

**EMPEROR CONSTANTINE:
THE MAN AND THE MYTH**

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Flavius Valerius Constantinus was born on February 27, but the actual year of his birth, like many other things in his life, is a subject of debate among historians. Apparently, he was born sometime between 273 and 280.¹ The place of his birth is debated as well, but is generally agreed to have been *Naissus*,² which is, in modern times, *Nish*, in Serbia, about 125 miles southeast of Belgrade.³ Constantine I, who was known as “Constantine the Great”, was the eldest son of Constantius Chlorus by a barmaid named Helena.⁴ Constantius may or may not have been married to Helena, but either way, he deserted her in favor of a more politically advantageous marriage to Flavia Maximiana Theodora, the stepdaughter of Maximian in 293⁵ when he attained the rank of Caesar.⁶ In 305, Constantius was promoted to the title of Augustus.⁷ On July 23, 306, Constantius died and his son Constantine became Augustus in his place.⁸ Upon the defeat of his rivals Maxentius,⁹ and Licinius,¹⁰ Constantine became the undisputed Emperor of the Roman Empire.¹¹

Constantine was the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire.¹² Because of Constantine, the despised and persecuted “superstition” called Christianity suddenly arose from the shadows of Roman society and almost overnight, assumed the spiritual

¹ Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), 15.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Merriam-Webster’s Geographical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1998), 830.

⁴ A. H. M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1966), 39.

⁵ Grant, 16-17.

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 1, AD 180-395 (New York: Random House, 1932), 344.

⁷ Jones, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹ Grant, 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 28.

leadership of the vast and powerful empire.¹³ This shift of power had a profound effect on both the Roman Empire and the Christian Church.¹⁴

Why did Constantine convert to Christianity, and subsequently make it the state religion of the Roman Empire? Did he just pretend to be a Christian for selfish or political reasons—or did he truly accept Jesus Christ as his Savior and allow Christ to change the person he was from the inside out? Was Constantine one of the world’s greatest con men, or one of the greatest Christians the world has ever known? There are historians who argue both of these opposing views and cite available information, including words attributed to Constantine himself, in the defense of their respective positions.¹⁵ It is impossible for any of us to know what was in the heart of another person the way that God can¹⁶, but we can draw conclusions from the actions of that person that give us a reasonably accurate representation of who that person was.¹⁷

Eusebius of Caesarea

The first person to write a biography of the life of Constantine was Eusebius (260-339), the Bishop of Caesarea.¹⁸ The story of Constantine as told by Eusebius is titled *Vita Constantini* or *Life of Constantine*.¹⁹ Eusebius began the *Vita Constantini* soon after Constantine’s death in 337.²⁰ The very first page of text praises Constantine’s sons and declares that they are as wonderful as their father:

¹³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴ Jones, 39-50.

¹⁵ Hermann Dörries. *Constantine the Great*. Translated by Roland H. Bainton. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Bainton’s *Introduction*, vii-xi.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 2:11 NKJV “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”

¹⁷ Matthew 7:15-18 NKJV “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. *You will know them by their fruits.* Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.”

¹⁸ Grant, 3-4.

¹⁹ Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*. Introduction, translation and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

On earth it perceives his own sons like new lamps filling the whole with his radiance, and himself more powerfully alive and directing the whole government of affairs more firmly than before, as he is multiplied in the succession of his sons.²¹

Eusebius then proclaimed Constantine himself to have been a divine instrument in the hands of God:

This is also what God himself, whom Constantine honored, by standing at Constantine's side at the beginning, the middle and the end of his reign, confirmed by his manifest judgment, putting forward this man as a lesson in the pattern of godliness to the human race. As the only one of the widely renowned Emperors of all time whom God set up as a huge luminary and loud-voiced herald of unerring godliness, he is the only one to whom God gave convincing proofs of the religion he practiced by the benefits of every kind which were afforded him.²²

Eusebius compared Constantine to Moses in that both Constantine and Moses were raised in a household that was hostile to their respective religions and they both grew to manhood and eventually defeated their enemies.²³ Eusebius also observes that both men destroyed their enemies by drowning them in a body of water.²⁴ Of course, in Constantine's case, the triumph was not quite as dramatic as the parting of the Red Sea. At the battle of Milvian Bridge, Maxentius drowned because he fell into the river and could not swim because of the weight of his armor.²⁵

Eusebius was, what we might call today, a "spin doctor." He may have believed every word of the veneration that he bestowed upon Constantine, or he may have been trying to get into the good graces of Constantine's sons—since Constantine himself was already dead.

Grant tells us that if we are to understand Constantine at all, we have to read Eusebius with a "grain of salt," and considers Eusebius to be "not only a mediocre stylist, but a depressingly unobjective historian."²⁶ Grant further states that Eusebius was guilty

²¹ Ibid., 67.

²² Ibid., 69.

²³ Ibid., 73.

²⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

²⁵ Gibbon, 365.

²⁶ Grant, 4.

of “numerous contradictions, dishonest suppressions, erroneous statements of facts or untruths.”²⁷

Barnes states the following:

Eusebius suggests he was close to the emperor; hence he becomes, in many modern accounts, a constant advisor of Constantine, a close confidant, and his principal counselor on ecclesiastical matters. Basic facts of geography and chronology contradict this conventional portrait. Eusebius did not reside near the imperial capital, come to court when he chose, or have ready access to the emperor’s presence. He probably met and conversed with the emperor on no more than four occasions.²⁸

Other Sources

If we cannot trust Eusebius, because he was so biased in favor of Constantine’s alleged greatness as a leader, and his exemplary model of true Christianity that Eusebius stretched the truth beyond reason, then who can we trust? Many writers followed Eusebius who showed varying degrees of objectivity.²⁹

Lactantius (240-320) was a Christian apologist from north Africa who had personally suffered persecution under Diocletian.³⁰ Unlike Eusebius, Lactantius was intimately familiar with Constantine, since he was the tutor of the emperor’s son and a member of his family.³¹ Lactantius wrote *Divinae Institutiones*, a seven-volume work that was dedicated to Constantine, whom Lactantius regarded as the embodiment of traditional values.³² *Divinae Institutiones* was a refutation of all opponents of Christianity—past, present and future.³³ Most of the writings of Lactantius were tenacious arguments about the reasons that Christianity is superior to paganism and

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Timothy D. Barnes. *Constantine and Eusebius*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 265-266.

²⁹ Grant, 6-10.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

³¹ Christopher Bush Coleman. *Constantine the Great and Christianity: Three Phases: The Legendary, and the Spurious*. (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 54.

³² Grant, 6.

³³ Ibid.

secular philosophy, including the premise that anger is a necessary element of God's character—a belief that was shared by Constantine.³⁴

Orosius was a Spanish presbyter, who fled to Africa in 414 when the Vandals invaded Spain. Orosius became a student of Augustine and in 417, wrote a seven-book Christian chronicle, *Historie Adversus Paganos*, which chronicles the history of the known world from the creation of the world to the story of Rome—which included Constantine's life and reign.³⁵

There are several other historians who were either contemporaries of Constantine, or who lived in the next generation, who wrote about Constantine, including Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, and Theodoretus.³⁶ There are, of course, many historians and scholars both Christian and non-Christian, from the 4th century to the present day, who have written about Constantine.³⁷

In addition to works written about Constantine by contemporaries and historians, there are edicts and letters purported to have been written by Constantine himself. Many of these documents may have been actually written by his advisors, especially Lactantius,³⁸ since neither Constantine's Greek nor his Latin was very good.³⁹ Nevertheless, these edicts and letters clearly reflect his points of view.⁴⁰

Constantine's *Oration to the Assembly of Saints*, probably delivered at Antioch in 325, is such a document. This document declares Constantine's desire to achieve imperial unity and his impatience with the theological dissensions that made such unity impossible. In the *Oration to the Assembly of Saints*, Constantine proclaims that he was

³⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

³⁷ Ibid., 8-13.

³⁸ Coleman, 53-54.

³⁹ Grant, 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

indeed chosen by God and that, in fact, God spoke to him directly, and told him what he must do—and that God would be angry with him if he did not do the right thing.⁴¹

Constantine's Vision and Conversion

The single most important event in Constantine's life that resulted in his conversion to Christianity, which would later result in the transformation of the entire Roman Empire and the Christian church as well, was the vision that Constantine is reported to have had prior to the battle of Milvian Bridge. As would be expected, there are different versions of Constantine's vision that have been preserved through time and are available to us today.

Eusebius describes the events as follows:

Knowing well that he [Constantine] would need more powerful aid than an army can supply because of the mischievous magical devices practiced by the tyrant [Maxentius], he sought a god to aid him. He regarded the resources of soldiers and military numbers as secondary, for he thought that without the aid of a god, these could achieve nothing; and he said that what comes from a god's assistance is irresistible and invincible. He therefore considered what kind of god he should adopt to aid him.⁴²

Eusebius goes on to explain that Constantine considered the fact that all of the previous attempts to defeat Maxentius were made by those who worshipped pagan gods, and that none of them had succeeded—whereas Constantine's father had found success in the worship of the Christian god.⁴³

This God he began to invoke in prayer, beseeching and imploring him to show him who he was, and to stretch out his right hand to assist him in his plans. As he made these prayers and earnest supplications there appeared to the Emperor a most remarkable divine sign. If someone else had reported it, it would not be so easy to accept; but since the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after, when I was privileged with his acquaintance and company, and confirmed it with oaths, who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence for the truth of what he said?

About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light and a text attached which said, "By this conquer". Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers which was then accompanying him on a campaign he was conducting somewhere, and witnessed the miracle.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁴² Eusebius, 79-80.

⁴³ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

Eusebius continues with his account by stating that on the following night, Jesus Christ appeared to Constantine in a dream, and instructed him to use the symbol he had seen in the vision as “protection against the attacks of the enemy.”⁴⁵

Different sources have variations in the legend of Constantine’s vision. The “words of light” seen in the vision have been reported by Lactantius as to have been in Latin: *Hoc signo victor eris* or *In this sign you shall be the victor*, whereas Eusebius reported it to have been in Greek: τούτωι νικά or *By this conquer*.⁴⁶

Some of the accounts report that Constantine saw a *cross* in his vision, but most report the symbol to have been what has become known as the *labarum* or battle-standard.⁴⁷ This symbol was created by combining the first two letters of the Greek Χριστος (Christ), *chi* and *rho* into the following symbol:⁴⁸



After Constantine’s vision, and subsequent dream, he instructed his soldiers to paint the *chi-rho* on their shields.⁴⁹ Constantine and his soldiers carried the symbol with them into the battle of Milvian Bridge where, despite being greatly outnumbered, they defeated Maxentius and his forces.⁵⁰

In fairness, it should be recognized that there is historical evidence that the use of the *chi-rho* symbol pre-dates the Christian era by several hundred years. It appears on coins 300 years before Christ,⁵¹ and is found on pre-Christian texts as the abbreviation of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁶ Andrew Alföldi. *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*. Translated by Harold Mattingly. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 18.

⁴⁷ John Holland Smith. (*Constantine the Great*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 102.

⁴⁸ Dörries, 33.

⁴⁹ Jones, 40.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Coleman, 79-80.

several Greek words, notably *χρηστος* or *useful*.⁵² However, in Constantine's time, the *chi-rho* was already a familiar Christian symbol.⁵³

Did Constantine really have the vision as he claimed? No one can know for sure unless he or she was there! Eusebius reports that Constantine's soldiers also witnessed the vision,⁵⁴ but that is equally difficult to prove or disprove.

There is biblical precedent for direct communication from God to mankind. God made Himself known to Old Testament patriarchs and prophets such as Abraham and Moses. In many of these visitations, God intervened to change the direction of a single person that affected millions of people for hundreds or even thousands of years to come.

A perfect example was the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus:

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.⁵⁵

I found it interesting that when Paul had his vision that the men who accompanied him also experienced it, in that they also heard the voice. Constantine's soldiers are alleged to have shared his vision.⁵⁶

Eusebius compared Constantine to Moses.⁵⁷ If Constantine's vision and conversion were genuine, it is also valid to compare him to Paul. Both were raised in a

⁵² Smith, 103.

⁵³ Coleman, 80.

⁵⁴ Eusebius, 81.

⁵⁵ Acts 3:1-9, NKJV.

⁵⁶ Eusebius, 81.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73, 84-85.

tradition that apposed Christianity. Paul had a vision, and Constantine had a dream, where Jesus Christ personally appeared to them. Both lived in a time where Christianity was in peril of destruction and a powerful leader was required to keep the movement alive. Forgive me if I'm starting to sound like Eusebius, but both men historically changed the Christian world in such a powerful way that made it possible for millions to hear the word of Jesus Christ and pass it on to future generations. There are many people who have claimed to have had visions or other direct communication with God in the last 2000 years—most of these claims are probably false, but some of them may be genuine. A room full of theologians would no doubt debate the possibility of visions from God in the post-apostolic age—but I believe that with God anything is possible.⁵⁸

Constantine's Confession

Eusebius reports that Constantine clearly acknowledged Christianity as the one true religion, and provides the text of a letter, written both in Latin and in Greek, that Constantine sent to every region of the empire.⁵⁹ In this letter, Constantine states the following:

For a long time past, it has been obvious to those of right and sound views about the Supreme, and to the absolute exclusion of all doubt, how great that difference is which distinguishes the correct observance of the most sacred cult of Christianity from those who are violently hostile and adopt a contemptuous attitude to it.⁶⁰

Constantine's letter continues with a quite verbose examination of how bad his rivals were and how much better the empire is since Constantine took complete control. Frequent mention is made of the fact that God chose Constantine to rule and helped him to defeat his enemies so that Constantine's rule could be accomplished.⁶¹ The writing is

⁵⁸ Mark 10:27, NKJV “Jesus looked at them and said: with men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God, all things are possible.”

⁵⁹ Eusebius, 103-104.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁶¹ Ibid., 104-109.

quite long-winded and redundant, but no more than what we find in speeches by contemporary politicians.

The Arian Controversy

Constantine intervened when the Christian church faced a doctrinal crisis. Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, took the position that Jesus Christ had not existed from all eternity, but had a beginning by the creative act of God.⁶² Arius believed that Christ was of a different essence or substance from the Father, and was divine but not deity.⁶³ This view was in direct opposition to the orthodox view, that was championed by Athanasius, that Christ had existed from all eternity with the Father and was the same essence with this Father though He was a distinct personality.⁶⁴

A heated debate ensued that threatened to divide the church and the empire, and even start a civil war.⁶⁵ Constantine never really understood the theology of the debate, but nonetheless recognized the threat to his empire.⁶⁶ Constantine sent Hosius, who held the title of *Special Vicarius in Ecclesiastical Affairs* to Egypt, and empowered him to do whatever was necessary to restore unity to the church.⁶⁷

Dörries states the following:

Constantine wanted to curb divisiveness but he would not admit a pluralism of religious opinions for reasons of state, as if it did not matter what anyone believed so long as the peace was maintained. The welfare of the state itself required unanimity of conviction. The appeal to good will assumed a kernel of faith which alone could maintain that peace.⁶⁸

⁶² Earle E. Carnes, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Church*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 126.

⁶³ Ibid. 128.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Smith, 186-191.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Dörries, 143.

Eventually, after several failed attempts to resolve the debate, at the urging of Hosius, Eusebius and Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, Constantine invited all the bishops in the empire to meet in a counsel in Nicaea.⁶⁹

Historians disagree about the actual number of bishops that attended the counsel, but it was at least 250.⁷⁰ Smith describes the event as follow:

The whole scene was beautifully stage-managed. Constantine wanted results from this conference, and needed them quickly. He was also determined to establish his dominion over the bishops. His advisors knew, even if he did not, that he was unlikely to achieve these ends by his intellect, so his splendid physical presence and love of display, together with the charm he could exert when circumstances warranted it, were employed instead.⁷¹

After about a month of theological debate, the bishops came to the agreement that the Arian view was heresy and that Jesus Christ was indeed “begotten, not made, of one substance with the father.”⁷² (I can only hope that someone present included I John 2:22-23 in the defense of the deity of Jesus.)⁷³ The statement which was made by the counsel of Nicaea regarding the nature of Jesus Christ, is considered orthodox Christian doctrine even today.

Constantine handled the crisis much differently than the Christian-hating emperors that preceded him, such as Diocletian or Nero would have probably handled it. One could imagine that Constantine’s predecessors would have simply rounded up Arius and his followers and had them put to death for daring to speak out against the accepted orthodoxy of the state religion.

Even though he did not really understand the theology being debated, Constantine came forward as a true leader and encouraged the church to come to agreement rationally, which resulted in strengthening the church and the empire. I believe that

⁶⁹ Smith, 193.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁷¹ Ibid., 195.

⁷² Grant, 174.

⁷³ I John 2:22-23, NKJV “Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.”

Constantine cared not only for the state but for the church as well—for they were one and the same in his eyes. Constantine cared about, and was defending, the Christian religion in which he himself was a believer.

Baptism and Death of Constantine

Constantine was baptized only a few days before his death.⁷⁴ The postponement of baptism until the deathbed was not unusual in this era.⁷⁵ Many of the church fathers, some of whom grew up in old Christian families, were baptized only in their latter years.⁷⁶ Even Ambrose was not baptized until shortly before being inducted into the episcopal office.⁷⁷ At this time in Christian history, baptism was often delayed until late in life because it was believed that after baptism, which would restore the soul to its original purity, one should not commit a sin—and the only way to ensure this, was to wait until death was imminent to be baptized.⁷⁸

When he was so close to death, Constantine had nothing to gain or lose, by the world's standards, by being baptized—or not being baptized. Baker states the following:

Now that he felt his end approaching, and any concealment or hesitation became pointless, he showed his true belief. Had he been at heart a pagan, or indifferent, he might with perfect ease have died unchristened. The Church, from a secular point of view, could neither have harmed nor helped him. He took the decided line just when it had the least worldly value: and this consideration is a reasonably conclusive indication of where his heart lay.⁷⁹

Conclusions

The time that has passed since the lifetime of Constantine I, almost 17 centuries, has obscured much of the factual information regarding his life. The only sources of information handed down by Constantine's contemporaries are suspect because of their

⁷⁴ Coleman, 87.

⁷⁵ Dörries, 195.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Grant, 212.

⁷⁹ G.P. Baker. *Constantine the Great and the Christian Revolution*. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 308-309.

personal biases and the fact that it was, after all, an emperor of whose life they were chronicling. Several writers told conflicting stories about the same event, which is to be expected—whether the event were a vision had by an emperor 1700 years ago or an automobile accident witnessed yesterday morning. Such is the paradox of reporting history.

The reason that I chose the subject of Constantine's character as the subject of research is that I have "heard stories" about his life, told by individuals in churches and Christian social settings, who offered little or no credibility. I do not accept everything I hear without questioning it; I wanted to find out for myself.

Most of these stories portray Constantine as the evil emperor who assimilated Christianity into the Roman Empire because he realized that all attempts to destroy Christianity had failed—and his only other recourse was to make it the state religion and control it from within. Constantine then, is responsible for the deliberate infusion of paganism into Christianity that transformed the pristine religion of Jesus Christ into the corrupt Catholicism of later years.

My research has shown me that this assertion is not historically correct. Constantine made mistakes, and errors in judgment—he was a sinner, just as all of us are.⁸⁰ He was not a scholar, or a theologian; he was a military man, a politician—an emperor. As I previously stated, there is no way to know what is in another person's heart, but based on his actions, it is my conclusion that Constantine was a Christian.

Constantine is reported to have had a vision, a divine communication from God. Christians accept direct communication from God to individuals or groups when it is recorded in scripture, but we are unsure of stories of visions at Fatima, Guadalupe, or Lourdes. We may like to believe that God sent messengers to Joan of Arc, but then in

⁸⁰ Romans 3:23, NKJV "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"

contrast we have similar claims by Joseph Smith, Jim Jones, and David Koresh. We cannot prove or disprove Constantine's vision; but his victory at Milvian Bridge, and the transformation of Christianity from an underground movement where Christians were in constant fear of their lives, to the state religion of the Roman Empire, are historical facts.

When the church was in a theological crisis over the Arian controversy, Constantine facilitated the diplomatic resolution of the dispute with lasting results for orthodox Christian dogma. I am tempted to compare Constantine to King Solomon—but I will resist that temptation!

Finally, just days before he died, Constantine asked to be baptized—a simple act of faith for which there was no apparent reward on this earth. I, like Constantine, am not a great scholar or theologian, but I believe that Constantine was indeed—a Christian.

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