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Eusebius: the progression of chronicle historiography in Christendom

Historiographical Essay 1

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Christianity, an Abrahamic monotheistic religion established on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians are those who espouse or believe that Jesus is the Christ. As chronicled in the New Testament, he was the Messiah that was prophesied of in the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Adherents believe that He is the Son of God, and savior of all people. Christianity developed from the Judaic sect during the 1<sup>st</sup> century in the Roman Province of Judea. Essential to Christian theology was Greco-Roman learning and literature customs. From this, Christendom adopted the techniques of exegesis and rhetoric producing voluminous works known as Bible commentaries reaching the educated. Additionally, were the historical accounts that helped define Christianity. This work is an interpretive account through the Ante-Nicene period that examines the progression of the chronical method within Roman Judeo-Christian historiography, with a focus on Eusebius (c. A.D. 263-339).<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with the Gospel accounts are the historical records of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Luke (a Hellenic Jew) reflected the Gospel as a historian in his account on the life of Jesus. In Luke 1:1-3, he writes his “narrative,” and evidence or sources by “things which have been fulfilled,” through “eyewitnesses” and does so writing in an “orderly account.” Of the Apostolic age were the accounts and letters that followed by the Apostle Paul, Peter, and other disciples of Jesus that all formed the New Testament from which much of Christianity was derived. It was the notable Apostle Paul (a Pharisaic Jew), among others, that would embark on missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean preaching the Gospel (good

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Ceh, "Greece, Rome, and Early Christianity," APUS, Week 2 Lesson, retrieved from <https://edge.apus.edu/portal/directtool/df54e583-9970-42a3-8f66-0840b1c20993/>

news of salvation), while others like the Apostle Peter focused in on Rome that would become the Roman Catholic Church to whom the biblical Book of Romans was written.<sup>2</sup>

Oral traditions also made up its beginnings as well as Church cannon and ecclesiastical history. There are extrabiblical accounts and writings of religious creeds that also followed such as *The Didache* (c. A.D. 60-150). All the apostles suffered persecution unto death except for John, yet Christendom continued to grow under what is known as the early Church Fathers or Apostolic Fathers; these were ancient and influential theologians and writers. Historians like Eusebius and the Jewish near contemporary of Jesus, Flavius Josephus (c. A.D. 37-100) attested to the historicity of Jesus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (18.3). Likewise, the Roman historian Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (c. A.D. 56-120) also refers to Christian execution in his *Annals* (15.44). Additionally, there is the *Mara Bar-Serapion* letter (c. A.D.73-200s) with reference to Jesus that is neither of Jewish or Christian origin. The *Mishna* and *Talmud* also attest to the historicity and crucifixion of Jesus.

In the late classical era, Christianity suffered persecution under the Roman Empire. The dissension, hostility, humanitarian maltreatment, and executions of Christians were premised on what a person could *believe*; moreover, it dehumanized the individual's very existence. Christians were attacked for a belief/thought. Not until Constantine, did relief come with his Edict of Milan (c. A.D. 313), providing religious tolerance. With this tolerance, the Bible became a standard of righteousness that followed in governments and laws that permeated

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<sup>2</sup> *New King James Bible Version*, Nashville, Lk. 1:1-3, TN: Formerly Thomas Nelson and now Division of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2019, retrieved from BibleGateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A1-3&version=NKJV>

the ideals of religious tolerance and morphed into the concept of freedom. Theodosius the Great (c. A.D. 347-395) followed this with laws of human dignity.<sup>3</sup>

The early Middle Ages saw the Church form a Christian commonwealth and continuity of religious customs and culture throughout Europe by way of its ecclesiastical structure as the Roman Empire declined. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, scholar, and Church historian gave chronological accounts of the development of Christianity in his ten-volume work *Ecclesiastical History*. Conclusively, it was Eusebius of Caesarea (c. A.D. 263-339), that employed the “chronicle framework” of recording history following the method of Josephus to maintain a pure religious tradition. Eusebius found precedent in other Judeo-biblical works like Luke, Acts, 1 and 2 Chronicles. The chronicle method is the writing of historical events that are written or narrated in chronological order or as they occur in time. Eusebius produced works too numerous to list here but is also well known for his, *Chronicle* (calendar from creation to his time), *On the Life of Pamphilus*, *On the Martyrs*, and a biography of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (c. A.D. 227-337). He was also known as Eusebius Pamphilus, having been personally mentored by Pamphilus. As a student of Origen and Pamphilus’ school, Eusebius often referenced Plato and later philosophic works as well. A biography titled *Life of Eusebius* by his successor, Acacius, is lost, so little of his life is known, and his pupil, Eusebius of Emesa provides only casual information. In as much, Eusebius writes,

It is my purpose to write an account of the successions of the holy

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<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, book 15.44, (Online: Perseus Digital Library), retrieved from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D15%3Achapter%3D44>; Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius, “Galerius and Constantine [and Licinius]: Edicts of Toleration 311/313,” Eusebius and Lactantius, *Original Sources of European History*, Vol 4:, 1, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907), 28-30. Fordham University, retrieved from <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp>

apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Saviour to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church...

to give the names and number and times...

to recount the misfortunes...

to record the ways and the times in which the divine word has been attacked by the Gentiles...

to describe the character of those who at various periods have contended for it in the face of blood and of tortures...

I confess that it is beyond my power to produce a perfect and complete history...

having plucked like flowers from a meadow the appropriate passages from ancient writers, we shall endeavor to embody the whole in an historical narrative...

and I hope that it will appear most useful to those who are fond of historical research.<sup>4</sup>

In so doing, he rightfully has been regarded as the *Father of Church History*.

As the Church developed, it established the Canon of Scripture and defined its core faith or doctrines on the purpose and nature of Christ, as well as the attributes of God in occasions like the Council of Nicaea. Monastic orders not only preserved the scriptures but also instilled the practice of devotion to God. It also provided for the replication of the Bible texts and translated these texts into the vernacular of German, French, and finally English. Among the most notable Bible translators of the early Church, as well a Church historian was St. Jerome (c. A.D. 342-

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 3rd ed., (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 73, 78, ISBN 9780226072838, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=448528>; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, 340 A.D. Documenta Catholica Omnia, retrieved from [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339\\_Eusebius\\_Caesariensis\\_Church\\_History\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf); Minton, Gretchen E. “‘The Same Cause and like Quarell’: Eusebius, John Foxe, and the Evolution of Ecclesiastical History.” *Church History* 71, no. 4 (December 2002): 715. doi:10.1017/S000964070009627X retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=aph&AN=8663630&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

420), whose Latin *Vulgate* became the standard Bible through the Middle Ages. There are also a few notable Church Fathers that were also regarded as Church Historians, namely Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Origen, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo.

The early church period included a universal and orthodox approach. The universal and united (Catholic) approach included the formation of a single church body and hierarchy with a Latin or western philosophy and tradition. Whereas, the orthodox approach included an approved or *right* form of ideology with a Greek or eastern philosophy and tradition. The Catholic reach opposed and replaced paganism with its savage barbarism, establishing a universal new belief system throughout Europe beginning with Constantine, then further impacted by Clovis, Theodosius I, and the Papacy in general. The Eastern Orthodox reach with its focus on truth and righteousness established a Greco-Roman legal and justice system with Biblical Judeo-Christian customs throughout Europe as seen in Justinian the Great's (c. A.D. 483-565) *Corpus Juris Civilis*. Its religious education encouraged righteous living as a matter of religious practice and emphasized compassion to humankind as an expression of love.

Christianity embodied a framework of faith, hope, and love that impacted culture and society by way of establishing the charitable humanitarian institutions in two distinct forms with that of Hospitals and Universities. It also provided peace and security to those of like faith by way of its orders of Knights. Beginning with Charlemagne (c. A.D. 742-814), a theocratic Christendom expanded in the form of the *Holy Roman Empire* during the High Middle Ages that spurred a Carolingian Renaissance. Chronicles became opulent in the high and late Middle Ages. So it was, the concept of liberty that was rooted in Christianity remained promulgated by the Bible. As such, the prominent infusing of Christian faith in Europe during the Middle Ages,

from its biblical teachings, imbued a pervasiveness of freedom, and more so in the high and late Middle ages with the emergence of the Reformation. The chronicle method is still used but usually in combination with other methods. While chronicling lacks interpretive synthesis, it maintains a high degree of factualness and order.

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