a Sunday closing law for all businesses and courts. He also took an active part in church affairs, summoning the Council of Nicea in 325 to establish Christian orthodox doctrine. Yet he never relinquished his position as supreme priest of the pagan state. Roman emperors were considered heads of their state religion and perhaps Constantine used this as a way to control paganism. His wife, sister of Maxentius, and son, both pagans were executed under suspicious circumstances that we don't understand very well. Were they involved in a plot? And coins of the realm proclaimed both Christianity and Mithraism (sun god worship) as official religions. Perhaps this was because soldiers often preferred one or the other of these two rival religions, and the Edict of Milan seems to be an attempt to proclaim religious freedom for all. (So was Constantine just playing the faiths politically?) Finally, Constantine was never baptized until shortly before his death. This may have reflected Donatism, a heretical belief in extreme spiritual purity, that was popular in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Donatists did not baptize until one was near death and it was accompanied by confession.

Whatever the case of the Emperor's personal faith, Christianity rose rapidly from about 10 million believers in 306 AD to roughly 36 million 20 years later. (Total population was about 100 million.) Constantine's devoutly Christian mother, Helena, was sent far and wide to establish Christian churches, dedicate monasteries, and find ancient sites like the cave where Jesus was born and his tomb. Many pagan Roman basilicas were converted to churches. Pageantry came into worship. Today formal or traditional Christian worship follows the order established during and after Constantine.