Taxonomies for liturgical books have been developed for the Western liturgical traditions by figures such as Cyrille Vogel and Eric Palazzo. This was made possible by the fact that scholarship on Western liturgy possesses a broad knowledge of available manuscript sources and has already produced numerous studies dedicated to individual liturgical book types. The same cannot be affirmed for the Eastern rites, including the Byzantine. With very few exceptions, systematic studies do not exist for Byzantine book types. Furthermore, our knowledge of the general history of the Byzantine rite is still developing rapidly as new sources are made available to liturgiologists. As such, some initial typologies for Byzantine books proposed by scholars in the twentieth century are now widely rejected.

As scholarship moves closer toward a general history of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, and thereby toward a taxonomy of liturgical books, it is becoming increasingly apparent that liturgical historiography has not always used the same classification methods and terms as other fields. The word “Byzantine” is used broadly by historians to refer to the Eastern Roman Empire. The contemporary liturgical rite of the Orthodox Churches is likewise termed “Byzantine” since it developed within that empire. But historically speaking, the Eastern Roman Empire was once home to several different liturgical traditions distinct from one another. Thus, the early liturgical tradition of Constantinople did not correspond to that of Alexandria, while both were celebrated in the Eastern Roman Empire. Not only did the different major churches have their own prayer texts for liturgies, sacraments and blessings, but even different calendar systems were employed across the Hellenophone Mediterranean.

The situation in Byzantium is akin to the West, where the early Roman Rite was different from other regional Latin rites, such as the Gallican, Ambrosian or Mozarabic Rites. At the same time, the comparative liturgical method has revealed that many of the earliest extant Greek liturgical books do not belong to any “pure” metropolitan custom, but rather reveal dynamic interaction between diverse Greek rites.
In fact, as different liturgical traditions interacted and influenced one another, new book types were created precisely to accommodate the new needs of synthesized liturgical forms. In the past, manuscript cataloguers often attempted to classify Greek manuscripts according to standardized book names that are used within the contemporary liturgical practice of the Orthodox Churches. But the manuscripts themselves reveal far more variety, and medieval monastic inventories include names for book types that are seldom employed in contemporary catalogues. Future endeavors by scholars to create a taxonomy of liturgical books must therefore be inclusive of the fact that book types varied according to both region and time period.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the term “Byzantine” is employed by many liturgiologists in a limited way to refer to the local tradition of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. These scholars tend to consider as “Byzantine” the ritual heritage of the region that remained in imperial hands only after the Arab conquest, an area that predominately corresponds to regions of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate to the exclusion of the other Eastern Patriarchates. But other fields, including archaeology and art history, have tended to conceive “Byzantine” as a much broader geographic and cultural category. This situation not only creates confusion between disciplines, but it constructs obstacles for clear classification. A book like the Tropologion, used within the early cathedral tradition of the Church of Jerusalem, is certainly Byzantine insofar as it is part of the cultural heritage of the Byzantine Empire. But ironically, in their effort to highlight the multiplicity of rites, many liturgiologists refuse to categorize such a book as “Byzantine,” instead preferring terms like “Hagiopolite” and “Palestinian.”

Despite such restrictiveness, the same liturgiologists apply the term “Byzantine” liberally in other contexts. While historians tend to limit the term “Byzantine” to peoples within the actual historical confines of the Byzantine realm, scholars of liturgy often apply the adjective “Byzantine” to the ritual heritage of peoples as diverse as the Bulgarians and Georgians. While some Byzantinists might require a book to be in Greek for it to be considered “Byzantine,” many liturgical historians would consider Arabic and Old Church Slavonic sources as equally valuable for the history of the “Byzantine rite.” Any future taxonomy of Byzantine liturgical books should therefore attempt to reconcile such inconsistencies in terminology and concepts both within the field of liturgiology and as it relates to other relevant disciplines.
At the present moment, the best possible taxonomy of Byzantine liturgical sources can be found in the manuscript books themselves. For now, Greek liturgical books should be classified according to their original titles and contents, together with the period in which they were copied and, when possible, their provenance. As such, Byzantine liturgical codices will be situated according to both the historical period and the local Church in which they were used. Any attempt to create a taxonomy that does not respect the multiplicity of Byzantine liturgical forms will fail to reflect the complexities of religious history in the Eastern Mediterranean.