


pathways, especially if we put them in conversation with perhaps unexpected partners. It shows us so many possibilities.

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***Power and Rhetoric in the Ecclesiastical Correspondence of Constantine the Great.* By Andrew J. Pottenger. London: Routledge, 2022. xiii + 260 pp. \$128 hardback, \$42.36 eBook.**

Andrew J. Pottenger, an instructor in church history at Nazarene Bible College in Colorado Springs, has revised his doctoral dissertation from the University of Manchester (2019) into an interesting book analyzing the epistles of Constantine the Great concerning the Donatist Schism in the western Roman Empire and the Arian Controversy across the eastern Roman world during the twenty-five years in which this emperor ruled after his conversion to Christianity (A.D. 312–337). He offers it as “a contribution to studies of Constantine’s reign and association with Christianity” (226) and attempts to highlight the doctrines of imperial power and the techniques of ancient rhetoric the emperor employed in trying to end the organizational and theological divisions of his Christian brethren. The tome is divided into an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, and contains a full bibliography and a useful index in a packed 273 pages.

The detailed Introduction offers an overview of the themes of the book and sets it within the context of Constantine’s ancient reign and modern Constantinian scholarship. Professor Pottenger states that his aim is “to provide an in-depth look at Constantine’s surviving correspondence concerning the Donatist schism and ‘Arian controversy’ in order to increase our knowledge of how and why he intervened in matters internal to the churches” (3). The author contends that a “close examination of the rhetoric in Constantine’s ecclesiastical correspondence reveals three consistently appearing themes that identify this emperor’s main assumptions that directed his use of power in dealing with the divided churches” (3). He describes these assumptions as “‘doctrines of power’—the doctrine of divine favour and agency, the doctrine of ecclesiastical unity, and the doctrine of resistance and compromise” (3). He admits that the term doctrine is usually reserved for theological issues (“doctrine of the Trinity”), and posits a weak defense for his use of it here regarding Constantine’s religious beliefs and his policies and strategies for dealing with inter-Christian divisions. He then lays out a preview of the contents of the book’s chapters, then surveys recent works in Constantinian studies by Harold Drake, Timothy Barnes, Charles Odahl, Paul Stephenson, Jonathan Bardill, and others. He notes that his tome is not a broader narrative or biography of Constantine like theirs, but a more “focused analysis” of one aspect of the first Christian emperor’s policies (6–16).

In Chapter 1—“The Constantinian Correspondence on Ecclesiastical Conflicts”—Pottenger indicates that he is not using many of the usual sources for describing Constantine’s life and reign (Lactantius, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, the *Origo Constantini*, and the *Panegyrici Latini*), but rather is concentrating solely on the surviving imperial epistles that the emperor wrote to Christian bishops and communities

regarding ecclesiastical disputes. He identifies the five ancient source collections in which these documents may be found: Eusebius of Caesarea's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Vita Constantini*; Optatus of Milevis's *Appendix* to his tract *Contra Donatistarum*; Athanasius of Alexandria's *Apologia Contra Arianos*; and other letters found in Socrates's *Scholasticus* and Theodoret's *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, and elsewhere collected by Hans-Georg Opitz. He sets them within the context of ancient imperial correspondence and deals with issues of authenticity (citing some of this reviewer's works on the subject), as well as the purposes and biases of the authors using this material (23–61).

Chapters 2–5 are the core of this tome, and provide Pottenger's major analyses and theses of Constantine's ecclesiastical correspondence. Chapter 2—"The Doctrine of Divine Favour and Agency"—accepts the traditional account of Constantine's conversion through a vision and dream before the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge in 312, and relates how the emperor thereafter transferred his religious fealty to the God of Christianity. It outlines how Constantine came to believe that he needed divine favor to assure victory in war and prosperity in peace for his reign, and that he had been selected as an agent by the Christian God to protect and promote the Christian religion. This is, of course, an idea recognized by most modern scholars, but Pottenger only cites a few (primarily Jones and Drake). He then analyzes Constantine's letters and actions in trying to bring organizational unity to the western church amid the Donatist Schism, and in trying to promote theological and liturgical unity to the eastern church against the Arian, Melitian, and Easter disputes. He cites the emperor's correspondence, showing how Constantine labeled himself a "servant" of God and a fellow "bishop" of the church whose duty it was to restore Christian unity in practice and belief so that their deity would be pleased and continue to support the emperor and his subjects (62–96). Chapter 3—"The Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Unity"—posits that "Constantine consistently prioritized the necessity of pleasing God with efforts towards achieving unity as a means towards that end; his primary concern was to be seen maintaining divine favour effectively in order to continually reinforce the legitimacy of his rule" (99). Pottenger "contends that Constantine's intentions for ecclesiastical unity were characterized by both uniformity and inclusivity" (99). Constantine believed that there was one deity who created order in the universe, and that rational people should recognize this and live in harmony with one another in His world. The author analyzes the emperor's use of the metaphors "madness and reason" against the Donatist schismatics in North Africa and "sickness and healing" for the theological heretics in the east. He shows how Constantine was at first angry and harsh against the Donatists, but when his policies failed to quell their divisions, he adopted a more mild approach to the eastern divisions, presenting himself as a physician who could heal his divided brethren. He employed church councils (Arles in 314, Nicaea in 325, and Tyre in 335) and summons to court in trying to gain church unity (97–128). The emperor got the western church to condemn the Donatists for not accepting the Catholic Bishop Caecilian of Carthage, but was not able, with harsh language and repression, to bring the schismatics back into one *corpus Chistianorum* (313–321). So when he encountered theological controversies and another schism in the east, he expected resistance and tried different language and policies. As a mediator of his brethren at the Council of Nicaea, he got most of the bishops to agree to a common creed of faith, a common dating of Easter, and a means of uniting Catholics and Melitians in Egypt (324–325). Yet, he still faced resistance from some Arians and Melitians on one side and Athanasius and the Orthodox on the other side after his initial efforts to obtain unity. So, in Chapters 4 and 5—"The Doctrine of Resistance and Compromise"—

Professor Pottenger deals with the emperor's different language and strategies to encourage harmony and unity among Christians in the middle years of his reign (325–328). Chapter 4 covers how Constantine moved from anger and repression against the Donatists to counseling patience to the Catholics in North Africa for dealing with their divided church (129–155). Chapter 5 shows how the emperor adopted “aesthetic arguments” of “what is” and “what ought to be,” and encouraged compromise among Christian disputants to obtain ecclesiastical unity (156–186).

Many earlier scholars have presented Constantine as wavering and unsteady in his ecclesiastical policies in the later years of his reign. However, Pottenger (following Drake and Odahl) sees consistency and coherence in the emperor's religious policies. He wanted theological orthodoxy and brotherly harmony from Christians, and he would support those who were team players and showed loyalty to the Nicene Creed and willingness to compromise with their opponents. Chapter 6—“Projecting Imperial Power in Ecclesiastical Affairs (325–337)” —deals with the last dozen years of Constantine's reign, and reveals the consistency of the emperor's policies to promote Christian unity. It shows Constantine writing to Christian bishops and communities and encouraging harmony in belief and practice, reveals him offering to visit communities who practiced unity, and either welcoming repentant heretics (Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia) or exiling obstinate Catholic bishops (Eustathius of Antioch and Athanasius of Alexandria). The author posits that “Constantine favored a flexible interpretation of Nicaea—which placed a greater weight on inclusiveness and fellowship than theological precision—as a basis for deciding the judicial cases between 325 and 337” (202), and illustrates his points with incidents from this period (187–224). A short Conclusion reviews the theses and claims of this tome (225–231); and an “Appendix of Analysed Imperial Documents,” a detailed Bibliography of relevant scholarship, and an Index close out the book (232–260).

Overall, Pottenger has offered a well-researched and well-written contribution to Constantinian studies, but his claim that these issues and material have “not received prior analysis” (63) is disingenuous at best, since many great Constantinian scholars over the past century have dealt with Constantine's religious progression and his involvement in church affairs. His notes and bibliography have concentrated mainly on recent scholarship, and have left out many pioneering and excellent studies by Norman Baynes, Jean-Rémy Palanque, Hermann Dörries, Ramsay MacMullan, and others. And the use of the term “doctrine” for what were emerging and changing beliefs, policies, and strategies by the first Christian emperor is hyperbolic and makes little sense. Yet, I enjoyed reading it and do think that it adds some new layers of interpretation to Constantine's relations with and correspondence to Christians. But for the greater context of Constantine's life and reign, and when and from whom he learned about Christian beliefs and practices, one will have to turn to Elizabeth DePalma Digeser's *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Cornell, 2000) and Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (Routledge, 2013). The book is too advanced and narrowly focused for undergraduates, but I can recommend it to graduates and scholars in Constantinian studies.

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