

## THE COPTIC SEPARATION FROM THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH: THE CAUSES AND THE EFFECTS

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29332.65925

### **Abstract**

*The seed of Christianity planted in the land of Egypt in 68 AD by Evangelist Mark sprouted and recorded a gigantic growth. Egypt became the power house, the theological and catechetical centre of the universal church, at the height of which she prided herself above other churches, and separated from the agreed Christological definition arrived at by the universal church. As a lone church vulnerable to external aggressions, she failed prey to the Islamic jihadists who conquered her in 641 AD. The write up closely looked into the effects and causes of the separation. It discovered that the remote cause of this evil that bedeviled the Egyptian Church was pride and arrogance; and the pitfall should serve as a lesson to the contemporary Christian Churches.*

**Keywords:** Coptic Separation, Church, Universal Church, Christianity, Evangelism

### **Introduction**

The Copt, the ancient name for Egypt according to Burton (1979) has over 5,000 years of recorded history; this entails that civilization has been in Egypt for many millennia ago. This political entity existed for thousands of years till 2950 BCE when an ancient Coptic temple Priest Menetho united the fragmented tribes into Upper Egypt (Upper Nile Valley) and Lower Egypt (Nile Delta).

The Copts at present are taken as Christians and the indigenous people of Egypt; direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians. The word Copt is derived from the Pharaonic word ypt and the subsequent Greek word, Aigyptus meaning Egypt. Coptic Church also is one of the most ancient churches in the world, and it is

founded by Saint Mark the Apostle, the writer of the gospel of St. Mark. The church claimed to have preserved the orthodox Christian faith in its earliest form, handing it down through generations and has also claimed to have remained true to the apostolic doctrines and patterns of worship. The church spiritual aspect emphasizes holiness, divine mysteries and fellowship rooted firmly in the canons of the Holy Scriptures, the apostolic and orthodox creeds, the teachings of the Church fathers and the first three ecumenical councils.

However, before arriving at these conclusions, the Coptic or Egyptian Christians had been part and parcel of the one universal church, believing and teaching one Christian doctrine. Being the power house of early Christian church, she contributed immensely to the growth and stability of the church. Through her many great Fathers and Saints whose inputs and writings sustained the early church, the Copt has played a leading role. The Coptic Church was equally a vanguard to the Church in confessing Christ and in Martyrdom. The first and second century Christian persecution saw the Copts standing tall in the midst of horrible torture and threat of death. As a citadel of Christian studies, many of the early Church heresies directly or indirectly sprang up from the Egyptian soil. In order to retain its pride and its prestigious position as a custodian of Christian orthodoxy, the fathers of Egypt defended the stand of their Patriarch Dioscorus at Chalcedonian council too far, that they severed their communion with the universal Church. This singular act relegated the Coptic Church to the background and later resulted into grave set back to Christianity in Egypt.

### **The Advent of Christianity in Egypt**

According to Dryton (2002), before the advent of Christianity, the Ptolemaic regime in Egypt had already watered the ground for the coming of Christianity through its people friendly laws and civilization. During Ptolemaic era, Egypt witnessed massive growth in economy and developmental strides that made it a rival of Rome, and becoming the capital of Mediterranean world. Alexandria city then became the city with the largest concentration of Jews in Diaspora. The Greek, Jews and Egyptians shared civilization and culture together, there was freedom of religious belief; the Jews were allowed to practice their religion freely. This template was equally adhered to by Roman regime in Egypt which was well accepted for its non- interference with Egyptian culture and ways of life. Both the Roman and Ptolemaic era played a major role in disposing the inhabitants to accepting Christianity.

Writing on the origin and advent of Christianity in Egypt, Roberts (1977) noted that the major problems had always been lack of substantial historical evidence associated with the period; which would provide the answers to exactly when Christianity reached Egypt; who was responsible for bringing Christianity in Egypt and the nature of early Christianity in Egypt. Many theories have been advanced to explain these, but the conclusions remain speculative.

Generally, it is believed that Christianity arrived in Egypt in the middle of the late first century and was given ecclesiastical structure in the early second century. However, for the Coptic Orthodox Church, Christianity arrived Egypt in early 1<sup>st</sup> century and was given Episcopal structure within the period, and Evangelist Mark for them, is the first to preach there and the first to found church in Egypt. The view is generally current among historians and Coptic orthodox Christians, especially when considering the fact that Jewish mission was assigned to Peter and Mark. Alexandria, the city with the largest concentration of Jews in diaspora must have been visited by either Peter or Mark or both of them.

### **The Growth of Christianity in Egypt**

In the course of second century A.D, Alexandria in Egypt became a leading center in Christianity. As Egyptian Christianity became the rallying point of Christian world, a theological cum catechetical school was opened in Alexandria under the leadership of Pantaenus in 180 AD. Clement took charge of the school in 220 AD after the exile of Pantaenus. Boer (1976) noted that at martyrdom of Clement in 250 AD, Origen became the head of the school. However, these growths recorded by Egyptian church was drastically reduced by Christian persecution initiated by Emperor Septimius Severus. Origen who became the head managed the affair of the school during this persecution and was later killed in 254 AD under the persecution of Emperor Decius when the school has reached its zenith. The persecution notwithstanding, Christianity continued to grow in Egypt. Lovasik (1990) stated that by the year 235, a synod of Egyptian bishops was held in Egypt and the participating bishops numbering about 20. In corroboration, Baur (1994) noted that Christian theology first started in Alexandria- Egypt in the name of Alexandria Catechetical School. Theology according to him develops when faith encounters a specific philosophy, be it by way of confrontation or adaptation. In his words:

The first attempt made by the agnostics to influence the faith failed utterly. They taught that salvation was to be found in knowledge and

this reduced Christianity to philosophical speculation, mixed with some Egyptian pagan rituals. To its great credit, Alexandria theological school was able to quench the thirst for knowledge of the young Christians of Egypt, avoiding the pit falls of the Gnostics without condemning it out rightly, as some bishops usually did (p.22).

Baur further stated that in the ecclesiastical field during the second and third centuries, Egypt played a leading role, second only to Rome. The Patriarchate's first known bishop is Demetrius (189-231AD), the bishop of Clement and Origen; though Eusebius listed St Mark as the first bishop of the See. During the episcopate of Demetrius, the church of Egypt recorded great growth. According to Latourette (1945), Demetrius ordained many bishops, even outside the patriarchate of Alexandria, though he placed them under his supervision. By 231 AD when he died, the number of bishops under Alexandrian patriarchate rose to one hundred.

### **Establishment of Catechetical School**

According to Masri (2012), Mark was the person that established the first catechetical school in Egypt. The school according to him exercised limited influence; they offered only an elementary catechism to pagans and new converts alike. The school soon became the lighthouse of Christianity; throughout its life of five centuries, it maintained the same reputation of erudition and scholarliness. The first dean of this school according to Masri was Athenagorus, an outstanding philosopher, who studied Christianity in order to refute it better. However, the deeper he delved into it, the more did it quench the thirst within his soul. This later led to his full conversion to Christianity. Masri further noted that among the students of Anthenogoras were Pantaenus, Clement, Justus and Eumanius. In his words, "Justus succeeded Anthenogoras as the dean. When Justus was erected as bishop of Alexandria, he appointed Eumanius to succeed him as the dean. Then, when Eumanius succeeded Justus as the Pope of Egypt, he handed over to Pantaenus" (p.30). The catechetical school as noted by Baur (2009) entered into prominence in 180 AD when Pantaenus took over the school as the dean, and the school became known as *Didascalia*. Pantaenus lectured in his own house and charged no fees for his students. As opined by Boer (1976), he even rejected free gifts given to him by his students. Masri (2002) narrated how Abba Demetrius, the 12<sup>th</sup> Pope of Egypt appreciated his zeal in the school and singled him out for a missionary journey to India; this he willingly accepted and handed the school over to Clement of Alexandria. However, Masri (2002) noted

that Pantaenus later returned to Egypt from India with a copy of Matthew's gospel which showed that Matthew had brought good news to the Indians. Masri further posited that Pantaenus with the help of Clement translated the whole Old and New Testament Bibles into Greek, the general Egyptian language, and the then known international language. This became the highest feat the Alexandria theological school achieved. Pantaenus continued working with Clement to consolidate the school till his death when Clement took full charge of the school and brought the school to the peak of its popularity. Boer (1976) stated further that Clement's time as the Dean of the school, attracted people from all walks of life, both the rich and the poor; young and the old. They flocked in the school seeking for knowledge. Boer noted that at peak of his life, Clement wrote three works. He persevered in teaching and writing until 194 AD when the persecution of Emperor Septimus Severus drove him out of Alexandria and the school was destroyed and brought to an end. Clement according to Masri (2002) fled Alexandria at the request of his friends and he died in exile.

When the Emperor Severus persecution subsided, Abba Demetrius appointed Origen as the Dean of the Alexandria theological school. Origen as described by Masri (2002) was son of parents who were martyrs, the first church father to be born of Christian parents. At a very tender age of nine he was rescued on his way to join in the martyrdom of his father Leonidas, when the persecution of Septimus Severus broke out. He did not only attend catechetical school but he was also disciple of Ammonius Saccas, an Alexandrian, and a founder of Neoplatonism. Masri stated that at the age of 18, Origen was appointed the dean of theological school of Alexandria by bishop Demetrius, to replace Clement who went on exile at the peak of Severus persecution. Origen brought the catechetical school to an enviable height. The school served as both theological and philosophical school. Baur (2009) while buttressing this fact admits that "To work all the elements of faith and philosophy into a theological system was the glory of Origen (p.23). Describing Origen, Nwakanma (2014) noted that he was an embodiment of eidetic memory, who was able to quote at length from scriptures to works of philosophers; a powerful force for intellectual Christianity of the old who was very productive that he employed six secretaries in writing down the thought that he lectured. Masri (2002) contended that Origen later life was not wonderful. According to him, he misinterpreted the scriptural verse that instructed one to cut off an object of temptation, and castrated himself. He skipped his bishop Demetrius who refused him ordination and got ordained by another bishop, and he was excommunicated. He never reconciled with his

bishop before suffering severe torture under Decius which led to his death in a foreign land.

Alexandria theological school contributed immensely in shaping the early church and translation of Old and New Testament Bibles. The school gave birth to numerous leaders in the church and satisfied the thirst of early Christians for religious and philosophical knowledge.

### **Establishment of Monasticism**

Egyptian church offered to the universal church the practice of Christian monasticism. Though St. Anthony of Egypt was reckoned as the father of monastic life, however, a certain Paul of Alexandria had been in desert living monastic life for decades before the beginning of Anthonian monasticism. Masri (2002) in confirmation stated that Paul went into desert when he was twenty years in 249 AD at the behest of her elder sister, who pleaded with him to escape to desert to avoid the wrath of Emperor Decius who had been informed of Paul's Christian faith. Masri further asserted that Paul initially grudgingly went into desert life abandoning his huge wealth. But as the light of God shone more on him, he retreated deep into dessert so that nobody could locate him or disturb him. He became the first Christian hermit. Masri further reveals that St. Anthony under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit found Hermit Paul who had stayed in desert seclusion for 80 years, fed only by God's angel. Paul strengthened encouraged Anthony at the meeting and later died at the age of 103. Giving credence to this, Drayton (2002) pointed out that although Paul, the hermit was the first man to retreat into the desert, his life was one of utter solitudes, and he was discovered at the end of his life. St Anthony of Egypt on the other hand, was the first Christian to blaze the trail of a consecrated life of solitude, and to live in a manner that attracted many followers. He further posited that when Anthony was surrounded by disciples, he laid for them a simple rule of life and of spiritual self-discipline. He thus gained the title "Father of Monks' and "Star of the Desert". The story of his life was written by St. Athanasius, the Apostolic who was his disciple and had very chose relationship with him. X-raying Athanasius write up on St. Anthony, Knowles (1969) finds out that Anthony was born about the year 250 AD and of very wealthy parents, both of whom died before he reached the age of twenty. Narrating Anthony's turning point further, Knowles noted that:

One Sunday, as Anthony was entering the church, the gospel message he heard was: "if thus wilt be perfect go and sell all that thou hast and give it to the poor and follow me". Anthony felt within his heart that the message was being addressed directly to him. As soon as he returned home, he obeyed it literally. He distributed all his wealth, took his only sister to a house where devout women lived, then went to a deserted place overshadowed by a sycamore tree, on the outskirts of his home town. His one burning desire is to have no other companion but God, to be alone with the "Alone" (p.81).

However, he did not enjoy his solitary life for long before he was discovered by many who would like to be his disciples, not only from Egypt but from other part of the world. He responded to the spiritual thirst of his visitors. According to Rouseau (1955) he allowed them to build cells not far from each other. They lived their ascetic lives daily and met together every Sunday for common prayers. Gould (1993) succinctly summarized Anthony's last days thus:

After spending eighty- five years in the desert to which he had resorted to at the age of twenty, St. Anthony was translated into the world of light. When he felt that the hour had come, he called unto himself two of his closest disciples and requested them to bury him in the vast desert and to tell no one his burial place (p.87).

Corroborating with the above fact, Evely-white (1932) admits that in Egypt a monastery bearing his name stands today. This monastery is situated at a cave covered with rocky boulder where the Saint (Anthony) spent most of his life. At the demise of St Anthony of Egypt, many of his disciples dispersed and founded their own monasteries. However, one of the most prominent of them was Makarius. He was later known as St. Makarius of Egypt, till date with a church dedicated to him.

In 314 AD another great contribution to the universal church in the area of monasticism also came from Egyptian Pakhom (Pachomius) who found a cenobite monastery, different from that of Anthonian. He was called the father of cenobitism and with the title "Great". His monasticism was taken as the third and the final stage in the evolution of the phenomenon of consecrated life. Writing on his life, Masri (2002) stated that he came from a lowly pagan background. He succinctly puts it thus: "Pakhom was born of pagan parents in one of the southern towns of Upper Egypt in 290AD, and was conscripted into the army at the age of twenty by Emperor Constantine the Great. He became a

Christian after the conquest of Constantine through a hospitality shown him by Christian” (p.213).

Pakhom (Pachomius), after his conversion to Christianity, joined Palamon, a desert father to build his spiritual life. Rousseau (1985) pointed out that after seven years’ formation under Palamon, Pakhom under the guardian of the Holy Spirit established Pakhomian monastery, the first ever organized monastery. In corroboration, Drayton (2002) reported that Pakhom not only founded male monastery, but he equally founded the first ever recorded female monastery which his sister Mary was in-charge of. Drayton further stressed that the Pakhomian monastic rule was the foundation on which the celebrated Benedictine rule was built. Giving credence to this, Gould (1993) admits that Pakhom contributed greatly to the civilization and spiritual growth of early church and the west. He clearly captured it thus:

The deepest impact of Abba Pakhom on Europe was exercised on Benedictine order which was the cradle of western civilization and spirituality. St Benedict, an Italian Saint legislated the same laws concerning obedience, labour, orderliness; in some cases, word-to- word with Pakhomian rules, influencing both the spiritual and social harmony of Europe. Pakhomian influence could also be traced down the centuries as it led to the rise of Cistercian and Carthusian orders during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Franciscan and Dominican orders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (p.220).

Gould further points out that the above orders were ultimately responsible for the rise of the humanistic movement leading to the institution of universities. He noted further that Abba Pakhom spirituality which started in Tabennesi in Upper Egypt reverberated in the great spiritual and intellectual movements in Europe.

The growth of Christianity in Egypt was also punctuated with presence of great fathers of the church such as Bishops Demetrius, Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria who during the second and third centuries played great role in stabilizing the Coptic Church and the universal church.

### **Separation of the Copts from the Universal Church**

After the council of Ephesus, a cold war began between Patriarch Cyril of Egypt and Patriarch John of Antioch. This standoff was later resolved by the emperor through Acacius, Bishop of Borea in 433 AD. Thomas (2005) confirmed that the

two great patriarchs later jointly condemned Nestorius in a meeting and upheld the inseparable and united two natures in Christ. However, in 448 AD when the major figures of the Council of Ephesus (Cyril of Alexandria, John of Antioch, Proculus and Nestorius) had all died, a new heresy emerged from Eutyches, a holy monk from Constantinople. Eutyches was taken as the third most influential man in the city after the Emperor Theodosius II and the Patriarch Flavian. Eutyches taught that in Jesus Christ, there was only one nature that was divine nature. He taught this in a bid to stop what he saw as a new outbreak of Nestorianism. As this heresy was spreading, a local synod according Schaff (1990) was held by Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople. Eutychianism was condemned. At the request of Flavian, Pope Leo the Great approved a general council of the church and sent his legates to hold brief for him. The council according to Thomas (2007) was high jacked by the Emperor whom Eutyches served as a spiritual director. He connived with Dioscuros, the Patriarch of Egypt and recalled the deposed Eutyches. Bishops Flavian, Ibas of Edesa and Irenaeus of Tyre were excommunicated, and Bishop Barsumar, a Monophysite was installed as patriarch of Constantinople. Thomas (2007) further added that Dioscorus and Emperor Theodosius denied papal legates the opportunity of reading Pope Leo's Tome during the council. The legates managed to escape from the council and reported the outcome to the Pope. Thomas stated that:

Pope Leo wrote a protest letter to the emperor telling him that the synod of Ephesus was an insult to the faith and an injury to the churches of the world. He told the emperor that it was proper to call a general council somewhere in Italy in which all the bishops of the universal church could take part (p.37).

This second synod of Ephesus in 449, was not counted among the legitimate council of the church, rather it is known in history as "Robber's Synod".

The request of Pope Leo for Emperor Theodosius to call another council was not adhered to till after the death of the Emperor who was succeeded by Emperor Marcian, a true Catholic. Marcian on October 8,451 AD assembled 550 bishops around the world in a city of Chalcedon near Constantinople for the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the church. The council was under the leadership of Bishop Pashasinus of Lilybacum, a Papal representative, who together with the council condemned Eutyches, Dioscorus and their supporters. The council according to Orlando & Nickoloff (2007) reaffirmed that the divine and human nature of Christ exists without confusion, without change, without division and without separation in one nature and one person of Jesus. The council ended on

November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 451 AD after the enactment of some canons. Nickoloff and Orlando further opined that this resolution though initially accepted by all the council fathers including delegates from Egypt but was later rejected by some fathers. According to them, “The settlement was acceptable by the both Eastern and Western Christians with the exception of the Armenian, Coptic Egypt, Ethiopia and Syrian Orthodox Churches. They continued in the line of Dioscorus and Eutyches to assert that Christ has one nature” (p.218).

These churches separated themselves from the churches of the West and East and became known as Monophysite Orthodox Churches. At the passage of time, the Coptic and the Oriental Churches constantly repudiate the western identification of Alexandria Christianity with Eutychianism – Monophysitism. They identify their churches presently as Miaphysitism, this they claimed was the stand of Cyril and Athanasius. By Miaphysitism, Alexandrian Christianity teaches that Jesus has two natures in one person but these two natures were united but confused and overwhelmed by the divine nature. But Pro-Chalcedon teaches that the two natures were not divided and not confused and not overwhelmed by the divine nature. The separation of the Coptic and the Oriental churches from the Eastern and Western Christianity ushered in severe persecution from the Roman and Byzantine Emperors with the blessing of pope.

### **The Persecution of Coptic Church**

Though Patriarch Dioscorus of Egypt has soft spot for heresy of Eutychianism, however, the major crimes he committed according to Masri (2012) was not heresy; he convoked the council of Ephesus without the permission of the Bishop of Rome, Leo the Great; he denied Pope legates the opportunity of reading Leo’s *Tomes*, and he equally excommunicated Pope Leo and approved the deposition of the innocent Flavianus, Patriarch of Constantinople. (The Patriarch later died in few days after his deposition).

In addition, Dioscorus refused to appear at the Council Chalcedon to answer for these allegations. After the traditional triple summons by the church at Chalcedonian Council, he was judged in his absence and deposed with all his supporters. His suppression and deposition according to Masri (2012) was orchestrated by long time rivalry among the three great patriarchates (Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople), and the need to suppress the growing orthodoxical, doctrinal and ecclesiastical dominance of Alexandria; this development, the Church of Rome was not comfortable with, especially as Rome

was and is taken as the first among equals. In obedience to the verdict of the council, Marcian, the Emperor of the East exiled Abba Dioscorus to the island of Gangra in Asian minor, where he later died in 456 AD.

Robert (2008) in his investigation of the event of Chalcedon stated that after the banishment of Dioscorus, a new patriarch in the person of Proterius was appointed for Alexandria; and the people were properly communicated to. The persecution of Egyptian Christianity started when they revolted the banishment of Dioscorus and their rejection of the new patriarch. Instead of accepting Proterius, they elected a new patriarch in 456 AD in the person of Bishop Timotheos. Through, the one hundred years of Byzantine and Roman persecution of Egyptian church was ushered in. According to Davis (1983), Egyptian Christians went too far in their resistance; they invaded the residence of Patriarch Prosterius and murdered him in order to install their elected preferred Timothoes. This led to merciless retaliatory persecution from the Prefect, Court Dionysius, who was strongly supported by the Emperor. Many Egyptian Christians died in the process.

The demise of Emperor Marcian in 474 AD brought Emperor Basiliscus to the throne. He recalled the exiled bishops of Egypt and suspended the persecution to look for common ground for peace and reconciliation. The interlude of the persecution was disrupted by Emperor Zeno usurpation of power and the deposition of Basiliscus. The death of Zeno in 491 AD halted the persecution and opened a new chapter for Egyptian church through the regime of Emperor Anastasius. In order to rule a united Eastern and Western Empires, he refused to accept the instruction of Roman bishop to forcefully subject the Egyptian church to Rome and to compel them to accept the resolution of the council of Chalcedon. The emperor allowed each camp to carry on practicing its faith in its own way without molestation. In addition, Ostrogorsky (1956) stated that this benevolence shown to Coptic Christian by Emperor Anastasius was as a result of favours he got from Egypt. Before Anastasius became emperor, he took refuge in Egypt when he was being hunted by Byzantine Emperor; secondly an Egyptian monk restored his only daughter to life with prayer as she was about dying of incurable disease. These according to Ostregorsky were why Anastasius never oppressed the Egyptian Christians. He even built churches for them.

However, Masri (2012) wrote that the death of Emperor Anastasias brought to an end peace and security enjoyed by the Egyptian Christians. The era of Byzantine despotism and persecution was re-introduced. He further noted that:

The successor of Anastasius, Emperor Justin I Interfered in theological controversies of the church and tried forcing the Egyptian church to abide by the Chalcedonian council. The Egyptian resistance led to the banishment of the Egyptian Patriarchs and imposition of foreign patriarchs. Many churches were destroyed or desolated, and abuses of all kinds were meted out on the Christians. The people were forced to pay dearly in life and property for their refusal to accept any other interpretation or form of Christian faith. Many outrageous acts of oppression and persecution were carried out on individuals and on the church (p.341).

In all these trials as observed by Masri, the Egyptian church had faithfully continued to elect their patriarchs at the death of each one; this normally took place in exile. However, the thirty third patriarch of Alexandria, Abba Theodosius after his election courageously refused to rule from exile but entered the Egyptian cathedral. He was given an ultimatum by the Emperor to accept the Chalcedonian decrees or suffer the fate of other Patriarchs. He fearlessly appeared before the emperor and asserted his belief. Masri (2012) captures his testimony thus: "The Emperor has power over this corruptible body of mine, but my soul belongs to Jesus Christ my Great king. You can do with me whatever you please... but I will follow in the footsteps of my Fathers, the Teachers of the Apostolic Church" (p.343). Patriarch Theodosius was severely dealt with and banished. The Copts continued to pay homage to the exiled Patriarch Theodosius and scorned the foreign one imposed by the Emperor. This act increased the Egyptian persecution, with their churches closed. At the death of Patriarch Theodosius in exile, the Copts elected Bishop Patros IV to succeed him. Emperor Justin I also died and was succeeded by Emperor Justinian II who was sympathetic with the Egyptian Christians. The tempo of persecution became high again; Byzantine Empire was still oppressing and exploiting the Copts to the extent that majority of Egyptian Christians started losing their faith and accepted Chalcedonian decrees. The reign of Emperor Justinian II was followed up respectively by Emperors Tiberius, Maurice and Phocas who like Justinian II mercilessly persecuted the Egyptian Christians. The persecution of Phocas according to Silverman (2003) can only be compared with that of Diocletian in severity. Thousands of Egyptian Christians died and thousands fled Egypt and took refuge in Nubia (South Sudan). Silverman further posited that the population that migrated to the Nubian region still remained there till date. They dominated the region and introduced Christianity that still thrives in South

Sudden. The reign of Phocas was cut short by Heraclius, his army general who overthrew and beheaded him.

Poole (1999) noted that Persian Empire constituted great threat during Phocas reign and the threat led to the attack and invasion of Egypt and other Palestine regions in 619 AD during. He equally noted that these regions were recovered by Heraclius when he ascended the throne as the Emperor of Byzantine in 625AD. Arthur (2008) in addition, opined that it was in 639 AD in the nineteenth year of the reign of Emperor Heraclius of Byzantine that the Arab Jihadists invaded and initiated the systematic conquest of Egypt that was rounded up in 641 AD.

### **Arab Invasion and the Conquest of the Copts**

Long before the invasion of Egypt by the Arabs, people of Egypt were polarized into two distinct camps: Monophysite sect and Melkite sect. Melkites are Christians who were royal to the Byzantine Emperors in acceptance of Chalcedonian council. They follow Byzantine rite and are in communion with the Church of Rome. The Monophysites are against the stand of Byzantine Emperors on Chalcedon and not in communion with the Church of Rome. The both sects were in Egypt decades before the Arab invasion. The disputes between these groups were very bitter. According to Sell (1984):

It has been well said that in the seventh century Egypt, the interest in politics was quite secondary to the interests in religion. It was opinion on matters of faith and not on matters of government which formed the divided parties in the state men debated with fury upon shadows or shades of belief (p.3).

Emperor Heraclius who was emperor before and during the invasion was very anxious to win the Coptic people and to effect a union between the Monophysite and the Melkite sections of the church. The two patriarchs of Alexandria, Nicetas (Melkite) and John the Almoner (Monophysite) were wise and tolerant rulers. Inspired by a laudable desire for unity, Emperor Heraclius according to Sell thought that he might go one step further; and so, at last, in Hieropolis in AD 631, he issued his decree for the union of the churches and appointed Cyrus as Patriarch of Alexandria to unite the two churches. This effort some historians described as the greatest mistake of the century. Cyrus was imprudent and intolerant.

However, Geanakoplos (1984) observed that both the Monophysites and the Melkites had watched with interest the Emperor's contest with Persia and had rejoiced with him as the Emperor defeated Khosrou II, Sassanid Persian king who had occupied Egypt for ten years. For Heraclius, the time was propitious for an attempt to soften the asperities of religious strife. The Emperor made a fatal mistake in his choice of the agent employed to carry out this imperial wishes. He courted disaster in making choice of Cyrus. Sell (1984) described him thus:

An evil genius who not only wrecked the emperor's hopes of religious union in Egypt but who after making himself a name of terror and loathing to the Copts for ten years, after stamping out to the best of his power, the Coptic belief by persecution, made Coptic allegiance to Byzantine rule impossible He is the tyrant who misgoverned the country into hatred of the Byzantine Empire and so prepared the way for the Arab invasion. He is also the traitor who at the critical moment of the invasion of the Arab delivered Egypt to the enemy (p.29).

Hitti (1984) noted that Cyprus was both the appointed Patriarch and Governor of Egypt. Hitti further averred that:

He failed to satisfy either party by the Emperor's proposed formula of compromise, looking back, one may conclude that both parties were intractable, but it seems clear that Cyprus was over bearing in a situation which required gentleness and courtesy. Then again the Copts love their ancient church intensely. As a nation, the Copts had not known independence; as a church, they had fought for independence and never wished again to be under Constantinople's bandage (p.5).

Other submissions were equally made to change the formula of compromise; these modifications were not accepted by the Copts. Cyprus resolved to attempt to drive the Copts into submission by offering them union with the Melkite Catholics or face bitter persecution. Bulter (1978) confirmed that the Copts bravely chose bitter persecution than compromising their belief. It was a sorry story; great number of the Copts stood the firm and faced deaths and exiles in the hand of Cyprus. This deepened their hatred for the Byzantine Emperor and for Cyprus, his representative in Egypt, and for the church into which both tried to force them to enter. Such was the state of Egypt till 638 AD when Amr started planning attacking Egypt from Syria.

Describing Amr back ground, Sell (1984), noted that Amr Ibn-al- As was of Quraiush tribe of Mecca who got converted to Islam after Hijra, and was

appointed by Mohammed to a military command in which he displayed martial qualities. In Syria, he displayed himself as a bold warrior and skillful general. It was with great alarm that Patriarch Cyprus received the news of the presence of this great warrior at the Egyptian border of Pelasium. By 639AD, Byzantine has lost Levant and all its Ghassanid allies in Arabia to the Rashidum Islamic Caliphate, whose caliph Umar, has permitted Amr to attack Egypt. Amr with tiny of 4,000 soldiers invaded poorly defended Pelusium and conquered it. Hitti (1984) observed that the loss of Pelusium has serious consequences; it opened a free way of communication for further troops from Syria. He equally pointed out that it shows either weakness or treachery on the part of Cyprus who doubled as the Patriarch and the Governor General of Egypt; considering the few enemies that did the war. In affirmation, Butler (1978) argued that the conquest by the few armies was an insult on Byzantine. In his words:

It was taken as an act of betrayal on the part of Cyprus, who may have had some hopes of establishing an independent patriarchate of Alexandria by alliance with the Arabs against the Byzantine Empire. On no other theory does it seem possible to explain his action and the loss of Pelusium (p.7).

According to Ferguson (1960) after the fall of Pelusius, Amr with his army marched to Bilbeies, 40 miles from Memphis, through desert roads and besieged it. Bilbeies was the first place the Byzantine offered resistance; Armanousa, the daughter of Cyprus gave the Arab stiff resistance. At the height of this Cyprus accompanied by two monks and famous Roman general, Aretion came out to negotiate with the Arab. (Aretion was previously the Byzantine governor of Jerusalem, and had fled to Egypt when the Arab conquered the city). Andre (2000) pointed out that Amr, the Arab commander gave the envoy the options: to either convert to Islam and live in peace, to pay Jizya tax and live as inferiors or to fight with the Arab until God gives the decision. After the five days deliberation of the options, Governor Cyprus of Egypt chose paying the Jizya, the two monks and General Aretion disobeyed the Governor and preferred fighting the Arab, in the process of which General Aretion was killed. The Arab persuaded the people to surrender to the Arab rule; pointing out that the both the Arab and Egypt were of one parent – Hagar. However, as the Arabs bent on conquering the whole of Egypt, Cyprus the Governor and the Archbishop of Egypt entered into treaty with the Arab. Sell (1984) stated that Cyprus and Copts recognized the supremacy of Muslims over Emperor Heraclius and accepted the payment of Jizya to the Arabs and sent the resolution to Byzantine for confirmation. Heraclius rejected this treaty and exiled Cyprus. Before Cyprus

embarked on the exile according to Child (1991), he made three requests from the Arabs:

- (i) Do not break your treaty with the Copts
- (ii) If the Byzantine after this repudiation of the treaty later ask for peace, do not make peace with them, but treat them like captives and slaves
- (iii) When I am dead, allow me to be buried in the Church of St. John at Alexandria.

By and large, some Copts from personal considerations continued to support Byzantine, its persecution notwithstanding. The Copts according to Child were not supposed to fight against the Byzantine on behalf the Muslims, but they undertook to help the Muslims in the promotion of war. Butler (1973) equally wrote that Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor, as the Arab held sway in Egypt, prepared a mother of all wars against the Arab, deploying of army in five thousand ships and was prepared to lead the army by himself. Unfortunately, he got sick and died on February 11, 641 AD. The battalion notwithstanding, still moved on by now under the command of Constantine, the son of Heraclius. According to Sell (1914), the army arrived Alexandria in March 641 and met the Arab at Sulteis arranging on how to attack Alexandria. The two armies ensued in a great fight that lasted for ten days. Great casualties according to Andre (2000) were recorded at the both armies but the Muslims eventually carried the day by launching vigorous attacks that saw the Byzantine on run. The Arab conquest of Alexandria in March 641 marked the round -off of the conquest of the whole Egypt.

Butler 1978) equally remarked that subsequent efforts were made in 646 by the Byzantine Empire to re-take Egypt, but was repulsed by the Arab. Amr, the Arab General after these battles was made the Governor of Egypt. In his capacity as the Governor, he imposed tax far-less than what the Byzantines imposed on the Egyptians and initiated religious toleration that allowed both the Monophysite Coptic Church and Melkite Pro-Chalcedonian Church to thrive. According to Geanakoplos (1984), he even yielded to the Coptic request and recalled Patriarch Benjamin, whom Melkite Patriarch Cyprus exiled, to his patriarchate of Alexandria. He restored all his powers and rights. The whole cities of Egypt fall to the Arab within a space of two years (639-641), and they had come entirely under Arab rule. Even more remarkably, it has remained under Muslim rule ever since. Seldom in history can so massive a political change has happened so swiftly and been so long lasting.

### **The Effects of the Islamic Conquest of Coptic Christians**

Amr, the Arab Commander and Governor of Egypt at the tail end of his life had serious misunderstanding with new caliph, Uthman for not collecting enough tax from the Egyptians. His death in 663AD brought new Arab Governor in the person of Abd-al-Hakam. His rule modified Egypt and imposed heavy tax on the people. Both land and poll taxes were implemented. Some other rules and discriminations that singled the Egyptians out as conquered people were enacted; the violation of which attracted grave punishment. These discriminating rules against the Coptic Christians are outlined by Butler (1978) as follow:

- i. The Quran is not to be reviled, nor its copies be burnt
- ii. The prophet Mohammed must not be called a liar nor spoken of contemptuously
- iii. The religion of Islam must not be condemned, nor must any attempt be made to refute it.
- iv. No Christian man may marry a Muslim woman.
- v. No attempt may be made by the Christians to seduce a Muslim from his religion nor injure him in pulse or person. The enemies of Islam must not be assisted nor the rich men among the Christians be entertained.
- vi. Subjects must wear a distinctive garment with a girdle fastened round the waist
- vii. The home of the conquered must not be built higher than those of the Muslims
- viii. The sound of the Christian bells must not be forced on the ear of Muslim, nor their reading, chanting, nor their opinions on their peculiar tenets, whether Jewish or Christian
- ix. Crosses must not be displayed nor wine drank in public, nor must swine be seen
- x. The dead are to be mourned in private and to be buried in private
- xi. The conquered must ride only common horses or mules, not thorough breeds.
- xii. It is not lawful for the Christian subjects to build a new church or synagogue in the territory of Islam, and any such building must be demolished; but they may restore old churches or synagogue which have fell into ruin, though with permission.

The above rules together with the introduction of heavy tax led the Copts to revolt against Arab rule. However, the revolt was quickly silenced by the Arab

Commander and Governor, Abd-al-Hakam's. Gradually, the above rules became part and parcel of Islamic rule in Egypt till date.

The post Islamic conquest of Egypt witnessed the rule of many dynasties. According to Arthur (2008), the Arab ruled Egypt from the time of their conquest (641AD) to 868AD during which Egypt was ruled by the Governor appointed by the Caliphs. The favoritism of the ruling family of Umayyad in 750 AD attracted revolt in Arab dynasty, and Abbasid family ceased power and moved Islam's seat of power to Baghdad (Iraq). Islamization and Arabization in Egypt was gradually carried out. However, some forceful and oppressive act towards the Christian Copts always attracted revolt and crisis in Egypt.

### **Conclusion**

The words of Jesus that the first will become the last and the last becoming the first could be said to have fulfilled in the event of the Coptic Christians. In the early Christian era, Egypt occupied a revered position in Christendom. As a power house of Universal Church, they furnished the church with renowned fathers and theologians whose teaching consolidated the orthodoxy of the church. However, their importance in survival of the church pride them off that they arrogantly and lonely pursued a Christological definition that pitched them against the whole world churches and thus leading to their separation from the universal church. As a separated defenseless church, they came under heavy persecution of the Western and Eastern Roman Emperors. The final blow became the attack and the conquest of the Islamic Arabs which mercilessly led to the fall of Coptic Christianity, and also brought the mass conversion of the Copts to Islamic Religion.

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IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 4. (2021)  
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)  
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