

PRAYING THE PSALTER



Psalter of David

Liturgical Use of the Psalter in the Byzantine Tradition

INTRODUCTION

The Psalms are a central feature of Christian worship, a practice we inherited from our Jewish forebears. The Psalms are used in a variety of ways liturgically in the Eastern Churches. The fixed cycle of daily services has certain Psalms assigned to them. Certain Psalm verses are assigned to specific functions during the services. The Psalter is read once per week distributed through these services. The Psalter is also one of the most commented on books of the bible by the fathers.¹

It was indeed for this reason that he (Christ) made this (righteous actions) resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion.

Athanasius, Letter to Marcellius²

Indeed, the fathers of the second council of Nicea decreed that any bishop must have memorized the Psalter.

When we recite the Psalter, we promise God: "I will meditate upon they statutes, and will not forget they words." It is a salutary thing for all Christians to observe this, but it is especially incumbent upon those who have received the sacerdotal dignity. Therefore we decree, that every one who is raised to the rank of the episcopate shall know the Psalter by heart, so that from it he may admonish and instruct all the clergy who are subject to him.

Canon II, Second Council of Nicea

The Psalter is the source of Christian prayer and instruction. The reason the Psalter forms the backbone of liturgical prayer is for this value to admonish and instruct us. By our constant encounter with this word of God in prayer we become like God.

PSALM NUMBERING

The numbering of Psalms in worship for the Catholic and Orthodox churches follows the Greek Septuagint scheme rather than the Hebrew numbering used by Jews and Protestants. The liturgical system outlined here is based on the Greek numbering scheme.

If you are unsure about which numbering scheme is in use in your bible, turn to Psalm 50. In the Greek version this is titled the great penitential Psalm of David when he was

¹ For a general background on the Psalms as the prayer book in the Byzantine tradition see Chapter six in John Custer, *The Old Testament: A Byzantine perspective* (Pittsburgh: God With Us Publications, 1994), 160-186.

² Athanasius, Letter to Marcellius, 13. of Alexandria Athanasius, *The life of Antony and the letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert Gregg, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 112.

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confronted by Nathan beginning "Have mercy on me O God...." If instead, Psalm 50 is titled as the Psalm of Asaph beginning "The mighty One, God the Lord..." your Bible has a Hebrew numbering scheme.

The table below shows the conversion of Psalm numbers from one version to the other. Many modern Bibles will show the second number in parenthesis after the primary number of a Psalm. As you can see by this list, if the primary number is lower than the secondary one, you have the Greek numbering scheme.

Greek	Hebrew	Greek	Hebrew
1-8	1-8	114-115	116
9	9-10	116-145	117-146
10-112	11-113	146-147	147
113	114-115	148-150	148-150

In addition to the numbering of the Psalms, there are some differences in the text of the Psalms between the Hebrew and Greek versions as well.³

KATHISMATA

The liturgical Psalter in the Eastern Church is divided into twenty sections called the Kathismata⁴, from the Greek term meaning to sit. Originally, this was likely a rubric indicating that the congregation may be seated during the singing of the hymns closing each section of the Psalter. The name kathisma was originally applied just to those closing prayers. We see this in the earliest extant Psalter where the twenty divisions are marked, but the name kathisma appears for the poetry chanted after the division.⁵ Each Kathisma is divided into three stations.⁶ There is an attempt to keep each of these divisions roughly equal and keep the thematically related material together at the same time. All of the Psalm numbering in these tables is by the Greek system (see the previous section).

With the division of the text into Kathismata and stations, there are three points of special prayers: the opening of any reading of the Psalter, the end of each station, and

³ For an introduction to the textual and grammatical issues between the Hebrew and Greek Old Testament see, Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1968; reprint, Third reprint), 314-37. Emanuel Tov, *Textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 121-48.

⁴ Kathismata is plural the singular is Kathisma

⁵ The Psalter manuscript is Lenigrad 216 dated to 862 Miguel Arranz, "Les grandes étapes de la liturgie Byzantine: Palestine-Byzance-Russie. Essai d'aperçu historique," *Liturgie de l'église particulière et liturgie de l'église universelle* Bibliotheca Ephemerides liturgicae, Subsidia, no. 7 (1976). As cited in, Robert F. Taft, "Mount Athos: a late chapter in the history of the Byzantine Rite," *DOP*, no. 42 (1988).

⁶ The Greek Stasis (στασις) can also mean standing. This contrasts with the "sitting" rubric inherent in the title of the Psalter closing prayers. In later monastic usage the Stylites adopt the term for their mode of life. See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1251.

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the end of each Kathisma.

Opening a session taken outside of another service would consist of the normal beginning prayers. These are concluded with the standard troparia of forgiveness and a special prayer to the Trinity on the psalter. Each station is concluded with a standard doxology and a triple alleluia with a glory repeated three times and concluded with another doxology. Each kathisma has a different set of ending prayers in the liturgical Psalter. There are several Psalters with these prayers noted in the "Printed editions of Psalters" section below.

Kathisma 1		Kathisma 2	
Station 1	1-3	Station 1	9-10
Station 2	4-6	Station 2	11-13
Station 3	7-8	Station 3	14-16
Kathisma 3		Kathisma 4	
Station 1	17	Station 1	24-26
Station 2	18-20	Station 2	27-29
Station 3	21-23	Station 3	30-31
Kathisma 5		Kathisma 6	
Station 1	32-33	Station 1	37-39
Station 2	34-35	Station 2	40-42
Station 3	36	Station 3	43-45
Kathisma 7		Kathisma 8	
Station 1	46-48	Station 1	55-57
Station 2	49-50	Station 2	58-60
Station 3	51-54	Station 3	61-63
Kathisma 9		Kathisma 10	
Station 1	64-66	Station 1	70-71
Station 2	67	Station 2	72-73
Station 3	68-69	Station 3	74-76
Kathisma 11		Kathisma 12	
Station 1	77	Station 1	85-87
Station 2	78-80	Station 2	88
Station 3	81-84	Station 3	89-90

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Kathisma 13		Kathisma 14	
Station 1	91-93	Station 1	101-102
Station 2	94-96	Station 2	103
Station 3	97-100	Station 3	104
Kathisma 15		Kathisma 16	
Station 1	105	Station 1	109-111
Station 2	106	Station 2	112-114
Station 3	107-108	Station 3	115-117
Kathisma 17		Kathisma 18⁷	
Station 1	118:1-72 ⁸	Station 1	119-123
Station 2	118:73-131	Station 2	124-128
Station 3	118:132-176	Station 3	129-133
Kathisma 19		Kathisma 20	
Station 1	134-136	Station 1	143-144
Station 2	137-139	Station 2	145-147
Station 3	140-142	Station 3	148-150 ⁹

ORDER OF PSALTER READINGS

The Kathismata are distributed across the liturgical services of the week so that the complete Psalter is read once a week normally, and twice a week during the Great Fast.¹⁰ These charts detail the complete liturgical cycle for the Psalter readings. As a practical matter, most small monasteries and parish churches do not follow this full

⁷ This is the Stepenni or Gradual Psalms, 119 – 133. In the Jewish tradition these are the Psalms sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Festal Matins contain the Gradual Antiphons composed based on these Psalms. They are taken at festal Matins services prior to the reading of the Gospel. These are sung to a special set of melodies in the Carpatho-Rusyn tradition.

⁸ Some Psalters end the first Station at verse 93 instead. This verse is sung three times in tone five on the 2nd, 3rd, & 4th Saturdays of the Great Fast (commemoration of all the departed). "I will never forget thy precepts; for by them thou hast given me life." This verse marks the mid-point of the Psalm.

⁹ Psalm 151 is in the Greek Psalter, but not in the Hebrew, is included at the end of many liturgical Psalters. But this Psalm is never part of the 20th Kathisma.

¹⁰ The Great Fast is commonly called Lent in the Latin tradition. This is the forty-day fast prior the Pascha (Easter in the west).

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cycle. In fact, the readings from a Kathisma are among the first sections of matins & vespers to be cut for the sake of brevity. Even those services that still include the reading of the Kathismata appointed usually only take a small sample of what is indicated by these charts.

THOMAS SUNDAY – SEPTEMBER 21 | DECEMBER 20 – JANUARY 14¹¹

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matins	2, 3, 17 or Polyelei ¹²	4, 5	7, 8	10, 11	13, 14	19, 20	16, 17
Vespers		6	9	12	15	18	1

The end of this period is holy cross. This returns from Nativity to Theophany

SEPTEMBER 22 – DECEMBER 19 | JANUARY 15 – SUNDAY OF PRODIGAL SON¹³

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matins	2, 3, 17 or Polyelei ¹⁴	4, 5, 6	7, 8, 9	10, 11, 12	13, 14, 15	19, 20	16, 17
Vespers		18	18	18	18	18	1

Kathisma 18 is stepenni or Psalms of the Ascent to the Jerusalem at vespers.

¹¹ Thomas Sunday is the Sunday after Pascha (Easter). The week between Pascha and Thomas Sunday is known as Bright week.

¹² Polyelei is Psalm 134-35. These are sung to a special melody when appointed to be sung at a festal matins.

¹³ The Sunday of the Prodigal son is two weeks before the start of the Great Fast. Note that in the Orthodox Liturgical calendar, the Great Fast begins on Monday, not Wednesday. This is the same time that the change in the Gospel reading cycle from Matthew to Luke occurs in the liturgical calendar (Lukan Jump). The feast of the exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14 is the key feast for this shift. This change in readings is not followed on Mount Athos and those that follow their lead. Instead, they continue with the first version from Thomas Sunday until the Sunday of the Prodigal son.

¹⁴ Polyelei is Psalm 134-35. These are sung to a special melody near the end of Matins.

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THE GREAT FAST WEEKS 1-4 & 6¹⁵

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matins	2, 3, 17 or Polyelei ¹⁶	4, 5, 6	10, 11, 12	19, 20, 1	6, 7, 8	13, 14, 15	16, 17
1st Hour			13	2	9		
3rd Hour		7	14	3	10	19	
6th Hour		8	15	4	11	20	
9th Hour		9	16	5	12		
Vespers. <small>17</small>		18	18	18	18	18	1

During the Great Fast the reading of the Psalter is doubled, so that we read the entire Psalter twice a week during the liturgical services. This expands the scheduled readings of the Kathismata to the hours.

¹⁵ The Great Fast begins on a Monday, not a Wednesday. The forty days are counted from Monday until the Friday before Palm Sunday. There are six full weeks of the fast and the change in these readings would occur on the Monday of the cycle. The fast for Holy Week is separate from the Great Fast.

¹⁶ Polyelei is Psalm 134-35. These are sung to a special melody.

¹⁷ During the Great Fast the Presanctified Divine Liturgy is celebrated on Wednesday and Friday evenings instead of vespers. The Presanctified is a vespers service with communion that has been consecrated on the previous Sunday, hence the name "Presanctified." Celebration of the Divine Liturgy (what the Latin tradition calls Mass) is prohibited on weekdays during the Great Fast. The Presanctified Liturgy provides the faithful with communion without breaking the liturgical character of the fast by the joyous celebration of the Divine Liturgy. For more detail on the liturgical season of the Great Fast see, Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, Rev ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1974), 45-62.

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THE GREAT FAST WEEK 5

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matins	2, 3, 17 or Polyelei ¹⁸	4, 5, 6	11, 12, 13	20, 1, 2	8	13, 14, 15	16, 17
1st Hour			14	3	9		
3rd Hour		7	15	4	10	19	
6th Hour		8	16	5	11	20	
9th Hour		9	18 ¹⁹	6	12		
Vespers		10	19	7		18	1

During the 5th week of the Great Fast we celebrate the Matins of St. Andrew of Crete on Thursday morning, (or transferred to Wednesday night). This is a long penitential canon at Matins. As a result the Psalter readings for the week are redistributed to compensate.

HOLY WEEK

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matins	2, 3, and Polyelei	4, 5, 6	9, 10, 11	14, 15, 16			17
1st Hour							
3rd Hour		7	12	19			
6th Hour		8	3	20			
9th Hour							
Vespers		18	18	18			

Presanctified liturgies are celebrated on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week. From here we take our leave of the Psalter until Matins of Thomas Sunday. So for half of Holy Week and all of Bright week we have no readings from the Psalter.

BIBLICAL CANTICLES

The biblical canticles are part of the matins service. Originally the canticles or odes were sung alone. Eventually composed stanzas were made to supplement the biblical odes for each of the feasts and Sundays. The composed verses would play off a theme or item in the biblical ode and add material on the day's celebration. These composed

¹⁸ Polyelei is Psalm 134-35. These are sung to a special melody.

¹⁹ Because of the canon of St. Andrew on Wednesday night or Thursday morning, a Presanctified Divine Liturgy may be celebrated on Tuesday evening this week. If the Presanctified is celebrated then Kathisma 18 is moved from the ninth hour to Presanctified.

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stanzas then replaced the singing of the biblical odes themselves entirely.

Liturgical Psalters generally include the biblical odes as well. These are the biblical odes and their arrangement for use in matins.

Ode 1	Ode 2	Ode 3
Song of Moses Exodus 15:1-8	Song of Moses Deuteronomy 32:1-43 ²⁰	Prayer of Anna 1 Kings 2:1-10 ²¹
Sidalen		
Ode 4	Ode 5	Ode 6
Prayer of Habakkuk Habakkuk 3:2-19	Prayer of Isaiah Isaiah 26:8-21	Prayer of Jonah Jonah 2:1-9
Kontakion & Ikos		
Ode 7	Ode 8	Ode 9
Prayer of the three youths Daniel 3:26-56	Hymn of three youths Daniel 3:57-88	Song of Theotokos ²² Luke 1:46-55

SOME PRINTED EDITIONS OF THE PSALTER

Psaltir. Lvov: Stauropegial Institute, 1901.

Includes the division into Kathismata and all the prayers at the end of each. There are charts for the use of the kathisma throughout the year. Includes the biblical canticles. There is a section of charts and instructions on determining the date of Pascha and the movable feasts. There is a listing of major feasts for each month. This publication is in Church Slavonic in Cyrillic type. This is the Psalter that the St. Joseph Institute translates.

Liber Psalmorum Cum Canticis Breviarii Romani. Boston: Benziger Brothers, Inc, 1945.

This is a Latin text Psalter that includes the biblical canticles at the end. In addition to the traditional nine canticles there is also the Song of Zecharia (Luke 1:68-79) and the canticle of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). There is also about thirty pages of Latin introductory material. The Psalm text includes footnotes and introduction notes to each Psalm.

²⁰ Ode two is only taken on Tuesdays during the Great Fast. Thus ode two does not even exist in most composed canons.

²¹ There are four books of Kings in the Greek Old Testament. In the Greek 1 & 2 Kings is equivalent to 1 & 2 Samuel from the Hebrew version, 3 & 4 Kings in the Greek are 1 & 2 Kings in the Hebrew version.

²² Theotokos is a Greek term coined by the 4th ecumenical council from the words god and bearer. This becomes the centerpiece of the debate over Mary's role in giving Christ flesh.

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The Psalms: A New Translation Singing Version. Translated by The Grail Society. New York: Paulist Press, 1966.

This English translation of the Hebrew text of the psalms is a carefully done to be metrical in English. These translations are designed to work with J. Gelineau's psalm tones. There is an introduction to the system and music for the six psalm tones provided. Each psalm is then assigned to one of the six tones. The psalms are numbered by the Greek system, each is given a title and one paragraph commentary. The six page introduction provides a brief history of the psalms in Jewish & Christian use.

The Psalter According to the Seventy. Translated by Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1974. Reprint, 1987.

Psalms are marked into the Kathisma, but without the prayers of the Kathisma. An appendix includes the order for taking the kathismata during the liturgical year. This Psalter includes the Biblical Canticles. There is about 20 pages of introduction in English and a few quotations from the Fathers on the Psalms.

The Psalter: An English Translation of the Church Slavonic Version of the Greek Septuagint. Translated by John Weisengoff and Joseph Shary. Detroit: St. Joseph's Institute, 1985.

Includes instructions on the Kathisma readings for the seasons, the introductory prayers to reading the Psalms. The book is divided into the Kathisma with all the prayers of the Kathisma. Includes the Biblical Canticles and a supplement of Psalmody use in the Divine Liturgy. The supplement provides the translation and reference for the Antiphons, prokimen, Alleluia & Communion verses. There is also sections for the exaltations, Paraclis and the Penitential psalms (6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 & 142).

The Psalms Translated from the Greek Septuagint. Translated by José M. Vinck and Leonidas C. Contos. Allendale, NJ: Alleluia Press, 1993.

This is a straight translation of the Psalms without the Psalm titles. There is a one-page introduction in English. There are no markings of Kathismata or their prayers. The Psalms are numbered. A one-page index of Psalm topics is at the end.

The Psalms. Translated by Albert Pietersma New English Translation of the Septuagint, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

This is part of the NETS series of translations (New English Translation of the Septuagint). The series introduction and description of methodology is included in this volume. The NETS series is an adjustment of the NRSV translation to the Septuagint text where it is different from the Masoretic text. This translation is based on the Greek text of Rahlfs' critical text. Pietersma does outline his methodology for straying from that text on occasion in the introduction. The introduction also notes the problems in grammar, structure and language encountered in the Greek text of the Psalms. The text does translate all the Psalm titles and includes some critical textual notes at the foot of each page. The critical notes are only major issues, about 2-4 per page. There are no markings of the kathismata.

The Psalter According to the Seventy. Ottawa, Ontario: Archdiocese of Canada, OCA & WORDsmith, 2001.

This is an English translation of Rahlfs' Septuagint critical text of the Psalms. The text is divided into the kathismata with the closing troparia of each kathisma

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included. There is an introduction that includes the charts showing the assignment of the kathismata to the liturgical services for each season of the year. This also includes the opening prayers for a reading session, general information and a few patristic quotations on the psalms. Each psalm has a Latin & Greek incipit and "Christological prompts" from the works of Archimandrite Placide. The nine biblical canticles and the service of the twelve psalms follow the psalter.

Farkasfalvy, Dénes. *Zsoltáröskönyv Fordította, Bevezetéssel És Magyarázatokkal Ellátta*. Eisenstadt: Prugg Verlag, 1976.

This is a Hungarian language publication of the Psalms. There is a 15-page introduction. Each Psalm has a brief introductory paragraph. After the Psalms there is a collection of other Biblical poetry spanning both the OT & NT. This is not the standard collection of Matins Canticles, but some thirty-five Biblical poems.

Geitler, Lavoslav, ed. *Psalterium Glagoliski Spomenik Manastira Sinai Brda*. Zagrebu: Tisak dioniäke Tiskare, 1883.

This is a transcription of a Church Slavonic Psalter written in the Glagolitic rotund script in the 10th to 11th century. The transcription is into standard Church Slavonic Orthography. There is a single photographic plate at the end showing a sample page from the manuscript. There is some damage on the opening pages of the manuscript indicated in the transcription and the manuscript ends with Psalm 147. The text includes the scriptural titles of the Psalms. There are no divisions indicated for the Kathisma or markings for the stations or other divisions. There is a twenty page Croatian introduction to the manuscript.

Guilbert, Charles Mortimer. *The Book of Common Prayer & Administration of the Sacraments & Other Rites & Ceremonies of the Church Together with the Psalter of David*. Proposed ed. New York: The Seabury Press, 1976.

The Psalter has a short two-page introduction on methods of recitation and translation notes. The Psalter is divided into thirty roughly equal portions designated for each day of the month. The Biblical titles are not here, but there is a Latin descriptive title for each Psalm.

Hately, Thomas L., ed. *The Book of Psalms and Sacred Harmonies with Translations and Paraphrases*. Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1854.

This English Psalter using the text of the King James version of the bible is published in an unusual split page format. The pages are literally cut in half. The bottom half contains psalm tones with attribution to specific churches (there are 220 Psalm tones). The top half is the text of the psalms themselves. The idea is that one can keep the psalm tone open on the bottom to any text of psalm at the top desired. After the Psalms are a series of paraphrase hymns based on biblical texts. The hymns are done in the style of Psalms with content from throughout the Old & New Testaments. An index lists all the Psalm tones in groupings by character. A second index recommends particular tones for each Psalm or hymn in the book. There is a license notice at the opening of the book from Her Majesty's Patent office authorizing the publication of this Psalter.

Zeedick, Peter Ivan, ed. *Psaltir*. Homestead, PA: Greek Catholic Union, 1921.

This is primarily a Church Slavonic Psalter in Cyrillic. The introduction in Church Slavonic gives the charts assigning the kathismata to the liturgical cycle and a

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brief description for taking the Psalms. The prayers for beginning the Kathisma reading are here and the prayers after each Kathisma, all in Church Slavonic. The Psalms are divided into the Kathismata and stations. There is a parallel column English text for the Psalms printed in the main text. The English is from the Douay translation of the Bible.

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The Festal Menaion. Translated by Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware. London: Farber & Farber, 1969.

The Festal Menaion contains the variable parts for Matins & Vespers of the major feasts. This volume also includes the common for the vigil service. There is a seventy-page introduction covering the liturgical cycles, order of the services and the meanings of the feasts. There are appendixes on the Psalter, service book titles, glossary and the calendar.

Arranz, Miguel. "Les grandes étapes de la liturgie Byzantine: Palestine-Byzance-Russie. Essai d'aperçu historique." *Liturgie de l'église particulière et liturgie de l'église universelle* Bibliotheca Ephemerides liturgicae, Subsidia, no. 7 (1976): 43-72.

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Lampe, G. W. H. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.
This 1,500 + page lexicon is part concordance for Patristic era usage of Greek terms. For every major word, each gloss and sub-category is supported by multiple citations of specific usage in Patristic literature.

Schememann, Alexander. *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*. Rev ed. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1974.
This book has become the classic explanation of the liturgical experience of the Great Fast. Father Alexander clearly explains the change in our attitude in prayer that needs to accompany the change in liturgical practice during the Great Fast. He briefly covers the development of liturgical practice, the readings encountered and the rationale for these in our preparation for Pascha. The appendix of this volume is his call for renewal in our approach to communion as a church.

Taft, Robert F. "Mount Athos: a late chapter in the history of the Byzantine Rite." *DOP*,

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Tov, Emanuel. *Textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.