Foreword. The Power of the Book: Between Rhetoric and Practice

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In the conference we have organized in Bucharest, in January 2005, our purpose was to explore the medieval and early modern political history from the point of view of its relations with the Bible. The subject is not entirely new — far from it — but, despite the large amount of studies that deal with it, many aspects are still ignored or neglected, and many cultural areas are very little known. It is exactly the case of the so called “Byzantine peripheries” and of the post-Byzantine world. This situation makes quite impossible a truly comprehensive and comparative approach of the subject, as well as the building of a theoretical framework likely to provide valuable interpretations of political attitudes in medieval and pre-modern Europe. This is one reason, among others, for having paid special attention to the “Byzantine Commonwealth” and to its survival after the fall of the Polis.

It would be wrong to consider, as often happens in practice, this world as a “closed” one and its peoples as completely isolated. This perspective is not only inappropriate but heuristically poor. We are faced here with dynamic and open cultures, with cultures that communicate one to another. Greek and Church Slavonic played a very important role in this process, since they acted as unifying cultural — and sometimes political — agents. The contributions brought together in this volume clearly illustrate the cultural communication within the Balkan area, the dynamics of cultural models and the manners to assume and appropriate them. This optic, we strongly hope it, might encourage scholars to pass over any “national” borders by focusing on “transnational” approaches.

It also happens very often that the discussions about cultural communication begin and end by invoking the obstacles and the limits, the difficulties and the frontiers that obstruct the process itself. These are, of course, some important elements, but they are also quite relative. The two important schisms that divided the Christianity in the 11th and 16th Centuries certainly broke, in a sense, the so called “unity” of the Christian world; they created or at least consolidated borders, of course, but they did not completely cut off the channels of the cultural communication. The contacts between East and West, as historians and political scientist use to call the “two Europes”, were nonetheless permanent. We should then consider the different Christian – and also non-Christian – cultures as “natural” parts of a single dynamic development and see each of them in regard to the others.

Crossing borders and connecting disciplines and chronological frames allow us to follow a precise topic through times and cultures, to grasp its dynamics, and possibly to draw up in the long run a comprehensive image of it. This is also a way to detect the various meanings assigned to a certain idea and the different manners to handle with them in particular contexts, which will promote a better understanding
of the habits and attitudes of the social actors. In this respect, some “universal” categories like power and the Bible constitute exceptional indicators by possessing the great advantage to be present everywhere and to be always interrelated: no power system could exist without a theology and every form of theology makes reference, in a way or another, to power. Professor Brandt’s essay proves it pertinently by exploring the juridical uses of the scriptural references to the Last Judgment and their role as symbolic element that structured juridical spaces and procedures. His contribution marks, without any doubt, a starting point for a sociology of practice concerning the concrete ways “to live” the Last Judgment idea, from the Middle Ages to our times.

The same is true about the approaches that pursue the “historical career” of a precise figure. Let us take as point of reference King David, whose fortune as biblical model of the ruler is by far exceptional. He is invoked everywhere, as Professor Bakalova and Professor Klaniczay show, sometimes together with his son Solomon, sometimes with other biblical characters, but he does not remain the same through time and space. On the contrary, the comparative study, in a both synchronic and diachronic perspective, reveals him as quite a changing, versatile and even paradoxical character.

We will not list here the main features that King David’s portrait bears during the Middle Ages; Professor Bakalova and Professor Klaniczay have done it at length in their essays. By reading them, one could remark that the absence of a model could tell us as much as its presence does, insofar as it indicates the dynamic of ideas and attitudes in a particular culture at a particular moment. After a long and eventful “imperial career” in Byzantium, King’s David model is suddenly abandoned in the 14th Century. The same occurred in medieval Bulgaria, whereas in medieval kingdom of Hungary this phenomenon is even more ancient. Same effects but, as the two authors cited above state it, for different reasons.

The accentuated decline of the Byzantine power and the political victory of the hesychast movement, alongside the increase of the eschatological beliefs, explain the change of basileis’ position with regard to King David. With the balance between Emperor and Church becoming clearly favorable to the latter, the basileus tried henceforth to incarnate another ruler ideal, one that was inspired by the humble attitude of Christ towards the Father and the Church. Almost simultaneously, the Bulgarian king Ivan Alexander chooses as reference for his own authority Constantine the Great, whose (quite invented) extreme reverence to the Church constituted the main point in the long-lasting dispute between secular and temporal power in the Orthodox world.

The Orthodox rulers abandoned the Ancient Testament models as early as the 14th Century, but the “political career” of these models still continued after the fall of Constantinople. A new turning point in this history seems to be detected in 18th Century Wallachia and Moldavia. By scrutinizing the Court literature of that time, Emanuela Popescu-Mihut and Radu G. Păun show that Greek panegyrics devoted to the Phanariot princes emphasize their condition of χριστιανομοι, breaking up with
a long tradition of using the Old Testament models. Could this change be related to a “new alliance” concluded between the Great Church of Constantinople and the Greek Phanariot elite who governed the Romanian Principalities at that time, as it has already been suggested? Did the Phanariot princes and their adulators “rediscover” and re-employ the Byzantine political tradition in this particular case?

It is difficult to answer convincingly for now, but these questions deserve to be put forth, all the more since the identification of the prince with David was not completely left out by the “voices of power”. In fact, the use of the χριστιανιτίς idea simply changes the sense of the reference to David, who becomes a “Christ oriented” reference. Consequently, David is seen here not only as the perfect — or almost perfect — ruler, not in the first instance, anyway, but especially as the forerunner of the Savior. Furthermore, he is supposed to announce not only the First Coming, but rather the Second, the Day of Judgment. By contrast, the contemporary Romanian panegyrics dedicated to the same princes continue to invoke King David’s model in a very direct sense, following the ancient political tradition. As a result, the prince himself takes on a double-sided face: he is at once a “second David” (according to the Romanian sources) and an imitator of Christ (in the eyes of the Greek authors).

Now let us come back to the “real” absence of David, and remark that in medieval Hungary he was replaced by his own son. Was Solomon “more perfect” than his father in the eyes of the Hungarian court milieu? Of course not, but Solomon’s figure expressed better the current values of the time, especially the ruler’s sapientia. One could see here at work a new manner to emphasize the outstanding condition of the king. Yet this was not without risk, since the comparison with Solomon was by no means easier to manage than that with his father. The fact is, as Professor Klaniczay clearly states, that the two Biblical kings are both quite contrasting figures, whose failings played a similar role as their virtues in the story.

Symbol of the perfect ruler, chosen by God to govern His people, David is often presented as prototype of the royal sinner as well. It occurs frequently that these two dimensions are assigned to the same person: to the Byzantine emperors Basil I and Basil II, whose destiny was connected by the contemporaries to David’s life, responds the case of the Wallachian prince Neagoe Basarab, invoked here by Professor Bakalova, Professor Pippidi and Ovidiu Cristea. His exemplary devotion is hyperemphasized by the author of Saint Niphon’s Vita, who depicts Neagoe as a second David for having brought Niphon’s relics to the country. But it is precisely the same source that recalls his remorse about the murder of his predecessors — like

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David after Saul’s death - and pays particular attention to his expiatory actions.

Sinner as he was, because of his corrupted human nature, King David possessed nevertheless an exceptional quality: he was able to confess his sin and ready to repent. So was the king, or at least, he might be. If he was near to fail in, the Church never failed to remind him of his duty.

This is true about the Catholic West, where David’s example provided valuable arguments to the critiques of the monarchical government. But this is also true about the Byzantine and post-Byzantine world. Excepting the specula principum, currently written by churchmen who always underline David’s negative example, the potential faults of the ruler are often illustrated by the images of the Repentance of David. This kind of “permanent admonition”, to quote the title of Professor Brandt’s essay, could be encountered in Byzantium, Bulgaria and Serbia, but also in 16th century Moldavian iconography, as mentioned by Professor Bakalova and Margarita Kuyumdzhieva.

Was David the only royal sinner in the Bible? Of course not, but he incarnated the most brilliant example of a human who enjoyed God’s love, since he was “took from out of the haven of the sheep” (2 Sam 7: 8) and elevated over His people. Accordingly, his duties towards both Lord and people were greater than others: the more grace one received, the greater must be his humility.

This explains why his example continues to be used even in the absence of power. Margarita Kuyumdzhieva’s sharp analysis has put it in the context of the Ottoman domination over the Balkans. Lacking an “empire” of their own, i.e. a Christian one, the Orthodox peoples turned their eyes to the Kingdom of Heaven and prepared themselves for the Judgment Day. Consequently, the history of the biblical imperial models was retold and reinterpreted, and the Repentance of David lost its political emphasis to turn into a “simply” devotional and didactic theme, a general symbol of human humility in face of the Almighty God’s power.

Therefore, the versatility of the David’s figure – and the case of Solomon could be easily added here – is precisely the result of the various manners to handle with it. It is not only about polysemy, as Margarita Kuyumdzhieva observes, or ambivalence, as in the case studied by Professor Klaniczay, but also about polemics.

The first point to note is that, despite the profusion of biblical models and ideas mobilized by the “propaganda” of power, there are some who completely miss or suddenly disappear in a moment or another. We already mentioned the case of David. Moses’ example is equally relevant. After being quite commonly employed by the rulers in Byzantium, medieval Serbia and Bulgaria, comparison with the Old Testament “Law Giver” abruptly ceased in the 14th Century. The reason was, again, the influence the hesychast movement. The patriarch Euthymius of Trnovo was particularly firm in this matter strictly avoiding the use of Moses or Aaron figures as comparison terms for the “secular” ruler.

Two centuries later, Moses’ figure proved to be highly problematic for the leaders of the Protestant iconoclasm. As Marina Miladinov maintains, “a clear connection was established between the Biblical story and the contemporary acts of icono-
clasm”. Nevertheless, the doubts continued to exist concerning the validity of the Old Testament teachings. While the most frequently cited Biblical models for legitimate destruction of images were the godly Old Testament kings Josiah, Hezekiah, and Jehu, and at that point the meaning was quite clear, the different currents could not agree upon the acceptance or reject of Moses. One has to admit that it was a difficult task, since the main difference between the “moderate” reformers and the radical iconoclasts was “often intricately linked to their denial or acceptance of the Old Testament laws and prescriptions”. Moreover, even if his quality of “transmitter of the Law and guardian of the Decalogue proscription against idolatry” makes him an essential reference for those who fought against the images, its authority was occasionally used against the iconoclast reformers as well.

The second observation to be made is that almost every reference to a precise Biblical model, whether good or bad, involves its contrary. When the Byzantine panegyrists exalt their patron as “new David”, or “new Solomon”, they mark a sharp distinction between him and the others – not only the rest of the people but also the rest of the monarchs. When “the other” is explicitly defined, the polemical intention arises automatically. By assigning David’s virtues to Neagoe Basarab, the prince who restored the peace of God and the harmony between Church and secular power, the chronicle explored by Ovidiu Cristea equally anathematizes Neagoe’s predecessors and rivals. A kind of parallel is drawn up between the “real David”, the one who respects the promise made to God and people, and the “non-David”, that is, the violator(s) of the sermon. Or, the motif of false sermon refers here to the Covenant, the constituent act marking the alliance between God and His people.

We could easily add some more other similar situations. Let us mention here only one. References to King David currently served to legitimize the authority and the person of the victorious usurper “by the will of God”. This was the case of many Byzantine emperors, as presented by Professor Bakalova, but also of Moldavian princes, chosen by God “from the womb of their mother”, as shown by Radu G. Plun. In this context, the “new David” automatically points towards a “new Saul”, that is, his dethroned predecessor. If the first one’s virtue gave him the power, it is because the second one’s sin, sanctioned by God, provoked his failure.

Gaining power is but one side of the coin; transmitting it to one’s own heirs is the other. This put the usurper in situation of looking for continuity. Nevertheless, the card he plays is quite the same but simply turned over: one face is David; the other Solomon, and in this case they are invoked together as a God blessed model of dynastic continuity. Besides the medieval Byzantine and Serbian examples, cited by Professor Bakalova, we mention here the Romanian panegyrics addressed to the 18th Century Phanariot princes that repeatedly quote the Biblical verse:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, who gave today from out of my seed one sitting upon my throne, and my eyes see it (1 Kgs 1: 48).
We are faced here with a double-oriented claim: by using the legitimacy furnished by his ancestors, the prince not only asserts his own right, but also prepares his offspring's way to power. In circumstances of a real weak and threatened princely authority, the rhetoric of legitimacy increases even more. The figures of David and Solomon are always at hand, ready to be employed.

Their words are there, too, and their use according to different circumstances and interests is by no means less eventful and controversial. The history of Solomon’s famous adagio *Per me reges regnant* ..., deeply examined by Professor Hattenhauer, provides good evidence for this. Fitted by St. Augustine into the doctrine of dual powers teaching that any king, even the tyrannical one, is ordained by God and has to be obeyed by his subjects, Prov. 8: 15 was afterwards appropriated by the Roman Church who demanded for itself the right to execute the king’s responsibility. Simultaneously, the same sentence was reduced only to be a rule of royal virtue at the court of Charlemagne. In the time of Carolingian decay, archbishop Hincmar of Reims sharpened the clerical meaning of Prov. 8: 15, by turning it into a title of severe political control of rulers by the Church, since kings had to submit to Christ, the incarnated wisdom.

The Byzantine response to papal pretensions is even more relevant for our purpose. After a short history, abruptly interrupted by the dispute between Justinian and Pope John II, Prov. 8:15 left the scene of Byzantine imperial ideology. Fully aware of the controversial character and polemic potential of the sentence, the secular and clerical milieu related to the imperial power avoided its use in imperial writings and replaced it by Prov. 21: 1, which puts the king’s heart into God’s own hand.

It is interesting to observe that one could find out the two biblical sentences far later in 18th Century Moldavia and Wallachia. Prov. 8:15 had already had a long history in official charters in order to assert the divine right of princes. Prov. 21:1 seems to have been more rarely employed, but it clearly emerged in 18th Century Greek and Romanian documents, not in reference to the Christian monarch, as in the previous case, but to the Ottoman Sultan. It would be worthwhile then to investigate deeper the relations between these two sentences and their consequences for the definition of monarchical power.

The references to the Biblical kings and to Christ himself as comparison terms for the Christian rulers involve another three important ideas. The first one is that Christian monarchs belong to a large and continuous “family of grace”, an uninterrupted dynasty whose history meets the history of the world itself. We have to deal with an “ideal dynasty” that originated in the Davidic lineage and was continued by Constantine the Great and the other Christian emperors – a dynasty whose constituent feature is the divine gift graciously accorded to its members. It is precisely this condition that allowed any Christian monarch “to choose” his “equal” or his “fore-runner” from a large set or potential “ancestors”. This is not the blood kinship but a kind of “grace kinship” which prevails here.

All depends on the context and on the interest at stake, which refers not only to the ruler but also to the milieu involved in the shaping process of his image. Many
studies are devoted to these topics; it suffices here to recall the brilliant book of Jacques le Goff, who brought to light the “changing faces” of Saint Louis of France according to the religious and political orientation of the contemporaries who regarded him. The same is true about the 16th and 17th Moldavian princes who adopted the predestination idea in order to assert their legitimacy and authority, threatened by the Ottomans and challenged both by local Church and noble factions. As Radu G. Păun observes, by invoking their divine election “by the womb of the mother”, the princes set themselves as successors of Old Testament Prophets, of John the Forerunner and of Christ himself and “evacuate” any mediation between their power and God. Accordingly, the Ottoman Sultan, their “earthly overlord”, is merely reduced to a secondary position, since his only attribution is to make the God’s will come true.

This “rhetoric of accommodation” goes back to the 15th Century and constantly mobilizes an entire arsenal of Biblical arguments. One can find its main features not only in the medieval Serbian, Moldavian and Wallachian charters, but also in the letters of Ecumenical Patriarchs of Constantinople, who were deeply preoccupied to legitimize the Ottoman conquest and to “exorcise” the collaboration of the Great Church with the Ottoman Sultan. But since a prince is completely subordinated to an “Infidel” master, could he be a good Christian monarch at the same time? Paradoxically, as the contribution of Emanuela Popescu-Mihut and Radu G. Păun shows, the answer is: yes.

The Greek panegyrists of the 18th Century go even further and proclaim their patrons as χριστιανοί—Christ imitators. By assuming this condition, the Phanariot princes highly emphasize their own providential dimension as rulers, perhaps in close connection with the eschatological feelings that animate the spirits of the time. And if they are, or better pretend to be, like “new Saviors”, their people become a figura of the chosen people.

Consequently, and this is the second idea which we would like to underline, every “national” history has to be written and read as another Biblical history. Sometimes it is all about continuatio: the exceptional fortune of the universal chronicles (chronographies) in the Orthodox world proves it at length. Some other times we have to speak about imitatio or about figura, to use Erich Auerbach’s concept. In the story of the “icon knifed by the Jew”, analyzed by Professor Pippidi, for instance, the icon itself bears the features of the Ark of Covenant and the eventful history of his move into Wallachia reiterates the Ark’s sacred history.

Accordingly, the prince who brings it to the country becomes a new David and/or a new Solomon. This is not an empty metaphor at all. When the author of Saint Niphon’s Vita, repeatedly invoked here, compares Neagoe Basarab with David or with Solomon, he always knows much more than we do today. Ioana Iancovescu uncovers only one of these “hidden reasons”, but a really essential one. She clearly shows that Neagoe’s main pious foundation, the famous church of Curtea de Argeș,
follows actually the model of the Temple of Revelation as viewed in dream by the Prophet Ezekiel. We are able to see then both acts exposed so far in their true light: Neagoe’s church is not only an immediate symbol of his outstanding piety, nor is it a simple dynastic monument, but it is above all a *figura* of the Universal Church, which announces a New Alliance between the Lord and His new chosen people and monarch. Accordingly, Neagoe integrates himself into a biblical, that is, sacred, framework and considers himself as a new David. It is not a matter here of simple *imitatio*, but rather of a concrete manner to assume — that means to live — Biblical principles and values. What is more, by choosing precisely this “perfect monument” as burial place for himself and his kin, the prince clearly highlights his exceptional condition among humans and makes his kin’s name (ancestors and descent all included) sacred.

But there are some situations where the relation with the Biblical history is even stronger. This is perfectly true about *Kebrag Nagaq St*, *The Glory of the Kings of Ethiopia*, investigated by Ivan Biliarsky. One could discover here not the *imitatio*, but merely the ideology of *translatio* pointed out by the hypothetical move - presented of course as a real historical event - of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. In this case, we could not speak any longer of *a* New Israel, but of *the* New Israel: it is the uniqueness of the people, dynasty and history which is emphasized. The Ethiopian kings do not operate with metaphors or comparisons; they simply put themselves *in* the Biblical history. Consequently, the sanctification of the ruler’s power is operated by originating the dynasty directly from the union between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Since Solomon’s figure is allegorically identified with Christ-Logos-Wisdom and that of Queen of Sheba with the Church, a bridge is built between Old Testament and Ethiopian kings through New Testament’s history of Salvation. Consequently, as Ivan Biliarsky indicates, it is the Ethiopian dynasty which assumes the role of God’s unique instrument on earth and the mission to lead His people to Salvation.

These ideas are not unusual in themselves. What is quite unusual is precisely the manner of conceiving the relation between the king and the Lord, *via* the biblical characters. In the Ethiopian case, “dynasty of grace” and “dynasty of blood” are practically one and the same or, to be more specific, the grace is originated in and transmitted by blood in the same manner as the blood is originated in and transmitted by grace, while in other cases (as in medieval kingdom of France, for instance) grace could be transmitted by blood, but it is not originated in it.

The third aspect we would like to stress concerns the different levels where power and authority are structured and exerted upon. We have spoken at length about ruler’s power, about Church and State and their relationship. We have dwelt on ideology and rhetoric, with different strategies to sharpen the ruler’s images and to disseminate them among the “ordinary people” or among his “natural peers”. But power is a plural and polyvalent reality; one could encounter it everywhere. That is

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precisely what Andreea-Roxana Iancu’s analysis suggests. As far as power and authority are concerned, grace and election could be conjugated on the family level, too, being illustrated by significant Biblical references. The kin group bears then the features and follows the logic of the chosen people while the kin leader is conceived of as God’s representative on earth. He simply is king of his family just as the “real” king is commonly presented as father of his people. The family leader personifies then the delegation of Lord’s power, the Biblical Alliance with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is always invoked, whereas the reference to the Last Judgment day recalls the duties one has to accomplish towards parents and/or children. Particularly consistent material could be found here for systematic research concerning the ways in which the kinship’s ethos of authority is gradually structured by Biblical teachings and reciprocally, the manners in which kinship groups employed Biblical arguments in order to assert their position in regard with other groups and with State’s authority as well.

We are not pretending to elaborate here some theory of relationship between Bible, power and law during Middle Ages and even less to produce any methodological framework to be applied. Likewise, the book we submit to the reader is not a monograph in the narrow sense of the word – it simply could not be. One will surely understand then that any pretension of exhaustiveness is excluded from the very beginning.

Our aim was altogether different. We intended firstly to connect several research spheres and to promote an open dialogue between scholars coming from different fields and different generations. The subject of the meeting fit in quite well and we venture to believe that the results bear convincing witness.

We have also attempted to put together, in a comparative perspective, new sources and to bring forward fresh interpretations of political and cultural phenomena. In this respect, we have to notice the essential contribution brought in by art historians. Their research proved clearly the extent to which text and image must be considered together in order to see events in their true light. The same could be said about the juridical approach, which considerably enlarged our historical perspective. All of us have learned from each other’s work experience and tried to use it effectively. We hope one will be able to say the same after reading this volume.

The meeting we have organized and the present book represent also a good opportunity to draw scholars’ attention to the remarkable potential that political theology still poses for the history of the Byzantine and especially post-Byzantine Europe and for the European history as a whole. This would be, in our view, a way to encourage comparison between Eastern and Western problematic and to prepare the way to a truly comprehensive study. That does not mean to ignore or to exclude non-Christian and/or non-European traditions – not at all. Comparative approaches focusing on Judaism and Islam, for instance, would highly enrich the reflection. Let us hope they will be considered at one of our future meetings.

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