

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC
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(ISTAC)

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CONCEPTION OF
HISTORY BASED ON THE WORKS OF
EUSEBIUS AND AL-TABARĪ

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CIVILIZATION (ISTAC) IN
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE M.A. DEGREE

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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To my beloved parents for their trust in me, and to my wife and children for their
patience, sacrifice and support

CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER ONE	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
A. Problem and Its Context	2
B. Significance and Justification	3
C. Scope of the Study	4
D. Object of the Study	5
E. Methodology	6
F. Literature Review	6
G. Outline	7
CHAPTER TWO	
EUSEBIUS AND TABARI: BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	9
1. Eusebius: A Short Biographical and Historical Background	9
A. Eusebius' Life	9
B. Eusebius' Works	11
I. Historical Works	12
II. Apologetic Works	16
III. Exegetic Works	17
IV. Dogmatic and Polemic Works, Orations and Epistles	18
C. A Short Overview of <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	18
2. Al-Ṭabarī: A Short Biographical and Historical Background	27
A. Ṭabarī's Life	27
B. Ṭabarī's Fields of Study and His Works	31
I. Exegetic and <i>Ḥadīth</i> Works	33
II. Works in the Field of Law	34
III. Historical Works	36
IV. Theological and Ethical Works	37
C. A Short Overview of <i>Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk</i>	37
CHAPTER THREE	
EUSEBIUS: THE CONCEPTION OF HISTORY	41
1. Eusebius' Historical Methodology	41

A. Eusebius' Sources	41
B. Eusebius' Ecclesiastical Historical Methodology	46
C. General Comments on Eusebius' Historical Methodology	49
2. Eusebius' Philosophy of History	51
A. Possible Sources of Influence on Eusebius' Philosophy of History	52
B. Eusebius' Philosophy of History and Its Final Faith	54

CHAPTER FOUR

ṬABARĪ: THE CONCEPTION OF HISTORY	62
1. Ṭabarī's Historical Methodology	62
A. Origins of the Early Islamic Historical Methodology	62
B. Ṭabarī's Sources	66
C. Ṭabarī's Annalistic Historical Methodology	75
D. General Comments on Ṭabarī's Historical Methodology	80
2. Ṭabarī's Philosophy of History	84
A. Precise Methodology as a Pre-requisite for Self-Explanatory and Deductive Interpretation of History	85
B. Self-Explanatory and Deductive Interpretation of History	88
C. Shortcomings of Ṭabarī's Philosophy of History	92

CHAPTER FIVE

EUSEBIUS AND ṬABARĪ: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR CONCEPTIONS OF HISTORY	94
1. Comparative Analysis of Their Biographical and Historical Backgrounds	
2. Comparative Analysis of Their Historical Methodologies	98
3. Comparative Analysis of Their Philosophies of History	102
CONCLUSION	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to compare and contrast the conceptions of history based on the works of Eusebius (d. 339) and Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and to identify, clarify and analyze their legacies, shortcomings and contributions.

The conception of history in this research refers to the methodology and philosophy of history. Therefore, the research focuses on these two fundamental issues, exposes them, and provides a critical comparison. The study extracts and compares the biographical and historical backgrounds of Eusebius and Ṭabarī and the conceptions of history of both scholars i.e. their methodology and philosophy of history.

In regard to their methodologies, the research illustrates their sources, possible influences, methodologies, general comments and relevancies. Then, in regard to their philosophies of history, the research exposes their philosophies of history, sources, influences, legacies and relevancies, and the position of their philosophy of history in the Western and Islamic thoughts. The research provides a comparative analysis highlighting their similarities and differences, an evaluation of their conceptions of history with special reference to the preservation of the Western and Islamic heritage, and their contributions to the field of historiography.

The research provides several findings. First, the methodology of Ṭabarī i.e., the annalistic-chain historical methodology, is more sound than the chronological narrative historical methodology of Eusebius. Second, their historical methodologies illustrate the preservation of the early Western and Islamic heritage. In this regard, due to unsuitable historical methodology Christianity has not preserved its roots as is the case with Islam.

Third, the research provides sound evidences that Ṭabarī's conception of history is closer to the realm of science than that of Eusebius. This is particularly apparent in their methodological approaches, presentation and interpretation of history. Fourth, Ṭabarī's philosophy of history, as reflected in his popular annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history, is more sound than that of Eusebius whose philosophy of history is dogmatic, goal-oriented, and represents the unfolding of a provisional divine plan.

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

History is an essential field of study which preserves the beneficial knowledge of the past and binds it together with the present and the future and as such is an important subject. Two main features of historiography i.e., historical methodology and philosophy of history refer to, as I term it, the conception of history. The conception of history, as a scientific inquiry, is extended from the philosophy of knowledge and in this regard Islamic and Western conceptions of history differ to a great extent.

Therefore, in order to find out the general role of the conception of history in Western and Islamic thought it is necessary to compare their outstanding representatives. It can, further, expose the fundamental roots of Western and Islamic conceptions of history and lead towards a better understanding of their role, roots and the reasons for their developments and changes in both heritages.

In the above regard, the conception of history, particularly the clear exposition and comparative analysis of Eusebius and Ṭabarī, represents a great contribution to the field of historiography. It might clarify fundamental problems facing Western and Islamic scholarship in this domain, and it could be a milestone for further clarification of the conception of history in both heritages.

A. Problem and Its Context

In spite of its tremendous magnitude, proper study of history and an exposition of the past are neglected. Consequently, history has been reduced to the study of mere historical dates and events without emphasizing the conception of history i.e., its philosophy, its methodology, its meaning, its aims and objectives, and above all its purpose.

Western civilization has been witnessing change and development regarding the conception of history. It has resulted in the formation of different schools of thought such as the "millenarian, the ecclesiastical, the reformist/revival, mystical, [and modern secular or materialistic]."¹ Among the pool of different conceptions of history one could wonder and ask which conception of history is correct and why there is a pool of different conceptions of history?

Islamic civilization considers history as an essential field of study because its conception is derived from Islam. However, the Muslim historians have concentrated on a correct methodological preservation of history while a profound conceptual approach, even by classical Muslim historians, to the field has been neglected. At this point it is significant to ask why?

In the above regard, it is important to revive the conception of history as propagated by Eusebius and Ṭabarī in order to find out what the standpoints of the two most outstanding representatives of Western and Islamic thought are. Besides, their

¹ C. T. McIntire, "Christian Views," in Mircea Eliade ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 16 vols. (New York & London: Macmillan, 1987) 6:397, hereafter cited as "Christian Views."

conceptions of history will necessarily open the way to a better understanding of the Western and Islamic developments in this domain. In this regard, it is important to expose their conceptions of history, their similarities, legacies, influences, and relevance to the modern conceptions of history. In other words one has to start from the beginning in order to see or understand the end.

Then, modern civilization emphasizes the 'here and now' while it forgets the past and its richness. However, concentration on the 'here and now' cannot expose the roots of Western and Islamic civilization.² It is particularly apparent in Islamic civilization whose roots, based on Islamic principles, interrelate the past, present and future. In this regard, one should emphasize on the theory of knowledge and the role history plays in it. Consequently, the comparison between the conception of history and particularly the comparison of their methodologies could lead to a meaningful conclusion in the above mentioned regard.

B. Significance and Justification

The researcher is fully aware of the difficulties of the subject because it has been approached from different perspectives. Nevertheless, it is important to extract the conception of history based on the works of Eusebius and Ṭabarī. Their conception of history might lead us towards a general exposition of the early Western and Islamic conceptions of history. These conceptions of history, then, could easily be contemplated

² Concentration on the 'here and now' deliberately implies secularization. See details in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978; repr., Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC 1993) 16-17, hereafter cited as *Islam and Secularism*.

with modern conceptions. This two-fold comparison could answer the essential question: what are the positive and negative effects of Eusebius' and Ṭabari's conceptions of history and did their conceptions of history affect the Western and the Islamic worldview?

History, being part of us, has to be properly addressed and the fundamental questions related to it should be answered. These fundamental questions could be summarized as follows: 1) What is the meaning of human history, its subject, and content? 2) Is it possible to deduce a universal conception of history? 3) What criterion is to be taken to address the course of historical events? 4) What is an objective of history, is it evolution, progress? 5) What is the role of religion in the conception of history? 6) How it is possible to overcome the plurality of historical truth? 7) Is history part of the theory of knowledge? Some of the above questions are part of our research.

C. Scope of the Study

The conception of history is a complex subject and it does not stand on its own. Its exposition requires a special approach to the subject. The research is a comparison between Eusebius and Ṭabarī and focuses mostly on the two scholars. Moreover, while concentrating on their conceptions of history, a vast number of related issues will be analyzed, such as the roots of the Western and Islamic heritage, the historical methodology and its reliability in both heritages, the historical methodology and its effects on the theory of knowledge and the preservation of the Western and the Islamic heritage, the meaning of history, approaches towards the philosophy of history and their

relevance, the relationship between the early Western and Islamic conceptions of history with the modern one, etc. However, the above issues are directly or indirectly related to the conceptions of history of Eusebius and Ṭabarī. Therefore, some issues may just be illustrations because the task of the research is to address the main research question.

The research, in order to minimize its size, focuses on the most essential issues. Therefore, biographies of Eusebius and Ṭabarī, as well as their works will be briefly addressed. Moreover, since the research is based on Eusebius' and Ṭabarī's works it is necessary to give a short overview of their works, namely *Ecclesiastical History* and *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*.

Then, the conception of history in Western thought, particularly its philosophy of history, developed different conceptions of history after Eusebius, but all these are beyond our scope. In the case of Ṭabarī, his conception of history is quite complex. Therefore, the researcher formulates the theory of the annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive approaches to history from his work which interrelate Ṭabarī's methodology and philosophy of history. Regarding both Eusebius and Ṭabarī, the researcher focuses on their conceptions of history while other issues will be used to comment, analyze, clarify, relate and extract their conceptions of history.

D. Object of the Study

After dealing with the biographical and historical backgrounds the researcher attempts to answer the following questions: 1) What are Eusebius' and Ṭabarī's conceptions of history? 2) What are the similarities and differences between their

conceptions of history? 3) What are the positive and negative effects of their conceptions of history? 4) Did their conceptions of history affect the Western and Islamic worldviews, respectively? 5) To what extent are their conceptions of history relevant today in the field of historiography? 6) What are the roots of their conceptions of history?

E. Methodology

The research method is *historical/comparative analysis*. This approach is quite adequate because the research deals with a historical issue and has the task of comparing and contrasting two different conceptions of history. The researcher has abstained from utilizing empirical methods in the research due to the nature of the research. However, besides *historical/comparative analysis*, the researcher partly undertakes descriptive, critical and analytical approaches.

F. Literature Review

A comparative study on the conception of history based on the works of Eusebius and Ṭabarī is an original contribution of this research. Therefore, there is only scattered information and a few illustrations here and there about their conceptions of history.

The primary sources are their own books namely: Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake & J. E. L. Oulton, 2 vols., (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1980), and Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr, al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī: Tarīkh al-Umam wa-l-Mulūk*, 6 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988).

The most profound sources dealing with Eusebius' thought are the following works: Attridge, Harold & Hata, Gohei eds., *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Barnes, T. D. *Constantine and Eusebius*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981); Chesnut, G. N. *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Grant, R. M. *Eusebius as Church Historian*, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Wallace-Hadrill, D. S. *Eusebius of Caesarea*, (London: Mowbray, 1960).

The works on Ṭabarī mostly expose his thought and methodology in *tafsir*, *hadith* and *fiqh* while a profound work on his contributions to historiography has not been exposed. Besides his own book on history the following books shed some light on his contributions to the field of historiography: Muhammad Zahili, *Imām Ṭabarī: Shaykh al-Mufasssīrīn, wa-'Umdat al-Mu'arrikhīn wa-Muqaddam al-Fuqaha' al-Muḥaddithīn Sāhib al-Madhab*, (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1990.); 'Alī Jawād, "Maṣādir Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī" *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī* 1, 2, 3 (1950), (1951), (1954); Ḥusayn 'Āṣī, *Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī wa Kitābuhu Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992); and Ahmad Muhammad Hawfi, *Al-Tabari*, (Misr: Vizatat al-Thaqafah, 1963).

G. Outline

The research consists of five chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter deals with the introduction to the work. It presents the problem and its context, its significance

and justification, the scope of the study, the object of the study, the methodology, the literature review and the outline.

The second chapter deals with the biographical and historical backgrounds of Eusebius and Ṭabarī i.e., their biographies, fields of studies, works, and a short overview of their books.

The third chapter deals with the conception of history of Eusebius. It elaborates on Eusebius' historical methodology as founded in his work, his sources, the influences on him, critical analysis of his methodology, and general comments. Then, it exposes Eusebius' philosophy of history, his sources, the influences on him, and the fatal end of his conception of history.

The fourth chapter deals with the conception of history of Ṭabarī. It exposes his historical methodology, his sources, the influences on him, relevancies of his historical methodological approaches and his contributions in this domain to overall methodology in Islamic thought. Then, it deals with his philosophy of history as reflected in the annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive approach. It discusses its exposition, relevance, and shortcomings.

The fifth chapter presents a comparative analysis of their conceptions of history. It deals with the following issues: 1) their similarities and differences regarding their conceptions of history, 2) the relationship between their conceptions of history and the theory of knowledge, 3) the extent to which their methodologies differ, 4) the extent to which their conceptions of history influence the field of historiography, 5) the relationship between their conceptions of history and the preservation of the Western and Islamic heritage.

CHAPTER TWO

EUSEBIUS AND TABARI: BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Eusebius: A Short Biographical and Historical Background

A. Eusebius' Life

Eusebius' life is obscure and works on his biography, including that by Acacius, have been lost.³ Consequently, there has been continuous debate as to why many of his works, including his biography, have not been preserved. A significant reason, provided by Louth, is his involvement in the Arian controversy which consequently instigated the church not to canonize him.⁴ However, in spite of the lack of primary sources, there is scattered information about his life in his own books and in the books of his successors.⁵

Even the date of his birth is debatable; however, references to his own works indicate that he was born in 260 in Palestine. He was born in the city of Caesarea,⁶ and as

³ Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, 2d ed., rev., with introduction by Andrew Louth, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin, 1989), xi, hereafter cited as *The History of the Church*.

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, "Eusebius of Caesarea," in William C. Piercy and Henry Wace, eds., *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies* (London: John Murray, 1911; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 318, hereafter cited as "Eusebius."

⁶ About historical developments in this city, see Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 81-105, hereafter cited as *Constantine and Eusebius*.

a result, he became well known as Eusebius of Caesarea.⁷ His life spanned several distinct periods. During his youth, he associated himself with the church at the time when it enjoyed continual growth and the state of tolerance. Then, later he had witnessed the Great Persecution, the restoration of peace and the firm establishment of Christianity as the state religion under the emperor Constantine (d. 337).⁸ Accordingly, he formed his thought in accordance to the above-mentioned historical periods playing an enormous role as the scholar of early Christianity.

The city of Caesarea, being a well-known historical city and centre of learning, attracted many learned scholars. Among them was the great Christian theologian Origen (d. circa. 254), who established the Christian Academy with a great library. His right hand, Pamphilus (d. circa. 309), consolidated the library. Being born in this city, Eusebius had the opportunity to join the academy with the most sophisticated library in the region. Here he met his mentor Pamphilus with whom he composed the great work called *Apology of Origen*. Due to Eusebius, the thought of Origen and Pamphilus has been preserved. Eusebius, deeply attached to his mentor, had added Pamphilus' name to his own. Therefore, he was known also as Eusebius Pamphili.⁹

⁷ Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 318; Harold W. Attridge & Gohei Hata, "Introduction," in idem, eds., *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 27-28, hereafter cited as "Introduction;" and Aziz S. Atiya, "Eusebius of Caesarea," in idem, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1991); 4:1070, hereafter cited as "Eusebius." Attridge, "Introduction," 28.

⁸ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, x; Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 318; Rebecca Lyman, "Eusebius of Caesarea," in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Chicago & London: St James Press, 1990); 325, hereafter cited as "Eusebius;" Glenn Chesnut, "Eusebius of Caesarea," in David Noel Freedman ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:674, hereafter cited as "Eusebius;" and S. A. Cook, et al., eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 12 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), 12: 639, hereafter cited as *Cambridge History*.

Then, after the period of prosperity Eusebius witnessed the Great Persecution. In fact, as Lightfoot points out "the city of Caesarea became a chief center of persecution,"¹⁰ the details of which Eusebius documented until the year 313.¹¹

Eusebius witnessed, then, the restoration of peace during the reign of the emperor Constantine. After the restoration of peace, in 313, Eusebius became the bishop of Caesarea. Nevertheless, in 320 he was accused of being involved in the great Arian controversy which led to his excommunication from the church. Later on, however, due to a number of factors, he signed the Nicæan creed and condemned Arius (d. 336).¹²

Eusebius died in 339 in Caesarea leaving behind tremendous and remarkable works that shed light on the early Christian history. In fact, had he not written early Christian history, the fundamental roots of Christian history possibly would not have been known.

B. Eusebius' Works

Being a well-known historian of the church he left a number of works. In fact, he is the one to whom Christians refer as the 'Father of Ecclesiastical History.' In addition, he is occasionally termed the 'Christian Herodotus,' which means the legitimate historian of church antiquity. Being a distinctive scholar, his literature covers different fields. He wrote forty-six works only fifteen of which have survived.¹³ His works expose Christian

¹⁰ Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 318.

¹¹ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, x.

¹² For details about his involvement in the Arian controversy see G. C. Stead, "Eusebius and the Council of Nicæa," *Journal of Theological Studies, New Series* 24 (1973), 85-100, hereafter cited as "Eusebius and Nicæa."

¹³ Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1995), 346, hereafter cited as *The Ancient Historians*.

religion from different angles such as: "historical, apologetic, exegetical, doctrinal, and oratorical."¹⁴ In the words of Lightfoot, he was historian, apologist, topographer, exegete, critic, preacher, dogmatic writer, in turn.¹⁵

I. Historical Works

Eusebius was primarily concerned with the writing of a history of the church. His historical works have been primary sources for early Christian history. However, in his work, a *Chronicle*, he has gone beyond describing "the history of the Chaldaeans, the Assyrians, the Hebrews, the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans ... [and] tables of dates¹⁶ arranged in columns, the columns corresponding to Hebrew history, Greek history and so on."¹⁷ This work was based on primary sources¹⁸ and, consequently, many fragments of the prominent historical figures were preserved in the former work.

There are different opinions regarding the publication of the *Chronicle*. According to Wallace-Hadrill the first edition of the *Chronicle* was published in 303,

¹⁴ Attridge, "Introduction," 33.

¹⁵ See Lightfoot, "Eusebius."

¹⁶ See C. Nordenfalk, "The Eusebian Canon-Tables: Some Textual Problems," *Journal of Theological Studies, New Series* 35 (1984), 96-117, hereafter cited as "The Eusebian Canon-Tables."

¹⁷ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, xiii; and Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake & J. E. L. Oulton, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1980), 1: xxxix, hereafter cited as *History*.

¹⁸ See the authors Eusebius has referred in Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 322.

while the second edition dates from 325.¹⁹ On the other hand, another scholar of Western thought has suggested that the *Chronicle* was published in 295.²⁰

Another historical work, composed by Eusebius, was *Martyrs of Palestine*. It was incorporated in *Ecclesiastical History* and its first edition appeared in 311.²¹ The work deals with the persecutions of Christians during the reign of emperor Diocletian (d. circa. 316), particularly in Palestine and "the martyrdoms accomplished in Palestine in eight entire years."²² The work is tremendously, but it neither covers the persecutions over all the Roman territory nor over the entire time of persecution.²³

Eusebius dedicated the whole book, entitled *The Life of Pamphilus*, to his master from whom he acquired most of his knowledge. They were working hand in hand to represent the church, and they together had composed a tremendous and valuable work called *Defense of Origen*. The book about his master Pamphilus, which has not survived, consisted of three books and a catalogue of the library.²⁴

Another of Eusebius' books on history is entitled *Life of Constantine*.²⁵ The book indirectly illustrates the philosophy of Christian history which is based upon God, the

¹⁹ See D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, "The Eusebian Chronicle: The Extent Date of Composition of Its Early Editions" *Journal of Theological Studies New Series* 6 (1955), hereafter cited as "The Eusebian Chronicle;" and D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: Mowbray, 1960), 42-43, hereafter cited as *Eusebius of Caesarea*.

²⁰ See Timothy D. Barnes, "The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 21 (1980), 192-193, hereafter cited as "The Editions."

²¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

²² *Ibid.*, 195; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 148-149; Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 322; and Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, i-ii

²³ For details about persecution see Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 256-302; and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 148-163.

²⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 94; Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 321.

²⁵ Due to some inconsistencies regarding Constantine's life narrated by Eusebius, some scholars argue that he was not the first hand writer of these narrations, particularly his book *Life of Constantine* was not written by him. Different views have been very well summarized in R. Williams ed., *Penegyric History and Hagiography in Eusebius' Life of Constantine. The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), in Timothy D. Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine: Selected Papers 1982-1993* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1994), 94-123, hereafter cited as *Penegyric History*.

church, and the emperor or the empire. There are different views regarding the date of edition of the book. For example, Barnes argues: "Eusebius may have begun his *Life of Constantine* while the emperor still lived, and he may even have taken up his pen in response to the emperor's express wishes."²⁶ On the other hand, another scholar declares: "Constantine died on May 22, 337, and Eusebius almost immediately had begun his *Life of Constantine*."²⁷

The work in its "literary form is not that of a biography but an *encomium*, a celebration of Constantine's virtues and achievements, not a dispassionate account of his life."²⁸ As a result, Eusebius was severely accused of being subjective in writing the biography of Constantine because he had omitted negative accounts about the emperor and about those who had committed persecution of the Christians.²⁹ Chesnut illustrated these inconsistencies in the following words: "it [*Life of Constantine*] was instead a political manifestation cast in a form similar in ways to the medieval "Mirror of Princes."³⁰ In addition, even Socrates accused him saying that he "has devoted more thought to the praises of the emperor and to the grandiloquence of language befitting a panegyric, as he were pronouncing an encomium, than to the accurate narrative of the events which took place."³¹

Eusebius' masterpiece, *Ecclesiastical History*, earned him the title 'The First Church Historian.' It is due to his writing of early Christian history in the meaningful

²⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 265.

²⁷ Chesnut, "Eusebius," 2:674; and idem, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Atlanta, 1965; 2d rev. ed., Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 140-174, hereafter cited as *The First Christian Histories*; Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 326; and Cook, *Cambridge History*, 12:645.

²⁸ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, xiv.

²⁹ See Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine*, 268; and Grant, *The Ancient Historians*, 353-354.

³⁰ Chesnut, "Eusebius," 2:674.

³¹ Lightfoot, "Eusebius," 326.