OK, I am ready now to finish up my thread on the conversion of Constantine, based on the vision or visions that he had. So far I have narrated the three relevant accounts. If you haven’t read those posts, you should do so to make the very best sense of this one.

The differences among the three accounts, and one can readily see why various scholars have suggested different ways of reconciling them. Some think he had just one vision, two years before the Battle at the Milvian Bridge (just before the panegyric of 310 CE), which at the time he took to be of Sol Invictus but later came to interpret as being instead a vision of Christ. In this view, at a still later date Constantine came to think that he had always understood it to be Christ and that, since the vision was so closely connected with his ultimate victory, he came to “remember” that it occurred the night before the battle. At the other extreme of interpretation, others have argued that Constantine was simply a visionary and that he had lots of visions and dreams and sometimes muddled them all up. It is striking that Eusebius himself, in a speech praising Constantine near the end of his life, indicates that Constantine was a famous visionary, that he had “thousands” of visions along with “thousands” of dreams in which Christ appeared to him. There is obviously a range of reconciliatory options.

The accounts do share some striking features, however. For one thing...

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[Private]For one thing, in each case the vision involves a solitary God whom Constantine decided is the only one to be worshiped: he chose no longer to engage in polytheistic practices. Moreover, the account from the panegyrist in 310 and, more striking still, the account of Eusebius many years later, both agree that Constantine did not become a Christian immediately after the dream. The panegyrist says nothing about him becoming a Christian at all – which may suggest the conversion had not happened yet, or that Constantine had not yet made it public, or that the pagan orator decided not to delve into that little detail. Eusebius admits that the emperor needed to do considerable consultation, reading, and reflecting before working out the implications of what he saw. Who knows how long that would have taken.

One reason we have difficulty working out what the vision/dream was and when exactly it occurred is that modern research on conversion has demonstrated that long after such an experience occurs, a convert tends to confuse what actually happened in light of everything that occurred in its aftermath. That is to say, years later, people tell (to themselves and to others) accounts that have been slanted by all they have learned, thought, and experienced in the interim. Surely that was true of Constantine as well.

No one will ever solve this problem to the satisfaction of all interested parties. But here is one plausible reconstruction.

The first thing to reflect on is that Eusebius clearly states that the vision of the cross in the sky was observed not only by Constantine but by the soldiers with him. How does that work, exactly? There have been numerous suggestions over the years, but none as tantalizing or widely discussed as one made by a German scholar named Peter Weiss, who argued that what Constantine may have seen was a “solar halo.” Solar halos are an unusual but completely normal optic phenomenon in which the light of the sun is refracted by millions of ice crystals suspended in the atmosphere. The sun is surrounded by a bright halo – you can see many instances online – and sometimes appears to have rays shooting out
in a few, or in many, directions. You can imagine seeing the phenomenon and thinking that the sun looks like a “wreath” – or even a cross. Sometimes the phenomenon lasts as long as two hours, appearing suddenly and disappearing as quickly.

Did Constantine (and the soldiers with him) have such a vision? It is at least possible. Whether actual or imagined, the sight contributed to Constantine’s religious meditations as he was reflecting on the problem of the gods and how to find much needed divine support for his assault on Maxentius. He became convinced that this was a sign from the one true and ultimate god, and he decided to worship him.

My best guess is that the vision occurred just before it was first reported, in 310 CE, and at that point Constantine became a henotheist, one who revered the sun God, Sol Invictus, above and in lieu of all others. It would be two years before he launched his assault on Maxentius, and in that time he had plenty of occasion to reflect on his new religious commitments. Among other things, he because increasingly aware of the growing Christian movement (in chapter 6 we will be discussing just how rapidly it was growing at the time). Soon before the battle for Rome, he had another vision, or a dream, or both, and came to a decision. This decision was not that he would switch loyalties from Sol Invictus to the God of the Christians. Instead, he decided that Sol Invictus was the God of the Christians.

Constantine became a Christian convert. Possibly the most important point to make about the conversion is that Constantine – as is true of all converts – did not and could not understand everything there was to know about the Christian faith at the time. His faith, and his knowledge, may have been very rudimentary indeed. He may not have known that he needed to be baptized at some point. He may not have known that Christians not only refused to worship other gods but believed the pagan gods were demons and not gods at all. He may not have known that there were ethical requirements that went along with being Christian. He may not have known that there were refined theological views and serious debates among the Christians about the nature of God, the identity of Christ, the relationship of Christ and God. He may not have known … lots and lots of things.

What he apparently did know was that he wanted to worship the Christian God and that God only. He went into battle with that conviction. And he emerged victorious.

Who Wrote the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel?  
Constantine’s Vision according to Eusebius