

Psalm 81: Announcing the Resurrection on Holy Saturday

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Abstract

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In the Byzantine vesperal liturgy of Holy Saturday, an unusual occurrence takes place when the Alleluia, with its customary psalm verses, is not sung before the gospel, but is replaced by a unique psalm responsorial unit beginning with Psalm 81:8, “Arise, O God, and judge the earth, for to You belong all nations.” This occurs only on Holy Saturday, and suggests that the novel responsorial psalm unit carries some liturgical or theological significance which explains the displacement of the customary Alleluia. This article presents the history of the Holy Saturday Psalm 81 responsorial unit by examining its occurrence in select cathedral and monastic liturgical sources of Constantinople and Jerusalem/Palestine from the fifth through the fourteenth centuries. Following an examination of the evidence, the article articulates the theological significance of the proclamation of Psalm 81 at the Holy Saturday vesperal liturgy, revealing the meaning of Alleluia as a responsorial refrain, the relationship between it and the gospel lection, and the liturgical context of Psalm 81 throughout its development in the history of the offices of Holy Saturday and Pascha.



In the Byzantine vesperal liturgy of Holy Saturday, an unusual occurrence appears in the rubrics.¹ On this sole occasion of the entire liturgical year, the Alleluia, with its customary psalm verses, is not sung before the gospel, but is replaced by a unique psalm responsorial unit beginning with Psalm 81:8, “Arise, O God, and judge the earth, for to You belong all nations.”² In some traditions, during the chanting of this responsorial psalm, the clergy exchange their black vestments for white,³ whereas in others, laurel leaves are spread throughout the church.⁴ This liturgical instance suggests that the novel responsorial psalm unit carries some liturgical or theological significance which explains the displacement of the customary Alleluia.

This article presents the history of the Holy Saturday Psalm 81 responsorial unit by examining its occurrence in select cathedral and monastic liturgical sources of Constantinople and Jerusalem/Palestine from the fifth through the fourteenth centuries. Following an examination of the evidence, the article will articulate the theological significance of the proclamation of Psalm 81 at the Holy Saturday liturgy in history. The analysis will attend to the meaning of Alleluia as a responsorial refrain, the relationship between it and the gospel lection, and the liturgical context of Psalm 81 throughout its development in the history of the offices of Holy Saturday and Pascha.

¹ This liturgical office is often called the “paschal vigil.” In this article, I will use this term interchangeably with “vesperal liturgy of Holy Saturday.” For clarification, this vesperal liturgy is celebrated as a singular liturgical office.

² This paper will follow LXX numbering throughout.

³ “While this is being sung, the Royal Doors are closed and the curtain is drawn. The clergy change from dark to white vestments, and the hangings and covers in the sanctuary and the rest of the church are likewise changed from dark to white,” in *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), 659. The typikon of the Russian Orthodox Church contains a terse description: “While this is sung, the priests and deacons change their garments, and vest in white,” in *Тунікон* (Moscow: Publishing Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2002), 951.

⁴ Alkiviadis C. Calivas, *Great Week and Pascha in the Greek Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1992), 113–14.

1. Liturgical Function of Responsorial Psalm Units in the Eucharistic Liturgy

A brief review of the structure and history of the Alleluia responsorial psalms that occurs between the New Testament readings of the eucharistic liturgy establishes its context.⁵ The Alleluia occurs during the eucharistic liturgy immediately prior to the gospel reading.

The Alleluia is intoned by the assigned reader after the completion of the epistle lection. The reader announces the Alleluia, which the people sing to an assigned melody.⁶ In his study of the Byzantine liturgy of the word, Juan Mateos states that the Alleluia responsorial psalm unit never includes an entire psalm, unlike the case of the prokeimenon. He notes that the verses frequently originate from varying psalms, and that as early as the tenth century, only one verse was used, whereas the current liturgical books utilize two verses to assimilate the Alleluia responsorial psalm unit to the prokeimenon.⁷ The current execution of the Alleluia differs from one country to the next, as the intercalated psalm verses are often omitted.⁸ Mateos only describes the liturgical functions of these responsorial psalm units without elaborating upon any related theological function, or the connection between the responsorial psalm and the readings.

Thus, the Alleluia is a liturgical unit comprising a dialogue of praise between clergy, chanter, and people, and culminates in their hearing the assigned gospel reading. The connection

⁵ For a broad overview of the function of psalmody in the Christian tradition, see Robert Taft, "Christian Liturgical Psalmody: Origins, Development, Decomposition, Collapse," 7–32 in Harold W. Attridge & Margot E. Fassler, eds., *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁶ Juan Mateos notes that the rubrics of the Diataxis of Philotheus call for the reader to intone "Alleluia! A Psalm of David!" in *La célébration de la parole dans la liturgie byzantine: étude historique* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta [OCA] 191) (Rome: Pontificium institutum orientalium studiorum, 1971), 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 135. Hence the frequent appellation of "prokeimenon before the gospel" commonly applied to the Alleluia responsorial psalm unit.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.