

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 20

Eusebius

In recent lessons, we have concentrated on the rise to power of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire. We also looked at his efforts to keep the church united in the face of controversy surrounding the nature of Christ through a Council at Nicea. At the same time in history, we have another early noteworthy figure within the annals of church history: Eusebius of Caesarea.

While we will call him simply Eusebius in this lesson, we should remember that Eusebius was a common name in that era. There are a number of men so named¹ that we are aware of arising from that time period. For example, it is a Eusebius that eventually baptizes the Emperor Constantine, but not Eusebius of Caesarea!²

Eusebius was a most prolific researcher and writer. Timothy Barnes cites Eusebius as the “most voluminous extant writer of the late third and early fourth centuries – Greek or Latin, Christian or pagan.”³ Eusebius wrote on many different kinds of books on a number of different subjects. He wrote apologetic works that defended the integrity of the Christian faith, and he wrote on scripture as it prophesied Christ, as it covered the church and its life and doctrines. He also wrote actual commentaries and exegesis of scripture. We have letters Eusebius wrote, orations he delivered, and even Bible dictionary/reference type works.

Importantly for this class, Eusebius wrote the first real history book on the church, appropriately entitled, “*Ekklesiastikes Historias*” (Εκκλησιαστικῆς Ιστορίας) in the Greek. Translation? Ecclesiastical (a/k/a “church”) History!⁴ His *Church History* is a composite of ten books he wrote over most likely some 25 years.

¹ The name means “pious” or “devout/reverent.”

² Just as there were many men named “Eusebius” in church antiquity, there were many towns and cities named “Caesarea.” A town bore the name “Caesarea” if it was named in honor of a Caesar, generally Caesar Augustus, Rome’s first real Emperor. Eusebius came from Caesarea Maritima, the town frequently mentioned in the New Testament on the Mediterranean Sea in Palestine. This was the Roman capital of Judah where Pilate’s headquarters were located. This is where Peter converted Cornelius and his household, as well as where Felix and Festus heard Paul’s case.

³ Constantine and Eusebius, p. v.

⁴ Scholars abbreviate when citing this text as either, “Hist. Eccl.” or the even shorter, “H.E.”

Eusebius seems to have written the first seven books by 300. The last three were likely finished the year before the Council of Nicea (which occurred in 325).⁵

There is an excellent recent translation of *Church History* by Paul Maier that we will use for our text in this lesson. The book is published by Kregel Publications (©1999.) It is available at Amazon.com and is well worth the money!

As we have gone through this class, we have actually referenced Eusebius's history a number of times. Many events we know about in the early church, we know because of Eusebius! It is not just the historical events he has secured for us in his writings. Eusebius wrote in a manner where he would quote others at great length. So, we have in his history some of our materials from many other writings that we would not otherwise have today.

One could ask where Eusebius got his materials for his history. While we can never answer that fully, we can still get a fairly complete answer. In Caesarea, there was one of the best Christian libraries of the time. Origen (as we discussed in earlier classes, he was the self-castrated Alexandrian church leader who predated Eusebius by a generation) had left behind a great library of Christian works in Caesarea where he spent a good bit of his later days teaching in the church.

When Eusebius quoted or used these sources, he would almost always give a full cite for what he was quoting. We can determine by comparing the quotes to the source material that Eusebius was accurate as a scholar in his quoting.

Eusebius also would reference the local traditions and teachings of those who were close to the history as well. When he did so, he would always point out what was tradition.

Eusebius was a linguistic scholar as well as a historian and theologian. When confronted with writings in other languages, Eusebius would readily translate them himself for his history.

Eusebius was the Bishop of Caesarea. He was elected after Constantine's Edict of Milan, which legalized and protected the Christian faith. As the Bishop, Eusebius would attend the Council of Nicea (after he finished his history). Eusebius also became a confidant of the Emperor himself. Before his death, Eusebius wrote a biography of Constantine the Great.

⁵ Eusebius, *The Church History*, Paul L. Maier, at 16.

Eusebius structured his *Church History* around a chronology of Roman Emperors. Book one, for example, covers Augustus to Tiberias. Book two covers Tiberius to Nero, and so on. Eusebius not only sets out the Roman Emperors in succession, but he also sets out the Bishops of the Jerusalem church in succession as well.

In this lesson, we have chosen not to rehash the history of the church as Eusebius gives it. We have already referenced him in numerous prior classes for the insight provided to the church history issue in focus. Instead, we are going to focus on what Eusebius had to say about the nature of Christ and Eusebius's insight into scripture as offered in his *Church History*. The way Eusebius wrote provides a unique opportunity to see the perspective of a major Bishop of the church in the 300-time period on issues about Jesus and the Bible.⁶

BOOK 1, THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST

Eusebius starts his book with a note of humility and a road map of what he wishes to achieve. Eusebius believed any proper history of the church must begin with a discussion of who Jesus Christ was not only in history on earth but also before history. Therefore, Eusebius begins with the very nature of Christ.

THE NATURE OF CHRIST

Eusebius saw Jesus as a dual nature. "Like the head of the body in that he is regarded as God and yet comparable to the feet in that he put on humanity for our sake." Eusebius saw Jesus as nothing recent or *nouveaux*. Jesus was not just a late coming fad. Jesus was more ancient than human history. Quoting Isaiah 53:8 ("Who shall declare his generation?"), Eusebius explained that no human words or insight could fully explain the preexistent Christ.

Having said such, however, Eusebius begins to try and at least discuss what was known! Jesus was "before all creation," was the "first and only offspring of God," and was "the Lord and King of everything created, who has received lordship, power, honor, and deity itself from the Father.

Eusebius uses John 1:1 and 3 and quotes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things were made by him, and apart from him nothing was made."

⁶ We will use the actual text of Eusebius for our analysis, but we will use the titles and subdivisions used by Maier to divide up our lesson analysis.

For Eusebius, God was speaking to Christ in Genesis 1:26 when he said, “Let us make man in our image and likeness.” Eusebius believed that many in the Old Testament saw the divinity of Jesus. He argues, for example, that Abraham saw Jesus under the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18. When Abraham worshipped the visitor and said, “O Lord, judge of all the world, will you not do justice?” (Gen. 18:25), Eusebius believed that Jesus was the visitor so Abraham worshipped. Similarly, Eusebius points to Jacob’s wrestling at the Jabbok, to Moses at the burning bush, and to Joshua at Jericho as further “theophanies” (a fancy theological word for appearances of God/Jesus prior to the incarnation in Mary’s womb).

Eusebius then answers the question, why wasn’t Jesus “proclaimed long ago to all people and all nations, as now?” He asserts that “In the past humanity was not capable of grasping the teaching of Christ in all its wisdom and virtue.” The fall was so dramatic and drastic, that man lived a brutal existence without regard to art, knowledge, laws, politics and civic duty, virtue or philosophy. Man lived in “total depravity” that required floods, famines, plagues, wars and other punishments before mankind began to understand even the rudimentary reasons behind the holiness of God.

God then came to a people who as a nation sprung from the “seeds of true religion,” the Hebrews. God revealed “images and symbols” to the prophet Moses that people could grow in preparation for Jesus. As the law and symbols “penetrated everywhere like a fragrant breeze...savage brutality changed into mildness, so that profound peace, friendship, and easy communication prevailed.” Then, when the time was right, Jesus appeared!

THE NAME JESUS AND CHRIST KNOWN EARLIER

In chapter 3 of the first book, Eusebius deals with the names “Jesus” and “Christ.” He taught that both these names were known and used by “God-loving prophets of old.” Starting with Moses, Eusebius takes Old Testament passages that speak of the “anointed” and applies them to Christ. This was easier for Eusebius than for us because he had the Greek version of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”). In the Greek, the word anointed is the same as the word “Christ.” So as Eusebius read the Old Testament, the passages he used actually had “Christ” in them where our versions today would use the English “anointed,” saving “Christ” for those occasions where the New Testament authors reference Jesus specifically.

As Moses would write in Leviticus 4:5 and 16, the High Priest is described as anointed (“Christ”). For Eusebius, the emphasis is that God told Moses that the types and symbols associated were extremely important in that Moses was to have them made “according to the pattern shown you” (Eusebius here quotes from Ex. 25:40).

Eusebius then moves to Joshua. Eusebius points out that Joshua was named “Hoshea” by his parents (Numbers 13:16), “but Moses calls him Jesus” (Hebrew is “Joshua”). In this way, Moses takes the “two men who in his time surpassed all others in merit and glory: the High Priest and the man who would rule after him” and “bestows the name of the Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Eusebius does not end this line of thought there. In similar ways, he takes the “Christ” from the Greek Old Testament and speaks of Jesus through David and the Psalms as well as through Isaiah the prophet. He adds a section of thought on how Jesus is fittingly foreseen in the symbolism of Melchizedek and his priesthood.

THE ANTIQUITY OF THE TRUE FAITH

Eusebius deals with an issue that we have seen from other early church writers that it seems they commonly dealt with: Was Christianity a “new religion?” Eusebius would answer a resounding, “No!” By going to ancient passages in the Old Testament prophets, he writes his proofs that not only is Christianity the faith that was set out in the Old Testament, but even outside Christianity, the elements of truth that humanity found in virtue and philosophy were a proclamation of the Christian faith, whether they knew it or not!

Eusebius goes a bit further and challenges the Jewish adherents of the literal law as not accurately practicing the faith that Abraham did. For Eusebius, the law had many symbols not meant for literal application in his day (*e.g.*, circumcision, the Sabbath, dietary laws, etc.) Eusebius points out that Abraham’s justification came from faith *before* circumcision. Hence, Eusebius saw the Christians as practicing the more ancient faith!

JESUS’ BIRTH AND THE END OF THE JEWISH DYNASTY

In chapters 5 and 6, Eusebius writes about the birth of Jesus. Here, he introduces to us one of his “sources” for his writings, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. Eusebius explains the timing of the birth of Jesus with the census the Roman authorities ordered. Eusebius also explains the placement of Herod as the Jewish King both from a genealogical perspective and from scripture. With chapter 7, Eusebius deals with the questions surrounding the genealogy of Christ given in the gospels.

THE VARIANT GENEALOGIES OF CHRIST

Eusebius begins chapter 7 writing, “The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record the genealogy of Christ differently, and many suppose that they conflict with one another.” Noting that a number of people had explanations, Eusebius quotes the one he believes true, one offered by Julius Africanus.⁷ The quotation is rather long which is fortunate because it is the only place where we have these words of Africanus saved.

Africanus explained that both genealogies were true and accurate. Whereas Matthew gives the father of Joseph as Jacob, Luke states that Joseph’s father was Heli. Africanus points out that the lineage divergence begins as Matthew uses the Solomon branch of the line of David while Luke uses the Nathan branch from David.

Africanus educates his readers on the Jewish system of familial remarriage within tribal units. When a husband would die and leave a widow, the closest family relative was in a position to marry the widow to keep her lineage going within the individual tribe (we see this in the case of the kinsman redeemer account in Ruth).

After we filter through the details provided by Africanus, we are left with his explanation that Jacob was the natural father of Joseph, but Heli was the “legal father.” Heli was married to Estha, but died before fathering a child. So Jacob, Heli’s half-brother, married the childless widow Estha and fathered a child (Joseph) for the family line of Heli.

Africanus supports this explanation appealing to the Greek used by Matthew and Luke. Matthew uses the term “begot” to show the physical descent of Joseph, while Luke does not. Luke just notes that Joseph was the “son of Heli,” an accurate legal description of property inheritance purposes, but not the begotten son of actual parentage.

Africanus supports his theory by applying the historical knowledge also available. After explaining that burning of the official Jewish lineage records by Herod (who had no legitimate claim to his position through birth), Africanus points out that many Jews had kept their own private copies of the lineages. The family of Jesus had such records in their possession. These papers provided the explanation for the divergent genealogies.

⁷ Julius Africanus lived approximately 160–240. He wrote, among other things, a five volume history of the world, integrating Biblical history with secular history. Very few of his works are available today. What we do have indicates a high level of careful Biblical thought.

HEROD AND THE INFANTS OF BETHLEHEM

Chapter 8 deals with the slaughter of the infants by Herod at the time of Jesus' birth. Eusebius not only writes of the horrendous crime, but also adds that the hideous death that overtook Herod was God's judgment for the crime. Eusebius quotes from Josephus⁸ giving a detailed rendition of the death of Herod. It is important to Eusebius that his readers know how gruesomely Herod was made to pay for his horrid sin "as a prelude to what awaited him in the next world."

PILATE AND THE PRIESTS

In chapter 9, Eusebius points out a few matters concerning Pilate and the High Priests at the time of Christ. Pilate is mentioned to show that the "recently published" (recent to Eusebius) *Acts of Pilate* "are forgeries" and inaccurate. We see here the critical nature Eusebius was able to employ rather than take everything he read at face value. Eusebius also uses Josephus to validate the gospel teachings about the High Priests in office as referenced in the gospels.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

Eusebius references the gospel account of John's beheading and then proceeds to give the non-Christian confirmation from the records of the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus' account includes the contemporary mindset that many thought the destruction of Herod's army was God's recompense for Herod's execution of John. Josephus adds that John "was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to exercise virtue" in the way they treated each other and before God and "to join in baptism."

In connection with the passage about John, Josephus also writes of Christ. Though most scholars believed part of Josephus's history has been altered with the insertion of some lines that indicate the Messiahship, most recognize that the rest of the Josephus account is truly what the historian wrote around 75 A.D. The alleged insertions I will put in italics. Importantly, scholars do not believe that Eusebius made the insertions. The insertions were already well in place before Eusebius quoted Josephus (many copies of Josephus's works are still extant):

⁸ Flavius Josephus is a first century Jewish historian who wrote thorough histories of the Jewish people. The histories add detail to much of what we read in scripture and were composed somewhere near the 70-80 A.D. time range. Josephus is believed to have lived from 34 A.D. to about 100 A.D. We have most of his works extant today, though scholars debate the veracity of all the text in a key passage on Christ.

About this time lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was the achiever of extraordinary deeds and was the teacher of those who accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When he was indicted by the principal men among us and Pilate condemned him to be crucified, those who had come to love him originally did not cease to do so; for *he appeared to them on the third day restored to life*, as the prophets of the Deity had foretold these and countless other *marvelous things* about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.”⁹

In the last two chapters of Book one, Josephus adds information on the disciples of Jesus (more specifically on the 70 who Jesus sent out in addition to the 12 apostles). Eusebius also recounts the story of the King of Edessa corresponding with Jesus while Christ was active in his earthly ministry. The King needed healing and sought Jesus to come to Edessa. Jesus wrote back that he could not come personally, but would send a healer after he finished his work and was “taken up.” Most scholars doubt the original authenticity of the story, but accept that the writings were truly in existence at the time of Eusebius. Eusebius wrote that he had personally “extracted the letters from the archives [of Edessa] and translated them from their original Syriac. We do know that Christianity came early to Edessa, by at least 150. There was an early Christian church constructed there and the scriptures were translated into Syriac early.

POINTS FOR HOME

Much of what Eusebius wrote is in fairly direct concurrence with most evangelical teaching about Jesus today. While many might debate some of the points, we can rest assured that:

1. Jesus is God, the word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1: 1-14).
2. Jesus was God’s plan for us from before the foundation of the world. “He chose us in him before the creation of the world...” (Eph. 1:4).
3. Our faith and our scriptures are real, are rooted in real events in real history, and are reliable. “All scripture God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

⁹ This comes from Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.63. The idea that the italicized words were interpolations stems mainly from the general consent that Josephus was never a Christian. As a lifetime Jew, it cannot be reasonably assumed that he wrote that Jesus was Messiah. In 1972, an old Arabic manuscript of Josephus written in the tenth century records the passage without the italics confirming the suspicions about the interpolations.