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 Tigray 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 article 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. 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 Ḥimyarites; another anonymous work, the Greek Martyrium Arethae; and the History of the Wars by Procopius of Caesarea.

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.” As such, ideologies are, to quote Teun A. van Dijk, “a special kind of social belief system, stored in long-term memory.” The social aspect of ideologies is key here, as “[t]here are no personal or

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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.


individual ideologies, only personal or individual uses of ideologies”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{11} Wouter J. Hanegraaff goes further, suggesting that the very word “religion” be retired, at least in academic studies.\textsuperscript{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,”\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{6} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{10} Pongratz-Leisten, Religion and Ideology, pp. 24–25.
\textsuperscript{12} Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘Imagining the future study of religion and spirituality,’ Religion 50/1 (2020), p. 79.
\textsuperscript{13} Pongratz-Leisten, Religion and Ideology, p. 23.
Ethiopians during Late Antiquity. 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.” 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 Ga’az 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, these particular aspects of Aksumite tradition can be accessed only indirectly through tangible remains like inscriptions. The religious references in the Ga’az 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.” As we shall see, the Ga’az 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 (ḥbs²).

During the third century, the Aksumites intervened militarily on several occasions in South Arabia. In the process, they established outposts in the

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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.


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


Tihāma and briefly occupied Nağrān, only to be expelled by King Yāsirum Yuhanʿim I (r. ca. 265–287) of Ḥimyar. Apart from a diplomatic exchange with Ḥimyar in the reign of its king Karibʾīl Watar Yuhanʿim (r. ca. 312–316) and an oblique reference to a failed Aksumite attack on the Ḥimyarite capital of Zafār ca. 330, 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 ʿĒzānā (ca. 330–370), who established his new faith as the state religion of Aksum 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), ʿĒzānā 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. 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 ʿĒzānā 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). While Ousanas and ʿĒzānā 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

20 This exchange is documented in Ir 28 from Mārib (Muṭahhar bin ʿAlī al-Iryānī, Fī-tārīḫ al-Yaman: Nuqūš musnadiyya wa-taʿlīqāt, Ṣanʿāʾ 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-ʾĀswāl but probably originating from Zafār (Christian Julien Robin, ‘L’inscription Ir 40 de Bayt Ḍabʾān et la tribu ʿMrī. 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 Bāfaqīh, 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” (bʿdn ḏt dhr-hw ʔḥbs²). 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).
in these royal titles indicates the important symbolic status that South Arabia enjoyed in Aksumite royal ideology. The use of the South Arabian musnad script – and even Sabaicizing lexical and morphological features – in several royal Aksumite inscriptions in Gəʿəz dating from the fourth and sixth centuries similarly highlights this status. Equally telling is a fragmentary reference to “[…] […] of the Aksumites and the Ḥimyarite[s […] […] Αξομειτῶν καὶ Ὁμηρειτῶν[v […] […]]] in RIÉth 286, 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 fīdal, most likely based on the syllabic Brāhmī script of India. Although some preliminary efforts to develop this system were made during the reign of Ousanas, these were limited to coins, and it is not until ʿĒzānā’s reign that we find the first examples of a fully developed syllabary. Even then, the full-fledged fīdal 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. Thus, it is clear that, in contrast to other writing systems born of Late Antiquity, such as the Armenian and Georgian alphabets, fīdal was not devised with the intention of providing a written

26 The term is derived from the pan-Ancient South Arabian term for “inscription”: ms’nd, less commonly ms’nd (Middle and Late Sabaic) or mṯnd (Ḥaḍramitic).
29 The term itself is etymologically obscure, though it may be derived from Ga’az fadala “trennen, absetzen” (Francis Breyer, Schrift im antiken Afrika: Multiliteralismus und Schriftadaption in den antiken Kulturen Numidiens, Ägyptiens, 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 Ga’az graffiti of Aksumite date have also been found.
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 and a handful of short graffiti in consonantal Gəʿəz from the grotto of Ḥōq on the island of Soqṭrā, at least two of which appear to be of Christian origin, virtually all Gəʿəz texts from ’Ēzānā’s reign onwards were written using the fīdal 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 Gəʿəz 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 Ḏū-Raydān and Saba’ and Salḥīn and Ṭōdumm and Yamanāt and Tihāma and Ḥaḍramawt and all of their Arabs, and of the Beğa and the Noba and the Kushites and Şeyāmō and DRBT […] of the land of ʔṬFY” (ngs² ʔks¹m w-hmr w-z-rydn w-s¹b w-s¹lḥn w-tdm w-z-ymnt w-thmt w-ḥdrmwt w-kl ñrbm w-z-bg w-z-ks¹ w-ṣym w-z-drbt […] t z-mdr ʔtfy). This title is based in part on the so-called Very Long Title borne by Ḥimyarite kings beginning in the reign of ’Abīkarib ’As’ad (ca. 400–440): “King of Saba’ and Ḏū-Raydān and Ḥaḍramawt and Yamanāt and the Arabs of Ṭawdumm and Tihāma” (mlk s¹b w-ḏ-rydn w-ḥḍrmwt w-ymnt w-ʔhtub 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 Ḏū-Raydān after the name of the palace of Raydān at Žafār. 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 Šāmmar Yuḥar’iš (ca. 287–312), though the remaining outposts of Ḥaḍramī resistance were not fully integrated by Ḥimyar until the reign of Ḥamʿar’alī Yuhabirr (ca. 321–324). As for Ṭawdumm and Tihāma, these toponyms denote the Nağd 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 Wāʾzēb (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.
rule during the fifth century. 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 Naǧd, 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 Beğa people inhabiting the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea to the north of the Ethiopian highlands, the Nuba and Kushites of the Middle Nile Valley, and the Ṣǝyāmō, who may have dwelled to the west of the Takkazē, not far from the Somēn Mountains. The identity of DRBT remains elusive, as this name is attested only in this single reference in RIÉth 191. Equally obscure is ṬFY, which again is known only from the single reference in this inscription, and which may not actually have formed part of the title. From their positions in the list of vassals, however, both DRBT and ṬFY 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, Maʿdīkarib Yaʿfur, to the throne. Supported by an Aksumite contingent stationed at Žafār, Maʿđikarib Yaʿfur ruled

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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 Sahratān (s’hrt’n). 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.


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 kāšāyā (pl. kāšāyē) – most commonly applied, if ironically so, to the Aksumites.


41 Christian Robin interprets ṬFY 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 Aἰθιοπία should here be merely transliterated into musnad when other Aksumite inscriptions supply instead its Semitic equivalent, Ḥabašat, as in RIÉth 185 II/2 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 243).

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. 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 East were largely left unharmed and even possibly sided with Yōsēph. 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. As before, a Ḥimyarite Christian was brought to power, this time one Sumūyafaʿ ‘Ašwa’. 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 ʾAbrəhā, who seized power in South Arabia sometime after 531. After two failed attempts by Kālēb to remove him from power, ʾAbrəhā achieved independence with the understanding that he would pay tribute to Kālēb’s successor, i.e. his son Wāʿzēb (r. ca. 540–560?). ʾAbrəhā’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.

44 Popularly, if incorrectly, referred to as the Nestorian Church.
50 Gajda, Royaume de Himyar, pp. 148–156.
Selected Texts from the Gəʿəz Corpus

To date, six Gəʿəz inscriptions have come to light in Yemen: RIÉth 263, RIÉth 264, and Zafār 08-773 from Zafār; RIÉth 195 I+II from Mārib; and RIÉth 265 and RIÉth 266 – 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.

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.

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56 Ibidem, p. 353.
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 Ḏī-Yazan, the Ḥimyarite nobleman who, according to Arabic sources, sought help from the Sāsānids in liberating his country from Ethiopian rule (Muḥammad Ibn Ǧarīr 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.\textsuperscript{60} Certainly, the frequency with which South Arabians are said to have entrusted (\textit{rṭd}) 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.\textsuperscript{61} The issuing of curses against would-be vandals similarly highlights the concern with safeguarding written memorials.\textsuperscript{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 concerned\textsuperscript{63} – 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 Ḥimyarites alike. Potentially relevant is the excision of ʾAbrahāʾ’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 offentsichtlich um eine bewuβte damnatio memoriae.”\textsuperscript{64} Clearly, there were elements in late pre-Islamic South Arabia who wished to erase any memory of Ethiopian rule, be it by Kālēb or by his turncoat general ʾAbrahāʾ. Although it cannot be proven at present, it is possible that still other, yet to be discovered ʾGəʿəz inscriptions were erected in other South Arabian towns (e.g. Naḡrān and al-Muḫāʾ) in which the Aksumites are known to have maintained a presence during the sixth century.\textsuperscript{65}

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

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\textsuperscript{63} RIÉth 191/38-40 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 273). For a discussion, see \textit{The Aksumite Context}.

\textsuperscript{64} Alexander Sima, ‘Epigraphische Notizen zu Abrahāʾs Damminschrift (CIH 541),’ \textit{Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy} 13 (2002), p. 127.

\textsuperscript{65} Thus we read in Ry 507, from Biʾr Ḥimā, that Yōsēph’s troops “killed and plundered the Ethiopians in al-Muḫāʾ, along with its (indigenous) inhabitants, the Farasānīs” (\textit{hrgw w-ġnmw ʾḥbs² b-ḥw r-hw frs²nyt m}) (Walter W. Müller, \textit{Sabäische Inschriften nach Ären datiert: Bibliographie, Texte und Glossar}, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 104). That some Ethiopians also resided at Naḡrān is indicated in the \textit{Book of the Himyarites}, which states that an Ethiopian deacon named Jonan was among the Christians slaughtered by Yōsēph’s forces at Naḡrān (Axel Moberg (ed. and trans.), \textit{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. 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. 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. Likewise, the fact that there are no known private Aksumite inscriptions recording military ventures, 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. 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. 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


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.

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) RİÉth 195 I+II

This inscription from Mārib consists of three alabaster fragments, of which only two (jointly constituting RİÉth 195 II) can be connected. The fragment RİÉth 195 I was discovered at Mārib in 1947 by Ahmed Fakhry, whose photograph of the piece was first published with an English translation by Murad Kamil in 1964. 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 Jamme during the course of the expedition of the American Foundation for the Study of Man in 1952. In 1970, the Deutsche Yemen Expedition rediscovered RİÉth 195 I at the Museum of Taʿizz, where it was copied and photographed. That same year, the German expedition came across two further fragments, that together constitute RİÉth 195 II, in the storage facility of the National Museum in Ṣanʿā. The latter inscription was first published with a German translation and commentary by Walter Müller in 1972, along with RİÉth 195 I. A decade later, RİÉth 195 I and RİÉth 195 II were re-published with a French translation and commentary by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye and in 1991 a revised edition of the two fragments was published in transliteration by Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider. More recently, Abraham Drewes’ French translation of RİÉth 195 I and RİÉth 195 II have been published, along with a philological commentary, in his posthumous Receuil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des periods pré-axoumite et axoumite. When last accounted for, both RİÉth 195 I and RİÉth 195 II were kept at the National Museum in Ṣanʿā. We shall begin with RİÉth 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 Gəʿaz. This text reads as follows:


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75 Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke.’
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 Ḫawr Ġūrayra that the Aksumites made their landing. The seaborne invasion of South Arabia by Kālēb is described in great detail in the Martyrium Arethae. 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 Yaṯar refer to the reinforcement of this very “chain of Mandab” (s’s’lt mdbn, s’s’lt mdbn). There are, to be sure, some

79 Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 72.
80 Here following Walter Müller’s tentative restoration of [...]dōkū as ḡabdōkū “ich verwüstete” (Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ pp. 72, 73). Less plausible is the reconstruction proposed by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye: [...]t[...], ḡabdōkū [...] : ṭsdōkū : ḡabdōkū : ḡabdōkū ( [...] ṭs(a)ddōkū marsa za-la[... …]la masi la ḡahzābī) “je suis passé par le port que [...] avec l’[sic]armée” (Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Deux inscriptions,’ pp. 108, 112).
82 Martyrium Arethae (= Joëlle Beaucamp (ed. and trans.), Le martyre de Saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons (BHGG 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, IVe 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 qarṣa as “to cut through,” as this verb generally refers to actions like incising, scarring, scalping, engraving, and carving, rather than breaking through. However, if qarṣa 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 ʾAsʾar Yaṯʾar himself.

The extant text reads as follows:


Takeno, ‘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 Arctes 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 et la Search of 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.

1[the fugitive], he wander[ed… the noble]2-man and […] 3-the Victorious in […] 4[that] I might give you th[at …] 5-that you might judge us, G[od …] 6-Christ, in whom […] 7[…] and he followed the fugitive […] [their] [brothers] 8-and their sisters […] 9-I sent him(?) […] Gwərā][10. gʷərā. And Gʷərāgwə[ˈɑ] 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-naʾel the vanquished king of Ḥimyar and […] 18-and I burned the palace of Sabaʾ […] 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 ṭangabēnāy “nobleman” is attested for the first time in ‘Ēzānā’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 ṭǝngabēnāwē.[87] Although much

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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 Gəʿaz. 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 ʾangabēnāy/ʾangabēnāwē 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 anģâmō “Magier, Herr des Regens.”89 Since the term, in the variant form ʾangabēnāwē, 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 ʾangabēnāy 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 Himyar” (nǝgūśa hamēr sǝʕūr) 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 Gwǝrāgǝwǝʿā, 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 ʾangabēnāy 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 ʾArwē by a man named ʾAngabō, 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 ʾangabēnāwē of ʾĒzānā’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 Gəʿəz material from Mārib, Walter Müller restores ʾangabēnāy as Ėngabenāy, which he interprets as a nisba-adjective (Müller, ‘Zwei weitere Bruchstücke,’ p. 64). In his Gəʿəz dictionary, Wolf Leslau glosses ʾangabēnāy 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 Gəʿəz 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 nağīb “nobly-born” or Oromo hangafa/angafa “first, first-born” (Leslau, Comparative Dictionary, p. 29), though neither option inspires much confidence.

89 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 ʾilla-ʾAzgʷāgʷē, ʾilla-ʾAnzogʷāgʷē, and Zaʾilla-ʾIsgʷāgʷē (Rodinson, ‘Conversion de l’Éthiopie,’ pp. 243–244, 246).


91 During the reign of Sumūyafaʿ ʾAwā, Yōsēph is referred to as simply the “King of Himyar” (mlk ḥmyrª) in the Sabaic inscription CII 621 from Ḥisn al-Ġurāb (CII 621/9 [Müller, Sabäische Inschriften, p. 106]) and is perhaps also alluded to as “this king” (bn mlkª) in Wellcome A 10364/6 (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 Sabaʾ” (tāšēkā sabāʾ). It is tempting to identify this palace with Salḥīn, a royal residence at Mārib mentioned in Sabaic inscriptions as well as in Aksumite royal titles. However, it is not clear whether such a structure still stood at Mārib in Kālēb’s time, 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. 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 Hagaraynē” (sāhdīṯ qaddīṣē ḏ-asheḏ (w) b-[ha]ǧarayn). Since that chapter was listed between a chapter treating the martyrdom of the Christians of Mārib and a chapter dealing with those of Nağrān, 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. 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-Ǧawf, namely Naššān (modern al-Sawdāʾ) and Našqum (modern al-Bayḍāʾ), that are referred to as hgrn hnr “The Two Cities” in Ja 665, dating from the reign of the Ḥimyarite king Yāsir um Yuhانʾim I (ca. 265–287). In that case, one might interpret “The Two Cities” as a nickname, of the sort borne by many South Arabian settlements. Robin admits, however, that the latest known references to either of these towns date from

idem, ‘Ḥimyar, Aksūm, 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 Salḥīn is featured in the titles borne by Kālēb’s fourth-century predecessors Ousanas and Ḥāzān in various forms: sʾlḥn (RIÉth 185 I/2), sʾlḥ (RIÉth 185 II/2), sʾlḥn (RIÉth 185 bis I/2, RIÉth 186/3), sʾlḥn (RIÉth 185 bis II/2), salḥn (RIÉth 187/2, RIÉth 188/3–4, RIÉth 189/3) in Gəʿəz (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ pp. 242, 243, 246, 247, 251, 255, 259–260, 263); and Σιλεῆ (RIÉth 270/3, RIÉth 270 bis/3), Σ[ιλ]εῆλ (RIÉth 271/8) in Greek (Bernand, ‘Inscriptions de la periode axoumite,’ pp. 364, 368, 371).

93 The last known reference to Salḥīn 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)).


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

96 The identification with Haģarān, 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 Dawʾan, far to the east of both Mārib and Nağrān—and quite possibly beyond the range of Yōsēph’s forces, as well as those of Kālēb.


Religious Ideology in the Gəʿəz Epigraphic Corpus from Yemen

In the fourth century, while the latest inscriptions found at the sites of Naššān and Našqum themselves do not post-date the third century, 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 Ḏū-Dī āwān in Year 632 (i.e. January 523), refers to Mārib ( mrb) by name and alludes to a local church (Ωn < Syriac ʕīttā). Although the context is not clear in either text, both RIĒth 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-Ǧawf. That Mārib possessed a church has long been known thanks to CIH 541, ʿAbrəhā’s famous Sabaic inscription from the Great Dam at Mārib, which refers to the celebration of Mass at the town’s church. 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 Gəʿəz for the purpose of RIĒth 195 I+II, rather than in the local Sabaic, would no doubt have resonated with this community.

More problematic is [...]naʔəl, which is widely viewed as a proper name and which is tentatively reconstructed by Robin as ʕ[.[]nʔəl] on the basis of a reference in RIĒth 191 to Kālēb’s having built a church in Ḥimyar at a place called ʕqnʔl. The implication, then, is that ʔqnʔl was the place where Yōsēph met his end at the hands of Kālēb’s forces. According to Robin, ʕqnʔl could be an Ethiopian name not for a specific point on the map but for an entire region, perhaps the Tihāma. This is possible, though it must be stressed that RIĒth 191 gives no specific details regarding ʕqnʔl’s location, save only that it lay in Ḥimyarite territory. Whatever the case, there is no reason to identify this toponym with the [...]naʔəl of RIĒth 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 [...]naʔəl too was located somewhere in the interior of Ḥimyar.

99 Robin, ‘Les Deux Villes,’ p. 120.

100 Peter Stein, Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäben 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. ʿAbrahā) 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-bdsl ʃkw ʕzm w-dn ʃrbn ʃdyw hgrn mrb w-qd][]s’w b-ʃt mrb k-b-hw ks’ʃm ʃb-μs’tl-hw) (Müller, Sabäische Inschriften, pp. 113–114).


104 Ibidem, p. 16.
the country, 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.

(2) RÍÉth 263

Our second inscription, RÍÉth 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, and was re-published in 1982 with a French translation and commentary by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye in the same article that treated RÍÉth 195 I and RÍÉth 195 II. A transliteration of the Go’az text was published by Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider in 1991, followed in 2012 by an emended edition with a German translation and commentary published by Walter Müller. 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 RÍÉth 263 are dismissed as “incomprehensible” by Drewes in his posthumous Receuil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des periods pré-axoumite et axoumite. 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 RÍÉth 263 is preserved than is the case with either RÍÉth 195 I or RÍÉth 195 II, what text survives contains many points of interest.


1. [...] and he allowed/gave authority [...] 3. [...] the faith of the Father [...] 4. [...] nobleman [...] 5. [...] Ch]rist will be victorious ...

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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), 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.
111 Drewes, Receuil des inscriptions, p. 357.
112 Adapted from Müller, ‘Äthiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ p. 14.
Here again we find reference to a “nobleman” ( 가능한). 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 Arethaeae, which mentions Kālēb’s capture of a kinsman of Yōsēph and his use of this man as a guide to Ẓafār,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 Ṣǝrǝʾ, Jacqueline Pirenne interprets this as the Goʿaz 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 solete of RIÉth 263 is identical with solete (اسخاء), 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

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113 Martyrium Arethaeae (= Beaucamp, Martyre de Saint Aréthas), §35.
115 Müller, ‘Athiopische Inschriftenfragmente,’ p. 16.
116 Martyrium Arethaeae (= Beaucamp, Martyre de Saint Aréthas), §29.7.
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 Dākēn) 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 < *dhū (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 Dākēn – the slight orthographic difference between the solete of ’Ēzānā’s RIÉth 189 and the solete of Kālēb’s RIÉth 263 poses no problems for identifying these as names for one and the same clan.
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-Ḥamrāʾ on the site of Zaftār, 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
1. & [\ldots]b[\ldots]m[\ldots] & 2. & [\ldots]s\acute{a}r\ddot{a}\acute{s}k\dddot{w}\ddot{o} \ [\ldots] & 3. & \dddot{\acute{\omega}}\ddot{n}\ddot{a}\dddot{t}\ddot{a} \dddot{\acute{h}}\ddot{a}\dddot{n}\dot{a}\ddot{s}\ddot{[}k\ddot{u} \ [\ldots] \\
4. & [\ldots]h\acute{a}n\acute{a}s\acute{\ddot{u}} \ b\acute{e}\ddot{t}a \ k\ddot{\omega}\ddot{a}[s\ddot{\ddot{y}}\dddot{\acute{a}}n \ [\ldots] & 5. & [\ldots]\dddot{\acute{\omega}}n\ddot{a}r\dddot{u}\ddot{\ddot{\ddot{\ddot{u}}} \ s\dddot{\ddot{a}}\dddot{\ddot{b}}\dddot{\ddot{\ddot{a}}\dddot{h}[t]a \ [\ldots] & 6. & [\ldots]\acute{s}\ddot{u} \ w\ddot{a}-z\ddot{a}\ddot{k}a[r\ddot{u} \ [\ldots] & 7. & [\ldots]\dddot{m}\ddot{a}[r](r)y\dddot{a}m \ w\ddot{a}[\ldots] & 8. & [\ldots]\dddot{m}\ddot{o}\ddot{t}\ddot{a}[\ldots]
\end{align*}
\]

1. [... ] 2 [... ] I established it/put it in order [... ] 3 [... ] that [I] built¹²² [... ]

The construction of a church in Himyar 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 Zaftār 08-077. Furthermore, the relevant passage in RIÉth 191, while mentioning Himyar by name, says nothing about Zaftār but instead refers, as we have seen, to a place called ɢqnʔl. Given the provenance of Zaftār 08-773, one would assume that the church in question was located at Zaftār. Significantly, the Syriac Letter of Simeon of Bēṯ Aršām refers to just such a church at Zaftār during the 520s in a quotation from a letter sent by Yōsēph to the Laḥmid king al-Munḏir III (r. 504–554), wherein Yōsēph claims to have converted

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¹²¹ Ibidem, p. 10.
¹²² Since the graphemes for ʃØ and ʃū 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 Zaftār 08-077/4.
¹²³ Without context, =Gəʿəz ʿ准确性 (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 Himyar under the leadership of one Hayyān (hyn). This is undoubtedly to be identified with the individual named ḥywnʔ who, according to the Book of the Himyarites (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.
Religious References

Before examining the religious themes that infuse the Gǝʿəz 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 ǧihād 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

¹²⁷ RIÉth 264, another fragmentary Gǝʿəz inscription from Zafār, alludes to synagogues in the plural (mǝkʷrābāta) (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.
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 à qu’il est question, est présentée comme une légitimation a priori des expeditions 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” (ʔîš 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 Yiṯaʾ’amar Watar Ibn Yakrubmalik (fl. late eighth century BCE) and Karibʾil Watar Ibn Ḍamarʾalī (fl. early seventh century BCE), which state that both rulers waged war for the Sabaean state-god ʾĪlmuquh and for the body politic of Sabaʾ (l-ʔlμqḥ w-l-s′bʔ).¹³⁵ The latter ruler is reported to have compelled the inhabitants of the defeated city-state of Naššān and their king Sumhuyafaʾ Yāsīrān Ibn Labūʾān to construct a temple to ʾĪlmuquh within the main town of Naššān itself (yḥw r s′ḥbʔ b-hgrn nsʾn),¹³⁶ though here too the intention was clearly not to force the Naššānites to worship the Sabaean deity. Rather, Karibʾil Watar sought to give Naššān a Sabaean makeover, and to that end saw fit to erect a temple to ʾĪlmuquh, as well as to settle Sabaean colonists in the town (yḥw r s′ḥbʔ b-hgrn nsʾn).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-Jospeh 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 3945/1.4-6.7-11-12.12.14.15.17.18.19-20 (Hatke, ‘For ʾĪlmuquh and for Sabaʾ,’ pp. 97–100); DAI Širwāḥ 2005-51/1.3.4 (Nobert Nebes, Der Tatenbericht des Yiṯaʾ’amar Watar bin Yakrubmalik aus Širwāḥ (Jemen) Tübingen and Berlin 2016, pp. 9, 10–11).

¹³⁶ RÉS 3945/16 (Hatke, ‘For ʾĪlmuquh and for Sabaʾ,’ pp. 104–105).

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.\textsuperscript{138} Also significant is the fact that, with the conquest of South Arabia, the Aksumites gained control of Naǧrān, a key station in the network of trans- Arabian caravan routes from which the two main branches bifurcated: one leading via the Ḥiǧāz to Syria-Palestine and the other via Yamāma to the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{139} Given that Naǧrān 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\textsuperscript{140}, a fact that explains in part why the local Christian community was targeted for particularly harsh treatment by Yōsēph \textquoteleft As'ar Yaṯ'ar, who no doubt had geo-strategic and economic interests of his own. From the Aksumites’ perspective, it helped that Naǧrān 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 found\textsuperscript{141} – and then, upon reaching Ğazān, proceeded inland to Naǧrān. The Aksumites’ interest in Naǧrān is evident from Sabaic inscriptions,

\textsuperscript{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, \textit{History of the Wars}, §1.20.12), the sixth-century author Cosmas Indicopleustes (\textit{Topographie chrétien}, §11.15.5-13) states that Taqprobanē (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 \textit{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,’ \textit{Newsletter di Archeologia CISA} 5 (2014), pp. 547, 587 (Fig. 42)).

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

\textsuperscript{140} As an example of the Naǧrānīs’ wealth, a woman of Naǧrān named Rūhayma is reported to have possessed gold, silver, slaves, bondmaids, and crops (\textit{dahbā w-sīmā w-ṣafādē w-amḥāgā w-ṣalāṯā}), some 40,000 stamped \textit{dīnār}s in her own treasury, along with the treasury of her recently martyred husband, as well as jewelry made of pearls and rubies (\textit{arbūn al-pīn dīnārī ṣa-hāmīn w-sīmīn bāṯ gazzā ḏil ṣatran bāṯ gazze ḏ-gaḇr ṣaḥlāṯā ṣa-miḡnāṯā w-yāiqūntē}) (Irfan Shahīd, \textit{The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents}, Brussels 1971, p. xxvii). So great was Rūhayma’s wealth, in fact, that at one point King Maḏīkarib Yaʿfur (r. ca. 518–522) himself, Kālēb’s first appointee on the Ḥimyarite throne, borrowed 12,000 \textit{dīnār}s from her (Ibidem).

\textsuperscript{141} Timothy Insoll, ‘Dahlak Kebir, Eritrea: From Aksumite to Ottoman,’ \textit{Adumatu} 3 (2001), pp. 45–46; John P. Cooper and Chiara Zazzaro, ‘A Stone Anchor from the Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia,’ International Journal of \textit{Nautical Archaeology} 41/2 (2012), p. 409; John P. Cooper and Chiara Zazzaro, ‘The Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia: towards a chronology of settlement,’ \textit{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. 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 Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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, 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. 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. 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

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142 Ja 576+Ja 577, a Sabaic inscription from Mārib dating from ca. 243 during the coregency of the Sabaean kings ʾĪlšaraḥ Yahḏūb and his brother Yaʾzil Bayyin, speaks of not only an alliance between the Nağrānīs and the Aksumites but also of a governor of the Aksumite king who held sway over Nağrān (ṣgh ngsy"n b-hgr" ngrn) (Ja 576+Ja 577/25-26 (Jamme, ‘Sabaean Inscriptions,’ p. 77)). Other, indirect evidence of even earlier Aksumite interest in the Nağrān 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’a 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-tṣnʕn bn-hbs²n l-mẓʔw ṭrd-hmwn) (Robin-Umm Laylā 1/5-6 (Robin, ‘Saba’a 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 Nağrān (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.


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. 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” (τοῦτο νίκα).

The resonance of this symbol with Aksumite Christians is evident from the coins minted by ‘Ēzānā following his conversion to Christianity, in which the pagan symbols of the crescent and lunar disc are replaced by the cross. Then, in a clear instance of imitatio Constantini, the early fifth-century Aksumite king MḤĐYS minted coins bearing the legend b-z msql tmwʔ (= ba-zǝ masqal tǝmawwə) “With this cross you shall conquer.” What concerns us in the present study, however, are the religious references in inscriptions from Yemen’s Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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), “I spent the night on the ship” (bētkū wəsta ḥamar), “I burned the palace of Sabaʾ” (ʔawʕaykū tāʕəkā sabāʔ), and “I established it/put it in order” ([ʃa]rāʕkəwwō). On the other hand, he acknowledges the role of the divine in such phrases as “G[od] delivered unto me” (maṭṭawanī ʔǝ gzī ʔa bəḥēr) and “this Go[d] did for me” (zanta gabra līt ʔa ʔǝ gzī ʔa bəḥ[ēr]) in RIÉth 195 I/10 and “this Go[d] did for me” (zanta gabra līt ʔa ʔǝ gzī ʔa 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 ‘Ēzānā 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 μαι...
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” (Kαὶ ἀνέστη[ν] ἐν τῇ δυνάμι τοῦ Θεοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ὅν ἐπίστευσα καὶ ὁδήγησέν με). Likewise, in a Goʿaz 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-ḥlfnᵐ ṣm-dᵐ ṣgzʔbhrmᵐ ṣmrhnᵐ [b-d] ṣwl[mⁿ]). 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-rdʔt [ṣgzʔ b]hr dbʔk) and that his troops seized booty from the enemy “by the power of God” (b-hyl ṣgzʔ bhr). 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 ṣwhbn ṣgzʔ bḥr z-kyh ṭʔm[ṇk]).

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 Goʿaz 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 Goʿaz corpus from Yemen. Christ (kərəstōs) 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 …]” ([… kərəstōs ṣy-md[wwaʔ …]). Given the association of Christ with victory in RIÉth 263/5, the fragmentary phrase […ṣ mawārdi ba[… in RIÉth 195 II/2-3 might be reconstructed as [kərəstōṣṣ mawārdi 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” (ʔys¹s¹ krs¹ts¹ wld ṣgzʔ bhr mwʔ ṣ-ʔmnk bt), who is elsewhere referred to in the same inscription as “Christ who is unvanquished by the enemy” (krs¹ts¹ d-ʔyt[mwʔ l-dr]). Likewise, in the Goʿaz account of his Nubian campaign, ʿĒzānā invokes God as “Lord of Heaven, [Who is in] heaven and (on) earth, victorious
on my behalf” (ʔəgzīʔa samāy [za-ba] samāy wa-mədr mawāʔī līta).\textsuperscript{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 ‘Ēzānā’s conversion to Christianity.\textsuperscript{164} In the South Arabian context, the invocations of Christ in the Gəʿəz 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 Himyarite throne, Sumūyafaʿ ʾAšwaʿ, we read [...] s'm rhmnº w-bn-hw krs¶ts³ ġlbº [...] “[... ...] the name of Raḥmān and His son, Christ the Victorious [... ...].”\textsuperscript{165} Here too, as with RIÉth 263/5 and RIÉth 195 II/2-3, Christ is described as “victorious” (ġlbº). As for Raḥmān “the Merciful,” this is an epithet for the Judaeo-Christian deity, ultimately derived from Jewish Aramaic,\textsuperscript{166} that first appears in Sabaic ca. 420.\textsuperscript{167} Although the epithet ġlb has no cognate in Gəʿəz,\textsuperscript{168} it is possible that its use here in reference to Christ is a calque on contemporary Gəʿəz expressions.

Turning now to the Virgin Mary, there is only one reference to her in the extant corpus, in Ṣafār 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.”\textsuperscript{169} Her cult was avidly promoted by the Ethiopian emperor Zarʾa Yāʾaqōb (r. 1434–1468),\textsuperscript{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...
māryām) or “Jews” (ʔayhūd). 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 ʔamlāk) and “Mother of Light” (ʔəmmū la-bərhān) in inscriptions on wooden ritual furniture dating from the reign of the Zāgʷē king Lālibalā (ca. late twelfth-early thirteenth century), a period during which Aksumite cultural influences were still strong. 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 Gəʿez translation was made during the second half of the fourteenth century on the basis of an Arabic version. Similarly, the Taʾāmra 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. 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 Ṣanʿāʾ (YM 1803), that may represent Mary and the infant Jesus. 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 ṣǝyōn “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.
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 Yá’aqōb. 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 Yá’aqōb—is provided by the Maṣḥafa ‘Ērafa’a la-Māryām “The Book of Mary’s Rest”, a Gə’az translation of a now lost Greek text. As we shall see in the following paragraph, the fact that the Gə’az 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’az. 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’az 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’az at about the same time. If Christian literature was being translated into Gə’az 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’az 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’az. 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.

of Arabic sources, the transmission of Enochic material by Kaʿb 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 Gəʿəz made use of a Greek *Vorlage*.\(^{183}\) Again, if a Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz on the basis of a Greek *Vorlage*, judging from the presence in the Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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. 518\(^{185}\) 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 Gəʿəz 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.\(^{187}\)

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\(^{185}\) Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien*, §1.56.1-14; Francis Breyer, *Das Königreich Aksum: Geschichte und Archäologie Abessiniens 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).


\(^{187}\) 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 Arabs 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 ʿĒzānā’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 Gaʾaz inscription RIÉth 189 invokes the Christian deity in such neutral terms as “Lord of Heaven, Who is in heaven and (on) earth” (�示a samāy [za-ba-]samāy wa-mdr),188 “Lord of Heaven” (⽰a samāy),189 “Lord of All” (⽰a k“əllū),190 and “Lord of the Land” (⽰a bəḥēr).191 By contrast, the Greek inscription RIÉth 271 invokes, in explicitly Christian terms, Jesus Christ (Ἰησoῦ[ς] Xριστό[ς])192 and the Trinity (Ἐν τῇ πίστι τοῦ θ[εoῦ καὶ τ]ῇ δυνάμι τοῦ [πα]τρός καὶ υἱoῦ καὶ [ἁ]γίο[υ] πνεύματoς).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 ʿĒzānā’s reign. To date, the earliest evidence for the incorporation of Biblical verses in Aksumite inscriptions in Gaʾaz 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 Gaʾaz, 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 Gaʾaz 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 ʿĒzānā 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).
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 ʿĒzānā’s Nubian campaign, which is written in Gaʾaz 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-yəkʷənən wa-ʔəlbō [...] [... ... ...].nnəna la-maʔman bəhēr wa-ʔənbaɾō dība [... ... ...]. This is tentatively reconstructed by Pierluigi Piovanelli as [ʔəhū]bō kəbra dāwīt wa-yəkʷənən wa-ʔəlbō [za-yəʔəbbayō (takʷənnən) wa-ʔəsəyyəmō makʷənənə la-maʔman bəhēr wa-ʔənbaɾō dība [manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔəbūhū] “[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 Δαυιδ αὐτῷ καὶ ἄρξει καὶ oὐκ 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-ʔənbaɾō dība [manbara kəbr za-bēta ʔəbūhū]). 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 ḥəssū ʔəd[q-…] yətwəsəkəkəmū “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 Garīm 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 ḥəssū məngəstō la-ʔəqəzīda bēhēr wa-ʃdəq wə-zə:ssa kʷəllū yətwəsəkəkəmū).201 Then in RIÉth 195 II/21-23 we read [nəfū səm]ʕənī wa-ʔəngərkəmū

199 The Aksumite Context.
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 Garīm III, ʃdəq follows the imperative ḥəssū in RIÉth 195 II, whereas Abba Garīm III has instead məngəstō. This is a minor difference, however, and there is no doubt that the versions of Matthew 6:33 in RIÉth 195 II and Abba Garīm III
religious ideology in the gəʿəz epigraphic corpus from yemen

maṭana gab[ra lātī la-nafsoya za-ṣarāḥkū ḫabē][h]u ba-ṣafāya wa-kalākhū ba-lǝsānǝya “[…: ‘Come listen to me and I will tell you the extent of what He has done 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 Gəʿəz Psalter the passage reads 饬i ǝru rātī la-nafsǝya za-ṣarāḥkū ḫabē hū ba-ʔ afāya wa-kalāḥkū ba-lǝsānǝya “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.”

Two other passages from the Psalter are quoted in RIÉth 195 I+II. In RIÉth 195 I/5-6 we find Psalm 68:2: ǝn[nasāʔ wa-yəzzarawū darrū wa-yǝq “yayū šalāʔ]tū ǝom-qədma gaṣṣū “May He arise, and may His enemies be scattered, and may His foes [flee] before His Presence;” while in RIÉth 195 II/26-28 Psalm 19:8-9 is quoted: ǝmün[tū:ssa ba-ʔastrās wa-ba-saragalāt wa]-nḥa:ssa našābī ba-sǝma ʔeqziʔa ba[ḥer ǝamlākəna ǝmün-tū:ssa tasāqaṣū wa-wadqū wa-nḥna:ssa taṃsa)n[ [wa-ratās]n[ …] “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 Gəʿəz Bible.

Intriguing, if somewhat speculative, is Walter Müller’s identification of the passage in RIÉth 195 II/4 (ʔəhūbakāhā la-yəʔ[ʔ]a[ʔ] “[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 Gəʿəz Book of Genesis reads wa-yəbēlō la-ʔabrām ʔa-na waʔeṭi ʔeqziʔa ḥoʔer ʔəamləkə za-ʔawšʔa ʔe-məd ра kalədqawīn kama ḥahabkāh  la-yəʔeṭi mədərd tətwārasā205 “And He said to Abram, ‘I am God your Lord, Who brought you out of the land of the Chaldaeeans 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 ḥuqença ኧ ከጋ ከጋ ከጋ ከጋ (ʔəhūbakāhā la-yəʔeṭi mədərd tətwārasä),206 though in their edition of the text, Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider reconstruct

have much more in common with the version in the standard version of the Gəʿəz Bible. Walter Müller reconstructs the lost text of RIÉth 195 II/20-21 as ǝqeq ǝw-mangeqeq ǝw-zontu k “ellu, 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 ǝom-qədma gaṣṣū 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 yapūsū ðeqeqeqeq), 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 yānásu mašalaw Ṿip-panies “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).
RIÉth 195 II/4 more conservatively as ʔǝhūbakāhā la-yəʔ[ti mədr ...]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 qa-hlāp qāhāl ṭaybūtā qa-lwāt allāhā d-mallel rāhem la-mšīhā malkā kāleb lwāt ḥaylawātēh b-arṣā qa-hmīrāyē men hātar 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” (hā awrṭan māryā arṣā qa-bēlādāḥayn).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 yešāʿ bar nūn w-awrṭeh arâšōn).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 Nagaśt “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).
and visits his father, he is then made king and given the name David.\textsuperscript{214} Although a case has been made that claims of Davidic lineage by Ethiopian royalty, and even the \textit{Kəbra Nagaśt} itself, date back to the Aksumite period,\textsuperscript{215} hard evidence to that effect is lacking. All available evidence, in fact, indicates that the \textit{Kəbra Nagaśt} is a medieval, specifically a fourteenth-century, work.\textsuperscript{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 Ṣəyōn, i.e. 1340–1344.\textsuperscript{217} At most, the \textit{Kəbra Nagaśt} seems to incorporate material culled from (possibly) Coptic sources, some of which may date from as far back as the seventh century.\textsuperscript{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 RIÉth 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 \textit{Martyrium Arethae} in which Timothy, the archbishop of Alexandria, writes to Kālēb exhorting him

\textsuperscript{214} Ibidem, p. 38 (Gə’az text).


\textsuperscript{216} Stuart Munro-Hay, ‘A Sixth-Century Kebra Nagast?’ \textit{Annales d’Éthiopie} 17 (2001), pp. 43–58; idem, \textit{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; Ṣabāʾ ʿujjastī ṣīn Ḫayyār ‘Saba, that is to say, of the Ḥimyarites’ (\textit{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 (\textit{Christian Topography}, §2.50.4–7).


\textsuperscript{218} The colophon of the \textit{Kəbra Nagaśt} in fact alludes to a Coptic \textit{Urtext} that had been translated into Arabic (Bezold, \textit{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 \textit{Kobra Nagaśt}. In addition to the reference to Cairo in Chapter 59 of the \textit{Kabra Nagaśt}, a Coptic origin for at least portions of Chapter 83 is plausible. The latter chapter, entitled “Concerning the King of the Ishmaelites” (ba-ʔonta ʔogāsa ʔomāʔēlōwāyān), 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, \textit{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 \textit{Chronicle of John of Nikiu}, survives solely in a Gə’az translation, albeit dating from 1602 (Ibidem, p. 152), a much later period than the \textit{Kobra Nagaśt} indeed. The story of the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which forms such an important part of the \textit{Kabra Nagaśt}, 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, \textit{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” (kobra 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 (sagʷ̣ā) of ʾĔlla-ʾAṣbǝḥā, literally “He who has brought the dawn.” This royal habit of adopting a nickname continued into the Zägʷē 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 ʾĔlla-ʾAṣbǝḥā 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 Gaʿaz corpus from Yemen survives in a very fragmentary state. If, however, the

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221 Beaucamp, Martyre de Saint Aréthas, p. 260 (n. 174).
223 Derat, Marie-Laure, ‘Before the Solomonids: Crisis, Renaissance and the Emergence of the Zagʷē Dynasty (Seventh-Thirteenth Centuries),’ in: Kelly, Companion, Leiden and Boston 2020, p. 52.
225 Thus in consonantal Gaʿaz we have the form Ḳ̣ ṣbh in RIÉth 191/7-8 and RIÉth 192/7 (Drewes and Schneider, ‘Inscriptions de la période axoumite,’ p. 272), in Sabaic Ḳ̣-ṣ<ṣ>bḥ in Ist 7608 bis/6 (Robin, ‘Joseph, dernier roi,’ p. 96), and in Greek sources Ἐλεοθείας, Ἐλλατζίβιας, and Ἐλλησθεαίος (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, 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 Gəʿəz 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 (ṣ²ʕb) as Israel (ys³rʔl), 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.

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

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229 Serjeant, ‘Hūd,’ p. 171. Although Isrāʾīl 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 Isrāʾīl clan (Ibidem).
the 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 ḥəqət a bəḥēr) 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” (qn ˤy bənt sˤm wld ḥəq ˤhr)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 ḥəśḥūn (yəḥūnh) by Jacqueline Pirenne and Gigar Tesfaye233 and yəḥānā 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 yəḥsənte.236 While the root ṣ̱sn 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): ḥəṭīʔatossa sasan ḥākīt yəʔətī “but sin is as evil sorcery,”241 the

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 yǝśsǝnū in RIÉth 263 is ś, the same sibilant that occurs as the first radical of the root √śsn from which yǝśsǝnū would be derived, leading Müller to tentatively translate RIÉth 263/9 as “dass sie Weissagungen weissagen” or “dass sie Zaubereien zaubern.” 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 Laḥayʿat of the lineage of Ḟū-Barʾān invokes the god ʿAṯtar Šāriqān for the protection of the Himyarite king Šammar Yuharʿš (r. ca. 287–312), as well as for the protection of the town of Silyat243 and of his family against such things as sorcery (ḥbr).244 Another Sabaic inscription, MṢ1, discovered by Mohammed Maraqten in a private collection in Ṣanʿāʾ and dating from the second or third century, similarly contains a plea that the god Taʾlab 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 ʿAṯtar 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 Soqṭrā 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.
247 Mon.script.sab. 7/A/1: tʔlk sʔlt bn wld ḥnṯt w-ḥb n-ḥs nbn ḥfn, “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: sʔr ḥb ḥn ḥb w-ḥb l-ḥs nbn kl kll ḥbn ḥb n-ḥs nbn, “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: ḥmt swd ḥmt swd ḥn ḥb ḥn sʔwr “Deliver me, O Wadd, deliver me from the presentation of (bad) counsel” (Ibidem, pp. 153, 158).
The Aksumite Context

It need hardly be stressed that the Gǝʿǝz 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 Gǝʿǝz 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, no such inscriptions allude to divine aid on the battlefield, much less do they quote from Scripture. 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). Even in ʾAbrahā’s Sabaic inscriptions, religious themes are limited to invocations of Raḥmānān and the Trinity, all of which use vocabulary of Syriac rather than Gǝʿǝz origin. 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 Nubia and early modern

251 In addition to the invocation of Jesus Christ as krs³ts³ in Ist 7608 bis/16 examined above (Religious References), he is referred to as ms'ḥ in CIH 541/2-3 (Müller, Sabäische Inschriften, p. 111).

252 Recently, Ahmad Al-Jallad has reanalyzed a unique monothist inscription in the zabūr script from Ġabal Drupal in the region of al-Ḍāliʿ 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.


254 DAI GDN 2002-20/1-4: b-hyl w-nṣ[r] w-rdʔ rḥmn m ṣ’my w-ms’h-hw “By the power and help and aid of Raḥmānān, the Lord of Heaven, and His Messiah” (Müller, Sabäische Inschriften, p. 107); CIH 541/1-3: b-hyl w-[r]dʔ w-rḥmt rḥmn w-ms’h-hw w-rḥ [q]dṣ “By the power and aid and mercy of Raḥmānān and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit” (Ibidem, p. 111); Ry 506: b-hyl rḥmn w-ms’h-hw “By the power of Raḥmānān” (Ibidem, p. 118). The Syriac loanwords in these formulae are ms’h “Messiah” (< mšiḥā) and ṣ’ḥ qds “Holy Spirit” (< ṣḥ qudādā). By contrast, Ist 7608 his employs Christological vocabulary of Gǝʿǝz origin. Thus Ist 7608 bis refers to the Holy Spirit as [mm]js ‛qds (“manfūs qaddās”) (Ist 7608 bis/1 (Robin, ‘Joseph, dernier roi,’ p. 96)) and to Christ as krs³ts³ (“Ist 7608 bis/16 (Ibidem, p. 97)). Although the latter term is derived ultimately from Greek Χριστός, it most likely entered Sabaic via Gǝʿǝz kərəstōs.

255 Thus, the tenth-century Fāṭimid ambassador Ibn Salīm al-Aswānī, as quoted by Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn ʿAlī 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-rûmiyya yufassirānahā bi-lisānihim (Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-mavā’ ʾiz wal-i ‘ibār bi-ḡk al-ḥiṭat wal-āḡār al-maʾruf bil-ḥiṭat al-maqrīzīyya, Vol. 1, Baghdad, n.d, p. 193)).
Malta. 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. As for the fact that Aksumite inscriptions from Yemen are written exclusively in Gəʿəz, 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, while in the context of monuments they can serve as links to history or as markers of foreign political power. 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

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257 An inscription in verse form from Qāniya employs the feminine second-person singular suffix -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 Wāḍī Širğān, 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 ṭūr ʔt (Müller, Sabäische Inschriften, p. 99). Following Walter Müller’s gloss of ṭūr 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 ṭūr ṭūr ʔt, which is quite unconventional by written Ancient South Arabian standards, occurs at the end of Ry 508, almost as an addendum.


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 [...].

Although the possibility that Aksumite inscriptions were read aloud upon their official dedication should not be dismissed out of hand, hard evidence of such a practice is lacking. Given the language barrier between Aksumites and South Arabians, it would be most improbable indeed that the Ga‘az 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 Kâlêb’s inscription RIÉth 191 from Aksum, recording that king’s first invasion of South Arabia, is written in Ga‘az, it employs not the fidal 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 Himyarite campaign of 518, the use of musnad conveyed the message to Kâlêb’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 fidal 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 Ga‘az 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


263 A particularly poignant example of this language barrier is given in Chapter 44 of the Book of the Himyarites. In that chapter we are told that, once the Aksumites had captured the oasis town of Nağrân 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 Nağrânîs, 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 Himyarites, 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 Sumūyafaʿ ʾAšwaʿ) 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 Gəʿəz inscriptions from Yemen were originally erected is unclear, given that only one such inscription, Ẓafār 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.
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 1 (see Historical Background) alludes to Sabaean conflict with the Aksumites.
ever been found, while the inscription is known solely from the copy made by a visiting merchant ca. 518 – one of the two foreigners alluded to above in connection with the translation of Greek inscriptions at Adulis. 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 Mahram) at Adulis in the twenty-seventh year of his reign. In Aksumite inscriptions, thrones of this type are designated δίφρoς in Greek and manbar in Gəˈəz. That δίφρoς, rather than the more common Greek term for throne, ὑπήρως, is employed may reflect the symbolic, rather than functional, character of such thrones. In Greek, δίφρoς 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, δίφρoς is attested in Greek inscriptions from the pre-Islamic Near East as a term for a small throne. That thrones were dedicated by Aksumite kings to gods is confirmed by extant Aksumite inscriptions. Thus in RIÉth 188, a Gəˈəz 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 Ṣadō and entrusted it to the gods ʿAstar, Bəḥēr, and Mədr (takalů manbara ba-zyyya ba-ṣadō wa-ʔamaḥa’danəwwō la-ʕastar wa-la-bəḥēr wa-la-madr). Significantly, in light of the Yemeni provenance of the Gəˈəz 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

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From Sabaeic inscriptions dating from the reign of the Sabaean king ʿAlḥin Nahfin (r. ca. 200–210), however, we learn that relations between Aksum and Saba 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, *Inscriften aus Riyām*, 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, Saba “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 Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*, eds. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, Leiden and Boston 2010, pp. 117–118).  


269 See Religious References.  


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. 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-ʔamahda nkū za-manbara za-takalkū la-ʔegziʔa samāy za-ʔangašani*277

48. And I have entrusted 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,

[I]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-yw? w-ʔmhdkw ḫb ʔ[ɡ]39.z? bhr gbr s’my w-mdr ʔm-z yms’n w-yns’t w-ys’t b[r w-]40.z w-ʔms’n ys’t ʔgzbh[r] b-bt w-b-s’bs’ […]*279

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274 RIÉth 286 A/7 (Bernand, ‘Inscriptions de la periode 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 periode axoumite,’ p. 265.
277 Ibidem, p. 265.
And I have sat upon this throne that [...] and have entrusted it to God, the creator of heaven and earth. If one should destroy and overturn it and break [it], 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. 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 Ga’az inscriptions that have come to light in Yemen were erected in a similar manner. 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 Ga’az or Greek. Such formulae belong to a broader Near Eastern tradition of issuing written threats to would-be vandals of public monuments, including inscriptions. With so much of the Ga’az 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, 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, 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

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280 The meaning of ywʔ is uncertain.
281 On coins of the early seventh-century Aksumite king Armaḥ, 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 increasingly important in this regard beginning in the sixth century (Ibidem, pp. 557–563).
283 In Ga’az: 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 periode axoumite,’ p. 369).
285 See Selected Texts from the Ga’az Corpus.
286 Maraqtēn, ‘Curse formulae.’
named DHR, the Aksumite king erected a throne (tklk mbr) in what appears to have been the territory of the defeated enemies. Most of the place-names mentioned in RIÉth 192 remain obscure, but since none suggest a South Arabian connection, Wāʿzēb’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-ʔanbaʔō dība [manbara kābr za-bēta ?abūhū] “and I shall place him on [the throne of glory of his father’s house].” As we have seen, the wording of this quote in Gəʿəz 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 la-kissē ḫaḥōd la-bēt ḥāḥîw “and he shall be as a throne of honor for the house of his father”) more closely than does its Gəʿəz counterpart. Where the Gəʿəz 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 the RIÉth 191:

2 b-ḥyl ḡz bhr w-b-mwgs’ ḡys’ krs ḡts’ wld ḡz bhr mw’ z-ʔmnk bt [d’]-w’ ḡwhn mngs’ ḡsn’ b-z ḡrr ḡry w-ʔkyd ḡrṣ’ ḡl’ty ḡ-w’ ḡqb ḡn ṣm-n’ṣ’y w-ʔbrn ws’ ṣmbt ṣbr’ ḡbwy

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

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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 wsw’ mlh-hm is a bit problematic, as the substantive mlh is not attested in Classical Gəʿəz and its meaning remains obscure. The phrase wsw’ mlh-hm recalls wasta mlalāmâ 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.
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 Qurʾān 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” (\textit{maḏman bəḥēr}) similarly recalls the reference in RIÉth 191/3 to God’s having given Kālēb a “strong kingdom” (\textit{mngs²t ʂn}²). 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 Gəʿəz 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 Piovanelli 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

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 Baʾəda Māryām I (r. 1468–1478) against the pagans (ʔaramīyān) of the Ethiopian highlands. In that text, the king is reported to have “deal with them as King Kālēb dealt with those who killed the people of Nağrān” (rassayōmū kama rassayōmū kālēb nāgūs la-ʔella qatalawwōmū 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 Gəʿəz. 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 Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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 Maʾdikarib Yaʿfur and Sumūyafaʾ ʾAšwa 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 (*bāʕūṯā*) 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:

śāḇeq (h)wā ennōn d-nēzlān kaḏ d-sūḥēn w-pāqeq (h)waw l-hōn da-ŋkannsūn (h)waw l-sarkā d-kālā aylēn da-kpar(w) (h)waw ᵇa kāhār (h)waw ᵇa-mgīnānā d-aprā w-sātār (h)waw kālīnā d-ū (h)waw ᵇ-napšēh [...] w-meṭṭūl tīḥ d-neḥēz (h)waw w-neḥqē ennōn en mktattrin (h)waw ᵇa-tvēbēḥōn w-haydēn nepqōd hwā l-kāhmē 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 Gaʿaz 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 Samēh metṭūl da-nḥassōn ʕlayhōn w-nešbqūn l-hōn kpūryā haw d-ḥ-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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