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Author(s): T. G. Elliott

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CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION: DO WE REALLY NEED IT?

T. G. ELLIOTT

THE RECENT ADVANCES that have been made in the study of Constantine have not helped to produce agreement on the critical matter of the conversion. Those who thought that T. D. Barnes had improved matters by stressing Constantine's early contact with Christianity have now seen R. Lane Fox minimize that contact and resume the effort to reconcile the famous passages of Eusebius and Lactantius.¹

Early in 1985 I thought that I had found the solution to the problem of these passages when I recognized the possibility that the miracle described by Constantine had resulted in the *labarum*, but not in a conversion.² However, it became apparent immediately that the removal of the conversion as an historical event eliminated some difficulties with the evidence only to create others, and it seems to me even now that these may be of sufficient importance to rule out the possibility of a conclusive proof. What follows here is therefore an attempt to present a more probable interpretation of the evidence. Examination from a new point of view is bound to appear more argumentative, and less judicious, than examination from points of view with which we are familiar. I have tried not to cause unnecessary discomfort.

In support of my proposal, then, I offer four arguments, which I have put in a chronological order. The first of these is the least conclusive, but it does not have to accomplish more than a modest re-distribution of the burden of

The following are cited by author's name alone: N. H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*² (Oxford 1972); H. Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins* (Göttingen 1954); H. Kraft, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung* (Tübingen 1955); R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth 1986).

The following are also referred to in abbreviated form: T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) = Barnes, *CE*; *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982) = Barnes, *NE*; "The Conversion of Constantine," *EMC* 29 ns 4 (1985) 371–391 = Barnes, "Conversion;" F. Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia," *SBBerl, KlfSprach* 1965.3 = Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen;" "Charakter und Bedeutung der Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 1 (1966) 346–385 = Winkelmann, "Charakter."

¹Cf. Barnes, *CE* 43; Barnes, "Conversion;" Lane Fox 609–635. The latter supplies an up-to-date bibliography. The passages in question are Eusebius VC 1.28 and Lactantius *De mortibus persecutorum* 44.

²The argument of this paper was presented at a seminar of the Classics Department at the University of Toronto in January 1986, and at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in December 1986. I am indebted to Timothy Barnes, John Rist, Barbara Rodgers, Paul Fedwick, and Malcolm Wallace for their help on those and other occasions.

proof. The arguments are: (1) that the evidence that Constantius "Chlorus" was a Christian is strong enough to have a serious effect on the theory that Constantine was converted; (2) that Constantine himself dated the beginning of his christianizing mission to his time in (or near) Britain; (3) that Constantine's misrepresentations about his age during the years 303–305 indicate that he was a Christian at that time; (4) that the "Kreuzerscheinung" described in Eusebius' Life resulted in the *labarum*, but not in a conversion of Constantine.

The view that Constantius was not a Christian depends on the belief that Constantine was converted from paganism to Christianity. That belief has fostered arguments from the Sol Invictus coinage of Constantius, from the pagan panegyrics, and from his failure to legislate an end to the Great Persecution when he became senior Augustus in 305.³ Each of these arguments is a *non sequitur*. The coinage indicates what he wanted to appear on his coins, not his religious convictions. Baynes (Appendix) argued very effectively against drawing extravagant conclusions from the coinage of Constantine down to 324, but overlooked the fact that the same argument could be applied to the coinage of Constantius.⁴ The fact that it is not until 313 that mention of the gods ceases in the pagan panegyrics to Constantius and Constantine has been thought to prove a change in the imperial thinking between 311 and 313. Such reasoning ignores both the official nature of the panegyrics and the drastic change in Constantine's circumstances. In 313 he was in a far stronger position than his father (or he himself) had ever enjoyed, so that what appears as a change may have been simply a further revelation. Even in the case of Constantine, the gods who disappear from the panegyrics in 313 remain on the coins until 323. The fact that the coins are unreliable as an indicator of religious belief diminishes the value of arguments from the panegyrics, which share the propaganda purposes of the coins.⁵ As for Constantius' failure to legislate against the persecution, he knew that Galerius would have ignored such an edict. Constantius had compelling reasons for not acting openly as a Christian. He would not have wished to produce a combination of his colleagues against himself, nor to get Constantine killed. Because his reasons for concealment are so good, the arguments against the view that he was a Christian are inconclusive.

It is now convenient to set out other evidence regarding his religion. He had a daughter whose name, Anastasia, indicates that he was a Christian (cf.

³Cf. Baynes 7–9; 56–58, nn. 23–25; Appendix at 95–103. The most careful discussion of the subject, however, is that of Kraft (1–6). Kraft would not commit himself to the view that Constantius was a pagan.

⁴For the argument regarding Constantine cf. Kraft 14; Barnes, *CE* 48; Lane Fox 658.

⁵For the language of the panegyrists concerning divine attributes of emperors and divinity of emperors cf. B. Saylor Rodgers, "Divine Insinuation in the Panegyrici Latini," *Historia* 25 (1986) 69–99. See also below, n. 31.

Kraft 5–6). Concerning his first wife, Helen, there was a tradition, reflected in Theodoret,⁶ that she had raised Constantine as a Christian, and she reappears, as a Christian in Rome, by 316 (cf. Barnes, *CE* 49). In *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 15 Lactantius praises Constantius as follows: *nam Constantius, ne dissentire a maiorum praeceptis videretur, conventicula, id est parietes, dirui passus est: verum autem Dei templum, quod est in hominibus, incolume servavit*. This statement clearly implies that Constantius disagreed with the policy of persecution. Furthermore, the word *servavit* suggests that Constantius was a fellow Christian; for an outsider's action *reliquit* was a more natural word. In the *Divine Institutes* 1.1 Lactantius addresses Constantine as *Imperator Maxime, qui primus Romanorum principum, repudiatis erroribus, maiestatem Dei singularis ac veri et cognovisti et honorasti*.⁷ Although the phrase *repudiatis erroribus* might be taken to imply that Constantine had once lived in those errors, and the *primus* might be taken to imply that Constantius was a pagan, neither inference is necessary. As emperor, Constantine could be envisaged as repudiating on behalf of the empire the errors of others, and Constantius could not be the first emperor so described because he had not formally repudiated the errors and had not published an allegiance to Christianity. It is possible that Lactantius' emphasis on the fact that Constantine did two things (*et cognovisti et honorasti*) results from a view that Constantius had done one of them, i.e., that he had been a Christian man, but not a Christian emperor. Constantine himself, as quoted in Eusebius VC 2.49, said that Constantius, with wonderful piety, asked for the blessing of the Saviour God upon all his actions. If the quotation is correct, Constantine claimed in 324 that his father was a Christian.

Next there is the abundant testimony of Eusebius in VC 1.12–27. According to Eusebius, Constantius was a Christian throughout his reign (17). During the Great Persecution he showed himself the friend of the Church (13, 15) and cleverly got rid of those Christians at his court who were willing to offer pagan sacrifice (16). His palace was like a church (17). God rewarded

⁶The contrary tradition is that represented by the plain statement of Eusebius (in VC 3.47) that Constantine converted her to Christianity. Since Eusebius represents Constantius as a Christian he should not have represented Helen as having been converted by her son unless he believed that it was true. Theodoret, in his *HE* 1.18, describes Helena as “she who brought forth this great luminary for the world and nurtured him in piety from his childhood.” While copying several chapters of Theodoret into his own *HE* Gelasius of Cyzicus added at this point (3.6.1) a single parenthetical sentence: “For she no less than the child's father, her husband Constantius, brought him up by God's laws to worship Christ.” This sentence, like that of Theodoret, may go back to Gelasius of Caesarea, for whom see below (423). If Eusebius' statement had been made early in his account of Helen's work in Jerusalem, it would be more persuasive against the other tradition. In fact it is made in passing, in his account of her funeral, and I am doubtful about it.

⁷Cf. T. D. Barnes, “Lactantius and Constantine,” *JRS* 63 (1973) 29–46, at 43. See below, n. 22.

him for his devotion with a happy life (18) and a happy death as he was rejoicing in being able to bequeath his empire to his son (19, 21). Constantine had spent his youth at the court of the oppressors of the Church, but God had inclined him to piety, and he wished to imitate the more virtuous conduct of his father (12). Having pacified his own realm he decided to liberate Rome from tyranny (26) with the help of his father's god (27).

Finally, we may consider the statements of Gelasius of Caesarea who, fairly late in the fourth century, wrote an *Ecclesiastical History*, now lost, starting with Constantius Chlorus and continuing to the period after the Council of Nicaea.⁸ This author had both Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Life of Constantine*.⁹ He was a nephew of Cyril of Jerusalem, who was bishop there from about 350 until his death in 386.¹⁰ Through Cyril's influence he was made bishop of Caesarea in 366, and he seems to have been dead in 400 (Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen" 71). Quotations from Gelasius' work survive in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Gelasius of Cyzicus, which was written by about 475, and in *Byzantine Lives*. Gelasius of Caesarea described Constantius as a Christian and a protector of Christians during the Great Persecution, and said that he bequeathed his empire to Constantine because he was convinced that Constantine would end the persecution of Christians (*op. cit.* 18–22). If there were no story of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, this evidence would surely be accepted as showing that his father had been a Christian. Indeed, to the present writer it appears far more likely that Constantius was a Christian of a special sort—probably unbaptized, certainly concealing the fact much of the time, and perhaps offering pagan sacrifice sometimes—than that he was not a Christian at all, or that he was merely sympathetic to Christianity.¹¹ For the purposes of the present argument, however, it is sufficient to note two things. First, Constantine's claim about his father's religion has some support. Second, that claim works against any theory that Constantine himself was a convert to Christianity.

My second argument arises from Constantine's statements about his christianizing mission. In VC 2.24–42 Eusebius quotes Constantine's letter

⁸Cf. Gelasius of Cyzicus *HE* 1.1–4, edited by G. Loeschke (and M. Heinemann) in *GCS* (Leipzig 1918). The subject of Gelasius of Caesarea was controversial until the publication of Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen," "Charakter," and "Die Quellen der Historia Ecclesiastica des Gelasius von Cyzicus . . .," *Byzantinoslavica* 27 (1966) 104–130.

⁹For Gelasius' use of the VC cf. Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen" 38–43; "Charakter" 375, 378–380.

¹⁰For Cyril cf. W. Smith and H. Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography* 1 (London 1887) 760–763.

¹¹Some might simply regard him as an apostate. I think that a chronically repeating apostate is not very well described as an apostate, and that his beliefs are not to be discovered by simple tests. In the case of Constantius "apostate," without qualification, would be a very misleading description.

to the eastern provincials after the final victory over Licinius in 324. The emperor began by arguing against the persecution and went on to order the release of the victims and the restoration of confiscated property to Christians and churches. In chapters 28–29 he described how God ended the persecution, using Constantine as his instrument:¹²

τὴν ἐμὴν ὑπηρεσίαν πρὸς τὴν ἐαυτοῦ βούλησιν ἐπιτηδεῖαν ἐζήτησέν τε καὶ ἔκρινεν, ὅς ἀπὸ τῆς πρὸς Βρεττανούς ἐκείνης θαλάσσης ἀρξάμενος καὶ τῶν μερῶν, ἔνθα δύεσθαι τὸν ἥλιον ἀνάγκη τιμὴ τέτακται κρείττονι, ἀπωθούμενος καὶ διασκεδαννύς τὰ κατέχοντα πάντα δεινὰ, ἢν' ἅμα μὲν ἀνακαλοῖτο τὸ ἀνθρώπειον γένος τὴν περὶ τὸν σεμνότατον νόμον θεραπείαν τῇ παρ' ἐμοῦ παιδευόμενον ὑπουργίᾳ, ἅμα δὲ ἡ μακαριστὴ πίστις αὖξοιτο ὑπὸ χειραγωγῷ τῷ κρείττονι (οὐδέποτε γάρ ἂν ἀγνώμων περὶ τὴν ὀφειλομένην γενοίμην χάριν. ταύτην ἀρίστην διακονίαν, τοῦτο κεχαρισμένον ἐμαυτῷ δῶρον πιστεύσας), μέχρι καὶ τῶν ἐξῶν πρόειμι χωρίων, ἃ βαρυτέrais κατεχόμενα συμφοραῖς μείζονα καὶ τὴν παρ' ἡμῶν θεραπείαν ἐπεβοᾶτο.¹³

According to this the ending of the persecution was begun in or near Britain, and the process was completed when Constantine had gained control of the east. Constantine repeated his reference to a beginning of his mission at the ocean in his letter to Sapor, which Eusebius quotes at VC 4.9. The date for this beginning is derived from Lactantius' statement in *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 24.9: *suscepto imperio, Constantinus Augustus nihil egit prius quam christianos cultui ac Deo suo reddere*. This implies legislation in Britain in 306,¹⁴ and that is in accord with Constantine's statement. Since agreement of these two sources would be against the theory of a conversion in 312, Constantine's other times in Britain should be considered. Barnes lists these as 306; 307; ?310, late; ?313 (NE 69–71). If this is right, Constantine dated the beginning of his christianizing mission either to a period before the supposed conversion by miracle or to a period after both the miracle and the "edict of Milan." The 313 date is thus ruled out and the 307

¹²It is this very passage whose authenticity is proven by the London Papyrus 878. Cf. A. H. M. Jones, "Notes on the Genuineness of the Constantinian Documents in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*," *JEH* 5 (1954) 196–200. The text below is that of F. Winkelmann, *Eusebius: Werke* 1.1 (Berlin 1975, GCS) 60.

¹³Baynes translated the important parts of this passage as follows (17): "God sought my service and judged that service fitted to achieve His purpose. Starting from Britain God had scattered the evil powers that mankind might be recalled to true religion instructed through my agency, and that the blessed faith might spread under His guiding hand. And from the West, believing that this gift had been entrusted to myself, I have come to the East which was in sorer need of my aid. At the same time I am absolutely persuaded that I owe my whole life, my every breath, and in a word my most secret thoughts to the supreme God." This translation is misleading because in the Greek the person who scattered the evil powers is the same as the person who came to the East, namely, Constantine himself. By making "God" the subject of "had scattered" Baynes obscured the fact that Constantine declared that he had been conscious of his mission from the beginning.

¹⁴For a discussion of Lactantius' statement see Barnes (above, n. 7) 44–46.

and 310 dates have no support. The 306 date should therefore be accepted. It is supported by the concluding chapters (22–26) of Constantine's *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints*. There he refers to all of his efforts, including the war against Maxentius, to rid the empire of persecution, and in the last chapter he says that all of those successes were achieved in faithful and prayerful service to God.¹⁵

The third argument concerns Constantine's rather curious lies about his age. In 324, in his second letter to the eastern provincials, he described himself as just a child when the Great Persecution began.¹⁶ He was in fact about thirty in 303 (cf. Barnes, *NE* 39–42). The misrepresentation must have been deliberate and of long standing, for the panegyrists of 307, 310, and 321 greatly understate his age.¹⁷ Furthermore, Eusebius' work on this is most peculiar. Although he was willing to give an elaborate, and presumably correct, statement of Constantine's age at death (VC 1.8 and 4.53), he had earlier given Constantine's age in 301/2 as about fourteen (apparently)¹⁸ instead of about twenty-eight, and perhaps about sixteen in 303.¹⁹ Eusebius thus contradicts himself and Constantine. It is Constantine who is at the bottom of all this. It is quite futile to suggest that he did it in an effort to dissociate himself from the persecutors because he was embarrassed at having done nothing to protect or defend the Christians in 303 (cf. Barnes, *NE* 40–41). First, we do not know what he did in 303. If he argued against persecution, which was all that he could have done to protect Christians, he lost the argument. Second, in 324 his own testimony and his whole career were more than sufficient to dissociate him from the persecutors. Why should he have gone to the trouble of a public pretence, beginning as early as 307, which must often have produced laughter?

A very common reason for lying about one's age is to dissociate oneself from one's past. In Constantine's case it seems that some religious consideration was involved, because his concern was with the question of his age during the Persecution. Now, if he had been converted in 312 he could have dissociated himself from the persecutors simply by saying that he had seen the light, become a Christian, and worked to end the persecution. If he had become a Christian during the years 306–312 the same justification would

¹⁵Cf. also the part of his speech to the bishops at the Council of Nicaea quoted in Gelasius of Cyzicus *HE* 2.7.35–38. I hope to provide a full discussion of Constantine's explanation of his career in a later paper. However, I should point out here that the fact that Maxentius was not a persecutor does not alter the likelihood that an attempt by Constantine to christianize the empire would involve war against him.

¹⁶Cf. Eusebius VC 2.50–51: τότε κομιδῇ παῖς ἔτι ὑπάρχων.

¹⁷Barnes, *NE* 40. Cf. Jones (above, n. 12) 196.

¹⁸VC 1.19 ἤδη δ' ἐκ τοῦ παιδὸς ἐπὶ τὸν νεανίαν διαβάς.

¹⁹VC 1.12 παῖς ἄρτι νέος ἀπαλὸς ὥραιος τ' ἀνθρώπῳ ἰούλῳ. Gelasius of Caesarea took this statement from Eusebius (cf. Winkelman, "Charakter" 348–349), but rejected Eusebius' presentation of a conversion. Therefore the rejection must have been quite deliberate.

have been available. He needed only to describe, as converts enjoy doing, his conversion. In 312 and thereafter, when he was trying to deal with the Donatists, it would have been very useful to be able to point to a conversion at any point after his departure from the court of Galerius in 306. He could have urged them not to worry about the lapsed, because their deliverer had himself only recently been a pagan, and an associate of the persecutors. The real job, he might have argued, was to make more converts like himself, and not waste time on a discussion which he himself had now rendered pointless. Such words would have come easily. They were never spoken. It is only if he had been a Christian during the persecution that he would have wanted to lie about his age. The problem of dealing with the lapsed arose as soon as toleration was proclaimed by Constantine and Maxentius in 306 (cf. Barnes, *CE* 28, 36). At any time after that anyone could have raised embarrassing questions about a Christian's escape from the courts of Diocletian and Galerius.

I think that Constantine survived the persecution by means which rigorist Christians, notably the Donatists, would have found unsatisfactory. I doubt, however, that he was ashamed of what he (presumably) did. Although he always honoured the martyrs, his own response to the persecution was to put a stop to it. He regarded it as an outrageous civil war against the Christian population and he claimed that God had assigned him the task of christianizing the empire.²⁰ In his circumstances he probably did not feel that he needed penitential discipline, and he certainly would not have thought it safe or sensible to make a spectacle of himself. The thing to do was avoid the subject. His solution was to declare "I was just a child at the time." In Britain and Gaul he got away with this, because Constantius had minimized the effects of the persecution and there would have been little or no discussion of what to do about the lapsed. When the victory over Maxentius brought the Donatists under his rule, he probably hoped that the storm in North Africa would soon blow over, and that he could quietly go back to acting his age.²¹ The Donatists defeated and frustrated him. He did not want to tell them that his own behaviour had been similar to that which they ascribed to their hated opponents. As the horrible affair dragged on and on, he found himself stuck with a chronological problem and a need for reticence about a part of his life which has caused a great deal of trouble for scholars.²² The performance of Eusebius is interesting. The correct state-

²⁰Cf. Eusebius VC 2.49; 2.28; 4.9.

²¹If Constantine became a Christian in late October of 312, the speed with which he embroiled himself in the Donatist controversy is most remarkable.

²²Lactantius' reticence about the religion of Constantius may also have been deliberate. If he had thought that Constantius had been, as I have suggested, a crypto-Christian, he would not have wished, after the terrible strains of the Great Persecution and during the struggle with the Donatists, to have set up such an imperial example against that of the martyrs.

ment of Constantine's age at death suggests that he was not Constantine's accomplice in this matter, and yet it seems that he should not have mistaken a man of thirty, in 301/2, for a youth of fourteen. Carelessness and ignorance may have contributed to the production of this discrepancy. Eusebius was quite ignorant about Licinius until after the War of Cibalae in 316/7,²³ and his apparent ignorance of Constantine's legislation of 306 seems to show that he never was very well-informed about the early career of Constantine. Nevertheless, the temporary loss of a quarter of Constantine's life by a scholar with a strong interest in chronology is disconcerting, and worth remembering.

The fourth argument is the most aggressive. Eusebius was not at all sure that Constantine had been converted by the miracle in 312. In VC 1.27, just before the famous chapter on the miracle, he represents Constantine as having decided to worship his father's God alone before the miracle takes place, and in 1.32 he represents him as having learned the identity of that God after the miracle and after he has given orders for the production of the *labarum*. On this account the effect of the miracle is not conversion, but action and knowledge. There is another oddity in ch. 32, where he represents Constantine as ignorant of the identity of Constantius' god but as finding that the claims of his Christian advisors confirm his own opinion as to that god's identity. This is self-contradictory.

Now, the claim that until Constantine questioned the Christians with him he did not know the identity of his father's God must involve the view that Constantine was an ignoramus or moron. The new Moses—the man who has seen the Persecution, lived in his father's churchy household, inherited and kept his father's Christian associates—does not know who his father's god is. On Eusebius' account in chapters 20 ff., Christ Himself did not manage to teach Constantine who He was. This ridiculous presentation is the Eusebian contribution to a story which originated with Constantine. That contribution may now be provisionally rejected, pending further argument. It is clear that Eusebius himself did not accept it in the way that modern scholars do, for if he had been sure that Constantine had been converted by that miracle he would have said so plainly, fully, and triumphantly. In fact he did not say it at all; neither did Constantine or any other fourth-century source.

It is easier to accept Eusebius' story of Constantine's conversion if one discards what he says about the religion of Constantius, for if Constantius were as Christian as Eusebius says and if Constantine saw him much before

²³For recent discussions of the successive editions of his *Ecclesiastical History* cf. R. M. Grant, *Eusebius as a Church Historian* (Oxford 1980) 1–21; T. D. Barnes, "The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*," *GRBS* 21 (1980) 192–201, esp. 198. I think that for some time after 313 Eusebius really did think that Licinius was a champion of the Church, and that his purge of Maximinus' associates was intended as a purge of persecutors.

his death, then some parts of the conversion story are impossible. However, since Eusebius himself did not reject what he says about the religion of Constantius, it is uncritical for us to reject it, in order to make ourselves more comfortable with the conversion story, without asking questions about his confusion. For example, it has long been thought that Eusebius was wrong in saying (in VC 1.21) that Constantine reached his father in 306 only when Constantius lay dying. The statements of the *Anonymus Valesii* and of the panegyrist of 310 to the effect that he reached Constantius at Boulogne,²⁴ before they proceeded together to Britain, are preferred by modern scholars. So far as I know, however, it is not observed that Eusebius' statement suits his conversion story, because it eliminates time spent with the Christian Constantius. This is worthy of note.

The rejection, for the moment, of the conversion element leaves Constantine's own story, which is of the miracle by which God showed him how to make the *labarum*. In VC 1.28 Eusebius gives two reasons for believing the story. The first is that the *victorious* emperor himself swore that it was true; the second is that later events confirmed the truth of it. What was confirmed by later events, as Constantine won victory after victory, was the divine origin of the *labarum*, not a story of a conversion which could have been confirmed only by the testimony of the convert.²⁵ It is worth noting that in VC 2.7–9 Eusebius again refers to the occasion on which Constantine told him this story. The context is Constantine's victories over Licinius, and the subject of Constantine's speech is the *labarum*. Of course, it is true that this miracle, as Constantine saw it, did have an effect on his faith, as Eusebius knew. In VC 2.55 Constantine is quoted as saying that God's many demonstrations of His power confirmed Constantine's faith. "Confirmed," he says, not "produced."²⁶

That Eusebius somehow assumed a conversion of which he knew nothing is also indicated by his problems with both the chronology and the geography. In the famous ch. 44 of *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* Lactantius had placed Constantine near Rome, just before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, when he had his dream and ordered his soldiers to paint on their shields a monogram resembling a sign seen in the sky and signifying Christ. Now, it is not usually mentioned in discussions of the passages in Eusebius and Lactantius, but Gelasius of Caesarea said that Constantine saw something real in the sky, that he saw it near Rome, before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and that immediately after he saw it he had the *labarum* made.²⁷ As

²⁴Cf. Origo 4 (= *Anonymus Valesii* or *Excerpta Valesiana*) and *Pan. Lat.* 6(7).7,1 ff., and, for a recent account based on them, Barnes, *CE* 27.

²⁵Constantine might have been converted by the miracle and defeated by Maxentius.

²⁶τῇ ἐμῇ πίστιν βεβαιότεραν εἰργάσω.

²⁷Cf. Gelasius of Cyzicus *HE* 1.3–7, which is agreed by everyone, on the basis of the citation of "Gelasios" in 1.8, to have been copied from the work of Gelasius of Caesarea. For a discussion of the passage cf. F. Scheidweiler, "Die Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia," *ByzZeit* 46 (1953) 277–301, at 293–296.

has often been remarked, Eusebius had no idea where or when the *labarum* had been made; he says only that it was "somewhere" before the campaign began. His location of Constantine at the time of the celestial phenomenon has every appearance of being based on a deduction rather than on factual knowledge, and should not be preferred to the circumstantial account of Gelasius without argument.²⁸ A misleading deduction by Eusebius was quite possible. If he had assumed, when he saw Constantine in 301/2, that the latter was a pagan he would have needed some sort of change in order to produce the Christian of 312. In those circumstances he would have been prone to take the great experience of 312 as a first Christian experience.

It is easily seen that the accounts of Lactantius and Gelasius do not present difficulties in themselves and do not conflict with each other. Indeed they can be combined, on the supposition, confirmed by the account of Eusebius, that Constantine dreamed after he saw the phenomenon. In addition to that, they support each other, for the following reason. Constantine must have ordered the making of the *labarum* immediately after the appearance of the phenomenon, for it was intended to have an effect on his army. That effect would have been lost by a delay between the occurrence of the phenomenon and Constantine's orders. Therefore Lactantius' testimony confirms the independent testimony of Gelasius as to the time and place where Constantine saw the phenomenon, and Eusebius has no facts to support his rival (and very feeble) claim, which should be rejected. The rejection of his claim about the time and place of these events is another reason for rejecting the conversion element in his account, since Constantine could not have fought this whole campaign as a Christian and have been converted to Christianity by a miracle during the campaign.

Since the use of Gelasius to support the evidence of Lactantius against that of Eusebius is bound to raise questions, it may be helpful if some discussion is provided here of Gelasius and his evidence. First, it is clear that his account is independent of Eusebius, whose account he knew and rejected, because he has so much detail on the circumstances near Rome. It is also independent of Lactantius, whose story is about a dream and an order to paint the monogram on the shields, and has nothing about the *labarum*. Second, on this matter the credit of Gelasius is not affected by arguments which have been advanced concerning his work in general. Winkelman has argued that he was a person of mediocre abilities who introduced the biases of the orthodox of the age of Theodosius into an account of earlier events, notably by whitewashing Constantine and blackening the Arians (Winkelman, "Charakter" 381–385). Now, if Gelasius' aim was to whitewash Constantine, he would have wanted to get the conversion story into the *labarum* story, in order to show Constantine as, to use Rufinus' words,

²⁸It is interesting that Eusebius says that the sign in the sky was seen about noon. That detail is not found in Gelasius.

caelitus invitatus ad fidem.²⁹ If, on the other hand, Gelasius was more reliable than Winkermann thought, his account of the events is reasonably deserving of credit.³⁰ Thus, whatever view we take of him does not undermine his testimony on this point. Third, as regards this question there is no simple escape by preferring the VC on the ground that it is earlier than Gelasius, because one is immediately faced by Lactantius. Thus, the solution to the problem of choosing between Eusebius and Lactantius is obtained by reducing the context from the conversion to the *labarum*. In the new context Lactantius obtains support from Gelasius, and the effect is decisive.

However, that problem was only part of the subject. This is the appropriate place to deal with other contemporary evidence which has been thought relevant to a conversion. In the case of Constantine, as of Constantius, there are arguments from the pagan panegyrics—for example, the alleged vision of Apollo in 310.³¹ Each of these arguments is also a *non sequitur*, neutralized simply by saying that Constantine was willing to keep the pagans happy for the time being. Furthermore, it must be noted that, except for a few minor literary effects, the gods have disappeared from Panegyric 5(8) of 311, to be replaced by a *divina mens*.³² This further weakens the arguments for a 312 conversion. The beginning of Optatus, Appendix 5, was translated by Baynes (13) as follows:

The incomprehensible kindness of our God by no means allows the state of man to stray for too long a time in the darkness, nor does it suffer the odious wills of some so to prevail as not to grant men a new opportunity for conversion to the truth (*iustitiam*) by opening up before them through its most glorious light a path to salvation. Of this indeed I am assured by many examples and I can illustrate the same truth from my own case. For at the first there were in me things which appeared far removed from the truth (*iustitia carere*) and I did not think that there was any heavenly power which could see into the secrets of my heart. What fortune ought

²⁹Cf. Rufinus *HE* 9.9.1–3. For Gelasius' use of Eusebius' VC cf. above, n. 9. The way to exalt the religious character of Constantine was to minimize paternal (and maternal?) influence and to use the conversion story as proof that God had chosen him.

³⁰Winkermann's objection to Gelasius' presentation of Constantius as a Christian made an important contribution to his unfavourable judgment of Gelasius. This objection resulted from acceptance of the conversion theory of Eusebius, who also (be it noted) presented Constantius as a Christian. In spite of the very high value of Winkermann's work I do not think that the last word has been said on the subject of Gelasius. I note that it appears from Philostorgius *HE* 1.6 that an Arian historian also placed Constantine near Rome at the time of the phenomenon.

³¹For a careful discussion of this subject cf. B. Saylor Rodgers, "Constantine's Pagan Vision," *Byzantion* 50 (1980) 259–278. She argues (successfully, I think) that the identification suggested is that of Constantine and Augustus, and that this increases the likelihood that the "vision" was invented by the panegyrist, rather than by Constantine. Earlier arguments about this "pagan vision" suffered from the identification of the London Papyrus 878 (see above, n. 12) because Constantine's letter in which he blamed Apollo's oracle for starting the Great Persecution was shown to be authentic.

³²I am indebted to Professor Rodgers for this point.

these things which I mentioned to have brought upon me?—surely one overflowing with every evil. But Almighty God, Who sitteth in the watch-tower of Heaven, has bestowed upon me that which I did not deserve. Truly, most holy bishops of the Saviour Christ, at this time I can neither describe nor number these gifts which of His heavenly benevolence He has granted to me, his servant (*famulum suum*).

Since the translation of *iustitia* by “truth” is rather disquieting, the Latin text should be quoted:³³

Constantinus Augustus episcopis catholicis carissimis fratribus salutem! aeterna et religiosa incomprehensibilis pietas dei nostri nequaquam permittit humanam condicionem diutius in tenebris oberrare neque patitur exosas quorundam voluntates usque in tantum pervalere, ut non suis praeclarissimis luminibus denuo pandens iter salutare eas det ad regulam iustitiae converti. habeo quippe cognitum multis exemplis, haec eadem ex me ipso metior. fuerunt enim in me primitus, quae iustitia carere videbantur, nec ulla putabam videre supernam potentiam quae intra secreta pectoris mei gererem. equidem haec, ut dixi, quam fortunam debuerunt sortiri? scilicet omnibus malis redundantem. sed deus omnipotens in caeli specula residens tribuit, quod non merebar: certe iam neque dici neque enumerari possunt ea, quae caelesti sua in me famulum suum benivolentia concessit.

It appears that “truth” is used to translate not only *iustitia* but also the phrase *regulam iustitiae*, for which it is clearly inappropriate. If Constantine had been thinking of a “rule of truth,” surely he would have written *regula veritatis*, an expression used by the bishops writing to Pope Silvester at the same time, after the Council of Arles in 314 (cf. Optatus, Appendix 4). Constantine’s point is that God gives men the light which they need in order to abandon wickedness (which he expresses with the words *exosas voluntates*) and be converted to righteousness, or the rule of righteousness. Constantine’s conveys the idea of “truth” here not by *iustitia*, but by *suis praeclarissimis luminibus*. His wish is not simply to have the Donatists see the light; it is to have them change their behaviour.³⁴ It also appears that instead of translating *nec ulla putabam videre supernam potentiam, quae intra secreta pectoris mei gererem* (lines 7–8) as “and I did not believe that the heavenly power could see any of the secrets of my heart,” Baynes translated as if the Latin were *nec ullam putabam*. That error helped the conversion case a little more, by suggesting that Constantine was now contemplating a new god. Thus, Baynes’ translation is wrong and misleading. Constantine is not contemplating pagans suddenly seeing the light. He is

³³The text is that of K. Ziwsa in *CSEL* 26 (Vienna 1893) 208.

³⁴The passage had been rendered correctly by O. R. Vassall-Phillips, *The Works of St. Optatus* (London 1917) 395. Cf. the translation in P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church* 1 (London 1966) 59. I apologize to many readers for this laborious criticism of a part of Baynes’ work. Sometimes, it seems, an error by Baynes must be totally destroyed before an alternative can be considered. I doubt that he would have approved of this situation.

rejoicing that God shows to such delinquents as the Donatists the road to righteousness, and he implies that he himself, by the removal of things *quae iustitia carere videbantur*, has been made better by God. Everybody involved here is a Christian, and there is no reference to a conversion.³⁵ If anything is demonstrated by this passage, and by the rest of the letter, it is that soon after his alleged conversion Constantine could preach a short sermon, which would have been much improved by a full account of his own conversion by a miracle, without reference to either conversion or miracle.³⁶

It should be noted that Baynes himself does not seem to have misunderstood the passage, for in his comments on it he writes only in terms of Catholic truth and Donatist heresy. The trouble is that some scholars have been misled by his translation into thinking that Constantine here referred to his own conversion. I hope that correction of the translation will stop the spread of this error.

A less widespread misconception is that most clearly reflected by Barnes when he says that in chapter 11 of his *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints* Constantine “alludes to his own conversion in the prime of life.”³⁷ The passage is as follows:³⁸

ἡϋξάμην δ' ἂν πάλαι τήνδε μοι τήν ἀποκάλυψιν δεδωρήσθαι, εἴ ποῦ μακάριος ὁ ἐκ νέων συσταθείς καί τῇ γνώσει τῶν θείων καί τῷ τῆς ἀρετῆς κάλλει κατευφρανθείς. καί ταῦτα μέν ἡμῖν μετρίως εἰρήσθω· εἰ γάρ καί μὴ ἀπὸ πρώτης τῆς ἡλικίας μὴδ' ἐκ σπαργάνων, ὡς φασίν, οἱ χρηστοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων σοφοὶ γίνονται, ἀλλ' ὅμως ἀγαπητόν, εἰ καὶ ἐν τῇ τῆς ἀκμῆς ἡλικίᾳ τὴν σοφίαν εὐτυχῶσιν.

Barnes argues that εἴ ποῦ “misrepresents the train of thought” which would be properly rendered by *siquidem* in a causal sense, and translates the hypothetical original version with “I wish that this revelation had been vouchsafed to me long ago, since happy is he who from childhood has rejoiced in the knowledge of things divine and the beauty of virtue.”³⁹ This argument is

³⁵Kraft (183–186) did not see any reference to a conversion of Constantine in this passage. Dörries did not include discussion of a conversion in his commentary on the document (29–33), but he cited (246–247) the document as the most important evidence coming from Constantine regarding his conversion, and he maintained his view in his review of Kraft’s book in *ByzZ* 49 (1956) 130. Unfortunately for Dörries’ argument it is clear from p. 28 of his book that he, like Baynes, had translated Optatus 5 as if the text had read *nec ullam putabam*. Kraft (184) translated the text correctly.

³⁶There are several echoes of this letter (as of the *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints*) in Constantine’s speech to the bishops at the Council of Nicaea as quoted by Gelasius of Cyzicus in his *HE* 2.7.1–41. Cf. especially 6–9, which seems to me both important and neglected. I hope to discuss Constantine’s religious development in a later paper.

³⁷Cf. Barnes, *CE* 75 and 275; Barnes, “Conversion” 387–391. Cf. also below, n. 43.

³⁸The text is that of Ivar Heikel, *Eusebius: Werke* 1 (Leipzig 1902, GCS 7) 165–166.

³⁹In his article “Emperor and Bishops, A.D. 324–344: Some Problems,” *AJAH* 3 (1978) 53–75, at 64, n. 75, Barnes claimed that Eusebius and Constantine used the word μακάριος

circular, because in order to accept the claim about a *siquidem* we must first assume that the passage refers to Constantine's conversion, which is what the argument is supposed to prove. Furthermore, the personal reference in *ἡδέα μὲν δ' ἂν πάλαι τήνδε μοι τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν δεδωρῆσθαι* is not to a revelation which has been granted to Constantine, but rather to the idea, which he momentarily entertains, that the happy man is he who has had the faith from childhood. The *τήνδε* looks forward to the *εἰ που* clause.

The passage must be read in context. Constantine had been saying that the reason that success in christianizing the empire is possible is that pagans can be converted. With the big word *ἀποκάλυψιν* he ironically raises the possibility, soft-pedalled by *εἰ που*, that the only way to produce Christians is to raise them as such from childhood, and promptly dismisses it with *καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἡμῖν μετρίως εἰρήσθω*.⁴⁰ The whole idea seemed as funny to him as it would have to Jesus and others. He then prefers, in the *εἰ που* clause, the view that conversions are to be welcomed, and goes on with the subject of converting the pagans, an effort for which God's help is, of course, all-important. Thus, the Greek text makes perfectly good sense so long as we do not insist on finding "the conversion of Constantine" in it. We may also note that in the fourth century, when even second- or third-generation Christians were not baptized until they were about thirty years old,⁴¹ the possibility being raised by Constantine well deserved the "if (as is unlikely)" introduction, and the prompt dismissal.⁴² So far as I know, there is no other argument from contemporary texts. I conclude that there is no reliable contemporary evidence for a conversion of Constantine.

There is no later evidence for it either. It is interesting to look at later sources relevant to the problem in the light of the foregoing arguments. In his *Caesares* 336 Julian the Apostate said that Constantine had gone to Jesus

only of the dead, never of the living. If that is correct, it is rather awkward for Barnes' later argument, because Constantine would have to be saying that only those raised in the faith get to heaven. Such a statement could not have been welcome to those whom he was trying to convert or those who had been converted in the prime of life or those trying to convert them.

⁴⁰I take *μετρίως* as meaning "adequately in the circumstances," and would translate "well, so much for that."

⁴¹Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea are notable examples. I am indebted to Fr Paul J. Fedwick for this point.

⁴²Kraft (271–272) did not note any reference to a conversion in this passage, but his discussion was very brief, because he did not think that the speech in its present form was written by Constantine. In his discussion of the speech Dörries (131) seems to have taken *ἀποκάλυψιν* to refer to Constantine's recognition that God's help made conversion of the pagans possible. However, at 247 he cites the passage as evidence of a conversion of Constantine, and what he says at 131 should be read in the light of that. Barnes must not have remembered Dörries 247, for it is not cited in *CE* 405, n. 21, where he expresses surprise that historians "have abstained from exploiting the evidence of the speech." I do not know how the error regarding this passage originated. Perhaps the germ of it is to be found in I. Heikel's "Kritische Beiträge zu den Constantin-Schriften des Eusebius," *Texte und Untersuchungen* 36.4 (Leipzig 1911) 15–16.

to get forgiveness for the murders of Crispus and Fausta, i.e., in 326.⁴³ Later, some Arian or Arians, probably while engaged in defensive controversy during the reign of Theodosius,⁴⁴ fabricated a story to the effect that after the Council of Nicaea several Arian priests, including Eusebius and Theognis, had acquiesced in the Nicene formula in 325, not because they believed it, but through fear lest Constantine, who had only recently become a Christian, should become annoyed by arguments, go back to paganism, and start persecuting the Church (Sozomen *HE* 3.19). This worthless material was eventually to fool Sozomen, and it may have affected Socrates too.⁴⁵

Except for the Arians just mentioned the Christians were doing quite well without the conversion. Gelasius of Caesarea assumed that Constantine fought the whole campaign against Maxentius as a Christian. His account of the *labarum* has already been discussed. He had nothing to say about the campaign in the north of Italy. He did, however, say that Maxentius was prompted to fight because of protests in the city over a food shortage. He also assumed that there had been a battle near the Milvian Bridge, although his main concern regarding that event was the collapse under Maxentius of a trick bridge, on to which he had hoped to lure Constantine. As has already been noted, there is no reference to a conversion.

By 402 Rufinus had produced a garbled conversion story. His account exhibits the following features.⁴⁶ Constantine is practically a Christian before the campaign⁴⁷ and he prays for God's help in the fight to come. Then he sees in a dream a fiery cross in the eastern sky, and hears some angels standing by him say "Constantine, conquer by this." The vision leads to the production of the *labarum*. By this dream Constantine is *caelitus invitatus ad fidem*, like St Paul, but with the difference that St Paul's invitation had come before he became a Christian, Constantine's after he already was a Christian. Maxentius perishes alone at the Milvian Bridge before a battle can take place, so that the pious Constantine is spared the necessity of fighting a civil war. The elaborate claim that Constantine did not fight a civil war

⁴³Libanius and other pagans assumed that Constantine had not started out as a Christian, but they placed any supposed conversion incredibly late, and their views are disregarded. Cf. Lane Fox 626–627, and n. 58, for the references.

⁴⁴Sozomen *HE* 7.9; 12; 13; 14; 17; 8.8. Cf. Rufinus *HE* 10.5 *ad fin.* The Arians had to defend their predecessors who were accused of having lied when they subscribed the Nicene Creed, and they could do so only by inventing a good reason for the (apparent) falsehood.

⁴⁵See below 435 f. I have omitted discussion of Philostorgius *HE* 1.6 because the reference, of what Philostorgius said about Constantine in 312, to a conversion of Constantine was made only by Photius.

⁴⁶Mommsen's text of Rufinus *HE* 9.8–9 is found at *Eusebius: Werke*, ed. E. Schwarz 2 (Leipzig 1908) 827, 829.

⁴⁷Rufinus says: *erat quidem iam tunc Christianae religionis fautor verique dei venerator, nondum tamen, ut est sollemne nostris initiari, signum dominicae passionis acceperat.*

seems to be Rufinus' own invention.⁴⁸ The delightful claim that God invited Constantine to become a Christian when Constantine already was one indicates the use of two different sources. Rufinus was using Gelasius (cf. Winkelmann, "Untersuchungen" 103–108), who had represented Constantine as a Christian before the "miracle" and/or the dream. Gelasius had used Eusebius' VC. Did Rufinus also have the VC? J. Vogt argued that the passage now being discussed showed that he did.⁴⁹ Scheidweiler disagreed, arguing that if Rufinus had had the VC he would have modelled his account on that rather than on Gelasius (above, note 27, 295, n. 2). Vogt was right, for the dream and *labarum* combination occurs nowhere but in the VC, and the placement of the story before the campaign must come from the VC. What happened here was that Rufinus could not decide between his two sources. He solved his problem by supposing that God had been a little late with the famous invitation to Constantine. This proves that Rufinus had no evidence for a conversion other than Eusebius, and that in spite of Eusebius' authority he would not reject the tradition which did not have a conversion.

In his *Contra Symmachum* 1.467–488 (of A.D. 402–403) Prudentius described Constantine simply as a Christian leader attacking Maxentius, without reference to any conversion. It is clear that Prudentius accepted both the *labarum* story, from whatever source, and the story of the shields as found in Lactantius.⁵⁰

It is in the first three chapters of Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History*, a century after Eusebius' *Life*, that the modern view of the events of 312 makes its first appearance. Socrates confidently⁵¹ assumed the truth of the conversion element in Eusebius' account. He may have wished, as Sozomen did, to answer

⁴⁸Perhaps the many pagan usurpations of the fourth century had reduced some Christians' appetite for religious wars.

⁴⁹Cf. J. Vogt, "Berichte über Kreuzeserscheinungen aus dem 4. Jahrhundert n. Chr.," *Mélanges Grégoire, Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves* 9 (1949) 593–606, at 593–595.

⁵⁰Scholars make their desperate efforts to conflate these two stories (cf. recently Lane Fox 613–614) because there could have been only one conversion. Although both stories mention the heavenly sign, they are obviously neither the same story nor different stories of the same event (cf. Baynes 60). The famous story in ch. 44 of *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* refers back, in the words *caeleste signum*, to the *labarum* miracle. (H. Schrörs, *Konstantins des Grossen Kreuzerscheinung* [Bonn 1913] 14, cites A. Knöpfler, "Konstantins Kreuzesvision," *Historisch-politische Blätter* 141 [1908] 183–199 for this point.) When Eusebius' conversion and chronology are discarded, it is easily seen that the relationship between the accounts of Constantine and Lactantius is that they overlap. The events were (1) the celestial phenomenon (in Eus. and referred to by Lact.); (2) the dream (Eus. and Lact.); (3) Constantine's orders, for the making of the *labarum* (Eus.) and for the marking of the shields (Lact.). Since Prudentius has the *labarum*, but not the conversion, his information regarding the *labarum* presumably did not come from Eusebius' VC.

⁵¹I distinguish between the confusion and lack of interest in the conversion element, which is evident in Eusebius and Rufinus, and the confidence of Socrates, which is shared by modern scholars.

Julian, and he may have seen that the conversion story in the *VC* supplied a refutation of the Arian fabrication mentioned above.⁵² In any case, Socrates was faithful to the account in the *VC*, so that in his re-telling of the story the result of the miracle remained the *labarum*. It is also worth noting that although his starting-point is the conversion of Constantine, he does say that Constantius had abandoned paganism.

Sozomen had Eusebius' story, Rufinus' garbling thereof, the Arian fabrication, and Socrates' confident assumption of a conversion. He wished to refute Julian's claim that Constantine had gone to Jesus in order to get forgiveness for the murders of Crispus and Fausta, and was sure that he could do so by adducing pro-Christian laws of Constantine and Crispus prior to 326. At the beginning of 1.3 he accepts Socrates' assumption of a conversion, and goes on to retail, briefly, the account of Rufinus, which had no celestial phenomenon, down to the production of the *labarum*. He then begins anew by referring to Eusebius' account of how Constantine had declared on oath that he and his army had seen a cross in the sky with the words "Conquer by this." At this point Sozomen contradicts Eusebius by saying that when the marvel appeared, Constantine did not know where he should lead his army. Three more contradictions follow as he continues with Eusebius' account. First, he says that after the appearance of Christ in Constantine's dream "there was no further need of an interpreter for the emperor had been clearly shown what he should think about God." Second, he says that Constantine was amazed by what the priests told him. Third, he says that it was only after listening to the priests that he had the *labarum* made. All of these contradictions were necessary in order to change the story of the *labarum* into a story of conversion. I consider Sozomen's distortions important, because they show that a fifth-century Church historian did not find Eusebius' story satisfactory as an account of a conversion.

It is interesting to observe Sozomen's peculiar procedure in telling the conversion story. He started with Rufinus. This was not the Greek Rufinus (= Gelasius), but rather the Latin Rufinus, who presented Constantine as having a vision rather than as seeing something in the sky, and as hearing the "conquer by this" from some angels. Since the Latin Rufinus was not very

⁵²I accept the argument of Scheidweiler (above, n. 27, 299–300) that Socrates read the *VC* only after he had written the first edition of his first two books, and that his discovery of the *VC* was a factor which prompted his re-writing of those two books. This argument of Scheidweiler's is confirmed by the work of Winkelmann, who showed (cf. "Untersuchungen" 103–108) that the Rufinus whom Socrates criticized in his *HE* 2.1 for having misdated the Council of Tyre and thereby having misled Socrates with regard to Athanasius was probably a work written in Greek, consisting of the *HE* of Gelasius of Caesarea followed by translation from Book 11 of Rufinus' *HE*, and going under the name of Rufinus.

helpful on the subject of the conversion, Sozomen abandoned him and started again with Eusebius. Now, before he did any of this he had probably been using the Greek Rufinus (= Gelasius), who was even less helpful than the Latin one. Sozomen's inability to find a conversion anywhere but in Eusebius is yet another indication that it was not to be found elsewhere. For many Christians the miracle-conversion-victory connection now made available without any troublesome doubts was very satisfying. For their opponents that connection could be made the basis for sceptical argument about a cynical, opportunistic Constantine, using the Church as the footstool of his throne. When *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* was discovered in 1678 the battle was well under way, and little attention was paid to the statement about Constantine's legislation in 306.

In the foregoing discussion I have tried to treat the evidence far more gently than Sozomen did. The paradoxical result of this conservative approach has been the disappearance of the conversion—the big story of the fourth century. This conclusion is itself certainly unsettling, and so, for many, must be the boldness of the approach which led to it. The distinction made above between the accepted testimony of Constantine and the rejected testimony of Eusebius is quite sharp. Furthermore, it is one thing to show that the struggle with the Donatists provides a motive for Constantine's lies about his age and for Lactantius' reticence about the religion of Constantius, and another thing to show that that motive did in fact operate. Similarly, it is one thing to agree that pagan assumptions of a conversion cannot be maintained, and another to be absolutely sure that they were completely without foundation. These are the reasons why, as I said earlier, I doubt that my argument can be conclusive. However, the question to be answered is not whether it can be rejected because it is not completely conclusive, but whether it provides a better explanation of the evidence than does the conversion theory. I hope that the evidence has been dealt with fairly.

Before concluding I wish to make a couple of points about the lack of evidence. Constantine never mentioned the alleged conversion. Even if he had made several obscure references to it, the mystery of why he said nothing would only be exchanged for the mystery of why he said so little. As long as it could be thought that documents quoted by Eusebius were not genuine it was not necessary to deal with Constantine the missionary preacher trying to convert the pagans while remaining silent about his best subject. However, the identification of the London Papyrus requires us to explain why the momentous event was not the central theme of his exhortations. It is not enough to warn against the dangers of arguments from silence, because too much is known about Constantine and his aims. The behaviour of Constantine the convert is in fact inexplicable. There is no support elsewhere for what Eusebius says in the *Life* about a conversion. I

think that scholars have always felt uncomfortable about the inadequacy of his evidence, and that this is why so many wish to refer the passage in Lactantius to the supposed conversion. Is it not better to admit the inadequacy?

I conclude with a brief mention of some of the advantages of abandoning Eusebius' idea. We can explain the silence of the fourth-century sources, which in fact harmonize quite well on this non-event. The miracle becomes much more the miracle as Constantine might have been expected to see it,⁵³ and Eusebius' difficulty over Constantine's location at the time is accounted for. The legislation of 306 finds a comfortable place. It is also, of course, very good to be able to explain why Constantine did not know that he had been converted. I find all this adequate compensation for the loss of the conversion story.

ERINDALE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
MISSISSAUGA, ONT. L5L 1C6

⁵³I take it that Constantine sincerely believed that God had sent a sign in the sky. Maybe he was right. For the purposes of the present argument it does not matter what we think of the thing in the sky, and I have cheerfully avoided discussion of theological, astronomical, and meteorological questions.