FOURTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN PALESTINIAN POLITICS: A GLIMPSE AT EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA’S LOCAL POLITICAL CAREER AND ITS NACHLEBEN IN CHRISTIAN MEMORY

Oded Irshai

One of the most famous records and now CDs in rock music history is the Pink Floyd’s “The Dark Side of the Moon”, a title which I adopted for a recent lengthy paper (published late 2006) on the political career and demeanor of one of the most prominent and colorful figures in Late Antique Christianity, Eusebius of Caesarea.¹

Eusebius was born in Caesarea ca. 260 and died at an advanced age in 339 CE; he served the church for approximately 26 years as the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, his home town. Eusebius is well known to us via his numerous writings, his encyclopedic knowledge and his ground-breaking literary enterprises, like the *Chronicon* and above all his *Ecclesiastical History*. Almost 17 centuries later he still continues to command great scholarly interest.

Much of the scholarly effort over the centuries has been devoted to deciphering his involvement in some of the major events of his time that shaped the future of the church, in particular his enigmatic liaison with Constantine. A less well-known side of this renowned church father is his political ecclesiastical career particularly within the Roman Palestinian orbit.²

¹ What follows is a much abridged though slightly updated version of that paper, “The Dark Side of the Moon: Eusebius of Caesarea between Theological Polemics and Struggles for Prestige”, *Cathedra* 122 (2006), 63–98 (Hebrew).

Fate placed Eusebius at a unique juncture, between the days of the greatest onslaught on the church, and its legitimatization and renaissance under Constantine at which stage it was no longer at the mercy of its persecutors. This formidable position enabled Eusebius to achieve two goals: first, he recorded the atrocities of the Roman heathen against his fellow believers in Christ, i.e. *The Martyrs of Palestine*. Second, he compiled his historic *magnum opus*, i.e. the *Historia Ecclesiastica* which set the future tone for the triumphal posture of the church. In that pioneering enterprise he painted in wide brush strokes the path of the church from its modest grass roots beginnings to the point at which it was on the threshold of becoming a universal power. Eusebius was deeply aware of the transformation the Church was undergoing but he did not let these stirring times color his views with shades of eschatology: he did not expect an imminent salvation. Pragmatism was the call of the day and not just vengeance such as evoked and portrayed by Lactantius, in his *De Mortibus Persecutorum*.

Unlike Lactantius, Eusebius adopted a rather reserved posture. He penned the *Martyrs of Palestine*, which was one of the most harrowing and gruesome portrayals of human violence in Late Antiquity. However, the tone of Eusebius’ work is not set by the expectation of...