

“In the Power of God Christ”: Greek inscriptional evidence for the anti-Arian theology of Ethiopia’s first Christian king

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Abstract

Four fourth-century AD inscriptions of Ezana, first Christian king of Aksum (Ethiopia), are surveyed, with special attention to Ezana’s only known post-conversion inscription, written in Greek. Greek syntax and terminology in Ezana’s inscription point to an anti-Arian Christology which may be associated with Frumentius, first bishop of Aksum, and his connection with Athanasius of Alexandria. The inscription’s trinitarian formula “the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit” is structured in such a way as to assert the identity of the three members of the Trinity. The phrase “in the power of God Christ” further equates Christ with God. This christological language stands in contrast to the Arian imperial policy of the time, and is historically significant in light of Constantius’s attempt to force Frumentius’s recall to Alexandria. This inscription serves as the first internal documentary evidence for an anti-Arian Christology in the earliest developments of Ethiopian Christianity.

I. Introduction

For many readers unfamiliar with Africa the name Ethiopia will evoke images of desert, drought and border wars, images made more vivid as recurring cycles of famine flicker across western television screens.¹ But there is another, richer, Ethiopian narrative rarely heard beyond Africa: the story of Christianity’s introduction into the powerful Aksumite kingdom in the fourth century AD, beginning an unbroken history of Christian faith and worship in Ethiopia which continues to the present day. This Christian tradition flourished in the Ethiopian highlands, surviving as Islam spread across Africa.²

- 1 The name “Ethiopia” is used throughout this article to refer to the modern nation of Ethiopia, although in ancient times the term had a much wider range of use, extending to any areas south beyond the known regions of Egypt. In the LXX, “Ethiopia” (Αἰθιοπία) is commonly used to translate “Cush”, and thus probably refers primarily to areas which lie within present-day Sudan, as well as undefined regions further south including present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. See Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 5–9.
- 2 Following the spread of Islam and the resulting isolation from other Christian centres, Gibbon writes, “Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion

Munro-Hay observes: “Of all the important ancient civilisations of the past, that of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum still remains perhaps the least known”.³ However, ongoing archaeological excavations are bringing to light evidence of Aksum’s history and socio-political organization, as well as artefacts demonstrating the extent of Aksum’s trade and political relations. Among such archaeological finds are inscriptions and coins relating to the introduction of Christianity into Aksum through the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church dates its beginning to Ezana’s conversion to Christianity in c. 330 AD, under the influence of Frumentius, a Syrian Christian captive who rose to prominence in Aksum. Glimpses of the religious climate surrounding the introduction of Christianity into Aksum emerge through four fourth-century inscriptions in the name of Ezana himself. Two of the inscriptions discussed in this article are recorded both in Greek and in Geʿez, the ancient Ethiopian language still used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The third is found only in Geʿez, and the fourth inscription, for the present purposes the most significant, is available only in Greek.

The existence of these four Aksumite inscriptions is well known in archaeological circles and is often noted in studies of Ethiopian history. But little if any use has been made by church historians of the linguistic and theological content of Ezana’s only known post-conversion inscription.⁴ The purpose of this article is to consider the four Ezana inscriptions briefly from a theological and historical standpoint, and then to outline the potential significance of certain features in the Greek text of Ezana’s only known Christian inscription.⁵ This article attempts to break new ground through syntactical and theological analysis of this inscription in its historical context. The inscription is of particular interest in light of the Arian controversy in which the larger Christian world was engaged following the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and through most of the fourth century. The involvement in Aksumite affairs of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria and the most noted anti-Arian apologist, adds an additional

the Æthiopians slept near 1000 years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten” (Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. III (London: Frederick Warne and Co., n.d.), 367–8).

3 Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), ix.

4 These inscriptions and the parallel numismatic evidence are not unknown in biblical studies, especially among those with an interest in textual criticism. See, for example, Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 217–19.

The late R. Schneider, perhaps the outstanding epigraphist to work with this material, gives a detailed description of the Ezana inscriptions in “Notes sur les inscriptions royales aksumites”, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 44, 1987, 599–616. However, the Greek texts of the inscriptions have not to this point been readily accessible, and there has been little discussion of their content in light of biblical, theological or church historical studies.

5 While I do not claim any expertise in Aksumite archaeology or epigraphy, my interest in Hellenistic (Koine) Greek and several years of living in Ethiopia have produced a fascination with the use of Greek in the Aksumite kingdom and a desire to make fellow scholars more aware of the linguistic evidence available.

layer of interest to the emergence of Christianity in Ethiopia. Although some of the events surrounding Frumentius and Ezana are attested in sources outside Ethiopia, most notably in Athanasius’s own writings, a closer look at the syntax and phrasing of Ezana’s only known post-conversion inscription reveals that it may offer the earliest documentary evidence from within Ethiopia for Aksumite Christianity’s stance against Arianism.

II. The Aksumite empire: a brief overview

The Aksumite empire arose some time around 100 BC and lasted until its collapse in *c.* 700 AD. It was part of a thriving trade network which encompassed Egypt, both coasts of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, and stretched as far as India.⁶ While Aksum’s power ebbed and flowed through the centuries, at its greatest extent the Aksumite empire covered parts of what are now Ethiopia, Sudan as far north as Meroë, Eritrea, Djibouti, parts of Somalia, and parts of the southern Arabian peninsula (present-day Yemen). Because of its extent and its close connections with Hellenized Egypt, it is not surprising that Greek was used in Aksum for trade and for certain diplomatic functions during the Hellenistic era and after.⁷ A trade manual describing the Red Sea area, written in Greek by an anonymous, possibly Egyptian, author in the mid-first century AD, lists imports and exports for Aksum’s port of Adulis and comments on the local king’s knowledge of Greek.⁸ The earliest known Aksumite coins (third century AD) have Greek legends, probably due to existing trade relations involving Greek-speaking merchants.⁹ Likewise, the forms of numerals in Ge’ez, the language of Aksum which remains the classical Ethiopian language, are directly dependent on Greek alphabetic numerals, again likely due to commercial interests.¹⁰

6 Burstein describes the development of this trade under the Ptolemies; see Stanley M. Burstein, *Agatharchides of Cnidus on the Erythraean Sea* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1989), 1–12. See also Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: University Printers, 1972), 54–5, 71–2, 84–5. For concise yet informative histories of the Aksumite empire, see Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*; Munro-Hay, *Aksum*; David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum: Its Antecedents and Successors* (London: British Museum Press, 1998).

7 See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 62, 67. With respect to the diplomatic function of Greek in Aksum, Burstein has raised questions about the motivation for the use of Greek in trilingual inscriptions such as those discussed here. He suggests that the trilingual inscriptions erected in Aksum are modelled on trilingual Persian boundary-marking stelae, and are therefore not necessarily intended to be read in Greek, but to serve political and cultural functions (Stanley Burstein, personal communication).

8 “Βασιλεύει δὲ τῶν τόπων τούτων ... Ζωσκάλης ... γραμμάτων Ἑλληνικῶν ἔμπειρος”, *Periplus* 5:2.18–22 in Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 54–5.

9 See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 82; Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 184–9.

10 See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 90, which includes a diagram comparing Greek and Ge’ez numeral forms; also, Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* (Essex: Lalibela House, 1955), 112; Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, second edition, 1965), 133.

Although the story of the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 probably refers to a court official from what is now Sudan rather than Ethiopia itself,¹¹ Christianity did find its way into Aksum at an early date. It is likely that at least some Christian merchants had reached Aksum before the fourth century and had perhaps even taken up residence there. However, this does not appear to have been an indigenized expression of Christianity. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church traces its origin primarily to the evangelistic work of Frumentius and to traditional accounts of the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana in approximately 330 AD.

Sources from the late fourth and early fifth centuries report that Frumentius and his companion Aedesius were youths travelling with a certain Meropius, a “philosopher” from Tyre who was exploring the area of the “Indians” (an area which can be equated with the Red Sea region, the Horn of Africa, and lands bordering the Indian Ocean).¹² When Meropius’s ship was attacked at one port and he was killed, the two youths were spared and taken as captives to the king of that region. The king made Aedesius his cupbearer and Frumentius was made treasurer and secretary. When the king died, leaving his queen and a young son, the queen asked Frumentius and Aedesius to help administer the kingdom until the child was old enough to govern. The two young men agreed to stay. In addition to his administrative tasks, Frumentius took an interest in the Graeco-Roman merchants who frequented the kingdom, seeking out those who were Christians and organizing them into groups for Christian worship. According to Socrates, a few of the local “Indians” also became Christians at this point.¹³ Once the late king’s son was old enough to assume responsibility for the kingdom, the two former captives received reluctant permission from the new king and his mother to leave the country. While Aedesius returned to Tyre and to his family, Frumentius travelled to

11 The term “Ethiopian” in Acts 8.27 (Αἰθίοψ, Αἰθίοποι) probably refers to Meroë and its surrounding area, since “Candace” or “Kandike” (Κανδάκη in Acts 8.27) was a title used for several known queens of Meroë. See Edward Ullendorff, “Candace (Acts VIII. 27) and the Queen of Sheba”, *New Testament Studies* 2, 1955–56, 53–6.

12 Rufinus’s *Ecclesiastical History* is considered the primary source for this narrative, as Rufinus claims to have had the report directly from Aedesius, Frumentius’s fellow captive. Socrates Scholasticus’s contemporary and almost verbatim rendering of Rufinus’s account is found in Socrates’s *Ecclesiastical History*, I.19, in A. C. Zenos, “The ecclesiastical history of Socrates Scholasticus”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. II, Socrates, Sozomeus: Church Histories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 23. A translator and commentator of Rufinus notes that “all that is valuable in his history is incorporated into the works of Socrates” (William Henry Fremantle, “Prolegomena on the life and words of Rufinus”, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. III, Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, Etc.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 411). For an English translation of Rufinus, see A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 26–7, reproduced also in Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 98–9. For a discussion of this history which includes further consideration of later Ethiopian documentary sources, see Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 98–100.

13 Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.19.

Alexandria and reported to Athanasius, who had recently become bishop. Frumentius begged Athanasius to send a bishop and clergy to the small Christian community he had left in Aksum. After careful consideration, Athanasius responded by consecrating Frumentius himself and commissioning him to return to the kingdom from which he had just come.¹⁴

Frumentius is counted in Ethiopian history as the first bishop of Aksum and is known as Abba Salama, “Father of Peace”. On his return, Frumentius apparently succeeded in converting the young king, Ezana, to Christianity.¹⁵ Numismatic evidence from Aksum corroborates accounts of a conversion during Ezana’s reign. Some of the coins issued in Ezana’s name bear the crescent and disk motif characteristic of pre-Christian Aksumite religious iconography, while other coins are marked with a cross. Scholarly consensus is that the crescent and disk motif belongs to Ezana’s earlier pre-conversion period, while the cross indicates a change in Ezana’s religious status.¹⁶ The introduction of Christianity into Aksumite civilization seems to have been a “top-down” social process.¹⁷ Similar cross motifs do not appear in pottery or other everyday items of Ezana’s period, and are not found in widespread use among the population for another two centuries.¹⁸

III. The Ezana inscriptions

Four known inscriptions of Ezana are surveyed here, representing different phases in a reconstruction of Ezana’s religious development. The first two, one a nearly identical version of the other, describe Ezana’s subjugation of a rebelling ethnic group. In these presumably earlier inscriptions Ezana presents himself as “son of the unconquered god Ares” (*Mahrem* in Ge’ez). The third inscription, written in Ge’ez and concerning a victory over the Noba people, has been of interest to scholars because Ezana makes reference to “the Lord of Heaven” and “the Lord of all”. This has led scholars to speculate whether Ezana had at this point made a transition to

- 14 Sergew Hable Sellassie suggests, “Because [Frumentius and Aedesius] were partly ‘co-regents’, they must have had access to all the secrets of the government, but here [Rufinus] presents Aedesius as a man who lacks elementary historical and geographical knowledge. He did not even know who the king was or what the name of the city and country in which they had spent so long a time was ... For this reason, it is hard to believe that Aedesius did in fact ever deliver such information to Rufinus in person. We must suppose one of two things: either Rufinus never met Aedesius and the information was gathered from common people, or he met him, but wrote his account long afterwards when he had forgotten many details” (Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 100).
- 15 A. H. M. Jones argues, “The fact that this, Frumentius’ crowning achievement, is not mentioned in Rufinus’ story is good evidence of its authenticity. Aedesius, Rufinus’ informant, could tell him of the part of Frumentius’ career which he himself had witnessed; of his later evangelical work he had only the vaguest reports” (Jones, and Monroe, *History*, 28–9).
- 16 See Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 189–94; R. Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 26–7.
- 17 See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 104–05.
- 18 See *The Aksum Archaeological Area: A Preliminary Assessment* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 2000), 25.

monotheism, and also to question whether the nature of that monotheism was pagan, Jewish or Christian. This scholarly debate was transformed by the publication in 1970 of the fourth inscription, written in Greek, in which Ezana also recounts a military campaign against the Noba and in doing so expresses a clearly Christian and trinitarian religious viewpoint. These inscriptions combine to give a glimpse into Ezana's possible religious development, as well as illustrating the use of Greek during this early period in Ethiopian history.

a. Inscriptions 1 and 2 (DAE 4 and 4 bis)

Inscription 1 was published in 1913 by Enno Littmann in the report of the 1906 *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*.¹⁹ The inscription, known as DAE 4, is written in Greek on one side of a stele. On the other side are inscriptions both in Ge'ez and in what appears to be Sabaeen (South Arabian), but what scholars have suggested is actually Ge'ez written in Sabaeen script.²⁰ Each of the three versions is essentially the same report of Ezana's subjugation of a rebellion by a particular ethnic group, the Beja people. The Ge'ez version is slightly longer than the Greek due to additional statements at the end comprising an imprecation against anyone who would harm the stele, statements which do not appear in the Greek version. This stele once stood along the road entering Aksum from the east, but was moved by the Italians to facilitate the widening of the road during their 1936–41 occupation of Ethiopia. Its present location is in a small park in the centre of Aksum town.

Of interest is Ezana's self-identification at the beginning of the inscription (lines 1–6), given here in Littmann's reconstructed Greek text and my translation:²¹

Ἄειζανᾶς βασιλεὺς Ἀζωμιτῶν...
 ...βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, υἱὸς θεοῦ
 ἀνικῆτου Ἄρεως

Azanas, king of the Aksumites...
...king of kings, son of the
invincible god Ares...

19 Enno Littmann *et al.*, *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, Bd. IV: *Sabäische, Griechische und Altbabylonische Inschriften* (Berlin: Reimer, 1913). Copies of the original DAE have become relatively difficult to find, but the inscriptions are also available in E. Bernand, A. J. Drewes and R. Schneider, *Recueil des Inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des Périodes Pré-Axoumite et Axoumite* (2 vols; Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1991). *Tome I: Les Documents* includes reconstructed texts of the inscriptions, while *Tome II: Les Planches* offers good quality photographs of the stelae. Phillipson has produced an updated English edition of Littman's descriptions of Aksumite monuments in DAE: David W. Phillipson, *The Monuments of Axum* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1997).

20 See Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 246.

21 Bernand *et al.*, *Recueil*, I, 364–5; see Littman, *DAE*, 4–7.

Ezana (Azanas) then explains that he sent his two brothers to put down a rebellion by the Beja people. Following a description of how generously he afterwards resettled and provisioned the offending group, in the final lines of the inscription (lines 28–31) Ezana turns to a thanksgiving to Ares:

...ὕπερ δὲ ε[ὕ]-
 χαριστίας τοῦ μαι γεννήσαντος ἀνικήτου Ἄρεως
 ἀνεθήκα αὐτῷ ἀνδριάντα χρύσου α κ[αὶ] ἀργύ-
 ραιον ἓνα κ[αὶ] χαλκοῦς γ, ἐπ’ ἀγαθῷ.

...*In behalf of the favour
 of the one who begot me, the invincible Ares,
 I erected to him statues, one gold and one silver
 and three brass, for good.*²²

Richard Pankhurst notes that in such inscriptions pre-Christian Aksumites equated their pantheon of gods, derived from South Arabia, with the ancient Greek gods. Chief among the Aksumite deities were Astar (= Zeus, king of the gods), Mahrem (= Ares, god of war), and Baher (= Poseidon, god of the sea).²³ An additional Greek inscription from Abba Pantaleon near Aksum, known as DAE 2, also makes reference to “the invincible Ares of Aksum”.²⁴

Inscription 2 is from another trilingual inscribed stele discovered in 1980, nearly identical to the stele of Inscription 1 (DAE 4) in form and content, and for this reason is known as DAE 4 *bis*.²⁵ The stele remains where it was found, protected by a small purpose-built hut in the Bete Giyorgis archaeological site just to the north-west of the present-day town of Aksum. Unlike DAE 4, the Greek text of this version does contain the same imprecation against anyone damaging the stele which the Geʿez contains. In this inscription Ezana affirms that besides erecting the five statues, he “presented [this stele] to heaven and to earth and to the one who begot me, invincible Ares” (παρεθέμην αὐτὴν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τῇ γῆ καὶ τῷ μαι γεννήσαντι ἀνικήτῳ Ἄρει, lines 29–31).

b. Inscription 3 (DAE 11)

The third inscription, written in Geʿez only, was also included in Littmann’s 1913 publication and is known as DAE 11. Of the four it has engendered perhaps the most controversy over its theological content, as Ezana’s

22 In what sense this phrase, “for good”, is to be taken is uncertain.

23 Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 24; See also Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 196–202.

24 Τῷ ἀνικήτῳ Ἄρει τοῦ Ἀξωμείτ[ου]; see Littman, *DAE*, 2–3, Bernard *et al.*, *Receuil*, I, 362–3.

25 To my knowledge, only the Greek text of the inscription has been published, first in Etienne Bernard, “Nouvelle version de la campagne du roi Ezana contre les Bedja”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45, 1982, 105–14, and also available in Bernard *et al.*, *Receuil*, I, 368–9. See also Schneider, “Notes”, 600–01.

statements now have a monotheistic cast. In it Ezana describes a military victory over the Noba people which he ascribes to “the might of the Lord of heaven, who has created me, of the Lord of all, by whom the King is beloved”. Kaplan points out that the phrase “the Lord of Heaven” occurs seven times in the inscription.²⁶ This omission of Ares/Mahrem, but without any overtly Christian or trinitarian language, has led to questions about Ezana’s religious status at this point.

Most scholars conclude that this inscription is monotheistic. At issue is whether that monotheism is pagan, Jewish or Christian in nature. Kaplan provides a concise overview of the debate:

While some scholars, including Conti Rossini, Guidi, Sergew Hable Sellassie, and Bairu Tafla accepted the fact that Ezana had become a Christian, others, noting the absence of specifically Christian formulae in the inscription, offered differing interpretations. The Russian Scholar Yuri Kobichtchanov argued for a vague monotheism similar to that found in some South Arabian inscriptions. A. Z. Aescoly suggested that Ezana had become a Jew. Ephraim Isaac wrote that both the phrase “the Lord of heaven” and the use of the cross on Ezana’s later coins were in keeping with strong “Jewish-Christian” tendencies in Ethiopian Christianity.²⁷

Ethiopian historian Sergew Hable Sellassie argues that this inscription was commissioned by a Christianized Ezana. He notes that for Ezana to begin the inscription “by the power of the Lord of Heaven”, “is completely different from ‘Son of Ares’, and ... shows the religious change in Ethiopia”.²⁸ Schneider, in his study of Aksumite royal inscriptions, similarly concludes that this inscription marks more than simply a step by Ezana towards Christianity, but is itself Christian. In spite of the lack of trinitarian language, he argues, the fact that a severe break has been made with earlier paganism is demonstrated by the modifications to the conventions of pagan inscriptions, specifically, the lack of names of traditional deities. Schneider cites with approval Rahlfs’s comment that if Ezana speaks so insistently of a single all-powerful god, it is because for him the monotheistic nature of the Christian God is the most important aspect of that new faith.²⁹

c. Inscription 4 (Caquot-Nautin)

The discussion of Ezana’s religious commitment in DAE 11 was largely superseded by the discovery of more pertinent material. The publication in 1970 of a recently revealed Ezana inscription provided new and significant data regarding Ezana’s status vis-à-vis Christianity.³⁰ In this last known

26 See Stephen Kaplan, “Ezana’s conversion reconsidered”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, 1982, 103.

27 Kaplan, “Ezana’s conversion”, 103.

28 Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 102.

29 See Schneider, “Notes”, 611–14.

30 Francis Anfray, André Caquot and Pierre Nautin, “Une nouvelle inscription grecque d’Ézana, roi d’Axoum”, *Journal des Savants*, 1970, 260–74.

inscription Ezana explicitly invokes a Christian and trinitarian God as his “helper” and “leader” in a successful military campaign against the Noba people.

Anfray reports what he learned about the provenance of the inscription: that this Greek stele and two others in Ge‘ez were first discovered by a local clergyman, the Aleqa Zeru Gebre-Egzie, when he was in the process of digging the foundations for a new house in the Enda Semon sector of Aksum, near the place where Littmann’s German expedition had uncovered the ruins of a palace about a dozen years previously. Concerned that his building project not be halted, he kept the discovery a secret, but made arrangements for the stelae to pass after his death into the care of clergy at the historic church of Maryam Seyon (St Mary of Zion) in Aksum. He died in September 1968, and in May 1969 Afray and others working in Aksum with the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology were informed of these previously unknown inscriptions.³¹

Below is Caquot and Nautin’s reconstruction of the text, in which they use upper-case letters to refer to uncertain place names or proper names, followed by my English translation with Caquot and Nautin’s upper-case terms transliterated from Greek:³²

Ἐν τῇ πίστι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ [πα]-
 τρός καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἀγί[ο]υ [π]νεύματος, τῷ
 4 [σ]ώσαντί μοι τὸ βασίλειον τῇ πίστι τοῦ υἱοῦ
 αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ, τῷ βοηθήσαντί μοι
 τῷ καὶ πάντοτε μοι βοηθοῦντι ἐγὼ
 Ἀζανάς βασιλεὺς Ἀξωμιτῶν καὶ Ὀμηρι-
 8 [τῶν κ]αὶ τοῦ ΠΕΕΙΔΑΝ καὶ Σαβαειτῶν καὶ
 τοῦ Σ[ΙΛ]ΕΗΛ καὶ τοῦ ΧΑΣΩ καὶ Βουγαιτῶν
 [κ]αὶ τοῦ Τιαμῶ, ΒΙΣΙ ΑΛΗΝΕ, υἱὸς τοῦ ΕΛΛΕ-
 ΑΜΙΔΑ, δούλος χριστοῦ, εὐχαριστῶ Κυρίῳ,
 12 τῷ [θεῷ] μου καὶ οὐ δύναμαι εἰπὶν πλήρης
 τὰς εὐχαριστίας αὐτοῦ, ὅτι οὐ δύναται
 τὸ στό[μ]α μου καὶ ἡ διάνοιά μου πάσας
 τὰς εὐχαριστίας ἄσπερ ἐποίησεν μετ’ ἐ-
 16 μου, ὅτι ἐπ[οί]ησεν ἐμοὶ ἡσχύν καὶ δύναμιν
 καὶ ἐχαρίσ[α]τό μοι ὄ[ν]ομα μέγα διὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ
 [α]ὐτοῦ εἰς ὃν ἐπ[ί]στευσα [κα]ὶ ἐποίησέν μοι ὄ-

31 See Anfray *et al.*, “Une nouvelle inscription”, 261–2. Anfray reports that the other side of the stele on which this Greek inscription is found contains an inscription in Sabaean characters, with a cross engraved at the end, and indicates that Schneider would publish the text in the future. However, in a 1987 article Schneider (who has since died) reports that the inscription, written in Ge‘ez in the South Arabian alphabet, is badly preserved, and that this inscription and the other Ge‘ez stelae found at the same time are as yet only available in preliminary publication (Schneider, “Notes”, 600).

32 The text and Caquot and Nautin’s French translation are available in Anfray *et al.*, “Une nouvelle inscription”, 265–6; text only in Bernand *et al.*, *Receuil*, I, 371–2.

[δ]ηγὸν πάσης τῆς βασιλείας μου διὰ τὴν πί-
 στ[ι]ν τοῦ χριστοῦ τ[ῶ] θελήματι [αὐ]τοῦ καὶ
 20 δυνάμι τοῦ χριστοῦ, ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁδήγησέν
 μαι καὶ εἰς α[ὐ]τὸν πιστεύω καὶ αὐτὸς ἐγέ-
 νετό μοι ὁδηγός. Ἐξῆλθα πολεμήσαι
 24 τοὺς ΝΩΒΑ, ὅτι κατέκραζαν κατ' αὐτῶν
 οἱ ΜΑΝΓΑΡΘΩ καὶ ΧΑΣΑ καὶ ΑΤΙΑΔΙΤΑΙ
 καὶ ΒΑΡΕΩΤΑΙ λέγοντες ὅτι κατεπόνη-
 σαν ἡμᾶς οἱ ΝΩΒΑ, βοηθήσατε ἡμῖν, ὅτι ἔ-
 θληψαν ἡμᾶς ἀποκτένοντες. Καὶ ἀνέστην
 28 ἐν τῇ δυνάμι τοῦ θεοῦ χριστοῦ, εἰς ὃν ἐπί-
 στευσα, καὶ ὁδήγησέν με. Καὶ ἀνέστην ἀ-
 πό Ἄξῶμεος ἐν μινὶ κατὰ Ἄξῶμιτὰς ΜΑΓΑ-
 ΒΙΘΕ ἢ ἡμέρα σαμβάτω πίστι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ
 ἔφθασα εἰς ΜΑΜΒΑΡΙΑΝ καὶ ἐκίθην ἐσιτάρχησα

By faith in God and by the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, to the one who saved the kingdom³³ for me by faith in his son Jesus Christ, to the one who helped me and who always helps me, I, Azanas, king of the Aksumites and Himyarites and of REEIDAN and the Sabaeans and of SILEĒL and of KHASŌ and the Bejas and of Tiamo, BISI ALĒNE, son of ELLE-AMIDA, a servant of Christ,³⁴ give thanks to the Lord my God. And I am not able to tell the full measure of his favour, because my mouth and my mind are not able [to tell] all the gracious things which he has done for me: that he made me strong and powerful and he gave me a great name through his son in whom I believed, and he made me leader of all my kingdom because of faith in Christ, by his will and the power of Christ; because he himself led me,³⁵ and in him I believe and he himself became my leader. I went out to make war on the NŌBA, because the MANGARTHŌ and KHASA and ATIADITAI and BAREŌTAI cried out against them, saying, “The NŌBA have made us suffer.³⁶ Help us, because they oppressed us, killing us”. And I rose up in the power of God Christ, in whom I believed, and he led me. And I went up from Aksum in the Aksumite month of MAGABITHE,³⁷ on the eighth day, a Saturday, by faith in God, and I reached MAMBARIA and from that place I provisioned [my army].

33 Or “kingship”.

34 The Greek grammar makes it clear that it is Ezana who is the “servant of Christ”, not Elle Amida.

35 Or “that he himself led me”.

36 Or “afflicted us”, “oppressed us”, “distressed us”.

37 In Amharic, the modern Ethiopian national language, “Megabit” is the name of the spring month equivalent to March–April.

IV. Linguistic and theological commentary

The significance of this inscription in relation to the Arian controversy lies in the trinitarian formula and the christological designations found within the inscription. Around the year 318, Arius of Alexandria began to air his view that Christ, the Word of God, was neither co-eternal nor co-equal with God the Father, but was a created being – divine and yet subordinate to the Father.³⁸ Arius was a popular presbyter (priest) in Alexandria. His theological position was widely accepted and quickly spread beyond Alexandria into other Eastern centres of Christianity. Although Arius’s view was investigated and rejected as heresy at the Council of Nicaea in 325, Arianism continued to hold sway, particularly in the Greek-speaking church, through much of the fourth century. As Bray writes:

Constantine tried to patch things up with Arius in 332, and swung away from the [Nicene] orthodox diehards who refused compromise. This position remained the official imperial policy until 361, when Julian the Apostate renounced Christianity altogether. Julian died in battle in 363 and his successor Jovian reverted to orthodoxy for a while, but in 364 *his* successor Valens leaned once more towards Arianism. It can therefore be said with justice that Arian sympathizers ruled the state for forty-three of the fifty-six years which separated the Council of Nicaea from that of Constantinople in 381, compared with only eleven years in which the orthodox were in the ascendant.³⁹

Thus Arianism was the official policy of the Roman empire from 332 under Constantine until the death of Valens in 378, except for the three years of Julian’s return to paganism and Jovian’s brief reign (361–364). Irwin and Sunquist observe, “To someone living in the fourth century ... the triumph of Nicaea was anything but certain”.⁴⁰ It was not until after Valens’s death, and the reaffirmation at the Council of Constantinople in 381 of Nicene orthodoxy concerning the full deity of Christ and the identity and co-equality of the Son, or Word, of God with God the Father, that Arianism lost its dominant place in the Christian church. In short, for much of the fourth century “official” Christianity was Arian, especially in the East.⁴¹

38 While Arius may have been among the first to popularize this view, it is not limited to ancient times but is, for example, essentially the position taken by Jehovah’s Witnesses today.

39 Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils & Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 109.

40 Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement, Vol. I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 173.

41 For an introduction to Arius’s Christology and the history of the Arian–Nicene controversy see, for example, Bray, *Creeds, Councils & Christ*, 104–18; Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Contours of Christian Theology, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 125–9; Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, second edition, 2000), 48–63; Irvin and Sunquist, *History*, 173–9; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, revised edition, 2003), 223–51.

One of the strongest voices against Arianism in the post-Nicene period was Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria from 328 until his death in 373. As a young man Athanasius had attended the Council of Nicaea, and he devoted much of his life to the defence of the Nicene position that the Father and Son were from eternity equal members of the Godhead, against Arius's teaching of Christ as a created and subordinate being. When Frumentius went to Alexandria to request a bishop for the newly emerging Ethiopian church it was, as we have seen, Athanasius who consecrated him and sent him back as the first bishop of Ethiopia. Thus it is not beyond reason to postulate that Frumentius shared, or came to share, Athanasius's anti-Arian Christology, and by implication, that Frumentius's influence shaped Ezana's own understanding of Christ.⁴²

a. Christological evidence: syntax

Against this historical background, it is noteworthy that Ezana's inscription begins with a reference to "faith in God" followed closely by the grammatically parallel phrase "the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit" (τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος).⁴³ The syntax used here for the members of the Trinity, in which a single definite article "the" is used for two or more nouns joined by "and" without repeating the article, is known familiarly to Greek grammarians as a Granville Sharp construction, after the eighteenth-century British scholar who described its use.⁴⁴ In such situations it is generally the case that the conjoined nouns each refer to the same person. As contemporary grammarian Daniel

42 It is purely speculative to conjecture as to what Frumentius's own theological influences may have been as a youth in Syria. However, the Antiochean East historically held a view of Christ in sharp distinction to that of Arius. Wallace-Hadrill notes that the first Christian writer to use the term "Trinity" of God "wrote in Antioch at the end of the second century but probably represented the tradition of the Syrian Church east of Antioch" (D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 67). Wallace-Hadrill observes that "Antioch was drawn into the [Arian] controversy at an early date. The great council of Nicaea in 325 originated in a council which met at Antioch the previous year ... mainly to combat the threat of Arianism" (Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 7). He also suggests that in terms of distinguishing the persons of the Trinity while maintaining a single Godhead, "the Antiochene conception of unity proved to be stronger than the Alexandrian conception of multiplicity, and the definition of Nicaea in 325 leaned more heavily upon the Antiochene tradition than upon the Alexandrian" (Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 74). Thus Frumentius may have been predisposed to be in sympathy with Athanasius's Christology.

43 Unfortunately, the first line of the inscription is in relatively poor condition compared to the clarity of the rest of the text. However, reference to the photograph in Anfray *et al.*, "Une nouvelle inscription", 264, shows that their reconstruction is to be accepted. Even without the word "power" (δυνάμι, the most difficult word to read), the syntax of the three nouns conjoined by *kai* is legible.

44 "When the copulative καὶ connects two nouns of the same case, (viz. nouns {either substantive or adjective, or participles} of personal description respecting office, dignity, affinity, or connexion, and attributes, properties, or qualities, good or ill,) if the article ὁ or any of its cases, precedes the first of the said nouns or participles, and is not repeated before the second noun or participle, the latter always relates

Wallace notes, “In Greek, when two nouns are connected by *καί* [“and”] and the article precedes only the first noun, there is a close connection between the two. That connection always indicates at least some sort of *unity*. At a higher level, it may connote *equality*. At the highest level it may indicate *identity*”. Wallace goes on to list the three conditions for identity as being that neither noun is impersonal, neither noun is plural, and neither noun is a proper name, all of which seem to apply in the Ezana inscription.⁴⁵

Similar syntactical constructions are found in the New Testament at a number of points including christological contexts, e.g., Tit 2:13, “our great God and saviour Jesus Christ” (“*the* great God and saviour of us”; τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν), where “God” and “saviour” are equated, with only one article “the” modifying the two terms; and 2 Peter 1:1, “our God and saviour Jesus Christ” (“*the* God of us and saviour”; τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν καὶ σωτῆρος), where again “God” and “saviour” are set in parallel as designations of Jesus Christ with one article.⁴⁶ However, this construction is *not* found in the New Testament with reference to the Trinity. The omission of the definite article between persons of the Trinity in Ezana’s text stands in marked contrast to Jesus’ own command in Matt. 28:19 that his disciples baptize new converts “in the name of *the* Father and of *the* Son and of *the* Holy Spirit” (τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος). Thus the use in this inscription is not simply an imitation of biblical language and may in fact be a conscious theological choice influenced by concerns to assert more explicitly the identity of the three members of the Trinity.

The question left for the modern scholar to ponder is whether this phrasing is indeed an intentional theological affirmation; whether it is an inadvertent expression by a scribe with only a naïve knowledge of Greek; whether it is simply an imitation – conscious or unconscious – of language encountered elsewhere (and if so, where?); or whether it reflects grammatical interference by similar structures in the mother tongue or other language of the scribe.

One of the previous inscriptions, DAE 4 *bis*, provides a counter-example in which the definite article “the” is supplied for each member of a triad group whose members are mutually distinct. In lines 29–31 of DAE 4 *bis* Ezana is said to have “presented [this stele] to *the* heaven and to *the* earth and to *the* one who begot me, invincible Ares” (τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τῇ γῇ καὶ τῷ μαι γεννήσαντι ἀνικῆτῳ Ἀρέει), where “heaven”,

to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun or participle: i.e. it denotes a farther description of the first-named person...” (Granville Sharp, *Remarks on the Uses of the Definitive Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament; containing many new proofs of the Divinity of Christ from passages which are wrongly translated in the common English Version* (Durham, 1798)).

45 D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 270.

46 For more general examples of the Granville Sharp Rule in the New Testament, see, *inter alia*, Mark 6:3, Eph. 6:21, Heb. 3:1, Rev. 1:9.

“earth”, and “Ares” are presumably construed as separate entities.⁴⁷ This does not in itself guarantee that the scribe of Caquot-Nautin had a similar facility in Greek as the DAE 4 *bis* scribe. However, throughout the Caquot-Nautin inscription the scribe shows evidence of using the article appropriately at the beginning of noun clusters joined by “and”.⁴⁸ In lines 1 and 2, separate articles are inserted before “*the* faith in God and *the* power of the Father ...”, where “faith” and “power” are separate concepts (τῆ πίστι ... καὶ τῆ δυνάμει). Similarly, in lines 12–14, where Ezana proclaims that “my mouth and my mind are not able [to tell] all the gracious things which he has done for me”, the words “mouth” and “mind” are each supplied with an article (“*the* mouth of me and *the* mind of me”; τὸ στόμα μου καὶ ἡ διάνοιά μου). Where the article is omitted, the scribe also gives evidence of appropriate use. In lines 24–5, four people groups are joined with one article: “*the* Mangarthō and Khasa and Atiaditai and Bareōtai” (οἱ Μανγαρθω καὶ Χασα καὶ Ατιαδιται καὶ Βαρεωται). This is consistent with usage elsewhere when multiple groups are portrayed as closely connected and only one article is supplied, as in the New Testament examples in Acts 17:8, “*the* Epicureans and Stoics” (τῶν Ἐπικουρίων καὶ Στωϊκῶν), and Acts 23:7, “*the* Pharisees and Sadducees” (τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαίων).⁴⁹ Because these are proper nouns and are plural, they do not fit the criteria listed above for identity in a Granville Sharp construction.⁵⁰ That is, the four names are not understood as applying to a single ethnic group. Similarly, the scribe does not include a second article in lines 19–20 in the phrase “his will and the power of Christ” (“*the* will of him and power of Christ”; τῷ θελήματι αὐτοῦ καὶ δυνάμει τοῦ χριστοῦ). This is a stylistic choice, but as “will” and “power” are abstract or impersonal nouns, this too is not subject to the criteria listed above, and so does not serve as evidence against the scribe’s ability to make use of a Granville Sharp type of syntactical construction where desired. Thus there is no reason to conclude that the scribe omits the article “the” in the trinitarian formula of lines 1–2 simply because he does not know how to use it.

As Robertson observes, the use of one article before several attributes joined by “and” applied to the same person or thing “is the normal idiom in accord with ancient usage”.⁵¹ It appears likely that the syntax in lines 1–2, “*the* Father and Son and Holy Spirit”, is chosen to indicate the

47 Robertson notes, “Obviously, therefore, whether one or more articles are to be used depends on the point of view of the speaker or writer” (A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 787).

48 I am indebted to Margaret Sim of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology for drawing my attention to some of these examples.

49 See Robertson, *Grammar*, 787.

50 In the proper nouns of lines 6–9, the scribe seems to follow a pattern of supplying an article for singular place names and omitting it for people group designations with plural endings: “Azanas, king of Aksumites and Himyarites and of *the* REEIDAN and of Sabaeans and of *the* SILEËL and of *the* KHASŌ and of Bejas and of *the* Tiamo ...”.

51 Robertson, *Grammar*, 785.

identity – or at minimum, the unity and equality – of the three members of the Trinity.

b. Christological evidence: terminology

Additional evidence for an anti-Arian Christology behind this inscription is supplied by the christological expression found in line 28, where Ezana states that he rose up “in the power of God Christ in whom I believed” (τοῦ θεοῦ χριστοῦ; note here as well that one article “the” is used for the compound designation “the God Christ”). This striking terminology “God Christ” may be intended as a title for Christ, or may alternately be understood epexegetically, giving the sense “God, that is, Christ in whom I believed”.

It should be noted that the Greek syntax also allows for an alternative reading, “the God of Christ”, making “of Christ” modify “God” to indicate a relationship between “God” and “Christ” without specifying the nature of that relationship, even though this may not be the most natural reading in context. This is allowed by an ambiguity arising from the fact that in this phrase both the nouns “God” and “Christ” occur in the genitive case.⁵² However, the inclination of previous translators has been to handle the two nouns as parallel terms rather than making “Christ” in some way grammatically subordinate to “God” and there is no compelling reason to depart from that understanding. Caquot and Nautin translate this phrase *la puissance du Dieu Christ* (“the power of God Christ”),⁵³ and Munro-Hay suggests *by the power of Christ the God in whom I have believed*.⁵⁴

By this generally accepted reading the structure identifies Christ with God, and conforms to Nicene orthodoxy. This phrase “the power of God Christ” in line 28 (τῆ δυνάμι τοῦ θεοῦ χριστοῦ) is closely parallel to “power of Christ” in line 20 (δυνάμι τοῦ χριστοῦ), as well as the trinitarian formula “the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit” in lines 1–2 (τῆ δυνάμι τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος), further suggesting that “God” and “Christ” are being equated and understood jointly as members of the Trinity. The translation of line 28 offered in Munro-Hay, *by the power of Christ the God in whom I have believed*, is in fact insufficient in that it reverses the order of the terms “God” and “Christ” as present in the text and does not quite reflect the strength of the identification that is made here between the two terms. By so translating, the christological significance of this phrase in terms of the contemporary Arian controversy is muted.

52 “God” is genitive case here because it serves as the source or agent of “power” (“the power of God”; τῆ δυνάμι τοῦ θεοῦ). “Christ” is also in genitive case (“of Christ”; χριστοῦ). The question is whether the genitive is used for “Christ” because it is being treated in parallel with the first noun “God” – and so both terms would normally occur in the same grammatical case – or as a separate syntactical choice showing an undefined relationship between “God” and “Christ”. This type of ambiguity would not have arisen if “God” had occurred in any grammatical case other than genitive. In those circumstances “Christ” would either have occurred in a matching case clearly indicating the identification of the two nouns, or in the genitive case allowing an undefined relationship.

53 Anfray *et al.*, “Une nouvelle inscription”, 266.

54 Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 229.

The sequence “God Christ” (θεὸς χριστός) appears nowhere in the New Testament. Nor does it seem to appear in the writings of Athanasius.⁵⁵ A preliminary English-language search of Athanasius’s major writings found no instances of the phrase “God Christ”, and only one appearance of the reverse sequence “Christ God”, in a quotation of 1 Cor. 1:24 in a grammatical usage not parallel to this one.⁵⁶ A more extensive search for this phrasing in Athanasius and other contemporary writers may shed additional light on sources influencing the development of Christology in early Ethiopian Christianity.

V. Historical context: the Arian controversy

If it is the case that the terminology “God Christ” (or even “God, that is, Christ”), combined with the trinitarian formula of lines 1–2, reflects a christological position held by Ezana and/or Frumentius, this inscriptional evidence suggests how closely early Christianity in Ethiopia was in line with the anti-Arian position. Even if this is not Athanasian language, it is clearly consistent with Athanasian theology, that is, the Christology of Nicene orthodoxy. In light of the role Athanasius played in Frumentius’s position in Aksum, such anti-Arianism can be explained. But even so, it is striking that Ezana (under the influence, one may assume, of Frumentius) expresses a Nicene Christology in the face of immense imperial pressure for the church as a whole to adopt Arianism.

Even though Aksum lay at the far borders of the Roman Empire, it was not beyond the reach of imperial displeasure with Nicene Christology and with Athanasius himself. This is clearly expressed in the letter written by the Emperor Constantius to Ezana and his brother Saizana (Shaizana), preserved in Athanasius’s *Defence before Constantius*.⁵⁷ In this letter Constantius instructs Ezana and Saizana to send Frumentius to Alexandria for the purpose of having his theology examined by Bishop George, Athanasius’s pro-Arian usurper in Alexandria from 356. Constantius was a fierce defender of Arianism, known for his pursuit of those who refused to

55 Caquot and Nautin also observe that the phrase “God Christ” is not familiar to Greek-language theologians; see Anfray *et al.*, “Une nouvelle inscription”, 272.

56 Works searched on the Catholic New Advent internet site (www.newadvent.org) include *Against the Heathen*, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, *Deposition of Arius*, *Council of Nicaea/Letter of Eusebius*, *On Luke 10:22 (Matthew 11:27)*, *Circular Letter*, *Apologia Contra Arianos*, *De Decretis*, *De Sententia Dionysii*, *Vita S. Antoni (Life of St. Anthony)*, *Ad Episcopos Aegypti et Libyae*, *Apologia ad Constantium*, *Apologia de Fuga*, *Historia Arianorum*, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, *De Synodis*, *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, *Historia Acephala*, *Letters*. Unfortunately, searching in English or in other modern languages means missing underlying Greek phrasing which may be obscured by translation. A more precise analysis would involve working with a searchable electronic Greek text of Athanasius’s extant writings (not available to this author in Ethiopia), or searching the Greek text of these writings manually.

57 Stevenson dates this letter *c.* 357; see J. Stevenson (ed.), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church AD 337–461* (London: SPCK, 1966), 34–5.

adhere to the imperial position. Gonzales observes that “... after the death of Constantine II, the West was united under Constans, and Constantius was forced to follow a more moderate policy. Eventually, however, Constantius became sole emperor, and it was then that, as Jerome said, ‘the entire world woke from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian’”.⁵⁸

In this letter Constantius emphasizes the link between Frumentius and Athanasius who consecrated him bishop and “who is guilty of ten thousand crimes”.⁵⁹ Frumentius is called to prove that he “is in no respect opposed to the laws of the Church and the established faith”, that is, the imperial policy of Arianism. Frumentius is warned that otherwise “it will surely be very evident, that he has been induced by the persuasions of the wicked Athanasius, thus to indulge impiety against God”, the impiety of Nicene, or anti-Arian, Christology. Athanasius himself is denounced in the letter because he has, among other things, “blaspheme[d] the supreme God” by making Christ his equal in the Nicene sense. The end result put forth by Constantius is that in the aftermath of his examination by George, Frumentius will “return home, perfectly acquainted with all matters that concern the Church, having derived much instruction” – in other words, in accordance with the imperial church’s adherence to Arianism.

It appears, however, that this letter did not achieve its aim: Frumentius did not return to Alexandria, and instead remained as Bishop of Aksum.⁶⁰ Ezana’s inscription suggests that he remained firmly anti-Arian in his Christology. This, of course, raises the question of whether this inscription commemorating Ezana’s campaign against the Noba is to be dated before or after the letter of Constantius, a question which cannot yet be answered with any certainty.⁶¹ However, should the inscription be dated before the letter, and imperial Arianism be presumed to have prevailed in Aksum afterwards as a result of Constantius’s intervention, one would need to explain: first, why this inscription was allowed to remain intact (for example, why anti-Arian phraseology on the stele was not effaced); secondly, the positive view of Frumentius and negative view of Arius that are found in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition to the present day; and thirdly, how Ethiopian Christianity continued along the trajectory of the “high” Christology it subsequently followed in its embrace of Monophysitism.

58 Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, reprinted 2001), 167; see also, Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 100–01.

59 English translation of Constantius’s letter is taken from Archibald Robertson, *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, reprinted 1995), 250–51; see also, Stevenson, *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies*, 34–5; S. Pankhurst, *Cultural History*, 58–9; Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 101–2.

60 See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *History*, 102.

61 For example, Irvin and Sunquist suggest a date of c. 350 for the stele, presumably before Constantius’s letter of 357, although they offer no rationale for this dating (Irvin and Sunquist, *History*, 218).

Although it may be true, as Pankhurst points out, that the coming of Christianity reinforced ties between Aksum and the Roman Empire,⁶² the version of Christianity that Aksum apparently adopted set Ethiopian Christianity firmly against imperial policy for most of the fourth century.

VI. Conclusion

Four fourth-century inscriptions of Ezana, first Christian king of Aksum, have been surveyed in this article, with special attention to the fourth, Ezana's only known post-conversion inscription, written in Greek. Syntax and terminology in Ezana's inscription point to a strongly anti-Arian Christology influenced, it may be assumed, by Frumentius and his association with Athanasius of Alexandria. The trinitarian formula "the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit" is structured in such a way as to assert the identity of the three members of the Trinity. The phrase "in the power of God Christ" further equates Christ with God. This christological language is striking in light of the official policy of Arianism in imperial Christianity and of Constantius's attempt to force Frumentius's recall to Alexandria for theological examination. While the events linking Frumentius and Athanasius are well known from sources outside Ethiopia, this inscription serves as the first internal documentary evidence for Ezana's – and presumably Frumentius's – anti-Arian stance.

The inscriptions and events discussed in this article pre-date by approximately one hundred years the christological controversies associated with the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). While the history of Chalcedon is significant in understanding the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's later adherence to Monophysitism, interest in Chalcedonian theological issues among Ethiopian scholars may have overshadowed discussion of earlier christological developments and their implications for Ethiopian Christianity. In contrast to Chalcedon and the attempt to define the interplay between Christ's human and divine natures, the fourth-century christological controversies spanning the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 centred on the deity of Christ, and later by extension, the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. It is to these controversies, and to the stand against Arianism taken by Frumentius and Ezana, that this only known Christian inscription of Ezana bears witness. As new archaeological discoveries come to light in Aksum, more inscriptional evidence may become available in the search to uncover the earliest theological developments of the Ethiopian Church.

62 See R. Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 36.