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The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Canon of the Scriptures: Neither Open nor Closed

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Abstract

Traditionally, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) holds that its canon of the Scriptures comprises eighty-one books of the Old and New Testaments. However, which books comprise this list remains obscure and the very little research executed so far on the topic is both insufficient and misleading. This paper critically investigates if there has ever been a closed canon in the EOTC. It further critically engages with the notion and concept of the term "canon" and/or the Scripture(s). The theoretical framework applicable to this study is a history of reception approach as the study focuses on the history of reception, collection, translation, and transmission of the Scriptures in the Ethiopian Church. Methodologically, this study applies both library readings and fieldwork and the main tool employed in collecting data is qualitative interviews. In addition, insights from Ethiopian literature that have been neglected or that were earlier inaccessible are used. Finally, the study tries to prove that not only the canon of the EOTC, but also its concept in this church is very loose; it is possible to conclude that the canon of the EOTC is neither open nor closed.

Keywords

biblical canon, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), Scripture, Ge'ez, reception history

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Introduction

As with any Christian denomination, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) asserts its own canon of the Scriptures traditionally identified as eighty-one books, including the Old and New Testament books as well as other selected texts. With closer and critical investigation, however, this tradition can be challenged and a different conclusion drawn, as it seems that the concept of a canon as a strict list of books and the requirement to limit oneself to that list is possibly alien to the EOTC's understanding of canon. Thus the fundamental issue at stake is not only the extent and content of the canon, but also the concept and usage of the term itself. The EOTC canon is neither open nor closed because the understanding of canon in this church transcends the idea of a limited set of sacred texts. Therefore, while the question of canon has become more relevant to the EOTC in recent times, questions such as "Is the canon of the EOTC closed or open?" are inherently alien to the traditional conception of canon in the church. Such questions reflect more the definition of canon in other church traditions and contemporary academic discourse around the issue. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate critically both the conceptualization and extent of canon in the EOTC.[1]

The paper will begin by offering brief descriptions of the reception-historical approach which serves as the interpretive framework and the background of the history of reception of Scriptures in Ethiopia in order to facilitate proper understanding of the study. Following the background, a precise description of issues, including a review of the literature on the EOTC canon, data analysis, and findings both from the literature and qualitative interviews, will be presented.

Reception-historical approach

The specific theoretical framework applicable to this study is the "history of reception approach," since behind the question of the canon of the Scriptures lies the history of the reception, collection, translation, and transmission of the Scriptures in the Ethiopian Church.[2] This approach gives special attention to the way in which the particular perspective and context of each period has shaped the understanding of the text and how the text

[1] This article was originally presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, California, USA, Nov. 22–25, 2014.
[2] For an extensive discussion of this history, see Bruk 2013, 358–75.

in turn has had effects on the history into which it has been received.[3] In clearer terms, H. Marcuse (2003) defines "history of reception" as

> the history of the meanings that have been imputed to historical events. It traces the different ways in which participants, observers, historians and other retrospective interpreters have attempted to make sense of events both as they unfolded and over time since then, to make those events meaningful for the present in which they lived and live.

It is this approach which frames the entire discussion of this paper. As the discussion around the canon of Scriptures is arguably as old as the history of the Christian church, this paper has in mind discussions and concepts from various points in history, in accordance with the contemporary debate.

Methodologically, this study relies on both the literature and fieldwork. In addition to drawing on the small amount of literature on the topic, the main tool employed in collecting data is qualitative interviews with leaders of the EOTC. The study included purposively selected interviewees representing high-level scholars, theologians, clergy, and lay members of the EOTC. The questions the interviewees were asked include, "How do you define the canon of Scripture?" "What constitutes Scripture or the canon of Scripture in the EOTC?" "Is the canon of the EOTC closed or open?"

Background: reception and transmission history of Scriptures in Ethiopia

In dealing with the reception and transmission history of Scriptures in Ethiopia, one may begin by asking questions like these: When and from which versions were the Geʿez translations made? Was it before Christianity? Or during the fourth century, when Christianity was the official religion of the government at Aksum? Or after that, with the coming of "the Nine Saints"? Or only in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the church underwent a major internal reformation? Which versions were used at each point in time if translations were being made during all of these periods?

Broadly speaking, there are five major periods in the history of the reception, transmission, and translation of Scriptures into Geʿez: (1) the earliest period before and at the birth of Christianity, when the religion of Israel and Christianity were introduced; (2) the fourth century C.E., when Christianity had become the state religion; (3) the fifth to sixth centuries, typically

[3] For a detailed discussion on the theoretical framework of the history of reception approach, see also chapter two of my Ph.D. dissertation (Bruk 2015), which is devoted solely to a discussion on this and two other theoretical approaches.

believed to be the time of the arrival of "the Nine Saints," when the faith spread widely and the church was structurally consolidated; (4) the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, when the church underwent a major reform; and (5) the twentieth century with the formal autonomy of the church and a translation shift from Geʿez to Amharic.[4] These are the five turning points which shape and contribute to the translation and transmission history of Scriptures in Ethiopia, and to which we will turn one by one.

(1) If Judaism was introduced to Ethiopia following the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon—a position strongly held by the EOTC—some portions of the Hebrew Bible, at least the Pentateuch, and a text of the Falasha[5] (the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, or Ethiopian Jews) must have been introduced at that time. Although the claim by the EOTC that the Scriptures were translated from the Hebrew text as early as this time is very persistent, this is extremely unlikely since Geʿez was not yet a written language before the Christian era. This issue is particularly linked to Acts 8, where the Ethiopian eunuch[6] is reading from the Book of Isaiah. Though it is not known with certainty what version the eunuch was reading,[7] it is evident that some scriptural texts, in whichever language, existed in Ethiopia as early as the Christian era, or even before.

A generalized description from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* dealing with Bible translation into Geʿez dismisses this history in a few lines, which leads to major shortcomings. It reads,

> Bible translation into Ethiopic (Geʿez) prob[ably] began in the 4th–5th cent[uries], basically from Greek, but with some influence from Syriac and possibly also Hebrew. From the 14th cent[ury] there were revisions based on the Arabic texts. Almost all Ethiopic biblical MSS date from the 13th/14th cent[uries] or later. (Cross 1997, 566)[8]

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[4] On the eve of the twenty-first century, the church found itself at a crossroads, having to choose between continuing with its strong traditions by resisting the increasing influence from the Western cultural worldview or compromising some of its long-standing traditions to accommodate modernity, hoping to retain the new generation in the church.

[5] Even if Ethiopian legends strongly claim a very early date for the Falasha arrival in Ethiopia, dating it back to Menelik I's visit and return from Jerusalem, the dating of their coming to Ethiopia is much disputed.

[6] For further discussion on various scholarly arguments regarding the Ethiopian eunuch, see Yamauchi 2004, 161–81.

[7] There is a strong consensus among historians that the eunuch was most likely reading from the LXX version since Greek was widely used in Ethiopia at that time in government circles and among the elite (Mikre-Sellassie 2007a, 9). However, Mikre-Sellassie Gebre Amanuel argues that the eunuch was reading a Geʿez text, since all the Scriptures of the Falasha, the Ethiopian Jews, were not in Hebrew or Greek, but in Geʿez (Mikre-Sellassie 2007b, 159).

[8] The dictionary further notes on the extent of the canon, "The extent of the canon of the EOTC is unclear in detail, but most lists of books said to comprise the canon include (in addition to the OT, NT, and most of the Deuterocanonical Books) various other items such as Jubilees, 1 Enoch, and the Ethiopic Didascalia" (Cross 1997, 566).

The two primary shortcomings of this description which particularly need to be closely studied are its strict identification of the fourth to fifth centuries as the beginning of Geʿez translation and the dating of extant manuscripts only to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is correct, however, to note that "there is no satisfactory complete ed[itio]n [of the Geʿez version in one volume], though most Books of the OT have been pub[lished separately]" (Cross 1997, 566). But this cannot rule out the possible existence of manuscripts from as early as the fourth and fifth centuries C.E.

Against the long-standing position of many scholars that the earliest Ethiopic manuscripts date only from or after the thirteenth century, a very recent archaeological discovery revealed that there exist well-preserved biblical manuscripts in Geʿez from as early as the fourth century.[9] A report from the archaeologists in relation to a particularly important find discloses that

> What could be the world's earliest Illustrated Christian manuscript has been found in a remote Ethiopian monastery. The Four Gospels were previously assumed to date from about 1100AD, but radiocarbon dating conducted in Oxford suggests they were made between 330 and 650AD. This discovery looks set to transform our knowledge about the development of illuminated manuscripts. It also throws new light on the spread of Christianity into sub-Saharan Africa. (Bailey 2010)[10]

In other words, the discovery of manuscripts from as early as the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. suggests that Christianity was well established before the period to which these manuscripts are dated.[11] This in turn indicates that Christianity was being practiced in Ethiopia to some extent during the time of King Ezana of Aksum or the coming of St. Frumentius, the first bishop of the EOTC, in the early fourth century, even if it was not endorsed by the state. This discovery thus undermines the previous academic consensus that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia only during or after the fourth century.[12]

Another argument raised by some scholars against the possibility of Bible translation into Geʿez before the time of Ezana, the second quarter of the fourth century, is the claim that Geʿez was not a written language before this period. This argument, too, is easily countered by archaeological

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[9] The main reason for the earlier position, as Mikre-Sellassie (2007b, 165) strongly argues, is that there have been hardly any sufficient paleographical or archaeological studies done in the field in Ethiopia.

[10] For a detailed report on the archaeological discovery and the carbon dating process at Oxford, see EOTC 2009.

[11] It needs to be noted that the existing manuscripts do not claim at all to be translations—they are probably transcriptions of older manuscripts.

[12] This view has been proposed by scholars such as Paul B. Henze (2000, 32–34).

evidence which demonstrates that some of the kings before Ezana used Geʿez to inscribe their coinage.[13]

(2) As mentioned above, an unambiguous fact in Ethiopian Church history is that Christianity became the state religion of the Aksumite Kingdom during the reign of King Ezana in the first half of the fourth century with St. Frumentius as its bishop. It is most likely in this period that a formal translation of Scriptures was produced from versions which were available to the bishop and without any distinction being made between "canonical" and "non-canonical" books.

It is strongly believed that the Geʿez language underwent two major changes at this time, possibly as a result of that translation. The two new developments were the reversal of the direction of writing, becoming left to right instead of the previous right to left, a reversal perhaps influenced by Greek, and the introduction of vowels (Pankhurst 1998, 25).

Besides the development of the Geʿez language another significant historical turning point is the consecration of the first bishop of the church, St. Frumentius. As a result of this first appointment of the bishop by St. Athanasius, head of the Alexandrian Patriarchate, the EOTC fell under the apostolic headship of the Coptic Church for sixteen hundred years, until it became an autonomous Patriarchate in the mid-twentieth century.[14] The bond with the Coptic Church significantly influenced the subsequent translation of Scripture from Syrio-Arabic texts.

(3) The third turning point in the history of reception, transmission, and translation of Scriptures in Ethiopia was the arrival of "the Nine Saints" from Syria in the fifth to sixth centuries. These missionaries widely propagated the faith and consolidated the church in many aspects. Pankhurst believes that the Nine Saints, besides introducing monasticism and a Christian education system in Ethiopia, were involved in "translating, or re-translating the Bible, mainly from the Greek, into Geʿez" (Pankhurst 1998, 37). There is a general consensus that the major translation work of Scripture into Geʿez was largely carried out by the Saints, who have been very formative for Ethiopian Christianity. It is believed that they used the LXX as their base text with some reference to the Syriac text (Cross 1997, 566).

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[13] For instance, King Wazeba, one of the Aksumite kings before Ezana, began to use Geʿez instead of Greek on his coins (Henze 2000, 31).

[14] It is not clear whether St. Frumentius followed the canon of St. Athanasius or whether he even ever subscribed to any particular canon as the church he presided over was an infant one. The latter is more likely, not only because the church was in its infancy, but also because the question of canon was too far from being settled at the time for him to conclusively adopt a canonical tradition.

However, there is no indication that they made any attempt to designate a list of authoritative scriptural books. Rather, the evidence indicates the Saints translated both "canonical" and "pseudepigraphical" books without making any distinction. For instance, the Ethiopic book of Enoch, retained in its entirety only in Geʿez, along with some other pseudepigraphical works, had disappeared in that same period from other parts of the Christian world.[15] However, Enoch and other pseudepigraphical works were translated into Geʿez either during this period or before, as part of the sacred books of the EOTC.

(4) Another major period of literary activity in the history of Ethiopia is the fourteenth century, known as a time of literary renaissance. After the so-called "dark age"[16] in the history of the EOTC, there was both political and religious reform in Ethiopia. During this period, the Geʿez version underwent a major revision, this time based on an Arabic translation (Cross 1997, 566), which was itself probably based on a Hebrew text. In other words, the LXX-based Geʿez translation was revised using a Hebrew-based Arabic, which made the Geʿez version a hybrid of the LXX and MT.[17] This became clear during the recent translation process from the LXX-based Geʿez text into Amharic.[18] Mikre-Sellassie (2007b, 171), a leading EOTC scholar and translation expert, notes that, at times, the Geʿez is much closer

[15] For a discussion on the rejection of Enoch, especially by Augustine, and its disappearance from the Christian Church in the West since the fourth century, see Adler 1978, 272, and VanBeek 2000, 111.

[16] There are three major features which characterize the period known as "the dark age" in Ethiopian (Christian) history, a period from the late seventh to the early thirteenth centuries. First, as the kingdom of Aksum weakened, the ports were captured by Islamic Arabs and the inland roads were blocked by internal rivals, which also blocked all trade routes, resulting in both economic and political crisis. Second, as a result of the political crisis and internal rifts, the Coptic Church refused to send patriarchs for about a century, meaning that the Ethiopian Church was completely isolated and left without legitimate leadership. As there was no one authorized to ordain priests and the existing generation was decimated, the church's pastoral and liturgical ministry was endangered. Finally, the invasion of Queen Judith marked the first political and religious persecution of the Ethiopian state and church by a somewhat external force in this period. With the destruction of the religious and historical heritage, her assault marked the climax of "the dark age." Her dynasty did not sustain power after her fall, but rather left a vacuum filled by another Christian dynasty in a different locality, the Zagwe Dynasty in Lasta. For a detailed discussion of these three incidents and the characteristics of "the dark age," see Lule 2004, 47–52; Mikre-Sellassie 2010, 98–101; Gorgorios 1982, 30–31.

[17] It is argued that Syriac also had immense influence on the early Geʿez translations, which makes the Geʿez version a fusion of all these texts.

[18] For a discussion on the millennium translation of the Amharic Bible based on the Geʿez and LXX texts by the EOTC and the Bible Society of Ethiopia (BSE) and the controversy around the translation, see Bruk 2014a, 49–73.

to the MT than the LXX because of the Arabic influence in the fourteenth century.

With regard to canonical lists, one important document translated in this period was the Fetḥa Nagast, the Law/Justice of the Kings. It is believed that it is a legal code compiled around 1240 by an Egyptian Christian writer in Arabic and later translated into Geʿez and expanded with numerous local laws (Paulos Tzadua 1968, xvff.). In this legal code it is mentioned that there are eighty-one "divine books which must be accepted by the holy church," though it lists only seventy-three (or seventy-four). On the basis of this tradition, which the Fetḥa Nagast considers as being of apostolic origin, the Ethiopian Church describes the "canon" of Scriptures as comprising eighty-one books. The problem is that it is not known which council recognized this list as such and which books make up these eighty-one. There was no debate as to the extent and the concept of the canon in this period either, with the most prominent theological controversy of this period being Mariology, among others.

(5) From the fifteenth until the twentieth century, the church has faced many challenges, both from external bodies and within itself. Movements of the Imperial centers,[19] a less than friendly tie with the Coptic Church, which was under constant pressure from the Egyptian Muslim governors,[20] failed attempts by the Jesuits to Catholicize Ethiopian Christians,[21] bloody controversy over the two natures of Christ,[22] invasion by the Muslim sultanate of

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[19] The major shifts were from Aksum to Zagʷe/Lalibäla, from there to Gondär, and then finally to Šäwa. For a detailed discussion on such power shifts, see Munro-Hay 2002, 19–36.

[20] For the difficult relationships the EOTC experienced with the Coptic Church at times, see Lule 2004, 49, 57, 59. For the major complaints and dissatisfaction of the EOTC regarding the Coptic Church, see Gorgorios 1982, 74–83. For similar discussions, see also O'Leary 1936, 47–49.

[21] The Jesuits' attempt to Catholicize Ethiopians was not only a failed one but also a bloody one with lasting negative effects. Taddesse Tamrat (1997, 29), for instance, writes, "The Jesuit experience was very bitter for the Ethiopian Church, and it naturally led to the creation of very strong antipathies towards anything European for a long time." In the same vein, Patrick Gilkes (1975, 1) notes that the Portuguese "attempt to convert Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism created havoc; . . . and it had the effect of encouraging the empire's already strong xenophobia." See also Crummey 1993, 43–46.

[22] For a lengthy discussion on the coming of the Jesuit missionaries, their attempt to Catholicize the EOTC, and especially the ensuing bloody controversy regarding the nature(s) of Christ, see Jones and Monroe 1955, 88–96; Gorgorios 1982, 50–60; Lule 2004, 97–128. Gibbon also records some of the details of the events chronologically, including the bloodshed (1830, 234–35). He concludes by reasoning that that historic event had the effect of shuttering the EOTC from the West. After the EOTC won the battle against the Jesuits, Gibbon writes that the churches "resounded with a slogan of triumph, 'that the sheep of Ethiopia were now delivered from the hyenas of the west'; and the gates of that solitary realm were forever shut against the arts, the science, and the fanaticism of Europe" (1830, 235).

Adal,[23] are but a few examples of the historical events which seriously shook the church.[24] However, the church proved to be strong enough to cope with the challenges and to preserve its unique traditions. At the same time the church managed to copy, transmit, and retain scriptural books at various monasteries, remote from danger and other challenging circumstances.

The most notable, and long-awaited, achievement of the church in this period was its formal autonomy, to be headed by its own Ethiopian patriarchate, in the twentieth century. Technically, before this time the church never had the right to conduct its own major council, as it was always subordinate to the Coptic Church. At the same time, in spite of its dependence and because of its isolation, the church managed to adhere to its own unique collection of Scriptures and to continue its other unique traditions.

As we can see from this brief look at the history of the reception, translation, and transmission of Scriptures in Ethiopia, the influences have been highly diverse. Strong and direct influence from the Jews, the Alexandrian Coptic Church, Syrian theologians and texts, and later, from an Arabic textual and theological legacy, is evident. The overview of this history further indicates that the EOTC scriptural tradition is most likely a conglomeration of all these influences and as a result open and wider than them all. It is amidst such competing textual traditions that some of the texts, such as 1 Enoch, gain prominence as they became central for various practical traditions such as calendar, angelology, amulets, astrology, dualism, medicine, and many other aspects of the lives of both the laity and the clergy.[25]

In summary, the Geʿez translations of the Scriptures serve as an ancient witness to biblical and other texts. Although the translation process has been very complex, it is clear that the main text for the Geʿez Bible is the LXX with, at times, influences from the MT, the Syriac,[26] and at a later age from the Arabic. The earliest translation was likely made in, or even before, the fourth century, with major translation work following in the fifth and sixth centuries, and another major revision taking place as late as the fourteenth and subsequent centuries. However, the production of an authoritative list of books to be included remained lacking or unclear or incomplete, with

[23] Much has been written on the invasion by the Muslim sultanate of Adal, Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, also nicknamed Ahmed Gragn, to which the EOTC attributes much of the destruction of countless priceless manuscripts, monasteries, and other sacred materials; see Tekle-Tsadik Mekuria 1966; Pankhurst 1998, 84–96; Lule 2004, 100–107.

[24] These challenges are mainly connected to external attempts at expansion which resulted in the invasion of both the country and the church. For a detailed discussion of the major wars fought at this time, see Pankhurst 1998.

[25] For a detailed discussion on the influence and place of 1 Enoch in the Ethiopian Church in particular and the entire populace in general, see chapter 7 in Bruk 2015, 222–65. For a discussion particularly of 1 Enoch's influence on some ancient Ethiopian literature, see Bruk 2014b, 423–42.

[26] Whether the Syriac origin is MT or LXX is not known and needs further study.

variations. In other words, the canon of Scriptures was never fixed definitively in the long history of the church, which affords equal authority to both "canonical" and some "pseudepigraphical" works. What then is the canon of the EOTC?

Literature review on the EOTC canon

The literature dealing with the EOTC canon is both insufficient and contradictory. It is insufficient because the extensive Western academic discussion on the topic of the canon of the Scriptures has largely neglected the issue of the canon of the EOTC. For instance, the leading scholars in this debate in the last century, Beckwith (1991, 385–95), Bruce (1988), Gamble (1985), Metzger (1987), and Sundberg (1969; 1988, 78–82) all ignored the canon of the EOTC in their discussion.[27] In addition, the definition and the extent of the canon of the Scriptures in general has been a highly debated issue among scholars in the field in recent years. A recent monumental work on the subject, rightly entitled *The Canon Debate*, with contributions from more than thirty scholars, is evidence of the ongoing debate (McDonald and Sanders 2002). The book admits that it seeks "to show how diverse and complex the issue and positions on canon formation are" (12). However, the questions around the EOTC canon are entirely ignored in this comprehensive work, as in other works before it.

Amongst a number of books produced by the EOTC, a recent publication on the overall life and beliefs of the church, entitled *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations* (1996), is notable. The book comprises twenty-seven chapters, one of which deals with holy Scripture according to the church's canon. However, the list is only one among several mentioned elsewhere,[28] which complicates the canon problem of the EOTC. In fact, the works by Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu (1970) and by Sergew Hable Selassie (1997) also give different lists, contradictions that can be confusing for the reader.

To the best of my knowledge, Cowley (1974) is the first scholar to contribute directly to the issue of the canon of the Ethiopian Church. His brief but pioneering article states that there are two ways of classifying the EOTC canon—namely, as a "narrower" and a "broader" canon (1974, 318). The distinction between the number of OT books in the "broader" canon (46)

[27] Beckwith (1985, 478–505) only includes some descriptions in the appendix of his seemingly exhaustive book on the OT canon.

[28] For instance, the recently translated EOTC *Amharic Bible* (2007) contains a different list from the previous one in 1988 (*Amharic Bible* 1988) while Cowley offers two other lists (1974, 318–19).

and the "narrower" canon (56) is one of categorization of books, with the content remaining essentially the same. The difference between these two lists is thus ultimately found in the NT, where eight additional books are included in the broader canon (thirty-five as against twenty-seven).[29] The content of the OT list is more or less the same, but there is still fluidity in both lists. However, Cowley's conclusion that the list in the "narrower" canon "can be regarded as undisputed in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today" (320) is misleading since the variations in different lists have not yet been resolved.[30]

Another recent article by Leslie Baynes (2012, 799–818) raises the issue of the concept of canon in the EOTC, concluding that it is a loose one. However, the article admits that its study of the concept of the canon is not exhaustive, as its main concern is the canonical position of two "pseudepigraphical" books, 1 Enoch and Jubilees, in the EOTC canon.[31]

It is Dibekulu Zewde (1995), an EOTC theologian and researcher, who has devoted a full study to the topic of the EOTC canon, a very detailed work entitled *The 81 Holy Books and the Scripture—Canons in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*. This extensive and exhaustive work is written in Amharic, which limits its access almost exclusively to local readers. Thus, this present study briefly, but closely and critically, engages with it as one of its primary sources.

Data analysis

The two main questions around the EOTC canon, namely its concept and extent, were critically analyzed for the purpose of this research, using Dibekulu's book. This book is relevant because it addresses concerns related to the concept of the canon and whether it is a closed or open canon.

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[29] One version of the eight books included in the EOTC NT and known as Books of Church Order, lists Sinodos (4 books, namely The Order of Zion, Commandment [Tizaz], Gitzew, and Abtils), the Book of the Covenant (2 books), Clement (1), and Didascalia (1). Another version simply counts eight books of Clement, which are called 1 Clement through 8 Clement. Thus, when we talk about publication, it is about the "narrower" canon since these eight additional NT books are too bulky to be printed in one volume.

[30] All the existing Amharic translations, which follow the "narrower" eighty-one list, have variations in the number of their OT list. Referring to the 1918, 1929, 1947, and 1980 publications, Dibekulu (1995, 118) argues that there are lists with more than eighty-one books in some of these canons, even if all of them are counted as eighty-one books of the Scriptures.

[31] Some other general books on the EOTC briefly touch on the canon issue, mainly the list of eighty-one books and the belief of the church regarding the inspiration of those books. For instance, EOTC (1997) and Gorgorios (1982) bypass the topic of EOTC Scriptures in their books as they include a number of other topics.

The main qualitative data come from fifteen participants who were deliberately chosen because of their capacity and expertise in Scripture and canon. All participants were clearly informed about the nature and purpose of the study and they have signed a declaration of such an understanding and explicitly consented to participate in the research project.[32] All the interviews were audio-recorded and, at an early stage of the data analysis, all were transcribed verbatim and codified topically. In this way responses to the same question or topic were grouped for comparison and contrast. The findings of this study are based on my interpretation of these interviews.

Discussion and findings

Dibekulu begins with the assumption that the two authoritative sources for the EOTC Scriptures are ecumenical synods before 451 C.E. and the church fathers. He refers to six ecumenical councils, from what he calls the eighty-five Apostolic Canons to the Council of Laodicea in 363–364.[33] He also refers to more than fifteen church fathers from both the East and the West, up to the time of St. Augustine, as credible sources for the origin of the canon of the EOTC.

His study proves that it is possible to reach a list of eighty-one canonical books in a number of different ways and that at times the list of books may be above or below eighty-one. He points out that this has not been a problem in the church's tradition. In other words, the fluidity of the extent of the canonical books has not been a major concern in the history of the EOTC.[34] After an extensive discussion of six major canonical traditions which he assumes as the background for the EOTC Scriptures, Dibekulu concludes that the number of canonical books of the EOTC is eighty-one and that this is only a tradition without an explicit or official decision or recognition by the church (1995, 296).

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[32] The qualitative interviews were conducted for a Ph.D. dissertation which addressed the issue of canon as one of its central questions.

[33] Even if Dibekulu refers to the canons of the Council of Laodicea, he questions the credibility of the sixth canon, which listed the canonical books (1995, 132–33).

[34] The question of why this was never an issue for the EOTC, while it was definitely raised and dealt with in other churches in the fourth and fifth centuries and during the time of the Reformation, is an interesting one. While answering this question satisfactorily may require further investigation, an initial response would be that the historical context of each period and the questions that rose during those times required fixation of a canon. However, in the case of the EOTC, the challenges and the resulting questions were different from those in other parts of the world.

A closer look at the book further shows that the entire discussion not only clarifies the fluidity of the EOTC canon; rather, it demonstrates that the church does not have any officially accepted canon. Besides a comprehensive and detailed discussion with credible evidence, the simple proof that he presents for the lack of such a canon in the EOTC is the four published Bibles or canons of Scriptures in the last century, from 1918–1980 (Dibekulu 1995, 275),[35] where the four editions have different lists, even if they agree in most of the collection.

As Dibekulu tries to respond to the issue of the concept of canon, he explicitly argues that what makes a sacred book a part of a church's authoritative Scripture is not recognition in a certain ecumenical council; rather, it is its orthodoxy in line with the teachings of the church[36] (i.e., that it is interpreted in an orthodox way according to the teaching of the church). The example he gives is the canonical status of the two books of Clement, which were rejected by two ecumenical councils in 692 in which the EOTC did not participate (Dibekulu 1995, 222–23). Thus, the decisions of these councils regarding the canonical status of these books were not binding on the EOTC so long as the books did not contradict its teaching according to the church's own assessment.[37]

A major factor that has contributed to the openness of the EOTC canon is the meaning of the adjectives used to refer to Scripture. Dibekulu identifies at least ten terms or adjectives used in the church to characterize holy Scriptures (1995, 225–26). These include: (1) books that are "ordered to be accepted" by the church; (2) "honored," that is, those books that maintain the highest honor; (3) "holy," that is, those books that are the holiest ones; (4) books that are "to be read," that is, obligatory reading; (5) books that would necessarily "be read" in the future; (6) "canonical," that is, books that are canonized; (7) "should be canonized"; (8) "recognized" or "known" more than any other books; (9) "divine," that is, books that speak about God; and (10) "written with the inspiration of the Spirit of God." It is in this context that Dibekulu discusses the canon of the EOTC, where books qualified by these descriptors may have scriptural status, thus playing an important role in the concept of Scripture in this church. In other words, the various adjectives used to indicate sacred books allowed the church to be

[35] This list could also include a fifth edition with a variant list of books, the Millennium Edition, published after Dibekulu's book, in 2007.

[36] In fact, this was the original meaning of "canon" in the church until the fourth century. See John Barton in Coggins and Houlden 1992, 104.

[37] It is important to note that the EOTC was not part of the ecumenical councils and hence did not feel the pressure for a clear-cut solution.

more inclusive and open to a larger number of books, without a clear delimitation.

Finally, Dibekulu argues that the EOTC has an open canon but calls for a closed canon to bring the EOTC into conformity with the traditions of other churches.[38] In his final remarks, he proposes three options the church should consider, underlining the necessity of closing the canon. The three options he suggests are to determine (1) which forty-six OT and thirty-five NT books constitute the eighty-one books of a canon; or (2) which forty-nine OT and thirty-five NT books constitute eighty-four books of a canon; or (3) which forty-six (49) OT and twenty-seven NT books constitute seventy-three (76) books of a canon.

It can be inferred from his final remarks in particular, and the entire book in general, that the canon of the EOTC has never been closed in a strict sense with a binding list of books, on the one hand, and on the other hand, that there is nonetheless a limited set of books that are up for consideration as part of the canon. This article, however, argues against Dibekulu's conclusion that the canon of the EOTC as it stands is an open canon and does not share his recommendation to close the canon. Rather, I argue that the canon of the EOTC transcends these categories. In other words, it is not an open canon so long as the option to include whatever books one may want to include is closed and it is not a closed canon so long as there is still the possibility of including or excluding certain books.

Findings from interviews

Regarding the issue of a closed or open canon, one can observe five major categories of responses that emerged from the interviews with interviewees from the EOTC: (1) those who strictly argued for a closed canon but failed to objectively prove their position; (2) those who argued for a progression from an open canon to a closed one; (3) those who identified characteristics of both an open and a closed canon and expressed the need for a middle ground; (4) those who preferred to bypass the question or were not comfortable responding to it; (5) those who tried to defend both a closed and open canon.[39] It is appropriate to give a description of each of these:

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[38] It is interesting that the approach is not limited to canonical works but aims to study all documents from the same period in order to understand the canonical works. On the other hand, canonical criticism does emphasize the canonical framework.

[39] It is appropriate to make a distinction between the concept of canon as a rule of faith and a list of books, where the former is the guiding principle in the EOTC whereas the latter is assumed by Ethiopian Evangelicals.

(1) The first position is that the EOTC canon is strictly closed. For instance, Amsalu Tefera (personal communication, December 19, 2011), a university lecturer and EOTC theologian, strongly argues that the EOTC canon is a closed one. Even though he concedes that one could count the list of the canon in various ways, he insists that the canon is closed and what seems to be open is a matter for interpretation. Likewise, Aemere Ashebir (personal communication, December 19, 2011), the vice-chairperson of the scholars' committee of the EOTC, second to the patriarch, strictly contends that the church has a closed canon even if he admits the existence of some gaps in the way the books are counted. An instructor in a prominent EOTC theological seminary, Aynekulu Getaneh (personal communication, December 21, 2011), is in agreement with the previous two respondents. He says that strictly speaking, the church has a closed canon of eighty-one books even if we can come to this number in different ways. Moreover, he argues that the issue of determining which books constitute the correct canon is the responsibility of the scholars of the church and is best left to them. Mulugeta Wordofa (personal communication, December 27, 2011), an accountant by profession but an active member of the church, argues that his church has eighty-one books, which makes it a strictly closed canon. He admits the enumeration may vary but that does not matter so long as the books included in any of the lists do not violate the true teaching of Scriptures and are coherent with it. He further notes that one can even accept other books if their teaching[40] is edifying, and this seems like indirect advocacy of an open canon. For the most part, however, he shares the same position as the above-mentioned research participants.

(2) In the second category are those who advocate an open canon. One of the leading scholars of the EOTC and a Bible translation consultant, Mikre-Sellassie Gebre-Amanuel (personal communication, December 15, 2011), maintains that there is no distinction between canonical and non-canonical books in the EOTC; the church holds all as Scripture.[41] He also suggests that there are different schools within the EOTC holding differing positions on the list of canonical books. Abraham Adugna (personal communication, December 19, 2011), an EOTC theologian and researcher at Addis Ababa

[40] It should be noted that correct teaching has been a strong canonical norm in the history of the church. Even Luther was tempted to use it to sideline the Letter of James. This could be an indication that canon as correct doctrine may be a stronger argument than canon as belonging to a list. The question of a canon within a canon is a move in this direction.

[41] Besides the openness of the canon, the other nuance he indicates in his interview is that the EOTC does not make any distinction between the "canonical," "apocryphal," "non-canonical" and/or "pseudepigraphical" books as Western churches do. The books of Genesis, Luke, 1 Enoch, and Judith are all equally Scripture in the EOTC, for instance.

University (AAU), also has a clear position, suggesting that the canon of the EOTC is open since there is no strict list of books to form a closed canon. It is possible for certain books to be in or out of the canon. On the other hand, he argues that this does not mean any book can have that privilege; a book should be in agreement with the overall teaching of the Scriptures to be part of the canon in one or the other list, in which case it is a closed canon. Strictly speaking, he expresses the need for a third alternative.

(3) As partially suggested by Abraham above (2), in the third category are those in search of a middle ground to define the canon of the EOTC as not strictly closed or open. For instance, Merkeb Mekuria (personal communication, December 11, 2011), an EOTC theologian and researcher at AAU, clearly sees the number eighty-one as more of a tradition than practice. The books of the canon are fewer than eighty-one. However, it is very difficult for him to say the canon of the EOTC is open even if the church is still trying to fix it.

(4) Many informants fall into a category where they fear the issue is still inconclusive and as a result they either opt to bypass the question or are not comfortable responding to it conclusively. Yilma Getahun (personal communication, December 21, 2011), the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Ethiopia (BSE), responds that the church has not yet declared officially whether it has an open or closed canon and, as a result, it is difficult to say whether the church owns an open or closed canon. Haileyesus Engdashet (personal communication, December 27, 2011), a translation consultant at BSE, is either uncertain or uncomfortable responding to this question and he comments that the church strongly attached itself to the number eighty-one, which assumes a closed canon, whereas the variation in the inclusion and exclusion of certain books in this strict list is still open.[42]

(5) Finally, Daniel Seife Michael (personal communication, December 16, 2011), a prominent church leader and scholar, argues that the EOTC canon of Scripture is both closed and open. He argues that so long as there is a clear principle that permits a book to be among Scriptures, it is a closed canon. However, that does not mean that there is a rigid number of books counted as part of a canon; this would make it an open canon.[43] In other words, he argues, it is not which book is part of the canon that is binding

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[42] Along the same line, some interviewees, including Haddis Tikuneh (personal communication, December 20, 2011), a Ph.D. student and instructor in a leading seminary of the EOTC, Haile Mariam Melese (personal communication, December 19, 2011), scholar of the church and head of the Evangelistic and Apostolic Mission Department of the EOTC, and Tsehay Lema (personal communication, December 23, 2011), a lay member of the church, were either unwilling to respond to the question or uncomfortable or unsure about it.

[43] He exemplifies this with the law of fasting. That one has to fast is an unchangeable and strict law. But how to fast, how long, when, and other details are flexible for the one who is determined to fast.

(open?); rather, it is what teaching is derived from it that decides its inclusion in the canon (closed?).

A summary of the findings across the five categories reflects that respondents appreciate the tension of the EOTC canon of Scripture in that it is neither closed nor open, or alternatively that it is both closed and open. In other words, the discussion reflects that three broader categories are in dialogue: (1) closed, (2) open, and (3) neither closed nor open.

In the meantime, the concept of the canon in the EOTC has not been understood as a strict list of sacred books where nothing can be added or removed. This is very much connected to the ultimate authority of the church, where it retains the right to determine what is binding in regard to Scripture. This is very clearly reflected in the call from many of the participants to the church to finalize the closure of the canon. However, there are others who question this request, since they believe that the church has always had the mandate to recognize whether a book is canonical or not. In other words, they suggest that the "canon" of the EOTC is basically in line with rule of faith as the determining factor over a list of books. So, a hard-and-fast inclusion and exclusion of books is not apparent in the church's scriptural tradition.

Besides Dibekulu's analysis and the interviews, which suggest the canon of the EOTC is neither closed nor open, the literature published under the supervision of the church indicates similar findings. For instance, a book entitled *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations* strongly claims a closed canon of eighty-one books (EOTC 1996, 45–47). However, it admits that the EOTC "has other books written by Holy Fathers based on the Old and New Testaments expanding the theological education and prayer; books on the hymns and chants of St. Yared and other related books" (EOTC 1996, 47). It is in this latter sense that another book entitled *The Church of Ethiopia: Past and Present* generalizes that the holy books at the disposal of the EOTC make it difficult to say exactly how many constitute the canon. It does not indicate that the canon is closed, nor does it mention the traditional number eighty-one; rather it collectively indicates various kinds of ancient books preserved by the church that are over 850 in number (EOTC 1997, 77). One can readily find more evidence of such variations as an indication of the fluidity of the EOTC canon, which can be both confusing and misleading, at least for a non-Orthodox scholar or reader.

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the EOTC canon is fluid (Baynes 2012; Cowley 1974).[44] Such a conclusion remains meaningless and misleading if it does not consider the EOTC's deeper understanding

[44] See also Ullendorff (1968, 31–72), who, although he does not discuss the issue of canon directly, seems to presume noncanonized Scripture in the EOTC in his study of the history of Ethiopian Bible translation.

of the concept of canon. It represents no more than an understanding of the external appearance of the canon of the EOTC, but it does not include the historical and pragmatic position of the church itself. Historically, the EOTC, as a church, has never participated in any ecumenical council deliberating on the issue of the canon of the Scriptures nor has it held any debate independently so as to make a conclusive decision on its canon of Scriptures. Pragmatically, until the dawn of the twenty-first century, the church did not find itself in a position where the issue of the closure of the canon was a major challenge and a central issue for its life and faith, since all Scriptures, regardless of their inclusion in the list of the canon, have been part of the broader tradition by which the church is governed.

On the other hand, it should be noted that there has been an increasing tendency in the EOTC to look for a closed canon, perhaps because of external influences. These may include (1) the general pressure for the church at large to have, as almost all other churches, a formally closed canon; and (2) an informal but continuing debate with believers from Protestant churches, where in most cases both Protestants and Orthodox believers presume a closed canon.[45]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems fairly clear that the main reason for the existence of an inconclusive list of the EOTC canon is very much connected to a different understanding of the concept of the canon of Scriptures. The concept of canon, according to the EOTC, is not a list of books with nothing to be added or removed, but is rather an inclusive collection of ancient sacred books which are traditionally, historically, theologically, and practically in line with the teaching of the church and actively promote that teaching. In other words, according to the EOTC, any ancient writing that is coherent with the dogma of the church can be part of the canon. As a result, the church has never officially defined what constitutes a canon of Scripture nor fixed which books might comprise such a list. It is satisfied with the tradition of eighty-one canonical books without interrogating the number or the value of the eighty-one and without worrying that this number is

[45] Given the canon debate is a dynamic one, it should be noted that there remain more serious and sensitive questions around the canon, in both the EOTC and other Christian churches in general, which are beyond the scope of this short article. Specifically, questions recommended for further study include, among other issues: Why did it become so important in sixteenth-century Europe to have absolute clarity on the boundaries of the canon and why was it not so urgent in Ethiopia? Why was it not so urgent in the West until the sixteenth century? What type of situations led to discussion of the issue of canon in different parts of the world?

neither unambiguous nor definitive. Thus, one may conclude that the central concept of the "canon" of Scripture for the EOTC does not mainly reflect a list of specific books that would constitute authoritative Scripture; rather, it denotes "the apostolic criteria" (Daniel Seife-Michael, personal communication, December 16, 2011), as claimed by the church, that determine whether a given book can be part of that authoritative Scripture. In other words, the concept of the EOTC "canon" of Scripture arises more from the ancient concept of canon as a rule of faith than the later understanding of canon as a fixed list of books. Only time will determine whether the church will finally take a decision to clarify both the concept and extent of the canon of Scripture in line with this latter development and in response to current pressures, or whether it will continue to hold to a canon that is neither closed nor open.

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