

The Legacy of Constantine in Lucifer of Cagliari

Beginning in his own lifetime, Constantine the Great began to be remembered in an overwhelmingly positive light by Christian authors. Lactantius emphasized Constantine's role in ending the persecution of Christians across the empire (cf. *Div. inst.* 1.1; *De mort. persec.*); Eusebius of Caesarea celebrated Constantine for organizing the council of Nicaea and bringing unity to the Church (cf. *Vit. Const.* 3.6-21); even Athanasius, who was exiled by Constantine himself after the Council of Tyre in 335, had a generally positive view of the first Christian emperor (cf. *Hist. Ar.* 50.2; *Ap. Sec.* 87). But among the multitude of laudatory voices we find a lone detractor: Lucifer of Cagliari, a relatively little-known author of several invective tracts addressed to emperor Constantius II, Constantine's son. This paper will examine Lucifer's view of Constantine, as well as the assumptions, events, and ideologies that shaped his view.

In the mid-fourth century, Lucifer became involved in the so-called Arian controversy, a theological debate over the nature of Christ. Lucifer was a staunch supporter of the pro-Nicene position, which affirmed that Christ, the Son of God, was of the same nature as God the Father. Constantius, on the other hand, denied this claim, and used his imperial authority to depose bishops of the pro-Nicene persuasion. Lucifer ran afoul of Constantius when, at the Council of Milan in 355, he refused to assent to the condemnation of Athanasius, the most prominent pro-Nicene bishop of his day; consequently, Lucifer himself was sent into exile (Dierks 1978, xii-xiii).

During his exile, Lucifer wrote the five works which we still possess, in which he relentlessly accuses Constantius of being an Arian heretic and pleads with him to repent. It is within this context that Lucifer mentions Constantine. In two separate passages, Lucifer

essentially implies that Constantius is continuing a family tradition of heresy and villany (Flower 2013, 92-93). In support of this claim, he says that Constantine had sent Athanasius into exile in 335 for refusing to become Arian (*De Ath.* 1.20-48), and that Constantine himself had moved over to the Arian position (*De Reg.* 6.18-20). This is an interpretation of Constantine that we do not find in other authors.

In my analysis, I will try to show why Lucifer saw Constantine in such a negative light. First, I will argue from the text of *De Athanasio* that Lucifer attributes a pro-Arian motive to Constantine's exile of Athanasius in 335, and I will compare Lucifer's interpretation of these events to the way that Athanasius himself presents them. Second, I will mention some actions of Constantine that could be interpreted as pro-Arian, such as his recall of Arius from exile (Barnes 2009, 124-127) and his later association with Eusebius of Nicomedia (Dölger 1913, 381-94). Third, I will argue that Lucifer's political theology predisposes him to oppose imperial interference in ecclesiastical affairs, and thus he is less inclined than some of his peers to praise Constantine for his involvement in the Church (cf. Smolin 2024, 231-278).

To conclude, I will argue Lucifer's references to Constantine provide evidence that Constantine's actions were not uniformly viewed as positive by pro-Nicene Christians in the generation immediately following his reign. Lucifer's voice offers an early revisionist interpretation of Constantine's involvement in the Church, and should be taken into account by those who seek to understand the legacy of Constantine in the ages following his reign.

Bibliography

- Barnes, Timothy D. "The Exile and Recalls of Arius." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (April 2009): 109–129.
- Diercks, Gerardus, ed. *Luciferi Calaritani opera omnia quae supersunt*. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 8. Turnhout: Brepols, 1978.
- Dölger, Franz Joseph. 1913. "Die Taufe Konstantins und ihre Probleme." In *Konstantin der Grosse und seine Zeit, gesammelte Studien. Festgabe zum Konstantins-jubiläum 1913 und zum goldenen Priesterjubiläum von Mgr. Dr. A. de Waal*. Freiberg: Herdersche Verlagshanglung.
- Flower, Richard. *Imperial Invectives against Constantius II*. Translated Texts for Historians 67. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.
- Smolin, Nathan Israel. *Christ the Emperor: Christian Theology and the Roman Emperor in the Fourth Century AD*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024.