Jewish and Christian religious influences on pre-Islamic Arabia on the example of the term RḤMNN (“the Merciful”)

The well known epithet, RḤMNN is constantly confirmed in inscriptions particularly from so-called “Late Sabaean Period” (after 380) which were associated with monotheism. In this time Judaism and Christianity attempted to replace the traditional South Arabian religion. In this context RḤMNN was used by polytheists Arabs, Jews and Christians.

Raḥmānān’s connection to Arab Paganism

Some authors argue that the epithet Raḥmān (“the Merciful”) has any connection to Arab Paganism – especially any connection to a lunar deity. They stress that Raḥmān is only Jewish-Christian origins and usage.\(^1\) It is the standard Muslim explanation, does not seem to be relevant for explanation of Raḥmānān’s historical connections with all Semitic world.\(^2\)

The first know example Raḥmān’ form (rḥmn) is bilingual inscription written in Akkadian and Aramaic which was found in the Tell Fekherye in northeast Syria. This inscription was dedicated to the Aramean god Hadad contending following sentence: ‘lh. rḥmn zy. tslwth. ṭbh “merciful god to whom prayer is sweet.” In the Akkadian version Adad is called by the form rēmēnȗ. It is worth to add that rēmēnȗ was used as the epithet for god Marduk. Raḥmān in


the written version *rḫmn* has the Pagan origins and was used as a title for both a King and for the god Marduk.³

Explaining the genesis of *al-Rahmān* in Qur’an we should carefully examine the use of the related title *rḥmnn* in epigraphic South Arabic inscriptions. As is was mentionned, a highly developed polytheistic religion prevailed in South Arabia. The various kingdoms that succeeded each other and the tribal groups had different gods and goddesses.⁴ According to Jacques Ryckmans, during the second half of the ⁴th century the pagan formulas disappear from the South Arabic texts (only one single pagan text is later). Taking their place had monotheistic formulas invocations with the term: “Lord of Heaven” or “Lord of Heaven and Earth” and the “Merciful” (*Raḥmānān*). In this way Christianity and Judaism, using the same terminology, had supplanted paganism.⁵ This process of the monotheizing cult of the “Merciful One” (*rḥmnn*) became an important aspect of the latest phase of Prei-Islamic religion. There is no doubt that Judaism and Christianity had both become important in Late Sabaean Period in Yemen. The South Arabian epithet *Raḥmān* arising from traditional pagan usage, since the worship of the Merciful One (*rḥmnn*) was widespread in Syria in the first centuries A.D. in a non-Christian and non-Jewish context under Mesopotamian cultural influence.⁶

**Raḥmānān** in Jewish Old Arabic Inscriptions

In the ⁴th–⁵th century A.D. the perspective presented by some inscriptions change radically. The epithet *Raḥmānān* was used by the Jews and Christians in southern Arabia and this religion tried to replace the traditional pagan religions. Missionary activity of Jews and Christians caused, that many of the deities of the pagan pantheon virtually disappears, to be replaced by a monotheistic cult of the unique God. Certainly we find in this centuries pagan texts like two inscriptions: one dated c. 397 A.D., which mentions the traditional tribal deity Ta’lab and the other dateable to about the middle of the ⁵th century with god

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‘Athtar. Al-Raḥmān as the name of a single God in central and southern Arabia pictures several Jewish inscriptions:

Inscription Ry 515

Inscription Ry 520


Translation: C. Greenfield, From ‘LH Ṣḥmn To AL-RAḤMĀN…, p. 388.
Inscription Ry 508\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{verbatim}
10. … w''lh n dlhw | smyn | w'rdn | lynn | mlkn…
11. … wtrhm | 'ly | kl | 'lm | rhmnn | rhmkr' | 't
\end{verbatim}

10. … “and God to whom belongs heaven and earth shall protect our king…
11. … and have mercy on all the world, O Merciful, you are Lord”\textsuperscript{13}

Deep influences of Judaism in this period is testified by Jewish words and phrases in the Sabaean inscriptions, even Jewish personal names, such as Yehuda, and the reference to the “tribe Israel.” In the Sabaean texts “god” is called «the Merciful» (Raḥmānān), with the epithets “lord of heaven” or “master of heaven and earth.”\textsuperscript{14}

From the reading of the Jewish Sabaean inscriptions it is clear that Raḥmānān gives a life of justice, grant them children who will fight for Raḥmānān, asked for his mercy and to answer their prayers.

\textit{Raḥmānān (“the Merciful”)} in Christian Pre-Islamic inscription from South Arabia

It has often been pointed out that the use of the term Raḥmānān is of Jewish origin and this epithet was used in the same time by both Jews and Christians.\textsuperscript{15}

The best known Christian Sabaean inscriptions are two texts from the time of Abraha (died at least 553\textsuperscript{16} also spelled Abreha), an Aksumite Christian viceroy in southern Arabia for the Kingdom of Aksūm.

\textsuperscript{13} Translation: C. Greenfield, \textit{From 'LH RḤMN To AL-RAḤMĀN…}, p. 388.
Abraha’s Murayghan Inscription (Ry 506)\textsuperscript{17}

The discovered at Murayghan (or Mureighan) inscription informs about Abraha’s war campaign of Huluban in 662 of the Sabaean era that is 552 A.D.\textsuperscript{18}

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{bḫyl} | \text{rḥmn} | \text{wmshhw} | \text{mlkn} | \text{‘brh} | \ldots
\end{array}
\]

8–9 … So Abraha returned from Haliban by the power of the Merciful One.\textsuperscript{19}

This inscription begins with the formula \textit{bḫyl | rḥmn | wmshhw} which is translated by Alfred Felix Landon Beeston (1911–1995): “By the power of the Merciful One and His Messiah.” Some authors express doubt concerning this translation of \textit{bḫyl | rḥmn}. The Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia translates in another way the first sentence of so called Abraha’s Inscription: “With the power (help) of God, and the Jesus (Christian) King Abraha Zeebman (King’s title), the King of Saba’a, Zuridan and Hadramaut.”\textsuperscript{20}


Abraha’s Inscription on The Ma’arib Dam (CIS 541)²¹

Marib, 120 km from Sana’a in the Wadi Aḑana region, was the most important centre of the Sabaeans empire and culture. So called the Great Dam of Ma’arib (مُأرِب سد) was built around 750 BC (the first construction 1750–1700 BC) found as the one of the engineering wonders of the ancient world.²² Abraha’s inscription on the Ma’arib dam relates the quelling of an rebellion inspired by a son of the dethroned ruler Sumuyafa Ašwa (Esimiphaios²³) in the year 542/543 (that is 657 of the Sabaeans era²⁴). This text, also know as Marib’s inscription, give us information about the dam’s repairs; the meeting of embassies from Abyssinia, Byzantium, Persia, Hira and Harith bin Jabalat, the phylarch of Arabia in the following year.²⁵ Marib’s Inscription begins also with interesting us sentence: “By the power and favour of the Merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit.”

¹ “By the power and favour
² of the Merciful and His Mes-
³ -siah and the Holy Spirit. They have
⁴ written the inscription: Behold
⁵ Abraha who has been exalted, the king, the descendent of men of Ge’ez, the ramaihis,
⁶ Za Bayman, king of Saba’ and Dhu
⁷ Raydan and Hadramaut and Yamanat

²¹ Vgl. Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum ab Academia Inscriptionum et Litterarum Humaniorum Conditum atque Digestum, Pars Quarta: Inscriptiones Himyariticas et Sabæas continens, Tomus 2, Parissiis 1911, no. 541, p. 278.
²³ According to the inscription Istanbul 7608bis.
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8. and of ‘their’ Arabs on the plateau and in Tihamat.”

There are a few Christian inscriptions mentioning term *Raḥmānān*. Abraha’s Inscription on The Ma’arib Dam (CIS 541) and Abraha’s Murayghan Inscription (Ry 506) come from the period of Ethiopian rule (c. 525–575), when Christianity played a dominant role in South Arabia.27

*Raḥmānān* (“the Merciful”): from pre-Islamic religions to the Quran

They are some evidences of presence of *Raḥmānān* in pre-Islamic religions in Arabia and its confirm that this term was used in the three different spheres: old Arabic paganism, Judaism and Christianity. Which of the following religions did Muhammad adopt the name *ar-Raḥmān* as the name of God? Gerald Hawting (born 1944) argues that environment in which Islam arose was monotheist not politest28 but this explanation is not accepted by majority of scholars. It is likely that Muhammad borrowed the name *Raḥmānān* directly from Jews or Christians29 but we can not forget that in the same time among other gods the people of Yemen worshiped a deity whose name was in Sabaean *Raḥmānān*. According to Philip Hitti (1886–1978), the Nabateans, who were from north Arabia, brought both terms *ar-rahmān* and *ar-raḥīm* from southern Syria. Eventually, these Pagan gods found a place in the pantheons of South Arabian temples.30

*RḤMNN*’s equivalents in the Semitic world Semitic world have a long and very interesting history. The using of *ha-Raḥman* (the root ﬆﬣﬧ) and Sabaean *Raḥmānān* by Jews as a name for God was popular in the Talmudic period. In the Hebrew Bible appears the term *rachuwm* ( “[mercifull”) only in the function of the God’s attribute (Deut. 4,31; Psa 86, 15 etc.).31 For Christians of

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27 The Ethiopian rule in 6th century Yemen caused persecutions of Christian during the reign of Ḏū-Nuwās, the Jewish king of South Arabia. Ḏū-Nuwās burned down churches in Zafār and Ḥadramawt, also massacred Christian population in Nağrān. Vgl. K. Kościelniak, *XX wieków chrześcijaństwa w kulturze arabskiej*, vol. I:
Yemen the term *RḤMNN* was useful to propagate the doctrine of the Trinity, what we observe in the Abraha’s Inscription on the Marib Dam (CIS 541): “In the power of the All-merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit.” In the same time the Syriac Christians used Aramaic term *Rahmānā* for Jesus.\(^{32}\)

It was mentioned that many Muslim authors connect the term *RḤMNN* only with monotheist religions stressing that Jews and Christians used *rchm* and *ar-Raḥmān* as attributes of the God of Israel. In the second position are the Orientalists, who explain how did this term evolve from Paganism to Judaism and Christianity. For example Andrew Vargo believes that Muhammad most likely thought that the use of *ar-Raḥmān*, as a name for God, was “a good marketing ploy.” Taking the name *ar-Raḥmān* for Islamic theology, he could attract both the Jews and some Pagans to his new religion.\(^{33}\)

*RḤMNN* – *Ar-Raḥmān* well known in South Arabia before the advent of Islam had many connections. Probably Muhammad borrowed this name from three sources, which could observe in his milieu. *RḤMNN* – *Ar-Raḥmān* understood by Jews and Christians as “Lord, the Merciful, Master of Heaven” was useful for Islam, new Monotheistic religion. On the other hand *RḤMNN* in South Arabia signified a moon-god, whom Muhammed even occasionally confused with or used as a substitute for ‘Allah’. It is proper to remember that a god called *Mar-Allah* was recognized from inscripational evidences in northern Arabia. The Koran mentions *Ar-Raḥmān* occasionally, for example in sura 43:19, which most translators have renamed as God or Allah, since they, as Muhammed, found no difference between these two South Arabian moon-gods.

\(^{32}\) Vgl. H. Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, London 1902, p. 68.