

Eusebius Pamphili of Caesarea

Mid-Term Paper for
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1. Biography of Eusebius

Eusebius Pamphili of Caesarea¹ (hereafter referred to simply as “Eusebius”) was born around 264 A.D and died c. 339. In order to be able to fully appreciate the flow of Eusebius’ life, I would first like to give some general background information on the development of the Roman empire during Eusebius’ lifetime.

Kommentar [Computer1]:

Eusebius’ life coincides with the reigns of the two great emperors Diocletian (245-316, r. 285-305) and Constantine (280?-337, r. 324-337). The most important event during the reign of Diocletian was the Christian persecution that he started in the year 303. After Diocletian abdicated in 305, a power struggle ensued, which was resolved for the Western part of the Roman Empire by the victory of Constantine over Maxentius in 312. Together with the ruler of the Eastern part of the empire, Licinius, Constantine issued an Edict of Tolerance of Christianity in 311, and two years later established complete freedom of religion, so that the Christian persecutions finally ended after ten years. In 324, Constantine eventually defeated Licinius and so managed to unify the Roman Empire. As Constantine also converted to Christianity, one can speak of the following decades as “the age of church unification under Constantine.”²

Eusebius’ life was connected with these events and developments in various ways. First of all, his teacher Pamphilus³ became a victim of the Diocletian Christian persecution in 310 after he had been jailed for three years. Eusebius, who had long been Pamphilus’ disciple, apparently spent some time in jail together with him, where they both continued their theological studies. After Eusebius was freed from jail in 311, he became bishop of Caesarea, then the most important city of the Roman province of Palestine.⁴

In the 25 or so years that followed until his death, one main event shaped Eusebius’ life in a decisive way, namely the “Arian Controversy”, which evolved from c. 318 on. Arius of Alexandria was excommunicated by his bishop that year for holding the view that God, the Father, and Jesus, his son, were not identical, but two separate entities, a view that was considered to be heretical by most of the Church authorities of

¹ His name “of Caesarea” does not refer to his place of birth, which is not known, but to the place where he spent most of his life and career. Cf. Schwartz 1907, col. 1370.

² The New Encyclopaedia Britannica 1994, p. 608.

³ It was from him that he got his other name, “Pamphili”, meaning “of Pamphilus”.

the time. In the following controversies, Eusebius supported Arius until he finally accepted the majority opinion that God and Jesus were of the same substance at the Council of Nicaea, which was supervised by Emperor Constantine himself in 325. Accordingly, Eusebius, unlike Arius and his followers, was able to hold on to all his posts and titles, and even became an advisor of Emperor Constantine. After the latter's death he wrote a four-volume "Life of Constantine" praising and glorifying his benefactor's deeds and virtues in an elaborated language. It was his last major work before he died in the late 330's.

2. The "Chronicle"

Eusebius probably started work on his "Chronicle" (Gr. *chronikon*) before the persecutions of 303, but did not finish it until after 313, even then constantly revising it until he began writing his greater work, the "Church History". In a separate introduction, Eusebius explains his fundamental principles in composing the "Chronicle": He explicitly leaves any interpretation or analysis aside and wants to focus on giving excerpts of the authors he consulted.⁵

Accordingly, the main part of the chronicle after the introduction consists only of tables, made up in such a manner that they provide two columns for two different methods of counting years.⁶ One column gives the biblical years, taking the year of Abraham's birth as year one, the other one relies on the so called "Olympiads" taking the year 776 B.C. as year one, going up to the year 300 A.D.⁷ Every single year is written down in both fashions, even if there is no information given for any events in that year. If there is any information Eusebius drew from the authors he consulted, this is inserted in between the years: biblical events on the left hand side, profane events, mainly pertaining to political developments, on the right hand side.

This structure given, it would be rather difficult to call the "Chronicle" a work of

⁴ Q.v. Bigelmair 1913, p. 10.

⁵ Bardenhewer (ed.) 1914, pp. 7ff.

⁶ The following description relies on Schwartz 1907, coll.1380f.

⁷ In later editions he probably extended that to his present times. Q.v. Schwartz 1907, col. 1381.

history, although it is undoubtedly concerned with events of the past. The interest in establishing a chronology of events that is as correct as possible is not a particular Christian characteristic, although we do not find anything of the like in the Greek and Roman historiographers. Rather, it goes back to the tradition of the Jews, who had established a series of orthodox chronologies in order to prove that their own culture was older than that of their polytheistic contemporaries.⁸ Likewise, the early Christian historiographers, starting in the late third century with Sextus Julius Africanus and his “Chronography”,⁹ drew up their chronologies with a specific aim in mind, namely “to give the human past a Christian framework.”¹⁰ The events of the past were seen as leading up to the development of the Christian faith and, since Eusebius’ times, also as ending in the creation of an empire that was congenial to that faith and became its protector in the end, which is to say the Roman Empire since Constantine’s times.

3. The “Church History”

The “Church History”¹¹ (Gr. *historia ekklesiastike*) is Eusebius’ opus maximus, deserving this assignation for both its size as well as its popularity: It consisted of ten books that went through four new editions during Eusebius’ lifetime, and was soon translated into Latin, Syrian, and Armenian in the decades following its first publication in 324.¹²

The “Church History” is basically the result of the studies Eusebius conducted in connection with collecting the material for his “Chronicle”; it is for its main part a presentation of these collected materials, only occasionally interspersed with narration or the author’s interpretation.¹³

Concerning the outline of the work itself, it can be roughly divided into two parts. The first one consists of Books I - VII, giving first a list of bishops from the time of the

⁸ Q.v. Schwartz 1907, col. 1377.

⁹ Cf. Breisach 1983, p. 81, for a brief discussion of Africanus and his work.

¹⁰ Breisach 1983, p.81.

¹¹ An English translation is provided in Lake/Oulton 1926ff.

¹² Q.v. Bigelmair 1913, pp. 61f.

¹³ It might well be worth noting here that the the Greek word “ἱστορία” meant in fact nothing else than

apostles up to Eusebius' present, by so doing attempting to prove that the currently installed bishops can in fact trace back their heritage to the apostles.¹⁴ This is followed by excerpts of all books pertaining to the development of the Christian church that were at Eusebius' hands, thus establishing a kind of canon of early Christian literature, but also quoting extensively from heretic works. While Eusebius also writes passages of his own in between the long quotes, they focus almost exclusively on the development of the church and there is little reference to political events.

The second part, Books VIII - X, gives the story of the martyrs, concentrating on those early fourth century persecutions which Eusebius himself witnessed. This second part differs from the first one insofar as there is more of Eusebius' own narration and fewer documents. Also, he provides more descriptions on current political developments, e.g. by inserting information on Constantine and his sons into later editions.

Although the "Church History" is the first one of its kind that "deserves this name,"¹⁵ it has been criticized for not putting enough emphasis on cause and effect reasoning¹⁶ and also for containing some faulty documents.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the "Church History" has considered to be of such great importance throughout history that even a person like Hieronymus (also called Saint Jerome, 347-419), who was a bitter enemy of Eusebius theologically as a result of Eusebius' stand in the Arian controversy, translated the complete work into Latin, all the while adding to it to extend it up to his own times.¹⁸

4. Characteristics of Eusebius' Historiographic Approach

As seen, Eusebius understood himself as, and was, more of a compiler than a proper interpreter of what happened. This approach can be understood as being in line with his academic upbringing, having emerged from the tradition of Origenes and Pamphilus. Both of these men originated serious literary exegetics, mainly

"collection of available traded down material". Q.v. Schwartz 1907, col. 1395.

¹⁴ Q.v. Schwartz 1907, col. 1397.

¹⁵ Bigelmair 1913, p. 60.

¹⁶ So by Bigelmair 1913, p. 60.

¹⁷ So by Schwartz 1907, col. 1407.

¹⁸ Q.v. Bigelmair 1913, p. 58.

concentrating on the Bible, but also extending this approach to other works of Christian authors. What they and Eusebius did might, in today's understanding, rather be called the work of a librarian than that of a historian. The reason why Christians would have a particular interest in treating a text carefully is that "[m]istakes in the sacred tradition were too costly; they distorted divine revelation..."¹⁹; as mentioned above, this concern was borrowed from the Jewish cultural tradition.

Another important point that needs to be stressed is that Eusebius' endeavor had the rather clear-cut aim to serve as an apologetic against the heathen.²⁰ The defense against heretic movements, or rather the emergence of an orthodox unified church in the first place, consumed much of early church's energy for some time until well after Eusebius' death. One of the means which enabled the church to counter the heretics' arguments was to establish an orthodoxy. While others focussed on doing this theologically, Eusebius took a literary-historic approach, that is, he sorted out which events and writings of the past belonged to the official church history from those belonging to the realm of outsiders, heathen, and heretics.

The special worth of Eusebius' work, even up to today, lies in the fact that he was very well schooled for selecting and presenting texts without a bias, and that so much of the writings of early church history are preserved for us only through his writings. The relevance of Eusebius' work in history can perhaps be seen by the fact that not only his early successors used it as a basis for their own chronologies, but that it also remained valid throughout the following centuries and even up to the Middle Ages,²¹ until the whole presumption of the primacy of a Christian world view was threatened during the Renaissance, and finally came to disappear following the Enlightenment and lastly the Materialistic Revolution in the 19th century.²²

¹⁹ Breisach 1983, p. 78.

²⁰ This is also the reason for Eusebius' sometimes being classified as one of the "apologetic authors".
Q.v. Bigelmair 1913, p. 33.

²¹ Cf. Breisach 1983, pp. 91, 124, 131.

²² Cf. Breisach 1983, pp. 177, 318f., 401f.

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