

The Council of Chalcedon and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria

Joseph Metry

The Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 AD, is viewed quite differently from the perspectives of Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians at that time and after, until the invasion of Islam takeover. The attempt of this historian essay is not a defense of any perspective. Still, as a Coptic, I asked myself a critical question: Were the Copts so naive as to die because they were against a faith presented by an ecumenical council, even if the Pope was exiled? Why did the Copts resist with all their might the Council of Chalcedon and the Pope imposed by the Emperor? The Copts considered the Chalcedonians to be enemies, like Diocletian and Nero. For 190 years, they refused to pray behind the Roman patriarchs and refused to baptize their children in the Chalcedonian churches that they seized from the Copts by the force of the emperor, and their churches have remained empty to this day.

From a historical perspective, the question of whether the Copts were "naive" for choosing to suffer persecution rather than conforming to the Chalcedonian doctrine is deeply layered. It's important to understand that the theological disputes at Chalcedon were not merely about abstract doctrines but were intertwined with issues of cultural identity, political power, and ecclesiastical authority. For the Copts, their rejection of the Chalcedonian definition was not

simply just a theological choice but a profound expression of religious and cultural identity. The Council's decisions were seen as influenced by imperial politics and an overreach of authority, particularly given the exile of Pope Dioscorus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, who was a leading figure in the non-Chalcedonian community. This added a sense of injustice and alienation to the theological disagreement.

On the other hand, From the Chalcedonian's view, this was a great victory, especially for Leo, the Pope of Rome, who dreamed of removing the Church of Alexandria from its high position in the world. ¹Before the accidental death of Theodosius II, Leo wished for another council after the second Council of Ephesus, and he tried to gain permission from the emperor. But the emperor refused to authorize him to make another council, and the Emperor declared that no Church law had been violated at the Second Council of Ephesus (449 AD). Theodosius II clarified “that the Pope of Rome should not interfere in the affairs of Eastern Churches.” Refusal for someone like Leo is crucial; the Pope of Rome, who speaks in the name of Peter, ²who appointed himself the head of all the churches in the world, as his representative said, without any of those present

¹ Ashagrie, Abebe Kesi Endale. *Early Church History: A Review on the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD)*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. Pg. 55

² Hefele, Karl Joseph von . *A History Of The Councils Of The Church* (p. 1359). Kindle Edition.

objecting. Even before the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Leo I had been in dispute with Pope Dioscorus, insisting that the ecclesiastical practice of Alexandria should follow that of Rome. ³This was based on the belief that Mark the Evangelist, the founder of the Alexandrian Church and a disciple of Peter the Apostle, could have had no other tradition than that of the prince of the apostles. This stance reflects Leo's broader efforts to assert the primacy of the Roman see over other patriarchates, including Alexandria. At the Council of Chalcedon, the Eastern bishops received Leo's teachings as authoritative, who acclaimed, "Peter has spoken through the mouth of Leo." This acceptance of Leo's doctrine by the Eastern bishops significantly affirmed the Roman Pope's influence and authority in the broader Christian world. It underscored the Roman See's theological leadership, especially over Alexandria, who was the leader of the theological counsels for decades.

The great victory was also for Bishop ⁴Eusebius of Dorylaeum, who achieved a significant victory through his strategy of falsely accusing Pope Dioscorus of causing the death of Bishop Flavian and mistreating him. This

³ "Dioscorus (1), Patriarch of Alexandria." *Henry Wace: Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies.* - *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, www.ccel.org/ccel/wace/biodict.html?term=Dioscorus+%281%29%2C+patriarch+of+Alexandria.

⁴ Hefele, Karl Joseph von . *A History Of The Councils Of The Church* (p. 1360). Kindle Edition.

accusation was orchestrated in coordination with the Pope of Rome, aiming to make Dioscorus responsible for all the controversial outcomes of the Second Council of Ephesus. To achieve this, they fabricated charges against Dioscorus. Additionally, they received support from ⁵Pulcheria, who played a crucial role in reinstating bishops who had been previously exiled. The primary objective of these false accusations was to diminish Dioscorus' authority and to contest the decisions that were made during the Second Council of Ephesus.

Victory for the Oriental bishops at the Council ⁶“those from the patriarchate of Antioch) and their friend.” Those who lied in front of everyone, saying that at the Council of Ephesus, Dioscours forced them to sign on white papers and scream, “Out then with the murderer” (Dioscurus). The Egyptian Bishops witnessed that the Oriental Bishops signed in front of them, so Bishop Stephen of Ephesus came up with another story that he got threatened at his residence to subscribe. The drama of the oriental bishops reached the vertex, and all their lies became clear to everyone. ⁷With mouths full of shame, Basil confessed their lies and asked the council for forgiveness. I have a quick question: Are these the

⁵ Ashagrie, Abebe Kesi Endale. Early Church History: A Review on the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. Pg. 56

⁶ Hefele, Karl Joseph von . A History Of The Councils Of The Church (p. 1363). Kindle Edition.

⁷ Hefele, Karl Joseph von . A History Of The Councils Of The Church (p. 1369). Kindle Edition.

Bishops who are more than half of the Christian world flowing right now and trusting their beliefs about Christology?

Also, it was a significant opportunity for the Byzantine Emperor, Marcian, to exert greater control over the Christian Church. This aspect of the council reflects the complex interplay between religion and politics in the late Roman and early Byzantine empires. Emperor Marcian, who succeeded Theodosius II, was keenly aware of the power and influence of the Church and sought to use the council to strengthen imperial authority over religious matters. Before the council in 450 AD, Marcian took active steps to reinstate those whom Dioscorus had deposed.⁸ He ensured that these bishops were returned to their dioceses. Additionally, Marcian had the body of Flavian, who had been displaced and died following the Second Council of Ephesus (often referred to as the "Robber Council"), brought to the capital for honorable burial.

By supporting the Chalcedonian doctrine,”⁹ Emperor Marcian wished to bring proceedings to a speedy end. He asked the council to make a pronouncement on the doctrine of the Incarnation.” which was favored by the Roman Pope Leo I, Marcian was looking to be able to align himself with the powerful Western Church

⁸ “Council of Chalcedon.” Visit the Main Page, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Council_of_Chalcedon. Accessed 2 Dec. 2023.

⁹ “Council of Chalcedon.” Visit the Main Page, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Council_of_Chalcedon. Accessed 2 Dec. 2023.

and consolidate his position in the Christian world. Furthermore, by endorsing the Chalcedonian Creed and ensuring its acceptance as the official doctrine of the Empire, Marcian aimed to create a unified religious front under imperial control. This was particularly important in an era where religious unity was seen as essential for political and social stability. The emperor's involvement in the council and its outcomes demonstrated the extent to which secular rulers were willing to intervene in religious affairs to serve their political interests. However, this imperial view in ecclesiastical matters had accidental consequences. Rather than unifying the Empire under a single doctrinal position, the Council of Chalcedon deepened the divide between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians, leading to centuries of religious conflict and schism. The non-Chalcedonian communities, particularly in regions like Egypt and Syria, saw the council's decisions as an imposition of imperial power and an infringement on their religious traditions and the independence of their doctrine.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria refused the Council of Chalcedon, the most hilarious situation in the main, while the Council of Chalcedon didn't reject the education Cyril of Alexandria and St Athanasius -the Coptic Popes- “μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη” the Chalcedonian until recently accused the Coptic by the Monophysite “which comes from two Greek words meaning “single nature.” And this is NOT what the Coptic believe. The

¹⁰ ἈΜΗΝ ἈΜΗΝ ἈΜΗΝ. ҨҢа2Ҩ ҨҢа2Ҩ ҨҢа2Ҩ оґо2 ҭеро̀мологин җа пи́иҨи
 нэ́ае. Ҩе ҭаи ҭе Ҩсарз нреҨҨтанэо е́та пекмоногеннс нҨҗһи́: пено́с оґо2
 пенНоуҨ оґо2 пенСωτηρ Ιη̅ς Πχ̅ς: 6иҨс е́волэен ҭено́с н̅ннв ҭһрен
 ҨҨео̀тоκος е̅ϋҨ Ҩа́җиа Μαρια.

Amen, Amen, Amen. I believe, I believe, I believe and confess to the last breath that this is the life-giving flesh that Your only-begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, took from our lady, the lady of us all, the holy Theotokos, Saint Mary. He made it One with His divinity without mingling, without confusion,

¹⁰ Basil. *The Coptic Liturgy*. St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church, 1974.

and without alteration. He confessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate. He gave it up for us upon the holy wood of the cross, of His own will, for us all. Truly, I believe that His divinity parted not from His humanity for a single moment nor a twinkling of an eye.

This is what the Coptic believe about Christ's humanity and divinity. From generation to generation, we believe in the Miaphysite; we never deny Christ Humanity or divinity, but at the same time, we never separate them after incarnation, and we don't accept the language of Leo that the Divinity dazzles with miracles and humanity endures pain. Yes, Coptic had a good point! When Jesus made miracles, did he use only his divinity? For instance, when he raised Lazarus from death," Καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ἐκραύγασεν Λάζαρε δεῦρο ἔξω" John 11:43 (having said in a loud voice) Jesus Christ used his voice in front of all the people to raise him from death. Thus, when he entered the gates after his resurrection, did he enter with his humanity or his divinity? Suppose we say that Christ entered the doors by his humanity. In that case, we are lying because the body cannot pass through a closed door, and if we say that he only used his divinity, we are also lying because the disciples experienced that he is a body, so he must be a body united with divinity. It is impossible to differentiate between the works of divinity and humanity after the incarnation.

The Copts adhered to the faith of their fathers, so they paid dearly, including their lives. For 190 years, the oppression and persecution by the Byzantine Empire and the foreign Pope, continued except sometimes when the Empire was not Chalcedonian (like Zeno 474-475). After Pope Dioscorus was exiled to Gagra, the Emperor and his Bishops appointed Proterius as a Patriarch to Alexandria. The Bishops of Egypt and the people refused- even until today- to participate with him, so he, the (Malakin) Patriarch, was praying only by himself with the Empire military soldiers. Proterius became angry and attacked the monasteries and churches with government forces, plundering them and stealing their money and goods, and because of that he became wealthy and had abundant money. The thieves attacked him at night, killed him, and stole what they found with him. (murdered by the Byzantine garrison in Alexandria)”¹¹”when Proterius continued to threaten the Romans and to display his rage against them because they took his gold but did not fill their hands with the blood of his enemies: then, indeed, a certain Roman was stirred to anger in his heart, and was boiling over with rage; and he invited Proterius to look round, and he would show him the corpses of the slain as they lay. And suddenly and secretly, he drew his sword and stabbed Proterius in the ribs along with his Roman comrades. They dispatched him and

¹¹ Pearse, Roger. “Zachariah of Mitylene, Syriac Chronicle (1899). Book 4.” Zachariah of Mitylene, Syriac Chronicle (1899). Book 4., www.tertullian.org/fathers/zachariah04.htm. CHAPTER II

dragged him to the Tetrapylum, calling out, respecting him as they went along, "This is Proterius." And others suspected that it was some crafty plot.”¹²The emperor Marcian sent his troops and killed Thirty Thousand Christians in the City of Alexandria on the day of 23 Misra.

The Copts rejected Chalcedon not only for ideological reasons but also for political reasons. The Coptic Church has remained a persecuted church since the time of the Apostle Mark until now. It was never the church of the State or the church of the Emperor, and the secret of its distinction has always been its doctrinal independence. Even though it was never the Church of the Pope, as most of its patriarchs were exiled, it remained strong and proud with the strength of its faith. Therefore, unity with the Coptic Church will not be achieved through the agreements of the priestly leader but will only be achieved through cultural exchange between other churches and the Coptic people, who are the cornerstone of preserving the faith and the Church.

¹² Egypt, Michael Ghaly -. “23 Misra - Masra Month - Coptic Synaxarium (Coptic Orthodox Calendar: Daily Synaxarion) - Saint Tekle Haymanot Coptic Orthodox Website - Alex, Egypt.” St.Takla, st-takla.org/Full-Free-Coptic-Books/Coptic-Synaxarium-or-Synaxarion_English/12-Mesraa/Coptic-Calendar_23-Mesra.html. Accessed 2 Dec. 2023.