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The pre-Islamic *basmala*: Reflections on its first epigraphic attestation and its original significance

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Introduction

The *basmala* is an Islamic invocation traditionally translated as 'in the name of Allāh, the most gracious, the most merciful'.[1] It begins each chapter of the Quran, except for Sūrah 9, and is found in its full form in Quran 27:30. Given its tripartite structure, it is possible to see an interaction with Matthew 28:19: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*'.[2] Similar invocations are found in the Ancient South Arabian monumental texts from the monotheistic period and in Gəʿəz. Yet, until recently, no directly comparable pre-Islamic formula had been attested. In 2018, M.A. Al-Hajj and A.A. Faqʿas published a unique inscription from Jabal Ḏabūb in the region of al-Ḍāliʿ, Yemen: a South Arabian graffito in the latest stage of the minuscule script containing a variant of the *basmala* in a language distinct from the Late Sabaic written register.[3] In this paper, I wish to refine the interpretation of this text, discuss its language, dating, and its significance for our interpretation of the meaning of the *basmala* in the pre-/paleo-Islamic period.[4]

Part I: *The inscription, its reading and interpretation*

1.1 The original edition

The two-line graffito was carved vertically on a side of a cliff near a small cave. Unlike most rock inscriptions, the text is written in the minuscule variant of the South Arabian script, the hand typically reserved for writing day-to-day documents on sticks.[5] The *ed. pro.* contains an in-depth discussion of the inscription's paleography; it suffices to say that

[1] On the traditional understanding of the *basmala*, see Carra de Vaux and Gardet, "Basmala." See Said-Reynolds, *Allah*, pp. 94-96 for a balanced discussion of the traditional opinions.

[2] Matthew 28:19: πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς **εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.**

[3] Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, "Naqš Jabal Ḏabūb."

[4] I follow Al-Azmeh's use of this term to signify the period of the formation of the proto-Quranic community and the Medinian state; see Al-Azmeh, *Islam in Late Antiquity,* ch. 6.

[5] See Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, "Naqš Jabal Ḏabūb," p. 39–42 for other examples of the minuscule script on rock. For an outline of the languages of pre-Islamic Yemen, see Stein, "Ancient South Arabian", and the script chart on p. 1045 for examples of the chronological development of the letter shapes. On literacy in pre-Islamic South Arabia, see Stein, "Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia" and for a bird's-eye view of the entire Peninsula, see Macdonald, "Written Word" and Al-Jallad, "Linguistic Landscape." On the paleography of the Ancient South Arabian script, see Drewes et al., "Some Absolute Dates."

the letter shapes of the text date to the very latest stage of South Arabian documentation, sometime after the 5th c. CE.[6] We will return to the matter of its date following a discussion of its contents, which ultimately must bear on this question.

The *editio princeps* (*ed. pro.*) reads the text as follows and provides two interpretations.[7]

Line 1: *bsmlh | rḥmn | rḥmn | rb | s¹mwt*

Line 2: *r(z)(q)n | mfḍlk | wʾṯrn | mḫḫ | s²kmtʾymn*

Interpretation 1:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم رب السموات

الرزاق (الذي) مفضلك (أيها الانسان) والمردف نعمه عليك (بأن) أعطاك الايمان

Interpretation 2:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم رب السموات

(أسألك) الرزق من فضلك وأن تمنح عقله (قبله) قوة(حلاوة) الايمان

[6] Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, “Naqš Jabal Ḏabūb,” pp. 39–42.
[7] Editorial marks: () = abnormal shape; | = word divider; in the interpretation () = supplied word.

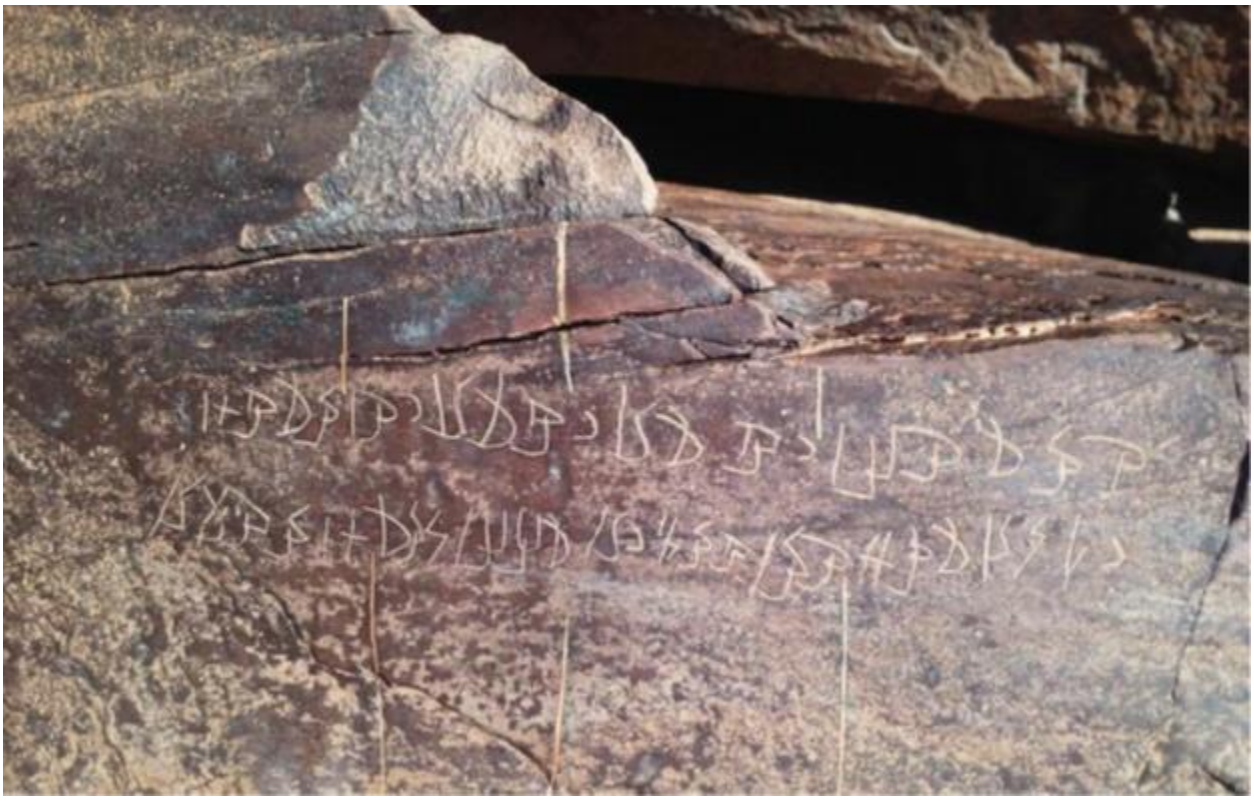

Image 1: The Jebel Ḏabūb inscription (Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, “Naqš Jebel Ḏabūb”)

1.2 Discussion: original reading and interpretation

The first issue that requires our attention is the reading of the second word of the first line as *rḥmn*. The *ed. pro.* took the second letter of this word as a clear *ḥ* but one could argue for reading it as a *w*, producing the word *rwmn*.[8] However, comparing all the *w*'s and *ḥ*'s of this short text, we can see that the two letter shapes are quite close (table 1). Indeed, the *w* of *smwt*, the final word of line 1, is virtually indistinguishable from the *ḥ* of the third word of line 1, *rḥmn.* Context in this case of *smwt* clearly prefers the reading of *w*. Context likewise should help us arbitrate between the two options - *rḥmn* and *rwmn* - concerning the first word. The word is clearly a theonym and since no deity by the name of *rwmn* is attested throughout the long history of South Arabian documentation, the original reading of *rḥmn* is assured.

[8] I think Ch. Robin for bringing this issue to my attention and for a fruitful discussion of this text's paleography in November 2019.

	smwt	*w-*	*rḥmn*	*rḥmn*
w 				
ḥ 				

Table 1: Shapes of *w* and *ḥ* in the Jebel Ḏubūb inscription[9]

The *ed. pro.* expressed some uncertainty in their reading of the second and third glyphs of line 2, *z* and *q* respectively. The *z* has a completely unique shape here, but the editors make a convincing case for its identification as a simplified form of the *z*-glyph attested in other minuscule texts owing to the present context and medium.[10] The *q* is only missing a small loop, which may reflect a normal paleographic development in this late stage of the script, for which we have so few witnesses. Thus, I would regard the reading of the third letter as virtually certain while the second is somewhat conjectural but strongly supported by its lexical context, as we shall see below.

While the reading of the *ed. pro.* is sound and will be followed here, their interpretation, on the other hand, faces several difficulties. Both translations depend on a Sabaic-oriented interpretation of the morphology, especially when it comes to the final *-n*'s. This assumption produces several unexplained grammatical oddities. In both cases, they interpret the first four words - *bsmlh rḥmn rḥmn* - as the tripartite Islamic *basmala*, where the first *rḥmn* is identified as *raḥmān*, lacking any marker of definiteness, and the second is *raḥīm-ān*, that is, the adjective *raḥīm* with the Sabaic post-fixed definite article.[11] The presence of the article on the second term but its absence on the first is not satisfactorily explained, nor is the absence of the article on *smwt* at the end of the line. The *ed. pro.* interprets the first word of line 2, *rzqn*, in the same way - they equate it with the agentive

[9] Tracings of letters taken from the script chart of Stein, "Ancient South Arabian."
[10] Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, "Naqš Jabal Ḏabūb," pp. 20; 41.
[11] Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, "Naqš Jabal Ḏabūb," pp. 21–22.

noun in Arabic *ar-razzāq*, explaining the final *n* again as the article. While mixed texts do exist, including those that exhibit the influence of North Arabian languages,[12] there are no inscriptions, to my knowledge, that freely fluctuate in the deployment of the definite article in this way, which suggests that the present interpretation of these final *n*'s is incorrect.

The *ed. pro.* interprets the final word of the inscription, which reads clearly as *ʾymn*, as /ʾīmān/. This requires the use of <y> internally to represent the medial ī-vowel. South Arabian orthography, however, does not make use of *matres lectionis* in word-internal position, so this spelling must be considered anomalous.[13] This interpretation is especially unlikely considering that the *ed. pro.* understands the preceding word, *s²kmt*, as reflecting /śakīmat/, without an internal <y>. While no attempt is made to explain this spelling, one can rule out the calquing of Arabic orthography, as there is no indication elsewhere in this text for the influence of another writing tradition. Rather, the author seems to be writing the vernacular in a phonetic manner.

1.3 Revisiting the text

Given these inconsistencies, I think we should approach the text anew, seeking an interpretation that is both consistent linguistically and orthographically. Short literary texts such as these pose the greatest interpretive challenges. Unlike commemorative and historical monumental inscriptions, the vocabulary of which is mainly concrete and which draw on an established formulae and themes, literary texts can be unformulaic, make use of metaphorical language, and are usually replete with *hapax legomena*. Selections of literary texts that do find their way into the epigraphic genre are decontextualized, lacking the broader literary context from which they were drawn. As such, they can be subject to a wide spectrum of interpretation, which only becomes greater if the grammar of the language is unfamiliar, such as with the present inscription. And without the aforementioned context, it becomes impossible to arbitrate between competing

[12] The Haramic inscriptions, for example, exhibit a mixture of North Arabian and South Arabian features, but the distribution is consistent and there is no fluctuation in the shape of the definite article; it is always -*n*. On these, see Robin, *Karibʾīl à Mahomet*, 3, pp. 97ff. Stein, "Dialektgeographie," pp. 228–29. On the linguistic character of these texts and other 'mixed' inscriptions from Ancient South Arabia, see Al-Jallad, "What Is ANA?"

[13] Internal *w* and *y* may, however, note internal diphthongs in ASA orthography; see Beeston, *Sabaic Grammar*, 6–7; Stein *Phonologie und Morphologie*. The interpretation of the *matres lectionis y* and *w* in final position, whether indicating true long vowels, diphthongs, or something else, has not yet achieved a consensus among specialists. For an outline, see Avanzini, "Origin and Classification of the Ancient South Arabian Languages," n. 18; see Robin "arabie antique," pp. 550–56 on the interpretation of these final letters as long vowels, mostly *ā*, and see Al-Jallad, "Sūrat Al-Baqárah" for a hybrid interpretation, where they sometimes mark final vowels, *w* = /ū/~/ō/; *y* = /ī/~/ē/ and other times consonants.

interpretations. Nowhere is this better illustrated than with the South Arabian poetic texts, which remain till this day without convincing interpretations.[14]

But literary texts do not appear *ex nihilo* on rock. They are drawn from living, literary traditions, which in turn do not exist in isolation. The best chance we have, therefore, at interpreting such texts is to identify the non-epigraphic literary genre in which they are anchored. Our interpretation should also be naturally guided by stylistic considerations, such as compositional structure.[15] The paleography of the present inscription places it in the latest period of South Arabian documentation, that is, the 6th c. CE. We know that by this period South Arabia was monotheistic and politically Christian.[16] This is confirmed by the opening invocation: monotheistic *basmala* invoking the name of the monotheistic god of South Arabia, the Raḥmān.[17] Thus, the text is likely impacted by Jewish or Christian liturgy; the invocational genre is reminiscent of the Psalter. I would therefore suggest that its contents reflect a re-working/paraphrasing of biblical material to form a prayer in an Arabian vernacular. The Psalter will therefore be our first port of call for its interpretation. With this hypothesized context, I offer the following interpretation based on themes in Psalm 90 and 123.

Introduction: *bsm lh rḥmn*	'In the name of Allāh, the Raḥmān'
Invocation 1: *rḥm-n rb s¹mwt*	'have mercy upon us, O lord of the heavens'
Invocation 2: *rzq-n m-fḍl-k*	'satisfy us by means of your favor'
Invocation 3: *w-ʾṯr-n mḫ-h*	'and grant us the essence of it (i.e. wisdom) to
s²kmt ʾym-n	number our days'

New Commentary

Introduction: General

As the *ed. pro.* recognized, the *basmala* introduces the invocation; this function is reminiscent of the use of the *basmala* to introduce chapters of the Quran. I depart from their interpretation in seeing this *basmala* as having only two components, *lh* and *rḥmn,* lacking the final adjective *raḥīm*. The third word, *rḥmn,* I take as belonging to the first

[14] For a discussion of these, see Beeston, "Antecedents." Robin, "Ḥimyaritic"; Robin, *Karibʾīl à Mahomet,* 3. The most comprehensive collection of these poet texts is found in Stein, "'Himyaritic' Language."
[15] For an application of this methodology to a comparable literary fragment in Safaitic/Hismaic, see Al-Jallad, "Echoes."
[16] On the political history of South Arabia, see Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta." See Gajda, "Remarks" the religious landscape of this late period as consisting of Jews, Christians, and "Ḥimyarite monotheists", a local monotheistic cult centered on the deity Rḥmnn that was influenced by Judaism. On the Jewish character of the Ḥimyarite state, see Robin "Le judaïsme de Ḥimyar" and "Quel judaïsme en Arabie?".
[17] See Beeston, "Raḥmānism" and "Judaism and Christianity", and the references in n. 16 above.

invocation, which will be discussed below.[18] In terms of its confessional context, we are not likely dealing with a Christian text as we would expect a tripartite invocation, mentioning Christ and the Holy Ghost as well.[19] Thus, the simple *bi-smi llāhi r-rāḥmān* could be Jewish or, perhaps, reflective of the liturgy of a local monotheistic cult.

Philological commentary

bsm: The prepositional phrase /bi-smi/ or perhaps /bi-sem/ is spelled phonetically, as it is in the Arabic script. This may suggest that the spelling of this phrase in the Arabic-script reflects the orthographic logic of another writing tradition. The word *s¹m* 'name' is previously attested in Ancient South Arabian,[20] including in an invocational contexts: [....*b-*]*s¹m Rḥmnn w-bn-hw krs³ts³ ġlbn* 'in the name of the Raḥmān and his son, Christ the Victorious';[21] *[b]rk w-tbrk s¹m rḥmnn* 'may the name of Rḥmnn bless and be blessed'.[22] The *basmala* of course belongs to an established genre of invocations, including well-known parallels in Greek, Gəʿəz, and Aramaic.

lh*:* The spelling *lh* presumably reflects /allāh/ with a vocalic onset unrepresented in South Semitic orthography. We find the same spelling in the Rbbl bn Hfʿm epitaph from Qaryat al-Fāw, *w-lh* 'and Allāh'[23] and in Safaitic, C 4430: *h lh ḫlṣ* 'O Allāh, deliver (him)'. Greek transcription assures us that the vocalization of *lh* was /allāh/ in Safaitic: WHGreek 2 Ουαβαλλας = WH 1849 *whblh* /wahballāh/.[24]

rḥmn: Like *lh*, this term was likely preceded by the *al*-article, with assimilation of the coda and elision of the onset. Both practices are found in the Rbbl bn Hfʿm inscription - *ʿdky tmṭr ʾ-s¹my dm w-l-ʾrḍ s²ʿr* 'so long as the sky produces rain and the earth herbage'.[25] The epithet *rḥmn* /raḥmān/ is the general term for the monotheistic deity in the South Arabian inscriptions, derived from Jewish Aramaic *raḥmānā*.[26] It is attested as a divine epithet in

[18] The significance of its two components, ***allāh*** and *ar-raḥmān*, will be discussed in the third section of this essay.
[19] See for example the introductory invocations in the inscriptions of Abraha, Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta", pp. 153-154.
[20] Beeston et. al. *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 126; and in invocations, *brk w-tbrk sm rḥmnn* 'May the name of Rḥmnn bless and be blessed'.
[21] Ist 7608 bis RES 3904, see http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=30&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=193288769&recId=2410&mark=02410%2C016%2C006; see also Robin, Abraha, Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta", pp. 153-154.
[22] CIH 543, Robin, "Himyar et Israël," pp. 844-845; see http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=30&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=43636336&recId=2384&mark=02384%2C001%2C003.
[23] Beeston, "Nemara and Faw," p. 1: *ʾʿḏ-h b-khl w-lh w-ʿtr ʾ- s²rq* 'and he placed it (i.e. the grave) under the protection of Kahl, Allāh, and ʿAttar of the east'.
[24] C = Ryckmans, *Corpus*; WH = Winnett and Harding, *Safaitic Cairns*.
[25] Beeston, "Nemara and Faw" p. 1.
[26] Stein, "Ḥimyar und der Eine Gott", p. 558.

the pagan period, *ʾlh* | *rḥmn* | *zy* | *tṣlwth* | *ṭbh* ‘merciful god whose prayer is beneficial’.[27] The divine epithet is also found at Palmyra. In South Arabia, the divine name *rḥmnn* /raḥmān-ān/ ‘the Raḥmān’ refers to the deity of the monotheistic period, which was heavily influenced by, or even derived from, Judaism and, thus, is likely a loan translation of *rḥmnʾ*. While the name *rḥmn* is not attested in a pagan Arabic context, the Safaitic inscriptions attest a deity called simply *rḥm* /raḥīm/.[28]

Invocation 1

Rather than viewing the first word of this section as the Sabaic rendition of *al-raḥīm*, I believe we are dealing with an imperative verb *irḥam* with a 1st common plural pronominal suffix, *nā*. This imperative will set the style of the following two invocations, which will also begin with an imperative and 1st person plural object pronoun. The subject of this imperative is *rabb as-samāwāt* ‘lord of the heavens’. The invocation recalls Psalm 123:3

חָנֵּנוּ יְהוָה חָנֵּנוּ

Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy

The use of the root *rḥm* to render Hebrew *ḥnn* is attested in the Pshitta: ܪܚܡ ܥܠܝܢ ܡܪܝܐ ܪܚܡ ܥܠܝܢ.[29] This exact form occurs in Quran 2:286 and 7:115, *irḥam-nā*, although the syntax of the subject differs.

Philological commentary

rḥm-n: The root *rḥm* is previously attested in Sabaic as *rḥm* and *trḥm.*[30] The T-stem is also attested in Hismaic as *trḥm*.[31] The spelling of the imperative without any representation of the vocalic onset matches the orthography of the article in the previous line. Imperatives in Safaitic likewise lack any representation of the initial vowel, if it was there to begin with.[32]

rb s¹mwt*:* As discussed in the *ed. pro.*, the divine epithet ‘lord of the heavens’ is well attested in the South Arabian inscriptions of the monotheistic period, *mrʾ smyn w-ʾrḍn* ‘lord of the heavens and the earth’.[33] This exact phrasing appears in the Quran, where Arabic *rabb* equals Sabaic *mrʾ*: *rabbu s-samāwāti wa-l-ʾarḍi* (Quran 19:65)*.* The rendition of *mrʾ* / *mry* as *rabb* in Arabic is paralleled in another divine epithet: *mry ʿlmʾ* ‘lord of

[27] Fakh. 5 = Abou Assaf et al. *Fekherye*.
[28] For example, *h rḥm ʿqbt* ‘O Raḥīm, grant retribution’, Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Safaitic Dictionary*, pp. 54; 117.
[29] I thank Prof. Luke Yarborough for drawing my attention to this similarity.
[30] Beeston et al. *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 116.
[31] Al-Jallad, *Hismaic*.
[32] Al-Jallad, *Outline*, p. 117.
[33] For example, Ḥasī 1, l. 11-12; see Robin, “Himyar et Israël”, p. 885.

eternity' (JSNab 17; UJadhNab 538),[34] which is given in Arabic as *rabbu l-ʿālamīna*. The term *rb* as lord is also attested in Sabaic, in the phrase *rb yhd* 'lord of the Jews' and *rb hwd* 'idem'.[35]

A deity known simply by *smyʾ* is attested in two Nabataean inscriptions, and the Arabic equivalent *ʾl-smʾ* is found in two personal names from Darb al-Bakrah, NW Arabia.[36] It is possible that *smyʾ / smʾ* is an abbreviated form of an epithet like *rabbu l-samāʾ* 'lord of heaven'. A similar divine title is attested in Ancient South Arabian, *ḏ-s¹mwy*, the patron god of the tribe of *ʾmr*.[37] While the deity is attested in a polytheistic context, the name appears to survive into the monotheistic period, perhaps suggesting that it was reappropriated as an epithet of the monotheistic deity or even the name of the deity itself, similar to the name *allāh*.[38]

Invocation 2

Following the structure of the first invocation, *rzqn* should not be taken as a noun but rather as imperative with the 1st common plural suffix pronoun. The invocation is found verbatim in a saying attributed to Mohammed in the Muṣannaf of Abī Šaybah: 29888 *allāhumma rzuq-nā min faḍlika* 'O Allāh, satisfy us by means of your favor'. I would draw attention to a similar phrase in Psalm 90:14, which becomes especially relevant as we move on to the discussion of *Invocation 3* below.

שַׂבְּעֵנוּ בַבֹּקֶר חַסְדֶּךָ

Satisfy us in the morning with your benevolence

It is possible to regard *rzq-n* as a rendition of *śabʿēnû* 'satisfy us', where both have to do with sustenance - *rzq* can refer to one's daily bread, sustenance, while *śbʿ* covers sustenance/nourishment/being sated. Both are used in a similar metaphorical way to refer to God bestowing his grace upon the faithful. Like *rzq* and *śbʿ*, a connection between Arabic *faḍl-* and Hebrew *ḥɛsɛd* is also likely. In Classical Arabic, *faḍlun* can signify an 'act

[34] For a discussion on this divine name, see Nehmé, *Darb al-Bakrah*, p. 91; Robin, "The Arabian Frontier", p. 58 on its identification as the 'God of the Jews'.
[35] C 453; see Gajda, "Remarks", p. 253 on its interpretation and on the possible difference between *rḥmnn* and the 'God of the Jews'.
[36] Nehmé, *Darb al-Bakrah*, p. 77.
[37] See Stein, "Ḏū-Samāwī" on this question.
[38] The deity *ḏ- s¹mwy* is marginally attested in the monotheistic period on day-to-day documents in personal names. Stein, "Ḏū-Samāwī", has taken this as evidence for the marginal survival of the pagan cults into the monotheistic period. While possible, a number of other interpretive possibilities are available. Personal names with pagan elements are found in Christian contexts, suggesting a disconnect between the literal meaning of a name and the confession of its bearer. Former pagan deities can be reconfigured as angelic figures or minor supernatural beings within a monotheistic framework; see the important ideas of P. Crone, "Qur'ānic Pagans". As for the re-appropriation of a former pagan divine name, we can compare the situation to the history of the term *allāh,* Nabataean *ʾlh*. While Allāh first appears in a pagan Nabataean context, and occasionally in the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, see Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Safaitic Dictionary,* p. 43, it becomes the name of the monotheistic deity by the 6th c. CE in West Arabia.

of bounty or grace; a favor; a benefit',[39] but also more literally 'a preference for a thing' or 'to favor s.o./sm.th.'. Likewise, Hebrew *ḥɛsɛd* signifies 'benevolence' and 'favor'.[40] I therefore suggest that the present invocation is based on Psalm 90:14, only missing a rendition of *ba-bōqer* 'in the morning'.

Philological Commentary

***rzq-n**:* The root has not yet appeared in the epigraphic record. It is allegedly attested in a Safaitic theophoric name known only from a handcopy, *rzqʾl*, but this reading is difficult to maintain based on the copy.[41]

***m-fḍl-k**:* The spelling of this phrase suggests the assimilation of the *n* to the following noun. N-assimilation is common in Old Arabic and in the local dialects of Southwest Arabia, as well as in Middle and Late Sabaic.[42] The root *fḍl* likewise seems to be an Arabic lexical isogloss. It is found in a personal name in Safaitic *fḍlt*[43] and as a verb in a single Safaitic inscription: CSNS 190: *l wqf bn frq bn slm w fḍ{l} ḥb{b} f ḥbb* 'by Wqf son of Frq son of Slm and he bestowed favor (or: may favor be bestowed) upon loved one after loved one'.[44]

Invocation 3

I would also suggest interpreting this line in light of Psalm 90, specifically line 12:

לִמְנוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנָבִא לְבַב חָכְמָה.
So teach us to number our days, that we may obtain a heart of wisdom

The first component does not necessarily translate any part of this verse literally - it simply asks the deity 'to grant us' *ʾṯr-n* - again an imperative maintaining the structural balance of the composition - 'the essence of it' *mḫ-h*, linking back to *fḍl-k* 'your benevolence'. What is implied here, in light of Ps. 90:12, could be wisdom. The final two words are an independent clause, in apposition with *mḫ-h*. If we take *mḫ-h* as referring to wisdom, then the final component completes the sense of this verse: *s²kmt ʾym-n* 'to count our days'. As I have explained above, *ʾymn* is not a likely spelling of /ʾīmān/ 'faith'. Rather, I would

[39] Lane, *Lexicon*, 2412b.
[40] Gesenius, *Lexicon*, 294a.
[41] WH 140.
[42] For the local Arabic dialects, see Watson, "Dialects and South Arabian" p. 317; for North Arabian, see Macdonald, "ANA", 501-502, and Stien, "Dialektgeographie" on the attestation of this feature in South Arabian.
[43] SSWS 30.
[44] This is my reading and interpretation; the *ed. pro.* suggests: *l wqf bn frq bn s¹lm w fḍl ḥrs¹ f ḥbb* 'By Wqf son of Frq son of S¹lm and he kept excellent watch; and he was in love'. This translation is based on a faulty reading of the pre-penultimate word, which is clearly *ḥbb* and not *ḥrs* as suggested, and moreover, ignores the fact that *ḥbb f ḥbb* 'loved one after loved one' is an established phrase.

connect *ʾym-n* with the Hebrew *yāmênû* ‘our days’, and therefore *śkmt* with *limnôt* ‘to count’.

Philological commentary

ʾṯr-n: This word is subject to two interpretations which produce very similar meanings.[45] The first is a derivation from the root *ʾṯr*, equivalent to Arabic *ʾāṯir-* ‘grant’, a C-stem. This root is well attested in the epigraphy of Ancient Arabia. In Sabaic, it has the sense of ‘after’, used mostly as a preposition, *ʾṯrn* and *b-ʾṯry*.[46] In Safaitic, the term refers to traces of the lost, either writings or campsites.[47] But in an unattested Safaitic text, the expression *b-ʾṯr*, similar to the Sabaic preposition, is attested. One may also compare this with Aramaic *bāṯar* ‘after’. The second option is to take it as C-stem of the root *ṯrw* meaning ‘to enrich’, ‘to make wealthy’, /ʾaṯri/.

mḫ-h: I follow the *ed. pro.*’s identification of this word as *muḫḫ-* ‘brain’ and the 3rd masculine singular pronoun *-h.* The word must be understood metaphorically as ‘choice or best part’ of a thing, a meaning already attested in Classical Arabic: *hāʾūlāʾi muḫḫu l-qawmi* ‘these are the best of the people’; *ad-duʿāʾu muḫḫu l-ʿibādati* ‘supplication is the best of worship’.[48]

s²kmt*:* I would take this as a verbal noun ‘to count’, cognate with Syriac *skm* ‘to number’, ‘count’ – the correspondence between Arabic *s²* and Syriac *s* is regular. The *ed. pro.* appealed to the Arabic cognate *škm, šakīmat-* ‘a gift’.[49] This interpretation remains possible and would suggest the translation ‘the gift of our days (i.e. our life)’ of this final portion of the verse.

ʾym-n: This spelling of the plural of *yawm* is found in Safaitic *ʾym* and corresponds to the Classical Arabic form*, ʾayyāmun*. The Sabaic form is *ʾywm* = ʾaywām,[50] which is attested in Safaitic once, in a poetic text as *ʾwm* /ʾaywām/. If one wishes to maintain the translation of ‘faith’, one must appeal to perhaps the reflex *ʾaymān*, perhaps a sporadic development from Aramaic *haymānūṯā* ‘faith’. This word, however, was borrowed into Arabic as *haymanatun*, which makes such an interpretation less likely.

[45] The *ed. pro.* takes it as a Sabaic infinitive of the root *ʾṯr*, Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, “Jebel Ḏubūb,” p. 24.
[46] Beeston et al. *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 9.
[47] Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Safaitic Dictionary*, p. 49.
[48] Lane, *Lexicon*, 2639.
[49] Al-Hajj and Faqʿas, “Jebel Ḏubūb,” p. 25; they also point out that *s²km* is previously attested in Minaic and Qatabanic but seems to be unrelated to the present attestation.
[50] Beeston et al, *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 169; alternative plurals are *ymt* and *ywmn*.

1.4 Remarks on language and dating

The linguistic identity of this text is difficult to determine. It is clearly not written in late Sabaic; indeed, unlike the Haramic inscriptions, there is no trace of Sabaic or South Arabian influence. The pronominal suffix *-h* speaks to the non-Sabaic character of this inscription as well – in Late Sabaic the suffix is consistently written *-hw*, likely /hū/. Several lexical isoglosses connect it with Arabic and if we are correct in interpreting the zero-marked article on *rḥmn* and *s¹mwt*, then it would seem to be written in a register with a prefixing nasal article or assimilating *al*-article.[51] One could plausibly suggest that this inscription is carved in an Old Arabic dialect, distinct from the language of the Quran, and perhaps an antecedent of the local Arabic dialects of the region. Alternatively, it may reflect the so-called Ḥimyarite vernacular, distinct from the written Sabaic of the Ḥimyarite period. If this is the case, then it is significant to note the absence of the *am-* and non-assimilating *an*-articles traditionally attributed to that variety. The two lines of text, and the lack of any comparable examples from this period, prevent us from giving a positive identification of its idiom. Indeed, the invocation beginning with *lh* suggests an North Arabian orientation; see section II below.

The script combined with its language supports a date towards the very end of South Arabian documentation. Its contents, rather distinct from the standardized Arabic phraseology of the Islamic period, speak to a late pre-Islamic or perhaps even a paleo-Islamic dating, that is late 6th or early 7th c. CE.[52] At the same time, these irregularities speak against a mid- or late 7th c. CE date as the text deviates from the heavily standardize pietistic language of this period.

1.5 Genre and confessional background

The contents, as suggested above, most likely reflect a local monotheistic tradition rather than strictly Jewish or Christian background. The invocations are clearly inspired by the Psalter but have been reworked and paraphrased in the local vernacular. The invocational style is reminiscent of Islamic-period *duʿāʾ* literature, as found in the Hadith material quoted above, and may be an antecedent of it.

1.6 Notes on context

The text is incised vertically on the rock face adjacent to a small cave by what seems to have been a sharp metal object. The vertical direction is to be explained by its context – the author would have had to lean too far out to carve horizontally, risking a fall. What brought the author up to this isolated place is open to speculation. Ritual social isolation is a well-attested practice in the ancient Near East. The traditional biography of Mohammed holds that he habitually retreated to a cave in a local mountain near Mecca,

[51] See Al-Jallad, "*am*-article" and the bibliography there.
[52] Compare with Islamic period phraseology outline in Hoyland, "New documentary texts".

where according to the narrative his encounters with the supernatural began.[53] The similarity in location with the present inscription is hard to overlook - it is possible that its author had come to this isolated place to commune with the divine. During one of these meditative sessions, perhaps possessed by religious experience, s/he carved this short prayer into stone.

Part II: Reflections on the *Basmalah*

The earliest attestation of the tripartate Arabic *basmala* occurs in the Quran, where it takes the form *bismi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm*. Traditional exegetes understand the final two components as adjectives explaining the merciful qualities of the deity.[54] Jomier, however, problematizes the understanding of *ar-raḥmān* as an adjectival divine epithet in the Quran.[55] Through a close study of the text, he suggests that al-Raḥmān remained a proper name. Indeed, this was the name of the deity of Maslamah, the Yamamite prophet and rival of Mohammed.[56] This understanding is supported by the broader Arabian context, where *raḥmānān* – which is rendered *ar-raḥmān* in Arabic – was the name of the monotheistic deity of ancient Ḥimyar. With this in mind, we may ask what light the bipartate *basmalah* attested here may shed on the background and original sense of the invocation.

Putting aside later Islamic-period traditions and approaching the present text from what came before it, the invocation of *lh* and *rḥmn* together seems to have had another significance. “The Raḥmān” was much more than an epithet – it was the proper name of Ḥimyar’s deity, and was not used in North Arabia. Gajda brings into relief this distinction, even in the monotheistic period, in her discussion of CIH 543:

> *[b]rk w-tbrk s¹m Rḥmnn ḏ-b-s¹myn w-Ys³rʾl w-ʾlh-hmw Rb-Yhd ḏ-hrdʾ ʿbd-hmw S²hrm w-ʾm-hw Bdm w-hs²kt-hw S²ms¹m w-ʾwld-hmy. . . .*
>
> ‘Blessed and praised be the name of Raḥmānān who is in Heaven and Israel (Yisrāʾīl) and their God, Lord of Jews (Rb-Yhd) who helped Shahrum, his mother Buddum, his wife Shamsum and their children. . . . ’

Here she suggests that *rḥmnn* the god of monotheistic Ḥimyar and *rb yhd* ‘God of the Jews’, another monotheistic tradition, were not regarded as identical. I think it is significant that both are mentioned but there might be another way of looking at this. Perhaps a

[53] For the most recent appraisal of the sources for Mohammad’s life, see Anthony, *Mohammad*. See Al-Jallad, *Hismaic*, for an example of ritualized social isolation in a Hismaic context.
[54] See Said-Reynolds, *Allah*, pp. 94–96.
[55] Jomier, “al-Raḥmān”.
[56] Jomier, “al-Raḥmān”, p.4.

distinction between the two was common among ordinary people and the present text seeks to affirm the fact that the Ḥimyarite god, the Raḥmān, and the God of Israel, Rabb-Yahūd, were identical. Certainly the atmosphere of overlapping monotheisms with different proper names for the one god would have caused confusion among the faithful. By explicitly placing both gods in apposition in this way, the text affirms the identical person of the monotheistic deity of both traditions.

By the sixth century CE, the pagan gods had completely disappeared from the inscriptions of North Arabia. Those in the Arabic script, spanning from Nagrān in the south to near Aleppo in the north attest only deity - الاله and more rarely لله or الله.[57] The name is found rendered into Sabaic as *ʾlh-n* /ʾilāh-ān/ 'the god' in Sabaic inscriptions from the area of Nagrān and further to the north, perhaps already reflecting a sensitivity to the local name of the monotheistic god.[58]

In contrast to South Arabia, the North Arabian monotheistic traditions of the 5th and 6th c. CE invoked *al-ʾilāh* / *allāh*. While *al-ʾilāh* is attested in clear Christian contexts, *allāh* is rarer and found in confessionally ambiguous contexts.[59] It is impossible at this moment to decide whether the distinction between the two was simply regional or whether it betokened a confessional split. What is clear, however, is that "Raḥmān" was not used in pre-Islamic times in North Arabia.

In this light, I would suggest that the *basmala* has a theological and political dimension. It seeks to synchronize the two main monotheistic poles of Arabia by equating North

[57] This spelling is found, for example, in the Christian Arabic inscriptions of Ḥimà; see Robin et al. "Ḥimà"; the Zebed inscription; the Christian Arabic inscription of Dūmat al-Jandal; see Nehmé, "Dumah"; and in the Yazīd inscription; see Shdeifat et al. "Yazīd". The spelling with two *lām*'s is attested in an unpublished inscription from the Higāz – known informally as the ʿAbd-Shams inscription by its author's name, in the invocation *bismika llāhumma*, which is known from traditional Islamic sources as well as an alternative opening formula used by the Quraish; see Nöldeke, "the Basmala". The spelling *ylh* is attested once in an unpublished pre-Islamic Arabic-script inscription from the Tabūk area in the phrase: *lʾ ʾwṣkm b-br ylh* 'I indeed urge you to obey God'. The spelling likely reflects the phonetic writing of the pronunciation *bi-birri illāh*, where the hiatus between both *i* vowels was rendered with *y*. The text is monotheistic but it is impossible to say more. On the etymological relationship between *al-ʾilāh* and *allāh*, see Testen, "Definiteness".

[58] Robin notes a similar phenomenon with the wording of the trinity; in the earliest periods, Ḥimyar's religion reflected Aksūmite Christian dogma, later inscriptions appear to show a compromise, using neutral terms for Christ such as 'Messiah' rather than 'son'; Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta", p. 154.

[59] The ʿAbd-Shams inscription for example reads: بسمك اللهم انا عبد شمس بر المغيره يستغفر ربه 'In your name, O Allāh, I am ʿAbd-Šams son of Al-Muġīrah, (who) seeks the forgiveness of his lord'. It would be wrong to conclude from the name ʿAbd-Shams that the author was a pagan – Christian tradition permitted the use of names with pagan elements. Indeed, it was Islam that so strongly resisted this and engaged in a reform of the onomasticon. It is possible that our ʿAbd-Shams was a Christian or perhaps a Christian or Jewish-inspired Arabian monotheist. The phraseology and invocation strongly suggests a monotheistic background as this type of wording and formulae are not found in pagan texts. On the vocative form *allāhumma* and its attestation in pre-Islamic times, see Al-Jallad, *Hismaic*.

Arabian *Allāh* with South Arabian *Raḥmān*. The regional and perhaps confessional difference between the two is echoed in the Quran:

Qur'an 17:110

قُلِ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوِ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَٰنَ ۖ أَيًّا مَّا تَدْعُوا فَلَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ

'And say: call upon Allāh or call upon the Raḥmān; whichever you call upon, for him are the best names'

Qur'an 25:60

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اسْجُدُوا لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ قَالُوا وَمَا الرَّحْمَٰنُ أَنَسْجُدُ لِمَا تَأْمُرُنَا وَزَادَهُمْ نُفُورًا

'and when it was said to them: 'bow to the Raḥmān' they replied: and what "the Raḥmān"? should we bow (simply) because you tell us to? And it only increased them in aversion'

The interaction between North and South Arabians was no doubt intensified by the Ḥimyarite Empire's expansion into Arabia Deserta, and would have reached a climax following Abraha's excursions as far north as Tabūk in the 6th c. CE.[60] These would have brought both groups under a single political umbrella and would have led to new dynamics between different regional confessional groups. It is possible that the bipartite *basmala* traces its origins back to this period, and originally functioned as an expression of confessional unity among North and South Arabian monotheists, declaring: *In the name of Allāh,* (who is) *the Raḥmān.* This synchronization perhaps echoes our reading of CIH 543 above. The political motivations for this are unclear and open to speculation. I would cautiously suggest two hypotheses:

1) In the mid-sixth century, between the years of 535 and 555 CE, South Arabia was ruled by a vicegerent of Aksūm, Abraha. He expanded the political borders of ancient Ḥimyar considerably, with military excursions reaching far into North Arabia. While in the earliest periods, Ḥimyar's religion reflected Aksūmite Christian dogma, later inscriptions appear to show a compromise, using neutral terms for Christ such as 'Messiah' rather than 'son'.[61] Perhaps reflecting a similar spirit, the *basmala* emerged as a compromise –

[60] Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta".
[61] Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta", p. 154.

both south and north Arabian terms are treated as equals, and would have been regarded as acceptable in the cosmopolitan landscape created by Abraha's expansions.

2) The *basmala* may reflect the aspirations of Arabian rebels against Aksūmite or perhaps later Persian rule. Abraha's conquests made the West and South Arabians opposing him *de facto* allies, as did the Persian occupation that replaced him. The *basmala* may be an echo of such an alliance – a translation of political unity into confessional terms. Allāh, the monotheistic god of Arabic-speaking West Arabians and Raḥmān of the South Arabians were equated, and so too were both groups opposing foreign occupation.

The Islamic innovation is therefore the addition of the epithet *raḥīm* 'merciful' to the innovation, producing, *In the name of Allāh,* (who is) *the Raḥmān*, *the merciful*. The adjective *raḥīm* therefore applies to both divine names, which are in apposition. [62] The addition of the third element may have been motivated by, and perhaps even regarded as a respond to, Christian invocations of the trinity. Such invocations would have been widely known as they are displayed on public royal inscriptions. The tripartate form may have been a response to South Arabian: *bs¹m Rḥmnn w-bn-hw krs³ts³ ġlbn w-mnfs qds* 'In the name of the Raḥmān, his son Christ, the victorious, and the Holy Ghost' or *b-ḫyl w-rdʾ w-rḥmt Rḥmnn w-Ms¹ḥ-hw w-Rḥ qds¹* 'by the power, aid, and mercy of the Raḥmān, his Messiah, and the Holy Ghost'. Over time, this cultural context was forgotten and "the Raḥmān" was reinterpreted as an adjective, giving rise to the common Islamic-period interpretation of the invocation.

[62] Already Jomier, "al-Raḥmān", p. 200.

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