

**Constantine and Christianity through the writings of Lactantius
and Eusebius of Caesarea**
**Constantino y la cristiandad en los escritos de Lactancio
y Eusebio de Cesarea**

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Abstract: Heralded as the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great is recognised as the ruler who ended Christian persecutions, changed an entire empire's religion, and founded a new capital city to the east of the once all-powerful Rome. It is not surprising that, due to these achievements, modern-day historians consider this fourth century emperor to be "one of the outstanding men of Rome's declining years. One of the first areas of debate concerning Constantine is the events that led to his conversion to Christianity. Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea underlined that the cruciform symbol seen in the sky and in Constantine's dream was the basis for being Constantine Christian. Through their writings, we will try to show that Constantine believed in Christ and became Christian, because he believed that Christ was the real God.

Key Words: Lactantius; Eusebius of Caesarea; Constantine the Great; Christian emperor; cruciform symbol.

Resumen: Proclamado como el primer emperador cristiano, Constantino el Grande es reconocido como el gobernante que puso fin a las persecuciones cristianas, cambió toda la religión de un imperio y fundó una nueva ciudad capital al este de la otrora poderosa Roma. No es sorprendente que, debido a estos logros, los historiadores modernos consideren a este emperador del siglo IV como "uno de los hombres más destacados de los años en decadencia de Roma". Una de las primeras áreas de debate sobre Constantino es sobre los eventos que llevaron a su conversión al cristianismo. Lactancio y Eusebio de Cesarea subrayaron que el símbolo cruciforme visto en el cielo y en el sueño de Constantino era la base para hacer cristiano a Constantino. A través de sus escritos, intentaremos mostrar que Constantino creyó en Cristo y se hizo cristiano, porque él creía que Cristo era el verdadero Dios.

Palabras clave: Lactancio; Eusebio de Cesarea; Constantino el Grande; emperador cristiano; símbolo cruciforme.

Summary: 1. Introduction: The Christianity and Constantine the Great. 2. Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea. 2.1 The Primary Sources for Reign of Constantine. 3. Conclusions. Sources and Bibliography

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1. Introduction: The Christianity and Constantine the Great.

C. Flavius Valerius Constantinus was born at Naissus, Nis in Serbia. He was the son of Constantius Chlorus, who later became Roman Emperor, and St. Helena, a woman of humble extraction but remarkable character and unusual ability¹. Helena was a daughter of an inn keeper. The date of his birth is not certain, being given between 274 and 288. Constantine I or Saint Constantine was the Roman Emperor since 306 to 337. Well known for being the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which proclaimed religious tolerance of all religions throughout the empire². Today, some historians support that there was no official Edict but only Licinus' and Constantinus' decisions about the religion³.

The Edict did not only protect Christians from religious persecution, but all religions, allowing anyone to worship whichever deity they chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by Galerius, then senior emperor of the Tetrarchy; Galerius' edict granted Christians the right to practice their religion without causing any troubles "Ut denuo sint Chrsitiani et conventicula sua component, ita ut ne quid contra disciplinam agant" but did not restore any property to them⁴. On the contrary, the Edict of Milan consisted of many clauses which stated that all confiscated churches would be returned as well as other provisions for previously persecuted Christians⁵. Neither Constantine nor Licinius proclaimed Christianity as official religion⁶.

In 324, after the defeat of Licinius and his death, Constantine's autocracy began. The insight and acumen of his character led him to take two important decisions, which changed the history of the Roman Empire until then. His first decision was the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Byzantine state and the second was the transfer of the capital of the Empire from Rome to a new city. It was built on the site of ancient Byzantium and its name was Constantinople. This city was the new capital of the Empire, New Rome⁷.

¹ Charles Herbermann & George Grupp, "Constantine the Great" *In The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. (1908) Retrieved April 20, 2012 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04295c.htm>. Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 61.

² Aikaterini Christophilopoulou, *Byzantine History*, A 324- 610, Thessaloniki: Vaniias 1996², p. 132.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, PL 34, 4.

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, I, 5.2-14. Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, PL 34, 8.

⁶ Périclès Pierre Ioannou, *La législation impériale et la christianisation de l' empire romain* (311-476), *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 192, Roma 1972, p. 36.

⁷ Salamanes Hermias Sozomenos, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 3, trans. By Eirini Artemi: "... God appeared to Constantine during the night, and gave this commandment to him to seek another spot. Led by hand of God, Constantine reached at Byzantium in Thrace, beyond Chalcedon in

Since 320 Constantine was constantly supporting Christianity by financial aid and benefits or tax relief to Christian Church. After the recognition of Christianity as *religio licita*, Constantine the Great conferred the civil *audentia episcopalis* on the bishop. Thereby the bishop judged not only in virtue of his spiritual authority but also on the strength of imperial authority⁸. Although, Constantine was defending and supporting the Christian religion, he was baptized Christian before he died. Typically he remained as *Pontifex Maximus* for political reasons and for maintaining peace and harmony in relations between pagans and Christians⁹. Many historians¹⁰ believe that Constantine helped Christianity by political expediency. They argue that the triumph of the victory of Christianity had been already taken place in the East long before the autocracy of Constantine. The conversion of Constantine to Christianity began – according to Eusebius’ history¹¹- with the vision of Constantine, before the battle against Maxentius, and Constantine’s prayer to God of Christians. Eusebius attributed the description to the vision not only to focus on which was the reason for the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, but in order to saw that the new emperor had the blessing of the Triune God of Christians. On this perspective, the political theology was founded on¹².

Constantine brought about many changes in the empire: i) Crucifixion was abolished, ii) infanticide - the killing of unwanted infants- was abolished, iii) the practice of slavery was discouraged and many slaves were set free, iv) the gladiatorial games were suppressed -although they were not yet completely eliminated, v) Christian men were chosen as emperor’s advisers, vi) the Church was made tax-exempt, vii) the first day of the week, Sunday, was set aside as a

Bithynia, and there he was desired to build his city and to render it worthy of the name of Constantine. In obedience to the words of God, he therefore enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium... He gave the name to it New Rome and Constantinople, and constituted it the imperial capital for all...”.

⁸ “If proceedings were to be taken before the bishop, the agreement of both sides was requisite (see Codex Justinianus 1.4.7 from the year 398 and Codex Theodosianus 1.27.2 from the year 408). By *Novellae* 79 and 83, Emperor Justinian placed the clergy and monks under episcopal jurisdiction in civil affairs. According to *Novella* 86.2, the bishop, upon rejection of the state judge, was to decide the case in conjunction with the rejected judge. This administrative activity of the bishop in civil law as a justice of the peace can be distinguished only with difficulty from his purely ecclesiastical disciplinary *functio*”<http://cdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cce/id/278/rec/20> (2012)

⁹ John Karagiannopoulos, *Byzantine State*, Thessaloniki: Vaniyas 1996⁴, p. 75.

¹⁰ Burckhardt presents Constantine as a clever and too ambitious emperor, who sacrificed everything to satisfy his thirst for power. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, University of California Press, California 1983, p. 326. The German theologian Adolph Harnack supports the same, in his book: *The diadosis of Christianity during the first three centuries*, english transl. and edited by James Moffatt, Berlin 1905.

¹¹ Alexander A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, transl. from the Russian by Mrs. S. Ragozin V, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, footnote. 4, 71. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 9.2. A select library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, 2nd ser., I, 363.

¹² Vlassios Feidas, *Ecclesiastic History*, Athens 1992, p. 327.

sacred day of worship. Sunday was made an official Roman holiday so that more people could attend church¹³.

It is supported that Constantine embraced Christian Church not only for theological reasons but also for political. As a politician he understood the increasing importance of the Christian minority into private and public life. The fact that the Christianity became his religion and his children's showed that Constantine wasn't guided by political motives only. He was guided by religious fervor too. Generally, Constantine I is considered the father of the Byzantine Empire and one of the most influential figures of Western history¹⁴.

2.Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea

Lactantius, a celebrated father of the Church in the beginning of the fourth century of the Christian era, famous for the purity of his Latin style, and sometimes called the Christian Cicero was born in 240AD. Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius was an African by birth and a pupil of Arnobius¹⁵ who taught at Sicca Veneria. He became a Christian apologist, although he was not born into a Christian family. He did not become Christian until the time of persecution (AD 303-313). When he converted to Christianity, he was about 50 years old¹⁶.

The little we know about his life comes from a short biography and various brief remarks by Jerome. His fame was such that he was summoned by the (pagan) Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305) to teach Latin rhetoric at Nicomedia -a Greek city in Bithynia and Diocletian's eastern capital¹⁷. It was probably at this period that he embraced the Christian faith, and we may perhaps be justified in supposing some connection between his poverty and his change of religion¹⁸. In this period he turned to writing Christian apologetics for the educated pagan and for Christians disturbed by the challenges of the accepted

¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, III, 18, 13, 25, 28, etc. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 5-7.

¹⁴ Timothy Kallistos Ware, *Byzantium I: The Orthodox Church*, Baltimore: MD, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 26.

¹⁵ His major concern is to differentiate the Christian God from the popular deities of his time, and he apparently constructed his doctrine of God along Epicurean lines. Cf. George Englert McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca: The Case against the Pagans*, Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1949, p. 29-30.

¹⁶ Vincenzo Loi, "Lactantius", in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 469-470.

¹⁷ *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. by Margaret Campbell Howatson & Ian Chilvers, Oxford University Press, <http://www.answers.com/library/Classical-literature-Companion-letter-1L#ixzz2muvh5uNh> Howatson and Ian Chilvers, Oxford University Press, <http://www.answers.com/library/Classical-literature-Companion-letter-1L#ixzz2muvh5uNh>

¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies, Grand Rapids, Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, Michigan 2004, p. 7.

intellectual wisdom. Feeling that technical Christian terminology had obscured the effectiveness of previous apologists, he shunned its use whenever possible.

He wrote in Latin with ambition to vanquish first national religion and thought, and then expose the teachings of Christianity. For that purpose, he had admirable zeal, rhetorical and literary talents and encyclopaedic knowledge of Greco-Roman culture. Lacking, however, deep philosophical education and theological understanding of the mystery of the Church, because he became a Christian at the age of about 50 years old, as we referred, He had experienced Christianity of surface and unending, as impatient catechumen¹⁹.

Lactantius was unaware with Greek Ecclesiastical writers and with the text of the Holy Bible. He knew the Holy Scripture mainly from collections of biblical passages (Testimonia). Patrick Healy says of Lactantius' work, "The beauty of the style, the choice and aptness of the terminology, cannot hide the author's lack of grasp on Christian principles and his almost utter ignorance of Scripture"²⁰. For these reasons, he did not manage to express both Ecclesiastical theological climate of the time, as reaffirmed his enthusiasm for the new religion and reasons that justified his conversion to it, as some apologists did earlier. The most important is that he contributed to the shaping of Christian Latin language²¹.

When Constantine and Licinius became emperors, they agreed to end the Christian persecutions in 313. Sometime after this, in 316 Constantine appointed Lactantius to serve as Latin tutor for his oldest son, Crispus, in Trier. Later (c.316) His works, which were influenced by Cicero and Seneca, were sincere, well-written expositions of Christian doctrine, but some of his theological details have been pronounced erroneous²². It is presumed that Lactantius spent the remainder of his life in Gaul and died around 330²³.

Lactantius thought of God in the familiar manner of patristic theology. He is "impassible, immutable, incorrupt, blessed, and eternal"²⁴. He is one and perfect²⁵, and He is also "incomprehensible and unspeakable, and fully known to no other than Himself"²⁶. The doctrine of God is summarized in the Epitome of the Divine Institutes: "There is, then, one God, perfect, eternal, incorruptible, incapable of suffering, subject to no circumstance or power, Himself possessing all things, ruling all things, whom the human mind can neither estimate in thought nor mortal tongue describe in speech"²⁷. Although Lactantius tried to

¹⁹ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II*, Athens 1990, p. 96.

²⁰ Patrick Healy, "Sibylline Oracles", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 9 Dec. 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13770a.htm>.

²¹ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II*, Athens 1990, p. 96.

²² *Ibid*, p. 97.

²³ Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church*, trans. by Manfred Hoffmann, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964, p. 265.

²⁴ Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, 1, 2, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid*. 1, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid*. 1, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid*. 3.

follow the patristic theology, his superficial knowing and understanding the Christian theology was the cause for some significant errors about Christian God in his theology. Indicative of his heretic teachings, they were delivered dualistic ideas for interpretation the principle of evil. God bore two sons, one before creation and the other after it²⁸. The second, which was the mean son of God, removed from God Father and created evil, which was interpreted as a result of human desire. Lactantius did not make any distinction as “separate person” for the Holy Spirit, which was identified with Christ²⁹. Also he deferred the final judgement of dead and alive people after the millennial reign of Christ³⁰, which would begin about two hundred years after the time in which he wrote³¹.

Although Lactantius is thought as Christian Cicero, Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine is often referred to as the father of church history because of his work in recording the history of the early Christian Church. Eusebius was born about 263C.E., probably in Palestine. He was educated at Antioch and Caesarea, where he formed a close relationship with the learned presbyter Pamphilus, whose name he added to his own. Pamphilus was the owner of a large library and the founder of a theological school, in which Eusebius taught. During this period Eusebius devoted a great deal of his time to studying the works of the second-century Catholic Church father Origen, which Pamphilus had collected as a feature of his library.

He may have come from a family of some influence as he was released after a short imprisonment during the Diocletian's persecutions, persecutions in which his friend Pamphilus and other companions were martyred. Eusebius too, was imprisoned but managed to avoid his mentor's fate. This fact created questions to Orthodox whether Eusebius worshiped and sacrificed to Gods of Pagans.

Eusebius was acquainted with the Priest Dorotheus in Antioch, who may have given him exegetical instruction. By 296 he was in Palestine, where he first saw Constantine when Constantine visited Palestine with Diocletian³². The most known work of Eusebius was the Ecclesiastical history. The latter was not written simply to record the deeds of the church after Christ's ascension; he wanted to show that Christianity, with Constantine's conversion, was the pinnacle of humanity's long climb. The church had been an oppressed minority, but now it could enter a period of peace. Unfortunately, Eusebius had the misfortune to live in the first doctrinal debates and disputes that troubled the Catholic Church during the early fourth century. That period included issues of

²⁸ Ibid. 3, 5. Ibid 2.8.6 and 7.5.27.

²⁹ Ibid 2, 8, 3. Paul McGuckin, “Spirit Christology: Lactantius and his sources”, in *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 24, issue 2, (April 1983), p. 141–148.

³⁰ In Book VII of *Divinae institutiones*, “Of a happy life” Lactantius quoted the oracles of the Cumaean and Erythraean Sibyls, to support his views about the conditions on the earth during the Millennium, which were also based upon his extremely literal approach to several Old Testament prophecies. See Chap. XXIV– *Of the renewed world*; and Chap. XXVI.–*Of the loosing of the devil, and of the second and greatest judgment*.

³¹ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II*, Athens 1990, p. 96.

³² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 7, 33.

Christology relating to the nature of Jesus Christ. Had He always existed in some divine form prior to His human birth? Had He enjoyed a similar status to that of the Father, or was He a created being of lower status? Eusebius was present at the Council of Nicaea (325), where the subject was hotly debated. His firsthand account of the proceedings has been a valuable record through the ages.

Eusebius was not only a recorder of history, but one of the key players at a significant turning point for the church. His era was marked by the “Great Persecution” under Diocletian and his co-rulers (303-311), the conversion of Emperor Constantine (312), and the council of Nicaea (325). About many events of his time, Eusebius could write as an eyewitness: "We saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the divine and sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the market-places, and the shepherds of the churches basely hidden here and there, and some of them captured ignominiously, and mocked by their enemies"³³.

Around 313, about the time of Constantine's Edict of Milan, Eusebius became bishop of the Palestinian city. There he continued work on his church history, which he began during the persecutions. He also wrote a 15-volume refutation of paganism called Preparation, and Demonstration of the Gospel, demonstrating Christ's fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy; he also completed his Chronicle of world history.

Eusebius's history was not written simply to record the deeds of the church after Christ's ascension; he wanted to show that Christianity, with Constantine's conversion, was the pinnacle of humanity's long climb. The church had been an oppressed minority, but now it could enter a period of peace. Eusebius was a very important figure in the church of his day. He was neither a great theologian nor a profound thinker, but he was the most learned man of his age, and stood high in favour with the emperor Constantine³⁴. During the Arian controversy he supported Arius and was condemned by the Council of Antioch in 324/5. At the council of Nicaea in 325 he took a prominent part, occupying a seat at the emperor's right hand, and being appointed to deliver the panegyric oration in his honour. He was the leader of the large middle party of Moderates at the council, and submitted the first draft of the baptismal creed of Caesarea as evidence of his orthodoxy, which was afterwards adopted with important changes and additions³⁵. In the beginning he was the most influential man present, but was finally forced to yield to the Alexandrian party, and to vote for a creed which completely repudiated the position of the Arians, with whom he had himself been hitherto more in sympathy than with the Alexandrians³⁶. However, his

33 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2.1.

34 Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II*, Athens 1990, p. 122.

35 Eirini Artemi, “The heresy of Arius and the First Ecumenical Council”, in *Antiairetiko Egolpion*, (2009) http://egolpion.com/airesh_areiou.el.aspx. Eirini Artemi, “The religious policy of Byzantine emperors from the First Ecumenical Council to Fourth Ecumenical Council”, in *Ecclesiastical Faros*, vol. 76 (2005) 121- 163, p. 129.

36 Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II*, Athens 1990, p. 122.

acceptance of the creed was half-hearted, and he continued as one of the opponents of Athanasius³⁷.

Eusebius started from the fundamental thought of the absolute sovereignty (*monarchia*) of God. God is the cause of all beings. But he is not merely a cause; in him everything good is included, from him all life originates, and he is the source of all virtue. He is the highest God to whom Christ is subject as the second God. God sent Christ into the world that it may partake of the blessings included in the essence of God. Christ is the only really good creature, he possesses the image of God and is a ray of the eternal light; but the figure of the ray is so limited by Eusebius that he expressly emphasizes the self-existence of Son. For this, Eusebius feared the Western heresy of Sabellianism and was lukewarm toward Nicaea's Homoousion settlement "of the same substance with the Father" because it smacked of modalism. The fact that the *Homoousion* had the strong support of known modalists such as Marcellus of Ancyra only confirmed Eastern suspicions that the Nicene formula was a Trojan horse for insinuating modalism and patripassianism into the doctrine of God. In part, it had to do with his Origenistic training. Origen was strongly subordinationistic and held an adoptionist Christology, and it would appear that Eusebius was less than orthodox in his Christology. Also Eusebius underlined that the Son was a "perfect creature" and then "Son is a creature of God whose generation, took place before time. Son is in his activity the organ of God, the creator of life, the principle of every revelation of God, who in his absoluteness is enthroned above all the world. This divine Logos assumed a human body without being altered thereby in any way in his being"³⁸.

In fact, Eusebius refused the eternity, homoousiotita, *aidiotita* of Son, and he remained theologically strict follower of Arius. He succeeded, however, to obscure his extreme position as arianist either as signing Orthodox Symbol and either sometimes stressing that the term consubstantial is not necessary for the relationship of the Father with the Son.

Generally, the presence of Eusebius in the Church had positive and negative sides. The Christianity honours him as a significant historian, an Ecclesiastical writer but not as a patristic father, not as a saint.

2.1. The Primary Sources for Reign of Constantine

The fact is that the attitude of historians towards Constantine is contradictory. For others there was great riddle or brutal killer and an opportunist, and for others, the great miracle of history. This happens because it usually prevails ideological criteria and partisan considerations in the default sources. This opinion is one of the greatest crimes in the field of history, leading run entirely on own suppression history and research, is the use of history to any adaptations, to be used to prove things that are not historically based. The most important

37 Vlasios Feidas, *Ecclesiastical History*, I, Athens 1992, p. 327, 376-393.

38 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Contra Marcellinum*, 1, 1.

sources for the reign of Constantine is the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius³⁹.

Eusebius's history was not written simply to record the deeds of the church after Christ's ascension; he wanted to show that Christianity, with Constantine's conversion, was the pinnacle of humanity's long climb. The church had been an oppressed minority, but now it could enter a period of peace. The first direct references to Constantine's conversion come from the surviving writings of Lactantius and Eusebius, both of them early Christian writers who lived during the time of Constantine. They both had close ties to the Emperor; Lactantius as his son's tutor⁴⁰ and Eusebius as an acquaintance. Despite their differences in recounting the events leading up to the battle of the Milvian Bridge – Eusebius tells of a divine encounter, in which Constantine and his entire army see a vision sent by the Christian god in the sky, an episode which is entirely absent from Lactantius' previously written account – both sources agree essentially that Constantine converted as a direct result of a visit from the Christian God in his dreams. This is an excerpt from Lactantius describing that very: “Constantine was advised in a dream to place the celestial sign of God on his shields... Having been armed with this sign, the army took up its weapons...”⁴¹.

Specifically, about the battle of Milvian Bridge, in the spring of 312, Constantine led his army toward Maxentius in Rome. After routing Maxentius' forces in northern Italy, Constantine approached Rome in October. According to Eusebius and Lactantius, on October 27, the day before the two armies would battle outside of Rome near the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had a vision instructing him to fight in the name of Christ, with his soldiers' shields bearing the symbol of Christ. The symbol was either a cross or the labarum, an intersection of the chi (X) and rho (P), the letters of Christ.

Christian author Lactantius, writing several years after the battle, described, “Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ. Having this sign (XP), his troops stood to arms.”⁴² Eusebius, the Constantine apologist, also described the event in “Life of Constantine,” which he wrote after Constantine's death in 337. According to Eusebius, Constantine saw a vision of a cross rather than the letters of Christ. “He saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, *CONQUER BY THIS- Ev τούτω Νικά*”⁴³. At this sight he himself was struck with

39 George Metallinos, “Constantine the great and the historic truth” http://www.impantokratoros.gr/megas_konstantinos_sykofanties.print.el.aspx (2013).

40 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, University of California Press, California 1983 p. 326.

41 Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44, 5.

42 Ibid.

43 Eusebius of Casarea, *Life od Constantine*, 1.26-32. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.9.

amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle,” wrote Eusebius. The following day, Constantine’s outnumbered forces defeated Maxentius’ forces, which tried to retreat over the Tiber River on a pontoon bridge. In the chaos of the retreat, the bridge collapsed, leaving only the too-narrow Milvian Bridge as a route to escape. Maxentius and many of his men would drown or be trampled to death in the escape. Constantine rode into Rome with the head of Maxentius. There, at around the age of twenty-four, Constantine was hailed as emperor, of the western half of the empire. He was hailed as a man of boldness and a man favoured and guided by the gods. Constantine’s crucial victory at Milvian Bridge proved one of the most decisive moments in world history, while his legalization and support of Christianity together with his foundation of a “New Rome” at Byzantium can be seen as amongst the most momentous decisions made by a European ruler.

Lactantius as contemporary of Constantine, was the first Western thinker to adumbrate a theory of religious freedom rooted not in notions about toleration but in the nature of religious belief. According to his writings about Constantine, Lactantius emerges as the key figure formulating ideas that would find expression in Constantine’s religious policy⁴⁴.

On the other hand, Eusebius underlines that Constantine adopted the God of the Christians because he wanted, among other things, to use the power of this God to unify the empire and give him a secure and successful reign. Because Eusebius’ favourable account gave a primary place to political factors in Constantine’s conversion, Burckhardt⁴⁵ presumed that his conversion was insincere. By putting “a pious veneer over such raw ambition”, says Burckhardt, Eusebius was “the first thoroughly dishonest historian of antiquity”⁴⁶. On the other hand Meyendorff and Norwich agree that the text of Eusebius’ and Lactantius’ writings about Constantine do not try to cover-up, gloss over, or address the emperor’s contradictory religious actions. Mainly, Meyendorff asserts, “No single human being in history has contributed...to the conversion of so many to the Christian faith”⁴⁷. Norwich reiterates this opinion on a global scale stating that “No ruler in all of history...has ever more fully merited his title of ‘the Great’.... [Constantine has] serious claim to be considered...the most influential man in all of history..”⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine”, in *First Things*, April 2001, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/in-defense-of-constantine-47>

⁴⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, University of California Press, California 1983 p. 330. Robert Louis Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine”, in *First Things*, April 2001, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/in-defense-of-constantine-47>

⁴⁶ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, University of California Press, California 1983, p. 330. Robert Louis Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine”, in *First Things*, April 2001, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/in-defense-of-constantine-47>

⁴⁷ John Meyendorff, *Church and Empire: Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989, p. 7

⁴⁸ John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, p. 32

Generally, someone can documents that, no Roman Emperor before Constantine had ever done this things for the Christianity and for the establishment of a Christian Empire. Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius were to see in Constantine the first emperor who was a ‘friend of God’ and thus chosen to proclaim his message to the world. All of Constantine actions about thee Christianity (the Edict of Milan, the First Ecumenical Council and the transference of the capital of Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople) weigh in favour of the opinion that Constantine was exposed to Christianity early in life, that he was tolerant of Christianity, if not promoting it, in his early rule. And that his apparent “delay” in making Christianity the imperial religion, and postponement of baptism, are not evidence that he was a pagan with mere affections for Christianity. Conversely, they are evidence that he was deeply convinced of the truth of Christ from early on and worked diligently for its assertion within the empire, step by step, as allowed by the providence of God⁴⁹.

Based on sources of Lactantius and Eusebius, Schmemmann excels in synthesizing the historical and personal dynamics of Constantine’s conversion, saying, “In Constantine’s mind the Christian faith, or rather, faith in Christ, had not come to him through the Church, but had been bestowed personally and directly for his victory over the enemy — in other words, as he was fulfilling his imperial duty. Consequently the victory he had won with the help of the Christian God had placed the emperor — and thereby the empire as well — under the protection of the Cross and in directs dependence upon Christ. This also meant, however, that Constantine was converted, not as a man, but as an emperor. Christ Himself had sanctioned his power and made him His intended representative, and through Constantine’s person He bound the empire to Himself by special bonds. Here lies the explanation of the striking fact that the conversion of Constantine was not followed by any review or re-evaluation of the theocratic conception of empire, but on the contrary convinced Christians and the Church itself of the emperor’s divine election and obliged them to regard the empire itself as a consecrated kingdom, chosen by God”⁵⁰.

3. Conclusions

Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea promulgated Constantine's reputation as the “first christian emperor” has been promulgated. Were their actions for Christianity only political or only religious or both of them? Did Lactantius and Eusebius try to cover-up, gloss over, or not address the emperor’s contradictory religious actions? We don’t refuse the fact that during his reign, Constantine was involved in a number of events that appear to contradict his religious beliefs but according to our opinion it is clear that Constantine had been sincere in his beliefs. Of course, he was

⁴⁹ Thaddeus Hardenbrook, “Emperor Constantine the Great (306–337). The Importance of His Faith in the History of the Church”, *The Journal of the Chicago Pastoral School*, Vol. 3 (2008) No. 1, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, *Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977 p. 65-66.

guided by political necessity as well as religious fervour. Through our paper, we presented his portrait as political and religious person and we will underline the facts that historians and Church based on for calling Constantine Great, Saint and equal to Apostles. Despite the debate over the sincerity of Christian faith of Constantine, since he was baptized only on his death bed, his support for Christianity, however, was sincere and reflected in his policies. Because of Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the whole empire. Christians could worship openly, and imperial patronage resulted in the affirmation of a single creed. However, the bishops had the right to ask from the emperor the imperial support. Thus, Christianity was changed from a prosecuted religion of a uniform faith with a disciplined hierarchical institution. Of course, we cannot refuse the fact that Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea may try to cover-up, gloss over, or not address the emperor's contradictory religious actions, the fact is that during his reign, Constantine was involved in a number of events that appear to contradict his religious beliefs, but the unquestioned subject is that Constantine had been sincere in his beliefs for Christianity.

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