

# Eusebius of Caesarea

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This early church period is uncommonly rich in great teachers of the church, who happily united theological ability and practical piety, and who, by their development of the most important dogmas in conflict with mighty errors, earned the gratitude of posterity. They monopolized all the learning and eloquence of the declining Roman empire, and made it subservient to the cause of Christianity for the benefit of future generations.

They are justly called fathers of the church; they belong to Christendom without distinction of denominations; and they still, especially Athanasius and Chrysostom among the Greek fathers, and Augustine and Jerome among the Latin, by their writings and their example, hold powerful sway, though with different degrees of authority according to the views entertained by the various churches concerning the supremacy of the Bible and the value of ecclesiastical tradition.

We discuss here one of the most important Nicene and post-Nicene divines, EUSEBIUS of Caesarea, the “father of church history,” the Christian Herodotus.

He was born about the year 260 or 270, probably in Palestine, and was educated at Antioch, and afterwards at Caesarea in Palestine, under the influence of the works of Origen. He formed an intimate friendship with the learned presbyter Pamphilus, who had collected a considerable biblical and patristic library, and conducted a flourishing theological school which he had founded at Caesarea, till in 309 he died a martyr in the persecution under Diocletian. Eusebius taught for a long time in this school; and after the death of his preceptor and friend, he travelled to Tyre and to Egypt, and was an eye-witness of the cruel scenes of the last great persecution of the Christians. He was imprisoned as a confessor, but soon released.

Twenty years later, when Eusebius, presiding at the council at Tyre (335 or 336), took sides against

Athanasius, the bishop Potamon of Hieraclea, according to the account of Epiphanius, exclaimed in his face: “How dost thou, Eusebius, sit as judge of the innocent Athanasius? Who can bear it? Why! didst thou not sit with me in prison in the time of the tyrants? They plucked out my eye for my confession of the truth; thou camest forth unhurt; thou hast suffered nothing for thy confession; unscathed thou art here present. How didst thou escape from prison? On some other ground than because thou didst promise to do an unlawful thing [to sacrifice to idols]? or, perchance, didst thou actually do this?” But this insinuation of cowardice and infidelity to Christ arose probably from envy and party passion in a moment of excitement. With such a stain upon him, Eusebius would hardly have been entrusted by the ancient church with the episcopal staff.

About the year 315, or earlier, Eusebius was chosen bishop of Caesarea, where he labored till his death in 340. The patriarchate of Antioch, which was conferred upon him after the deposition of Eustathius in 331, he in honorable self-denial, and from preference for a more quiet literary life, declined.

He was drawn into the Arian controversies against his will, and played an eminent part at the council of Nicaea, where he held the post of honor at the right hand of the presiding emperor. In the perplexities of this movement he took middle ground, and endeavored to unite the opposite parties. This brought him, on the one hand, the peculiar favor of the emperor Constantine, but, on the other, from the leaders of the Nicene orthodoxy, the suspicion of a secret leaning to the Arian heresy. It is certain that, before the council of Nicæa, he sympathized with Arius; that in the council he proposed an orthodox but indefinite compromise-creed; that after the council he was not friendly with Athanasius and other defenders of orthodoxy; and that, in the synod of Tyre, which deposed Athanasius in 335, he took a leading part, and, according to Epiphanius, presided. In keeping with these facts is his silence respecting the Arian controversy (which broke out in 318) in an Ecclesiastical History which comes

down to 324, and was probably not completed till 326, when the council of Nicaea would have formed its most fitting close. He would rather close his history with the victory of Constantine over Licinius than with the Creed over which theological parties contended, and with which he himself was implicated. But, on the other hand, it is also a fact that he subscribed the Nicene Creed, though reluctantly, and reserving his own interpretation of the homoousion; that he publicly recommended it to the people of his diocese; and that he never formally rejected it.

The only satisfactory solution of this apparent inconsistency is to be found in his own indecision and leaning to a doctrinal latitudinarianism, not unfrequent in historians who become familiar with a vast variety of opinions in different ages and countries. On the important point of the homoousion he never came to a firm and final conviction. He wavered between the older Origenistic subordinationism and the Nicene orthodoxy. He asserted clearly and strongly with Origen the eternity of the Son, and so far was decidedly opposed to Arianism, which made Christ a creature in time; but he recoiled from the homoousion, because it seemed to him to go beyond the Scriptures, and hence he made no use of the term, either in his book against Marcellus, or in his discourses against Sabellius. Religious sentiment compelled him to acknowledge the full deity of Christ; fear of Sabellianism restrained him. He avoided the strictly orthodox formulas, and moved rather in the less definite terms of former times. Theological acumen he constitutionally lacked. He was, in fact, not a man of controversy, but of moderation and peace. He stood upon the border between the ante-Nicene theology and the Nicene. His doctrine shows the color of each by turns, and reflects the unsettled problem of the church in the first stage of the Arian controversy.

With his theological indecision is connected his weakness of character. He was an amiable and pliant court-theologian, and suffered himself to be blinded and carried away by the splendor of the first Christian emperor, his patron and friend. Constantine took him often into his counsels, invited him to his table, related to him his vision of the cross, showed him the famous labarum, listened standing to his occasional sermons, wrote him several letters, and entrusted to him the supervision of the copies of the Bible for the use of the churches in Constantinople.

At the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of this emperor's reign (336), Eusebius delivered a

panegyric decked with the most pompous hyperbole, and after his death, in literal obedience to the maxim: "De mortuis nihil nisi bonum," he glorified his virtues at the expense of veracity and with intentional omission of his faults. With all this, however, he had noble qualities of mind and heart, which in more quiet times would have been an ornament to any episcopal see. And it must be said, to his honor, that he never claimed the favor of the emperor for private ends.

The theological and literary value of Eusebius lies in the province of learning. He was an unwearied reader and collector, and probably surpassed all the other church fathers, hardly excepting even Origen and Jerome, in compass of knowledge and of acquaintance with Grecian literature both heathen and Christian; while in originality, vigor, sharpness, and copiousness of thought, he stands far below Origen, Athanasius, Basil, and the two Gregorys. His scholarship goes much further in breadth than in depth, and is not controlled and systematized by a philosophical mind or a critical judgment.

Of his works, the historical are by far the most celebrated and the most valuable; to wit, his Ecclesiastical History, his Chronicle, his Life of Constantine, and a tract on the Martyrs of Palestine in the Diocletian persecution.

The position of Eusebius, at the close of the period of persecution, and in the opening of the period of the imperial establishment of Christianity, and his employment of many ancient documents, some of which have since been lost, give these works a peculiar value.

He is temperate, upon the whole, impartial, and truth-loving—rare virtues in an age of intense excitement and polemical zeal like that in which he lived. The fact that he was the first to work this important field of theological study, and for many centuries remained a model in it, justly entitles him to his honorable distinction of Father of Church History.

Yet he is neither a critical student nor an elegant writer of history, but only a diligent and learned collector. His Ecclesiastical History, from the birth of Christ to the victory of Constantine over Licinius in 324, gives a colorless, defective, incoherent, fragmentary, yet interesting picture of the heroic youth of the church, and owes its incalculable value, not to the historic art of the author, but almost entirely to his copious and mostly literal extracts from foreign, and in some cases now extinct, sources.

As concerns the first three centuries, too, it stands alone; for the successors of Eusebius begin their history where he leaves off.

His Chronicle consists of an outline-sketch of universal history down to 325, arranged by ages and nations (borrowed largely from the Chronography of Julius Africanus), and an abstract of this universal chronicle in tabular form. The Greek original is lost, with the exception of unconnected fragments by Syncellus; but the second part, containing the chronological tables, was translated and continued by Jerome to 378, and remained for centuries the source of the synchronistic knowledge of history, and the basis of historical works in Christendom. Jerome also translated, with several corrections and additions, a useful antiquarian work of Eusebius, the so-called Onomasticon, a description of the places mentioned in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

In his Life, and still more in his Eulogy, of Constantine, Eusebius has almost entirely forgotten the dignity of the historian in the zeal of the panegyrist. Nevertheless, this work is the chief source of the history of the reign of his imperial friend.

Next in importance to his historical works are his apologetic; namely, his *Praeparatio evangelica*, and his *Demonstratio evangelica*. These were both written before 324, and are an arsenal of the apologetic material of the ancient church. The former proposes, in fifteen books, to give a documentary refutation of the heathen religious from Greek writings.

The latter gives, in twenty books, of which only

the first ten are preserved, the positive argument for the absolute truth of Christianity, from its nature, and from the fulfillment of the prophecies in the Old Testament. The Theophany, in five books, is a popular compend from these two works, and was probably written later, as Epiphanius wrote his *Anacephalaeosis* after the Panarion, for more general use.

It is known in the Greek original from fragments only, published by Cardinal Mai,<sup>4</sup> and now complete in a Syriac version which was discovered in 1839 by Tattam, in a Nitrian monastery, and was edited by Samuel Lee at London in 1842. To this class also belongs his apologetic tract *Against Hierocles*.

Of much less importance are the two dogmatic works of Eusebius: *Against Marcellus*, and *Upon the Church Theology* (likewise against Marcellus), in favor of the hypostatical existence of the Son.

His Commentaries on several books of the Bible (Isaiah, Psalms, Luke) pursue, without independence, and without knowledge of the Hebrew, the allegorical method of Origen.

To these are to be added, finally, some works in Biblical Introduction and Archaeology, the Onomasticon, already alluded to, a sort of sacred geography, and fragments of an enthusiastic Apology for Origen, a juvenile work which he and Pamphilus jointly produced before 309, and which, in the Origenistic controversy, was the target of the bitterest shots of Epiphanius and Jerome.