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Strategies of Equivocation and the Construction of multiple Meanings in Middle Byzantine Texts

Many Byzantine manuscripts contain a host of spelling mistakes and thus give the impression that their scribes had only a shaky grasp of the rules of Greek orthography as they had been defined in Antiquity. The reason for this phenomenon is well known: changes in the pronunciation of the Greek language had resulted in a situation where many letters sounded alike. However, it would be wrong simply to regard the Byzantines as hapless victims of these changes. Careful reading of their own writings reveals that they consciously exploited the potential for ambiguity that arose from the greatly increased number of homophones in order to cast doubt on the meaning of words and phrases. In this article I shall first demonstrate that such equivocation exists and that it is deliberate, and then undertake a survey of Middle Byzantine texts in order to identify the various strategies through which this effect was achieved. I focus on homophonous vowels and combinations of vowels where the changes were particularly sweeping. Already in the early Byzantine period ω was no longer differentiated from o , and α , η/ϵ and ou were pronounced like ϵ , ι and v .¹ Over the next centuries this system was then further simplified when ou and v came to be assimilated to ι .² The choice of texts is random and no systematic attempt is made to establish differences between individual authors.

In the early ninth century Theodore, the abbot of the Constantinopolitan monastery of Stoudios, wrote a letter to his disciples, which

¹ G. HORROCKS, *Greek. A History of the Language and its Speakers*. London–New York ²1999, 102–111.

² This last stage was only completed in the tenth century, cf. HORROCKS, *Greek* 111, 205, 255, and R. BROWNING, *Medieval and Modern Greek*. Cambridge ²1983, 56–57.

contained fierce criticism of their unseemly conduct during church services to which they had been invited by laypeople.³

τί δὴ οὖν βούλεται μοι ὁ λόγος ὑποδηλώσαι· περὶ ἀταξίας· ὅτι προσκαλούμενοι ὑπὸ εὐσεβῶν εἰς ψαλμωδίας οὐ κατὰ τὸ πρεπῶδες συναθροίζεσθε καὶ παννυχίζετε, ἀλλ' ἐν λογομαχίαις καὶ πρωτοκλισίαις· προὔλαβες σύ· φησὶν· κἀμὲ οὐκ ἀνέμεινας· τὸ ἴδιον δεῖπνον ἔφαγες κἀμὲ οὐ συνεκάλεσας· ἐγὼ κανοναρχήσαμι ἀλλ' οὐ σύ· φησὶν· καὶ ταῦτα ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ ταῦτα ἀκουόντων τῶν κεκληκότων· μὴ γὰρ χῶραν οὐκ ἔχετε εἰ καὶ τι γίνοιτο θλιπτικόν εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἐγκαλεῖν ἀλλήλους.⁴

What then is the point that I wish to make with these words? It is about disorder: that when called by the faithful to psalm-singing you do not gather and celebrate all-night vigils in a fitting manner but engage in bickering over questions of precedence such as ‘You have overtaken me and not waited for me; you have eaten your own supper and have not called me as well’, and ‘I should be leader of the choir but not you!’ And this in a church and this in the hearing of those who have called you! Even if something distressing does happen do you not have an opportunity to rebuke each other at home?

In his diatribe against the failings of his monks Theodore singles out the issue of precedence. The term *πρωτοκλισία*, literally ‘the privilege of the first couch’, conjures up the Antique practice of eating one’s meal in a reclining position and thus appears to refer to the ‘evening meal’, *δείπνον*, which Theodore mentions shortly afterwards.⁵ This link is even more obvious when we consider the connotations of *πρωτοκλισία*: contemporary readers would surely have thought of Christ’s rebuke of the Pharisees as desiring *τάς πρωτοκλισίας ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις*, ‘the privilege of the first couches during evening meals’.⁶

In my discussion of this passage so far I have followed the critical edition of the text by Georgios Fatouros. However, it must be pointed out that the manuscript tradition is not unanimous: the earliest extant manuscript of Theodore’s *Letters*, which was copied at Studios in the ninth century, offers the alternative reading *πρωτοκλησίας*.⁷ This variation is easily explained through the changes in pronunciation that have been described above. The Studite manuscript of Theodore’s *Letters* is

³ Theodore of Studios, Letter 473 (ed. G. FATOUROS, *Theodori Studitae epistulae II* [CFHB 31.2]. Berlin 1992, 680–681).

⁴ Theodore of Studios, Letter 473 (II.680, 9–20 FATOUROS).

⁵ *LSJ* s.v. *πρωτοκλισία*, ἡ, the first seat at table.

⁶ Matthew 23:6, Mark 12:39 and Luke 20:46.

⁷ For a description of the manuscript, the Codex Coislinianus Graecus 269, see FATOUROS, *Epistulae I*, 44*–45*. Its scribe may have been Nicholas the Studite, the companion of Theodore’s last years. All other manuscripts date to the twelfth century and later, cf. FATOUROS, *Epistulae I*, 45*–67*.

riddled with incorrect spellings and thus one might be tempted to dismiss the variant as a simple mistake. However, the situation is not as straightforward as it first seems for *πρωτοκλησία* is evidently also a meaningful word.⁸ Derived from the verb *καλεῖν*, ‘to call’, it can be translated as ‘the privilege of being called first’. A look at Theodore’s letter shows that such a meaning would fit the context perfectly well. As we have seen Theodore repeatedly refers to the activities of calling and inviting: the laymen invite the monks to their services, and one of the monks does not invite the other to share his meal. Indeed the phrases ‘you have overtaken me’ and ‘you have not called me as well’ imply a situation where one person is called before the other. This observation can be corroborated when we further consider Theodore’s choice of expressions: in this short passage we find five words, *προσκαλούμενοι*, *συνεκάλεσας*, *κεκληκότων*, *ἐγκαλεῖν* and *ἐκκλησία*, which are all derived from the same verb *καλεῖν* as *πρωτοκλησίας*.

Does this mean that one should emend the text of Theodore’s letter? This is unlikely because with the reference to ‘evening meal’ and its obvious Biblical connotation the letter also contains pointers to the reading that is supported by the majority of manuscripts. This suggests that Theodore did indeed write *πρωτοκλησίας* but that he placed it in a context saturated with derivatives of *καλεῖν* in order to signal the possibility of an alternative reading *πρωτοκλησίας*.⁹

A survey of Middle Byzantine texts shows that equivocations of this kind were not ad-hoc creations of individual authors like Theodore but a widespread phenomenon, which followed fixed rules. I will first focus on the writings of Theodore’s younger contemporary Patriarch Methodius where I have been able to detect several cases of equivocation. Discussion of these instances will allow me to establish the whole range of techniques that Byzantine authors could employ in order to construct ambivalence. In the last part of the article I will then broaden the scope of my study to include texts by other authors.

I start with two passages in which Methodius creates equivocation between the homonyms *κατησχυμένος* and *κατισχυμένος*, the perfect passive participles of the verbs *καταισχύνειν*, ‘to shame’, and *κατισχύειν*, ‘to overpower’. My first example is taken from Methodius’ *Life of Eu-*

⁸ *LSJ* s.v. *πρωτόκλητος*, first called.

⁹ In fact, *πρωτοκλησίας* is not the only ambiguous word in this passage because the perfect participle *κεκληκότων*, which I have translated with ‘those who have called you’, also has a homophone in *κεκλικότων*, ‘those who have made you recline’.

thymius of Sardes where it is part of a series of posthumous miracles of this confessor of icon worship:

νεανίσκος τις ἐκ παιδὸς κατισχυμένος δαίμοσι πλείοσιν ... παρὰ τῷ γλωσσοκόμῳ συνασθεὶς τοῦ ἱερομάρτυρος καὶ πλείστοις νεανίσκων ἰσχυροτάτοις διακρατούμενος καὶ κυκλούμενος πάντας δὲ ὑπερισχύων διὰ πλῆθος τῶν κινούντων καὶ ἐνεργούντων ἐπ' αὐτῷ δαμονίων καὶ τὸν ἅγιον ... ἐξονομάζειν μετὰ βοῆς τε καὶ οἰμωγῆς ἀναγκαζόντων αὐθήμερον τοὺς ὄλους ἐξήμεσε δαίμονας.¹⁰

A youth who from childhood onwards had been overpowered by several demons ... had been driven to the coffin of the priestly martyr. And being gripped and surrounded by a great many very powerful young men but nevertheless overpowering all of them through the multitude of the demons that moved and acted in him and that forced him to name the saint ... with shouting and wailing he disgorged all demons on the very same day.

Here I have followed Gouillard's edition, which gives the reading *κατισχυμένος δαίμοσι*. Contemporary readers would have had no problem in understanding the sentence in this sense since formulae such as *κατισχυμένος νόσῳ* as well as the unambiguous alternative *νόσῳ κάτοχος* are common in Late Antique and Byzantine literature.¹¹ A look at the context shows that Methodius took additional care to establish the presence of this meaning because there we find the two cognates *ἰσχυρός* and *ὑπερισχύειν* and the synonymous verb *διακρατεῖν*.¹² All these words reinforce the paradox that while himself being overpowered by 'many' demons the young man overpowers 'even more' young men.

However, it is worth noting that the alternative *κατισχυμμένος νοσήματι* is also attested in Byzantine manuscripts.¹³ That this alternative reading, too, is present in Methodius' text becomes evident when we turn to the immediately preceding passage in the *Life of Euthymius*. There we find an invective against Emperor Theophilus:

¹⁰ Methodius, *Life of Euthymius* 41 (ed. J. GOUILLARD, *La vie d'Euthyme de Sardes* († 831), une œuvre du patriarche Méthode. *TM* 10 [1987] 79, 847–849).

¹¹ See for example Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarius in Isaiaem prophetam*. *PG* 70, 12C: ὁ τῷ τῆς λέπρας πάθει κατισχυμένος, and *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*. *PG* 68, 984C: ὁ τῷ νόσῳ (sc. τῆς λέπρας) κάτοχος .

¹² Compare *Suda* K 1076 (ed. A. ADLER, *Suda Lexicon* ...): *κατισχυμμένος: κεκρατημένος*.

¹³ See the *Synaxarium of Aninas* (ed. H. DELEHAYE, *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae [Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris]*. Brussels 1902, 541, 13–14): ὃς τῇ ἐνοικούσῃ αὐτῷ θεῖα χάριτι καὶ μόνῃ προσευχῇ ἰᾶτο πάντας οἰφδῆτινι κατισχυμμένους νοσήματι.

οἱ σὺν σοὶ καὶ πρὸ σοῦ κατασχυνόμενοι ὑποβολέες σου δαίμονες ὡς πάλαι μάρτυρας τοὺς πρώτους διὰ τῶν ὁμοίων σου διοικτῶν αἰσισάμενοι μετέπειτα θανόντων τούτων θεοχαριστῶς διὰ τῶν ἐνεργουμένων βοῶντες διώκονται.¹⁴

The demons, your prompters, who are shamed together with you and (sc. have been shamed) before you, because once they tortured the first martyrs through persecutors of your ilk but afterwards when those (sc. the martyrs) had died they were themselves persecuted by the grace of God while shouting through the possessed.

This sentence functions as an introduction to the series of miracles that contains the story of the young man, which we have just analysed. The links are evident: in both cases we find references to demonic possession as well as exorcism accompanied by shouting. However, this time the unequivocal present participle of the verb *κατασχύνειν* appears in the text, suggesting to the audience the same meaning for the following perfect participle. Thus a second juxtaposition emerges: the demons that shame the possessed youth are themselves being shamed when they are expelled at the tomb of the saint.

A survey of Methodius' writings shows that the *Life of Euthymius* is not the only text in which he created this equivocation. It also appears in his *Encomium of Agatha*:

καὶ ἡ μάρτυς ... ἐν ἀψύχοις τὰς σωτηρίας ἀβούλως ἀνέθεσθε τὴν δόξαν ἐν τῇ οἰκείᾳ αἰσχύνῃ ὑμῶν κατακτώμενοι. ὁ τύραννος τῷ ἔρωτι κατισχυμένος ἔτι μακρὰς ἐλπίδας ὡς σαθρὰ σχοινία ἕαντῷ ... πλεκόμενος ... ἐτόλμα λαλεῖν.¹⁵

And the martyr said: '... You foolishly entrust your salvation to soulless things and thus possess the glory in your own shame.' But the tyrant, overpowered by desire, was still twining for himself long hopes like rotten ropes ... and dared to reply.

Here, too, the context suggests both the reading 'overpowered' and the alternative 'shamed': the participle is preceded by the noun *αἰσχύνῃ*, 'shame', and it is followed by the adjective *σαθρός*, 'rotten', an antonym for *ἰσχυρός*, 'strong', with which it is indeed often juxtaposed in Byzantine literature.¹⁶

When we compare the two passages from Methodius with the passage from Theodore we can see clear similarities. Like Theodore Methodius achieves equivocation of the words that he singles out for this

¹⁴ Methodius, *Life of Euthymius* 40 (79, 846–847 Gouillard).

¹⁵ Methodius, *Encomium of Agatha* 12 (ed. E. Mioni, *L'Encomio di S. Agata di Metodio patriarca di Costantinopoli*, *AnBoll* 68 [1950] 83).

¹⁶ See for example Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Pace*. PG 35, 1165C: μὴ ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις ἰσχυροῖς τὸ ἀσφαλὲς ἔχειν ἀλλ' ἐν τοῖς ἑτέρων σαθροῖς. Pseudo-John Chrysostom, *De sancta Thecla martyre*. PG 50, 748D: ὁ πολεμῶν ἰσχυρὸς ἢ πολεμουμένη σαθρά.

purpose by surrounding them with other words, which are derived from the same root as one or both alternative meanings but are themselves unequivocal. However, it is worth noting that Methodius does not always create clusters of homonyms: as the second example shows he can content himself with giving only one term as indicator for an alternative meaning. The recurrence of the same equivocation in different texts suggests that he could rely on an informed audience that was used to the play with the two homonymous participles. It is evident that such economy makes it much more difficult for modern readers to detect the presence of equivocation in Byzantine texts.

Moreover, this is not the only technique employed by Methodius: the combination of *κατισχύειν* first with *διακρατεῖν* and then with *σαθρός* shows that he also uses synonyms and antonyms of the alternative meanings present in the equivocated word. Indeed in the second example the antonym *σαθρός* is the only word that points to the reading *κατισχυμένος*, which suggests that synonyms and antonyms not only complement cognates of the equivocated words but that they can replace them altogether in their function as indicators of equivocation. This assumption can be corroborated through analysis of a passage from Methodius' *Life* of Theophanes. Having narrated that the saint and his young wife wished to enter the monastic life, Methodius continues:

τοῦτο οὖν μαθὼν ὁ ἀλωπεκόφρων Λέων τοῦ Νεστοριανοῦ φημι Κωνσταντίνου ὁ παῖς ὁ Ζαχάρειος διόμνυται τὸ θεῖον κράτος ὁ δυσσεβέστατος ἔκκόψαι τοῦ νεανία τὰ ὄμματα εἰ τοῦτο βουληθεῖ διαπράξασθαι προσέτι γε μὴν καὶ ἔκυρός ὁ τούτου συνέιργει τῇ τοῦ τυράννου βουλῇ καὶ διεκώλυεν τοὺς νέους τοῦ ἐνθέου σκοποῦ αὐτῶν.¹⁷

Having learnt this, the Lion with the mind of a fox – I mean the Chazarian son of the Nestorian Constantine –, the most impious, swears by the divine power that he will gouge out the eyes of the youth if he wishes to do this. Moreover, his (sc. Theophanes') father-in-law in accordance with the decision of the tyrant also holds back and prevented the young ones from carrying out their godly purpose.

The Greek text of this passage follows the edition of Latyšev, which is based on the only surviving manuscript of the *Life*. Accordingly, I have interpreted the first verb *συνείργει* as the third person singular of

¹⁷ Methodius, *Life of Theophanes the Confessor* 15 (ed. V. V. LATYŠEV, *Methodii Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Vita S. Theophanis Confessoris*, in: *Zapiski rossijskoj akademii nauk* viii. ser. po istoriko-filologičeskomu otdeleniju XIII 4. Petrograd 1918, 10, 29–11, 1)

the present tense of *συνείργειν*, ‘to hold back together with’.¹⁸ However, an alternative reading is possible, for this verb has a homophone in *συνήργει*, the imperfect of *συνεργεῖν*, ‘to support’. If we adopt the reading *συνήργει*, we arrive at the following translation: ‘his father-in-law also supported the decision of the tyrant.’ Analysis of the passage shows that the context provides justification for both interpretations. The form *συνείργει* is clearly suggested by the following verb *διεκώλυεν*, which has the same meaning,¹⁹ whereas the alternative *συνήργει* has a synonym in the infinitive *διαπράξασθαι*. It is further noticeable that these synonyms share the prefix *δια-*, which is complementary to the prefix *συν-* in the equivocal term. This suggests that the prefixes function as pointers that guide the audience to the two alternative readings encoded in the text. At first sight the link with *διεκώλυεν* is much more evident than that with the relatively distant *διαπράξασθαι*. However, the reading *συνείργει* is not without problems: it results in a shift within the sentence from the present to the imperfect, where one would have expected both verbs to appear in the same tense. This shift can be avoided if one reads *συνήργει* instead, which like *διεκώλυεν* is an imperfect form. Thus one can argue that the shift in tense functions as an irritant that makes the most obvious reading also the most awkward and thus redresses a potential imbalance. What is the outcome of this equivocation? It is evident that the two readings do not exclude each other: by ‘supporting’ the emperor’s decision Theophanes’ father-in-law also ‘holds back’ the saint and his wife from entering the monastic life. We can conclude that two related meanings are superimposed on each other and thus give the text a greater density.²⁰

So far I have focused on the writings of Theodore of Stoudios and above all Methodius of Constantinople. However, this does not mean that the use of these techniques was limited to these authors and their time. I conclude my survey with an example from an eleventh-century

¹⁸ *LSJ* s.v. *συνέργω*, old form of Attic *συνείργω*, To shut up or enclose together.

¹⁹ See for example *Etymologicum Gudianum* (ed. F. G. STURZIUS, *Etymologicum Gudianum*. Leipzig 1818, 169.57): *εἶργω· κολύω*, and Photius, *Lexicon* E 252 (ed. Chr. THEODORIDIS, *Photii patriarchae lexicon* II. Berlin–New York 1998, 26): *εἶργεσθαι· κολύεσθαι*.

²⁰ As both meanings are integral parts of the text they need to be reflected in the translation. Since it is impossible to recreate the superimposition in the English language the only option left is to present the two words in linear fashion: ‘his father-in-law also supported the decision of the tyrant and in doing so holds them back in accordance with this decision.’

text, the *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite, where superimposition of no less than three different homophones can be demonstrated. In this passage we are told how the devil who had suffered defeat from the saint sought to take revenge:

περιελθὼν γάρ τὸ ὄρος ἅπαν οὐκ ἔτι μὲν ὡς τὸ πρότερον μετὰ κόμπου καὶ σοβαροῦ τοῦ φρονήματος οἷος ἐκεῖνος μεγάλανχος καὶ τὸ ὄρος ἅπαν ὡς νοσσιὰν καταλήψεσθαι καὶ ὡς καταλελειμμένον ᾧδὸν ἀπειλῶν ἄραι ὅσπερ ὁ τούτου πατήρ τὴν οἰκουμένην ποτὲ ἀλλὰ περιδείης καὶ κάτω κύπτοντι εὐκωδῶς ὡς οὐδὲ μίαν τοῖς ποσὶ ποθὲν ἀνάπαισιν εὕρισκεν - ἤδη γὰρ πάντοθεν ἀπελήλατο καὶ τόπος οὐκ ἦν οὐδεὶς αὐτῷ ἔν τινι καταλύματι ἀλλὰ πάντα πεπόλιστο πάντα τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείας πεπλήρωτο πανταχοῦ φροντιστήρια ἀσκητήρια πανταχοῦ - τὴν μανίαν οὐκ ἐνεγκὼν γυμνοὶ τὸ ξίφος ζητεῖ δῆμιον.²¹

For no longer did he go around the whole mountain with boasting and a haughty attitude as before, like the one who of old had uttered great boasts, and nor did he threaten to grasp the whole mountain like a nest and to lift it like a left-over egg, as his father had once the inhabited world, but he was frightened and resembled one who stoops low since he did not find any rest for his feet anywhere – for he had already been driven away from everywhere and there was no room for him in any resting-place but all was transformed into a city, all was filled with the worship of God, monasteries everywhere and everywhere hermitages –, and not being able to contain his madness he bares the sword and seeks an executioner.

In my discussion I focus on the noun *καταλύματι*. This is the spelling found in all extant manuscripts and the context in which the word appears leaves no doubt that this spelling was intended by the author: the sentence ‘there was no room for him (i.e. the devil) in any resting-place’, *τόπος οὐκ ἦν οὐδεὶς αὐτῷ ἔν τινι καταλύματι*, closely resembles Luke 2:7: ‘there was no room for them in the resting-place’, *οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἔν τῷ καταλύματι*. However, further analysis again shows that this is not the only possible reading. In the first part of the episode the hagiographer describes the previous attitude of the devil with the phrase *τὸ ὄρος ἅπαν ὡς νοσσιὰν καταλήψεσθαι καὶ ὡς καταλελειμμένον ᾧδὸν ἀπειλῶν ἄραι*, ‘threatening to grab the whole mountain as a bird’s nest and to snatch it as an egg that has been left over’, which is an adaptation of the speech of the Assyrian king in Isaiah 10:14: *τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην καταλήψομαι τῇ χειρὶ ὡς νοσσιὰν καὶ ὡς καταλελειμμένα ᾧδὰ ἄρῶ*, ‘I will grab the whole world with my hand like a bird’s nest and I will snatch it like eggs that have been left over’. Through these comparisons Mt Athos is likened both to a *νοσσιὰ κατειλημμένη* and to a *καταλελειμμένον ᾧδὸν* and therefore can be described as *κατάλημμα* ‘that which has been grabbed’, and as

²¹ *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite 125 (ed. J. NORET, *Vitae duae antiquae sancti Athanasii Athonitae* [CCSG 9], Turnhout–Leiden 1982, 59–60).

κατάλειμμα ‘that which has been left over’,²² which are both homophones of the word κατάλυμα that appears in the text.²³

Through skilful combination of two Biblical passages the hagiographer has thus encoded in his text three different interpretations of the sound pattern ‘katalimati’. The immediate context reveals itself as an almost literal quotation of Luke 2:7 and therefore ensures initial decoding as ‘resting-place’. By comparison, the alternative meanings ‘hand-hold’ and ‘remnant’ are much less obvious: the quotation of Isaiah 10:14 is found at some distance from the equivocal sound pattern and can only be recognised as a point of reference through a series of interpretative steps. At the same time, however, Isaiah 10:14 is much more suitable in this context than Luke 2:7: the Assyrian king had long been equated with the devil whereas the reference to Joseph and Mary appears to be completely out of place.²⁴ Thus one can argue that the oddity of an allusion to the Nativity in this episode functions as an irritant that goads readers on to look for more satisfactory solutions. It is evident that the strategies of equivocation in the *Vita A* of Athanasius are highly sophisticated and that they demand the full attention of the audience.

How are we to conceive of this interaction between authors and audiences? The hagiographical texts that have provided the majority of examples present themselves as speeches. However, one must be careful not to take claims to oral delivery at face value. Moreover, it seems impossible that listeners would have been able to notice equivocations encoded in such lengthy and complex texts. It is much more likely that the realisation came during private reading. Confirmation of this hypothesis can be found in a Studite manuscript, the Theodore Psalter.²⁵ This manuscript contains a depiction of the investiture of an abbot, which is accompanied by a poem consisting of an intercessory prayer of John the Baptist and the granting of this prayer by Christ. I repro-

²² *LSJ* s. v. κατάλειμμα, ‘remnant’. The noun κατάλειμμα occurs frequently in the Old Testament, for example in Isaiah 10:22: καὶ ἐὰν γένηται ὁ λαὸς Ἰσραὴλ ὡς ἡ ἄμμος τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ κατάλειμμα αὐτῶν σωθήσεται.

²³ *LSJ* s. v. κατάλημμα, ‘comprehension’. *LSJ* remark that the word is often spelt κατάλειμμα in manuscripts. Given the identical pronunciation this is not surprising.

²⁴ See for example Life of Euarestus of Kokorobion 43 (ed. C. VAN DE VORST, *La vie de S. Évariste higoumène à Constantinople. AnBoll* 41 (1923) 322.13).

²⁵ Ch. BARBER, *Theodore Psalter. Electronic Facsimile* (University of Illinois Press, in association with the British Library). London 2000.

duce the last line of John's prayer and the first line of Christ's answer:

αἰτῶ μὲν αὐτὸ(ς) πρὸς δὲ καὶ σὸς οἰκέτης.
εἶκω λιπαῖς σου φίλε μου.²⁶

'I beg you myself, and so does your servant.'
'I yield to your entreaties, my friend.'

The 'servant' mentioned by the Baptist can be identified as Theodore of Stoudios, whose image appears in the illumination. The Greek term οἰκέτης is found in the manuscript and it is further suggested by the proximity of φίλε, 'friend', with which Christ addresses John: it indicates a difference in status between the two figures.²⁷ However, this is not the only possible interpretation because the two terms αἰτῶ, 'I beg', and λιπαῖς, 'entreaties', point to an alternative reading as ἰκέτης, 'suppliant', which belongs to the same semantic field and which appears in Byzantine texts alongside the other two terms.²⁸ Thus we have a clear instance of a double meaning, which moreover makes perfect sense because Theodore is indeed both, servant of Christ and John's fellow-suppliant. In this case, however, the text can only be understood in conjunction with the image, which means that contemporary users of the Psalter saw only one of the two possible meanings in writing. How would they then have noticed the equivocation? Here one must remember that visible signs are not the only way in which words were communicated to Byzantine readers: they used to read aloud and while doing so it would have become evident to them that an alternative spelling and therefore also meaning was possible.

To conclude: by the Middle Byzantine period changes in the Greek language had obscured the once direct relation between spelling and pronunciation and had turned many originally distinct words into hom-

²⁶ These lines are found on folio 191v of the manuscript.

²⁷ The terms 'friend' and 'servant' define John's and Theodore's relationship with Christ and establish a hierarchical relationship between the two saints.

²⁸ See for example Genesis IV 33 (ed. A. LESMUELLER-WERNER-I. THURN, Josephi Genesii Regum libri quattuor [*CFHB* 14]. Berlin 1978, 83, 89–90): ἰκέτης ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ παραγίνεται ἑξαπῶν. Nicephorus of Constantinople 122 (ed. J. M. FEATHERSTONE, Nicephori Patriarchae Constantinopolitani refutatio et eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815 [*CCSG* 33]. Turnhout–Leuven 1997, 217, 67): λιπαῖς καὶ ἰκεσίας. See also Theophylact Simocatta IV 11, 11 (ed. C. de BOOR–P. WIRTH, Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae. Stuttgart 1972, 171, 5–6): ἐγὼ ὡς παρὼν προσφθέργομαι Χοσροῦς ὁ σὸς υἱὸς καὶ ἰκέτης.

ophones. Byzantine authors deliberately exploited these changes for the equivocation of words and phrases. They constructed contexts that often make it impossible to determine the 'right' spelling, and as a consequence the 'right' meaning, of particular words or phrases. In order for this technique to work the authors spiked the contexts of such terms with 'mixed signals' and thus cast doubt on their identity. In some cases these signals are found in the actual text: authors use unequivocal cognates of the possible interpretations of a sound pattern or synonyms and antonyms of these interpretations. In these cases the use of complementary prefixes can give additional hints to the reader. Other instances of equivocation only become evident through comparison with other texts, in particular the Bible. The employment of these techniques may well be the reason for peculiar features of Byzantine texts such as apparently redundant pairs of synonyms and the high frequency of juxtaposition between terms. Even obvious deficiencies like awkward syntactical structures or the use of inappropriate quotations may find their explanation here if indeed authors deliberately created such 'oddities' in order to make audiences look for alternative, more satisfactory meanings.

The great effort that Byzantine authors expended on constructing often highly elaborate cases of equivocation raises the question of their purpose. One reason for the use of this technique is suggested by the analysis of the letter of Theodore of Stoudios: alternative readings can add layers of meaning to a text that may be indispensable for proper understanding. Even more important, however, is the effect that the very presence of this feature in Byzantine texts had on contemporary audiences. As we have seen it inculcates the notion that the meaning of signs is dependent on the contexts in which they are found. As a consequence readers and listeners were constantly reminded that understanding is not the result of passive reception but is constructed through an active process of 'making sense'. This comes as a surprise when we consider that most of the texts that have been analysed in this article were written during or soon after the time of iconoclasm when the defenders of icon worship insisted that images of saints were unequivocal and that they always had the same effect regardless of the circumstances of their display and the predispositions of the onlookers.

