

## **APOSTOLIC CANONS**

A series of eighty-four or eighty-five canons that in [Greek](#) form the concluding chapter (47) of Book 8 of the Apostolic Constitutions (Funk, 1905, Vol. 1, pp. 564-94). The Sahidic Coptic version counts seventy-one canons, the Arabic series (Book 2 of the 127 Canons of the Apostles) fifty-six only, the same as the Ethiopic version. The [Greek text](#) has often been published (e.g., by Funk, 1905; Lagarde, 1856).

We have two Coptic versions, in Sahidic and Bohairic, and several in Arabic.

### **Sahidic Text**

This is preserved in two complete manuscripts, one in the British Library (Or. 1320, cf. Crum, 1905, no. 162), dating from A.M. 722 (A.D. 1005-1006), and an unnumbered manuscript in the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo, dating from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. There are two editions, by P. de Lagarde (1883, pp. 209-37, the upper half of the pages: British Library Or. 1320) and by U. Bouriant (1885).

### **Bohairic Text**

According to the colophon, this translation was made from the Sahidic; it is not divided into canons but appears as the seventh book of Clement, "that is to say the completion of the eight books," as the title adds. Its text, however, is little different from that of the Sahidic. Three manuscripts are known: Staatliche Museen, Berlin (Or. quarto 519, dated to A.M. 1520 [A.D. 1803-1804]); Cairo (Coptic Patriarchate, Canons 9 and 10 [Simaykah and 'Abd al- Masih, 1942, nos. 577 and 581], dating from 1803-1804); and a manuscript of A.D. 1854 (unpublished). There are two editions, by H. Tattam (1848, pp. 173-214) and P. de Lagarde (1883, pp. 209-37, lower half of the pages that constitute Tattam's text).

## Arabic Text

At least three recensions have been listed: only the one that forms Book 2 of the 127 Canons of the Apostles has been published, on the basis of eight manuscripts, by J. and A. Périer (1912, pp. 556- 61, introduction, and pp. 664-93, text and [French](#) translation). Another is contained in the Clementine Octateuch; J. and A. Périer give the text of canons 45 and 47-50 (the numbering of the Greek), which are missing from the first recension (1912, pp. 555-60); in this Clementine Octateuch these apostolic canons form Book 8 (Graf, 1944-1953, Vol. 1, pp. 581-84).

A third recension appears to have been borrowed from the Melchites (Riedel, 1900, pp. 44-45, 158); it is unpublished. The parallelism between the fifty-six canons of Book 2 of the 127 Canons of the Apostles and Book 8 of the Octateuch of Clement did not escape Coptic authors, like Abu al-Barakat (Riedel, 1900, p. 73; Samir Khalil, 1971, p. 198).

## Content

The Apostolic Canons, in contrast to the ECCLESIASTICAL CANONS, deal in no particular order with the principal matters of ecclesiastical discipline, ordinations, and canonical impediments (the numbers are those of the Coptic version: 1, 2, 9, 10, 49, 54, 64, 65, 68), the Eucharist and oblations (1, 4, 5), the marriage of clergy (1, 11, 12, 18), Easter (2), simony (21, 22), the ecclesiastical hierarchy (23-33), relations with the heretics and the Jews (37, 38, 50, 58, 59), and the canonical books (71).

The other canons specify various faults and the corresponding penalties, excommunication or deposition as the case may be. Some canons are duplicated. Most of the penal prescriptions have the clergy in view.

## Origin

No one today defends the apostolic origin of these canons, although it

was accepted in the [Greek](#) church after the Quinisext Synod of 692. It is difficult to determine at what period they were drawn up. There are two [opposing](#) opinions. On the one hand, it has been claimed that there are allusions to these apostolic canons in various synods, such as Canon 9 of Antioch (about 341) and the synodical letter of Constantinople (382) (Nau, 1932, cols. 1607- 1608), from which it has been concluded that the Apostolic Canons date from the third or even the end of the second century.

More recent authors think that it was the compiler of the Apostolic Canons who borrowed from the *Didascalia* and the canons of the councils of Nicaea, Antioch, Laodicea, Constantinople, and so forth. Since toward 500 Dionysius Exiguus translated them into Latin, or at least the first fifty (in the [Greek](#) numbering), these authors think that the composition of the Apostolic Canons must have been done in the fourth or fifth century. But what disturbs the critics is the allusion at the very end, in the Greek text, to “the statutes edited in eight books for you, bishops, by me Clement, which ought not to be divulged to all.”

This passage is missing from the Coptic and the Arabic, and could well be a later addition. Here as in other documents the Coptic-Arabic recension might well offer a state of the text prior to that transmitted by the [Greek](#) manuscripts at our disposal, since this final remark, both of the Apostolic [Constitutions](#) and of the Clementine Octateuch, is missing from the Egyptian recension.

The critics are unanimous in setting the place of origin of the Apostolic Canons in the region of Antioch, and a good number think that the Apostolic [Constitutions](#) and the Canons are by the same author. This is possible, but cannot be demonstrated; the compiler of the Apostolic Constitutions may very well have simply reworked an older document.

## Characteristics of the Egyptian Recension

The Coptic and Arabic recensions (or at least that of the 127 Canons of the Apostles) differ on several points from the [Greek](#) text (which may be called the *receptus*) through the division into canons, through omissions, and through modifications of the text.

In addition to variation in number of canons, there are also some changes of order: thus Canons 6 and 7 of the [Greek](#) correspond to Canons 3 and 2 in the Coptic, 5 and 4 in the Arabic. The Coptic- Arabic recension differs also from the Greek—and Arabic versions that depend on it—by the omission of several canons. The Coptic does not have Canons 47 to 50 in the Greek, and the Arabic has also suppressed Canon 45, which forbids the clergy to pray with the heretics. The Greek Canons 47 to 50 forbid rebaptism without cause, the dismissal of a spouse and remarriage, and baptism with a heretical formula or a single immersion; some manuscripts add a trinitarian profession to Canon 50.

Canons 47 to 50, with the profession of faith, are found in the canonical collection of the Copts, which inserts the Arabic version made from the Greek; they have been edited and translated by J. and A. Périer (1912, pp. 557- 59). Among the more notable modifications we may draw attention to that of Canon 67 in the Coptic (81 in the Greek, 53 in the Arabic). The [Greek](#) recension forbade the bishop or the priest to “engage in public affairs” but the Coptic version says, “We have said that it is not fitting that the bishop should sit to receive taxes.” The Coptic uses here the Greek word *demosion* and the Arabic *al-kharaj* for “taxes.” The Coptic translation of Canon 4 of the Council of [Laodicea](#) had modified the [Greek](#) in the same way.

The last canon (85 in the Greek, 71 in the Coptic, 56 in the Arabic) is a list of the canonical books received in the churches. It presents a certain number of variants according to the recensions and even to the manuscripts (Guidi, 1901, pp. 161-74). They all, however, distinguish

between the books to be considered “venerable and holy” and those that “your children must learn in addition,” that is, between the protocanonical and the deuterocanonical. The Sahidic version places Judith and Tobit among the first, the [Wisdom](#) of Solomon, Esther, the three books of the Maccabees, and the Wisdom of Sirach among the second; the Arabic omits Judith and Tobit among the first, but puts Judith in place of Esther among the second.

In the list of the New Testament books, the Sahidic adds “the two epistles of Clement”; the Arabic does not. We are familiar with the list set out by ATHANASIUS in his thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* of 367 (Lefort, 1952, pp. 19-20; [Greek text](#) in CSCO 151, pp. 34-35); this too distinguishes protocanonical and deuterocanonical, and adds the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In some manuscripts at least, another list follows Canon 59 of the Council of Laodicea.

The Apostolic Canons were handed down in Arabic by the medieval Coptic canonists, either in the form of the fifty-six canons of Book 2 of the 127 Canons of the Apostles or in versions borrowed from the Melchites, or perhaps from the Syrians, which have not yet been closely studied (see Riedel, 1900, p. 158). They were extensively cited, sometimes in these different recensions, by the compilers of the nomocanons, systematic collections in which the documents were grouped by subjects by GABRIEL II ibn Turayk; Michael, bishop of Damietta (composed in 1188), and al- Safi ibn al-‘Assal (composed in 1238; Graf, 1944-1953, Vol. 2, pp. 323-27, 333-35, 398-403).

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