

THE PRE-ISLAMIC DIVINE NAME ‘SY AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE QUR’ĀNIC JESUS

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Abstract

This paper presents a newly discovered Safaitic inscription bearing the divine name ‘sy. It is argued that this theonym corresponds to Qur’ānic Arabic عيسى <‘ysy>, and reflects the earliest attestation of this form of Jesus’s name, likely dating to the fourth century CE, during the initial spread of Christianity to Arabia.

Part I: The Inscription (Ahmad Al-Jallad)

The Arabic name of Jesus عيسى <‘ysy> has perplexed scholars since the beginning of source-critical studies of the Qur’ān. It cannot be derived directly from any Northwest Semitic source, neither the Hebrew ישוע /yēšūa‘/, nor the Syriac ܝܫܘܥ in either its West /yešū/ or East /’išō/ vocalizations, nor can it be explained by appealing to Greek Ἰησοῦς or its Ethiopic form ስሱዮሴ. /’īyasūs/.¹ The name had seemed to appear for the first time in the Qur’ān, where its identification as Jesus is unambiguous.² Early Christian Arabic, however, makes use of the expected Arabic reflex of ישוע, namely, yasū.³ Its irregular shape has lent itself to several explanations, ranging from taboo deformation by Muḥammad to various avenues of corruption through the oral or written transmission of the name from Aramaic to Arabic.⁴ A major

1. For an up-to-date and detailed discussion of these problems, see Manfred Kropp and Guillaume Dye, “Le nom de Jésus (‘Īsā) dans le Coran, et quelques autres noms bibliques: Remarques sur l’onomastique coranique,” in Guillaume Dye and Fabien Nobilio (eds.), *Figures bibliques en Islam* (Brussels-Fernelmont: EME, 2011), 171–198.

2. See Carlos Segovia, *The Qur’anic Jesus: A New Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), ch. 2, for a comprehensive list and discussion of the occurrences of Jesus in the Qur’ān.

3. I will come back to this form in section 3.

4. The classic discussion is Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān*

limitation in the discussion of the background of qur'ānic عيسى has been the paucity of evidence. The name had not appeared in any text before the Qur'ān and therefore there was little to help arbitrate between the various theories of its origin.

This article presents a new Safaitic inscription containing the first occurrence of a theonym ʿsy, which in Safaitic orthography corresponds to Qur'ānic Arabic عيسى.⁵ The present discovery could therefore document our first pre-qur'ānic attestation of this name, likely as the name of Jesus. This edition will provide a reading of the inscription and an interpretation couched in its Safaitic and Roman/Byzantine Near Eastern context.

1. Discovery

The present inscription was discovered during the summer campaign of the 2019 Badia Survey season from the Jordanian basalt desert (*ḥarrah*).⁶ The text comes from a large collection of inscriptions—more than 100—surrounding a small cairn on the side of a footpath connecting Wādī al-Khuḍarī to a dry watering hole, called Naq'at al-Khuḍarī.⁷ The large number of inscriptions, many of which mention the watering hole itself (*'aḍayat*),⁸ suggest that this was an important stopping point on the road connecting the settled areas of the Ḥawrān to Lake Burqu', and then east to Palmyra

(Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 218–220, which is expanded in Kropp and Dye, “Le nom de Jésus.” The reader is referred to those works for further bibliography.

5. Word-internal long vowels are not represented orthographically in Safaitic or other Ancient North Arabian alphabets; see Michael C. A. Macdonald, “Ancient North Arabian,” in Roger Wood (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 488–533, 495, 502; Ahmad Al-Jallad, “Safaitic,” in John Huehnergard and Na'ama Pat-El (eds.), *The Semitic Languages*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 342–366, 345.

6. The Badia Epigraphic Survey project aims to document in a comprehensive manner the inscriptions and archaeological sites of the Jordanian Ḥarrah. The summer 2019 campaign was led by Ahmad Al-Jallad (Ohio State University) and Ali al-Manaser (Jordanian Department of Antiquities) and carried out within the framework of the “Missing Link” project co-directed by Zuhayr al-Qadi (al-Ḥuṣn research center, Abu Dhabi).

7. See Ali al-Manaser's contribution in part 2 for a detailed description of the site.

8. On the linguistic affiliation of the inscriptions and discussion of the various opinions on the matter, see Ahmad Al-Jallad, “What is Ancient North Arabian?,” in Daniel Birnstiel and Na'ama Pat-El (eds.), *Re-engaging Comparative Semitic and Arabic Studies* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 1–45.

and into North Arabia.⁹ While most of the inscriptions documented at the site are Safaitic, at least one Greek text suggests that locals and outsiders alike would have made use of the precious resource.¹⁰

Before entering the main subject of this essay, a few remarks on Safaitic are in order. Safaitic is a modern conventional label given to the northern-most variety of the South Semitic script family. It is a sister of the Ancient South Arabian alphabet rather than a descendent of it.¹¹ The inscriptions are concentrated in the Syro-Jordanian basalt desert, extending into North Arabia, but isolated examples can be found much further away.¹² The inscriptions express a continuum of Old Arabic dialects, most closely related to Classical and Qurʾānic Arabic, and to the shadowy vernacular of the Nabataeans.

The corpus covers a wide range of textual genres, including, but not limited to, funerary texts, religious invocations, commemorative inscriptions, and isolated personal names.¹³ The writing tradition is highly formulaic, which aids in the interpretation of *hapax legomena* and rare grammatical constructions. In terms of chronology, scholars have very cautiously suggested a range between the first century BCE to the fourth century CE. These dates are not based on any archaeological evidence; rather, they are defined by the contents of a minority of Safaitic inscriptions. A small number of texts are dated using the formula *snt* (“year”) followed by the description of a prominent event. While many are dated to local happenings now lost to history, those that are recognizable tend to anchor in events that transpired in the Nabataean and Roman periods. Such texts therefore became the basis for the conventional first century BCE starting date of the Safaitic corpus. However, the recent archaeological excavations in the Jebel

9. For other inscriptions published from this site, see Ahmad Al-Jallad, “Arab, ʿAʿrāb, and Arabic in Ancient North Arabia: The First Attestation of (ʿ)ʿrb as a Group Name in Safaitic,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 31 (2020): 1–14.

10. On this text, see note 35.

11. Michael C. A. Macdonald, “Safaitic,” *EF*, s.v. (1995); Ahmad Al-Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), ch. 1; Ahmad Al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 5–8.

12. For a map of the distribution of the Safaitic inscriptions based on the OCIANA corpus (*Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia*, <http://krcfm.orient.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd/ociana>), see Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Dictionary*, 3. See Michael C. A. Macdonald, “The Distribution of Safaitic Inscriptions in Jordan,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 4 (1992): 303–307.

13. See Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Dictionary*, 8–20, on Safaitic text genres and writing formula.

Qurma region led by P. Akkermans have made a good case for pushing back the *terminus post quem* to at least the third century BCE.¹⁴ The end of the writing tradition is based on silence—the known inscriptions do not seem to refer to Christianity or, leaving aside inscriptions that have references we do not understand, any event post-dating the third century CE. The present inscription will no doubt contribute to the discussion on the chronology of Safaitic, but unfortunately brings us no closer to solid dates.

2. The Inscription

The text is carved on an unworked piece of basalt, approximately forty centimeters at its widest (fig. 1). The letter shapes correspond best to the “common” category of Clark’s rough classification of Safaitic hands.¹⁵ This may be significant, as most of the Safaitic inscriptions at this site are carved in the “fine” script, which may suggest that our author’s text dates to a different period. The inscription is carved in a winding style, resembling a snake (fig. 2). This manner of orientation is not uncommon and simply reflects an aesthetic choice of the author, partly motivated by his desire to avoid carving over a pre-existing text on the rock. Four sets of seven parallel lines and one sequence of twelve parallel lines accompany the inscription; the latter symbol is quite rare and this may be its first attestation. The meaning of these symbols is unclear; most scholars have assumed that they serve an apotropaic function.¹⁶ Another short Safaitic inscription shares the rock

14. See Peter Akkermans, “Living on the Edge or Forced into the Margins? Hunter-Herders in Jordan’s Northeastern Badlands in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 7 (2019): 412–431.

15. Vincent A. Clark, “A Study of New Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan” (Ph.D. diss., University of Melbourne, 1970), 70–71. It should be said however that this classification is extremely preliminary and much more work is needed to distill legitimate sub-varieties of the script from idiosyncratic variation in the handwriting of individual authors. On the “square” variety of the Safaitic script, see Michael C. A. Macdonald, “On the Uses of Writing in Ancient Arabia and the Role of Palaeography in Studying Them,” *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 1 (2015): 1–45. On the “Safaitic-Hismaic” script type, see Jérôme Norris, “A Survey of the Ancient North Arabian Inscriptions from the Dūmat al-Jandal Area (Saudi Arabia),” in Michael C. A. Macdonald (ed.), *Languages, Scripts and Their Uses in Ancient North Arabia: Supplement to Volume 48 of the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 71–93.

16. See Nathalie Brusgaard, *Carving Interactions: Rock Art in the Nomadic Landscape of the Black Desert, North-Eastern Jordan* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 117, for further examples.



Figure 1: The 'sy inscription (by the Badia Survey team).

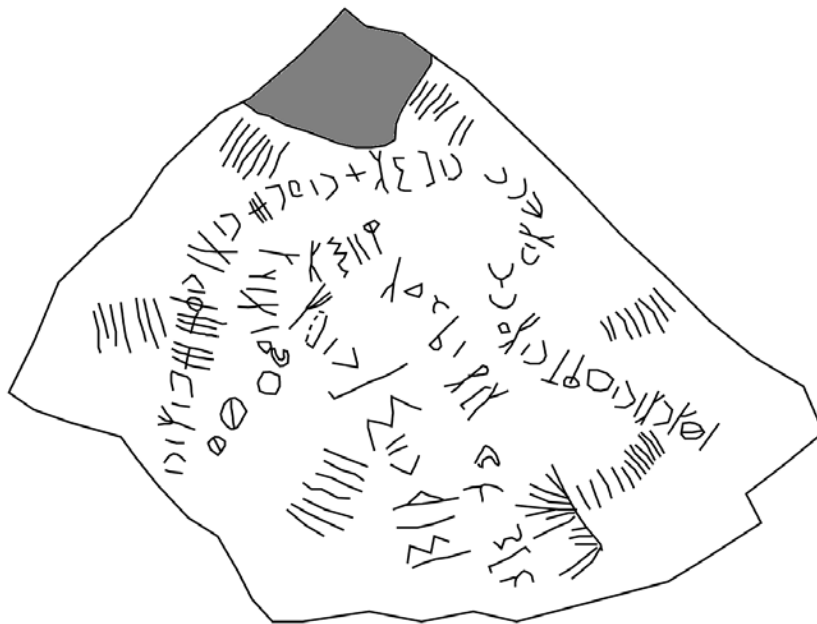


Figure 2: Tracing of 'sy inscription (by A. Al-Jallad).

face with the primary text but appears to be unrelated and to pre-date the main text. It is edited in Appendix 1 following this article.

Reading: *l whb'l bn gyz bn 'bs bn 'hbb bn rft bn 'bṭ bn ḥl bn qṭṭ bn ḏnbn w-wgm 'l-ḥl-h h-'šlly h 'sy nṣr-h m-kfr-k*

Division into formulaic segments:

Genealogy: *l whb'l bn gyz bn 'cbs bn 'hbb bn rft bn 'bt bn hl bn qtṭ bn dnbn*

Narrative: *w-wgm 'l-hl-h h-'šlly*

Invocation: *h 'sy nšr-h m-kfr-k*

Interpretation:

“By Whb'l son of Gyz son of 'cbs son of 'hrr son of Rf't son of 'bt son of Hl son of Qtṭ son of Dnbn and he grieved for his maternal uncle, the 'šll-ite; O 'sy help him against those who deny you”

2.1 Commentary*2.1.1 The Genealogy and Narrative*

The genealogy contains names that have all been attested previously in Safaitic and have good Arabic etymologies.¹⁷ However, this exact genealogy is not known from other inscriptions. No part of it repeats in the thousands of attested genealogical chains in the corpus, suggesting perhaps that our author does not come from a line that was active in the production of Safaitic inscriptions. But members of Wahb'el's¹⁸ maternal line, the tribe of 'šll, have produced a fair number of texts. The following is a comprehensive list of inscriptions—containing relevant genealogical information—by 'šll-ites and those that mention the tribe in the OCIANA corpus (*Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia*, <http://krccm.orient.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd/ociana>). It is possible that many more men from this lineage carved inscriptions but did not mention explicitly their tribal affiliation.

17. The OCIANA database contains the most up-to-date onomasticon, replacing G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1971).

18. The name of our author, *whb'l*, appears in Greek transcription as Ουαβηλος, indicating the pronunciation *wahb'el*; see Heinz Wuthnow, *Die semitischen Menschnamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri des vorderen Orients* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1930), 91.

Table 1: References to the line of ʿšll in the Safaitic inscriptions.

Reference	Location	Identification	Translation
BS 1240	NE Jordan; 32.463073; 37.237803	<i>l tm d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By Taym of the lineage of ʿšll”
Al-Mafraq Museum 59	Mafraq Museum (original provenance unknown)	<i>...w ʿdy b-ʿšll</i>	“...and he raided (the tribe of) ʿšll”
MWH 2 ¹⁹	Wādī al-Ḥashād, NE Jordan	<i>l ʿnʿm bn zʿn d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By ʿnʿm son of Zʿn of the lineage of ʿšll”
HSNS 5 ²⁰	Wādī Umm Khnayṣrī, NE Jordan	<i>...w hl dr snt mlk grfš bn hrđš w wgd ʿtr ʿhwl-h ʿl ʿšll tm w grmʿ w ʿhwđ w zbd f ngʿ w h dšry w lt gnmt l-d d{ʿ}y w lm yḥbl sfr</i>	“and he encamped here the year of king Agrippa son of Herod and he found the traces of his maternal uncles of the lineage of ʿšll, Tm, Grmʿ, and ʿhwđ, and grieved in pain, so O Allāt and Dusares, may he who reads (this inscription) have spoil and let the inscription not be effaced”

19. MWH = Inscriptions recorded by Ali al-Manaser on his survey in Wādī Ḥashād in 2004 and published on OCIANA.

20. HSNS = Rafe M.A. Harahsheh & Yunus M. Al-Shdeifat, “Nuqūsh ṣafawiyyah muʿarrakhah ilā ḥukm aghrībā al-thānī (19/50 – 92/93 m),” *Majallat Muʿtah liʿl-Buḥūth waʿl-Dirāsāt* 21.6 (2006): 111–129.

Reference	Location	Identification	Translation
RWQ 65 ²¹	Wādī Salmā, NE Jordan	<i>l ʿwsn bn wdm bn rbʿl bn ʿswr bn šḥr bn ʿksr bn br bn ḥs bn ydʿ ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By ʿwsn son of Wdm son of Rbʿl son of ʿswr son of Šḥr son of ʿksr son of Br son of Ḥs son of Ydʿ, the lineage of ʿšll”
HaNSC ²²	Tell al-Jaʿbariyyah, Wādī al-ʿAbd, NE Jordan.	<i>l bk bn nšrʿ {bn} hrml h-ʿšlly</i>	“By Bk son of Nšrʿ son of Hrml the ʿšll-ite”
Is.H 205 ²³	ʿĪsāwī, Rif Dimashq, Syria	<i>l dd bn ʿsyb h-ʿšlly</i>	“By Dd son of ʿsyb the ʿšll-ite”
Is.L 325	ʿĪsāwī, Rif Dimashq, Syria	<i>l hsrk bn šdd bn nkf bn mlḥ bn ḥnn h-ʿšlly</i>	“By Hsrk son of Šdd son of Nkf son of Mlḥ son of Ḥnn the ʿšll-ite”
RaIM 3074.1 ²⁴	Iraq Museum	<i>l mʿz bn slm bn sny bn ḥnʿl bn slm bn sny d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By Mʿz son of Slm son of Ḥnʿl son of Slm son of Sny of the lineage of ʿšll”
KRS 2824	NE Jordan	<i>l ʿzhm bn šmtʿl h-dr h-ʿšlly</i>	“By ʿzhm son of Šmtʿl, in this place, the ʿšll-ite.”
KRS 1508	NE Jordan	<i>...snt ḥrb ḥb{q} w ʿšll</i>	“... the year Ḥbq and ʿšll made war”

21. RWQ = Mahmud M. Al-Rousan, “*Nuqūsh šafawiyyah min Wādī Qaṣṣāb biʿl-Urdunn: Dirāsah maydāniyyah taḥlīliyyah muqāranah*” (Ph.D. diss., King Saʿūd University, 2004).

22. HaNSC = Rafe M.A. Harahsheh, “*Nuqūsh šafāʿiyyah mukhtārah min al-bādiyah al-urdunniyyah*,” *Journal of Epigraphy and Rock Drawings* 1 (2007): 29–52.

23. Inscriptions from ʿĪsāwī, Syria collected by the Safaitic Epigraphic Survey Programme (SESP) and published on OCIANA.

24. Iraq Museum (Inv. # 3074), published on OCIANA.

Reference	Location	Identification	Translation
KRS 68	NE Jordan	<i>l ʿnʿm {b}{n} {w}rl bn dmy d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By ʿnʿm son of Wrl son of Dmy of the lineage of ʿšll”
SIJ 658 ²⁵	Jāwā, NE Jordan	<i>l ġny d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By Ġny of the lineage of ʿšll”
SIJ 630	Jāwā, NE Jordan	<i>l f{d}g b{n} gryt d-ʿl {ʿ}šll</i>	“By Fđg son of Gryt of the lineage of ʿšll”
SIJ 43	Jāthūm, NE Jordan	<i>l {q}dm bn bny d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By Qdm son of Bny of the lineage of ʿšll”
C 2962 ²⁶	Zalaf, Rif Dimashq, Syria	<i>l w{s}t bn db bn ʿgmḥ h-ʿšlly</i>	“By Wst son of Ḍb son of ʿgmḥ the ʿšll-ite”
HCH 33 ²⁷	Amman Museum (Cairn of Hāniʿ, NE Jordan).	<i>l ġḥś bn tmlh bn tm d-ʿl ʿšll</i>	“By Ġḥś son of Tmlh son of Tm of the lineage of ʿšll”

HSNS 5 records a grieving formula very similar to our inscription: its author finds the traces (*wgd ʿtr*) of his maternal uncles of the lineage of ʿšll (*ʿḥwl-h d ʿl ʿšll*) and so he grieves in pain (*ngʿ*).²⁸ The text dates to the reign of “Agrippa son of Herod.”²⁹ This particular choice of dating could be understood as an expression of cultural affiliation with the settled world.³⁰ Indeed,

25. SIJ = Fredrick V. Winnett, *Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957).

26. C = Gonzague Ryckmans, *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum: Pars Quinta, Inscriptiones Saracenicae Continens: Tomus I, Fasciculus I, Inscriptiones Safaiticae* (Paris: E Reipublicae Typographeo, 1950–1951).

27. HCH = G. Lankaster Harding, “The Cairn of Haniʿ,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 2 (1953): 8–56, plates 1–7.

28. The recording of expressions of grief and longing at the finding of the traces of lost/absent loved ones is an established writing genre; see Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Dictionary*, 15.

29. As argued by the editors, this is likely the final ruler of the Herodian dynasty, Agrippa II, d. 92 or 100 CE.

30. The use of the Greek script and language by the nomads could be taken as

the inscription's author hails from the lineage of Ḍayf, a large confederation with clear ties to the Roman military and whose members have furnished occasional Greek inscriptions.³¹ Roman military camps were set up deep in the desert. Jāthūm, which attests the presence of 'šll-ites (SIJ 43, 630), for example, could have acted as a nexus of contact between Arabian nomads and the Roman military. A rather long and well-preserved Greek inscription carved by a musician and barber serving a Roman captain confirms the presence of a Roman military encampment at the site.³² This inscription calls the place *siwāy 'abgar*, "the cairn of Abgar," indicating that they cooperated with local nomads to navigate through the region and had learned the local toponymy. Similar cooperation is attested in a new inscription published by Z. Al-Salameen et al., where a Safaitic-writing nomad records himself serving as a guide (*ḥfr*) for the Palmyrenes through the Ḥarrah.³³

a marker of this affiliation as well; see, for example, Ahmad Al-Jallad and Ali al-Manaser, "New Epigraphica from Jordan II: Three Safaitic-Greek Partial Bilingual Inscriptions," *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 2 (2016): 55–66.

31. A Ḍayfite named Sha'ar produced a Greek text at a site near Wādī Rushaydah in S. Syria; see Michael C. A. Macdonald, Muna Al Mu'azzin, and Laila Nehmé, "Les inscriptions safaitiques de Syrie, cent quarante ans après leur découverte," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres* (1996): 435–494, 480–484, number 1. The same man carved a nearly identical text in the upper part of Ghadir al-Ghuṣayn in NE Jordan, which was discovered by William and Fidelity Lancaster but was never formally published; it appears on OCIANA as MG 1. On the ties between the tribe of Ḍayf and the Roman military (and settled areas), see Ahmad Al-Jallad and Chams Bernard, "New Safaitic and Greek Inscriptions from the Jordanian Ḥarrah Relating to Auxiliary Roman Military Units," *ZDMG* (2021): 61–72; Ahmad Al-Jallad, Zeyad Al-Salameen, Yunus Shdeifat, and Rafe Harahsheh, "Gaius the Roman and the Kawmites: Inscriptional Evidence for Roman Auxiliary Units Raised from the Nomads of the Ḥarrah," in Peter Akkermans (ed.), *Landscapes of Survival* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021): 353–359. More broadly on this phenomenon, see Michael C. A. Macdonald, "Romans Go Home? Rome and Other 'Outsiders' as Viewed from the Syro-Arabian Desert," in Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (eds.), *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 145–163.

32. See Lucetta Mowry, "A Greek Inscription at Jathum in Transjordan," *BASOR* 132 (1931): 34–41. Other Greek graffiti may have been carved by soldiers stationed there.

33. Zeyad Al-Salameen, Rafe Harahsheh, and Younis Al-Shdaifat, "The Palmyrenes in a New Safaitic Inscription," *Syria* 96 (2019): 387–394. The editors of the inscription, however, have misread and misinterpreted an important section of it. They read: *l m'n bn syd bn ḥd d 'l mslq w-qyf m'-'l tdmr l-fnyt ḥfr l-hm w-wgd sfr ḥl-h mḥwr*, "By M'n son of Syd son of Ḥd of the tribe of Mslq and he followed the trace (sic) with the Palmyrenes in Fnyt, [and] protected them, and he found the inscription of his maternal uncle Mḥwr." What Al-Salameen et al. read as *qyf* is, however, clearly *qyz*,

These facts allow us to sketch two possible explanations for our author's unique lineage and his connection to the tribe of ʿšll, which will come into play later once we attempt to establish a historical context for the unique invocation contained in our inscription. Perhaps like Lobayʿat,³⁴ the author of HSNS 5, Wahbʿel, whose father had married a woman of the ʿšll tribe, hails from a local tribe with some connection to the Roman world. Such contacts allow for the possibility of cultural diffusion from settled areas to the desert.

But if the uniqueness of the long genealogy is significant, then perhaps it could suggest that Wahbʿel hails from a settled tribe, and was only moving through the area. Indeed, a Greek inscription carved at the same site by a man named Ααρικος Βαδαρου—the first name of which is not clearly attested in the Safaitic onomasticon—could reflect the same phenomenon.³⁵ Outsiders passing through the Ḥarrah have produced Safaitic texts from time to time: a man named Taymallāh of the people of Bostra carved a text at Ruʿaylah, several kilometers deeper in the basalt desert.³⁶ Several texts were carved by people who identified as Nabataeans,³⁷ and a so-far unique text records the presence of a man named Gaius “of the people of Rome.”³⁸ In addition to this, settled tribesmen have left their mark in the desert. Al-Salameen et al. published a fascinating inscription by a man from the tribe

which means “to spend the dry season.” The term *ḥfr* is also better understood as “to guide” rather than “to protect” in this particular context, as it would be rather odd indeed for a single man to protect an entire group of people. The narrative should be re-read and interpreted as follows: *w-qyʿ mʿ-ʿl tdmr ʿl-fnyʿ ḥfr l-hm*, “and he spent the dry season with the people of Palmyra on the edge of Fnyʿ (the edge of the basalt desert near Burquʿ), acting as a guide for them.”

34. The genealogy of the author of HSNS 5 is: *lbʿt bn ḥʿst bn flʿt bn bhʿs bn ʿdnt bn ʿslm bn zkr bn rʿt bn wʿsyʿ bn dʿf bn ʿg(d) bn tʿwḍ*, where *dʿf* is the eponymous ancestor of the tribe Ḍayf. The vocalization of the name *lbʿt* is assured by its appearance as Λοβαίαθου in Greek transcription in the bilingual text J1 in Michael C. A. Macdonald et al., “Les inscriptions safaitiques de Syrie.”

35. See Ahmad Al-Jallad and Ali al-Manaser, “Old Arabic Minutiae II: Greek-Safaitic Bilinguals and Language Contact in the Ḥarrah,” *Arabica* (forthcoming).

36. This simple text states *l-tmlh bn ʿnhk ḍ ʿl bʿry*, “By Taymallāh son of ʿAnhak of the people of Bostra,” and was found at Wādī al-Ruʿaylah on the way to Jubbat al-Ruʿaylah in NE Jordan. It will appear in Al-Jallad and al-Manaser, “Old Arabic Minutiae II.”

37. For example, CSNS 661; see Michael C. A. Macdonald, *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), II, 307, n. 28; 350, n. 302; 2009 IV, 185, n. 23, 186, on this phenomenon.

38. This text appears to belong to a Roman soldier, although it was likely carved by a local; see Ahmad Al-Jallad et al., “Gaius the Roman and the Kawnites.”

of Kawkab, which apparently had both settled and nomadic sections. Our author, ‘Azīz son of Ṣayyād, wrote that he was spending the season of the later rains in the desert although his residence was in the Ḥawrānī town of Ṣalḥad.³⁹ Thus, Wahb’el may fit into this category of writer, a man with links to the desert, clearly capable of writing Safaitic, but whose social group resided beyond the Ḥarrah.

It should be noted, however, that all Safaitic texts carved by settled peoples so far contain rather short genealogies. The long genealogy of the present inscription could therefore suggest that the author hailed from a nomadic tribe. But this is not decisive. The short genealogies of the inscriptions by settled peoples so far may simply reflect a bias of the writing tradition. Most inscriptions contain short genealogies: 15,608 inscriptions in the OCIANA Safaitic corpus contain only two-generation genealogies while a mere sixty-two contain ten generations, and the number shrinks as the generations increase. It is possible, then, that the short genealogies in the small number of texts produced by settled folk simply reflect this tendency rather than reduced genealogical knowledge on the part of town dwellers of Arabian extraction.

Thus, both possibilities—namely, that Wahb’el was a local nomad with ties to the Roman world, like the author of HSNS 5, or a settled person of Arabian extraction—can be well supported. But the unique genealogy and contents of this text could be the result of another factor—chronology. In order to treat this matter, we should now turn to the discussion of the inscription’s unique invocation.

2.1.2 *The Invocation*

Safaitic inscriptions may terminate in an invocation to the gods. These prayers are often semantically connected to the narrative.⁴⁰ Invocations for the improvement of the condition of a mourner, for example, often follow expressions of grief and loss of loved ones. The author of Ms 30 expresses grief for the dead (*wgm*) and then calls upon Allāt to relieve his condition (*h*

39. The text is: *l ‘zz bn ṣyd bn qdm d ‘l kkb w y‘mr b-ṣlḥd w-dt’ snt mlk rb’l* “By ‘zz son of Ṣyd son of Qdm of the lineage of Kawkab and he resides in Ṣalḥad but spent the season of the later rains (here) in the year of king Rabb’el”; see Ziyad Al-Salameen, Yunus Shdeifat, and Rafe Harahsheh, “Nabataean Echoes in al-Ḥarrah: New Evidence in Light of Recent Field Work,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 150 (2018): 60–79. On this phenomenon, see Michael C. A. Macdonald, *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, II, and on the tribe of *kkb*, 357.

40. See Al-Jallad and Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, 16.

lt *rwḥ*);⁴¹ similarly *'glh*, author of KRS 270, grieves for an unnamed loved one (*ḥbb*) and calls on the god Roḏay for relief (*h rḏy rwḥ*). KRS 1188 expresses grief for the loss of the author's companions and the camels, presumably taken off in a raid (*wgm 'l-'šy^c-h w h-'bl*), and invokes Allāt to grant relief to those who remain alive (*rwḥ l-d s'r*) and then the god Yayte^c for security from enemies (*slm m-śn^ʔ*). The author of HaNSB 163 asks Yayte^c for relief from the enemy tribe Ḍayf (*h yt^c rwḥ m-df*).⁴²

The present invocation falls into this thematic and structural category, but its contents have not been previously attested. After grieving for the demise of his maternal uncle, Wahb^ʔel calls upon a new deity, 'sy. Its identity as such is assured by the formulaic context—it follows the vocative particle *h* and precedes an invocation. In its consonantal form, the theonym is compatible with qur'ānic عيسى, which was pronounced as 'isē in Old Ḥigāzī and 'isā in normative Classical Arabic.⁴³ The graphic connection between Safaitic 'sy and qur'ānic 'ysy is bolstered by the contents of the invocation that follows, which suggest a monotheistic context: *nšr-h m-kfr-h*.

The collocation of *nšr* and *kfr* is remarkable and reminiscent of qur'ānic and Syriac diction, as we shall see later. While *nšr*, “to help, aid,” is previously known in Safaitic prayers,⁴⁴ *kfr* as a verb or substantive appears for the first time. In a recent paper, Juan Cole has treated in a comprehensive manner this root's entire spectrum of meaning in Qur'ānic Arabic, restricting the sense of “deny, disbelieve” to the idiomatic expression *kafara bi-*.⁴⁵

41. Ms = Safaitic inscriptions from NE Jordan published on OCIANA; this text comes from Shi'b Ghuṣayn.

42. See Cassandra Bennet, “Geographic and Religious Trends in the Pre-Islamic Religious Beliefs of the North Arabian Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribes,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 44 (2014): 43–52, for a list of popular Safaitic deities and associated invocations. A comprehensive study of divine names and titles remains a desideratum.

43. Safaitic orthography does not represent internal long vowels with *matres lectionis*. The pronunciation 'isē obtains in several qur'ānic reading traditions, such as that of al-Kisā'ī. The so-called *alif maqṣūrah* (*bi-ṣūrat al-yā^ʔ*) derives from an original word-final diphthong/triphthong that yielded a different reflex in Old Ḥigāzī, /ē/, and in what would become normative Classical Arabic, /ā/. On the outcome of the Proto-Arabic triphthongs, see Marijn van Putten, “The Development of the Triphthongs in Qur'anic and Classical Arabic,” *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017): 47–74. The correspondence between qur'ānic *alif maqṣūrah* and Safaitic final *y* is abundantly illustrated: بنى = Safaitic *bny*, “he built”; أتى = Safaitic *'ty*, “he came”; فتي = Safaitic *fty*, “youth.”

44. Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Dictionary*, 107b.

45. Other meanings discussed by Cole are “peasant,” “pagan,” “libertine,” “rebel,” and

Outside the canonical Qurʾān, *kafara* can take a direct object, as in the *duʿāʾ qunūt al-witr*, which originates in the controversial lost *sūrah* of the Qurʾān, *Sūrat al-Khalʿ*:⁴⁶

lā nakfuruka wa-nuʾminu bika

We do not deny you but we believe in you.

In Classical Arabic, the L-stem *kāfara* can take a direct object, meaning “to deny, to disacknowledge,” e.g., *idhā aqarra ʿinda ʿl-qāḍī bi-shayʿin thumma kāfara* (“when he confesses a thing in the presence of a judge but then denies [it]”).⁴⁷ The earliest attestation of this form occurs in a line of al-Farazdaq (d. c. 110/728), *kāfarānī in lam ughithhu* (“he would have denied me [my right] if I had not helped him”).⁴⁸ While the L-stem is not attested in the qurʾānic reading traditions, the consonantal text would not consistently distinguish between it and the G-stem; both would appear as كَفَرَ. It is therefore possible that the L-stem underlies some of the occurrences of كَفَرَ in the *rasm*.

The sense of denial and rejection is a metaphorical derivative of the more basic meaning of the root, “to cover, conceal.”⁴⁹ This meaning—which always takes a direct object—is attested in the earliest layers of Classical Arabic, for example, in a line of the *muʿallaqah* attributed to Labid b. Rabīʿah (d. 40/660–661): *fī laylatin kafara ʿl-nujūma ghamāmuḥā* (“on a night whose clouds have concealed the stars”). Since the sense of “to deny, renounce” is also expressed by the Syriac G-stem *kpar*, where it takes an object introduced by *b-* as in the Qurʾān, the construction found in *Sūrat al-Khalʿ* may reflect the original Arabic syntax of this verb, while the construction *kafara bi-* could betray the impact of Syriac.⁵⁰

“blasphemer”; see Juan Cole, “Infidel or Paganus? The Polysemy of *kafara* in the Qurʾān,” *JAOs* 140 (2020): 615–635, and the bibliography there for further literature.

46. *Sūrat al-Khalʿ* was supposedly part of the codex of Ubayy. Sean Anthony treats this issue in his characteristically brilliant manner, arguing that while the *sūrah* and its counterpart *Sūrat al-Ḥafd* were ultimately excluded from the qurʾānic canon, their use in *qunūt*- and *witr*-prayers ensured their preservation; see Sean Anthony, “Two Lost *Sūrahs* of the Qurʾān: *Sūrat al-Khalʿ* and *Sūrat al-Ḥafd* between Textual and Ritual Canon (1st-3rd/7th-9th centuries),” *JSAI* 46 (2019): 67–112.

47. Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon, Derived from the Best and Most Copious Eastern Sources* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863–1893), 2621a.

48. See the *Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic* (<https://www.dohadictionary.org/>; accessed December 17, 2021).

49. Lane, *Lexicon*, 2620a–b.

50. For example: **وَقَدْ كَفَرَ بِالذِّكْرِ**; **وَقَدْ كَفَرَ**, “(if) he denies the Nazarene faith”; from *The*

The second relevant family of meanings signaled by this root is “to atone, to forgive,” which, like “to deny,” ultimately derives from a more basic meaning “to cover.”⁵¹ This sense is expressed by the D-stem in Arabic, e.g., *kaffara ʿllāhu ʿanhu ʿl-dhanba* (“Allāh has forgiven his sins”).⁵² Lane records the expression *kaffara lahu*, meaning “to give obeisance to him,” used to refer to the lowering (i.e., covering) of one’s head as a symbol of submission to a superior.⁵³ The Hebrew D-stem *kipper* conveys the same meaning, “to pardon (< to cover), to seek atonement,” where the sin or guilty party is the logical direct object of the verb, usually introduced by ʿal, and the pardoning agent is introduced by *min*, “from.”⁵⁴ Thus, Lev 5:26: *wə-kipper ʿālāyw hak-kōhēn lipnē YHWH*, “and the priest shall make atonement for him before YHWH.” This meaning is also attested in a Late Sabaic monotheistic inscription, *(ykf)rn ḥ(b)-hmw*, “may he (God) forgive their sins.”⁵⁵

The various options the lexicographical sources provide must be judged against Safaitic syntax and formulaic language. The sense of “atonement, forgiveness,” and even “obedience,” seems unlikely, as they require prepositional objects while the Safaitic attestation takes a pronominal direct object *-k*, the antecedent of which is the divine name. Further, when the verb is used with the meaning of “atonement, forgiveness,” across all languages, its direct object is the “sin”—which can be implied—for which one seeks atonement *from* a deity. In the case of the meaning of obedience, the subject covers an implied object (the head, face) for the ruler or deity, which is introduced by a preposition.

As shown by table 2, the syntactic construction *nšr-h m-kfr-k* follows an established invocational pattern in Safaitic.

Julian Romance (Com. JulSok 181[87]:15). See the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (<http://cal.huc.edu/>; accessed December 17, 2021) and Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 250.

51. In Syriac, *kpr* can also produce verbs meaning “to erase” and “to blaspheme,” but neither of these meanings is plausible in the present context.

52. Lane, *Lexicon*, 2620b.

53. Lane, *Lexicon*, 2621a.

54. Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, trans. S. P. Tregelles (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1846), 411.

55. CIH 539; see *Sabäisches Wörterbuch* (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/sabaweb/>; accessed December 17, 2020).

Table 2: The formulaic structure of the invocation.

Siglum	Vocative	Imperative	Direct object	Prepositional phrase	Translation
C 4148	<i>h yṭʿ</i>	<i>slm</i>	<i>ʿgdy</i>	<i>mn-sqm</i>	“O Yayṭeʿ, keep my kids safe from illness”
WH 2163	<i>h rḏw</i>	<i>sʿd</i>	<i>-h</i>	<i>m-śnʿ</i>	“O Roṣaw, help him against enemies”
C 3744	<i>h yṭʿ</i>	<i>sʿd</i>	<i>-h</i>	<i>m-bʿs</i>	“O Yayṭeʿ, help him against misfortune”
C 1548	<i>h rḏw</i>	<i>flṭ</i>	<i>-h</i>	<i>m-śnʿ</i>	“O Roṣaw, deliver him from enemies”
KRS 372	----	<i>nqm</i>	<i>-h</i>	<i>m-mrm-h</i> ⁵⁶	“Allow him to take vengeance upon the one who struck him with arrows”

The syntax of our invocation becomes clear in light of these parallels. The verb *nṣr* corresponds to other verbs of aid and deliverance, such as *sʿd*, “help,” and *flṭ*, “deliver,” while the phrase following *m-* signifies what the author is seeking protection/deliverance from. It therefore seems best to take *kfr* as a G-stem participle meaning “to deny,” taking a pronominal direct object. Safaitic orthography does not allow us to distinguish between singular and plural forms in this situation, thus it may be translated as either.

While the preceding interpretation seems secure, we must exercise due diligence and consider all *possible* understandings of this brief clause. There is a second path of interpretation that would read the invocation through another syntactic lens. The *m-* preposition could introduce the instrument of divine aid. Returning to the primary meaning of *kfr*, namely “to cover,” we could understand the word as an abstract noun “protection,” paralleling

56. The form *mrm-h* is likely the participle of the L-stem *rāmā* “to shoot arrows at someone”; the OCIANA edition translated it as “he took vengeance on those who accused {him},” but this ignores the fact that the *nqm* takes an object introduced by *m-*.

the development of the meaning of *gnn*.⁵⁷ There are two drawbacks to this explanation: the first is that while Safaitic frequently invokes the deities for protection, it is almost always using terms derived from *wqy*.⁵⁸ Indeed, in no case in which the root *kpr* is attested does it come to mean something like “protection.” The second drawback is that the instrumental is almost always introduced by *b-*. The use of the preposition *m-* (= *min*) is difficult to reconcile with this proposed meaning. Finally, it is possible to understand *kfr* as “forgiveness,” with the partitive use of *m-*, rendering “help us by means of your forgiveness.”⁵⁹

Weighing these options, I would suggest that the understanding *nšr-h m-kfr-k* as “help him against those who deny you” appears to be most likely. Indeed, once we take *kfr* in this way, the choice of *nšr* as the verb of aid seems to be deliberate, perhaps the result of word play signaling a connection with Christianity and Christians, cf. Syriac *nāšrāyūtā* and Qurʾān *nšry* /*našārē*/. Indeed, the same lexical pair appears in Q Āl ʿImrān 3:147 and al-Baqarah 2:250, producing an invocation with a meaning quite like the one suggested here:

wa'nšurnā ʿalā ʿl-qawmi ʿl-kāfirīn
And grant us victory over the disbelieving host.

3. The Identity of ʿsy

If my interpretation of the invocation is correct, then this would strongly suggest that ʿsy corresponds to qurʾānic ʿysy and that we are dealing with an invocation addressed to Jesus. This brings us to the problem of the etymology of the Arabic name of Jesus. Its attestation in Safaitic would rule out explanations of imperfect transmission to Muḥammad, either orally or through textual corruption, which appear to be the most popular in the literature. Indeed, the name would have been Arabicized early, perhaps at the dawn of the spread of Christianity in North Arabia.

57. Safaitic *gnn* can mean “to protect”; see Al-Jallad and Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, 72, cf. Classical Arabic *jannahu* “he veiled him,” “he protected him,” Lane, *Lexicon*, 462a.

58. Al-Jallad and Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, 140–141.

59. A comparable prayer is attested in KRS 68 with the preposition *b-* introducing the instrument and *m-* the object from which the author seeks deliverance: *h šʿhqm ... b-ḥfrt-k fltn m-mt*, “O Šʿhqm ... by means of your protection/guidance there is deliverance from death”; this interpretation was first offered in Ahmad Al-Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden, Brill: 2015), and repeated in Ahmad Al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, 69.

The problem of ʿsy/ʿysy is that it does not reflect the outcome of normal phonological processes of borrowing. A putative *yešūʿ* should have come into the QCT as *yswʿ* or, if via Syriac *ʾišoʿ*, as *ʾswʿ*. Recently, Guillaume Dye and Manfred Kropp have discussed this issue in great detail and attempted to explain the development of Arabic *ʿisā* from a form of Aramaic.⁶⁰ They posit an East Syrian source, similar to Mandaic, which had lost *ʿayn*, producing *yešūʿ* > *ʾišūʿ* > *ʾišūʿ/ʾišō*. They then argue that once this form was transmitted to Arabic, it gained an *ʿayn* in initial position, a rare yet attested phenomenon.⁶¹ This would produce *ʿišūʿ/ʿišō*, which was then changed to *ʿisā* by an ad-hoc lowering of the final vowel. While ingenious, the explanatory power of this account depends on the existence of this unattested Aramaic antecedent at a rather early historical period and on the status of final *y* as a *mater lectionis*. While Kropp and Dye suggest that the final *y* should not be taken as a representation of final *ē* or *ay*, and is therefore available to represent other qualities of final long vowels, advances in the study of early Arabic orthography and the writing system of the Qurʾān in fact require that it reflect an i-class vowel.⁶² There are to date no examples of etymological *ā or *ū written with a final *y* in early Arabic.

We should also remember that the pronunciation *ʿisā* itself is a result of what Sohaib Saeed has termed “Ḥaḥḥnormativity,” that is, the assumption that the pronunciation of Arabic as reflected in the reading tradition of Ḥaḥḥ *ʿan ʿĀḥim* reflects the earliest and most authentic vocalization of the Qurʾānic Consonantal Text (QCT), relegating other pronunciations to scholarly arcana. While Ḥaḥḥ *ʿan ʿĀḥim* reads عيسى as *ʿisā*, the equally canonical tradition of al-Dūrī *ʿan al-Kisāʾī* reads it as *ʿisē*. There is no objective reason to treat Ḥaḥḥ’s pronunciation as original, and the assumption that it is, is entirely anachronistic. In fact, the earliest material we have to inform the pronunciation of the name عيسى is the transcription of the Arabic name موسى <mwsy> in Greek. In a document dated to 716 CE from Aphrodites Kome, a man name موسى بن نصير appears in Greek transcription as Μουση υί(οῦ) Νοσα[ε]ρ] = *Mūsē* son of *Noṣayr*, confirming that the pronunciation of the *alif maqṣūrah* was /ē/.⁶³ Indeed, in this layer of early Arabic material, what is termed the *alif maqṣūrah* (*bi-ṣūrat al-yāʾ*) is consistently represent-

60. Kropp and Dye, “Le nom de Jésus,” 171–198. This article contains an up-to-date and thorough discussion of previous suggestions and their weaknesses. The reader is referred there for previous opinions.

61. Kropp and Dye, “Le nom de Jésus,” 188.

62. See note 43 on Arabic triphthongs.

63. Harold I. Bell, *The Aphrodito Papyri: With an Appendix of Coptic Papyri* (London: British Museum, 1911), p.lond 4 1434–1435.

ed with e-class vowels in Greek transcription, ε and η.⁶⁴ Considering these facts, it then appears certain that the earliest pronunciation of عسى in the Umayyad period and the pronunciation underlying the qurʿānic *rasm* was ʿisē, in agreement with the reading tradition of al-Kisāʿī. This is even more difficult to reconcile with a source along the lines of ʿišō/ʿišū.

Given that the name عسى eludes a satisfactory derivation from an Aramaic source, and now in light of the appearance of ʿsy in Safaitic, I would like to suggest a new way of thinking about this problem. If Christianity spread to Arabic speakers during the period in which Safaitic inscriptions were composed, then the pre-Classical Arabic lexicon and methods of rendering foreign divine names into the Arabic of this period should inform our interpretation of the form (y)sy. But before entering into the details of etymology, we should note that the *alif maqṣūrah* corresponds to Safaitic y, which signifies a final diphthong in nominal forms and a triphthong in verbs: Safaitic *fty* /fatay/, “youth” = qurʿānic فتى /fatē/; Safaitic *bny* /ban-aya/, “he built” = qurʿānic بنى /banē/.

The Safaitic pantheon contained both local Arabian gods, such as *rḏw* /*rḏy*, and gods whose cult centers lay beyond the Ḥarrah. In most cases, the names of these foreign gods were simply taken over without modification. For example, the storm god Baʿal-Šamīn—whose local cult center was at the town of Sīʿ in southern Syria—is rendered into Safaitic as *bʿlsmn*, preserving its Aramaic form.⁶⁵ However, in a few cases, authors translated the divine name into Arabic, producing *bʿlsm̄y* /baʿal-samāy/, where Aramaic *šamēn* /*šamīn* was replaced with Arabic *samāy*.⁶⁶ And in one case, the entire name was replaced by a Safaitic epithet *mālek has-samāy*.⁶⁷ Another intriguing example is the possible attestation of the Greek divine title εἷς θεός in Safaitic as ʿḥd, reflecting a direct translation of the epithet.⁶⁸ While these examples are certainly a minority situation, they do represent a living strategy of localizing foreign gods.

64. See Ahmad Al-Jallad, “The Arabic of the Islamic Conquests: Notes on Phonology and Morphology Based on the Greek Transcriptions from the First Islamic Century,” *BSOAS* 80 (2017): 419–439, 431.

65. On the town of Sīʿ and Baʿal-Šamīn’s temple there, see Michael C. A. Macdonald, “References to Sīʿ in the Safaitic Inscriptions,” in J. Dentzer-Feydy, J.-M. Dentzer, and P.-M. Blanc (eds.), *Hauran II: Les installations de Sīʿ 8: Du sanctuaire à l’établissement viticole* (Beirut: IFPO), 278–279.

66. For example, C 88; RWQ 281.

67. KRS 1944.

68. Ahmad Al-Jallad, “The ‘One’ God in a Safaitic Inscription” *Eretz-Israel* 34 (2021): 37–48. Cf. Q 112:1.

The second option—which does not preclude the first—is the equation of pre-existing names with foreign ones through phonosemantic matching.⁶⁹ We can see this process active in the Qur’ān. The name *yahyē*, for example, is not a direct port of *yôḥānān* or any of its derivatives, but is rather a pre-existing Arabic name—attested in Safaitic as *yhyy* (C 614) and *yhy* (RWQ 115)—that was equated with John.⁷⁰ Indeed, this equation was employed by Arabian Jews as well. The Jewish Nabataean funerary inscription JSNab 386 (dated 306 CE), from al-‘Ulā, was set up by a man named *yhy’ bn šm’wn*, where *yhy’* substitutes for the common Hebrew name *ywhn* (= *yôḥānān*).⁷¹ The two names derive from different roots, which demonstrates that phonetic proximity, rather than etymology, was the main driving force connecting them.

It may, then, be possible that the foreign name *yešū’* was equated with a pre-existing Safaitic name, regarded perhaps as its local equivalent. The name ‘sy is attested some seven times in the Safaitic corpus as an anthroponym, suggesting that it pre-existed its application to Jesus. In fact, a man named *qdm* son of ‘sy records an invocation to Rđw in Is.H 144:⁷² *l qdm bn ‘sy w h rđw ’ws-h*, “By Qdm son of ‘sy; O Roṣaw grant him a boon.” This proves that the personal name ‘sy was used in a pagan context.

So if ‘*isē* pre-existed the introduction of Christianity, what did the name mean? Traditional exegetes have devoted much time to this subject and their opinions are discussed by Jeffery and, more recently, by Robinson.⁷³ Most have assumed that it derives from the root ‘y-s, which denotes the semantic sphere of “off-whiteness” in Arabic, e.g., ‘*isatun* and ‘*ayasun*, “reddish whiteness” in a camel’s color; and *rajulun a’yasu*, “a man with white hair.”

69. Phonosemantic matching is similar to calquing, but, in addition to semantic approximation, attempts to match the sound of the word in the source language with a pre-existing word in the target language; see Ghil’ad Zuckermann, *Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), § 1.2.4.

70. This issue is discussed as early as Arthur Jeffery, who takes note of the pre-Islamic epigraphic evidence and states: “It would thus seem that Muḥammad was using a form of the name already naturalized among the northern Arabs, though there appears to be no trace of the name in the early literature,” though he seems to still regard it as a mutation of *yôḥānān*; see Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 290–291.

71. JSNab = Antonin Jaussen and Raphaël Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie* (5 vols; Paris: Leroux/Geuthner, 1909–1920).

72. IS.H = Safaitic inscriptions from ‘Isāwī, Syria, collected by the SESP project and published on OCIANA.

73. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 218–220; Neal Robinson, “Jesus,” *EQ*, s.v. (2003).

Anthroponyms derived from color terms are common, e.g., ʿswd, “black.”⁷⁴ The form, however, is irregular. One would expect something like ʿys along the lines of ʿswd. Rather, if we assume that the vocalization represented in the qurʿānic reading traditions reflects the word’s original derivation, then it should be construed as an abstract noun based on the feminine *fiʿlē* (فعلى) pattern. The discord between morphological and natural gender in Arabic anthroponyms is well attested and not surprising, so: *usāmah*, *muʿāwiyah*, *rabīʿah*, all names of men. While the abstract noun *ʿīsay* “whiteness” is not attested in classical sources, its appearance in Safaitic predates this material by nearly a millennium. Thus, such a rare word could have easily fallen into disuse by the time the lexica were compiled. It is also possible to regard the word as a hypocoristic formation based on the noun *ʿīsatun*, “reddish white,” where the final feminine ending is replaced with the *-ay* termination; compare with names such as ʿbdy, a hypocoristic of ʿbd, or *zbdy* from *zbd*.

The above discussion also holds if we assume that the root ʿ-y-s in early Arabic had a meaning closer to Gəʿəz ʿesa < (*ʿayisa), “to grow soft” and *taʿesa*, “to be patient”;⁷⁵ both of these meanings would serve as suitable personal names.

One may also consider a derivation from the root ʿsy, which opens new interpretive possibilities but creates several morphological problems in its wake. This root gives rise to the verb *ʿasā* in Arabic, which functions as a modal auxiliary, indicating a wish or hope.⁷⁶ In Sabaic, however, the verb ʿsy means “to purchase, acquire, make (a sacrifice)” and is sometimes interpreted as “to do, make”;⁷⁷ in Gəʿəz, we find *ʿasaya*, *ʿassaya*, *ʿāsaya* “to repay, reward, recompense.”⁷⁸

If we assume a name derived from this root, it challenges a straightforward connection with *ʿīsay*, as it would assume an unattested noun pattern,

74. This name is attested seventy-five times in the OCIANA corpus.

75. Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic): Geʿez-English, English-Geʿez, with an Index of the Semitic Roots* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), 80.

76. The modal function of this word is also attested in Safaitic: WH 2840 *w tẓr d ʿs ytf*, “and he kept watch for him whom he hopes to return.” This translation replaces the one suggested in Al-Jallad and Jaworska, *Dictionary*, 55: “... him who might return.”

77. *Sabäisches Wörterbuch* (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/sabaweb>; accessed December 17, 2020).

78. Leslau, *Dictionary*, 75. On the relationship of this root with Hebrew *ʿāsā*, see Frithiof Rundgren, “Zur arabischen Wortkunde,” in Carl Brockelmann and Manfred Fleischhammer (eds.), *Studia Orientalia in memoriam Caroli Brockelmann*. (Halle: Martin-Luther Universität, 1968), 161–166, 161–162.

fiʿal. This gives us two options. First, we could assume that the Safaitic form reflects a putative name ʿasīy (< *ʿasiyyun), “purchased.” Names of this sort are typologically common, cf. *zabīd*, *taym*, *kareyy*, ʿagīr, and so on. But to connect this with later *ʿisay*, we must assume metathesis of the vowels as it was transferred across communities in Arabia, so ʿasīy > ʿisay. This is possible but unprovable.

The consonantal spelling ʿsy could reflect a participial form ʿāsey, meaning “purchaser,” but this would not be compatible with the qurʾānic form ʿysy and its vocalization in later reading traditions. Perhaps, then, the root ʿsy was applied to the *fayʿal* pattern, which is an adjectival/agentive pattern: thus, we have *dayghamun*, “gnawing,” from *ḍaghama*, “to bite without tearing”; *ṣayrafun*, “money exchanger,” from *ṣarafa*, “to exchange money”; *bayʿasun*, “harsh and powerful” (applied to a man), that is, “causing affliction,” or *buʿsun*; *ṣayqalun*, “polisher” (of swords), from *ṣaqala*, “to polish,” and so on. If this is correct, then ʿsy should be understood as meaning literally “purchaser” or “redeemer.” This would make the name the equivalent of the Classical Arabic anthroponym *fādī*, from the root *fdy*, “to ransom.”⁷⁹ Thus, a form like ʿaysay would appear in Safaitic orthography as ʿsy as medial diphthongs were not normally indicated.⁸⁰

The path from ʿaysay to the pronunciation in the qurʾānic reading traditions is explained through two steps, one regular and the second *ad hoc* yet linguistically sound. First, the final *ay* collapses to *ē* in Old Ḥigāzī, producing ʿaysē, as discussed above. The second change involves the shift of the medial diphthong to *ī* as a result of dissimilation. While this is admittedly an *ad-hoc* process, the repetition of two diphthongs would have certainly provided the impetus for such a change; the dissimilation of *ay* to *ī* could have preceded or followed the collapse of final *ay* to *ē*. We should note, however, that the qurʾānic *rasm* does not require this dissimilation—indeed, the pronunciation ʿaysē could have been current in the compositional dialect of the Qurʾān.

Phonosemantic matching could have motivated Arabic speakers to equate the name of Jesus with this pre-existing anthroponym. In fact, ʿsy could also have been felt to be a suitable equivalent—and not a translation—

79. Note that the name *fdy* is also attested in Safaitic, eighty times in the OCIANA corpus (accessed May 25, 2021).

80. While the root ʿsy has not appeared as a verb in Safaitic, its presence in the onomasticon confirms its existence in the northern dialects. The rigid formulaic structure of the Safaitic inscriptions give us a frustratingly narrow view of the language’s lexicon, so the absence of a word in the inscriptions is not necessarily evidence for its absence in the language.

of the Greek title *sōtēr*⁸¹ and its Syriac equivalent *pārōqā*.⁸² The focus on the redemptive aspect of salvation in the Arabic name may be deliberate—the pagan gods were frequently invoked for deliverance and salvation, yet they never pay or sacrifice anything in order to save the faithful. This would have been a unique quality of Christian salvation and such an epithet could have served to distinguish Christ as a redeeming savior from the old gods. Indeed, Christ’s sacrifice as redemption is expressed in several of Paul’s letters and is a universal aspect of Christian theology.⁸³

3.1 ʿsy, *the Creator, a Pagan Epithet?*

Is it possible that the divine title ʿsy should be understood as “creator” (cf. Hebrew ʿāsâ “to make”), a divine epithet applied to the creator deity of the local pantheon? Or could it have been the title of the Jewish God? The sound correspondence between Arabic s = s1 and Hebrew ś = s2, however, is irregular; the true cognate of Hebrew ʿāsâ would be عشى, which would appear in Safaitic as ʿśy. While the Sabaic cognate ʿsy has been interpreted to mean “to do, make,” this seems always to occur in a sacrificial context, i.e., “to make (a sacrifice)”; the basic meaning of the verb is “to purchase, acquire.”⁸⁴ Moreover, the use of *kfr*, “to deny,” with the deity himself as the direct object in the invocation, challenges a pagan or even Jewish interpretation, and indicates, rather, that we are couched within a Christian context.

81. The title was employed in pagan times and was popular among the post-Alexandrian dynasties. The title was applied to YHWH in the Septuagint and was one of the earliest popular epithets applied to Christ, as in the final word in the abbreviation IXΘΥΣ used by early Christians as their secret symbol.

82. The Syriac root *prq* has attracted considerable discussion in Qurʾānic studies, especially its connection to the difficult word *furqānun* and the title *fārūqun*. For the most recent opinions on the matter, see Fred M. Donner, “Qurʾānic *Furqān*,” *JSS* 52 (2007): 279–300; Uri Rubin, “On the Arabian Origins of the Qurʾān: The Case of *al-Furqān*,” *JSS* 54 (2009): 421–433; Walid A. Saleh, “A Piecemeal Qurʾān: *Furqān* and Its Meaning in Classical Islam and in Modern Qurʾānic Studies,” *JSAI* 42 (2015): 31–71.

83. For example, Rom 3:24: “being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” where the Greek uses ἀπολυτρόσεως (genitive) for redemption. In the New Testament this is expressed by the verbs ἀπολύω, “to grant acquittal, set free, release”; λύτρωσις, “redemption” in the sense of “ransoming,” “releasing”; ἀγοράζω, literally “to acquire at the forum,” used for “redeem” in the Book of Revelation; and ἐξἀγοράζω, literally “to acquire outside the forum,” which Paul uses to mean “redeem” in his epistles. See also 1 Cor 1:30; Rev 1:5; 1 Thess 1:10; Heb 9:12; Eph 1:7; Tit 2:14; Rom 8:23.

84. See the detailed lemma in the *Sabäisches Wörterbuch*, <http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/>.

If we accept the understanding of ʿsy as “redeemer,” could it have nevertheless applied to a pagan deity? Deliverance and salvation are major themes in Safaitic invocations to the ancient gods, so it is easy to imagine how one or several of these divinities may have taken such a title. But as we have noted before, the very essence of redemption is to make a payment in order to release or save someone—none of the verbs of deliverance used in pagan Safaitic invocations have this implication,⁸⁵ let alone its fundamental meaning. The conception of redemption therefore seems to be alien to divine activity in the pagan Safaitic context. Given the great number of philological issues and coincidences that the pagan interpretation produces, I believe we are rather secure in understanding the present text as a monotheistic invocation, and more precisely as an invocation of Jesus himself.

4. Concluding Remarks: Dating and Context

If the identification of ʿsy as Christ is correct, then this inscription constitutes the earliest Arabic witness to Christianity discovered so far—pre-fifth century CE. Its precise dating, however, remains uncertain, as does the social background of its author. Recalling the discussion in section 2, Wabhʿel could have been a local nomad, with possible links to settled areas, or a settled person of Arabian background passing through the region. The task here is to attempt to explain how a Christian invocation has appeared in a Safaitic context.

Early literary sources record several accounts of Christian holy men and ascetics venturing out into the deserts to convert its nomadic inhabitants.⁸⁶ Perhaps one of the most famous descriptions belongs to Jerome (347–419 CE), who recounts an encounter between St. Hilarion and the Arabs in Elusa, southwest of the Dead Sea.⁸⁷ He describes the “Saracens” as devoted

85. The commonest roots for these are *hls*, *flt*, *flt*, *ngw*; Al-Jallad and Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, s.v.

86. For an excellent summary of this material, see Greg Fisher and Walter Ward, “Arabs and Christianity before the Sixth Century: Miracles, Conversion, and Raiding,” in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 287–296. See also the essays in Johannes Hahn and Volker Menze (eds.), *The Wandering Holy Man: The Life of Barsauma, Christian Asceticism, and Religious Conflict in Late Antique Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

87. For a critical discussion of this story in the context of similar processes and topoi, see Konstatin Klein, “How to Get Rid of Venus: Some Remarks on Jerome’s *Vita Hilarionis* and the Conversion of Elusa in the Negev,” in Arietta Papaconstantinou,

to the cult of the Morning Star. Stories of St. Hilarion's miracle working caused the nomads to flock to him to receive blessings, at which point he invited them to abandon idols and worship God alone.⁸⁸ Stories such as these became a topos in conversion literature; nevertheless, Fisher sees little reason to doubt their basis in real activities. While we possess no accounts describing such ventures in the Ḥarrah, it is topologically comparable to the Negev, a semi-arid region on the edge of the Roman Empire, and so it would stand to reason that its nomadic population was eventually missionized as well. Considering the military connections between the nomads of the Ḥarrah and the Roman empire, Christianization would have further served to consolidate alliances and Roman political power in these border areas.⁸⁹

Greek inscriptions left by men with Greek names litter the remote parts of these deserts and could have possibly been carved by ascetics venturing into the basalt for the purpose of proselytization. There is, so far, one Greek inscription that contains Christian devotional language, discovered near Qaşr Burqu.⁹⁰

Jerome describes Elusa as a “semi-barbarous town”; Fisher speculates on the connotations of this phrase: mixed pagan and Christian or perhaps mixed settled and nomadic. The second option could imply the first, as Christianity took longer to penetrate the deserts. As we have previously discussed, the villages of the Ḥawrān were home to settled sections of nomad tribes who maintained ties with their nomadic kinsmen. Jerome's description could have easily applied to such places as well. Our man Wahb'el could therefore have received Christianity through either channel, being a sedentary person with nomadic roots or a nomad at the end of the period of Safaitic documentation, perhaps in the fourth century CE. The fact that

Niel McLynn, and Daniel L. Schwartz (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond: Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009–2010* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 241–266.

88. Fisher and Ward, “Arabs and Christianity,” 287–289.

89. See note 31. Jerome reports that the Saracens bowed their heads and shouted “barech” meaning “bless” in “Syrian” = (Aramaic). Does this mean that Jerome's Saracens were Aramaic speakers or that they used Aramaic with the foreign miracle worker? Irfān Shahīd suggests that Jerome mistook Arabic *bārik* for Syriac *barek*, which is indeed possible; Irfān Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 294. See Klein, *Venus*, n. 15, for further discussion. In general, it is perhaps misguided to treat such quotations as authentic documentation of nomadic speech rather than literary devices to set the scene.

90. This text was discovered on the 2018 season of the Badia Surveys and remains unpublished. See Al-Jallad and al-Manaser, “Old Arabic Minutiae II,” for further examples.

Jesus is invoked in a manner similar to the pagan gods could suggest that Wahb'el himself was a convert and modified his writing tradition to accommodate his new faith. Klein suggests that the type of conversion described by Jerome was merely the grafting of the new upon the old, and that may be what we are witnessing here.⁹¹

But this would not be sustainable. It seems that Safaitic writing, which was clearly very closely tied to traditional religious expression, was abandoned in the wake of the spread of Christianity. And so this precious text may be a rare witness to the transition from Arabian paganism to Christianity among the nomads of the fourth century CE.

It is then in such an environment that we may posit the transformation of *yešū'* to *'aysay* and ultimately *'isē*, through one of the avenues discussed in section 3. Epithets and localization were normal processes in the formation of divine names among the pre-Islamic Arabs. Even theonyms such as *al-'uzzay*, *dū-šaray* (Dusares), and even the monotheistic deity of South Arabia, *raḥmānān*, are titles that eventually became proper names.⁹² It is therefore possible that when Christ was introduced to the Arabs, they chose to refer to him by a pre-existing anthroponym, the semantics of which would have allowed it to double as a divine epithet, *'aysay*, "redeemer." Thus, it would have been in this northern edge of Arabia that Jesus became *'isē*, and from there the name would have spread with Arabic vernacular proselytization, until finally appearing in writing when Arabic became a language of scripture.

The simultaneous existence of *yasū'* in Arabic would suggest a second process of importation, but this time directly adapting the West Syriac *yešū'* to Arabic. The earliest securely dated attestation of *yasū'* comes from Sin.Ar 72, an Arabic translation of the Gospels dated by the copyist to 897 CE.⁹³ The form of the name *yasū'*, however, suggests a much earlier date of borrowing. Had the Aramaic form been adapted to Arabic in the ninth century CE, we would expect it to be pronounced *yashū'*, with Arabic ش rendering Syriac ܫ. The use of س and the pronunciation *yasū'* reflects the ancient strategy of consistently rendering pre-Islamic Aramaic /š/ into Arabic with /s/. Thus,

91. Klein, *Venus*, 256.

92. See John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), ch. 4, for a discussion.

93. See Aziz S. Atiya, *The Arabic Manuscripts of Mt. Sinai: A Handlist of the Arabic Manuscripts and Scrolls Microfilmed at the Library of the Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1955). I thank Phillip Stokes for this reference. I have excluded mentions of *yasū'* in poetry attributed to the pre-Islamic period as it is impossible to determine the authenticity of these occurrences.

while we cannot be sure of the antiquity of *yasūʿ*, it appears to belong to the same stratum of loans as the Aramaic vocabulary of the Qurʾān in contrast to later practice.⁹⁴

We may now conclude with a few words on who was meant by the term *kfr*. We see in other comparable invocations that the gods are invoked in order to deliver the mourner from his own grief and from enemies, often those who murdered his beloved. Wahbʿelʿs maternal uncle could have been killed by a rival nomadic group who in this early period remained practitioners of traditional Arabian religion. His invocation refers to them with Christian polemical language, as those who have denied Christ.

Part II: The Site (Ali al-Manaser)

Al-Khuḍarī is one of the largest areas in the Jordanian Black Desert, the Ḥarrah (fig. 3). The area comprises Wādī al-Khuḍarī, Wādī Ḥashād al-Khuḍarī, Sūḥ al-Khuḍarī, Marabb al-Khuḍarī, Maṭabb al-Khuḍarī, Naqʿat al-Khuḍarī, and Ābār al-Khuḍarī. Sūḥ al-Khuḍarī is an open and level area in which it is possible to engage in agriculture. It is distinguished from the Marabb by its size only. The area called Ḥashād is a relatively flat area characterized by basalt gravel. This term is applied to many areas in the Ḥarrah, each qualified by the larger region in which they are located—e.g., Ḥashād Salmā, Ḥashād al-ʿŌsajī, and Ḥashād al-Swēʿid. As for the region called Maṭabb, it describes the boundary of the Ḥarrah and the sand/mud desert, the *ḥamād*.

The present inscription was discovered at one of the tributaries of Wādī al-Khuḍarī, near Naqʿat al-Khuḍarī, “the pond of al-Khuḍarī,” which leads to the area of Ābār al-Khuḍarī, “the wells of al-Khuḍarī,” which continues to be used by Bedouin today in the summer. The area of Naqʿat al-Khuḍarī is located between the larger area of al-Khuḍarī and Tell al-Hfēf, which leads to the area of al-Ṣqērāt, an area in which there is an abundance of inscriptions. The nearby Tell al-Hfēf, which faces the cairn at which the present inscription was discovered, was surveyed in 2017, resulting in the documentation of more than 1,000 Safaitic inscriptions.

This region has enjoyed significant epigraphic attention in the past, especially the area of Tulūl al-Ghuṣayn, al-Shbēkah, Jāwā, and Qaṣr Burquʿ. The discoveries at these sites point towards continuous human habitation from the Neolithic to present times.

94. For a thorough discussion of this issue and previous opinions, see Ahmad Al-Jallad, “The Month ʿdr in Safaitic and the Status of Spirantisation in ‘Arabian’ Aramaic,” *Aramaic Studies* 18 (2020): 147–170.

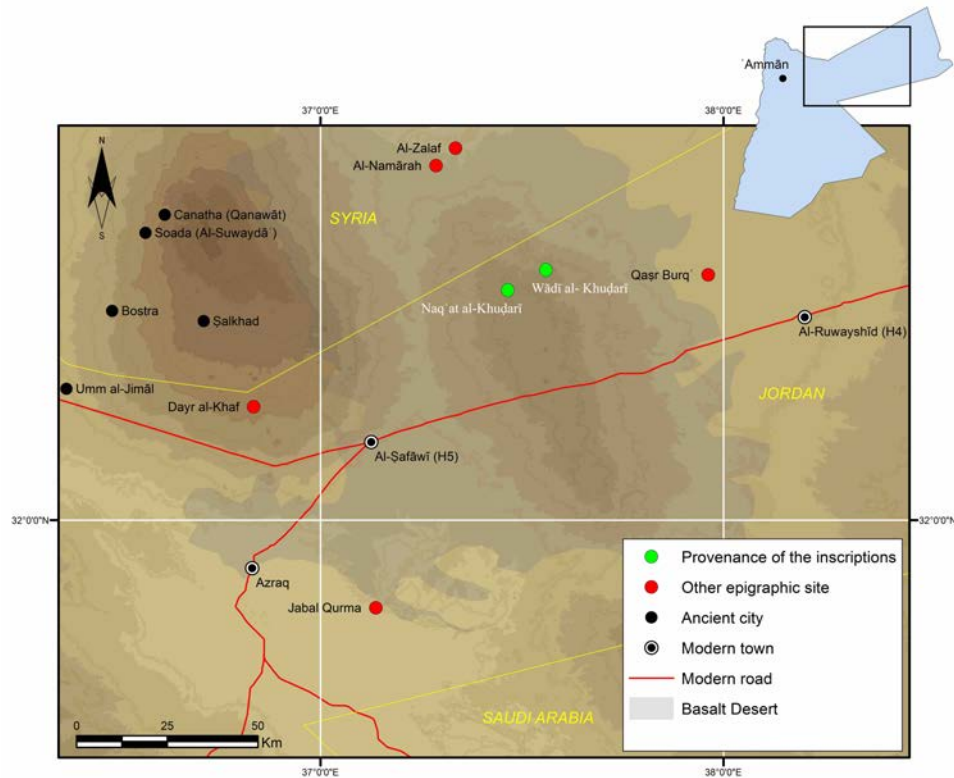


Figure 3: Map of the area (by Ali al-Manaser) in which the inscription was discovered.

Appendix 1: The Second Inscription

Reading: $l \{f\}ld \text{ bn } nfl \text{ bn } \{g\}d$

Interpretation: By {Fld} son of Nfl son of Gḏ

Fld is attested once in WH 2725. The *f* of this name, however, seems to be smaller than the clear *f* of the following anthroponym. There could be several further undulations towards the bottom of the glyph, which could permit reading it as an *ś*. A name *śld*, however, is not attested in the OCIANA corpus. Both roots are unattested in Classical Arabic. *Nfl* corresponds to the Classical Arabic name *nawfalun*, and occurs in eighteen Safaitic texts. Finally, *{g}d* is not yet attested in the Safaitic onomasticon but the root is attested in Classical Arabic, *gadhha*, “he broke.” The name *‘d*, however, is fairly common; but the first glyph in the present inscription is clearly oblong, making its reading as a *‘* quite impossible.

Appendix 2: On Littmann's Identification of Jesus in an Ancient North Arabian Inscription

In 1950, the great E. Littmann produced an edition of a short Hismaic inscription alleged to carry the name of Jesus underneath a cross (fig. 4). Three glyphs appear under the Christian mark, which Littmann identified as a γ , \acute{s} , and '^{c} . This reading, however, should be doubted.

Once we inspect the photograph closely, it becomes clear that what Littmann took as a γ is in fact simply a circle. The alleged shaft is a secondary marking, carved later and in a lighter fashion than the circle to which it appears to attach. Another similar, secondary mark attaches to the left side of the leftmost glyph as well. So, if we were to take these glyphs as an Ancient North Arabian inscription,



Figure 4: Photo of G. L. Harding of the alleged "Jesus" inscription, published in Enno Littmann, "Jesus in a pre-Islamic Arabic inscription," *MW* 40 (1950): 16–18.



Figure 5: The o | o carved on a wall of Qaşr Kharrānah, Jordan (photograph by A. Al-Jallad).

specifically a Hismaic one, then they should read as ʿ-ś-ʿ, which is not compatible with the name *yešūʿ*. But I would question whether these marks are to be understood as letters at all. Rather, they should more likely be interpreted as tribal symbols, a *wasm*, which the nomads use to mark their animals and property and can often be found carved on rock faces. The o | o design is quite common in Jordan, and remains in use even today. The same design was carved into the walls of Qaṣr Kharrānah, one of the Umayyad desert castles near al-Azraq (fig. 4). Thus, it seems that the o | o of Littmann's inscription can be securely understood as a *wasm*, a tribal mark rather than an Ancient North Arabian inscription. As such it is most likely not contemporary with the Christian symbol it sits beneath, but carved centuries later by a passerby.