

# Constantine and the Miraculous

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ONE DAY saw Constantine a pagan, the next a Christian, all thanks to the vision of a refulgent cross burning above him. So runs the familiar story. But told in this manner, apparently lacking precedent or preparation or context, it challenges belief. Readers of Lactantius or Eusebius, more alert than those historians themselves to the course of the events they trace, now point to many gradual steps by which the emperor actually changed his public adherence from old gods to new, bringing his empire with him. They point, moreover, to bridges of thought touching both paganism and Christianity by which men like Constantine could pass from one to the other without need violently to repudiate their earlier worships and without need of any miraculous or magical act from on high. In fact, acts of the latter sort themselves constituted a part of the bridge, and it is on them that the following pages will focus, with citation of as many authors of Constantine's whole lifetime as are pertinent. It is the spread and prevalence of ideas as much as their content that will concern us.

Constantine's cross, a model for several similar appearances later, evidently served the credulity of his times. Such a sign was to meet the Caesar Gallus at Antioch as he entered that city, "a cruciform pillar in the sky" visible to other spectators as well, and Constantius, about to engage Magnentius in battle, was not only favored with the same miracle but the citizens of Jerusalem attested its simultaneous appearance in the East stretching from the Mount of Calvary as far as the Mount of Olives. To the pious emperor it brought victory, to Magnentius' troops terror, "because they worshipped demons."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Socr. 2.28 (Gallus), with parallels afforded by Philostorgius, *HE* ed. Bidez (*GCS* 1913) 3.26, involving Constantius, and by Soz. 2.3, where Constantine's physician, his conversion not yet complete, is won over to Christianity by a vision of the cross and a voice explaining its significance as the guarantor of salvation; cf. *ibid.* 4.5, a cross 15 stadia high seen by multitudes in Jerusalem, who rush to the churches to be shriven or converted.

Constantius' reign witnessed divine intervention on another front. Persians beleaguered Nisibis where, among the Roman defenders, the holy bishop James of Antioch sent up his entreaties for aid. In response a kingly figure ablaze with crown and purple robe stood out upon the battlements, in whom the Persians recognized the Christian God; and James, himself mounting next, cursed the enemy with hordes of gnats that attacked their horses and elephants, putting them all to flight.<sup>2</sup> Plagues of stinging insects first fell at Moses' command on Egypt; more recent ones were known, attributed to divine anger;<sup>3</sup> and the efficacy of prayer in battle was to recur also, as that which Theodosius uttered against Eugenius in 393, raising a mighty wind to blow the rebels' missiles back in their faces.<sup>4</sup> In so many ways did the incidents at Nisibis build on themes which were the common property of Christians in that period, just as the story of Theodosius and Eugenius likewise could be counted on to remind its audience of a storm they all had heard about, the famous storm that saved the "Thundering Legion" under Marcus Aurelius when Germans and Sarmatians beset his army. For this miracle, in an altogether typical contention over events certainly historical (confirmed by Marcus Aurelius' sculptured Column as well as by his coin-issues), Christians credited their fellows, pagans turned for explanation to a wonder-worker of the time, one Julianus, or to an Egyptian magician, Arnouphis, who "had summoned by enchantment certain demons, above all, Hermes the aerial, and through them had brought on the rain-storm."<sup>5</sup>

But the figure of God Himself threatening Persians from the walls of Nisibis was more spectacular than these deluges and winds. Parallels are thus correspondingly rare. An early glimpse into the popular mind is offered by the *Acta Andreae* of the last quarter of the second century. It relates how the saint and his companions, "proceeding through Thrace, met a troop of armed men who made as if to fall on them. Andrew made the sign of the cross against them and prayed

<sup>2</sup> Thdrt. *HE* 2.26.

<sup>3</sup> *Exod.* 8.16f; *Ps.* 105.31f; cf. Thdrt. *Graec.affect.cur.* 10.58 (ed. P. Canivet, *Sources chrét.* 57.2 [1958] 378 n.2), on pests of mice, bats, snakes and scorpions; the last, with various stinging insects, appear often on magical amulets (S. Eitrem, *SymbOslo* 7 [1928] 70-73; cf. *Cypr. Ep.* 69.5). In Arnobius' day (*adv.Nat.* 1.3) plagues of locusts and mice were still blamed on Christians.

<sup>4</sup> *Socr.* 5.25, "so powerful was the emperor's prayer."

<sup>5</sup> *Dio* 72.8.4; cf. Euseb. *HE* 5.5.1-3, adding the detail of lightning-bolts, and E. R. Dodds, *JRS* 37 (1947) 56; full treatment in J. Guey, *RevPhil* 22 (1948) 17f.

that they might be made powerless. A bright angel touched their swords and they all fell down.”<sup>6</sup> Eusebius later (*Vita Const.* 2.6) tells of detachments of Constantine’s forces—where none really were, hence miraculous troops—marching through eastern cities on the eve of the battle with Licinius, sent “by a divine and superior power.” Two other examples are found in Socrates’ *Ecclesiastical History* (6.6, 7.18): “multitudes of angels . . . like armored soldiers of great stature” who vanquished Gainas; “the angels from God [who] appeared to people in Bithynia . . . [and] said they were sent as arbiters over the war.” Better yet is the “demonic apparition” drawn by Eusebius from Josephus (*HE* 3.8.5; Joseph. *BJ* 290f): “before sunset in the air throughout the country chariots and regiments [were seen] flying through the clouds and encircling the cities.” Among pagan writers, on the other hand, such miraculous beings play a smaller part. A woman of gigantic form turns up in Dio Cassius’ pages almost as a genre-figure. Dio asserts his personal belief in her, whether in the scene of Drusus crossing the Elbe or upon the crisis of Macrinus’ reign in 217.<sup>7</sup> Herodian (8.3.8) goes further. The occasion as he describes it is the closing in of Maximinus’ legions on Aquileia in 238. To the townspeople “certain oracles were given that the deity of the region would grant them victory. They call him Belis, worship him mightily, and identify him with Apollo. His image, some of Maximinus’ troops reported, often appeared in the skies fighting in defense of the city”—which returns us to Constantine.

For that susceptible emperor had *two* visions, not only of a cross but (somewhat less well known if hardly less debated by scholars) an earlier one of Apollo. It came to him on his way south from the Rhine to defeat Maximian in Marseilles. He turned aside en route to a temple of Apollo, “whom you saw, I believe, O Constantine—your Apollo accompanied by Victory holding out laurelled crowns to you each of which brought the presage of thirty years [of rule] . . . And yet why do I say, ‘I believe’? You saw and you recognized him in the form to which . . . the reigns of all the world were destined” (*Paneg. vet.* 7[6].21.3–5). “You saw,” presumably as others by the score had seen some deity invoked by magic or freely offering himself to them, and as, in later embroidered versions, Constantine’s second vision was

<sup>6</sup> M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1924) 339; date (*ibid.* 228) revised upward by P. M. Peterson, *Andrew, Brother of Simon Peter* (Leiden 1958) 26.

<sup>7</sup> Dio 55.1.3f, 79[78].25.5; cf. 73.13.3, and Plin. *Ep.* 7.27 and Soz. 7.23.

explained to him personally by Christ.<sup>8</sup> Superhuman beings, then, who revealed themselves to their worshippers before armed conflict or whose agents or powers were exerted for the battalions of the pious were a feature of pagan as of Christian mythology in the third and fourth centuries; and no better illustration of this common ground can be found than the spiritual career of Constantine between 310 and 312.

His panegyrists noted elements throughout his rise and reign beyond mere mortal reach. Sometimes such notice was blurred and vague, for example, in the emphasis of Nazarius on Constantine's "celestial favor," the victims "divinely granted to your arms," "the divinity accustomed to forward your undertakings," and so forth—expressions shading off into ambiguities common among both pagan and Christian writers.<sup>9</sup> So victory comes to Valentinian *magni numinis adiumento*, Julian's armies feel confident *caelestis dei favore . . . freti*, spurred on by *salutaris quidam genius praesens*.<sup>10</sup> More often the notices of Constantine's protector are explicit, as in the paragraphs devoted by Eusebius (*HE* 10.8.6–9) to proving his hero God's representative on earth.

With Constantine, indeed, the sense that men, especially leaders of state, acted as servants of some supernal purpose and thus played their rôles under its direction, took firm hold on the minds of contemporaries, as was bound to come about from the ascendancy of so historically oriented a religion as Christianity. The view, destined long to prevail, was new to the Roman world. It left faint traces in the Augustan History, where a favorite of pagan polemic, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, was imagined Stoically receiving news of a pretender's revolt in the certainty that *di me tuentur, dis pietas mea . . . cordi est*. "We have not so worshipped the gods nor so lived that he

<sup>8</sup> A catalogue of pagan epiphanies—of Asclepius alone—would be endless. For a selection of those sent to Christians, see Constantine's being led on the founding circuit of Constantinople by some divine being, in Philostorg. *HE* 2.9; Theodosius' vision of "the blessed Meletius," in Thdr. *HE* 5.6; and of St John and St Philip on the eve of battle, promising him success, *ibid.* 5.24 (confirmed by a second witness); Constantius' beholding of his own guardian angel or genius, in Amm. 21.14.2; Arnobius' conversion by visions, in Hieron. *Chron.* A.D. 326/7; and the angel sent to Licinius in a dream, in Lact. *Mort.pers.* 46. For Christ appearing to Constantine, see Soz. 1.3.

<sup>9</sup> *Paneg.vet.* (ed. Baehrens<sup>2</sup>, Leipzig 1911) 10[4].2.6, 12.1, 13.5, 16.2, 17.1, 28.1.

<sup>10</sup> Amm.Marc. 29.5.40, 16.12.13; cf. frequent references to the emperor's *numen* or *divinitas* in the *Paneg.vet.* 3 and 4 (e.g. 4.15.6, 4.17.1); Constantine's conversion *ἀφράστῳ τινὶ δυνάμει*, in Soz. 1.18. Even such loosely conceived Powers might still be thought of as actually operating on history. We see events taking place *ὑπὸ τινος δαιμονίου τύχης*, in Hdn. 1.9.4; *ἐξ ἐπινοίας τινὸς θείας*, in Dio 79[78].8.2, cf. 76[75].4.5; or *ὡς περ ὑπὸ πνεύματος δεινοῦ τινος*, in Euseb. *HE* 4.2.2.

should overcome us.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the acts of Christian emperors were frequently hailed as approved, inspired, intended or made possible by God. God (says a writer addressing Constantine’s sons) has bestowed the *imperium*, the *vexillum fidei*; *vobis hoc divinitas reservavit. Favore eminentis dei victores estis omnium hostium vestrorum . . . Strati sunt adversantium cunei, et rebellantia ante conspectum vestrum semper arma ceciderunt . . . Haec vobis deus summus . . . pro fide vestra reddidit praemia*. And if this be a view no doubt deeply colored by the established supremacy of Christian rulers in whom the devout would wish to see the workings of Providence, we may yet match it with the statement of an Alexandrian bishop a century earlier, for whom God “entrusted the monarchy to the most pious Valerian and Gallienus,” whose reign he prays Him to uphold.<sup>12</sup> So late as the fourth century, moreover, vestiges survived of a belief in guardian angels set over each people, giving to them their worships, languages and separate characters and, beyond that, controlling their destiny through their own high or low position in God’s favor. Angels might sometimes exert their power on the battlefield.<sup>13</sup>

Upon his conversion, Constantine entered into this whole heritage of beliefs—the belief that a pious people would receive divine protection, that their ruler ruled according to divine plan, and that God directly or through his angels could be expected to intercede in their behalf at crucial moments. Thus, to Maxentius’ fateful collision with Constantine at the Milvian Bridge, “God Himself as with chains dragged the tyrant far away from the [safety of Rome’s] gates.”<sup>14</sup>

The question how pagans looked on the position of the Roman emperors *vis à vis* the gods has been surprisingly little studied, despite a mass of material.<sup>15</sup> It is fortunately tangential to our purpose. Two

<sup>11</sup> Interesting passages: SHA *Avid. Cassius* 2.2; 8.2f, 11.8, quoting Hor. *Od.* 1.17.13. I cannot recall any earlier pagan texts hinting at the existence of a divine plan for history, though it is easy to find the belief that the accession and demise of an emperor were divinely intended. See J. Béranger, *Recherches sur l’aspect idéologique du principat* (Basel 1953) 155f, 164f. In the fourth century, no doubt in a spirit of anti-Christian polemic, Eunapius (*Vit.soph.* 476) describes Julian’s “conquering all [the barbarians] because he worshipped the gods”—a more explicit statement of cause and effect than fits in the earlier Empire. Cf. *infra* n.17.

<sup>12</sup> Firm.Mat. *Err.prof.rel.* 16.4, 20.7, 29.3; bishop Dionysius in Euseb. *HE* 7.11.8; cf. Tert. *Apol.* 33; Orig. *c.Cels.* 8.68 and 70; and, of course, Eusebius throughout the *Vita Const.*, e.g. 1.38.

<sup>13</sup> The basic text was *Deut.* 32.8f (and *Dan.* 10.13), with later adherence clearest in Orig. *c.Cels.* 1.24, 3.2, 4.8, 5.25, 5.30; see H. B. Kuhn, *JBL* 67 (1948) 218–31; E. Peterson, *TheolZ* 7 (1951) 81–90; and C. M. Morrison, *The Powers That Be* (London 1960) 18–23 and *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Euseb. *V.Const.* 1.38.

<sup>15</sup> Some slight help from A. D. Nock, *JRS* 37 (1947) 112–14.

points only need be made. In the first place, the idea of national guardian angels, though familiar to writers like Celsus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Julian,<sup>16</sup> did not lead to a concept of supernatural intervention in terrestrial happenings; nor (in the second place) did the concept of the ruler favored or even chosen by the gods develop further into the expectation that they would miraculously succor him in the hour of national crisis. Not until challenged by Christianity did pagans give any sharpness to their claims that their own piety could secure the safety of the state or the victorious outcome of a campaign.<sup>17</sup> In Constantine's lifetime, a change can be seen. In the transition to an era of far more intense and vaunting religious propaganda, the battle of the Milvian Bridge was critical. Thereafter, through the conflicts involving Licinius and Maximin and so to the historic conversion of Clovis in the following century, battle was determined, so men said, by divine judgement.

But to return to Constantine: newly converted, he advanced into Italy in 312. His decision to make war, his march, his feelings and motives, all receive a characteristic treatment at the hands of spokesmen for the Church. But they make the meaning of the march clearer by their description of his opponent, who, we are told, huddles in Rome gripped by terror, vice and superstition, dupe to countless religious charlatans, petitioner to countless vain spirits, convert to such revolting measures as the tearing of unborn babes from the womb for use in prognostic sacrifices. Though the picture of his *superstitiosa maleficia* is a compendium of commonplaces,<sup>18</sup> it sets the stage for the dramatic collision of the two religious worlds. This is the

<sup>16</sup> Julian, *adv.Gal.* 115D; Origen, *c.Cels.* 8.35; Ael.Arist. *Or.* 43.18, cited from H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge 1965) xix; Iambl. *Myst.* 5.25; Morrison, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 84f; on the related idea of a supreme god with angel-agents, like the Persian king surrounded by his satraps, which was fitted into both Origen's and Neoplatonic thought, see F. Cumont, *RevHistRel* 72 (1915) 163-74.

<sup>17</sup> Note the references, of a new explicitness, by the Egyptian prefect Aemilianus, to "the gods that preserve their [*scil.* of Valerian and Gallienus] monarchy," or by Maximin, to the city that is "by many proofs revealed to flourish through the presence of the heavenly gods," etc., or his assertion that "by the gods the government of the state and all individuals in it have their being" (Euseb. *HE* 7.11, 9.7.5, 9.7.7f, 9.9A.6). Pagan supporters attributed Julian's spectacular success against Constantius to Julian's divine protectors (Eunap. *Vit.soph.* 476; Greg.Naz. *Or.* 4, *adv.Juln.* 1.47). For even approximate parallels to such views, one would have to go back three centuries and more to Vergil's age (R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* [Oxford 1939] 448f).

<sup>18</sup> On Maxentius' desperate measures, see *Paneg.vet.* 9[12].16.5; Euseb. *V.Const.* 1.36, *HE* 8.14.5, 9.9.2; Lact. *Mort.pers.* 44; Zos. 2.15.4; for these clichés of the tyrant's last days, compare SHA *Julianus* 7.9f; Soz. 1.7; Dio 74.16.5, 80[79].11; Euseb. *V.Const.* 2.4f, *HE* 8.14.8; and Zon. 13.1.2; for the prognostic sacrifices, also Amm.Marc. 29.2.17.

significance felt by historians of the battle of the Milvian Bridge. The old world failed, whatever devices were desperately attempted; the new conquered, in the first campaign of a century's religious strife.

This strife was carried on not merely by men but by supernatural forces, too. If the Sibylline books, demons, priests and the rest deceived Maxentius, it is at any rate they who fought as well as he; and their enemy was not the western emperor but the Savior's sign. The sign may then have been the *chrisma* and only in later battles the cross; more likely, at the Milvian Bridge as throughout the rest of Constantine's career, the cross.<sup>19</sup> Its cherished use in war, its invariable efficacy whether on armor or on the *labarum* and whether to protect emperor or humble standard-bearer, set it above all other forces;<sup>20</sup> yet the relation between the *labarum* and the traditional Roman *vexillum* is obvious,<sup>21</sup> while the painting of a declaratory or magical device on the shields of one's troops had earlier close parallels.<sup>22</sup> Even the tales of the defensive properties of the cross in combat are matched by the inscriptions found on pieces of military equipment from the centuries just before Constantine, reading "Luck to the bearer" or "Best and Greatest, save the corps of all our soldiers"; Mars or Victory might be depicted on armor.<sup>23</sup> Such evidence shows us the well-worn paths that Constantine trod when, according to the ancient arts of apotropaic magic though with a different device, he put the insignia of Christianity in the hands of his followers.

On the history of those insignia there is no need for much discussion. Their potency to tear demons from their lairs in statues, to uproot them from unhappy maniacs, to drive them forever from

<sup>19</sup> A. Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine* (Oxford 1948) 17f, argues for the *chrisma*, but points out (126 n.7) the magical properties which it as well as the cross might be supposed to possess.

<sup>20</sup> On the power given to Constantine by use of the cross, see Socr. 1.2; Soz. 1.4, the cross venerated by soldiers and the *labarum* work miracles; *ibid.* 1.8, cross marked on weapons; Thdr. HE 1.17, and Socr. 1.17, Helena sends her son nails and wood from the true cross, which he uses on his equipment and bears into battle "in order to avert the missiles of his enemies."

<sup>21</sup> Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 20.7, the *labarum* called the *vexillum fidei*; and, on its warlike properties, Alföldi, *op. cit.* (*supra* n.19) 84 and n.3, coins of Constantine showing "the imperial standard with the emblem of Christ piercing with its point the snake of paganism."

<sup>22</sup> Thunderbolts on shields in W. F. Volbach, *Altchristliche Mosaiken* (London 1947) pl. II; E. Petersen *et al.*, *Die Marcus-Säule* (München 1896) plates 5.1, 10.1f, 11.1, 15.1, etc.; *RE* 2A (1921) 919 s.v. SCURUM on Trajan's Column; for identification of units by their shields, see Tac. *Hist.* 3.23; Dio 64.14.2; Amm. Marc. 16.12.6; for Vespasian's name on his *vexilla*, Suet. *Vesp.* 6; for apotropaic animal symbols on shields, MacMullen, *ArtB* 46 (1964) 442.

<sup>23</sup> A. Ruhlmann, *CRAI* 1935, 67f; P. Wuilleumier, *Gallia* 8 (1950) 146f; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (London 1962) 168 and pl. 107.

shrines and temples to the accompaniment of their anguished howls and supplications—all this is attested in dozens of accounts of Christ's cross or name in the service of the faithful.<sup>24</sup> So mighty was the weapon that Constantine aimed at Maxentius' weaker gods. But Constantine extended its use. His mother Helena sent him a piece of the true cross. "When he received it, confident that the city in which it was kept would be preserved forever, he hid it in a statue of himself standing in the so-called Forum of Constantine in Constantinople, on a large porphyry column"—thereby producing the Christian equivalent of those images of the pagan gods that, both earlier and later, deflected enemies' attacks. They guarded Nero against conspiracies, Ephesus against plagues, Athens against earthquakes, Rome against sedition.<sup>25</sup>

Constantine's actions fitted the times. Apotropaic magic to ward off disease was on the increase. Lucky stones with mystic signs and spells on them grew more popular in the third and fourth centuries than ever before, evidently among both Christians and pagans, since the synods of Ancyra (under Constantine) and of Laodicea (between 341 and 381) spoke out against "those who foretell the future and follow the customs of the heathen, or introduce persons into their houses to find out magical remedies or to perform purifications," or against priests who "shall not be magicians or enchanters or astrologers or make so-called phylacteries [amulets] . . . and those who wear them we order to be expelled from the Church."<sup>26</sup>

Eusebius tells the tale of Caesarea in Palestine where once lived the woman whom Christ cured of an issue of blood. At the gates of her house stood two statues which he himself had seen, one of a woman

<sup>24</sup> For example, Cypr. *ad Demetrianum* 15; *Acta Andreae* 9; Thphl.Ant. *ad Autol.* 2.8 (Migne PG 6.1061f); Marc.Diac. *V.Porph.* 61; *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii*, ed. G. Morin (Bonn 1935) 1.5; Greg.Nyss. *V.Greg.Thaum.* (Migne PG 46.916A and 949D–952D); Soz. 4.16 and 5.2; Thdrt. *HE* 3.1, 5.21; Athan. *Or. Incarn.verbi* 48 (Migne PG 25.181); *idem*, *V.Anton.* 13.23, 35, 40, 53, 63f, and 80; Lact. *Mort.pers.* 10.2f; Euseb. *c.Hierocl.* 4; Juln.Imp. *Ep.* 79 (ed. Bidez); and *Acta Xanthippae et Polyxenae* (ed. James) 17f.

<sup>25</sup> To the references in MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1966) 319, on apotropaic statues, add Suet. *Nero* 56, Philostr. *V.Apollon.* 4.10, and Dio 37.9.2; cf. effective apotropaic rites against the enemies of the state, SHA *Aurelian* 18.5, 20.5–7, 21.4, described with considerable emphasis to match, in pagan history, the miracles wrought by Christians. On Constantine's statue, see Socr. 1.17.

<sup>26</sup> J. Stevenson, tr., *A New Eusebius* (London 1957) 312, Council of Ancyra; *Concilium Laodicenum* (ed. Jonkers) 36; cf. Basil on medical magic resorted to by his congregation, Migne PG 29.417. Further, on superstition prevalent among Christians, cf. Stevenson 308 (Council of Elvira, A.D. 305), *infra* n.44, and esp. compare Plut. *Mor.* 356E with August. *Conf.* 8.12.29.

praying, the other of a man resembling Jesus. At the base of the latter grew a curious herb able to "cure diseases of all kinds." To this wonder we must add the power of the true cross that Helena discovered to heal the sick: thus, two illustrations of the workings of *Christus medicus*, in opposition especially to the authority enjoyed by Asclepius.<sup>27</sup> But it was, after all, essential for the Church to present its founder as a God of deeds equal to the performances of pagan deities, since, particularly for a mass audience, proof through miracles offered an infinitely more persuasive appeal than the type of argument carried on in written form. Simple people wanted simple proof of the superior ability of Christianity to do for them what older worships had always promised: that is, to defend them from the ills of this earth. The dreams granted at Asclepieia taught suppliants how to be healed. Could Christ or his holy men do as much? And if the answer was yes, in scores of wonders wrought especially by monks, there remained the more general affliction of epidemic disease. Throughout antiquity men attributed plagues to divine anger. A persistent conviction blamed their onset on the progress of Christianity and the resulting neglect of pagan cults.<sup>28</sup> It was a heavy charge variously answered; but one response as it was ultimately framed in pious myth said that even in averting disease Christians had access to a more greatly beneficent power than pagan wonderworkers.

With a few exceptions—Eusebius was one—Christians, like pagans, acknowledged the supernatural origin of plagues, as they did of other bodily ills which they could not understand. Ailments afflicting (in grotesquely disgusting descriptions) especially the intestines and genitals marked the victim as the target of a god's, or of God's, wrath; the genre is well known and meets us most often in the heated religious atmosphere of the fourth century.<sup>29</sup> Manic fits likewise

<sup>27</sup> Euseb. *HE* 7.18.1–3; Socr. 1.17; R. Arbesmann, *Traditio* 10 (1954) 3f. Note that, as Christ was lowered to a healer of bodies, pagan propaganda sought to raise Asclepius to a healer of souls, Juln. Imp. *adv. Gal.* 200b. At the same time the ability of the gods, notably Asclepius, really to heal their worshippers was persistently depreciated, e.g., in Cypr. *Idol. vanit.* 6f; Tat. *Ad Graec.* 16; Tert. *Apol.* 22; Ps.-Clem. *Hom.* 9.15f; and Athan. *V. Anton.* 33. F. Dölger, *AuChr* 6 (1950) 242–54, discusses some of these and other passages.

<sup>28</sup> Cypr. *ad Demetr.* 2f; Arnob. *adv. Nat.* 1.1 and 3; Porphyry in Thdr. *Graec. affect. cur.* 12.96f. For a pagan and a Christian in competition to avert plague from Rome, only the Christian successful, see Dodds, *op. cit.* (*supra* n.5) 57.

<sup>29</sup> Medical details meet us in Plut. *Sulla* 36, but earlier examples that he draws from Greek literature could be easily multiplied. See the full history of *θεομάχοι* in W. Nestle, *Griechische Studien* (Stuttgart 1948) 568f. Other roots of the genre reach into Judaism, continued by Christian writers against pagans, persecutors and heretics, and usurped for use

called more for the exorcist than the doctor, and Christians claimed to possess the requisite skills more than their opponents. Palladius and Sozomen supply an abundance of case-histories. It was the same with other mysterious catastrophes: sterility of the fields, insect-pests, hail, drought, earthquakes, storms. Great winds, said Maximin Daia, were controlled by the gods,<sup>30</sup> and could be turned on or off by their favor or displeasure. Jealous courtiers of Constantine accused the influential wise man Sopater of having “chained the winds” that were to bring the grain fleet to the capital; whereupon the emperor, evidently convinced that the man was actually capable of the necessary enchantments, executed him.<sup>31</sup>

Believing that natural phenomena, from earthquakes to the wasting of the flesh, were in fact all supernatural, people of the later Empire saw in their afflictions a working out of divine conflicts on a terrestrial plane or stage. Pagans accused Christians of causing these conflicts and their resultant sufferings. In the Apologists the echoes of such accusations—*popularia verba*, said Arnobius—are plainly heard; individual instances of persecution breaking out in the train, and because of the typical interpretation, of droughts and earthquakes are fairly often recorded. It was thought that droughts and the like might be deliberately inflicted in response to invocation or upon people hateful to the gods, though it was still more usually argued that the protectors of cities and nations had been neglected, and had for this reason departed.<sup>32</sup> The sum total of the later Empire’s ill-fortunes could thus, to Zosimus, appear to follow from the abandonment of ancestral cults and rites. He singles out for his criticism the decision of Constantine not to hold the *ludi saeculares*, in order that he may strike a blow at that hero of the Church.<sup>33</sup>

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against Christians by pagans. See *II Chron.* 21.15 and 18; *I Macc.* 6.8; *II Macc.* 9.8f; *Acts* 1.18, 12.23; Herod smitten, in Joseph. *AJ* 17.168–170, *BJ* 1.656–660, both texts familiar to Eusebius (*HE* 1.8.5f); Arius smitten in answer to bishop Alexander’s prayer, in Socr. 1.38 and Thdrt. *HE* 1.13; Galerius smitten, in Lact. *Mort.pers.* 33 and Euseb. *HE* 8.16.3–5; Julian, uncle to the Apostate, smitten in Soz. 5.8, in Thdrt. *HE* 3.9, and in Philostorg. *HE* (Bidez) 7.10, adding the names of other victims of *φθειρίαις*; and used against Christians by Juln.Imp. *Ep.* 55 and 90 (ed. Bidez).

<sup>30</sup> Euseb. *HE* 9.7.10; cf. Marc.Diac. *V.Porph.* 56; Iambl. *Myst.* 5.6, and *V.Pythag.* 135; *supra* n.5. Though this evidence deals only with storms, much more could be gathered on other types of natural disaster.

<sup>31</sup> The poisoned source for the incident is Eunap. *Vit.soph.* 462f.

<sup>32</sup> Marc.Diac. *V.Porph.* 19; Cypr. *Ep.* 75.10.1f, ed. Bayard (Paris 1961).

<sup>33</sup> Zos. 2.7; Z. Petre, *Studii clasice* 7 (1965) 263f, noting (264 n.4) “the obviously magical nature of these games.”

Here, then, is another part of the background to the battle of the Milvian Bridge: terrestrial events of a striking, public character were thought to result from supernatural intercession whether spontaneous or invoked. It was neither improper nor uncommon for Christians to give credence to happenings of this order, and it was frowned on only if it degenerated to the private practice of magic. Pagans of course enjoyed a wider latitude in superstition, without, however, any fundamentally different views.

To understand a further aspect of the collision between Maxentius and Constantine, some discussion of demons is needed. The term, in Greek or by adoption in Latin, had the broadest meaning. Pagan philosophers used it to designate, between the crass material of mankind and the etherial realm of pure intellect, the denizens of an intermediate world who served as agents and emissaries from the higher to the lower and (conducting the souls of the dead and the prayers of the living) from the lower to the higher. These denizens had ranks according to their insubstantiality and intellectuality, the purer ones sometimes called angels but often not differentiated under a separate category. They linked men to gods. Foreign as was most of this hierarchy of intermediaries to classical Greek thought, it can be seen developing in the second century and went virtually unquestioned in the later Empire. Its roots lay partly in a substratum of popular superstition, partly in Oriental religions.<sup>34</sup> To mention only points of interest to our present purpose: it was demons who occasioned earthquakes, pests and so forth; they again who brought oracles from the gods and cured the sick; sometimes, too, harmed men when called on with the proper enchantments. Outstanding minds of late antiquity, Porphyry and Libanius, were quite sure that magic could be enlisted in the cause of personal vendettas—though the pure in spirit were beyond the reach of demons.<sup>35</sup> The more evil among demons

<sup>34</sup> K. Svoboda, *La démonologie de Michel Psellos* (Brno 1927) 11–14, 31, 34f; F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua* (Paris 1949) 81–95; *idem*, *RevHistRel* 72 (1915) 159–74; T. Hopfner, *Griechisch-ägyptischer Offenbarungszauber I* (Leipzig 1921) 6, 8, 21f, 43f; and the sources, from the less important forerunners like Plutarch (e.g. *Mor.* 361Af), Albinus (e.g. *Epit.* 15.1), and Artemidorus (e.g. *Oneir.* 2.34), to the chief Neoplatonists, Plotinus (*Enn.* 3.5.6), Porphyry (*Ep. ad Anebo*, *passim*; August. *De civ.D.* 10.9.26; Procl. *In Tim.* 142c), Iamblichus (*Myst.* 1.3–9, 12, 20; 2.3; 3.16; etc.), and Proclus (*In Crat.* 122).

<sup>35</sup> Demons caused pests, etc., in Porph. *Abst.* 2.40 and Iambl. *Myst.* 2.6 and 56; they cure the sick, *ibid.* 3.3; bring oracles, *ibid.* 3.2 and 16; Plut. *Mor.* 362; respond to *defixiones*, in Iambl. *Myst.* 2.7, and Cumont, *RevHistRel* 72 (1915) 175; they attack men at the command of magic, Marc.Diac. *V.Porph.* 10; Liban. *Or.* 1.43, 36.1–3 (cf. Zon. 13.8.17f, and Amm.Marc.

longed to gorge themselves on sacrifices, to experience sexual intercourse vicariously through the bodies of the possessed, and to deceive with false revelations.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes demons dwelt in cult images; they would not appear in impure places and shunned a hostile presence.<sup>37</sup> To different ones among them different temples, even different zones or, more specifically, nations and peoples, had been assigned for oversight,<sup>38</sup> and they occasionally took visible human shape to meddle directly in the course of events.<sup>39</sup> According to a particularly common conviction, the Devil—ὁ μισόκαλος—or his agents continually worked against the progress or unity of the Church by spreading false doctrines, libels, suspicions against Christians, and the like. Infected with these diabolical errors, heretics and persecutors became mere instruments of a wickedness from beyond.<sup>40</sup>

Strange views, perhaps. But as a darkness of irrationality thickened over the declining centuries of the Roman empire, superstition blacked out the clearer lights of religion, wizards masqueraded as philosophers, and the fears of the masses took hold on those who passed for educated and enlightened.<sup>41</sup> From the same world, reflecting of necessity the same ideas because surrounded by them in all social classes, rose the leaders of the Church. Thus all of the opinions about demons (by that specific term, *daemon* or δαίμων) just now reviewed as representing the consensus of pagan thought also reigned as orthodoxy among Christians like Origen, Lactantius, Eusebius,

26.3.2)—though the pure were immune, Plot. *Enn.* 4.4.43; and MacMullen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) 317.

<sup>36</sup> Svoboda, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.34) 24f, 29–31; Iambl. *Myst.* 2.9f.

<sup>37</sup> Euseb. *Prep.ev.* 4.23 (Porphyry); C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Ann Arbor 1950) 15f; Dodds, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 64f; *Corp.Herm.*, ed. Nock II (Paris 1945) *Asclepius* 37; Macrobian. *Sat.* 1.23.13; Porph. *V.Plotin.* 10; Hopfner, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.34) 1.14.

<sup>38</sup> Fronto, *Ep.* 3.9.1–2; Celsus in Orig. *c.Cels.* 5.25; Iambl. *Myst.* 1.20, 5.25; Juln. *Imp. adv.Gal.* 143A–B; Hopfner, *Ueber die Geheimelehren von Jamblichus* (Leipzig 1922) 243, adding Procl. In *Tim.* 142c; *supra* n.16.

<sup>39</sup> Iambl. *Myst.* 3.3; Dio 65.25.5, 79[78].7.4, 80[79].18.1; *supra* n.7. “The term [δαίμων] ordinarily indicates, in Dio Cassius, a divinity of the second rank often foreign, entrusted with functions among mortals”—J. Beaujeu, *La religion romaine à l’apogée de l’empire* (Paris 1955) 344 n.4.

<sup>40</sup> Constantine attributed *stasis* in the Church to the operation of “the envious *daemon*” (Soz. 1.19). For similar views on the deceitful activity of demons who control events through the control of men’s minds, see Athenag. *pro Christ.* 27; Cypr. *Idol.vanit.* 6f; Thphl. *Ant. ad Autol.* 2.8 and 28; Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 1.56; Greg. *Naz. Or.* 1.47, 39.7; Thdr. *HE* 1.1c; Euseb. *HE* 2.14.1, 3.8.9; 4.7.1, 9, and 10; 5.14.1, 7.17.1; Justin, *Apol.* 1.5 and 26, 2.13; Orig. *c.Cels.* 3.32, 4.32, 4.92, 5.5; Tert. *Apol.* 27; and Lact. *Mort.pers.* 3.

<sup>41</sup> See the discussion and sources in MacMullen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) ch.3–4.

Basil, Gregory and many others,<sup>42</sup> though with this major difference, that the intermediaries between mortal and divine were conceived of as good and bad angels, the latter being equated (under the name 'demons') with the pagan gods. It hardly occurred to Christians to deny the whole infinite list of the older deities; only as many as possible were traced back to men as heroes, according to the traditional teachings of Euhemerism, while those that could not be talked out of existence in this fashion were left to deceive men with false visions, false cures, false oracles and insidious intrusions of shameful lust. This last trial especially will be recalled by readers of Athanasius' *Vita S. Antoni*. Anthony declared himself the target of temptation by beautiful succubi some of whom, it is permissible to imagine, were simply pious peasant girls coming to venerate the saint. The mistake, at any rate, is once attested of a bishop of Constantius' time, spending the night at an inn. A woman entered in the dark, the bishop asked, "Who's there?" and hearing her voice concluded she was a demon in female form. "Straightway he called on Christ the Savior to help him."<sup>43</sup> The instinctive assumption that unearthly forces were at work tells us much about the spirit of the age.

Priests forbidden by the Council of Laodicea to engage in magical practices are joined by the clients of charlatans in Basil's congregation; together they and their like form the audience for one of the charges most frequently (surely, because most credibly) launched by

<sup>42</sup> Demons were seen as intermediary beings (Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 2.35; Euseb. *Prep.ev.* 4.5), formerly angels until their fall (Tat. *ad Graec.* 12; Tert. *Apol.* 22; Lact. *Div.Inst.* 2.15; Euseb. *Prep.ev.* 7.16; Athenag. *pro Christ.* 24; *Consult.Zacchaei* (*supra* n.24) 1.30f; Phot. *Bibl.* 234f=Methodius; Svoboda, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.34] 6f). What pagans called gods were either formerly mortals (Euhemerism: Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 1.37; Firm.Mat. *Err.prof.rel.* 2.3, 7.6; Cypr. *Idol.vanit.* 1; Athenag. *pro Christ.* 28) or simply demons (Tat. *ad Graec.* 22; Justin. *Apol.* 1.5; Clem.Alex. *Cohort.* 1.2.63 and 69; Tert. *Apol.* 22; Euseb. *c.Hierocl.* 25 and *Prep.ev.* 4.5 and 23; *Consult.Zacchaei* 1.5; Socr. 3.23; Soz. 2.5; Thdrt. *HE* 1.1c, 3.3). They lodged in cult statues (*Ps.* 96.5; *Ps.-Clem. Hom.* 9.15; Cypr. *Idol.vanit.* 7; Rufin., Migne PG 12.789B; Basil, Migne PG 30.532c; Firm.Mat. *Err.prof.rel.* 13.4; Athenag. *pro Christ.* 26f), delighting in the smoke and blood of sacrifices (Orig. *c.Cels.* 7.5; Tert. *Apol.* 22; Firm.Mat. *Err.prof.rel.* 13.4; Basil, Migne PG 30.165c and 532c), issuing deceitful oracles to pagans (Cypr. *Idol.vanit.* 6; *Consult.Zacchaei* 1.27; Svoboda, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.34] 34); they sought sexual license through possession (*Ps.-Clem. Hom.* 9.9f; [Clem.Rom.] *Recog.* 4.16; *Consult.Zacchaei* 1.30; Svoboda, *op.cit.* 31). Especially by controlling men's minds and impulses they intervened to shape historical events (Justin. *Apol.* 1.44.12; Cypr. *Idol.vanit.* 7; Euseb. *V.Const.* 1.45, 1.49, 3.12, 3.26, *HE* 3.8.5, 4.7.2, 4.11.9, 9.10.2; Greg.Naz., Migne PG 36.341B; Socr. 4.19; Thdrt. *HE* 1.1c). They could be called or banished by spells (Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 1.43-45), but could not hurt the pure (Lact. *Div.Inst.* 2.16). Nations and peoples were assigned to the oversight of angels (*supra* n.13; Clem.Alex. *Cohort.* 2; J. Daniélou, *Origène* [Paris 1948] 236f; *idem*, *Recherches de science religieuse* 38 [1951] 132-34).

<sup>43</sup> Thdrt. *HE* 2.7.

Christians at their fellows, heretics or schismatics or simply personal foes, namely, the charges of attempted sorcery. It is irrelevant that these were no doubt often untrue; the fact remains that they were believed.<sup>44</sup> They could be launched, moreover, at more ambitious targets, and used in polemics of a yet graver importance. When enemies of the Church competitively inflated the reputation of that renowned wonder-worker of the first century, Apollonius of Tyana, Christians could dismiss him, too, as a mere 'magician'; in reply, the term was turned against Christ, lowering Him to the rank of *magus*.<sup>45</sup> Could pagan miracles truly equal those wrought by Christ? A didactic tract pointed to his raising of the dead to life, whereas heathen wizards could only boast that *magicis carminibus non mortuorum sed daemonum spiritus evocari*.

The atmosphere of contentious comparison, the tendency to prove the superiority of one's faith by matching its miraculous powers with another's, emerged suddenly from books to the stage of real events in Constantine's lifetime. The conditions making this possible were all present. What was required was a conviction that powers accessible to men through invocation, and willing to intervene in tangible forms and happenings—moreover, powers potentially hostile to each other—filled the universe. It was necessary, too, that such a conviction should be held by the great mass of people, as was indeed the case. Our sketch so far, relying more on anecdotes than analysis, has been intended to reveal society shot through at all levels with the colors of a grosser superstition, with cruder expectations of the supernatural than one could find in the Empire at its height.

The consequences appeared first in the origins of the Great Persecution, of which Constantine, incidentally, was a witness. As Diocletian was assisting in the ceremony of *extispicium*, Christians in his retinue crossed themselves, "by which act the demons were put to flight and the ritual disturbed." The chief priest explained why the

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 1.28; Socr. 1.27; Soz. 2.25, 4.10—all recounting accusations against Athanasius; also against Eusebius of Emesa (Socr. 2.9; Soz. 3.6), Cyprian (Prudent. *Perist.* 13.21f), Constantius (Amm.Marc. 21.1.6), and various heresiarchs (Iren. *adv.Haer.* 1.13.3, and Euseb. *HE* 4.7.2 and 4.11.4, quoting Irenaeus and Justin; Tert. *De praescr.haeret.* 43; *idem, adv.Marc.* 1.18). One set of charges against a certain Syrian bishop in 444 is interestingly analyzed by E. Peterson in *Miscellanea Pio Paschini* I (Rome 1948) 95–99. The usual term of abuse was *γόνος* and *γοητεία* (cf. Joseph. *AJ* 20.5.1, 20.8.5f, 20.8.10).

<sup>45</sup> On *Christus magus* see Lact. *Div.Inst.* 5.2, refuting Hierocles' comparison of Apollonius and Christ; *ibid.* 5.3; Athan. *Or. Incarn.verbi* 48 (Migne PG 25.181); and Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 1.53; cf. Athan., Migne PG 25.129 and 149, and *Consult.Zacchaei* 1.13, on *magica carmina*.

entrails refused to yield their prophetic message, whereupon the emperor flew into a rage at those guilty of the disturbance. The incident is well known; but not so often emphasized is the conception of demonic conflict that lay behind Lactantius' account: one superhuman power could drive away another, magic worked only in the absence of inimical forces. Evidence for those views has been gathered above.<sup>46</sup> After Lactantius, Church historians multiplied imitations of the story, sometimes by retrojection: for example, "The teacher and arch-priest of Egyptian magicians persuaded him [Valerian] to get rid of them [Christians], bidding him kill and drive away the pure and holy men as being enemies and preventers of his foul and disgusting spells (for they are and were able, by being present and by watching and by simply breathing on them and speaking, to scatter the plots of baneful demons)."<sup>47</sup> Until the end of Eusebius' century and even beyond, though with diminishing report, the noise of battle was to sound as it were contrapuntally between Christians and pagans on earth, and between their gods invisible in shrines, in the heavens, in the nether regions and in men's minds—a battle, however, in which the combatants struggled with identical weapons of attack and on the same field of ideas.

Men who controlled gods, great wonder-workers, launched their superhuman agents or allies against their rivals, in duels more fit for a Greek novella; yet they were recounted in sober prose. Witness the vision of a certain persecutor of pagan wise men, one Festus, in which he saw a former victim "throwing a noose around his [Festus'] neck and dragging him down to Hades . . . As he came out [of the temple in which the vision came to him], his feet slipped from under him and he fell on his back and lay speechless there. He was borne away immediately and died, and this seemed to be an outstanding work of Providence (*πρόνοια*)."<sup>48</sup> We need change only the proportions of the story, from two individuals to two causes and armies, to have the prelude to the battle of the Milvian Bridge. On the one side is Constantine with his vision, his prayers, his divine support, his miraculous symbol borne before his troops; on the other is Maxentius busied

<sup>46</sup> See nn. 35, 37 and 42, and especially Porph. *V.Plotini* 10, with Thdr. *Graec.affect.cur.* 12.96f; Arnob. *adv.Nat.* 2.2; Tert. *Apol.* 46; Orig. *c.Cels.* 1.60, 3.29; Euseb. *HE* 7.10.4, 9.3; Socr. 3.18; Soz. 5.2, 5.19; and Hopfner, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.34) I.14 (a Neoplatonist view).

<sup>47</sup> Euseb. *V.Const.* 2.50, *HE* 7.10.4, *cf.* 7.17 and 9.3; Socr. 3.18, 4.24.

<sup>48</sup> Eunap. *Vit.soph.* 481; *cf.* the attack repulsed by Plotinus, in MacMullen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) 100f.

with "certain unspeakable invocations to demons and deterrents of war,"<sup>49</sup> vain, as it turns out, and powerless against the mightier arsenal of Christianity.

How much in the scene can be credited? Were our whole basis of understanding the pages of Eusebius alone, we might, like Burckhardt a hundred years ago, replace the supernatural elements with others more easily acceptable to a modern mind. Anachronistic rationalism, however, only misleads; the interpretation suggested by more recent scholars, notably Alföldi, is surely right. In the light of the beliefs surveyed in the foregoing pages, we must suppose that Constantine's contemporaries (why not himself, then?) did in truth fear antagonistic wizardry, did put their faith in supernatural aid to be exerted visibly on the very field of battle, accepted without skepticism the powers claimed both for Maxentius' sacrifices and for the symbol of the cross, and looked on the whole struggle of old against new religion as being greater than, but no different in kind from, the operation of magicians' spells and counter-spells.

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<sup>49</sup> Euseb. *HE* 8.14.5; *supra* n.18.