

## LESSON ELEVEN – Eusebius of Caesarea and Monasticism

### Eusebius of Caesarea

**Looking westward or eastward, looking over the whole earth, and even looking at heaven, always and everywhere I see blessed Constantine leading the same empire. – Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>1</sup>**

- Eusebius of Caesarea was probably the most learned Christian of his time. He was also one of the most passionate admirers of Constantine.
- Eusebius was born around 260, most likely in Palestine, where he spent his early years. He is known as Eusebius of Caesarea because it was the city, in which he spent most of his life and where he served as a bishop.
- The person who left a deep impression on Eusebius was Pamphilus of Caesarea. Pamphilus was a native of Berytus, now Beirut, in Lebanon.
- He studied in Alexandria under Pierius, a famous teacher who was carrying on Origen's work in that city. Pamphilus eventually made his way to Caesarea, probably at the request of the city's bishop.
- The church in Caesarea had kept Origen's library, and Pamphilus spent long hours working on it and adding to it. Eusebius aided in this task.
- Pamphilus, Eusebius and others spent years working as a team. During this period of joint work Pamphilus and Eusebius wrote several works, although most of them have been lost.
- By June of 303, persecution had made its way to Caesarea. In 305, Maximinus Daia, a bitter enemy of Christianity, achieved imperial rank and two years later Pamphilus was arrested.
- There was a brief lull in the storm and Pamphilus remained imprisoned for two years before finally being condemned to death.
- Eusebius himself was not arrested, why is not clear. On at least two occasions he left the city and one may conclude it was to avoid arrest.
- In the midst of those turbulent times, Eusebius carried on with what would become his most important work, his *Church History*.
- It was Eusebius who collected, organized and published most of what is known about the people and events in the life of the early church.
- In 311, things started to change. First came the edict by Galerius that granted tolerance to the Christians and then Constantine defeated Maxentius. Licinius and Constantine then met in Milan and put an end to persecution.
- From the point of view of Eusebius, what was taking place was direct intervention by God, like the events of Exodus.
- From then on Eusebius began looking upon Constantine and Licinius as the instruments of the divine design. When hostilities broke out between Constantine and Licinius, Eusebius was convinced the latter had become insane. Only Constantine remained as God's chosen instrument.

- A few years before Constantine became the sole emperor, Eusebius had been appointed bishop of Caesarea. Persecution had disbanded his flock so he had the great responsibility to gather them back.
- The bishopric of Caesarea had jurisdiction not only over the city but over all of Palestine, leaving Eusebius little time for literary and scholarly pursuits.
- He had been bishop of Caesarea for quite a few years when a new storm broke the peace of the church.
- This was not a matter of persecution by the government, but a bitter theological debate that threatened to rip the church apart. It was the Arian controversy over the divine status of Jesus.
- Eusebius's role in the controversy was not beyond reproach. The reason for this was not because Eusebius was a hypocrite or opportunist but rather that he did not fully understand what was at stake. For him, peace and unity of the church were of paramount importance.
- At first, he seemed inclined toward Arianism but at the Council of Nicaea he took the opposite stance, only to waver again once the council had disbanded.
- Since Eusebius was a famous bishop and scholar many looked to him for direction and his confusion did little to bring the controversy to a happy conclusion.
- Eusebius had met Constantine years before, when the future emperor visited Palestine under Diocletian's reign. At Nicaea, Eusebius witnessed the emperor seeking the unity and well-being of the church.
- On multiple occasions he had interviews and correspondence with Constantine. Eusebius also gave a speech honoring Constantine during the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.
- Since Eusebius was admired by many of his colleagues, the emperor cultivated that support, and since Eusebius was convinced that Constantine had been raised up by God, he never hesitated to support the emperor.
- Eusebius's gratitude did go beyond its most obvious expressions of words of praise. His understanding of what had taken place in the person of Constantine left a mark on his entire work.
- The final draft of his *Church History*, did not simply seek to retell the various events in the earlier life of the church. It was really an apology that sought to show that Christianity was the ultimate goal of human history, particularly as seen within the context of the Roman Empire.
- Similar notions had appeared earlier, when Christian writers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century declared that all truth comes from the same Logos, who was incarnate in Jesus.
- Also circulating was the idea that the empire itself, and the relative peace it brought to the Mediterranean basin had been ordained by God as a means to facilitate the dissemination of the Christian faith.
- What Eusebius did was to bring together these various ideas, showing them at work in the verifiable facts of the history of both the church and the empire.
- The history collected was a testament to the truth of Christianity, which is the culmination of human history.

- In support of this thesis, Constantine's conversion was the keystone. According to Eusebius, the main reason for persecution was that Roman authorities did not see Christianity as the crowning touch on the best Roman traditions.
- Faith and the empire were not incompatible. Rather the Christian faith was the culmination of the empire.
- Eusebius seemed to be aware of some of Constantine's shortcomings especially his petulant and sometimes blood thirsty temperament. But, apparently, in order not to weaken his argument, Eusebius remained silent about those parts of Constantine's personality.
- Eusebius's work is an indicator of the degree to which, even unwittingly, Christian theology was being shaped by the new situation with Constantine's favorable policies, even to point of abandoning some of its traditional beliefs.
- It is clear in the New Testament as well as in the early church that the gospel was first good news to the poor and that the rich had particular difficulty in hearing it and receiving it.
- One of the theological issues that caused some concern for earlier Christians was how it was possible for a rich person to be saved. But beginning with Constantine, riches and pomp came to be seen as signs of divine favor.
- Eusebius does not seem to have been aware of the radical change that was taking place as the persecuted church became the church of the powerful, nor of the dangers involved in that change.
- Eusebius described with great joy and pride the ornate churches that were being built. But the result of those buildings and liturgy that evolved to fit them, was the development of a clerical aristocracy, similar to the imperial aristocracy and often as far from the common people as were the high-powered officers of the empire.
- The scheme of history that Eusebius developed led him to set aside or postpone a fundamental theme of early Christianity, the expectation of the full reign of God.
- Religion tended to become a way to gain access to heaven, rather than serve God in this life and the next.
- The earlier notion, that in the resurrection of Christ a new age had dawned and that by baptism and communion Christians became participants in it, was now abandoned and Christian hope was limited to the individuals life after death.
- Since the time of Constantine there was a tendency to set aside or to postpone the hope of the early church, that its Lord would return in the clouds to establish a kingdom of peace and justice.
- The entire history of the period would seem to indicate that Eusebius, although more articulate than most, was simply expressing the common feeling among Christians for whom the victory of Constantine and of the peace he brought was the final triumph of Christianity over its enemies.

## Monasticism

### **Monks who leave their cells, or seek company of others, lose their peace, like the fish out of water loses his life. - Anthony<sup>2</sup>**

- Not all Christians received the new peace Constantine brought with joy. There were some who lamented what they saw as the low level to which the Christian life had descended.
- Bishops competed over prestigious positions. The rich and powerful seemed to dominate the life of the church. The tares were growing so rapidly it seemed they would soon choke out the wheat.
- For almost 300 years, the church had lived under the constant threat of persecution. All Christians accepted the possibility that some day they might be taken before the Roman authorities and be given the choice of apostasy or death.
- During the prolonged periods of peace in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries there were those who forgot this possibility of persecution and when it did arrive, they were too weak to withstand the pressure.
- This convinced many that security and comfortable living were the greatest enemies of the faith and these enemies proved stronger during times of peace.
- Many found the answer in living a monastic life: to flee from human society, to leave behind everything, to dominate the body and its passions, which give way to temptation.
- At the very time churches were being flooded by thousands demanding baptism, there was an equal exist of thousands who sought blessedness in seclusion.
- Even before Constantine's time, there were Christians, who for various reasons, had felt called to an unusual lifestyle.
- A number of outside influences also played a part in the development of the Christian monastic movement. Several schools of philosophy held that the body was a prison of the soul and that the soul could not be truly free unless it overcame the limitations of the body.
- Stoic doctrine was also widespread at the time and held that the passions of the body are the enemy of true wisdom.
- Several religions in the Mediterranean basin included sacred virgins, celibate priests, eunuchs, and others whose lifestyle set them apart for service to their god.
- This sense that the body, and particularly sexual relations, was somehow evil or unworthy of those devoted to holiness became so widespread that there was an attempt to curb this extreme practice at the Council of Nicaea, ordering that any among the clergy that castrated themselves be deposed, and no one who had done such a thing would be admitted into the clergy.
- Although there were early monastics throughout the Roman Empire, it was the Egyptian desert that provided the most fertile soil for the growth of monasticism.
- The word monk is derived from the Greek word *monachos*, which means solitary. One of the driving motivations for the early monks was search for solitude.
- For these people the desert was attractive, not because of its hardship but because of its inaccessibility.

- It is impossible to know who the first monk of the desert was. The two names usually given are Paul and Anthony and they owe their fame to the great Christian writers, Jerome and Athanasius, who wrote about them, each claiming his guy was the first founder of Egyptian monasticism.
- Jerome's *Life of Paul* is very brief and almost entirely legend but the center of the story is probably true.
- Toward the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, feeling persecution, a man named Paul went to the desert, where he found an abandoned hiding place once used by counterfeiters. There he spent the rest of his life in prayer and a diet of mostly dates.
- According to Jerome, Paul lived in such conditions for almost a century with his only visitors being the beasts of the desert and an elderly monk named Anthony.
- According to Athanasius, Anthony was born in a small village on the shore of the Nile, son of wealthy parents. He was likely a Copt, a descendent of the ancient Egyptians who now suffered oppression and discrimination from both Greeks and Romans.
- When Anthony's parents died, they left enough wealth for him and his sister to live a comfortable life.
- One day in a church Anthony read in one of the gospels Jesus words in Matthew 19:21, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." In response to those words, Anthony sold all his property and gave the proceeds to the poor, leaving only a portion for the care of his sister.
- Later he was moved by the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:34, "do not be anxious about tomorrow." He then disposed of even the small fund he had kept for his sister, placed her under the care of the virgins of the church and left for the desert.
- Anthony spent time for a while learning from other monks in the desert until he eventually moved on and lived in a tomb in an abandoned cemetery.
- It was at this time, according to Athanasius, that Anthony began having visions of demons that accosted him continuously.
- When he was 35, Anthony had a vision in which God told him not to fear, for he would always be able to count on the divine. It was then Anthony moved even further out into the desert and found an abandoned fort to make his residence.
- The demons followed him there but Anthony was now convinced that he had God's help and the struggle with the demons became more bearable.
- Unfortunately for Anthony, it was not only the demons who followed him in his monastic pursuit but other monks who desired to learn from him the discipline of quiet prayer and contemplation.
- He was also pursued by the curious and ailing as he had garnered a reputation as a worker of miracles.
- Eventually he gave up the struggle and agreed to live near a group of disciples, on the condition that they would not visit him too often.
- In exchange Anthony would occasionally come and talk with them about monastic discipline, the love of God and prayerful contemplation.

- On two occasions Anthony did visit Alexandria. The first was during the persecution of Diocletian when Anthony and several of his disciples came and offered themselves up for martyrdom.
- However, the prefect decided such disheveled and ragged characters were not worth his attention so they had to be content with offering up words of encouragement to others.
- Anthony's second visit to Alexandria took place years later, during the Arian controversy. The Arians were claiming that Anthony had taken their side and Anthony decided that the only way to undo such false rumors was to appear in person before the bishops of Alexandria.
- According to Athanasius, the elderly hermit, spoke in Coptic, since he did not know Greek and was also likely illiterate but that he spoke with such wisdom and conviction he confounded the Arians.
- Toward the end of his life, Anthony had two younger monks living with him, caring for him. He died in 356, after instructing his two disciples to keep the place of his burial secret and to send his cloak, his only possession, to the bishop Athanasius.
- Both Anthony and Paul had gone to the desert before the time of Constantine but when Constantine came to power, the life of these hermits in the desert became much more popular.
- Travelers in the region declared that the desert was more populated than the cities and others speak of 20,000 women and 10,000 men leading the monastic life in a single area in Egypt.
- Similar numbers are given for the arid regions of Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey, where monks dug caves in the soft stone of the area.

## **The Monastic Life**

- The lives of the monks were very simple. Some planted gardens, but most of them earned a living by weaving baskets and mats that they traded for food and oil.
- Their diet consisted mostly of bread with the occasional fruit or vegetable.
- Their only belongings were the clothes on their backs and a mat to sleep on. Most of them frowned on the owning of books which they believed led to pride.
- They taught each other by heart, entire books of the Bible.
- The growing number of people withdrawing to the desert, and the desire of most of them to learn from an experienced teacher gave rise to a new form of monastic life. Increasingly, solitary monastic life gave way to community monastic life.
- This form of monastic life is called cenobitic, a name derived from two Greek words, meaning communal life.
- The cenobitic monasticism was born out of the natural tendency of monastics to gather around particularly saintly leaders and out of the commandment to love one another.
- Although not the founder of communal monasticism, Pachomius deserves credit as the organizer who most contributed to the development of this type of monasticism.
- Born around 286 to pagan parents, Pachomius seems to have known little of Christianity until he was taken from his home and forced to join the army.

- A group of Christians came along to console him and his companions for their unfortunate lot. Pachomius was so impressed by this act of love that he vowed if ever able to leave the military he too would devote himself to serve others.
- When he was unexpectedly allowed to leave the service, he sought out a Christian teacher to instruct him in the Christian faith and to baptize him.
- Awhile later he withdrew into the desert and asked an elderly monk to be his teacher. Eventually his brother John joined him and the two brothers devoted themselves to prayer and contemplation.
- Pachomius constantly asked God to show him how he can serve better. He had a vision of an angel who instructed him to serve mankind.
- At first Pachomius rejected this since his desire was to serve God and not man, but the message was repeated and Pachomius changed direction and with his brother's help they built a large enclosure, sufficient for a number of monks and recruited what would be the first members of the community.
- His first attempt at community life failed when discipline broke down and Pachomius expelled all the newly recruited monks.
- Trying again, he became even more rigorous, demanding that anyone who wished to join must give up all their goods and promise absolute obedience to their superiors.
- All would work with their hands and no one would consider any task unworthy. This time Pachomius was successful and his sister even founded similar communities for women.
- The daily life of a Pachomian monk included both work and devotion with Pachomius himself always taking on the most humble tasks.
- For devotional life those in the communities were encouraged to pray without ceasing. While they worked, they sang Psalms, recited Scripture passages, and prayed, sometimes silently and sometimes out loud. Twice a day they had common prayers. In the morning they would gather to pray and hear the reading of the Scriptures. In the evening they did the same.
- Although they lived in poverty, Pachomius did not insist on extreme poverty like some monks lived in. At the meals there was bread, fruit, vegetables and fish.
- What the monks produced they sold in the marketplace not only so they could buy food and other necessities but also so they could give to the poor and sojourners.
- Twice a year all Pachomian monks gathered for prayer and worship and to deal with any issues necessary to maintain proper order of the communities.
- Although the roots of monasticism are not to be found exclusively in Egypt, that is where the movement gained the most momentum in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- The earlier practice of Christian communities in general, sharing of goods among members, now became the hallmark of monasticism, something expected of monks and nuns, but not the rest of the church.
- Now that most of the population had become "Christian," most were excused from such sharing, while monastics continued that earlier tradition.

- This led to a distinction between two levels of Christians which would mark most of the history of the church. A distinction reinforced by the vows of celibacy and obedience that only monastics took.

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 149

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 157