ON THE EVE OF his battle against Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312, Flavius Valerius Constantinus (ca. 273/74–337) reportedly saw a symbol in the sky, which played a role in his conversion to faith in the Christian God. Victorious at Milvian Bridge, Constantine took control of the western empire and then, after victory over his rival Licinius in 324, he emerged as the sole Roman emperor ruling until his death in 337. Mark Noll, in his introductory work on Christian history Turning Points, correctly notes that “In the long view, Constantine’s victory at Milvian Bridge was much more important for the history of Christianity than for the history of Rome.” He adds that Constantine’s vision on the eve of battle “changed the course of his life as well as the course of the Christian church.” Indeed, during his lifetime, Constantine gave peace and preference to the church and set into motion a relationship between church and state that has never been the same.

What happens to the church when the emperor becomes a Christian? Should such a triumph be perceived as God’s will and the fulfillment of prophecy? Or, was it the beginning of compromise and worldly captivity for a pilgrim people? Constantine’s life—his career, faith, and relationship to the church—raises questions for Christians and for historians of the church that cannot be ignored. Scholars continue to be intrigued with Constantine the man, his motivations for Christian faith, the influence he wielded over the church, and the paradigm that he introduced for church-state relations. While some have approached the study of Constantine as

1. Noll, Turning Points, 42.
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Roman historians with little interest in religion, others have endeavored to make sense of Constantine through the lenses of theology. The amount of scholarship on Constantine in recent years, 1700 years after Milvian Bridge, continues to bear witness to the seismic paradigm shift that his life and reign initiated.2

The aim of the present work is to reassess our picture of Constantine through careful historical inquiry largely within the scope of the early Christian period. Our approach is threefold: to re-examine the history surrounding Constantine’s life, to consider his connection to the development of Christian theology, and to then assess his legacy regarding the church. In the opening chapter, Glen Thompson begins by summarizing the most important recent literature on the emperor. Next, through a careful look at the sources, he engages the important question of Constantine’s conversion and Christian faith. Though approaching the issue historically, Thompson interprets Constantine’s story within the Lutheran framework of *simul iustus et peccator*—that followers of Christ (even monarchs) are righteous sinners. In chapter 2, Brian Shelton examines Constantine’s story through the eyes of Lactantius (d. 320)—the African rhetor who had served in Diocletian’s court and tutored at least one of Constantine’s sons. As far more scholarly energy has gone into exploring Eusebius of Caesarea’s take on the events, Shelton’s article—framed by the motif of architecture—offers a timely look at Lactantius, a source who was closer to the emperor than Eusebius and who wrote in an earlier period. In a very thorough third chapter, David Alexander re-examines the Donatist issue—the first church controversy in which the emperor chose to get involved. Alexander carefully reviews recent scholarship on the African movement and the narrative of the emperor’s response. In short, the author shows not only how Constantine’s engagement with the Donatists would shape his intervention on other church matters (such as Arianism), but he also lays the groundwork for an early Christian understanding of church and state that would continue through the first millennium.

Moving from history to theology, in chapter 4, Jonathan Armstrong re-examines Constantine’s involvement at the Council of Nicaea of 325 and especially explores the trinitarian theology of Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339). With fresh insights on Eusebius’ thought from his recent translation

2. See Glen Thompson’s article for a helpful review of recent historical works on Constantine.

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of Eusebius’ *Commentary on Isaiah*, Armstrong argues for a rather Nicene-minded bishop who probably influenced Constantine towards a more Nicene way of thinking.

The final chapters deal with Constantine’s legacy and impact on the church. In chapter 5, Paul Hartog challenges the popular notion that Christians worship on Sunday because Constantine changed the Sabbath from Saturday to the “day of the sun.” Hartog further evaluates a variety of perspectives on the Sabbath—Seventh-Day Adventist, Reformed, Lutheran, and free church—before returning to the Patristic sources to resolve this question. In chapter 6, I ask the question, did the rise of Constantine signal the end of authentic Christian mission as understood in the Scriptures? While acknowledging that the motives for conversion and the means of Christianity’s spread indeed became confusing, there is still evidence for mission following the advent of Christendom. In a brief epilogue, Bryan Litfin offers some summary arguments for rethinking Constantine.

This volume of essays is the result of a number of conversations from 2012 on Constantine. A summary of each chapter was read in an invited session on Constantine at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Milwaukee in November. We were joined by Bryan Litfin who read a summary of his article, “Eusebius on Constantine: Truth and Hagiography at the Milvian Bridge,” which has since been published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. Some of these conversations were held elsewhere as Paul Hartog read his chapter as a paper at the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference at Villanova University in October. Finally, part of my chapter was developed from the response I gave to Peter Leithart’s lectures on Constantine at the Eastern Regional Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in March.

The intended audience for this book includes specialists in Constantinian and early Christian studies as well as students of theology, and church and missions history. In light of that, the primary sources consulted have been listed in the bibliography in both their critical editions and English translations. In order to make the book accessible to all, the primary sources cited in individual chapters have been made available in translation in most cases.

3. Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*.

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The editor and authors wish to thank the Evangelical Theological Society and the other noted forums for a place to reflect on Constantine during the 1700th anniversary year of the victory at Milvian Bridge. Finally, we are grateful for the editorial team at Wipf & Stock and their willingness to publish this work.