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Relationships between the Libyan Church and the Coptic Church through the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea 325 A.D., Constantinople 381 A.D., and Chalcedon 451 A.D.

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المخلص:

بما أن العلاقة بين كنيسة الاسكندرية وبنتابولس (المدن الخمس) غير واضحة في القرون الثلاث الاولى، فإن هذه الورقة تحقق في العلاقة بين الكنيستين بعد اعتراف الإمبراطور قسطنطين الكبير (305-337م) بالمسيحية في مرسوم ميلان عام 313م،¹ وبعد ان أصبحت المسيحية الدين الرسمي للإمبراطورية البيزنطية في عهد الامبراطور ثيودوسيوس الاول (379-395م). تتناول هذه الدراسة بالتحليل القانون السادس لمجمع نيقيا والذي عقد فينيقيا عام 325م، (مدينة ازنيك التركية حاليا). افتتح الامبراطور قسطنطين المجمع حضره عدد كبير من رجال الدين من كل انحاء العالم بلغ عددهم 300 أسقف تقريبا. حدد هذا المجمع طبيعة العلاقة بين الطرفين بحيث جعل كنيسة بنتابوليس تابعة لكنيسة الإسكندرية، وهذا في حد ذاته مؤشرا على استقلالية كنيسة المدن الخمس قبل المجمع السابق ذكره. هذه الدراسة أيضا تولي اهتماما للعلاقات بين الكنيستين بعد مجمع القسطنطينية 381م ومجمع خلقدونيا 451م لتوضيح سير العلاقات بين الطرفين بعد هذه المجمع وتبعية كنيسة بنتابوليس لكنيسة الإسكندرية. برؤية فاحصة لما آلت اليه طبيعة العلاقات بين الطرفين بعد هذه المجمع يتبين استمرار العلاقات بين الكنيستين بعد مجمع القسطنطينية 381م، وان اتجاه كنيسة الإسكندرية بعد مجمع خلقدونيا إلى الجانب القبطي (سواء في اللغة او القداس) قد أضعف علاقة التعاون مع كنيسة المدن الخمس التي لم تعد تتبع كنيسة الإسكندرية.

هو مرسوم أعلن فيه إلغاء العقوبات المفروضة على المسيحيين والسماح لهم بممارسة حريتهم الدينية¹

Relationships between the Libyan Church and the Coptic Church through the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea 325 A.D., Constantinople 381 A.D., and Chalcedon 451 A.D.

Abstract

Since the relationship between the Alexandrian Church and the Church of the Pentapolis before the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D.² is unclear, this paper examines the relationship between the two churches after the Emperor Constantine (305-337 A.D.) confessed his conversion to Christianity and after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, during the reign of Emperor Theodosius (379-395 A.D.) This paper investigates the sixth canon of the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) which took place in Nicaea (now İznik, in Turkey). It was convened by the Emperor himself, who had invited a large number of bishops of the Christian churches. About three hundred bishops gathered from all around the world. The Council of Nicaea defines the relationship between the Alexandrian Church and the Church of the Pentapolis, which made Cyrenaica belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. This in itself gives an induction to the independence of the Pentapolis before this Council. Attention is also paid to the relationship between the two churches after the Council of Constantinople (318 A.D.) and the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) to identify the continued active relationship between them and the authority of the Church of Alexandria over the Pentapolis Church. From examination of these Councils, one can conclude that the relationship between the two churches continued after the Council of Constantinople. After the Council of Chalcedon, the Church of Alexandria tended to move towards the Coptic language in writing and the liturgy. There is no doubt that this weakened the cooperative relationship with the Church of Pentapolis, which did not follow the Church of Alexandria.

²The Edict of Milan was agreement to treat Christians benevolently.

Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church linksthe PentapolisChurch with the Church of Alexandria from the first centuries. Christianityduringthisperiodengenderedtheologicaldebate.

Disagreementemergedconcerningphilosophical and theological concepts of the nature of Jesus, his identification as God or a createdbeing and hencehisrelationshipwith the Father. The Council of Nicaea was the first ecumenical council of the Christian.It was convened by the EmerorConstantine Ito anathematize the teaching of Arius and his supporters.³The first words of the canon“Let the ancient customs” proves that the Church of thePentapoliswas belonged to the Church of Alexandria and it gives the ancient right to the Bishop of Alexandria over the Church of the Five Cities. The Council of Nicaea acknowledged for the Patriarch of Alexandria the rights over the church Pentapolis, Subsequently over their dioceses. This paper seeks to study therelationship between the bishopric of Cyrenaica and the Church of Alexandria after the Councils ofNicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon.

Scholars' views on the sixth canon of the Council of Nicaea differ,this paper attempts to analyse scholars' views on this issue.

- The researchwillillustrate the relationshipbetween Alexandria Church and the Church of the Pentapolisthrough the threecouncils.
- Examine the causes which lie behind the weakness of the relationships between the two Churches

The principal questions posed by thispaper are as follows:

- Did Cyrenaica belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria?
- What extent was given to the church of Alexandria over the dioceses of the Pentapolis by the Council of Nicaea?
- What was the value of the sixth canon after the Councils of Alexandria and Chalcedon?

To conduct the researchtopic, the researcherwill use the methodswhichsuitshistorytopics. The researcherwill examine differentresources, analyse them in order to providecredibleknowledge and information of thistopic. There willbecomparisons of events, sources to reconsider the issue.

The province of CyrenaicaislocatedbetweenEgypt to the east and Sirte to the west (see Figure 1). The mostdenselyinhabitedarea is a limestone plateau between Benghazi and Darnah, known as Jabal al-Akhdar or ‘the Green Mountain’. Jabal al-Akhdarrisessharplyacrosstwohills to a height of approximately 600m aboveesealevel,⁴with al-Luseitalyingbetweenthem. A thirdhill, the highest, has as itssummitSīdī al-Ḥamrī, at the village of Lasamices (modern Āslanṭah), whereitreaches a maximum height of around 900m aboveesealevel.⁵

³Arius was born in Libya in the second half of the 3rd centuryA.D., and he eventually became a priest in Alexandria.

⁴Lloyd, J.A. (1977) *Excavation at SidiKhrebish*, Vol. 1, The Department of Antiquities:Tripoli, p.1.

⁵Goodchild, R. G. (1971) *Kyreneund Apollonia*, RaggiVerlag: Zurich p.11; Ward-Perkins, J. B.&Goodchild, *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*,The Society for LibyanStudies:London,p.1.

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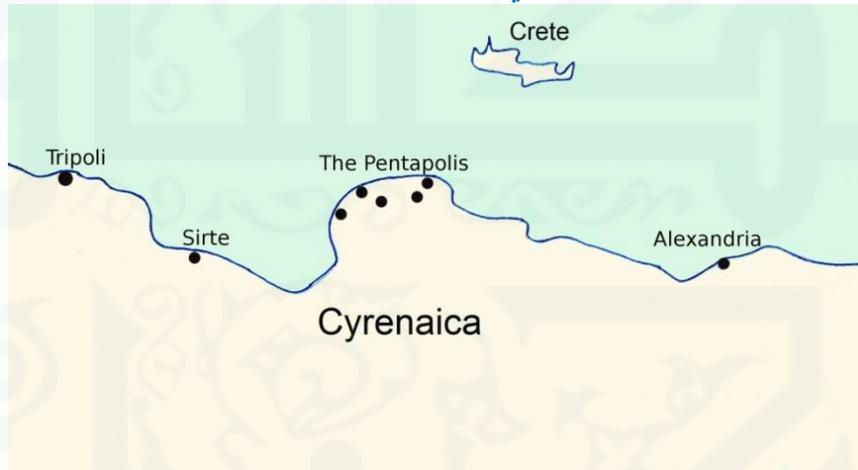


Figure 1 : The location of the Pentapolis.

The Five Cities are Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais (the port of Barca), Taucheira and Berenice (Euesperides), (see Figure 2), and were, according to Herodotus, founded by Battus of Thera, later Battus I of Cyrene (c. 631-599 B.C.), the first of the Battiad dynasty and ruler of Cyrenaica.⁶ The Five Cities, or the Pentapolis, are located in eastern Libya, and were defined in the Hellenistic period by their eastern and western borders; the former at Catabathmos (modern Sallum),⁷ and the latter at Automalax (a castle on the Gulf of Sirte), as stated in the Constitution of Ptolemy I (c. 323–284 B.C.).⁸ It seems that this location had a significant effect on its history.



Figure 2: The Five Cities of Cyrenaica.

⁶Herodotus (1921) *The Histories*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press: MA, London, 4.151-159.

⁷*Ibid.*, 3.

⁸Klaffenbach, G. (1923) *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, J.C. Gieben: Amsterdam, 9.1

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Before Christianity reached Cyrenaica, the population of the Pentapolis had variously worshipped the deities of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. This remained the case until the advent of Christianity in the 1st century A.D., and polytheism was not outlawed until the end of the 4th century A.D.⁹

After the legalisation of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in the Edict of Milan 313 A.D., and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire under Emperor Theodosius (379-395 A.D.), theological controversy emerged about the true nature of Jesus.

At a time when Christianity enjoyed a degree of stability in Cyrenaica, a new doctrine emerged which owed its origin to an Alexandrian priest called Arius (c. 256 /270-336 A.D.). It concerned the relationship between Christ, the Son, and God the Father. Arius held that the Son of God was not eternal but created by the Father from nothing before the ages began, to be an instrument for the creation of the world. He was, therefore, not in his nature God, but a creature, and so susceptible to change. He was, however, different from all other creatures in that he was the one created directly by God. His dignity as Son of God was bestowed on Him by the Father, because he foreknew his eternal righteousness.¹⁰

Eusebius the Bishop of Caesarea (c 260-340 A.D.) played an important role at the Council of Nicaea in being involved in the Council among more than 250 bishops,¹¹ but he seems to have had the particular favour of the Emperor Constantine (Grant, 1980),¹² He put forward the confession which subsequently became the basis of the Nicene Creed.¹³

As a result, the twenty canons were drawn up. It was stated in the sixth canon, when the Church of the Pentapolis was subordinate to the Church of Alexandria, "Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria has authority in all these, since the like is customary for the Bishop of Rome also. Likewise in Antioch and the other provinces, let the churches retain their privileges. And this is to be universally understood, that if any one be made bishop without the consent of the Metropolitan, the great Synod has declared that such a man ought not to be a bishop. If, however, two or three bishops shall from natural love of contradiction, oppose the common suffrage of the rest, it being reasonable and in accordance with the ecclesiastical law, then let the choice of the majority prevail".¹⁴

The Sixth Canon of the Council of Nicaea has long been the focus of academic discourse Hammond claims that this canon does not confer any new power or religious authority on the Church of Alexandria; on the contrary, the council of Nicaea had simply confirmed the ancient customs which were already in existence.¹⁵ Atiya agrees with

⁹Livingstone, D. (2002) *The Dying God: The Hidden History of Western Civilization*, Writers Club Press: New York, p. 98.

¹⁰Williams, Rowan (2001) *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, SCM Press: London. p.98; Behr, John (2004) *Nicene Faith*, St. Vladimir Seminary Press: Crestwood, New York, p.138.

¹¹Harold, W Attridge & Göhei Hata (1992) *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, Brill, Leiden ; New York. p. 32.

¹²Grant, Robert (1980) *Eusebius As Church Historian*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, p. 165.

¹³Is a statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church in opposition to certain heresies, I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.

¹⁴Schaff, Philip (2007) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol.14, Cosimo: New York, p.15.

¹⁵*Ibid*, pp. 15-17.

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this view too and then he adds that the Pentapolis was subordinate to the Church of Alexandria, which had been the case since the first century.¹⁶

Ffoulkes states that the purpose of the sixth canon not to introduce a new power, but rather to confirm the old custom already existing.¹⁷ Chadwick makes the additional point that in 325 A.D; the theological position is completely reversed. The Pentapolis Church showed its independent spirit when they accepted different views opposing the Church of Alexandria. The reason behind this was probably due to the large distance between the Pentapolis and Alexandria. It would take three weeks for a traveller familiar with the route to cover this distance. This may have encouraged their desire for self-determination.¹⁸ Romanelli states that the dependent position of the church of the Pentapolis on that of Alexandria began with the Council of Nicaea. He then adds that the Patriarch of Alexandria was appointing bishops to the Pentapolis Church after the consent of its archbishop whose full authority he accepts.¹⁹

Jones claims that the ecclesiastical situation in the Pentapolis was controversial. The Council of Nicaea laid down that in each region, the bishop of the capital city, the Metropolitan, should have authority over the local council and he should have authority over the consecration of every bishop. However, the sixth canon gave the Church of the Pentapolis over to the Church of Alexandria. He wonders why the council enacted this decree. He suggests, by way of an answer, that this was possibly an "ancient custom" created before the Emperor Diocletian (284-305 A.D.) which divided Egypt into certain areas. There is no proof, however, that it was ever challenged. Although it was always a separate province.

With regard to this, he suggests that Alexandria may have encroached in the direction of Cyrenaica, and that Ptolemais was called the Metropolitan church by Synesius, the bishop of the Pentapolis (365-370-412-413 A.D.), which he calls a local council. However, Synesius was unable to consecrate a bishop for a village called Oibia. It was not his role to consecrate bishops, and he asked the Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, for his agreement. He also declared that the previous consecration of a bishop in any village was unacceptable, because he had not been consecrated at Alexandria or with the authorization of the Bishop of Alexandria, but by the Bishop of Cyrene.²⁰

From the text of the sixth canon of Nicaea and previous opinions one can surmise that the Church of the Pentapolis customarily belonged to the Church of Alexandria; that it might have enjoyed its independence in the three first centuries; and that the distance between the two countries might have been one of the factors behind the independence of the Pentapolis. To support this view, According to Eusebius, in 259 A.D., the citizens of Ptolemais had split into two groups, held a theological discussion regarding the spread of Sabellius' heresy and presented the matter to Dionysius, the Patriarch of Alexandria (248-265 A.D.)²¹ The question

¹⁶Atiya, Aziz Suryal (1980) *A history of eastern Christianity*, Methuen; Millwood, N.Y. Kraus Reprint Co: London, p.433.

¹⁷Schaff, *Op.cit.*, p.17.

¹⁸Chadwick, H (1960) Faith and order at the Council of Nicaea: A Note on the Background of the Sixth Canon, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol.53, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, pp.171- 195.

¹⁹Romanelli, P. (1943) *La Cirenaica Romana 96 A.C.-642 D.C.*, L'Erma di Bretschneider: Rome, p.232.

²⁰Jones, A.H.M (1968) Frontier defence in Byzantine, *Libya in history, Historical conference*. Libyan University Faculty of Art: Benghazi, pp.295-296.

²¹Sabellius was a native of Libya, first a priest and then a bishop in the Pentapolis, operating principally in Ptolemais, where his views were well received. He proposed the idea of Sabellianism that God was indivisible, with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being three modes of one divine person.

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is, did they send this letter because he was responsible for the Church of the Pentapolis? and if so, why did he not send it to the Bishop of Alexandria? In fact, by this time Dionysius was banished to Cephro (modern al-Kufrah, in south-east Cyrenaica) during the time of Emperor Valerian (253-259 A.D.²² This being the case, as he did not return before 260 A.D.²³

We may conclude that the distance between the two countries had encouraged the inhabitants of Ptolemaïsto ask Dionysius to resolve the dispute during his exile in Libya. Furthermore, this letter cannot prove that the Church of the Pentapolis was under the Church of Alexandria in the mid-third century A.D. The decision in 325 A.D. resulted in the current situation in the Church of the Pentapolis because of the heresy of Arius (256 /270-336 AD.). This matter may have disrupted the Roman Emperor Constantine, who feared for the unity and stability of the state and may have viewed the impact of religious division as a potential threat to the *integrity* of the Empire. It would seem that the Emperor Constantine viewed the Church of Alexandria as a good protector of the Church of the Pentapolis by the appointment of some bishops of Alexandria to maintain a careful watch concerning the Pentapolis' aforementioned heresies. Subsequently, the Church of the Pentapolis lost its independence and became a follower of the Church of Alexandria.

The principal question raised here is what was the power of the Church of Alexandria over the Pentapolis Church? Was it limited to the interest in their local affairs, such as the demarcation and adjudication of the problems between the bishops? Or was it used to represent a role of protector and to preserve the unity of the Church, and for how long did this dependency continue?

It seems that relations between the two churches varied according to the ebb and flow of the circumstances of state affairs, that the Church of the Pentapolis did not always belong to the Church of Alexandria, but was dissociated from it many times and then returned to it. Each of the two regions were part of the Roman Empire, and it was the Roman Emperor who sometimes made Egypt stand-alone, and sometimes made Cyrenaica belong to Egypt. So the church as an institution and its leaders were under the Roman Emperor and also under the authority of the Bishop Patriarch of Alexandria. It stretched and shrank according to administrative and organizational expediency.

The Patriarch of Alexandria was the Chairman of religious and civil affairs and appointed Patriarchs, determined their responsibilities and hired and fired them. Thus all Patriarchs were subordinate to his orders.²⁴ He also mentions that the accession of the Church of the Pentapolis to the Church of Alexandria assumed such a prominent place in the East, especially in the period taken up by Patriarchs that it became a powerful principle in the Christian world. He is of the opinion, moreover, that this was probably one of the reasons, which led the emperors to frequently separate Cyrenaica from Egypt. He adds furthermore that it is thought that this separation was influenced by competition from the Archbishop of Constantinople.²⁵

²²Eusebius of Caesarea (1926) *The Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 1, London: William Heinemann 7:11.

²³Pasquini, John J (2003) *True Christianity: The Catholic Way*, Universe, Inc: Lincoln, p.301.

²⁴Eusebius, *Op.cit*, 7.11.12.; Davis, L. D. (1987) *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils, 325-787: Their History and Theology of the Early Ecumenical Councils*, DL: M. Glazier: Wilmington, p.42; Lienhard, Joseph T. (1989) Basil of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Sabellius, in *Church History*, Vol.58, p.165.

²⁵Eusebius, *Op.cit*, 7.11.12.

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The Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., was convened by the Emperor Theodosius, (379 -395 A.D.). It was attended by a hundred and fifty bishops; most of whom were from the East. ²⁶The council confirmed the Nicene faith, and dealt with the Arian issue.²⁷The third canon of the Council of Constantinople declared that since Constantinople was the 'New Rome', the Bishop of Constantinople held a place of reverence second only to that of the Bishop of Rome, and thus the Church of Alexandria was put in third place.²⁸

In fact, it is hard to deduce the outcome of the relations between the two churches after the Council of Constantinople. However, we can trace through one of Synesius' letters (76) to Theophilus, the Pope of Alexandria (385-412 A.D.) the process of how to choose a successor to the former Bishop Athamas.

"I complimented the people on having to choose between many candidates who were so entirely deserving, but I particularly complimented Antonius on account of his goodness, for he was thought nobler even than the noble, and it is upon him that everybody's choice is fixed. The choice of the multitude has had the full assent of two venerable bishops, with whom Antonius had been brought up, and by one of whom he had been ordained presbyter. I was not entirely without knowledge of Antonius myself, and as much as I knew of his deeds and words, so much I praised him, and, adding what I had heard to the good things I knew, I gave my vote to the man. It would accord with my own wish to receive him into the honourable priesthood as a colleague. One thing only is needed, but the most important thing of all, namely, your sacred hand. The Olbiates have need of this, and I have of your prayers".²⁹

Even though Synesius does not give us adequate information about these bishops, Badawi infers from this letter that the supervision of the election process was in the hands of two bishops and the Patriarch of Alexandria. This method of appointment was endorsed by a greater number of votes than the former method.³⁰Concerning the appointment of Synesius, the Bishop of Ptolemais and Archbishop of the Pentapolis, Synesius sent a letter (105) to his brother to let him know that he was not very grateful to the inhabitants of Ptolemais; he also made reference to the attitude of the citizens of the Pentapolis, who had offered him this position. Then he adds, "Theophilus, knowing about the situation and giving me clear evidence that he understands it, decided on this issue concerning me. He will then either leave me by myself to lead my own life, and to philosophize, or he will not leave himself any grounds on which hereafter to sit in judgement over me, and to turn me out of ranks of the priesthood".³¹ This letter shows the intervention of the Patriarch of Alexandria over the affairs of the Church of the Pentapolis. It also shows the refusal by the other side to give guidance or isolation.

²⁶Hogan, Richard. M (2001) *Dissent from the creed: heresies past and present*, Our Sunday Visitors Publishing: Huntington, p.98.

²⁷Novak, Ralph Martin (2001) *Christianity and the Roman Empire: background texts*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, p.277.

²⁸Baynes, N.H & Moss, L. B (1962) *Byzantium: An Introduction to East Roman Civilisation*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 96.

²⁹Fitzgerald, A. (1930) *The Essays and Hymns of Synesius of Cyrene: Including the Address to the Emperor Arcadius and the Political Speeches*, Oxford University Press: London, pp.166-167.

³⁰Abd al-Rahman Badawi (1971) *The History of Philosophy in Libya: Synesius of Cyrene*, Dar Sadar: Beirut, p. 298.

³¹Fitzgerald, A. *Op.cit*, p. 201.

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The Council of Chalcedon was called by the Emperor Marcian (392-457 A.D.), It was held at Chalcedon (a city of Bithynia in Asia Minor) in 451 A.D.. The Council refused the idea that Jesus has only one nature, and declared that Christ has two natures in one person.³² It also declared the see of Constantinople (the New Rome) second only in the honor and the jurisdiction to Rome. As a result of the Council of Chalcedon the Patriarch was deprived and removed from episcopal office. Following the removal of the Patriarch of Alexandria in accordance the Church of Alexandria became disinterested and gave way to a policy of stagnation after the Council of Chalcedon. This led to the weakening of the relationship between the clergy and the public. The people felt the clergy were just an instrument concerned with decisions about religious rituals. It seems that the clergy reciprocated this approach and so the task of enlightening the clergy became a secondary issue, thus widening the gap between the two parties.³³

With the resolution of the Council of Chalcedon, the Church of Alexandria tended to move in the direction of the Copts, turning away from everything Greek, both in their religious writing and in the liturgy. It seems that this Coptic trend became more marked in the sixth century onwards and brought Greek influence to an end by the eighth century A.D.³⁴ Also the Church of Alexandria neglected the Berber language (the language of the native Libyans) and adopted Greek letters as did the Coptic language. It also neglected to translate and produce religious books and commentaries that were accessible to the citizens. In fact after this council we do not notice any cooperation or clear connection between the two churches, now separated by the growing prominence of the Coptic language.

³² Meinardus, O.F.A (2002) *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, The American University Press: Cairo, p.53; Baynes, N.H & Moss, L. B., *Op.cit*, p.99.

³³ Riad Zahar (1962) *The Church of Alexandria in Africa*, the School of Coptic Studies: Cairo, p.67.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.

Conclusion

Even though the relationship between the Church of Alexandria and the Church of the Pentapolis was not clear during the first three centuries, the Council of Nicaea shows the nature of the relationship between the parties, indicating that the Church of the Pentapolis belonged to the Church of Alexandria, and this in itself is an indicator of the independence of the Church of the five cities as is mentioned earlier. The cordial relations between the two sides remained, despite interruptions from time to time, through the policies of the Roman state as mentioned above. However, the active relationship between the two churches continued after the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.

The removal of the Patriarch of Alexandria in accordance with the resolution of the council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D. may have had an effect on the nature of the relationship between the two churches, so that it is likely that the independence of the Church of the Pentapolis after this council, affected the relationship between the clergy and people in the Church of Alexandria, and perhaps also with the people of the Pentapolis. After the Council of Chalcedon, the Church of Alexandria tended to move towards the Coptic language in writing and the liturgy. There is no doubt that this weakened the cooperative relationship with the Church of Pentapolis, where Greek was used as the language of religion and culture. The Church of Alexandria did not translate the Berber language using Greek letters to enable the people of the Pentapolis to read it, as it had the Coptic language. Neither did it translate the religious books and commentaries and make them accessible for their citizens. This may be an important factor that damaged the goodwill and cooperation between them.

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