

## [52] ABRAHA'S CHRISTOLOGICAL FORMULA *RHMNN W-MS<sup>1</sup>H-HW* AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE STUDY OF ISLAM'S ORIGINS

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*Abstract.* If compared to Esimiphaios's, Abraha's thanksgiving formulas hint at political and cultural shift in 6th-century Yemen. This paper explores whether such shift had too – as suggested by several authors over the past decades – religious motivations; and, if so, which were these. It also analyses the eventual implications of the aforementioned shift for the renewed study of Islam's origins by examining Abraha's rhetoric and several key passages in the Qur'ān, in addition to other late-antique sources like the synoptic gospels and Musaylima's prophetic stanzas. All this in the conviction that to escape a paradigm that has clearly overemphasised the Hijazi background of emergent Islam, one does not need to overemphasise, in turn, its Syrian-Iraqi setting at the expense of the its South-Arabian connections, no matter how decisive the North-Arabian ones prove.

*Keywords.* Abraha – Christology – Early Islam – Yemen

For M. K. and G. D.

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Around 525, or 531 (Robin 2012b: 283-4), ʿĪllā Aṣḥā Kaleb (Greek Hellestheaios), king of Aksum, defeated the self-proclaimed (in 521 or 522) Jewish king of Ḥimyar Yūsuf As'ar Yaṭ'ar (Greek Dounaas, Arabic dū Nuwās), who following his rise to power had the Aksumite garrison in Ḥafār killed, Ḥafār's church destroyed, the coastal regions of the Red Sea facing Aksum seized, and the Miaphysite community of Naḡrān massacred. Thus Aksumite authority, which had gained prominence in the region in the 500s and the 510s, and Christianity with it (after a *longue durée* of Jewish supremacy), were imposed in Ḥimyar – an event from which Byzantium benefited, for it implied

controlling with the help of a victorious ally the trade routes through the eastern and western shores of the Red Sea against its own rival empire: Persia.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Kaleb did not annexed Ḥimyar. Instead, he maintained the Himyarite throne and placed on it a Himyarite prince called Sumyafa‘ Ašwa‘ (Greek Esimiphaios). Very likely, Esimiphaios was of Jewish origin but had converted to Christianity after Kaleb’s successful campaign in Ḥimyar (Gajda 2009: 115, after Procopius). Be that as it may, two extant, if fragmentary, official inscriptions in Sabaic bear witness to his Christian faith, namely Istanbul 7608 bis,<sup>2</sup> and Wellcome A 103664.<sup>3</sup>

Istanbul 7608 bis consists of 16 lines. It starts with a fragmentary trinitarian thanksgiving formula that mentions Esimiphaios and the king of Aksūm (ll. 1-3), as well as the latter’s military success in Ḥimyar (ll. 3-8).<sup>4</sup> Next figures a list with the names and the tribes of those who helped him (ll. 9-15), Esimiphaios [53] included (l. 11). It concludes with a two-part *basmala* mentioning God (*Raḥmānān*) and his Son Christ, the victorious (l. 16).

In turn, Wellcome A 103664 consists of 17 lines. Its first four lines cannot be interpreted, as they are too poorly preserved. L. 5 seemingly contains a two-part thanksgiving formula, similar to that found in l. 16 of Istanbul 7608 bis. Ll. 5-9 allude to the king and his acceptance of Aksumite authority. Ll. 10-17 provide a list of names akin to that found in ll. 9-15 of Istanbul 7608 bis; an additional reference to Esimiphaios is made in l. 16 within that list, following a succinct allusion to warfare and destruction (l. 15).

As Iwona Gajda aptly puts it, “pour la première fois dans l’histoire de l’Arabie du Sud, des formules religieuses chrétiennes apparaissent dans un texte officiel” (Gajda 2009: 115).

The formulas in question are those found in l. 1 and l. 16 of the first inscription (henceforth formulas no. 1 and 2):<sup>5</sup>

No. 1	Istanbul 7608 bis, l. 1
w-Mn]fs <sup>1</sup> Qds <sup>1</sup>	and (the)] Holy [Spi]rit

No. 2	Istanbul 7608 bis, l. 16
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<sup>1</sup> On Ethiopia, Ḥimyar, Byzantium, and Persia between the 4th and the 7th centuries, see further Bowersock 2012, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> [http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2410](http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2410).

<sup>3</sup> [http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2459](http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2459).

<sup>4</sup> On this type of formulas, see Gajda 2009: 226-31.

<sup>5</sup> I give the transliteration provided by the CSAI team at the University of Pisa, directed by A. Avanzini. See <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&rl=yes>.

s<sup>1</sup>m Rḥmnn w-Bn-hw Krs<sup>3</sup>ts<sup>3</sup> ḡlbn (in the) name of *Raḥmānān* <= the Merciful><sup>6</sup> and his son Christ(, the) victorious

and in l. 5 of the second inscription (henceforth formula no. 3):

No. 3	Wellcome A 103664, l. 5
Rḥmnn w-B[	<i>Raḥmānān</i> and (his) S[on

No. 1 looks like the last segment of a, thus partly preserved, mainstream trinitarian formula (“God, his Son, and the Holy Spirit”). Conversely, no. 2 does not need to be read in the same way, as it could simply mention God and his Son (see Abraha’s formula below);<sup>7</sup> and the same applies to no. 3, which in turn echoes No. 2. Be that as it may, the Ethiopic influence is perceptible (despite the inclusion of the divine name *Rḥmnn*) in the wording of the first formula: (Ethiopic) *Mānfās Qəddus* → (Sabaic) *w-Mn]fs<sup>1</sup> Qds<sup>1</sup>* (Gajda 2009: 115).

But there is an even more salient feature in these formulas, more specifically in nos. 2 and 3. In addition to being mentioned by his name in no. 2 (*Krs<sup>3</sup>ts<sup>3</sup> = Christos*), Christ is described as God’s “Son” (*Bn-hw*) in formulas nos. 2 and 3. This, [54] again, matches the normal Christian formula “God (the Father) and his Son”; cf. the usual Ethiopic *basmala*: *bä-sämä ’Ab wä-Wäld wä-Mānfās Qəddus* (Kropp 2013-14: 195). However, Esimiphaios’s inscriptions represent, as we shall see, the last occurrence of this particular formula (“God and his Son”) in the official Christian inscriptions of late-antique South Arabia – an issue, in my view, which hitherto has not been paid enough attention.

## 2

Esimiphaios’s reign was short-lived. Around 535, his army commander, Abraha, deposed him and assumed the throne of Ḥimyar. Upon receiving this news, Kaleb sent two military expeditions against Abraha, but the king managed to negotiate an agreement with Kaleb’s soldiers the first time, and then crushed Kaleb’s second expedition.

Judging from what we know of his reign between the 540s and the 550s (Gajda 2009: 118-49; Robin 2012b: 284-8), Abraha brought stability to Ḥimyar and successfully extended his rule to several neighbouring regions of the Arabian peninsula including Saba’, dū Raydān, Ḥaḍra-

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<sup>6</sup> On the divine name/epithet *Raḥmānān* (Arabic *al-Raḥmān*), its geographical and cultural background, and its biblical parallels, see Gajda 2009: 231; Kropp 2013-14. On its association to the divine name *Allāh*, Retsö 2014.

<sup>7</sup> *Pace* Gajda (2009: 115), who considers it “[u]ne seconde formule trinitaire.”

mawt, Yamanat, Ṭawd and Tihāma. More interestingly, he refused to act as a vassal king of Aksūm, as can be fairly deduced from the way in which his official inscriptions display his “will to maintain, if not to restore, the brilliance of the cradle of South Arabian civilisation and thus to consolidate a contested legitimacy by acting as an indigenous sovereign” (Robin 2012b: 285; cf. Gajda 2009: 119). He died c. 565 (allegedly after a frustrated expedition against Mecca) and was succeeded by his two sons Aksūm and Masrūq, who ruled successively until the mid-570s;<sup>8</sup> then his dynasty came to an end and the Christian kingdom of Ḥimyar collapsed with the help of Persia.<sup>9</sup>

Among other minor inscriptions of that period, we have several official inscriptions by Abraha himself, in particular for our purposes here CIH 541<sup>10</sup> and DAI GDN 2002-20,<sup>11</sup> both from 548, and Ry 506<sup>12</sup> from 552.

CIH 541 is the longest of Abraha’s extant inscriptions and consists of 136 lines. It opens with a trinitarian thanksgiving formula (ll. 1-3) followed by a reference to Abraha’s name (l. 4), titles (ll. 4-6), [55] and dominions (ll. 6-8).<sup>13</sup> It then reports a rebellion that the king suffocated (ll. 10-55) prior to having the inscription set up (l. 9). This report is followed by another one mentioning the king’s reparation of the Ma’rib dam (ll. 55-61), which is alluded to again in ll. 68-71; the celebration of a mass in its church (ll. 65-7); and a plague (ll. 72-5). Next we find more details about the king’s military campaigns in Arabia (ll. 76-80); the indication that he returned to Ma’rib after them (ll. 80-7); and a report concerning the subsequent organisation of a diplomatic conference in which delegations from Ethiopia, Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab vassal kingdoms of the

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. shortly after the date traditionally assigned to Muḥammad’s birth.

<sup>9</sup> On Abraha’s expedition against Mecca and its supposed allusion in *sūra* 105 of the Qur’ān (“The Elephant”), see Robin 2012b: 285-8. On the debatable historical basis of the quranic passage in question and its plausible biblical subtext, de Prémare 2000; Beck.

<sup>10</sup> [http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=389874095&recId=2382](http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=389874095&recId=2382).

<sup>11</sup> [http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2391](http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2391).

<sup>12</sup> [http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2447](http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2447).

<sup>13</sup> As Manfred Kropp wrote to me in a private communication of July 24, 2015, ll. 4-6: *’brh ’zly mlkn ’g’zyn rmḥs<sup>3</sup> zbymn* present a remarkable interpretative problem to the epigraphist. The king’s name is mentioned in what seems to be a complex Ethiopic wordplay drawing on Psalms 18:28; 119:105 (*’brh ’zly* = Abraha *’zly* = “He [God] has enlightened [*abrāha*] my darkness [*’əzələya*]”; see Kropp 1991: 136). Then come the several titles (see again Kropp 1991) with which he is described: *mlkn ’g’zyn rmḥs<sup>3</sup>* (the “Ethiopian-Roman king”; cf. Smith 1954: 437 and the various alternative readings of *rmḥs<sup>3</sup>* mentioned in Gajda 2009: 119) + *zbymn* (*zybmn* through metathesis in Ry 506 l. 1), this one being the problem: *zbymn/zybmn* = “the one in (i.e. the Lord of) *y(b)mn*,” which can hardly be a reference to Yemen inasmuch as *ymn* for Ḥimyar/Yemen is attested neither in Sabaic nor in Ethiopic (cf. once more Gajda 2009: 120). Yet as Manfred Kropp suggested to me, *y(b)mn* (as also *ymnt* in CIH 541 l. 7; DAI GDN 2002-20 l. 10; and Ry 506 l. 2) may be interpreted as alluding to the Yamāma in central Arabia, which Abraha conquered in the time when he had CIH 541 and DAI GDN 2002-20 set up and thus could be expected to be listed among the king’s dominions in both inscriptions, which are roughly contemporary with one another. On Abraha’s conquests see further Robin 2012a, 2012b: 284-8, 2012c, 2013.

Romans and the Sassanians participated (ll. 87-92). Some supplementary information on the plague mentioned in ll. 72-5, the rebuilding of the Ma'rib dam, and the mass alluded to in ll. 65-7, is then given in ll. 92-117, as well as a detailed list of provisions (ll. 118-36).

DAI GDN 2002-20 must be linked to CIH 541 (they belong to the same building and are more or less contemporary) and consists of 41 lines. It starts with a thanksgiving formula similar, if longer, to that found in CIH 451 ll. 1-3, but which lacks any reference to the Holy Spirit (ll. 1-4); it mentions too the king's name and his dominions (ll. 5-12). The rest of the inscription consists of extensive report on the restoration of the Ma'rib dam (ll. 13-41) that echoes the one provided in CIH 541 ll.

Finally, Ry 506 consists of only 9 lines. It opens with an abridged thanksgiving formula that resembles that found in DAI GDN 2002-20 ll. 1-4, although it is visibly shorter (l. 1), and which mentions once more the king's name (l. 1) and his dominions (ll. 1-2). Then his military campaigns in central Arabia are referred to (ll. 2-8). Lastly, we find another thanksgiving formula, now mentioning God alone and the date (552) when the inscription was set up (l. 9).

In this case we find three different religious formulas, one in l. 1-3 of the first inscription (henceforth formula no. 4): [56]

No. 4	CIH 541, ll. 1-3
b-ḥyl w-[r]d' w-rḥ—	With the power(.) {and} the [a]id and the mer-
mt Rḥmn w-Ms'—	cy of <i>Raḥmānān</i> (.) {and} his Messi-
ḥ-hw w-Rḥ [Q]ds'	ah and the Holy [Gho]st

another one in l. 1-4 of the second inscription (henceforth formula no. 5):

No. 5	DAI GDN 2002-20, ll. 1-4
b-ḥyl w-n(š)[r]	With the power(.) {and} the he(l)[p]
w-rd' Rḥmn	and the support of <i>Raḥmānān</i> ,
Mr' s'myn	Lord of the heavens(,)
w-Ms'ḥ-h(w)	and hi(s) Messiah

and another one in l. 1 of the third inscription (henceforth formula no. 6):

No. 6	Ry 506, l. 1
b-ḥyl Rḥmn w-Ms'ḥ-hw	With the power of <i>Raḥmānān</i> and his Messiah

Despite some slight variations in their three consecutive segments that may be summarised as follows:

Wording	Components
Segment 1	
No. 4: “With the power, the aid and the mercy . . .”	A + B + C
No. 5: “With the power, the help and the support . . .”	A + D = B’ + E = C’
No. 6: “With the power . . .”	A
Segment 2	
No. 4: “. . . of <i>Rahmānān</i> . . .”	E
No. 5: “. . . of <i>Rahmānān</i> , Lord of the heavens, . . .”	E + F
No. 6: “. . . of <i>Rahmānān</i> . . .”	E
Segment 3	
No. 4: “. . . his Messiah and the Holy Spirit”	G + H
No. 5: “. . . and his Messiah”	G
No. 6: “. . . and his Messiah”	G

the three formulas run parallel (S1: A ± B/B’ + C/C’ | S2: E ± F | S3: G ± H), although only no. 4 can be said to convey a trinitarian message.

Now, three features are particularly noteworthy in comparison to Esimiphaïos’s aforementioned formulas: Firstly, a different choice regarding the opening words of the thanksgiving formulas:

Esimiphaïos: “In the name of . . .” [57]

Abraha: “With the power + the aid/help and the mercy/support of . . .”

Secondly, the different wording displayed in the reference the Holy Spirit:

Esimiphaïos: Mnfs<sup>1</sup> Qds<sup>1</sup>

Abraha: Rḥ Qds<sup>1</sup>

which denotes Syriac, rather than Ethiopian, influence in the latter case (Beeston 1994: 42; Gajda 2009: 121; Robin 2012c: 540), and hence bear witness to a curious shift in Abraha’s linguistic and cultural policy – aiming perhaps at affirming his political independence from Aksūm. Lastly, the wording relative to Jesus and Jesus’s relation to God is also different (Robin 2012c: 539-40):

Esimiphaios, no. 2: “*Raḥmānān and his son (bn-hw)* Christ, the victorious”

Esimiphaios, no. 3: “*Raḥmānān and his Son (bn-hw)*”

Abraha, nos. 4, 5, 6: “*Raḥmānān and his Messiah (w-ms'h-hw)*”

3

Why did Abraha choose the term *Ms'h* (“Messiah”) – which is unattested elsewhere in the whole corpus of ancient South-Arabian inscriptions (ASA) (cf. Esimiphaios’s *Krs<sup>3</sup>ts<sup>3</sup> = Christos* = the Anointed One/Messiah, which nonetheless functions in no. 2 as a proper name) – to refer to Jesus, instead of using the more common *Bn* (“Son”), which is also the term commonly used in the Ethiopic trinitarian *basmala*-s (*bä-sämä 'Ab wä-Wäld wä-Mänfäs Qəddus*; see again Kropp 2013-14: 195; cf. Robin 2012c: 540)?

Several explanations have been provided so far. In 1960, Alfred Beeston – who was also the first to notice this quite remarkable singularity – suggested that Abraha might have inclined towards Dyophysitism rather than Miophysitism out of his distaste for Kaleb (Beeston 1960: 105). In turn, Irfan Shahid contended that he probably converted to the Chalcedonian faith in order to obtain support from Byzantium (Shahid 1979: 31). More recently, Iwona Gajda has discussed Beeston’s (and implicitly Shahid’s) view(s) and proposed an alternative one: “Abraha précise bien qui sont le Père et le Fils: « Raḥmānān et son Messie ». Il s’agit probablement d’un usage local” (Gajda 2009: 122); “[i]l ne nous paraît pas possible d’avancer une [autre] hypothèse en se fondant sur les données dont nous disposons” (Gajda 2009: 122 n.456). Conversely, Christian Robin highlights the apparent Jewish-Christian nature of Abraha’s formula (Robin 2012c: 540). Lastly, Jonn Block argues that “it is not inconceivable that Abraha allowed ambiguity in his presentation of the faith in order to gain Byzantine support for his action against the Persians, but an official conversion from Monophysitism to Nestorianism is very unlikely. It is more likely that Byzantium still had Monophysite leanings, and was on friendly terms with Abyssinia. Beeston’s conviction on the matter [58] seems lower than that of Shahîd, who proposes the possibility that Abraha changed his faith from Monophysite to Chalcedonian” (Block 2014: 21).

I take Shahid’s interpretation to be too far-reaching, as there is no evidence to support it – despite the fact that emphasising Jesus’s humanity might have proved effective in attempting to establish friendly relations with Byzantium, one may question how the term *Ms'h* could bear witness to Abraha’s eventual conversion from Miophysitism to Chalcedonianism. Gajda’s “local-usage” hypothesis has no evidence to support it, either – for, as I have underlined, Abraha’s formula is unattested elsewhere in the ASA corpus; notice, moreover, that, *pace* Gajda, Abraha does not make clear “qui sont le Père *et le Fils*” (my emphasis), for he actually does *not* explicitly call the Messiah the “Son,” even if formula no. 4, which is also the longest and perhaps the most important one, presents

an apparent – but no more than that, therefore – trinitarian outlook. In turn, Robin’s interpretation overlooks the problems inherent in the adjective “Jewish-Christian” (see Jackson McCabe 2007; Boyarin 2009; Segovia 2016a). As for Beeston’s hypothesis, I think it cannot be dismissed. I shall now try to offer an additional argument that may support it.

Invocations of Jesus in late-antique Christianity normally mention “God (the Father) and his Son Christ.” Yet Dyophysites, who held that Christ was God’s Son (like the Miaphysites and the Chalcedonians), are known to have emphasised (against the Miaphysites and even more than the Chalcedonians themselves) Jesus’s human nature. Thus the well-known Dyophysite description of Mary as *Christotókos* (i.e. “Mother of the Messiah”) rather than *Theotókos* (“Mother of God”). Let me be clear: the formula “God and his Messiah” has no scriptural basis<sup>14</sup> and is not attested in the corpus of late-antique Dyophysite literature; but it implicitly fits within the Dyophysite mindset.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, Dyophysite Christians [59] lived in Ḥimyar (Robin 2012b: 282-3, who bases his report in the *Chronicle of Seert*) albeit Ḥimyar was confessionally linked to Ethiopian Miaphysitism after 525/531.<sup>16</sup> Hence in my view it is reasonable to ask – as Beeston does – whether Abraha tried to distance himself from Aksūm by endorsing a Dyophysite-oriented Christology.

But it could also be that Abraha – who obviously was and presented himself as a Christian king – tried to avoid any sharp provocation against the Jews of Ḥimyar, a land that for several centuries had witnessed to an ongoing religious conflict (indirectly promoted by Byzantium and Persia) between Christians and Jews, and that he attempted to rule in his own way.<sup>17</sup> Had Abraha intended not to offend his Jewish subjects, he could have done so by evoking God alone (instead of God plus his Messiah = Jesus); indeed, *Rahmānān* was (also) the south-Arabian Jewish name for God. Anyway, referring to Jesus as the Messiah would be less provoking for them than describing him as God’s divine Son.

In fact, these two hypotheses need not contradict themselves, as apparently Dyophysites and Jews did not collide in antiquity as often as Miaphysites and Jews [60] happened to. Thus Becker

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Antonio Piñero (private communication of July 19, 2015) for checking the whole NT corpus so as to determine if there is a single scriptural passage that may be adduced against this view – the only two occurrences being Luke 9:20 and Acts 3:18.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. too Arius’s salutation to Eusebius of Nicomedia “on account of God and his Messiah,” which shows that Arians (and possibly Anomoeans later on, whose presence in 4th-century South Arabia is documented in the work of Philostorgius) shared a similar caution against the assimilation of God and Jesus, notwithstanding the Christological differences between Arianism/Anomoeanism and Dyophysitism.

<sup>16</sup> See for discussion Wood 2013: 249-53. Even if the author(s) of the *Chronicle of Seert*, “by claiming precedence in Najran, . . . may have . . . sought to emphasise their own role as intermediaries with the Muslim authorities” (Wood 2013: 253), there is in my view no need to completely dismiss their report as an *ad hoc* construction, since the presence of Dyophysites in Naḡrān is mentioned too in both the *Book of the Himyarites* 13 and the *Martyrium Arethae* 2.6; see Grillmeier 1996: 321.

<sup>17</sup> This hypothesis was suggested to me by Guillaume Dye in a private communication of July 13, 2015.

(2003: 387) contends that among the late-antique Christian literature not even a single extant anti-Jewish text can be attributed to the Dyophysites. It is true, as Philip Wood pointed to me in a private communication of August 26, 2015, that Ephraem, whose anti-Judaism is quite patent (see further Shepardson 2008), was part of the inheritance of all Syriac speakers, be the East- or West Syrians, and hence that they all shared a more or less straightforward anti-Jewish attitude from the very beginning – even if for the East-Syrian Christians the Zoroastrians often played the role of the Pharisees in the way that they mapped the Gospels onto contemporary events, which meant that the Jews drew less fire in practice among them. Nevertheless, the tension between the Dyophysites and the Jews was less pointed in comparison to the prevalent situation among the Miaphysites, and in my opinion this fact cannot be overlooked.

Whatever Abraha's intent, his Christological formula evinces that South-Arabian Christians in the 6th century (even mainstream Christians!) were not totally unfamiliar with the representation of Jesus as the Messiah instead of God's son – a feature that we also find in the Qur'ān from the viewpoint of the Jesus himself, who is repeatedly called there “the Messiah, son of Mary” instead of “son of God”.<sup>18</sup> And it is at least curious in this respect to notice the positive references to the religion of the Arab conquerors in several Dyophysite writings of the 7th century, including Iṣḥāq

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<sup>18</sup> See Q 2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:57, 159, 171-2; 5:17, 46, 72, 78, 110, 112, 114, 116; 7:58; 9:30-1; 17:57, 104; 18:102; 19:34; 21:26, 91, 101; 23:50; 25:17; 33:7; 39:45; 43:57, 61; 57:27; 61:6, 14; 66:12. The fact that Abraha's formula (“*Raḥmānān* and his Messiah”) is paralleled in the quranic corpus (“*al-Raḥmān*” [*passim*] + “the Messiah” ± “Jesus, the son of Mary”) has not escaped Robin's attention (Robin 2012c: 540). See also Shahid 2006: 20-21, who, albeit he adduces no evidence thereof, interprets the quranic phrase “Jesus son of Mary” as a Dyophysite expression circulating in Mecca in Muḥammad's lifetime; and van der Velden's interpretation of Q 5:116 (2008).

III's letters (48B.97; 14C.251), the Khuzistan Chronicle (34), and John bar Penkāyē's *Book of Main Points* (141) (see Penn 2015: 33, 36, 50, 88-9).<sup>19</sup>

Yet in my view there is something even more intriguing in all this. If *y(b)mn/ymnt* in CIH 541, DAI GDN 2002-20, and Ry 506 can be interpreted as alluding to the Yamāma (see n. 13 above), there is good reason to presume that Abraha did not only conquer, but also had his particular form of Christianity spread in central Arabia and beyond – as, possibly too, he conquered Yaṭrib in the Ḥiḡāz (Robin 2012c). Now, the Yamāma, with which pre-Islamic Mecca apparently had commercial ties (Makin 2014: 290), is the region where, according to the later Muslim sources, Musaylima “the liar,” i.e. Muḥammad's main rival prophet (who, the legend goes, was called “al-Raḥmān” after his Lord's name) preached his own monotheistic message – and where the battle between Musaylima and his followers, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those of Muḥammad led by Abū Bakr, took place in 632 (Musaylima himself being killed in the battlefield at a place that would later come to be known as the “Garden of Death”). As Makin (2008: 219-31) has shown, it is extremely difficult to establish with accuracy the differences between Musaylima's and Muḥammad's religious views (they both preached in the name of the same God and thus spoke the same theological language, used similar rhetorics, and even had their own shrines and their own Qur'ān-s). Of

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<sup>19</sup> If compared to Dyophysite Christology, the Qur'ān's Christology operates on a different level, for it does not address the question of the relationship between Christ's divinity and his humanity, i.e. between Christ's divine and human hypostases, as Guillaume Dye insightfully pointed to me in a private communication of August 12, 2015. Nonetheless, it reflects its premises in so far as it takes the earthly Jesus to be a man and labels him the Messiah, son of Mary, instead of son of God. It must also be mentioned that the Dyophysites developed a “theology of the indwelling Logos. Colossians 2:9 [REB: ‘For it is in Christ that the Godhead in all its fullness dwells embodied’] was paraphrased to mean: ‘In him the Logos dwells perfectly.’ The man whom the Logos had assumed as his temple and dwelling was the Second Adam, made sinless by the grace of God. It was this assumed man, and not the indwelling Logos, who had been crucified” (Pelikan 1974: 41); cf. the reference to Jesus's death in Q 4:153-9, which may be read in this way *contra* its traditional interpretation in Islam (cf. Robinson 2003: 17-20; Reynolds 2009). Also, in contrast to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, the Dyophysites saw Jesus more as a teacher and example, so that Christ-believers could effectively imitate the pattern that the man assumed by the Logos had set (Pelikan 1974: 46); otherwise, they argued, humanity would be deprived of the hope of salvation. Yet, normally, the Dyophysites gave the name Christ to the person of the union of both hypostases, the human and the divine, rather than to Jesus the human teacher alone; this, in turn, raised among their opponents the objection that they endorsed the view of a double sonship, one divine and the other human (Pelikan 1974: 48). It was only with Babai the Great (c. 551-628) that an effort was made on the part of the Dyophysites both to solve this and other related ambiguities (Pelikan 1974: 42-3) and to counter the threat of a growing Miaphysite influence in Nisibis between 571 and 610, which in turn must be seen as one of the reasons that led Khusraw II to temporarily suppress the catholicate in 609 (Reinik 2010; see further Greatrex 2003). Thus it is fair to ask what knowledge of such problems and conflicts might certain peripheral groups more or less inclined towards Diophysitism have had around that time, and if any of such groups might have eventually striven to uphold an even more radical distinction between Christ's divinity and humanity by stressing Jesus's exclusively human condition. The possibility that the Qur'ān reflects their hypothetical views cannot be excluded, either. On the eventual connections between Dyophysites and Unitarian Christians (i.e. Christians who refused to see Jesus as anything else than a man and thus reserved the title “God” for the Father alone) in the late-6th- to mid-7th century Arabian peninsula and Iraq, see further Wood 2015, whose references to the *Acta Arethae*, Iṣō'yahb I, and Thomas of Marga are particularly helpful in this respect. I am also grateful to Peter von Sivers for drawing my attention to the relevance of the early 600s in the making of Dyophysite orthodoxy.

course, the Muslim sources authenticate Muḥammad's religion as divinely inspired and dismiss Musaylima's as being radically false, but this binary opposition serves a legitimizationist purpose – and in any event conveys a theological, rather than historical, argument. It is then fair to ask whether Musaylima's and Muḥammad's religious views were influenced by Abraha's. Compare the apparent quranic parallels to the latter's Christology, which I have already mentioned, as well as Musaylima's presumed reference (*apud* Ṭabarī 1962: 272) to the parable of the “mustard seed” in Matthew 13:31-2; [61] 17:20; Mark 4:30-2; and Luke 13:18-9; 17:6; cf. too the quranic rendering of this parable in Q 21:47; 31:16 (El-Badawi 2009: 24; 2014: 151-2). In particular, the wording in Musaylima's presumed stanza: *fa-law annahā ḥubbat ḥardala . . .* (“if it were *only* mustard seed . . .”) is noteworthy, as it matches the Old Syriac version of Matthew and Luke, whereas *'lw* is lost in the Peshitta (Burkitt 1904: 2.77-8); thus the Old Syriac gospels may be ventured as its subtext. Now, one of the manuscripts of the Old Syriac gospels (namely, Syrus Sinaiticus) omits the words *ouk eginōsken autēn eōs* in Matthew 1:25 (Burkitt 1904: 2.261), therefore implicitly presenting Jesus as humanly born of Mary – which somehow matches, once more, the Christology of the Qur'ān.

Hence it would be also legitimate to ask to what extent emergent Islam must be studied against the background of 6th-century South-Arabian Christianity. Obviously, I am not claiming that 6th-century South-Arabian Christianity is the key to deciphering Islam's origins. I am simply stating that it should be taken into consideration as a relevant, if hitherto often neglected, factor that may help to explain both the emergence of Islam and its South-Arabian component.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See further de Blois 2004; Retsö 2014. See now too Segovia 2016a, where I explore the possible parallels existing between Abraha's and Muḥammad's polity vis-à-vis the Jews and other religious groups.

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