



The Islam Research Group

Who Wrote the Qur'an?

VI. Inscriptions



Contents

1	Pre-Islamic inscriptions	2
	Pagan rock inscriptions	2
	Rahman	
2	Earliest inscriptions with Islamic references	6
	Zuhayr and the death of Umar (year 24/644)	6
	The Baths of Hammat Gader (662) and the Ta'if Dam (680)	7
	The Fustat bridge (688-689)	8
	The 'Aqabah' (winding road) inscription Year 73 or 83 AH (probably 73 ie 692/693)	9
	The earliest shahadas	10
	Building the Ka'aba (Year 78/697)	13
	The Umayyad Mosque, Damascus (705)	14
	Nevo's survey of popular inscriptions	15
3	Relevant non-Islamic inscriptions	16
	Sde Boker	
4	Conclusions	17

© 2020, The Islam Research Group

<https://IslamResearchGroup.com>

Pre-Islamic inscriptions

Pagan rock inscriptions

Arabia contains many thousands of rock inscriptions in a number of related now extinct languages, known as:

in the north of Arabia (the Ancient North Arabian languages),

- Safaitic,
- Taymanitic (also known as Thamudic A),
- Thamudic B, C and D,
- Himaic (also known as Thamudic E)
- Hasaitic and
- Dadantic

in the south of Arabia (the Ancient South Arabian languages).

- Sabaic,
- Minaic,
- Qatabanic and
- Hadramitic.¹

‘Old Arabic’ is closely connected with Hebrew and was originally written using the alphabet of other languages. Only a handful of short examples of inscriptions using Arabic script have been confirmed to predate the Qur’an, the earliest from the sixth century.

¹*The Ancient Languages Of Syria Palestine And Arabia*, ed. Roger Woodward

The Jabal Ḍabūb basmala

The basmala

Each surah of the Qur'an, other than for **Surah 9** begins with an invocation known as the basmala:

'Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim'.

(In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.)

The two words that are here translated as *'the Compassionate'* and *'the Merciful'* each derive from the same trilateral root *'r-ḥ-m'*. Consequently, the repetition of the name acts as a polyptoton - a literary device whereby a word is repeated in a different form for the purpose of creating a poetic emphasis. Such a form appears on occasion in the Hebrew Bible in the phrases *'Holy of Holies'*, *'vanity of vanities'*, *'Song of Songs'* and *'King of kings'*, the last of which also occurs twice in the New Testament followed by *'and lord of lords'*. The form also occurs in the speech of four biblical characters in the Qur'an, Moses, Jacob, Joseph and Job, who each address God as *'the most Merciful of the merciful'* (**{7.151}**, **{12.64}**, **{12.92}** and **{21.43}**).

The Qur'an also describes God as *'al-Rahman'* fifty seven times in addition to the basmalas. The term appears to have been used in a middle period of the Qur'an's announcement, since it does not appear in either its earliest surahs (**Surahs 73-114**) nor those surahs though to be its latest.

Rahman in pre-Islamic inscriptions other than for the Jabal Ḍabūb basmala

The word (in pre-Arabic Arabian script) that is rendered *'Rahman'*, literally *'the merciful'*, is clearly derived from the Hebrew word *'raḥam/raḥamim'* that is used as an epithet for God several times in the Hebrew Bible, with a range of meanings including: *'womb'*, *'kinship'*, *'relationship'*, *'loving-kindness'*, *'mercy'*, *'compassion'*, and *'nourishing-tenderness'*.

In ***Jewish and Christian religious influences on pre-Islamic Arabia on the example of the term RḤMNN ("the Merciful")*** Krzysztof Kościelniak writes that the first known example of the use of *'rḥmnn'* in a rock inscription is found in a bilingual Akkadian/Aramaic inscription which was found in the Tell Fekherye in northeast Syria, which was dedicated to the Aramean god, Hadad, and in the Aramaic version ended:

'Merciful god to whom prayer is sweet.'

The Akkadian version uses the word *'rēmēnū'*, which he observes, was an epithet for the god Marduk.

A number of engravings in rocks in the Sabaitic script in South Arabia, dated to the fifth and sixth centuries Islamic times, use the term *'r-ḥ-m'* (in this section rendered as *'Rahman'*) as an epithet for

God. In all these, the context shows the term 'rahman' within a monotheist context, sometimes explicitly Jewish or Christian, including:

- ✦ 'By Rahman, Lord of the Jews',²
- ✦ '... For their Lord, the Rahman, Master of Heaven, so that he grant to him and his spouses and to his children, the Merciful, to live a life of justice, and to die a death of justice. And that the Rahman grant to him children who are healthy who will fight for the name of the Rahman',³
- ✦ 'May the name of the Rahman, who is Heaven be blessed and praised, and Israel, and their God, the Lord of the Jews, who helped his servant Shahrum.'⁴
- ✦ 'By the power of the Merciful One and His Messiah, the king Abraha...
- ✦ So Abraha returned from Haliban by the power of the Merciful One.'⁵
- ✦ 'By the power and favour of the Merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit. They have written the inscription: Behold Abraha who has been exalted, the king, the descendent of men of Ge'ez, the ramaihis, Za Bayman, king of Saba' and Dhu Raydan and Hadramaut and Yamanat and of 'their' Arabs on the plateau and in Tihamat'⁶
- ✦ 'In the name of the Merciful and, his son Christ, the victorious.'⁷

It will be noted that two of the above six inscriptions refer to Abraha, king of Himyar (modern day Yemen). Inscriptions show that the former kings of Himyar had converted to Judaism in the 380s, and all pagan inscriptions in the region ended at that time. In the 520s a Himyarite king, Yusuf As'ar Yathar, is said to have committed a massacre of Christians at the city of Najran (This is traditionally believed to be the event described in the Qur'an's **Surah 85**, although this association is considered doubtful). Abraha was a general sent by the Christian King of Aksum in North East Africa (c.525) to protect the Himyarite Christians. Abraha defeated Yusuf and established a Christian kingdom, which lasted until about the time of the reported birth of Mohammed in 570. Abraha is believed in traditional Islamic

² *From 'LH RĤMN To AL-RAĤMĀN: The Source Of A Divine Epithet*, J. C. Greenfield in *Judaism And Islam: Boundaries, Communication And Interaction - Essays In Honor Of William M. Brinner*

³ Ibid

⁴ *The Inscription CIH 543: A New Reading Based On The Newly-Found Original* in *Recherches Sur Les Inscriptions De L'Arabie Préislamique Offertes Par Ses Collègues Au Professeur A.F.L. Beeston*, 1987

⁵ *Notes On The Mureighan Inscription*, A. F. L. Beeston, *Bulletin Of The School Of Oriental And African Studies*, 1954, Volume 16

⁶ *Events In Arabia In The 6th Century A.D.*, S. Smith, *Bulletin Of The School Of Oriental And African Studies*, 1954, Volume 16, p. 437

⁷ C. Greenfield, see above.

exegesis to feature (although he is not named) in **Surah 105** of the Qur'an, where a supposed assault of Mecca by Abraha was destroyed by God's wrath, the Meccan defenders being led by Mohammed's grandfather.⁸ After his invasion of Himyar, Abraha adopted, in inscriptions, the distinctively Jewish-sounding phrase '*Messiah of God*' to describe Jesus. The adoption of such a term was no doubt calculated to make Christian rule less provocative to his Jewish subjects than the more usual '*son of God*'.⁹

Ethiopic/South Arabian influence upon the Qur'an

The Aksumite monarchs claimed to be descended from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the Ethiopian Tawahedo church preserved (and still preserves) a far stronger Jewish identity than any other Christian denomination. The Tawahedo church:

- ✦ observes the Jewish sabbath,
- ✦ follows Old Testament dietary laws and practises circumcision
- ✦ includes the **Book of Enoch** in its Bible

This Jewish style of Christianity not only recalls the practises of the original apostolic church, but also shares this outlook with the Qur'an which draws more heavily upon Old Testament figures than New, presents Jesus as one of the Jewish prophets (as indeed he was) and confirms aspects of the old Mosaic law (including dietary laws) that had been eschewed by Pauline Christianity.

There is no tradition that Mohammed ever went to either Ethiopia or Himyar, but such a journey would have been possible, since the traditional narrative does describe him sending approximately half his followers to Abyssinia during the first decade of his mission. Moreover, a rock inscription to mark an expedition by Abraha describes him having '*seized*' (probably meaning having secured oaths of loyalty from) the Arabs of several places including Yathrib¹⁰. Consequently, one does not need to imagine that the Qur'an's author travelled to Ethiopia or Himyar to anticipate that Ethiopic culture was able to influence the Qur'an author whilst the latter was residing in Yathrib.

The Qur'an also contains clear evidence of some South Arabian/Ethiopian influence, including the use of some Ethiopic words (other than Rahman) including:

'wangel', originally from the Greek '*euangelion*', likely to have been the immediate source of the Qur'an's word for gospel, the '*injeel*';

⁸ This interpretation has been convincingly discredited by Daniel Beck in *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet*, Chapter 1: *Maccabees Not Mecca, The Biblical Subtext and the Apocalyptic Context of Sūrat al-Fīl (Q 105)*

⁹ *The Jews and Christians of Pre-Islamic Yemen (Himyar) and the Elusive matrix of the Qur'an's Christology in Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam*, 2015, Carlos Segovia

¹⁰ Christian Robin in *Abraha et la reconquête de l'Arabie déserte: un réexamen de l'inscription Ryckmans 506 = Murayghan 1*, 2012, cited in *The Jews and Christians of pre-Islamic Yemen (Himyar) and the elusive matrix of the Qur'an's Christology*, 2015, Carlos A. Segovia, in *Jewish Christianity and the origins of Islam*, ed. Francisco del Rio Sanchez.

'hawāryā', (literally 'walkers') referring to the disciples of Jesus which appears in the Qur'an as 'hawāriyyūn', and

'mā'edd' ('feast') that appears in the Qur'an as 'al-mā'ida', 'the table spread' by Jesus in **Surah 5**.

The Qur'an also appears to be influenced by the **Book of Enoch** (for example in its telling of the angels Harut and Marut in **{2.102}**).

The Jabal Dabūb basmala

In 2018 it came to light that a South Arabian rock inscription had been discovered on a mountain, Jabal Dabūb in South Arabia, which appeared to include a version of the Bismillah written in a pre-Islamic script.

From surrounding evidence this has been dated to the sixth century. It is suggested that this carving is evidence that the form of the Bismillah predates the year of Mohammed's first announcement of the Qur'an (traditionally said to be 610).¹¹ It may be noted that the words of the bismillah appear once in the body of the Qur'an (if one considers Surah 1 to be an introductory invocation) and that this is a greeting by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba, the Qur'an's most prominent South Arabian reference.



In ***The pre-Islamic basmala: Reflections on its first epigraphic attestation and its original significance***, Ahmad Al-Jallad offers the following translation:

'In the name of Allāh, the Raḥmān, have mercy upon us, O lord of the heavens, satisfy us by means of your favour and grant us the essence of it (i.e. wisdom) to number our days'

¹¹ *Al'ibar Journal, International scientific periodical journal deals with historical and archaeological studies*, 2018 (2)

The similarity of the inscription's

'bsmlh rḥmn rḥmn...'

which al-Jallad translates as

'In the name of Allāh, the Raḥmān, have mercy upon us...'

is too similar to the basmala's

'bsmi llāh r-rḥmān r-raḥīm' ('In the name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful')

for one not to have derived from the other and since Surah 1 and the introductory basmalas appear to have been added to the Qur'an at the stage that it was compiled into a canon¹², it is suggested that the polyptotic basmala emerged as a variation of the formula used in the **Jabal Dabūb** inscription.

Al-Jallad notes

'The Raḥmān' was much more than an epithet – it was the proper name of Ḥimyar's deity, and was not used in North Arabia ... By the sixth century CE, the pagan gods had completely disappeared from the inscriptions of North Arabia ... In contrast to South Arabia, the North Arabian monotheistic traditions of the 5 th and 6 th c. CE invoked 'al-'ilāh' / 'allāh'. While al-'ilāh is attested in clear Christian contexts, 'allāh' is rarer and found in confessionally ambiguous contexts.

It is impossible at this moment to decide whether the distinction between the two was simply regional or whether it betokened a confessional split. What is clear, however, is that 'Raḥmān' was not used in pre-Islamic times in North Arabia.

In this light, I would suggest that the basmala has a theological and political dimension. It seeks to synchronize the two main monotheistic poles of Arabia by equating North Arabian Allāh with South Arabian Raḥmān. The regional and perhaps confessional difference between the two is echoed in the Quran:

{17.110} **And say: call upon Allāh or call upon the Raḥmān;
whichever you call upon, for him are the best names'**

and

{25.60} **And when it was said to them: 'Bow to the Raḥmān'
they replied: and what is 'the Raḥmān'? Should we bow
(simply) because you tell us to?
And it only increased them in aversion**

¹² See **Who Wrote the Qur'an IV Variant Qur'ans**

The inscription can thus be seen as a hugely important development in understanding the Qur'an, uniting the Arab monotheists of North and South Arabia.

Al-Jallad dates the inscription, from its script and epigraphy, to *'the late sixth or early seventh century CE'*.

'The text is incised vertically on the rock face adjacent to a small cave by what seems to have been a sharp metal object. The vertical direction is to be explained by its context – the author would have had to lean too far out to carve horizontally, risking a fall. What brought the author up to this isolated place is open to speculation. Ritual social isolation is a well-attested practice in the ancient Near East. The traditional biography of Mohammed holds that he habitually retreated to a cave in a local mountain near Mecca,

The similarity in location with the present inscription is hard to overlook - it is possible that its author had come to this isolated place to commune with the divine. During one of these meditative sessions, perhaps possessed by religious experience, s/he carved this short prayer into stone.

The dating, physical context and content of the inscription are all consistent with, if not indicative of the inscription having been made by the Qur'an's announcer himself.

Earliest inscriptions with Islamic references

Zuhayr and the death of Umar (year 24/644)

Incredibly given the reported extent the Arab conquests and the religious zeal that drove them, only a handful of inscriptions have been discovered from the supposed early years of Islamic empire building.

The second oldest dated document of Islam,¹³ consists of a carving upon a rock in northern Arabia.



*'In the name of God
I, Zuhayr, wrote [this] at the time
Umar died in the year four and twenty'*

Carved nearby is:

'I am Zuhayr, mawla of Ibnat Shayba'

Assuming that the inscription is genuine, it corroborates the traditional Muslim date for the death of Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph, who is said to have been assassinated in the final days of the Islamic year 23.

The inscription invokes God, but gives no more specific religious content or information concerning the nature and extent of Umar or Zuhayr's religious beliefs.

¹³ After the Receipt of Herakleopolis (642), part V and the coin dated year 17 (below).

The baths of Hammat Gader (662) and the Ta'if Dam (680)

The earliest two relate to Muawiyah, who is remembered as the grandson of Abu Bakr, who deposed Mohammed's son in law, Ali, and established the Umayyad dynasty. He is, with the possible exception of Mohammed, the first individual from the traditional Islamic narrative to have his existence substantiated by contemporary evidence.

Oddly, the earliest monumental inscription of a purported Muslim incorporates a prominent and unmistakably Christian cross. Written in Greek, it exists on a bathhouse in the ruined Samaritan city of Gadara.



“✠ In the days of the servant of God Mu'āwiya, Amir al-mu'minin, the hot baths of the people there were saved and rebuilt by 'Abd Allāh son of Abū Hāshim, the governor,

on the fifth of the month of December, on the second day (of the week), in the 6th year of the indiction, in the year 726 of the colony, according to the Arabs, the 42nd year¹⁴,

for the healing of the sick, under the care of Ioannes, the official of Gadara.”

A second inscription, this time in Arabic, appears on a dam in Tai'f,¹⁵ in Southern Arabia.



This dam belongs to the servant of God Mu'awiya, Amir al-mu'minin.

Abdullah ibn Sakhr built it with God's leave in the year fifty eight. O God forgive the servant of God Mu'awiya, Amir al-muminin, strengthen him and held him and let the believers profit by him. Amr Habbab wrote this.

¹⁴ Ohlig and G Puin in *The Hidden Origins of Islam* explain the complex dating system as the Byzantine tax year 'the sixth year of the indiction' followed by the 'era of the city' ('726') and finally the year 'according to the Arabs', presumably the year following the Islamic Hijah calendar that dates an event in terms of how many series of twelve lunar months have elapsed since Mohammed's migration to Medina in the spring of 622. Ohlig and Puin calculate this as AD 662/663.

¹⁵ Mohammed is said to have had sought to establish himself in Ta'if as an alternative base to Mecca but was chased away pelted with rocks. A decade later, as conqueror of Mecca he besieged Ta'if unsuccessfully, although Ta'if voluntarily surrendered to his authority shortly afterwards.

In addition to the cross, the other significant religious feature of these inscriptions is the reference to Mu'awiya on each, not by the title '*caliph*' (meaning successor) by which the early Muslim rulers are known today, but as '*Amir al-mumini'n*': the emir of the believers/faithful. The title '*emir*' has a militaristic connotation and is often translated as '*commander*' or occasionally '*prince*' (for example when used in relation to the ruler of an emirate).

The Fustat bridge (688-689)

A bridge in Fustat once carried the inscription bearing the name of the son of Caliph Marwan (and the future caliph) Abd al-Aziz: ¹⁶

*This bridge was commissioned by the governor 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Marwān.
O God, bless him in his affairs, strengthen his rule as You see fit and cheer him himself
and his entourage, amīn.*

*Sa'd Abu 'Uthmān undertook the building of it, and 'Abd al-Raḥmān wrote [this] in
Ṣafar of the year sixty-nine.*

¹⁶ 'first attested by Maqrīzī (d. 845 AH / 1442 CE)' *Islamic-Awareness*

The 'Aqabah' (winding road) inscription, year 73 or 83 AH (probably 73 ie 692/693)

An inscription commemorates a road levelling by Abd al-Malik.



*In the name of Allah, the Merciful.
There is no god but Allah alone,
He hath no companion,
Muḥammad is the Apostle of Allah.*

*Hath ordered the levelling of this difficult
pass, 'Abdullāh 'Abd al-Malik, Amīr of the
Faithful, and it has been fulfilled by the two
hands of Yaḥya b. al-Ḥakam in the (month)
of Muḥarram of the year three...*

There have also been found four milestones from along the course of this road:



Discovered at
Bāb al-Wād
(lit. 'The gate of
the valley') on
the road from
Jerusalem to Tel
Aviv



Discovered at
Abū Ghōsh
(7km west of
Jerusalem)



Discovered at
**Khān al-
Hathrūra**
(in current West
Bank)



Discovered at
**Khozaiba near
Deir al-Qalt,**
between
Jerusalem and
Jericho

The earliest shahada:

The tombstone of Abbasa

Possibly the oldest example of the Shahada, outside the Qur'an, appears on the inscription upon a tombstone found in Aswan in Egypt (the earliest known Islamic grave) . The inscription commemorates a woman identified therein as Abbasa, the daughter of Jurayj son of Sanad who died on 14 Dhu l-Qa^da 71 (i.e. 21 April 691).¹⁷



*... there is no deity except God, He alone,
He has no partner, and that Muhammad is
His Servant and His Messenger*

Bacharach comments upon how this Egyptian tomb differs to the inscription on the Dome of the Rock¹⁸, probably completed the following year:

In all five sections (on the outer arcade of the Dome of the Rock, excluding the section with the dedication) which began with the full basmala, it was followed by

'la ilaha illa llahu wahdahu' ('There is no god except God, alone').

Four of them continue:

'la sharika lahu' ('He has no partner')

In two segments the phrase 'la sharika lahu' is followed immediately by the words:

'muhammadun rasulu llah' ('Muhammad is the Prophet of God'),

¹⁷ **Early Versions of the shahāda: A Tombstone from Aswan of 71 A.H., the Dome of the Rock, and Contemporary Coinage**, Jere Bacharach

¹⁸ See related paper in this series: **Who wrote the Qur'an?, VIII The Masjid al-Haram**

while in the other three segments that began with the basmala the words ‘muhammadun rasulu llah’ are separated from ‘la sharika lahu’ by additional pious phrases and/or Qur’anic verses.

In this case we are defining the **Syrian ‘affirmation of faith’** as

‘bismi llahi l-rahmani l-rahi m la ilaha illa llahuwahdahu la shar i ka lahu muhammadun rasulu llah’

(‘In the name of God the Magnificent, he Merciful, There is no deity except God, alone, He has no partner, Muhammad is the Prophet of God.’)

Therefore, the Syrian version differs from the **Egyptian ‘affirmation of faith’**

By:

- i. the physical connection of the basmala with the rest of the words
- ii. ending in the more familiar ‘muhammadun rasul ullah’ rather than the more complex formula on the Egyptian tombstone.
- iii. The inclusion of the phrase ‘la sharika lahu’ (‘He has no partner’)

Unfortunately, all we can conclude is that the Egyptian and Syrian forms of the “affirmation of faith” are different but not why, particularly since both media— a monument and a tombstone— had enough space to have exactly the same wording.

Bacharach proceeds to contrast the Egyptian and Syrian shahada with the gold solidus minted by Abd’ al-Malik in 72 (692)¹⁹:



‘Bismi llahi la ilaha illa llahu wahdahu muhammadun rasulu llah

‘In the name of God, There is no deity except God, He alone, Muhammad is the Messenger of God.’

It differs from the other two contemporary versions of the ‘affirmation of faith’ in a few ways. The opening phrase has been reduced to ‘bismillahi’ (‘In the name of God’). This may reflect a simple continuation of the same phrase which first appeared on the earliest Arab-Sasanian silver coinage or the lack of space on a coin to write the full basmala.

The more important difference is that in contrast to the Syrian and Egyptian versions, the Eastern text does not include the phrase ‘la shari ka lahu’ (‘He has no partner’). To put it another way, while all three versions emphasize God’s unity and Muhammad’s mission, there is nothing specifically anti-Trinitarian about the Eastern “affirmation of faith.” This is not surprising since Christians were only one of a number of religious populations within

¹⁹ See: **Who wrote the Qur’an?, VII Coins**

Muslim lands east of Greater Syria such as Iraq and there was no reason for anyone ruling the eastern lands to single them out on the coinage.

From 997 the caliph minted epigraphic coinage in which the shahada changed again



(Centre of coin, obverse/left)

'la ilahaila lahu wahdahu la sharika lahu'

'There is no deity except God, He alone, He has no partner''.

The message the caliph wished to transmit with his new coinage related to God's unity. This message was re-enforced by placing in the centre of the other side of the coin the well-known part of *Surat al-Ikhlās* [*'Say: He is Allah, One. Allah is As-Samad, He begets not, nor was He begotten, and there is none comparable to Him', {112.1-4}*] which rejects the concept of the Trinity. To find a reference to Muhammad's role as Prophet, the reader of the coin has to look on the inscription in the margin encircling the centre. The sense of a connection between the first phrases and the words *'muhammadun rasulu llah'* (*'Muhammad is the Messenger of God'*) is made even weaker because the reference to the Prophet appears on different sides of the dinars and dirhams.

Bacharach's summary of the early evolving or deliberately region-specific shahada may be expressed in chart form:

	Egyptian (Abassa tomb, 691)	Syrian (Dome of the Rock, 692)	Eastern (<i>'Heraclian'</i> solidus, 692)	>997 (Epigraphic dhirram, 697)
<i>'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'</i>		✓	✓ (short)	
<i>There is no god but God (+ 'he alone')</i>	✓	✓	✓ +	✓
<i>'He has no partner'</i>	✓	✓		✓
<i>Muhammad is His (+ 'servant and') messenger'</i>	✓ +	✓	✓	[✓]

Building the Ka'aba (Year 78/697)

A rock inscription at Ḥuma al-Numoor, near Ṭā'if, refers to itself as having been written '*in the year the Masjid al-Ḥarām was built in the seventy eighth year.*'

Other than for the Qur'an this is believed to be the earliest text to refer to the Masjid al-Haram.



Al-Rayyān b. 'Abdullāh testifies that there is no god but God and he testifies that Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.

then reiterates to those to come to testify to that, God have mercy on al-Rayyān. May He forgive him and cause him to be guided to the path of Paradise and I ask him for martyrdom in his path. Amen.

This was written in the year the Masjid al-Ḥarām was built in the seventy eighth year.

Dan Gibson has proposed that the original Masjid al-Haram/Ka'aba/Mecca was located in Petra, in which the 'black stone' that forms part of the current Ka'aba was the most important element. He notes that al Tabari describes Abdullah Ibn al-Zubayr dismantling the Ka'aba during his twelve year rebellion against the Umayyad caliphate (680-692) and notes that there is a pronounced lacuna in al-Tabari's account of events in which he only reports that al-Zubayr obtained many horses and camels.

Gibson speculates that al-Zubayr had sent the black rock into the safety of the Arabian desert, and that after the crushing of his rebellion its guardians built a new Ka'aba for it there, beyond the reach of the Umayyads. This was later given official recognition when the Umayyad Caliphate was toppled by the Abbasid Caliphate in 750.

The Umayyad Mosque, Damascus (705)

Abd al-Malik died in 705 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Walid I. Nevo writes:

One of Walid (ibn Abd al-Malik)'s first acts on his accession to the caliphate in AH 86/705 was to confiscate St John's church in Damascus, pull down its inner walls, and convert it into a masjid.

Two inscriptions inside it celebrated this event... The most obvious difference between Abd al-malik's proclamation in the Dome of the Rock and Walid's in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus is the change of attitude towards Christianity. Abd al-Malik commented on Christological and trinitarian issues from within the Christian polemical tradition but was not anti-Christian. Walid destroyed a church, built an Arab house of prayer on the site and proclaimed the deed publicly. He thereby finalised the complete separation between Christianity and the new religion.²⁰

The longer inscription reads:

There is no coercion in matters of dīn, as the right way is already distinct from the crooked. And he who denies an erring creed but trusts Allah clings to a firm handhold never to give way.

*There is no god but God; there is no other and we shall worship only Him.
Our Lord is Allah alone,
Our dīn is Islam
Our prophet is Muhammad.*

²⁰ *Crossroads to Islam, The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab State*, Yehuda D Nevo and Judith Koren

Nevo's survey of popular inscriptions

In *Crossroads to Islam, The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab State*, Nevo and Koren classify popular inscriptions into four types:

'Basic' (in which words used in the Qur'an are employed – eg Allah, but the inscription is broad enough to be regarded as 'indeterminately monotheistic' within the Judeo-Christian tradition rather than specifically Islamic),

'Mohammedan', in which the text is more clearly associated with the person of Muhammed or the text of the Qur'an (c.<730s)

Early Muslim (c. 780s) and **Muslim** (tenth century)

Nevo notes:

Forgiveness

Basic inscriptions generally sought forgiveness for the writer and others, this became less frequent in the Mohammedan period and only 'occasional' in the Muslim texts.

Requests for Allah's favour

Eg *'be pleased with ...'*, *'bestow your favour on ...'* etc. are common with the basic type, then seem to fall out of fashion but return with the Muslim type.

Only the basic type inscriptions used *'Accept him into your love'* this did not make a return. When the requests returned they tended to be worded *'Incline unto ...'*

Prophets

Some basic texts invoked the *'Lord of Moses'*, suggesting that the author was a Jew, this then became *'the Lord of Moses and Isa'* (see above) in the Mohammedan-type, or alternatively *'the Lord of Abraham and Moses'*.

Such references to *'the Lord of...'* one or more specific prophets ceases in the early Muslim type, to be replaced by references to Muhammad typically *'Muhammad rasul Allah'*, sometimes in the Mohammedan texts 'forgive' Muhammad, later *'incline towards...'* or *'Blessings upon...'* Muhammad.

The Qur'an

As one might expect the incorporation of phrases from the Qur'an such as *'Allah suffices as a witness'* and requests for guidance along the *'straight path'* are rare to unknown in the early types, to become commonly encountered in the later *'Muslim'* types.

Relevant non-Islamic inscriptions

Sde Boker

A site at Sde boker shows several religious buildings, but no contemporary dwellings, suggesting that it was a religious site used by tent-dwelling Bedouins. These buildings included small enclosed places, some with offering shelves, or stellae. There is evidence of deliberately broken pottery. The site appeared to have been systematically but peacefully abandoned, with sites 'cleaned ... and filled in in an unhurried, orderly and possibly ritual fasion'. He dates this event to c. 770, indicating that paganism survived amongst the Bedouins, undoubtedly tolerated by the authorities, until after the Abbasid revolution of 750. ²¹

There were also hundreds of monotheist rock inscriptions, the earliest dated one, from 705, suggesting that the pagans and monthesits occupied the site concurrently and apparently peacefully. Nevo suggests that the monotheists had occupied the site first, and that pagans had started using it in the time of caliph Hisham Abd al-malik (732-747). ²²

One type of monotheist inscription is particularly curious, those including reference to:

'Amin rabb-l-alamin rabb Musa wa 'Isa'

*'Amen, Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Jesus'*²³

It would be highly unusual for a Jew to invoke Jesus in an inscription, and a Christian would hardly talk about the 'Lord of Jesus' nor place Jesus on a par with Moses. The inscriber apparently was familiar with the Qur'an since *rabb-l-alamin* is a term for Allah used in the second verse of the Qur'an and he referred to Jesus through his Quranic name, Isa, but if he was a muslims, where was Muhammad? The inscription may merely reflect the ill informed piety of a Bedouin who was seeking to adopt aspects of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic tradition, but the inscription demonstrates the religious possibilities that were arising in seventh century Palestine.

²¹ *Crossroads to Islam, ...* page 179

²² *Crossroads to Islam...* page 201

²³ *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, Nevo

Conclusions

1. The Jabal Ḍabūb basmala appears to show that the 'basmala' originated as a phrase uniting North and South Arabian monotheists. It is evidence of a strong South Arabian influence upon the Qur'an author, which could be referred to the South Arabian kingdom's influence over Yathrib, although it is quite possible that the Jabal Ḍabūb basmala had actually been created by the Qur'an author himself.
2. The Zuhayr inscription confirms the life - and death- of Umar.
3. The 'fifth caliph' Muawiyah was content to be depicted as a Christian ruler
4. The Islamic Shahada was first evidenced c.690, about seventy years after the reported death of Muhammad 700, and initially took several, slightly different forms.
5. There is little sign of any forced religious orthodox, with pagan sites continuing to openly operate, some with an intriguing Moses-Jesus devotion, which appear neither Jewish, Christian nor Islamic.