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Eusebius of Caesarea and the Consolidation of Jewish Cultural Memory in the Christian Church around the Constantinian Shift

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Abstract

It is this chapter I will study the Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339 CE). In this monumental work, Eusebius describes the development of the Christian Church from Jesus to Constantine I. I will draw attention to the final three books, where he portrays the quite extraordinary transformation from the persecution of Christians – due to their refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods – to toleration and their obtaining of an advantageous position in the Roman Empire. I will emphasize some innovative features in Eusebius Church History and argue that the final three books show a dramatic shift in terms of how he views the future. Utilizing Jewish concepts, from the Old Testament, Eusebius demonstrates that the Christians were God's chosen people, that this same God stood behind Emperor Constantine, and that it was high time for the Christians to stop hiding and start building churches instead. Like no historian before him, Eusebius consolidates Jewish concepts in what would, in due time, become a global Christian church.

Keywords: Eusebius of Caesarea, Christianity, late antiquity, Old Testament, Judaism, (trans-) cultural memory

1. Studying Eusebius

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339 CE), bishop, exegete, apologist, and scholar, is widely recognized today as the first Christian historiographer and church historian. Among other writings, many of which have been lost, he wrote a ten-volume Church History spanning the period from Jesus to the coming of Emperor Constantine to power in 312 and 324 in the Western and Eastern Roman Empire, respectively.

It is this Church History that I will scrutinize in this article. More precisely, I will draw attention to the final three books (8–10) of Eusebius' Church History. Here the author describes the quite extraordinary transformation from more or less systematic persecution, torture, and killing, of Christians – who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods and the well-being of the emperor – to their toleration and obtaining of a quite favorable position in the Roman Empire. I will emphasize some innovative features in Eusebius Church History and argue that the final three books show a dramatic shift in terms of how he views the future. Utilizing Jewish concepts, from the Old Testament, Eusebius demonstrates that the Christians were God's chosen people, that this same God stood behind Emperor Constantine, and that it was high time for the Christians to stop hiding and start

building churches instead.

Andrew Louth argues that three events profoundly shaped Eusebius life and activity, namely 1) his encounter with Pamphilus, a prominent theologian, and his teacher, 2) the toleration of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and 3) his encounter with Emperor Constantine himself (Louth 2008, p. 266–267). In the context of this article, the two latter are of interest. I will suggest that Eusebius, through his Church History, did not only ascribe Constantine with qualities granting the Christians a better position in the Roman Empire, but he also tried to influence Constantine to continue along this "Godly" path. I will also stress that Eusebius, through his Church History, played a crucial role in institutionalizing contemporary Jewish beliefs and practices – or cultural memories – on the Christian community.

In terms of writing style, Eusebius is rather systematic. He quotes other sources, which he comments, criticizes, or elaborates upon. Eusebius informs the reader that he has had a rich library at his disposal, from which he has been able to single out the most important events and sources.¹ Hereby he demonstrates that he at least attempts to write a history that comes as close to the truth as possible (Eusebius 1.13.5, 6.33.3, 6.36.3). Moreover, it is a fact that many or most of the documents in the archives that he used have been

¹ According to Winkelmann, Eusebius used the libraries in Caesarea, Jerusalem and Tyre (Winkelmann 2003, p. 8).

lost, which further enhances the value of his documentation as a source from early Christian times.



Figure 1. Eusebius of Caesarea. Retrieved from Wikipedia.org

Naturally, Eusebius is not all-through objective. Louth asserts that Eusebius, though emerging as a “man of wide reading and great scholarly erudition,” also represented the “culmination of [the] tradition of apologetic theology” (Louth 2008, p. 268). While some of Eusebius’ sources seem trustworthy, he, as Olof Andrén writes, sometimes reproduces pure legends (Andrén 2007, p. 16). Moreover, when he engages in debate with adversaries, his objectivity may be questioned. For instance, Jeremy Schott stresses that Eusebius, in debating with the philosopher Porphyry he purposely manipulated his quotations (Schott 2008, p. 139). Friedhelm Winkelmann has a somewhat more positive opinion regarding the deficiencies in Eusebius’ writing, and views it in light of the author’s religious faith and wish to make sense in a future church.

Eusebius’ main principle of selection and quotation of sources were essentially his view of orthodoxy, his criterion of apostolic tradition and his evaluation of the age of the sources. Within these aims he was handling his sources in a reliable manner. Mistakes, confusions or utilization of forged documents by mistake are rare. But sometimes he truncated his sources, having in mind his main apologetical purposes such as for instance, the unity of the church or the good use by future Christian generations (Winkelmann 2003, p. 9).

Winkelmann highlights that Eusebius began a new chapter in historiography, with the, for his time, scientific methods. However, in this chapter, I am more concerned with

Eusebius’ narration than with scientific solidity. My interest lies in how a Jewish cultural memory was projected upon the Christians, and how Eusebius documents and hereby also institutionalized these perceived societal roots for times to come. Moreover, I view Eusebius’ narration as his attempt to influence the political leadership at a time when the future of the Christian minority in the Roman Empire was promising but far from secure.

The tracing of societal roots in historical writing is no novelty but has been prevalent throughout history. Jan Assmann highlights the tendency of societies to search for “traces of its normative past” (Assmann 2006, p. 29). In this act of searching – where both time and space boundaries are crossed – the “faraway and here” tend to float together.

Culture becomes conscious of the depth of time and develops a sense of cultural simultaneity that makes it possible to identify with the forms of expression of a past going back thousands of years [...]” (Assmann 2006, p. 28).

Naturally, these traditions, histories, memories, etc. tend to be sought and brought from distant eras, and often they cross geographical and ethnic borders. Assmann takes as an example the Homeric epics to describe this.

Not only do they reach over the abyss of a “dark age” of four to five centuries, back to the Late Bronze Age, and elevate the Trojan War to the status of a central, identity-creating, and in this sense “connective” memory. Transcending the individual states, what is mirrored, reinforced, and renewed in every recitation of this story of a pan-Hellenic coalition engaged in a war with an enemy in the East is the identity of a pan-Hellenic group consciousness” (Assmann 2006, p. 29).

Assmann’s concept also applies in the case of Eusebius. As we will see below, Eusebius interpreted his own time, the emperors, and the Christian church through biblical (mostly Old Testament) narratives and prophecies. However, he was not alone in this. In fact, he documents a Jewish tradition, which had been hailed and practiced since the first apostles, i.e., nearly for three centuries. Already Apostle Paul (1 Cor 10) had viewed the Christians in light of God’s promises to the Jewish people. Like other Christian theologians before him, Eusebius finds himself positioned between the (Jewish) Old Testament texts and the Christians and their quite different context. Moreover, through his Church History, Eusebius injected into the Christian Church a living cultural memory from a Jewish context – into a Christian church, where a growing number of followers were, in fact, not even Jews. This extraordinary transportation of a Jewish cultural memory can therefore also be viewed as an early Christian example of a transcultural or traveling memory (Crownshaw 2014, p. 1–7, Erll 2014, p. 9–21), which, as we will see, also called for certain re-interpretations.

2. Biblical narratives

In the cultural memory of the Western world, ever since Christianity became a majority religion, several Old Testament narratives have been central. The stories of the Israelites making their exodus from Egypt, the deportation of Jews during the Babylonian exile, but also other tales like how God created the world, Cain and Abel, and Noah's ark have played an immense role in the identity of the Christian West. Of course, it is logical that the early Christians brought with them traditions of the Jewish world from which they departed. This is articulated, for instance, by the Apostle Paul in several letters to Christians in the New Testament. What Eusebius did, some two centuries later than Paul was that he utilized the early Jewish-Christian tradition – including documents written by early Christians from that worldview – made a selection, condensed it, and included it in his Church History. Of interest for this article is that Eusebius also included specific biblical passages in his Church History. In books 1–7 (possibly written before the Diocletian persecution, see Louth 1990, p. 115), the biblical references are provided mainly through quotations from other sources that Eusebius uses. With some exceptions, notably in book 1, he uses biblical references quite sparingly. This changes in his last three books (8–10) of his Church History (most of which was written after the end of the Diocletian persecution, Louth 1990, p. 115–116). In this part, Eusebius gives attention to the Diocletian persecution (starting in 303 CE), the suffering under Emperor Maximinus II, which ended with his death in 313 CE and Constantine's coming to power shortly after. In these three books, Eusebius' tone shifts, from historian to visionary. He also changes the tools that he uses. No longer does he use sources from the well-equipped libraries that he had at his disposal. Instead, he is providing more personal insight into what he had experienced and what he had heard from his contemporaries. In the following, I will give attention to three biblical themes occurring in Eusebius Church History: the conception of the Christians as God's chosen people, the relationship between the worldly rulers and God, and the temple as a sign of victory.

2.1. God's chosen people

Eusebius views Christians as God's chosen people. He is projecting the Jewish captivity in Egypt on the persecutions in the Roman Empire and the exodus from Egypt on the end of the persecutions. This runs like a red thread in the latter part of Eusebius' Church History (Eusebius 9.9.1–9). With several quotes from scriptures – in particular, Exodus and the Psalms in the Old Testament – Eusebius demonstrates God's alliance with his people whom he is protecting and awarding victories against oppressors.

However, Eusebius' utilization of biblical narratives does not only apply to the emperors' persecution of the Christians and the eventual victory of the Christian church. Following a period of relaxation (between 259 and 303 CE), Eusebius views the renewed persecutions under Diocletian (Emperor in the East and West 284–305 CE) as God's punishment.

But by reason of excessive liberty, we sank into negligence and sloth, one envying and reviling another in different ways; we were almost on the point of taking up arms against each other, assailing each other with words and with darts and spears, prelates inveighing against prelates, people rising up against people, and hypocrisy and dissimulation arising to the greatest height of malignity. Then the divine judgement, which usually proceeds with a lenient hand, while the multitudes were yet crowding into the church, began to afflict its episcopacy with gentle and mild visitations (Eusebius 8.1.7).

At this point, Eusebius makes a direct reference to Lamentations 2:1–2 in the Old Testament.

The Lord in his anger darkened the daughter of Zion, and hurled from heaven to earth the glory of Israel. Neither did he remember his footstool in the day of his wrath. But the Lord, also, overwhelmed all the beauty of Israel, and tore down all his walls (Eusebius 8.1.8).

Eusebius further cites the prediction from the Old Testament Psalms 89 as follows.

He overturned the covenant of his servant, and he prostrated his sanctuary to the earth" by the demolition of the churches. He has destroyed all his walls, and has made all his bulwarks fear. All the multitudes that pass through have ravaged him, and hence he has become a reproach to his neighbors [...] (Eusebius 8.1.9).

Eusebius sends a strong message to his readers. The renewed persecutions were not primarily to be viewed as a result of competition, conflict, and hatred, but as God's punishment. This is a conception, which Eusebius introduces only in book 8. This rather sudden transformation, from martyrdom as a blessed act to God's protection and punishment (more in line with Old Testament tradition), is remarkable in Eusebius' account. He demonstrates that the Constantian shift had brought about considerable changes in the living conditions of Christians, which in turn had affected the way they anticipated their near future.

However, as shown by Eusebius, God had now withdrawn his blessing due to the Christians' own transgresses. Moreover, by this example, Eusebius demonstrates that future Christians could learn from past mistakes and be prosperous if they only were "prompt in measures to appease and propitiate the Deity" (Eusebius 8.1.8). Hereby, through Old Testament conceptions, he also institutionalizes a new fascinating world of Godly promises and threats for Christians who do or fail to do his will (Eusebius 9.9.1–12, 10.1.3). Eusebius

does not quite explain how he views that Christians should live their lives in order to please God. Instead, he chooses to demonstrate the “wicked and miserable” lives that he and his fellow Christians had lived when they angered God. Surely, the conception of the Christians as God’s chosen people was widespread in the Christian parishes in the early church, and in this regard, Eusebius was merely documenting the conceptions of his time. However, through his Church History, he documents and institutionalizes the view of the Christians as God’s people and interconnects the Christian church with its Hebrew roots. He cemented contemporary belief systems for long times to come, stretching the history of the Christian church not only of the life and the acts of Jesus, but also to a Jewish tradition and prophetic messages, which the Christian church associated with Jesus: as the promised Messiah. For Eusebius, it was clear that the Christians were God’s chosen people.²

2.2. The emperors

Eusebius portrays the Roman emperors either as God’s enemies or friends. It is worth noting here, that Eusebius views the persecutions as a backdrop in the latter part of his Church History. Perhaps, for this reason, Eusebius is also strikingly meticulous and detailed in his description of the gruesome torture during – in particular – the persecutions during Diocletian (Eusebius 8.7–8.13, 10.1.4).

Later, historians have challenged many claims in Eusebius’ account of the course of events. For instance, Constantine’s genuine conversion to Christianity has been debated (Barnes 2014, p. 2–13 and 15–16). Furthermore, Maxentius, at times, favored Christians and had basilicas built (Alburene & Williams 2017, 901). Nonetheless, in this chapter, I will not be concerned with the virtues and vices of the emperors, but how Eusebius portrays them.

Eusebius shows dislike for several emperors. He describes Maximian (emperor in the West 286–305 CE) as an impious and execrable man, Maxentius (emperor in the West 306–312 CE) as a tyrant, and Licinius (co-emperor in the East 308–324 CE) as one who turned into a tyrant. For some reason, Diocletian is hardly mentioned at all, only the persecutions during his reign (Eusebius 7.30.22, 8.2.4, 8.13.2). Some emperors are described more accurately as having been punished by God. One of them is Diocletian’s successor in East Rome, Galerius (emperor 305–311 CE), whom Eusebius

ascribes an active role in persecutions against Christians.

But the evident superintendence of divine Providence on the one hand being granted to his people and on the other assailing the author of these miseries, exhibited his anger against him as the ringleader in the horrors of the whole persecution (Eusebius 8.16.2)

Here Eusebius’ portrayal of God’s protecting hand over the Christians continues. God had reconciled with his people and had turned his anger against Galerius instead. Emperor Galerius became sick and, driven by pain, he made a complete turnaround.

Turning, therefore, his reflections upon himself, first of all, he confessed his sin to the supreme God. Then summoning his officers, he immediately ordered that, without delay, they should stop the persecution against the Christians and by an imperial ordinance and decree, commanded that they should hasten to rebuild the churches that they might perform their accustomed devotions and offer up prayers for the emperor’s safety” (Eusebius 8.17.1).

Through God’s forgiving of his people and the punishment of Galerius, in Eusebius’ account, the emperor thus issued the Edict of Toleration in 311. In Eusebius’ narration, God also punished Maximinus II (emperor in the East 311–313 CE) for his violence against the Christians. Eusebius describes Maximinus as God’s enemy, and as a tyrant. He is relatively thorough in his description of Maximinus’ persecution against the Christians (Eusebius 9.2–4, 9.10.3, 9.11.2). Maximinus is depicted as a staunch opponent of Galerius’ Edict of Toleration in 311, offering little hope of an end to the persecutions.

When the hope of most of us was almost extinct, all of a sudden, almost while the agents of this decree against us were in some places on the way to carry it into effect, God who is the defender of his church, all but stopping the pomp and boasting of the tyrant’s mouth, exhibited his heavenly interposition in our behalf (Eusebius 9.8.1.).

Eusebius describes how God sent misfortune to Maximinus. Epidemics broke out, the emperor’s war luck against the Armenians turned to the worse, and God sent Constantine against the “two most profane tyrants” Maxentius and Maximinus (Eusebius 9.8.1–3, 9.9.1). Maximinus tried to escape Constantine’s forces by “lying concealed in the fields and villages” He survived but succumbed to sickness and died shortly after. Eusebius has chosen his biblical reference to Maximinus from

² This becomes clearer in Eusebius’ other texts. In his commentary on Isaiah, as M. J. Hollerich writes, “Eusebius wishes to demonstrate that Christianity is not in fact derivative from Judaism but prior to it, and therefore to ‘Hellenism’, since the religion founded by Christ is actually the same as that professed by the pre-Mosaic saints or ‘friends of God’ (theophiles) spoken of in Genesis”

Hollerich further writes that Eusebius viewed Christianity as being older than both Judaism and Hellenism, and which he “wants to show has preserved Judaism’s virtues but not its defects” (Hollerich 1999, p. 119–120). See also Johnson 2014, p. 44.

(King David's) Psalm 33 in the Old Testament.

A king is not saved by the multitude of an host nor shall a giant in the greatness of his strength; horse is a vain thing for safety, and in the greatness of his strength he shall not be saved. Behold, the eyes of the LORD are upon those that fear him, those that trust in his mercy, to rescue their soul from death (Eusebius 9.10.5).

Constantine, by contrast, is depicted as God's friend. Eusebius compares the emperors Constantine's and Maxentius' battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE with Pharaoh's pursuing of Moses and his people. In this narrative, Constantine is seen as a protector of the Christians and Maxentius as a "pharaonic" enemy. Eusebius finds a parallel in Jewish cultural memory, writing that "the chariots of Pharaoh and his forces were cast into the Red Sea" (Eusebius 9.9.5) and further quoting Exodus 15:1–2 and 11 as follows;

Let us sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he hath cast into the sea: the LORD is my helper and defender, and he is become my salvation....Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods; who is like unto thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders" (Eusebius 9.9.8–9).

Eusebius, moreover, connects these verses with the victorious Emperor Constantine, whom he claims "sang [like expressions] to God, the universal sovereign and author of the victory by his deeds, as he entered Rome in triumph" (Eusebius 9.9.9). Hereby Eusebius draws parallels between the religiosity of King David and Emperor Constantine, but he also effectively connects the "Christian victory" over their enemies with Moses' victory over Pharaoh's tyranny.

A decade later, when his co-emperor Licinius, according to Eusebius, "plotted every kind of mischief against his superior," Constantine enjoyed divine protection.

But God was the friend and the vigilant protector and guardian of the emperor (Constantine) who bringing these plots formed in darkness and secrecy to light, foiled them. So much excellence as that powerful armor of piety to repel our enemies and for the preservation of our own safety. Our most divinely favored emperor fortified by this, escaped the diverse and complicated plots of the iniquitous man (Eusebius 10.8.6).

In Eusebius' historical explication, "God detected every artifice and villainy to his favored prince" (Eusebius 10.8.7). When Licinius "determine[ed] war against Constantine," he did not only proceed to array himself against his former ally but at "that supreme God Constantine worshipped" (Eusebius 10.8.8). Constantine defeated Licinius twice, at

Adrianople (in 317) and again at Chrysopolis (in 324 CE, Barnes 2014, p. 5 and 103–106).

Eusebius paints the legacy of emperors who had prosecuted Christians in highly negative terms. For instance, Maximinus' allies were punished and killed.

[P]aintings and representations having been placed in honor of him or his children in every city were forced down, [...] torn to pieces, broken, or were destroyed by having the face daubed with black paint (Eusebius 9.11.1–8).

In Eusebius' words, these were people who "would neither receive instruction nor understand the exhortation given in the Holy Scriptures" (Eusebius 9.11.7). Likewise, concerning Licinius death in 325 Eusebius writes

Suddenly, those who but yesterday breathed threats and destruction were no more, not even leaving the memory of their names. Their effigies, their honors received the deserved contempt and disgrace, and those very scenes which Licinius had seen occurring to the iniquitous tyrants, these same he experienced himself (Eusebius 10.9.5).

2.3. The temple

The tenth and last book in Eusebius' Church History stands out from the rest. Here Eusebius' tone is markedly positive. The Christian Church in the Roman Empire finds itself in a dramatically improved situation after the Constantinian shift. Eusebius opens the book with words of gratefulness.

Thanks be to God, the omnipotent and universal Sovereign, thanks also to the Savior and Redeemer of our souls, Jesus Christ, through whom we pray that peace will be preserved to us at all times, firm and unshaken by any temporal molestation from without and troubles from the mind within (Eusebius 10.1.1).

Judging from Eusebius' prayer "that peace will be preserved [...] at all times", it appears as if Christ's imminent return and the end of time were no longer a central theme for him. Rather Eusebius appears hopeful as regards the future of the Church already in this life – a theme that he takes further in his later writing *Commentary on Isaiah* (2013).³ Eusebius vividly portrays the optimism and celebrating among the Christians in the Roman Empire, but also an inevitable institutionalization and materialization of the same. One central aspect here is the building of churches.

[A]nd there sprung up for all a certain celestial gladness, seeing every place, which but a short time before had been desolated by the impieties of the tyrants, reviving again and recovering as from a long and deadly disease, temples again rising from the soil to a lofty height, and receiving a splendor far exceeding those that had been formerly destroyed

³ Eusebius writes that (co-) Emperor Licinius' had some bishops killed and a number of churches closed and destroyed, but this did not change the overall tone of his

tenth book (Eusebius 10.8).

(Eusebius 10.2.1).

Here Eusebius refers to two biblical discourses. On the one hand, he views the congregants above as separate limbs that, when working together, formed the “body of Christ.” This concept was common in the early church (see, for instance, 1 Cor. 12:27), but Eusebius founded his comprehension in the prophecy about the Valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:7. This is interesting since Ezekiel’s vision is that Israel would be restored to her land under the leadership of King David. Eusebius, therefore, signals that Ezekiel’s prophecy had been fulfilled under Emperor Constantine’s rule.

On the other hand, Eusebius clearly views the newly built churches in relation to the temple in Jerusalem. For instance, he refers to Haggai 2:10 prophesying about a new temple (Eusebius 10.4.36). The dramatic turn in terms of religious freedom for the Christians went hand in hand with a shift of attitude as regards materiality and wealth. No longer did the Christians have to suffer persecution, but the Constantinian turn had brought “a new and better Jerusalem” to the Roman Empire (Eusebius 10.4.3).

This account of the building of churches confirms Eusebius’ earlier account of the Christians’ remarkable progress after the Diocletian persecutions, but it also confirms the Christians’ connection to Judaism before Jesus. The Christians no longer conscientiously anticipated the end of time and a heavenly Jerusalem, but now they were prepared to build a New Jerusalem already in this life. Of course, this New Jerusalem called for a temple – or “divine tabernacle,” as Eusebius calls the basilica in Tyre (Eusebius 10.4.3) – and the Christians built temples wherever they gathered. Eusebius clearly shows that at least he viewed the building of grandiose churches in favorable terms. For Eusebius, the temple was a heavenly embodiment on earth of the temple in heaven.

Such is the character of this great temple, which the great creative Word [Jesus] hath established throughout the whole world, constituting this again a kind of intellectual image on earth of those things beyond the vault of heaven. So that in all his creation, and through all his intelligent creatures on earth, the Father should be honored and adored (Eusebius 10.4.69).

Employing a heavenly perspective – and strengthened by Haggai (2:10) who prophesied about the building of the second temple in Jerusalem that “the glory of this latter house shall far exceed the former” – Eusebius could sincerely endorse the increased size and beauty of the basilicas (Eusebius 10.4.36). It is apparent that the home, or house church, as a model in the early Christian church, had given way to the basilica. According to Eusebius, Emperor Constantine supported many building projects through

monetary donations to bishops (Eusebius 10.2.2, 10.5.15–17, 10.6.1–3). It is also apparent that the “return” of the temple had started well before Constantine. This is supported by Hugo Brandenburg, who writes that the cult rooms and church buildings of the Christian communities, “after the persecution under Decius were returned to the Christians by Emperor Gallienus in AD 260 or erected during the long period of peace” (Brandenburg 2005, p. 12). Brandenburg further writes about Eusebius’ hailing the beauty of the churches during his time that;

Eusebius’ praises of the size and beauty of the buildings destroyed during the Diocletian persecution should not be taken as mere rhetoric exaggeration, but rather as a confirmation that an autonomous sacred Christian architecture existed and perhaps distinguished itself by its appearance and furnishings” (Brandenburg, 2005, 12)

The growth of the Christian community and the gradual shift to the better, before and during Eusebius’ time, does not only tally with the change-of-attitude as regards the eschatological future of the Christians. In Eusebius’ Church History, this is also seen in a shift of focus from small gatherings to worship services in ever larger and more decorated basilicas.

3. Analysis and conclusion

Due to the Constantinian Shift, the worldview of the Christians changed. More than ever, the Christians were open to the thought that Christ’s return, after all, may not be imminent, but that the Church will indeed have a bright future in this worldly life.

In this chapter, I have studied Eusebius of Caesarea’s Church History, focusing on the Constantinian Shift. This document is not only interesting as a history of the Christian church from Jesus’ times to Constantine I, but above all, as strong evidence of a change of mind-set in the church. Focusing on the three last books in Eusebius’ Church History, I have studied his role in projecting Jewish cultural memories onto the 4th-century church and hereby also institutionalizing Jewish conceptions within the church. Three conceptions with origin in Judaism are particularly visible in Eusebius’ portrayal around the Constantinian Shift. These are the conception of the Christians as God’s chosen people, of Emperor Constantine as a God-given ruler, and of the temple – or basilica – as a divine image on earth.

Eusebius did not come up with these ideas himself, but he builds upon a more than two-century long Christian tradition of referring to Old Testament sources, or in other words, of a strong and living Jewish cultural memory in a Christian context.

Moreover, Eusebius did not only write his Church History to document the development in the church but (and maybe even more) he wrote it for

the emperors. It can be viewed as his contribution to peace and prosperity in and for the Christian communities. By bringing forward well-thought-through aspects, Eusebius tried to motivate the political powers to continue treating the Christians well. Maybe, therefore, the first Church History should foremost be viewed as a literary contribution where the author tried to make sure that the favorable situation he personally encountered would continue.

Eusebius' Church History is interesting as early documentation of dialogue and friction between tradition and innovation. In this article, I have not dealt with how the Christian communities challenged practices in the Roman Empire through their refusal to sacrifice to the gods. In fact, this was one of the main reasons why Christians were persecuted. Instead, my focus has been on transformations within Christianity in late antiquity. I have tried to highlight how Christians brought with them Jewish lore into their own less and less Jewish church. They found meaning in Old Testament perceptions, but these were reinterpreted to fit within their context.

This calls for some attention to the transcultural dimension of this Jewish cultural memory. I would like to mention the transformation of the grand narratives as they traveled over time and space. It is only natural that the early Christians of Jewish descent brought with them the tradition from where they departed. In his Church History, Eusebius provides some insight into this narrative transformation. When Eusebius views the Christians as God's people, guided and punished by God, he alludes to a concept dating back to the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, but he omits the Ten Commandments so crucial to the Jews. He portrays a radical shift from martyrdom, as a beautiful ideal, to relative prosperity granted by God, however, with little to offer in terms of what rules or ideals the Christians adhered to in order to appease God.

Based on Eusebius or other writers, we cannot know with certainty how the early Christians understood and spoke about their Jewish past. Cultural memories crossing the boundaries of time and space often tend to change and assume a more symbolic shape (compare Assmann 2006, 6). Nonetheless, as traveling memories, Exodus and the image of the Jews, and later Christians, as the People of God undoubtedly provided the Christians with comfort and guidance during hard times. However, they were also reinterpreted as the situation changed from oppression to prosperity. Following a focus on the exodus from Pharaonic persecution – which continues to remain as a backdrop in Eusebius Church History – Eusebius shifts his attention to the building of the New Jerusalem instead. Of course, there are parallels to

this, too, in Jewish tradition. The First Temple in Jerusalem was built after Exodus, and the second temple was built after the Babylonian Captivity. The second temple was destroyed during the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, never to be rebuilt. Thus, the young Christian Church originated in a temple tradition. This temple-tradition shifted into a kind of apocalyptic longing for a heavenly temple in Jerusalem amidst suffering. Eventually, at least as per Eusebius, the Christians came to embrace Jewish prophecies about the rebuilding of the temple and started erecting ever more majestic basilicas in the second century CE.

Finally, it was not only the transformation from Judaism to Christianity that was characterized by cultural hybridization. After the Christianization of the Roman Empire, Graeco-Roman, as Gerhard van den Heever asserts, religious concepts and images continued would survive for a long time in new shapes and forms. (Heever, p. 295). Neither here, would one belief system easily do away with another one, but Christianity and polytheism would continue in co-existence, intermingling, and rivalry for long times.

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