1 Praise and Criticism

Constantine is a controversial historical figure. He has been praised and abused. In the 18th century Voltaire describes him as a tyrant in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*.¹ In the 19th century Burckhardt styles him a power politician, ‘an egoist in purple, whose sole aim in all he does and condones is to expand his own power’.² In the 20th century the Belgian Grégoire expresses himself in the same vein and compares him with Napoleon: ‘Constantin fut le Napoléon de la grande révolution religieuse du IVe siècle’.³

In his recently published book *Defending Constantine* Peter Leithart makes a stand against these critics of Constantine. He opposes particularly the Mennonite John Howard Yoder, who in several publications proceeding from his pacifistic background denounces Constantinianism as the fall of Christianity.⁴

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Leithart, however, is not the only one who gives a more balanced and positive picture of Constantine. Baynes, Vogt, Dörries, and Kraft had already preceded him.

The different views on Constantine are connected with the line of approach that is taken. Even in antiquity opinions on him differed greatly. Christian authors like Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius, who were contemporaries of Constantine and were in his entourage, gave a positive picture. Julian the Apostate (361–363 CE) and the heathen historian Zosimus (about 500 CE) passed a negative judgment.

The criticism on Constantine often goes hand in hand with the criticism on Eusebius. He is said to have idolized Constantine. Burckhardt calls Eusebius the most awful eulogist, who thoroughly falsified his picture. Erik Peterson considers the works of Eusebius as the prototype of ‘political theology’. He blames him for three things: that he propagates a Christian ideology, that he carries on propaganda, and that he made a clever use of rhetoric. Therefore he is in his view more a sophist than a historian. Although Barnes in his book *Constantine and Eusebius* also points out ‘grave deficiencies’ in Eusebius, he expresses a more lenient judgment. He emphasizes that Eusebius gives a wealth of information, of which, however, he gives his own interpretation.

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7 H. Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins* (Göttingen 1954); *Konstantin der Grosse* (Stuttgart 1958).
9 Julian reproaches him with the innovations which he brought in and held against him that he had thrown overboard old laws and customs (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* XXI, 10, 8 (ed. W. Seyfarth) and Zosimus, *Historia nova* II, 7; 29; 32–39 (ed. F. Paschoud)).