

BIBLE IN THE CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX TRADITION



*The Canon of the
Bible and the
Apocrypha in the
Churches of the East*



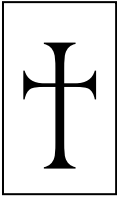
Edited by
Vahan S. Hovhannessian

The Canon of the Bible and the Apocrypha in the Churches of the East features essays reflecting the latest scholarly research in the field of the canon of the Bible and related apocryphal books, with special attention given to the early Christian literature of Eastern churches. These essays study and examine issues and concepts related to the biblical canon as well as non-canonical books that circulated in the early centuries of Christianity among Christian and non-Christian communities, claiming to be authored by biblical characters, such as the prophets and kings of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament.



Vahan S. Hovhannessian holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies from Fordham University. He is currently the chairman of the “Bible in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions” unit of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and an “Honourary Research Fellow” at Cardiff University, United Kingdom. He has published books, chapters in books, and many articles in Arabic, Armenian, and English in the fields of biblical and early Church studies. He is an ordained Bishop in the Armenian Orthodox Church tradition and the Primate of the Armenian Church of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

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Vahan S. Hovhanessian
General Editor

Vol. 2



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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Preface

This is the third volume to be published by the “Bible in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions” unit of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The first volume was published in 2009 under the title *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East*, which included the papers presented and discussed at the SBL meeting in San Diego, USA. The second volume, *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East*, was published in 2010 as the first volume in the new series “Bible in the Christian Orthodox Tradition.”

The papers published in this book represent the latest scholarly findings in the field of Apocrypha and the New Testament canon from the perspective of the churches of the East. These findings were presented and discussed at the July 2009 International Meeting of SBL in Rome, Italy, and at the November 2009 Annual Meeting of SBL in New Orleans.

These two sessions became two giant steps in strengthening the foundation laid years ago through the establishment of the SBL unit as a forum for a new scholarly endeavor to explore a critical examination of biblical scholarship as founded and developed in the earlier centuries of Christianity within the Orthodox churches in the East.

Sincere thanks to the steering committee members of the “Bible in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions” unit of the SBL, and to the scholars who chaired and moderated the sessions as well as those who presented the fruits of their scholarly labor as part of the unit’s program.

May the Lord continue blessing us as we strive to explore, understand and teach His word.

Bishop Vahan Hovhannessian, Ph.D.
November 2011

The Canon of Scripture in the Orthodox Church

The precise status, content and role of the canon in the Orthodox Church escape easy definitions and explanations. The Eastern Church never conclusively defined a canon of Scripture in an authoritative statement such as those ultimately pronounced in the West. Although the Orthodox Church is one Church, united in one faith and historically connected to the early apostolic Church, it is also simultaneously many separate, autonomously functioning churches. The various Orthodox churches embrace a variety of practices and traditions with respect to liturgics, iconography, lectionary and even the canon of Scripture itself. Among the Orthodox Churches are both Chalcedonian (“Eastern Orthodox”) and non-Chalcedonian (“Oriental Orthodox”). The most unusual aspect of the canon of Scripture among the Orthodox is that no official canon exists at all and the canon remains somewhat loose.

The word “canon” (*kanon* in Greek) originally meant a reed or measuring stick. It came to mean the applicable standard for measurement: a ruler. The word “canon” was employed to refer to a rule or Church law. With respect to the Bible, “canon” is the list of books recognized as authoritative Scripture because when deciding which books should be considered Scripture, the Church applied certain standards. The canon of Scripture also demarcates those books which may be read in Church.

The Septuagint

Some consider the consistent use of the Septuagint to be the most distinctive characteristic of the Orthodox canon. The Septuagint was

the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures produced during the mid-third century B.C. by Greek-speaking Jews, also known as “Hellenistic” Jews, or Jews of “diaspora.” The collection of books recognized as sacred among diaspora Jews tended to be larger than among Jews in Judea and Galilee who read the Scriptures in Hebrew. However, even among first century Jews no such thing as a completely standardized and fixed canon existed, whether in Greek or in Hebrew. Originally the Bible did not exist as a single volume but was more like a *library* of books. As books were written, they were added to this collection. “The Bible” was not a single volume and people called these books “the Scriptures,” a collection of writings. Each book of Scripture was written independently of the others, and was circulated and hand-copied separately. Furthermore, the collections of different congregations, whether among Jewish or Christian communities, initially were not the same.

The books which now comprise our Bible were written, read, copied and circulated along with other religious and spiritual books individually at first. Over a period of time some of these books acquired elevated status as people regarded them highly and began to think of them as *Sacred* or *Holy* Scripture. Holy Scripture differs from ordinary writing because it is recognized by the worshipping community as God-inspired and authoritative. This distinction indicates that the Jews, and later the Christians, realized that not all religious books in their collections were equal in merit, authenticity or value.

First century Judaism encompassed a variety of opinions on many matters, including what constituted Sacred Scripture. The Sadducees and Pharisees only agreed that the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, was Scripture. Among the books found in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection were many copies of books, which were very popular among the residents of the Qumran community which produced the scrolls, but which are not part of the Jewish canon today, including Septuagint books. Exactly how they were viewed by the people of Qumran—as “Scripture” or “not Scripture”—is unclear. The Church emerged from this atmosphere of first century Jewish diversity. The early Church, therefore, embraced a much less rigid concept of “canon” and this is reflected in the Orthodox Church today.

The early Church began in Judea among non-Hellenized Jews but it soon attracted even larger numbers of Gentiles and Hellenistic Jews who also accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The followers of Jesus, who ultimately came to be known as “Christians,” were initially a group within Judaism and not a separate religion. Jewish Christians were the first to marshal passages from the Jewish Scriptures to passionately assert that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies. The Septuagint was usually employed since most Jews in the Roman Empire were Greek-speaking. Many Jews were not convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and resented the hijacking of “their” Scriptures by the “heretic” followers of Jesus. In time the movement, which came to be known as “Christianity” separated from Judaism and the Jews gradually associated the Septuagint with the Church. Eventually, the Jews rejected all Greek translations of the Scriptures in favor of Hebrew and settled on canon of twenty-two books.

But the Septuagint collection, which had been used by diaspora Jews for approximately three centuries, contained additional books other than those twenty-two and also some extra passages among books which the Jews had accepted. These additional books and passages in the Septuagint which were later excluded from the Jewish canon, included the Books of the Maccabees, the Wisdom of Sirach, Judith, Tobit, Psalm 151 and the hymn of the three youths, (an extended version of Daniel 3). The early Church was by then separate from Judaism and did not conform to the smaller Jewish canon. In response to Jewish criticisms of the Septuagint canon and the use of the Greek translation in general, Christians defended the Septuagint as an inspired translation and collection, something which had also been a long-standing Jewish tradition.

The Orthodox Church continues to utilize the Septuagint’s broader canon since it was the canon of the apostles and the early Church. This does not mean that the Orthodox Church rejects the Hebrew version of the Bible. Rather, the acceptance of the Septuagint reflects the typical Orthodox practice to follow the norms of the ancient Church. The decision of the Jews to define a twenty-two book canon and exclude some books already in use by the Christian Church was eventually followed by the Protestant Reformers during the 16th century. The Protestant canon of thirty-nine Old Testament books precisely matches