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# What did Constantine learn in 325? Constantine's theological declarations before, at and after Nicaea

*¿Qué aprendió Constantino en 325? Declaraciones  
teológicas de Constantino antes, en y después de Nicea*

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**Resumen:** El análisis del corpus de las cartas del emperador Constantino, en particular la que dirigió al sínodo de Arles en 314, la que dirigió a la Iglesia de Nicomedia en 325, y la que dirigió a Arrio en 333, y del relato de Eusebio de Cesarea acerca del concilio de Nicea de 325, permiten evaluar la evolución de las representaciones teológicas del primer emperador cristiano. El interés de Constantino no fue sólo político sino que él supo también escuchar y entender cuáles eran los hitos teológicos de la controversia.

**Palabras clave:** Constantino, Concilio de Nicea, Eusebio de Cesarea, Marcelo de Ancira, Eustacio de Antioquía, cristología.

**Abstract:** The analysis of the corpus of letters of the emperor Constantine, in particular, the one he addressed to the synod of Arles in 314, the one he addressed to the Church of Nicomedia in 325 and the one he addressed to Arius in 333, and of Eusebius of Caesarea's account of the Synod of Nicaea in 325, allows to evaluate the evolution of the theological representations of the first Christian emperor. Constantine's interest was not only political, but he also was able to listen to and understand the theological milestones of the controversy.

**Keywords:** Constantine, Council of Nicaea, Eusebius of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra, Eustathius of Antioch, Christology.

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**Cómo citar el artículo:** Xavier MORALES, *What did Constantine learn in 325? Constantine's theological declarations before, at and after Nicaea*, en *Anuario Historia de la Iglesia*, 32 (2023), pp. 159-188.  
<https://doi.org/10.15581/007.32.006>

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\* A first version of this article was presented at the workshop on «Nicaea (325) and its Reception» held at Boston College (Boston, Ma.) on May 7th, 2022. Its content is the result of the author's participation in the research project of Professor Samuel Fernández, FONDECYT Regular 1190025: «Constantinopla (381), ¿confirmación, negación o relectura de Nicea (325)? Contribución de la actividad sinodal al desarrollo de la teología del siglo IV.» The author expresses his gratitude to the editorial board of the *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* and the peer reviewers of the manuscript for valuable suggestions, and to Manuel Mira Iborra for his meticulous revision of the first draft.

The Roman emperor Flavius Valerius Constantinus has been the subject of numerous studies, in particular to determine when, to what extent, and why he became a Christian, and to describe his religious policy<sup>1</sup>. In this context, it is mainly the first period of his reign, from 306 until the elimination of his last rival, Licinius, in 324, that is analysed, as well as the various accounts of his alleged «vision» at the Milvian Bridge in 312. Yet Constantine was not only the first Christian emperor, he was also the first emperor theologian<sup>2</sup>. As a matter of fact, various documents penned by the emperor include theological declarations, before and after the council of Nicaea (325), and Eusebius of Caesarea, eyewitness of the council, emphatically affirms that the idea of inserting the word «consubstantial» in the theological exposition of the council, an idea which gave pretext to more than fifty years of theological debate, was his.

In this paper, I would like to assess the authenticity and coherence of the theological declarations of the first Christian emperor. In order to do so, I have chosen various documents containing important theological declarations attributed to Constantine. I have consciously omitted an analysis of the long *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*<sup>3</sup>, with its rich theological content, because the determination of its date of composition is still the subject of divergent hypotheses<sup>4</sup> and would require a separate treatment. The analysis will focus on the corpus of Constantine's letters, some of which include substantial theological developments.

Three of them are of utmost importance for our topic. The letter by Constantine to the synod of Arles in 314, in the context of the efforts of the emperor to resolve the division between supporters of Donatus and supporters of Caecilianus

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, recently, Klaus Martin GIRARDET, *Die Konstantinische Wende. Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Großen*, Darmstadt, 2006; Pierre MARAVAL, *Constantin le Grand. Empereur romain, empereur chrétien (306-337)*, Paris, 2011; Timothy D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, Chichester, 2011; Andrew J. POTTENGER, *Power and Rhetoric in the Ecclesiastical Correspondence of Constantine the Great*, Routledge, 2023 (*sic*).

<sup>2</sup> On Constantine's theology, see Hermann DÖRRIES, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins*, Göttingen, 1954; Heinrich KRAFT, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung*, Tübingen, 1955; Karl ALAND, *Die religiöse Haltung Kaiser Konstantins (Texte und Untersuchungen, 63)*, Berlin, 1957, pp. 549-600; Charles PIETRI, *Constantin en 324. Propagande et théologie dans les documents de la «Vita Constantini»* (1983), in *Christiana respublica. Éléments d'une enquête sur le christianisme antique*, Rome, 1997, pp. 253-280 (273-280); Pierre MARAVAL, *La religion de Constantin*, in *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, 22 (2013), pp. 17-36; Pierre MARAVAL, *Thèmes constantiniens*, in *Constantin, Lettres et discours*, P. MARAVAL (trad.), Paris, 2010, pp. XXIX-XXXIV.

<sup>3</sup> Constantine, *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints* (GCS, 7), Leipzig, 1902, pp. 149-192. Among numerous commentaries, see Tarmo TOOM, *Constantine's «summus deus» and the Nicene «unus deus»: Imperial Agenda and Ecclesiastical Conviction*, in *Vox Patrum*, 61 (2014), pp. 103-122.

<sup>4</sup> See Luce PIETRI, introduction to Eusèbe de Césarée, *Vie de Constantin* (SC, 559), Paris, 2013, p. 53, n. 2 for a list of hypotheses between 314 and 328.

of Carthago in Africa, is one of the first documents in which Constantine introduces Christian determinations in his religious representations. A comparison of this letter with the letter by Constantine to the Church of Nicomedia, in 325, just after the council of Nicaea, makes clear that, in ten years, Constantine has learnt much about the Christian theology. Constantine's presence during at least part of the sessions of the synod of Nicaea no doubt was an important moment in his theological training. The letter from Eusebius of Caesarea to his Church describing the debates about the main theological topic of the council, might contain valuable information on what Constantine actually learnt from the protagonists of the assembly. Finally, the letter of the emperor to Arius in 333 verifies that the ideas expressed in 325 were not just inspired by the context, but that the emperor integrated them into what he believed was the faith of the Catholic Church.

### I. PRELIMINARY QUESTION: DID CONSTANTINE WRITE HIS LETTERS?

The analysis of the letters of the emperor Constantine faces a first difficulty. Did Constantine write them himself? Did he entrust the final drafting to a secretary to whom he only indicated the main lines? Would the religious representations present in these texts rather be those of ecclesiastical advisers or Christian members of the imperial chancery? In this case, these religious representations would not be directly those of Constantine and could not be used to reconstitute a hypothetical theology of the emperor.

Thus, as Charles Odahl<sup>5</sup> reminds, since at least Pierre Batiffol in 1914, it has often been considered that Constantine's letter to the synod of Arles in 314, or at least the Christian elements that appear in it, were not the work of the emperor himself but of a «clerc de son entourage»<sup>6</sup> to whom he entrusted the drafting, for example Osius of Cordoba.

In the absence of precise information on how Constantine kept his correspondence<sup>7</sup>, it is difficult to imagine the collaboration of which each document

<sup>5</sup> Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles: A Defence of Imperial Authorship*, in *Journal of Religious History*, 17 (1993), pp. 274-289, here, p. 278, n. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Louis MAIER, *Le dossier du donatisme*, I, *Des origines à la mort de Constance II (303-361)*, Berlin, 1987, p. 167, n. 3, quoting Ernst Ludwig GRASMÜCK, *Coercitio, Staat und Kirche im Donatistenstreit*, Bonn, 1964, pp. 254-256.

<sup>7</sup> The structure of the imperial chancery (*scrinia*) described by manuals on the Late Roman Empire is only taking shape during the fourth century. See Christopher KELLY, *Bureaucracy and Government*, in Noel LENSKY (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 188-190, and Timothy D. BARNES, *Constantine...* [vid. n. 1], pp. 91-92.

signed by him is the product. However, as Charles Odahl has shown for the letter of 314, the repetition of the same stylistic traits, of the same tone, of the same topics, throughout the various letters and documents attributed to Constantine forces to admit, with Pierre Maraval, that «la touche de Constantin est incontestable en plusieurs passages»<sup>8</sup>. The analyses in the following pages will attempt to corroborate this.

First of all, it may be recalled that, according to the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantin «stood out for his literary education, his innate intelligence and his wisdom given by God»<sup>9</sup>. The biographer even describes the emperor spending his nights writing speeches and «talking about theology»<sup>10</sup>. As the *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints* appended to the emperor's biography proves, Constantin's literary pretensions were not an invention of his biographer. Commenting on the emperor's letter to the poet Porphyrius<sup>11</sup>, Timothy Barnes points out that «Constantine, so far from being an emperor without intellectual attainments or interests, presented himself as a patron of literature in the mold of Augustus»<sup>12</sup>. Actually, some of the letters and the speech preserved are written in an art prose, which, indeed, can be judged clumsy. It is characterized by the following traits:

– Allusions or quotations from classical works:

The letter to Arius of 333 is particularly rich with *Sybilline Oracles*, III, 323-329 quoted in *Urk.* 34, 19; *Sybilline Oracles*, VIII, 398 alluded to in *Urk.* 34, 2; Aeschylus, *Prometheus bound*, v. 1015 in *Urk.* 34, 4; pun on Ares-Arius and possible allusion to *Iliad*, v, 31 in *Urk.* 34, 6. Some of the allusions or archaisms in vocabulary might come from the translator into Greek – who did a great job!

<sup>8</sup> Pierre MARAVAL, *Constantin, Lettres et discours...* [vid. n. 2], p. 16. Nonetheless, Pierre Maraval still considers «vraisemblable qu'un conseiller ecclésiastique en a rédigé une partie, peut-être le schéma global».

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, I, 19, 2, ll. 15-16 (SC 559), p. 208: παιδεύσει λόγων φρονήσει τ' ἐμφύτῳ καὶ τῇ θεοσδότῳ σοφίᾳ διαφερόντως ἐκπρέπων.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, IV, 29, 1-5, particularly, IV, 29, 2, l. 8 (SC 559), p. 488: λέγοντι θεολογίας.

<sup>11</sup> The authenticity of the two letters between Constantine and Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, edited among Porphyrius' poems (Giovanni POLARA [ed.], *Carmina*, vol. 2, Torino, 1973, pp. 19-27) has been under suspicion. For a recent positive assessment, see Johannes WIENAND, *Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius: The man and his book*, in Michael SQUIRE et Johannes WIENAND (eds.), *Morphogrammata / The Lettered Art of Optatian. Figuring Cultural Transformations in the Age of Constantine*, Paderborn, 2017, pp. 121-163, in particular pp. 148-155.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy D. BARNES, *Constantine...* [vid. n. 1], p. 84; see p. 210, n. 35, where Barnes rejects the hypothesis that the letter should be a «text prepared by the imperial chancery». On Constantine's cultural pretension, see for example the commentary on his *Discourse of the Assembly of Saints* by Reinhart STAATS, *Kaiser Konstantin der Grosse und der Apostel Paulus*, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 62 (2008), pp. 334-340 (337 and n. 37).

– Use of philosophical elements:

The letter to Alexander and Arius of 324 gives as an example the search for consensus between the philosophers<sup>13</sup>; the letter condemning the writings of Arius (its authenticity is controverted) compares him to the philosopher Porphyry, author of «treatises against the religion»<sup>14</sup>; the reflexion on the ubiquity of God in the letter to Arius<sup>15</sup> has a speculative flavour that Opitz compares to the treatise II of the *Corpus hermeticum*<sup>16</sup>; the discussion on the origin of the order of the universe (by fate, by chance, by divine providence), in the *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*<sup>17</sup>, is typical of the philosophical tradition<sup>18</sup>, and leads to an explicit mention of Socrates, Pythagoras and Plato<sup>19</sup>.

– Insertion of general digressions, especially at the beginning of the letters:

Like most of Constantine's letters, the short letter of 312 to Anullinus, proconsul of Africa<sup>20</sup>, one of Constantine's earliest known writings, begins with a very general statement about respect for property and the duty to return belongings to their legitimate owners<sup>21</sup>, before applying it to the concrete case in the form of a decree<sup>22</sup>. The introduction is particularly lengthy in the letter to the bishops of Numidia<sup>23</sup> of 5 February 330<sup>24</sup>, before Constantine comes to address his recipients directly<sup>25</sup>. In his letter of late 327 or early 328 to the Antiochians<sup>26</sup>, Constantine himself concedes that his correspondents may have difficulty in grasping the link between «the introduction to this speech»<sup>27</sup> and the situation to which the emperor is referring.

<sup>13</sup> *Urk.* 17, 10 in Hans Georg OPITZ (ed.), *Athanasius Werke*, III, 1, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites 318-328*, Berlin, 1934-1935 All documents edited in Opitz's collection will be referred to as *Urk.*

<sup>14</sup> *Urk.* 33, 1, p. 67, ll. 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> *Urk.* 34, 27 and 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Urk.*, 34, p. 72, annotation.

<sup>17</sup> *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*, VI-VIII.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the beginning of Cicero's *On the Nature of the gods*, I, 18-41 and Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*, IX, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 5, 15-17.

<sup>21</sup> X, 5, 15.

<sup>22</sup> X, 5, 17 (GCS, 9/2), p. 887, l. 19: πρόσταγμα.

<sup>23</sup> This and other letters in Latin are transmitted in a dossier in a single manuscript of the work of Optatus of Milevis, published in *Optatus Milevitanus. Contra Parmenianum Donatistam, Appendix decem monumentorum veterum*, ed. by Karl ZIWSA (CSEL, 26), 1893, pp. 183-216. On this dossier, see Jean-Louis MAIER, *Le dossier du donatisme*, I [vid. n. 6], pp. 12-17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), X, p. 213, l. 31; p. 214, l. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), X, p. 214, l. 25: *grauitas uestra*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, III, 60.

<sup>27</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, III, 60, 3, l. 18 (SC, 559), p. 436.

- Numerous figures of speech, in particular the recurrent use of rhetorical questions<sup>28</sup>, apostrophes alternately pious or violent<sup>29</sup> and vivid images<sup>30</sup>.
- Finally, the first person singular is very present: Constantine strongly personalizes his speech.

Again, there are too many examples. In his letter to Aelafius, vicar of Africa, Constantine not only recalls his previous decisions<sup>31</sup> before stating the new decision which he instructs the vicar to apply<sup>32</sup>; he ends the letter by appealing directly to the religious convictions shared by his addressee<sup>33</sup> and to his personal relationship with the *summa diuinitas*<sup>34</sup>, who entrusted him with governing the whole earth *nutu suo caelesti*<sup>35</sup>. In the letters written after the synod of Nicaea, Constantine presents himself as a full actor in the event<sup>36</sup>. The first word of the letter to the bishops of the synod of Tyre, is Ἐγὼ<sup>37</sup>. Constantine interrupts the statement of the order to appear before him (2-4), with the narration of his unexpected meeting with Athanasius in Constantinople (5-8), before resuming

<sup>28</sup> The examples are too numerous to list exhaustively. See the *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), V, p. 210, ll. 2-3; *Letter to the Palestinians*, ap. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* II, 24, 3; II, 40; *Letter to the inhabitants of Nicomedia* in 325, *Urk.* 27, 3-5 and 8; *Letter to the Church of Alexandria* of the beginning of 332, ap. Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 61, 2-5 and 62, 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), V, p. 209, l. 5: *o uere uictrix prouidentia Christi saluatoris*; p. 209, l. 28: *o rabida furoris audacia*; *Letter to the inhabitants of Nicomedia*, *Urk.* 27, 8, p. 59, l. 19: ὃ τῆς ἀποπίας, ὃ μίσους ὑπερβολῆ...; *Letter to the Church of Antioch* in 328, ap. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, III, 60, 4, l. 27 (SC, 559), p. 436: ὃ πίστις ἀγία; *Letter to the Church of Alexandria* of the beginning of 332, ap. Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 62, 2, *Athanasius Werke*, II, p. 141, l. 11: φεῦ τῆς ἀποπίας ταύτης, and *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Opposition between darkness and light in the *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), V, p. 208, l. 20: *in tenebris* and l. 22: *praeclarissimis luminibus*; p. 209, l. 4: *praeclarissima luce*; p. 209, l. 14: *manifesta luce*; the State sick with plague and requiring a cure, in the *Letter to the Palestinians* of autumn 324, ap. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 28, 1; analogy of statues with illusory appearances at the beginning of the *Letter to Arius*, *Urk.* 34, 1; Arius and his followers, a band of pirates (*Urk.* 34, 3, p. 69, l. 12: ληστήριον), beset by storms (*Urk.* 34, 4, p. 69, l. 15: ὡσπερ τισὶ ζάλαις καὶ τρικυμίαις). There may be a memory of Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, v. 1015, where Hermes threatens Prometheus who does not want to be convinced by his words: «Behold, if you are not convinced by my words, what a storm and wave of evils (χειμῶν καὶ κακῶν τρικυμία) will come upon you, without your escape». The repugnant description of Arius as a sick man (*Urk.* 34, 35) is also a vivid image.

<sup>31</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, 204, l. 18; p. 205, l. 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 205, l. 25; p. 206, l. 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 206, ll. 13-14: *cum apud me certum sit te quoque dei summi esse cultorem*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 206, l. 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 206, ll. 17-18.

<sup>36</sup> See *Urk.* 25, 3, p. 53, l. 1: εἰς ἐξ ὑμῶν συνθεράπων ὑμέτερος and *Urk.* 26, 2; 27, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ap.* Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 86, 2, *Athanasius Werke*, II, p. 164, l. 18.

the statement of the summons (9), which he interrupts again with a digression (10-11) in which he presents himself as a «genuine servant of God»<sup>38</sup>, an object of God's protection and an instrument of his benevolence for humanity.

Within this stylistic homogeneity<sup>39</sup>, the analyses that follow will describe a coherent evolution of the theological representations which, although they testify to the successive influences received throughout Constantine's career, are integrated into a personal vision. In these terms, they cannot be considered only as foreign bodies due to co-editors.

The analysis of a text by Licinius contemporary with Constantine's first preserved letters provides a good point of comparison with the later evolution of the «first Christian emperor»<sup>40</sup>.

The document improperly referred to by modern historiography as the «Edict of Milan»<sup>41</sup> is a letter that Licinius addressed from Nicomedia to the governors of the Eastern provinces in June 313, after his meeting with Constantine in Milan in February-March 313. The emperors, among other matters, had probably agreed that «Licinius should extend to the territories under his control the restitution of confiscated Christian property which Constantine and Maxentius had previously granted to their Christian subjects before 312»<sup>42</sup>. The religious representations employed are open: the text speaks of «all that is divine in the heavenly seat» (*quicquid <est> diuinitatis in sede caelesti*)<sup>43</sup> or of «the supreme divinity» (*summa diuinitas*)<sup>44</sup>. The expression *sedes caelestis* may be a literary allusion by the writer of the text to the classical poet Ovid<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, the expression *summa diuinitas* is absent from the *Library of Latin Texts* database<sup>46</sup> before Lactantius and the Christian Latin authors of the fourth century. Constan-

<sup>38</sup> Ap. Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 86, 9, *Athanasius Werke*, II, p. 165, 20: τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι γνήσιον θεράποντα.

<sup>39</sup> The same stylistic argument is invoked by Luce Pietri in her introduction to the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea (SC 559, p. 44): the letters «sont d'un ton très personnel»; the letters quoted by Eusebius in the *Life* and those preserved in the appendix of Optatus are «comparable» from the point of view of «la phraséologie».

<sup>40</sup> Josep VILELLA MASANA (ed.), *Constantino, ¿el primer emperador cristiano? Religión y política en el siglo IV*, Barcelona, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> On the so called «edict of Milan», see Timothy D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power...* [vid. n. 1], pp. 93-97.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power...* [vid. n. 2], p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Ap. Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 48, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ovid, *Pontic epistles*, III, 5, v. 53; *Metamorphoses*, IV, v. 447.

<sup>46</sup> <https://about.brepolis.net/library-of-latin-texts/> [consulted on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022].

tine himself uses it several times<sup>47</sup>. By way of comparison, the anonymous, obviously non-Christian panegyrist charged with the thorny task of praising the first Christian emperor at Trier in August 313<sup>48</sup> does speak of *diuina mens*<sup>49</sup>, *diuinum numen*<sup>50</sup>, *diuinus instinctus*<sup>51</sup>, *diuinitas*<sup>52</sup>, and finally *summus rerum sator cuius tot nomina sunt*<sup>53</sup>, «the supreme creator of the universe, whose names are so many», to designate the divine entity that favoured Constantine, but never uses the expression *summa diuinitas*, which seems to be peculiar to the Christians, although ambiguous, probably by design: it can refer either to the transcendent divine principle of intellectual paganism, without deciding whether it is impersonal, or to the unique personal God of the Christians.

## II. CONSTANTINE'S THEOLOGY BEFORE NICAEA (LETTERS OF THE YEARS 312-315)

Constantine's interventions in the Donatist case in the years 312-315, show the same ambiguity<sup>54</sup>. The expression *deus summus*<sup>55</sup> used by Constantine, comparable to the *summa diuinitas* of Licinius' letter, still refers to an anonymous god

<sup>47</sup> *Letter to Aelafius*, vicar of Africa, in 314, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 206, l. 16; *Letter to Celsus*, vicar of Africa, in 315 *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), VII, p. 211, ll. 22-23; *Letter to the bishops of Africa*, in 321, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), IX, p. 213, l. 20; final wish of the decree of September 17<sup>th</sup>, 325, *ap.* Theodosian Code, IX, 1, 4: *ita mihi summa diuinitas semper propitia sit.* See also the *Letter to the synod of Arles*, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), V, p. 209, ll. 12-13: *neque in eorum sensus ingressa est diuinitas propitia.*

<sup>48</sup> See the commentary by Charles ODAHL, *A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion. Religious References in the Trier Panegyric of A.D. 313*, in *The Ancient World* 21 (1990), pp.45-63.

<sup>49</sup> R.A.B. MYNORS (ed.), *XII Panegyrici latini*, Oxford, 1964, XII (IX), 2, 5; 16, 2; 26, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, XII (IX), 4, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, XII (IX), 11, 4. See the inscription on the arch dedicated to Constantine by the Roman Senate in 315: *instinctus diuinitatis* (CIL VI, 1139=EDCS-17600785, [https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi\\_url.php?p\\_edcs\\_id=EDCS-17600785&s\\_sprache=en](https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_url.php?p_edcs_id=EDCS-17600785&s_sprache=en) [consulted 13 November 2022]).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, XII (IX), 22, 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, XII (IX), 26, 1, p. 289, l. 12.

<sup>54</sup> See Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles...* [vid. n. 5], p. 286, n. 54, and pp. 285-286 on the phrases *Deus omnipotens*, *summa diuinitas*, *deus summus*.

<sup>55</sup> *Letter to Aelafius*, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 206, l. 13-14; *Letter to Celsus*, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), VII, p. 211, l. 28; *Letter to the bishops of Africa*, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), IX, p. 213, l. 1; *Letter to the bishops of Numidia* in 330, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), X, p. 213, l. 31; p. 214, l. 35; p. 215, l. 16. See also ἡ θεϊότης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ in the final wish of the letters to Caecilianus of Carthage and to Miltiades of Rome of 313, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 6, 5 (GCS, 9/2), p. 890, l. 26, and X, 5, 20, p. 888, l. 19. And ὁ ὑψιστος θεός in the *Letter to the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces* in 324, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, II, 48, 2; 51, 1; ὁ μέγιστος θεός, *ibid.*, II, 55, 1.



which could well be the transcendent principle of philosophical monotheism<sup>56</sup>. However, the expression is almost absent from classical Latin literature<sup>57</sup>, whereas, with the background of Gn 14,18-20 (LXX) onwards it becomes commonplace among the great Latin Christian authors, Tertullian, Cyprian and especially Lactantius. It is therefore incorrect to say that «these designations neither say anything particular about Constantine's concept of God nor are they exclusively Christian vocabulary»<sup>58</sup>. The God in question is not just any God, he is «the almighty God» (*deus omnipotens*)<sup>59</sup>, yet another expression peculiar to Christian Latin authors, Tertullian, Novatian, Cyprian, Lactantius..., the god of Constantine's political success, military victories, and imperial mission<sup>60</sup>.

This personal link with the deity of the Christians expressed in the emperor's letters makes it impossible to attribute their entire writing to an official of the imperial chancery<sup>61</sup> or to reduce its mentions to the intervention of an assessor in religious matters.

The same applies to the letter Constantine sent to the bishops of the synod of Arles in 314<sup>62</sup>, the first known text in which the religious discourse refers explicitly to the God of the Christians. In this letter, Constantine personally rec-

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Plato, *Leges*, 821a2: τὸν μέγιστον θεὸν, and Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, 2, 72; 3, 55; 12, 52; 36, 35.54; 40, 36. The expression *summus deus* occurs 12 times in Calcidius' Latin translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, on which, see *infra*, n. 81.

<sup>57</sup> The expression *summe deum* or *deorum* appears in Naevius, Virgil or Ovid, corresponding to the Homeric Greek θεὸν μέγιστος.

<sup>58</sup> Tarmo TOOM, *Constantine's «summus deus» and the Nicene «unus deus»...* [*vid.* n. 3], p. 107, on the letters of 312-313.

<sup>59</sup> *Letter to Aelafius* (CSEL, 26), p. 205, l. 14: *deus omnipotens*; p. 206, l. 20: *potentissimus deus*; *Letter to Chrestus*, bishop of Syracuse, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 5, 24 (GCS, 9/2), p. 890, l. 2. The expression has evidently a biblical background.

<sup>60</sup> In the *Letter to Miltiades*, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 5, 18 (GCS, 9/2), p. 888, l. 4, Constantine asserts that it was «divine providence» (ἡ θεία πρόνοια) that handed over to him the provinces of Africa. See Pierre MARAVAL, *Constantin, Lettres et discours* [see n. 2], xxix: «La différence se trouve dans le Dieu que vénère Constantin, dont il reconnaît la toute puissance – et du même coup la vérité – au fait qu'elle lui a donné la victoire sur tous ses ennemis.» Same idea in the *Letter to the Palestinians* in 324, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, II, 28, 2-29, 1 and in the *Letter to the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces*, *ibid.*, II, 55.

<sup>61</sup> The expression *summus deus* appears only twice in the *Theodosian Code*, in XVI, 5, 6, in 381, and in IX, 45, 4, in 432.

<sup>62</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), V, pp. 208-210; Hans VON SODEN & Hans VON CAMPENHAUSEN, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des donatismus*, Berlin, <sup>2</sup>1950, pp. 23-24; Jean-Louis MAIER, *Le dossier du donatisme*, I [*vid.* n. 6], document 21, pp. 167-171. For a complete analysis of the letter, see Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles...* [*vid.* n. 7].

ognises himself as *famulus suus*, «his servant»<sup>63</sup>. The use of the word *famulus* in a religious context is typical of Christians. Very common as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Tertullian, probably under the influence of the Bible, the expression is also found in Lactantius<sup>64</sup> and Arnobius<sup>65</sup>. Constantine applies the term also to bishops<sup>66</sup> as well as to himself, «fellow servant»<sup>67</sup> of the bishops.

In the imperial letter to the synod of Arles, God is not just «the god of the Christians», as in Galerius' edict of toleration of 311<sup>68</sup>, but «our God»<sup>69</sup>, and, while the emperor continues to describe him as «the almighty God who dwells in the heavenly watchtowers»<sup>70</sup>, he explicitly names «Christ the Saviour»<sup>71</sup> for the first time in an imperial document<sup>72</sup>. The emperor repeats his conviction that God leads events through his «celestial providence»<sup>73</sup>, the «truly victorious providence of Christ the Saviour»<sup>74</sup>. He also refers to Christian doctrine as

<sup>63</sup> *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), v, p. 208, l. 31. See also *Letter to the Palestinians*, ap. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, II, 31, 2, l.10 (SC, 559), p. 304: θεοῦ θεράποντες with a plural of majesty; *Letter to the Eastern inhabitants*, ap. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, II, 55, 1, l. 3-4 (SC, 559), p. 324: δι' ἐμοῦ τοῦ σοῦ θεράποντος; *Letter to the Church of Nicomedia*, *Urk.* 27, 17, p. 62, ll. 12-13: τοῦ θεράποντος τοῦ θεοῦ, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐμοῦ; *Letter to the bishops of the synod of Tyre*, ap. Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 86, 9 and 86, 11, *Athanasius Werke*, II, p. 165, l. 24.

<sup>64</sup> In the final prayer of *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 52, 5.

<sup>65</sup> For example, in *Against the Nations*, I, 31. In the digital *Library of Latin Texts* (consulted on June, 2022), the use of the word *famulus* in a religious context by non-Christian authors is rare: see Martial, *Epigrams*, IX, 28, v. 10: *famulum Iouis*; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 27, speaking of the initiate to the mysteries of Osiris: *magno etiam deo famulum*.

<sup>66</sup> For example, *Letter to the bishops of Numidia*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), p. 215, l. 3: *uos [...] famulos et sacerdotes Dei*. See also the *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria and Arius*, *Urk.* 17, 1, p. 32, ll. 8-9: οἱ θεοῦ θεράποντες.

<sup>67</sup> *Letter to the Church of Alexandria*, *Urk.* 25, 3, p. 53, l. 1: συνθεράπων.

<sup>68</sup> Ap. Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 34, 4, ed. Jacques Moreau (SC, 39/1), p. 117, l. 17, and 34, 5, p. 118, l. 26: *christianorum deus, deus suus*. The protocol of the edict (preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, 17, 1) includes Constantine, who immediately enforced the decision in his territories.

<sup>69</sup> *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), v, p. 208, l. 2: *deus noster*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208, ll. 28-29: *deus omnipotens in caeli specula residens*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 208, l. 31; p. 209, l. 1; p. 209, ll. 5 and 34: *Christus saluator*.

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Louis MAIER, *Le dossier du donatisme*, I [vid. n. 6], p. 168, n. 5, puts this mention «au compte du rédacteur de la lettre»; same opinion by Luce Pietri (SC, 559), p. 72, n. 4 («interpolations probablement dues à un conseiller ecclésiastique de l'empereur»), citing Heinrich KRAFT, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung* [vid. n. 3], p. 185-191. On Christ Saviour as a keyword of Constantine's Christology, see for example Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles...* [vid. n. 5], p. 286.

<sup>73</sup> *Letter to the synod of Arles*, ap. Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), v, p. 209, l. 15 and 18: *caelestis prouisio*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209, l. 5: *uere uictrix prouidentia Christi saluatoris*.

«the Law»<sup>75</sup>, «Christ's teaching»<sup>76</sup>, «the way of the Lord Saviour»<sup>77</sup>. However, Christ is never described as the Son of the supreme God, but only as a teacher<sup>78</sup>, a judge<sup>79</sup>, and of course, a saviour.

Curiously enough, no other letter by Constantine mentions Christ until after his victory over Licinius in September 324. However, the religious representations assumed by the emperor in his letters between 312 and 315 are distinctively Christian, although expressed in the equivocal style typical of the Christian Apologists, and not that of the Scriptures and the Creed of the Church. Under these conditions, the hypothesis of Constantine's religious representations being influenced by the ideas and literary works of Lactantius is plausible<sup>80</sup>. Other potential influencers are Ossius, bishop of Cordoba<sup>81</sup>, whose presence with the emperor is attested already in late 312 or early 313<sup>82</sup>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209, ll. 4 and 8: *lex catholica, sanctissima lex*. Constantine always refers to the Scriptures as «the Law»: see for example in 313, *ap.* Optatus of Milevis (CSEL, 26), III, p. 204, l. 20; in 324, *ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 27, 2; II, 47. In 333, Constantine identifies «the Law of God» with Christ: *Urk.* 34, 34.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209, l. 26: *Christi magisterium*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210, l. 4: *domini saluatoris uia*.

<sup>78</sup> See n. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209, l. 23: *iudicium Christi*.

<sup>80</sup> The hypothesis has been defended, among others, by Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER, *Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the Divine Institutes*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2 (1994), pp. 33-52. Arnaldo MARCONE, *Lattanzio e Costantino*, in Josep VILELLA MASANA (ed.), *Constantino, ¿el primer emperador cristiano? Religión y política en el siglo IV*, Barcelona, 2015, pp. 21-30, accepts DePalma's hypothesis and emphasizes the influence of the second version of Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* on the *Letter to the synod of Arles* (p. 26), concluding that, in this letter, as in the *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*, «Constantino ha presente gli scritti di Lattanzio» (p. 28).

<sup>81</sup> Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles...* [vid. n. 5], p. 279, after Victor C. DE CLERCQ, *Ossius of Cordoba: A Contribution to the History of the Constantinian Period*, Washington, D.C., 1954, p. 63, refers Platonic elements in Constantine's *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints* (for example, IX, 3-7) to Ossius of Cordoba, on the basis of Calcidius' preface to his translation and commentary of Plato's *Timaeus*, praising Ossius' *animo florente omnibus studiis humanitatis* and suggesting that the translation was Ossius' idea, who would have been able to do it himself. It is difficult to discern what is rhetoric and what is reality, beyond Ossius' probable knowledge of the Greek language. Moreover, the identification of the Ossius (*sic*) to whom Calcidius' work is dedicated with Ossius of Cordoba is controverted. See Christina HOENIG, *Plato's Timaeus and the Latin Tradition*, Cambridge, 2018, p. 160-162 for a critical approach.

<sup>82</sup> Charles M. ODAHL, *Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles...* [vid. n. 5], pp. 279-282, gives a list of ecclesiastical advisers: Ossius, Lactantius and Miltiades; Luce Pietri, in her introduction to the *Life of Constantine* (sc, 559), p. 73-76: speaks of the bishops met in Gaul and Italy in the years 312-314, of Lactantius and of Ossius.

### III. CONSTANTINE BEFORE AND AFTER NICAEA (LETTERS OF THE YEARS 324-325)

After his victory over Licinius in September 324, Constantine resides in Nicomedia. In this context, he writes various letters to his new Eastern subjects. The three letters that have survived, the letter to the Eastern regions on the restitution of confiscated property to the members of the Church<sup>83</sup>, the letter to each bishop of the Eastern regions<sup>84</sup> and the letter to the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces<sup>85</sup>, are preserved only in Greek translation, which makes a comparison with Constantine's other letters difficult. It is nevertheless likely that the expressions «the (very) great God» and «the mightier» translate the Latin expressions *summus deus* and *deus omnipotens*<sup>86</sup>, so characteristic of the letters of the years 313-315 preserved in Latin. The new element in this set of letters is the designation of God as «saviour»<sup>87</sup>, a designation which in the letter to the synod of Arles qualified Christ.

The lengthy letter to the Oriental subjects of the Empire<sup>88</sup> is a veritable apologetic discourse on Christianity. Constantine's God, *summus deus* (ὁ ὑψιστος θεός, ὁ μέγιστος θεός) whom human reason can know by considering the «laws of nature»<sup>89</sup> disposed by his providence, is a God who judges between virtue

<sup>83</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 24-42. The copy transcribed by Eusebius is the one sent to the province of Palestine.

<sup>84</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 46, 1-3. The copy transcribed by Eusebius is the one sent to him as bishop of Caesarea, the metropolis of Palestine.

<sup>85</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 48-60.

<sup>86</sup> On the probable equivalence between «(very) great God» and *summus deus*, on the one hand, and between «the mightier» (τὸ κρείττον) and *deus omnipotens*, on the other, see the commentary by Luce Pietri, in SC 559, p. 77. The use of the neutral τὸ κρείττον to denote the transcendent principle is characteristic of the Greek translations of Constantine's letters and speeches: 10 occurrences in the *Letter to the Palestinians* of 324; 5 occurrences in the *Letter to Alexander and Arius* of the same period; 2 occurrences in the *Discourse to the Assembly of the Saints*; 1 occurrence in what Eusebius presents as Constantine's speech at Nicaea (see *infra* n. 105). In his *Life of Constantine*, I, 16, 2; III, 58, 2 and IV, 29, 4, Eusebius uses the expression in paraphrases of a story about Constantius I, of a letter of Constantine to the city of Heliopolis and of a theological discourse of Constantine. It is nowhere else attested, except for the treatise XVIII of the *corpus hermeticum* and, among the preserved works of Eusebius, the *Oration in Praise of Constantine* (10 occurrences).

<sup>87</sup> God is «the God who is the helper of my enterprises and the saviour of the universe» (*ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 64, 1, l. 5, p. 334: τὸν τῶν ἐγχειρημάτων βοηθὸν καὶ σωτῆρα τῶν ὅλων θεὸν), «our great God, the saviour of all things» (*ibid.*, II, 71, 4, l. 21, p. 342: ὁ μέγας ἡμῶν θεός ὁ σωτῆρ ἁπάντων); see also II, 30, 1, l. 8, p. 302; 46, 1, l. 4, p. 316; 49, 1, l. 5, p. 320.

<sup>88</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 48-60.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 48, 1, ll. 3-4 (SC, 559), p. 318.

and vice<sup>90</sup>. He is «the master of the universe»<sup>91</sup> who protects Constantine in his political and military endeavours, and to whom Constantine confesses his devotion<sup>92</sup>. The human race owes him reverence but has gone astray. Nonetheless, the sovereign God of the universe has restored the memory of his existence «through your son»<sup>93</sup>, thanks to «the teachings of the divine Logos»<sup>94</sup> – first mention of Christ since the letter to the synod of Arles in 314. However, there is no question of Constantine imposing conversion to the supreme God by force<sup>95</sup>, since the mission he has entrusted to him is to make peace reign<sup>96</sup>, a benefit that God grants to all<sup>97</sup>.

With this letter, Constantine has become a public confessor of the Christian faith: «I will try to confess as clearly as possible before you all <what I think> about the hopes that are mine.»<sup>98</sup> The emperor confesses explicitly this faith in a letter to the king of Persia of the same period: «I do not think I am wrong in confessing this <God who has favoured me> is the only God, chief and father of all.»<sup>99</sup>

Just as in 312, after his victory over Maxentius in the West, Constantine had immediately sought to resolve the division in the African Church created by the Donatist schism, so in 324, after his victory over Licinius in the East, Constantine immediately sought to resolve the recent affair which threatened to divide the Eastern Church. To this end, he sent a trusted emissary, most probably Ossius<sup>100</sup>, with a letter addressed to the troublemakers, Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, and one of his priests, Arius, and, more broadly, to the Christians involved in the conflict between them.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 48, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 55, 1, l. 5, p. 324; 59, l. 17, p. 328.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 55, 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 57, l. 5 (SC, 559), p. 326: διὰ τοῦ σοῦ υἱοῦ.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 59, l. 4 (SC, 559), p. 328: τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου μαθήματα.

<sup>95</sup> *Ap. Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, II, 60, 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Ap. Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, II, 56, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *Ap. Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, II, 59.

<sup>98</sup> *Ap. Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, II, 48, 2, ll. 14-16 (SC, 559), p. 320: Ἐγὼ δ' ὡς ἐνι μάλιστα φανερώς περὶ τῶν κατ' ἐμαντὸν ἐλπίδων πᾶσιν ὑμῖν ὁμολογήσαι πειράσομαι.

<sup>99</sup> *Letter to the king of Persia, Ap. Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, IV, 11, 1, ll. 1-2 (SC, 559), p. 468: Οὐ μοι δοκῶ πλανᾶσθαι, ἀδελφέ μου, τοῦτον ἓνα θεὸν ὁμολογῶν πάντων ἀρχηγὸν καὶ πατέρα.

<sup>100</sup> See Xavier MORALES, *Athanasie a-t-il rédigé l'encyclique d'Alexandre d'Alexandrie?*, in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique*, 114 (2019), pp. 541-589, here p. 556, on the identity of the messenger, and pp. 546-560, for a proposal of chronology of the controversy between Arius' first condemnation and the synod of Nicaea. At n. 14 and n. 16, the date of Alexander's election to the episcopate must be corrected from 312 to 313, and the dates of the two festal letters alluding to the conflict with Arius must be corrected to 318 and 321. Consequently, Arius' first condemnation would be situated in 318.

At first, Constantine, had thought the conflict between the two would be easily solved, because its object was only «a particular matter of vain interest», a «childish trifle»<sup>101</sup> of no impact on the common faith, or rather, one of those «great and too difficult topics»<sup>102</sup> about which it is better to keep quiet, for fear of not understanding them or of being misunderstood in explaining them to others.

Consistent with its message, the letter to Alexander and Arius is almost devoid of theological representations. As in the previous letters, God is described as the subject of the providence<sup>103</sup> by which Constantine is entrusted with the mission of establishing peace and concord in the universe. The expressions describing him are comparable to those of the other letters of the end of 324. There is no Christological element: this topic, central in the controversy is not, for Constantine, «the summit of the precepts of the Law»<sup>104</sup>.

In the early summer of 325, Constantine hosted at Nicaea, near to the eastern imperial capital, Nicomedia, a general synod of bishops, representing every Eastern province, together with two legates from the Roman bishop and Constantine's man of confidence in the Donatist conflict, Ossius, already mentioned<sup>105</sup>.

The two letters written by Constantine to announce the decisions taken at the synod of Nicaea<sup>106</sup> are again highly personal letters, and their style is comparable to that of the earlier letters. In accordance with the emperor's wish in his letter to Alexander and Arius, the Christological question is not set out in detail. Constantine, in his letter to the Church of Alexandria, merely recalls that the condemned doctrine of Arius concerned «our Saviour, our hope and life»<sup>107</sup>, while the letter of the synod to the same Church of Alexandria is more explicit in its account of the condemnation of Arius, as it takes up the content of the final anathematism of the formula of faith<sup>108</sup> subscribed to at Nicaea.

<sup>101</sup> Letter to Alexander and Arius, *Urk.* 17, 6, p. 33, ll. 3-4: ὑπὲρ ματαίου τινὸς ζητέσεως μέρους, and *Urk.* 17, 10, p. 34, l. 17: παιδικαῖς ἀνοίαις.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, *Urk.* 17, 8, p. 33, l. 14: πραγμάτων οὕτω μεγάλων καὶ λίαν δυσχερῶν.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, *Urk.* 17, 4, p. 32, ll. 24 and 30; 17, 11, p. 34, l. 19; 17, 14, p. 35, l. 6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 70, ll. 3-4, p. 340: τοῦ κορυφαίου τῶν ἐν τῷ νόμῳ παραγγελμάτων.

<sup>105</sup> What Eusebius presents as the translation of Constantine's speech at the opening of the synod of Nicaea (*Life of Constantine*, III, 12, 1-5), with the mitigation: «a speech such as this» (III, 11, l. 7 [SC, 559], p. 366: τοῖον [...] λόγον), shares a number of stylistic features with this set of letters, in particular the use of τὸ κρεῖττον (III, 12, 3, l. 14 [SC, 559], p. 366) and the designation of God as «saviour» (III, 12, 2, l. 9 [SC, 559], p. 366; 12, 5, l. 27, p. 366).

<sup>106</sup> *Letter to the Church of Alexandria*, *Urk.* 25, and *Letter to the Churches*, *Urk.* 26.

<sup>107</sup> *Urk.* 25, 4, p. 53, ll. 4-5.

<sup>108</sup> *Urk.* 23, 3, p. 48.

However, it should be noted that, whereas in the letters shortly before the synod the title «saviour» was used to describe the one God<sup>109</sup>, Constantine now identifies Christ as «our Saviour». He does so again in the letter to the Churches announcing the decision of the synod of Nicaea on the date of Easter<sup>110</sup>, in a letter to Macarius of Jerusalem shortly after the synod<sup>111</sup>, and in a letter to the Antiochians at the end of 327 or beginning of 328<sup>112</sup>, each time linking this appellation to the «most holy Passion» of this saviour.

It is also in the two imperial letters on the decisions of the synod that the Holy Spirit appears, for the first time in the corpus of letters<sup>113</sup>, whereas he is mentioned several times in the great *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*<sup>114</sup>.

#### IV. WHAT DID CONSTANTINE LEARN IN NICAEA (EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA'S LETTER TO THE CHRISTIANS OF CAESAREA)?

So far, it seems the only thing Constantine did learn in Nicaea was that Christ should be «our saviour». This is quite at variance with what Eusebius pretends about Constantine's implication in the Christological debate at the synod.

The letter that Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, addresses from the synod to the Christians of Caesarea is difficult to interpret, because its purpose is not only informative but also apologetic: for Eusebius, it is a question of demonstrating that his subscription to the theological formula drafted by those to whom he had been clearly opposed in the preceding months does not mean that he is abandoning his previous positions.

The letter apparently gives a chronological account of the part of the synod devoted to «the faith of the Church» (*Urk.* 22, 1, p. 42, l. 1), the part that primarily interested Eusebius and his recipients.

1. According to the chronological sequence, Eusebius presented a written statement of faith to the assembly in the presence of Constantine (§ 2-6).

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<sup>109</sup> Again in *Letter to Theodotus of Laodicea*, autumn 325, *Urk.* 28, 1, p. 63, ll. 3-4 and 28, 3, p. 63, l. 13, and *Letter to Eusebius, ap.* Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III, 35, l. 3 (SC, 559), p. 496, whose date is probably later than the synod of Nicaea.

<sup>110</sup> *Urk.* 26, 4, p. 55, l. 20; *Urk.* 26, 8, p. 56, l. 9.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 30, 1, l. 3, p. 391.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 60, 4, l. 27, p. 436.

<sup>113</sup> *Urk.* 25, 8, p. 54, l. 4; *Urk.* 26, 8, p. 56, l. 11.

<sup>114</sup> *Discourse to the Assembly of Saints*, IX, 6; XVII, 1; XX, 2.4.

2. The statement remained unopposed. The emperor himself declared it satisfactory and invited the members of the synod to endorse the statement, on the sole condition that the word ὁμοούσιος be inserted (§ 7, p. 43, l. 26, p. 44, l. 4).
3. The emperor then gave an interpretation of the word ὁμοούσιος (§ 7, p. 44, l. 4-8).
4. The synod composed a written statement of faith that actually included the word ὁμοούσιος (§7, p. 44, l. 8; § 8, p. 45, l. 5).
5. The statement was subjected to a question-and-answer session about the meaning of three difficult expressions: from the substance, begotten and not made, ὁμοούσιος (§ 9-13).
6. The assembly agreed (§ 14).
7. Eusebius then comments on the meaning of the anathematism appended to the statement (§ 15; § 16, p. 46, l. 17).
8. Constantine takes the floor to comment on the anathematism against «Before he was begotten, he did not exist» (§ 16, p. 46, l. 18-21).

Now, the interpretation of ὁμοούσιος attributed to the emperor at § 7 is almost identical to that which emerges from the question-and-answer session between promoters and opponents of the word at § 12. Moreover, the content was already present in the letters of Arius against Alexander of Alexandria and Alexander against Arius, and almost identical formulations are found in the fourth book of the *Evangelical Demonstration* of Eusebius of Caesarea, the book focused on Christology.

In fact, at § 7, Constantine understands the controversial adjective in an exclusively negative way:

*Homoousios* cannot be said according to the passions of bodies. Therefore, <the Son> did not come to being from the Father according to a division nor according to a cutting. Indeed, the immaterial and incorporeal nature cannot undergo a bodily passion. It is such meaning that must be given to the divine and ineffable words.

ὅτι μὴ κατὰ τῶν σωμάτων πάθη λέγοιτο ὁμοούσιος<sup>115</sup>, οὐτ' οὖν κατὰ διαίρεσιν οὔτε κατὰ τινὰ ἀποτομὴν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑποστῆναι· μηδὲ γὰρ δύνασθαι τὴν ἄυλον καὶ νοερὰν καὶ ἀσώματον φύσιν σωματικόν τι πάθος ὑφίστασθαι, θείοις δὲ καὶ ἀπορρήτοις λόγοις προσήκειν τὰ τοιαῦτα νοεῖν.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Opitz adds: <ὁ υἱός>, which is not necessary.

<sup>116</sup> *Urk.* 22, 7, p. 44, l. 4-7.



At § 12 we read the same:

<*Homoousios* cannot be said> according to the manner of bodies, nor in the likeness of mortal animals. Indeed, <it cannot be said> according to a division of the substance or a cutting up, nor according to a passion, modification, or alteration of the substance and power of the Father. In fact, the Father's unengendered nature is other than all this.

οὐ κατὰ τὸν τῶν σωμάτων τρόπον οὐδὲ τοῖς θνητοῖς ζώοις παραπλησίως, οὔτε γὰρ κατὰ διαίρεσιν τῆς οὐσίας οὔτε κατὰ ἀποτομήν, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ κατὰ τι πάθος ἢ τροπὴν ἢ ἀλλοίωσιν τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας τε καὶ δυνάμεως. τούτων γὰρ πάντων ἀλλοτρίαν εἶναι τὴν ἀγένητον τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν.<sup>117</sup>

Now, Arius, in his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, had already rejected the idea that

the Father be composed, divisible, mutable, and a body, according to them, and that, as far as it depends on them, the incorporeal God should undergo the passions that correspond to a body,

σύνθετος ἔσται ὁ πατήρ καὶ διαιρετὸς καὶ τρεπτὸς καὶ σῶμα κατ' αὐτοῦς καὶ τὸ ὅσον ἐπ' αὐτοῖς τὰ ἀκόλουθα σώματι πάσχων ὁ ἀσώματος θεός,<sup>118</sup>

to which Alexander had responded by rejecting the interpretation of the begetting of the Son <in the likeness of bodies, by the cutting or effluvia from divisions><sup>119</sup>. Above all, the formulations in Eusebius' letter find parallels in the same author's *Evangelical Demonstration*. Eusebius, describing the begetting of the Son, declares that he has <nothing like corporeal realities><sup>120</sup> and that he

is begotten from the unengendered Father [...] having proceeded, not according to a separation, cutting, or division of the Father's substance, but in a way which is ineffable and inexplicable to us.

γεννώμενον δ' ἐξ ἀγεννήτου πατρὸς, [...] οὐ κατὰ διάστασιν ἢ τομὴν ἢ διαίρεσιν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας προβεβλημένον, ἀρρήτως δὲ καὶ ἀνεπιλογίστως ἡμῖν.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>117</sup> *Urk.* 22, 12, p. 45, l. 22-25.

<sup>118</sup> Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, *Urk.* 6, 5, p. 13, ll. 18-20.

<sup>119</sup> Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Byzantium*, *Urk.* 14, 46, p. 27, ll. 5-6: οὐ κατὰ τὰς τῶν σωμάτων ὁμοιότητος ταῖς τομαῖς ἢ ταῖς ἐκ διαίρεσεων ἀπορροῖαις.

<sup>120</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelical Demonstration*, IV, 3, 13 (GCS, 23), p. 154, ll. 12-13: οὐδὲν μὲν οἷον τὰ ἐκ σωμάτων.

<sup>121</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelical Demonstration*, IV, 3, 13 (GCS, 23), p. 154, ll. 16-19. See also V, 1, 8-9, in the commentary on Pr 8,12-31.

In short, these considerations are more likely to be attributed to Eusebius than to Constantine. However, Eusebius felt entitled to put them in the emperor's mouth as well, probably because Constantine had agreed with them during the synod.

The case of Constantine's statement at the end of the letter is different. It has been noted for more than a century<sup>122</sup> that it is difficult to attribute to Eusebius the statement that:

He exists according to his divine begetting occurred before all ages, since even before he was begotten actually, he was potentially in the Father according to an unengendered modality. For the Father is always Father, just as he is always king and always saviour, who is potentially all, and is always identical with himself<sup>123</sup>.  
καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἔνθεον αὐτοῦ γέννησιν τὴν<sup>124</sup> πρὸ πάντων αἰώνων εἶναι αὐτόν, ἐπεὶ καὶ πρὶν ἐνεργεῖα γεννηθῆναι δυνάμει ἦν ἐν τῷ πατρὶ ἀγεννήτως, ὄντος τοῦ πατρὸς αἰεὶ πατρὸς ὡς καὶ βασιλέως αἰεὶ καὶ σωτῆρος αἰεὶ, δυνάμει πάντα ὄντος, αἰεὶ τε κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχοντος. (*Urk.* 22, 16, p. 46, l. 18-21).

It is true that the insistence on the eternal pre-existence of the Son is dear to the bishop of Caesarea. The statement that «he exists according to his divine begetting before all ages» is comparable to a passage of the fourth book of the *Evangelical Demonstration* already quoted, where Eusebius emphasizes that:

it is false that, at first, during some time, he did not exist, and then, he began to exist. He has existed and pre-existed since before times eternal...  
οὐ χρόνοις μὲν τισιν οὐκ ὄντα, ὕστερον δὲ ποτε γεγονότα, ἀλλὰ πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων ὄντα καὶ προόντα...<sup>125</sup>

<sup>122</sup> For example by F. LOOFS, *Das Nicänum* (1922), in *Patristica: ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Alten Kirche*, ed. H.C. Brennecke and J. Ulrich, Berlin, 1999, p. 120: «diese gewiss nicht von Euseb erdichtete Äusserung des Kaisers [...] gibt der *fides occidentalis* hinsichtlich der Ewigkeit des Sohnes Ausdruck». Loofs refers to Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 7, 26 and Marcellus of Ancyra, frag. 70 (ed. VINZENT). OPITZ, *ad locum*, speaks of «die dem Kaiser die Formeln soufflierten» and also refers to Marcellus of Ancyra. More recently, Mark EDWARDS, *Why did Constantine Label Arius a Porphyrian?*, in *L'antiquité Classique*, 82 (2013), pp. 239-247 (243), commenting the passage, notes that Eusebius «would not have fathered on Constantine a form of words which a superficial reader might construe as an endorsement of the teaching of his perennial antagonist, Marcellus of Ancyra», and discards a direct influence of Marcellus on Constantine.

<sup>123</sup> The words κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχοντος are an allusion to Plato, for example, *The Statesman*, 269d, quoted in *Evangelical Preparation*, XI, 32, 6 (GCS, 43/2), p. 70, l. 2.

<sup>124</sup> τὴν Athanasius, Gelasius : τὸ Socrates, Theodoretus, Opitz. In favour of τὴν, see Eusebius, *Fragments on Lucas*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 24, col. 589, ll. 23-24: τὴν ἀνωτάτω καὶ πρὸ πάντων αἰώνων ἐκ Θεοῦ γέννησιν αὐτοῦ.

<sup>125</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelical Demonstration*, IV, 3, 13 (GCS, 23), p. 154, ll. 14-15. This statement is Origenian: see for example *Principles*, I, 2, 9, ed. S. FERNÁNDEZ (Fuentes Patristicas, 27), Madrid, 2015, p. 194, l. 1-15.

Ten years after the synod of Nicaea, Eusebius precisely reproached Marcellus of Ancyra for not believing that the Logos «preexists the assumption of the body»<sup>126</sup>.

Nonetheless, the Aristotelian opposition between potentiality and actuality is a *hapax legomenon* in Eusebius, who tends instead to use ἐνέργεια and δύναμις as synonyms<sup>127</sup>. Also a *hapax legomenon* in Eusebius, the adverb ἀγεννήτως was attributed by Arius to Alexander of Alexandria as evidence of his heterodoxy, since, according to the priest, the bishop referred it to the Son<sup>128</sup>. Likewise, the proposition: «the Father is always Father» resembles the proposition Arius had attributed to Alexander of Alexandria: «always God, always Son», but actually never occurs in what is preserved of Alexander, of Eusebius of Caesarea or of Marcellus. Athanasius seems the first to have used it<sup>129</sup>.

The opposition between a potential existence of the Logos before the incarnation, and a real existence as Son from the incarnation, is often attributed to Marcellus of Ancyra. This is not the case<sup>130</sup>. Marcellus consistently uses ἐνέργεια in the sense of «activity»<sup>131</sup> and asserts that the Logos «is separate from the Father only when he acts»<sup>132</sup>, especially in the creative activity and in the activity of the economy according to the flesh: «The Logos proceeded with an active activity.»<sup>133</sup>

It is within this framework that we must understand the one fragment where Marcellus seems to contrast ἐνέργεια and δύναμις:

When <John> says: «In the beginning was the Logos,» he shows that, by power, the Logos is in the Father (indeed, God, «from whom all <comes>», is the beginning of all that has come into being). When he says: «and the Logos was with

<sup>126</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical Theology*, I, 20, 2 (GCS, 9/1), p. 81, 5-6: προϋπάρχειν αὐτὸν τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀναλήψεως.

<sup>127</sup> See for example *Evangelical Demonstration*, IX, 2, 6 (GCS, 23), p. 81, l. 23: ἀπορρήτῳ δυνάμει καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ. Origen, on the contrary, uses the opposition, for example in *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, II, XXIV, 157, ll. 22-23 (SC, 120bis), p. 314.

<sup>128</sup> Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, Urk. 1, 1, p. 2, l. 1.

<sup>129</sup> Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, Urk. 1, 1, p. 2, l. 1. Athanasius attribute to Arius οὐκ αἰὶ ὁ θεὸς πατὴρ ἦν in *Discourses against the Arians*, I, 5, 2, in *Athanasius Werke*, I, 1, 2, K. Metzler et K. Savvidis (eds.), Berlin, 1998, p. 114, l. 11 *et passim* and answers: πατὴρ αἰὶ πατὴρ εἶναι (I, 21, 10, p. 131, l. 32).

<sup>130</sup> See Sara PARVIS, *Marcellus of Ancyra and the Lost Years of the Arian Controversy 325-345*, Oxford, 2006, 33: «There is general agreement that these terms [ἐνέργεια and δύναμις] are not used by Marcellus in the Aristotelian sense of potentiality and actuality.»

<sup>131</sup> See for example Marcellus, frag. 87 and 109, ed. S. FERNÁNDEZ (Fuentes Patristicas, 36), Madrid, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> Marcellus, fragment 104, ed. S. FERNÁNDEZ (Fuentes Patristicas, 36), p. 238, l. 1-2: ἐνεργείᾳ μόνῃ [...] κχωρισθαι τοῦ πατρὸς. See also frag. 106.

<sup>133</sup> Marcellus, frag. 109, p. 250, l. 23: προῆλθεν ὁ λόγος δραστηκῆ ἐνεργείᾳ.

God,» <he shows that>, by activity, the Logos is with God (indeed, «all things came into being through him, and nothing came into being without him»).

ἐν μὲν τῷ φῆσαι ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος δεῖξει δυνάμει ἐν τῷ πατρὶ εἶναι τὸν λόγον (ἀρχὴ γὰρ ἀπάντων τῶν γεγονότων ὁ θεὸς ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα), ἐν δὲ τῷ καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐνεργεῖα πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εἶναι τὸν λόγον (πάντα γὰρ δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν).<sup>134</sup>

Power and activity are here two aspects of the being of the Logos, not the Aristotelian opposition between power and actuality.

In short, it seems as if Eusebius is quoting an authentic statement by the emperor, repeating, in his own way, statements heard, for example, from Marcellus, on the pre-existence of the Logos before his human begetting, and from Alexander on the eternity of the Father-Son correlation.

#### V. CONSTANTINE AFTER NICAEA (LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF NICOMEDIA AND LETTER TO ARIUS)

That Constantine indeed learnt something on Christology at the synod of Nicaea can be corroborated by two later letters of the emperor, one of autumn 325 and one of 333.

Shortly after the synod of Nicaea, Eusebius, bishop of the imperial capital, Nicomedia, and Theognios, bishop of Nicaea, received into their communion Alexandrian Arians exiled by Constantine to Nicomedia. This act contravened canon 5 of the Nicene synod, which states that «those condemned by some should not be received by others.» Constantine took the decision to exile Eusebius and Theognios. His letter to the Church of Nicomedia announces this decision and supports the convocation of a synod of election to replace Eusebius (*Urk.* 27, 12).

The letter is divided into two parts (1-8 and 9-16). The authenticity of the first part, an indignant defence of the Christology attributed to the synod of Nicaea, has been questioned<sup>135</sup>, as it is missing from one of the two sources transmitting the letter<sup>136</sup>. However, its mordacious style, marked by irony and rhetorical questions, is typical of Constantine.

<sup>134</sup> Marcellus, frag. 70, p. 194, l. 1-5.

<sup>135</sup> Hermann KRAFT, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung* [vid. n. 2], p. 229, considers that Athanasius attached a fragment of a theological discourse by Constantine to the authentic letter.

<sup>136</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Decisions of Nicaea*, 41, transmits both parts, as does the Latin translation of the Acts of the Council of Constantinople II of 553 (*ACO*, IV, 2). In contrast, the

Moreover, the virtual adverse opinion to which Constantine opposes the Christology proclaimed at Nicaea resembles precisely that of Eusebius of Nicomedia, as I shall attempt to show. This is only to be expected in a letter announcing his condemnation.

Finally, in the second part of the letter, as in other letters from Constantine after the synod of Nicaea<sup>137</sup>, the emperor insists on his active presence at the sessions (*Urk.* 27, 13). He could thus learn first-hand about the arguments of Eusebius of Nicomedia against the Christology of the begetting «from the substance», and the arguments in favour of the *homoousios* presented by Alexander of Alexandria, Eustathius of Antioch or Marcellus of Ancyra.

The opening of the letter (§ 1-5) forms a veritable exposition of binitarian theology: this time, Constantine does not only speak of «the Lord God and the Saviour Christ» (τὸν δεσπότην θεὸν δηλαδὴ καὶ σωτῆρα Χριστὸν, *Urk.* 27, 1, p. 58, l. 2), as in 314: but «of a Father and a Son» (πατέρα τε καὶ υἱὸν εἶναι, *Urk.* 27, 1, p. 58, l. 3)<sup>138</sup>.

The Father is characterized by his radical eternity: «without beginning or end» (ἄναρχον ἄνευ τέλους, *Urk.* 27, 1, p. 58, l. 3) and his being the origin of all: «progenitor of this world» (γονεῖα τοῦ αἰῶνος αὐτοῦ, *Urk.* 27, 1, p. 58, l. 3-4)<sup>139</sup>. This characterisation corresponds well with the insistence of all the theologians present at Nicaea on the Father's «unengendered» being, and more particularly with the insistence of the opponents of Alexander of Alexandria<sup>140</sup>, who reproached him for speaking of «two unengendered ones» and opposed him that «the Son is not unengendered»<sup>141</sup>. For Alexander of Alexandria, this is a slander-

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first part (*Urk.* 27, 1-8) is absent from the transcription by Theodoretus, *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 20 and Gelasius, *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 11, 22-31. But Theodoretus explicitly states that he transcribes only «the end of the letter» (I, 19, 3 [SC, 501], p. 276, l. 21).

<sup>137</sup> See *Urk.* 25, 3, p. 53, l. 1; *Urk.* 26, 2, p. 55, ll. 5-6.

<sup>138</sup> The opening words of a letter to the Church of Alexandria in 332, only preserved in a Greek translation, also mentions both the *summus deus* and «the Only-begotten craftsman» (*ap.* Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians*, 61, 1, *Athanasius Werke*, II, p. 141, ll. 6-7).

<sup>139</sup> The Greek translator probably misinterpreted a Latin original \**genitorem saeculi ipsius*, mistaking a demonstrative adjective in the genitive («of this world») for a pronoun («progenitor of his world»).

<sup>140</sup> Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, *Urk.* 6, 2, p. 12, l. 4: μόνον ἀγέννητον; 6, 4, p. 13, ll. 11-12: οὐδὲ [...] δύο ἀγεννήτους ἀρχάς; Eusebius of Nicomedia, *Letter to Paulinus of Tyre*, *Urk.* 8, 3, p. 16, ll. 1-2: οὐτε δύο ἀγέννητα [...] ἐν μὲν τὸ ἀγέννητον.

<sup>141</sup> Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, *Urk.* 1, 4, p. 2, l. 10: ὁ υἱὸς οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγέννητος; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Letter to Euphratation of Balanea*, *Urk.* 3, 1, p. 4, l. 6: ὁ μὲν ἀγέννητος, ὁ δὲ γεννητός; *Evangelical Demonstration*, IV, 3, 13 (GCS, 23), p. 154, l. 16: οὐκ ἀγέννητον ὄντα, γεννώμενον δ' ἐξ ἀγεννήτου πατρός.

ous extrapolation<sup>142</sup>. He too characterises the Father as «unengendered»<sup>143</sup>, and the synod of Antioch in the winter of 324-325 states it again: the Christology the bishops subscribe to does «not» imply that the Son too «is unengendered»<sup>144</sup>, it is indeed «the Father» who is «unengendered»<sup>145</sup>.

The Son, on the other hand, is metaphorically described as the «will of the Father»:

A Son, that is, the will of the Father, which was not conceived through a so-called Enthymēsis, nor was it grasped through the agency of a so-called substance subject to examination for the realization of its works.

υἰὸν δέ, τοῦτ' ἔστι τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς βούλησιν, ἣτις οὔτε δι' ἐνθυμήσεώς τινος ἀνείληπται οὔτε πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ τελεσιουργίαν διὰ τινος ἐξεζητημένης οὐσίας κατελήφθη. (*Urk.* 27, 1, p. 58, l. 4-6)

Constantine, aware of the Gnostic resonances of the metaphor, immediately dismisses the system of successive emanations: the Son proceeds directly from the Father, because, as he will say in a few lines, there is «nothing between the God and Father and <the> Son» (*Urk.* 27, 3, p. 58, l. 13), whereas in the Gnostic system, the intermediate aeons are multiplied: the hypothetical aeon Will<sup>146</sup> would proceed from the Father through the aeon Enthymēsis (Reasoning)<sup>147</sup>.

The identification of the Son with the will of the Father is an indirect response to the assertion of Arius, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Eusebius of Nicomedia that the Son proceeds not from the substance of the Father, but from his will<sup>148</sup>.

<sup>142</sup> Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Byzantium*, *Urk.* 14, 44, p. 26, ll. 22-24.

<sup>143</sup> Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Byzantium*, *Urk.* 14, 46, p. 27, l. 1: μόνον ἀγέννητον πατέρα; see *Urk.* 14, 44, p. 26, l. 26; *Urk.* 14, 47, p. 27, ll. 14-15, and the distinction between ἀγέννητος and ἄναρχος in *Urk.* 14, 48-52.

<sup>144</sup> *Synodal of Antioch*, *Urk.* 18, 10, p. 39, ll. 1-2: *kw dl' ylyd' ytwby*. The synodal is preserved only in Syriac. Its authenticity has been objected, for example by HARNACK, and more recently by Holger STRUTWOLF, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea. Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung seiner Platonismusrezeption und Wirkungsgeschichte*, Göttingen, 1999, pp. 32-44.

<sup>145</sup> *Synodal of Antioch*, *Urk.* 18, 11, p. 39, l. 7: 'b' l' ylyd'.

<sup>146</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 12, 1, describing one of the variants of the Ptolemaic system, gives the Father two companions, *Ennoia* and *Thelēsis*, through whom he causes the Monogene and the Truth to proceed.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 5, 1, ed. Adelin ROUSSEAU and Louis DOUTRELEAU (SC, 264), p. 78, l. 486-489, where the aeon Saviour proceeds «through» Enthymēsis. See also the gnostic treatise *Blessed Eugnostos*, in *NH* III, 3, f. 83, ll. 5-10, where ἐνθυμησις derives from ἔννοια and produces indirectly θέλῃσις.

<sup>148</sup> Arius, *Urk.* 1, 4, p. 3, l. 2-3: θελήματι καὶ βουλή ὑπέστη; *Urk.* 6, 2, p. 12, ll. 8-9: ὑποστήσαντα ἰδίῳ θελήματι; Eusebius of Nicomedia, *Urk.* 8, 3, p. 16, l. 3: οὐκ ἐκ οὐσίας αὐτοῦ γεγονός; *Urk.* 8, 7,

For Constantine, the Son does not come from the will of the Father, he *is* the will of the Father<sup>149</sup>. The name «will» is indeed the equivalent of those of Logos or Wisdom, absent from the letter but evoked by the description of the Son as «craftsman-demiurge» (*Urk.* 27, 2, p. 58, l. 7) proceeding «with a view to the orderly arrangement of what he has brought into being» (ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ γεγενημένων διακόσμησιν, *Urk.* 27, 2, p. 58, l. 10) – a probable allusion to Pr 8,22. Constantine's Christology is indeed the Christology of the Logos<sup>150</sup>. Some years later, in his letter to Arius, Constantine will speak more clearly of a «Logos of his substance»<sup>151</sup>.

The description of the begetting of the Son as a procession of the will for the creation of the world (*Urk.* 27, 3) has as its goal the negation of any separation between the Son and the Father: «The performance of the tasks» entrusted to the will «did not separate the will from the substance of the Father by division» (οὐχὶ δὲ μερισθεῖσαν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας τὴν βούλησιν διέστησεν, *Urk.* 27, 3, p. 58, l. 14-15). Constantine emphatically describes a bipolar structure similar to the one Eusebius of Caesarea had put in his mouth at the end of his letter: «He who proceeded» for creative activity «is the one who is always in the Father» (προῆλθεν αὐτὸς ὁ καὶ πάντοτε ἐν τῷ πατρὶ ὄν, *Urk.* 27, 2, p. 58, l. 9); «the will is at the same time fixed in its residence and [...] acts and administers» (ἡ γὰρ βούλησις ὁμοῦ καὶ τῷ οἰκητηρίῳ ἑαυτῆς ἐμπέπηγε καὶ [...] πράττει τε καὶ διοικεῖ, *Urk.* 27, 2, p. 58, l. 11-12). The economic «procession» is «without separation» (ἀμερίστω προελεύσει, *Urk.* 27, 2, l. 10-11), it does not mean theological division. Marcellus will not write anything very different some years later: if he exposed orally at Nicaea his own bipolar Christology, Constantine was able to understand his point.

The following sections 4-5 take up another theme, hitherto absent: the question of Christ's sufferings.

Does the divine suffer, when the habitation of the venerable body hastens towards the knowledge of its own holiness?

ἄρ' οὖν πάσχει τὸ θεῖον, ἐπειδὴν ἡ τοῦ σεμινοῦ σώματος οἰκησις πρὸς ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἰδίας ἀγιότητος ὀρμᾷ; (*Urk.* 27, 4, p. 58, l. 16-18)

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p. 17, l. 3: ἐκ τοῦ βουλήματος αὐτοῦ γένεσιν; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelical Demonstration*, IV, 3, 13 (GCS, 23), p. 154, ll. 17-21: οὐ κατὰ διαίρεσιν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας προβεβλημένον [...] ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀνεκφράστου καὶ ἀπερινοήτου βουλῆς τε καὶ δυνάμεως οὐσιούμενον.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, 13, 4, ed. Manlio SIMONETTI, Bologna, 2000, p. 176: Εἰ δὲ οὖν Λόγος ἀποστέλλεται διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τὸ θέλημα τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐστὶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 10, 3; Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, 10, 3-11, 2, or TERTULLIAN, *Against Praxeas*, 5, 3.

<sup>151</sup> *Urk.* 34, 13, p. ll. 30-31: τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ [...] λόγον.

This question is typical of the atmosphere in Antioch as reflected in the fragments of Eustathius of Antioch: Eustathius has his opponents attribute Christ's sufferings to his divinity, which therefore cannot be a divinity of the same ontological level as that of the incorporeal and impassible Father<sup>152</sup>; Eustathius, on the other hand, attributes them to the «man of Christ», safeguarding the impassibility of the Spirit of holiness that resides in the human body<sup>153</sup>. Constantine's image of the body as an «habitation» echoes those of the tent and the temple dear to Eustathius<sup>154</sup>. Constantine may well have learned from Eustathius the solution to this problem of God's suffering through the distinction in Christ between «the divine» and «the body».

The emperor ends the theological part of the letter with a direct allusion to the position of Eusebius of Nicomedia at Nicaea:

He denies that the Son of God proceeded from the indivisible substance of the Father.

τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ υἱὸν ἀρνείται ἐξ ἀμερίστου τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας προεληλυθέναι.<sup>155</sup>

The detailed treatment of what a year earlier Constantine had regarded as an unimportant debate, and of which he spoke in the briefest and vaguest terms after the synod of Nicaea, is surprising. In the anger unleashed by what he considered a betrayal, Constantine forgot the advice he had given to Alexander and Arius to keep one's theological reflections to themselves. The authenticity of these reflections, which were certainly influenced by the discussions between Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra, can be further corroborated by the emperor's letter to Arius eight years later<sup>156</sup>.

I will pass over the stylistic elements, which have already been noted in the previous analyses and show that it is indeed Constantine's voice that resounds in the letter. From the beginning of the letter, where the emperor describes Arius'

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Eustathius of Antioch, frag. 19, ed. José DECLERCK (CCSG, 51), pp. 80-81.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Eustathius of Antioch, frag. 8 (CCSG, 51), p. 69, ll. 22-24; cf. frag. 74, p. 146, ll. 15-17.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. Eustathius of Antioch, frag. 66, *passim*. See also frag. 77 (CCSG, 51), p. 147, l. 3; p. 148, l. 8.

<sup>155</sup> *Urk.* 27, 8, p. 59, l. 21.

<sup>156</sup> The dating of Constantine's letter to Arius (*Urk.* 34) is controversial. Athanasius, who transcribes it in his *Letter Concerning the Decrees of Nicaea*, 40, indicates that it was brought to Alexandria when Paterios was prefect of Egypt, in 333. This is the date I have chosen. It would be followed by a further summons to appear before the emperor a year later (*Urk.* 24 of November 27<sup>th</sup>, 334). Because of what appears to be an allusion to a rehabilitation of Arius (*Urk.* 34, 8, p. 70, l. 10-11: τὴν τοῦ εἰσδεχθῆναι ἡμᾶς ἕδειαν), Opitz places Constantine's letter in the wake of an alleged second session of the synod of Nicaea, in 327.



duplicity, the Christological position is very clear: Christ<sup>157</sup> co-exists eternally with the one who is his Father: «You who co-exist with the eternal Father of your source»<sup>158</sup>. The eternal coexistence of the Son with the Father is a proposition that Arius attributed to Alexander of Alexandria<sup>159</sup> and that he himself rejected: «He is not eternal, nor coeternal, no co-unengendered with the Father»<sup>160</sup>, as did Eusebius of Caesarea: «we affirm that the Son does not coexist with the Father, but that the Father preexists before the Son.»<sup>161</sup>

This coexistence is specified in the formula of faith that Constantine proposes to Arius:

Are you saying that there is only one God? I agree with you, keep this opinion. You assert that there is a Logos of his substance, without beginning or end? I like that, continue believing it. If you add something to it, I eliminate it. If you sew a piece of cloth to <assert> an ungodly separation, I neither agree to see it nor to think it. If you support the housing of the body for the sake of the economy of divine operations, I do not reject it. If you say that the Spirit of eternity came into being in the eminent Logos, I accept it.

ἓνα λέγεις θεόν· σύμψηφον ἔχεις κάμῃ, οὕτω φρόνει. τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ ἀναρχον καὶ ἀτελευτήτον λόγον εἶναι φῆς· στέργω τοῦτο· οὕτω πίστευε. εἴ τι περαιτέρω προσπλέκεις, τοῦτ' ἀναιρῶ· εἴ τι πρὸς ἀσεβῆ χωρισμὸν συγκαττύεις, τοῦτο οὔτε ὄραν νοεῖν ὁμολογῶ· εἴ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ξενίαν πρὸς οἰκονομίαν τῶν θείων ἐνεργειῶν παραλαμβάνεις, οὐκ ἀποδοκιμάζω. εἴ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀιδιότητος ἐν τῷ ὑπερέχοντι λόγῳ γεγενῆσθαι λέγεις, δέχομαι.<sup>162</sup>

The eternal coexistence of Christ is an existence without beginning or end, a precision already affirmed with regard to the Father in the letter to the Church

<sup>157</sup> The name «Christ» appears 10 times in the letter, a record.

<sup>158</sup> *Urk.* 34, 4, p. 69, ll. 16-17: σὺ τῷ αἰδίῳ τῆς σαυτοῦ πηγῆς τῷ πατρὶ συνυπάρχων.

<sup>159</sup> *Urk.* 1, 2, p. 2, ll. 1-2: συνυπάρχει ὁ υἱὸς ἀγεννήτως τῷ θεῷ. In the preserved documents, Alexander only states that «the Son is always from the Father» (*Urk.* 14, 48, p. 27, ll. 17-18: ἀεὶ εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς).

<sup>160</sup> *Urk.* 6, 4, p. 13, ll. 10-11: οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶν αἰδιος ἢ συναίδιος ἢ συναγέννητος τῷ πατρὶ.

<sup>161</sup> *Letter to Euphratation of Balanea, Urk.* 3, 1, p. 4, ll. 4-5: Οὐ γὰρ συνυπάρχειν φημὲν τὸν υἱὸν τῷ πατρὶ, προϋπάρχειν δὲ τὸν πατέρα τοῦ υἱοῦ.

<sup>162</sup> *Urk.* 34, 13, p. 70, l. 30-14, p. 71, l. 2. For Opitz and most scholars, the theological statements are fragments of a profession of faith contained in Arius' letter to Constantine. Now, in *Urk.* 34, 32, Constantine alludes to the statement about the incarnation of *Urk.* 34, 14, presenting it as a statement of his own. Therefore, I prefer to think that, here, Constantine does not quote Arius' letter, but his own theological convictions, which he would like to hear from the mouth of his addressee. The Constantinian paternity of the confession of faith in this paragraph is corroborated for stylistic reasons (Constantine does not use the usual way of making exact quotations with ὅτι), and for reasons of content.

of Nicomedia, and which the «document» of the synod of Serdica of 343 will repeat several times<sup>163</sup>. In his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, Arius had affirmed exactly the opposite: «We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a principle, while God is without principle»<sup>164</sup>.

There is therefore no essential separation between the Father and the Son who comes from him, as Constantine had already declared in his letter to the Church of Nicomedia. The Logos is «of his substance». Paraphrasing the final anathematism of the Nicene formula, Constantine denies that the Son is a hypostasis alien to the Father:

You think it necessary to subordinate an alien hypostasis, believing, as it is, wrongly, whereas I know that the fullness of the supreme power that extends itself on everything is the one substance of the Father and Son.

Σὺ μὲν ὑπόστασιν ξένην ὑποτάττειν οἶει δεῖν κακῶς δήπου πιστεύων, ἐγὼ δὲ τῆς ὑπερεξόχου καὶ ἐπὶ πάντα διηκούσης δυνάμεως τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ οὐσίαν μίαν εἶναι γινώσκω.<sup>165</sup>

Constantine's interpretation of Nicene consubstantiality is the most radical of all, the one repeated ten years later in the «document» of Serdica: «one substance of the Father and the Son»<sup>166</sup>.

Constantine remains discreet about the Holy Spirit: his coming into being is mediated by the Logos, as Origen deduced from Jn 1,3<sup>167</sup>, but Constantine also attributes eternity to him.

The other topic addressed in the letter to the Church of Nicomedia, that of the passibility of Christ, is also an important theme in the letter to Arius (*Urk.* 34, 29-34). Constantine addresses it from the definition of the omnipresence of God's power in the universe, already mentioned in the letter to the Church of Nicomedia:

Is not God everywhere [...]? Is not the beautiful order of the universe subsisting by his power?

Ἄρ' οὐχὶ πανταχοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ θεός [...]; Ἄρ' οὐχὶ διὰ τῆς τούτου δυνάμεως ἡ τῶν ὅλων συνέστηκεν εὐκοσμία;<sup>168</sup>

<sup>163</sup> *Ap. Theodoretus, Ecclesiastical History*, II, 8, 38.42.48. The application of the adjective «without beginning» to the Logos seems to be an innovation of Athanasius of Alexandria. See *Discourses against the Arians*, I, 12, 8; II, 57, 3; II, 58, 1.

<sup>164</sup> *Urk.* 1, 5, p. 3, l. 5: διωκόμεθα δὲ ὅτι εἶπομεν, ἀρχὴν ἔχει ὁ υἱός, ὁ δὲ θεός ἀναρχός ἐστι.

<sup>165</sup> *Urk.* 34, 14, p. 71, ll. 3-6.

<sup>166</sup> *Ap. Theodoretus, Ecclesiastical History*, II, 8, 39-40.43.47.

<sup>167</sup> See Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, II, XI, 79.

<sup>168</sup> *Urk.* 27, 8, p. 59, ll. 21-23.

Constantine repeats: «God is present in Christ»<sup>169</sup> as he is present in the universe, without the passions being in God: «God is present everywhere. Where are the injuries in God?»<sup>170</sup> The body is a «form» into which Christ «was sent», just as the universe itself is a «form» into which the power of God is exercised. The incarnation of the Logos is thus presented, as in the letter to the Church of Nicomedia, as housing in the body, specified here as housing for a stranger (ξενίαν), with the same probable influence of Eustathius of Antioch.

As for the Father, besides his uniqueness, his main property is the «power that extends to all things»: «your power in action is unlimited»<sup>171</sup>. Nineteen years earlier, in his letter to the synod of Arles, Constantine the convert had said he had discovered that a «higher power»<sup>172</sup> could see into his heart. And eight years earlier, in the letter announcing the decision of the synod of Nicaea on the date of Easter, he attributed his political successes to the «grace of divine power»<sup>173</sup>. With his deeper Christological understanding, Constantine could now affirm that God is not only the «ruler who holds all things in his power», but also the «Father of the one power»<sup>174</sup>, who is Christ.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown that Constantine knew how to listen to the opinions of some and others at Nicaea and that he retained the insistence of Eusebius of Caesarea and his namesake of Nicomedia against a material representation of the divine substance, dividing itself into two parts in order to engender the Son. He also retained the insistence of Alexander of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea himself on the eternal existence of the Son, the bipolar structure through which Marcellus might have described the inseparability of the Logos from the Father, and the affirmation of Eustathius on the impassibility of the Godhead.

<sup>169</sup> *Urk.* 34, 33, p. 73, ll. 25-26: ἐν Χριστῷ παρεῖναι τὸν θεόν.

<sup>170</sup> *Urk.* 34, 32, p. 73, l. 23: ὁ θεὸς πανταχοῦ πάρεστι. Ποῦ τοῖνυν εἰσιν ἐν τῷ θεῷ αἱ ὕβρεις;

<sup>171</sup> *Urk.* 34, 27, p. 73, ll. 3-4: ἡ σὴ δύναμις μετ' ἐνεργείας ἐστὶν ἀπειρος. See also *Urk.* 34, 33, p. 73, l. 29.

<sup>172</sup> *Ap.* Optatus of Milevis (*CSEL*, 26), v, p. 208, l. 26: *supernam potentiam*. See also *Letter to Chrestus*, bishop of Syracuse, convoking him to the synod of Arles, *ap.* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, x, 5, 21 (GCS, 9/2), p. 888, l. 25; p. 889, l. 1: τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ἐπουρανίου δυνάμεως.

<sup>173</sup> *Urk.* 26, 1, p. 54, l. 1: τῆς θείας δυνάμεως [...] χάρις. See the end of the letter, *Urk.* 26, 12, p. 57, l. 17.

<sup>174</sup> *Urk.* 34, 26, p. 72, l. 27: ὃ τῶν πάντων ἔχων τὸ κύρος δέσποτα, ὃ τῆς μονήρους δυνάμεως πάτερ.

The coherence of Constantine's theological reflexions proves indirectly the authenticity of the theological declarations included in the official correspondence of the emperor, against the hypothesis of the intervention of ecclesiastical advisers or Christian secretaries. These declarations witness a personal interest in the theological content of the Nicene debates, beyond Constantine's general involvement in the religious affairs of his empire in search for peace and concord. Is this interest the consequence of an existential preoccupation or of the will to show himself to his contemporaries and to posterity as a man of erudition and culture? To answer this difficult question is beyond the scope of this paper.

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