

Krzysztof Kościelniak

Jagiellonian University in Krakow

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

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

Raḥmānān’s connection to Arab Paganism

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

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

¹ Vgl. M. S. M. Saifullah, A. David, *Raḥmānān (RĤMNN) – An Ancient South Arabian Moon God?* in: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Sources/Allah/rhmnn.html>, quoted: 20.03.2011.

² Vgl. A. Vargo, *Responses to Islamic Awareness: Rahmanan (RĤMNN) – An Ancient South Arabian Moon God?*, in: http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Saifullah/rahman_av.htm, quoted: 10.04.2011.

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

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

Raḥmānān in Jewish Old Arabic Inscriptions

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

³ Vgl. J. C. Greenfield, *From 'LH RḤMN to AL-RAḤMĀN: The Source of a Divine Epithet...*, p. 381–384; J. C. Greenfield, *Aspects of Aramean Religions*, in: M. Shalom, S. Paul, M. E. Stone, A. Pinnick (ed.), *Al kanfei Yonah: collected studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology*, Jerusalem 2001, p. 290.

⁴ Vgl. J. C. Greenfield, *From 'LH RḤMN to AL-RAḤMĀN: The Source of a Divine Epithet...*, p. 386.

⁵ Vgl. J. Ryckmans, *The Old South Arabian Religion*, in W. Daum (Ed.), *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia Felix*, Innsbruck 1988, p. 110.

⁶ Vgl. J. F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, "Religions in the Graeco-Roman World" 136, Leiden 2001, p. 96.

Inscription Ry 515⁸

X፳፬	X፻፬	1
፲፱ ፡ ፶፱	X፻፲ ፡ ፶፱	2
ሐሣድ	XX፻፶ ፡ ፶፱	3
	ሐሐ፳፻፱ ፡ ፲	4
ሐሐ፳፻፱ ፡ ፲	፶፱፻፶፱ ፡ ፶፱፻፶፱	5

5. “By the Merciful, Lord of the Jews”⁹

[illegible]

8. who are healthy who will fight for the name of the Merciful..."¹¹

¹¹ Translation: C. Greenfield, *From 'LH RHMN To AL-RAHMĀN...*, p. 388.

Inscription Ry 508¹²

| 𐩧𐩢𐩨 | 𐩣𐩠𐩨 | 𐩧𐩢𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 10
 | 𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨
 𐩨 | 𐩣𐩠𐩨𐩠
 | 𐩨<𐩠>𐩠𐩠 | 𐩨 | 𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨(𐩨) | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 11
 | 𐩠𐩨𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨 | 𐩨𐩠𐩨
 𐩨𐩠 | 𐩠𐩨

10. ... w'lhñ | dlhw | smyn | w'rdñ | lysrññ | mlkn...

11. ... wtrhm | 'ly | kl | 'lm | rhmnn | rhmk mr' | 't

10. ... “and God to whom belongs heaven and earth shall protect our king...”

11. ... and have mercy on all the world, O Merciful, you are Lord”¹³

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

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

Rahmānān (“the Merciful”) in Christian Pre-Islamic inscription from South Arabia

It has often been pointed out that the use of the term *Rahmānān* is of Jewish origin and this epithet was used in the same time by both Jews and Christians.¹⁵ The best known Christian Sabaean inscriptions are two texts from the time of Abraha (died at least 553¹⁶ also spelled Abreha), an Aksumite Christian viceroy in southern Arabia for the Kingdom of Aksūm.

¹² Vgl. G. Ryckmans, *Inscriptions Sud-Arabs – Dixième Série...*, p. 297.

¹³ Translation: C. Greenfield, *From 'LH RHMN To AL-RAHMĀN...*, p. 388.

¹⁴ Vgl. A. Sima, *Religion*, in: St. J. Simpson (Ed.), *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, London 2002, p. 165.

¹⁵ Vgl. A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, Baroda 1938, p. 140–141; J. Jomier, *Le nom divine al-Rahmān in Coran*, in: *Mélange Louis Massignon*, vol. II, Damascus 1957, p. 361–381.

¹⁶ Vgl. S. C. Munro-Hay, *Aksūm: An African Civilization of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh 1991, p. 87.

Abraha's Murayghan Inscription (Ry 506)¹⁷

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

[illegible]

1. *bhyl* | *rhmnn* | *wmshhw* | *mlkn* | *'brh* | ...
 8. ... *wqftw* | *bn* | *hl*
 9. [*b*]*n* | [*b*]*hyl* | *rhmnn*

1. “By the power of the Merciful One and His Messiah, the king Abraha...

8–9 ... So Abraha returned from Haliban by the power of the Merciful One.”¹⁹

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

¹⁷ Vgl. A. F. L. Beeston, *Two Bi'r Hima Inscriptions Re-Examined*, "Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies" 48 (1985), p. 45.

¹⁸ Vgl. M. J. Zwettler, *Ma'add In Late-Ancient Arabian Epigraphy And Other Pre-Islamic Sources*, "Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes" 90 (2000), p. 223–309

¹⁹ Translation: A. F. L. Beeston, *Notes On The Mureighan Inscription*, "Bulletin of The School of Oriental and African Studies" 16 (1954), pp. 391–392.

²⁰ Vgl. Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia, *Written in stone. Pre-Islamic Period Inscription: Sabaean* – نَقش سبئي, in: http://www.mnh.si.edu/EPIGRAPHY/e_pre-islamic/fig04_sabaean_img.htm (quoted 15.04.2011).

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

Marib, 120 km from Sana'a in the Wadī Aḏana region, was the most important centre of the Sabaeen empire and culture. So called the Great Dam of Ma'arib (مأرب سد) was built around 750 BC (the first construction 1750–1700 BC) found as the one of the engineering wonders of the ancient world.²² Abraha's inscription on the Ma'arib dam relates the quelling of an rebellion inspired by a son of the dethroned ruler Sumuyafa Ašwa (Esimiphaioi²³) in the year 542/543 (that is 657 of the Sabaeen era²⁴). This text, also know as Marib's inscription, give us information about the dam's repairs; the meeting of embassies from Abyssinia, Byzantium, Persia, Hira and Harith bin Jabalat, the phylarch of Arabia in the following year.²⁵ Marib's Inscription begins also with interesting us sentence: "By the power and favour of the Merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit."

ሠኑዕ		አዛ		ዕ		ገዢ	1
ሐዕ		ካካ		ሐዕ		አገ	2
ዕጋሐ		አዛ		ሠኑዕ		ዕሃሠ	3
ገጸ		ሃ	'	አዛ		አዛአጸገ	4
	ጸሐዕ		ካዝግሐ		አሐገዕ		የ
ኑዘ		አገሐ		ሐገዕ		አዕዝገጸ	6
	አዕዕዕ		አዕዕዕዕ		አዕዕ		7
ሐሃሐ		ሐዕገ		ዕሃሠገሐዕ			8

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

²¹ Vgl. *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum ab Academia Inscriptionum et Litterarum Humaniorum Conditum atque Digestum*, Pars Quarta: *Inscriptiones Himyariticas et Sabæas continens*, Tomus 2, Parisiis 1911, no. 541, p. 278.

²² Vgl. B. Vogt, *Towards a new dating of the great dam of Marib. Preliminary results of the 2002 fieldwork of the German Institute of Archeology*, in: "Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies" 34 (2004), p. 383–394; U. Brunner, *The Great Dam and the Sabeen Oasis of Marib*, in: "Irrigation and Drainage Systems" 14 (2000), p. 167–182.

²³ According to the inscription Istanbul 7608bis.

²⁴ Vgl. K. A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, Part I: *Chronological Framework and Historical Sources*, "The World of Ancient Arabia Series", Liverpool 1994, p. 10.

²⁵ Vgl. S. Smith, *Events in Arabia in the 6th Century*, in: "Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies" 16 (1954), p. 425–468; B. Vogt, *Der Grosse Damm von Marib – Neue Forschungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts 2002*, in: "Hefte zur Kulturgeschichte des Jemen" 1 (2003), p. 75–85.

8. and of 'their' Arabs on the plateau and in Tihamat."²⁶

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

Raḥmānān ("the Merciful"): from pre-Islamic religions to the Quran

They are some evidences of presence of *Raḥmānān* in pre-Islamic religions in Arabia and its confirm that this term was used in the three different spheres: old Arabic paganism, Judaism and Christianity. Which of the following religions did Muhammad adopt the name *ar-Raḥmān* as the name of God? Gerald Hawting (born 1944) argues that environment in which Islam arose was monotheist not politeist²⁸ but this explanation is not accepted by majority of scholars. It is likely that Muhammad borrowed the name *Raḥmānān* directly from Jews or Christians²⁹ but we can not forget that in the same time among other gods the people of Yemen worshiped a deity whose name was in Sabaean *Raḥmānān*. According to Philip Hitti (1886–1978), the Nabateans, who were from north Arabia, brought both terms *ar-rahmān* and *ar-rahīm* from southern Syria. Eventually, these Pagan gods found a place in the pantheons of South Arabian temples.³⁰

RḤMNN's equivalents in the Semitic world Semitic world have a long and very interesting history. The using of *ha-Raḥman* (the root ܪܚܡ) and Sabaean *Raḥmānān* by Jews as a name for God was popular in the Talmudic period. In the Hebrew Bible appears the term *rachuw* (רַחֲוּם – "merciful") only in the function of the God's attribute (Deut. 4,31; Psalms 86, 15 etc.).³¹ For Christians of

²⁶ Translation: S. Smith, *Events in Arabia In The 6th Century A.D.*, "Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies", 16 (1954), p. 437.

²⁷ The Ethiopian rule in 6th century Yemen caused persecutions of Christian during the reign of Dū-Nuwās, the Jewish king of South Arabia. Dū-Nuwās burned down churches in Zafār and Ḥaḍramawt, also massacred Christian population in Naḡrān. Vgl. K. Kościelniak, *XX wieków chrześcijaństwa w kulturze arabskiej*, vol. I:

²⁸ Vgl. G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge 1999.

²⁹ Such a simple explanation I published on the: K. Kościelniak, *Quelques remarques sur la littérature pré-islamique arabe chrétienne*, "Rocznik Orientalistyczny" 57 (2004), p. 70–72; 75–76; the same, *Chrześcijańskie piśmiennictwo arabskie przed Mahometem i jego wpływ na islam*, "Analecta Cracoviensia" 35 (2003), p. 329–343.

³⁰ Vgl. Hitti, *History of the Arabs: from the earliest times to the present*, Basingstoke 2002, p. 105.

³¹ Vgl. S. P. Tregelles (transl.), *Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scripture: translated with additions and corrections from the Author's Thesaurus and other Works*, London 1881, p. 933.

Yemen the term *RḤMNN* was useful to propagate the doctrine of the Trinity, what we observe in the Abraha's Inscription on the Marib Dam (CIS 541): "In the power of the All-merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit." In the same time the Syriac Christians used Aramaic term *Raḥmānā* for Jesus.³²

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

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

³² Vgl. H. Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, London 1902, p. 68.

³³ Vgl. A. Vargo, *Responses to Islamic Awareness: Rahmanan (RHMNN) – An Ancient South Arabian Moon God?*, in: http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Saifullah/rahman_av.htm (accessed: 2011.04.10).