

RELIGIOUS INSCRIPTIONS FROM SOUTHERN ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

Ancient religions and worship still constitute a fertile field for study and research, and various historical sources are still full of materials that can be studied with a serious inductive method. Since we have inscriptions in Musnad script from the IVth century AD indicating the emergence of a monotheistic religious pattern in southern Arabia, the present research aims to shed light on these inscriptions and what they recorded about this monotheistic belief as it was expressed in the worship of a god known as Raḥman.

INTRODUCTION

Southern Arabia is a place where many pagan gods had been worshipped until the IVth century AD. But since the last quarter of that century, a kind of neutral monotheism began to appear in the inscriptions of the region, represented by the worship of a god known as “Raḥman,” i.e., the “Merciful.”¹ Although the available inscriptions and sources do not allow us to identify the followers of this cult and their rituals, or determine whether their be.he initial manifestations of this monotheism were characterized by the worship of one God and the abandonment of temples.²

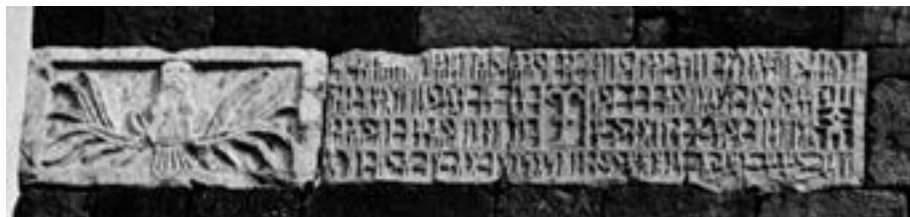
Although the adoption of this monotheistic pattern was a religious decision by the people of southern Arabia, it was evidently associated with tribal political ambitions. Southern Arabian society had a multi-tribal structure, and the custom was for the weaker tribes to submit to the stronger tribe, just as it happened in the case of Saba.³ After the Himyarite kings had succeeded in unifying the vast lands of southern Arabia, they felt an urgent need to find a mechanism that would strengthen the unity of the population and bring disparate communities closer

¹ Faith in God alone has no partner.

² Muller: Survey of the History of the Arabian Peninsula, 128.

³ Al-Shaybah: Studies in the ancient history of Yemen, 28.

together.⁴ Because religious pluralism, which made each tribe have its own deity, constituted a formidable obstacle to the melting of the southern tribes into one crucible, monotheism was the appropriate solution to consolidate the concept of a central state whose affairs were managed by a single ruler.⁵ In other words, it seems that the conjunction of the political system based on the concept of pluralism of tribal leaderships and entities with pagan pluralism made Shammar Yahri'sh and his successors realize that the presence of a deity for each tribe enhances the presence of one leader for each tribe, and that worshipping one God would pave the way for accepting the concept of submission to a single ruler, and thus achieving political unity in southern Arabia.⁶



Bayt al-Ashwal 2. (Old South Arabic “Sabaeo” and late Sabaeo, 378 AD.)

Transliteration: (1) Mlkkrb Yh'mn w-bny-hw 'bkrb 's'ḏ w-Dr'mr 'ymn 'm(lk) (S¹)b' w-(ḏ)-(R)[ydn w]— (2) Ḥḏramwt w-Ymnt br'w w-hwtrn w-hqwh w-hs²qrn byt-hmw Kl[n]— (3) m bn mwtr-hw 'dy tfr'-hw b-mqm mr'-hmw Mr' s¹m— (4) yn wrh'-hw ḏ-D'wn ḏ-b-ḥryfn ḏ-l-tlt w-ts¹y w-'rb' m'[tm]

Translation: (1) Mlkkrb Yhn'm and his sons 'bkrb 's'ḏ and Dr'mr 'ymn, kings of Saba', Dhū-Raydān, (2) Ḥḏramawt and Yamanāt built, laid foundations, finished and completed their house Kl[n]- (3) m, from foundations to top, with the power of their Lord, the Lord of heaven. (4) In the month of D'wn in the year four hundred ninety-three.

Context: This inscription is the first explicit reference to a monotheistic religion in South Arabia.⁷ It is attributed to Malkīkarib min'Yuha and his sons, Dhara' amar Ayman and Abīkarib As'ad, the kings of Saba', Dhū-Raydān, Ḥḏramawt and Yamanāt, who completed the construction of their palace with the help of their god, the Lord of Heaven, in the year 493 in the Himyarite calendar (=378 AD).

Although the name of Raḥman is absent from the inscription, its reference to one of his common titles, which is “Lord of Heaven,” indicates that his worship may

⁴ Piotrovsky: *Yemen before Islam*, 28.

⁵ Al-Mutahhar: *The Religious Conflict*, 17; Munabbih: *Crowns in Kings of Himyar*, 307.

⁶ Moscati: *Ancient Semitic civilizations*, 188; Piotrovsky: *The Epic of the Himyarite King*, 68; Ryckmans: *Civilization of Yemen before Islam*, 132.

⁷ Muhammad: *The Incident of the Groove*, 115.

have begun royally.⁸ Other later inscriptions indicate that the mention of the god of monotheism became associated with the common people and was familiar in many popular economic, military, and architectural inscriptions. This may indicate the prevalence of the monotheistic pattern – without identifying the name of the God – in both royal and popular inscriptions.⁹



CIH 537+RES 4919. (Old South Arabic “Sabaean” and late Sabaean, 472 AD.)

Transliteration: (1) [... .. w-b] ny-hmw (M)[rs¹]’m Yḥmd bn(w) ± [... ..] (2) [... ..] Kwkbn w-N¹mn w-Yf¹n w-d-W±[... ..] (t)[... ..] (3) [... ..] Ḥwln GddmU w-S³nḥn w-Ṣgrt((ṣgrt)) w- ± [... ..-h](m)w S¹nfrtn br(’)— (4) [w by]t-hmw Rymn ḥrm s¹q(f) ± m grbm w-mnhmtm bn mwt— (5) [r-hw ‘dy fr’-hw b-rd¹] Rḥmn b¹l s¹myn w-(b)-(rd) ± ’mr¹-hmw ḥmlkn S²rḥb— (6) [l Ykf w-bny-hw] Nwf(m) w-Lḥy¹t Ynwf w- ± M¹dkrb Yn¹m ḥmlk S¹b¹ w- (7) d-Rydn w-Ḥḍrmwt w-Ymnt w-’rb-hmw Ṭwd ± m w-Thmt w-’rbw w-s¹tqfw (8) [... ..]-(h)mw w-b-ḥmd-hw h(k) ± mlw w-hqm w-byt-hmw w-kl (9) [... ..]ḥtm l-yṣlḥn l-hm ± (w) Rḥmn w-rt dw byt-hmw w-’f— (10) [s¹-hmw w-’lwd-hmw Rḥm]nn b¹l s¹myn wrḥ-hw d-(Ḥ) ± rfn d-l-tny w-tmny w-ḥms¹ m¹tm.¹⁰

Translation: (1) [... ..] and their sons Mrs¹’m Yḥmd, those of the clan [... ..] (2) Kwkbn, N¹m, Yf¹n, d-W[... ..] (3) [... ..] Ḥwln Gddm, S³nḥn, Ṣgrt (or servants) [and their kabir] of S¹nfrtn built (4) [... .. for ?] their house Rymn, in a state of inviolability, roofs in undressed stones and in smooth stones from its foundations

⁸ Al-Mutahhar: The Religious Conflict, 16.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Iwona: Ḥimyar gagné, 156.

(5) [to its top] with the help of Rḥmn, the Master of Heaven, and with the help of their lords, the kings S²rḥb- (6) 'l Ykf and his sons, [... ...] Nwfm, Lḥy't Ynwf, M'dkrb Yn'm, kings of Saba' (7) Dhū-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Yamanāt and their Arabs of Ṭwdm and of Thmt. They built in square blocks and they built a roof (8) [... ...] for his care they completed and erected their house and all (9) [... ...] might Rḥmn grant to them prosperity. They entrusted their house, themselves, (10) their sons to the protection of Rḥmn, the Master of Heaven. In the month of Ḥrfn of the year five hundred eighty-two.

Context: This inscription indicates that King Sarahbi'il completed the construction of his house under the patronage of the god Raḥman. It is clear from the inscription that he shares the royal title with his three sons and asks for mercy from the Lord of Heaven for them. The inscription's religious significance lies with its reference to Raḥman, Lord of Heaven. This confirms the association of the "Lord of Heaven" with Raḥman as one of his distinctive titles, and also supports the view that religious monotheism most likely began with a royal initiative as a religious instrument to achieve political unity. Significantly, the repetition of the title "Kings of Saba', Dhū-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Yamanāt" in this and the previous inscription supports the association of both religious monotheism and political unity in the mentality of the Himyarite kings at that time.



CIH 539 RES 3170. (Old South Arabic "Sabaeen" and late Sabaeen.)

Transliteration: (1) [... ...] ' (ykf)rn ḥ(b)-hmw w-yqbln qr(b)[n]-(hm) [w] (2) [... ...] ' w-b-'lmn b'dn w-qrbn w-s²ym 'l [... ...] (3) [... ...] n w-bs²rn w-bn s²rk l-mr'm b-b's¹m [... ...] (4) [... ...] w-mrdym l-s¹m Rḥmn *d*-Kl'n | [... ...] (5)

[... ..] Rḥmnn rdw' mr'-hmw 'mlkn | [... ..] (6) [... ..] w-'ws¹m w-ḏllm w-mḥlm w-tm [... ..]¹¹

Translation: (1) [... ..] may He forgive their sins and may He accept their offering [... ..] (2) [... ..] and in the far and present world and the patron of [... ..] (3) [... ..] and the human beings and the agreement to a lord in malice (?) [... ..] (4) [... ..] and satisfaction in the name of Rḥmnn of Kl'n (?) [... ..] (5) [... ..] Rḥmnn, goodwill of their lords, the kings [... ..] (6) [... ..] and pestilence, sickness, drought and [... ..]¹²

Context: A six-line inscription is a supplication for forgiveness of sin and a request to the god Raḥman to grant the devotees the favor of kings and protect them from all evil. It is possible that the inscription belongs to King Sarahbi'il Yakkuf, whose reign modern researchers agree to date from 455 to 475 AD.¹³



RES 4107 Ghul-YU 21. (Old South Arabic “Sabaean” and late Sabaean.)

Transliteration: (1) 'ys¹n (') [...]' mqtwy m[lkn] (2) br (') w-twb(n) bt-hw ḏ-Gd— (3) (n)m bn mwtr-hw 'dy mrymn (b)- (4) [rd'] 'ln b'l s¹myn w-'rd(n) |

Translation: (1) 'ys¹n '[...]' mqtwy of the king (2) constructed and completed his house ḏ-Gd- (3) nm from its foundation to top, by (4) the help of 'ln, the Lord of the Heaven and of the Earth.¹⁴

¹¹ Beeston – Landon – Al-Ghul – Müller-Wulckow – Ryckmans: Sabaic Dictionary, 24.

¹² Iwona: Ḥimyar gagné, 157.

¹³ Al-Yasoui: Lights on Christianity, 83–115.

¹⁴ Hayajneh: Anmerkungen, 236.

Context: From this inscription it appears that it belonged to one of the king's employees who completed the construction of his house with the help of the "Lord of Heaven and Earth." This is because the word "mqtwy" may refer to a job and then it comes in the sense of a servant, or it may be a personal title, or refers to one of the king's courtiers.¹⁵

THE MUSNAD SCRIPT USED IN THE INSCRIPTIONS OF SOUTHERN ARABIA

Arabic sources use the term "ḥimyarī," i.e., Himyaritic, to refer to the pre-Islamic languages and civilizations of southern Arabia, while inscriptions written during this period are known as "Late Sabaean." The reason for this is that the political unity achieved by Himyar had a great impact on the culture that came to bear its name, especially after it absorbed "Sabaean" as the language of the unified state at that time.¹⁶

As for the Musnad script, it is an ancient writing system that developed in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and it was the dominant and main script before the emergence of the current Arabic script. It was also known as the "Himyarite script," even though it was the script of all the southern Arab kingdoms: Sheba, Ma'in, Qataban, Hadhramawt, and others. For this reason, it is also called the Southern Arabic script.¹⁷

The Musnad alphabet consists of twenty-nine letters, as shown below:

ر	ذ	د	خ	ح	ج	ث	ت	ب	ا
r	d	d	h	h	g	t	t	b	a
غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض	ص	ش	ؤ	س	ز
g	g	z	t	d	s	š	š	s	z
	ي	و	ه	ن	م	ل	ك	ق	ف
	y	w	h	n	m	l	k	q	f

One of the features of the Musnad script is that the direction of its writing is not fixed, although it is mostly from right to left. In contrast to current Arabic script, it is written in separate, unconnected letters, while a vertical line is used to separate words. There is no diacritics or dotting below or above the letters.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hayajneh: Anmerkungen, 236.

¹⁶ Marqatn: The Worship of God Rahman, 41.

¹⁷ Jawad: The Detailed History, 127; Al-Yarbi: A Brief History, 5.

¹⁸ Ismail: The Ancient Yemeni Language, 67.

The Musnad is considered of great importance because it is the script of the main sources from which researchers derive their information about the history and civilization of ancient southern Arabia. The people of the southern kingdoms used it to record aspects of their daily lives, their ways of living, their beliefs, their political circumstances, and their external relations with neighboring countries.¹⁹

Musnad inscriptions revolve around two basic areas: public life and private life. Both religion and the world of the gods fall within this framework. We often find that public and private achievements, legislation, and personal and political practices have been accomplished thanks to the patronage and blessings of the gods.²⁰ Perhaps this is the reason why the largest proportion of these inscriptions are of a religious nature, and often include sanctification, offerings, sacrifice, public confessions, and memorial texts.²¹

Aside from religion, these inscriptions include topics of a political and military nature, such as commemorative ones that praise the king or important figures in the kingdom for one of the major deeds they carried out,²² or that celebrate victory in wars and conflicts between kingdoms, kings, and tribes.²³ There are also decrees issued by the king, tribe, or temple to regulate public life, covering various topics such as the protection and definition of private property rights,²⁴ market regulation, land distribution, investment, irrigation systems, and access to temple.²⁵

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¹⁹ These are writings related to making sacrifices, commemorating a victory, building a house, and similar activities. For more, see Alhayal: From the inscriptions, 63.

²⁰ Ismail: The Ancient Yemeni Language, 67.

²¹ Abdel Basset: Religious Life, 143; Al-Salawi: Dedication Inscriptions, 39.

²² Al-Shar'I: Three New Sabaean Inscriptions, 544.

²³ Al-Hajj: The Political and Economic Importance, 711.

²⁴ Al-Naim: Legislation in Southwest Arabia, 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

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