

Aaron P. Johnson

# EUSEBIUS



UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

I.B. TAURIS



Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339 CE) is one of the most important intellectuals whose writings survive from late antiquity. His texts made lasting and wide-ranging contributions, from history-writing and apologetics to biblical commentary and Christian oratory. He was a master of many of the literary and scholarly traditions of the Greek heritage. Yet he left none of these traditions unaltered as he made brilliant and original experiments in the many genres he explored.

Aaron P. Johnson offers a lively introduction to Eusebius' chief oeuvre while also discussing recent scholarship on this foundational early Christian writer. Placing Eusebius in the context of his age, the author provides a full account of his life, including the period when Eusebius controversially sought to assist the heretic Arius. He then discusses the major writings: apologetic treatises; the pedagogical and exegetical works; the historical texts; the anti-Marcellan theological discourses; and expositions directly connected to the Emperor Constantine.



AARON P. JOHNSON is Assistant Professor of Humanities and Classics at Lee University, Cleveland, Tennessee. He is the author of *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (2006) and of *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (2013).

Aaron Johnson is one of the best among the new wave of scholars who are giving us an entirely new way of looking at Eusebius of Caesarea. His book is far more than an introduction: it is a powerful, original and authoritative presentation of one of the most important contributors to the intellectual development of Christianity. Drawing on his impressive command of pagan philosophy, late antique culture and Christian theology, Johnson shows just how crucial Eusebius' works were and why, both in his own day and for future generations including our own.

—Averil Cameron, DBE, FBA, Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine History, University of Oxford, formerly Warden of Keble College

In his new book, Aaron Johnson explores the many facets of the amazing scholar–theologian, Eusebius of Caesarea – apologist, exegete, historian, theologian and encomiast. With his fresh and uncluttered approach, Johnson demonstrates how different facets of the bishop relate to each other, and builds up a credible picture of Eusebius that will surprise many.

—Andrew Louth, FBA, Professor Emeritus of Patristic and Byzantine Studies, Durham University, and Visiting Professor of Eastern Orthodox Theology, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

# UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

EDITOR: RICHARD STONEMAN (UNIVERSITY OF EXETER)

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# EUSEBIUS

Aaron P. Johnson

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS SERIES EDITOR:  
RICHARD STONEMAN

**I.B. TAURIS**  
LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2014 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
[www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com)

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN: 978 1 78076 555 6 (HB)  
978 1 78076 556 3 (PB)

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Text design, typesetting and eBook versions by Tetragon, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall



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*For b.e. (...with affection)*



# PREFACE



EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA IS ONE of the most important intellectuals whose writings survive from Late Antiquity. His texts made deep and wide-ranging contributions in a number of fields of enquiry, from history-writing and apologetics to biblical commentary and Christian oratory. He was a master of many of the literary and scholarly traditions of the Greek heritage. Yet he left none of these traditions unaltered as he made brilliant and original experiments in the many genres he explored. The following pages seek to trace some of the most salient features of Eusebius' corpus as literary works. The issues of his reliability as a historian and scholar, with which much of Eusebian scholarship has been preoccupied, are here for the most part bracketed.

While the present book aims to introduce the general reader to his works, it does not avoid the attempt to push the scholarly conversation in new, hopefully beneficial, directions. In particular, in an attempt to extend several of the more fruitful trajectories in recent work on Eusebius, my discussion draws upon the following convictions. The first is that Eusebius was not a 'court theologian', and that it is severely misleading to see his writings as representative of an official imperial platform. Secondly, not only is it erroneous to identify him as being 'Arian' or a 'modified Arian' at any point in his life (including the brief period when he sought to assist Arius – even while, it is often forgotten, advising him to submit to his bishop

at Alexandria), it is also misleading to see the Arian conflict as determinative of Eusebius' long-standing theological expressions. Thirdly, Eusebius was an original and creative thinker and writer who also aimed to pass on the traditions of the Church and of the ancient Hebrews. Modern exclamations of his unoriginality are themselves banal and do little to aid our appreciation of his diverse scholarly and literary contributions. Fourthly, Eusebius' incisive use of quotation in many of his works deserves continued study as a literary and pedagogical phenomenon in its own right, not just in terms of his accuracy or fidelity to the sources quoted. Fifthly, the historical and biographical works must be examined as literature; analysis of their accuracy or omission of historical fact, while important for the historian, must not displace a literary approach to these works as an end in itself. Finally, Eusebius' intellectual project was, at its most fundamental and pervasive levels, the envisioning of his Late Antique world in terms of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures (or Christian Old Testament). The Scriptures provided the fund of metaphors, words, characters, ideas, principles and narrative patterns by which to make sense of the world, nations, individuals and events of the fourth-century Mediterranean and beyond.

The sequence of the book is generally chronological, without always following such an order strictly (in any case, several works cannot be dated with precision). The first chapter, which introduces the age in which Eusebius was formed and offers an account of what we can know about his life and compositional activity, is followed by chapters on the major clusters of his writings: the apologetic treatises (Chapter 2); his pedagogical and exegetical works (Chapter 3); the historical texts (Chapter 4); the anti-Marcellan theological treatises (Chapter 5); and the writings directly connected to Constantine (Chapter 6). It is hoped that the reader is not under the impression that any of these categories can be neatly circumscribed. His late theological writings elaborated doctrinal concerns that we discover in his earliest works. His historiographical vision was pervasive and may be found expressed in his apologetic texts, commentaries and orations. A deep and meticulous conversation with the biblical writings informs every work that survives from his pen. At the same time, his wide-ranging dialogue with the philosophical culture of his own day and the Greek literary and

intellectual traditions of the past is exhibited pervasively throughout his corpus.

This is an introduction to the texts of Eusebius, not to the scholarship on Eusebius. I have, therefore, sought to limit bibliographical references only to the most necessary texts. Especially in the case of the great number of important, provocative and often excellent works of scholarship in non-English languages that are rapidly extending our knowledge of the problems and possibilities of various approaches to Eusebius' corpus, this constraint has admittedly been painfully felt. I hope this book is received as a part of the ongoing conversation about Eusebius' works, not as the final word on the many issues that have arisen in that conversation over the course of the last century.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



I HAVE ACCRUED SEVERAL DEBTS while working on the present volume. First, I am grateful to Richard Stoneman for the invitation to write the book and for his recognition of the importance of including an introduction to Eusebius in a series on ‘Understanding the Classics’. Noel Lenski, as always, gave much needed advice and encouragement. Students of my Eusebius seminar provided a myriad of ideas and questions on a great many aspects of Eusebius; Kevin Lawrence, in particular, read and discussed portions of the Greek text of the *Commentary on the Psalms* with me. Skip Jenkins furnished opportunities to discuss Eusebius’ theology in his graduate seminar on fourth-century theology. I am grateful to Paul Conn for allotting a Lee University President’s Grant for continuing my work on Eusebius. Andrew Clay, David DeVore and Mark DelCogliano read individual chapters, while Jared Wielfaert read the entire manuscript, and gave astute advice on improving the presentation and argument. Remaining errors and shortcomings are due to my own recalcitrance or limitations. Randy Wood, Bob Barnett, Jared Wielfaert and Alan Wheeler provided encouragement and laughter at every stage. My wife and children, as always, have been my support. Without them, reading and writing would give me little pleasure.



# I

## CONTEXTS, LIFE AND WORKS



UNLIKE THE SCATTERED BUILDING BLOCKS that now extend from the beach into the Mediterranean Sea on the northern coast of the modern state of Israel, the city of Caesarea in the third and fourth centuries was a bustling metropolis of intense economic and Roman administrative affairs that provided a space for intellectual and religious diversity. What had once been a military fortress in the Hellenistic period was urbanized and renamed Caesarea by Herod the Great in 22 BCE and had become one of the most important cities of Roman Palestine by the time of Eusebius (c. 260–339 CE). Syrian and Roman paganism flourished alongside strong Jewish, Christian and Samaritan communities in this vibrant and richly complex city, which formed a centre of power for strong men wielding administrative, ecclesiastical or rabbinic authority.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the years of Eusebius' life saw his city and the larger Mediterranean world of which it was a part pulled nearly to the breaking point by the dynamic interplay of centrifugal political, religious, social and economic forces. Roughly a decade before his birth, the first systematic, Empire-wide persecution of Christians sought to placate the gods by forcing the adherents of the rival

deity to offer sacrifice, in an attempt to ameliorate the troubled period now known as the ‘Third Century Crisis’. Ever since the *Historia Augusta*, written in the fourth century and popularized inimitably in the modern period by Gibbon, the age has been represented as one of brutality, revolt, war, poverty, famine and plague.

Though based on the identification of very real problems, such a characterization nonetheless masks a more variegated range of economic and social factors throughout the Roman Empire and often occludes the flourishing of intellectual activity during this period. Eusebius was both the inheritor and the purveyor of intellectual and literary discourses of vast importance in the making of Late Antique thought.<sup>2</sup> It was in the contexts of crisis, persecution and the shocking shift in imperial religious policy under Constantine that Eusebius’ literary habits and intellectual proclivities would be formed and find fresh and innovative expression as he began to rethink and reapply established genres in new ventures of thought and writing. Part of the reason that this period was able to provide the crucible in which Eusebius’ thinking was shaped is that the ‘Third Century Crisis’ was arguably something of a misnomer – at least in some important respects.

Recent investigations have tempered the bleak image of the discord and disorder of the third century with a more nuanced account.<sup>3</sup> Economic troubles were not uniform, but varied in degree and duration by region. In the midst of foreign invasion, some cities grew, public figures advertised their importance in inscriptions, philosophers crossed the Empire in search of learning, and Christianity produced some of its greatest thinkers and saints. Gallienus, an emperor during Eusebius’ early years, provides an instructive picture. After ruling jointly with his father Valerian from 253 to 260, he was unable to rescue or avenge him when the latter was captured by the Persian sovereign, Shapur I, and treated with humiliation as a human footstool until being flayed alive so that his skin could be stuffed and made into a trophy. According to an unflattering biography of the next century, Gallienus’ reign was spent battling down usurpers, inadvertently allowing numerous northern barbarian groups to invade Asia, the Balkans and Italy, and engaging in unbridled vice and luxury. At the same time, the account admits that Gallienus was an accomplished orator

and poet.<sup>4</sup> Another biography of the early fourth century offers a kinder picture: the emperor and his wife favoured philosophers and valued (at least in principle) the leisured pursuit of truth and virtue. None other than Plotinus, the ‘father of Neoplatonism’, would conduct his cosmopolitan school of intellectually and spiritually serious philosophers in Gallienus’ Rome and earn the admiration of the emperor. This image combines with visual representations (such as statues and coins) of a holy emperor with an otherworldly look in his eyes.<sup>5</sup> Christians, too, felt his holiness when he favourably responded to Christian concerns over property confiscated during the persecution by his father.<sup>6</sup>

It was during Gallienus’ reign that Caesarea would fall under the control of the short-lived but significant Palmyrene Empire.<sup>7</sup> When it became clear that the emperor was unprepared to redeem the captured Valerian, a chieftain of Palmyra in the region north-east of Caesarea named Odenathus stepped in to preserve Roman stability and interests in the East and keep Persia at bay. In spite of overtures by Odenathus and then, after his death, by his powerful wife Zenobia, Romans saw the Palmyrene control of the area as an illegitimate seizure of power, which was allowable only so long as Rome was too weak to deal with the two. Gallienus’ successor, the emperor Aurelian, a devotee of Sol Invictus and the most successful of the emperors of the Third Century Crisis, would eventually defeat Zenobia and lead her in a triumphal procession through the streets of Rome. Though a woman, she fought like a man.<sup>8</sup>

Aurelian died a few short years after his triumph over Zenobia and was followed by a series of less successful, militarily beleaguered emperors who met violent deaths one by one at the hands of the next claimant to the throne. None of them made any recognizable impression on Eusebius until Diocletian, the man now credited with ending the Third Century Crisis, whom our author would later recall seeing when he visited Palestine.<sup>9</sup> Following the assassination of his predecessor, an act in which he was likely involved, Diocletian made the brilliant move of electing first one and then two more fellow emperors. The creation of this Tetrarchy (‘rule of four’), consisting of two senior emperors bearing the title of Augustus and two junior emperors with the title of Caesar, provided legitimate imperial rulers

across the span of the Empire from the British Isles to the Persian frontier. Along with a sustained attempt to stabilize the economy and reduce inflation, Diocletian made clear and active overtures towards attaining the divine goodwill. He and his junior emperor in the East, Galerius, claimed the patronage of Jupiter; the two emperors in the West, Maximian Augustus and his Caesar Constantius I, claimed Hercules as their divine protector. The coinage and sculptural representations of the Tetrarchy advertise an image of unity among the emperors and closeness to the gods.

As had occurred already in the reigns of earlier third-century emperors, the renewed *pax deorum* ('peace' or 'pact' with the gods) entailed a suppression of those elements within the Empire that threatened the working relationship between the Romans and their gods.<sup>10</sup> According to contemporaneous sources (Lactantius, a Christian rhetorician at the court of Diocletian, and Eusebius himself), persecution of Christians was fanned into flame by certain catalysts, such as when a Christian covertly made the sign of the cross during the sacrificial procedures at the court of Diocletian, or an oracle of Apollo complained that the Christians were a threat to his work, or pagan intellectuals presented anti-Christian arguments at Diocletian's court in Nicomedia.<sup>11</sup> While there may have been other motivations behind his persecution of Christians, and while we should not forget that the Empire never had the capacity to act as a police state and relied heavily on local men of power (what has been named a 'minimalist' view of imperial administration), or that sacrifice mandates may not have had Christians as their sole target,<sup>12</sup> the so-called Great Persecution (303–11, with resurgences up until 324) is still imagined today as a war of an oppressive state against Christianity alone. This impression remains largely shaped by Eusebius' narratives in the brief memorial of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, significant portions of the *Ecclesiastical History* and the first part of the *Life of Constantine*. The persecution came in phases: first the purge of Christians from the army and upper levels of the administration, then the seizure of Church property, and finally the imprisonment, torture and execution of ecclesiastical leaders and other Christians.<sup>13</sup> It persisted with varying levels of intensity through the retirement of the first two senior emperors (in 305) and intermittently until the last of the second generation of Tetrarchs, Constantine, the son

of Constantius, became sole ruler of the Roman Empire and put a stop to persecution once and for all.

We should be careful not to gloss over the unevenness of the persecution itself or of the persecuting policies. Physical brutality and bloody suppression broke out apparently only in certain parts of the Empire: especially the Near East, Asia Minor, Egypt and North Africa. In the West, Constantius limited himself to the closure of a few token churches.<sup>14</sup> If we trust Eusebius' account, he even protected Christians in his court and praised their stalwart courage.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the son of another Tetrarch, Maxentius, restored Church property confiscated during the persecution after he had usurped control of Italy and North Africa.<sup>16</sup> Persecution was most heated in other areas of the Empire, in particular in close proximity to the emperors Diocletian, Galerius and Maximinus Daia (a Caesar of the next generation of Tetrarchs). Yet we are told that Diocletian's heart was not in the persecution (he had fallen under the sway of Galerius, who had become immensely popular and powerful due to a triumph over the Persians<sup>17</sup>), and even Galerius and Maximinus Daia – both known as the most virulent of persecuting emperors – renounced their policies of persecution before their deaths. It may be that their religious policies were exploratory moves groping at a solution to the impasse at which they found themselves. On the one hand, persecution may have been perceived as no longer effective in maintaining the peace and stability of the Empire. Though still a small minority, the Christians represented an itch the emperors could not adequately scratch. Or rather, the more they scratched the more chafed and raw the body of empire felt. Neither the emperors nor the elite inhabitants of the Empire were always or equally supportive of the religious assumptions or of the precise ways in which those assumptions should be implemented. Furthermore, Christians were finding new tactics for surviving the persecuting edicts. If the encyclical of Peter of Alexandria is any indication, rich Christians were allowed options other than confession, torture and death. One could force one's slave to suffer in one's stead (a confession by proxy), pay for an exemption or, if one wanted to impress fellow Christians as a brave witness, pay for a bogus torture session.<sup>18</sup> Persecution was not having its desired effect of aligning dissident elements, who stood as 'security threats' to the Empire, with Roman society.

On the other hand, the abandonment of persecuting policies by both Galerius and Maximinus Daia may have been less an honest admission of failure or wrong-headedness and more a strategic manipulation of their subjects' responsiveness to empire. The edict of toleration that has been entitled 'Galerius' palinode' was probably a successful move that rendered innocuous certain troubling tendencies that had manifested themselves during the persecution.<sup>19</sup> Christianity had been conceived and practised by many as a political alternative to the Empire, even while remaining within it. An incident that occurred in Caesarea in 303 reminds us that theological difference and spirituality were not neatly circumscribed domains: theology became (or already was) a political matter. At a governor's tribunal, a Christian named Procopius stepped forward and quoted Homer: 'The rule of many is not good, let there be one king.'<sup>20</sup> On a theological level his statement was a criticism of polytheism. But taken on a political level, it conveyed a deep criticism of the Tetrarchic form of government. His tongue was cut out before he was tortured and executed. By a singular shift in conception, Galerius and later Maximinus Daia sought through belated toleration to undercut such polarizing tendencies among Christians. No longer was Christianity deemed religiously other or bad for empire. On the contrary, it was reframed as a vital part of the imperial-religious complex.

The emperors' attempts at a conceptual shift in Christianity's role within the Empire were only partly successful. In times of tension, rival emperors after Galerius would choose to identify their political struggles as the conflict between rival gods.<sup>21</sup> Such a practice suggests a reversion to the traditional polarizing framework. When Licinius, the last emperor to fall before the advance of Constantine, adopted this strategy, his eventual defeat marked its definitive end (at least until Julian the Apostate in the 360s). Nonetheless, the experimentation in relativizing Christianity symbolized in Galerius' palinode remains a significant feature of the administrative processes that temper any singular approach to the problem of imperial religious ideology in the early fourth century.

The remarks offered here, insofar as they can be substantiated by closer analysis (in this book and elsewhere), produce a first step towards unsettling the established narrative of the reign of Constantine.<sup>22</sup> That narrative



runs something like this: being born the son of Constantius, he was kept under the vigilant eye of the Tetrarchs Diocletian and Galerius in the East (in order to prevent a dynastic principle replacing the meritocracy of the Tetrarchs' government),<sup>23</sup> until he was able to finagle an agreement out of a drunken Galerius to join his father in Britain; Constantine hamstrung the horses of the imperial post as he hastened across the expanse of the Empire to avoid recriminations by the emperor when he sobered up; soon after arrival in Britain, his father died and he immediately found himself hailed Augustus (that is, a senior-ranking emperor) by the troops; after successfully stabilizing the frontiers in the north-west, he marched against the usurper Maxentius in Rome in an attempt to prove his own legitimacy as a Tetrarch; while Maxentius consulted the pagan Sibylline books, Constantine received divine admonition at midday (and again at night) instructing him to conquer in the sign of Chi-Rho (the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ); the sign was duly painted on his soldiers' shields and victory was achieved; this 'conversion' was followed by an edict of toleration (the so-called 'Edict of Milan', proclaimed jointly with another of the Tetrarchs, Licinius),<sup>24</sup> the commencement of church-building projects (most notably in Rome and later in the Holy Land) and involvement in the affairs of the Church (most notably in the hosting of the councils of Arles in 314 and Nicaea in 325, dealing with the Donatist schism and the Arian controversy, respectively); illness curtailed an attempt by Constantine to rescue persecuted Christians in the Persian Empire, and he was baptized before his death in 337; his burial place was to be 13th alongside the 12 Apostles in a huge mausoleum in his new capital city of Constantinople. Significant to this narrative is its unproblematic understanding of a conversion that represented a crucial turning point, an event setting Constantine apart as a Christian ruler who would begin to model a monarchic rule on earth imitative of the monarchic rule in heaven (that is, monotheism).

Such a narrative depends fundamentally upon an uncritical reading of the writings of Lactantius (who became tutor of Constantine's eldest son, Crispus, after serving as a rhetor under Diocletian) and Eusebius himself. One tendency of modern historians has been to distrust these accounts. The judgement of Jacob Burckhardt was severe: Eusebius was 'the first thoroughly

dishonest historian.<sup>25</sup> More recent historians have been gentler, but have often determined to begin their investigations of Constantine's reign with other sources before letting Eusebius speak.<sup>26</sup> The issue will be considered in later chapters on Eusebius' historical and biographical works. For the moment, we may accept that Constantine's conversion need not have been a singular dramatic event at one point in his life, but was a process of learning to tell his narrative and the role of the divine in his life over a series of years. Like a patient on an analyst's couch, Constantine probably told and retold his story to bishops and other Christians, learning to relate it in a way that was deemed appropriate and even therapeutic. Both Lactantius and Eusebius seem to offer snapshots of a retelling, which, in turn, are grafted onto their own narrations.<sup>27</sup> The actions of the emperor (such as building both churches and pagan temples, continuing to use pagan iconography while belatedly adopting the Chi-Rho monogram on coinage, or holding Church councils while closing only a limited number of pagan sites), combined with his own words, rhetorically overwrought though they may be (in his edicts, letters and orations), illumine the presence of narrative layers draped around his person like the jewel-encrusted regalia he wore at the Council of Nicaea. Part of Constantine's genius may have been his ability to create supple stories to answer the hopes and visions of rival constituencies in his complex Empire.

By the time of Constantine's death, it seemed that a sea change in the position of the Church in the Roman world had occurred. The representation of the reign of Constantine as the definitive Christian triumph over a dying paganism may, however, overstate the case. Resolute pagan senators in both Rome and Constantinople advocated religious tolerance, maintained meticulously their ancient heritage and perpetuated pagan rituals in the following generations.<sup>28</sup> Pagan intellectuals would dismiss the newly formulated theologies and spirituality of Christians, while practising rigorous immersion in philosophical texts combined with a gentle asceticism and a revived spiritual vibrancy.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Christianity was not quickly or easily made coterminous with empire. What many today have labelled 'Constantinianization' – that is, the dual processes of imperial involvement in the affairs of the Church and the rise of an allegedly over-comfortable, mediocre or dysfunctional Christendom which replaced the radical religion