

Biblical echoes in two Byzantine military speeches

Meredith L. D. Riedel

Duke University

mriedel@div.duke.edu

This article examines the two extant military speeches attributed to Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos for their biblical references and allusions. These speeches demonstrate imperial Byzantine exegesis, establish biblical grounds for the ‘chosen’ status of Byzantine Christians, and reveal that the non-soldierly emperor Constantine VII appropriated the role of a mediating priestly figure as a way of claiming authority over his fighting forces. In this, he follows in the footsteps of his father, the emperor Leo VI (r. 886–912). Both speeches are explicitly Christian, and were used to bolster military morale and to reinforce imperial authority.

Key words: military; speeches; Constantine VII; Christianity; religion; morale; scripture

For more than a thousand years, the Byzantine empire was home to people who identified themselves as ‘Romans’ or, more frequently after the rise of Islam, simply as ‘Christians’. However, the way in which medieval Byzantines understood and employed their Christian holy books, especially in political contexts, has not yet been systematically studied. In two military orations attributed to the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII (r. 913–59)¹, frequent quotations of the Septuagint (LXX) and the New Testament (NT) provide the authoritative basis for the emperor’s views of Christian superiority vis-à-vis Muslims in impending military engagements. Others have sketched the ways in which these two speeches follow and even innovate with regard to accepted Byzantine rhetorical practice. However, neither speech has received a close examination of its biblical allusions and imagery, nor is such analysis commonly seen in scholarly treatment of other similar military

1 These are the official dates of his reign; Romanos Lekapenos usurped power and was overthrown by Constantine VII only in 945.

texts.² This oversight has led to a truncated understanding of Byzantine cultural priorities, specifically those subject to religious influences.³

As Constantine the Great established the eastern empire soon after he legitimised Christianity in the early fourth century, closer inspection of the influence of Christian scriptures on Byzantine political culture is warranted. When direct appeals to religious writings are found in imperial speeches aimed at employing popular cultural beliefs for the advantage of the state, they certainly merit deeper analysis. These two speeches illuminate Byzantine practical exegesis in distinct ways. Most noticeably, they provide evidence of the characteristically Byzantine confidence in the ‘chosen’ status of Byzantine Christians. They further reveal that the non-soldierly emperor Constantine VII appropriated the role of a mediating priestly figure as a way of claiming authority over his fighting forces, a move first articulated and developed by his equally non-soldierly father, the emperor Leo VI (r. 886–912).⁴

Byzantine Christian holy books

Before describing the two speeches, it is important to clarify what is meant by the Christian scriptures used by the Byzantines. The Septuagint (LXX) is a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures traditionally dated to the third century BCE (also some other original Greek compositions), and has a complex and difficult history.⁵ Although it varies from the later Masoretic text of the Hebrew scriptures in some substantial ways,

2 For some observations on ideology (but not exegesis) in these two speeches, see A. Markopoulos, ‘The ideology of war in the military harangues of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos’, in J. Koder and I. Stouraitis (eds.), *Byzantine War Ideology Between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion*, Akten des Internationalen Symposiums (Wien, 19.–21. Mai 2011) (Vienna 2012) 47–56. On Constantine VII’s use of Syrianos Magister’s *Rhetorica militaris*, see C. Zuckerman, ‘The military compendium of Syrianus Magister’, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 40 (1990) 209–24; ‘Syrianos magistros, *Ναυμαχία Συριανοῦ μαγίστρου*. ed. and trans., in J. H. Pryor and E. Jeffreys (eds.), *The Age of the ΔΡΟΜΩΝ: The Byzantine Navy ca 500–1204* (Leiden 2006) 455–81. See also I. Eramo, ‘Ἔανδρες στρατιῶται. Demegorie protrettiche nell’Ambrosianus B 119 sup.’, *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università degli Studi di Bari* 50 (2007) 127–65, and I. Eramo, ‘Retorica militare fra tradizione protrettica e pensiero strategico’, *Talia Dixit: Revista Interdisciplinar de Retórica e Historiografía* 5 (2010) 25–44.

3 The argument of this essay falls into a category Catherine Holmes has called ‘political culture’, because it excavates biblical exegesis as it was employed to serve political goals. See C. Holmes, ‘Byzantine political culture and compilation literature in the tenth and eleventh centuries: some preliminary enquiries’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 64 (2012) 55–80.

4 See M. L. D. Riedel, *Unexpected Emperor: Leo VI and the Transformation of Byzantine Law, Faith, and War* (Cambridge forthcoming 2016) chapters 2–4.

5 The key primary source document that purports to describe the origin of the LXX is the *Letter of Aristeas*, which survives in 23 manuscripts. It was known by Josephus (*Antiquities*, Book 12) and Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica*, Books 8–9), both of whom paraphrase parts of it and appear to have accepted it as a legitimate historical document. However, its authenticity has been challenged by modern scholars since the sixteenth century. For a more complete discussion, including relevant scholarship, see N. F. Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible* (Leiden 2000) chapter 3.

there is no doubt that the Byzantines viewed the LXX as inspired and accepted it as the orthodox version of the Christian Old Testament and apocrypha.⁶ A detailed analysis of Byzantine biblical exegesis has yet to be written, but some initial work is in progress.⁷ Of particular interest is Claudia Rapp's work on Old Testament models for Byzantine emperors, which identifies the mid-fifth century as 'the great watershed in the invocation of Old Testament models for the emperor', where the use of OT models changed from largely negative to overwhelmingly positive.⁸ However, the topic of Byzantine biblical exegesis is problematic because, as James Miller has pointed out, the idea of the Bible as a unified entity was a concept unknown in Byzantium, not least because it was 'not limited to a textual corpus.'⁹

The tenth-century military orations

These two military orations are dated to CE 950 and 958, respectively; the first was published by Ahrweiler in 1967, and the second in 1908 by Vári.¹⁰ Both speeches (δημηγορίαι) are found in a well-known tenth-century codex, the Ambrosianus gr. 139 (B 119 sup.).¹¹ This codex includes military manuals, military oratory, and books on naval warfare; these two speeches are in the section on military oratory (προτρεπτικοί λόγοι),

6 E. Tov, 'The nature of the large-scale differences between the LXX and MT S T V, compared with similar evidence in other sources', in A. Schenker (ed.), *The Earliest Text of the Hebrew Bible: The Relationship Between the Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Base of the Septuagint Reconsidered* (Leiden 2003) 121–44. English translations of Old Testament verses referenced in this article are drawn from the scholarly translation of the LXX produced in 2007 and sponsored by the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies; English translations of New Testament verses are from the recent English Standard Version, first published in 2001. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright (Oxford 2007). *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton 2001). An ecclesiastical translation has also been published recently in English: *The Orthodox Study Bible: Ancient Christianity Speaks to Today's World* (Englewood 2008). These two versions were chosen because both embrace an 'essentially literal' approach to translation based on the maxim 'as literal as possible, as free as necessary.'

7 *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, ed. P. Magdalino and R. Nelson (Washington, DC 2010) presents eleven essays given by leading Byzantinists at a scholarly conference held at Dumbarton Oaks in 2006. A companion volume is due to appear in 2017: D. Krueger and R. S. Nelson (eds.), *The New Testament in Byzantium* (Washington, DC).

8 C. Rapp, 'Old Testament models for emperors in Early Byzantium,' in P. Magdalino and R. Nelson (eds.), *The Old Testament in Byzantium* (Washington, DC 2010) 175–197, esp. 189–92.

9 J. Miller, 'The Prophetologion. The Old Testament of Byzantine Christianity?' in P. Magdalino and R. Nelson, (eds.), *The Old Testament in Byzantium* (Washington, DC 2010), 55–76, esp. 75–76.

10 H. Ahrweiler, 'Un discours inédit de Constantin VII Porphyrogénète', *Travaux et Mémoires* 2 (1967) 393–404. R. Vári, 'Zum historischen exzerptenwerke des Konstantinos Porphyrogenetos', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 17 (1908) 75–85. English translations of both speeches are found in E. McGeer, 'Two military orations of Constantine VII', in J. W. Nesbitt (ed.), *Byzantine Authors, Literary Activities and Preoccupations: Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicholas Oikonomides* (Leiden 2003) 111–35.

11 C. M. Mazzucchi, 'Dagli anni di Basilio parakimomenos (Cod. Ambr. B119 sup.)', *Aevum* 52 (1978) 267–318.

commissioned by the high-ranking palace official Basil Lekapenos between 958 and 960.¹²

The two tenth-century orations included in the codex are attributed to Constantine VII and reveal the primary foreign policy concern of his reign: the eastern Arabs.¹³ Katerina Karapli, author of a recent study on the Byzantine army, considers these two speeches to be the genuine work of Constantine VII, but she does not consider in any detail the impact of the biblical language used in them.¹⁴ According to Eric McGeer, the speeches ‘bear witness to the changes in Byzantine military policy during the 950s, and they shed light on the questions of morale and motivation in the armies of the time.’¹⁵ His analysis excludes a consideration of the language or vocabulary, and focuses on events and imperial attitudes implicit in the text. More usefully, Markopoulos has identified the extensive use of biblical quotations in these speeches as ‘intended to put both the harangues and their author in a purely biblical ideological context.’¹⁶ But what is that context?

One must consider the problem of Byzantine identity in the face of Muslim claims to exclusive divine blessing as the people of God. Of particular interest is the author’s choice of biblical quotations and allusions. Not only do these presuppose Christian faith on the part of the intended audience, they also reveal the Byzantine worldview that claims the status of chosen people and idealizes divine moral standards as defined by contemporary exegesis. The speeches are therefore historically useful, rhetorically slanted, and culturally significant. This last aspect is most relevant to the question of Constantine VII’s use of religious language in propaganda, and sheds light on the development of the Byzantine self-image as a consciously Christian military power. The historical value of these speeches lies not in their elocution, but in their content.¹⁷ In particular, their use of Christian scriptures reveals to what extent the early Constantinian legacy of *victoria augusti* had changed to a deliberately theological concept of *victoria Christi* some 700 years later.

The first speech

This speech is relatively short with five main sections. It begins with praise for recent victories and then exhorts the army to even greater feats for the glory of Christ. It dismisses

12 Mazzuchi ‘Dagli anni di Basilio’, 303–4.

13 For more on Constantine VII’s awareness of the eastern regions and his diplomatic policies concerning them, see J. Shepard, ‘Constantine VII, Caucasian openings and the road to Aleppo’, in A. Eastmond, (ed.), *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium* (Aldershot 2001) 19–40.

14 K. Karapli, *Κατευόδωσις στρατού - Η οργάνωση και η ψυχολογική προετοιμασία του βυζαντινού στρατού πριν από τον πόλεμο (610–1081)* (Athens 2010) 208.

15 E. McGeer, ‘Two military orations’, 115.

16 Markopoulos, ‘The ideology of war’, 53.

17 For further discussion on style in Byzantine prose, see I. Ševčenko, ‘Levels of style in Byzantine prose’, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31 (1981) 289–312 and 32 (1982) 220–38.

Sayf al-Dawla, the emir of Aleppo and famously paradigmatic jihadi warrior, portraying his words as bluster to cover his fear.¹⁸ Finally, it describes the emperor's desire to be with his soldiers in person and makes a request for accurate records and especially the names of men who deserve rewards for their bravery.

The purpose and context of the speech are a matter of disagreement.¹⁹ References to 'recent victories' provide clues for dating the speech. The army is commended for making 'the fierce soldiers of the Hamdanid the victims of [their] swords, and the others whom, like the Egyptians long ago, [they] consigned to the waters.'²⁰ The phrase, 'consigned to the waters', refers to a victory over Sayf al-Dawla ('the Hamdanid') and the drowning of some of his forces, either at Lake Hadat in 950, after being routed by the great Byzantine general Leo Phokas, or in the Euphrates in 952. The reference to the 'Egyptians of long ago' recalls the biblical episode of the Exodus, recounted in the Pentateuch.²¹ As Markopoulos also notes, this reference resonates with the well-known comparison of Constantine I to Moses, made by Eusebios, and thus links Constantine VII to the pre-eminent Byzantine model emperor.²²

The speech is dated to late 950 by Mazzuchi but Ahrweiler thinks it more likely to have been composed two years later just after the battle of Germanikeia.²³ McGeer considers Mazzuchi's arguments for 950 more compelling.²⁴ The exact date of the speech is not crucial for the arguments presented here, but the later date is more convincing because the speech sounds more like motivation for an imminent battle, not an end-of-year retrospective with some motivational material for next season's campaigning. Moreover, any successes enjoyed by the Byzantines in 952 would have been played up, because they were rare, while in 950, the stunning counter-raids of Leo Phokas were so effective as not to require more than passing mention. In fact, it is noteworthy that Constantine VII did not sponsor any triumphal celebrations in 950, preferring to wait until several years later.²⁵

The speech addresses the army during its preparations for an expected clash with the emir of Aleppo, who is referred to as 'the Hamdanid' once and 'the foul Hamdanid' (ὁ μᾶρὸς Χαμδῶν) twice.²⁶ At the end of the campaigning season, armies would conduct an inventory of weaponry, the division of plunder, and the granting of rewards and promotions. In this speech, the emperor promises rewards to each combatant, with

18 For more on the source of Sayf al-Dawla's towering reputation, see A. Hamori, *The Composition of Mutanabbi's Panegyrics to Sayf Al-Dawla* [Studies in Arabic Literature, 14] (Leiden 1997).

19 Ahrweiler, 'Un discours inédit', 401.

20 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 118.

21 See Exod. 14, esp. v.28.

22 Markopoulos, 'The ideology of war', 55-6.

23 Ahrweiler, 'Un discours inédit', 402. Mazzuchi, 'Dagli anni di Basilio', 296-8.

24 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 116.

25 M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory. Triumphal rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge 1986, repr. 1990) 159.

26 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 118-9.

the accompanying promotions and fiscal bonuses each deserves, to be given by him personally.²⁷ For this reason, it seems unlikely that this speech came at the end of the campaign season. On the contrary, the mention of rewards indicates the possibility of future recompense for fighting well and loyally – rewards to be granted by the emperor himself to invigorate army morale. Furthermore, there is mention of rewards in the second speech as well, and it is clearly a motivational speech for imminent battle, not an end-of-year totting up of who earned what during the campaign.

As an oration, the earlier speech is short and concise; it reads the way a military leader would speak, straightforward and to the point. Although the text lacks an initial salutation which might allow one to identify the audience with precision, none the less it is addressed to the soldiers directly, as from a general, and focuses on the soldiers themselves, on their valour and achievements. Peppered with quotes from the LXX, the speech praises the successes of the army, encourages the soldiers to continue without fear, denigrates the enemy as deceitful and superstitious, asks for continued reports and promises rewards for service.

The author's choice of scripture suggests he views the Muslims as enemies of God as well as Byzantium. Although clearly familiar with the Jewish scriptures, the original historical context does not appear to influence his exegesis. He borrows the expressions and metaphors, but ignores their Jewish framework, appropriating the message for his own time and Christian worldview.²⁸ For example, he refers to the bodies of Muslim soldiers scattered on the ground 'like grasses after reaping, ungathered' (ὡς χόρτος ὀπίσω θερίζοντος καὶ ὁ συνάγων οὐκ ἦν).²⁹ This phrase echoes Jeremiah 9:21 (LXX), a prophecy of destruction for unfaithful Israel brought about by their own God. It seems an awkward choice, given that Byzantine Christians usually identified themselves with the Israelites as the 'chosen' of God. Jeremiah was a prophet whose primary message was the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Cyrus of Persia, and not a prophet who foretold pleasant things. One must therefore ask why a Christian emperor seeking to bolster the morale of his army would choose to quote from the book of Jeremiah? This counterintuitive choice can work only if one examines more closely the exegetical moves made by the speechwriter.

What is the reason for this prophecy of destruction? In the ninth chapter of Jeremiah, destruction is foretold because they 'bent their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not faith grew strong in the land; because they proceeded from evil to evil, and me they did not know.' (Jer. 9:3) Ultimately, destruction is visited on them because their 'tongue is a wounding arrow; the words of their mouth are deceitful.' (Jer. 9:6) This indictment leads to the 'ungathered grasses' later in the same chapter, and is used here

27 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 120.

28 For more on the dialogic nature of Christian-Jewish relations in Byzantium, see the excellent collection edited by Robert Bonfil et. al., *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures* (Leiden 2011).

29 For the Greek text of this speech, see Ahrweiler, 397–9, here at 398. 13–14.

by the speechwriter; it communicates the reminder that those who use deceit are themselves deceived because they do not know God and are therefore doomed. This statement fits with his earlier comment that the Muslim enemy, long characterized by Byzantine writers as followers of a false religion³⁰, are doomed ‘without the one paramount advantage [which is]... hope in Christ’ (Ἄλλ’ ἐπειπερ ἐνὸς ἐστέρηντο τοῦ μεγίστου, τῆς εἰς Χρ[ιστὸν] ἐλπίδος).

Having described ‘an opponent now clearly perceived for what he is’, the writer goes on to characterize the strength of God as the ally of Christians, who are themselves ‘avengers and champions not only of Christians but of Christ Himself’ (ἐνδικηταὶ καὶ ὑπέρμαχοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦ Χριστοῦ γίνεσθε). This God, who ‘will stretch forth His hand to those girded for battle against His foes’ (ὀρέξει χεῖρα τοῖς κατὰ τῶν ἐχθρῶν τῶν ἐκείνου ὀπλιζομένοις), is an avenging and powerful deity. The imagery of biblical poetry from the psalms as well as the Song of Moses serves to remind the soldiers of God’s promise to bring justice for His people (Dt 32:41-42) by breaking the weapons of those who stand against His chosen people (Ps 75:3 LXX, Ex 19:5).

Two psalms of David, the legendary warrior-king of ancient Israel and the perennial model for all Byzantine emperors, are invoked: Psalm 17 (LXX) is a psalm of praise for deliverance from enemies, a deliverance that is given by training one’s hands for war and providing a shield of salvation.³¹ Psalm 23 (LXX) describes God (‘mighty in battle’ – δυνατὸς ἐν πολέμοις) and those who may approach Him: those who do not swear deceitfully or embrace falsehood. By indicting falsehood and deception, one detects an echo of the widely-held Byzantine view of Islam as a false religion.

For example, in the *Taktika* of Leo VI, a military manual attributed to the father of Constantine VII, one finds a description of the ‘blasphemy of the Saracens disguised as piety’ and especially their belief that ‘God, who scatters the peoples who desire war (ἔθνη τὰ τοὺς πολέμους θέλοντα), Himself loves war’.³² Using an oblique reference to holy war and an unidentified quotation of Psalm 67, Leo highlighted the differences between these two faiths. Psalm 67, also a Davidic psalm, would have been an appropriate reference here in Constantine’s speech, and it is curious that the writer omitted it. Psalm 67 (LXX) begins ‘Let God rise up, and let His enemies be scattered’ and ends ‘the

30 This view of Islam originated in the *De Haeresibus* of John of Damascus (d. ca. 754) and was followed by apologists and chroniclers thereafter; for example, Theodore Abu Qurra, Niketas Byzantios, Evodios and others.

31 The only emperor to have his portrait on a Byzantine psalter is Basil II, the grandson of Constantine VII; he is portrayed in full military regalia with eight captives prostrate at his feet, an unabashed pose of victory. Furthermore, this psalter includes a page of six miniature illustrations of the early life of David, the warrior-king of Israel and writer of many of the Psalms. Cf. A. Cutler, ‘The psalter of Basil II’, in *Imagery and Ideology in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot 1992) III.

32 *Leonis imperatoris Tactica*, J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 107 (Paris, 1863), XVIII.111 (col. 972C). A recent critical edition by G. T. Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI* (Washington, DC 2010) is not used here because it is based on the shorter Laurentian recension of the *Taktika*; citations throughout this article refer to the longer Ambrosian recension of the *Taktika* found in the *Patrologia Graeca* 107.

God of Israel, He will give power and strength to His people.³³ The emphasis is on the power of God, not human armies, to scatter enemies, a classic biblical motif.

The speechwriter also chooses oblique references from the book of Isaiah, quoting prophecies of God's apocalyptic vengeance on Jerusalem for failing to respond in faith to the Lord (Is 5:15),³⁴ the destruction of the strongholds of the ruthless (Is 25:2),³⁵ and the destruction of alien oppressors (Is 13:11).³⁶ All these prophecies serve as reminders of God's moral standard: God will bring justice upon merciless unbelievers, here understood to be Muslims.

This speech resonates with the clash of battle, consciously evoking the memory of Old Testament warfare between a powerful, militant God, and His powerful but doomed enemies. It is a speech designed to lift weary spirits, to remind them that victory is inevitable, despite grim setbacks such as the humiliating defeat of the Cretan expedition in 949 and the successful raids of Sayf al-Dawla.³⁷ The soldiers are reminded that they possess truth (in the form of Christianity) while the mention of 'those who rely on Beliar or Muhammad' reassures them that their enemy is ultimately weaker, since Beliar (or Belial) is a biblical name for 'the father of lies'³⁸ and Muhammad had long been characterized by Christian writers as a false prophet.³⁹ Furthermore, the emperor exhorts his soldiers 'let us arm ourselves with His cross' (τῷ σταυρῷ φραξώμεθα).⁴⁰ This

33 Psalm 67:1, 35. This reference is identified by Dagon in his discussion of this section of the *Taktika*; Dagon, 'Byzance et le modèle islamique', 224.

34 'A person shall be brought low, and a man shall be dishonoured, and the eyes that are high shall be brought low.' This passage is known as the song of the unfaithful vineyard.

35 'Because you have made cities a heap, fortified cities so their foundation might fall; the city of the impious will not be built forever.'

36 'I will command evils for the whole world, and for the impious, their own sins; I will destroy the pride of the lawless and bring low the pride of the arrogant.'

37 On the disastrous Cretan expedition of 949, see V. Christides, 'The raids of the Moslems of Crete in the Aegean Sea: Piracy and conquest', *Byzantion* 51 (1981) 76–111. For more background on the Cretan expedition as well as Sayf al-Dawla's raids, see W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford 1997) 489–93.

38 This name appears in the Bible only twice. In the OT, it is used to describe the tribe of Benjamin after they attack and kill the concubine of a visitor to Gibeah (Judges 20:13). In the NT, it is used to describe the one person with whom Christ (and therefore God) can have no fellowship. By parity of reasoning, if God is truth (Isaiah 65:16, John 14:6, etc.) then Belial is falsehood. In the Gospel of John, the 'father of lies' is identified as the devil, that is to say, not-God. Cf. John 8:44: 'You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.'

39 In the *De administrando imperio*, Constantine repeats the commonly held, and in Byzantine eyes not only wrong but perverse, view that Muhammad preached that anyone killing or killed by an enemy entered paradise. G. Moravcsik, (ed.), R. J. H. Jenkins, trans., *De administrando imperio* (Washington, DC 1967) 14, 78.

40 For a discussion of the significance of the cross in the tenth century, see J. C. Cheynet, 'Quelques remarques sur le culte de la Croix en Asie Mineure au X^e siècle', in Y. Ledure (ed.), *Histoire et culture chrétienne. Hommage à Monseigneur Yves Marchasson par les enseignants de la Faculté des Lettres* (Paris 1992) 67–78.

is a reference to the σταυρός νικοποιός or victorious cross of Constantine I, which also regularly features on tenth-century seals, effectively linking emperor, Christ and victory. Oikonomides notes that the stepped cross is particularly common on seals from the mid-ninth until the eleventh century, the era of the Macedonian dynasty.⁴¹ The use of the first person plural ('let us arm ourselves...') emphasizes the emperor's solidarity with his men, expressing an equality of status between the emperor and his audience which serves to elevate them to a high dignity.

The second speech

The second speech is more than twice as long as the first one, and has been securely dated to 958.⁴² It declares the emperor's love for his soldiers and a notice that he is sending leaders with the authority to reward the bravest men. He then reassures them that prayers are being said for the army. The emperor signals his desire to join them on the battlefield and urges them to demonstrate their famous courage for the benefit of the foreign mercenaries in the army. Finally, the letter indicates that it is accompanied by holy water and prayers for their safe return.

Compared to the first, the second speech is much longer and far more emotional. McGeer places it in midsummer of 958 as a second Byzantine army under the command of the chief imperial minister, the *parakoimomenos* Basil Lekapenos, was sent to join the one led by the famous general (and future emperor) John Tzimiskes.⁴³ It is addressed to the generals of the east (πρὸς τοὺς τῆς ἀνατολῆς στρατηγοὺς) and strikes a rather different tone. It opens with the emperor stating that he enjoys writing these speeches and loves the soldiers so much that it is a delight to instruct them in the art of war.

He expresses his affection for them and announces that he is sending them some outstanding leaders, which is slightly odd, since the speech is addressed to the 'generals of the east' themselves. Who are these leaders sent by the emperor? These envoys are described as ἡγεμόνας καὶ κυβερνήτας. The primary meanings of these two words are 'guide' and 'pilot', respectively. Secondary meanings include 'leader' and 'commander', but it is curious that the speechwriter chooses not the official titles, but these somewhat less specific descriptions. This delicacy of language may indicate that the imperial envoys were high-ranking Constantinopolitan officials with some sort of hiring and firing authority, able to grant promotions and rewards on behalf of the emperor. As *parakoimomenos*, Basil Lekapenos would be expected to hold this level of imperial trust,

41 N. Oikonomides, *Byzantine Lead Seals* (Washington, DC 1985) 12.

42 The speech refers to two campaigns that took place in 956 (to Tarsos led by Basil Hexamilites, to southern Italy led by Marianos Argyros) and one that took place in 958 (to Mesopotamia, led by John Tzimiskes). Cf. Theophanes Continuatus, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn 1838) 461.9–462.4; A. A. Vasiliev and M. Canard (eds.), *Byzance et les arabes* (Brussels 1935–68) vol. 2.1, 362–4; McGeer, 'Two military orations', 123.

43 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 123.

and the generic plural (θεράποντες) may refer to him.⁴⁴ The speech specifically states that their (his) task was to elevate the most courageous soldiers to leadership positions, 'so that by their repute alone they will intimidate the adversary.'⁴⁵

Constantine then immediately informs them that not only he but many monks and clergy in Constantinople are praying for the success of the army, now that they are prepared and (it is implied) on their way to battle. He announces his desire to join them on campaign and exhorts them to fight well, as befits their widespread reputation for incomparable courage. He closes his speech with a reference to the gift of holy water which has been in contact with the holiest relics of Christendom, including fragments of the True Cross.⁴⁶ The sources of encouragement in this speech include the emperor's fatherly love of the army, his spiritual care of them by means of the holy water, and intercessory prayer. The power of Christian relics is inextricably intertwined here with imperial pastoral care.

The scriptures quoted in this second speech are nearly all from the New Testament and the Psalms. Constantine starts with the well-known declaration of God's love in John 3:16. In the emperor's use of the passage, however, the love of God is less than Constantine's love. Whereas God gives His only begotten son, Constantine gives his 'whole being in body and soul, linking and mixing [his] flesh with [their] flesh and [his] bones with [their] bones' (ἀλλ' ἐμαυτὸν ὅλον καὶ σῶματι καὶ ψυχῇ ὑμῖν ἐπιδίδωμι καὶ προσηλῶ καὶ ἀναμίγνυμι τὰς ἐμὰς σάρκας ταῖς ὑμετέραις σαρκί καὶ ὅστᾳ τοῖς ὀστέοις). This intensely personal description of his complete bodily identity with his troops consolidates the emperor's message of sacrificial love.

Using the sole Old Testament reference from the Song of Moses,⁴⁷ he continues the father-son metaphor ascribing to himself the divine ability to engender life. He declares, 'I want my host assembled to be made animate (ψυχοῦσθαι) and to be brought alive (ζωογονεῖσθαι) by me (ὅπ' ἐμοῦ)'. Moses' song praising God's apocalyptic security provides the apodosis to the Apostle Paul's protasis of fatherly love: the emperor (like Paul) has 'begotten [the soldiers] through the gospel' (διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς ἐγέννησα - 1 Cor 4:14-15) and then (like God) 'implanted them in the inheritance of God' (Ex 15:17). Here the word 'inheritance' (κληρονομία) reminds him further of Psalm 15, which praises God for his security and joy in God's inheritance (κληρονομία).

The emperor then queries a lack of informational dispatches from the battle zone, reminding the generals that he writes in order to display his affection for them. The rest of the speech quotes only from the Psalms, which are used to list the most fortifying of God's personal characteristics: He saves the humble (Ps 17), is enthroned above the cherubim (Ps 79, Ps 98), rescues the needy (Ps 112, 137), wears a sword (Ps 44:3) and

44 Mazzucchi, 'Dagli anni de Basilio', 299-303.

45 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 128-9.

46 The other relics mentioned in this list are the Holy Lance, the Staff, the Reed (κάλαμος), the blood which flowed from the wound in Christ's side, the Tunic, the swaddling clothes, the shroud (σινδόνοσ) and 'the other relics of His undefiled Passion.' Cf. McGeer, 'Two military orations', 133.

47 This refers to the poem in Exodus 32:1-43.

resists the proud (Prov 3:34). The pious description of the Deity serves perhaps to dissipate the emperor's palpable anxiety with his relationship to his generals by reminding them of God's unfailing integrity, and perhaps thereby also his own status as the divinely chosen, impeccably legitimate, born-in-the-purple emperor over the whole Byzantine empire, including its army.

Comparison of the two speeches

While both speeches contain traditional elements of imperial rhetoric, they are specifically targeted toward a military audience. Both exemplify what Nike Koutrakou has identified as the two primary themes of imperial propaganda intended for the military. The first was the notion that the emperor was the brother, companion in arms, or father of the Byzantine soldiers. The second was the concept of the Roman soldier as a defender of Christianity against an enemy of another race and another faith.⁴⁸ These elements are also praised in the *Taktika* of Leo VI, when he counsels the use of inspiring speeches before battle.⁴⁹ He recommends reminding the soldiers of 'the reward of faith in God, of the emperor's benefactions, and of previous successes; that the battle is for the sake of God and for the love of Him and for the whole nation...that this struggle is against the enemies of God, and that we have God as our ally, Who holds the power to decide the outcome.'⁵⁰ Constantine's two military orations exploit both the emperor's role as co-belligerent and the soldiers' role as explicitly Christian warriors.

The enemy was of a different religion, and in both speeches, the writer (whether the emperor or another author) emphasizes that difference, using the Byzantine army's Christian faith as a rallying cry. The military situation involved the defence of Byzantine lands from annual Muslim raiding parties, who would invade perhaps three times a year.⁵¹ The *De velitatione bellica* (Περὶ παραδρομῆς τοῦ κυροῦ Νικηφόρου τοῦ βασιλέως), a tenth-century military manual concerning warfare in these decades, mentions 'Arabs' (Ἀραβας) as additional to the large invading armies, composed of jihadis from 'Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia, and southern Syria to Cilicia' that seasonally gathered along the frontier to raid Roman territory.⁵² This is interesting because it combines both ethnographic and religious designations. The two military orations of Constantine VII illustrate the tenth-century circumstances accordingly. The earlier speech focuses on recent

48 N. Koutrakou, *La propagande impériale byzantine: persuasion et réaction, VIIIe-Xe siècles* (Paris 1993) 371.

49 *Taktika* XVIII.19 and XVIII.133.

50 *Taktika*, XII.71.

51 Arab historian Kudama (ca.873-932) explains that these raids took place in late February, from mid-May to mid-June, and from early July to early September. M. J. de Goeje (ed.), *Kitab al-Kharadj*, 259, quoted by E. W. Brooks, 'Byzantines and Arabs in the time of the early Abbasids', *English Historical Review* 15 (1900) 730.

52 *De vel.*, chapter 7, line 9, in G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, DC 1985) 162-3.

victories, is congratulatory in tone and employs the imagery of the Old Testament to evoke a sense of security based on being a chosen people who belong to an all-powerful God: 'He is our ally, men, Who alone is strong and mighty in battle [Ps 24:8], Whose sword is sharpened like lightning [Deut 32:41], Whose weapons are drunk with the blood of those set against Him [Deut 32:42], Who breaks bows and makes strong cities a heap [Is 25:2], Who brings low the eyes of the overweening and teaches the hands of those who hope in Him to war [Ps 18:30, 34-35].'⁵³ The use of Davidic psalms and Exodus covenant vocabulary serve to highlight the battle of the righteous against the unrighteous, a classic perspective of those engaged in defensive warfare, just as the Israelites fought against the Egyptian oppressor and David against Saul's immoral pursuit of his death.

The second speech, by contrast, is significantly longer than the earlier one, and exhorts the army to show courage in an imminent battle: 'Brace your souls, strengthen your arms, sharpen your teeth like wild boars, let no one attempt to turn his back to the enemy ... Let your heroic deeds be spoken of in foreign lands...'⁵⁴ The emperor implores them not to dishonour his expectations but to fight the enemy courageously as 'sturdy and invincible champions of the Byzantine people.'⁵⁵ It is a speech that acknowledges the victory just past, and urges its audience onward toward further triumphs in war. The tone is confident, yet not triumphal. It refers to the rumours of the emir's invincibility and attempts to discredit these, indicating that Byzantium had begun to fight back but still considered itself on the defensive though gaining momentum. Both speeches were composed (and presumably delivered) in the 950s, the period of Sayf al-Dawla's most successful raids and the era in which the tactics of the guerrilla warfare manual, *De velitatione bellica*, were employed.

Although both orations are attributed to Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, and both are intended to encourage the army to greater valour, each communicates a different message. Both speeches refer to imminent battles, query a lack of information, promise rewards for bravery and the presence of the emperor on the battlefield, but each has a distinctive tone. The first speech refers to a situation of ongoing warfare in which the Byzantines have achieved some successes while acknowledging that the enemy is formidable. The writer describes the Muslim soldiers as 'feeble women' and 'deeply frightened' because they use 'tricks and ruses'; he denigrates Arab morale while simultaneously exaggerating the speed of their horses and the quality of their weaponry. He does not lose credibility by playing down the genuine challenge posed by a fast and deadly enemy. Rather, by emphasizing the stature of the enemy and simultaneously accentuating the power of the divine Byzantine ally, the writer both respects the soldiers' experience and calls them to fight to a higher standard. Although the speech is flooded with biblical language, nevertheless the focus is on the soldiers, on their inevitable

53 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 118.

54 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 131.

55 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 132.

victory and their formidable reputation. Their faith is bolstered through implicit identification as those allied with the all-powerful God of the Old Testament prophets.

The main aim of this first speech is clearly motivational; its brevity and succinctness attest to the identity of the writer as an experienced military leader, which is at odds with the voice of a stay-at-home emperor. The 'voice' of this speech is noticeably more direct than that of the second, uses far more Old Testament imagery and quotations, and reveals little personal information about the writer.⁵⁶ The somewhat wistful remark that the writer longs to don his armour and weapons, and 'to hear the trumpet calling us to battle'⁵⁷ may also indicate that Constantine commissioned the speech to be written by a retired general, living in Constantinople but yearning for the glory of his former profession. This suspicion is further bolstered by a subsequent remark that imperial office comes 'often to those who are not worthy, whereas [military office is] for those only who love virtue, who esteem glory before pleasure'.⁵⁸

The second speech, by contrast, is long and rather more centred on the emperor's thoughts, deeds, and intentions. It also emphasizes inevitable victory and the army's reputation for courage, but adds the more personal security of the fatherly love and care of God and the emperor, through which they also receive the practical help of prayers and holy water. This even more religiously-laden imagery of the fatherhood of the emperor over his army may reveal a greater ambiguity about the role of the emperor as a leader of men. If so, it shows his concern to maintain his imperial authority, particularly with regard to the Phokas family, without whom he would not have been able to claim and hold sole power. In this period, armies were no longer returning home for the winter, but were permanently posted along the frontier, the lands controlled by eastern military aristocratic families. The distance may have weakened the emperor's authority and therefore his control over the soldiers, who were loyal to their generals as the more immediate authority among them. Thus the second speech may reflect an uncertain domestic situation of the emperor vis-à-vis the army.

Perhaps because he had (and wished to keep) the support of the Phokades, Constantine was at pains to demonstrate not just spiritual but financial care for Byzantium's fighting forces. He issued his first novel protecting military lands with the words, 'As the head is to the body, so is the army to the state; as their condition varies, so too must the whole undergo a similar change'.⁵⁹ The Byzantine army in the early tenth century had been far from a standing force of professionals deployed in response to specific

56 Ahrweiler claims the second speech bears the mark of Constantine VII's style and vocabulary, and sees similarities with the earlier speech that indicate that they are both by the same writer, but her arguments are not convincing. Her arguments are based on common attributes: lively religious sentiment, the wish of Constantine to participate on campaign, and similar arguments to encourage the soldiers. These similarities do not constitute sufficient proof. Cf. Ahrweiler, 'Un discours inédit', 394, 402.

57 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 119-120.

58 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 120.

59 E. McGeer, *The Land Legislation of the Macedonian Emperors* (Toronto 2000) 71. This novel is dated to early in Constantine's sole reign, no later than 947 or 948.

threats, but was rather a dispersed and localized body of soldiers inhabiting areas defined by themes which were responsible for supporting them. However, by the middle of the tenth century, the theme system was evolving to become less like local militias and more like a multi-ethnic professional force. An easily-mobilized, prepared and well-equipped army was key to providing an effective defence of the borderlands, and so new laws were put in place to assure its continuing competence.⁶⁰

In order, therefore, to assert his authority and to protect soldiers from the depredations of powerful local families, Constantine VII instituted two further changes in land legislation early in his reign. One change, instituted in January of 945 when he took power as sole ruler, restricted the alienation of military holdings (by raising their minimum inalienable value to four pounds of gold). The second change, citing the suffering of the poor, two years later reinforced the laws against the powerful (*δυνατοί*).⁶¹ Haldon has noted that by the tenth century, an aristocracy had arisen – he calls them ‘a magnate class which combined both provincial landowning and imperial office- and title-holding with a near monopoly on key state positions in both the military and civil administration of the empire’⁶² – whose power threatened both state revenue and military funding by taking over lands previously serving those purposes. Thus the emperor was forced to maintain a delicate balance between restraining the abuses of the emerging military aristocracy while also providing for the viability of the army and its ability to protect Byzantine lands from incursions, most notably those of Sayf al-Dawla. Constantine sought therefore to encourage the army to valour by combining military virtue with high spiritual status; in this, he may simply have been following the increase in public support for Christian soldiers and particularly those who fought Muslims.

In the second speech Constantine promises to ‘embrace you as victors appearing as triumphant conquerors against the enemy and... kiss your bodies wounded for the sake of Christ in veneration *as the limbs of martyrs, we will pride ourselves in the*

60 Already in 922, Romanos I had moved to protect the alienation of local lands by reviving pre-emption on a scale of priority that gave local people the right of first refusal. The rubric on this novel indicates its publication in 922, but this date has been contested. N. Svoronos, *Les nouvelles des empereurs macédoniens concernant la terre et les stratiotes* (Athens 1994) 93–126; M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VIe au XIe siècle: propriété et exploitation du sol* (Paris 1992) 426–30. The novel of 934 went further: ‘No longer shall any one of the illustrious magistroi or patrikioi, nor any of the persons honoured with offices, governorships, or civil or military dignities, nor anyone at all enumerated in the Senate, nor officials or ex-officials of the themes, nor metropolitans most devoted to God, archbishops, bishops, abbots, higoumenoi, ecclesiastical officials, or supervisors and heads of pious or imperial houses, whether as a private individual or in the name of an imperial or ecclesiastical property’ dare to acquire village lands. McGeer, *Land Legislation*, 54–5. It was perhaps a stringent application of this law that brought down John Kourkouas ten years later. J. Howard-Johnston, ‘Crown lands and the defence of imperial authority in the tenth and eleventh centuries’, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 21 (1995) 87–8.

61 McGeer, *Land Legislation*, 61–76.

62 J. Haldon, ‘Military service, military lands, and the status of soldiers: current problems and interpretations’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993) 29.

defilement of blood, we will be glorified in you and your valorous accomplishments and struggles.⁶³ This extraordinary statement explicitly connects military triumph with the high status of martyrdom. Christian religion places martyrs at the very altar of God in heaven.⁶⁴ The promise given here is even more extreme, in keeping with the other spiritual ideas expressed in the speech.⁶⁵ Constantine here equates the bodies of the (merely) wounded with those of martyrs, saying he will venerate them to the point of pride, despite the defilement that inevitably occurs when one touches blood. This is a distinctively Old Testament concept, as the plethora of laws and regulations concerning blood testifies.⁶⁶ Oddly, the emperor chooses to use a Homeric word (λύθρος) here to indicate defilement, instead of the biblical word (μολυσμός). Perhaps the choice of word is deliberately intended to distance him from the conceptual weight of the biblical view of blood as defilement. He is declaring that he will take pride in it, an idea more in accord with the militaristic Roman past than the pious Orthodox present.

The language of martyrdom used here flatly contradicts the injunctions of the Orthodox Fathers against the declaration of military casualties as worthy of martyr status.⁶⁷ It also goes against the general Orthodox view of bloodshed, whether at the command of the state or not, as deserving of punishment, usually a ban from the Eucharist. However, it does perhaps provide a clue to the supposedly audacious request made fewer than ten years later by the famous military general and emperor Nikephoros II Phokas to have soldiers who were killed fighting the Muslims automatically declared martyrs.⁶⁸

Given this statement attributed to Constantine VII in this speech, plus the reference to martyrdom found on the mid-tenth-century epitaph of the Byzantine general Katakalon in Thessalonike,⁶⁹ one might begin to wonder if popular opinion tended toward the

63 McGeer, 'Two military orations', 132. Italics added.

64 Rev 6:9. εἶδον ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον.

65 Cf. a contemporary office for the dead in Th. Détorakis and J. Mossay, 'Un office byzantin inédit pour ceux qui sont morts à la guerre, dans le *Cod. Sin. Gr.734-735*', *Le Muséon* 101 (1988), 183–211; and perhaps more poignantly, a slightly later one in L. Petit, 'Un office inédit en l'honneur de Nicéphore Phocas', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 13 (1904) 398–420.

66 Cf. Leviticus 7:26–27 and 17:10–11, 14–15 (forbids the eating of blood and prescribes exile for anyone who does so); Lev 15:19–28 (the defilement of menstrual blood).

67 Most notably, Basil of Caesarea counseled combat veterans to refrain from the Eucharist for three years as a penance for violating the sixth commandment (against murder). It is found in his first canonical letter to Amphilocheus of Iconium: 'Our fathers did not consider killing on the battlefield as murder, it seems to me, [but] pardoned defenders of chastity and piety, that it might be good to advise these [men], having unclean hands, only to be abstinent for three years from communion.' Y. Courtonne (ed.) *Saint Basile Lettres*, 3 vols. (Paris 1961) vol. 2, 130 (Greek with French translation).

68 *Ioannis Skylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin 1973) 18.62–65; See also B. Flusin, and J. C. Cheynet, Jean Skylitzès, *Empereurs de Constantinople* (Paris 2003) 230; M. L. D. Riedel, 'Nikephoros II Phokas and Orthodox military martyrdom', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41 (2015) 121–147.

69 Katakalon, βασιλικὸς πρωτοσπαθᾶριος, στρατηγός, στρατηλάτης Θεσσαλονίκης died fighting the Magyars in 945 or 946. He was eulogised by an anonymous poet for his exceptional courage in battle, his love for God, and his devotion to Constantine VII and Romanos II. S. Lampros, *Τὰ ὑπ' ἀριθμὸν ΡΙΖ' καὶ ΡΤ' κατὰλοιπα*, *Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων* 16 (1922) 53.

acceptance of martyrdom. It has been noted that ‘it raises a question typical of tenth-century Byzantium at war: does death on the battlefield amount to martyrdom or not? The official answer is: no. The unofficial answer is: possibly.’⁷⁰ Either way, it was a live question in the tenth century, and Constantine’s speech to his generals indicates a willingness, on his part anyway, to follow what appears to have been general public opinion on this, a matter both military and religious. Such an accommodation, moreover, shows that Constantine consciously sought to maintain control over shaky domestic security as well as an uneasy relationship with his army by simultaneously mobilizing the religiosity of the civilian populace in Constantinople and the rank-and-file soldiers. Such initiative reveals an emperor prepared to employ the full panoply of religious, legislative, financial, and rhetorical tools available to him in order to achieve his goals.

The distinctions made between the Byzantines and other peoples in both speeches point to a deep and abiding self-identity bound up in their piety as well as political allegiance. Both speeches offer the inspiration and encouragement of the Cross, making them explicitly Christian in contradistinction to the faith of the Muslims against whom the Byzantine army must fight. Most of all, both illustrate the Byzantines’ self-image as the chosen people of God, particularly in their exegetical approaches to Old Testament scripture. Constantine exploits the Old Testament images of the righteous Israelites fighting heretical unbelievers, and uses Davidic psalms to reflect the image of a divinely appointed leader for the chosen people. However, he also casts himself in the role of a mediating priestly figure by sending holy relics and assurances of intercessory prayer. Christian faith thus is used not only to bolster military morale, but also to reinforce imperial authority.

70 M. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres* (Vienna 2003) 227.