THE PRE-ISLAMIC DIVINE NAME ‘SY AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE QUR’ÂNİC 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’ânic Arabic ﺎھ�ي ﺍسی، and reflects the earliest attestation of this form of Jesus’ 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 ﺎھ�ي ﺍسی has perplexed scholars since the beginning of source-critical studies of the Qur’ân. It cannot be derived directly from any Northwest Semitic source, neither the Hebrew ﺪ ﺳ /yēšûa‘/, nor the Syriac حم in either its West /yešû/ or East /išô/ vocalizations, nor can it be explained by appealing to Greek Ἰησοῦς or its Ethiopic form የሸ. /‘yasûs/. The name had seemed to appear for the first time in the Qur’ân, where its identification as Jesus is unambiguous. Early Christian Arabic, however, makes use of the expected Arabic reflex of ﺪ ﺳ, namely, yasû. Its irregular shape has lent itself to several explanations, ranging from taboo deformation by Muhammad to various avenues of corruption through the oral or written transmission of the name from Aramaic to Arabic. A major

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’ân.
3. I will come back to this form in section 3.
4. The classic discussion is Arthur Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ân

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limitation in the discussion of the background of Qur’anic عيسى has been the paucity of evidence. The name had not appeared in any text before the Qur’an 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 ‘sy, which in Safaitic orthography corresponds to Qur’anic Arabic عيسى.⁵ The present discovery could therefore document our first pre-Qur’anic 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 (harrah).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-Khuḍari to a dry watering hole, called Naq‘at al-Khuḍari.⁷ The large number of inscriptions, many of which mention the watering hole itself (‘adayat),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

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⁵ 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.
⁷ The Badia Epigraphic Survey project aims to document in a comprehensive manner the inscriptions and archaeological sites of the Jordanian Harraḥ. 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).
⁸ See Ali al-Manaser’s contribution in part 2 for a detailed description of the site.

and into North Arabia. 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.

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. The inscriptions are concentrated in the Syro-Jordanian basalt desert, extending into North Arabia, but isolated examples can be found much further away. The inscriptions express a continuum of Old Arabic dialects, most closely related to Classical and Qur’ānic 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. 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

10. On this text, see note 35.
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{16} Another short Safaitic inscription shares the rock

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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 ‘bt bn ḥl bn qṭṭ bn ḍnb Ṣ w-wgm ʾl-ḥl-h h-ʾšlly h ‘sy nṣr-h m-kfr-k
Division into formulaic segments:
Genealogy: l whb’l bn gyz bn ḥbs bn ḥhb bn ṭf t bn ṭt bn ḥl bn qṭṭ bn ḏbn
Narrative: w-wgm ḥl-h-h h-‘sily
Invocation: h ‘sy nṣr-h m-kfr-k

Interpretation:
“By Whb’l son of Gyz son of ḥbs son of ḥhb son of ṭf t son of ṭt son of ḥl son of Qṭṭ son of ḏbn and he grieved for his maternal uncle, the ḥsill-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. 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’s maternal line, the tribe of ḥsill, have produced a fair number of texts. The following is a comprehensive list of inscriptions—containing relevant genealogical information—by ḥsill-ites and those that mention the tribe in the OCIANA corpus (Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia, http://krcfm.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 Menschenennamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri des vorderen Orients (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1930), 91.
Table 1: References to the line of ʾšill in the Safaitic inscriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BS 1240</td>
<td>NE Jordan; 32.463073; 37.237803</td>
<td>l tm ʾd-ʾl ʾšill</td>
<td>“By Taym of the lineage of ʾšill”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mafraq Museum 59</td>
<td>Mafrac Museum (original provenance unknown)</td>
<td>...wʾdy b-ʾšill</td>
<td>“...and he raided (the tribe of) ʾšill”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWH 2¹⁹</td>
<td>Wāḍī al-Ḥashād, NE Jordan</td>
<td>lʾnʾm bn ʾzʾn ʾd-ʾl ʾšill</td>
<td>“By ʾnʾm son of ʾZʾn of the lineage of ʾšill”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSNS 5²⁰</td>
<td>Wāḍī Umm Khnaysrī, NE Jordan</td>
<td>...w hʾl dr snt mlk grfš bn hrdš w wgd ʾt r ḥwʾl-ʾl ʾšill tm w grʾm ḥwʾd w zbd f ngʾw h dšry w lt gnmt l-ʾd dʾl ṭy w lm yḥbl ʾsfr</td>
<td>“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 ʾšill, Tm, Grʾm, and ḥwʾd, and grieved in pain, so O Allāt and Dusares, may he who reads (this inscription) have spoil and let the inscription not be effaced”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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¹⁹. MWH = Inscriptions recorded by Ali al-Manaser on his survey in Wāḍī Ḥashād in 2004 and published on OCIANA.
<table>
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<th>Reference</th>
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<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RWQ 65(^{21})</td>
<td>Wādī Salmā, NE Jordan</td>
<td>l ʾwsn bn wdm bn rbʾl bn ʾswr bn ʾshr bn ʾkṣr bn br bn hs bn ydʾ ʾl ʾšll</td>
<td>“By ʾwsn son of Wdm son of Rbʾl son of ʾswr son of ʾshr son of ʾkṣr son of Br son of Hs son of Ydʾ, the lineage of ʾšll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HaNSC(^{22})</td>
<td>Tell al-Jaʿbariyyah, Wādī al-ʿAbd, NE Jordan</td>
<td>l bk bn nṣrʾ{bn} hrml h-ʾšlly</td>
<td>“By Bk son of Nṣrʾ son of Hrml the ʾšll-ite”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is.H 205(^{23})</td>
<td>ʿĪsāwī, Rif Dimashq, Syria</td>
<td>l dd bn ʾṣyb h-ʾšlly</td>
<td>“By Dd son of ʾṣyb the ʾšll-ite”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is.L 325</td>
<td>ʿĪsāwī, Rif Dimashq, Syria</td>
<td>l hsrk bn ʾṣdd bn nkf bn mlh bn ḥnn h-ʾšlly</td>
<td>“By Hsrk son of ʾṣdd son of Nkf son of Mlh son of ḥnn the ʾšll-ite”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RaLM 3074.1(^{24})</td>
<td>Iraq Museum</td>
<td>l mʾz bn slm bn sny bn ḥnʾl bn slm bn sny q-ʾl ʾšll</td>
<td>“By Mʾz son of Slm son of ḥnʾl son of Slm son of Sny of the lineage of ʾšll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRS 2824</td>
<td>NE Jordan</td>
<td>l ʾzhm bn ʾṣmtʾl h-dr h-ʾšlly</td>
<td>“By ʾzhm son of ʾṣmtʾl in this place, the ʾšll-ite.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRS 1508</td>
<td>NE Jordan</td>
<td>...ṣnt ḥrb ḥb[q] w ʾšl[ ]</td>
<td>“… the year Hbq and ʾšll made war”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KRS 68</td>
<td>NE Jordan</td>
<td>( l \ 'n'\text{m } [b][n] {w}rl ) ( bn \ dmy \ d-'l \ 'sll )</td>
<td>“By ’n’m son of Wrl son of Dmy of the lineage of ’sll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIJ 658(^{25})</td>
<td>Jāwā, NE Jordan</td>
<td>( l \ 'gny \ d-'l \ 'sll )</td>
<td>“By Gny of the lineage of ’sll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIJ 630</td>
<td>Jāwā, NE Jordan</td>
<td>( l \ [f][d]g \ b[n] \ gryt \ d-'l \ '{j}sll )</td>
<td>“By Fdg son of Gryt of the lineage of ’sll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIJ 43</td>
<td>Jāthūm, NE Jordan</td>
<td>( l \ [q]dm \ bn \ bny \ d-'l \ 'sll )</td>
<td>“By Qdm son of Bny of the lineage of ’sll”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 2962(^{26})</td>
<td>Zalaf, Rif Dimashq, Syria</td>
<td>( l \ w[s])t \ bn \ db \ bn \ 'gmh \ h-’sll )</td>
<td>“By Wst son of Db son of ’gmh the ’sll-ite”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCH 33(^{27})</td>
<td>Amman Museum (Cairn of Hānī’, NE Jordan).</td>
<td>( l \ gh\text{s} \ bn \ tmlh \ bn \ tm \ d-'l \ 'sll )</td>
<td>“By Ghś son of Tmlh son of Tm of the lineage of ’sll”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HSNS 5 records a grieving formula very similar to our inscription: its author finds the traces (\( wgd \ 'tr \)) of his maternal uncles of the lineage of ’sll (’hw\text{w}l-h \ d-'l \ 'sll) and so he grieves in pain (\( ng \)).\(^{28}\) The texts 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,

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\(^{28}\) 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 Dayf, a large confederation with clear ties to the Roman military and whose members have furnished occasional Greek inscriptions. Roman military camps were set up deep in the desert. Jāthūm, which attests the presence of šl-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. This inscription calls the place siwyā ’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 Harrah.

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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.


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 mn bn syd bn ḥd ḏl ʿml ṣlq w-qyyf mʿ-ʿl tdmr ʿl-fnyt ḥfr ḥ-hm w-wgd sfr ḥl-h ṣhw r, “By Mʿn son of Ṣyd son of Ḥd of the tribe of Msłq and he followed the trace (sic) with the Palmyrenes in Fnyt, [and] protected them, and he found the inscription of his maternal uncle Ṣhw r.” What Al-Salameen et al. read as qyyf is, however, clearly qyż,
These facts allow us to sketch two possible explanations for our author’s unique lineage and his connection to the tribe of ’ṣill, which will come into play later once we attempt to establish a historical context for the unique invocation contained in our inscription. Perhaps like Lobay’at, the author of HSNS 5, Wahb’el, whose father had married a woman of the ’ṣill 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 Wahb’el 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 Αὐρικος Βεδαρων—the first name of which is not clearly attested in the Safaitic onomasticon—could reflect the same phenomenon. Outsiders passing through the Ḥarrah have produced Safaitic texts from time to time: a man named Taymallāh of the people of Bostra carved at text at Ru‘aylayh, several kilometers deeper in the basalt desert. Several texts were carved by people who identified as Nabataeans, and a so-far unique text records the presence of a man named Gaius “of the people of Rome.” In addition to this, settled tribesmen have left their mark in the desert. Al-Salamīn 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-qyz m’-l tdmr ’l-fnyt ḥfr l-hm, “and he spent the dry season with the people of Palmyra on the edge of Fnyt (the edge of the basalt desert near Burqu’), acting as a guide for them.”

34. The genealogy of the author of HSNS 5 is: lb’t bn ḥṣṭ bn fltt bn bhš bn ’dnt bn ’slm bn zkr bn rft bn wṣyt bn df bn g(d) bn t’wd, where df is the eponymous ancestor of the tribe Dayf. The vocalization of the name lb’t is assured by its appearance as Δοβιαζού in Greek transcription in the bilingual text J1 in Michael C. A. Macdonald et al., “Les inscriptions saïtaïques de Syrie.”


36. This simple text states l-ṭmlḥ bn ḥnhk d ’l bšry, “By Taymallāh son of ’Anhak of the people of Bostra,” and was found at Wādī al-Ru‘aylah on the way to Jubbat al-Ru‘aylah 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, ‘Aziz son of Shayyād, wrote that he was spending the season of the later rains in the desert although his residence was in the Hawrānī town of Salḥād. 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. 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

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40. See Al-Jallad and Jaworksa, *Dictionary*, 16.
It rwh),41 similarly 'glh, author of KRS 270, grieves for an unnamed loved one (hbb) and calls on the god Roďay for relief (h rdy rwh). KRS 1188 expresses grief for the loss of the author’s companions and the camels, presumably taken off in a raid (wgm l-šy-h w h-’bl), and invokes Allāt to grant relief to those who remain alive (rwh l-đ s-r) and then the god Yayte' for security from enemies (slm m-šn'). The author of HaNSB 163 asks Yayte' for relief from the enemy tribe Dayf (h yţ rwh 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’el 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 qurʾānic یحیى, which was pronounced as īsē in Old Hijāzī and īsā in normative Classical Arabic.43 The graphic connection between Safaitic ‘sy and qurʾānic ‘ysy is bolstered by the contents of the invocation that follows, which suggest a monotheistic context: nṣr-h m-kfr-h.

The collocation of nṣr and kfr is remarkable and reminiscent of qurʾānic and Syriac diction, as we shall see later. While nṣr, “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 Qurʾānic 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.
43. Safaitic orthography does not represent internal long vowels with matres lectionis. The pronunciation īsē obtains in several qurʾānic reading traditions, such as that of al-Kisā‘i. The so-called alif maṣūrah (bi-ṣūrat al-yā`) derives from an original word-final diphthong/triphthong that yielded a different reflex in Old Hijāzī, /e/, and in what would become normative Classical Arabic, /a/. On the outcome of the Proto-Arabic triphthongs, see Marijn van Putten, “The Development of the Triphthongs in Qurʾānic and Classical Arabic,” Arabian Epigraphic Notes 3 (2017): 47–74. The correspondence between qurʾānic alif maṣūrah and Safaitic final y is abundantly illustrated: بني = Safaitic bny, “he built”; أَنّى = Safaitic ‘ty, “he came”; فَي = Safaitic fly, “youth.”
44. Al-Jallad and Jaworska, Dictionary, 107b.
45. Other meanings discussed by Cole are “peasant,” “pagan,” “libertine,” “rebel,” and
Outside the canonical Qur’an, kafara can take a direct object, as in the du’ā’ qunūt al-witr, which originates in the controversial lost sūrah of the Qur’an, Sūrat al-Khal‘.

lā nakfuruka wa-nu’minu 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 ‘inda l-qāḍi bi-shay’in thumma kāfara (“when he confesses a thing in the presence of a judge but then denies [it]”). 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”). While the L-stem is not attested in the Qur’ānic reading traditions, the consonantal text would not consistently distinguish between it and the G-stem; both would appear as كفر. It is therefore possible that the L-stem underlies some of the occurrences of كفر in the rasm.

The sense of denial and rejection is a metaphorical derivative of the more basic meaning of the root, “to cover, conceal.” This meaning—which always takes a direct object—is attested in the earliest layers of Classical Arabic, for example, in a line of the mu’allaqah attributed to Labid b. Rabī’ah (d. 40/660–661): fi laylatin kafara ‘l-nujūma ghamāmuhā (“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 Qur’an, the construction found in Sūrat al-Khal‘ may reflect the original Arabic syntax of this verb, while the construction kafara bi- could betray the impact of Syriac.

46. Sūrat al-Khal‘ 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-Ḥafid were ultimately excluded from the Qur’ānic canon, their use in qunīt- and witr-prayers ensured their preservation; see Sean Anthony, “Two Lost Sūrahs of the Qur’an: Sūrat al-Khal‘ and Sūrat al-Ḥafid between Textual and Ritual Canon (1st-3rd/7th-9th centuries),” JSAI 46 (2019): 67–112.
49. Lane, Lexicon, 2620a–b.
50. For example: مَعَالَةُ مِسْلِمَةُ، “(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.” This sense is expressed by the D-stem in Arabic, e.g., *kaffara ‘llahu ‘anhu ’l-dhanba* (“Allah has forgiven his sins”). 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. 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 ‘al, and the pardoning agent is introduced by min, “from.” Thus, Lev 5:26: *wa-kipper ‘âlâyw hak-kôhên lapnê YHWH*, “and the priest shall make atonement for him before YHWH.” This meaning is also attested in a Late Sabaic monotheistic inscription, *(ykf)*rn h(b)-hmw, “may he (God) forgive their sins.”

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 *nṣr-h m-kfr-k* follows an established invocational pattern in Safaitic.

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51. In Syriac, *kfr* 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.


55. CIH 539; see *Sabäisches Wörterbuch* (http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/sabaweb; accessed December 17, 2020).
Table 2: The formulaic structure of the invocation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Siglum</th>
<th>Vocative</th>
<th>Imperative</th>
<th>Direct object</th>
<th>Prepositional phrase</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C 4148</td>
<td>$h~yî'$</td>
<td>$slm$</td>
<td>'gdy</td>
<td>$mn-sqm$</td>
<td>“O Yayte’, keep my kids safe from illness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH 2163</td>
<td>$h~rdw$</td>
<td>$s’d$</td>
<td>-h</td>
<td>$m-śn’$</td>
<td>“O Rośaw, help him against enemies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 3744</td>
<td>$h~yî'$</td>
<td>$s’d$</td>
<td>-h</td>
<td>$m-b’s$</td>
<td>“O Yayte’, help him against misfortune”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 1548</td>
<td>$h~rdw$</td>
<td>$flt$</td>
<td>-h</td>
<td>$m-śn’$</td>
<td>“O Rośaw, deliver him from enemies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRS 372</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>$nqm$</td>
<td>-h</td>
<td>$m-mrm-h$</td>
<td>“Allow him to take vengeance upon the one who struck him with arrows”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 $s’d$, “help,” and $flt$, “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

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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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{59}

Weighing these options, I would suggest that the understanding nsr-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 nsr as the verb of aid seems to be deliberate, perhaps the result of word play signaling a connection with Christianity and Christians, cf. Syriac nāṣrāyūtā and Qur’ān nṣry /naṣārē/. Indeed, the same lexical pair appears in Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:147 and al-Baqarah 2:250, producing an invocation with a meaning quite like the one suggested here:

\begin{quote}
wa’nṣurnā ‘alā l-qawmi l-kāfīrīn
And grant us victory over the disbelieving host.
\end{quote}

\section{3. The Identity of ‘sy}

If my interpretation of the invocation is correct, then this would strongly suggest that ‘sy corresponds to Qur’ānic ‘ṣy 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.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{57} Safaitic gnn can mean “to protect”; see Al-Jallad and Jaworkska, Dictionary, 72, cf. Classical Arabic jannah “he veiled him,” “he protected him,” Lane, Lexicon, 462a.
    \item \textsuperscript{58} Al-Jallad and Jaworkska, Dictionary, 140–141.
    \item \textsuperscript{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 ʾśḥqm ...
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The problem of 'ṣy/ṣy is that it does not reflect the outcome of normal phonological processes of borrowing. A putative yeṣūʾ should have come into the QCT as yswʾ or, if via Syriac ʾišoʾ, as ʾswʾ. Recently, Guillaume Dye and Manfred Kropp have discussed this issue in great detail and attempted to explain the development of Arabic ʾiṣā from a form of Aramaic.\(^{60}\) They posit an East Syrian source, similar to Mandaic, which had lost ʾayn, producing yeṣūʾ > ʾišūʾ > ʾiṣūʾ/ʾiṣā. They then argue that once this form was transmitted to Arabic, it gained an ʾayn in initial position, a rare yet attested phenomenon.\(^{61}\) This would produce ʾiṣūʾ/ʾiṣā, which was then changed to ʾiṣā 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 ʾ as a mater lectionis. While Kropp and Dye suggest that the final ʾ should not be taken as a representation of final ʾe or ʾay, 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 ʾa or ʾu written with a final ʾ in early Arabic.

We should also remember that the pronunciation ʾiṣā itself is a result of what Sohaib Saeed has termed “Ḥaṣṣonormativity,” that is, the assumption that the pronunciation of Arabic as reflected in the reading tradition of Ḥafṣ ʾan ʾĀsim reflects the earliest and most authentic vocalization of the Qurʾānic Consonantal Text (QCT), relegating other pronunciations to scholarly arcana. While Ḥafṣ ʾan ʾĀsim reads عمسى is the transcription of the Arabic name موسي <mwsy> in Greek. In a document dated to 716 CE from Aphrodites Kome, a man name موسي بن نصير appears in Greek transcription as Μουση υἱ(οῦ) Νοσαρ[επ] = Mūṣē son of Noṣiyr, confirming that the pronunciation of the alif maṣūrah was /ē/\(^{63}\). Indeed, in this layer of early Arabic material, what is termed the alif maṣūrah (bi-ṣūrat al-yāʾ) is consistently represent-

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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.
62. See note 43 on Arabic triphthongs.
ed with e-class vowels in Greek transcription, ε and η.\textsuperscript{64} Considering these facts, it then appears certain that the earliest pronunciation of عَسَى in the Umayyad period and the pronunciation underlying the qur’ānic rasm was ‘īsē, in agreement with the reading tradition of al-Kisā‘i. This is even more difficult to reconcile with a source along the lines of ‘īšō/‘īšū.

Given that the name عَسَى eludes a satisfactory derivation from an Aramaic source, and now in light of the appearance of ‘ṣy 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)ṣy. 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” = qur’ānic فَتِي /fatē/; Safaitic bny /ban-aya/, “he built” = qur’ānic بَنِى /bañe/.

The Safaitic pantheon contained both local Arabian gods, such as rdw/ rdy, and gods whose cult centers lay beyond the Harrah. In most cases, the names of these foreign gods were simply taken over without modification. For example, the storm god Ba‘al-Šamin—whose local cult center was at the town of Sī in southern Syria—is rendered into Safaitic as b‘lsmn, preserving its Aramaic form.\textsuperscript{65} However, in a few cases, authors translated the divine name into Arabic, producing b‘lsmy /ba‘al-samāy/, where Aramaic šamēn/ šamin was replaced with Arabic samāy.\textsuperscript{66} And in one case, the entire name was replaced by a Safaitic epithet mālek has-samāy.\textsuperscript{67} Another intriguing example is the possible attestation of the Greek divine title ἔλεος θεοῦ in Safaitic as ḫād, reflecting a direct translation of the epithet.\textsuperscript{68} While these examples are certainly a minority situation, they do represent a living strategy of localizing foreign gods.

\textsuperscript{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.


\textsuperscript{66} For example, C 88; RWQ 281.

\textsuperscript{67} KRS 1944.

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 yōḥānān or any of its derivatives, but is rather a pre-existing Arabic name—attested in Safaitic as yḥy(y (C 614) and yḥy (RWQ 115)—that was *equated* with John.\(^ {70}\) Indeed, this equation was employed by Arabian Jews as well. The Jewish Nabataean funerary inscription JSInv 386 (dated 306 CE), from al-‘U lã, was set up by a man named yḥy’ bn šm‘wn, where yḥy’ substitutes for the common Hebrew name ywhmn (= yōḥānān).\(^ {71}\) 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 Rād in Is.H 144: \(^{72}\) l qdm bn ‘sy w h ṭd w ‘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 Muhammad 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 yōḥānān; see Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 290–291.


\(^ {72}\) IS.H = Safaitic inscriptions from ʿIsawi, Syria, collected by the SESP project and published on OCIANA.

Anthroponyms derived from color terms are common, e.g., `swd, “black.”\(^{74}\) The form, however, is irregular. One would expect something like `ys along the lines of `swd. Rather, if we assume that the vocalization represented in the qurʾānic reading traditions reflects the word’s original derivation, then it should be construed as an abstract noun based on the feminine fiʿlē (فَلِي) pattern. The discord between morphological and natural gender in Arabic anthroponyms is well attested and not surprising, so: usāmah, muʿawiyah, rabiʿah, all names of men. While the abstract noun ʿisay “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 ʿisatun, “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 Goʿaz 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 Goʿaz, we find ʿasaya, ʿassaya, ʿāsayya “to repay, reward, recompense.”\(^{78}\)

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

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\(^{74}\) This name is attested seventy-five times in the OCIANA corpus.
\(^{76}\) The modal function of this word is also attested in Safaitic: WH 2840 ʿwr dʿs 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).
fi‘al. This gives us two options. First, we could assume that the Safaitic form reflects a putative name ‘āsiy (< “asiyyun), “purchased.” Names of this sort are typologically common, cf. zabid, taym, kareyy, ‘agīr, and so on. But to connect this with later ‘īsaiy, we must assume metathesis of the vowels as it was transferred across communities in Arabia, so ‘āsiy > ‘īsaiy. This is possible but unprovable.

The consonantal spelling ‘sy could reflect a participial form ‘āsey, meaning “purchaser,” but this would not be compatible with the qur’ānic form ʿysy and its vocalization in later reading traditions. Perhaps, then, the root ʿsy was applied to the fay‘al pattern, which is an adjectival/agentive pattern: thus, we have dayghamun, “gnawing,” from daghama, “to bite without tearing”; sayrafun, “money exchanger,” from sarafā, “to exchange money”; bay‘asun, “harsh and powerful” (applied to a man), that is, “causing affliction,” or bu‘sun; sayqalun, “polisher” (of swords), from ṣaqala, “to polish,” and so on. If this is correct, then ‘sy should be understood as meaning literally “purchaser” or “redeemer.” This would make the name the equivalent of the Classical Arabic anthroponym fādi, from the root fdy, “to ransom.”

Thus, a form like ‘āysay would appear in Safaitic orthography as ‘sy as medial diphthongs were not normally indicated.

The path from ‘āysay to the pronunciation in the qur’ānic 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 Higāzī, producing ʿaysē, as discussed above. The second change involves the shift of the medial diphthong to i 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 ē could have preceded or followed the collapse of final ay to ē. We should note, however, that the qur’ānic rasm does not require this dissimilation—indeed, the pronunciation ʿaysē could have been current in the compositional dialect of the Qur’ān.

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

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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 ‘sy 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 sōtēρ and its Syriac equivalent pārōqā. 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.

3.1 ʻsy, the Creator, a Pagan Epithet?

Is it possible that the divine title ʻsy should be understood as “creator” (cf. Hebrew ʻāšâ “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 š = s2, however, is irregular; the true cognate of Hebrew ʻāšâ would be ʻasâ, which would appear in Safaitic as ʻỹ. While the Sabaic cognate ʻsy has been interpreted to mean “to make, 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.” 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.


83. For example, Rom 3:24: “being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” where the Greek uses ἀπολυτρώσεως (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 “redeeem” in the Book of Revelation; and ἐξαγοράζω, 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 ‘sy 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, 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 monothetic invocation, and more precisely as an invocation of Jesus himself.


If the identification of ‘sy 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, Wahb’el 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. 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. He describes the “Saracens” as devoted

85. The commonest roots for these are hls, fšt, fšt, ngw; Al-Jallad and Jaworkska, Dictionary, s.v.
87. For a critical discussion of this story in the context of similar processes and topoi, see Konstadin 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. 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.

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 Qasr Burqu’. 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 Ḥavrān 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 Saqaitic documentation, perhaps in the fourth century CE. The fact that

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? Irťan Shahid suggests that Jerome mistook Arabic bārik for Syriac barek, which is indeed possible; Irťan Shahid, 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.\footnote{Klein, Venus, 256.}

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 yešū́ to ‘aysay and ultimately ‘īsē, 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, rahmānān, are titles that eventually became proper names.\footnote{See John F. Healey, The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus (Leiden: Brill, 2001), ch. 4, for a discussion.} 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 ‘īsē, 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 ‘yasū́ in Arabic would suggest a second process of importation, but this time directly adapting the West Syriac yešū́ to Arabic. The earliest securely dated attestation of ‘yasū́ comes from Sin.Ar 72, an Arabic translation of the Gospels dated by the copyist to 897 CE.\footnote{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 ‘yasū́ in poetry attributed to the pre-Islamic period as it is impossible to determine the authenticity of these occurrences.} The form of the name ‘yasū́, 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 yashū́, with Arabic Yaw rendering Syriac Yāw. The use of Yāw and the pronunciation yasū́ reflects the ancient strategy of consistently rendering pre-Islamic Aramaic /š/ into Arabic with /s/. Thus,
while we cannot be sure of the antiquity of yasū’, it appears to belong to the same stratum of loans as the Aramaic vocabulary of the Qur’ān 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. Wahb’el’s 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-Khuḍari is one of the largest areas in the Jordanian Black Desert, the Ḥarrah (fig. 3). The area comprises Wādi al-Khuḍari, Wādi Ḥašḥaḏ al-Khuḍari, Sūḥ al-Khuḍari, Marabb al-Khuḍari, Maṯabb al-Khuḍari, Naq’at al-Khuḍari, and Ābār al-Khuḍari. Sūḥ al-Khuḍari 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 Ḥašḥaḏ 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., Ḥašḥaḏ Salmā, Ḥašḥāḏ al-ʿĪsajī, and Ḥašḥāḏ al-Swē’id. As for the region called Maṯabb, it describes the boundary of the Ḥarrah and the sand/mud desert, the hamād.

The present inscription was discovered at one of the tributaries of Wādi al-Khuḍari, near Naq’at al-Khuḍari, “the pond of al-Khuḍari,” which leads to the area of Ābār al-Khuḍari, “the wells of al-Khuḍari,” which continues to be used by Bedouin today in the summer. The area of Naq’at al-Khudari is located between the larger area of al-Khudari and Tell al-Hfēf, which leads to the of 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-Ghūṣayn, al-Shbēkah, Jāwā, and Qaṣr Buqrū’. The discoveries at these sites point towards continuous human habitation from the Neolithic to present times.

Appendix 1: The Second Inscription

Reading: l [f]ld bn nfl bn [g]d
Interpretation: By {Fld} son of Nfl son of Gd

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 ʃ. A name ʃld, 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, gadhdha, “he broke.” The name ʃd, however, is fairly common; but the first glyph in the present inscription is clearly oblong, making its reading as an ʃ 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 ɣ, ʃ, and ʿ. This reading, however, should be doubted.

Once we inspect the photograph closely, it becomes clear that what Littmann took as a ɣ 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 Qaṣr Kharrānah, Jordan (photograph by A. Al-Jallad).
specifically a Hismaic one, then they should read as 'ṣ-ꜱ', which is not compatible with the name yešū. 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.