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Religious Ideology in the Gəʿəz Epigraphic Corpus from Yemen

In memoriam Getatchew Haile (1932–2021)

Abstract

In the aftermath of their invasion of the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar in 525 CE, the Aksumites of Ethiopia erected a series of inscriptions in Gəʿəz documenting the invasion. Although these inscriptions survive in very fragmentary condition, enough is preserved to indicate that the Aksumites presented their victorious campaign in religious terms, often quoting passages from the Bible. This manner of presentation provides insight into how the Aksumites conceived of themselves and their military venture in Ḥimyar, an undertaking that, while motivated by strategic concerns, had strong religious overtones in that it pitted Christian Aksumites against Ḥimyarite Jews. At the same time, the Aksumites took pains to emphasize their Ethiopian identity in this corpus of inscriptions, as evidenced by the fact that the inscriptions in question were composed in Gəʿəz, the Ethiosemitic lingua franca of Aksum, rather than in the local Sabaic language. That these inscriptions may have been erected as parts of symbolic stone thrones, as were similar Aksumite inscriptions erected elsewhere, would also have served to emphasize the Ethiopian identity of Ḥimyar's conquerors. Thus, to the extent that the Aksumites identified with the Israelites, they saw themselves as an Israel in a Christian, Ethiopian guise.

Keywords: Aksum, Ḥimyar, Gəʿəz, Scripture, Christianity, Israel



Introduction

In most studies of imperialism, Africa is allotted a place at the receiving end. It is true that large-scale states that can justifiably be called empires did arise in different parts of the African continent in pre-colonial times. However, with a single exception, all Africa-based empires that annexed territory outside Africa were located in the far north of the continent (e.g. Egypt) and most of these (e.g. Carthage and various Muslim polities in medieval North Africa) were founded by non-Africans. The exception in question is Aksum, a powerful kingdom that emerged at the end of the first millennium BCE in what is now the Təgrāy province of northern Ethiopia and that intervened in South Arabia on several occasions during Late Antiquity, making it the only sub-Saharan polity that ever expanded into regions outside Africa. Aksum was also a literate society, whose rulers employed Gəʿəz, the kingdom's Ethiosemitic lingua franca, in their inscriptions, at times alongside Greek. Thanks to these written sources, it is possible to follow the history of Aksumite activities in South Arabia as the Aksumites themselves wished it to be known. This article¹ will examine one aspect of Aksumite imperialism in South Arabia, namely the religious ideology that informed the manner in which the Aksumites sought to present their wars in South Arabia, using the medium of inscriptions, during the first quarter of the sixth century CE.² To that end, it will examine three of the most relevant inscriptions from the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen, focusing on the religious references in these inscriptions, including quotations from Scripture. This will be followed by a discussion of the specifically Aksumite context of the corpus, concentrating on the symbolic stone thrones on which inscriptions were typically erected. When necessary, other Aksumite inscriptions, as well as Ancient South Arabian inscriptions will be brought to bear on the topics discussed, as will such sixth-century texts as the anonymous Syriac *Book of the Himyarites*; another anonymous work, the Greek *Martyrium Arethae*; and the *History of the Wars* by Procopius of Caesarea.³

With respect to the title of this article, ideology will be understood, following the lead of Joseph S. Roucek, as “a system of ideas elaborated in the light of certain conceptions of what “ought to be” [that] designates a theory of social life which approaches the facts from the point of view of an ideal, and interprets them, consciously or unconsciously, to prove the correctness of its analysis and to justify that idea.”⁴ As such, ideologies are, to quote Teun A. van Dijk, “a special kind of social belief system, stored in long-term memory.”⁵ The social aspect of ideologies is key here, as “[t]here are no personal or

¹ The author wishes to thank Aaron Butts, Jason Weimar, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for reading and commenting on the draft of this article. Any remaining shortcomings are the author's.

² Henceforth, all dates belong to the Common Era (CE), unless otherwise noted.

³ Except where otherwise noted, all translations of Semitic-language texts in this article are the author's.

⁴ Joseph S. Roucek, ‘A History of the Concept of Ideology,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5/4 (1944), p. 479.

⁵ Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Politics, Ideology, and Discourse,’ in: *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. Keith Brown, Vol. 9, Oxford and New York 2006, p. 729.

individual ideologies, only personal or individual uses of ideologies”.⁶ It is also essential that the idea-elements that constitute an ideology be bound together, such that they “belong to one another in a non-random fashion.”⁷ In colloquial parlance, the term “ideology” has acquired rather negative connotations, suggesting a belief system that is bad or unreasoned: something to be imputed to the misguided “others” and contrasted with the in-group’s notion of “truth.”⁸ Ideology has also frequently been viewed, most notably from a Marxist perspective, as a strategy used by political elites to influence behavior and disguise socio-economic realities with the aim of maintaining a structure of exploitation and domination.⁹ It must be stressed that the author makes no such polemical judgment of ideology in this article but rather adopts the view expressed by Beate Pongratz-Leisten who, writing of the ancient Near East, states that “[i]deology was a central element of the cultural discourse, and it also functioned as an effective source of power (rather than solely as a source of authority) along with economic, political, and military sources.”¹⁰ This understanding of ideology applies with equal force to the Late Antique world, of which both Ethiopia and South Arabia were an integral part. As for religion, this category of human behavior is rather more difficult to define, for all our confidence in our ability to recognize it when we see it. To date, no single definition of “religion” has been established to the satisfaction of all scholars, a fact that leads Talal Asad to claim, boldly but justifiably, that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”¹¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff goes further, suggesting that the very word “religion” be retired, at least in academic studies.¹² Compounding the problem is the tendency among many scholars to view religion as but one cultural system among others, as opposed to a “meta-discourse encompassing, structuring, and permeating all others, ideology included,”¹³ an idea to which we shall return below. With these points in mind, religion shall for the purposes of this article be understood as a discourse informed primarily by Christian, and more broadly Biblical, symbols that permeated the worldview and daily lives of Aksumite

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ John Gerring, ‘Ideology: A Definitional Analysis,’ *Political Research Quarterly* 50/4 (1997), p. 980.

⁸ Roucek, ‘History of the Concept,’ pp. 479, 482; Rhys H. Williams, ‘Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35/4 (1996), p. 371; van Dijk, ‘Politics, Ideology, and Discourse,’ p. 728.

⁹ For criticisms of this view, see Talal Asad, ‘Anthropology and the Analysis of Ideology,’ *Man* 14/4 (1979), pp. 621–622 and Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records, Vol. 6, Boston and Berlin 2015, pp. 23–24.

¹⁰ Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology*, pp. 24–25.

¹¹ Talal Asad, ‘The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,’ in: *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, Oxford 2002, p. 116.

¹² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘Imagining the future study of religion and spirituality,’ *Religion* 50/1 (2020), p. 79.

¹³ Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology*, p. 23.

Ethiopians during Late Antiquity.¹⁴ For our purposes, symbols are best understood, following Asad, as “a set of relationships between objects and events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance.”¹⁵ The same discourse took for granted the idea that God intervened directly in human affairs and, in that capacity, aided the Aksumite king on the battlefield. This discourse found expression in various media, not least the Gə‘əz inscriptions erected by the Aksumites in South Arabia. While it is true that what is generally understood as religion extends well beyond discursive formations to encompass experience and practice,¹⁶ these particular aspects of Aksumite tradition can be accessed only indirectly through tangible remains like inscriptions. The religious references in the Gə‘əz inscriptions from Yemen can be viewed as ideological in that they provide an insight not into the manner in which Aksumite religion was practiced, but rather the manner in which the Aksumites’ worldview, as informed by religion, located them socially vis-à-vis other groups, such as South Arabian Jews. In addition, and to quote Pongratz-Leisten once more, “ideology – as it materializes in state ceremonies, ritual, monuments, architecture, iconography, and all kinds of textual categories such as treaties, royal inscriptions, chronicles, and myths – strives [...] to respond to and negotiate the religious *weltanschauung*.”¹⁷ As we shall see, the Gə‘əz epigraphic corpus from Yemen provides an illuminating case study of this phenomenon.

Historical Background

Before proceeding to the relevant inscriptions, a few words about the history of Aksumite activities in South Arabia are in order. The Aksumites first appear in South Arabia’s written record ca. 160–190 in Robin-Umm Laylā 1, a Sabaic inscription that states that tribes in the northern Yemeni highlands had to take defensive measures against a group of Ethiopians (*hbs*²¹).¹⁸ During the third century, the Aksumites intervened militarily on several occasions in South Arabia. In the process, they established outposts in the

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that the population of Aksumite Ethiopia was uniformly Christian during the sixth century. Rather, it is those elements within this population that self-identified as Christian that concern us here. As for the interpretation of symbols and their function in society, this is a topic over which a great deal of ink has been spilled. For a useful summary of anthropological treatments of symbols, see Janet Hoskins, ‘Symbolism in Anthropology,’ in: *Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 860–865.

¹⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore 1993, p. 31.

¹⁶ Hanegraaff, ‘Imagining the future study,’ pp. 76–78.

¹⁷ Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology*, p. 25.

¹⁸ Christian Julien Robin, ‘Saba’ et la Khawlān du Nord (Khawlān Gudādān): l’organisation et la gestion des conquêtes par les royaumes d’Arabie méridionale,’ in: *Arabian and Islamic Studies: A collection of papers in honour of Mikhail Borishovich Piotrovskij on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, ed. Alexandr Vsevolodovi Sedov, Moscow 2014, pp. 164–167.

Tihāma and briefly occupied Nağrān, only to be expelled by King Yāsir^{um} Yuhan'im I (r. ca. 265–287) of Ḥimyar.¹⁹ Apart from a diplomatic exchange with Ḥimyar in the reign of its king Karib'il Watar Yuhan'im (r. ca. 312–316)²⁰ and an oblique reference to a failed Aksumite attack on the Ḥimyarite capital of Zafār ca. 330,²¹ nothing further is heard of the Aksumites in South Arabia for another two centuries. In the interim, Aksum experienced many new developments. The most significant of these was the conversion to Christianity of the Aksumite king 'Ēzānā (ca. 330–370), who established his new faith as the state religion of Aksum²² and, in so doing, set Ethiopia on a course that would define its identity as a predominantly Christian nation down to the present. Following in the footsteps of his elder brother and predecessor Ousanas (r. ca. 310–330),²³ 'Ēzānā invaded Nubia in 360 in an effort to curb the power of the Noba people who had been threatening Aksum's western frontier and to make a show of force against the Kushites of Nubia.²⁴ Although the Aksumite attack on Zafār does not appear to have led to any territorial gains in South Arabia, the mere fact that such an invasion was undertaken, coupled with the memory of Aksumite occupation in South Arabia in the third century, gave rise to the fiction of continued Aksumite rule in that region, a fiction advertised by Ousanas and 'Ēzānā in their respective royal titles. In these titles, both rulers styled themselves kings of South Arabia, laying claim to Ḥimyar and the now defunct, though still historically significant, kingdom of Saba' (Biblical Sheba).²⁵ While Ousanas and 'Ēzānā also claim rulership over various peoples inhabiting Northeast Africa, the fact that the names of Ḥimyar and Saba' are generally placed immediately after that of Aksum itself

¹⁹ On the earliest phase of Aksumite occupation in South Arabia, see Christian Julien Robin, 'La première intervention abyssine en Arabie méridionale (de 200 à 270 de l'ère chrétienne environ),' in: *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 2, ed. Taddese Beyene, Addis Ababa and Frankfurt am Main 1989, pp. 147–162.

²⁰ This exchange is documented in Ir 28 from Mārib (Muṭahhar bin 'Alī al-Iryānī, *Fī-tārīḫ al-Yaman: Nuqūṣ musnadiyya wa-ta'līqāt*, Ṣan'a' 1990, pp. 183–186).

²¹ The reference in question is found in Gr 27, a Sabaic inscription reused in a modern structure at Bayt al-Ašwāl but probably originating from Zafār (Christian Julien Robin, 'L'inscription Ir 40 de Bayt Ḍab'ān et la tribu Ḍmry. Appendice: Les inscriptions Gl 1192, Gl 1197 et Gr 27,' in: *Ṣayhadica: Recherches sur les inscriptions de l'Arabie préislamique offertes par ses collègues au professeur A.F. L. Beeston*, eds. Christian Robin and Muḥammad Bāfaḳīh, Paris 1987, pp. 151–152). Although the inscription is fragmentary in places, it appears that its dedicants restored a structure "after the Ethiopians burned it" (*bšdn ḡt dhr-hw ṫhbs²ⁿ*). On paleographic grounds, Gr 27 can be assigned to the period in which the first monotheistic inscriptions in Sabaic appear (Ibidem, p. 151), in which case a date of ca. 330 is likely.

²² Maxime Rodinson, 'La conversion de l'Éthiopie,' *Raydān* 7 (2001), pp. 225–262. It should be noted, of course, that the Christianization of Ethiopian society at large was a long, slow process. Even at the core of the Aksumite state, archaeological evidence indicates that Christianity did not gain widespread adherence until the late fifth and early sixth centuries, when the Cross began to appear with greater regularity on pottery, as well as on tombstones (David W. Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC–AD 1300*, Woodbridge 2012, p. 97).

²³ George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa*, New York 2013, pp. 67–82.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 85–135.

²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 69–71, 75–76, 87, 101.

in these royal titles indicates the important symbolic status that South Arabia enjoyed in Aksumite royal ideology. The use of the South Arabian *musnad* script²⁶ – and even Sabaicizing lexical and morphological features – in several royal Aksumite inscriptions in Gə‘əz dating from the fourth and sixth centuries²⁷ similarly highlights this status. Equally telling is a fragmentary reference to “[... .. of the Aksu]mites and the Ḥimyarite[s]” ([... .. Ἀξω]μειτῶν καὶ Ὀμηρετῶ[ν]) in RIÉth 286,²⁸ a Greek inscription probably erected by Ousanas at Meroë in Sudanese Nubia. Since this phrase is undoubtedly a fragment of the Aksumite royal title, its inclusion in an inscription erected at Meroë indicates that rule over South Arabia in the fourth century was a political fiction that the Aksumites were keen on promoting outside of Ethiopia. Another important development during ʿĒzānā’s reign was script reform. Although a consonantal alphabet derived from the *musnad* script had been in use in Ethiopia for several centuries, this was refashioned during the fourth century as a syllabic system, known as *ḥidal*,²⁹ most likely based on the syllabic Brāhmī script of India.³⁰ Although some preliminary efforts to develop this system were made during the reign of Ousanas, these were limited to coins,³¹ and it is not until ʿĒzānā’s reign that we find the first examples of a fully developed syllabary. Even then, the full-fledged *ḥidal* syllabary is attested before ʿĒzānā’s conversion to Christianity, as it is already employed in inscriptions of his (RIÉth 187 and RIÉth 188) that invoke the pagan gods of Aksum.³² Thus, it is clear that, in contrast to other writing systems born of Late Antiquity, such as the Armenian and Georgian alphabets, *ḥidal* was not devised with the intention of providing a written

²⁶ The term is derived from the pan-Ancient South Arabian term for “inscription”: *msʿnd*, less commonly *msʿnd* (Middle and Late Sabaic) or *mṯnd* (Ḥadramitic).

²⁷ Alexander Sima, ‘Die „sabaäische“ Version von König ʿĒzānās Trilingue RIE 185 und RIE 185bis,’ *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003–2004), pp. 269–284; Abraham J. Drewes, *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite. Tome III – Traductions et commentaires. B. Les inscriptions sémitiques*, Wiesbaden 2019, pp. 260–261, 262, 264, 265.

²⁸ Etienne Bernand, ‘Les inscriptions de la période axoumite: B. Les inscriptions grecques,’ in: Etienne Bernand, Abraham J. Drewes, and Roger Schneider, *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite. Tome I: Les documents*, Paris 1991, p. 385.

²⁹ The term itself is etymologically obscure, though it may be derived from Gə‘əz *fadala* “trennen, absetzen” (Francis Breyer, *Schrift im antiken Afrika: Multiliteralismus und Schriftadaption in den antiken Kulturen Numidiens, Ägyptens, Nubiens und Abessiniens*, Berlin and Boston 2021, p. 271).

³⁰ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, p. 130 (n. 554). That the Aksumites were in contact with users of Brāhmī is evidenced by the discovery, during excavations at Adulis at the turn of the twentieth century, of a seal inscribed in the Brāhmī script (Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *India and Ethiopia from the Seventh Century B.C.*, Calcutta, 1968, pp. 52–53), as well as by the abundant Indian graffiti in Brāhmī from the grotto of Ḥōq on Soqotrā (Ingo Strauch (ed.), *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*, Bremen 2012, passim), at which several Gə‘əz graffiti of Aksumite date have also been found.

³¹ Wolfgang Hahn, ‘Die Vokalisierung axumitischer Münzaufschriften als Datierungselement,’ *Litterae Numismaticae Vindononensis* 3 (1987), pp. 217–224.

³² Abraham J. Drewes and Roger Schneider, ‘Les inscriptions de la période axoumite. A. Les inscriptions guèzes,’ in: Etienne Bernand, Abraham J. Drewes, and Roger Schneider, *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite. Tome I: Les documents*, Paris 1991, pp. 255–261.

medium for translating Scripture and various other Christian religious texts into the local language. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, once established, the script was inextricably linked to Ethiopia's Christian tradition. Apart from exceptions like two royal Aksumite inscriptions post-dating 'Ēzānā's reign that employ *musnad*³³ and a handful of short graffiti in consonantal Gə'əz from the grotto of Ḥōq on the island of Soqotrā, at least two of which appear to be of Christian origin,³⁴ virtually all Gə'əz texts from 'Ēzānā's reign onwards were written using the *fidal* syllabary. As we shall see, language and script were to be of great significance in the context of the sixth-century Aksumite inscriptions from South Arabia.

That the Aksumites revived their interventionist policy towards South Arabia in the sixth century is due in no small part to the ambitious character of their king Kālēb (r. ca. 510–540). The military exploits of this ruler in the Horn of Africa are recorded in RIÉth 191, a Gə'əz inscription from Aksum dating from the aftermath of the Aksumite invasion of South Arabia ca. 518, but one written in the *musnad* script and bestowing upon Kālēb the grandiose title of “King of Aksum and Ḥimyar and Dū-Raydān and Saba' and Salḥīn and Ṭōd^{um} and Yamanāt and Tihāma and Ḥaḍramawt and all of their Arabs, and of the Beḡa and the Noba and the Kushites and Šeyāmō and DRBT [...] of the land of ṚṬFY” (*ngs² ṛks¹m w-ḥmr w-z-rydn w-s¹bṛ w-s¹lḥn w-ṭd^m w-z-ymnt w-thmt w-ḥḍrmwt w-kl ḥrbm w-z-bg w-nb w-z-ks¹ w-šym w-z-drbt [...]t z-mdr Ṛṭfy*).³⁵ This title is based in part on the so-called Very Long Title borne by Ḥimyarite kings beginning in the reign of 'Abīkarīb 'As'ad (ca. 400–440): “King of Saba' and Dū-Raydān and Ḥaḍramawt and Yamanāt and the Arabs of Ṭawd^{um} and Tihāma” (*mlk s¹bṛ w-ḍ-rydn w-ḥḍrmwt w-ymnt w-Ṛḥrb ṭwd w-thmt*). In this title, Saba' denotes the South Arabian kingdom of that name that was conquered by Ḥimyar ca. 280, while Ḥimyar itself is referred to as Dū-Raydān after the name of the palace of Raydān at Zafār. Ḥimyar's more easterly territories, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamanāt – the latter probably denoting the southern possessions of Ḥaḍramawt – were first added to the Ḥimyarite royal title ca. 296 in the reign of Šammar Yuhar'iš (ca. 287–312), though the remaining outposts of Ḥaḍramā resistance were not fully integrated by Ḥimyar until the reign of Ḍamar'alī Yuhabirr (ca. 321–324).³⁶ As for Ṭawd^{um} and Tihāma, these toponyms denote the Naḡd plateau and the Red Sea littoral of Arabia north of Yemen respectively, both of which were brought under Ḥimyarite

³³ The inscriptions in question are those of Kālēb (RIÉth 191) and his son and successor Wā'zēb (RIÉth 192), both of which were erected at Aksum (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 271–278).

³⁴ Of the graffiti at Ḥōq, the identification of six as Aksumite is certain, while two other graffiti are probably Aksumite and three may be of either Aksumite or South Arabian origin (Christian Julien Robin, 'South Arabia, Ethiopia, and Socotra,' in: Strauch (ed.), *Foreign Sailors*, pp. 438–442). On the purportedly Christian graffiti, for which 'Ēzānā's conversion in the 340s provides a probable *terminus post quem*, see Robin in Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, pp. 54–57.

³⁵ RIÉth 191/8–11 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 272).

³⁶ Christian Julien Robin, 'Ḥimyar au IV^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne: Analyse des données chronologiques et essai de mise en ordre,' *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 10 (2005), pp. 136–145.

rule during the fifth century.³⁷ While the area of South Arabia affected by the Aksumite invasion in 518 seems to have been fairly limited, and can hardly have secured Aksumite rule as far as Nağd, for example, the fact that Kālēb reused this portion of the Ḥimyarite royal title implies that he saw himself as one in a long line of legitimate kings of South Arabia. Yet for all that, he was no less a king of Aksum who held sway over territories in Northeast Africa and, as such, he proclaims his rule over the Beḡa people inhabiting the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea to the north of the Ethiopian highlands,³⁸ the Noba and Kushites of the Middle Nile Valley,³⁹ and the Ṣayāmō, who may have dwelled to the west of the Takkazē, not far from the Sēmēn Mountains.⁴⁰ The identity of *DRBT* remains elusive, as this name is attested only in this single reference in RIÉth 191. Equally obscure is *?TFY*, which again is known only from the single reference in this inscription, and which may not actually have formed part of the title.⁴¹ From their positions in the list of vassals, however, both *DRBT* and *?TFY* would appear to have been based somewhere in the Ethiopian highlands.

As a Christian king ruling an Ethiopian populace that was converting in ever larger numbers to Christianity, Kālēb observed the affairs of South Arabia's Christian community with great interest, and when, ca. 518, reports reached him that his South Arabian coreligionists were being persecuted by Ḥimyarite Jews, he sent a punitive campaign against Ḥimyar that brought a Ḥimyarite Christian, Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur, to the throne.⁴² Supported by an Aksumite contingent stationed at Zafār, Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur ruled

³⁷ To be sure, the Red Sea coast of Yemen has long been known as the Tihāma, though in Sabaic inscriptions this region is as a rule called Sahrat^{ān} (*s'hrṯ*). On the process of Ḥimyarite expansion into interior regions of Arabia, which in fact began in the fourth century but came to full fruition during the fifth, see Christian Julien Robin, 'Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta in Late Antiquity: The Epigraphic Evidence,' in: *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher, Oxford 2015, pp. 137–145.

³⁸ Didier Morin, 'Beḡa. Beḡa history,' in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 3, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 516–518.

³⁹ On these two groups, see Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, passim. In fact, the kingdom of Kush, though invaded by Aksum in the fourth century, no longer existed in Kālēb's time. That Kush warrants mention in Kālēb's title in RIÉth 191 reflects memory of the historical status of the kingdom, much as is we find with the reference to Saba' in the South Arabian portion of the title. To the extent that the name Kush remained in common use during the sixth century, it did so only as the Syriac ethnonym *kūšāyā* (pl. *kūšāyē*) – most commonly applied, if ironically so, to the Aksumites.

⁴⁰ Serge A. Frantsouzoff, 'Ṣayamo,' in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 4, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 645.

⁴¹ Christian Robin interprets *?tḥy* as a *musnad* rendition of Greek Αἰθιοπία (Robin, 'Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta,' p. 155). While this hypothesis should not be rejected out of hand, it is curious that Αἰθιοπία should here be merely transliterated into *musnad* when other Aksumite inscriptions supply instead its Semitic equivalent, Habašat, as in RIÉth 185 II/2 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 243).

⁴² On the Aksumite invasion of 518 and the Aksumite role in bringing Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur to power, as well as a discussion of the relevant chronological issues, see George Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite Relations with Ḥimyar in the Sixth Century CE' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), pp. 109–152, 166–175; cf. Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste: L'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IV^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'à l'avènement de l'islam*, Paris 2009, pp. 76–81.

South Arabia as a client of Aksum. His reign was, however, cut short by an uprising by the Jewish Ḥimyarite rebel Yōsēph 'As'ar Yaṭ'ar (r. ca. 522–525), who massacred those Aksumites residing in South Arabia as well as indigenous Ḥimyarite Christians, culminating in the slaughter of the Christian community of the oasis town of Nağrān during the autumn of 523.⁴³ It should be pointed out, though, that, while Chalcedonian and Miaphysite sources view this violence as an indiscriminate attack on South Arabia's Christian population, there are indications that those Christians who belonged to the Church of the East⁴⁴ were largely left unharmed and even possibly sided with Yōsēph.⁴⁵ It is possible, then, that Yōsēph's persecution of Christians in South Arabia was motivated by a desire to curb Roman (Chalcedonian) and Aksumite (Miaphysite) influence in the region by striking at the local representatives of these respective influences, whom he may have regarded as a fifth column. Whatever the case, Kālēb responded to Yōsēph's aggressions by launching another invasion of Ḥimyar in 525, this time leading the army in person. In the course of this invasion, Yōsēph's regime was toppled and Yōsēph himself was killed.⁴⁶ As before, a Ḥimyarite Christian was brought to power, this time one Sumūyafa' 'Ašwa'.⁴⁷ Again as before, the reign of this vassal ruler was brought to an end by a revolt. This second revolt, however, was led not by a Ḥimyarite Jew but by a general in the Aksumite army – a Christian, no less – named 'Abrēhā, who seized power in South Arabia sometime after 531.⁴⁸ After two failed attempts by Kālēb to remove him from power, 'Abrēhā achieved independence with the understanding that he would pay tribute to Kālēb's successor,⁴⁹ i.e. his son Wā'zēb (r. ca. 540–560?). 'Abrēhā's dynasty, carried on after his death by his sons Yaksūm and Masrūq, held sway in South Arabia until the Sāsānid invasion of the country ca. 570.⁵⁰

⁴³ For an in-depth study of the reign of Yōsēph, see Christian Julien Robin, 'Joseph, dernier roi de Ḥimyar (de 522 à 525, ou une des années suivantes),' *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008).

⁴⁴ Popularly, if incorrectly, referred to as the Nestorian Church.

⁴⁵ Yury Arzhanov, 'Zeugnisse über Kontakte zwischen Juden und Christen im vorislamischen Arabien,' *Oriens Christianus* 92 (2008), pp. 79–93.

⁴⁶ On the Aksumite invasion of 525, see Gajda, *Royaume de Ḥimyar*, pp. 102–109; Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix,' pp. 247 ff.

⁴⁷ On the reign of Sumūyafa' 'Ašwa', see Gajda, *Royaume de Ḥimyar*, pp. 111–114; Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix,' pp. 298–328.

⁴⁸ On the reign of 'Abrēhā, see Gajda, *Royaume de Ḥimyar*, pp. 116–146; Christian Julien Robin, 'Abraha et la reconquête de l'Arabie déserte: un réexamen de l'inscription Ryckmans 506 = Murayghan 1,' *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012), pp. 1–93; Christian Julien Robin and Sālim Ṭayrān, 'Soixante-dix ans avant l'Islam: L'Arabie toute entière dominée par un roi chrétien,' *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 1 (2012), pp. 525–553.

⁴⁹ Procopius, *History of the Wars. Books I–II* (trans. H. B. Dewing), Cambridge and London 2006, §1.20.5–8.

⁵⁰ Gajda, *Royaume de Ḥimyar*, pp. 148–156.

Selected Texts from the Gəʿəz Corpus

To date, six Gəʿəz inscriptions have come to light in Yemen: RIÉth 263,⁵¹ RIÉth 264,⁵² and Zafār 08-773⁵³ from Zafār; RIÉth 195 I+II⁵⁴ from Mārib; and RIÉth 265⁵⁵ and RIÉth 266⁵⁶ – these last two being of uncertain provenance. It must be stressed that none of these inscriptions, including those whose provenance is known, were discovered in situ, meaning that the original context in which they were erected remain unknown. Having said that, some reasonable hypotheses regarding this context can be posited on the basis of data obtained from other Aksumite inscriptions, a subject that shall be treated in the section entitled *The Aksumite Context*. While the Gəʿəz corpus is small, it must be stressed that the inscriptions that belong to this corpus may constitute only a portion of what was originally a larger corpus. Walter Müller was told as much back in the early 1970s by an old man in Ṣanʿāʾ who had served as a soldier in the army of Imām Yaḥyā (r. 1904–1948). According to Müller, this man remembered having seen similar Gəʿəz inscriptions years earlier at Mārib, but stated that these had been destroyed by the *imām*'s troops.⁵⁷ This particular act of destruction might have occurred as early as 1945, according to information supplied by Hermann von Wissmann and Maria Höfner, who write that

[s]eit 1945 hat die yemenitische Regierung einen Komplex von Regierungsgebäuden im Stil der Kasernen, die einst die Türken bei Ṣanʿāʾ (*sic*) gebaut hatten, für die Ost-Provinz mitten in die Ruinen der alten Stadt Mārib hineingebaut und dazu Steine der Ruinen benutzt. Sie hat dadurch wenigstens 15 vorislamische Gebäude noch mehr zerstört.⁵⁸

It is possible, however, that the systematic destruction of traces of Ethiopian rule in South Arabia began much earlier, perhaps after the Ethiopian regime was toppled by the Sāsānids, at which time such material could conceivably have been demolished, if not by the Sāsānids then by those among the local population who had opposed rule by Ethiopian Christians.⁵⁹ Building on research on the ritualized destruction of texts in the ancient Near

⁵¹ Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 350–351; Walter W. Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente aus der himjarischen Hauptstadt Zafār,' *Aethiopica* 15 (2012), pp. 13–17.

⁵² Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 351; Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,' pp. 17–19.

⁵³ Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,' pp. 10–13.

⁵⁴ Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 284–288.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 351–352.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 353.

⁵⁷ Walter W. Müller, 'Zwei weitere Bruchstücke der äthiopischen Inschrift aus Marib,' *Neue Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik* 1 (1972), p. 61.

⁵⁸ Hermann von Wissmann and Maria Höfner, *Beiträge zur historischen Geographie des vorislamischen Südarabien*, Mainz 1952, p. 28.

⁵⁹ i.e. people like Sayf Ibn Dī-Yazan, the Himyarite nobleman who, according to Arabic sources, sought help from the Sāsānids in liberating his country from Ethiopian rule (Muḥammad Ibn Ḡarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos*

East, the author has drawn attention in an earlier study to the destruction of inscriptions in South Arabia during the early seventh century BCE, linking this phenomenon with military victory.⁶⁰ Certainly, the frequency with which South Arabians are said to have entrusted (*rtđ*) their inscriptions to the gods for protection against any who might damage or remove said inscriptions indicates the importance that they placed on the preservation of the written word and implies the seriousness of the offense caused by those brazen enough to commit such acts of vandalism.⁶¹ The issuing of curses against would-be vandals similarly highlights the concern with safeguarding written memorials.⁶² That comparable curse formulae are attested in Aksumite inscriptions well into the Christian period – indeed, during the very sixth-century period with which the present study is concerned⁶³ – indicates a similar system of beliefs regarding the sanctity of the written word on the African side of the Red Sea. Consequently, the symbolic significance of destroying Aksumite inscriptions erected in South Arabia would have been understood by Aksumites and Himyarites alike. Potentially relevant is the excision of 'Abrəhā's name from the fourth line of his famous inscription from the dam at Mārib (CIH 541). In the words of Alexander Sima, “es handelt sich dabei nicht um einen Akt von gedankenlosem Vandalismus sondern offensichtlich um eine bewußte damnatio memoriae.”⁶⁴ Clearly, there were elements in late pre-Islamic South Arabia who wished to erase any memory of Ethiopian rule, be it rule by Kālēb or by his turncoat general 'Abrəhā. Although it cannot be proven at present, it is possible that still other, yet to be discovered Gə'əz inscriptions were erected in other South Arabian towns (e.g. Nağrān and al-Muḥā') in which the Aksumites are known to have maintained a presence during the sixth century.⁶⁵

All of the inscriptions in the extant corpus employ the *fīdal* script and can thus be assigned to the period following the Ethiopian script reform in the mid-fourth century. As with other Gə'əz inscriptions dating from the Aksumite period, these inscriptions display a number of morphological features, and at times vocabulary, that set them apart from

scripsit Abu Djaḥar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari = Tārīḥ al-Rusul wal-Mulūk (ed. M. J. de Goeje), Vol. 2, Beirut 1965, pp. 946–947, 950–951).

⁶⁰ George Hatke, 'For 'Ilmuqūh and for Saba': The Res Gestae of Karib'il Watar bin Dḥamar'alī from Širwāḥ in Context,' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 105 (2015), pp. 114–116.

⁶¹ Mohammed Maraqtan, 'Curse formulae in South Arabian inscriptions and some of their Semitic parallels,' *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 28 (1998), pp. 190, 192.

⁶² *Ibidem*, pp. 193–194.

⁶³ RIÉth 191/38-40 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axumite,' p. 273). For a discussion, see *The Aksumite Context*.

⁶⁴ Alexander Sima, 'Epigraphische Notizen zu Abraha's Damminschrift (CIH 541),' *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 13 (2002), p. 127.

⁶⁵ Thus we read in Ry 507, from Bi'r Ḥimā, that Yōsēph's troops “killed and plundered the Ethiopians in al-Muḥā', along with its (indigenous) inhabitants, the Farasānīs” (*hrgw w-ḡnmw [ʔhbs^{2m}] b-mḥw^m b-[ḥw]r-hw firs'nytm*) (Walter W. Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften nach Ären datiert: Bibliographie, Texte und Glossar*, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 104). That some Ethiopians also resided at Nağrān is indicated in the *Book of the Himyarites*, which states that an Ethiopian deacon named Jonan was among the Christians slaughtered by Yōsēph's forces at Nağrān (Axel Moberg (ed. and trans.), *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*, Lund 1924, p. 14b (Syriac text)).

the classical Gəʿəz employed in medieval manuscripts.⁶⁶ Although no Aksumite king is mentioned by name in any of the surviving fragments, this can be explained by the fact that none of these fragments preserves the introductory portion of an inscription, where the king's name and titles would appear. Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that the entire corpus dates from the reign of Kālēb given that, though of Ethiopian origin, ʾAbrəhā erected inscriptions only in Sabaic.⁶⁷ Through use of the first person, the narrative in the Gəʿəz corpus is presented as direct speech of the king, such that the actions described can be understood as actions of the king. Since this presumes Kālēb's physical presence in South Arabia, the invasion of 525 provides the only possible context for the corpus, as Kālēb merely dispatched armed forces, rather than taking the field himself, on his other invasions of the country.⁶⁸ Likewise, the fact that there are no known private Aksumite inscriptions recording military ventures,⁶⁹ much less ones in which the dedicant speaks in the first person, strongly suggests that Kālēb is indeed the speaker throughout the narrative portions of the inscriptions from the Gəʿəz corpus that are analyzed in this article.⁷⁰ This would disqualify, for example, the rather shadowy individual named Ḥayyān, who is reported by both RIÉth 191 and the Syriac *Book of the Ḥimyarites* to have led the Aksumite army in its invasion of Ḥimyar in 518.⁷¹ What follows in this section is intended not as an exhaustive treatment of the Gəʿəz corpus but rather a more focused examination of those inscriptions from the corpus that have a direct bearing on religious ideology in the context of Aksumite activities in South Arabia during the early sixth century. A discussion of the broader context of the religious themes in these inscriptions will be reserved for the section *Religious References*. In the present section, commentary on the inscriptions is limited to questions of provenance and historical content. It should be noted that all of the inscriptions from the corpus survive

⁶⁶ Abraham J. Drewes, 'Some Features of Epigraphical Ethiopic,' in: *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau on the Occasion of his 85th Birthday, November 14, 1991*, Vol. 1, ed. Alan S. Kaye, Wiesbaden 1991, pp. 382–391; Alessandro Bausi, 'Ancient Features of Ancient Ethiopic,' *Aethiopica* 8 (2005), pp. 149–169; Maria Bulakh, 'Word Order in Epigraphic Gəʿəz,' *Aethiopica* 15 (2012), pp. 136–175.

⁶⁷ The known inscriptions dating from ʾAbrəhā's reign are DAI GDN 2002–20 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 107–109), CIH 541 (Ibidem, pp. 110–117), and Ja 547+544+546+547 (Ibidem, pp. 120–121) from Mārib; and Ry 506 (Ibidem, pp. 118–119), Murayghān 2 (Ibidem, p. 119), and Murayghān 3 (Robin and Ṭayrān, 'Soixante-dix ans,' pp. 526–528) from Bi'r Muraygān in southwestern Saudi Arabia.

⁶⁸ i.e. the invasion of 518 and the two failed punitive campaigns that sought to remove ʾAbrəhā from power (see *Historical Background*).

⁶⁹ This is one of many characteristics that set Aksumite inscriptions apart from their South Arabian counterparts. In the case of the latter, there are many examples of private individuals who erected inscriptions recording their military activities.

⁷⁰ This is not to say that all the remaining Gəʿəz inscriptions that have come to light in Yemen, not treated in this article, were erected on Kālēb's orders or even necessarily date from his reign. Since, however, Kālēb's reign witnessed the period of Aksum's most direct and intensive in South Arabia, assigning these other inscriptions to his reign seems plausible.

⁷¹ RIÉth 191/34-35 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 273); Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, p. 3b (Syriac text). On the name Ḥayyān, see Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix,' pp. 125–136; Drewes, *Receuil des inscriptions*, pp. 511–514.

in very fragmentary condition, and those selected for examination in this study are no exception. That said, it is likely that the sentiments expressed in these inscriptions are broadly representative of the complete corpus.

(1) RIÉth 195 I+II

This inscription from Mārib consists of three alabaster fragments, of which only two (jointly constituting RIÉth 195 II) can be connected. The fragment RIÉth 195 I was discovered at Mārib in 1947 by Ahmed Fakhry,⁷² whose photograph of the piece was first published with an English translation by Murad Kamil in 1964.⁷³ The following year, an improved edition of the fragment was published with a French translation and commentary by André Caquot, based on a photograph and squeeze taken by Albert Jammé during the course of the expedition of the American Foundation for the Study of Man in 1952.⁷⁴ In 1970, the Deutsche Yemen Expedition rediscovered RIÉth 195 I at the Museum of Ta'izz, where it was copied and photographed. That same year, the German expedition came across two further fragments, that together constitute RIÉth 195 II, in the storage facility of the National Museum in Ṣan'ā'. The latter inscription was first published with a German translation and commentary by Walter Müller in 1972, along with RIÉth 195 I.⁷⁵ A decade later, RIÉth 195 I and RIÉth 195 II were re-published with a French translation and commentary by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye⁷⁶ and in 1991 a revised edition of the two fragments was published in transliteration by Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider.⁷⁷ More recently, Abraham Drewes' French translation of RIÉth 195 I and RIÉth 195 II have been published, along with a philological commentary, in his posthumous *Receuil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*.⁷⁸ When last accounted for, both RIÉth 195 I and RIÉth 195 II were kept at the National Museum in Ṣan'ā'. We shall begin with RIÉth 195 I, and inscription that, in its present state, measures 32 cm in height and 21 cm in width and consists of thirteen partially preserved lines of text in fully vocalized Gə'əz. This text reads as follows:

1:[...]wata[...] 2:[...] wa-yāṣābīyaka [...] 3:[...ṣab]dōkū marsa za-səmū
 [...] 4:[...]la məsla ṣaḥzābī[ya ...] 5:[...ka]ma yəbē mazmūr yəṭ[naṣā?
 wa-yəzzarawū ḍarrū] 6:[wa-yəg^wyayū ṣalā?]tū ṣəm-qədma gaṣṣū [...] 7:[...]
 wa-dēwəwō wa-barbara[...] 8:[...s]adada ṣaḥzāba ṣəm-qə[DMA ...]
 9:[...]bētkū wəsta ḥamar [...] 10:[...]tā ḥayqā za-maṭṭawanī ṣə[ḡzī?a

⁷² Ahmed Fakhry, *An Archaeological Journey to Yemen (March–May, 1947)*, 3 vols., Cairo 1952, I, p. 119.

⁷³ Murad Kamil, 'An Ethiopic Inscription Found at Mareb,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964), pp. 56–57.

⁷⁴ André Caquot, 'L'inscription éthiopienne de Mārib,' *Annales d'Éthiopie* 6 (1965), pp. 223–227.

⁷⁵ Müller, 'Zwei weitere Bruchstücke.'

⁷⁶ Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, 'Les deux inscriptions du negus Kaleb en Arabie du sud,' *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 15 (1982), pp. 105–122.

⁷⁷ Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 284–288.

⁷⁸ Drewes, *Receuil des inscriptions*, pp. 279–285.

bəḥēr ... ¹¹[...] *marān wa-manfaqu* *ʔa[ḥzābəya ...]* ¹²[...] *manfaqu*
ʔaḥ]zābəya warada ʔanta qarša [...] ¹³[...] *man]faqu ʔaḥzābəya*
*warada [...]*⁷⁹

¹[... ...] ²[...] and may He make you great [...] ³[...] I devastated⁸⁰
the port named [...] ⁴[... ...] with my troops [...] ⁵[...] as the Psalter
says, “May He arise, and may His enemies be scattered,] ⁶[and may His
foe]s [flee] before His presence.” [...] ⁷[...] and the taking of prisoners
and booty [...] ⁸[...he ex]pelled the troops be[fore ...] ⁹[...] I spent
the night on the ship [...] ¹⁰[...] its shore, that G[od] delivered unto
me [...] ¹¹[... ...] and a portion of my tr[oops ...] ¹²[... a portion of
my tr]oops descended by cutting through(?) [...] ¹³[... a por]tion of my
troops descended [...].

What we have here is a description of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Aksumite army under the command of Kālēb. Although the name of the port at which the invaders landed – and that they destroyed, if one accepts Müller’s reading of the text – is not preserved, a strong case has been made that it was at Ḥawr Ġurayra that the Aksumites made their landing.⁸¹ The seaborne invasion of South Arabia by Kālēb is described in great detail in the *Martyrium Arethae*.⁸² According to that text, the vessels used by the Aksumites in their invasion managed to break through a chain that had been set up to bar entry at a vulnerable spot at which anchorage was possible. Several Sabaic inscriptions dating from the reign of Yōsēph ʾAsʾar Yatʾar refer to the reinforcement of this very “chain of Mandab” (*sʾsʾlt mdbⁿ*, *sʾsʾlt mdbⁿ*).⁸³ There are, to be sure, some

⁷⁹ Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 72.

⁸⁰ Here following Walter Müller’s tentative restoration of [...] *dōkū* as *ʔabdōkū* “ich verwüstete” (Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ pp. 72, 73). Less plausible is the reconstruction proposed by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye: [... ተ]ግዳኩ : ሞርሰ : ዘለ[... ...]ለ : ምስለ : አሕዛቢ ([...] *ta]ʔādōkū marsa za-la[... ...]la məsla ʔaḥzābī*) “je suis passé par le port que [...] ...] avec l’[sic]armée” (Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ pp. 108, 112).

⁸¹ A. F. L. Beeston, ‘The Chain of al-Mandab,’ in: *On both sides of al-Mandab: Ethiopian, South-Arabic and Islamic Studies presented to Oscar Löfgren on his ninetieth birthday 13 May 1988 by colleagues and friends*, eds. Ulla Ehrensward and Christopher Toll, Stockholm (1989), pp. 1–6. As Mikhail Bukharin points out, Ḥawr Ġurayra is one of the few places in the southern part of the Red Sea in which reefs do not impede landing (Mikhail D. Bukharin, ‘The Coastal Arabia (*sic*) and the Adjacent Sea-Basins in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (Trade, Geography and Navigation),’ *Topoi*, Suppl. 11 (2012), p. 188).

⁸² *Martyrium Arethae* (= Joëlle Beaucamp (ed. and trans.), *Le martyre de Saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons* (BHG 166), Paris 2007), §32–§38.

⁸³ Ry 508/8; Ja 1028/4.8; Ry 507/10 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 98, 101, 104). The use of a chain to bar access to a port was a well-attested practice from antiquity to the early modern era. Chains were used to protect ports in North Africa from Carthaginian times down to the eighth century CE (Maxime Rodinson, ‘Éthiopien et sudarabique,’ *École pratique des Hautes Études, IV^e section: Sciences historiques et philologiques, Annuaire 1965–1966* (1965), p. 138; Dionisius A. Agius, *Classic Ships of Islam: from Mesopotamia to the Indian Ocean*, Leiden and Boston 2008, p. 237) while, during the Byzantine era, an iron chain was similarly pulled across the Golden Horn from Constantinople to the opposite shore in times of a military threat (Junichi Takeno and Yoshihiko

problems with interpreting *qarša* as “to cut through,” as this verb generally refers to actions like incising, scarring, scalping, engraving, and carving,⁸⁴ rather than breaking through. However, if *qarša* in the present context really does mean something along the lines of “to cut through” then we could have here a reference – if fragmentary – to the breaking of the chain of Mandab described in the *Martyrium Arethae*.

Having treated the main historical points documented in RIÉth 195 I, let us now turn to RIÉth 195 II. As noted above, this fragment consists in fact of two fragments that can be connected, the upper fragment measuring 36 cm in height and the same in width at its widest point, while the lower fragment measures 42.5 cm in height and 41.5 in width at its widest point. Being larger, RIÉth 195 II naturally preserves a much larger amount of text than RIÉth 195 I: no fewer than twenty-nine partially preserved lines, in fact. This text describes the beginning of armed conflict, with reference to several South Arabian towns by name and even, so it would appear, King Yōsēph 'As'ar Yaṭ'ar himself. The extant text reads as follows:

¹[...wa]tga ʔangōga[w-... ʔanga]²bēnāy wa-qa[... kərastō]³s mawāʔī
ba-[...]⁴.ʔəhūbakāhā la-yəʔə[ṭī ...] ⁵kama tək^wannənnā ʔə[gzīʔa
bəhēr ...] ⁶kərastōs za-bōtū ta[...]⁷.ʔa wa-talawa watga [... ʔahawīhō]⁸.
mū wa-ʔahātīhōmū [...] ⁹fannōkūwō wazab-t[...g^wərā]¹⁰.g^wəʕā
wa-baṣṣa g^wərāg^wə[ʕā ...] ¹¹dēwawa ʔahzābaya bā[...]ⁱ².qata ʔənbala
ʔəgzīʔa [bəhēr ...] ¹³mārab wəsta mālātōmū [...] ¹⁴ʔənza yəqattəl
wa-yəḏēwəw [...] ¹⁵rəḏōhā ʔangabēnāya məsla [...] ¹⁶səmə hagaraynē
wa-qatala [...]ⁱ⁷.nəʔəl nəgūsa ḥamēr səʕūr wa-[...] ¹⁸wa-ʔawʕaykū tāʕəkā
sabāʔ [...]ⁱ⁹.wa-zanta gabra līta ʔəgzīʔa bəh[ēr ... yəbə]²⁰l ʔantəmū-ssa
qədamū ḥəśśū ʕəḏ[q-...] ²¹yətwēssakakəmū wa-kāʕəba yəbəl [... nəʕū
səm]ⁱ².ʕūnī wa-ʔəngərkəmū maṭana gab[ra lāṭī la-naʕsəya za-ʕarāḥkū
ḥabē]ⁱ³.hū ba-ʔafāya wa-kalāḥkū ba-ləsānəya wa-[kāʕəba yəbəl wəsta

Takeo, ‘The Mystery of the Defense Chain Mechanism of Constantinople,’ in: *Explorations in the History of Machines and Mechanisms: Proceedings of HMM2012*, eds. Teun Koetsier and Marco Ceccarelli, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 199–211). Moving much further east, we find in the *Chau Ju-Kua*, a thirteenth-century Chinese text, a reference to a harbor at the straits of Malacca that was barred by an iron chain (Agius, *Classic Ships*, p. 237). As for visual representations of chains protecting harbors, an anonymous fifteenth-century Italian treatise entitled *Tractatus Pauli Sanctini Ducensis de re militari et machinis bellicis* (MS. Lat. fol. 16, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris) depicts a Mediterranean port protected by a chain (Vassilios Christides, ‘The Martyrdom of Arethas and the Aftermath: History vs. Historiography,’ in: *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Graeco-Oriental and African Studies: Nicosia, 30 April–5 May, 1996*, eds. Vassilios Christides and Theodoros Papadopoulos, Nicosia 2000, pp. 58, 85 [Fig. 5]). Then, in a fresco representing the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, the Italian painter Matteo Pérez D’Aleccio (1547–1628) depicts a chain at the entrance to the creek beside the town of Birgu, fitted with wooden buoys to keep the heavy metal device afloat (Simon Mercieca, ‘«La Navigation du Savoir Project» and the Search of (sic) Malta’s Late Medieval Ship-Shed,’ in: *Mediterranean Seascapes*, ed. Simon Mercieca, Msida 2007, p. 29). If a chain similar to the ones mentioned above was used in sixth-century South Arabia, it too would have barred access to a specific stretch of coast.

⁸⁴ Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)*, Wiesbaden 1991, p. 444.

ʔīsāyās ʔāhū]²⁴.bō kəbra dāwīt wa-yək^wēnnən wa-ʔalbō [za-yaʔabbəyō (tak^wannənō) wa-ʔəsəyyəmō mak^wa]²⁵.nnəna la-maʔman bəḥēr wa-ʔanbərō dība [manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔabūhū] ²⁶.wa-yəbəl wəsta mazmūr-ʔa ʔəmūn[tū-ssa ba-ʔafrās wa-ba-saragalāt wa-]²⁷.nəḥna-ssa naʔābbī ba-səma ʔəgzīʔa bə[ḥēr ʔamlākəna ʔəmüntū-ssa] ²⁸.taʔāqasū wa-wadqū wa-nəḥna-ssa tansāʔna [wa-ratāʔna ...] ²⁹.wəsta ʔīsāyās kama-zə yəbē ʔəg[zīʔa bəḥēr ...]⁸⁵

¹[the fugi]tive, he wander[ed... the noble]²-man and [... Chris]t ³-the Victorious in [...] ⁴[that] I might give you th[at ...] ⁵-that you might judge us, G[od ...] ⁶Christ, in whom [...] ⁷[...] and he followed the fugitive [...] their [brothers] ⁸-and their sisters [...] ⁹I sent him(?) [... G^wəṙā]¹⁰. g^wə'ā. And G^wəṙāgwə['ā] reached [...] ¹¹-he took my troops captive [...] ¹²[...] without God [...] ¹³.Mārib, amid their possessions(?)⁸⁶ [...] ¹⁴-while killing and taking prisoner [...] ¹⁵-its [...] the nobleman with [...] ¹⁶-named Hagaraynē and killed [...] ¹⁷-nə'əl the vanquished king of Ḥimyar and [...] ¹⁸-and I burned the palace of Saba' [...] ¹⁹-and this Go[d] did for me, [... he] says: ²⁰."But you, seek first righteous[ness ...] ²¹-it shall be added to you." And moreover he says [...: "Come li]sten ²²-to me and let me tell you the extent of what He has don[e for my soul, I who cried to ²³-H]im with my mouth and shouted with my tongue." And [moreover He says in Isaiah: "I shall give] ²⁴-him the glory of David and he shall exercise power, and there is none [who shall refuse to serve him. And I shall appoint him] as a ruler ²⁵-of a secure land, and I shall place him on [the throne of glory of his father's house.]" ²⁶-And he says in the Psalm: "Now they have horses and chariots, but ²⁷-we shall be great by the name of God our Lord; they ²⁸-have stumbled and fallen but we have risen [and acted righteously...]" ²⁹-in Isaiah, as G[od] says "[...]."

There are a number of points of historical interest here. A variant form of the term *ʔangabēnāy* "nobleman" is attested for the first time in ʔĒzānā's record of his Nubian campaign (RIÉth 189), in which the Aksumite king states that in the course of that campaign he captured two local administrators (*maggabt*), who had come as spies riding camels, as well as a nobleman, referred to in the text as an *ʔangabēnāwē*.⁸⁷ Although much

⁸⁵ Adapted from Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 286–287 and Pierluigi Piovanelli, 'The Apocryphal Legitimation of a "Solomonic" Dynasty in the Kəbrā nāgāšt – A Reappraisal,' *Aethiopica* 16 (2013), p. 23; cf. Müller, 'Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,' pp. 62–63.

⁸⁶ The word read by Walter Müller as *mālātōmū* (Müller, 'Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,' p. 62) is possible, even if no such word is attested in Classical Gə'əz. For the interpretation of this word as "Besitzungen," see Ibidem, p. 66. For a different, less plausible interpretation, see Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, 'Deux inscriptions,' p. 111.

⁸⁷ RIÉth 189/25 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 264).

has been written over the years regarding the etymology of this term,⁸⁸ the most plausible etymology has been posited by Francis Breyer, who argues that *ʔangabēnāy/ʔangabēnāwē* is of Cushitic origin and is paralleled by the Hadiya (Highland East Cushitic) masculine name *angaabo* or *angeeboo*, as well as by the Kambaata (also Highland East Cushitic) substantive *anġāmō* “Magier, Herr des Regens.”⁸⁹ Since the term, in the variant form *ʔangabēnāwē*, is applied to an individual of Nubian origin in RIÉth 189, one can assume that, despite being of Ethiopian origin, the term could refer to non-Ethiopians. On the basis of this observation, and judging from what context is preserved, the *ʔangabēnāy* of RIÉth 195 II would appear to have been a local South Arabian. The nobleman alluded to in RIÉth 195 II is clearly distinct from Yōsēph, with whom the “vanquished king of Ḥimyar” (*nəġūša ḥamēr səʕūr*) is undoubtedly to be identified, but might have been a member of Yōsēph’s entourage – a matter to which we shall return in our discussion of RIÉth 263 below. As for Gʷərāġwəʕā, this individual cannot be identified with any person known from other historical sources but, in view of his name, was definitely an Ethiopian.⁹⁰ Given that he is mentioned by name in the first place, was quite likely an important person, perhaps an officer in Kālēb’s army. By contrast, the fact that Yōsēph remains nameless in what survives of the text recalls the similarly anonymous allusions to the king in Sabaic inscriptions post-dating the invasion of 525.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye regard the *ʔangabēnāy* of RIÉth 195 II as a proper name, “‘Angabo-nay = ‘Angabo le voici” (Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ p. 113). This, they claim, was a name borne by Kālēb, as evidence for which they cite an Ethiopian legend of the slaying of the serpent-king ‘Arwē by a man named ‘Angabō, who subsequently takes the throne. In variants of this tradition, the role of liberator of Ethiopia from the serpent-king is assumed by none other than Kālēb, who after slaying the serpent rules as king (Ibidem, p. 114). Whether legends of this sort can be traced back to Aksumite times is questionable. Moreover, if the *ʔangabēnāwē* of ‘Ēzānā’s inscription is a related term, as seems likely, the theory that this supposed name is linked exclusively with Kālēb falls apart. In his initial study of the Gəʕəz material from Mārib, Walter Müller restores *ʔangabēnāy* as Ēngabenāy, which he interprets as a *nisba*-adjective (Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 64). In his Gəʕəz dictionary, Wolf Leslau glosses *ʔangabēnāy* as “noble” (Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary*, p. 29), following Enno Littmann, who a century ago translated the term as “Adeliger” (Enno Littmann, *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition. Band IV. Griechische und altabessinische Inschriften*, Berlin 1913, p. 39). In his more recent publication on the Gəʕəz inscriptions from Zafār, Müller accepts this interpretation (Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ pp. 14–15), and indeed this is the interpretation adopted here. As for the etymology of this term, Leslau cites an unpublished paper by Anton Schall, who proposes a connection with either Arabic *naġīb* “nobly-born” or Oromo *hangafa/angafa* “first, first-born” (Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary*, p. 29), though neither option inspires much confidence.

⁸⁹ Francis Breyer, ‘Die Inschriften ‘Ēzānā,’ in: *Kaiserlichem Auftrag: Die Deutsche Aksum Expedition unter Enno Littmann. Band II. Forschungen zur Archäologie Außereuropäischer Kulturen 3.2.*, ed. Steffen Wenig, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 345.

⁹⁰ A similar reduplication of the labialized consonant /gʷ/ is attested in the name of a mythical Aksumite prince, mentioned in the Ethiopian *Synaxarion* and some king-lists in such varied forms as ‘Īlla-ʕAzgʷägʷē, ‘Īlla-ʕAnzəgʷägʷē, and Za-ʕĪlla-ʕIsḡʷägʷē (Rodinson, ‘Conversion de l’Éthiopie,’ pp. 243–244, 246).

⁹¹ During the reign of Sumūyafa ‘Ašwaʕ, Yōsēph is referred to as simply the “King of Ḥimyar” (*mlk ḥmyr^m*) in the Sabaic inscription CIH 621 from Ḥiṣn al-Ġurāb (CIH 621/9 [Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 106]) and is perhaps also alluded to as “this king” (*dn mlkⁿ*) in Wellcome A 103664/6 (A. F. L. Beeston, ‘The South Arabian Collection of the Wellcome Museum in London,’ *Raydān* 3 (1980), p. 12). Although no records of its provenance exist, the latter inscription may derive from Dāf if, as has been assumed (Robin, ‘Joseph, dernier roi,’ pp. 96–100;

Turning to place-names, the provenance of RIÉth 195 II and the fact that it mentions Mārib by name provides a geographical context for most of the events recounted in the text. Of interest is the reference to Kālēb's having burned the "palace of Saba" (*tāḥākā sabāʾ*). It is tempting to identify this palace with Salhīn, a royal residence at Mārib mentioned in Sabaic inscriptions as well as in Aksumite royal titles.⁹² However, it is not clear whether such a structure still stood at Mārib in Kālēb's time,⁹³ and its mention in the title borne by Kālēb in RIÉth 191 may represent nothing more than a vestigial element based on older Aksumite royal titles. As for Hagaraynē, literally "The Two Cities," this toponym has been plausibly identified with a Hagarayn mentioned in the *Book of the Himyarites* in connections with Yōsēph's atrocities.⁹⁴ In that text, an entire chapter, now lost but listed in the table of contents, was devoted to "the martyrdom of the holy martyrs who suffered martyrdom in the town of Hagarayn" (*sāhdūtā ḡ-sāhdē qaddīšē ḡ-ashed(w) b-[ha]ḡarayn*).⁹⁵ Since that chapter was listed between a chapter treating the martyrdom of the Christians of Mārib and a chapter dealing with those of Naḡrān, the natural conclusion – assuming, of course, that these instances of persecution are described in geographical order – is that Hagarayn was located somewhere between those two towns.⁹⁶ In a short article on this toponym, Christian Robin suggests that the Hagaraynē of RIÉth 195 II refers not to a single city but rather to two cities in Wādī al-Ḡawf, namely Naššān (modern al-Sawdāʾ) and Našq^{um} (modern al-Bayḡāʾ), that are referred to as *hgrn^{hm}* "The Two Cities" in Ja 665, dating from the reign of the Himyarite king Yāsir^{um} Yuhan'im I (ca. 265–287).⁹⁷ In that case, one might interpret "The Two Cities" as a nickname, of the sort borne by many South Arabian settlements.⁹⁸ Robin admits, however, that the latest known references to either of these towns date from

idem, 'Himyar, Aksum, and Arabia Deserta,' pp. 163–164), Wellcome A 103664 and Ist 7608 bis constitute two fragments of the same inscription.

⁹² Although absent from South Arabian royal titles, the name Salhīn is featured in the titles borne by Kālēb's fourth-century predecessors Ousanas and ʿĒzānā in various forms: *s'lh^m* (RIÉth 185 I/2), *s'lh* (RIÉth 185 II/2), *s'lh^m* (RIÉth 185 bis I/2, RIÉth 186/3), *s'lhⁿ* (RIÉth 185 bis II/2), *salhēn* (RIÉth 187/2, RIÉth 188/3–4, RIÉth 189/3) in Ḡāʿaz (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 242, 243, 246, 247, 251, 255, 259–260, 263); and Σιλῆη (RIÉth 270/3, RIÉth 270 bis/3), Σ[ιλ]εῖλ (RIÉth 271/8) in Greek (Bernard, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 364, 368, 371).

⁹³ The last known reference to Salhīn by name in Sabaic is preserved in CIAS 57.51/w 7 n° 1/5, an inscription that may date from no later than the fourth century (D. Brian Doe, *Southern Arabia*, London 1971, pp. 146–147 (Pl. 57)).

⁹⁴ Christian Julien Robin '«Les Deux Villes» (*Hagaraynē/Hgrnhn*) sont-elles Nashshān et Nashqum?' *Arabia* 2 (2004), p. 119.

⁹⁵ Moberg (ed. and trans.), *Book of the Himyarites*, p. 5b (Syriac text).

⁹⁶ The identification with Haḡarān, proposed by Axel Moberg (Ibidem, p. liii), the editor and translator of the *Book of the Himyarites*, can be dismissed on the grounds that this town is located in Wādī Daw'an, far to the east of both Mārib and Naḡrān – and quite possibly beyond the range of Yōsēph's forces, as well as those of Kālēb.

⁹⁷ Ja 665/20 (Albert Jamme, *Sabaeen Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqīs (Mārib)*, Baltimore 1962, p. 169; Robin, 'Les Deux Villes,' passim).

⁹⁸ R. B. Serjeant, 'Hūd and Other Pre-Islamic Prophets of Ḥaḡramawt,' *Le Muséon* 67 (1954), p. 141.

the fourth century, while the latest inscriptions found at the sites of Naššān and Našq^{um} themselves do not post-date the third century.⁹⁹ Since the appearance of Robin's article, however, publication of texts in the cursive *zabūr* script deriving (most probably) from Naššān has provided evidence that that town survived into the sixth century. Intriguingly, one such text, X.BSB 74 (= Mon.script.sab. 625), dating from the month of Dū-Di'āw^{ān} in Year 632 (i.e. January 523), refers to Mārib (*mr̄b*) by name and alludes to a local church (𐩨𐩣𐩪 < Syriac 𐩨𐩪𐩣).¹⁰⁰ Although the context is not clear in either text, both RIÉth 195 II and X.BSB 74 imply that Mārib was linked in some way with at least one of "The Two Cities" of Wādī al-Ġawf. That Mārib possessed a church has long been known thanks to CIH 541, 'Abrēhā's famous Sabaic inscription from the Great Dam at Mārib, which refers to the celebration of Mass at the town's church.¹⁰¹ While CIH 541 dates from March 548, the date provided by X.BSB 74 indicates that this church already existed at the time of Kālēb's invasion in 525 and implies the presence of a Christian community at Mārib. The Biblical rhetoric employed by Kālēb in connection with this invasion, even if expressed in Gə'əz for the purpose of RIÉth 195 I+II, rather than in the local Sabaic, would no doubt have resonated with this community.

More problematic is [...]*nəʔəl*, which is widely viewed as a proper name and which is tentatively reconstructed by Robin as 𐩨[.]q[.]n^ʔēl on the basis of a reference in RIÉth 191 to Kālēb's having built a church in Ḥimyar at a place called 𐩨qⁿʔl.¹⁰² The implication, then, is that 𐩨qⁿʔl was the place where Yōsēph met his end at the hands of Kālēb's forces.¹⁰³ According to Robin, 𐩨qⁿʔl could be an Ethiopian name not for a specific point on the map but for an entire region, perhaps the Tihāma.¹⁰⁴ This is possible, though it must be stressed that RIÉth 191 gives no specific details regarding 𐩨qⁿʔl's location, save only that it lay in Ḥimyarite territory. Whatever the case, there is no reason to identify this toponym with the [...]*nəʔəl* of RIÉth 195 II. In the latter inscription, the events leading up to the Ḥimyarite king's death are said to have taken place at Mārib and Hagarayn, indicating that the Aksumite army was operating well into the interior regions of South Arabia by this point. With the caveat that the relevant passage is fragmentary, the context strongly suggests that [...]*nəʔəl* too was located somewhere in the interior of

⁹⁹ Robin, 'Les Deux Villes,' p. 120.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München*, Tübingen and Berlin, 2010, I, p. 274.

¹⁰¹ As we read in CIH 541/63-67: "And after he (i.e. 'Abrēhā) had sent the summons and the Arabs had surrendered, he advanced to the town of Mārib and he celebrated Mass in the church of Mārib, when it had a priest, a father of its divine mysteries(?)" (*w-bʿdn ḏkyw 𐩨𐩣𐩪 w-dn 𐩨rbⁿ 𐩨dyw hgrⁿ mr̄b w-qd{}*)s'w b-𐩨 mr̄b k-b-hw q^s's^m ʔb-ms'tl-hw) (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 113–114).

¹⁰² Robin, 'Joseph, dernier roi,' pp. 14–15. The full passage (RIÉth 191/35-36 [Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 273]) reads *w-tklk mqds^l b-ḥmr b-𐩨qⁿʔl qnʔy bʔnt s'm wld ʔgzʔ bḥr z-ʔmnk bt* "and I established a sanctuary in Ḥimyar at 𐩨qⁿʔl, being zealous for the name of the Son of God in whom I believe."

¹⁰³ Robin, 'Joseph, dernier roi,' pp. 14–15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

the country,¹⁰⁵ rather than on or near the coast – and this is assuming that [...]nəʔəl is a toponym at all. It seems best, then, to posit that Yōsēph died fighting the Aksumites at some yet unidentified inland locale.¹⁰⁶

(2) RIÉth 263

Our second inscription, RIÉth 263, consisted of nine lines of text inscribed on marble and survives in the form of a single fragment that was originally found by Paolo Costa at Zafār and, so far as is known, is currently kept at the local museum. The fragmentary inscription was first published in 1973 with an Italian translation and commentary by Giuseppina Igonetti on the basis of a photograph taken by Giovanni Garbini,¹⁰⁷ and was re-published in 1982 with a French translation and commentary by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye in the same article that treated RIÉth 195 I and RIÉth 195 II.¹⁰⁸ A transliteration of the Gəʔaz text was published by Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider in 1991,¹⁰⁹ followed in 2012 by an emended edition with a German translation and commentary published by Walter Müller.¹¹⁰ In his article, Müller differs most significantly from earlier treatments of the text in his interpretation of the eighth and ninth lines, and it is his reading that is adopted in the present study. By contrast, these final lines of RIÉth 263 are dismissed as “incomprehensible” by Drewes in his posthumous *Receuil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*.¹¹¹ Although this last study is the most recent to appear, it was already a bit dated when it went to press and hence does not cite Müller's 2012 article. Although much less of RIÉth 263 is preserved than is the case with either RIÉth 195 I or RIÉth 195 II, what text survives contains many points of interest.

1:[...] 2:[...]nā wa-ʔābəḥa [...] 3:[... hāy]mānōta ʔab [...] 4:[...] ʔangabēnāy la[...] 5:[... kə]rəstōs yəma[wwəʔ ...] 6:[...]qa ba-šəraʔ ba-sa[lām ...] 7:[...]nāwī wa-bašahkū [...] 8:[... waʕa]lkū samūna ʕəla[ta ...] 9:[...] yəssənū šə[...]¹¹²

1:[...] 2:[... ...] and he allowed/gave authority [...] 3:[... the fa]jith of the Father [...] 4:[...] nobleman [...] 5:[... Ch]rist will be vic[torious ...]

¹⁰⁵ Bukharin, ‘Coastal Arabia,’ p. 188.

¹⁰⁶ CIH 621, a Sabaic inscription from Hiṣn al-Ġurāb, alludes to the killing by the Aksumites of “the king of Ḥimyar” (*mlk ḥmyr^m*), who remains unnamed but who can only be Yōsēph (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 106). Unfortunately, this inscription, which postdates the invasion of 525 CE by several years, provides no details as to exactly where Yōsēph was killed.

¹⁰⁷ Giuseppina Igonetti, ‘Un frammento di iscrizione etiopica da Zafar (Yemen),’ *Annali dell’Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 33 (1973), pp. 77–80.

¹⁰⁸ Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ pp. 107–108.

¹⁰⁹ Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 350.

¹¹⁰ Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ pp. 13–17.

¹¹¹ Drewes, *Receuil des inscriptions*, p. 357.

¹¹² Adapted from Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ p. 14.

6[...] by the Šərə' (clan) in pe[ace...] 7[...] and I reached [...]
 8[...] I [sp]ent eight da[ys ...] 9[...] that they practice magic(?) [...].

Here again we find reference to a “nobleman” (*ʔangabēnāy*). There is no reason to assume that this is the same nobleman mentioned in RIÉth 195 II, with the caveat that neither inscription in its current state preserves the personal names borne by these individuals. A tantalizing reference to a possible candidate for the nobleman alluded to in RIÉth 263 is found in the *Martyrium Arethae*, which mentions Kālēb’s capture of a kinsman of Yōsēph and his use of this man as a guide to Zafār,¹¹³ the very city in which RIÉth 263 was erected. Certainly, the provenance of RIÉth 263 strongly suggests that the events it describes were in some way related to the capture of Zafār, though with so much of the text missing, any identification of the “nobleman” with Yōsēph’s kinsman remains purely hypothetical. As for the name Šərə', Jacqueline Pirenne interprets this as the Gə'əz word for Greece and glosses it as a term for Byzantium,¹¹⁴ an interpretation adopted more recently by Walter Müller.¹¹⁵ However, while Kālēb is known to have appropriated Roman and other foreign merchant ships for his invasion of Ḥimyar in 525,¹¹⁶ direct involvement of Roman authorities in that invasion seems to have been limited to moral support.¹¹⁷ It is more likely that the *šərəʔ* of RIÉth 263 is identical with *šarāʔ* (𐩨𐩣𐩪), the name of a clan and military division mentioned in RIÉth 189 from the reign of 'Ēzānā.¹¹⁸ Seen from this perspective, what has hitherto been interpreted as a reference to the Romans in RIÉth 263 may in fact be a reference to an Aksumite clan that operated as a unit in Kālēb’s invasion force. That the Aksumite army was divided along clan lines is known from other inscriptions.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ *Martyrium Arethae* (= Beaucamp, *Martyre de Saint Aréthas*), §35.

¹¹⁴ Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, 'Deux inscriptions,' p. 108.

¹¹⁵ Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,' p. 16.

¹¹⁶ *Martyrium Arethae* (= Beaucamp, *Martyre de Saint Aréthas*), §29.7.

¹¹⁷ For the case that direct Roman involvement with the Aksumite invasion of 525 was minimal, see Joëlle Beaucamp, 'Le rôle de Byzance en Mer Rouge sous le règne de Justin: mythe ou réalité?' in: *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux V^e et VI^e siècles: regards croisés sur les sources. Actes du colloque de novembre 2008*, eds. Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, and Christian Julien Robin, Paris 2010, pp. 197–218; Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix,' passim.

¹¹⁸ RIÉth 189/35 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 264); Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, p. 115 (n. 485). That a fourth-century clan survived intact down to the sixth century is not without parallel in Aksumite history, for a clan and military unit called Dākēn (alternatively Dak^wēn) is similarly attested in the reigns of both 'Ēzānā (RIÉth 187/21; RIÉth 188/10 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 256, 260)) and Kālēb (RIÉth 191/15.16 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 272)). If this clan is also mentioned on coins from the reign of Endybis (r. ca. 290–300 CE) in the form ΔAXY < *dahū (Wolfgang Hahn, 'Endybis,' in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 2, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 301), its history is longer still. Given the various forms in which the name of this clan is written over the centuries – Dahū, Dākēn, and Dak^wēn – the slight orthographic difference between the *šərəʔ* of 'Ēzānā's RIÉth 189 and the *šarāʔ* of Kālēb's RIÉth 263 poses no problems for identifying these as names for one and the same clan.

¹¹⁹ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, pp. 115–116.

(3) *Zafār 08-077*

Our third and final inscription is even more fragmentary than RIÉth 263. A surface find discovered by the University of Heidelberg expedition at Ġabūbat al-Ĥamrā' on the site of *Zafār*, it measures a mere 12 cm in height and 10 cm in width and consists of only eight lines of text. Far less text is preserved in these lines than in the extant lines of text in the inscriptions treated above, with some lines consisting of no more than a single word – if even that – and others consisting of at most two words. In 2012, Walter Müller published an edition of the inscription with a German translation and commentary, supplemented by a photograph of the fragment taken by the expedition's leader, Paul Yule.¹²⁰ It preserves the following text:

1.[...]b[.]m[... ...] 2[... *ša*]rāš*kəwwō* [...] 3.[...] *ʔanta ḥanaṣ*[*kū* ...]
 4.[...*ḥa*]naṣū *bēta kəṛə*[*stīyān* ...] 5.[...*ʔa*]n*barū ṣabbāḥ*[*ta* ...] 6.[...]šū
wa-zaka[*rū* ...] 7.[...*mā*](*r*)yām *wa*-[...] 8.[...]mō*ta*[...] ¹²¹

1.[... ...] 2.[...] I established it/put it in order [...] 3.[...] that [I] built¹²² [...]
 4.[...] they [bu]ilt a chur[ch ...] 5.[...] they imposed tribu[te ...] 6.[...] and
 they remember[ed ...] 7.[... Ma]ry and [...] 8.[...] death/he died.¹²³

The construction of a church in *Ḥimyar* is also recorded in RIÉth 191,¹²⁴ but since that inscription appears to date from the aftermath of the invasion of 518,¹²⁵ the church to which that inscription refers is presumably not the structure alluded to here in *Zafār 08-077*. Furthermore, the relevant passage in RIÉth 191, while mentioning *Ḥimyar* by name, says nothing about *Zafār* but instead refers, as we have seen, to a place called *ʕqnʔl*. Given the provenance of *Zafār 08-773*, one would assume that the church in question was located at *Zafār*. Significantly, the Syriac *Letter of Simeon of Bēt Arsām* refers to just such a church at *Zafār* during the 520s in a quotation from a letter sent by Yōsēph to the Laḥmid king al-Mundir III (r. 504–554), wherein Yōsēph claims to have converted

¹²⁰ Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,' pp. 10–13.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹²² Since the graphemes for *ṣØ* and *ṣū* are orthographically distinct, the fact that the former is used here disqualifies a reconstruction of the verb in question as *ḥanaṣū* "they built," as in *Zafār 08-077/4*.

¹²³ Without context, *Gə'əz* ጠተ (*mōta*) can be interpreted as either the noun "death" in the accusative state or the perfect verb "he died."

¹²⁴ RIÉth 191/35 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 273).

¹²⁵ According to the text (RIÉth 191/34-35 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 273)), Kālēb sent an army to *Ḥimyar* under the leadership of one *Ḥayyān* (*ḥyn*). This is undoubtedly to be identified with the individual named *ḥywnʔ* who, according to the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* (Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, p. 3b (Syriac text)), accompanied the Ethiopians on their first (sixth-century) campaign to South Arabia. Since RIÉth 191 says nothing about the campaign of 525, which Kālēb led in person, one may conclude that the inscription dates from the immediate aftermath of the campaign of 518.

this church into a synagogue.¹²⁶ No doubt the structure was then converted back into, or replaced by, a church after Kālēb's forces prevailed over those of Yōsēph, and it is conceivable that just such an act is recorded in Zafār 08-773.¹²⁷ The reference in Zafār 08-077 to the imposition of tribute recalls a statement by Procopius to the effect that, after he had defeated and killed Yōsēph and many of his followers, Kālēb brought to power the Christian Ḥimyarite Esimiphæus, i.e. Sumūyafa' 'Ašwa', and ordered that he pay an annual tribute.¹²⁸

Religious References

Before examining the religious themes that infuse the Gə'əz inscriptions from Yemen, it is worth pausing to consider the role of religious ideology in ancient warfare more broadly. Although early Christian authors generally objected to warfare and violence, particularly in the context of serving in the armies of pagan Roman emperors, the conversion of the emperor Constantine I (r. 306-337) to Christianity dramatically shifted the discourse to the justification of warfare as an instrument of defending the faith and upholding orthodoxy – at least in theory.¹²⁹ Thus, during the fourth and fifth centuries, liturgical prayers emphasized the military role of the emperors and the need for soldiers to defend Christianity.¹³⁰ In this new ideological environment, enemies of the Roman Empire could be portrayed as enemies of Christianity itself against whom warfare could be justified on religious grounds.¹³¹ Military operations of this nature have often been labeled “holy war,” though this concept has received a fair amount of criticism by historians in recent years, not least given the fact that, by virtue of defending a God-protected empire, all warfare waged by Christian Roman emperors was, in a manner of speaking, “holy.”¹³² The same can be said of *ḡihād* in the Islamic context.¹³³ Beyond that, the framing of certain types of pre-modern warfare as “holy” implies that there were other types that were in some way not invested with a religious significance. Such a distinction, however, is born of

¹²⁶ Ignazio Guidi (ed. and trans.), *La lettera di Simeone vescovo di Bêt Arsām sopra I martiri omeriti*, Rome 1881, p. 2.

¹²⁷ RIÉth 264, another fragmentary Gə'əz inscription from Zafār, alludes to synagogues in the plural (*mək^wrābāta*) (RIÉth 264/2 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 351)), but since so little of the text of that inscription is preserved it is not clear whether we have a reference here to Yōsēph's conversion of churches into Jewish houses of worship.

¹²⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, §1.20.1.

¹²⁹ John Haldon, ‘Fighting for Peace’: Justifying Warfare and Violence in the Medieval East Roman World,’ in: *The Cambridge History of Violence. II: The Medieval Era*, eds. Matthew Gordon, Richard Kaeuper, and Harriet Zurndorfer, Cambridge 2020, pp. 496–497. For a detailed discussion of the perspectives of Christian authors both before and after Constantine's conversion, see Louis J. Swift, ‘Early Christian Views on Violence, War, and Peace,’ in: *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, Malden and Oxford 2007, pp. 279–296.

¹³⁰ Haldon, ‘Fighting for Peace,’ p. 497.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 498–499.

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 510 (and the sources cited therein).

¹³³ Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*, Princeton and Oxford 2006.

the sacred-secular binary that, while typifying western modernity, is not applicable to pre-modern societies. Add to this the problems posed by treating religion as but one of several discrete cultural systems instead of an all-encompassing meta-discourse, an issue noted in the Introduction, and it should become evident that the phrase “holy war” is best avoided. Even when the ultimate goals of warfare were purely political, e.g. punitive measures or territorial acquisitions, warfare itself was directly linked with the world of the divine. This association predates the rise of Christianity by many centuries. Writing of warfare in the Iron Age Levant, though with applicability to a wide range of pre-modern cultures, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet notes that, while

[u]ne guerre n'est jamais entreprise afin de convertir par la force d'autres peuples à son ou ses dieux [... l']intervention divine légitimant la guerre, puisque c'est bien de cela a qu'il est question, est présentée comme une légitimation a priori des expéditions militaires.¹³⁴

At times, this divine intervention was expressed in literature by casting the deity himself as a warrior, as in Exodus 15, where YHWH is described as a “man of war” (*ʔiš milḥāmāh*) who annihilates Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. In other instances, a king might present his military campaigns as valorous acts undertaken for the sake of a deity. The latter phenomenon can be observed in monumental inscriptions left by the early Sabaean kings *Yīta'amar Watar Ibn Yakrubmalik* (fl. late eighth century BCE) and *Karib'il Watar Ibn Damar'alī* (fl. early seventh century BCE), which state that both rulers waged war for the Sabaean state-god *'Īlmuq̄h* and for the body politic of Saba' (*l-ʔlmq̄h w-l-s'ibʔ*).¹³⁵ The latter ruler is reported to have compelled the inhabitants of the defeated city-state of Naššān and their king *Sumhuyafa' Yāsir^{ān} Ibn Labū^{ān}* to construct a temple to *'Īlmuq̄h* within the main town of Naššān itself (*ybn̄y s'mhyf' w-ns²n byt ʔlmq̄h b-ws'ṭ hgrⁿ ns²n*),¹³⁶ though here too the intention was clearly not to force the Naššānites to worship the Sabaean deity. Rather, *Karib'il Watar* sought to give Naššān a Sabaean makeover, and to that end saw fit to erect a temple to *'Īlmuq̄h*, as well as to settle Sabaean colonists in the town (*yḥwr s'ibʔ b-hgrⁿ ns²n*).¹³⁷ Thus, it was religion that was placed in the service of politics, much though it was presented the other way round.

In the case of *Kālēb's* campaigns in South Arabia, the underlying geo-strategic goals, as opposed to the publicized religious motives, are not difficult to discern. Simply put,

¹³⁴ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, ‘« Kamosh me dit: “Va, prends Nebo à Israël!” ». Réflexions sur l'idée de guerre sainte dans la Bible et chez les peuples du Levant dans l'Antiquité,’ *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 62 (2009), pp. 217, 219. Although Briquel Chatonnet retains the use of the phrase “holy war” (*guerre sainte*) in her article, her observations remain valid.

¹³⁵ RÉS 3945/1.4.6.7.11.11-12.12.14.15.17.18.19-20 (Hatke, ‘For *'Īlmuq̄h* and for Saba’,’ pp. 97–100); DAI *Širwāḥ* 2005-50/1.3.4 (Nobert Nebes, *Der Tatenbericht des Yīta'amar Watar bin Yakrubmalik aus Širwāḥ (Jemen)* Tübingen and Berlin 2016, pp. 9, 10–11).

¹³⁶ RÉS 3945/16 (Hatke, ‘For *'Īlmuq̄h* and for Saba’,’ pp. 104–105).

¹³⁷ RÉS 3945/16 (Ibidem, pp. 104–105, 107–110).

whoever controlled both sides of the southern end of the Red Sea effectively controlled all traffic into and out of that body of water – including, of course, all shipping linked to maritime trade with India.¹³⁸ Also significant is the fact that, with the conquest of South Arabia, the Aksumites gained control of Nağrān, a key station in the network of trans-Arabian caravan routes from which the two main branches bifurcated: one leading via the Ḥiğāz to Syria-Palestine and the other via Yamāma to the Persian Gulf.¹³⁹ Given that Nağrān served as the point of departure for all northward-bound caravans and the point of arrival for all caravans bound for South Arabia, its inhabitants grew quite wealthy,¹⁴⁰ a fact that explains in part why the local Christian community was targeted for particularly harsh treatment by Yōsēph 'As'ar Yaṭ'ar, who no doubt had geo-strategic and economic interests of his own. From the Aksumites' perspective, it helped that Nağrān could be reached with relative ease if one departed from Eritrea's northern coast near Adulis, struck out for the Arabia coast via the Dahlak and Farasān Archipelagos – in both of which Aksumite remains have been found¹⁴¹ – and then, upon reaching Ġāzān, proceeded inland to Nağrān. The Aksumites' interest in Nağrān is evident from Sabaic inscriptions,

¹³⁸ Although the Sāsānids of Iran enjoyed certain advantages over their neighbors to the southwest on account of the closer proximity of their realm to the Indian subcontinent (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, §1.20.12), the sixth-century author Cosmas Indicopleustes (*Topographie chrétien*, §11.15.5-13) states that Taprobanē (i.e. Sri Lanka) sent ships to Adulis and in turn received goods from that town. This textual evidence of sustained Aksumite contact with South Asia is confirmed not only by the (likely) derivation of the *fidal* syllabary from the Brāhmī script but also by the discovery of Indian beads at Aksum, Aksumite pottery at Kamrej in Gujarat, Aksumite coins at various Indian sites (including the Mangalore hoard of twenty-seven Aksumite coins dating between the mid-fourth and mid-fifth centuries, a possible coin from the Madurai Basin, and imitations of Aksumite coins from Karur in Tamil Nadu), and a fragmentary clay figurine at Adulis of the sort produced in India's Gupta Empire between the fourth and sixth centuries (Anjana Reddy, 'Looking from Arabia to India: Analysis of the Early Roman 'India Trade' in the Indian Ocean during the Late Pre-Islamic Period (3rd Century BC–6th Century AD),' 2 vols. (PhD diss., Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute 2013), pp. 171–172; Chiara Zazzaro in Zazzaro, Chiara et al., 'The Contribution of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" to the 2013–2014 Eritrean-Italian Archaeological Field Season at Adulis,' *Newsletter di Archeologia CISA* 5 (2014), pp. 547, 587 (Fig. 42)).

¹³⁹ For an overview of the main caravan routes of pre-Islamic Arabia, see Alessandro de Maigret, 'La route caravanère de l'encens dans l'Arabie préislamique: Éléments d'information sur son itinéraire et sa chronologie,' *Arabian Humanities* 11 (2003), Viewed 25 January 2022 <<https://journals.openedition.org/cy/160>>.

¹⁴⁰ As an example of the Nağrānīs' wealth, a woman of Nağrān named Rūhayma is reported to have possessed gold, silver, slaves, bondmaids, and crops (*dahḥā w-sīmā w-ṣaḥdē w-amḥātā w-ṣalātā*), some 40,000 stamped *dīnārs* in her own treasury, along with the treasury of her recently martyred husband, as well as jewelry made of pearls and rubies (*arbšīn alḥīn dīnārē da-ḥīīmīn w-sīmīn bēt gazzā dīl šar men bēt gazzeh d-gabr w-ḥešlātā margānyātā w-yāqūntē*) (Irfan Shahīd, *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents*, Brussels 1971, p. xxvii). So great was Rūhayma's wealth, in fact, that at one point King Ma'dikarib Ya'fur (r. ca. 518–522) himself, Kālēb's first appointee on the Ḥimyarite throne, borrowed 12,000 *dīnārs* from her (Ibidem).

¹⁴¹ Timothy Insoll, 'Dahlak Kebir, Eritrea: From Aksumite to Ottoman,' *Adumatu* 3 (2001), pp. 45–46; John P. Cooper and Chiara Zazzaro, 'A Stone Anchor from the Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia,' *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 41/2 (2012), p. 409; John P. Cooper and Chiara Zazzaro, 'The Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia: towards a chronology of settlement,' *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 25 (2014), pp. 151, 153 (Fig. 7/B), 155 (Fig. 8/G), 156.

which speak of their having briefly occupied the oasis during the mid-third century.¹⁴² Clearly, Aksumite intervention in South Arabia during the sixth century was motivated by more than the liberation of persecuted Christians. In presenting this intervention in religious terms, however, the inscriptions from Yemen's Gə'əz corpus gave a legitimacy to the undertaking in ways that purely material interests could not. It would be easy enough to dismiss Kālēb's ostensibly religious motives for warfare in South Arabia, as well as the religious framework in which this warfare is presented in Late Antique texts like the inscriptions of the Gə'əz corpus, as nothing more than a crude ideological cover for materialist and political motives. Such an assessment, however, runs the risk of assuming that the maintenance of Aksumite domination in South Arabia was dependent on nothing more than an integrated set of concepts,¹⁴³ quite apart from taking for granted a sacred-secular binary that is universally applicable to all times and cultures. It also overlooks the role of narratives, including those informed by religious ideology, as models both of and for reality.¹⁴⁴ As an archetypal Christian king, Kālēb could thus be both a savior of his South Arabian coreligionists and at the same time a pragmatist who, by establishing a sphere of influence in South Arabia, ensured stability and order, the fruits of which were both political and economic – not to mention, from an Aksumite perspective, evidence of divine favor.

When viewed against the backdrop of historical precedent of the sort discussed above, it is clear that warfare waged by the Aksumites in the name of Christianity, or at least presented as such, was the product of a long tradition of political ideology in the ancient Near East. As we shall see, the Aksumites at times made explicit reference to this tradition by comparing their military victories to those of the Israelites before them. In this, they were in good company. Already in the New Testament, the Israelite conquest of Canaan is invoked as evidence of the unfolding of a divinely ordained narrative in which the nascent Christian community now had a part to play.¹⁴⁵ Later on, we find that, no sooner had Constantine embraced Christianity than the ecclesiastical author Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339/340) compared the defeat of his rival Maxentius to the destruction

¹⁴² Ja 576+Ja 577, a Sabaic inscription from Mārib dating from ca. 243 during the coregency of the Sabaean kings ʿIlšaraḥ Yaḥḏub and his brother Yaʿzil Bayyin, speaks of not only an alliance between the Naḡrānīs and the Aksumites but also of a governor of the Aksumite king who held sway over Naḡrān (*ʿsqb ngs-ʿyⁿ b-hgrⁿ ngrn*) (Ja 576+Ja 577/25-26 (Jamme, 'Sabaean Inscriptions,' p. 77)). Other, indirect evidence of even earlier Aksumite interest in the Naḡrān region may be hinted at in Robin-Umm Laylā 1 (= Ja 2877), a Sabaic inscription from Umm Laylā, located some 50 km northwest of Ṣaʿda, which dates from ca. 160–190 (Robin, 'Saba' et la Khawlān,' p. 164). According to this inscription, local tribes made an agreement "to fortify themselves against the Ethiopians, who had reached their land" (*l-tṣnʿn bn-ḥbsⁿ l-mzʿw ʾrḏ-hmw*) (Robin-Umm Laylā 1/5-6 (Robin, 'Saba' et la Khawlān,' p. 183)). Since Umm Laylā lies within relatively easy reach of the Red Sea coast, and since the town of Ṣaʿda was an important station on the caravan route linking regions further south with Naḡrān (Heiss, 'Historical and Social Aspects,' pp. 66–67), it is possible that gaining access to the oasis was the reason why the Aksumites targeted this otherwise remote part of South Arabia.

¹⁴³ Here paraphrasing Asad, 'Anthropology and the Analysis,' p. 622.

¹⁴⁴ Pongratz-Leisten, 'Religion and Ideology,' p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ Acts 7:45, 13:17-19; Hebrews 11:32-34.

of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, citing the very chapter cited above, Exodus 15, in which God himself intervenes in his capacity as a divine warrior.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the development of a distinctly Christian ideology in the centuries following the career of Jesus of Nazareth furnished early Christian rulers with a new set of symbols and literary allusions with which to express their religious identity and present narratives of their military undertakings. The most obvious example of a symbol was, of course, the cross, that Eusebius claims had appeared to Constantine's troops at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, accompanied by the words "By this conquer" (τούτω νικά).¹⁴⁷ The resonance of this symbol with Aksumite Christians is evident from the coins minted by ʿĒzānā following his conversion to Christianity, in which the pagan symbols of the crescent and lunar disc are replaced by the cross.¹⁴⁸ Then, in a clear instance of *imitatio Constantini*, the early fifth-century Aksumite king *MHDYS*¹⁴⁹ minted coins bearing the legend *b-z msqł tmw?* (= *ba-zə masqal təməwwə?*) "With this cross you shall conquer."¹⁵⁰ What concerns us in the present study, however, are the religious references in inscriptions from Yemen's Gə'əz corpus, be they invocations of God and Jesus Christ or quotations from Scripture. Whatever the geo-strategic motives of Kālēb's campaigns in South Arabia, religious references in the Gə'əz corpus give these campaigns a distinctly religious cast.

Much though we today take for granted a dichotomy between sacred and secular interests, no such dichotomy existed for the Aksumites. By the same token, human and divine causality were interrelated in the Aksumites' worldview. On the one hand, Kālēb makes such statements as "I devastated the port" ([*ʔab*]dōkū *marsa*),¹⁵¹ "I spent the night on the ship" (*bētkū wəsta ḥamar*),¹⁵² "I burned the palace of Saba'" (*ʔawʕaykū tāʕakā sabā?*),¹⁵³ and "I established it/put it in order" ([*ʕa*]rāʕkəwwō).¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, he acknowledges the role of the divine in such phrases as "G[od] delivered unto me" (*maṭṭawanī ʔə[ʕzī]a bəḥēr*) in RIÉth 195 I/10 and "this Go[d] did for me" (*zanta gabra lūta ʔəʕzīʔa bəḥ[ēr]*) in RIÉth 195 II/19. To give a bit of context, it bears noting that similar sentiments, reflecting a belief in being guided by God in the course of military action, are expressed by ʿĒzānā in records of his Nubian campaign of 360. Thus, in the Greek account of the campaign preserved in RIÉth 271/20-22, the king says "He (i.e. God) guided me and I have faith in Him and He Himself became my guide" (ὁδήγησέν μου

¹⁴⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, §9.9.5.

¹⁴⁷ Idem, *Life of Constantine*, §1.28.2.

¹⁴⁸ Phillipson, *Foundations*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁹ The vocalization of this king's name remains uncertain.

¹⁵⁰ Stuart Munro-Hay, *Catalogue of the Aksumite Coins in the British Museum*, London 1999, p. 36. Stuart Munro Hay's translation of the legend as "By this cross he will conquer" is incorrect. Were this the intended message, the verb would be *yww?* (*yəməwwə?*). The only way *tmw?* could represent the masculine third person singular would be if it took the form of the perfective of the T-stem verb *tamawʔa* (alternatively *tamōʔa*) "he was conquered, he was defeated" – hardly the sort of message which a king would want to send!

¹⁵¹ RIÉth 195 I/3 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 286).

¹⁵² RIÉth 195 I/9 (Ibidem, p. 286).

¹⁵³ RIÉth 195 II/18 (Ibidem, p. 286).

¹⁵⁴ Zafār 08-077/2 (Müller, 'Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,' p. 10).

καὶ εἰς α[ὐ]τὸν πιστεύω καὶ αὐτὸς ἐγένετό μοι ὁδηγός).¹⁵⁵ Once ʿĒzānā was informed of the depredations by the Noba on the people dwelling along Aksum’s western frontier, he sprang into action: “I stood up with the power of the God Christ, in whom I have placed my faith, and he guided me” (Καὶ ἀνέστη[ν] ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ Θεοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ὃν ἐπίστευσα καὶ ὁδήγησέν με).¹⁵⁶ Likewise, in a Gəʿəz account of the same campaign, RIÉth 190, inscribed in South Arabian *musnad*, we read: “And we passed from there while God guided us [through their] country” (*w-hlfh^m ḡm-d^m b-z^m ḡgzḡbhr^m mrh^m [b-d] w/[m]^m*).¹⁵⁷ Then, in the account of his campaigns in the Horn of Africa, documented in RIÉth 191, Kālēb states that “with the help of [Go]d, I waged war” (*b-rdḡt [ḡgzḡ b]hr ḡbḡk*)¹⁵⁸ and that his troops seized booty from the enemy “by the power of God” (*b-hyl ḡgzḡ bhr*).¹⁵⁹ Of the prisoners and spoils of war that the Aksumite troops seized in the process, Kālēb says, “This has God, in Whom I place my trust, given to me” (*znt whbn ḡgzḡ bhr z-kyh tḡm[nk]*).¹⁶⁰ It is clear, then, that when the Aksumites embarked on their invasion of South Arabia in 525, they did so in the firm belief that the Christian deity favored their kingdom in its military ventures. Thus, they had every reason to expect that this deity would aid them every step of the way in the campaign to liberate their South Arabian coreligionists. Even in those portions of the Gəʿəz inscriptions from Yemen where Kālēb claims to have taken the initiative, comparative Aksumite material leaves us in no doubt that he felt himself guided by God. Human and divine causality, then, did not merely coexist in the Aksumites’ worldview; the former was closely tied to the latter.

Given the staunchly Christian identity of the ruling elite of Aksum, as well as the increasing number of Christians among their subjects, it should come as no surprise that Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are both mentioned by name in the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen. Christ (*kərastōs*) appears once in RIÉth 195 II/6 in an unclear context and makes another appearance in RIÉth 263/5 in the phrase “[... Ch]rist will be vic[torious ...]” ([... *kərastōs yəma[wwəḡ ...]*). Given the association of Christ with victory in RIÉth 263/5, the fragmentary phrase [...]*s mawāḡi ba*-[...] in RIÉth 195 II/2-3 might be reconstructed as [*kərastōs mawāḡi ba*-...] “[Chri]st the Victorious in [...]” Very similar formulae are employed in RIÉth 191, wherein Kālēb invokes “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Victorious, in Whom I believe” (*ḡysʼsʼ krsʼtsʼ wld ḡgzḡ bhr mwḡ z-ḡmnk bt*),¹⁶¹ who is elsewhere referred to in the same inscription as “Christ who is unvanquished by the enemy” (*krsʼtsʼ ḡ-ḡ[yt]mwḡ l-dr*).¹⁶² Likewise, in the Gəʿəz account of his Nubian campaign, ʿĒzānā invokes God as “Lord of Heaven, [Who is in] heaven and (on) earth, victorious

¹⁵⁵ Bernard, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 371; trans. Hägg in Eide et al., *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, p. 1102.

¹⁵⁶ RIÉth 271/27-29 (Bernard, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 372); trans. Hägg in Eide et al., *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, p. 1102.

¹⁵⁷ RIÉth 190/8-9 (adapted from Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 269).

¹⁵⁸ RIÉth 191/11-12 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 272).

¹⁵⁹ RIÉth 191/23 (Ibidem, p. 272).

¹⁶⁰ RIÉth 191/33 (Ibidem, p. 273).

¹⁶¹ RIÉth 191/2-3 (Ibidem, p. 272).

¹⁶² RIÉth 191/11 (Ibidem, p. 272).

on my behalf” (*ḡəgzīʔa samāy [za-ba] samāy wa-mədr mawāʔi līta*).¹⁶³ Although this last inscription does not mention Jesus Christ by name, it demonstrates nonetheless the importance of divine victory in Aksumite religious ideology. This concept owes something to pre-Christian tradition, as Maḥrəm, a deity regarded as the progenitor of Aksum’s pagan kings, is regularly invoked as “he who is undefeated by the enemy” in Aksumite inscriptions predating ʿĒzānā’s conversion to Christianity.¹⁶⁴ In the South Arabian context, the invocations of Christ in the Gə’əz corpus from Yemen are among the few features that the inscriptions of the corpus share with Christian inscriptions in Late Sabaic. Thus in Ist 7608 bis, a fragmentary inscription from Ḍāf dating from the reign of Kālēb’s second appointee to the Ḥimyarite throne, Sumūyafa’ ʿAšwa’, we read [... ..] *sʿm rḥmnʿn w-bn-hw krsʿtsʿ ḡlbʿn* [... ..] “[... ..] the name of Raḥmān^{ān} and His son, Christ the Victorious [... ..].”¹⁶⁵ Here too, as with RIÉth 263/5 and RIÉth 195 II/2-3, Christ is described as “victorious” (*ḡlbʿn*). As for Raḥmān^{ān} “the Merciful,” this is an epithet for the Judaeo-Christian deity, ultimately derived from Jewish Aramaic,¹⁶⁶ that first appears in Sabaic ca. 420.¹⁶⁷ Although the epithet *ḡlb* has no cognate in Gə’əz,¹⁶⁸ it is possible that its use here in reference to Christ is a calque on contemporary Gə’əz expressions.

Turning now to the Virgin Mary, there is only one reference to her in the extant corpus, in *Zafār* 08-77/7. As the mother of Jesus, Mary is the most revered saint in Ethiopian Christianity, which bestows upon her a special title, that of *walatta dāwīt* “daughter of David.”¹⁶⁹ Her cult was avidly promoted by the Ethiopian emperor Zar’a Yā’əqōb (r. 1434–1468),¹⁷⁰ to the extent that those Christians who felt that the emperor was a bit too excessive in his devotion to Mary were branded “enemy of Mary” (*darra*

¹⁶³ RIÉth 189/1 (Ibidem, p. 263).

¹⁶⁴ RIÉth 185 I/2-3: *ḡ-ḡytmwʔ ḡḍrrʿm*; RIÉth 185 II/3-4: *z-ḡytmwʔ l-ḍr*; RIÉth 185 bis I/3-4: *ḡ-ḡytmwʔʿm l-ḍrʿm*; RIÉth 185 bis II/4: *z-ḡytmwʔ l-ḍr*; RIÉth 186/4-5: *ḡ-ḡytmwʔʿm l-ḍrʿm*; RIÉth 187/4: *za-ḡəyyətmawwā la-ḍarr*; RIÉth 188/5-6: *za-ḡəyyətmawwāʔ la-ḍarr* (Ibidem, pp. 242, 243, 246, 247, 251, 255, 260). Although syntactically ambiguous in Gə’əz, these descriptions clearly refer to Maḥrəm and not to the Aksumite king, victorious on the battlefield, since Aksumite inscriptions in Greek invoke Maḥrəm in his incarnation as Ares as “invincible” (ἀνίκητος). For illustrative examples, see RIÉth 269/8; RIÉth 270/6; RIÉth 270 bis/4-5 (Bernard, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ pp. 362, 364, 368).

¹⁶⁵ Ist 7608 bis/16 (Robin, ‘Joseph, dernier roi,’ p. 97).

¹⁶⁶ Gajda, *Royaume de Himyar*, p. 225 (n. 1031).

¹⁶⁷ Christian Julien Robin, ‘The Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Ḥimyar in Arabia: A Discreet Conversion,’ in: *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, eds. Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, Cambridge 2021, p. 193.

¹⁶⁸ This form is rare enough in Ancient South Arabian, as *ḡlbʿn* is attested in only a handful of cases as a masculine personal name in Ḥaḍramitic and Qatabānic. On these, see the online Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions <<http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0>>, viewed 25 January 2022. The cognate epithet in Ist 7608 bis may be a loanword from Arabic, in which *ḡālib* “victorious” is attested.

¹⁶⁹ Getatchew Haile, ‘Mary,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 3, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 808.

¹⁷⁰ Getatchew Haile and Denis Nonsitsin, ‘Mariology,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 3, p. 810; ‘Genres of Ethiopian-Eritrean Christian Literature with a Focus on Hagiography,’ in: *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Samantha Kelly, Leiden and Boston 2020, p. 254; Emmanuel Fritsch and Habtemichael Kidane, ‘The Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Its Liturgy,’ in: Kelly, *Companion*, p. 187.

māryām) or “Jews” (*ṣayhūd*).¹⁷¹ Whether the cult of Mary had already achieved in Aksumite times the status that it enjoyed in medieval Ethiopia is not clear. The Virgin Mary is invoked variously as “Mother of God” (*walādīta ṣamlāk*) and “Mother of Light” (*ṣammū la-bərḥān*) in inscriptions on wooden ritual furniture dating from the reign of the Zāgʷē king Lālībalā (ca. late twelfth-early thirteenth century),¹⁷² a period during which Aksumite cultural influences were still strong.¹⁷³ When considering medieval Ethiopian Mariology more broadly, however, we have to take into consideration the influence of foreign traditions that post-date the Aksumite period by many centuries. Thus, while the text known as *Wəddāsē Māryām* “The Praise of Mary” is alleged in Ethiopian tradition to have been translated from a Syriac original during the Aksumite period, it seems that the Urtext was in fact a Bohairic Coptic Theotokion, and that the Gəʿəz translation was made during the second half of the fourteenth century on the basis of an Arabic version.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, the *Taʿāmra Māryām* “The Miracles of Mary,” another text integral to Ethiopian Mariology, is based ultimately on French legends about the Virgin Mary dating back to the first half of the twelfth century. These were then transmitted to Palestine by the Crusaders and finally reached Ethiopia via Arabic translations.¹⁷⁵ As for Late Antique South Arabia, possible evidence of the cult of Mary does seem to survive in the form of a rather crude, 24-cm high limestone statue from the Ibb region, now kept in the National Museum at Ṣanʿā (YM 1803), that may represent Mary and the infant Jesus.¹⁷⁶ However, while this piece is probably of pre-Islamic date, it remains unclear whether it can be assigned to the period of Aksumite occupation. At the town of Aksum itself, the main church is widely known as *māryām ṣəyōn* “Mary of Zion,” though here too, while there is material evidence that a structure dating from the Aksumite period stood on the

¹⁷¹ Getatchew Haile and Nosnitsin, ‘Mariology,’ p. 810.

¹⁷² Claire Bosc-Tiessé, ‘Catalogue des autels et meubles d’autel en bois (*tābot* et *manbara tābot*) des églises de Lālībalā: jalons pour une histoire des objets et des motifs,’ *Annales d’Éthiopie* 25 (2010), pp. 64, 77.

¹⁷³ Claude Lepage, ‘Entre Aksum et Lalibela: les églises du sud-est du Tigray (IX^e–XII^e s.) en Éthiopie,’ *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 150/1 (2006), pp. 22, 24; David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, New Haven and London 2009, pp. 185, 195–196 and passim; Alessandro Bausi, ‘Kings and Saints: Founders of Dynasties, Monasteries and Churches in Christian Ethiopia,’ in: *Stifter und Mäzene und ihre Rolle in der Religion: Von Königen, Mönchen, Vordenkern und Laien in Indien, China und anderen Kulturen*, ed. Barbara Schuler, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 173–174; Gianfrancesco Lusini, ‘Dinamiche identitarie nell’Etiopia antica e medievale,’ in: *Materiality and Identity: Selected papers from the proceedings of the ATrA Conferences of Naples and Turin 2015*, ed. Ilaria Micheli, Trieste 2016, p. 161; idem, ‘The Costs of the Linguistic Transitions: Traces of Disappeared Languages in Ethiopia,’ in: *Cultural and Linguistic Transition Explored: Proceedings of the ATrA Closing Workshop. Trieste, May 25–26, 2016*, ed. Ilaria Micheli, Trieste 2017, pp. 205.

¹⁷⁴ Stefan Weninger, ‘Wəddasē Maryam,’ in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 4, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 1173.

¹⁷⁵ Veronika Six, ‘Water – The Nile – And the Tāʿamrā Maryam. Miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Ethiopian Version,’ *Aethiopica* 2 (1999), p. 54; Alessandro Bausi, ‘Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene: Cultural Transmission, Translation, and Reception,’ in: Kelly, *Companion*, pp. 238–239.

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Finster, ‘Arabia in Late Antiquity: An Outline of the cultural situation in the Peninsula at the time of Muhammad,’ in: *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, eds. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, Leiden 2010, pp. 95–96.

site of the present (late sixteenth-century) church, the dedication of the original church to Mary is unconfirmed in Aksumite documentation and is only first attested in a land grant of Zar'a Yā'əqōb.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, credible evidence for a cult of Mary of sorts during Aksumite times – even if not on par with the cult promoted by Zar'a Yā'əqōb – is provided by the *Maṣḥafa 'Iraftā la-Māryām* “The Book of Mary's Rest”, a Gə'əz translation of a now lost Greek text.¹⁷⁸ As we shall see in the following paragraph, the fact that the Gə'əz version relies on a Greek *Vorlage* indicates that the text can only have been translated during the Aksumite period.

RIÉth 195 I+II is of particular interest in that it preserves several quotations from Scripture. Not only does this shed light on the ideological manner in which the Aksumites chose to frame the narrative of their invasion of South Arabia, but it also provides a *terminus ante quem* for the translation of at least some portions of the Bible into Gə'əz. When exactly this process of translation began is difficult to say, though its inception can definitely be assigned to the Aksumite period. Research by Alessandro Bausi on a Gə'əz codex dubbed the “Aksumite Collection,” containing texts on the liturgy, canon law, the history of Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the history of the church councils, reveals that this manuscript is based on a corpus written in Greek in Egypt sometime in the fifth century or the first half of the sixth and was probably translated into Gə'əz at about the same time.¹⁷⁹ If Christian literature was being translated into Gə'əz during that period, this could provide us with a timeframe for at least the beginning of the translation of the Bible. Indirect evidence for the translation of Scripture into Gə'əz during the fifth century or even earlier is provided by the reception in Ethiopia of the *Book of Enoch*. Although fragments of this Hellenistic-period Jewish work survive in Aramaic and Greek translation, the complete version of the text is preserved only in Gə'əz.¹⁸⁰ Uniquely in the Christian world, the *Book of Enoch* enjoys canonical status in Ethiopian Christianity, a fact that may indicate that the text was received in Ethiopia at a very early date, before it had fallen out of favor in the Christian lands of the Mediterranean.¹⁸¹ In the context

¹⁷⁷ Stuart Munro-Hay, ‘Aksum Ṣayon,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 1, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 183–184.

¹⁷⁸ Victor Arras, *De transitu Mariae apocrypha aethiopice*, 2 vols., Louvain 1973–1974.

¹⁷⁹ Alessandro Bausi, ‘New Egyptian texts in Ethiopia,’ *Adamantius* 8 (2002), pp. 146, 147; idem, ‘The Aksumite Background of the Ethiopic “Corpus Canonum”,’ in: *Proceedings of the XIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies Hamburg July 20–25, 2003*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Wiesbaden 2006, p. 533; idem, ‘The so-called >Traditio apostolica<: preliminary observations on the new Ethiopic evidence,’ in: *Völksglaube im antiken Christentum*, eds. Heike Grieser and Andreas Merkt, Darmstadt 2009, p. 291; idem, ‘The History of the Episcopate of Alexandria (HEpA): Editio minor of the fragments preserved in the Aksumite Collection and in the Codex Veronensis LX (58),’ *Adamantius* 22 (2016), pp. 249–302; idem, ‘Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene,’ pp. 225–226, 228.

¹⁸⁰ A vast amount of scholarship has been devoted to the *Book of Enoch*. In addition to Loren T. Stuckenbruck, ‘The Book of Enoch: Its Reception in Second Temple Jewish and in Christian Tradition,’ *Early Christianity* 4 (2013), pp. 7–40, a useful introduction can be found in Siegbert Uhlig, ‘Enoch, Book of,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 2, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 311–313 (and the literature cited therein). For an English translation and critical edition of the text, see Michael A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: a new edition in the light of the Aramaic Dead Sea fragments*, 2 vols., Oxford 1978.

¹⁸¹ Stuckenbruck, ‘Book of Enoch,’ p. 22.

of Arabic sources, the transmission of Enochic material by Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. ca. 652), a Jewish Yemeni convert to Islam known for his knowledge of Biblical and South Arabian tradition, indicates the circulation of Enochic material in the southern Red Sea region during Late Antiquity.¹⁸² Significantly, fragments of a Greek version of the text, dating from the fourth and fifth centuries, have come to light in Egypt, a country with which Ethiopia has long had close ties, and there are indications that those who translated the *Book of Enoch* into Gə'əz made use of a Greek *Vorlage*.¹⁸³ Again, if a Gə'əz translation of the *Book of Enoch*, regarded by the Ethiopian church as a canonical part of the Bible, was produced in the fourth or fifth century, it stands to reason that at least some of the other major books of the Bible were also translated around the same time. Like the *Book of Enoch*, the Bible would also have been translated into Gə'əz on the basis of a Greek *Vorlage*, judging from the presence in the Gə'əz Bible of Greek loanwords, syntactical features, morphological structures, Greek-inspired orthography of proper names, and errors of translation that can only be explained by the translators' reliance on a Greek version of the text – in contrast to the lack of influence from Hebrew, Aramaic, or Syriac.¹⁸⁴ That the scribes involved with the translation of the Bible into Gə'əz relied on a Greek *Vorlage* in the first place provides in itself indirect evidence for an early (i.e. pre-sixth century) timeframe for such a project. Although Aksumite inscriptions in Greek are attested for the third and fourth centuries, none from the sixth century are known, and the very fact that a governor of the Aksumite trading center of Adulis sought the help of two foreigners in making copies of two older Greek texts from the town ca. 518¹⁸⁵ suggests that Aksumite knowledge of Greek waned after the fourth century. If so, this could narrow the timeframe for the translation of the Bible into Gə'əz to the late fourth century. Further evidence to this effect is provided by John Chrysostom (d. 407), who alludes to an “Indian” version of the Gospel of John,¹⁸⁶ “Indian” being a common term for Ethiopians during Late Antiquity.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² David J. Halperin and Gordon D. Newby, ‘Two Castrated Bulls: A Study in the Haggadah of Ka'b al-Aḥbār,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102/4 (1982), pp. 631–638.

¹⁸³ Stuckenbruck, ‘Book of Enoch,’ pp. 20, 22–23.

¹⁸⁴ Michael A. Knibb, *Translating the Bible: the Ethiopic version of the Old Testament*, Oxford and New York 1999, p. 19; Alessandro Bausi, ‘Translations in Late Antique Ethiopia,’ in: *Egitto crocevia di traduzioni*, ed. Franco Crevatin, Trieste 2018, pp. 76–79; idem, ‘Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene,’ pp. 220–221, 223.

¹⁸⁵ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien*, §1.56.1-14; Francis Breyer, *Das Königreich Aksum: Geschichte und Archäologie Abessinien in der Spätantike*, Darmstadt and Mainz, p. 118; idem, *Schrift im antiken Afrika*, p. 284. The fact that coins bearing Greek legends were struck as late as the reign of Kālēb (Robin, ‘L’arrivée du christianisme,’ pp. xxvii–xxviii) need not imply a widespread knowledge of Greek at that time, not least given the fact that the legends in question are often corrupt (Breyer, *Schrift im antiken Afrika*, p. 284).

¹⁸⁶ Pierluigi Piovaneli, ‘Aksum and the Bible: Old Assumptions and New Perspectives,’ *Aethiopica* 21 (2018), pp. 13–14.

¹⁸⁷ Philip Mayerson, ‘A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113/2 (1993), pp. 169–174. To be sure, South Arabians were also at times referred to as “Indians” during Late Antiquity but, since there is no evidence that the Bible was ever translated into Sabaic, nor even that it was translated into Arabic in pre-Islamic times (Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*, Princeton 2013, pp. 7–53), it is presumably not

It is even possible that the first attempts at translation of Scripture were made as early as 'Ēzānā's reign, though admittedly hard evidence is lacking. Inscriptions recording that king's Nubian campaign, following his conversion to Christianity, make clear the religious transformation but express religious concepts rather differently depending on the language used. Thus, the Gə'əz inscription RIÉth 189 invokes the Christian deity in such neutral terms as "Lord of Heaven, Who is in heaven and (on) earth" (*ṛəgzīṛa samāy* [za-ba-]samāy wa-mədr),¹⁸⁸ "Lord of Heaven" (*ṛəgzīṛa samāy*),¹⁸⁹ "Lord of All" (*ṛəgzīṛa k'wəllū*),¹⁹⁰ and "Lord of the Land" (*ṛəgzīṛa bəhēr*).¹⁹¹ By contrast, the Greek inscription RIÉth 271 invokes, in explicitly Christian terms, Jesus Christ (Ἰησοῦς[ς] Χριστό[ς])¹⁹² and the Trinity (Ἐν τῇ πίστι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος).¹⁹³ Neither of these inscriptions, however, quotes from Scripture,¹⁹⁴ though RIÉth 274, a now lost Aksumite inscription in Greek that quotes from either Psalm 47 or 87 may date as early as 370–380,¹⁹⁵ i.e. immediately after 'Ēzānā's reign. To date, the earliest evidence for the incorporation of Biblical verses in Aksumite inscriptions in Gə'əz dates from the reign of Kālēb.¹⁹⁶ That no such quotations from Scripture have (yet) been identified in Aksumite royal inscriptions pre-dating Kālēb's reign is not, however, relevant for the question of dating the Bible's translation into Gə'əz, for reasons stated above. Instead, one might posit that the choice to quote Biblical passages in royal inscriptions is a reflection not of the date at which the Bible was translated into Gə'əz but of the increasing Christianization of Aksumite society, as a result of which references to the Bible, whether in inscriptions or in public discourse, might be expected to have carried more rhetorical weight. To this, it should be added that, while 'Ēzānā acknowledges the power of God and alludes to the role of divine aid in battle against the Noba, one does not get the sense from those inscriptions recording his Nubian campaign that he saw himself as fighting the enemies of Christ, much less that he was intent on promoting Christianity in the course of his campaign.¹⁹⁷ In the Aksumite invasion of South Arabia in 525, however, such ideas were at the forefront.

South Arabians to whom John Chrysostom is referring. Similarly, it is unlikely that the "Indian" version of the Gospel of John was a translation into one of the languages of the Indian subcontinent, as Aramaic/Syriac served as the language of Scripture and the liturgy among South Asian Christians during Late Antiquity (István Perczel, 'Syriac Christianity in India,' in: *The Syriac World*, ed. David King, London 2019, pp. 657, 663).

¹⁸⁸ RIÉth 189/1 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 263).

¹⁸⁹ RIÉth 189/5.40-41.45.49.52 (Ibidem, pp. 263, 264, 265).

¹⁹⁰ RIÉth 189/5.7 (Ibidem, p. 263).

¹⁹¹ RIÉth 189/14-15.33-34 (Ibidem, pp. 263, 264).

¹⁹² RIÉth 271/4 (Bernand, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 371).

¹⁹³ RIÉth 271/1-2 (Ibidem).

¹⁹⁴ Nor, for that matter, does RIÉth 190 from Aksum (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' pp. 268–271), a third inscription recording 'Ēzānā's Nubian campaign, which is written in Gə'əz but employing consonantal South Arabian *musnad*. For a discussion of the content of RIÉth 190, see Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, pp. 129–135.

¹⁹⁵ Breyer, *Das Königreich Aksum*, p. 117; idem, *Schrift im antiken Afrika*, p. 282.

¹⁹⁶ On the quotation of Psalm 23:8 in RIÉth 191, see Knibb, *Translating the Bible*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁷ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, pp. 110–111, 133.

If we accept that the Gəʿəz Bible was based on a Greek *Vorlage* – as the available evidence indicates it was – this proves to be of direct relevance for the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen, for the Greek Bible allows us to reconstruct a missing portion of text in RIÉth 195 II/23-25: [...]*bō kəbra dāwīt wa-yəkʷənnən wa-ʔalbō* [...]*nnəna la-maʔman bəhēr wa-ʔanbərō dība* [...]. This is tentatively reconstructed by Pierluigi Piovanelli as [*ʔahū*]*bō kəbra dāwīt wa-yəkʷənnən wa-ʔalbō* [*za-yaʔabbəyō (takʷannənō) wa-ʔəsaɣyəmō makʷa*]*nnəna la-maʔman bəhēr wa-ʔanbərō dība* [*manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔabūhū*] “[I shall give] him the glory of David and he shall exercise power, and there is none [who shall refuse to serve him. And I shall appoint him] as a ruler of a secure land, and I shall place him on [the throne of glory of his father’s house]”. Piovanelli bases this reconstruction on the Greek version of Isaiah 22:22-3: καὶ δώσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυὶδ αὐτῷ καὶ ἄρξει καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντι λέγων καὶ στήσω αὐτὸν ἄρχοντα ἐν τόπῳ καὶ ἔσται εἰς θρόνον δόξης τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ “And I will give him the glory of David (Gəʿəz *kəbra dāwīt*), and he shall rule, and there shall be no one to contradict him. And I will make him a ruler in a secure place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house.”¹⁹⁸ The wording of this passage is slightly different in the Gəʿəz version in RIÉth 195 II/25, particularly the final part which, following Piovanelli’s reconstruction, reads “and I shall place him on [the throne of glory of his father’s house]” (*wa-ʔanbərō dība* [*manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔabūhū*]). We shall return to this motif of the throne below.¹⁹⁹ Suffice it to say for the time being that RIÉth 195 makes direct reference to David, indicating that this Israelite king had a certain importance for the Aksumites. As for the quote from Isaiah in RIÉth 195 II/29, the precise verse is unknown, as the text of the inscription breaks off at this point.

That the Gəʿəz Bible in its current form is the product of multiple translations is evident from the fact that, in the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen, the wording of certain quotations from Scripture differs somewhat from that attested in later versions of the Gəʿəz Bible. The example of Isaiah 22:22-3 in RIÉth 195 II/23-25 has been treated above. Another example is the passage in RIÉth 195 II/20-21 (*ʔantəmū-ssa qədəmū həsšū šəd*[*q-...*] *yətwəsakakəmū* “But you, seek first righteous[ness...] it shall be added to you”) can be identified with Matthew 6:33. Yet it differs somewhat from the version preserved in Abba Garīmā III, a codex containing the Gospels that may date to 330–540, making it one of the oldest Gəʿəz manuscripts.²⁰⁰ In the latter text we read “But you, seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and this shall all be added to you” (*ʔantəmū-ssa qədəmū həsšū mangəštō la-ʔəgzīʔa bəhēr wa-šədqō wa-zə-ssa kʷəllū yətwəsakakəmū*).²⁰¹ Then in RIÉth 195 II/21-23 we read [*nəṣū səm*]*ṣūnī wa-ʔəngərkəmū*

¹⁹⁸ Piovanelli, ‘Apocryphal Legitimation,’ p. 23.

¹⁹⁹ *The Aksumite Context*.

²⁰⁰ Piovanelli, ‘Aksum and the Bible,’ p. 9.

²⁰¹ Knibb, *Translating the Bible*, p. 48; cf. Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 69. Though Michael Knibb claims that the version of Matthew 6:33 preserved in RIÉth 195 II agrees with that in Abba Garīmā III, *šədq* follows the imperative *həsšū* in RIÉth 195 II, whereas Abba Garīmā III has instead *mangəštō*. This is a minor difference, however, and there is no doubt that the versions of Matthew 6:33 in RIÉth 195 II and Abba Garīmā III

maṭana gab[ra lātī la-nafsəya za-šarāhkū ḥabē]hū ba-ṗafāya wa-kalāhkū ba-ləsānəya “[...: ‘Come li]sten to me and I will tell you the extent of what He has don[e for my soul, that I cried to] Him with my mouth and shouted with my tongue’.” This can be identified with Psalm 65:16, though in the standard Gə'əz Psalter the passage reads *nəsū səmṣūnī wa-ṗəngərkəmū kʷəlləkəmū ṗalla təfarrəhəwṗō la-ṗəgzīṗabəḥēr maṭana gabra lātī la-nafsəya za-šarāhkū ḥabēhū ba-ṗafāya wa-kalāhkū ba-ləsānəya* “Come listen to me and I will tell all of you who fear God the extent of what He has done for my soul, that I cried to Him with my mouth and shouted with my tongue.”²⁰² Two other passages from the Psalter are quoted in RIÉth 195 I-II. In RIÉth 195 I/5-6 we find Psalm 68:2: *yət[naśāṗ wa-yəzzarawū ḍarrū wa-yəgʷyayū šalāṗ]tū ṗəm-qədma gaşşū* “May He arise, and may His enemies be scattered, and may His foe[s] [flee] before His Presence;”²⁰³ while in RIÉth 195 II/26-28 Psalm 19:8-9 is quoted: *ṗəmūn[tū-ssa ba-ṗafṗās wa-ba-saragalāt wa-]nəḥna-ssa naśābī ba-səma ṗəgzīṗa bə[hēr ṗamlākəna ṗəmūntū-ssa taśāqaşū wa-wadqū wa-nəḥna-sa tanśāṗna [wa-ratāṗna ...]* “Now they have horses and chariots, while we will be great by the name of God our Lord; they have stumbled and fallen but we have risen [and acted righteously...].” Here, however, the rendition of these two verses agrees with the versions given in the standard Gə'əz Bible.

Intriguing, if somewhat speculative, is Walter Müller’s identification of the passage in RIÉth 195 II/4 (*ṗəhūbakāhā la-yəṗəṗtī ...*) “[that] I might give you th[at ...]” as a paraphrase of Genesis 15:7.²⁰⁴ The version of this verse given in J. Oscar Boyd’s edition of the Gə'əz Book of Genesis reads *wa-yəbēlō la-ṗabrām ṗana wəṗəṗtū ṗəgzīṗabəḥēr ṗamlākəka za-ṗawşāṗka ṗəm-mədra kalādawīyān kama ṗahabkāhā la-yəṗəṗtī mədr tətṗarasā*²⁰⁵ “And He said to Abram, ‘I am God your Lord, Who brought you out of the land of the Chaldaeans to give you this land that you might inherit it’.” The identification of this passage with Genesis 15:7 is met with approval by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, who follow Müller’s lead in reconstructing RIÉth 195 II/4 as ጸሁብካሃ : ለይእቲ : ሞድር : ትትዋረሰ (*ṗəhūbakāhā la-yəṗəṗtī mədr tətṗarasā*),²⁰⁶ though in their edition of the text, Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider reconstruct

have much more in common than they do with the version in the standard version of the Gə'əz Bible. Walter Müller reconstructs the lost text of RIÉth 195 II/20-21 as *şədqō wa-mangəştō wa-zəntū kʷəllū*, translating this as “seine Gerechtigkeit und sein Reich, und die alles...” (Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 69).

²⁰² Knibb, *Translating the Bible*, p. 48.

²⁰³ Murad Kamil’s claim that *ṗəm-qədma gaşşū* is a quotation of Numbers 10:35 (Kamil, ‘Ethiopic Inscription,’ p. 57) must be rejected. To be sure, that verse, quoting Moses, similarly speaks of the scattering of enemies (Hebrew *yaṗūşū ṗəyabēkā*), i.e. enemies of God. On the other hand, Numbers 10:35 refers to God in the second person, while Psalm 28:2 refers to Him in the third person, thus *yānūsū məśaṗāw mip-ṗānāw* “may those who hate Him flee before Him.” Since the verse quoted in RIÉth 195 I/5-6 similarly employs the third person, its identification with Psalm 28:2 is justified.

²⁰⁴ Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 64.

²⁰⁵ J. Oscar Boyd, *The Octateuch in Ethiopic according to the text of the Paris Codex, with the variants of five other manuscripts. Part I: Genesis*, Leiden 1909, p. 38. The Biblical manuscripts used by J. Oscar Boyd range in date from perhaps as early as the first half of the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century (Ibidem, pp. xii–xx).

²⁰⁶ Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ pp. 109, 110.

RIÉth 195 II/4 more conservatively as *ʔəhūbakāhā la-yəʔə[ʔī mædr ...]*²⁰⁷ “I will give you th[is land],” leaving out the reconstructed bit about inheriting the land proposed by Müller. Since not enough text is preserved, the association of RIÉth 195 II/4 with Genesis 15:7 remains nothing more than an interesting but still unverified possibility.²⁰⁸ That said, the idea of inheriting land in connection with the Aksumite invasion of Ḥimyar in 525 is alluded to in Chapter 43 of the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*. The title of this chapter is given in the table of contents as “An exposition pertaining to the thanksgiving to God that the Christ-loving King Kālēb spoke to his forces in the land of the Ḥimyarites after the victory” (*mallpānūtā da-ḥlāp qūbāl ṭaybūtā da-lwāt allāhā d-mallel rāhem la-mšīḥā malkā kaleb lwāt ḥaylawātēh b-arśā da-ḥmīrāyē men bāṭar zākūtā*), which gives us some temporal context.²⁰⁹ In the chapter itself, Kālēb gives a speech to his troops in which he frames the invasion of Ḥimyar in the context of divinely ordained entitlement, saying, “Behold! The Lord has bequeathed to us the land of our enemies” (*ḥā awrṭan māryā arśā da-bʿfeldbābayn*).²¹⁰ This theme of the destruction of God’s enemies and the inheritance of their land is later repeated by Kālēb as he recounts instances in which God helped the prophets of the past, reminding his troops that “He destroyed the nations before Joshua son of Nun, and caused him to inherit their land” (*ḥāreb hwā l-ṣammē men qdām yešūf bar nūn w-awrṭeh arašhōn*).²¹¹ While these are, of course, words that the anonymous Syriac author of the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* puts into Kālēb’s mouth, the use of such discourse indicates that the conception of the Aksumite invasion of 525 as an inheritance of land – calqued on the Israelite acquisition of Canaan – was indeed current among Christian communities during the sixth century and might well have an Aksumite origin.

The reference to King David in RIÉth 195 II calls for special comment. As we have seen, RIÉth 195 I+II quotes in several places from the Psalter, a text attributed to David in Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Psalter has historically been one of the most frequently copied works in Ethiopia, as well as the first text to be memorized in the course of traditional education.²¹² David himself is highly regarded in Ethiopia, not least because the claim by many of its emperors to descent from King Solomon naturally implied their genealogical connection with David. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the famous *Kəbra Nagašt* “The Glory of the Kings,” the best known sub-narrative within which is the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba – an Ethiopian woman named Mākəddā according to the account – to King Solomon, in the course of which the queen is impregnated by the Israelite king.²¹³ When the child born of this union comes of age

²⁰⁷ Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 286.

²⁰⁸ Knibb, *Translating the Bible*, pp. 47–48 (n. 5).

²⁰⁹ Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, p. 6a (Syriac text).

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 47a (Syriac text).

²¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 47b (Syriac text).

²¹² Marilyn E. Heldman, ‘Psalter,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 4, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 232.

²¹³ Carl Bezold (ed. and trans.), *Kebra Nagast: Die Herrlichkeit der Könige: Nach den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris*, Munich 1905, pp. 17–28 (Gəʿəz text).

and visits his father, he is then made king and given the name David.²¹⁴ Although a case has been made that claims of Davidic lineage by Ethiopian royalty, and even the *Kəbra Nagašt* itself, date back to the Aksumite period,²¹⁵ hard evidence to that effect is lacking. All available evidence, in fact, indicates that the *Kəbra Nagašt* is a medieval, specifically a fourteenth-century, work.²¹⁶ A recent study by Serge Frantsouzoff makes the case for a more precise dating of the text, in its final form at any rate, to the last four years of the reign of the Ethiopian emperor 'Amda Səyōn, i.e. 1340–1344.²¹⁷ At most, the *Kəbra Nagašt* seems to incorporate material culled from (possibly) Coptic sources, some of which may date from as far back as the seventh century.²¹⁸ For their part, Aksumite kings never claim Israelite ancestry in their royal titles, which are concerned exclusively with rule over peoples and territories, while royal kinship ties are expressed by reference to one's father and to one's affiliation with Ethiopian clans, not putative Israelite ancestors. Thus, David must have had a significance in the context of RĪĒth 195 II that differed from the genealogical importance with which he is invested in medieval Ethiopian tradition. That a direct association was made, as early as the sixth century, between Kālēb's invasion of South Arabia and David's military campaigns is evident from a passage in the *Martyrium Arethae* in which Timothy, the archbishop of Alexandria, writes to Kālēb exhorting him

²¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 38 (Gə'əz text).

²¹⁵ Irfan Shahid, 'The Kebra Nagast in the light of recent research,' *Le Muséon* 89 (1976), pp. 133–178.

²¹⁶ Staurt Munro-Hay, 'A Sixth-Century Kebra Nagast?' *Annales d'Éthiopie* 17 (2001), pp. 43–58; idem, *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant: The True History of the Tablets of Moses*, London and New York 2005, p. 65; Piovanelli, 'Apocryphal Legitimation,' passim; Britta, 'Genres,' p. 258. What is more, external sixth-century sources display no awareness of an Aksumite tradition that the Queen of Sheba hailed from Ethiopia, much less one claiming that she was impregnated by Solomon. At most, Cosmas Indicopleustes gives the famous queen a passing mention in a reference to the incense-producing regions, where he glosses Saba' as Ḥimyar: Σαβᾶ τουστέστι τοῦ 'Ομηρίτου "Saba, that is to say, of the Ḥimyarites" (*Topographie chrétien*, §2.50.2). He mentions Barbaria (i.e. the Somali coast) and Ethiopia only as regions from which the queen's merchants acquired aromatics, ebony, gold, and monkeys (*Christian Topography*, §2.50.4-7).

²¹⁷ Serge A. Frantsouzoff, 'On the Dating of the Ethiopian Dynastic Treatise Kəbrā nāgāšt: New Evidence,' *Scrinium* 12 (2016), pp. 20–24.

²¹⁸ The colophon of the *Kəbra Nagašt* in fact alludes to a Coptic *Urtext* that had been translated into Arabic (Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, pp. 172–173), though the reliability of this statement is open to question. That said, there are hints of Coptic influence in various places in the *Kəbra Nagašt*. In addition to the reference to Cairo in Chapter 59 of the *Kəbra Nagašt*, a Coptic origin for at least portions of Chapter 83 is plausible. The latter chapter, entitled "Concerning the King of the Ishmaelites" (*ba-ḡanta nāgūsā ḡasmā?əlāwāyān*), i.e. the Muslims, alludes to the Islamic invasions of the seventh-century, though only insofar as they affected Egypt, Libya, Nubia, and the Levant – regions which Coptic Christians inhabited, or with which they had regular contact. More distant regions, such as Spain, Mesopotamia, Iran, and Central Asia, are by contrast conspicuously absent from the chapter (Hatke, 'Africans in Arabia Felix,' p. 392 [nn. 693–694]). On seventh-century Coptic works treating the Islamic invasions, see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton 1997, pp. 149–156. That Ethiopians were directly acquainted with such works is evidenced by the fact that one of them, the *Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, survives solely in a Gə'əz translation, albeit dating from 1602 (Ibidem, p. 152), a much later period than the *Kəbra Nagašt* indeed. The story of the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which forms such an important part of the *Kəbra Nagašt*, may also owe something to Coptic tradition, for a Coptic text dating from probably the tenth or eleventh century seems to describe an encounter between the two rulers (Munro-Hay, *Quest for the Ark*, pp. 70–71).

to “head an expedition, as Samuel had exhorted David against Amalek, and to deliver the Ḥimyarite unto anathematization by sword and fire.”²¹⁹ In fact, it was Saul, not David, who according to the Old Testament was sent by Samuel against the Amalekites,²²⁰ and indeed the erroneous reference to David is emended to Saul in one of the Greek recensions of the *Martyrium Arethae*.²²¹ Correct in every detail or not, a clear analogy is made by the anonymous author of the *Martyrium Arethae* between Kālēb’s war against Yōsēph and the Israelites’ war against their Amalekite enemies, with the Ethiopian Christians appropriating from the Jewish Ḥimyarites the status of the true Israel. That the author of the *Martyrium Arethae* errs in imputing to the archbishop a reference to David rather than to Saul may not be as much a careless oversight as perhaps an intentional re-working of the Biblical narrative for rhetorical ends, as the allusion to the “glory of David” (*kəbra dāwīt*) in RIÉth 195 II and the quotations from the Psalms in that inscription hints at a Davidic cast to the discourse involving Aksumite warfare. For their part, some medieval Ethiopian traditions bestow upon Kālēb the alternative name of Dāwīt (= David).²²² That an Ethiopian king might bear multiple names is evident from the fact that Kālēb bore the nickname (*sag^{wā}*) of ʾƏlla-ʾAšbəḥā, literally “He who has brought the dawn.” This royal habit of adopting a nickname continued into the Zāgʿē Period (pre-1270),²²³ and by the fourteenth century, a number of kings additionally bore a baptismal name.²²⁴ However, while it is tempting to hypothesize that the name Dāwīt might have influenced the choice of Isaiah 22:22-3 for inclusion in RIÉth 195 II, it is by no means certain that Kālēb was known as Dāwīt during his lifetime. It bears mentioning as well that medieval Ethiopian traditions about Aksumite rulers are often highly unreliable and that ʾƏlla-ʾAšbəḥā remains the only alternative name for Kālēb attested in extant sixth-century sources.²²⁵ Consequently, medieval traditions about Kālēb bearing the name Dāwīt should be viewed as suggestive but still in need of confirmation.

In connection with the Davidic reference in RIÉth 195 II, it is striking that, with the exception of Matthew 6:33 in RIÉth 195 II/20-21, all quotations from Scripture are taken from the Old Testament. Again, this observation must be qualified by the caveat that the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen survives in a very fragmentary state. If, however, the

²¹⁹ *Martyrium Arethae*, §28.12-14 (translation based on Beaucamp, *Martyre de Saint Aréthas*, p. 260).

²²⁰ I Samuel 15:1-3. Only later does Samuel, following God’s orders, reject Saul in favor of David as king of Israel (I Samuel 16:1-13).

²²¹ Beaucamp, *Martyre de Saint Aréthas*, p. 260 (n. 174).

²²² Steven Kaplan, ‘Notes Towards a History of Aše Dawit I (1382–1413),’ *Aethiopia* 5 (2002), p. 72.

²²³ Derat, Marie-Laure, ‘Before the Solomonids: Crisis, Renaissance and the Emergence of the Zagʿe Dynasty (Seventh-Thirteenth Centuries),’ in: Kelly, *Companion*, Leiden and Boston 2020, p. 52.

²²⁴ Michael Kleiner, ‘Name(s). Regnal names,’ in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 3, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 1122–1124.

²²⁵ Thus in consonantal Gəʿəz we have the form ʔl ʔsbḥ in RIÉth 191/7-8 and RIÉth 192/7 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 272), in Sabaic ʔl-ʔ<ʂ>bḥh in Ist 7608 bis/6 (Robin, ‘Joseph, dernier roi,’ p. 96), and in Greek sources Ἐλεσβάας, Ἐλλατῆβάας, and Ἐλλησθεαῖος (Roger Schneider, ‘Trois nouvelles inscriptions royales d’Axoum,’ in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma, 10–15 aprile 1972), Tomo I (Sezione Storica)*, Rome 1974, p. 773).

Biblical quotations in what survives of the corpus are in any way representative, they might suggest that, already in the sixth century, Ethiopian Christianity was acquiring something of an affinity for Old Testament tradition that would become one of its most distinctive characteristics. There is no reason to attribute this affinity to Jewish influence, as many scholars have in the past and some scholars indeed still do. To date, no convincing evidence for a Jewish presence in Aksumite Ethiopia has ever been presented,²²⁶ and since Aksumite relations with Ḥimyarite Jews – the only Jewish community with which they had any known contact – were hostile, it is difficult to see how such relations could have facilitated an exchange of religious ideas. That said, the South Arabian context of the Gə'əz corpus is likely to have been an important factor in determining which Biblical verses were chosen. Even if one rejects the identification of the passage in RIÉth 195 II/4 with Genesis 15:7, there are still a number of quotations that are very apt for inscriptions recording the victory of Ethiopian Christians over Ḥimyarite Jews. Psalm 19:8-9 (RIÉth 195 II/26-28), for example, speaks of triumph over a rival army – though a triumph achieved not through military might but through righteousness. By citing this verse in an account of their victory in South Arabia in 525, the Aksumites effectively appropriated the role of the righteous army for themselves, and in so doing cast themselves as the true Israelites of their day, while denying that status to the Ḥimyarite Jews. Such a claim would likely have had significant implications in a South Arabian context, as we have epigraphic evidence for a close identification with Israel on the part of Ḥimyarite Jews, such that some of them identified their tribe (*sʿḡb*) as Israel (*yʿsʿrʿl*),²²⁷ rather than one of the tribes that had traditionally constituted the Ḥimyarite confederation. In reference to this “tribe of Israel,” Christian Robin and Sarah Rijziger write that

[t]he new entity, the name of which implies that it was founded on religion, was not a mere copy of the ancient communes. It had a quasi-supernatural dimension since, in the formula of benediction at the beginning of a text, it appears between two appellations of God.²²⁸

Self-identification by Ḥimyarite Jews with Israel need not have been mere rhetoric, as a clan named Āl Isrāʿīl – by now fully Islamicized but likely dating back to pre-Islamic times – has survived at al-Rawḍa in Yemen down to the modern period.²²⁹ Robin and Rijziger further state that

²²⁶ For a discussion of this issue, see George Hatke, ‘Again the Question of Judaism in Ancient Ethiopia,’ *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 112 (2022), pp. 163–187.

²²⁷ Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1/3 (Rainer Degen and Walter W. Müller, ‘Eine hebräisch-sabäische Bilinguis aus Bait al-Ašwāl,’ *Neue Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik* 2 (1974), pp. 118, 119, 120–121) and ZM 2000 1/8 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 81–82).

²²⁸ Christian Julien Robin and Sarah Rijziger, “‘The Owner of the Sky, God of Israel’ in a new Jewish Ḥimyaritic Inscription Dating from the Fifth Century CE,” *Der Islam* 95/2 (2018), p. 285.

²²⁹ Serjeant, ‘Hūd,’ p. 171. Although Isrāʿīl is not unheard of as a proper name in the Islamic world, it is rare enough in South Arabia to suggest an otherwise carefully forgotten Jewish origin for the Āl Isrāʿīl clan (Ibidem).

[t]he name Israel that was given to the new social entity is not completely trivial. It reveals without doubt the hope of a reinstatement of the historical Israel.²³⁰

For the Aksumites, by contrast, any such New Israel was envisioned as a Christian Israel.²³¹ For this reason, the fact that Psalm 19:8-9 speaks of greatness achieved through the “name of God” (*səma ʔəgzīʔa bəhēr*) is significant in light of the importance placed on the name of Christ in RIÉth 191/36, wherein Kālēb refers to his “being zealous for the name of the Son of God” (*qnʔy bʔnt s'm wld ʔgzʔ bhr*)²³² in the context of his South Arabian campaign in 518. Another verse that was undoubtedly chosen on account of its reference to the defeat of the enemies of God is Psalm 67:2, quoted in RIÉth 195 I/5-6. In that verse, God is said to rise up and scatter His enemies, who in the context of South Arabia in the early sixth century would have been identified by the Aksumites with Ḥimyarite Jews and all those who aided them.

In addition to themes drawn from the Bible, we find what may be an allusion to popular religious practices in South Arabia in RIÉth 263/9. As a caveat, it must be stressed that only one word in this line is preserved in full. The word in question is read as 𐩦𐩣𐩬𐩨 (*yəśhūna*) by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye²³³ and *yəśhana* by Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider,²³⁴ though neither form is attested in Classical Gəʿəz. This is not in itself problematic, given that there are a number of words attested in Aksumite-period Gəʿəz that did not survive in the standard form that the language took during the Middle Ages.²³⁵ More recently, Walter Müller has proposed *yəśsanū*.²³⁶ While the root $\sqrt{śsn}$ is not attested in Classical Gəʿəz either, one can, assuming a shift from */ś/ to /s/, interpret this verb as the imperfect form of *sassana*.²³⁷ This is glossed by Müller as “weissagen, zaubern, huren, ehebrechen”²³⁸ and by Wolf Leslau as “to be lascivious, commit adultery, practice divination.”²³⁹ Leslau further posits that the verb originally meant “to be in excess, be excessive,” comparing this with Tigrinya *sassana* “to augment, increase.”²⁴⁰ In the Gəʿəz Bible, the noun *sasan* is attested in 1 Kings 15:23 (= 1 Samuel 15:23): *ḥaḥīʔatəssa sasan ʔəkīt yəʔəṯī* “but sin is as evil sorcery,”²⁴¹ the

²³⁰ Robin and Rijziger, ‘Owner of the Sky,’ p. 286.

²³¹ Such an idea was not unique to the Aksumites. On the parallel self-identification of the Anglo-Saxons as the “New Israel,” see Andrew P. Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon England*, Ann Arbor 2004, pp. 111 ff.

²³² Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 273.

²³³ Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ p. 108.

²³⁴ Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 350.

²³⁵ Drewes, *Receuil des inscriptions*, passim.

²³⁶ Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ p. 16.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 16–17.

²³⁹ Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary*, p. 516.

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁴¹ Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ p. 17.

context being Samuel's reproach of Saul for rejecting the word of God. As Müller points out, the first syllable of a word following *yəssənū* in RIÉth 263 is *śə*, the same sibilant that occurs as the first radical of the root \sqrt{ssn} from which *yəssənū* would be derived, leading Müller to tentatively translate RIÉth 263/9 as "dass sie Weissagungen weissagen" or "dass sie Zaubereien zaubern."²⁴² If prophesying and fortune-telling are indeed alluded to in RIÉth 263, this is significant in view of the fact that a number of Ancient South Arabian texts indicate that magic was regarded as a real threat in ancient South Arabia. Thus RÉS 4230, an incense-burner of unknown provenance now kept in the Louvre, bears a dedicatory inscription in which one Laḥay'at of the lineage of Dū-Bar'ān invokes the god 'Aṭtar Šāriq'ān for the protection of the Himyarite king Šammar Yuhar'iš (r. ca. 287–312), as well as for the protection of the town of Silyat²⁴³ and of his family against such things as sorcery (*hbr*).²⁴⁴ Another Sabaic inscription, MŠ1, discovered by Mohammed Maraqtan in a private collection in Ṣan'ā' and dating from the second or third century, similarly contains a plea that the god Ta'lab avert the effects of sorcery, together with several other harms.²⁴⁵ A clearer idea of what such sorcery might entail is provided by a Sabaic incantation text written in the cursive *zabūr* script, Mon.script.sab. 7,²⁴⁶ in which an individual seeks refuge with the gods 'Aṭtar and Wadd from harm inflicted by both humans and animals,²⁴⁷ physical and mental maladies caused by adversaries,²⁴⁸ and wrongful accusation by bad counsel.²⁴⁹ That the practice of magic survived the transition from polytheism to monotheism is indicated by medieval Arabic references to sorcery both on mainland South Arabia and on the island of Soqoṭrā during the Islamic period.²⁵⁰ Such practices could well provide a context for understanding what may be similar references in RIÉth 263/9.

²⁴² Ibidem.

²⁴³ Probably Silya, located 6 km to the north of al-Nādira on the left bank of Wādī Bana' (Yves Calvet and Christian Robin, *Arabie heureuse, Arabie déserte: les antiquités arabiques du Musée du Louvre*, Paris 1997, p. 102).

²⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 101.

²⁴⁵ MŠ1/11 (Mohammed Maraqtan, 'Two new Sabaic inscriptions: the construction of a building and the offering of a right hand,' in: *Arabian and Islamic Studies: A collection of papers in honour of Mikhail Borishovich Piotrovskij on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, ed. Alexandr Vsevolodovi Sedov, Moscow 2014, pp. 149–150, 154).

²⁴⁶ Peter Stein, 'The first incantation from Ancient South Arabia,' in: *Entre Carthage et l'Arabie heureuse: Mélanges offerts à François Bron*, eds. Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Iwona Gajda, Paris 2013, p. 153.

²⁴⁷ Mon.script.sab. 7/A/1: *t?lk s²l² bn wld ?n² w-lb? w-hs²s²* "I have sought refuge from three (things): from the child of a woman, a lion, and a serpent" (Ibidem, pp. 153, 158).

²⁴⁸ Mon.script.sab. 7/A/2-3: *s²rr wd l²h²n w-?n l-?h²s² ?n bn kll hn ḥbb w-b²n w-s²r ys'r* "Hear, O Wadd, the incantation! I will conjure against exhaustion/all evil, for the desire, expansion, and inflammation that he (i.e. the adversary) has sent" (Ibidem, pp. 153, 158).

²⁴⁹ Mon.script.sab. 7/A/3-4: *hmt²n wd hmt²n bn ḥfn s²wr* "Deliver me, O Wadd, deliver me from the presentation of (bad) counsel" (Ibidem, pp. 153, 158).

²⁵⁰ G. R. Smith, 'Magic, jinn and the supernatural in medieval Yemen: examples from Ibn al-Mujāwir's 7th/13th-century guide,' *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 13 (1995), pp. 9–11.

The Aksumite Context

It need hardly be stressed that the Gəʿəz corpus from Yemen belongs to a tradition that, while well documented in Aksumite Ethiopia, is quite alien to South Arabia. This is most evident in the choice of language and script, though it is equally true that the inscriptions from the corpus contain thematic elements that have no counterpart in Ancient South Arabian inscriptions. The religious themes in the Gəʿəz corpus are among the most striking examples for, while religious invocations are well attested in Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, including invocations of Jesus in two Late Sabaic inscriptions,²⁵¹ no such inscriptions allude to divine aid on the battlefield, much less do they quote from Scripture.²⁵² To the extent that Biblical themes occur at all in indigenous South Arabian inscriptions from pre-Islamic times, they are limited to inscriptions dedicated by private individuals of Jewish background, sometimes in Hebrew or Aramaic, and other times in Sabaic (while employing Hebrew or Aramaic loanwords).²⁵³ Even in 'Abrahā's Sabaic inscriptions, religious themes are limited to invocations of Raḥmān^{ān} and the Trinity, all of which use vocabulary of Syriac rather than Gəʿəz origin.²⁵⁴ In contrast to Ethiopia, where headway into the translation of Scripture had already been made during the Aksumite period, there is no evidence that the Bible was ever translated into Sabaic for South Arabian Christians, though it is not impossible that portions of Scripture were orally transmitted in the local language during religious services based on a foreign language text, as was the case, for example, in medieval Nubia²⁵⁵ and early modern

²⁵¹ In addition to the invocation of Jesus Christ as *krsʿtsʿ* in Ist 7608 bis/16 examined above (*Religious References*), he is referred to as *msʿh* in CIH 541/2-3 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 111).

²⁵² Recently, Ahmad Al-Jallad has reanalyzed a unique monotheist inscription in the *zabūr* script from Ġabal Dabūb in the region of al-Dāliʿ in southwestern Yemen, arguing that the text rephrases Psalms 90 and 123 (Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'The pre-Islamic basmala: Reflections on its first epigraphic attestation and its original significance,' *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, forthcoming). Since, however, as Al-Jallad points out, the language of the inscription is not in fact Late Sabaic and instead displays a number of North Arabian features, this inscription does not constitute evidence for the use of Scripture written in Sabaic.

²⁵³ Christian Julien Robin, 'Himyar et Israël,' *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 148/2 (2004), pp. 831–908.

²⁵⁴ DAI GDN 2002-20/1-4: *b-hyl w-nṣ[r] w-rd? rḥmnʿ mr? sʿmyʿ w-msʿh-hw* "By the power and help and aid of Raḥmān^{ān}, the Lord of Heaven, and His Messiah" (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 107); CIH 541/1-3: *b-hyl w-[r]d? w-rḥmt rḥmnʿ w-msʿh-hw w-rḥ [q]dsʿ* "By the power and aid and mercy of Raḥmān^{ān} and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit" (Ibidem, p. 111); Ry 506: *b-hyl rḥmnʿ w-msʿh-hw* "By the power of Raḥmān^{ān}" (Ibidem, p. 118). The Syriac loanwords in these formulae are *msʿh* "Messiah" (< *mšīḥā*) and *rḥ qdsʿ* "Holy Spirit" (< *rūḥā q-ḡuddšā*). By contrast, Ist 7608 bis employs Christological vocabulary of Gəʿəz origin. Thus Ist 7608 bis refers to the Holy Spirit as *[mn]fsʿ qdsʿ* (< *manfas qəddūs*) (Ist 7608 bis/1 (Robin, 'Joseph, dernier roi,' p. 96)) and to Christ as *krsʿtsʿ* (Ist 7608 bis/16 [Ibidem, p. 97]). Although the latter term is derived ultimately from Greek Χριστός, it most likely entered Sabaic via Gəʿəz *kərəstōs*.

²⁵⁵ Thus, the tenth-century Fāṭimid ambassador Ibn Salīm al-Aswānī, as quoted by Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, states that the inhabitants of the southern Nubian kingdom of Alodia possessed books in Greek, but that these were interpreted for the masses in the local tongue (*kutubuhum bil-rūmiyya yufassirūnahā bi-lisānihim* (Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā'iz wal-i'tibār bi-dīkr al-ḥiṭaṭ wal-āṭār al-ma'rūf bil-ḥiṭaṭ al-maqrīziyya*, Vol. 1, Baghdad, n.d, p. 193)).

Malta.²⁵⁶ Another foreign feature is the use of the first person in Aksumite royal inscriptions, as opposed to the exclusive use of the third person in Ancient South Arabian royal inscriptions.²⁵⁷ As for the fact that Aksumite inscriptions from Yemen are written exclusively in Gə'əz, one might deduce from this that the Ethiopian invaders were not concerned with engaging with a local audience when advertising their authority. To make such an assumption, however, is to overlook the symbolic impact of the written word itself, particularly when presented in a foreign script. In popular culture, foreign scripts are often thought to possess magical properties,²⁵⁸ while in the context of monuments they can serve as links to history²⁵⁹ or as markers of foreign political power.²⁶⁰ In addition, one must not confuse the tradition of erecting public inscriptions with transmitting a message through the medium of writing. To quote Michael Macdonald,

One should [...] remember that public inscriptions are often intended more as symbols than as channels of communication. In most cases in antiquity, if it was necessary to promulgate the text of the inscription, it

²⁵⁶ According to the Maltese philologist and cleric Giovanni Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712–1770), many Maltese preachers would write their sermons in Italian but translate them orally into Maltese for the congregation (Reno Fenech, 'Il-prietki bikrin: għajn ewlenija għall-istorja tal-Malti,' *Il-Malti* 82 (2011), p. 61).

²⁵⁷ An inscription in verse form from Qāniya employs the feminine second-person singular suffix *-k /ki/* in reference to the goddess Šams (Christian Julien Robin, 'Les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique et les études arabes,' *Arabica* 48 (2001), p. 518; Peter Stein, 'The "Himyaritic" Language in pre-Islamic Yemen: A Critical Re-evaluation,' *Semitica et Classica* 1 (2008), p. 204 (n. 12)). The same feature is also attested in the votive inscription ZI 11 from Mārib and the building inscription VL 24 (= J 2353) from Wādī Širgān, which similarly incorporate poetic material (Stein, 'The "Himyaritic" Language,' pp. 205–206). A strong case has been made by Peter Stein for identifying the language of these poetic texts as a form of Sabaic, as opposed to a distinct "Himyaritic" language, with, however, the caveat that it constitutes not a spoken language but instead "a highly artificial, literary idiom" (Ibidem, p. 209). Since these are not royal inscriptions, however, they are not exceptions to the rule regarding the use of the third-person. As a possible exception in Standard Sabaic, one might point to the use of the second person Ry 508/11, in which it is said of Raḥmān^{an} *rhmk mr? ?t* (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 99). Following Walter Müller's gloss of *rhmk* as "barmherzig sein" (Ibidem, p. 201), one might interpret this phrase as "Be Thou merciful! Thou art the Lord." Addressing a deity in the second person is, however, something quite different from the consistent use of the first person in Aksumite royal inscriptions, and it is worth noting that the rest of Ry 508 is entirely in the third person. Perhaps significantly, the expression *rhmk mr? ?t*, which is quite unconventional by written Ancient South Arabian standards, occurs at the end of Ry 508, almost as an addendum.

²⁵⁸ Examples include the use of Hebrew in Yemen (Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, 'Yemen: religion, magic, and Jews,' *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 39 (2009), p. 129), or Arabic in Malta (Carmel Cassar, 'Education in Hospitaller Malta,' in: *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History*, ed. Ronald G. Sultana, Msida 2001, p. 27), in magic talismans.

²⁵⁹ A case in point is the 1986 text commemorating the construction of the modern dam at Mārib, written in both Arabic and Sabaic (Christian Julien Robin, 'Quelques épisodes marquants de l'histoire sudarabique,' *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 61 (1991–1993), p. 68 (Fig. 21)) – the latter signifying a direct link between the modern structure and the ancient dam, construction work on which is similarly documented in Sabaic inscriptions.

²⁶⁰ Note the numerous Egyptian, Hittite, Neo-Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian inscriptions inscribed in foreign territories or in frontier regions (Jen Thum, 'When Pharaoh Turned the Landscape into a Stela: Royal Living-Rock Monuments at the Edges of the Egyptian World,' *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79/2 (2016), p. 69 and passim).

was distributed on parchment or papyrus and/or was proclaimed. Moreover, in antiquity, as in the Middle Ages, silent reading was rare enough to be remarked on, and reading aloud was the norm, so it only required one literate person to read an inscription for all within earshot to get the message. For the most part, however, I suspect the inscriptions themselves remained symbols of authority or commemoration with no requirement, or even expectation, that they would be read [...].²⁶¹

Although the possibility that Aksumite inscriptions were read aloud upon their official dedication should not be dismissed out of hand,²⁶² hard evidence of such a practice is lacking. Given the language barrier between Aksumites and South Arabians,²⁶³ it would be most improbable indeed that the Gə‘əz inscriptions erected in Yemen were ever read aloud, at least for the local population. The symbolic function of Aksumite inscriptions is evident from the fact that, while Kālēb’s inscription RIÉth 191 from Aksum, recording that king’s first invasion of South Arabia, is written in Gə‘əz, it employs not the *fdal* script that would have been familiar to Ethiopians – including those who could not actually read it – but rather the *musnad* script of South Arabia. Although only a small portion of RIÉth 191 deals with the Ḥimyarite campaign of 518, the use of *musnad* conveyed the message to Kālēb’s Ethiopian subjects that Aksum now controlled South Arabia. In light of this, the fact that all known Aksumite inscriptions from Yemen are written in the *fdal* reflects the symbolic function of that script: to signal that Aksum was now in charge, and to establish boundaries based on those very differences that set Aksumites apart from South Arabians. Even if the actual message of these Gə‘əz inscriptions remained inaccessible to local South Arabians, and most likely as well to the illiterate majority of resident Aksumites, the visual impact of inscriptions in a strange script on South Arabian

²⁶¹ Michael C. A. Macdonald, ‘Ancient Arabia and the written word,’ in: *The development of Arabic as a written language*, ed. Michael C. A. Macdonald, Oxford 2010, p. 7.

²⁶² On the role of orality in conveying the content of early West Semitic inscriptions, see Sanders, ‘Writing,’ p. 108. Barbara N. Porter similarly raises the issue of the (likely though still hypothetical) public reading of Neo-Assyrian inscriptions erected in provincial regions (Barbara N. Porter, ‘The Importance of Place: Esarhaddon’s Stelae at Til Barsip and Sam’al,’ *Historiography in the Cuneiform World: Proceedings of the XLV^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, eds. Tzvi Abusch et al., Bethesda 2001, pp. 388–389). A more explicit reference to the practice of reading an inscription aloud is preserved in the famous Code of Ḥammurapi (c. 1792–1750 BCE) in connection with the settling of legal disputes (Anne Marie Kitz, *Cursed Are You! The Phenomenology of Cursing in Cuneiform and Hebrew Texts*, Winona Lake 2014, p. 257). Another direct reference to the reading of an inscription aloud is found in a Safaitic text (KRS 1064): “he found the writing of his father and read it aloud” (*wgd s!fr ?b-h f hdt-h*) (Ahmad Al-Jallad, ‘Marginal notes on and additions to An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions (SSL 80; Leiden: Brill, 2015), with a supplement to the dictionary,’ *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017), p. 84).

²⁶³ A particularly poignant example of this language barrier is given in Chapter 44 of the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*. In that chapter we are told that, once the Aksumites had captured the oasis town of Naḡrān in 525, they were so virulent in their attack on the local Jewish community that they began indiscriminately slaughtering civilians, but that, given the language barrier between the Aksumites and the Naḡrānīs, a number of Christians were inadvertently killed in the process, being unable to communicate to their supposed Ethiopian liberators that they were Christian! (Moberg, *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, p. 49b (Syriac text)).

soil would have been enough to convey the essential message that the Aksumites had come, had seen, and had conquered. While asserting boundaries in this manner might seem counterproductive at a time when one might expect Kālēb to want to strengthen his hold on South Arabia by forging ties with the locals, it must be remembered that Aksumite policy in that region was indirect rule, with Aksumite authority being represented by specially appointed Ḥimyarite proxies. So long as these proxy-rulers maintained the peace, facilitated the flow of tribute, and allowed special privileges to the Aksumites, no further measures were needed. What the Aksumites wanted was a sphere of influence in South Arabia, not opportunities to make new Aksumites out of their South Arabian vassals. For his part, Kālēb might have felt that, once he had built – or reconstructed – churches, welcomed back within the fold those Christians who had recanted under duress, and placed another Christian (namely Sumūyafa' 'Ašwa') on the Ḥimyarite throne he had fulfilled his duty towards South Arabia's Christian community, while in the case of the local Jews he made no effort to win hearts and minds at all. In this connection, it is worth stressing that, to the extent that the Aksumites identified with the Israelites, and associated their conquest of Ḥimyar with the Israelite conquest of Canaan, they did so in the conviction that they were a new Israel in an Ethiopian Christian guise, distinct from the Israel with which Ḥimyarite Jews identified. It was therefore important that cultural boundaries *were* maintained.

The context in which the Gə'əz inscriptions from Yemen were originally erected is unclear, given that only one such inscription, Zafār 08-077, was discovered in the course of controlled archaeological excavations, and even this was a surface find. However, epigraphic evidence from Ethiopia and Sudan indicates that Aksumite royal inscriptions were typically erected as part of symbolic stone thrones in the aftermath of a military victory. In fact, the remains of several such thrones, minus the accompanying inscriptions, survive at the town of Aksum.²⁶⁴ The origin of this tradition remains obscure. Smaller-scale stone thrones, some of them bearing inscriptions on their backrests, are attested in South Arabia as early as the eighth to the seventh century BCE,²⁶⁵ and an alabaster fragment of what seems to be a similar throne from Adulis, possibly dating from the mid-first millennium BCE,²⁶⁶ indicates the diffusion of this type of object to the Horn of Africa. Whether Aksumite thrones are based on South Arabian prototypes is, however, difficult to prove owing to the time gap between attested South Arabian thrones and their Aksumite counterparts. The earliest known example of an Aksumite throne-cum-inscription, RIÉth 277 (= Monumentum Adulitanum II) from Adulis, dates most probably from the beginning of the third century.²⁶⁷ No trace of the throne has

²⁶⁴ Breyer, *Das Königreich Aksum*, 111–115.

²⁶⁵ Michael Jung, 'A short review of Southern Arabian thrones and stone furniture,' *Semitica et Classica* 12 (2019), pp. 65–82.

²⁶⁶ Andrea Manzo, 'Adulis before Aksum? Possible 2nd and 1st millennium BC evidence from the site of the ancient port,' *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 70/1.4 (2010), pp. 34–35, 36 (Fig. 5 (a and b)).

²⁶⁷ Dating RIÉth 277 to the beginning of the third century finds support in Sabaic inscriptions from that period. As we have seen, Robin-Umm Laylā I (see *Historical Background*) alludes to Sabaeen conflict with the Aksumites.

ever been found, while the inscription is known solely from the copy made by a visiting merchant ca. 518²⁶⁸ – one of the two foreigners alluded to above in connection with the translation of Greek inscriptions at Adulis.²⁶⁹ The merchant himself, known since the Middle Ages as Cosmas Indicopleustes, preserves his copy of the inscription in his *Christian Topography*. That his copy omits the name of the ruler who erected the original inscription might be due to damage to the first few lines of the inscription, where the royal name and titles typically appear in Aksumite inscriptions. The Aksumite king who erected RIÉth 277 claims in the concluding portion of the inscription to have set up a throne to Ares (i.e. the Aksumite god Maḥrēm²⁷⁰) at Adulis in the twenty-seventh year of his reign.²⁷¹ In Aksumite inscriptions, thrones of this type are designated δίφρος in Greek and *manbar* in Gə‘əz. That δίφρος, rather than the more common Greek term for throne, θρόνος, is employed may reflect the symbolic, rather than functional, character of such thrones. In Greek, δίφρος can refer to not only a throne, a seat, or a couch, but also a litter, a chariot-board on which two people can stand, and even a chariot itself. Additionally, δίφρος is attested in Greek inscriptions from the pre-Islamic Near East as a term for a small throne.²⁷² That thrones were dedicated by Aksumite kings to gods is confirmed by extant Aksumite inscriptions. Thus in RIÉth 188, a Gə‘əz inscription from Aksum pre-dating ʿĒzānā’s conversion to Christianity, the Aksumites, fresh from a military victory, are said to have erected a throne at a district called Śādō and entrusted it to the gods ʿAstar, Bəḥēr, and Mədr (*takalū manbara ba-zəyya ba-śādō wa-ḡamaḥaḍanəwwō la-ḡastar wa-la-bəḥēr wa-la-mədr*).²⁷³

Significantly, in light of the Yemeni provenance of the Gə‘əz corpus that is the subject of this article, thrones were also erected by Aksumite kings in the course of military campaigns abroad. Thus the fragmentary RIÉth 286 A (= SNM 24841), an Aksumite

From Sabaic inscriptions dating from the reign of the Sabaean king ʿAlh^{ān} Nahf^{ān} (r. ca. 200–210), however, we learn that relations between Aksum and Sabaʿ had been normalized, such that the two kingdoms had established an alliance (Gl 1222/9-15 Gl 1223/10-16; Gl 1224/10-16; Gl 1330/10-16; Gl 1331/8-12 (Josep M. Solá Solé, *Inscriptionen aus Rīyām*, Vienna 1964, pp. 52–58); cf. Nāmī NAG 13-14 (Jacques Ryckmans, ‘L’Inscription Sud-Arabe Nami NAG 13-14,’ *Eretz-Israel* 9 (1969), p. 102)). As Mikhail Bukharin argues, the fact that RIÉth 277 states that the Aksumite army campaigned as far as, but did not invade, Sabaʿ “would hardly have been possible without friendly relations between the two states” (Mikhail D. Bukharin, ‘Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity,’ in: *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, eds. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, Leiden and Boston 2010, pp. 117–118).

²⁶⁸ For the text of RIÉth 277, see Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien*, §2.60-63; cf. Bernard, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ pp. 379–380. For a discussion of the historical context of the inscription, see Glen W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*, Oxford 2013.

²⁶⁹ See *Religious References*.

²⁷⁰ Marie-Laure Derat, ‘Trône et sanctuaires: victoires, donations et religions à Aksum (IV^e–VII^e siècle),’ in: *Le Prince chrétien de Constantin aux royautés barbares (IV^e–VIII^e siècle)*, eds. Sylvain Destephen, Bruno Dumézil, and Hervé Inglebert, Paris 2018, p. 551.

²⁷¹ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien*, §2.63.7-12; cf. Bernard, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ pp. 379–80 (RIÉth 277/38-43).

²⁷² Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis*, p. 16.

²⁷³ RIÉth 188/24-26 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 260).

inscription in Greek from Meroë, contains the tantalizing passage [τῷ Ἄρει] δίφρον τοῦτον “[to Ares] this throne.”²⁷⁴ As with RIÉth 277, the name of the king at whose command this inscription was erected is unknown, though it is likely that the king in question was ‘Ēzānā’s elder brother and predecessor Ousanas.²⁷⁵ More detailed information survives in RIÉth 189 from Aksum, recording ‘Ēzānā’s Nubian war, which contains two references to the erection of thrones. In one instance, the inscription itself is alluded to as part of such a throne. Speaking in the first person, ‘Ēzānā says:

³⁹.*wa-takalkū manbara wəstēta maḥbarta ʔaflāg za-sīdā wa-*⁴⁰.*za-takkazī ʔanṣāra hagara nədq za-wəṣta zā-dassē*²⁷⁶

³⁹.And I set up a throne at the confluence of the Nile and ⁴⁰.Takkazē rivers facing the town of brick that is in the middle of that island.

Then, a few lines later, we read:

⁴⁸.*wa-ʔamaḥda*⁴⁹.*nkū za-manbara za-takalkū la-ʔəgzīʔa samāy za-ʔangaṣanī*²⁷⁷

⁴⁸.And I have entrusted⁴⁹: this throne that I have set up to the care of the Lord of Heaven, Who has made me king.

Since RIÉth 189 dates from the Christian period of ‘Ēzānā’s reign, it follows that the tradition of erecting symbolic thrones survived the transition to Christianity, though now it was to a new, single deity, here called the Lord of Heaven, that such monuments were entrusted. As Marie-Laure Derat states,

[l]es trônes sont peut-être moins des symboles d’une adhésion religieuse que d’un rituel royal profane, ce qui permettrait d’expliquer la raison pour laquelle seule la dédicace religieuse change avec la christianisation.²⁷⁸

That this tradition of erecting stone thrones continued into Kālēb’s reign is indicated by RIÉth 191, the concluding portion of which reads:

³⁸.*w-nbrk db z mnbr z-γwʔ w-ʔmḥḍkw ḥb ʔ[g]*³⁹.*zʔ bḥr gbr s'my w-mdr ʔm-z yms'n w-yns't w-ys'lb[r w-]*⁴⁰.*z w-ʔms'n ys't ʔgzbh[r] b-bt w-b-s'bs' [...]*²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ RIÉth 286 A/7 (Bernand, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 387).

²⁷⁵ On the dating of SNM 24841, i.e. RIÉth 286 A, to the reign of Ousanas, see Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, pp. 75–77.

²⁷⁶ Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 264.

²⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

²⁷⁸ Derat, ‘Trône et sanctuaires,’ p. 567.

²⁷⁹ Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 273.

38. And I have sat upon this throne that [...] ²⁸⁰ and have entrusted it to
 39. God, the creator of heaven and earth. If one should destroy and overturn
 it and break [it], ⁴⁰ may God destroy him [and] overturn him in his (own)
 house and with awe [...].

The implication here seems to be that, once a throne was set up, the Aksumite ruler would take his seat there as part of the ritual of dedication.²⁸¹ Since RIÉth 191 speaks of “this throne” (*z mnbr*), it would appear that the inscription formed part of such a throne. If so, it could well be the case that the Gə‘əz inscriptions that have come to light in Yemen were erected in a similar manner.²⁸² As for the reference to the divine punishment meted out to those who might damage the inscription, this is a standard curse formula of the sort that typically comes at the end of royal Aksumite inscriptions, whether in Gə‘əz or Greek.²⁸³ Such formulae belong to a broader Near Eastern tradition of issuing written threats to would-be vandals of public monuments, including inscriptions.²⁸⁴ With so much of the Gə‘əz corpus from Yemen surviving in fragmentary condition, it is unknown whether any of the inscriptions from that corpus contained similar curse formulae, though it is likely that most if not all originally did. Furthermore, and as noted above,²⁸⁵ since curse formulae are well attested in Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, as are references to the entrusting of an inscription to a deity for protection against potential vandalism,²⁸⁶ the use of such strongly worded language would have been as much at home in South Arabia as in Ethiopia.

Although RIÉth 191 was erected at Aksum and not in recently conquered territory, another inscription from Aksum, RIÉth 192, dating from the reign of Kālēb’s son and successor Wā‘zēb (r. ca. 540–560?) states that, while on a campaign against a rebel

²⁸⁰ The meaning of *yw?* is uncertain.

²⁸¹ On coins of the early seventh-century Aksumite king Armah, the ruler is in fact depicted seated on a throne, though it is by no means clear that a case can be made for linking this image with the tradition of erecting stone thrones (Derat, ‘Trône et sanctuaires,’ pp. 560–561).

²⁸² This is not to say, however, that stone thrones were the only, or even the primary, type of monument through which later Aksumite kings like Kālēb expressed their authority. Marie-Laure Derat has made the case that the foundation of churches became increasing important in this regard beginning in the sixth century (Ibidem, pp. 557–563).

²⁸³ In Gə‘əz: RIÉth 185 I/21-26; RIÉth 185 II/21-24; RIÉth 185 bis I/23-26; RIÉth 185 bis II/37-42; RIÉth 188/24-28; RIÉth 189/50-52; RIÉth 192, Face B/5-10 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ pp. 243, 247, 249, 260, 265, 276). In Greek: RIÉth 270 bis/31-34 (Bernand, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 369).

²⁸⁴ See, for example, John C. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. Volume II. Aramaic Inscriptions, including inscriptions in the dialect of Zenjirli*, Oxford 1975, pp. 10–13; idem, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. Volume III. Phoenician Inscriptions, including inscriptions in the mixed dialect of Arslan Tash*, Oxford 1982, pp. 50–53; John F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions & Documents of the Roman Period*, Oxford 2009, pp. 226, 282.

²⁸⁵ See *Selected Texts from the Gə‘əz Corpus*.

²⁸⁶ Maraqtan, ‘Curse formulae.’

named *DĤR*,²⁸⁷ the Aksumite king erected a throne (*tklk mbr*)²⁸⁸ in what appears to have been the territory of the defeated enemies.²⁸⁹ Most of the place-names mentioned in RIÉth 192 remain obscure, but since none suggest a South Arabian connection, Wā'zēb's campaign was most likely waged somewhere in the Horn of Africa outside the core of the Aksumite state. While not without certain problems associated with its interpretation, this passage in RIÉth 192 not only provides further evidence that Aksumite kings continued to erect symbolic thrones well into the sixth century, but also indicates that they were in the habit of doing so in the course of military campaigns abroad. Although hard evidence is lacking, it is reasonable to suppose that the Aksumite inscriptions erected in South Arabia following Kālēb's victory in 525 also formed parts of thrones of this type. Possibly significant in this regard is the passage based on Isaiah 22:23 in RIÉth 195 II/25: *wa-ʔanbərō dāba* [*manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔabūhū*] "and I shall place him on [the throne of glory of his father's house]". As we have seen,²⁹⁰ the wording of this quote in Gə'əz differs from the Greek version, which translates as "and he will become a throne of glory to his father's house." Moreover, the Greek version follows the original Hebrew (*wə-hāyā lə-kissē? kabōd lə-bēt ʔābīw* "and he shall be as a throne of honor for the house of his father") more closely than does its Gə'əz counterpart. Where the Gə'əz version preserved in RIÉth 195 II/25 differs is in its reference to the king as being seated on a throne, rather than serving as a metaphorical "throne" himself. Barring the possibility of an error in translation, one might posit a deliberate modification of the Biblical text for rhetorical ends in RIÉth 195 II/25. As supporting evidence, one may note that a rather similar phrase is employed in the opening of RIÉth 191:

*2-b-hyl ʔgz? bħr w-b-mwgs¹ ʔys's¹ krs¹³-ts¹ wld ʔgz? bħr mw? z-ʔmnk bt
[d]-w?t whbn mngs²t ⁴.šnʕ b-z ʔgrr dry w-ʔkyd ʔrʔs't šlʔty d-w?t ʕqb
⁵.n ʔm-nʔs'y w-ʔbrn ws't mnbr ʔbwy²⁹¹*

²By the power of God and the grace of Jesus Chri³st, the Son of God, the Victorious in whom I believe, He [who] has given me a strong kingdom ⁴with which I might subdue my enemies and tread upon the heads of my adversaries, who has protected ⁵me since my childhood and placed me on the throne of my fathers.

²⁸⁷ Vocalization uncertain.

²⁸⁸ Note that the word for "throne," *mbr*, here displays assimilation of the /n/ to the following consonant, thus **manbar* > *mabbar*.

²⁸⁹ RIÉth 192/38 (Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 276). The relevant passage, which reads *w-tklk mbr ws't mlt-hm* is a bit problematic, as the substantive *mlt* is not attested in Classical Gə'əz and its meaning remains obscure. The phrase *ws't mlt-hm* recalls *wasta mālatōmū* in RIÉth 195 II/13 which, following Müller, 'Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,' p. 6, might be interpreted as "amid their possessions". Such an interpretation, however, makes little sense in the present context, unless one understands by "possessions" the land within one's possession.

²⁹⁰ *Religious References*.

²⁹¹ Drewes and Schneider, 'Inscriptions de la période axoumite,' p. 272.

Here, there is no reference to the Biblical text. The throne of Kālēb's fathers is a symbol of inherited Aksumite kingship, not a reference to the throne of the Israelite kings. That RIÉth 195 II/25 modifies Isaiah 22:23 by reinterpreting the king as one whom God has placed on the throne could, in light of RIÉth 191, reflect an attempt to reinterpret the Biblical text to suit a specifically Aksumite ideology of kingship. Modification of quotations from Scripture is not without parallel in the Late Antique world, as evidenced by quotations from the Qur'ān in early Islamic inscriptions and coins that deviate somewhat from the standard text.²⁹² That the passage from Isaiah alludes to the idealized king being appointed by God as the ruler of a "secure land" (*maḏman bəḥēr*) similarly recalls the reference in RIÉth 191/3 to God's having given Kālēb a "strong kingdom" (*mngsʿt šnf*). It is possible, then, that pre-existing Aksumite ideas about kingship, as well as displays of royal authority in the form of symbolic stone thrones, influenced the selection of the passage from Isaiah for inclusion in RIÉ 195 II.

Conclusion

The sixth-century Gə'əz inscriptions from Yemen constitute a unique – if frustratingly fragmentary – epigraphic corpus. They document an unparalleled example of sub-Saharan African imperialism outside the African continent and, what is more, they provide us with an insight into the ideological framework within which this imperial expansion was presented. This ideology is robustly religious in nature, as evidenced by the quotations from Scripture. In one instance (RIÉth 195 II/20-21), Matthew 6:33 is quoted, and there are other instances in which Christ and the Virgin Mary are mentioned by name (RIÉth 195 II/6 and Zafār 08-077/7 respectively). Apart from the aforementioned passage from Matthew, however, all quotations from the Bible in the extant corpus are taken from the Old Testament, specifically Isaiah 22:22-3 (RIÉth 195 II/23-25), Psalms 19:8-9 and 65:16 (RIÉth 195 II/26-28 and RIÉth 195 II/21-23 respectively), and possibly Genesis 15:7 (RIÉth 195 II/4). The allusion to "the glory of David" in the passage recently identified by Pierluigi Piovaneli as Isaiah 22:22-3 has long invited speculation as to its significance in the Aksumite context. That Aksumite kings claimed Davidic ancestry in the manner of later Ethiopian monarchs is, however, quite unlikely owing to the total lack of evidence that such a political fiction was promoted in either Ethiopian or foreign texts dating from Late Antiquity. At most, an analogy between Kālēb and those kings of Israel imbued with the glory of David is made in RIÉth 195 II/23-24, much as an analogy between the Aksumite army and that of the Israelites is implied in the quotation of Psalm 19:9 in RIÉth 195 II/26-28. As argued in this article, it is, however, possible that the quotation of Isaiah 22:22-3 was informed by Aksumite conceptions of kingship that emphasized divine agency in placing a ruler on the throne. What is clear is that the

²⁹² Estelle Whelan, 'Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the Early Codification of the Qur'ān,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118/1 (1998), pp. 3–8.

Aksumites viewed their role in South Arabia as paralleling that of the Israelites in Canaan: righteous conquerors who overcame a wicked enemy. Since the Aksumites' adversaries in South Arabia were first and foremost the Jews of Ḥimyar, this identification of Aksumite with Israelite might have also sought to undermine the claim by Ḥimyarite Jews to be the inheritors of Israel. Although this is not the same thing as the claim by later Ethiopian rulers of descent from Solomon, it is quite possible that the religious ideology with which the Aksumite invasion of South Arabia in 525 was cloaked – and probably that in 518 as well – laid the foundations for the Ethiopian Christian identification with Israel that would develop in subsequent centuries. That Kālēb's exploits in South Arabia still resonated in the collective memory of medieval Ethiopia is evidenced by the sixteenth-century *Vita* of the monk Marḥa Kərəstōs, which speaks of the campaigns of King Ba'əda Māryām I (r. 1468–1478) against the pagans (*ʔaramīyān*) of the Ethiopian highlands. In that text, the king is reported to have “dealt with them as King Kālēb dealt with those who killed the people of Nağrān” (*rassayōmū kama rassayōmū kālēb nəgūs la-ʔalla qataləwwōmū la-sabʔa nāgrān*).²⁹³

To the extent that the Aksumites cast themselves in the role of a new Israel in what written records they left in Yemen, they did so not in the local Sabaic language but in Gə'əz. It is quite likely, though, that a similar message was conveyed by word of mouth through a program of Aksumite propaganda. That the Syriac *Book of the Ḥimyarites* compares the Aksumite conquest of Ḥimyar to the conquest of Canaan by Joshua suggests that ideas about Aksum as the new Israel circulated parallel to, but independently of, the Gə'əz inscriptions erected in Yemen. But why erect inscriptions in a region where they could not even be read? The answer is that, while the actual content of these inscriptions would have been inaccessible even to most of Ḥimyar's Ethiopian community – illiteracy being the norm in pre-modern societies – the message conveyed by the very visibility of Gə'əz monuments would still have been understood by South Arabians and resident Ethiopians alike: Aksum had made its presence known and it was going to maintain its cultural boundaries. Although foreign sources indicate that Kālēb restored churches that had been destroyed by Yōsēph's forces, and welcomed back within the fold those Christians who had converted to Judaism under duress, there is no evidence that he had any interest in imposing Aksumite culture on indigenous South Arabians, nor even that he compelled Ḥimyarite Jews to convert to Christianity.²⁹⁴ That his clients Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur and Sumūyafā' 'Ašwā' continued to erect inscriptions in Sabaic further testifies

²⁹³ Stanislas Kur (ed. and trans.), *Actes de Marḥa Krestos*, Louvain 1972, p. 64.

²⁹⁴ In its final chapters, the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* is concerned not with the fate of the Jews of South Arabia but with the Christians who, having recanted their faith under duress, sought to repent and re-enter the Christian fold. Chapter 45 purports to be a direct quotation of a petition (*bāʕūṭā*) to Kālēb by those Christians who had apostatized, though little of this chapter survives, and what is preserved is of no historical value. In the Chapter 46, however, we are told of the Aksumite king's leniency when dealing with this group:

šābeq (h)wā ennōn d-nēzlūn kaḏ d-šābēn w-pāqeḏ (h)wā l-hōn da-nkannšūn (h)waw l-šarkā ḏ-küll aylēn da-kpar(w) (h)waw šaḏ šābar (h)wā ba-mḏīnātā ḏ-atrā w-sāʕar (h)wā küllmā ḏ-ū (h)wā b-naḡšēh [...] w-meṭṭūl tūb d-neḫzē (h)wā w-neḡqē ennōn en mḏattrīn (h)waw ba-tyābūthōn w-haydēn neḡqōḏ hwā l-kāhnē hānōn d-ū

to the lack of Aksumite interference with local traditions. But regardless of the purpose for which they were erected, or the manner in which they were perceived by either the local South Arabian population or the Aksumites themselves, there is no doubt that the inscriptions of the Gə'əz epigraphic corpus from Yemen provide invaluable insight into the religious ideology of sixth-century Aksum. Through them, we gain direct access to the worldview and aspirations of an ancient African people as we can for no other society in sub-Saharan Africa during the same period.

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(h)waw šamēh meṭṭūl da-nḥassōn šlayhōn w-nešbqūn l-hōn kṗūryā haw d-b-alāhā (Moberg (ed. and trans.), *Book of the Himyarites*, p. 53b).

He allowed them to go as they pleased and commanded that they gather the rest of all those who had recanted while he was passing through the cities of the land and did all that was in his soul [...]; and (he did so) moreover in order that he might see and question them if they had remained repentant, and then he commanded the priests who were with him to give absolution to them and forgive them (their) infidelity to God.

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