CHRISTIAN RHETORIC IN EUSEBIUS' PANEGYRIC AT TYRE*

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In 315 circa, Eusebius (ca. 260-339) responded to an invitation from Paulinus, Bishop of Tyre, to attend the consecration of his newly-built church.¹ This festive occasion was to be marked by an innovation; formal panegyrics were to be delivered as part of the ceremonies. Although Christian churches had, of course, been consecrated before, these had either been structures which, originally built for another purpose, were converted for liturgical use, or they had been built as churches, but possessed little architectural distinction. Neither case furnished much subject matter for panegyrics of the church building. There had also been consecrations of larger, nobler structures but it is questionable whether the ceremony had had so public a character that formal pieces of oratory were declaimed.²

The problem Eusebius faced was lack of precedent for the task before him. There was no tradition, and no models existed, for a panegyric on the consecration of a church. Nor could he adapt panegyrics for the consecration of temples to his purpose, above all because the difference in function was too great: a temple was the house of a god and a shrine for his image, whereas an Early Christian church was a space for the assembly of the faithful and for cult services. Further, the Early Christian basilica has a totally different architectural form than does a pagan temple. How could Eusebius express himself in a genre of oratory that didn't even exist? What models could he study as guides? What earlier authorities on the subject could he quote? How could he be certain of making an appropriate speech—one suited to the time, place, subject and audience—when no decorum had been established for such an occasion? And without decorum (τὸ πρέπειν) he risked the fault most assiduously avoided by orators—vulgarity. Like most contemporary rhetoricians, Eusebius had been trained to extemporize on any given subject. But having been invited to speak at Tyre, his oration would
have to be perfectly polished and shaped beforehand, committed to memory, and delivered with feigned spontaneity.

Eusebius had been trained above all as a biblical scholar. He had studied with Pamphilus, a follower of Origen, at Caesarea (where the library had been founded by Origen himself). Barnes deduced from Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel* that although he had no familiarity with Greek comedy, tragedy or lyric poetry, he had a very complete grasp of the works of Plato and of a wide range of later philosophers from Philo to the late second century A.D.. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* shows that he was equally well-read in history.

While the figure of Eusebius the historian has received considerable attention as the only eye-witness recorder of many events in Constantine's reign, very little attention has been given to Eusebius the rhetor. Yet, since he was made bishop of Caesarea in 313 and remained in this capacity until his death in 339, public speaking must have been one of his most frequent and important activities. That he had considerable training in rhetoric is demonstrated by the Prologue to his oration for Constantine's tricennalia: "I come not forward prepared with a fictitious narrative, nor with elegance of language to captivate the ear, desiring to charm my hearers, as it were, with a siren's voice; nor shall I present the draught of pleasure in cups of gold decorated with lovely flowers (I mean the graces of style) to those who are pleased with such things...Let those who admire a vulgar style, abounding in puerile subtleties, and who court a pleasing and popular muse, essay, since pleasure is the object they have in view, to charm the ears of men." From his elaborate protestations of simplicity and sincerity, it is clear that Eusebius was a skilled orator, sensitive to the tropes then current in epideictic rhetoric. In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius shows himself to have been an erudite scholar, amassing a great many primary sources, interpreting them, and orienting this evidence toward his own point of view. It is my thesis that he followed the same procedure as an orator, and therefore in the composition of his speech at Tyre.

Eusebius probably didn't know a great deal about architecture. To him, as to most, then as now, architecture constitutes the man-made ambient in which we live, and which we accept without much thought. Yet if he was to speak in the new church Paulinus had just built, he had to do research on what sorts of things one said about a building—the τόπων—and what kind of vocabulary was most appropriate to its discussion. My analysis of his panegyric retraces Eusebius' steps. Although