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The Church of Virgins and Martyrs: Ecclesiastical Identity in the Sermons of Eusebius of Emesa

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Abstract

Published studies of the extant sermons of Eusebius of Emesa have focused on two of his concerns which, up to this point, have been treated independently of each other: his understanding of the divinity of the Son in the midst of the theological debates of the fourth century and his understanding of the importance of the life of asceticism. In the article that follows, I argue that there was a point of intersection between his theology and his zeal for asceticism, and that this point of intersection was his understanding of human salvation—and thus his understanding of the identity of the church. As creator, "God, the Son of God" transformed created natures while on earth; as savior, "God, the Son of God" transforms human nature into

an angelic nature on earth. In his sermons, Eusebius communicated a vision of the church as a body of virgins and martyrs, the former those who represent the church's ascetic ideal of the angelic life and the latter those who sacrifice everything for the church's ascetic ideal.

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From all accounts, Eusebius of Emesa (c. 300–59) was a popular bishop and writer among his contemporaries. Born at Edessa where he received his education in the Bible and Greek, he later studied under Eusebius of Caesarea and was closely connected to the early fourth-century ecclesiastical establishment at Antioch. Eusebius earned the respect of both the influential Eusebius of Nicomedia, who wanted to appoint him as bishop of Alexandria, and the Emperor Constantius, who included him in his entourage on a campaign against the Persians.¹ Presumably becoming

1. The principal sources for the life of Eusebius are the ecclesiastical historians Socrates, *HE* 2.9 and Sozomen, *HE* 3.6. Both claim to be dependent on an account of



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