

---

*Egyptian Ethnicity in Late Antiquity*

JAMES BALDWIN ONCE WROTE that “any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.”<sup>1</sup> It is the purpose of this book to understand the ways that late antique Egyptians formulated and asserted their social identity. In light of Baldwin’s comments, it is not surprising that the clearest articulation of an emergent Egyptian identity occurred on the heels of significant political, ecumenical, and cultural change. At the dawn of the Christological controversies of the fifth century, a particularized Egyptian identity came to the fore in an unprecedented manner.

In late antiquity, Roman imperial culture co-opted the universalizing element of the Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup> The present study focuses on Egypt as a means of investigating one side of the double-edged sword carving out ethnic identity. Egyptian Christian identity in late antiquity promulgated a Christian universalism that placed Christianity as the primary locus of identity—a global identity that placed all Christians in union across lines of ethnicity, language, empire or social class. At the same time, the “Egyptian” element in the Egyptian church was emphasized in distinction and sometimes, in conflict, with other Christian communities beginning in the fifth century. The double-edged sword of Egyptian Christian identity framed itself with religious universalism on one side and social particularity on the other. While Roman imperial Christianity promoted universality, Christians leveraged social factors such as ethnicity to frame theological divisions. In the case of Egypt, the role of ethnic difference as a means of framing theological discourse became increasingly evident after Chalcedon. Egyptian identity formation had already taken an ethnic turn well before the Arab Muslim conquest of Egypt. Scholarship on late antique Egyptian Christianity tends

to point to this as the decisive event that instigated a pronounced ethnic consciousness in the Egyptian church.<sup>3</sup> The following study will demonstrate how this awakening of ethnic consciousness actually happened two centuries earlier.

The Council of Chalcedon convened under the authority of Emperor Marcian in 451 CE to respond to growing differences in Christology between Egypt and the bishops of Constantinople and Rome. During the decades leading up to this council, theologians across the Roman Empire diverged in their attempts to explain how Jesus could be fully God, as established at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and fully human. A monk named Eutyches taught that Jesus's humanity and divinity persist in one nature (*physis*). Eutyches was supported by the Patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscorus, at the Second Council of Ephesus (449 CE). The decisions of this council and the person of Eutyches were both disagreeable to the bishops of Constantinople and Rome; this led to the Council of Chalcedon's acceptance of the Roman Bishop Leo's *Tome*, which defined Jesus as one person (*hypostasis*) with two natures (*physis*).

But the Council and Leo's *Tome* were disagreeable to the Patriarch of Alexandria and the majority of the Egyptian population. Patriarch Dioscorus was sent into exile for his rejection of the Council and replaced with a Chalcedonian ("two-nature") bishop who was killed by an Egyptian mob. Roman and Constantinopolitan bishops came to Egypt with Roman soldiers and attempted to force Egyptian bishops and monastic communities to accept the *Tome* of Leo and the Council of Chalcedon. Emperor Zeno's subsequent compromise proposal did not work. During the sixth century, Emperor Justinian attempted to force the Egyptians into Chalcedonianism, which only pushed them further away from Roman imperial authorities and church officials. During the early seventh century, Emperor Heraclius enacted similar policies in Egypt, exiling the Egyptian Patriarch Benjamin and replacing him with a bishop named Cyrus from the Caucasus region. Egypt came under Persian control for a decade and briefly returned to Roman dominance before the Arab Muslim conquest. When the forces of 'Amr ibn-al-As conquered Egypt, Christians had mixed reactions. Some lamented the new rule of "heathens," but others rejoiced at freedom from the Roman Chalcedonian "heretics." Even in the earliest years of Islamic dominance in Egypt, Christians displayed greater anger towards Roman Chalcedonians than their Muslim rulers. This demonstrates the importance of the anti-Chalcedonian movement for Egyptian identity.

The defining characteristic of Egyptian Christianity after Chalcedon was Miaphysite doctrine. The term “Miaphysite” (“one nature”), originally used by Cyril of Alexandria, refers to the central claim of this group: that Christ exists in one united nature, both human and divine.<sup>4</sup> The majority of recent scholarship has avoided the term “Monophysite,” a polemical term originating outside the communities that it labels.<sup>5</sup> While “anti-Chalcedonian” or “non-Chalcedonian” are certainly more appropriate, they are also not optimal as the communities that did not accept Chalcedon include other groups inside and outside of Egypt, such as Eutychians and the Church of the East.<sup>6</sup> I will employ the terms “anti-Chalcedonian” as well as “Miaphysite,” while avoiding use of “Monophysite.”

The Chalcedonian schism motivated the Egyptian church to mark its indigenous origin.<sup>7</sup> The framing of Egyptian identity by means of boundaries defined by Miaphysite doctrine is not a process that began with the Arab Muslim conquest but two centuries earlier, with the Chalcedonian schism.<sup>8</sup> The later conquest reinforced a process already well underway. While the Copts’ *dhimmi*—or religious minority—status under Islam generated an even more pressing need to define a distinct identity, Egypt’s Christians had already experienced minority status as a “heretical” faction within the Byzantine Empire. The elements that defined Egyptian identity—martyrdom and resistance to governmental oppression—were therefore strengthened, not created, at the time of the Arab Muslim conquest. Since Ptolemaic times, indeed, Greeks had represented Egyptians as oppressed martyrs. The adoption of martyrdom as a central theme in the life of the Coptic church came about during the period of the Great Persecution at the beginning of the fourth century CE.<sup>9</sup>

After the Chalcedonian schism, the Roman Emperor Justinian persecuted the Egyptian church, prompting Coptic leaders to resist through martyrological rhetoric. The hagiographical sources of the fifth and sixth centuries surveyed in the following chapters demonstrate that Egyptian preoccupation with forming ethnic identity along Miaphysite lines resulted from a new need to differentiate from the imperial church of Constantinople.<sup>10</sup> Anti-Chalcedonians wanted to demonstrate that their position was in agreement with the Christian voices of the past. This was not, therefore, a new position taken at the time of the Arab Muslim conquest. An earlier example of this strategy is found in the *Life of Longinus* when the Lycian monk summoned the voices of his deceased predecessors at the Enaton monastery who unanimously condemned the *Tome* of Leo.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Romans were not “gradually”

depicted as hegemonic, foreign oppressors; indeed, there was a swift development of anti-Byzantine rhetoric in the writings of mid-fifth-century figures like Timothy Aelurus and Dioscorus of Alexandria.<sup>12</sup> The works of Timothy mark the beginning of theological resistance framed in ethnic terms.<sup>13</sup> Texts such as these were some of the most powerful instruments of identity formation in late antique Christianity.<sup>14</sup> From the perspective of Egyptians, Chalcedonianism was rapidly associated with the Roman Empire. However, awareness of the new perspective developed only gradually and authorities in Constantinople did not fully understand what had happened for another century.<sup>15</sup>

Ethnic identity development in late antique Egypt is evident primarily in hagiographic, homiletic and historical works. It has become common in studies of late antiquity to prioritize documentary sources that are legal, administrative, and/or economic in nature.<sup>16</sup> While documentary papyri may be the most useful source in attempting to reconstruct the social and economic context of late antique Egypt, readers can gain understanding of religious and ethnic identity through hagiographic, homiletical, and historical material in which the attitudes of Egyptian Christians are most clearly presented.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, documentary papyri often leave one in the dark regarding the social and religious convictions of a particular community.<sup>18</sup> Primary attention here will be given to the anti-Chalcedonian/Miaphysite texts of Egypt written after the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) into the period immediately following the Arab conquest (642 CE).

This book presents events and figures of the Egyptian church in the chronological order in which they have been traditionally commemorated during the late antique, medieval, and modern periods, both within the Coptic church and in other religious communities around the world. Furthermore, texts that likely were written in very different time periods yet focus on similar events and people will be considered alongside one another. The book is organized first by time period, covering the pre-Chalcedonian period, the late fifth century, the sixth century, and the seventh century. Within these periodizations, the chapters are organized primarily by leading figures who are thought to have lived and operated in Egypt during these periods. However, several of the texts I treat were written much later than the date they claim. All the same, texts regarding certain individuals emerging from different periods are considered together. The danger in such an approach, of course, is that texts often reveal more about the period in which they were written than in which they are set. I have endeavored to signal such

instances throughout the book. The benefits of my approach, however, are twofold. One, many of these texts have a long, complicated redaction history, and their origins are often uncertain. This leaves open the possibility that many of them may have an oral or written origin during the time period in which they are set. Two, authors often labored to keep the details of a text set to its appropriate time. For example, texts written after Chalcedon that are set before Chalcedon leave the schism out of their contents and present Roman authorities in a vastly different manner than their contemporaries. Such examples demonstrate the continuity in which communal memory was fashioned, built upon, and maintained in the making of Egyptian identity.

While the following study will include an assessment of Egyptian identity from various religious communities, anti-Chalcedonian literature will be especially highlighted as the Miaphysites produced the majority of Coptic literature during this period and, as it will be argued, the dominant articulation of Egyptian identity. Events such as the reign of Justinian and the Islamic conquest continued to shape the Egyptian identity that took form in the aftermath of Chalcedon. The ethnic rhetoric present in Egyptian texts will be analyzed through the lens of contemporary anthropological methodology. However, I should first establish the utility of “ethnicity” as a useful interpretive category for late antique Egyptian Christianity, as opposed to alternative categories such as “race” or “nationality.”

#### THE FALSE THESIS OF LATE ANTIQUE EGYPTIAN NATIONALISM

The topic of Egyptian ethnic identity development has not been addressed in scholarship directly, but instead enters in the form of a debate regarding the existence of nationalism in Coptic literature. Scholars working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries alleged that an anti-Hellenistic sentiment motivated early Coptic writers in Upper Egypt to formulate a religious movement interested not in profound theological engagement but in Egyptian nationalistic propaganda that was both anti-Byzantine and anti-Alexandrine. This argument focused heavily on the writings of the fifth-century monastic leader and Coptic author *par excellence*, Shenoute of Atripe. Scholarship in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has seen a complete rejection of this analysis. While the modern rejection of an

anachronistic nationalist lens is accurate, scholars have not offered a helpful alternative for how to interpret Egyptian-centered rhetoric in late antique texts.

The nationalism thesis originated in the work of Émile Amélineau. Amélineau claimed that Christianity was adapted and fused with various elements of pre-Christian Egyptian religion and culture, while Islam entered Egypt as an opposing force demanding the rejection of indigenous religious practice.<sup>19</sup> Johannes Leipoldt went further and posited a sharp distinction between Greek-speaking, wealthy landowners and Coptic-speaking peasants. He operated under the assumption that the Greek language remained largely unspoken in Upper Egypt due to hostilities between “Greeks” and “Copts.”<sup>20</sup> E. L. Woodward suggested that theological controversies of late antiquity were, in fact, political power struggles between the various regions of the Roman Empire.<sup>21</sup> Jean Maspero claimed that Egyptian nationalism manifested in pagan religious practice<sup>22</sup> and even referred to Egyptians as a “vain people.”<sup>23</sup> Maspero’s analysis is laden with bias as he characterizes Miaphysite doctrine as “an assembly of disconnected assertions, contrary to orthodox theories.”<sup>24</sup>

Harold Idris Bell advanced a blunter version of the nationalism thesis, asserting an alleged racial purity of Egyptian Christians. Bell claimed that the Egyptian church was of “a strongly nationalist character,” bolstered by his belief that Egyptians were “without an admixture of Greek blood” and that they demonstrated “no capacity for abstract philosophical thought.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he even described Greek-speaking Egyptian leaders like Cyril as “ardent nationalists.”<sup>26</sup>

A. H. M. Jones was one of the first scholars to challenge the nationalism thesis. For Jones, Egyptian solidarity was motivated not by national sentiment but ecclesiastical unity.<sup>27</sup> While later-twentieth-century analysis was characterized by conflicting responses to the nationalist thesis and the challenge raised by Jones,<sup>28</sup> Ewa Wipszycka’s 1996 refutation of the nationalist thesis put a complete end to any nationalist analysis of late antique Egypt. Focusing solely on Egypt, Wipszycka argued that the exaltation of Greek speakers from other parts of the empire discredits any kind of Coptic anti-Greek sentiment.<sup>29</sup> Wipszycka’s study has influenced recent studies of late antique Egypt to the extent that there has been no support for the nationalist thesis in the last three decades of scholarship.<sup>30</sup>

Wipszycka’s claim is congruent with leading studies on nationality and nationalism finding that national identity is inherently political and that ethnic boundaries must exist within the political interests of the state.<sup>31</sup>

Nationalist movements seek political legitimacy. Following the schism between the Egyptian church and the dominant Roman church centered in Constantinople, the theological resistance movement was characterized by an increase in rhetoric centering the people of Egypt. However, this rhetoric was not political. There was no military resistance or move for political separation from the Roman Empire. Egypt was not a nation but a province of the Roman Empire; and the Miaphysites who resisted Chalcedon displayed no interest in changing that reality. Since Egypt was not a nation in the modern sense nor even in a manner equivalent to the modern concept of nationality, nationalism is not helpful in understanding the anti-Chalcedonian movement in Egypt.

However, there is a reason that scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were drawn to the question of social identity in anti-Chalcedonian texts. And that is because the land and people of Egypt are centered in unprecedented ways during this period. Prior to Chalcedon, Egyptian Christian texts did not mention being Egyptian very much; after Chalcedon, Egypt and Egyptians appear much more frequently. Contemporary scholarship on Egyptian Christianity has rejected the nationalist thesis, but has not yet provided an adequate framework to understand the role social factors *did* play in Christological controversies.<sup>32</sup> Jason Zaborowski argues that ethnic rhetoric in medieval Coptic texts are not assertions of Coptic pride, although he asks “when or how did Copts come to see themselves as an ‘ethnochurch’?”<sup>33</sup> Bagnall accurately summarizes the state of the current discussion of Egyptian ethnic identity development: “Nationalism is a doubtful interpretive concept for this emerging world, but was there an Egyptian consciousness detaching itself and reconstructing its past to justify such a detachment? If so, when did this come about? This is still a frontier for study.”<sup>34</sup> There is still a need for a better framework for the analysis of the “égyptocentrisme” present in Coptic texts.

#### PARADIGMS OF ETHNICITY

Studies have yielded a multiplicity of definitions and manners of conceiving of ethnicity. My working definition of ethnicity is: a form of social organization where the group continually fashions its membership along changing cultural, linguistic, or religious characteristics in order to distinguish itself from neighbors.<sup>35</sup> Leading anthropologists guide my definition as it builds