A New Eusebius

Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337

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249 The Conversion of Constantine, 312

These years, 312–13, are decisive for the history of Christianity and of Europe. No matter what interpretation may be placed on the events of these years, we have reached the turning point in the relations of Church and Empire.

The conviction of Christians and pagans was that Constantine, in his expedition against the usurper Maxentius, was the recipient of divine aid.

Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 44.3–6 (written before 318)

3 [Constantine had encamped in the neighbourhood of the Milvian Bridge.]

4 The anniversary of Maxentius' accession, the 27th of October, was near, and his (first) five years of rule were drawing to a close.

5 Constantine was directed in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of his soldiers and thus to join battle. He did as he was ordered and with the cross-shaped letter X, with its top bent over, he marked Christ on the shields.

6 [Armed with this sign his army engaged the enemy and was completely victorious.]

Lactantius is talking of the *Latin* letter X. In view of the next passage the 'heavenly sign' is interesting. It must be the cross, and Constantine went further by adding a second letter, i.e. , , or even .

Eusebius, *VC*, I.26–9 (*c.* 338)

26 [Constantine saw the oppression of Rome, capital of a universal empire, under the tyrant Maxentius. He had left her liberation to others (i.e. to Severus and Galerius) but they had failed.

27.1 Being convinced that he required greater aid than military force because of the wicked and magical enchantments that were so diligently practised at the tyrant's court, he sought divine aid, counting the possession of arms and of a numerous soldiery of secondary

importance . . . but declaring the co-operating power of God to be
2 irresistible and unconquerable. He considered therefore what god he should choose as his patron . . .
3 Constantine saw the contrast between the gods of paganism who failed to protect their worshippers, and his father Constantius' monotheism, and decided to cleave to the latter.]

*28.*1 Accordingly he besought his father's god in prayer, beseeching and imploring him to tell him who he was and to stretch out his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most incredible sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honoured with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of aftertime has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and an inscription, CONQUER BY THIS attached to it. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on an expedition, and witnessed the miracle.

*29.*1 He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this portent could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night overtook him; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. (Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, pp. 175–7, and NPNF, altered.)

In Eusebius the vision took place *sometime before* the battle of the Milvian Bridge: in Lactantius the dream occurred in *the night before it.*

*28.*1: *CONQUER BY THIS*: the Latin, i.e. original, form is *In hoc signo vinces.*

250 The 'Edict of Milan', 313

Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 48.2–12

2 When we, Constantine Augustus and Licinius Augustus, had happily met at Milan, and were conferring about all things which concern the

advantage and security of the state, we thought that amongst other things which seemed likely to profit men generally, the reverence paid to the Divinity merited our first and chief attention. Our purpose is to grant both to the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired; whereby whatsoever Divinity dwells in heaven may be benevolent and propitious to us, and to all
3 who are placed under our authority. Therefore we thought it salutary and most proper to establish our purpose that no man whatever should be refused complete toleration, who has given up his mind either to the cult of the Christians, or to the religion which he personally feels best suited to himself; to the end that the supreme Divinity, to whose worship we devote ourselves under no compulsion, may continue in all
4 things to grant us his wonted favour and beneficence. Wherefore your Dignity should know that it is our pleasure to abolish all conditions whatever which were embodied in former orders directed to your office about the Christians, that what appeared utterly inauspicious and foreign to our Clemency should be done away and that every one of those who have a common wish to follow the religion of the Christians may from this moment freely and unconditionally proceed
5 to observe the same without any annoyance or disquiet. These things we thought good to signify in the fullest manner to your Carefulness, that you might know that we have given freely and unreservedly to the
6 said Christians toleration to practise their cult. And when you perceive that we have granted this favour to the said Christians, your Devotion understands that to others also freedom for their own worship and cult is likewise left open and freely granted, as befits the quiet of our times, that every man may have complete toleration in the practice of whatever worship he has chosen. This has been done by us that no
7 diminution be made from the honour of any religion. Moreover in regard to the legal position of the Christians we have thought fit to ordain this also, that if any appear to have bought, whether from our exchequer or from any others, the places at which they were used formerly to assemble, concerning which definite orders have been given before now, and that by a letter issued to your office—that the same be restored to the Christians, setting aside all delay and
8 doubtfulness, without any payment or demand of price. Those also who have obtained them by gift shall restore them in like manner without delay to the said Christians. And those moreover who have bought them, as well as those who have obtained them by gift, if they request anything of our benevolence, shall apply to the Vicarius, that

order may be taken for them too by our Clemency. All these things must be delivered over at once and without delay by your intervention
9 to the corporation of the Christians. And since the said Christians are known to have possessed, not those places only whereto they were used to assemble, but others also belonging to their corporation, namely to their churches, and not to individuals, we comprise them all under the above law, so that you will order them to be restored without any doubtfulness or dispute to the said Christians, that is to their corporation and assemblies; provided always as aforesaid, that those who restore them without price, as we said, shall expect a com-
10 pensation from our benevolence. In all these things you must give the aforesaid Christians your most effective intervention, that our command may be fulfilled as soon as may be, and that in this matter, as well as others, order may be taken by our Clemency for the public
11 quiet. So far we will ensure that, as has been already stated, the Divine favour toward us which we have already experienced in so many affairs shall continue for all time to give us prosperity and
12 successes, together with happiness for the State. But that the tenor of our gracious ordinance may be brought to the knowledge of all men, it will be your duty by a proclamation of your own to publish everywhere and bring to the notice of all men this present document, that the command of this our benevolence may not be hidden. (Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, pp. 171–5, and ANCL, altered in accordance with the text of Brandt and Laubmann in *CSEL*.)

There is a translation into Greek of this document in Eusebius, *HE*, X.5.2–14.

As given by Lactantius, this document is a letter of Licinius directed to the governors of the provinces formerly subject to Maximinus Daia. It probably embodies the toleration already granted by Constantine in the West.

At the meeting at Milan the marriage of Licinius to Constantia, half-sister of Constantine, also took place.

The document embodies, (1) complete religious toleration, a principle on which Constantine never went back (see 275), though his toleration of paganism became more contemptuous; (2) provisions for the restoration of property of which the Christians, either individually or corporately, had been deprived during the persecution, with state compensation for any who suffered loss by this measure.