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The confession of Michael VIII Palaiologos and King David

On a Little Known Work by Manuel Holobolos

In 1906 and 1907 Maximilian Treu published five orations by the ‘Rhetor of the Rhetors’ Manuel Holobolos, all of them dating to the reign of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–1282).¹ Three of the five works are panegyrics in praise of the New Constantine, as Michael VIII styled himself after the recovery of Constantinople in 1261; these imperial encomia were delivered on Christmas day in three successive years and have been plausibly dated to 1265, 1266, and 1267.² The fourth work is the inauguration speech of Patriarch Germanos III (1265–1266), which Holobolos composed on his behalf at his patriarchal ordination in 1265. Of particular interest to us here is the fifth oration, which has never come to scholarly scrutiny and sheds new light on imperial propaganda during the conflict between Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos and Patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos (1254–1260; 1261–1264) – a severe confrontation that caused the internal Arsenite schism in the Byzantine Church (1265–1310). This oration is transmitted in Cod. Barocci gr. 131, a well-known rhetorical miscellany, and bears the title: *By the same author. An interpretation of the saying in the gospel, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain” and so on. This was a subject of enquiry by our holy emperor, the New Constan-*

¹ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes (Programm des Königlichen Victoria-Gymnasiums 93–95)*. Potsdam 1906/1907. On the biography of Manuel Holobolos, see PLP, no. 21047; M. TREU, Manuel Holobolos. *BZ* 5 (1896) 538–554; S. KOUROUSES, Ἡ πρώτη ἡλικία καὶ ἡ πρόωμος σταδιοδρομία τοῦ πρωτεκδικίου καὶ σακελλίου τῆς μεγάλης ἐκκλησίας Γεωργίου Γαλησιῶτου (1278/80–1357/;). *Αθηνᾶ* 75 (1973–74) 355–356, 368; Ch. HANNICK, Maximos Holobolos in der kirchenslavischen homiletischen Literatur (*WBS* 14). Vienna 1981, 43–49.

² R. MACRIDES, The New Constantine and the New Constantinople – 1261? *BMGS* 6 (1980) 19 and 37, n. 137.

tine.³ The author of the piece, although not mentioned in the manuscript title, was doubtless Manuel Holobolos. Not only does the work follow in the codex immediately after one of the imperial panegyrics, whose title explicitly attributes it to the ‘Rhetor of the Rhetors’ Holobolos, but some of the language and metaphors used in the work are reminiscent of those found in his panegyrics.⁴

The Date of Holobolos’ Work

The unfolding of the conflict between Michael VIII and Arsenios as well as internal textual evidence enable us to date the work and set it in its historical context. The events during the clash between the emperor and the patriarch are well known from the histories of George Pachymeres and Nikephoros Gregoras as well as from Arsenios’ own testament written during his exile on the island of Prokonnesos (1264–1273).⁵ In early 1262 Patriarch Arsenios excommunicated Palaiologos for having committed a breach of oaths in dethroning and blinding the junior co-emperor, John IV Laskaris (1258–1261).⁶ Merely a child, John IV was the last surviving male descendent of the Laskarid emperors who had ruled the Nicaean empire since its foundation in the wake of

³ Cod. Barocci 131, folios 240^r–242^r. On the codex, see N. WILSON, *The Date and Origin of Ms Barocci 131*. *BZ* 59 (1966) 305–306; Idem, *A Byzantine Miscellany: Ms Barocci 131 Described*. *JÖB* 27 (1978) 157–179. The title of the work (M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 20.1–7) reads: τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐπιμνηεῖα εἰς τὸ εὐαγγελικὸν ῥητὸν τό: “ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ” καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς. ἠπορήθη δὲ τοῦτο παρὰ τοῦ ἁγίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος τοῦ καὶ νέου Κωνσταντίνου.

⁴ In Cod. Barocci 131 the oration is copied after Holobolos’ third panegyric of Michael VIII Palaiologos (published by M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 78–98). Cf. N. WILSON, *A Byzantine Miscellany: Ms Barocci 131 Described*, 166. The reference in the oration to the customs of the ancient Romans and the Indians mirrors the opening lines of the first and the second imperial panegyric. See M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 30, 51.

⁵ On the conflict between Arsenios and Michael VIII, see M. Th. FÖGEN, *Kaiser unter Kirchenbann im östlichen und westlichen Mittelalter*. *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 16 (1997) 527–549. On the Arsenite schism, see P. GOUNARIDES, *Τὸ ζήτημα τῶν Ἀρσενιατῶν*. Athens 1999; I. SYKOUTRES, *Περί τὸ σχίσμα τῶν Ἀρσενιατῶν*. *Hell* 2 (1929) 268–332; 3 (1930) 15–44; 5 (1932) 107–126; R. MACRIDES, *Saints and Sainthood in the Early Palaiologan Period*, in: *The Byzantine Saint* (ed. S. Hackel). San Bernardino 1983, 73–79.

⁶ On the date of the excommunication, see V. LAURENT, *Les Regestes des actes du Patriarcat de Constantinople, I, Les actes des patriarches, fasc. 4: Les Regestes de 1208 à 1309*. Paris 1971 no. 1362.

1204. At the time of the proclamation of Michael VIII as co-emperor in Nymphaion on 1 January 1259, Arsenios himself had drafted and administered the solemn oath taken by Palaiologos, which bound him to refrain from plotting against his junior partner. The sanction in case of plotting was nothing less than the excommunication and punishment with death of the conspirer.⁷ Michael VIII understandably incurred the ire of the patriarch when he openly broke the sworn constitutional arrangement. In the course of nearly five years, from 1262 until 1267, Michael VIII remained an excommunicate, although as a special concession Arsenios allowed the emperor's name to be commemorated during the liturgy.⁸

At first Michael VIII accepted his excommunication patiently, and hoped that Arsenios would readmit him into the Church after seeing him repentant and humbled.⁹ According to Pachymeres, the emperor was willing to obey Arsenios and to do whatever the patriarch prescribed as a remedy or penance (*therapeia*) for his sins, apart from resigning from the imperial office.¹⁰ However the patriarch defiantly

⁷ Pachymeres II 3 (ed. A. FAILLER, Georges Pachymérès. Relations historiques, I-II [CFHB 24/1–2]. Paris 1984, 135–137); Arsenios, Testament, PG 140, col. 949D–953A. On the chronology of Michael VIII's imperial proclamation and coronation, see P. WIRTH, Die Begründung der Kaisermacht Michaels VIII. Palaiologos. *JÖBG* 10 (1961) 85–91.

⁸ Pachymeres III 14 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 269); Gregoras IV 4 (ed. L. SCHOPEN, Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina historia, I [CSHB 19]. Bonn 1829, 93–94). In addition, Michael VIII was permitted to venerate the icons before the onset of the liturgy in the church of Saint Sophia. See Pachymeres IV 5 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 343.4–10). According to Gregoras, Michael VIII was subjected to the third degree of excommunication, the so-called *hypoptosis*: i.e., he was allowed to attend the liturgy behind the ambo up to the point in the liturgy when the catechumens were asked to leave the church. On the four different degrees of excommunication and the corresponding places in the church where penitent excommunicates listened to the liturgy, see Matthew Blastares, Σύνταγμα, in: G. RHALLES and M. POTLES, Σύνταγμα τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων VI. Athens 1859, 363–364.

⁹ Pachymeres III 14 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 271.1–7); Gregoras IV 4 (ed. L. SCHOPEN), 93–94.

¹⁰ Pachymeres III 19 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 281–283). Michael VIII made a dramatic display of humility and repentance before the patriarch. The emperor removed the crown from his head and prostrated himself before Arsenios, although he did not permit the patriarch to take away the imperial sword – apparently a symbolic gesture which could be regarded as a resignation from the imperial office. Marie Theres Fögen has interpreted the scene, cogently in my view, as a reference to the western model of Church-state relations. See M. Th. FÖGEN, Kaiser unter Kirchenbann 541–545.

declined to lift the anathema and, according to Pachymeres, stubbornly refused to specify an ecclesiastical penance. Byzantine canon law prescribed heavy punishments for breach of an oath – the canons of Saint Basil, for example, envisaged a ten-year period of excommunication for the perjurer.¹¹ On the other hand, the canons granted the bishop the authority to apply the principle of *oikonomia* and to reduce the period of or repeal an excommunication after a suitable repentance of the sinner.¹² Michael VIII referred most probably to the canonical provisions for lenience when he accused Arsenios of disregarding the canons on penance. The emperor even bluffed that he would appeal to the papacy to lift the excommunication.¹³ The emperor's complaints were not without a reason. Instead of specifying an ecclesiastical penance for the emperor and applying the principle of *oikonomia*, as it was expected, Arsenios raised political demands. According to Pachymeres, the patriarch suggested that the emperor should resign from his office – as an atonement for his sins and because of having broken the constitutional arrangement.¹⁴ In his testament Arsenios makes no mention of having envisioned the resignation of the emperor, although he refers to other political conditions he posed before Michael VIII as the price of readmitting him into the Church: the repeal of commercial dues and taxes as well as the eradication of injustice from the empire.¹⁵

The emperor was not willing to yield to political pressure. After awaiting to be granted penance for two years, in early 1264 Michael VIII and his supporters took a more aggressive approach toward Arse-

¹¹ See G. RHALLÉS and M. POTLES, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων* IV. Athens 1854, 221. Depending on the circumstance of oath-taking, the period of excommunication for the perjurer could vary. See the fourteenth-century synopsis of the canonical provisions in Matthew Blastares, *Σύνταγμα*, in: G. RHALLÉS and M. POTLES, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων* VI. Athens 1859, 290.

¹² See the discussion by Matthew Blastares, *Σύνταγμα*, in: G. RHALLÉS and M. POTLES, loc. cit. 364–369.

¹³ Pachymeres III 19 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 283.17–19); IV 1 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 333.8–16).

¹⁴ Pachymeres IV 1 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 331.8–9). According to a speech by Andronikos II Palaiologos to the Arsenites on 29 September 1304 reported by Pachymeres, Arsenios had wanted that both Michael VIII and himself step down from their offices, while recognizing Andronikos as the legitimate heir. See Pachymeres XII 2 (ed. A. FAILLER, Georges Pachymérés. *Relations historiques*, III–IV [*CFHB* 24/3–4] Paris 1999, 509–521, esp. 517).

¹⁵ Arsenios, Testament, PG 140, col. 956A. Cf. Pachymeres III 19 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 283.12–17).

nios. Legal charges were trumped up against the ecclesiastic. The patriarch was accused of having omitted a psalm sung on the emperor's behalf from the morning liturgy. In addition, Arsenios was charged with having allowed the sons of the former Seljuk Sultan Izz ed-din II (1247–1257), who were resident in Constantinople, to take communion, although they were reported to be Muslims, and also with permitting their retinue to bathe in holy water.¹⁶ A special judicial tribunal convoked by the emperor – which Arsenios regarded as illegal and to which therefore he never presented himself in person – decreed the deposition of the patriarch. The dismissal of Arsenios opened the doors for the repeal of the excommunication, although Michael VIII proceeded cautiously as he realized that Arsenios' successor, Patriarch Germanos III, was unpopular in the Church. Finally, on 2 February 1267, the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin (*hypapante*), Patriarch Joseph (1266–1275), the one-time personal confessor of the emperor, arranged for the official removal of the excommunication. In a special ceremony that took place in the church of Saint Sophia Michael VIII prostrated himself before the patriarch and before each of the bishops, who all granted forgiveness to the emperor.¹⁷ Michael VIII set a special store by his official pardon from the Church, and the feast of the Purification – the day on which his excommunication was lifted – was specially celebrated in the Church during the rest of his reign.¹⁸

How does Holobolos' piece fit into this context? The work is an oration in its literary form addressed to an audience of anonymous literati.¹⁹ Holobolos reports a recent discussion between Michael VIII Palaiologos and his court entourage, which consisted, too, of literati. Holobolos writes that a few days earlier, when paying a visit to one of the imperial palaces in Constantinople, he was invited to a midday meeting between Michael VIII and some "men of learning."²⁰ The emperor

¹⁶ Pachymeres IV 3 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 337). Arsenios, Testament, PG 140, col. 956AB. In 1264 Izz ed-din II fled Constantinople and took refuge with the Mongol khan Nogai. Cf. A. FAILLER, Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère, *REB* 39 (1981) 150–155. Some of Izz ed-din II's sons and descendants were, in fact, baptized as Christians. Cf. E. ZACHARIADOU, Χριστιανοί απόγονοι τοῦ Ἰτζεδίν Καΐζαοῦς Β' σὴ Βέγγουα. *Makedonika* 6 (1964–65) 62–74.

¹⁷ Pachymeres IV 25 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 397–399); Gregoras IV 8 (ed. L. SCHOPEN, I, 107–108). Cf. V. LAURENT, Les Regestes, no. 1386.

¹⁸ Pachymeres VI 12 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 573.22–24).

¹⁹ M. TREU, Manuelis Holoboli Orationes 28.18: ὁ συνετὸς ἀχροατῆς; 28.26: ὃ φύλον ἀχροατήριον.

²⁰ Ibid. 21.37: τινες τῶν ἐλλογίμων; 22.7: σπουδασταὶ λόγων.

asked those in attendance the following question: “What, oh pursuers of learning, is the passage found in the Gospel of the divine-speaking Luke meant to say, ‘If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain: go and move to the sea.’ My Savior says this to his disciples – the one who has moved mountains into the ‘heart of seas’ (Psalm 45:3), to quote fittingly from the psalms.”²¹ Holobolos relates the ensuing discussion, focusing in particular on the emperor’s interpretation of the scriptural passage. His oration thus serves to propagate the emperor’s words and views among a wider audience. The work indeed bears the distinct characteristics of a propagandist piece. At its beginning and at its end Holobolos digresses into lauds of Michael VIII. He opens the oration by remarking that his models are the Roman rhetors and sculptors who perpetuated, in writing or in art, the glorious deeds of the emperor and by expressing his admiration for the allegedly Indian practice of recording the wise sayings of the ruler.²²

It is evident that the earliest date Manuel Holobolos could have written such a self-proclaimed work of imperial propaganda was his appointment as Rhetor in 1265. His standing vis-a-vis Michael VIII before that year makes an earlier date impossible. Holobolos had entered the imperial service as Michael VIII’s secretary at a very young age – at Christmas 1261 he was still a boy, according to Pachymeres, when he suffered the wrath of the emperor for objecting to the blinding of John IV Laskaris.²³ Holobolos was immediately dismissed from his post, punished with a mutilation of his lips and nose, and exiled to the Petra monastery in Constantinople. In 1265, after the deposition of Arsenios, Michael VIII initiated a policy of reconciliation with some former enemies, recalled Holobolos, and appointed him as teacher of logic and as Rhetor – a post in the hierarchy of the patriarchate which is not attested after 1204 and appears to have lapsed during the Nicaean period.²⁴ Holobolos’ full title, Rhetor of the Rhetors (ῥήτωρ τῶν ῥητόρων), was the equivalent of the twelfth-century office of the Master of the Rhetors (μαῖστωρ τῶν ῥητόρων). As the case had been in the Komnenian period, Holobolos’ duties as Rhetor involved the composi-

²¹ Ibid. 22.7–12. Henceforth all references to the Old Testament follow the numeration and nomenclature of the Septuagint.

²² Ibid., 20.8–21.

²³ Pachymeres III 11 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 259).

²⁴ Pachymeres IV 14 (ed. A. FAILLER, II, 369–371), speaks of the appointment of Holobolos as Rhetor in the context of the revival of old pre-1204 customs.

tion of propagandist speeches in praise of the emperor and teaching at the patriarchal school of higher learning.²⁵

While 1265 is a firm *terminus post quem*, the oration clearly dates before 2 February 1267 – the day when Michael VIII received an official pardon from the Church. A brief summary of its content demonstrates that the oration paints an image of the emperor as a penitent man deserving of forgiveness. After requesting an interpretation of the scriptural saying, Michael VIII waited for the literati to put forth their divergent views and then presented his own explanation. He ordered that a small codex (*deltarion*) be brought forth, which contained a prayer and a homily addressed to God composed by him.²⁶ Holobolos was asked to read aloud the text, evidently in his capacity as imperial spokesman. By Holobolos' own testimony, he felt stupefied to discover that the work was a confession of the emperor's sinfulness and unworthiness. Michael VIII allegedly compared himself not to God's "vessel of choice" (Acta 9:15), as he well deserved – and, furthermore, as he called himself in one of his two autobiographical accounts –, but to a vessel of dishonor.²⁷ At the moment Holobolos reached a passage of the text that referred to the scriptural saying under discussion, Michael VIII interrupted him and began to advance his own interpretation of Christ's words. Henceforth Holobolos summarizes the allegedly impromptu speech of the emperor.

Michael VIII is reported to have construed the mountain in Christ's saying as a reference to his own sins and lawless actions, and the sea as

²⁵ On the twelfth-century functions of the Master of the Rhetors, see J. DARROUZÈS, *Recherches sur les OFFIKIA de l'Église byzantine*. Paris 1970, 110–111, 207 and n. 4. Pachymeres (see above n. 24) informs us that Holobolos had teaching duties. In 1265 he replaced the *meγas logothetes* George Akropolites as a professor of logic. S. MERGIALI-FARANGAS, *L'école Saint-Paul de l'Orphelinat à Constantinople: bref aperçu sur son statut et son histoire*. *REB* 49 (1991) 237–246, has shown on the basis of a close reading of Pachymeres that Acropolites' and Holobolos' school of higher learning was not located at the *orphanotropheion* of the church of Saint Paul, as it has been traditionally assumed.

²⁶ On the meaning of δέλτος as a codex, cf. *LBG*. Holobolos' oration is not the only piece of evidence that Michael VIII was himself a literatus and penned literary works; he was the author of two autobiographic accounts incorporated into the monastic rules (*typika*) for the monasteries of Saint Demetrios in Constantinople and Saint Michael on Mount Auxentios near Chalcedon. Cf. M. HINTERBERGER, *Autobiographische Traditionen in Byzanz* (*WBS* 22). Vienna 1999, 267–276.

²⁷ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 23.19–20: σεαυτοῦ ὄν ἐκλογῆς. Cf. A. DMITRIEVSKII, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei*, II, *Typika*, part 1. Kiev 1895, 770 (*typikon* for the monastery of St Demetrios).

a reference to a sea of mercy. Although the emperor did not specify the nature of his sins, he noted that they were so vast and towering that they resembled a mountain. The main point of Michael VIII's interpretation was a simple one: his strong and unwavering faith was able alone to engulf and wash away the mountain of his sins into the sea of God's mercy.²⁸ Thus the emperor put forth the convenient view that his faith in God alone was enough to procure divine mercy. To coat this tendentious interpretation with additional scriptural luster, Michael VIII construed other Biblical passages in a similar vein. According to him, the mountains mentioned in the Old Testament – Mount Lebanon, Mount Tabor, and Mount Gilboa – were all metaphors of a mountain of sins. The coming of the Savior redeemed human sin.²⁹ According to the emperor, when Isaiah said that every “mountain and hill shall be made low” (Isaiah 40:4), he prophesied the coming of Christ, who was to redeem mountains of sin.³⁰ The emperor filled his exegetical work with references to the Biblical King David, a ruler who had also committed sins, had repented, and had benefitted from God's boundless mercy. It is clear, therefore, that Michael VIII's scriptural interpretation fits into his position as an excommunicate before 2 February 1267. The emperor referred to the crimes accompanying his accession to the throne by calling them a mountain of sin, while the sea of mercy alluded to the absolution he desired to obtain.

Michael VIII and King David

The oration by Holobolos opens a window into the endeavors of Michael VIII's propaganda to find arguments in support of repealing the excommunication imposed by Arsenios. Pachymeres reports that on his excommunication the emperor found himself in the uneasy position of having no ground for apology and no idea of how to remove the sentence.³¹ Furthermore, he felt the biting pangs of remorse.³² His worries were understandable. The canons prescribed the punishment of perjury with excommunication. From a strictly moral standpoint his

²⁸ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes*, 23.33–24.13, where the crux of Michael VIII's scriptural interpretation is summarized.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.7 ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.18–19.

³¹ Pachymeres III 19 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 281.5–6): μήτε τόπον ἀπολογίας ἔχων, μήτ' ἐπίνοιαν τοῦ τῆς δίκης ἀποθέσθαι.

³² Pachymeres III 15 (ed. A. FAILLER, I, 271.10–11).

deed was hardly anything but opprobrious. In his search for counter-arguments, Michael VIII turned to the exegesis of the holy scriptures.

It is interesting to observe that the passage proposed for discussion derives not from the gospel of Luke, as the emperor claimed, but weaves together various sayings of Christ in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Luke 17:5–6, Christ says that the one who has faith the size of a mustard seed can order a mulberry tree (not a mountain) to be uprooted and planted into the sea. In Matthew 17:20, at the end of the episode of the healing of the demoniac, Christ teaches his disciples that the one who has faith the size of mustard seed would say to the mountain to move and it will indeed move. No reference to the sea is made on this occasion, however. Further in the gospel of Matthew (21:21–22), Christ says that if his disciples have faith (no mustard seed is mentioned), they would not only perform the miracle with the drying-up of the fig tree, but would also make a mountain move to the sea.³³ Thus, the scriptural passage discussed at the palace was a concoction that easily lent itself to the interpretation desired by Michael VIII.

The most notable feature of Michael VIII's exegesis is his concerted effort to present himself as a New David. On several occasions the emperor mentioned David, whose name he construed to mean, in accordance with patristic interpretations, the "able-handed one."³⁴ Michael VIII quoted from the psalms and drew attention to the applicability of the cited passages to his own situation. David, just like him, had been "frequently cursed with heavy sin" and had begged for forgiveness.³⁵ Again like the emperor, David had supplicated the Lord to be "thoroughly washed of his inequities" (Psalm 50:3).³⁶ David, too, had cried out that "wickedness has gone over his holy head" (Psalm 37:5).³⁷ Furthermore, David had realized that mountains of sins were capable of attracting God's mercy and hence sang in his psalms that "mountains melted like wax before the Lord" (Psalm 96:5).³⁸

³³ The same passage is also found in Mark 11:22–23.

³⁴ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes 26.23–24: ἰκανὸς χειρῖ*. On this patristic interpretation, see Origenes, *Commentaries on Matthew*, in E. KLOSTERMANN (ed), *Origenes Werke, XII: Origenes Matthäuserklärung, III: Fragmente und Indices*. Leipzig 1941, 5.23; Athanasios, *Expositiones in Psalmos*, PG 27, col. 553.

³⁵ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes 26.26–27: κατοφεροῦς ἁμαρτίας συχνὰ καταρώμενον*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.31–32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.25–27.

Michael VIII took particular pains to emphasize the parallels between David's sin and repentance, and his own situation. In II Kings 11–12 David commits a sin for which he is severely reprimanded by the prophet Nathan. He falls in love with a married woman, the beautiful Bathsheba, and sends to a certain death her husband, the general Uriah, in order to take her as his own wife. Nathan rebuked David for this sinful act and cursed the firstborn son of the liaison with death. On this occasion David composed a psalm of contrition and supplication for mercy, Psalm 50. Through his repentance David managed to secure God's pardon, continued his rule, and his second son from Bathsheba, Solomon, succeeded to the throne with Nathan's assistance. In his speech Michael VIII quoted the penitential psalm and thus set himself in the footsteps of David.³⁹ Furthermore, in reporting the emperor's interpretation of the sea as a "sea of mercy," Holobolos referred again to the fiftieth psalm and compared Michael VIII to the penitent David. According to Holobolos, after his sin David had entered unimpeded the temple of the Lord, where he had obtained God's pardon.⁴⁰ Although Holobolos does not comment on the significance of David's action, the entry into the temple contrasts starkly to Michael VIII's status as an excommunicate and is most probably to be interpreted as a veiled argument for the readmission of the emperor into the Church.

The way in which Michael VIII and his spokesman, Holobolos, sought to highlight similarities between the emperor and King David – a traditional Byzantine model of sacral and charismatic kingship⁴¹ – is not an isolated case in imperial propaganda during the reign of the first Palaiologos. The panegyrics of Michael VIII, including those by Holobolos, called attention to how God had elevated both David and Michael VIII to the throne, despite conflicts with their predecessors and despite the lack of dynastic entitlement. In his first imperial panegyric of Michael VIII, Manuel Holobolos wrote that "it was necessary" for Palaiologos, who had aroused the suspicions of his predecessor, Emperor Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258), to flee to the Turks so that he could

³⁹ See above n. 36.

⁴⁰ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes*, 27.5–10. In II Kings 12:20 David enters the temple unimpeded by Nathan to worship God.

⁴¹ Basil I the Macedonian (867–885) and Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) provide earlier examples of emperors consistently presented in propaganda as imitators of David. See G. DAGRON, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. J. BIRRELL, Cambridge 2003, 199–200; P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993, 437, 447, 452.

emulate David's flight to the Philistines.⁴² In his third panegyric Holobolos further noted that Michael VIII, just like David, was acclaimed emperor three times: the first time not very conspicuously in Nymphaion (as in the case of the anointment of David by Samuel); the second time in Nicaea (in a way parallel to the anointment of David by the ten tribes of Judah in Hebron); the third time – the most glorious one – in Constantinople, just as David had been anointed as ruler of Judah and Israel.⁴³ Another panegyrist of Michael VIII, Gregory of Cyprus, also referred to the example of the rise of David when he described the moment of transfer of imperial power into the hands of Palaiologos.⁴⁴

From the point of view of imperial propaganda, the sin and repentance of David presented one more strikingly similar episode between the experiences of the Biblical king and those of Michael VIII. It is noteworthy that the rebuke and penitence of David were well known and popular among Byzantine learned audiences. The scene appears regularly in Byzantine manuscript illumination, especially in aristocratic psalters, from the ninth century onward.⁴⁵ In the psalters, the miniature most often faces the fiftieth psalm of penance. The repentant David is depicted seated or prostrated before Nathan, sometimes in the company of the personification of Repentance (*metanoia*). The propaganda of Michael VIII, which grappled to find arguments in support of the emperor's pardon by the Church, found a popular model of

⁴² M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 34.23–34. In the same oration (*Ibid.* 38.22) Holobolos compared the hands of Michael VIII Palaiologos to those of David. The flight of Michael Palaiologos to the Turks and his salvation from persecution during Theodore II's reign was much advertised in Michael VIII's propagandist autobiographies: H. GRÉGOIRE, *Imperatoris Michaelis Palaeologi de Vita Sua. Byz* 29–30 (1959–60) 453; cf. A. DMITRIEVSKII, *Opisanie* 770.

⁴³ M. TREU, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes* 92.16–93.4.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Cyprus, *Encomium on Michael VIII Palaiologos*, in J. FR. BOISSONADE, *Anecdota Graeca* I. Paris 1829, 338–339 (same as PG 142, col. 368CD).

⁴⁵ A. CUTLER, *The Aristocratic Psalters in Byzantium*. Paris 1984, 122 (index). The miniature of the rebuke and penitence of David (rarely the penitence alone) is found in seventeen psalters, including late Byzantine ones, such as Jerusalem, Cod. Taphou 51 and Sinai, monastery of St. Catherine, Cod. gr. 61. Cf. also N. OIKONOMIDES, *Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic of Saint Sophia. DOP* 30 (1976) 156–158 and images 1a–1d. We find depictions of the repentance of David in such well known Byzantine illuminated manuscripts as Paris, Bibl. Nat. Cod. gr. 510 (the Paris Gregory); Paris, Bibl. Nat., Cod. gr. 139 (the Paris Psalter); Venice, Bibl. Marciana, Cod. gr. 17 (The Marciana Psalter); Cod. Vat. gr. 333 (The Vatican Book of Kings).

royal repentance and forgiveness, and placed Palaiologos within the venerable tradition of Old Testament sacral rulership.

Seen in the context of the conflict between Michael VIII and Arsenios, Holobolos' oration points to a dearth of legalistic and moral arguments in support of the imperial position. No reference was made in the oration to canon law or canonical interpretations, despite the report of Pachymeres that the emperor regarded as uncanonical Arsenios' unwillingness to grant him penance.⁴⁶ Neither was there any mention of the actual sin for which Michael VIII was excommunicated – most probably because the execrable deed of blinding John IV hardly lent itself to apology. The only line of defense was the tendentious exegesis of a scriptural passage, itself a concoction, and the invocation of the example of King David. The special position of the imperial office within the tradition of Old Testament charismatic kingship was itself a reason why Palaiologos deserved a pardon for his sinful accession to the throne.

Our dating of Holobolos' work sheds additional light on the function of the office of the Rhetor, which Michael VIII revived in 1265. Like the other four orations by Holobolos, this one, too, presents the propagandist image of official authority and dates to the period 1265–1267, that is, soon after Holobolos' appointment to the post. The main duty of the Rhetor was to articulate and disseminate the official and unblemished image of the New Constantine, both through oral recitations at the court and in writing. The unusual personality of Holobolos must have added to the cogency of the case for granting forgiveness to the excommunicate emperor. For Manuel Holobolos was a pardoned ex-enemy of the regime and a living example of the spirit of reconciliation that Michael VIII wished so much to nurture after the deposition of Arsenios and with the imminent prospect of a schism in the Byzantine Church.

⁴⁶ For example, the twelfth-century canonical commentaries of Theodore Balsamon transmit a canonical opinion, stating that the anointing with imperial power (*chrismates basileias*) automatically purged the emperor of any sins committed before his accession. Specific reference was made to a synodical *praxis* of patriarch Polyeuktos (956–970), which exculpated the emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976) of the crime of complicity in the murder of his predecessor on the throne. See G. RHALLES and M. POTLES, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων* III. Athens 1853, 44–45.