

The Hazy Edges of the Biblical Canon: A Case Study of the Wisdom of Solomon in Arabic*

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In June 2016, the majority of Orthodox Churches convened on the island of Crete. Despite the absence of four autocephalous churches who protested against the agenda,¹ the council is an important achievement in terms of pan-Orthodoxy: the last synod considered ecumenical took place in 787. Although not explicitly on the agenda, the council is interesting also because of the formalization of a biblical canon. An Orthodox council is declared truly ecumenical only by its ratification at later councils. At Crete, the council acknowledged a list of such previous local and inter-Orthodox synods, including the local council in Jerusalem in 1672, and the council in Jassy thirty years earlier. These two were counted among the councils that “refute[d] Protestant beliefs,”² such as the rebuttal of the so-called deuterocanonical books. As a consequence, Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Tobit, Bel and the Dragon, Susanna, Maccabees, and Ben Sira were—as a group—explicitly listed as genuine parts of Scripture.³

In the main, the statement in Jerusalem, which was built on that in Jassy, had been adhered to since its inauguration and even prior to that.⁴ However,

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- 1 For a report on the council, see C. Hovorun, “The Panorthodox Council: A Fragile Hope for Aggiornamento?” *The Catholic World Report* (10 July, 2016).
- 2 For the 2016 council, see § 3 in the document “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,” on the council’s official homepage: <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council>, retrieved 29 August, 2016.
- 3 The decision in Jerusalem in 1672 followed a fierce discussion regarding the legitimacy of the deuterocanonical Scriptures. Prominent Orthodox Church leaders, most importantly Cyril Lucaris, Patriarch of Constantinople, had insisted on removing the deuterocanonical books from the biblical canon. See M. Konstantinou, “Bible Translation and National Identity: The Greek Case,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12 (2012): 176–186, at 180–181.
- 4 Prior to the seventeenth century, lists with somewhat different content had been accepted as canonical standards. At the council of Trullo, different lists were approved as canonical, thus

the lack of a formal decision universally accepting this view encouraged some theologians to nourish their hope that the Orthodox Churches would eventually conform to the Jewish-Protestant Bible canon.⁵

It is rather noticeable that Orthodox theologians still debate the Bible canon and occasionally make a point of lacking one.⁶ As we will see in this paper on Arabic-speaking communities, however, a strict Bible canon was not necessarily essential for the life of the Church, which instead centered around books that served a communal interest, in particular those used in the liturgy. Neither was there any urgent need to authorize a certain version of each biblical book in Arabic, despite the fact that many Christians in the Near East were able to access the biblical narratives only through an Arabic medium. Instead, several Arabic versions existed side by side, and the biblical corpus was safeguarded by texts in the traditional liturgical language, at least in theory. Standardized renditions of the Bible in Arabic, which also reflect a determined biblical canon, appeared as a consequence of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary activities to the East and Eastern reactions to such.⁷

allowing for regional differences. See also H.R. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, Together with the Canons of all the Local Synods which Have Received Ecumenical Acceptance* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, [1900] 1991), 159, 453–454, 599–600, and 612.

- 5 For instance, Roger Beckwith anticipated the Orthodox Churches to accept only the narrow canon at such a council, see *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 3, including n. 9. Although not explicitly advocating such a view, the Orthodox bishop and theologian Kallistos Ware states that the deuterocanonical books “stand on a lower footing than the rest of the Old Testament,” thereby toning down the difference between Orthodox and Protestants in this regard. See T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books; 1967), 208–209.
- 6 On the lack of a definite canon in the Orthodox Churches, see N. Roddy’s introduction in V. Hovhannessian, ed., *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). For a very helpful descriptive discussion on the formation of the canon, see L. Stuckenbruck, “Apocrypha and the Septuagint: Exploring the Christian Canon,” in T.S. Cauley and H. Lichtenberger, eds., *Die Septuaginta und das frühe Christentum* (WUNT 277; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 177–201.
- 7 For an overview of the textual history of the Arabic Bible, see the Arabic section in M.L. Hjälms, “1.1. The Canonical History of the Deutero-Canonical Texts,” forthcoming in A. Lange and M.J. Henze, eds., *The Textual History of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill). For reactions among the Byzantine and Oriental Churches to Western missionary activities, see C. Walbiner, “Melkite (Greek Orthodox) Approaches to the Bible,” and H. Kilpatrick, “Meletius Karmah’s Specimen Translation of Genesis 1–5,” in S. Binay and S. Leder, eds., *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text Critical, and Literary Aspect* (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2012), 53–61 and 63–73.