

Lecture Seven

Imperial Sponsorship and the Bible

Scope: With the Edict of Milan in 313, the emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal cult within the Roman Empire, and over the following years, Christianity displaced Greco-Roman polytheism as the empire's official religion. The consequences for both Christianity and Judaism were profound and wide-ranging. The ultimate triumph of Christianity cemented a supersessionist reading of the Jewish Bible. And as the sacred text of a newly Christian empire, the Bible as book took on the status of sacred object. The role of Constantine was shown not only in his managing the ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325, but also in his financing the publication of four magnificent codices of the Bible in Greek, solidifying the position of the Greek version as the imperial Bible.

Outline

- I. The 4th century marks a decisive turning point in religious history and in the story of the Bible.
 - A. Before the 4th century, Christianity was persecuted and powerless.
 1. Greco-Roman religion (polytheism) was the official religion of the empire and the beneficiary of imperial patronage.
 2. Jews and Christians competed as equal rivals, with Judaism enjoying more official recognition.
 - B. After the 4th century, Christianity was the privileged and powerful religion of the Roman Empire.
 1. Christianity took over from Greco-Roman religion its place as imperial client, with property and power.
 2. Judaism was increasingly marginalized and regarded as a threat to ecclesial and political order.
 3. Christianity itself found its "orthodox" expression within the bounds of empire, while "heretical" forms of Christianity found refuge beyond imperial reach.
- II. Constantine the Great (274?–337) was the key figure behind this epochal change.

- A. When Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, he claimed that victory was owed to Christ, he adopted the *Labarum* as his standard, and he gave, first, tolerance, then, privilege to the Christian religion.
 - 1. Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* applauds Constantine's conversion as sincere and as a providential act of God; Constantine is still regarded as a saint by the Greek Orthodox tradition.
 - 2. Constantine may have simply recognized the inevitable triumph of the Christians and decided that it was a more cohesive religious glue for the empire than paganism; the effect, in any case, was the same.
 - B. Like emperors before him, Constantine wanted the imperial religion to secure the unity of the empire and, therefore, demanded unity in Christianity.
 - 1. He used his imperial influence to settle the Donatist dispute in North Africa, in 316 deciding against the schismatics in favor of the Catholics.
 - 2. His concern for unity also led him to call the Council of Nicea in 325, to settle the rancorous doctrinal disputes caused by Arianism.
 - C. By moving his capital to Byzantium (rebuilt and renamed Constantinople) in 330, Constantine inadvertently opened the way for another sort of division in the empire.
 - 1. The Eastern Empire would remain steadfastly Greek in language and culture, and the patriarch of Constantinople would work in close harmony with the emperor for a millennium.
 - 2. The Western Empire would become increasingly Latin in language and culture; the Church in Europe, under the bishop of Rome (the pope), would be increasingly a political, as well as a religious, force.
- III. The full integration of the Christian religion into imperial society had an effect on the story of the Bible as well.
- A. The decisions of Church councils (and of orthodox bishops) had the backing of imperial force; thus, the canonical declarations of the Council of Carthage (397) or the Paschal Letter of Athanasius (367) had a certain coercive effect.

- B. Constantine put the services of imperial scribes to work in the production of 50 uncial codices that included the entire “Christian Bible” (the LXX and the New Testament), the first time we can confidently speak of the Bible as a “book.”
- C. As an imperial (Christian) literary publication, the Bible now appeared as the official religious literature of the state, so that empire and Bible were in a mutually legitimizing role.

IV. The new status of the Christian Bible had consequences for interpretation within the two religious traditions.

- A. Within Christianity, the Bible as book abetted certain forms of liturgical and ideological performances.
 - 1. As a book with covers (often adorned) that could be closed and even locked, the Bible served as an object of veneration, whether carried in processions or placed in a shrine.
 - 2. The form of this book, with the Old Testament preceding the New and the two testaments “facing” each other, abetted supersessionist forms of interpretation, in which Judaism and paganism are replaced in God’s story by Christianity.
- B. The Jewish Bible, in contrast, did not enjoy official approval or sponsorship but continued to be read as God’s Word for the children of Abraham.
 - 1. The Bible was inevitably read, by a Diaspora people, as a “religious” text rather than as the legitimizing text for a “people on the land.”
 - 2. Jewish interpreters were free to read Scripture, not as a divine history that made winners out of some, but as a divine commandment that placed freeing obligations upon God’s people.

Essential Reading:

J. R. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church*.

Supplementary Reading:

B. D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*.

Questions to Consider:

1. To what extent should the “triumph” of the Christian religion under Constantine be considered a positive thing for Christians?
2. How would the Christian Bible be read differently as the Scripture of a persecuted minority and as the religious literature of the world’s rulers?