



[Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History VI.34](#)

The Christianity of the emperor Marcus Julius Philippus (Philip the Arab)

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Ecclesiastical History

Reference: VI.34

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on [I.6.6-11](#).

This passage describes the apparent Christianity of the emperor Marcus Julius Philippus, known as Philip the Arab (reigned 244-249 CE). Philip was born in the province of Arabia, in Philippopolis, modern-day Syria. He succeeded Gordian III, and as Eusebius alludes to in this extract, his young son, Marcus Julius Philippus Severus (Philip II), only seven at the time of his father's accession, was immediately proclaimed Caesar. The relationship between Christianity and the imperial government was apparently positive enough during Philip's reign that Christian tradition has remembered him as a Christian (see Keresztes, "The Emperor Maximinus' Decree," p. 616). Eusebius claims here that Philip wanted to celebrate the Easter vigil with other Christians, but was prevented from doing so by the presiding church official until he had confessed his sins, and was commanded to sit with the penitents. This, we are told, was something he willingly accepted, displaying great piety and reverence (?????, *phobos*). According to another passage of Eusebius, Dionysius of Alexandria—in the context of reflecting upon the suffering of Christians following Decius's edict—also referred to the preceding Principate of Philip as having been one which was "more favourable" (???????, *eumen?s*) to Christians (*Ecclesiastical History* VI.41.9) (see Clarke, "Third Century Christianity," p. 624).

There has been debate over the years regarding whether we can place any trust in Eusebius's claims of Philip's Christianity. Some scholars, such as Hans Pohlsander and Paul Keresztes argue that the narrative of Eusebius and other Christian writers who follow him are simply construction based on rumours and/or infused with too much of a polemical agenda to take seriously (Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab and Christianity"; Keresztes, "The Emperor Maximinus' Decree," p. 616). However, the likes of Henri Grégoire, John York, and Irfan Shahîd have been content to grant Eusebius and his later Christian followers a degree of trust on the matter (Grégoire, *Les persecutions*, p. 9-10; York, "The Image of Philip the Arab"; Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs*). Glen Bowersock has argued that while it is perhaps too strong to describe Philip as a Christian, it is entirely plausible that he had a sympathetic curiosity towards the religion which was reminiscent of that of Julia Mamaea, Severus Alexander's mother, also a Syrian (see [VI.21.3-4](#); *Roman Arabia*, p. 126). This is echoed by Pohlsander, who states that Philip "may have been curious about a religion which had its origins in an area so close to his place of birth." Being a provincial from the East, then, Pohlsander considers, perhaps Philip was not as invested in Roman religion as he might have been if he were an Italian ("Philip the Arab and Christianity," p. 468).

For Shahîd, the event which Eusebius describes likely took place at Antioch in 244 CE, during Philip's return journey to Rome from Persia (*Rome and the Arabs*, p. 66, 70). On the contrary, Michael Peachin suggests that Philip might have taken a slightly different route back to Rome via Palmyra, without stopping in Antioch. However, he admits that the more traditional route assumed by Shahîd is still entirely plausible. Regardless, coins minted in Antioch later that year celebrate Philip having visited it, so we know that he was there at some point in 244 CE ("Philip's Progress," p. 333-334). It is notable that Eusebius introduces his narrative here with the words ??????? ????? (katechei logos), translated above as "it is reported." The meaning of the phrase has been debated, however, with some scholars arguing that it is suggestive of Eusebius simply drawing on oral rumour, and others that it implies he is using some sort of other document (see Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab and Christianity," p. 467). Shahîd, for instance, believes that modern translations distort Eusebius's meaning, and that he does indeed allude



to having consulted another source, probably one of the two letters sent by Origen to Philip and his wife Marcia Otacilia Severa, which Eusebius mentions in *Ecclesiastical History* VI.36.3 (*Rome and the Arabs*, p. 68). Such debates about the historicity of the event aside, there are many scholars who read into this event a parallel with the later confrontation between the famous bishop Ambrose of Milan and the emperor Theodosius in 390 CE, where the latter was refused entry to the church in Milan on account of his having killed scores of Thessalonians a few months prior, who had revolted. Shahîd objects to this on the grounds that Philip was not humiliated in quite the same way, as unlike Theodosius he was not excommunicated, and there is nowhere near the level of drama surrounding the story (*Rome and the Arabs*, p. 69-70). While this is true, it should be noted that Eusebius does make mention of the fact that Philip's repentance was particularly necessary due to the many crimes that he had committed.

While some scholars maintain that Philip's Christianity is plausible, this seems unlikely, and is not supported by non-Christian evidence, such as that he held the Secular Games to celebrate the thousand-year anniversary of the founding of Rome in 248 CE (Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 470). How does this passage fit in with Eusebius's wider rhetoric, then? In V.39.1, Eusebius states the following: "After a reign of seven years Philip was succeeded by Decius. On account of his hatred of Philip, he commenced a persecution of the churches." This might be compared with [VI.28](#), in which Eusebius attributes a persecution under the emperor Maximinus Thrax to his hatred for his predecessor Severus Alexander, and the fact that his household contained numerous Christians. Similarly, Decius's persecution is described as stemming from his disdain for a previous emperor (Philip) who was sympathetic to Christianity (on the debate surrounding the so-called persecution under Decius, see the commentary on [Papyrus Rylands 12](#)). Eusebius's broader narrative, in which certain emperors are receptive to and even actively involved with the Christian religion, while their malicious successors punish Christians, has the effect of implying that Christianity is a growing and powerful force within the empire, so much so that certain emperors were threatened by its potential influence. As in his description of Severus Alexander's mother, Mamaea, and her awe for the Christian teacher Origen (see VI.21.3-4), the present account of Philip has the added dimension of presenting Christianity as superior to Roman power. The fact that Philip is refused entry to the paschal celebrations without first adhering to the leader's demands that he repent of his sins, relegates him to the same level as every other Christian present. His position as imperial ruler means little in this context—in the eyes of God, all sinners are exactly the same. The emperor is therefore humbled, and, moreover, we are told *willingly* humbled before the Christian God, showing that no earthly ruler is so powerful that they are above the need for penance.

Keywords in the original language:

- [?????????](#)
- [?????????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Christian emperor](#)
- [church leaders](#)



- [Gordianus III](#)
- [penance](#)
- [Philip the Arab](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman power](#)

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