

## Chapter XX: Conversion Of Constantine.--Part II.

The assurance that the elevation of Constantine was intimately connected with the designs of Providence, instilled into the minds of the Christians two opinions, which, by very different means, assisted the accomplishment of the prophecy. Their warm and active loyalty exhausted in his favor every resource of human industry; and they confidently expected that their strenuous efforts would be seconded by some divine and miraculous aid. The enemies of Constantine have imputed to interested motives the alliance which he insensibly contracted with the Catholic church, and which apparently contributed to the success of his ambition. In the beginning of the fourth century, the Christians still bore a very inadequate proportion to the inhabitants of the empire; but among a degenerate people, who viewed the change of masters with the indifference of slaves, the spirit and union of a religious party might assist the popular leader, to whose service, from a principle of conscience, they had devoted their lives and fortunes. [25] The example of his father had instructed Constantine to esteem and to reward the merit of the Christians; and in the distribution of public offices, he had the advantage of strengthening his government, by the choice of ministers or generals, in whose fidelity he could repose a just and unreserved confidence. By the influence of these dignified missionaries, the proselytes of the new faith must have multiplied in the court and army; the Barbarians of Germany, who filled the ranks of the legions, were of a careless temper, which acquiesced without resistance in the religion of their commander; and when they passed the Alps, it may

fairly be presumed, that a great number of the soldiers had already consecrated their swords to the service of Christ and of Constantine. [26] The habits of mankind and the interests of religion gradually abated the horror of war and bloodshed, which had so long prevailed among the Christians; and in the councils which were assembled under the gracious protection of Constantine, the authority of the bishops was seasonably employed to ratify the obligation of the military oath, and to inflict the penalty of excommunication on those soldiers who threw away their arms during the peace of the church. [27] While Constantine, in his own dominions, increased the number and zeal of his faithful adherents, he could depend on the support of a powerful faction in those provinces which were still possessed or usurped by his rivals. A secret disaffection was diffused among the Christian subjects of Maxentius and Licinius; and the resentment, which the latter did not attempt to conceal, served only to engage them still more deeply in the interest of his competitor. The regular correspondence which connected the bishops of the most distant provinces, enabled them freely to communicate their wishes and their designs, and to transmit without danger any useful intelligence, or any pious contributions, which might promote the service of Constantine, who publicly declared that he had taken up arms for the deliverance of the church. [28]

[Footnote 25: In the beginning of the last century, the Papists of England were only a thirtieth, and the Protestants of France only a fifteenth, part of the respective nations, to whom their spirit and power were a constant object of apprehension. See the relations which

Bentivoglio (who was then nuncio at Brussels, and afterwards cardinal) transmitted to the court of Rome, (*Relazione*, tom. ii. p. 211, 241.) Bentivoglio was curious, well informed, but somewhat partial.]

[Footnote 26: This careless temper of the Germans appears almost uniformly on the history of the conversion of each of the tribes. The legions of Constantine were recruited with Germans, (*Zosimus*, l. ii. p. 86;) and the court even of his father had been filled with Christians. See the first book of the *Life of Constantine*, by Eusebius.]

[Footnote 27: *De his qui arma projiciunt in pace, placuit eos abstinere a communione.* Council. Arelat. Canon. iii. The best critics apply these words to the peace of the church.]

[Footnote 28: Eusebius always considers the second civil war against Licinius as a sort of religious crusade. At the invitation of the tyrant, some Christian officers had resumed their zones; or, in other words, had returned to the military service. Their conduct was afterwards censured by the twelfth canon of the Council of Nice; if this particular application may be received, instead of the loose and general sense of the Greek interpreters, Balsamor Zonaras, and Alexis Aristenus. See Beveridge, *Pandect. Eccles. Graec.* tom. i. p. 72, tom. ii. p. 73 Annotation.]

The enthusiasm which inspired the troops, and perhaps the emperor himself, had sharpened their swords while it satisfied their conscience.

They marched to battle with the full assurance, that the same God, who had formerly opened a passage to the Israelites through the waters of Jordan, and had thrown down the walls of Jericho at the sound of the trumpets of Joshua, would display his visible majesty and power in the victory of Constantine. The evidence of ecclesiastical history is prepared to affirm, that their expectations were justified by the conspicuous miracle to which the conversion of the first Christian emperor has been almost unanimously ascribed. The real or imaginary cause of so important an event, deserves and demands the attention of posterity; and I shall endeavor to form a just estimate of the famous vision of Constantine, by a distinct consideration of the standard, the dream, and the celestial sign; by separating the historical, the natural, and the marvellous parts of this extraordinary story, which, in the composition of a specious argument, have been artfully confounded in one splendid and brittle mass.

I. An instrument of the tortures which were inflicted only on slaves and strangers, became an object of horror in the eyes of a Roman citizen; and the ideas of guilt, of pain, and of ignominy, were closely united with the idea of the cross. [29] The piety, rather than the humanity, of Constantine soon abolished in his dominions the punishment which the Savior of mankind had condescended to suffer; [30] but the emperor had already learned to despise the prejudices of his education, and of his people, before he could erect in the midst of Rome his own statue, bearing a cross in its right hand; with an inscription which referred the victory of his arms, and the deliverance of Rome, to the virtue of

that salutary sign, the true symbol of force and courage. [31] The same symbol sanctified the arms of the soldiers of Constantine; the cross glittered on their helmet, was engraved on their shields, was interwoven into their banners; and the consecrated emblems which adorned the person of the emperor himself, were distinguished only by richer materials and more exquisite workmanship. [32] But the principal standard which displayed the triumph of the cross was styled the Labarum, [33] an obscure, though celebrated name, which has been vainly derived from almost all the languages of the world. It is described [34] as a long pike intersected by a transversal beam. The silken veil, which hung down from the beam, was curiously inwrought with the images of the reigning monarch and his children. The summit of the pike supported a crown of gold which enclosed the mysterious monogram, at once expressive of the figure of the cross, and the initial letters, of the name of Christ.

[35] The safety of the labarum was intrusted to fifty guards, of approved valor and fidelity; their station was marked by honors and emoluments; and some fortunate accidents soon introduced an opinion, that as long as the guards of the labarum were engaged in the execution of their office, they were secure and invulnerable amidst the darts of the enemy. In the second civil war, Licinius felt and dreaded the power of this consecrated banner, the sight of which, in the distress of battle, animated the soldiers of Constantine with an invincible enthusiasm, and scattered terror and dismay through the ranks of the adverse legions. [36] The Christian emperors, who respected the example of Constantine, displayed in all their military expeditions the standard of the cross; but when the degenerate successors of Theodosius had

ceased to appear in person at the head of their armies, the labarum was deposited as a venerable but useless relic in the palace of Constantinople. [37] Its honors are still preserved on the medals of the Flavian family. Their grateful devotion has placed the monogram of Christ in the midst of the ensigns of Rome. The solemn epithets of, safety of the republic, glory of the army, restoration of public happiness, are equally applied to the religious and military trophies; and there is still extant a medal of the emperor Constantius, where the standard of the labarum is accompanied with these memorable words, By This Sign Thou Shalt Conquer. [38]

[Footnote 29: *Nomen ipsum crucis absit non modo a corpore civium Romano rum, sed etiam a cogitatione, oculis, auribus. Cicero pro Raberio, c. 5.* The Christian writers, Justin, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Jerom, and Maximus of Turin, have investigated with tolerable success the figure or likeness of a cross in almost every object of nature or art; in the intersection of the meridian and equator, the human face, a bird flying, a man swimming, a mast and yard, a plough, a standard, &c., &c., &c. See Lipsius de Cruce, l. i. c. 9.]

[Footnote 30: See Aurelius Victor, who considers this law as one of the examples of Constantine's piety. An edict so honorable to Christianity deserved a place in the Theodosian Code, instead of the indirect mention of it, which seems to result from the comparison of the fifth and eighteenth titles of the ninth book.]

[Footnote 31: Eusebius, in Vit. Constantin. l. i. c. 40. This statue, or at least the cross and inscription, may be ascribed with more probability to the second, or even third, visit of Constantine to Rome. Immediately after the defeat of Maxentius, the minds of the senate and people were scarcely ripe for this public monument.]

[Footnote 32: Agnoscas, regina, libens mea signa necesse est; In quibus effigies crucis aut gemmata refulget Aut longis solido ex auro praefertur in hastis. Hoc signo invictus, transmissis Alpibus Ultor Servitium solvit miserabile Constantinus. Christus purpureum gemmanti textus in auro Signabat Labarum, clypeorum insignia Christus Scripserat; ardebat summis crux addita cristis. Prudent. in Symmachum, l. ii. 464, 486.]

[Footnote 33: The derivation and meaning of the word Labarum or Laborum, which is employed by Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Prudentius, &c., still remain totally unknown, in spite of the efforts of the critics, who have ineffectually tortured the Latin, Greek, Spanish, Celtic, Teutonic, Illyric, Armenian, &c., in search of an etymology. See Ducange, in Gloss. Med. et infim. Latinitat. sub voce Labarum, and Godefroy, ad Cod. Theodos. tom. ii. p. 143.]

[Footnote 34: Euseb. in Vit. Constantin. l. i. c. 30, 31. Baronius (Annal. Eccles. A. D. 312, No. 26) has engraved a representation of the Labarum.]

[Footnote 35: Transversa X litera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat. Caecilius de M. P. c. 44, Cuper, (ad M. P. in edit. Lactant. tom. ii. p. 500,) and Baronius (A. D. 312, No. 25) have engraved from ancient monuments several specimens (as thus of these monograms) which became extremely fashionable in the Christian world.]

[Footnote 36: Euseb. in Vit. Constantin. l. ii. c. 7, 8, 9. He introduces the Labarum before the Italian expedition; but his narrative seems to indicate that it was never shown at the head of an army till Constantine above ten years afterwards, declared himself the enemy of Licinius, and the deliverer of the church.]

[Footnote 37: See Cod. Theod. l. vi. tit. xxv. Sozomen, l. i. c. 2. Theophan. Chronograph. p. 11. Theophanes lived towards the end of the eighth century, almost five hundred years after Constantine. The modern Greeks were not inclined to display in the field the standard of the empire and of Christianity; and though they depended on every superstitious hope of defence, the promise of victory would have appeared too bold a fiction.]

[Footnote 38: The Abbe du Voisin, p. 103, &c., alleges several of these medals, and quotes a particular dissertation of a Jesuit the Pere de Grainville, on this subject.]

II. In all occasions of danger and distress, it was the practice of the primitive Christians to fortify their minds and bodies by the sign of



the cross, which they used, in all their ecclesiastical rites, in all the daily occurrences of life, as an infallible preservative against every species of spiritual or temporal evil. [39] The authority of the church might alone have had sufficient weight to justify the devotion of Constantine, who in the same prudent and gradual progress acknowledged the truth, and assumed the symbol, of Christianity. But the testimony of a contemporary writer, who in a formal treatise has avenged the cause of religion, bestows on the piety of the emperor a more awful and sublime character. He affirms, with the most perfect confidence, that in the night which preceded the last battle against Maxentius, Constantine was admonished in a dream [39a] to inscribe the shields of his soldiers with the celestial sign of God, the sacred monogram of the name of Christ; that he executed the commands of Heaven, and that his valor and obedience were rewarded by the decisive victory of the Milvian Bridge. Some considerations might perhaps incline a sceptical mind to suspect the judgment or the veracity of the rhetorician, whose pen, either from zeal or interest, was devoted to the cause of the prevailing faction. [40] He appears to have published his deaths of the persecutors at Nicomedia about three years after the Roman victory; but the interval of a thousand miles, and a thousand days, will allow an ample latitude for the invention of declaimers, the credulity of party, and the tacit approbation of the emperor himself who might listen without indignation to a marvellous tale, which exalted his fame, and promoted his designs. In favor of Licinius, who still dissembled his animosity to the Christians, the same author has provided a similar vision, of a form of prayer, which was communicated by an angel, and repeated by the whole

army before they engaged the legions of the tyrant Maximin. The frequent repetition of miracles serves to provoke, where it does not subdue, the reason of mankind; [41] but if the dream of Constantine is separately considered, it may be naturally explained either by the policy or the enthusiasm of the emperor. Whilst his anxiety for the approaching day, which must decide the fate of the empire, was suspended by a short and interrupted slumber, the venerable form of Christ, and the well-known symbol of his religion, might forcibly offer themselves to the active fancy of a prince who revered the name, and had perhaps secretly implored the power, of the God of the Christians. As readily might a consummate statesman indulge himself in the use of one of those military stratagems, one of those pious frauds, which Philip and Sertorius had employed with such art and effect. [42] The praeternatural origin of dreams was universally admitted by the nations of antiquity, and a considerable part of the Gallic army was already prepared to place their confidence in the salutary sign of the Christian religion. The secret vision of Constantine could be disproved only by the event; and the intrepid hero who had passed the Alps and the Apennine, might view with careless despair the consequences of a defeat under the walls of Rome. The senate and people, exulting in their own deliverance from an odious tyrant, acknowledged that the victory of Constantine surpassed the powers of man, without daring to insinuate that it had been obtained by the protection of the gods. The triumphal arch, which was erected about three years after the event, proclaims, in ambiguous language, that by the greatness of his own mind, and by an instinct or impulse of the Divinity, he had saved and avenged the Roman republic. [43] The Pagan

orator, who had seized an earlier opportunity of celebrating the virtues of the conqueror, supposes that he alone enjoyed a secret and intimate commerce with the Supreme Being, who delegated the care of mortals to his subordinate deities; and thus assigns a very plausible reason why the subjects of Constantine should not presume to embrace the new religion of their sovereign. [44]

[Footnote 39: Tertullian de Corona, c. 3. Athanasius, tom. i. p. 101. The learned Jesuit Petavius (Dogmata Theolog. l. xv. c. 9, 10) has collected many similar passages on the virtues of the cross, which in the last age embarrassed our Protestant disputants.]

[Footnote 39a: Manso has observed, that Gibbon ought not to have separated the vision of Constantine from the wonderful apparition in the sky, as the two wonders are closely connected in Eusebius. Manso, *Leben Constantine*, p. 82--M.]

[Footnote 40: Caecilius de M. P. c. 44. It is certain, that this historical declamation was composed and published while Licinius, sovereign of the East, still preserved the friendship of Constantine and of the Christians. Every reader of taste must perceive that the style is of a very different and inferior character to that of Lactantius; and such indeed is the judgment of Le Clerc and Lardner, (*Bibliothèque Ancienne et Moderne*, tom. iii. p. 438. *Credibility of the Gospel, &c.*, part ii. vol. vii. p. 94.) Three arguments from the title of the book, and from the names of Donatus and Caecilius, are produced by the

advocates for Lactantius. (See the P. Lestocq, tom. ii. p. 46-60.) Each of these proofs is singly weak and defective; but their concurrence has great weight. I have often fluctuated, and shall tamely follow the Colbert Ms. in calling the author (whoever he was) Caecilius.]

[Footnote 41: Caecilius de M. P. c. 46. There seems to be some reason in the observation of M. de Voltaire, (Euvres, tom. xiv. p. 307.) who ascribes to the success of Constantine the superior fame of his Labarum above the angel of Licinius. Yet even this angel is favorably entertained by Pagi, Tillemont, Fleury, &c., who are fond of increasing their stock of miracles.]

[Footnote 42: Besides these well-known examples, Tollius (Preface to Boileau's translation of Longinus) has discovered a vision of Antigonus, who assured his troops that he had seen a pentagon (the symbol of safety) with these words, "In this conquer." But Tollius has most inexcusably omitted to produce his authority, and his own character, literary as well as moral, is not free from reproach. (See Chauffepie, Dictionnaire Critique, tom. iv. p. 460.) Without insisting on the silence of Diodorus Plutarch, Justin, &c., it may be observed that Polyænus, who in a separate chapter (l. iv. c. 6) has collected nineteen military stratagems of Antigonus, is totally ignorant of this remarkable vision.]

[Footnote 43: Instinctu Divinitatis, mentis magnitudine. The inscription on the triumphal arch of Constantine, which has been copied by Baronius,

Gruter, &c., may still be perused by every curious traveller.]

[Footnote 44: Habes profecto aliquid cum illa mente Divina secretum; qua delegata nostra Diis Minoribus cura uni se tibi dignatur ostendere Panegyri. Vet. ix. 2.]

III. The philosopher, who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies, of profane or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude, that if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction. Every event, or appearance, or accident, which seems to deviate from the ordinary course of nature, has been rashly ascribed to the immediate action of the Deity; and the astonished fancy of the multitude has sometimes given shape and color, language and motion, to the fleeting but uncommon meteors of the air. [45] Nazarius and Eusebius are the two most celebrated orators, who, in studied panegyrics, have labored to exalt the glory of Constantine. Nine years after the Roman victory, Nazarius [46] describes an army of divine warriors, who seemed to fall from the sky: he marks their beauty, their spirit, their gigantic forms, the stream of light which beamed from their celestial armor, their patience in suffering themselves to be heard, as well as seen, by mortals; and their declaration that they were sent, that they flew, to the assistance of the great Constantine. For the truth of this prodigy, the Pagan orator appeals to the whole Gallic nation, in whose presence he was then

speaking; and seems to hope that the ancient apparitions [47] would now obtain credit from this recent and public event. The Christian fable of Eusebius, which, in the space of twenty-six years, might arise from the original dream, is cast in a much more correct and elegant mould. In one of the marches of Constantine, he is reported to have seen with his own eyes the luminous trophy of the cross, placed above the meridian sun and inscribed with the following words: By This Conquer. This amazing object in the sky astonished the whole army, as well as the emperor himself, who was yet undetermined in the choice of a religion: but his astonishment was converted into faith by the vision of the ensuing night. Christ appeared before his eyes; and displaying the same celestial sign of the cross, he directed Constantine to frame a similar standard, and to march, with an assurance of victory, against Maxentius and all his enemies. [48] The learned bishop of Caesarea appears to be sensible, that the recent discovery of this marvellous anecdote would excite some surprise and distrust among the most pious of his readers. Yet, instead of ascertaining the precise circumstances of time and place, which always serve to detect falsehood or establish truth; [49] instead of collecting and recording the evidence of so many living witnesses who must have been spectators of this stupendous miracle; [50] Eusebius contents himself with alleging a very singular testimony; that of the deceased Constantine, who, many years after the event, in the freedom of conversation, had related to him this extraordinary incident of his own life, and had attested the truth of it by a solemn oath. The prudence and gratitude of the learned prelate forbade him to suspect the veracity of his victorious master; but he plainly intimates, that in a

fact of such a nature, he should have refused his assent to any meaner authority. This motive of credibility could not survive the power of the Flavian family; and the celestial sign, which the Infidels might afterwards deride, [51] was disregarded by the Christians of the age which immediately followed the conversion of Constantine. [52] But the Catholic church, both of the East and of the West, has adopted a prodigy which favors, or seems to favor, the popular worship of the cross. The vision of Constantine maintained an honorable place in the legend of superstition, till the bold and sagacious spirit of criticism presumed to depreciate the triumph, and to arraign the truth, of the first Christian emperor. [53]

[Footnote 45: M. Freret (*Memoires de l'Academie des Inscriptions*, tom. iv. p. 411-437) explains, by physical causes, many of the prodigies of antiquity; and Fabricius, who is abused by both parties, vainly tries to introduce the celestial cross of Constantine among the solar halos. *Bibliothec. Graec.* tom. iv. p. 8-29. \* Note: The great difficulty in resolving it into a natural phenomenon, arises from the inscription; even the most heated or awe-struck imagination would hardly discover distinct and legible letters in a solar halo. But the inscription may have been a later embellishment, or an interpretation of the meaning which the sign was construed to convey. Compare Heirichen, *Excur in locum Eusebii*, and the authors quoted.]

[Footnote 46: Nazarius *inter Panegyri.* Vet. x. 14, 15. It is unnecessary to name the moderns, whose undistinguishing and ravenous appetite has

swallowed even the Pagan bait of Nazarius.]

[Footnote 47: The apparitions of Castor and Pollux, particularly to announce the Macedonian victory, are attested by historians and public monuments. See Cicero de Natura Deorum, ii. 2, iii. 5, 6. Florus, ii. 12. Valerius Maximus, l. i. c. 8, No. 1. Yet the most recent of these miracles is omitted, and indirectly denied, by Livy, (xlv. i.)]

[Footnote 48: Eusebius, l. i. c. 28, 29, 30. The silence of the same Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, is deeply felt by those advocates for the miracle who are not absolutely callous.]

[Footnote 49: The narrative of Constantine seems to indicate, that he saw the cross in the sky before he passed the Alps against Maxentius. The scene has been fixed by provincial vanity at Treves, Besancon, &c. See Tillemont, Hist. des Empereurs, tom. iv. p. 573.]

[Footnote 50: The pious Tillemont (Mem. Eccles. tom. vii. p. 1317) rejects with a sigh the useful Acts of Artemius, a veteran and a martyr, who attests as an eye-witness to the vision of Constantine.]

[Footnote 51: Gelasius Cyzic. in Act. Concil. Nicen. l. i. c. 4.]

[Footnote 52: The advocates for the vision are unable to produce a single testimony from the Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, who, in their voluminous writings, repeatedly celebrate the triumph



of the church and of Constantine. As these venerable men had not any dislike to a miracle, we may suspect, (and the suspicion is confirmed by the ignorance of Jerom,) that they were all unacquainted with the life of Constantine by Eusebius. This tract was recovered by the diligence of those who translated or continued his Ecclesiastical History, and who have represented in various colors the vision of the cross.]

[Footnote 53: Godefroy was the first, who, in the year 1643, (Not ad Philostorgium, l. i. c. 6, p. 16,) expressed any doubt of a miracle which had been supported with equal zeal by Cardinal Baronius, and the Centuriators of Magdeburgh. Since that time, many of the Protestant critics have inclined towards doubt and disbelief. The objections are urged, with great force, by M. Chauffepie, (Dictionnaire Critique, tom. iv. p. 6--11;) and, in the year 1774, a doctor of Sorbonne, the Abbe du Veisin published an apology, which deserves the praise of learning and moderation. \* Note: The first Excursus of Heinichen (in Vitam Constantini, p. 507) contains a full summary of the opinions and arguments of the later writers who have discussed this interminable subject. As to his conversion, where interest and inclination, state policy, and, if not a sincere conviction of its truth, at least a respect, an esteem, an awe of Christianity, thus coincided, Constantine himself would probably have been unable to trace the actual history of the workings of his own mind, or to assign its real influence to each concurrent motive.--M]

The Protestant and philosophic readers of the present age will incline

to believe, that in the account of his own conversion, Constantine attested a wilful falsehood by a solemn and deliberate perjury. They may not hesitate to pronounce, that in the choice of a religion, his mind was determined only by a sense of interest; and that (according to the expression of a profane poet) [54] he used the altars of the church as a convenient footstool to the throne of the empire. A conclusion so harsh and so absolute is not, however, warranted by our knowledge of human nature, of Constantine, or of Christianity. In an age of religious fervor, the most artful statesmen are observed to feel some part of the enthusiasm which they inspire, and the most orthodox saints assume the dangerous privilege of defending the cause of truth by the arms of deceit and falsehood.

Personal interest is often the standard of our belief, as well as of our practice; and the same motives of temporal advantage which might influence the public conduct and professions of Constantine, would insensibly dispose his mind to embrace a religion so propitious to his fame and fortunes. His vanity was gratified by the flattering assurance, that he had been chosen by Heaven to reign over the earth; success had justified his divine title to the throne, and that title was founded on the truth of the Christian revelation. As real virtue is sometimes excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion. The bishops and teachers of the new sect, whose dress and manners had not qualified them for the residence of a court, were

admitted to the Imperial table; they accompanied the monarch in his expeditions; and the ascendant which one of them, an Egyptian or a Spaniard, [55] acquired over his mind, was imputed by the Pagans to the effect of magic. [56] Lactantius, who has adorned the precepts of the gospel with the eloquence of Cicero, [57] and Eusebius, who has consecrated the learning and philosophy of the Greeks to the service of religion, [58] were both received into the friendship and familiarity of their sovereign; and those able masters of controversy could patiently watch the soft and yielding moments of persuasion, and dexterously apply the arguments which were the best adapted to his character and understanding. Whatever advantages might be derived from the acquisition of an Imperial proselyte, he was distinguished by the splendor of his purple, rather than by the superiority of wisdom, or virtue, from the many thousands of his subjects who had embraced the doctrines of Christianity. Nor can it be deemed incredible, that the mind of an unlettered soldier should have yielded to the weight of evidence, which, in a more enlightened age, has satisfied or subdued the reason of a Grotius, a Pascal, or a Locke. In the midst of the incessant labors of his great office, this soldier employed, or affected to employ, the hours of the night in the diligent study of the Scriptures, and the composition of theological discourses; which he afterwards pronounced in the presence of a numerous and applauding audience. In a very long discourse, which is still extant, the royal preacher expatiates on the various proofs still extant, the royal preacher expatiates on the various proofs of religion; but he dwells with peculiar complacency on the Sibylline verses, [59] and the fourth eclogue of Virgil. [60] Forty

years before the birth of Christ, the Mantuan bard, as if inspired by the celestial muse of Isaiah, had celebrated, with all the pomp of oriental metaphor, the return of the Virgin, the fall of the serpent, the approaching birth of a godlike child, the offspring of the great Jupiter, who should expiate the guilt of human kind, and govern the peaceful universe with the virtues of his father; the rise and appearance of a heavenly race, primitive nation throughout the world; and the gradual restoration of the innocence and felicity of the golden age. The poet was perhaps unconscious of the secret sense and object of these sublime predictions, which have been so unworthily applied to the infant son of a consul, or a triumvir; [61] but if a more splendid, and indeed specious interpretation of the fourth eclogue contributed to the conversion of the first Christian emperor, Virgil may deserve to be ranked among the most successful missionaries of the gospel. [62]

[Footnote 54:

Lors Constantin dit ces propres paroles:

J'ai renverse le culte des idoles:

Sur les debris de leurs temples fumans

Au Dieu du Ciel j'ai prodigue l'encens.

Mais tous mes soins pour sa grandeur supreme

N'eurent jamais d'autre objet que moi-meme;

Les saints autels n'etoient a mes regards

Qu'un marche-pied du trone des Césars.

L'ambition, la fureur, les delices  
Etoient mes Dieux, avoient mes sacrifices.  
L'or des Chretiens, leur intrigues, leur sang  
Ont cimente ma fortune et mon rang.

The poem which contains these lines may be read with pleasure, but cannot be named with decency.]

[Footnote 55: This favorite was probably the great Osius, bishop of Cordova, who preferred the pastoral care of the whole church to the government of a particular diocese. His character is magnificently, though concisely, expressed by Athanasius, (tom. i. p. 703.) See Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. tom. vii. p. 524-561. Osius was accused, perhaps unjustly, of retiring from court with a very ample fortune.]

[Footnote 56: See Eusebius (in Vit. Constant. passim) and Zosimus, 1. ii. p. 104.]

[Footnote 57: The Christianity of Lactantius was of a moral rather than of a mysterious cast. "Erat paene rudis (says the orthodox Bull) disciplinae Christianae, et in rhetorica melius quam in theologia versatus." Defensio Fidei Nicenae, sect. ii. c. 14.]

[Footnote 58: Fabricius, with his usual diligence, has collected a list of between three and four hundred authors quoted in the Evangelical Preparation of Eusebius. See Bibl. Graec. 1. v. c. 4, tom. vi. p.

37-56.]

[Footnote 59: See Constantine. Orat. ad Sanctos, c. 19 20. He chiefly depends on a mysterious acrostic, composed in the sixth age after the Deluge, by the Erythraean Sibyl, and translated by Cicero into Latin. The initial letters of the thirty-four Greek verses form this prophetic sentence: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior of the World.]

[Footnote 60: In his paraphrase of Virgil, the emperor has frequently assisted and improved the literal sense of the Latin text. See Blondel des Sibylles, l. i. c. 14, 15, 16.]

[Footnote 61: The different claims of an elder and younger son of Pollio, of Julia, of Drusus, of Marcellus, are found to be incompatible with chronology, history, and the good sense of Virgil.]

[Footnote 62: See Lowth de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum Praelect. xxi. p. 289-293. In the examination of the fourth eclogue, the respectable bishop of London has displayed learning, taste, ingenuity, and a temperate enthusiasm, which exalts his fancy without degrading his judgment.]