

# The ‘Servant of God’: Divine Favour and Instrumentality under Constantine, 318–25

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*This article focuses on the doctrine of divine favour and instrumentality as viewed from the emperor’s own perspective, in relation to the early development of the ‘Arian controversy’ as far as the Council of Nicaea. While modern writers have focused on explicit statements by Constantine to suggest that unity was the emperor’s highest priority, this article reveals a pattern by which he sought to manage divine favour and argues that doing so effectively was of primary importance to him. Such a shift in understanding the emperor’s priorities adds to the range of explanations for his later apparent inconsistencies as the actual achievement of unity continually eluded him.*

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Securing divine favour was a significant theme in ancient Roman historical writing.<sup>1</sup> From an early date, successful Roman generals such as Scipio Africanus, Marius, Sulla, Pompey and Julius Caesar claimed divine favour in their military efforts.<sup>2</sup> Emperors such as Augustus, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius likewise expressed gratitude to divine patrons for granting them protection and success.<sup>3</sup> By the late third

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of this theme from the later Republic through to Constantine’s reign, see the references in nn. 2, 3 below and Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 48.2–12; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.4–24, 10.6.1–5, 10.7.1–2; idem, *Life of Constantine* 2.24–42, 2.46.1–3, 2.48–60, 2.64–72, 3.12.1–5, 3.17–20.2, 3.30–32.2; Optatus of Milevis, *Against the Donatists*, Appendices 3, 5–7, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Livy, *History of Rome* 26.44–5; Plutarch, ‘Marius’ 17–22, ‘Sulla’ 6.1–5, 29.6, and ‘Pompey’ 68.2, in *Parallel Lives of Famous Greeks and Romans*; Appian, *The Civil Wars* 2.68.

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Caesar, *Acts of the Deified Augustus* 21, 24; Suetonius, ‘Augustus’ 29, in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*; Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 68.25.5, 72.8–9; Anon., *The Augustan History* 24.4.

century, Roman emperors increasingly publicized close links with certain gods and continued seeking their aid to restore an empire in crisis.<sup>4</sup> For example, Aurelian (270–5) paid respects to the Syrian sun god following victory over Queen Zenobia of Palmyra at the Battle of Emesa in 273. Returning to Rome, he built a temple and dedicated it to the ‘unconquerable sun’ (*sol invictus*).<sup>5</sup> The imperial tetrarchy from which Constantine (306–37) emerged had been based on an emperor’s personal association with divinity, the original two *Augusti* – Diocletian and Maximian – being identified with Jupiter and Hercules respectively.<sup>6</sup> Ruling the empire as a Christian following his famous victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome on 28 October 312, Constantine ever afterwards sought to ally himself with the ‘supreme god’, whom he soon identified with the God worshipped by Christians.<sup>7</sup> Thus, like his predecessors, Constantine was also concerned to remain on good terms with divinity by expressing gratitude as a beneficiary of divine assistance.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the ‘third-century crisis’, see John Drinkwater, ‘Maximinus to Diocletian and the “Crisis”’, in Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, eds, *Cambridge Ancient History*, 12: *The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2005), 28–66; see also Lukas de Blois, ‘The Crisis of the Third Century A.D. in the Roman Empire: A Modern Myth?’, in idem and J. Rich, eds, *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire* (Amsterdam, 2002), 204–17.

<sup>5</sup> Anon., ‘Aurelian’ 25.1–6, in *Augustan History*; Eutropius, *An Abbreviated History of Rome* 9.15.1; Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Book on the Caesars* 35.7.

<sup>6</sup> For example, *The Latin Panegyrics* 10.4.1–2, 10.11.6, 8.4.1–2, 7.8.1–3 (*In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. and transl. C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers [Berkeley, CA, 1994], 59–60, 71, 113–14, 200–1); cf. Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Caesars* 39; Eutropius, *Abbreviated History* 9.26.

<sup>7</sup> For views on Constantine’s ‘conversion’, traditionally associated with this battle, see Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, 1981), 34–53; T. G. Elliott, ‘Constantine’s Conversion: Do we really need it?’, *Phoenix* 41 (1987), 420–38; Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD, 2002), 154–91. On the development of Constantine’s religious beliefs, see Tarmo Toom, ‘Constantine’s *Summus Deus* and the Nicene *Unus Deus*: Imperial Agenda and Ecclesiastical Conviction’, *Vox Patrum* 34 (2014), 103–22; Mark Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire* (Oxford, 2015), 179–99.

<sup>8</sup> Further background on Roman concepts of patronage can be found in John Nicols, *Civic Patronage in the Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2014); Brenda Longfellow, *Roman Imperialism and Civic Patronage: Form, Meaning, and Ideology in Monumental Fountain Complexes* (Cambridge, 2011); Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner, eds, *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900* (Cambridge, 2007). Constantine referred twice in his *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints* to an exchange of benefits and gratitude between God and his worshippers. In the first instance, he claimed it would be absurd for human beings to offer gratitude in exchange for benefits given to each other while failing to respond gratefully to God for his aid: *Oration* 23. The second example ended

Despite the long tradition of imperial appeals to divine aid, some scholars prefer to focus on more 'secular' aspects of Constantine's reign.<sup>9</sup> Yet the emperor's public and private religious opinions continue to excite interest. For example, Jonathan Bardill holds that Constantine genuinely believed and presented himself as a Christian by late summer 314.<sup>10</sup> However, his emphasis on Constantine's 'ambiguity' downplays the emperor's sense of divine mission.<sup>11</sup> Klaus Girardet also opposes any dismissal of Constantine's early and genuine Christian conversion, outlining what he believes are explicit examples of the emperor's authentic faith from several imperial documents dated between 312 and 314.<sup>12</sup> His reading of Constantine's early statements pertaining to Christianity rules out ambiguity altogether by overemphasizing their possible Christian meaning for the emperor himself.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, this article will not argue for a particular position regarding the extent to which Constantine's conversion may or may not have been authentic. I have instead assumed a sociological

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his speech on a similar note, as he attributed the benefits of salvation and public welfare to Christ, whose continuing help is sought through prayer and worship: *ibid.* 26.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Noel Lenski, 'Introduction', in *idem*, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006), 1–13, at 10; Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2007), 10–11; David S. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford, 2013), 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2013), 273.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 1, 271–5, 280–4, 290–9. For Constantine's sense of divine mission, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.7.1–2; Optatus, *Life* 2.28.1–29.3, 2.55.1–56.2, 2.64–7, 4.9.

<sup>12</sup> Klaus Girardet, 'Ein spätantiker "Sonnenkönig" als Christ', *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 16 (2013), 371–81. Girardet relies heavily on Constantine's *Oration*, to which he assigns an earlier date than most scholars: 16 April 314. For varying views on dating, see Harold Drake, 'Suggestions of Date in Constantine's Oration to the Saints', *American Journal of Philology* 106 (1985), 335–49; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century A.D. to the Conversion of Constantine* (New York, 2006), 642–4, 777–8; Timothy Barnes, 'Constantine's Speech to the Assembly of the Saints: Place and Date of Delivery', *JThS* 52 (2001), 26–36; *Constantine and Christendom*, transl. Mark J. Edwards, TTH 39 (Liverpool, 2003), ix–xxix. The difficulty in dating the *Oration* contributes enormously to the challenge of attempting to draw out information concerning what Constantine believed at any point during his religious development. For this reason, it is referred to sparingly in this article.

<sup>13</sup> Girardet includes the legions' prayer that Eusebius attributed to Constantine (see Eusebius, *Life* 4.20.1) and one of two imperial letters from Constantine to Anulinus, pro-consul of Africa: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.7.1–2. In both instances, Girardet too easily follows Eusebius's commentary: cf. *ibid.* 10.1.2, 10.8.1; *idem*, *Life* 4.19–20.2. He also appears to confuse Eusebius's words with the prayer's text: Girardet, 'Ein spätantiker "Sonnenkönig" als Christ', 374, 380.

view of conversion as a process, so that Constantine's ambiguity is understood in terms of religious development.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after his victory over Maxentius, the emperor identified the god from whom he had sought aid in that battle with the God of Christians. His religious allegiance seemingly confirmed by defeating Licinius in 324, the emperor actively increased his understanding of Christianity's view of God until his death in 337. Out of gratitude for such assistance from his divine patron, he consistently sought to protect and support Christianity without alienating the majority of the empire's population. However, internal church disputes created difficulties for Constantine by forcing him to choose which competing institutional and theological version of Christianity to support. As the emperor himself was keenly aware, this had direct implications for his ability to maintain the divine favour on which (according to imperial tradition) he believed that his power depended.

This article argues from the imperial documents preserved by Optatus of Milevis and Eusebius of Caesarea that Constantine's primary concern was to preserve divine blessing by working as the 'servant of God' to restore unity among his worshippers.<sup>15</sup> The emperor's pattern of attempting to maintain and restore divine favour when he perceived it to be endangered will be defined through a brief examination of his involvement with the Donatist schism. This pattern, which has not received prior analysis and which thus forms the article's main contribution, remained consistent when Constantine subsequently intervened in the conflict involving Alexander and Arius. Finally, the emperor's self-described role as the 'servant of God' will

<sup>14</sup> I follow Drake's suggestion that conversion (as experienced rather than recalled) involves 'a number of progressive awakenings'. I also accept Drake's argument that the real question is not whether or not Constantine was a genuine Christian, but rather what kind of Christian he became: see Drake, *Constantine*, 188 n. 53, 200–1. For further reading about sociological perspectives on conversion, see Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Homewood, IL, 1984), 134–81; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York, 1996), 13–20.

<sup>15</sup> For helpful summaries of scholarship on the authenticity and reliability of the documents attached to the work by Optatus, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952), xi–xv; Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, transl. Mark J. Edwards, TTH 27 (Liverpool, 1997), xxvi–xxxii. See also n. 26 below for particular difficulties in relation to the letter to 'Aelafius' in Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, App. 3. Concerning imperial documents contained in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, see Friedhelm Winkelmann, 'Zur Geschichte des Authentizitätsproblems der Vita Constantini', *Klio* 40 (1962), 187–243; 'Introduction', in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, transl. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, 1999), 16–21.

be discussed in terms of his attempts to restore divine favour during the early stages of that particular ecclesiastical conflict.

MANAGING DIVINE FAVOUR: CONSTANTINE AND THE DONATIST  
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Having defeated Maxentius in 312, Constantine assumed control of Italy and Africa, in addition to the territories of Britain, Spain and Gaul inherited from his father six years earlier.<sup>16</sup> In February 313, Constantine and his Eastern colleague Licinius (who would soon defeat his rival in the East, Maximinus Daia) met at Milan to arrange the terms of their mutual support.<sup>17</sup> Maintaining divine favour was the primary principle behind the rescript issued in the names of both emperors and traditionally known as the 'Edict of Milan'.<sup>18</sup> Liberty in religion was granted so that 'whatever divinity there is in the seat of heaven' might be favourably disposed.<sup>19</sup> Having announced his religious policy in agreement with Licinius, Constantine proceeded to implement restitution toward Christians as a display of continuing gratitude for divine favour – whoever that divinity might be. By pursuing an agreed policy of restitution toward Christians at the imperial treasury's expense, Licinius and Constantine hoped to ensure that there would be no grounds for recrimination against Christians when others were legally bound to surrender any property obtained through confiscation during the persecutions.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, repeatedly emphasizing that liberty was granted 'both to Christians and to all men', the two emperors implied that no Christian could expect to be justified or excused in seeking vengeance against their persecutors.<sup>21</sup> Thus all worshippers of the 'supreme divinity' (*summa*

<sup>16</sup> Eutropius, *Abbreviated History* 10.1; Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Caesars* 40; Lactantius, *Deaths of Persecutors* 43–4; Eusebius, *Life* 1.19–22, 1.25–41.

<sup>17</sup> Lactantius, *Deaths of Persecutors* 48.1–12; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.1–14.

<sup>18</sup> On the traditional title for this document, see Milton V. Anastos, 'The Edict of Milan (313): A Defence of its Traditional Authorship and Designation', *Revue des études byzantines* 25 (1967), 13–41; Timothy Barnes, 'Constantine after Seventeen Hundred Years: The Cambridge Companion, the York Exhibition, and a Recent Biography', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14 (2007), 185–220. For convenience, the term 'Edict of Milan' will be used in quotation marks.

<sup>19</sup> '[Q]uo quicquid [est] divinitatis in sede caelesti': Lactantius, *Deaths of Persecutors* 48.2. The Latin text and its quoted translation are from Lactantius: *De mortibus persecutorum*, transl. J. L. Creed, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Lactantius, *Deaths of Persecutors* 48.2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.2–4.

<sup>21</sup> Lactantius, *Deaths of Persecutors* 48.2–6.

*divinitas*) received imperial protection, thereby assuring continuing divine favour.<sup>22</sup> Overall, however, this document clearly favoured Christianity without contradicting the agreed policy of embracing all forms of religion.<sup>23</sup> Such restitution as it extended to Christians easily grew to include bestowing actual benefits upon them.<sup>24</sup>

However, competing churches presided over by rival bishops in North Africa complicated Constantine's display of granting such benefits.<sup>25</sup> He perceived that the deep breach among Christians threatened the continuity of divine favour.<sup>26</sup> Acting on the expectation that such internal ecclesiastical disputes ought to be resolved by the bishops themselves, Constantine summoned a hearing of bishops assembled in Rome to make 'the most careful investigation' so that a 'just decision' could be made.<sup>27</sup> When that decision went against the party opposing Caecilian, they appealed to Constantine, who agreed to broaden representation of both sides at a council to be held at Arles in August 314.<sup>28</sup> Caecilian's opponents again lost the episcopal decision and petitioned Constantine further. Writing to the 'catholic' party in North Africa after Arles, Constantine expressed consternation at the continuing appeals by the Donatists for imperial intervention: 'They demand my judgment when I myself await the judgment of Christ. For I tell you ... that the judgment of priests should be regarded as if God himself were in the judge's seat'.<sup>29</sup> In a letter

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 48.3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 48.2–3, 6–12; cf. Timothy Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Power, and Religion in the Later Roman Empire* (Malden, MA, 2014), 93–7.

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.6.1–5; Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 610, 624–33; *Against the Donatists*, transl. Edwards, xiv; see also n. 18 above.

<sup>25</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.20, 10.6.1–7.2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 10.5.18, 10.7.1; Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, App. 3. The latter reference is a letter of Constantine to 'Aelafius', supposedly a *vicarius* of Africa during the spring of 314. The difficulties surrounding his name and position among the known *vicarii* of Africa contribute to doubts concerning this document's authenticity: A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1971–92), 1: 16; Timothy Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, 1982), 145 n. 18; Simon Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government, A.D. 284–324* (Oxford, 1996), 329–31; *Against the Donatists*, transl. Edwards, 181 n. 1. Concerning the authenticity of Optatus's Appendix 3, which has been questioned because of the difficulties of identifying its addressee, see Friend, *Donatist Church*, xi–xv; *Against the Donatists*, transl. Edwards, xxviii.

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.20; Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, App. 3; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.30.18–19.

<sup>28</sup> Optatus, *Against the Donatists* 1.22; David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay: A.D. 180–395* (London, 2008), 407.

<sup>29</sup> Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, App. 5 (transl. Edwards, 190).

releasing Christian clergy in communion with Caecilian from civic obligations, Constantine linked the basis for this immunity to a principle of divine reciprocity: violations of proper worship 'brought great dangers on public affairs' while its 'lawful restoration and preservation' guaranteed continuing divine favour.<sup>30</sup>

Thus a pattern for imperial management of divine favour was established. The policies of liberty and restitution in the 'Edict of Milan' attempted to inaugurate the shared *imperium* of Constantine and Licinius on positive terms with divinity. However, the schism among Christians in North Africa disturbed the proper order and discipline of divine worship and therefore endangered the continuity of God's favour. Constantine worked with both sides in the North African dispute in order to avoid further disruption to the continuance of divine blessing towards the whole empire.

#### DIVINE FAVOUR ENDANGERED: EARLY INTERVENTION IN THE 'ARIAN CONTROVERSY'<sup>31</sup>

A similar pattern emerged following Constantine's final victory over Licinius in 324. Again, imperial policies concerning religion were announced in Constantine's newly won territories, policies intended to maintain the divine blessing that he believed had aided him against his enemy. Again, Constantine learned of conflict among the worshippers of his God and believed such discord endangered the continuance of divine blessing on the empire and upon himself. Again, he acted according to his keenly felt obligation as emperor to restore unity for the sake of continuing divine favour.

According to traditionally accepted dating, the theological conflict associated with the name of Arius began in Alexandria during 318, when the presbyter came into open disagreement with his bishop, Alexander.<sup>32</sup> Over the next six years, partisans on both sides cast their nets ever wider throughout the empire in search of support for

<sup>30</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.7.1–2 (*The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius of Caesarea*, transl. J. E. L. Oulton and H. J. Lawlor, LCL 265, 2 vols [Cambridge, 1980], 463–5).

<sup>31</sup> On the term 'Arian controversy', see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, A.D. 318–381* (Edinburgh, 1988), xvii–xxi. For convenience, I have used it in a general and purely descriptive sense.

<sup>32</sup> For different views on when the dispute began, see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205–7; Hanson, *Search*, 129–38; John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 1: *True God of True God* (Crestwood, NJ, 2004), 62–6; David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of*

their respective viewpoints.<sup>33</sup> The conflict intensified to the point that from 321 Licinius apparently saw fit to ban all episcopal gatherings.<sup>34</sup> This action restrained ecclesiastical conflict in the East for a time, but it also allowed Constantine and his supporters to number Licinius among the persecuting emperors.<sup>35</sup> Licinius's defeat in autumn 324 enabled these Eastern bishops to renew their assemblies, and Christian division in these regions again burst into the open.<sup>36</sup> Only around this time, while formulating policy for his new Eastern subjects, did Constantine claim to have learned of the specific dispute involving Alexander and Arius.<sup>37</sup> Having ostensibly hoped to enlist Eastern clergy in resolving the ongoing Donatist dispute in the West, the news reaching Constantine's ears was that Christians were even more divided in the East.<sup>38</sup> Quarrels over the relationship of Jesus the Son to God the Father coincided with the Melitian schism.<sup>39</sup> This dispute was of a similar nature to the Donatist conflict, and like the current theological disturbance was centred in Egypt. Finally, some variance between Christians in both halves of the empire over celebrating Easter led Constantine to seek the establishment of a uniform practice.<sup>40</sup>

Upon being informed of such multiple levels of division, the emperor sent a letter to those most directly involved in the widespread theological disturbance: Alexander and Arius.<sup>41</sup> The letter is usually

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*Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'* (Oxford, 2007), 59–69.

<sup>33</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.61–2; Socrates of Constantinople, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.5. For a discussion of the chronological arrangement of the ancient evidence, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd edn (London, 2001), 48–61.

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 1.51.1; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.3; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.2; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 206; Hanson, *Search*, 131; Williams, *Arius*, 49; Gwynn, *Eusebians*, 60–1.

<sup>35</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 1.49.1, 1.51.1–2; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.3.

<sup>36</sup> Hanson, *Search*, 134–6; Gwynn, *Eusebians*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.65.1–2, 2.68.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 2.66–68.1.

<sup>39</sup> J. G. G. Norman, 'Melitian Schisms', in J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Exeter, 1978), 647–8; Michael P. McHugh, 'Melitius of Lycopolis', in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd edn (New York, 1999), 745.

<sup>40</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.61.2–62, 3.4.1–5.2, 3.16.1–19.3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 2.64–72; Paul Parvis, 'Constantine's Letter to Arius and Alexander?', *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006), 89–95. Parvis draws on arguments by B. H. Warmington and Stuart Hall suggesting that this document was addressed to the synod at Antioch in 325 rather than to Alexander and Arius as individuals. He argues that an official other than



invoked in discussions of Constantine's interest in ecclesiastical unity, for reasons that are obvious from the text itself.<sup>42</sup> However, it is also significant in revealing a clear link in the emperor's mind between ecclesiastical unity and divine favour.<sup>43</sup> Constantine opened the letter by invoking his God as witness to his activity according to a two-part approach involving the religious and political unification of the provinces. Uniting the provinces in a consistent view of God involved rational persuasion, while achieving political unity had demonstrably required the power of military force.<sup>44</sup> Unity among God's worshippers, according to Constantine, would of itself have a positive impact on the corporate well-being of his subjects.<sup>45</sup> The emperor also claimed to have suffered what he called a 'deadly wound' specifically in relation to the conflict between these two men and their respective partisans.<sup>46</sup> There was probably more to that comment than an exaggerated expression of disappointment. It also described Constantine's sense of danger as he feared divine vengeance. He already believed that disunity among the Christians of North Africa risked

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Ossius of Cordoba presented the letter, and that the central issue was a disputed episcopal succession. While a fully developed argument opposing Parvis, Warmington and Hall lies outside the purpose of this essay, the following points are offered here in response: the letter may not be addressed to Alexander and Arius as individuals, but I suggest these named persons in addition to their respective supporters are the intended recipients; the suggestion that the issue centred on episcopal succession rather than theology can be dismissed on that basis as well as from the letter's text (for which see, for example, Eusebius, *Life* 2.69, 2.71.2–7); it remains reasonable to follow Socrates's identification of the person entrusted with the letter as Ossius (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7), since the bishop is named earlier and functions in a similar capacity as imperial representative to the churches in Constantine's letter to Caecilian (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.6.2); this does not mean Ossius embarked on his mission alone and it is reasonable to accept the participation of someone like Marianus the notary: Parvis, 'Constantine's Letter', 92.

<sup>42</sup> Øyvind Norderval, 'The Emperor Constantine and Arius: Unity in the Church and Unity in the Empire' *Studia Theologica* 42 (1988), 113–50, at 118–20; Drake, *Constantine*, 240–2; Bardill, *Constantine*, 291–3.

<sup>43</sup> Constantine explicitly invoked divine support in addressing ecclesiastical discord: Eusebius, *Life* 2.68.2–3. Other scholars observe the same link, but not necessarily in relation to this letter; moreover, no known analysis emphasizes the specific issue of divine favour in relation to Constantine's approach to ecclesiastical unity: see, for instance, Drake, *Constantine*, 320; Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London, 2009), 305–6; Maijastina Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* (London, 2009), 62–4.

<sup>44</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.65.1–2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 2.65.2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 2.68.1.

provoking God's wrath.<sup>47</sup> Combined with the news of multiple divisions affecting his new Eastern provinces, it is not difficult to believe that Constantine felt quite threatened.

Yet he did not long dwell on these negative aspects in this letter, proceeding quickly to describe his attempts to investigate the causes behind the disturbance originating among Alexandrian Christians.<sup>48</sup> According to the emperor's understanding, 'the cause was exposed as extremely trivial and unworthy of so much controversy'.<sup>49</sup> The conflict's 'small and utterly trivial' nature was repeatedly emphasized throughout the rest of this letter.<sup>50</sup> This is an interesting remark by an emperor who clearly treated ecclesiastical division as a serious threat, and we shall return to it in due course. Some modern writers have pointed to such terminology as evidence that Constantine failed to grasp the debate's real theological significance or that he valued unity over doctrine.<sup>51</sup> It is also often assumed that Constantine must also have pursued unity above every other concern. Explicit statements by the emperor would appear to be irrefutable evidence of this. For

<sup>47</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.18, 10.17.1. This is not to ignore the more explicitly political dangers Constantine faced. For example, keeping the city of Rome supplied with oil, grain and corn was of vital importance for holding on to power, while the continuity of such provision was believed to depend on divine favour: see Athanasius, *Apology Against the Arians* 18; *Theodosian Code* 14.24–5 (ET *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, transl. Clyde Pharr [Clark, NJ, 2001; first publ. 1952]); Timothy Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, 1993), 178–9; Christoph Auffarth, 'With the Grain came the Gods from the Orient to Rome: The Example of Serapis and some Systematic Reflections', in Peter Wick and Volker Rabens, eds, *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West* (Boston, MA, 2014), 19–44, at 32.

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.68.2–3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 2.68.2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 2.68.2–3, 2.71.1, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Norderval, 'Constantine and Arius', 115, 118–21; Drake, *Constantine*, 238–44; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1973), 1: 86; Stephenson, *Constantine*, 265–6. However, Edwards describes a Constantine who was perhaps more in tune with the theological issues at stake than it might seem: Edwards, 'Why did Constantine Label Arius a Porphyrian?', *L'Antiquité classique* 82 (2013), 239–47, at 243–7. Additionally, it is unfair to criticize Constantine for failing to comprehend more fully a theological debate that was still developing and which taxed the greatest theological minds during and after his lifetime. Rather than showing a lack of interest, Eusebius claimed that Constantine engaged with doctrinal questions and enjoyed opportunities to declaim to the court on the meaning of various biblical passages: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.29. The emperor's *Oration* reveals the truth of Eusebius's words, although Constantine's Christological assertions in this speech provoke scholarly debate concerning its date and the extent of his 'Arian' theology.

example, at the beginning of the letter to Alexander and Arius, Constantine wrote that his 'first concern was that the attitude toward the divinity of all the provinces should be united in one consistent view'.<sup>52</sup> Second, in the same passage of the letter, he spoke of uniting the provinces in terms evoking traditional imperial language regarding the 'restoration' of the republic. Regarding the emperor's earlier mentioned means of 'healing' the empire of its 'wounds' through reason and force, the concern in both cases was clearly for unity. The emperor himself seemed to emphasize this particular point: 'I knew that if I were to establish a general concord among the servants of God in accordance with my prayers, the course of public affairs would also enjoy the change consonant with the pious desires of all'.<sup>53</sup> At the risk of stating the obvious, it appears to be this very concept of unity that was chiefly endangered by division among Christians in the East, where the disputants addressed by Constantine in this letter were a significant factor.

Unity was unquestionably of great importance to the emperor. In terms of imperial politics, this, too, risks stating the obvious. After all, it is inconceivable that any Roman emperor would have long tolerated (or survived) a state of affairs in which any kind of disturbance spread without interference. Therefore, the answer to why Constantine highly valued unity may appear so evident as to need little further analysis. Yet an implicit concern for maintaining divine favour shows through in the emperor's words. As he believed division among God's worshippers risked divine punishment, so he was likewise convinced that restoring unity thereby renewed divine favour. It was not unity for its own sake but the restoration of divine favour brought about by means of unity that he hoped would bring back a 'quiet life' of 'peaceful days and undisturbed nights'.<sup>54</sup> This is not to suggest that Constantine's motives were purely religious, or that the emperor's management of divine aid did not serve his political interests. But there is no reason to think that Constantine did not genuinely believe in the necessity of divine favour, or that he used religious language solely for political purposes. Although the emperor's explicit statements about unity did not refer to seeking God's support in every case, it can be suggested that divine favour was so evident a

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 2.65.1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 2.65.1–2 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 116).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 2.72.1 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 119).

primary motivating factor that he simply did not need to say it at all times. Roman emperors relied no more exclusively on political unity for holding on to power than their generals depended only on the coordinated movements of the legions for success on the battlefield: the continuing favour of the right god(s) was as essential in governing as in warfare. Constantine's words and actions favouring Christianity indicated his desire to maintain the pleasure of the 'supreme God' by expressing gratitude for the benefits received in battle, in the hope they would continue in the form of peaceful and prosperous government. Divine favour was a decisive and even, as this article argues, a primary factor.

#### RESTORING DIVINE FAVOUR: DIVINE INSTRUMENTALITY AND THE 'SERVANT OF GOD'

According to Eusebius, Constantine viewed his task of overcoming division among Eastern Christians in terms of another war in which he must prove victorious.<sup>55</sup> In order to 'march against' the invisible enemy who disturbed the peace of the Church, Eusebius wrote that Constantine mobilized a 'legion of God' by forming a broadly representative episcopal council on a hitherto unknown scale.<sup>56</sup> As in any military conflict, it required careful tactical planning on the emperor's part. First, he changed the originally announced location from Ancyra to Nicaea. His stated justification for the change need not be entirely ignored, but most scholars believe Constantine had other motives.<sup>57</sup> If Barnes is correct and the bishops gathered in Alexandria were initially responsible for announcing the great council in Ancyra, Constantine's changing of the venue ensured a less partisan result by removing the gathering from under the authority of Marcellus, a vocal opponent of Arius. But even if Hanson's assertion that Constantine himself initially suggested Ancyra is accurate, the change to Nicaea (as Barnes speculated) may have helped the emperor stay near Nicomedia at a time of increasing uncertainty due to political fallout from Licinius's defeat.<sup>58</sup> Such language evoking

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 3.5.3–6.1.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 3.6–9 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 123–4).

<sup>57</sup> Alastair H. B. Logan, 'Marcellus of Ancyra and the Councils of A.D. 325: Antioch, Ancyra, Nicaea', *JThS* 43 (1992), 428–46, at 429–36; Norderval, 'Constantine and Arius', 123; Barnes, *Constantine*, 121; Drake, *Constantine*, 251–2.

<sup>58</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214–15; Hanson, *Search*, 152–3.

'spiritual warfare' could very well have occurred to the mind of the emperor himself, and may have held particular appeal to one who was familiar with the New Testament.<sup>59</sup> Eusebius paraphrased a speech apparently delivered by Constantine at the council's opening in which military metaphors dominated.<sup>60</sup> Though Eusebius acknowledged that he had not recorded Constantine's exact words, such symbolic language could have been used by an emperor as easily as any bishop.<sup>61</sup> Regarding division in the Church as 'graver than any war or fierce battle', the emperor prayed for the same divine help that had given him victories in battle to grant the Church 'healing through [his] own instrumentality'.<sup>62</sup> Having therefore assembled such a 'legion of God' at Nicaea, Constantine then declared that unity was the desired result of their forthcoming deliberations. That would be pleasing to God and gratifying to the emperor.<sup>63</sup> In other words, while unity was foremost on the emperor's agenda for the council the achievement of harmony among God's worshippers continued to serve the purpose of restoring divine favour.

Such effective managing of divine aid was the emperor's chief religious duty as the 'servant of God'. He had referred to himself this way once in a letter to the 'catholic' bishops after the council of Arles (314).<sup>64</sup> Ten years later, 'service' came to epitomize Constantine's view of his role in relation to ecclesiastical affairs. Although the exact phrase 'servant of God' occurred only twice in his preserved correspondence after 324, references abound to his 'service', 'obedient service' and 'service to the supreme God', as well as self-description in relation to other bishops and even lay Christians as their 'fellow-servant'.<sup>65</sup> The biblical resonance of such servant language invited

<sup>59</sup> For example, Eph. 6: 10–17. On military metaphors in the New Testament, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Jesus and the Subversion of Violence: Wrestling with the New Testament Evidence* (London, 2011), 122–49.

<sup>60</sup> The speech is preserved in paraphrased form in Eusebius, *Life* 3.12.1–5.

<sup>61</sup> Eusebius's acknowledgement appears prior to the speech itself: *ibid.* 3.11.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 3.12.3 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 126).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 3.12.5 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 126).

<sup>64</sup> Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, App. 5 (transl. Edwards, 189).

<sup>65</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 2.29.3, 2.31.2. References include: τὴν ἐμὴν ὑπηρεσίαν (*ibid.* 2.28.2), θεραπείαν τῆ παρ' ἐμοῦ παιδευόμενον ὑπουργία (*ibid.*), τῷ θεράποντι τοῦ θεοῦ (2.29.3), οἱ θεοῦ θεράποντες (2.31.2), τῷ μεγίστῳ διακονεῖται θεῷ (2.38), ἡμετέρα δ' ὑπηρεσία (2.46.2), σοῦ θεράποντος (2.55.1), τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ θεράποντας (2.71.2), συνθεραπεύοντων (2.72.1), συνθεράπων (3.17.2). For the Greek text, see Friedhelm Winkelmann, ed., *Eusebius Werke*, 1.1. *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantins* (Berlin, 1975).

comparison with Moses and Paul.<sup>66</sup> Moses's status as ancient Israel's leader in political and military as well as religious matters makes this the most likely comparison in relation to a Roman emperor. This would also seem clear from Eusebius's explicit drawing of parallels between Moses and Constantine in several descriptions of the emperor.<sup>67</sup> Examination of the Greek words used in relation to Moses and Paul confirms these assumptions. Paul opened his letters to the Romans and to a protégé named Titus by describing himself as a 'servant of God', using the term δούλος, while Moses was referred to in the Septuagint as θεραπεία.<sup>68</sup> The former word could be more accurately rendered 'slave', emphasizing the apostle's servile status in relation to his God. However, θεραπεία is a more active term for 'service', and its range of meanings encompasses a sense of usefulness with religious or medicinal overtones.<sup>69</sup> In contrast with the more static meaning of δούλος, the emphasis of θεραπεία is on attending to what needs to be done. Thus, in his role as 'servant of God', Constantine claimed to be God's instrument for accomplishing the divine will on earth. This was not merely a divine legitimization of power under a single exclusive and omnipotent God. While an emperor would not think of abasing himself to the status of a mere slave, he would want to be seen as a useful instrument for 'curing' whatever ills he perceived were being suffered prior to or during his reign.

## CONCLUSION

Divine favour was long believed crucial to a successful imperial reign. Constantine believed, in accordance with a version of this tradition modified to integrate his new religious identification, that the God whom Christians worshipped was the 'supreme God' whose power worked on his behalf in battle against the supernatural powers called upon by Maxentius and Licinius. Convinced that he had received divine aid in defeating these rivals, Constantine's primary concern as

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Ex. 14: 31; Num. 1: 7–8; Rom. 1: 1; Titus 1: 1. For Drake's argument that Constantine styled himself after Paul by appealing to the title 'man of God', see H. A. Drake, 'The Emperor as a "Man of God": The Impact of Constantine the Great's Conversion on Roman Ideas of Kingship', *Historia* 35 (2016) [online journal], at: <<https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-436920160000000083>>, accessed 13 April 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius, *Life* 1.12, 1.19, 1.38–9.

<sup>68</sup> See n. 66 above.

<sup>69</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1976), 792–3.

the 'servant of God' was the successful management of divine favour upon which he believed his life and power and the public welfare depended. Ecclesiastical unity, while undoubtedly of great importance to the emperor, served that end rather than being itself his chief objective. Constantine's view was that continuity of God's favour rested on proper worship, which he believed required general harmony among Christians and the performance of Christian rites according to standard ecclesiastical order as determined by a majority of bishops assembled in a council. When he learned of divisions between varying parties of Christians, he worked actively with ecclesiastical leaders as their 'fellow-servant' to create space in which matters could be investigated and unity restored as the disputing factions worked out their own decisions.

However, ecclesiastical leaders did not achieve the emperor's hopes for a united Christian Church within the Roman Empire. Far from realizing unanimity, Nicaea's definition of the 'consubstantial' relation of the Father and the Son raised as many questions as it managed to answer.<sup>70</sup> Although Constantine continued to hold the episcopacy in high regard and wished to work with the bishops in bringing about the desired unity among Christians, not every bishop was as willing to work with the emperor.<sup>71</sup> For Constantine, continuing divine favour depended on the restoration of ecclesiastical unity. But because orthodox doctrine was of great importance to the bishops, divine favour and instrumentality alone proved insufficient as a doctrine of power guiding a Christian emperor in relation to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

<sup>70</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.14 (for Eusebius's letter defending and qualifying his acceptance of Nicene terminology), 23, 26–7, 36. Apart from the existing political conflicts among Church leaders, much controversy continued over the term *ὁμοούσιος* and its precise meaning in the Nicene definition, given its non-biblical origin and prior connotations of Sabellian heresy.

<sup>71</sup> Drake highlights the notion of competing 'agendas and priorities that clouded relations between Constantine and the bishops'. His work also emphasizes the variety of contending purposes among the bishops themselves: see Drake, *Constantine*, 30–1, 235–71, with reference to the Arian controversy.