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Recommended Citation

Angelov, A. (2014). Bishop over "Those Outside": Imperial Diplomacy and the Boundaries of Constantine's Christianity. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 54(2), 274-292.

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Bishop over “Those Outside”: Imperial Diplomacy and the Boundaries of Constantine’s Christianity

Alexander Angelov

AROUND THE TIME of the Council of Nicaea in 325, the emperor Constantine invited several close friends and bishops to dinner. It was in the comfort of good food and a private circle that Constantine shared his own idea on what a Christian emperor should actually be. “You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside”:¹ these were Constantine’s words as recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea, who insisted that he had overheard them in person.

Interested in Constantine’s own imagined role in Christianity, scholars have often commented on the emperor’s private statement. We usually find the imperial remark blended into discussions on Constantine’s piety and his long-term agenda to convert the world to Christianity and to rule as ‘Christ’s vicegerent on Earth’.² We also see it evoked in discussions on

¹ Eus. *Vit. Const.* 4.24, ed. Winkelmann: ἔνθεν εἰκότως αὐτὸς ἐν ἐστιάσει ποτὲ δεξιούμενος ἐπισκόπους λόγον ἀφῆκεν, ὡς ἄρα καὶ αὐτὸς εἶη ἐπίσκοπος, ὧδέ πη αὐτοῖς εἰπὼν ῥήμασιν ἐφ’ ἡμετέραις ἀκοαῖς· “ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος ἐπίσκοπος ἂν εἶην”; translations of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford 1999), sometimes modified.

² For one scholarly example (among many) depicting Constantine as God’s representative on earth see Johannes A. Straub, “Constantine as ΚΟΙΝΟΣ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ: Tradition and Innovation in the Representation of the First Christian Emperor’s Majesty,” *DOP* 21 (1967) 51–52. For an argument that connects Constantine to Moses and thus understands him as a real bishop see Claudia Rapp, “Imperial Ideology in the Making: Eusebius

church/state relations, or even encounter it understood as a joke, a casual quip.³ Eusebius himself interpreted the phrase as Constantine's ambition to be the supreme ruler of all Romans: "It follows by this phrase [bishop over those outside] that having in mind those over whom he ruled, he was an overseer [or bishop] of them all" (ἀκόλουθα δὲ τῷ λόγῳ διανοούμενος τοὺς ἀρχομένους ἅπαντας ἐπεσκόπει).⁴ However one chooses to interpret Constantine's phrase, it certainly invites us to think about the emperor's relation to those outside either the Christian Church or the Roman state.⁵

Studies on Constantine's policies against non-Christians are abundant, but surprisingly, especially in light of the recent explosion of work on the emperor, very few have seriously explored his relation with Christians who were outside of the Roman state. Claims that he envisaged himself as a global patron of Christians, which dominate the scholarly literature, are often based on assumptions derived from his domestic ecclesiastical involvement and policies.⁶ This article focuses on a

of Caesarea on Constantine as 'Bishop'," *JThS* 49 (1998) 685–695, and "Comparison, Paradigm and the Case of Moses in Panegyric and Hagiography," in Michael Whitby (ed.), *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 1998) 277–298.

³ For church/state relations and an emphasis on Constantine's sense of universal Christian mission see T. G. Elliott, *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (Scranton 1996) 327–336. For a summary of scholarly discussion of the phrase understood as an early sign of Byzantine caesaropapism see Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (New York 2010) 258. For Constantine's joke and quip see Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge 2011) 76.

⁴ *Vit. Const.* 4.24. This is a skillful wordplay revolving around the meaning of ἐπίσκοπος (bishop or overseer).

⁵ For a helpful bibliography on this passage see Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine* 320 n.24.

⁶ For a recent example of the widespread depiction of Constantine as a 'universal Christian ruler' see Elizabeth Key Fowden, "Constantine and the Peoples on the Eastern Frontier," in Noel Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge 2012) 377–398, esp. 389. See also

unique diplomatic letter cited in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine* (4.9–13) in order to evaluate Constantine’s presentation of Christianity both abroad and at home. Identified by some as the only surviving diplomatic document written by a Roman emperor himself, it has generated much commentary and disagreement.⁷ The letter has even managed to cross from academic literature into modern politics where it has been summoned as a witness for Armenia’s claim to primordial national sovereignty.⁸ The bibliography on Constantine’s letter is indeed long and the contestations often ardent. Yet its rhetorical features have not been systematically explored, so its diplomatic posture and the ways in which it charted the boundaries of Constantine’s Christianity have been largely overlooked.⁹

Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, “Apostolic Geography: The Origins and Continuity of a Hagiographic Habit,” *DOP* 64 (2010) 5–25, who argues that “bishop of those outside” should be understood in a geographical sense: “The New Rome stood as the hub of a wheel with apostolic or missionary spokes extending outward to the furthest reaches of the unknown world” (24).

⁷ B. H. Warmington, “The Sources of Some Constantinian Documents in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Life of Constantine*,” *Studia Patristica* 18 (1986) 94; C. Dupont, “Décisions et textes constantiniens dans les oeuvres d’Eusèbe de Césarée,” *Viator* 2 (1971) 32; C. Pietri, “Constantin en 324: Propagande et théologie impériales d’après les documents de la *Vita Constantini*,” in F. Frézouls (ed.), *Crise et redressement dans les provinces européennes de l’Empire* (Strasbourg 1983) 63 and 90.

⁸ For Armenia as a sovereign state on a pro-western historical path see Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies: Matters of Doctrine and Administration* (New York 1996) 63.

⁹ A major exception is Miriam Raub Vivian, *A Letter to Shapur: The Effect of Constantine’s Conversion on Roman-Persian Relations* (diss. U. California Santa Barbara 1987). Vivian (*Abstract*) concludes that (1) the letter is best understood not only as evidence for Constantine’s Christianity but also for his policy towards Persia, (2) “Constantine’s conversion changed the relationship between a Roman emperor and Christians abroad by adding a concern for their welfare to his responsibilities as a Christian king,” (3) as a result “Christians in Persia became politically as well as religiously suspect,” and

Especially in Anglo-American scholarship, the text is often brought into a general picture of Constantine's inveterate willingness to protect Christians at home and abroad. Usually placed in the context of strained Roman-Persian relations, the letter is read by scholars in a way that in effect casts Constantine as the first crusader in history.¹⁰ As provocative as these possibilities might be, a close analysis of the rich rhetorical exposition reveals a conciliatory and modest diplomatic approach on the part of the emperor. If we follow the scholarly consensus and accept the letter's authenticity, we can indeed hail it as an important, even unprecedented, personal religious manifesto as well as daring advice on proper governance centered on the Christian God. But it signals no imminent or distant threat to the Persian authorities, partly because Constantine in fact accepted the Persian shah's equal political standing and thus confined his own sovereignty over Christians to the domain of the Roman state.

Although significant, foreign affairs were only one aspect of the letter's agenda. Many of its explicit and implicit messages were directed to political factions at home. My analysis, therefore, will follow closely the rhetorical exposition of the letter, switching lenses between issues relevant to domestic and foreign audiences. In the end, the letter also throws light on how the emperor's new religious image was forged in the old political ideology of the Roman state in order to temper the radical novelty of Christianity. Even in this letter, one may sense the tension between the mandates of religion and the practical exigencies of government that came to shape all subsequent Christian rulers of the empire and beyond.

(4) "international alliances often came to turn on the question of religious faith." I disagree with some of these conclusions.

¹⁰ For a specific reference to Constantine as crusader see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 96. See also T. D. Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," *JRS* 75 (1985) 132.

Constantine’s letter and Christianity abroad

Originally written in the official Latin of the Roman state, the letter survives only in Greek translation in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*. According to Eusebius, the emperor wrote it personally and circulated its important message throughout the empire and abroad.¹¹ In preparing the manuscript of the *Life*, Eusebius translated Constantine’s text into Greek “so that it may be more readily understood by those who encounter it.”¹² But since the work was essentially a draft published only after Eusebius’ death in 339, his translation and commentary on the letter could have been intended as only preliminary.¹³

The insertion of Constantine’s letter in Eusebius’ essentially hagiographical text poses serious problems of interpretation, and scholars have long been divided over some basic issues. Although a few influential skeptics have remained, the authenticity of the letter has generally been accepted, so the debate has shifted to Constantine’s recipient and the letter’s precise date.¹⁴ The usual suspects for recipient are the Armenian ruler

¹¹ For views on how Eusebius obtained a copy of the letter see H. A. Drake, “What Eusebius Knew: The Genesis of the *Vita Constantini*,” *CP* 83 (1988) 29. Drake himself believes that Eusebius had an archival version. Warmington believes that the letter was “cited” or “described” to him: *Studia Patristica* 18 (1986) 95–96.

¹² *Vit. Const.* 4.8: μεταβληθὲν δ’ ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλήνων φωνὴν γνωριμώτερον γένοιτ’ ἂν τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσιν.

¹³ For specifics on writing the *Life* see G. Pasquali, “Die Composition der *Vita Constantini* des Eusebius,” *Hermes* 45 (1910) 369–386. Cf. Drake, *CP* 83 (1988) 25: “The nature of Book 4 suggests that it is the least revised of all.”

¹⁴ For a careful study of Eusebius’ sources that accepts the authenticity of the letter see A. H. M. Jones and T. C. Skeat, “Notes on the Genuineness of the Constantinian Documents in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*,” *JEH* 5 (1954) 196–200. The major advocate against the authorship of Constantine is H. Grégoire, “Eusèbe n’est pas l’auteur de la ‘*Vita Constantini*’ dans sa forme actuelle et Constantin ne s’est pas ‘converti’ en 312,” *Byzantion* 13 (1938) 561–586. For a historiographical overview on the issue of authenticity see F. Winkelmann, “Zur Geschichte des Authentizitätsproblems der *Vita Constantini*,” *Klio* 40 (1962) 187–243.

Trdat (287–330) and the Persian shah Shapur II (309–379). The putative dates of the letter extend from 324 (after Constantine's victory over Licinius) to 337 (the year of his death).¹⁵

The argument in support of Trdat rests on the claim that Eusebius' knowledge of the eastern frontier was limited, so when he casually referred to Persia (he never mentions Armenia in the context of the letter), he presumably folded Trdat's kingdom into it. A later editor, now unknown, supposedly was oblivious to Eusebius' error and specified, wrongly, the Persian shah Shapur II.¹⁶ Scholars in this camp have taken the message of the letter itself as a witness against Shapur and in favor of Trdat. First, Constantine's acknowledgement of the humiliating Persian victories over the Romans in the 260s is considered impossible in an official letter sent to the shah. Second, his endorsement of Christianity is seen as an unlikely diplomatic move, for it would have presumably triggered immediate Persian persecutions. On the basis of these counterfactuals, scholars have supposed a Christian ally of Constantine and thus have pointed to the Armenian Trdat.

Most scholars today, especially in Anglo-American literature, reverse the above arguments and are in support of Shapur. Thus, they have trusted the reference to Persia: they have considered it viable for the Roman emperor to grant the shah his victories, and they have taken Constantine's Christian declaration to the Persians as a major testimony of his strong religious convictions. Set within an elaborate plot on the part of the Roman emperor to invade Persia, the letter is often read as the earliest, though ambiguous and allusive, sign of Constantine's rising and vengeful hostility. It is maintained that the letter was sent in 324 (shortly after October), and Constantine's cam-

¹⁵ See Garth Fowden, "The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and their Author(s)," *JRS* 84 (1994) 148 n.11.

¹⁶ The major proponent of this theory is D. De Decker, "Sur le destinataire de la lettre au roi des Perses (Eusèbe de Césarée, Vit. Const., IV, 9–13) et la conversion de l'Arménie à la religion chrétienne," *Persica* 8 (1979) 99–116.

paign was launched in 336.¹⁷

As we shall see, Eusebius’ translation is indeed allusive and ambiguous. But rather than exploring its deliberate rhetoric, scholars have treated it as a major obstruction on their path to solid historical facts. The lack of systematic literary analysis has in effect reduced the subtle political and cultural messages of the text to generalities usually funneled through pre-conceived notions of Constantine’s political and religious intentions. There are those who imagine Constantine as a pacifist corresponding with a fellow Christian ruler, and their opponents who see him on a militaristic path leading to a crusade against Persia. The letter, however, is more variegated, and its message is subtler than both alternatives suggest.

Since most scholars today see the recipient as Shapur II and the date as 324, my analysis will focus also on the Persian context, for it is not the goal of this article to re-evaluate the consensus on the issue. Instead, I shall draw attention to specific passages in order to uncover their rhetorical appeal to disparate audiences in the Roman Empire and abroad. Although the letter evoked various, at times even rival, cultural and political sensitivities, its ultimate agenda was to embrace the several factions within a single political and religious ideology.

As it stands, the letter opens with Constantine’s declaration of the new religion’s luminary effect upon his own *self* and upon the empire at large:¹⁸

¹⁷ The major proponent of these dates is Barnes, *JRS* 75 (1985) 132.

¹⁸ *Vit. Const.* 4.9: τὴν θεῖαν πίστιν φυλάσσω τὸ τῆς ἀληθείας φωτὸς μεταλαγχάνω. τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας φωτὶ ὀδηγούμενος τὴν θεῖαν πίστιν ἐπιγινώσκω. τοιγάρτοι τούτοις, ὡς τὰ πράγματα βεβαιοῖ, τὴν ἀγιωτάτην θρησκείαν γνωρίζω. διδάσκαλον τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ ἀγιωτάτου θεοῦ ταύτην τὴν λατρείαν ἔχειν ὁμολογῶ. τούτου τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δύναμιν ἔχων σύμμαχον, ἐκ τῶν περάτων τοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ ἀρξάμενος πᾶσαν ἐφεξῆς τὴν οἰκουμένην βεβαίως σωτηρίας ἐλπίσι διήγειρα, ὡς ἅπαντα ὅσα ὑπὸ τοσοῦτοις τυράννοις δεδουλωμένα ταῖς καθημεριναῖς συμφοραῖς ἐνδόντα ἐξίτηλα ἐγεγόνει, ταῦτα προσλαβόντα τὴν τῶν κοινῶν ἐκδικίαν ὡσπερ ἕκ τινος θεραπείας ἀναζωπυρηθῆναι.

Guarding the divine faith, I participate in the light of truth. Led by the light of truth, I recognize the divine faith. Certainly, by these things, as events confirm, I acknowledge the most holy religion. I confess that I hold this cult to be the teacher of the knowledge of the most holy God. Having the power of this God as ally, beginning from the shores of the Ocean I have raised up the whole world step by step with sure hopes of salvation, so that all those things, which under the slavery of such great tyrants yielded to daily disasters and had come near to vanishing, have obtained the rectification of the public weal and come back to life as if by some medication.

Already in the introduction, Constantine drew upon powerful ideological motifs in order to reconcile fractured political allegiances in the aftermath of the recent civil wars. To Christians, these opening lines promised political endorsement and even alluded to a soteriological vision of history (σωτηρίας ἐλπίσι). To non-Christian Roman audiences, the pietistic ideals, characterizing Constantine as a humble and devout man, were coupled with the ancient motif of restoration, for centuries now deeply embedded in Roman political thought and employed with particularly brilliant skill by the propaganda of Augustus. To appeal to Roman conservative sensitivities, Constantine emphasized the centrality of the law and the restoration of peace and freedom, the “healing” of the state from the “illness” of tyranny. Branding his opponents “tyrants” drew on the rich connotation of the Greek word and its long political history.¹⁹ On the one hand, it dismissed the authority of Constantine’s adversaries as illegal, denigrating them as authoritarian rulers who set themselves above the law. On the other, it rhetorically gave legitimacy to Constantine as the self-proclaimed defender of traditional government based on freedom and justice. Past and future opponents were thus forever castigated as “usurpers.”

Constantine’s introduction delivered multiple messages to its

¹⁹ For a recent study on ‘tyranny’ and its meaning in antiquity see James F. McGlew. *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1993).

foreign audience as well. Persian followers of Ahura Mazda, for example, would have welcomed the Roman emperor’s monotheistic manifesto.²⁰ And Constantine’s rhetorical justification for suppressing his opponents could be readily imported into the political propaganda of Shapur II. Like Constantine’s own coming to power, the Persian shah’s rise to the throne was questionable since he put aside his elder brother Hormisdas, who likely remained alive only because he managed to escape from prison.²¹ Constantine knew that both political regimes had to find ways to legitimize themselves, so his rhetoric could serve as a personal justification of his coming to power and as a diplomatic validation of Shapur’s own standing at the same time.

The careful diplomacy and allusive nature of Constantine’s text unfolded further in the next section of the letter. Pressed by political expediency and his religious commitment, he tried to find appealing ways in which he could introduce his new god to an overwhelming Roman majority unfamiliar with his eastern deity. The emperor did not rely on philosophical argumentation but drew on his military success:²²

The God I profess is the one whose sign my army, dedicated to God, carries on its shoulders, and to whatever things the Word of Justice summons it goes directly; and from those men I receive thanks immediately with manifest trophies. This is the God I profess to honor with undying remembrance, and I make it shiningly clear that with an unsullied and pure mind I hold Him to be in the highest.

²⁰ For such a possibility seen in Constantine’s coinage see David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay* (New York 2004) 446.

²¹ For an account of Hormisdas see R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds 1992) 8–12.

²² *Vit. Const.* 4.9: τοῦτον τὸν θεὸν πρεσβεύω, οὗ τὸ σημεῖον ὁ τῷ θεῷ ἀνακείμενός μου στρατὸς ὑπὲρ τῶν ὅμων φέρει, καὶ ἐφ’ ἅπερ ἂν ὁ τοῦ δικαίου λόγος παρακαλῆ κατευθύνεται· ἐξ αὐτῶν δ’ ἐκείνων περιφανέσι τροπαίοις αὐτίκα τὴν χάριν ἀντιλαμβάνω. τοῦτον τὸν θεὸν ἀθανάτῳ μνήμῃ τιμᾶν ὁμολογῶ, τοῦτον ἀκραιβνεῖ καὶ καθαρῶ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἀνωτάτω τυγχάνειν ὑπεραυάζομαι.

In retrospect, it is easy to discover the embedded Christian notions of the text. We could even register some of the major tropes of Christian political theory: the emperor as an ambassador of God (πρεσβεύω)²³ and a direct recipient of divine grace (χάρις)²⁴ or as a vehicle of divine light (ὑπεραυγάζομαι).²⁵ But none of those ideas were self-evident to an audience that knew little about Christianity. To the majority of the Romans and to the foreign elites, this was simply a personal confession, promoting a victorious deity. The rhetoric even revolved around a topos of humility, reframing Constantine from a hero to a recipient of divine benevolence.²⁶ The opening assertions of Constantine's manifesto attested a careful mediation between different audiences at home and abroad.

Particularly in the social and political context of the 320s, Constantine's letter should be seen as his first major attempt to express in a moderate way his otherwise unconventional religious views. The emperor had to be cautious in the face of disparate allegiances and the overwhelming majority of non-Christian Romans. To a foreign audience, too, the letter con-

²³ The verb, especially in a political context, carries the denotation of 'to be an ambassador', 'to mediate', thus alluding to the notion of the emperor as God's representative on earth. The invention of this powerful and enduring ideological image is credited to Eusebius.

²⁴ In Christian theology, χάρις 'grace' has provoked heated debates (ancient and modern) about God's operations on earth and His relation to humanity, particularly in relation to evil in humanity and God's salvific plan. Constantine either depicted himself as a direct beneficiary of God's grace on behalf of the Christians or he emphasized the gratitude bestowed upon him by those in respect of justice. As elsewhere, the ambiguity is deliberate.

²⁵ The word evokes the semantics of light, a favorite Christian metonymy. Another possible and perhaps even stricter translation here could be "I am enlightened profoundly."

²⁶ Influenced by the image of Constantine as a religious expansionist, scholars have viewed this passage in particular as "a veiled warning to Shapur that an anti-Christian policy will lead to conflict": Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine* 314–315 n.9.

veyed a diplomatic profession of Constantine’s new religion. Beyond the general posture of the text which we have analyzed so far, two passages in particular support a conciliatory interpretation. The first alludes to Valerian:²⁷

I believe I am not mistaken, my brother, in confessing this one God, the Author and Father of all, whom many of those who have reigned here, seduced by insane errors, have attempted to reject. But such punishment finally came upon them that all mankind since has regarded their fate as superseding all other examples to warn those who strive for the same ends. Among them I consider that one whom divine wrath like a sort of thunderbolt drove from these parts and handed over to yours, where he caused the victory on your side to become very famous because of the ignominy he suffered.

Domestically, this passage accomplished the general objective of the letter in condemning the anti-Christian Roman past while also calling for an antithetical, pro-Christian future of the Roman Empire. Constantine’s propaganda here capitalized on the notorious death of the emperor Valerian in the Persian wars of the 260s. Never explicitly named in the text (τούτων ἐκεῖνον ἕνα), Valerian and his failed campaign and brutal murder epitomized one of the most disgraceful Roman debacles, and many stories about Valerian’s demise circulated in the empire.²⁸ Christians in particular interpreted his defeat as a testimony to God’s wrath that commanded a dramatic change

²⁷ *Vit. Const.* 4.11: οὐ μοι δοκῶ πλανᾶσθαι, ἀδελφέ μου, τοῦτον ἕνα θεὸν ὁμολογῶν πάντων ἀρχηγὸν καὶ πατέρα, ὃν πολλοὶ τῶν τῆδε βασιλευσάντων μανιώδεσι πλάναις ὑπαχθέντες ἐπεχείρησαν ἀρνήσασθαι. ἀλλ’ ἐκείνους μὲν ἅπαντας τοιοῦτον τιμωρὸν τέλος κατανάλωσεν, ὡς πᾶν τὸ μετ’ ἐκείνους ἀνθρώπων γένος τὰς ἐκείνων συμφορὰς ἀντ’ ἄλλου παραδείγματος τοῖς παρὰ τούτοις τὰ ὅμοια ζηλοῦσι τίθεσθαι. τούτων ἐκεῖνον ἕνα ἡγοῦμαι γεγονέναι, ὃν ὡσπερ τις σκηπτὸς ἢ θεία μῆνις τῶν τῆδε ἀπελάσασα τοῖς ὑμετέροις μέρεσι παραδέδωκεν, τῆς [ἐπ’ αὐτῷ] αἰσχύνης πολυθρύλητον τὸ παρ’ ὑμῖν τρόπαιον ἀποφύναντα.

²⁸ Contradictory accounts and rumors on Valerian’s death: Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 5.4; Eus. *Oratio ad Sanctorum coetum* 24.2, cf. *HE* 7.13 where Valerian is described as a slave.

of religious policies. Some reported that Valerian served as a stool of the Persian shah; others claimed that he was eventually skinned and stuffed with straw to decorate the chambers of the Persian palace. Constantine exploited those painful memories to promote his religious innovations and to silence any political opposition in the ranks of his elites.

In a foreign context, the passage sought to alleviate strained relations with Persia. Right at the outset, Constantine invoked the ancient appellation ‘brother’ that put Romans and Persians on an equal level of imperial legitimacy and sovereignty.²⁹ It was perhaps an attempt to re-enter diplomatic relations with Persia after the conflicts of his predecessors. ‘Brother’ had additional resonance with the Christians, especially with the explicit appeal to a common Creator. From that perspective the reference to Valerian was not a veiled threat, as one scholar has suggested,³⁰ but an appeal to embrace Christianity and continue to rule on equal terms.

The invocation of brotherhood was indeed a strong tactical move. At the same time, the acknowledgement of Persian sovereignty served to restore Rome’s own political standing, weakened by the recent military losses and civil turmoil. It sought to draw in both foreign and domestic elites and to predispose them towards the essential points of the letter:³¹

²⁹ The bibliography on the equal imperial standing of Byzantium and Persia is immense. For an early scholarly example see A. Gasquet, “L’empire d’Orient et l’empire d’Occident. De l’emploi du mot βασιλεύς dans les actes de la chancellerie byzantine,” *RHist* 26 (1884) 281–302; more recently, Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley 2009) 101.

³⁰ Barnes, *JRS* 75 (1985) 131–132. Alternatively, some scholars have used Valerian to argue altogether against Shapur as the recipient on the premise that Constantine could never have publicly admitted a Roman defeat to the Persians: e.g. P. Batiffol, “Les documents de la Vita Constantini,” *BAncLit* 4 (1914) 90; N. H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London 1930) 27. My analysis accommodates the objections against Shapur by pointing out the political advantages of Constantine’s reference to Valerian.

³¹ *Vit. Const.* 4.13: τούτου τοῦ καταλόγου τῶν ἀνθρώπων, λέγω δὴ τῶν

With this class of persons—I mean of course the Christians, my whole concern being for them—how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned! May the very best come to you therefore, and at the same time the best for them, since they are also yours. For so you will keep the sovereign Lord of the Universe kind, merciful, and benevolent. These therefore, since you are so great, I entrust to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety. Love them in accordance with your own humanity. For you will give enormous satisfaction both to yourself and to us by keeping faith.

This was an open and quite explicit declaration of Constantine’s Christian convictions. It was also a strategic appeal towards mutual kindness, mercy, and benevolence in imitation of the ultimate Creator (οὕτω γὰρ ἔξεις τὸν τῶν ὅλων δεσπότην [πρῶον] ἴλεω καὶ εὐμενῇ). These were not casual clichés, for the emperor recognized the significance of the diplomatic exchange and the potential risk that he was taking in trying to promote a new religion abroad. He associated himself with the Christians in Persia, but he also committed them to the hopefully protective hands of the Persian shah.

Unfortunately, the foreign response on this letter is not reported. But we do have Eusebius’ personal interpretation, which followed right after the letter:³²

Χριστιανῶν (ὕπερ τούτων ὁ πᾶς μοι λόγος), πῶς οἶμι με ἠδεσθαι ἀκούοντα ὅτι καὶ τῆς Περσίδος τὰ κράτιστα ἐπὶ πλείστον, ὡσπερ ἔστι μοι βουλομένῳ, κεκόσμηται. σοὶ τ’ οὖν ὡς ὅτι κάλλιστα ἐκείνοις θ’ ὡσαύτως ὑπάρχει τὰ κάλλιστα, ὅτι σοὶ κάκεινοι. οὕτω γὰρ ἔξεις τὸν τῶν ὅλων δεσπότην [πρῶον] ἴλεω καὶ εὐμενῇ. τούτους τοιγαροῦν, ἐπειδὴ τοσοῦτος εἶ, σοὶ παρατίθεμαι, τοὺς αὐτοὺς τούτους, ὅτι καὶ εὐσεβεῖα ἐπίσημος εἶ, ἐγχειρίζων· τούτους ἀγάπα ἀρμοδίως τῆς σεαυτοῦ φιλανθρωπίας· σαυτῶ τε γὰρ καὶ ἡμῖν ἀπερίγραφτον δώσεις διὰ τῆς πίστεως τὴν χάριν.

³² *Vit. Const.* 4.14: οὕτω δὲ λοιπὸν τῶν ἀπανταχοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἔθνων ὡσπερ ὑφ’ ἐνὶ κυβερνήτῃ διευθυνομένων καὶ τὴν ὑπὸ τῷ θεράποντι τοῦ θεοῦ πολιτείαν ἀσπαζομένων, μηδενὸς μηκέτι παρενοχλοῦντος τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχήν, ἐν εὐσταθεῖ καὶ ἀταράχῳ βίῳ τὴν ζωὴν διηγῶν οἱ πάντες.

Thus finally, with all peoples everywhere in the world steered as if by a single helmsman and embracing the political order under the servant of God, with no one any longer troubling the rule of the Romans, all led their lives in well-being and undisturbed livelihood.

Precisely what Eusebius meant by this highly charged and ambiguous summary is hard to discern, for theoretically he could have meant simply that Constantine had secured peace for his Christian Roman empire, or that he brought peace upon all Christians everywhere in the world (τῶν ἀπανταχοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἔθνῶν). As in the instances studied above, Eusebius' comment hinged on the rich connotations of key words and expressions. He may have restricted οἰκουμένη in conjunction with πολιτεία to include only the Roman polity. On this line of semantics, his comment selectively involved only the Romans and their acceptance of Christianity which has effectively secured peace at home and abroad. οἰκουμένη then could be narrowly translated as “our culture,” and πολιτεία could mean “polity,” “political order,” or even “republic,” familiar from the established translation of Plato's magnum opus.³³

The alternative interpretation of Eusebius' comment is to extend the semantic meaning of οἰκουμένη to the entire known world. In this case, he may have meant that all polities “in the civilized world” followed the Romans “steered as if by a single helmsman” and thus “all led their lives in well-being and undisturbed livelihood.”

Both interpretations are possible, although to render οἰκουμένη as “the civilized world” is more likely given Eusebius'

³³ For the rich connotation of οἰκουμένη in classical Greek see James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton 1992) 37–38. For a thorough study of οἰκουμένη within Roman ideological parameters see Attilio Mastino, “ORBIS, ΚΟΣΜΟΣ, ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΗ: Aspetti spaziali dell'idea di impero universale da Augusto a Teodosio,” *Popoli e spazio romano tra diritto e profetia* (Naples 1986) 63–162. On πολιτεία in non-Christian and Christian contexts see Nathanael J. Andrade, “The Syriac Life of John of Tella and the Frontier *Politeia*,” *Hugoye* 12 (2009) 199–234.

hagiographical agenda. Whatever the actual authorial intent, it is peace and tranquility that he emphasized, so it is out of place to conclude that “Eusebius believed that Constantine wanted to place the Christians of Persia under his own care and regarded this as one expression of Constantine’s desire to take thought for all men.”³⁴ And given the political context in which the letter was prepared and finally sent, the insistence on peace in Eusebius’ summation is more plausible. Moreover, we should note ἐν εὐσταθει, which could mean literally “in good standing” or “in good health.” Here at the very conclusion, the phrase is a skillful way to remind again of the restorative work of Constantine, an idea with which the letter began. The emperor supposedly cured the οἰκουμένη as a doctor would cure patients. Inspired by the New Testament, the imagery of healing was widely popular in Christian writings. Eusebius wanted to leave his readers with the basic image of Constantine as the deliverer of “well-being and undisturbed livelihood.”

Despite the diplomatic tone and the conciliatory rhetoric, scholars have remained suspicious of the letter’s slippery message and have interpreted it as antagonistic.³⁵ Even beyond the

³⁴ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley 2000) 345. Note that even Ando is implicitly uneasy with his interpretation and weakens it by adding “But Constantine did not question the legitimacy of Sapor’s governance over Persia, nor even his rulership over his Christian subjects—so long as Sapor’s piety toward them remained unquestioned.” See also David Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (New York 2013) 286, insisting that Constantine was preparing a campaign against Persia ever since defeating Licinius in 324.

³⁵ Barnes, *JRS* 75 (1985) 132: “And did Constantine not allude, even in his letter to Shapur, to a career of conquest which began in the far west and proceeded eastward? Where would Constantine cease his conquests? Shapur had good reason to suspect that the Roman emperor was planning to make war against him.” Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay* 446–447: “In the last section of the letter, however, Constantine says something that could be regarded as deeply troubling, for there he reveals that the god about whom he is speaking is the Christian God, and that he expects the Persian king to look after Christian communities in his realm. The veiled threat implicit in this statement is softened by the assertion that Constantine’s religiosity is not

objections based on rhetoric, however, two other points challenge the militaristic interpretation. First, although Constantine had recently defeated his rival Licinius (324), his power was far from consolidated. In fact, he spent many subsequent years and resources tarnishing Licinius' memory in an attempt to gain full military and political allegiance. Thus it is highly unlikely that Constantine in the 320s would wish to provoke an adversary like Persia on the eastern borders of the empire, the former stronghold of his domestic opposition.

The second problem with a militaristic interpretation of the letter is that it evokes prematurely the Roman-Persian conflicts of the late 330s or, even beyond, the Persian persecution of Christians in the 340s.³⁶ That presumes incredible foresight on the part of both Constantine and Shapur. Neither the Roman emperor nor the Persian shah in the 320s could have realistically anticipated the turn of events, triggered by the Armenian king Trdat's death in 330. Internecine struggles for the vacant throne eventually divided the *nakharars* (the Armenian nobles) into two factions: those who supported Arsaces, Trdat's son, and their opponents who turned to Persia. In 336, the shah became involved, presumably prompting Constantine's preparation for a military response.³⁷ The emperor's campaign ended prematurely, however, with his precipitous illness and death in 337.³⁸ Even if the conversion to Christianity of the Iberian king Mirian (284–361) at some point in the 330s could be connected

dissimilar to that of the Persian king himself"; but "Shapur may have had reason to be deeply suspicious of what Constantine was saying." Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy* 9 and 11, explicitly calls Constantine's letter a military threat. For the letter as an ultimatum see Ch. Pietri, "La conversion de Rome et la primauté du pape (IV^e–VI^e s.)," *Il primato del vescovo di Roma nel primo millennio* (Vatican City 1991) 225.

³⁶ See Barnes, *JRS* 75 (1985) 128–132.

³⁷ For details see Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay* 447, and Barnes, *JRS* 75 (1985) 132.

³⁸ For details on Constantine's final days see Fowden, *JRS* 84 (1994) 146–170.

to Persian reactions and anti-Christian policies of the 340s, the year 324 and Constantine’s letter were too remote from those events to be plausibly related.³⁹

Instead of being understood as foreshadowing Constantine’s supposed program of crusade, the historical value of the letter is in its unprecedented illustration of the ways in which the first Christian emperor communicated his religion abroad for the first time (or at the very least the ways in which Eusebius presented the imperial Christian image when exported abroad). First, the letter cast the emperor as a Christian activist and defender of the faith, at least within the empire if not necessarily beyond it. Then, the letter extended an unprecedented invitation to the foreign ruler to do the same. But these were diplomatic words and as such were carefully crafted, ambiguous and charged with complex nuances and meanings. Constantine’s Christian manifesto was not a veiled threat and an open declaration of the emperor’s patronage of all Christians. Quite the contrary, his letter may very well have been advice on how to function as a ruler in difficult times.

³⁹ Barnes dates the Persian anti-Christian policy to 340 and links it to a sequence of foreign conversions to Christianity—the Iberians in the 330s (the precise date is disputed), the Goths in 332, and the Sarmatians in 334. Invoking Constantine’s supposed plans to invade Persia, Barnes portrays him as a Christian crusader and views the letter of 324 as an early foreshadowing of his militaristic intentions: *JRS* 75 (1985) 132. Recently, however, R. W. Burgess has re-dated the Persian sequence of events. Rather than understood as a single event, he presents the Persian anti-Christian policy as a sequence of escalating episodes, spanning from 340 (the beginning of church destructions in Persia) to 345 (the “great massacre”): “The Dates of the Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba’e and the ‘Great Massacre,’” *AnalBoll* 117 (1999) 9–66. If Burgess is correct, there is an even longer separation between Constantine’s letter in 324 and these later events. In addition, the specifics of the foreign conversions to Christianity and their actual political repercussions are much debated. For a helpful overview on Iberia/Georgia see Stephen H. Rapp, Jr, “Georgian Christianity,” in Ken Parry (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (Malden 2007) 137–155.

Conclusions

The historical significance of Constantine's involvement with Christianity could easily overwhelm modern perceptions of his otherwise multi-dimensional rule. Already in the fourth century, Christians worked hard and were successful at constructing enduring tropes about their first emperor. Some of these tropes have captivated scholars who often overextend the emperor's Christian preoccupations. Usually folded into narratives of Christian commitment and imperial expansionism, the letter of Constantine is symptomatic of this tendency. Even if we politicize the emperor's religiosity as a way of engaging with the conclusions that other scholars have reached, we can hold that there are grounds to believe that he sent the letter to Shapur in the hope that a Christian Persian shah would assure better foreign relations between the two states. But nothing in the letter suggests that Constantine was threatening the Persians with war in defense of the Christians. At the same time, there is no indication that Constantine believed that conversion of the shah would somehow add to the power of the Romans.

Domestically, the letter sought to reconcile opposing political factions in the aftermath of the recent civil wars. The rhetoric carried the difficult task of framing Christianity as the absolute social and political panacea for the Roman πολιτεία and the οἰκουμένη. To convince Roman conservatives, it sought to soften Constantine's religious innovations by inserting them into the ancient framework of restoration and promotion of peace and justice, previously exploited by Augustus with considerable success.

In addition to illuminating issues of diplomacy and conveying some of the rhetorical ways in which Christianity was accommodated to traditional Roman ideology, the letter serves as a valuable source concerning Constantine's patronage of Christians abroad. It is a clear reminder that his domestic Christian concerns should not be automatically exported abroad. His own political standing as well as the general stability of the state had higher priority, especially in the tumultuous 320s. From the perspective of the letter's rhetoric, the

famous remark “bishop over those outside” narrowly translates as “overseer of the Romans alone.” In effect, the letter highlights the two dimensions of rule for all subsequent Christian emperors, caught as they came to be between dogmatic religious prescriptions and the practical everyday demands of government.

March, 2014

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