

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012 [repr. of 2000 Hbk.]). xv + 224 pp. Pbk. US\$24.95.

On the 1700th anniversary of Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge, Cornell has re-released (now in paperback) the seminal work that interprets the contribution of the philosophical ambassador Lactantius. This year marks the first of several commemorations of events leading to the establishment of a Christian empire in antiquity, episodes that have generated much attention to Constantine in recent scholarship. Lactantius is an important figure for understanding the causes, influences and religious policies in the seminal years of a new empire. Likewise, Digeser's work in 1999 is important for understanding the contribution of Lactantius to this new empire.

Since its original release, works like Paul Stephenson's *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor*, Nigel Goring Wright's *Disavowing Constantine* and Peter Leithart's *Defending Constantine* have explored and scrutinized the legacy of Constantine. Crucial to their works is an understanding of the developmental influences that led to Constantine's religious establishment of Christianity, including this often overlooked tutor to his son, who was writing against the imperial policies of persecution of the church. Lactantius came to Nicomedia from North Africa to serve as a teacher of Latin rhetoric, whereupon he encountered a conference of religious philosophers positing a case for traditional Roman religion and Diocletian's religious policy. Confronted with what he considered a biased and ineffective case for persecution of the church in the name of this piety, Lactantius constructed a significant writing entitled *Divine Institutes*, which sought to challenge the rationale of an exclusive restoration of Greco-Roman worship. In the spirit of Justin, he argued for an illumination that lent itself to philosophical monotheism yet also advanced the cause into the political arena: 'Lactantius accorded the classical tradition and those who treasured it a respect beyond that of any previous Christian author' (p. 89). His writing style

and classical knowledge has long impressed Latin scholars, and history has in fact dubbed him the ‘Christian Cicero’.

Elizabeth Digeser sets out to evidence the exact influence that this seasoned philosopher had on the person and policies of Constantine as he began to implement imperial laws in favor of a free Christianity. Their shared religious concerns to protect the church, their exposure to one another at court in Trier, the authorship of the *Divine Institutes* and their shared value not to harass aggressively those practicing traditional religion seem to reflect a genuine personal affinity. By 324 CE, ‘the Lactantian motifs come thick and fast’, and Digeser claims ‘Constantine incorporated all the major elements of Lactantius’ notion of concord into the edicts and speeches’ that year, although not with the same forbearance to traditional cults (p. 136). Yet Digeser reveals that the historical view of this overlooked figure neglects several important influences, and she claims in fact that the *Institutes* has not been interpreted as a scholarly source.

Her project received supportive but challenging attention from scholars in review, which deserves attention and a reconsideration of its influence in the studies of Constantine. Objections have fallen along two main issues of historicity maintained by *The Making of a Christian Empire*. First is the legitimacy of identifying Porphyry as the antagonistic philosopher at the conference in Nicomedia, which seems to serve as a source of adverse inspiration to Lactantius. The *Institutes* have Porphyry’s positions in view, but the timing is necessary to establish the place of the religious toleration debate during the Great Persecution. Digeser follows Wilken and Chadwick that Porphyry is the unnamed orator. Barnes and Odahl reject the position, particularly noting that the unnamed philosopher was blind, a quality never attributed to Porphyry. Nonetheless, Porphyry’s *Philosophy of Oracles* could still eventually become influential, as its authorship in c. 300 CE could offer the same motivation to Lactantius, as was by no means uncommon, especially in the guild. Additionally, the anti-Christian campaigns by Diocletian and Galerius fueled Lactantius’s response as much as the conference, especially if one maintains his authorship of *The Death of the Persecutors*, a work chronicling past anti-Christian emperors as sufferers of divine judgment.

A second point of contention is the time after Lactantius arrived from North Africa before his position of influence was established. Scholars agree that his landing occurred in the winter of 302–303 CE in time to

hear the philosophical lectures. For early influence on Constantine to be supported, he must have arrived in Trier as tutor to the emperor's son, entered the imperial court there and by 305 begun to author the *Institutes* as a response. This makes for a tight window of influence, especially if one considers Barnes's claim that Porphyry's *Oracles* were not authored in the East and were less likely to be available then.

This leads to the greatest question of all: the exact degree of influence of Lactantius on Constantine. Here, Digeser excels, as her interest in history focuses on the broadly inclusive new Christian order that Constantine would champion, rather than the theological examination that has been more common. The writings and presence of Lactantius as a premier Christian philosopher on the fringe of the emperor's life cannot be denied as influential. His writings take on an apologetic flair that is usually covert, comparing the value of the ancient Romans to the case for Christian thought in the fourth-century state. He sets up two clearly dichotomous and competing models that were used by opposing emperors to unify an empire to their advantage, and makes judgment about the inferiority of traditional Roman piety.

Lactantius's writings unmistakably call for a monotheistic state and the legitimacy of Christianity, sometimes at the expense of the revived Roman nostalgia for her own classical heroes, while permitting the highest values of the culture to continue. He seemed content with a broader scope of religious inclusion: 'His efforts to articulate a broadly based Christian theology that was compatible with the beliefs and practices of late Roman philosophical monotheism are important' (p. 90). Digeser identifies three qualities that underlie Lactantius's appeal: forbearance without force, free will in the realm of religion and a policy of concord—not tolerance. These should be practiced by both Diocletian's Rome and then by a Christian Rome. Like a natural selection of ideals, such permission would eventually lead to the dissolution of ancient paganism and the triumph of the Christian faith (p. 111). An underlying premise for this rhetorician and tutor, Digeser says, is that 'education was the tool that would craft a change in policy' (p. 9).

Yet, in the end, our inability to secure the exact historical narrative of his influence is probably limited by our understanding of Constantine. This is what makes Digeser's work so important in the present, as scholars will continue to pinpoint the mind of a Christian emperor who, on the one hand, showed persecution against pagan religious practice in the military, while, on the other hand, allowed traditional imperial cult

principles to apply to himself. He claimed a Christian conversion and clearly advanced the church's cause, but he also syncretized the new faith with the old Roman traditions, seemingly to his political advantage. The emperor's ambiguous religious position makes our identification of Lactantius's influence that much more elusive.

The book provides invaluable exposure to Roman philosophers, early church writers and imperial edicts and histories that revolve along the axis of the religious conflict of the early fourth century. Contained here are primary source quotations, a thorough bibliography and a sharp eye for the relevant influences of the hundreds of years constructing the religious divergence of the era. Such data and its impressive application are indispensable for understanding the religious milieu of the time. For such qualities, scholars have unanimously commended Digeser.

With attention given to Constantine these anniversary years, Lactantius will be a crucial figure in the literature and in scholarly dialog, and Digeser's work should be considered inspirational and foundational for understanding the enigmatic first Christian emperor in the decade ahead.

W. Brian Shelton  
Toccoa Falls College