

Contrition and Emulation:

Ambrose's De apologia prophetae David and Its Carolingian Reception

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Introduction

In 390, the Roman Emperor Theodosius (347–395), infuriated over the murder of his general Butherich in Thessalonica, commanded his troops to slaughter the city’s population for three hours in reprisal. Ambrose (339–397), the bishop of Milan, stepped forward to privately reprimand the emperor for this massacre with a letter and an exegetical text on Psalm 50.¹ In the past, the bishop often held the emperor’s favorable attention and had sometimes even preached at court with Theodosius himself as the audience; perhaps emboldened by the success of these previous interactions, Ambrose now complained in his letter that the emperor had infringed on the bishop’s “natural right” to participate in the inner circle of the imperial government. He then conveyed the Christian community’s collective lament and disapproval of the massacre, and even dared to excommunicate Theodosius until such time that the emperor would humiliate himself publicly: he should undertake the ritual of penance to acknowledge his sin and reconcile himself with God.² When the recalcitrant emperor referred to the crimes of the biblical King David in his defense, Ambrose replied that since Theodosius had imitated David in his fall, he should now follow David in his rise.³ Furthermore, as the priest Nathan had effectively persuaded King David to perform a public penance, Ambrose now assumed the role of Nathan in his letter of exhortation to Theodosius as he urged the latter to remit his iniquity like David—with unrelenting contrition and perpetual penance. Ambrose attached to this audacious letter a

¹ Irene van Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 91. For evidence confirming that the exegesis is dedicated to Theodosius, see Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Pierre Hadot and Marius Cordier, *Sources Chrétiennes* 239 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1977), 37–41. For discussions on Ambrose’s previous initiatives that had angered Theodosius, see Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 98–106.

² Ambrose, “Letter on the Massacre at Thessalonica (390),” in *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. John Hugo Wolfgang Gideon Liebeschuetz (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 265–67.

³ Paulinus of Milan, *The Life of Saint Ambrose: A Translation of the Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, trans. Mary Simplicita Kaniecka, Christian Roman Empire Series, vol. 13 (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2019), 26.

commentary on Psalm 50 (one of the seven “Penitential Psalms”: nos. 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142), entitled *De apologia prophetae David*, in which he further highlights David’s repentance and the recovery of his royal dignity, arguing that “[King David’s] fall is ordinary, but his confession is exceptional.”⁴ Addressing a delicate situation with both shrewdness and boldness, Ambrose used his letter and commentary to achieve his aims.

Ambrose was successful in his admonition. In a funeral oration that Ambrose dedicated to Theodosius, for instance, he reveals that the emperor had “abstain[ed] from participation in the sacraments, abandon[ed] his imperial procession in full regalia, and we[pt] publicly.”⁵ Furthermore, just like King David, who derived his power from his penance and his recognition of his powerlessness before God, Theodosius and his royal dignity were not diminished by his public self-abasement.⁶ Ambrose praised Theodosius as the most august and glorious emperor, and confirmed that his humility allowed him to attain salvation. Later generations would also remember Theodosius in a good light, respecting him for having exemplified ideal kingship and having fashioned himself as a new David.⁷

The Carolingian Renaissance and the Remembrance of Theodosius’s Penance

Besides attempting to revive Christian Roman penitential traditions, the Carolingians also admired the actions of Theodosius and Ambrose as demonstrative of the quintessential

⁴ Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 92: “lapsus communis, sed specialis confessio.”

⁵ Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” in *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. John Hugo Wolfgang Gideon Liebeschuetz (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 193.

⁶ Lynn Staley, “The Penitential Psalms: Conversion and the Limits of Lordship,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 2 (2007): 248.

⁷ Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” 190; H el ene Yagello, “Histoire, ex eg ese et politique: L’apologie de David d’Ambroise de Milan et les Carolingiens,” *Sources: Revue de l’Association Histoire au pr esent* 49–50 (1999): 110.

relationship between a sovereign and bishop. During the late eighth and ninth centuries, Charlemagne initiated a host of educational, religious, and cultural reforms to enhance the clergy's intellectual quality and raise the level of religious instruction within his realm (part of a program known more generally as the "Carolingian Renaissance"). Among the various reform initiatives, a special emphasis was placed on the salutary effects of penance, as well as on the clarification of episcopal duties. One consequence of the Carolingians' increased interest in penance was the recognition of a now-problematic diversity of penitential traditions in use throughout the realm. In response, Carolingian ecclesiastics sought to achieve uniformity among the various ritual forms by only accepting Roman provenance as a guarantee for authenticity of any given penitential text.⁸ As part of their re-examination of and esteem for Roman culture of late antiquity, these same ecclesiastics understood Theodosius as the model Christian emperor, and regarded Ambrose's bold remonstrance as that of an ideal bishop properly exercising his duties.⁹

The Carolingian familiarity with Ambrose, his commentary, and his encounter with Theodosius could have influenced Frankish emperor Louis the Pious (778–840), to undertake his two public penances. Through scrupulous analyses of the transmission and reception of Ambrose's letter and exegesis of Psalm 50, scholars such as Irene van Renswoude have demonstrated that many among the literate and learned in the ninth century were familiar with Ambrose, Theodosius, and the latter's penance. Certain scholars have also suggested that the remembrance of Theodosius's penance may have influenced Louis the Pious to repent in 822 to appease God through confession and fasting, almsgiving and prayers.¹⁰

⁸ Rob Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 123.

⁹ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 196.

¹⁰ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 197; Yagello, "Histoire, exégèse et politique," 111.

The Carolingian bishops allied with the rebellion may also have followed the Ambrosian legacy by pushing for the second penance of Louis in 833. Due to Louis's sons' discontent with the emperor's arrangements for his succession, they raised two rebellions in the 830s and forced their father to submit to another public penance in 833. H el ene Yagello argues that since many Carolingian clerics had been working to restore the "ancient" public penance of Theodosius's era, they were influenced by Ambrose's commentary on Psalm 50 in their admonition of Louis, for they appear to have emulated the steps that Ambrose had taken against Theodosius.¹¹

Historiography on the Two Penances

Several modern scholars have focused on the memory and reception of Theodosius's penance in later centuries. Sarah Hamilton has compared Ambrose's *Apologia David* to an eleventh-century *vita* and discussed Ambrose's influence on later authors' representations of pious kingship, while H el ene Yagello has succinctly examined the ninth-century interpretations of Ambrose's commentary on Psalm 50.¹² Mayke de Jong has articulated the importance of the confrontation between Ambrose and Theodosius in the ninth century by showing that the Carolingians admired the event as being demonstrative of both how a bishop should exercise his office, and how an emperor should undertake voluntary penance to purge himself of sin and redeem himself in the eyes of God.¹³

Modern scholarship has also offered different interpretations of Louis's penance in 833, and related the Carolingian bishops' efforts of pushing for Louis's penance to their

¹¹ Yagello, "Histoire, ex eg ese et politique," 111.

¹² Sarah Hamilton, "A New Model for Royal Penance? Helgaud of Fleury's *Life of Robert the Pious*," *Early Medieval Europe* 6, no. 2 (2003): 189–200; Yagello, "Histoire, ex eg ese et politique."

¹³ Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 118, 122.

understanding of the duty of their episcopal office. Mayke de Jong adopts an approach that treats the political and religious implications of Louis's penance in 833 among his contemporaries, while Courtney Booker offers an analysis of the competing contemporaneous medieval narratives of the penance, and traces the legacy of these interpretations in medieval and modern memory.¹⁴ In particular, De Jong and Booker have looked closely at Carolingian discussions of the duties of the episcopal office, and have demonstrated the rise of an episcopal "self-consciousness" during the reign of Louis the Pious. According to De Jong, both Carolingian kingship and the Carolingian episcopal office entail "sublime authority and heavy responsibility"—both offices require the "steering [of the] people towards salvation," and being accountable for the people's iniquities before God.¹⁵ This idea of an office's authority and responsibility was shared by Louis and his rebel sons' bishops, who often cited passages from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel to admonish others of the consequences of negligence.¹⁶ For example, the rebel bishops staunchly stated that since Louis had committed a sin, their silence and dissimulation would violate the duty of their episcopal office and result in God exacting his terrible vengeance upon everyone.¹⁷

Research Focus and Chapter Outline

Brian Dunkle's recent English translation of Ambrose's two commentaries on the penitential fiftieth Psalm have provided the opportunity to examine the nature and degree of their influence on Louis the Pious's penances. Despite a growing number of detailed analyses on the

¹⁴ De Jong, *The Penitential State*; Courtney M. Booker, *Past Convictions: The Penance of Louis the Pious and the Decline of the Carolingians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

¹⁵ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 37, 115.

¹⁶ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 79; Booker, *Past Convictions*, 140, 142.

¹⁷ Booker, *Past Convictions*, 142.

prominent significance of penance in Carolingian Europe, the reception of Ambrose's penitential exegesis, *De apologia prophetae David*, has not yet been carefully considered within the Carolingian context. While the Latin critical edition of Ambrose's commentaries is available, I will not undertake a philological examination of the Latin texts.¹⁸ Rather, I will adopt a formalist approach and use Dunkle's English translations of *De apologia prophetae David* and *Apologia David altera* to focus on the poetics of the two texts.¹⁹ I hope to offer new perspectives that emphasize the importance of Ambrose's text beyond its theological prominence: to recognize the *De apologia prophetae David* as exemplary or demonstrative—from an episcopal point of view—of the correct relationships that should obtain among the lay sovereign, the clergy, and God. I will attempt to uncover how Carolingian understandings of the performative component of the Penitential Psalms and their perceived effects, in combination with the awareness of both Ambrose's texts and the penance of Theodosius, could have contributed to or even have inspired Louis the Pious to undertake his own public penances. Overall, my study seeks to examine how both the Carolingian fixation on penance and the Penitential Psalms, and their insistence on the supposedly ancient Roman, and thus "correct," method of engagement with such texts, informed the performance and meaning of Theodosius's and Louis's penances.

Chapter One and Two focus on Ambrose's exegesis and its late fourth-century penitential context. In Chapter One, I will review the value and significance of the Penitential Psalms, penance, and the rhetorical practice of *parrhesia* (frank speech) in the fourth century to contextualize the objectives of Ambrose's exegesis. I will then discuss the multivalent effects of fourth-century penitential rituals for both the punishment of secular offenses and the

¹⁸ Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier.

¹⁹ Ambrose, *Treatises on Noah and David*, trans. Brian Dunkle (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

reintegration of sinners back into the Christian community. Underscoring the importance of Ambrose's exegesis to Theodosius's undertaking penance, I will show how Ambrose linked the philosopher's practice of *parrhesia* with the priest's ministerial duty, thereby holding himself—a “philosopher-bishop”—doubly accountable for admonishing Theodosius. Chapter Two presents a summary of Ambrose's exegesis of Psalm 50, a work of commentary that he appears to have written in two versions at slightly different times. I will demonstrate that both texts underscore the imitability of David's penance, the importance of listening to a priest's advice, and that a king shall always be held accountable as the steward of a realm entrusted to him by God.

Chapter Three and Four discuss the Carolingian penitential context, the Carolingian remembrance of Ambrose, and the possible influence and use of Ambrose's exegesis in the ninth century. The third chapter first describes the Carolingian longing for a return of Roman late antique practices and traditions during the historical context of the Carolingian Renaissance, exemplified in their reviving the use of the Penitential Psalms and in their emulation of the fourth-century penitential rituals. It then suggests that the ninth century held Ambrose in high esteem based on their citation of or reference to Ambrose and his works, and concludes with a recounting of the historical context leading to Louis's two penances. Chapter Four discusses the influence of the main ideas of Ambrose's *Defenses* in the ninth century, specifically in the context of Louis's penances. The first section compares the similarities between Ambrose's ideas and Louis's moral reforms, and suggests that Louis could have conducted his first penance in 822 in accordance with Ambrose's teaching and in emulation of Theodosius. The second section proposes that the rebel bishops may have used Ambrose's ideas to provide justifications for their bold admonition. It then concludes with a comparison of the accounts of Louis's, David's, and Theodosius's penances, to suggest that the Carolingian bishops also sought to emulate

Ambrose's actions to provide examples for future generations. Lastly, this thesis will end with a brief epilogue discussing other possible research opportunities in relation to the *Defenses*.

Chapter 1

The Penitential Psalms, Penance, and *Parrhesia* in the Fourth Century

Using *parrhesia* (frank speech) and his exegesis on the Penitential Psalms, Ambrose of Milan reprimanded Roman emperor Theodosius and effectively persuaded him to undertake a public penance in 390.²⁰ Historians during the Middle Ages long recognized Ambrose as an exemplary bishop for having done so. Sozomen (400–450), a Roman church historian, recounted how Ambrose’s public rebuke even attracted the admiration of Theodosius himself, while other contemporaneous historians and chroniclers held this incident as exemplifying the ideal relationship between a bishop and an emperor.²¹ What has arguably made Ambrose appear admirable was his extreme boldness in articulating his concerns, fearlessly speaking truth to power, and his success in convincing Theodosius to publicly confess his sins for the purpose of reconciling himself with the people and receiving communion from the Church again. During their encounters, Ambrose diligently fulfilled his episcopal duties by supplying the emperor with sincere advice and admonition. Although Ambrose did not block Theodosius at the church gates to reproach him publicly, as Sozomen would recount dramatically, Ambrose did successfully persuade Theodosius to repent by guiding the emperor privately with a long letter, to which Ambrose also attached his exegesis on the “*Miserere mei*,” the penitential fiftieth psalm.²²

²⁰ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 5.

²¹ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25, ed. Joseph Bidez and Günther Christian Hansen, trans. Chester D. Hartranft, *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 2* (Oxford: Parker, 1891), 394; Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 88, 97.

²² Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 10.

The present chapter surveys the fourth-century use of the Penitential Psalms, penance, and *parrhesia* as elements of contemporaneous penitential discourse. To better understand Ambrose's strategy of practicing *parrhesia* and using his commentary on Psalm 50 to persuade Theodosius to undertake a public penance, it is crucial to investigate what the Psalms, penance, and *parrhesia* meant in Ambrose's time. The following sections will lay the groundwork for this investigation. I will first review the creation of the "Penitential" Psalms and discuss their instructional and ritual use by ecclesiastics. I will then turn to one of the goals for which these psalms were used: persuading people to perform penance. That is, I will comment on the redemptive, reconciliatory, disciplinary, and dramatic effects of the penitential ritual. Finally, I will explore *parrhesia*—Ambrose's rhetorical technique for persuading Theodosius to perform penance—by investigating its meaning and use in late antiquity. I will then discuss Ambrose's originality in combining the practice of frank speech with episcopal responsibilities to achieve his immediate goals.

The "Penitential" Psalms: Their Designation and Content

The content of the Psalms is primarily concerned with the fall and subsequent rise of King David of Israel. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, a married woman, after he had seen her bathing from the roof of his house. After murdering Bathsheba's husband and marrying Bathsheba himself, David was reproached by the prophet Nathan, a priest sent by God to reprimand David for his egregious sins. Upon meeting Nathan, David admitted his sins and

repented with tears.²³ Through his remorseful confession and repentance, David regained his favorable position with God and was honored over the centuries as the ideal king and just man.

Late antique Christians identified seven psalms as a specific group relating to penance. Origen of Alexandria (184–253), a Christian theologian, was the first to notice the common theme of penance among seven particular psalms.²⁴ Three centuries later, Cassiodorus (485–585), a renowned Roman statesman and scholar, formed the subcollection of the Penitential Psalms by singling out seven inconsecutive psalms from the Psalter: nos. 6, 31 (32), 37 (38), 50 (51) the “*Miserere mei*,” 101 (102), 129 (130) the “*De profundis*,” and 142 (143).²⁵ However, although Cassiodorus, in his exegetical work *Expositio Psalmorum*, was the first commentator who made this designation of select psalms explicit, he repeatedly stated that he had “inherited” rather than “established” the grouping.²⁶ Consequently, scholars have argued that the creation of the specific collection of “penitential psalms” occurred sometime more generally between the third and the sixth century. Furthermore, the different numbering of the psalms is a result of different translation versions of the Psalter. Unsatisfied with the version of the Latin Bible based on the Greek Septuagint translation, the trilingual Church Father Jerome (347–420) translated the Hebrew Bible directly into Latin (the version later known as the Vulgate), and in the process combined Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 into Vulgate Psalm 9, while dividing the Hebrew Psalm 147

²³ Ruth Mazo Karras and Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 105.

²⁴ Michael S. Driscoll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms: Their Designation and Usages from the Middle Ages Onwards,” *Ecclesia Orans* 17 (2000): 153.

²⁵ Robert M. Kellerman, “*Miserere Mei*: Penitential Psalms and Lyrics in English Literature, 1300–1650” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1997), 3; E. Ann Matter, “Petrarch’s Personal Psalms (*Psalmi Penitentiales*),” in *Petrarch*, ed. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 219, 427. Driscoll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms,” 154.

²⁶ Annie Sutherland, “Performing the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages,” in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 20; Kellerman, “*Miserere Mei*,” 4; Clare Costley King’oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 5.

into Vulgate 146 and 147. All references to the Psalms in this thesis will be according to the Latin Vulgate version, and will refer to “*Miserere mei*” as Psalm 50.

The Penitential Psalms: Imitation

Late antique authors were familiar with the Penitential Psalms and focused more on their enlightening ethical effects, despite the Psalms’ ornate rhetorical elements. Although the seven Penitential Psalms were not specifically designated for recitation during the period of Lent until the twelfth century, Christians had been well-acquainted with them since late antiquity, for theologians and preachers had long been advocating since that time for their liturgical and penitential use.²⁷ In his *Confessions*, an autobiographical work recounting his spiritual exploration and self-scrutiny, the great Church Father Augustine (354–430) demonstrates his period’s familiarity with this group of psalms. Besides quoting extensively from the Penitential Psalms, Augustine confirms that the Psalms are “sung throughout the whole world.”²⁸ Furthermore, even as one who was mindful of the power of rhetoric, Augustine could not help but admit that the Davidic psalms “enkindled him” with words “honeyed with... luminous [divine] light,” as he strained his ears to hear their delightful “melody.”²⁹ Yet, despite their exquisite, seductive form, the Penitential Psalms also evince strong ethical values that aim to elicit emotionally edifying responses from their audience.³⁰ Cassiodorus, for instance, praised the

²⁷ Kellerman, “*Miserere Mei*,” 4; Staley, “The Penitential Psalms,” 222; King’oo, *Miserere Mei*, 13, 14.

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.4.8, ed. George Stade, trans. Albert C. Outler and Mark Vessey (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007), 113.

²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.15.27; 9.4.11, trans. Outler and Vessey, 51, 114.

³⁰ Michael P. Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song: The Psalms as Moral Discourse in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), xvi.

reading of the Penitential Psalms as taking “heavenly honey,” but also maintained that they were spiritually rich beneath their elaborate and captivating rhetorical cloak.³¹

To achieve their desired ethical effects, the Psalms build up an emotional climax, eliciting the reader’s passionate feelings and responses, in order to move them to imitation and contrition.³² According to E. Ann Matter, the Penitential Psalms heighten the reader’s emotions up to the central piece, Psalm 50, which reaches its crescendo by featuring a speaker remorsefully repenting and imploring God to have mercy on him.³³ Augustine himself remarked that after reading the Psalms, he “trembled with fear” in recognizing his own sinful love of vanity and falsehood, and spoke “loudly and earnestly” of his contrition.³⁴ Augustine was “warmed with hope” of rejoicing in God after reading the Psalms, as he believed that God’s mercy would grant him salvation after he repented like David.³⁵

The Penitential Psalms were also used in late antique and early medieval schools as models for writing and for behavior. They were employed as a formal written exercise by which beginners would take their first steps toward learning and internalizing various rhetorical tropes and figures. But the study of the Psalms had a greater purpose than merely serving as a model for rhetorical training.³⁶ Christians studied the Psalms’ moral lessons and respected David as a prophetic teacher, who had connected his personal repentance for his sins with his social responsibility as a king, leading his people by setting an example with his morally righteous

³¹ Driscoll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms,” 155.

³² Matter, “Petrarch’s Personal Psalms,” 220.

³³ Matter, “Petrarch’s Personal Psalms,” 220.

³⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.4.9, trans. Outler and Vessey, 113.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.4.11, trans. Outler and Vessey, 114.

³⁶ Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*, xix.

behavior.³⁷ More than just a text to be studied, the Penitential Psalms were a guide for action, as their readers were meant to emulate their content—like David, they were to feel both ashamed of their transgressions and encouraged to repent and behave righteously.³⁸

A New David

Theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries reached a consensus that, besides providing the Christian community with a penitential model, the essence of the Davidic story lies in its heroism that was worthy of emulation. As Lynn Staley observes, Latin authors of the early medieval West such as Ambrose, Augustine, Cassiodorus, and Alcuin all shared a common interest in the language of penitential discourse.³⁹ David was the perfect model for penance, adds Kevin Uhalde, not only because that king demonstrated the positive outcome of being a sincere penitent, but also because his words and deeds provided moral sentiments and a unified language to move the entire Christian community to introspection and contrition.⁴⁰ Augustine, for example, preached to his congregation that, while Nathan the prophet had not been sent to them, it was David who had been sent—a contrite and penitent king with whom everyone should moan, weep, and finally “share his delight” together.⁴¹

³⁷ Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*, xvii, xx.

³⁸ Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*, xx; Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Sutherland, “Performing the Penitential Psalms,” 20.

³⁹ Staley, “The Penitential Psalms,” 222.

⁴⁰ Kevin Uhalde, “Juridical Administration in the Church,” in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 124.

⁴¹ Uhalde, “Juridical Administration in the Church,” 114; Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos 50*, ed. Eligius Edkkers and Johannes Fraipont, *CCSL 38* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 602.

In his commentary on Psalm 50, Ambrose connected David with Christ's incarnation, hoping thereby to persuade Theodosius to imitate David. Ambrose normalizes David's sin as a commonality of human nature, and made a typological connection between King David and Christ, maintaining the belief that David is the incarnation of Christ.⁴² Ambrose underscores that Christ assumed the body of an adulterer only because he wished to teach the wicked about the way of piety and to convert the impious.⁴³ Within the story of Psalm 50, the prophet Nathan reprimanded David and showed him the proper means to repent; beyond Psalm 50, David/Christ attempted to preach the faith to the wicked. Here, Ambrose may also have been speaking allusively to Theodosius about the recent massacre at Thessalonica: when Ambrose, by way of his rhetorical skills, downplays David's transgressions, he may thereby be downplaying Theodosius's recent sin—like David, the emperor had been motivated by human nature. And when Ambrose extols the penance of David, exclaiming that “later rulers” should have imitated David to avoid the experience of “bitter war” and cleanse their sins with penance, he may also, through the same implicit comparison, be advising Theodosius to govern his passion and thereby turn his sinful massacre into an elevated manifestation of piety—to be the “New David.”⁴⁴ Undertaking a public penance was to be the method of this transformation.

Penance: Redemptive Readmission

Accounts of late antique penance not only stress the importance of the ritual's publicity, but also demonstrate the contemporaneous attention given its performative aspect. Although the

⁴² Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” in *Treatises on Noah and David*, trans. Brian Dunkle (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 114–17.

⁴³ Brian Dunkle, “Introduction,” in *Treatises on Noah and David* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 146, 149.

⁴⁴ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 120.

notion of sin originated in Judaism, Christians used it to construct a penitential discourse.⁴⁵ Claiming that “all human beings sinned [and] all [should] make reparation,” the early Church used a discursive language of transgression and forgiveness to create a cohesive community that was to work toward the common goal of attaining salvation.⁴⁶ Penance was believed to be the way to remit one’s sins for their souls’ salvation. Tertullian (155–220), an early Christian apologist, was the first person to describe the ritual of public penance. He had demonstrated that neither sin nor reparation was a personal matter, as both involved—whether directly or indirectly—the entire Christian community.⁴⁷ During Christian gatherings, the “penitent” had to dress in sackcloth and ashes, prostrate himself before the priests in humiliation, and thereafter live on a restricted diet in the hope of meriting reconciliation with his congregation.⁴⁸ Tertullian’s description, though perhaps not accurately reflecting his contemporary reality, displays what he believed to be his period’s central attitudes and concerns regarding penance: its publicity and performativity.⁴⁹

Late antique penance also focused on reconciliation and readmission. It was understood to be an honorable, solemn procedure that demonstrated the penitent’s devotion and consisted of a series of events, including public confession, bishops’ remonstrations, and a public performance of humiliation and tears. While excommunication—a priest’s or a bishop’s official exclusion of someone from participating in the sacramental rites of the Church—was the most

⁴⁵ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68.

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Tertullian: Treatises on Penance: On Penitence and On Purity*, trans. William P. Le Saint, (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1958), 86–87.

⁴⁸ Kellerman, “*Miserere Mei*,” 116; Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 16; Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68; Tertullian, *Tertullian*, trans. Le Saint, 86, 87.

⁴⁹ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 78; Uhalde, “Juridical Administration in the Church,” 102.

extreme form of alienation in Christianity, the early Church put considerable efforts into readmitting penitents, even if they were excommunicated.⁵⁰ Readmission was undoubtedly the highlight of the whole penitential ritual. Rather than an unbearably humiliating process, penance provided the excommunicated with a dignified and edifying opportunity for reconciliation. Indeed, as Kevin Uhalde shows, the title “penitent” in late antiquity was one held in honor and respect, even being worthy of record on the penitents’ tombstones as a testament to their penitential devotion.⁵¹ Capable of effecting both contrition and pride, public penance in the fourth century was not just a legalistic and rigorous process that people sought to avoid, but also one that allowed reintegration with the Christian community through an honorable demonstration of devotion.

To be sure, late antique penance had disciplinary effects, as it intersected with the Roman juridical system. If serious offenders like murderers and adulterers wanted to reconcile themselves with the Christian community, they needed to submit to a ritual penance and seek the bishop’s forgiveness.⁵² According to Tertullian, Christians had established a set of redemptive penitential rituals by which to perform exculpatory moral exorcism during their collective gatherings.⁵³ Transgressors of secular laws were not only prosecuted by the Church, but also had to reconcile with God and the Christian community through ritualized debasement, which subjected them to the community’s gaze and judgment. In short, penance was becoming a prerequisite for returning to the Christian congregation after having committed a serious fault,

⁵⁰ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 93.

⁵¹ Uhalde, “Juridical Administration in the Church,” 99.

⁵² Uhalde, “Juridical Administration in the Church,” 98.

⁵³ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68; Tertullian, *Tertullian*, trans. Le Saint, 86.

and by the fourth century it was being used as a means to discipline even secular offences.⁵⁴ In describing the penitential rituals of both Emperor Theodosius and King David, Ambrose depicted the two sovereigns as casting themselves prostrate on the floor, “weep[ing] publicly” over their sins, and praying with groans and tears for God’s forgiveness.⁵⁵ He saw little distinction between David’s time and Theodosius’s time. For Ambrose, David’s successful penance should serve as an example for Theodosius to follow to redeem himself for his sin. The method which Ambrose adopted to advise Theodosius was a conflation of *parrhesia* and his episcopal duties.

***Parrhesia*: Admiration for Boldness**

Parrhesia was an established late antique cultural practice that centered on criticism and truth-telling between friends. *Parrhesia* means frank speech, or “frankly speaking one’s own mind,” especially when uttering “a deserved reproach,” while *parrhesiastes* are those who use *parrhesia*.⁵⁶ Although a set of rhetorical rules governed *parrhesia* to help those who used it to achieve the most effective results, its practice differed from rhetoric both in its ultimately critical nature and in its speaker’s absolute conviction in the veracity of their words. The ancient Athenians admired *parrhesia* as a fundamental ideal of democratic politics, adopted it as a tool of criticism, and used it to effect both social and political change by speaking out against their rulers for the purpose of correction.⁵⁷ Irene van Renswoude has traced the history of *parrhesia*,

⁵⁴ Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 18.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” chp. 34, trans. Liebeschuetz, 193; Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 128, 129, 137.

⁵⁶ S. Sara Monoson, “Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy: Plato’s Debt to a Democratic Strategy of Civic Discourse,” in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstitution of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 175.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 65; Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 5, 10, 16, 17.

noting that it appears prominently in the New Testament's *Acts of the Apostles*, while instruction books on the intricate and tacit social codes that governed *parrhesia* are also attested as early as the first century.⁵⁸ The existence and circulation of these manuals suggest that frank speech was a carefully constructed cultural practice that had been going on for some time. Although *parrhesiastes* followed certain conventions in their approaches, the core of the practice remained anchored in the speaker's conviction and courage. The *parrhesiast* genuinely and strongly believed in the veracity of his view, explains Michel Foucault, since the very act of frank speech suggested that the person was telling the truth as he saw it.⁵⁹

The *parrhesiastes* also sought to "confront, oppose, or find fault" with powerful interlocutors of superior status or position, which thereby imputed a martyr-like spiritual authority to the inferior frank speakers.⁶⁰ The *parrhesiast* demonstrated a willingness to compromise or sacrifice their own interests, rights, or even life, in their fearless attempt to reprimand their interlocutors and articulate untimely truths. The potential danger of fully vocalizing such truths in a context where silence was normally expected heightened people's respect for the speaker's audacity and disregard of punishment.⁶¹ Indeed, both the pagan elite and Christians of the fourth century looked up to the "possessors of *parrhesia*" as laudable opponents of ruthless tyranny.⁶² People admired their courage and trusted their capability to steer the empire onto the right course with their frank, unvarnished utterances.⁶³

⁵⁸ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 1–3, 9.

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, "Discourse and Truth" and "Parresia," ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 3; Monoson, "Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy," 175.

⁶⁰ Foucault, "Discourse on Truth," 5; Monoson, "Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy," 175.

⁶¹ Monoson, "Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy," 177.

⁶² Richard Flower, *Emperors and Bishops in Late Roman Invective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.

⁶³ Monoson, "Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy," 178.

Ambrose's Innovation: A Spiritual Advisor

The notion of frank speech was often associated with the image of ancient philosophers, who could “tame the heart of the emperor” by employing *parrhesia*.⁶⁴ The fourth-century image of the philosopher was a “tranquil, bearded figure.... with bare chest and simple cloak,” retired from secular affairs and far removed from the locus of power.⁶⁵ However, while some philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato, merely wrote on political matters to voice their concerns and suggestions, other philosophers, such as Cicero and Themistius, were themselves directly involved in them.⁶⁶ For instance, in the fourth century, the philosopher Themistius personally pacified and counseled the Emperor Valens.⁶⁷ Philosophers as *parrhesiastes* who admonished rulers with equanimity, making bold and candid speeches to suggest changes for the better, became a common trope. As men of the court who were “at one and the same time close to power and independent of it,” they used their erudition and aplomb to intervene in secular affairs by offering candid advice to the emperor and his entourage.⁶⁸

However, in 390, Ambrose altered the model of the frank speaker by conjoining the role of philosophers and the classical notions of *parrhesia* together with a Christian bishops' duty and authority. Summarizing Ezekiel 3:18 in his letter to Theodosius after the massacre at Thessalonica, Ambrose warned the emperor of a priest's double accountability: that if a priest

⁶⁴ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 66.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 62.

⁶⁶ Pierre Hadot and Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 106; Yelena Baraz, “The Gift of Philosophy: The Treatises as Translations,” in *A Written Republic: Cicero's Philosophical Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 96.

⁶⁷ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 64, 69.

does not “admonish the wrongdoer... the priest will be liable to punishment” himself.⁶⁹ While philosophers held privileged advisory positions to guide emperors by boldly admonishing them, Ambrose argued that the priest was also duty-bound to rebuke candidly anyone who goes astray, for he shall be liable for the sins that he did not correct. With this connection, Ambrose combined the traditional role of philosophers with the moral responsibility of a priest’s office.⁷⁰ In legitimizing his own authority to admonish the ruler, Ambrose further modified his status from a bishop to an advisor of the emperor, making himself the “spiritual guide” of Theodosius—an authority no mere philosopher could ever wield.⁷¹ Conflating the unique aptitudes of philosophers and the classical rhetorical tradition of *parrhesia* with Christian ministerial duties, Ambrose’s innovation offered bishops of later generations a model to follow both in word and deed. One of the mediums through which Ambrose delivered his frank speech was his exegesis on Psalm 50.

⁶⁹ Ambrose, “Letter on the Massacre at Thessalonica (390),” trans. Liebeschuetz, 264.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 68.

⁷¹ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 89; Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 112.

Chapter 2

The Apologia prophetae David and the Apologia David altera

In this chapter, I will focus on the *Apologia prophetae David* of Ambrose, a text which exists in two versions: the *Apologia prophetae David*, hereafter referred as the *First Defense of David* or the *First Defense*; and *Apologia David altera*, the *Second Defense of David*, or the *Second Defense*. Both texts are commentaries on the Penitential Psalm 50 and share common themes regarding the virtue of King David, the typological connection between David and Christ, and the importance of imitating David's penance. I will first introduce the two texts and then summarize their contents to illustrate their differences in structure and objective. With this chapter, I shall demonstrate that, despite their differences, both *Defenses* underscore the imitability of David's penance and the divine accountability that is intrinsic to a king being entrusted with his kingdom by God.

Although Ambrose's two commentaries were written with different objectives, both *Defenses* downplayed David's transgressions, articulated a king's status as being beneath God, and extolled his penance as worthy of emulation. The *Second Defense* offers theological arguments to counter three groups of opponents, while the *First Defense* exhibits a line-by-line exegesis that centers on the themes of sin, confession, and emulation. Despite their difference in focus, both *Defenses* begin by excusing or normalizing David's sin. The *Second Defense* first addresses the gentiles to justify David's sin on the basis of human nature and Bathsheba's corrupting influence, while the *First Defense* pleads for David by claiming that his sin was a consequence of the fragility of human nature. The two *Defenses* then prove the secular king's status as hierarchically below God within the Church, since the king owed his authority to God

and relied on God to vouchsafe the kingdom to him. Furthermore, both texts also praise David's repentance as being worthy of emulation. This is revealed by the *Second Defense's* call to the congregation to follow David's example and confess their sins, whereas the *First Defense* describes in detail how David recognized his own iniquities and received God's pardon through charity, repentance, and confession. The *First Defense* also reiterates the general importance of listening to a priest's admonition, while the *Second Defense* demonstrates a tighter theological focus. It refutes claims of the Jews and other religious rivals by articulating Christ's identity as other than Solomon and separate from God, and concludes with a typological exegesis that excuses David's sin and demonstrates the promising future of Christianity.

Dating of the Two Defenses

Based on the texts' manuscript transmission and intertextual references, it appears that Ambrose finished the *Second Defense* prior to 388, then used it to complete the *First Defense* in response to emperor Theodosius's massacre at Thessalonica in 390. Because the two texts tended to be compiled together in medieval manuscripts and lack proper titles, scholars have given the texts their designations based on their order in the extant manuscripts (rather than on their respective dates of composition), thus naming *Apologia prophetae David*, which appears a few folios before the *Apologia David altera*, as the *First Defense*, despite it being the later composition.⁷² The *Second Defense's* absence in any early manuscript and its different style, however, have led to an ongoing controversy about its Ambrosian authenticity.⁷³ Nevertheless,

⁷² Dunkle, "Introduction," 15. For the two texts' manuscript transmission, see Martine Roques, "La tradition manuscrite de l'apologia David altera attribuée à Ambroise," *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 34 (2005): 239–97.

⁷³ Debates about its authorship have been ongoing since the fifteenth century; for details, see Franco De Capitani, "Analogie fra un'opera Ambrosiana discussa ed Alcuni scritti antimanichei di Sant'Agostino," *Rivista di Filosofia*

scholars in the twentieth century defended the Ambrosian authorship of the *Second Defense*, and argued for a chronological inversion of the texts' traditional sequence in the manuscripts.⁷⁴ Because its pedantic format and relatively rigid division of ideas are so unlike Ambrose's later, fluid style, these scholars date the *Second Defense*'s time of composition to Ambrose's early episcopal years of 375 to 378.⁷⁵ In contrast, the *First Defense* has been universally accepted as an authentic work due to its popularity and its stylistic affinities with other, more securely dated works of Ambrose.⁷⁶ Revolving around the themes of sin, redemptive penance, and the authority that God holds over the king, the *First Defense* likely was meant to clarify and elucidate points made in Ambrose's relatively succinct letter to the emperor in 390 about the Thessalonica massacre.⁷⁷

Summary of the *Second Defense*

The *Second Defense* is comprised of three distinct sections, in which Ambrose addresses and refutes three religious groups' respective theological concerns over Penitential Psalm 50. The first part identifies the weakness of human nature, offers viable corrections for such weakness, and positions secular kings within the Church. That is, Ambrose first normalizes

Neo-Scholastica 66, no. 1 (1974): 59–88; Hervé Savon, "Doit-on attribuer à Saint Ambroise 'l'Apologia David Altera'?" *Latomus* 63, no. 4 (2004): 930–62; Roques, "La tradition manuscrite."

⁷⁴ Dunkle, "Introduction," 15. For manuscript study that led to the conclusion that the two texts were the products of a common author, see De Capitani, "Analogie fra un'Opera Ambrosiana ed Scritti di Sant'Agostino"; Hugh Connolly, "Some Disputed Works of St Ambrose," *The Downside Review* 65, no. 2 (1947): 121–30.

⁷⁵ Savon, "Doit-on attribuer à Saint Ambroise," 935, 948; Dunkle, "Introduction," 16.

⁷⁶ Dunkle, "Introduction," 19; Hartmut Leppin, "Das Alte Testament und der Erfahrungsraum der Christen. Davids Buße in den Apologien des Ambrosius," in *Die Bibel als politisches Argument: Voraussetzungen und Folgen biblizistischer Herrschaftslegitimation in der Vormoderne*, ed. Andreas Pecar and Kai Trampedach (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 130, 133; Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 39, 41, 42; Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 315; Savon, "Doit-on attribuer à Saint Ambroise," 958.

⁷⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 315; Savon, "Doit-on attribuer à Saint Ambroise," 958; Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 41, 42.

David's sin, emphasizes the value of David's penance to persuade the text's audience to follow David as a model, and finally contends that secular laws are only useful for helping Christianity. In the *Second Defense's* second part, Ambrose addresses the Jews and other religious rivals, arguing that Solomon is not Christ, that Christ has a distinct and separate identity from God, and that Christ had assumed the body of David for the salvation of the world. Lastly, Ambrose calls on his congregation to confess like David, and reassures them that David's corrupt deeds were justified because grace has long been promised. In this section, Ambrose describes both the necessity and the benefits of confessing one's sin, and then uses typological connections and an allegorical story to illustrate the prosperity of the Christian legacy.

- First Part

Ambrose normalizes David's sin by vilifying Bathsheba, and then informs the gentiles that the weakness of human nature does not impede God's forgiveness, for David had already correctly remitted his sin by listening to a priest's advice to perform public penance.⁷⁸

Anticipating the gentiles' potential misinterpretation of Psalm 50 as enticing its readers to sin like David, Ambrose forestalls such a reading by stating that Christ disciplines the nation and condemns adultery; he would never allow a psalm to exist that could incite criminal thoughts.⁷⁹

Ambrose also points to Bathsheba, the source of David's sin, to mitigate and normalize that king's adultery. Describing her as a "lascivious woman" and a "powerful force for vice," Ambrose defines David's encounter with Bathsheba as one that "any man [would find] difficult to escape unharmed," and admonishes his congregation to refrain from approaching any such

⁷⁸ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 169.

⁷⁹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 152–53.

deceitful and dangerous woman.⁸⁰ Ambrose then describes David's penance as a model for the exoneration of sins and argues that he was a rarity among kings, one who had done the right thing of imploring God's mercy. He illustrates how David followed the fourth-century penitential rituals by first acknowledging his sin, then "falling prostrate on the ground, [and] covering himself with sackcloth."⁸¹ Noting how the priest Nathan reprimanded David to weep, fast, and repent in exchange for God's mercy, Ambrose also explicates this event's humiliating effect on David, which was due to the difference in status between Nathan and the king.⁸² Nathan's reproach was certain to bring "great embarrassment and shame" upon David, because a powerful secular king had been condemned by a lesser person, a mere "prophet."⁸³ However, the seemingly shameful experience also makes David's confession all the more admirable, for he demonstrates humility in not abusing his power but accepting the lowly priest's criticism and pleading for God's mercy.

Ambrose also declares that God's position is hierarchically superior to the king, as God had entrusted the kingdom to David and rewarded him with redemption for his contrition and piety. Ambrose first claims that David's sin is one that would be specifically against God. Since God had vouchsafed the kingdom to David, Ambrose explains, the king was responsible for preserving "with an inviolate faith the profit entrusted to [him] from the heavenly commandments."⁸⁴ Therefore, a king sinning is a king violating his promised faith towards God, and he needs to remit his sin with penance, beseeching divine pardon in the hopes of

⁸⁰ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 157–60.

⁸¹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 155.

⁸² Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 184, 185.

⁸³ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 185.

⁸⁴ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 194.

reconciliation.⁸⁵ Moreover, while all men are naturally drawn to sin, explains Ambrose, a ruler's enormous secular power presents an additional, especially potent "incentive" that lures him to commit iniquities and to disregard God's supremacy.⁸⁶ Since power only adds to the temptation of sinning, Ambrose applauds David for not abusing his sovereignty as a ruler and nullifying divine justice, but publicly admitting his sin in contrition despite the shame and subjecting himself to God.⁸⁷ Ambrose's hierarchy of sovereignty is made more explicit when he elucidates that secular power is only useful when it serves Christianity, such as by "improving divine ceremonies" and consecrating buildings for God.⁸⁸ Furthermore, in approval of the king's actions, God, who is hierarchically superior, graciously rewarded David's penance with redemption, and compensated David's piety by making him the "king and the victor over many nations."⁸⁹

- Second Part

Ambrose then turns to the Jews and various heresies to argue that Solomon is not Christ and that Christ has a distinct and separate identity from God. Historical context suggests that the heresies posed no threat to Ambrose, but Ambrose still constructed their arguments from scripture, and then refuted the claims to rhetorically encourage Christians to view themselves as inheriting the only true form of Christian faith.⁹⁰ To counter the Jews who contended that

⁸⁵ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 194.

⁸⁶ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 156, 160.

⁸⁷ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 155.

⁸⁸ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 156.

⁸⁹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 160.

⁹⁰ Maria Doerfler, "Ambrose's Jews: The Creation of Judaism and Heterodox Christianity in Ambrose of Milan's *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*," *Church History* 80, no. 4 (2011): 756, 770, 771.

Solomon is Christ, Ambrose contrasts Solomon's "beg[ging] for wisdom" with Christ's wise nature, and observes that Solomon "labored in vain" in building the Temple to God, his greatest achievement, because the Temple was ultimately constructed by "heavenly strength" rather than Solomon's efforts.⁹¹ Discrediting Solomon's wisdom and ability, Ambrose opines that Solomon was simply a human with impressive power, and even Joshua, who could control the stars, appears more like Christ than Solomon.⁹² Ambrose then rebukes the claims of Arius, Sabellius, and Photinus, who all identified with Modalism, a heresy maintaining that God manifested himself under the form of Christ and thus rejecting Christ's own distinct identity.⁹³ According to Ambrose, Christ has a separate identity from God, despite the two reigning with a "unity of power."⁹⁴ Christ could have assumed David's body for the salvation of the world, even though David had sinned.⁹⁵

- Third Part

By the end of the *Second Defense*, Ambrose calls all Christians to confess their sins to God, who will wipe them clean, and affirms the presence of divine providence. Discussing how David and the apostle Paul both recognized their sins, Ambrose asks his audience emphatically and rhetorically whether they would dare to claim their innocence when even the saints have confessed their iniquities.⁹⁶ To discourage Christians from hiding their sins, Ambrose warns that Judgment Day will make everyone shamefully reveal their iniquities; therefore, it would be

⁹¹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 161–63.

⁹² Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 163, 164.

⁹³ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 165.

⁹⁴ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 194.

⁹⁵ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 168.

⁹⁶ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 192.

better to confess now, despite the shame, so that God may pardon and absolve their faults.⁹⁷ Sins lodge within one's heart and will always testify, accuse, and condemn their bearer, but because God blots them out in exchange for penance, Christians need to confess promptly to cleanse themselves.⁹⁸ After remarking on the properties of sin, Ambrose concludes by reminding people of God's grace and divine providence, as God not only "forgives what was past" but also "prescribes what was to come."⁹⁹

Ambrose also espouses the hidden mysteries of Psalm 50 and uncovers the legacy of David's corrupt deeds for Christians. He first establishes the connection between David and Christ by stating that David sinned in order to save the world from erring and to redeem himself "in the body of Christ."¹⁰⁰ Since David had also addressed God as his "father" like Christ would, this further suggests that David was "chosen as the source" for Christ's body.¹⁰¹ Ambrose allegorically connects the nude Bathsheba with the Church, loved by David just as Christ would love the Mother Church, while the death of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, frees Bathsheba to legally unite with David/Christ.¹⁰² Through these typological connections, Ambrose thus excuses David of the sin of adultery with Bathsheba in order to legitimize their union as a lawful one between Christ and the Church, a "faithful chastity."¹⁰³ This conjugal relationship also yields Solomon, the "eternal fruit among the Christians."¹⁰⁴ While the prosperity of Christians is demonstrated and promised within Psalm 50, Ambrose then digresses to explicate the allegorical

⁹⁷ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 192, 193.

⁹⁸ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 191.

⁹⁹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 194.

¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 169.

¹⁰¹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 169, 170, 174.

¹⁰² Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 174, 181, 183.

¹⁰³ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 176.

¹⁰⁴ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 184.

story of the rich man and poor man to further emphasize the auspicious legacy of Christianity. Although the priest Nathan initially used this story to persuade David to perform penance, Ambrose used it to emphasize the promised glory of Christianity. The poor man, Ambrose observes, represents Christians led to heaven by their “noble poverty,” while the Jews are the rich men having sins as their guests.¹⁰⁵ In the end, the Jews will die, but the Christians will “enjoy more abundant blessings” because of their piety.¹⁰⁶

Summary of the *First Defense*

Departing from the *Second Defense*'s tight focus on a theological exegesis of David's adultery, the *First Defense* engages in a broader discussion of sin, confession, and emulation. Although the *First Defense* also discusses divine providence, it follows the early Church theologians Didymus and Origen in providing a detailed and expanded line-by-line exegesis of Psalm 50.¹⁰⁷ Thematically, the *First Defense* can be divided into two sections: a plea *for* David, and the plea *of* David. An introduction precedes the first section, within which Ambrose enumerates David's virtues, recounts David's story, and argues for a deeper meaning underlying the scriptural text. In the first section, Ambrose provides an explication of and justification for David's sins. The second section then presents David's own plea, in which he recognizes his own iniquities and remits them through charity and repentance.

The text begins with Ambrose explaining his objective—namely, excusing David from condemnation and discussing him both as a model for the faithful to emulate and as a reminder of divine providence. Ambrose claims that, in truth, David needs no defense, for he already

¹⁰⁵ Ambrose, “The Second Defense of David,” trans. Dunkle, 185, 186.

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, “The Second Defense of David,” trans. Dunkle, 187.

¹⁰⁷ Leppin, “Das Alte Testament,” 120, 126.

received divine affirmation for his glory, and God had also pardoned Solomon on his behalf.¹⁰⁸ Anticipating that his audience will overlook the deeper meanings beneath Psalm 50's superficial story of adultery and homicide, Ambrose then explicates the nuances of these failings of David by viewing them from a wider perspective.¹⁰⁹ It is precisely because the saints make mistakes, Ambrose reasons, that normal men can receive them as both companions and models who share the same weakness within their nature.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the saints' mistakes also make people aware of the working of divine power. Indeed, besides succumbing to the weakness in his nature and falling because it was part of the divine plan, David's rise and fall also remind people of God's continuous presence in the world, preventing people from stumbling into a "pit of deceit."¹¹¹ Some saints' "human sensibility" of vanity may have led them to attribute divine assistance to their own virtue, but, as Ambrose demonstrates, their special abilities in fact derive from and belong to God, not themselves.¹¹²

The Plea for David

In light of human frailty and David's exceptional penance, Ambrose pleads on David's behalf that his sin was a part of human nature and then justifies it by way of David's penance and charity. Recounting the sins of holy priests and the fact that a person is already a sinner at birth, Ambrose represents David's iniquity as a universal aspect of human nature.¹¹³ Furthermore, Ambrose alludes to the corruptive influence of secular power, a topic that he had dwelt on

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 106, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 105.

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 108.

¹¹¹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 109.

¹¹² Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 109.

¹¹³ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 113, 114.

previously in the *Second Defense*.¹¹⁴ He again speaks unfavorably of power and of its negative consequences of seducing men to sin, but here he immediately shifts his attention to specifically applaud David for having sinned “only once” when he had been exposed to the temptations of power and prestige throughout his life.¹¹⁵ David not only conquered the temptation of royal power, Ambrose maintains, but he had also publicly and virtuously purified himself with an extraordinary repentance.¹¹⁶ When even ordinary citizens, who had far less to lose, felt ashamed to confess, the king boldly prostrated himself on the ground and assiduously followed the penitential procedure to repent publicly with tears, sighs, and fasts.¹¹⁷ Besides performing confession and penance, David also committed himself to good deeds in the hope of redeeming himself.¹¹⁸ Ambrose enumerates David’s merits to demonstrate that his virtues had outweighed his vices, listing the king’s devotion to God, victorious battles, love towards his soldiers, and how he even honored his enemies.¹¹⁹ In short, Ambrose normalized David’s sin, representing it as a trait shared by all, and then justified it with David’s exemplary repentance and a series of his laudable deeds.

The first part of the *First Defense* concludes with a remark on the importance of listening to a priest’s admonition, and a discussion of how kings owe their authority to God. To emphasize the significance of following a priest’s correction, Ambrose extols David in comparison to the “other men,” who deny their sin when priests point it out and thereby make their fall greater.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Ambrose, “The Second Defense of David,” trans. Dunkle, 156.

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 107.

¹¹⁶ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 113.

¹¹⁷ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 107, 113.

¹¹⁸ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 117, 118.

¹¹⁹ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 118, 119, 122, 125.

¹²⁰ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 108.

Furthermore, Ambrose remarks that, due to David's "alacrity of pardon" and prompt confession, God forgave him and accepted him back into the Christian community.¹²¹ For Ambrose, divine forgiveness indicates God's ongoing presence in the world. To further highlight David's admirable humility and meekness before God, Ambrose describes other instances of David trusting in divine providence and subjecting himself to the power of the Lord.¹²² Moreover, when God bestowed specific powers on David, the king did not attribute these abilities to himself, but understood that they were his only thanks to God's approval.¹²³ More generally, David's experience reveals the proper hierarchical relationship between terrestrial sovereigns and the divine lord; as Ambrose explains, God stands above secular rulers, since He has the power to provide or withhold unique gifts to them as He sees fit. Describing David's discovery of confession and penance as a means to perpetual peace, Ambrose stresses the absolute authority of God, whom a sovereign is expected to "praise, love, and trust" no less than subjects do with respect to their terrestrial king.¹²⁴

The Plea of David

The second part of the *First Defense* constitutes the plea of David, in which Ambrose lets David speak for himself, beginning with David's admission of his guilt and his obligation to God. Reckoning that he was born from sin and had done evil before the Lord, David begs God's mercy and implores Him to cleanse him of his injustice.¹²⁵ Ambrose praises David's guilty

¹²¹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 107.

¹²² Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 125.

¹²³ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 119, 120.

¹²⁴ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 120.

¹²⁵ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 128.

conscience, arguing that publicly admitting one's shame is essential in avoiding the repetition of past mistakes.¹²⁶ The reason for David's recognition, Ambrose expounds, is because David correctly understood his relationship with and responsibility toward God. Although kings are not bound by worldly laws and cannot be held "accountable... against an individual," they are still liable to God for their positions within the Church.¹²⁷ Despite their supreme position in the secular world, rulers owe devotion and fidelity toward God, and they are also subject to the divine law.¹²⁸ Entrusted by God with the care of His people, rulers are tasked to be the stewards of God's palace; consequently, their responsibilities to God are all the greater.¹²⁹

To demonstrate his piety and to acknowledge his transgressions, David actively sought forgiveness of his sins through vocalization of his guilt, the performance of penance, and continuously beseeching God's mercy. Wanting to be "washed thoroughly from [his] injustice," David first heaps up proclamations of his sinful nature and his specific transgressions of adultery and murder.¹³⁰ Here, Ambrose interjects to make a distinction between iniquity and sin, and points out that while iniquity is the heavy and wicked condition of the mind, remittable only through God's cleansing, sins can be "forgiven through grace [or] covered through charity."¹³¹ David followed the fourth-century penitential rites of casting himself prostrate on the floor, his face streaming with tears; of fasting and refraining from bathing; and of imploring God's mercy and devoting himself to honorable works.¹³² After David had pleaded for divine intervention to

¹²⁶ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 129, 130, 131.

¹²⁷ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 133.

¹²⁸ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 133.

¹²⁹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 133.

¹³⁰ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 136, 138.

¹³¹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 132, 142.

¹³² Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 128, 129, 137.

cleanse his “bloodguilt” (*de sanguinibus*), God pardoned him for humbling himself and treating himself as a sinner.¹³³

Overall, both *Defenses* express similar thematic ideas by normalizing David’s sin, explicating the imitability of fallible saints, and demonstrating a king’s duty and responsibility towards God. While this chapter has delved into the texts themselves to provide a summary, the next chapter will zoom out to consider the broader historical context of the ninth century. Building on the discussions of these two chapters, the fourth chapter will then consider the similarities between the main ideas expressed in Ambrose’s *Defenses* and those of the Carolingians.

¹³³ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 143.

Chapter 3

The Ninth-Century Penitential Context and the Carolingian Remembrance of Ambrose

This chapter will describe the Carolingian context within which Louis the Pious performed his two public penances in 822 and 833. I will first sketch the ninth-century penitential context as one in which the ritual's nature and performance during the era of Roman late antiquity was revived and emulated, and then discuss the Carolingians' remembrance of Ambrose and Theodosius. I will then examine how Carolingian bishops used Ambrose's innovative combination of the classical rhetorical practice of *parrhesia* and priestly ministerial duties to articulate their responsibility of admonishing the emperor. Since the next chapter will examine the function, use, and influence of Ambrose's *Defenses* specifically with respect to Louis's penances, this chapter will conclude with an overview of the historical events leading to those dramatic rituals.

Longing for the Classical

In the late eighth century, Charlemagne and his court began a revival of the Roman classical and Christian past. Concerned with his people's spiritual health and believing that even the incorrect pronunciation of the Psalms would impact a person's chance of salvation, Charlemagne sponsored a series of educational, religious, and legislative reform movements to improve his subjects' general educational level and religious understanding.¹³⁴ One aspect of this

¹³⁴ Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 114; Henry Mayr-Harting, "Praying the Psalter in Carolingian Times: What Was Supposed to Be Going on in the Minds of Monks?" in *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward SLG*, ed. Santha Bhattacharji, Dominic Mattos, and Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 80.

late antique Roman revival was the special attention given to penance. Penitential handbooks, which detailed the method of the ritual, the different types of sin, and the corresponding penitential punishments to absolve them, were widespread throughout the Carolingian realm and, in the eyes of the reformers, disturbingly diverse in their content. In numerous council meetings Frankish bishops sought to reach an agreement on determining an authoritative, standard version of penance, but labored in vain.¹³⁵ A consistent aspiration of these bishops was a return to the late antique, Roman, “traditional” form of the ritual. Bishops at the Council of Chalon in 813, for instance, longed for the same ancient customs of excommunication and reconciliation to be applied in the present.¹³⁶ Bishop Jonas of Orléans (760–843) also regretted the absence of the traditional form of penance, since few in his day were demonstrating their contrition by voluntarily and publicly repenting in sackcloth and ashes with “remorseful laments.”¹³⁷

The Carolingian Renaissance also witnessed an interest in the Penitential Psalms and their function in the ritual of penance. Alcuin of York (735–804), head of the Palace School under Charlemagne, in particular sought to spread the ancient use of the Penitential Psalms during the reform movement.¹³⁸ He was the first person since Cassiodorus in the sixth century to comment on this distinct group of seven psalms and to recognize its ritual significance.¹³⁹ Although historians often describe Alcuin as a liturgist who was prone to re-utilize and systematize rather than to innovate, he did not slavishly copy the Celtic or Anglo-Saxon prayer

¹³⁵ Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 116–18.

¹³⁶ *Concilium Cabillonense* (813), ed. Albert Werminghoff, *MGH, Concilia aevi Karolini*, 2(1) (Hannover: Hahn, 1906), 278.

¹³⁷ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 244.

¹³⁸ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and His Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 109.

¹³⁹ Driscoll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms,” 158.

books that he had at hand, which lacked the Penitential Psalms.¹⁴⁰ Rather, he specifically looked for the seven psalms that originated from antiquity, and prefaced a prayerbook by prescribing eight circumstances of employing the Psalms, with their first and foremost use being their recitation during penance.¹⁴¹ Alcuin's preface, the "*De laude psalmodum*," provided the foundational basis for the Carolingians' further application of the Psalms and the mid-ninth century emergence of a private devotion program.¹⁴² This great impact is evinced by the more than two hundred extant manuscript copies of the Psalms, of various lengths and titles, appropriated by the Carolingians for diverse usage, and studied by people ranging from King Charles the Bald to the noble laywoman Dhuoda.¹⁴³

Remembrance of Ambrose: His Words and Deeds

The Carolingians remembered and admired Ambrose and Theodosius, painting them in a good light and referring to their acts in typological terms. While Ambrose used King David's redemption through penance as an example to persuade Emperor Theodosius to perform the ritual, both Ambrose's rebuke and Theodosius's own penance would themselves serve as examples for later centuries to admire and emulate.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, a significant part of the remembrance of Ambrose in the ninth century centers on his successful reproach in correcting the errant emperor. This remembrance can be connected to a fifth-century biography of Ambrose

¹⁴⁰ Driscoll, "The Seven Penitential Psalms," 180.

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Black, "Psalm Uses in Carolingian Prayerbooks - Alcuin and the Preface to *De psalmodum usu*," *Mediaeval Studies* 64 (2002): 2, 3.

¹⁴² Black, "Psalm Uses in Carolingian Prayerbooks," 18.

¹⁴³ Black, "Psalm Uses in Carolingian Prayerbooks," 3, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Michael P. Kuczynski, "The Psalms and Social Action in Late Medieval England," in *Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages*, ed. Nancy van Deusen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 194, 199, 200. For a detailed list of Carolingian references to Ambrose's encounter with Theodosius, see Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 195 n. 82.

written by his secretary, Paulinus of Milan. Although references to Ambrose almost ceased by the end of the sixth century, the ninth century witnessed a proliferation of interest in both Ambrose and Theodosius.¹⁴⁵ In creating a critical edition of Paulinus's biography of Ambrose, Michele Pellegrino consulted forty-two existing manuscripts, one third of which was from the ninth and tenth centuries, testifying to Carolingian ecclesiastics' great interest in and respect for the Church Father.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, in a late ninth-century copy of the biography that survived in full, an entire third of the text is dedicated just to Ambrose's rebuke and Theodosius's public penance, demonstrating the special attention paid to this momentous encounter in Ambrose's rich career.¹⁴⁷ In the *Epitaphium Arsenii*, a Carolingian hagiographical text modeled after Ambrose's funeral oration for his brother, its author Radbertus, a monk of Corbie, created an imaginative narrative that uses the life and times of Ambrose to speak allusively about Carolingian concerns. Radbertus felt confident enough in his audience's knowledge to deploy a set of typological connections that recount ninth-century history by way of late antique aliases that are intricately connected to Ambrose and others of his circle, despite Ambrose's name never being explicitly mentioned in the text.¹⁴⁸ To be effective, such an allusive technique relied not only on a reader's familiarity with Ambrose and his era, but also that the reader held Ambrose in high esteem.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 195.

¹⁴⁶ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 195; Angelo Paredi, "Paulinus of Milan," *Sacris Erudiri: Journal of Late Antique and Medieval Christianity* 14 (1963): 206.

¹⁴⁷ Giorgia Vocino, "Framing Ambrose in the Resources of the Past: The Late Antique and Early Medieval Sources for a Carolingian Portrait of Ambrose," in *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Clemens Gantner, Rosamond McKitterick, and Sven Meeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 135, 136, 140.

¹⁴⁸ Mayke de Jong, "From the Order of the Franks to the World of Ambrose: The *Vita Adalhardi* and the *Epitaphium Arsenii* Compared," in *Historiography and Identity III: Carolingian Approaches*, ed. Rutger Kramer, Helmut Reimitz, and Graeme Ward (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 50.

¹⁴⁹ De Jong, "From the Order of the Franks to the World of Ambrose," 54.

Furthermore, Carolingian bishops also highlighted Ambrose's courageous remonstrance, and demonstrated an "Ambrosian" combination of the classical rhetorical technique of *parrhesia* with the episcopal ministry to admonish and correct the ruler. A master of *parrhesia*, of boldly speaking truth to power, Ambrose had successfully corrected an erring ruler twice in his life.¹⁵⁰ Admiring Ambrose, the Carolingian reform bishops often recounted Ambrose's encounter with Theodosius with a focus on Ambrose's daring admonition.¹⁵¹ Like Ambrose, Carolingian reform bishops underscored the obligation of their office and the exercise of their priestly right to render a constructive admonition when they would see the ruler going astray.¹⁵² Moreover, the emperor was expected to listen to any such frank—and thus truthful and therapeutic—admonition and amend his behavior accordingly.¹⁵³ Among the sins that were considered especially offensive to God and the Christian community, the Carolingians emphasized the sin of negligence.¹⁵⁴ Historian Mayke de Jong notes that from the time of Charlemagne, reform councils harangued that ecclesiastics, who work as mediators between God and humanity, would be convicted of having sinned themselves if they ignored their ministerial duty of correcting a sinner.¹⁵⁵

It was not just Ambrose's practice of *parrhesia* that was well known in the ninth century, for manuscript transmission and Carolingian usage of the Psalms also demonstrate the remembrance and knowledge of Ambrosian ideas. A renowned Church Father, Ambrose was

¹⁵⁰ Vocino, "Framing Ambrose in the Resources of the Past," 144.

¹⁵¹ Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 197 n. 89.

¹⁵² For Carolingian incorporation of frank speech, see Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 198.

¹⁵³ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 144.

¹⁵⁴ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 121.

¹⁵⁵ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 121. For more on the Carolingian councils of 813, see Rutger Kramer, "A Model for Empire: The Councils of 813 and the *Institutio Canoniorum*," in idem, *Rethinking Authority in the Carolingian Empire: Ideals and Expectations during the Reign of Louis the Pious (813–828)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 65.

well-respected in the ninth century, and his exegetical works were popular.¹⁵⁶ Seven manuscript copies of his *First Defense* dating from the seventh to ninth centuries are extant, suggesting that this exegesis on Psalm 50 had some currency.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, several Carolingian authors quoted from the *First Defense*, including Dhuoda, a lay aristocratic woman. In 843, Dhuoda wrote a handbook of advice for her son William's spiritual education and salvation that consists of ideas that closely parallel Ambrose's *First Defense*.¹⁵⁸ Besides making similar cases regarding the remission of sin and minimizing one's culpability through almsgiving, Dhuoda's text—like Ambrose's exegesis—also underscores the imitability and reconciliatory effects of the Psalms.¹⁵⁹ In the *First Defense*, Ambrose argues that King David's sins are beneficial for commoners, for if one repents after sinning, no matter their rank or status, God would still cleanse their iniquities and accept them back into the Christian community.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Dhuoda asked her son to emulate David through zealous recitation of the Penitential Psalms, and assured him that such devoted and contrite recitation would grant him David's "moral uprightness" and "God's mercy."¹⁶¹ Although it is likely that Dhuoda took these ideas from Alcuin, who had repeated

¹⁵⁶ Jerome Bertram, "The Council of Aachen and the Canonical Institute," in *The Chrodegang Rules: The Rules for the Common Life of the Secular Clergy from the Eighth and Ninth Centuries. Critical Texts with Translations and Commentary* (London: Routledge, 2005), 166.

¹⁵⁷ Yagello, "Histoire, exégèse et politique," 112.

¹⁵⁸ Margaret Trenchard-Smith, "*Furibunda Silentia*: The 'Raging Silences' of the Testimony of Dhuoda, Countess of Septimania" (Unpublished manuscript, UCLA, 1997), 1, 28.

¹⁵⁹ Marie Anne Mayeski, "A Mother's Psalter: Psalms in the Moral Instruction of Dhuoda of Septimania," in *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nancy Van Deusen, SUNY Series in Medieval Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999), 149; Dhuoda, *Liber Manualis: Handbook for Her Warrior Son*, trans. Marcelle Thiébaux, Cambridge Medieval Classics 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 161; Annie Sutherland, "Performing the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages," in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 19; Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 132.

¹⁶⁰ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 108, 138.

¹⁶¹ Dhuoda, *Liber Manualis*, trans. Thiébaux, 235; Mayeski, "A Mother's Psalter," 146; Mayr-Harting, "Praying the Psalter in Carolingian Times," 96.

them in his own commentary on Psalm 50, the fact that she was familiar with these ideas as a lay woman is itself suggestive of their wide influence.¹⁶²

The Two Penances of Louis the Pious

In 806, Charlemagne issued his *Divisio regnorum*, in which he not only outlined the division of his kingdom among his heirs but also made pre-emptive efforts to forestall violence among them.¹⁶³ According to Thegan (800–850), a biographer of Louis the Pious, Louis swore to Charlemagne in 813 that he would show “unfailing mercy” to “all his relatives.”¹⁶⁴ However, he violated this oath in the following years. Upon Charlemagne’s death in 814, Louis quickly moved from his palace in Aquitaine to the court of Aachen to assume the imperial title. Disgusted with what he found there, he “cleansed the palace” by sending an “extremely large crowd of women,” including his sisters, into either exile or monastic confinement.¹⁶⁵ Louis also violently quashed the rebellion in early 818 of his nephew, King Bernard of Italy, who was captured, blinded, and died shortly thereafter.¹⁶⁶ For fear of further rebellions, Louis tonsured his half-brothers and sent them to monasteries.¹⁶⁷ Two apologists for Louis distanced their sovereign from the lethal act of Bernard’s blinding by claiming that certain advisors had done it “against

¹⁶² Alcuin, “Psalmus VI,” in *Alcuini opera omnia*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1863), 575.

¹⁶³ Charlemagne, “Charlemagne’s Division of His Kingdoms,” chp. 18, in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton, trans. Dana Carleton Munro, 2nd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), 151.

¹⁶⁴ Thegan, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 6, in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: The Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer*, trans. Thomas F. X. Noble (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 197.

¹⁶⁵ The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 23, in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: The Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer*, trans. Thomas F. X. Noble (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 248–49; Nithard, “Nithard’s History,” bk. 1, chp. 2, in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton, trans. Bernard W. Scholz and Barbara Rogers, 2nd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), 334.

¹⁶⁶ Thegan, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 22, 23, trans. Noble, 205–6; The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 45, trans. Noble, 276–77.

¹⁶⁷ Nithard, “Nithard’s History,” bk. 1, chp. 2, trans. Dutton/Scholz and Rogers, 334.

the will of emperor,” and painted Louis as a victim of the discord.¹⁶⁸ Still, the Franks displayed great anguish in seeing the broken family bonds and resulting political strife, with Louis having blatantly violated his oath to never “mutilate or blind or forcibly tonsure” his younger kindred.¹⁶⁹

In 822, Louis undertook a public penance for both his sins against his family and certain undisclosed sins of his father. The enormity of this act must have been apparent to all—no such penance had been performed by a sovereign in the West since that of Theodosius in 390. Louis recognized his and his father’s iniquity, sought reconciliation with his family and people, and wanted to appease God for having forcibly tonsured and even having murdered his kindred.¹⁷⁰ After a year of preparation, the public penance was conducted at Attigny in August of 822.¹⁷¹ Weeping and confessing, Louis admitted his own culpability before his people, acknowledged Charlemagne’s failings, and then sought forgiveness for these sins with prayers and almsgiving.¹⁷² Although the bishops pronounced Louis’s public penance as eminently successful, things would go from bad to worse by 829.¹⁷³ In that year, Louis broke his first succession arrangement of 817 in order to now include Charles, his six-year-old son with his second wife, Judith, as an heir. Infuriated over their now-diminished inheritance, the three sons of Louis’s first marriage, Lothar, Pippin, and Louis the German, rebelled against their father in 830. Through the

¹⁶⁸ Thegan, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 22, trans. Noble, 205–6; The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 45, trans. Noble, 276–77. As an example of contemporaneous discontent over Louis’s actions, see arguments dating Einhard’s biography of Charlemagne to the 820s as an indirect critique of Louis: Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, 2nd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), xix, xx.

¹⁶⁹ De Jong, “From the Order of the Franks to the World of Ambrose,” 50; Charlemagne, “*Divisio Regnorum* (806),” chp. 18, trans. Dutton, 151.

¹⁷⁰ *Royal Frankish Annals*, in *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard’s Histories*, trans. Bernard W. Scholz and Barbara Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 111.

¹⁷¹ The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 35, trans. Noble, 262–64; *Capitula ab episcopis Attinaci data* (822 Aug.), ed. Alfred Boretius, *MGH, Capitularia regum Francorum*, 1 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), 357–58.

¹⁷² Thegan, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 23, trans. Noble, 206; *Capitula ab episcopis Attinaci data* (822 Aug.), ed. Boretius, 357–58.

¹⁷³ *Capitula ab episcopis Attinaci data* (822 Aug.), ed. Boretius, 357.

combined might of their armies and public support, they forced Judith into a convent and made Louis promise to continue with the original plan of succession.¹⁷⁴ However, public support over the legitimacy of the rebellion—of sons rebelling against their father, a biblical abomination—quickly eroded, and Louis managed to re-establish control over his army and his court within just a few months. Removing Judith from her monastic confinement, Louis drafted a new succession plan in 831, the “*Regni divisio*,” in which he punished Lothar’s filial disobedience by confining him to Italy, while making the other three sons the main beneficiaries of the Frankish empire north of the Alps.¹⁷⁵

Not content with the new arrangement, Lothar, Pippin, and Louis the German raised a second rebellion in 833, which came to the verge of a battle, but ended once again with Louis’s capture when his troops deserted him. On October 1, 833, in Compiègne, a delegation of rebel bishops collectively admonished Louis for a variety of sins and urged him to submit to another public penance for the safety of his people and the salvation of his soul.¹⁷⁶ Days later, Louis debased himself publicly in the church of Saint-Médard in Soissons, declared himself unfit to rule, and exchanged his regalia for the garb of a penitent to demonstrate his withdrawal from his royal office.¹⁷⁷ Yet, within a few months, public opinion once again wavered over the righteousness of the sons’ actions, and Louis regained his freedom. With the support of Pippin and Louis the German, Louis the Pious soon forced Lothar to surrender, and in February of 835 had himself formally and solemnly re-invested with his imperial regalia. In this ritual reversal at

¹⁷⁴ Nithard, “Nithard’s History,” bk. 1, chp. 3, trans. Dutton/Scholz and Rogers, 334.

¹⁷⁵ *Regni Divisio* (831. Feb.), ed. Alfred Boretius and Victor Krause, *MGH, Capitularia regum Francorum*, 2 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), 24.

¹⁷⁶ Thegan, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 43, trans. Noble, 209–10; The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 49, trans. Noble, 282–83

¹⁷⁷ The Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 49, trans. Noble, 283.

the palace of Thionville, he assembled a council of nearly all the realm's bishops and abbots to declare the penance of 833 uncanonical.¹⁷⁸ Louis maintained his sovereignty over his sons for the next five years until his death in June, 840.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ The Astronomer, "The Life of Emperor Louis," chp. 54, trans. Noble, 287.

¹⁷⁹ The Astronomer, "The Life of Emperor Louis," chp. 64, trans. Noble, 301–2.

Chapter 4

The Carolingian Reception of Ambrose's *Defenses of David*

While previous chapters have sought to establish the Carolingians' familiarity with and knowledge of Ambrose, his exegesis, and his encounter with Theodosius, the present chapter will delve into the reception of Ambrose's *Defenses of David* in the ninth century. The first section outlines how Louis was influenced by ideas that run parallel to those discussed in the *Defenses*, as Louis demonstrated an understanding of a king's relationship with and responsibility towards God that was similar to that of Ambrose. It concludes by suggesting that Louis did his penance in 822 both in accordance with Ambrose's teaching in the *Defenses* and in emulation of David and Theodosius. The second section examines Carolingian bishops' use of several Ambrosian ideas, including the duties of priests as moral and spiritual physicians, the importance of a king heeding priests' advice, and the responsibilities of a king to safeguard the realm entrusted to him by God. I contend that the bishops who rose in rebellion against Louis in the 830s wished to create a "ministerial" model for future generations to emulate, and that they specifically staged Louis's second penance (in 833) following Ambrose's example.

Ambrosian Sovereignty

Louis the Pious was influenced by Ambrose's idea about the relationship between a king and God, as he came to view a king as indebted to God and accountable to Him, despite the ruler's supreme secular power and authority. In his *Second Defense*, Ambrose used the metaphor of creditor and debtor to capture the relationship between God and king, while in both *Defenses* he articulated how God had entrusted the kingdom and people to the secular ruler's

administration.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, Ambrose established that kings are “subject to God through devotion and fidelity,” owing “inviolable faith” to God for the realm’s management.¹⁸¹

Considering Ambrose’s revered authority in the ninth century, Louis may have been influenced by the *Defenses* in recognizing his responsibility as a king towards God. In issuing capitularies, a series of legislative and administrative acts, Louis specified his relationship with God in terms and concepts similar to those described by Ambrose. Issued between 823 and 825, Louis’s capitulary of general admonition to all orders of the kingdom, the *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines*, delineated a ruler’s relationship with God specifically as one of creditor and debtor.¹⁸² In addition to using terminology similar to that of Ambrose, Louis recognized that God had granted him the right of “administration” of the kingdom, and decreed that everyone, including himself, should be thankful to God and render Him just praise.¹⁸³

Unlike Ambrose’s characterization of bishops as providing only spiritual assistance, Louis recognized bishops as helpers assisting him in the pragmatic management of the realm. In his *Defenses*, Ambrose had presented the priest Nathan as a model of divine assistance preventing David from “falling into condemnation,” yet Ambrose did not hold Nathan as accountable towards God.¹⁸⁴ Louis would adapt Ambrose’s idea by explaining that bishops derive their power from the ruler and would assist him with the administration of the empire.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 133; Ambrose, “The Second Defense of David,” trans. Dunkle, 185, 193.

¹⁸¹ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 133; Ambrose, “The Second Defense of David,” trans. Dunkle, 193.

¹⁸² *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 2, ed. Alfred Boretius, *MGH, Capitularia regum Francorum* 1 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), 303, “sicut debitores sumus.”

¹⁸³ *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 1, 2, ed. Boretius, 303, “in huius regni administratione specialiter conserventur”; “Deo iustas laudes persolvere et vestrae bonae intentioni multimodas debemus gratias referre.”

¹⁸⁴ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 109, 133.

¹⁸⁵ *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 3, 8, ed. Boretius, 303, 304.

Like Ambrose, he could have attempted to include bishops as his joint assistants, but he also distinguished Nathan, the priest sent by God to provide divine assistance, from his own Carolingian bishops operating under him to jointly look after the realm.¹⁸⁶ Whereas Ambrose had held only the king as accountable towards God, Louis now declared that every helper could be convicted of the sin of negligence, with the sovereign holding the heaviest responsibility for the salvation of all.¹⁸⁷

Imitating David

Ambrose also affected Louis's actions through his commendation of David's fulfillment of his social duty. In both *Defenses*, Ambrose commented on the imitability of David's recovery, as everyone could and should identify with David's sin and follow David's example of penance to redeem themselves.¹⁸⁸ Ambrose called on the whole Christian congregation to follow David, admiring him as the proper moral example in leading his people to humble themselves before God, thereby procuring grace and redemption.¹⁸⁹ Like Ambrose, Louis also recognized the social responsibility of those of higher status to set a model for those beneath them to follow. He urged the high officials and bishops of his realm to "guide" their inferiors "by word and example" of their own actions.¹⁹⁰

Although Louis did not explicitly refer to Ambrose or his commentaries, I believe his actions in the 820s reflect his internalization of the Ambrosian ideal of proper kingship and his

¹⁸⁶ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 37; *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 4, ed. Boretius, 303.

¹⁸⁷ *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 3, ed. Boretius, 303; De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 37, 122.

¹⁸⁸ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 108; Kuczynski, "The Psalms and Social Action," 200.

¹⁸⁹ Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 192.

¹⁹⁰ Bertram, "The Council of Aachen and the Canonical Institute," 134, 152; *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 9, ed. Boretius, 304.

attempts to emulate David's (and Theodosius's) clemency and penance. Both *Defenses* describe the effects of charity and penance in cleansing sins, with Ambrose contending that David remitted his sin with good deeds and cleansed his injustice through both the vocalization of contrition and an outstanding public penance.¹⁹¹ Perhaps swayed by Ambrose's portrayal of King David, Louis demonstrated his own clemency and charity, and then performed a public penance to cleanse himself. Like David, who "wept with loud mourning" and "deplored" the death of Absalom, his impious parricidal son, Louis also demonstrated his sadness and contrition over the harm of his enemies.¹⁹² He wept over the death of his rebellious nephew, Bernard; he bequeathed monasteries to his half-brothers whom he had forcibly tonsured; and he granted amnesty and restored properties to the followers of the rebellion.¹⁹³ In recognition of his sins, Louis gave "a great deal to the poor" in the hopes of cleansing himself through charity.¹⁹⁴

Louis may also have been inspired to perform his astonishing public penance in 822 in observance of Ambrose's penitential teaching, and in emulation of David and Theodosius (the only two sovereigns in the West known to have previously performed such penance). Ambrose, for instance, had affirmed the benefits of immediately confessing one's sins in this life, for one would then not appear despicable before God in the next.¹⁹⁵ Ambrose describes admiringly how, upon recognizing his sin, David "did not allow the awareness of his crime to stay hidden" within

¹⁹¹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 126, 132, 137, 142; Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 155.

¹⁹² Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 121, 125.

¹⁹³ Thegan, "The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great," chp. 23, trans. Noble, 206; De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 123.

¹⁹⁴ Thegan, "The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great," chp. 23, trans. Noble, 206.

¹⁹⁵ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 109; Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 191, 192.

his conscience (*conscientiam*) “even for a moment,” but immediately rendered a “hasty confession” with “immense distress.”¹⁹⁶

The same haste and distress also marked Louis’s first penance. The Council of Aachen in 816 decreed that, once a person “admits to a serious crime,” there should be no delay for him to do a “spontaneous penance” to remit his sin, a decree that Louis would keenly practice himself.¹⁹⁷ Once Louis recognized his sin, he did not delay or hesitate. Rather, like David, he exhibited a similar feeling of anxiety, as Louis was “anxious to be reconciled.”¹⁹⁸ In 822, openly confessing his and his father’s errors and seeking to correct this sin through almsgiving and prayers, Louis “imitat[ed] the example of the emperor Theodosius,” explains his anonymous contemporary biographer, and performed a public penance.¹⁹⁹

Sovereign Accountability and Divine Punishment

Besides influencing Louis, Ambrose’s teaching also influenced the bishops, for despite their competing agendas they all agreed on several points that bear a striking resemblance to arguments that Ambrose made in his *Defenses*. After Louis’s second penance in 833, the rebel bishops maintained that Louis had received their salubrious admonition and heeded their advice.²⁰⁰ They agreed that God entrusted the kingdom to secular sovereigns like Louis, who was

¹⁹⁶ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 107; Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 76, “ne exiguo quidem momento manere penes se delicti passus est conscientiam, sed praematura confessione atque inmenso dolore reddidit peccatum suum domino.”

¹⁹⁷ Bertram, *The Council of Aachen and the Canonical Institute*, 121, “Si vero quis in collegio canonicorum culpam criminalem admiserit, huic nulla est danda dilatio, quin aut sponte penitentiam pro admissio crimine gerat aut”; Rutger Kramer, *Rethinking Authority in the Carolingian Empire: Ideals and Expectations during the Reign of Louis the Pious (813–828)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 94.

¹⁹⁸ Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 35, trans. Noble, 262.

¹⁹⁹ Astronomer, “The Life of Emperor Louis,” chp. 35, trans. Noble, 262.

²⁰⁰ De Jong, *The Penitential State*, 241; *Episcoporum de poenitentia, quam Hludowicus imperator professus est, relatio Compendiensis* (833 Oct.), chp. 1, ed. Courtney M. Booker, “The Public Penance of Louis the Pious: A New

expected to heed the bishops' counsel in order to provide peace for his subjects and lead them to salvation. Using and expanding on the metaphor of bishops as doctors, which Ambrose had used, the bishops described themselves as both physicians and faithful assistants, accountable for correcting the king and keeping him from going astray.

To reprimand Louis to conduct penance in 833, the rebel bishops condemned Louis for failing in his duty and thus offending God, echoing Ambrose's idea regarding a king's responsibility to keep his entrusted empire peaceful. Ambrose had observed that God commanded the sovereign to take care of the earthly country, and that a ruler is thus responsible to God for the physical and spiritual safety of his people who are entrusted to him.²⁰¹ Arguing that David's virtues outweighed his vices, Ambrose invited his readers to consider David's laudable quality in preserving "perpetual peace" and leading his people away from murder and bloodshed.²⁰² The same sentiment is echoed in the report of the rebel bishops on Louis's second penance, as they justified their condemnation of the emperor by arguing that he had failed in his duty of preserving the peace.²⁰³ The rebel bishops first acknowledged that God had granted Louis his position for keeping the kingdom intact and peaceful, and then charged that Louis had offended God by disrupting the peace and leading God's people into disorder.²⁰⁴ With this claim, the rebel bishops relied on Ambrose's idea of the king's responsibility to God as their basis for

Edition of the *Episcoporum de poenitentia, quam Hludowicus imperator professus est, relatio Compendiensis* (833)," *Viator* 39, no. 2 (2008): 16.

²⁰¹ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 133; Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 193.

²⁰² Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 120.

²⁰³ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 15, "et in eo multis modis Deum offendisse et ecclesiam Christi scandalizasse populumque per suam negligentiam multifarie in perturbationem induxisse."

²⁰⁴ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 13, "laborem pacificum et unitum... fuerit et domino Ludewico imperatori a Deo ad regendum sub magna pace commissum Dominioque"; 15, "et in eo multis modis Deum offendisse et ecclesiam Christi scandalizasse populumque per suam negligentiam multifarie in perturbationem induxisse."

judgment. By arguing that Louis had failed to discharge the divine duty of his office, the rebel bishops provided legitimate grounds for their demand that Louis perform another penance as a way to remit his sin and reconcile himself with God.

The Bishop as *medicus*

Ambrose's metaphor that likens a priest's prescription of penance to a physician applying medicine to cure a wound was used by the rebel bishops to justify their position and authority to admonish. In his *First Defense*, Ambrose describes Christ as assuming the body of an adulterer to convert the impious like a heavenly physician (*medicus caelestis*) curing the sick, with penance being the penitent's "remedy of health" (*remedia sanitatis*).²⁰⁵ Alcuin also appropriated this metaphor in his exegesis on Psalm 50 and his letter *Ad pueros sancti Martini*, the latter written for his students on the necessity of confession. Although he did not explicitly cite Ambrose, Alcuin demonstrates parallel ideas when he refers to God as the physician (*medicum Deum*) healing the sinner's ulcers, and repeatedly urges his audience to use penance as the medicine (*medicina*) for the health of their souls.²⁰⁶

The Carolingians quickly adopted the idea of penance as spiritual medicine and used it as a common trope. Louis's biographer the Astronomer, for instance, maintained that the emperor respected the counts and abbots as doctors who could cure the illness of the kingdom, while the

²⁰⁵ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 146; Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 176, "et medicus illu caelestis : non opus est sanis, inquit, medicus, sed infirmis"; 136, "qui autem agnoscit utique respiscit, non respuit remedia sanitatis, se ipse restringit, paenitet eum culpae."

²⁰⁶ Alcuin, "Psalmus VI," verse 1, 575, "ad medicum Deum recurrat, qui ulcera peccatorum suorum sanet"; Michael S. Driscoll, "'Ad Pueros Sancti Martini': A Critical Edition, English Translation, and Study of the Manuscript Transmission," *Traditio* 53 (1998): 52, "Confessio tua medicina est vulnerum tuorum"; 60, "ad confessionis medicamentum," "ut medicamenta salutis proficere valeant in vobis."

rebel bishops used the same metaphor for different effects.²⁰⁷ Seeking to legitimize their condemnation of Louis, they asserted their role as the empire's spiritual physicians (*medici spiritalis*), rightfully providing healthy admonitions for the sake of the body politic.²⁰⁸ The rebel bishops fashioned themselves not as mere secular assistants working under the emperor, but as doctors with divinely endowed expertise and power. Just as patients do not have equal medical authority before a doctor to argue for the condition of their health, the rebel bishops elevated their position and asserted that Louis should respect their professional authority and follow their salutary prescription of confession and penance.

Heeding the Doctors' Advice

The Carolingian bishops also followed Ambrose's discussion of royal and priestly duties in their accusation that Louis failed to seek their counsel before taking action. They begin their report of Louis's second penance with a lengthy discussion that justifies their bold admonition of the emperor on the basis of their duty as bishops (*ministerium episcoporum*).²⁰⁹ Within this prelude, they demonstrate how they have expanded on Ambrose's ideas to elevate themselves. In both *Defenses*, Ambrose had praised David for his willingness to accept the priest Nathan's advice to correct his sin. Such admirable humility by David shows that he prized emending his sin for salvation's sake over any personal feeling of humiliation of being reproached by a person of lesser status.²¹⁰ The rebel bishops attempt to normalize and rationalize David's humility of

²⁰⁷ Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, chp. 3, ed. Ernst Tremp, *MGH, SS rer. Germ.* 64 (Hannover: Hahn, 1995), 290, "Regnum esse veluti corpus quoddam et nunc isto... velut quibusdam medicis sanitas accepta tutetur."

²⁰⁸ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 15, "pontifices, utpote medici spiritalis, salubriter admonuerunt."

²⁰⁹ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 17, "omnibus in christiana religione constitutes scire convenit, quale sit ministerium episcoporum."

²¹⁰ Ambrose, "A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus," trans. Dunkle, 108; Ambrose, "The Second Defense of David," trans. Dunkle, 184, 185.

accepting the advice of the priest Nathan as not simply a duty of the sovereign but an act that was admirable. For example, they observe that Louis sinned by initiating useless military campaigns without any prior consultation.²¹¹ While undertaking such “useless military campaigns” itself sufficed as a sin that would necessitate Louis’s repentance, the bishops specifically added that Louis decided on his course of action without consulting their advice. Implicating themselves in their admonition of the negligent emperor, the rebel bishops thereby elevated their status from assistants working under Louis to the essential, indispensable position of spiritual advisors.

Emulation of Ambrose

In the eyes of the rebel bishops, Louis’s first penance of 822 did not have the same exemplary effect as David’s or Theodosius’s penance. Ambrose had explained how David derived his power and attained his sanctity through penance, while Theodosius, in emulation of David, also shone in the “glories... of the saints.”²¹² Just as Theodosius remembered David, the Carolingians remembered Theodosius as a model sovereign; the Astronomer had specifically praised Louis for his imitation of Theodosius’s example (*imitates Theodosii imperatoris exemplum*).²¹³ Yet, the rebel bishops had a different opinion. Although some contemporary narratives recount Louis performing his first penance in accordance with his bishops’ admonition, he is described as having undertaken it of his own volition, with little ecclesiastical interference. Unlike Ambrose, the bishops not only failed to compel the emperor to contrition,

²¹¹ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 13, “ac bonorum hominum consiliis acquiescere curavit”; 18, “De diversis expeditionibus, quas in regno sibi commisso non solum inutiliter, sed etiam noxie sine consilio et utilitate fecit.”

²¹² Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” trans. Liebeschuetz, 196.

²¹³ Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, chp. 35, ed. Tremp, 406.

but in the wake of Louis's penance even acknowledged their own sin of negligence in discharging the duties of their office.²¹⁴

However, Louis's second penance provided the bishops with another opportunity to emulate Ambrose and assert their attentiveness to their episcopal ministry, in the hopes of presenting themselves as exemplars for future generations. While Louis himself had described the bishops as the emperor's "assistants" in managing the empire divinely entrusted to him, the rebel bishops had a competing agenda.²¹⁵ In 833, they claimed that they were acting to set an example (*exemplum*) for future generations and declared themselves responsible for the salvation of all.²¹⁶

In the preliminary steps leading to Louis's penance, the rebel bishops followed a series of actions that Ambrose himself had taken. Ambrose had sent the emperor Theodosius a letter and a commentary in 390 that outlined his sins and the method of their remedy; the rebel bishops in 833 likewise provided Louis with a "booklet" that outlined his sins and the method of their remedy.²¹⁷ Within his letter and his exegesis, Ambrose used the example of David to persuade Theodosius to follow David's example, identify with David's sin, and emulate his recovery. Within their booklet, the rebel bishops told Louis to read it as a "mirror," and expected Louis to follow David, the "perfect penitent," speak the words of Psalm 50, and state that "he knows his

²¹⁴ *Capitula ab episcopis Attiniaci data* (822 Aug.), ed. Boretius, 357, "vestroque etiam saluberrimo exemplo provocati, confitemur... neglegentes extitisse... pro captu intellegentiae nostrae nos vello adhibere profiteamur."

²¹⁵ *Admonitio ad omnes regni ordines* (823–825), chp. 4, ed. Boretius, 303, "nobis veri adiutores in administratione ministerii nobis commissi existatis"; "The Report of Compiègne by the Bishops of the Realm concerning the Penance of Emperor Louis (833)," trans. Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 271.

²¹⁶ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 12, "Sic exerceant ministerium suum, ut et praesentibus salubriter consulant et futuris sint exemplum salutis."

²¹⁷ Agobard of Lyons, "Agobard's Attestation to the Penance Performed by the Emperor," trans. Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 278.

iniquity and his sin is always before him.”²¹⁸ Although the rebel bishops never explicitly cite Ambrose or his *Defenses*, their actions demonstrate that they followed Ambrose’s steps in engaging the penitent with Psalm 50 to provoke his contrition and imitation of David. According to the contemporary report of one of the rebel bishops, Agobard of Lyons, Louis’s contrite heart was “reawakened” by the bishops’ exhortations.²¹⁹

Despite the fact that the Carolingians had a rich variety of penitential traditions, the rebel bishops orchestrated a penance for Louis that was almost identical to the penitential rituals of Ambrose’s accounts. Following his knowledge of fourth-century penitential practices, Ambrose had depicted David’s penance as consisting of prostration, profuse tears, fasting, and the repeated use of verses from Psalm 50 to proclaim his contrition.²²⁰ Ambrose’s representation of Theodosius’s penance similarly includes public weeping and continuous prayers for divine mercy.²²¹ However, Ambrose observes that Theodosius had also thrown “all [his] royal attire to the ground” to demonstrate his contrition, an action that Ambrose did not describe David as having done.²²²

In Bishop Agobard’s detailed description of Louis’s penance of 833, its striking similarities with David’s and Theodosius’s penances connect the three ritual acts of different temporalities together. Requesting to repent after the bishops’ admonition, observes Agobard, Louis “flung his armour” to the floor, exchanged his royal regalia for penitent’s garb,

²¹⁸ Agobard of Lyons, “Agobard’s Attestation,” trans. De Jong, 278; Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 132, “quoniam iniquitatem meam ego agnosco et delictum meum contra me est semper”; Agobard of Lyons, *Agobardi cartula de poenitentia ab imperatore acta* (833 Oct.), ed. Alfred Boretius and Victor Krause, *MGH, Capitularia regum Francorum*, 2 (Hannover: Hahn, 1897), 57, “quod per penitentem perfectum dictum est: ‘Iniquitatem meam ego agnosco; peccatum meum contra me est semper.’”

²¹⁹ Agobard of Lyons, “Agobard’s Attestation,” trans. De Jong, 279.

²²⁰ Ambrose, “A Defense of the Prophet David to Theodosius Augustus,” trans. Dunkle, 128, 129, 137.

²²¹ Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” chp. 34, trans. Liebeschuetz, 193.

²²² Ambrose, “Oration on the Death of Theodosius I (395),” chp. 34, trans. Liebeschuetz, 193.

“prostrated” himself on the ground before the altar, and “confessed... four times to all in a clear voice, in a flood of tears... with psalms and prayers” in hopes of reconciliation and redemption with God.²²³ In Agobard’s description, Louis’s penance mixed the key elements of Ambrose’s two accounts of the penitential ritual. The textual similarities between these three penances cannot be explained simply as a by-product of the Carolingian Renaissance’s aspiration to return to late antique, “traditional” exemplars as the basis for its cultural reforms, but must also be considered as a deliberate function of the Carolingian episcopate’s aspirations to achieve its immediate, political-soteriological goals.

²²³ Agobard of Lyons, “Agobard’s Attestation,” trans. De Jong, 279; Agobard of Lyons, *Agobardi cartula de poenitentia*, ed. Boretius and Krause, 57.

Epilogue

This project has attempted to identify the influence of Ambrose's two *Defenses* in the ninth century, especially within the context of Louis the Pious's two penances. To contextualize the *Defenses*, Chapter One discussed the fourth-century knowledge and use of three penitential elements—the Penitential Psalms, penance, and *parrhesia*—that helped Ambrose to advise emperor Theodosius to undertake his penance. Chapter Two summarized key ideas discussed in Ambrose's *Defenses*, including how both texts softened the effects of David's sin, extolled David's penance, reiterated the imitability of saints' faults, and articulated a king's position as that of a steward safeguarding this realm for God. The third chapter examined the Carolingian penitential context and remembrance of Ambrose. It starts with the Carolingian longing for a return of late antique cultural values and forms, and proceeds to examine the revival of the late antique ritual of penance and its use of the Penitential Psalms. The chapter continues with the Carolingian remembrance of Ambrose and Theodosius, suggesting that in the ninth century Ambrose was admired for exercising his ministerial duty, and Theodosius was lauded for heeding Ambrose's admonition. The fourth and final chapter evinces the influence of the main ideas of Ambrose's *Defenses* in the ninth century. It first examines Louis's demonstration of his internalization of Ambrosian ideas on the administrative duties of a king, and then suggests that his striking first penance in 822 may have been done in emulation of Ambrose's teaching and Theodosius's example. It then hypothesizes that Carolingian rebel bishops may have used Ambrosian ideas regarding the bishop's ministerial duties to justify and legitimize their audacious admonition of Louis. The chapter ends with a discussion of the rebel bishops' attempt to emulate Ambrose in order to remedy the ills of their present and set an example for the future.

Lacking evidence such as the direct citation of or reference to Ambrose's *Defenses* by Carolingian authors, I have simply demonstrated certain parallels and hypothesized corresponding connections. The understudied textual transmission, reception, and influence of the *Defenses* invites more research and exploration. Future studies could discuss the Carolingian reception of Ambrose's ideas on the king's responsibilities and duties, and on other topics revolving around the theatricality of penance and conscience. In short, my project has only raised more questions than it answers. This brief epilogue will discuss several areas of research in relation to the Carolingians and the *Defenses* that I think would be profitable to pursue.

Future research might investigate other appropriations of Ambrose's work by the Carolingians. The relationship between Ambrose's *Defenses* and the Carolingian program of educational reform could bear further study. Seeking to revive and spread the use of the Penitential Psalms, Alcuin outlined their utility in a popular preface that survived in hundreds of extant manuscripts. Given the pervasive influence of Alcuin's texts during the ninth century and beyond, an investigation of the intertextuality between the *Defenses* and Alcuin's exegeses would thus be of great value.

The impact of Ambrose's *Defenses* on Carolingian narratives describing Louis's penance might also be more carefully evaluated. For example, throughout the Astronomer's biography of Louis, the emperor is depicted as always having regarded peace as his central concern. He sought peace treaties with neighboring kings, repeatedly forgave his enemies, and always demonstrated clemency; as the Astronomer put it, Louis was a "cherisher of peace [and] lover of unity."²²⁴ Having labored for his beloved empire, Louis successfully kept his kingdom intact and died in a

²²⁴ The Astronomer, "The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great," chp. 23, 25, 26, 35, 39, 42, 48, 54, 61, trans. Noble, 248–53, 262–64, 267, 272–74, 279–82, 287–89, 296–98.

state of “spiritual and temporal peace.”²²⁵ As Andrew Romig notes, with this characterization the Astronomer stressed that Louis had used his “zeal for forgiveness” to bind an empire that was nearly torn asunder by evil forces and strife.²²⁶ Although historians have understood the Astronomer’s account as one Carolingian thinker’s attempt to contemplate the possibility of restoring concord and peace through clemency, his work also evinces strong ethical values that I believe carry an Ambrosian intertextual resonance: that a good sovereign should have an awareness of his position as provisional and probationary, as being entrusted to him by God and dependent on the successful preservation of peace.²²⁷ Thus, I think a close study of the influence of Ambrose’s texts on the Astronomer would yield dividends.

On Penance

Another topic that could bear further study is the “theatricality” of penance and penitential rituals. In the fourth century, the amount of tears during the performance of penance was related in direct proportion both to the penitent’s level of regret and to the bishop’s level of authority. As a fundamental sign that allowed penitents to demonstrate their “deprecatory supplication” and regretful repentance, the shedding of tears was also meant to effect the propitiation of the community and clergy.²²⁸ In fulfilling their episcopal duties of pastoral care, bishops were also expected to publicly demonstrate their compassion by praying with tears for others’ sins.²²⁹ Participating in this tradition, Ambrose emphasized how David and Theodosius

²²⁵ Astronomer, “The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great,” chp. 64, trans. Noble, 301–2; Romig, “In Praise of the Too-Clement Emperor,” 409.

²²⁶ Romig, “In Praise of the Too-Clement Emperor,” 405.

²²⁷ Romig, “In Praise of the Too-Clement Emperor,” 409.

²²⁸ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 77.

²²⁹ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 88.

both shed abundant tears in contrition during their penances, while Agobard in his account also underscored Louis's weeping. One could conduct a close study of the theatricality within Ambrose's texts, and trace how this theatricality of penance retained its importance over the centuries as a measurement of contrition and compassion.

Finally, I conclude with a few remarks on promising points of analysis regarding the *Defenses*, contrition, and conscience. Historian Abigail Fiery has noted the Carolingians' growing focus on the "excavation of the interior," as they developed increasingly aggressive measures to probe the individual, private conscience and judge one's interior thoughts.²³⁰ This discourse on conscience was already present in Ambrose's *Defenses*. Concerning the transparency of one's mind before God, Ambrose remarks that "hidden things (*abscondita cogitationum*) ... and secrets of the mind (*mentis occulta*) do not escape" God's observation.²³¹ Besides admonishing his reader that they could conceal nothing before God, Ambrose also discusses conscience. He emphasizes that although David could be acquitted by secular laws as a king, he was still "guilty in his own conscience (*conscientiae*)."²³² With this statement, Ambrose makes the case for conscience as a binding moral power that transcends secular laws. Similar ideas also appeared in Alcuin's treatise, in which Alcuin repeatedly asks people to confess their secrets, and to refrain from concealing them because God already knows all.²³³ The rebel bishops again participated in this discourse when they condemned Louis in 833, as they invoked the

²³⁰ Abigail Fiery, *A Contrite Heart: Prosecution and Redemption in the Carolingian Empire*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, 145 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 5.

²³¹ Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 144, "Tibi soli peccaui, quem solum abscondita cogitationum et mentis occulta non fallunt."

²³² Ambrose, *Apologie de David*, ed. Hadot and Cordier, 178, "necis eius conscius ueniam tan ti poscat admissi et quamuis rex legibus absolutus suae tamen reus sit conscientiae."

²³³ Driscoll, "Ad Pueros Sancti Martini," 50, "Age igitur paenitens, propria scelera confitere, pande per confessionem tuae iniquitatis secretum. Nota sunt Deo quae in occulto fecisti. Quae si non dixerit lingua, non poterit celare conscientia"; "etsi hominis oculos in peccatis effugere valeas nullatenus tamen Dei aspectum latere poterit quicquid in occulto gesseris."

conscience when advising Louis against concealing anything from God.²³⁴ In short, future studies might also examine the textual influence of Ambrose's *Defenses* on Carolingian ethics and their notion of conscience.

²³⁴ *Relatio Compendiensis*, ed. Booker, 15, "in quibus maxime se Deum offendisse profitebatur, ne forte interius aliquid tegeret aut in conspectu Dei quippiam dolose ageret, sicut iam pridem in Compendio palatio ab alio."

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