

# The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Prophethood

## *The Testimony of Two Inscriptions*

*Suleyman Dost*

### **Introduction: What is "Arabian" about the Arabian Context of Early Islam?**

There has lately been a growing interest in the study of the "Arabian context" of Islam's origins.<sup>1</sup> This trend is due partly to the frustration caused by the limitations of the revisionist endeavor, which failed to unroot the event of the Qur'an from its traditionally accepted provenance in north-western Arabia. Despite its shortcomings, however, revisionist scholarship has gifted the field with the enduring idea that material evidence from pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, be it archaeological, architectural, epigraphic, numismatic and so on, is crucial to corroborate or counter the Muslim narrative. The return to the Arabian context of Islamic origins has benefited from this renewed emphasis on documentary evidence as we see the scholars of early Islam increasingly turning to epigraphic sources that have hitherto largely been in the exclusive use of comparative Semiticists and archaeologists of Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

But the following question is rarely asked: what do we mean by "Arabian" here? It must certainly mean something other than "Arab" or "Arabic". By using the word "Arabian" we thereby purposefully leave out categories of language and ethnicity, however they are construed, from its main signifier. To wit, the languages of Ancient South Arabia must have been unintelligible to Arabic speakers around Muḥammad and vice versa but scholars gladly take their testimony as part of the Arabian context of early Islam. Similarly, most speakers of these languages could have hardly identified as Arabs, whatever this might have meant at the time, because that seems to be a designation that they

---

1 See among others Blois, "Islam in Its Arabian Context"; Saleh, "The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Life"; Munt, "The Arabian Context of the Qur'an."

2 The utility of Arabian epigraphic sources for early Islamicists had long been argued by the likes of Margoliouth or Grimme but only recently do we see a burgeoning of studies in that direction. See Grimme, "Über einige Klassen südarabischer Lehnwörter im Koran." Margoliouth and British Academy, *The Relations Between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam*. For more recent examples, see Blois, "Islam in Its Arabian Context"; idem, "Qur'an 9:37 and CIH 547"; Miller, "Yemeni Inscriptions, Iraqi Chronicles, Hijazi Poetry."

ascribed to others in late Sabaic inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly some merit to understanding the scholarly use of “Arabian” as a geographical designation but this, too, has its ambiguities and needs to be probed further for precision and clarification.

What is “Arabian”, one could argue, is defined in our usage by the approximate borders of the Arabian Peninsula but, besides the problem of setting the latter’s fluid edges in the north, those of us who speak of the Qur’an’s or early Islam’s “Arabian context” rarely deem the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula relevant for such contextualisation. The area around the Arabian Gulf, in particular, is often neglected despite its connections with the larger Indian Ocean world and its, albeit limited, epigraphic heritage. “Arabian” in this case is not bound by the peninsula and denotes specifically that which is western Arabian in the north-south axis. If it has anything to do with geography it must be the sum of what Greek and Roman geographers called *Arabia Deserta* and *Arabia Felix*, the distinct appellations of which reflected two different sets of topographical, linguistic and political realities.<sup>4</sup> Islam was born in an area that was bookended by these two regions which were better known to classical authors than central-western Arabia and had a richer epigraphic record. In its positive connotations, then, the “Arabian context” of Islamic origins engages sources, old and new, that connect the world of Muhammad with the relatively better documented worlds of northwestern and southwestern Arabia. As Michael Macdonald astutely observed, the real linguistic divide in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was between the east and west, as the latter developed several writing systems, native as well as adopted, and the inscriptions in these scripts, Ancient North Arabian, Old South Arabian, Nabataean and Greek, have recently been brought to bear on a better contextualization of Islam’s beginnings.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that there is another sense of “Arabian” in the scholarly usage that dates back to the beginnings of critical western scholarship, and in this usage Arabian is defined not by what it is but what it is not. For scholars who raced to find parallels to early Islamic religious discourse in Jewish and Christian sources, there remained a portion of materials that were impenetrable through the latter. Even though it was agreed that the core of the Qur’an’s message owed greatly to biblical and parabiblical texts, there were still

3 For a discussion of Late Sabaic sources and their use of ‘rb see Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 32–36.

4 For an overview of how these different appellations of Arabia appear in Ptolemy, see Bowersock, “The Three Arabias in Ptolemy’s Geography.”

5 For Macdonald’s ground-breaking study see Macdonald, “Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Pre-Islamic Arabia.”

“Arabian” elements such as the idiosyncrasies of a seemingly active polytheism in the Ḥijāz or statements about other religions that looked out of place. Richard Bell, a proponent of Christianity’s dominant influence on the Qur’an, assessed this as follows: “He claimed to be an Arab prophet and he was. We shall see him consciously borrowing – he is quite frank about it. But to begin with, the materials which he uses, though they may remind us ever and again of Jewish and Christian phrases and ideas, are in reality Arab materials.”<sup>6</sup> On the opposite camp, Charles C. Torrey, who wrote the “Jewish Foundation of Islam” had a strikingly similar view: “Around all these Qur’anic narratives there is, and was from the first, the atmosphere of an Arabian revelation, and they form a very characteristic and important part of the prophet’s great achievement.”<sup>7</sup>

This Arabian component that accounted for what Jewish and Christian sources could not explain had been habitually explored with the help of Muslim sources. The case in point is the description of idolatry during the period of *jāhiliyya* that early Muslim scholars presented in vivid details. The same spirit of revisionism, however, cast doubts on the reconstruction of pre-Islamic paganism through the lens of Muslim sources, and I would say, often rightfully so. Once again, Arabian epigraphy provides a unique chance of corroborating or problematizing the picture of pre-Islamic Arabia portrayed in Muslim sources.

My understanding of studying the “Arabian” context of MuḤammad and the Qur’an, as a heuristic model, is conditioned by the two elements mentioned above where “Arabian” represents aspects of early Islam that Jewish and Christian sources cannot account for while epigraphic sources can provide a certain degree of explanation and corroboration. A typical and well-executed example of such an inquiry is François de Blois’s work on intercalation in the Qur’an as he reads Q 9:37 in the light of a Sabaic inscription (CIH 547). In this case, Arabian epigraphy not only provides a rare lexical parallel to the Qur’anic terminology but it also expands our knowledge of pre-Islamic religious and cultural milieu. As I focus in this piece on the Arabian context of Muhammad’s prophethood, I will follow a similar methodology.

### **Muhammad as an Arabian Prophet: A Prophet for the Pagans or Misguided Monotheists?**

Within the methodological parameters that I discussed above, I explore in this article two inscriptions that could potentially illuminate two seemingly

<sup>6</sup> Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, 126.

irreconcilable faces of Muḥammad's interlocutors and thereby his role as a messenger. On the one hand, the Qur'an refers to deities and rituals that were deeply rooted in the long-forgotten polytheistic cults of Arabia as though they were still part of the religious sphere that Muḥammad and his addressees inhabited. At the same time, the language of the Qur'an shows distinct familiarities with the idiom of Jewish and Christian inscriptions from southern Arabia dated to the 5th and 6th centuries CE. One gets the impression while reading the Qur'an that Muḥammad encountered and responded to a wide variety of beliefs and practices that could only be accounted for if centuries of religious transformations in Arabia, as can be traced in epigraphy, all unfolded during his tenure as a prophet. To be sure, his traditional biography reflects a shift in the religious demographics of his audience when he left Mecca for Yathrib but the main focus of his activity remained to be his Meccan townsfolk and alleged pagans of other Arabian tribes.

I do not propose here a way out of the conundrum of whether Muḥammad's primary addressees were pagans, as the Muslim tradition suggests, or monotheists, as the epigraphic sources imply. Rather, I'd like to make the point that Arabian epigraphic corpus has the potential to explain both the pagan *and* the monotheistic legacy of Arabia that the Qur'an reminisces in its own laconic way. To this end, I'll juxtapose and discuss one inscription from the polytheistic period of southern Arabia (RES 4176, see below) and another one left by Abraha (CIH 541, see below). Despite being centuries apart and coming from two different religious worlds, both of these inscriptions find echoes in the Qur'an.

### RES 4176: Pilgrimage, Sacrifice, and Animals Reserved to Gods

The late Patricia Crone had been working later in her career on the question of *mushrikūn* and their portrayal in the Qur'an, and she argued convincingly that the Qur'an is surprisingly silent on the details of polytheistic beliefs and practices that Muhammad's interlocutors adopted.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the references to idol worship in the Qur'an are either from the stories of former biblical and Arabian communities or restricted to rules related to agricultural surplus, cattle and livestock. The Qur'an is particularly concerned with setting certain animals and plants aside for pagan ritual purposes as Q 6:136–138 states:

---

8 Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'anic Pagans."

They appoint to God, of the tillage and cattle that He multiplied, a portion, saying, "This is for God" – so they assert – "and this is for our associates."... They say, "These are cattle and tillage sacrosanct (*hijrun*); none shall eat them, but whom we will" – so they assert – "and cattle whose backs have been forbidden, and cattle over which they mention not the Name of God." All that they say, forging against God; He will assuredly recompense them for what they were forging. And they say, "What is within the bellies of these cattle is reserved for our males and forbidden to our spouses; but if it be dead, then they all shall be partners in it ..." (tr. A. J. Arberry)

The practice that the Qur'an refers to here is not necessarily unique to pre-Islamic Arabia as similar practices of consecrating sacrificial animals and plants existed in other pagan contexts. What is significant here is the language that the Qur'an uses which echoes the terminology of religious practice as it is found in Old South Arabian inscriptions. An inscription from the modern-day Jabal Riyām region around sixty miles north of Sana'a, named RES 4176 provides a striking snapshot of pre-Islamic practices around consecrated lands and animals as well as pilgrimage rites that show parallels with the way these practices are mentioned in the Qur'an.

The inscription has been studied quite a few times, not least because it is fairly well-preserved and its content is interesting for several reasons. It also contains difficult or hitherto poorly-attested vocabulary leading to different interpretations by scholars of Old South Arabian. After Rhodokanakis<sup>9</sup> and Beeston,<sup>10</sup> Mahmoud Ghul turned to the inscription for its value for contextualizing the Muslim pilgrimage.<sup>11</sup> His interpretation was further revised by Beeston in a 1984 publication once better images of the inscription were made available by Christian Robin and the edited article was reprinted again in 2005.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Walter Müller made corrections to Ghul/Beeston's interpretation,<sup>13</sup> and some of the morphological oddities of the text have been discussed by Peter Stein.<sup>14</sup> The translation provided on the website of the Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions, to which I will refer below, incorporated these recent reappraisals.

As Beeston mentioned in his revision of M. Ghul's translation, the reason the latter was interested in the inscription was its references to a ritual of pilgrimage that appeared to have echoes of the same to Ka'ba. What eluded attention

9 Rhodokanakis, "Altsabäische Texte II."

10 Beeston, "Two South Arabian Inscriptions. Some Suggestions."

11 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 1984.

12 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 147–54.

13 Müller, "Das Statut Des Gottes Ta'lab von Riyām Für Seinen Stamm Sum'ay," 89–110.

14 Stein, *Untersuchungen zur Phonologie und Morphologie des Sabäischen*, 95.

in the inscription, however, is the practice of consecrating animals and land for ritual purposes, a practice that the Qur'an laconically mentions in the verse quoted above. I would like here to highlight those sections in conjunction with other inscriptions that refer to the same practice. The following transliteration and translation are from the website of CSAI with some of my emendations.<sup>15</sup> The parts that are underlined will be discussed with special attention:

Text:

- 1 *b-ḥg dn mḥrn ḥḥr T'lb Rym Yrḥm s<sup>2</sup>b-hw S'm'y b-kn s<sup>1</sup>tyf<sup>c</sup> b-ḥrf 'ws<sup>1</sup>l bn Yhs<sup>3</sup>ḥm l-k-d 'ly'tnn S'm<sup>c</sup> b-d-'bhy bn ḥḥdrn 'lmq—*
- 2 *h 'dy Mrb w-l-k-d ḥzr T'lb qs<sup>1</sup>dm bn ḍbh b-bd<sup>c</sup>-hw w-l-k-d ḥzr T'lb Rḥbtm bn zlf qnwym ywmy Tr't w-Zbyn w-s<sup>1</sup>rn ns<sup>1</sup>r-n Nws<sup>2</sup>m((Nws<sup>2</sup>m)) b-'md |*
- 3 *'dy Rḥb w-ḥmt ywm Tr't w-Zbyn w-ḥwšt T'lb ywm ḥgr s<sup>1</sup>rn l-ḡrḍ b-hw w-yḡrḍw S<sup>1</sup>m<sup>c</sup> b-s<sup>1</sup>rn b-ḥg mwšt T'lb s<sup>1</sup>b<sup>c</sup> m't qnym b-'hd |*
- 4 *ywmm w-l-k-d l-yqny T'lb b'l Tr't 's<sup>2</sup>r Ḡlḗ w-Ndḥt w-Brrn w-Mnḥdm d-Mnyd<sup>c</sup> w-'s<sup>2</sup>r Dr'm w-'s<sup>2</sup>r m[ḥ]mytn d-rt<sup>c</sup> mšyḥm((Mšyḥm)) 'dy l-yrt<sup>c</sup> s<sup>3</sup>dn Hgr w-mdy-*
- 5 *h w-qwlnhn d-Yhybb w-d Mdnḥn w-mnsftn l-ykwnw b-'ly mb'l T'lb w-d yḡln bn mb'l T'lb l-yt'lmn T'lb brt<sup>c</sup>-hw w-l-k-d ḥzr T'lb s<sup>1</sup>—*
- 6 *'r 'rwybn bn ns<sup>3</sup>g bn mšrn k-s<sup>1</sup>tnḥšn b-ns<sup>1</sup>lm w-ḥzr T'lb ḥlfn d-Mḥrmm w-Rydn w-Mnttm bn ḥwḍn 's<sup>3</sup>rm d-ys<sup>1</sup>t<sup>c</sup>ḍbn k-ḥrmw w-'l s<sup>3</sup>n S'm'y h—*
- 7 *ḥbn ṣd T'lb w-ḥzr 'lb bn ḥtl 'ntt b-ywm s<sup>1</sup>b<sup>c</sup> d-Šrr l-tfr qs<sup>1</sup>d T'lb 'dy Tmt w-'dy 'tmn w-ḥsr b-ḥrmt 'tmn w-ns<sup>2</sup> d-Mdnḥn qs<sup>1</sup>dn w-l-k-*
- 8 *d l-yf'l T'lb b-'s<sup>2</sup>r 'lm w-bn Hmdn 'lmn b-ḥrf w-d-Yhybb-w-d-Mdnḥn tny-b-ḥrf w-kwn-mrt<sup>c</sup> 'lmn ḥms<sup>1</sup>t b-'ḥd-ḥrf ym Tr't w-l-k-d l-y—*
- 9 *t'lmn 'tr w-'lt b-Yhrq d-ydktn ḥrm k-ḥrm w-l-k-d s<sup>2</sup>m T'lb Yhybb 'ḥd-fqḥm w-Mdnḥn w-Yrs<sup>1</sup>m 'ḥd l-ḥbb mšt 'lmqh*
- 10 *w-T'lb w-l-k-d ḥzr T'lb Rḥbtm bn kl-t'by ym Tr't w-ḥzrn-h nfs<sup>1</sup>m w-l-k-d l-y't 's<sup>2</sup>r 'bs<sup>1</sup>m<sup>c</sup> w-fql Ḥrmt w-S<sup>2</sup>db w-'bln w-Mḥns<sup>2</sup>y-w-S<sup>1</sup>mrt*
- 11 *w-Dmḥt w-Mdmnm w-Qḥrt w-'twt l-y't 'dy 'twt w-Rymt w-'s<sup>2</sup>r Dr' w-Mḥmtn w-S<sup>1</sup>rn w-Mnḥd w-fql Ḡḥfl l-y't 'dy Zbyn w-ḥg qny—*
- 12 *n ḍbh((d-bḥ))-hw tny 's<sup>1</sup>n w-t'l((T'l<b>)) w-l-yhrd<sup>c</sup> mr' 'rbbw S'm'y w-m'tn d't w-mḥr 'rs<sup>2</sup>wt Tr't w-Zbyn 's<sup>2</sup>rt ḥrfn w-'qb w-s<sup>1</sup>ḥmm l-yrt<sup>c</sup> d-'ḥdq—*
- 13 *{ḥ}n l-Rḥbt w-ḥtq b-ḥwfybn b-ḥg-dn-mḥrn ym Tr't ḥrf w-dt<sup>c</sup> w-'s<sup>1</sup>rr w-'tmr b-'s<sup>2</sup>r d-'gby 'ln-ḥgr T'lb 's<sup>3</sup>wr-hw w-mrd tlt l-q<sup>3</sup>m*
- 14 *'qwl w-ms<sup>3</sup>wd w-qs<sup>1</sup>d s<sup>2</sup>bn S'm'y ḡgddw w-h'zz mḥr ḥḥr l-hmw s<sup>2</sup>ym-hmw T—*
- 15 *'lb b'l Tr't 'dy dn zrn |*

15 The link for the epigraph together with the text and translation is <[http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&navId=211279720&recId=7497](http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&navId=211279720&recId=7497)>.

Translation (parts to be discussed are highlighted):

1 In accordance with this decree, T'lb Rym Yrḥm has ordained to His tribe S'm'y when He declared His will in the year of 'ws'l, of the family Yhs'ḥm: that S'm'y should not neglect in the month of 'bhy to make a pilgrimage to 'lmqh

2 in Mrb, and that T'lb has forbidden the pilgrims to make trouble in His territory and that T'lb has forbidden (the territory of) Rḥbtm to be grazed by livestock on the two days of Tr't and Zbyn as well as the valley from (or: on the authority of) Nws'm, directly

3 towards Rḥb and 'tmt, on the day of Tr't and Zbyn. And T'lb has decreed, when the valley was reserved, to slaughter there – and S'm' will slaughter in the valley – according to the decree of T'lb, seven hundred small animals in one

4 day; and that T'lb, Lord of Tr't, will receive the tithes of Ġlz, Nḏḥt, Brn and Mnḥdm d-Mnyd', and the tithes of Ḍr'm, and the tithes of the irrigated field which runs alongside the canalization (or: Mšyḥm) until the latter reaches the barrage Hgr and its

5 two overflow channels. And the two qwl of Yhybb and Mḏnḥn and the (temple) officials shall control the property of T'lb, and anyone who fraudulently appropriates (something) from the property of T'lb, shall be denounced to T'lb forthwith; and that T'lb has forbidden

6 capturing the remnants of the female ibexes by the mšr, when they are pregnant with offspring. And T'lb has forbidden the inhabitants of d-Mḥrmm, Rymn and Mnttm to lead herds, that can cause damage, since (these territories) are in the sacral state. And S'm'y are not allowed

7 to neglect the hunt of T'lb. And that He has forbidden that (those of) 'lb have sexual intercourse with women on the seventh day of (the month) d-Šrr, while the pilgrims of T'lb make a visit at Tmt and at 'tmn and stay in the sanctuary of 'tmn until he (the qyl) of Mḏnḥn dismisses the pilgrims. And that

8 T'lb will provide with the tithes – from Ḥmdn the single banquet in a year and from (each of) Yhybb and of Mḏnḥn two (banquets) in a year; so that the total of the banquets is five in one year, (to be held) in the day of Tr't. And that 'ttr and the gods in Yhrq shall

9 be notified of anyone who violates the ritual prohibition while in the sacral state. And that T'lb has appointed for Yhybb one arbitrator, and for Mḏnḥn and Ys'm one, for proclaiming the decree of 'lmqh

10 and T'lb. And that T'lb has prohibited Rḥbtm from any fighting among themselves on the day of Tr't and has prohibited disputes there. And that the tithes of 'bs'm' and the firstfruits of Ḥrmt, S<sup>2</sup>db, 'bln, Mhns<sup>2</sup>y, S<sup>1</sup>mrt,

11 Ḍmḥt, Mdmmn, Qḥrt and 'twt shall be brought into 'twt and Rymt; and the tithes of Ḍr', Mḥmtn, S<sup>1</sup>rn and Mnḥd, and the firstfruits of Gḥfl shall be brought into Zbyn and in regarding the cattle,

12 two men should free them; and furthermore the master of dependents of S<sup>1</sup>m'y and of the places shall enforce the proclamation and the decree of the priests of Tr't and Zbyn for ten years (or: and T'lb should aid ...). And subsequent dispute is to be adjusted by him of Hdqn

13 for Rḥbt; and the execution of this edict according to this is guaranteed on the day of Tr't, autumn and spring. And the valley (agricultural produce) and crops, which are with the tithes in the third decade (of the month) on the basis of the reserve, which T'lb separated for His part and one third is granted for the share

14 of the 'qwl, of the tribal council and of the pilgrims of the tribe of S<sup>1</sup>m'y. They have validated and put into effect the edict promulgated for them by their Patron T'lb,

15 Lord of Tr't, on this rock.

The inscription begins essentially as an ordinance (*ḥg*) from the deity T'lb to its people concerning a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the higher deity 'lmqh in Marib in a designated month. Then, T'lb lays down further rules related to the use of grazing land, animal slaughter, tithes, ritual hunts and banquets, ending with more prohibitions on two sacred days. It is not fully clear whether the rest of the regulations has to do with the pilgrimage to Marib mentioned at the top or with the local cult of T'lb but the text is clearly religio-legal in content touching on some of the basic features of pre-Islamic Arabian cultic practice.

The first point of interest in the inscription is its larger frame regulating the rites of pilgrimage. The deity T'lb stipulates that the pilgrims are expected to sustain an elevated status of ritual purity signaled by the semantic range of the word *ḥrm*. In this level of sacrality during designated days certain, otherwise permissible, actions are strictly prohibited. Some of these prohibitions are easier to infer from the text than others. For instance, the people of T'lb are clearly warned against disputes (*nfs<sup>1</sup>*, ln. 10) during the sacred day of Tr't and it is possible that there is another reference to disputes or "bad behavior" in line 2.<sup>16</sup> Another clear prohibition is on sexual intercourse (*ḥtl*) on the day of pilgrimage, a prohibition that appears in penitential texts from the Haram region as well.<sup>17</sup>

The text also seems to refer to restrictions related to the use of land and animals during sacred days but at this point scholars disagree over the reading

16 M. A. Ghul certainly thinks so but Beeston doubted this reading, see Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 149.

17 See CIH 533/Haram 34: *b-ḥn qrb-ḥ mr'<m> ywm tlt ḥgtn*: "[she made penance] because a man approached her sexually in the third day of the pilgrimage".

of certain passages in the text. Line 2 contains a reference to the prohibition of animal grazing on the two sacred days, which could be interpreted that the land itself and its plants gained a status of sacrality on the days of pilgrimage. Even more ambiguous is the reference in Line 6 to leading herds during pilgrimage. Ghul and Beeston translated this section as follows: "and T'lb has forbidden the (sacrificial) she-camels of d-Mḥrmm and Raydan and Mnttm to be driven at a (pace) which causes distress, when they are in the sacral state" (*w-ḥẓr T'lb ḥlfn d-Mḥrmm w-Rydn w-Mnttm bn hwḍ'n 's<sup>3</sup>rm d-ys<sup>t</sup>'ḍbn k-ḥrmw*).<sup>18</sup> In this interpretation, the camels led for sacrifice are supposed to be in a sacral state (*ḥrm*) and they need to be driven with care. Müller, on the other hand, argued that it is the land, not the animals, that is inviolable: *und T'lb hat den Anwohnern von (Wild)reservaten, der Weidegründe (des Wildes) und von Jagdgebieten verboten, eine Herde hinauszuführen, die Schaden anrichten würden, da (jene Plätze) unverletzlich sind* ("and T'lb has forbidden the dwellers of (game) reservations, grazing grounds (of game) and hunting grounds to lead out a flock that would do harm, since (those places) are inviolable", *my translation*). The divergence in the two translations is wide and the text is not easy to interpret but the common point in these interpretations is that it is not only humans that can have the status of *ḥrm* in sacred times and spaces but animals or land, too, gain such status.

That land and animals are accorded special cultic status in pre-Islamic Arabian religious practice is further attested in the inscriptions with the key-word *ḥjr*, the same word that the Qur'an uses for the concept. In RES 4176 the word appears twice, in Lines 3 and 13, the second one conforming more to the polemical usage in the Qur'an. In the first instance, the valley is "reserved" (*ḥgr s'ḥn*) for the slaughter of sacrificial animals, which curiously is supposed to take place in large numbers on a single day. The second attestation of the word *ḥgr* points to the practice of setting aside the crops of an area for the deity, in this case T'lb, mirroring the practice that the Qur'an accuses the *mushrikūn* of performing. The same deity T'lb is mentioned in another inscription from the region of Nihm, to the northeast of Sana'a, not too far from the provenance of RES 4176. In that inscription, T'lb has a land dedicated to it (*mḥgr*), which is forbidden to others for grazing.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, an inscription from Arḥab, north of Sana'a, records the dedication (*yḥgrn*) of a water reservoir for the sole use of the deity Nws<sup>2</sup>m. The dedication requires that any animal that peruses the

18 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 148.

19 MAFRAY-al-'Adan 10+11+12.

cistern be sacrificed, males to T'lb and females to Nws<sup>2m</sup>, unless their owner pays a fine to redeem them.<sup>20</sup>

This single legal inscription (RES 4176), then, preserves a dense repository of pre-Islamic religious practices in southern Arabia concerning pilgrimage, animal sacrifice and the cultic use of land and produce. The language of this inscription and its content clearly echo the way the Qur'an speaks of similar practices, some of which it approves and some others it decries. Chapter 5 of the Qur'an contains three references to *hurum*,<sup>21</sup> the elevated status of ritual sanctity for the performers of pilgrimage, and curiously, all these three references have to do with hunting (*ṣayd*) and its prohibition when someone is in the state of *hurum*. The Qur'an makes the curious distinction that during *hurum*, the hunt of land animals (*ṣayd al-barr*) is forbidden whereas one can still eat seafood (*ṣayd al-baḥr*). RES 4176 also contains references to limiting activities of hunting during pilgrimage. In other words, both the Qur'an and RES 4176 stipulate that the land within the perimeters of *ḥarām* and the animals therein gain special status for the pilgrim. The Qur'an denounces, however, the practice of consecrating such lands, its produce and its animals to a deity or restricting their use to specific groups.<sup>22</sup> That certain animals are treated specially by not being driven or hauled with burden according to Q 6:38 might find its parallel in the enigmatic statement in Line 6 of RES 4176, which, for Ghul and Beeston, prohibits the driving of sacrificial camels at a pace that causes distress.

The similarities are more striking when it comes to restrictions imposed on the pilgrims in the state of elevated ritual purity. The most extensive information about pilgrimage in the Qur'an comes from Q 2:196–198, where it is stated that the pilgrimage is confined to designated days, as in RES 4176. The pilgrims cannot engage in sexual activity nor cause trouble or fight (*wa-lā rafatha wa-lā fusūqa wa-lā jidāla fī l-ḥajj*) while they perform the pilgrimage.<sup>23</sup> That the pilgrimage is associated with animal sacrifice is evident in RES 4176 and the Qur'an also prescribes for pilgrims to sacrifice an animal as a conclusion to the rites of the pilgrimage.<sup>24</sup>

20 Robin/al-Mašamayn 1.

21 See Q 5:1, 95, 96.

22 See Q 6:139 for instance: "And they say, 'What is within the bellies of these cattle is reserved for our males and forbidden to our spouses; but if it be dead, then they all shall be partners in it.'"

23 See Q 2:197.

24 Q 2:196: *wa-'atimmū l-ḥajja wa-l-'umrata li-llāhi fa-'in 'uḥṣirtum fa-mā staysara mina l-hadyi*: "Complete the ḥajj and the 'umrah for Allah's sake, and if you are prevented, then [make] such [sacrificial] offering as is feasible."

Still, the picture that emerges from the comparison of a single Ancient South Arabian inscription and the Qur'an on the questions of pre-Islamic religious practice is a complicated one. There are practices that are simply criticized and abandoned in the Qur'an, such as consecration of animals and land to gods, whereas some others, such as forbidden months or certain rites of pilgrimage, are transformed and adapted to the Qur'an's religious agenda. More significantly, this comparison demonstrates the Qur'an's conscious engagement with the non-monotheistic/pagan/polytheistic legacy of its provenance that the Jewish and Christian sources can hardly account for. Even though the polytheism of southern Arabia gave way to Judaism and Christianity two centuries before the rise of Islam, inscriptions that document the polytheistic phase of the region still provide the closest parallels to the idiom of the Qur'an when it comes to its criticism and adaptation of earlier Arabian traditions. Yet, I would argue that the utility of Arabian epigraphy for the contextualization of Muhammad's prophethood and the Qur'an is not limited to its portrayal of Arabian polytheism. Admittedly, the monotheistic period of southern Arabia yielded a much smaller number of inscriptions than the polytheistic phase, given that the former lasted much longer, but the Christian and Jewish religious formulae that these inscriptions contain have already expanded our horizon on the study of these two religions in Arabia. In the next section I would like, as an example, to focus on a well-known inscription commissioned by Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of South Arabia, and two words in it that parallel their usage in the Qur'an.

#### CIH 541: Rasūl and Khalifa

Abraha's reign in Ḥimyar was marked by his struggle to gain recognition for himself as a leader that came to power by force and his efforts to maintain the Marib dam, which have long provided an invaluable source of irrigation but was in poor condition at the time. CIH 541, a large stele-inscription erected at the site of Marib Dam by Abraha, reflects both of these aspects of Abraha's reign. Beginning with a Christian formula invoking the Holy Trinity,<sup>25</sup> the hundred-odd-lines inscription touches on several topics: the rebellion of a governor appointed by Abraha (Lines 9–13) and how he suppressed the revolt (Lines 13–41), multiple repairs on the dam conducted by Abraha (Lines 55–63, 68–73, 97–114), a plague that led to the dismissal of his armies (Lines 72–75)

25 *b-ḥyl w-[r]d' w-rḥmt Rḥmnn w-Ms'ḥ-hw w-Rḥ [q]ds'*: "With the power, the help and mercy of Rḥmnn and his Messiah and the Holy Spirit".

and a diplomatic summit that brought representatives from Constantinople, Aksum, Persia and several Arabian tribal confederations (Lines 87–92). The inscription received due attention for its varied content<sup>26</sup> but my focus here will be on two terms that appear in the text: *rs'l* and *hłft*.

The Qur'an principally uses two words for messengers and prophets sent by God to a community to warn them: *nabī* and *rasūl*. The former is a common word in other Semitic languages with the sense of "prophet", corresponding squarely in meaning to the Greek word that became the basis of the English word as well. The word *rasūl*, however, does not have a cognate, nor does it seem to correspond to any specific concept in Jewish and Christian prophethood.<sup>27</sup> It is also unclear whether there is any difference between these two words,<sup>28</sup> even though Muslim scholars did come up with distinctions for who the Qur'an calls a *rasūl* and who a *nabī*.<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt that the meaning of the word in Arabic is "someone sent with a message, a messenger" but for a word that has a precise religious connotation referring often to biblical prophetic figures it seems to have little history before the Qur'an.

The only time a cognate word shows up in the Arabian epigraphic texts, as far as the current record is concerned, is in CIH 541. The lines 87–92 of the inscription mention a diplomatic convention as follows:

87 ... Following this  
 88 the ambassador of Negus  
 89 and the ambassador of Rome arrived at his court, as well as the diplomatic  
 mission  
 90 of the king of Persia, the envoy of Mḍrn, the envoy

26 The long inscription was studied for its narration of the events during the reign of Abraha as well as its linguistic peculiarities, see Smith, "Events in Arabia in the 6th Century AD"; Gajda, "Himyar Gagné Par Le Monothéisme (IVe-VIe Siècle de l'ère Chrétienne)"; Müller, "Die Stele Des 'Abraha, Des Äthiopischen Königs Im Jemen," 266ff; Sima, "Epigraphische Notizen Zu Abraha's Damminschrift (CIH 541)."

27 In the sense of "messenger", *rasūl* must certainly have links to similar concepts of prophethood in late antiquity but the fact that no direct cognates exist might indicate that it is a conscious translation of a concept like Greek *apostolos*, as argued by long ago by Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 44–46. I would argue that the Qur'anic word *mursal*, and particularly its use in Sūrah 36 in a seemingly Christian context, corresponds better to the word *apostolos*. It should also be remembered that the word of Jesus's apostles in the Qur'an is *ḥawāriyyūn*, an Ethiopic loanword, see Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, 115f; Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge Zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 48.

28 The distinction becomes all the more problematic as the Qur'an calls Ishmael, Moses and Muḥammad both a *rasūl* and a *nabī*, see Q 19:51, 19:54 and 7:157.

29 For a discussion of these two terms in their Qur'anic usage, see Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood," 289–307.

91 of Ḥrṭm son of Gblt and the envoy of 'bkrb  
92 son of Gblt.<sup>30</sup>

The text appears to have three categories for diplomatic representatives: *mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt* for the Byzantine and Ethiopian ones, *tnblt* for the Persian delegate and *rs'l* for the representatives of Ghassanids (Ḥārith b. Jabala and his brother Abū Karib) and Lakhmids (Mundhir b. al-Nu'mān). The first two words, or at least words from these roots, are attested elsewhere in Old South Arabian texts, suggesting that they are originally from the languages of South Arabia. *Rs'l*, on the other hand, is not found in any other inscription. Given that it is used for the envoys of Arab states, in this case Ghassanids and Lakhmids, it is very likely that the word in Old South Arabian is an Arabic loanword. Yet, what this solitary attestation tells us is that the word *rasūl*, or a similar form of it, was in circulation before Muḥammad as a word denoting a political office: diplomatic representative or messenger. With the Qur'an, it gained a religious sense not too far from its "secular" usage before.

A similar transformation can be observed in the word *khalīfa*, which is a fairly well-attested word in the Qur'an, both in singular and plural, meaning "one that succeeds, a group that replaces or comes after another one".<sup>31</sup> Two instances where the word is found in the singular form, Q 2:30 and 38:26, however, seem to stand out with more theologically-laden meaning. In these cases, Adam and David are described as "made (*ja'ala*) a *khalīfa* on earth (*fī l-arḍ*)", while in the case of David, his role as a *khalīfa* qualified further as "judging between people with justice". It is clear that the Qur'an is using the word in the sense of an office, perhaps best understood in a political sense for comparison, and it is no wonder that translating it as "viceroyn" or "vicegerent" became very common.<sup>32</sup>

A close parallel to the Qur'anic usage of the word *khalīfa* appears in CIH 541. The inscription mentions Abraha's military expedition against Yazīd b. Kabsha,

30 Once again, the translation is from the CSAI website. The text in Sabaic is as follows: ...  
*w-k-wšḥ-<h> m—*  
*88 w mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt ngs<sup>2</sup>yn w-wšḥ-hmw*  
*89 mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt mlk Rmn w-tnblt*  
*90 mlk Frs<sup>1</sup>w-rs'l Mḍrn w-rs'l—*  
*91 l Ḥrṭm bn Gblt w-rs'l 'bkrb*  
*92 bn Gblt ...*

31 See Q 6:165, 7:69, 7:74, 10:14, 10:73, 27:62, 35:39.

32 For a recent discussion on the Qur'anic usage of the term *khalīfa*, see Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 149f. For the semantic development of the term in early Muslim sources, see Al-Qadi, "The Term 'Khalifa' in Early Exegetical Literature."

whom Abraha had appointed (*s'thlfw*) as a *hlft* for Kinda. The best rendering of the term in this case would be “governor” or ruler in an inferior status to Abraha himself. Once again, the word is not common in Old South Arabian and the only other text in which it appeared (in the verbal form *s'thlf* in Ry 506) is from another Abraha inscription, in that instance referring to the appointment of ‘Amr b. Mundhir as the governor of Ma‘add. In both cases, Abraha appoints rulers to well-known Arab tribal confederations and calls such rulers as *hlft*. As in the case of *rasūl*, it is likely that the word is Arabic and refers to an office to which Arabic-speakers are appointed. Similarly, *khalīfa* as a word of political import in Old South Arabian texts is transformed in the Qur’an to a religious concept that signifies God’s appointment of humans as vicegerents on earth.

### Conclusion

It is tempting to reduce the Arabian element in early Islam or Muhammad’s mission to ethnic, linguistic or geographical categories but I contended here that the legacy of revisionist historiography opened up new venues to explain the “Arabian context” of Islam through new or overlooked sources that come out of the Arabian peninsula. Inscriptions in particular, and those with religious content, can be extremely useful in contextualizing both the Qur’an’s engagement with pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism and its unique take on Judaism and Christianity, both of which survived and thrived in South Arabia for at least two centuries before the rise of Islam. What is “Arabian” about early Islam, in my understanding as I argued in this paper, is what truly Arabian sources, such as epigraphic material in Old South Arabian, Ancient North Arabian or Hījāzi Nabataean, can illuminate when other sources, including early Muslim historiography in Arabic, fail to explain.

### Sigla of Inscriptions Cited

CIH: Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars Quarta. Inscriptiones himyariticas et sabaeas continens. Paris 1889, 1911, 1929.

MAFRAY-‘Adan: in C. Robin, L’offrande d’une main en Arabie pré-islamique. Essai d’interprétation. In: C. Robin (ed.), Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Maxime Rodinson, Paris 1985, 307–320.

RES: Répertoire d’épigraphie sémitique. Publié par la Commission du Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Vols. V, VI, VII. Paris 1929, 1935, 1950.

Robin/al-Mašamayn: in: C. Robin & J. Ryckmans, 1978. L'attribution d'un bassin à une divinité en Arabie du Sud antique. *Raydān*, 1., 39–64.

Ry: in G. Ryckmans, 1953. Inscriptions sud-arabes. Dixième Série. *Le Muséon*, 66. Pages 267–317.