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Biblical Canons in Church Traditions and Translations

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Abstract
This issue of *The Bible Translator* is devoted to the subject of the biblical canon, offering papers presented at UBS Global Bible Translation meetings. The introduction to the issue highlights the following points: the purpose of the papers, church perspectives on biblical canons, the contents of the papers, and the findings and suggestions drawn from the authors' conclusions.

Keywords
biblical canon, Orthodox canons, Catholic canon, Protestant canon, Jewish canon, United Bible Societies

During a biannual meeting of the Global Management Team of the United Bible Societies (UBS) that was held September 4–10, 2014, in Rome, Italy, the department of Global Bible Translation (GBT) decided to conduct fresh research on biblical canon issues in order to appreciate them better from the perspectives of different church traditions. A number of Global Translation Advisors were assigned to take part in this research. The first drafts of their papers were discussed at the Seminar on the "Philosophy of Education," jointly organized by the United Bible Societies and the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship on October 27–31, 2014, at the Fondazione Universitaria San Pellegrino in Misano-Adriatico, Italy. The second round of discussions on these papers took place during an annual GBT meeting March 2–6, 2015, in Antalya, Turkey. The authors received a great deal of

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encouragement which led to the revision of their papers, offered here to a wider readership. This introduction highlights the following points: the purpose of the papers, church perspectives on biblical canons, the contents of the papers, and the findings and suggestions drawn from the authors' conclusions.[1]

1. Purpose of the papers

The issues of what texts and what canons we translate often surface in UBS circles, especially during Bible translation checking sessions. Some Bible translators care less about any specific source texts and simply navigate between different texts available and accessible to them. When it comes to the biblical canons, some of them assume that there is only one original canon and that their source texts and that canon are the same thing. Therefore, the books that may not be found in that original canon are called apocryphal, deuterocanonical, or even non-canonical. The purpose of these papers is to provide a more considered understanding of the diversity of biblical canons and its implications for editors and publishers such as Bible Societies and theological schools. God is one, but his interactions with humanity take multiple forms, of which the person of Jesus Christ constitutes the ultimate climax, since he is the only incarnate Word of God (John 1.1-18) in whom the fullness of divinity dwells bodily (Col 1.19; 2.9; Heb 1.1-2).

Church divisions and theologies seem to shape both the meaning and the content of biblical canons. There is a need to use literary data to examine the contours of the biblical canons prior to the schisms which led to the demarcation of mainstream church traditions, including the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches. The findings of this research are expected to suggest ways of improving the translation and organization of Bible titles and contents, and to shed light on the boundaries of biblical canons within church traditions, as well as on the Scripture publishing and distribution policies of the Bible Societies in partnership with churches. Despite the guidelines jointly signed by the Bible Societies and the Roman Catholic Church (1968/1987) and between the Bible Societies and the Greek Orthodox Church (2010), some attitudes and practices contradict the ecumenical spirit of those guidelines. For example, only the sixty-six books recognized by Protestant churches are allowed to be used as the basis of devotions in the headquarters of some Bible Societies. African Bible Societies, along with their Catholic and Protestant church partners, have refused to welcome and

[1] I am grateful to Professor Alexander Schweitzer and Dr. Esteban Voth for having endorsed and supported the research proposal on the current topic as an initiative of the UBS Global Bible Translation group.

distribute the 2010 edition of the Traduction œcuménique de la Bible (TOB), jointly published by the French Bible Society and Editions du Cerf. It integrates six books not found in the previous edition (1975). These books include 3 and 4 Ezra, 3 and 4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, and Psalm 151. Generally speaking, Catholics and Protestants from Africa have associated this 2010 edition with the Orthodox Church and rejected it.

Three lessons can be learnt from the experience of this TOB edition. First, significant progress toward the recognition of the LXX as a valid source for Bible translation is being made by the TOB editors and publishers. Second, biblical canons cannot be assumed to be interconfessional nor ecumenical, because each church so far abides by its own canonical tradition. Third, one should not presume that the label deuterocanonical is a solution for an interconfessional/ecumenical edition. As a suggestion, the TOB editors and publishers (as well as others) could be encouraged to consider translating and distributing a translation of Codex Vaticanus or Codex Sinaiticus in order to promote an awareness of the format of the earliest extant Christian Bibles. Arguably, these two codices are the best representatives of the original texts and canons of the early Christian communities.

The overall argument of this collective work is to show that once the diversity of the biblical canons is recognized, accepted, and supported, such labelling would become irrelevant. Consequently, publishers like the Bible societies, along with theological schools of all Christian denominations, could lead the way in dropping these misleading labels from their Scripture material and related products. The intended audience of this research includes translators and translation officers of the Bible Societies, as well as biblical scholars, theologians, and church leaders.

2. Church perspectives on biblical canons

Etymologically, the term canon (from the Greek κανών) means a reed or a straight rod or bar that can serve as a tool for measurement. The term is used metaphorically to refer to the rules of an art or a trade or to signify a list or catalogue.

It goes without saying that the translation of biblical books often occurs in a church setting which is already familiar with a given biblical canon that the intended audience regards consciously or unconsciously as the Bible, the authoritative word of God. The relatively recent debate on biblical canons broke out during the Reformation period and has continued to shape the minds and attitudes of many Christians across different denominations. Protestant churches generally adopt the Reformation canon of sixty-six books (thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament books).

A Bible edited by a Roman Catholic entity presents forty-six books of the First Testament which are all regarded as canonical, reflecting not the shorter list adopted at the Synod of Laodicea (A.D. 363/4), but the longer one of the Synod of Rome (A.D. 382). The latter was confirmed during the Third Council of Carthage in 397 as preserved in the *Codex Canonum Africanae Ecclesiae* of 419.

In the wave of Western church reformation movements, Protestant communities progressively rejected all books that are not attested in the Masoretic text (MT) and gave preference to the shorter list of thirty-nine books (see "The Canons of the Synod," no. 60). Furthermore, Martin Luther recognized only twenty-three New Testament books as canonical and classed four other books as non-canonical (Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation), but useful for spiritual edification.

Orthodox Church traditions do not share a unique and fixed list of canonical books, given that the first seven ecumenical councils never provided such a list. Nevertheless, they substantiate their views with those of the Council in Trullo (691–692), which in turn refers to three documents of the fourth century: the Council of Laodicea, the Apostolic Constitution in its final form (375–380), and the Third Council of Carthage. The Apostolic Constitution and the Council of Carthage share the views of a longer list of which the LXX (250 B.C.) remains the earliest witness. Yet, a typical Orthodox Bible clearly distinguishes thirty-nine canonical books from eleven non-canonical books of the Old Testament, which are distinctly marked as such; it still keeps them inside the same Bible even though this is expected to contain only authoritative, inspired, or canonical books. While abiding by the Old Testament texts of the LXX, some lists of biblical canonical books of the Coptic Orthodox Church include 1 and 2 Clement and the Apostolic Constitutions among their New Testament books.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) counts forty-six books of the Old Testament (though the content is not the same as that recognized by the Roman Catholic Church) and thirty-five books of the New Testament. This tradition follows the canon of the Fetḥa Nagast (the Law/Justice of the Kings). This document of A.D. 1240 mentions eighty-one canonical books, without listing them, however. It is worthwhile to note that for the Orthodox Church, including EOTC, the question of canon is flexible. Similarly, for some emerging Christian communities of Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Independent churches, the issue of biblical canons remains open; the emphasis is put on the living Word of God and the Holy Spirit who guides its interpreter.

From a historical perspective, the LXX remains the earliest and most important witness of the Old Testament books that Christians, before any

schism, viewed as holy Scripture. This status is proudly maintained by the Orthodox Church traditions:

> The Septuagint constituted the Bible of the undivided Church, the text on which the apostles and the church fathers depended in order to present their theology, the text which facilitated beyond any other the spread of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world, the text which assumed the role of the original for a multitude of other ecclesiastical translations and became the source of inspiration for the hymnography and iconography of the Church. But also as a witness of a particular hermeneutic approach, which was dominant at the time of Christianity's emergence, the Septuagint has a special importance, from a theological point of view, for the understanding of the New Testament. . . .
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> To the extent that . . . nothing today compels the Orthodox Church to favour a text of a particular form, she must recognise as her own heritage both texts, the Hebrew and the Septuagint, encouraging their study and research. (Konstantinou 2004, 107)

Though the first catalogue of a biblical canon of the early Christian church would have been confirmed during the Synod of Rome, the earliest extant lists of biblical canonical books come from the Synod of Laodicea and the Synod of the Third Council of Carthage. Canon 60 of the Synod of Laodicea stipulates the following (even if the genuineness of this list is questionable):

> These are all the books of Old Testament appointed to be read: 1, Genesis of the world; 2, The Exodus from Egypt; 3, Leviticus; 4, Numbers; 5, Deuteronomy; 6, Joshua, the son of Nun; 7, Judges, Ruth; 8, Esther; 9, Of the Kings, First and Second; 10, Of the Kings, Third and Fourth; 11, Chronicles, First and Second; 12, Esdras, First and Second; 13, The Book of Psalms; 14, The Proverbs of Solomon; 15, Ecclesiastes; 16, The Song of Songs; 17, Job; 18, The Twelve Prophets; 19, Isaiah; 20, Jeremiah, and Baruch, the Lamentations, and the Epistle; 21, Ezekiel; 22, Daniel. And these are the books of the New Testament: Four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; The Acts of the Apostles; Seven Catholic Epistles, to wit, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude; Fourteen Epistles of Paul, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and one to Philemon. ("The Canons of the Synod," no. 60)

The *Codex Canonum Africanae Ecclesiae* reports the resolution of Carthage as follows:

> The Canonical Scriptures are these: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two

> books of Paraleipomena, Job, the Psalter, five books of Solomon, the books of the twelve prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Maccabees. Of the New Testament: four books of the Gospels, one book of the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul, one epistle of the same [writer] to the Hebrews, two Epistles of the Apostle Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, one book of the Apocalypse of John. ("Third Council of Carthage [A.D. 397]")

The four books of Kings include 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings; the two books of Paraleipomena refer to 1–2 Chronicles; the five books of Solomon are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach), whilst the two books of Esdras imply Ezra and Nehemiah.

One may notice that the books which are usually called deuterocanonical (Tobit, Judith, 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Greek Esther, and Greek Daniel) do not appear as a separate set of books. They are part and parcel of this particular canon which goes back not to the Council of Trent (1545–1563), but to a period as early as the fourth century A.D. (Synod of Rome, Third Council of Carthage). Indeed, this list is in tune with the LXX and not the MT.

As for the case of biblical canons, the number and the order of books will depend on the choice of each church tradition. In this regard, no biblical book that a church has accepted as canonical deserves to be labelled as "deuterocanonical" or any similar expression.

3. Contents of the papers

Beside this introduction, the present research comprises eight studies on biblical canons. Three studies focus on early Jewish and Christian Bibles as witnessed by the Qumran collections, the LXX, and the MT. One study is devoted to the Vulgate translation that was adopted as the Bible for the Roman Catholic tradition during the Council of Trent. One study concentrates on the role of the Reformation in biblical scholarship. Two studies deal with the topic of canon in Orthodox traditions for which the LXX translation remains the official Old Testament text. Finally, one study examines New Testament canons.

Andy Warren-Rothlin analyses the "Accretion of Canons in and around Qumran." He argues that there is no evidence for a closed OT canon before A.D. 70. Various sources indicate a high degree of fluidity and gradual accretion, closely related to politico-historical developments and the exigencies of new religious communities. The text collection of one of these, the Qumran community, can be investigated for the comparative rating of

biblical books, including those in the Tanakh as we know it, others which may have had ambiguous status, and a number of different types of Scripture-based works. This picture may serve to relativize modern Christian conceptions of canon where they have been based on accidents of history, such as the language in which texts have been available or the media in which they have been transmitted. As a result, the Bible Societies will need to engage with a wider range of concepts of canon.

Simon Crisp, in his paper "The Septuagint as Canon," summarizes the processes by which the Greek translation was made and traces the way in which this corpus gradually acquired authoritative and then canonical status. He argues that "whatever the authority of the LXX in Jewish communities in both Alexandria and Jerusalem, it is clear that the Greek Old Testament did acquire authoritative status in the Christian community. It is equally the case, however, that it took some time for this corpus to attain a fixed shape."

Seppo Sipilä explores "The Canonization Process of the Masoretic Text." He discusses the process that gave canonical status to the MT. Because the MT is a creation of rabbinic Judaism and because the rabbis did discuss the status of various books within the MT, Sipilä argues for a late dating of the text as a collection and of its canonization. While any canon is an authoritative list, the MT can only act as a canonical text in a limited sense. In practice it is a canonical text without authorization, though nowadays it is widely accepted as canonical.

Daniel Kerber, in his paper on "The Canon in the Vulgate translation of the Bible," tackles the development of the Vulgate translation of the Bible and the correlative discussion about the canon. He argues that after many centuries of several Vulgate versions which included shorter or longer list of Old Testament books, it is the longer list that was sanctioned as inspired and authentic by the Council of Trent during its fourth session in 1546. This decision confirms the canonical tradition already stated by the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397), although Jerome, the main translator of the Vulgate, would go on to prefer the shorter canon. Furthermore, the terminology "protocanonical" and "deuterocanonical" for books of the Old Testament does not feature in the canonical debate during the Council of Trent or in previous councils. It appears for the first time in the wave of the Counter-Reformation, namely in the writings of Sixtus of Siena (1520–1569). Even if this terminology has been and is being used by both Catholic and non-Catholic scholars, it seems to be anachronistic and critically unjustified.

Marijke H. de Lang addresses "The Reformation Canon and the Development of Biblical Scholarship." She shows how the well-meant

attention of humanist and Reformation scholars to the original languages of the Bible also had its downside, especially for study of the New Testament. Although the revival of Greek and Hebrew studies in itself was a positive development, together with the promotion of a Hebrew canon and the notion of *sola scriptura*, the hermeneutical horizon of the New Testament was limited to a Hebrew canon and a Semitic context. The New Testament was separated from its original Hellenistic-Jewish, Greek environment, and was explained from a background to which it never really belonged.

Bruk A. Asale presents an African view in his paper "The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Canon of the Scriptures: Neither Open nor Closed." He starts by asserting that the canon of the Scriptures in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) traditionally comprises eighty-one books of the Old and New Testaments. However, which books are included in this list remains obscure and the very little research that has been done 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 engages with the notion and concept of the terms "canon" and/or "Scripture." 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 are offered from the study of Ethiopian literature that has been neglected or that was earlier inaccessible. Finally, the study tries to prove that not only the canon of the EOTC, but also the very concept of canon in this church is very loose, such that it is possible to conclude that the canon of the EOTC is neither open nor closed.

Lénart J. de Regt examines the "Canon and Biblical Text in the Slavonic Tradition in Russia." For the sake of a better understanding of the situation in Russia, and particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church, with regard to biblical canon and biblical text, this article reflects on the notion of non-canonical books, the role of tradition (and its roots in the development of the canon in early Eastern Christianity), as well as the Russian Orthodox Church's acceptance of multiple authoritative versions of biblical books. This is followed by a brief discussion of the Slavonic Bible and the Russian Synodal Translation, particularly their sometimes hybrid textual base. The article closes with some thoughts on what this complex situation might mean for Bible translation projects in Orthodox contexts in Russia.

Jean-Claude Loba Mkole, in "Intercultural Construction of the New Testament Canons," develops the subject matter combining historical-critical approaches and canonical criticism with the method stated in the

title of the study. Historical-critical research has shed light on several issues pertaining to NT canons, namely the catalogues for NT books, codices containing NT books, early translations containing NT books, NT Apocrypha, criteria for selecting NT books, primary sources for the study of the NT canon, as well as particular contexts of the United Bible Societies. Canonical criticism has highlighted issues concerning extrinsic and intrinsic authority, canonical contexts and hermeneutics, and canonical editions. The intercultural method revolves around three major frames of reference: the original biblical cultures, the church cultures, and the target contemporary cultures. While focusing on the NT canons, it presumes that a Christian Bible is made of two sub-collections, the Old or First Testament and the New or Second Testament. It also assumes that each of the two sections may have canonical and non-canonical books, but not deuterocanonical books, given that the term "deuterocanonical" is inappropriate for designating the books that faith communities regard as either canonical or non-canonical.

4. Findings and suggestions drawn from authors' conclusions

As the collection of biblical books at Qumran can show, the

> early stages of formation of what we know as "canon" are those perhaps with which our generation can feel most comfortable—not "splitting and joining," "defining and excluding," but accretion in dialogue, all the while inviting and recognizing God's rule over the processes. . . . These texts to which the church is joined, which shape and are shaped by her, which define her, are a witness to God's people's walk with him. And their *form* is witness to his people's engagement with them in each generation. They testify not just through what they *communicate* to each generation, but through how they have taken shape and what they physically *are*, and *are still becoming* in our Bible Societies and in the church. The challenge of Bible translation and the production of editions in whatever medium is to represent faithfully what these texts *are*, not just what they *say*—their *identity*, not just their *message.* (Andy Warren-Rothlin)

Within the context of the Greek-speaking Orthodox Church, Simon Crisp finds that the "Septuagint" is something of a construct, which gradually acquired a more or less fixed form through a complex process lasting several centuries. In reality it is "a collection (overwhelmingly) of translations from Hebrew biblical books made at different times and in different places, and to a much more limited extent of original works written in Greek." Second, Crisp points out that "it might seem inappropriate to speak of 'canon' at all with regard to the LXX." In the context of Hellenistic

Judaism, the books in the LXX possessed varying degrees of religious or spiritual authority, from very high in the case of the Pentateuch to much lower in the case of those books without Hebrew originals, Third, the LXX did not constitute a formal or institutional canon—not least because the concept itself belongs to a later period. However, the LXX tradition subsequently became canonical for individual Christian churches. Therefore, the LXX must not be considered as derivative, but rather its own status and authority must be recognized.

"Masoretic canon" is a complex concept: "Much of that complexity relates to the fact that a traditional Christian understanding of the concept of canon does not easily fit with the MT and the Masoretic canon." There are no official lists of the canon in Judaism. No religious authority has imposed such a list. Issues are presented only as discussions between important figures such as rabbis. "At the same time, when looking at history, one sees a logical path that led to the creation of the MT and its prominent place among both Christians and Jews. This process—we might call it canonization—is more important than any list approved by any religious authority" (Seppo Sipilä).

Deuterocanonical books are commonly associated with the Roman Catholic Church, the Council of Trent, or even the Vulgate. However, "it seems to be Sixtus of Siena who coined the terminology 'protocanonical' and 'deuterocanonical' in his book *Bibliotheca Sancta*. . . . So, it is pointless looking for this formulation within the debates or in the decrees of the Tridentine Council and its fourth session concerning the canon in 1546, twenty years before Sixtus's work." One might suggest that "referring to the MT and the LXX, it would be acceptable to talk about the first *text* and the second *text*, for we can recognize, at least for the Law and the Prophets, that the Hebrew text is prior to the Greek, but the works of Sundberg (1966, 1997) seem to demonstrate that there is not a complete Hebrew canon prior to the Greek canon; that being the case, is it valid to continue using the terms 'protocanonical' and 'deuterocanonical'?" (Daniel Kerber).

Reformed scholars in Reformed Churches made the choice of moving "away from a combination of the LXX and Greek New Testament, and instead to combine a Hebrew Old Testament with a Greek New Testament. Their choice has had significant consequences for how the Bible is perceived. It has influenced biblical exegesis by making the Hebrew Old Testament the immediate background of the Greek New Testament (though this has changed for the better in the last decades). The promotion of the combination of a Hebrew Old Testament and a Greek New Testament also has dominated the discipline of Bible translation: it has been the background of the UBS guidelines and has influenced the development of electronic Bible programs such as ParaTExt. It is perhaps time to understand that this

ideal was a choice made at a particular moment in history, and has some serious limitations" (Marijke H. de Lang).

From an Ethiopian Orthodox perspective, "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 neither unambiguous nor definitive." It is suggested that 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 the current pressures, or whether it will continue to hold to a canon that is neither closed nor open" (Bruk A. Asale).

With regard to the canon in Russia, a translation "that is intended (also) for an Orthodox audience should not be regarded as complete without the non-canonical books and the non-canonical parts of Daniel, Esther, Psalms (Ps 151), and 2 Chronicles (Prayer of Manasseh). The Russian Orthodox Church includes the non-canonical as well as canonical books in the Bible. With regard to the *textual base* of the Old and New Testaments, . . . the Russian Orthodox Church has accepted multiple authoritative textual versions of biblical books. . . . It is quite possible, but by no means certain that the Russian Orthodox Church would, in the case of a new translation into Russian, follow exactly in the footsteps of the Synodal Translation of 1876." Nevertheless, concerning "translations for an Orthodox audience, the Hebrew MT on the one hand and even a critical edition of the Greek New Testament text on the other . . . are still a feasible textual base, although footnotes and careful comments should be included on the differences with the readings that were followed by the Synodal Translation. The same applies to translations for an interconfessionally diverse audience in an Orthodox context" (Lénart J. de Regt).

An intercultural method combined with historical approaches and canonical criticism has come up with the following findings about the New Testament canons. First, the historical approaches show that the biblical canons were set or confirmed by faith communities represented by church clerics, bishops, and synods/councils. Second, canonical criticism emphasizes reading the Christian Bible as a literary and theological whole made of the Old and New Testaments. Third, the intercultural method recognizes the unity and the diversity of biblical canons throughout church history, as well as the importance of understanding the Christian Bible as a literary and theological whole. It proposes that each contemporary church culture or faith community should not only construct appropriate Bible translations, but also determine and explicitly state the canonical frames of the latter, for

example, in titles, such as *The Holy Bible: Carthage Canon* (Jean-Claude Loba Mkole).

In a nutshell, these findings and suggestions indicate that the Bible Societies could do no harm to any church traditions, but would on the contrary render more justice to these traditions, if they could distinctively respect and promote the diversity of Christian biblical canons through Scripture translation, publication, and distribution.

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