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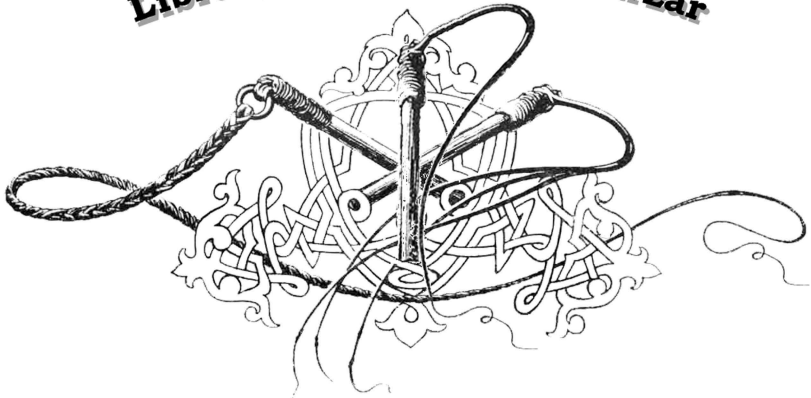
The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal

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THE ORIGIN OF THE *NOMINA SACRA*: A PROPOSAL

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The *nomina sacra* are a collection of words (ultimately, fifteen became common) written in special abbreviated forms in Christian sources to indicate their sacred character (see fig. 1).¹ The words given this special treatment fall into three groups: (1) the four earliest attested and most consistently rendered words, Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, Κύριος, Θεός; (2) three additional terms, which appear to be slightly later and less uniformly treated: πνεῦμα, ἄνθρωπος, σταυρός;² and (3) the remaining eight, πατήρ, υἱός, σωτήρ, μήτηρ, οὐρανός, Ἰσραήλ,

Earlier versions of this essay were given at the 1996 SBL Annual Meeting and to postgraduate seminars at the universities of St. Andrews and Aberdeen, and I thank all discussants for their comments. I particularly thank T. C. Skeat and John Gager for comments. I am also grateful to William Parkinson, one of my Ph.D. students, for discussing my ideas with me and for help in verifying Greek paleographical practices as discussed later in this essay. Mr. Parkinson's Ph.D. research is on the ritual functions and religious significance of Jesus' name in early Christianity.

¹ Of these fifteen words, some are nouns that can have a variety of references, of course, even in the case of Θεός and κύριος. In such cases, it is clear that the scribal aim (though not always consistently observed) was to write the words in the form of *nomina sacra* (i.e., in abbreviated forms) when they had sacred referents. The *nomina sacra* are briefly described in B. M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 36–37; C. H. Roberts, "Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament," in *Cambridge History of the Bible* (ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 1.60–61; H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 74–78; and now David Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments* (NTOA 31; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 16–31. Probably the most thorough discussion in English is C. H. Roberts, "Nomina Sacra: Origins and Significance," in *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt: The Schweich Lectures 1977* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979) 26–48.

² See M. Black, "The Chi-Rho Sign—Christogram and/or Staurogram?" in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 319–27, for an interesting discussion of the special scribal treatment of σταυρός and verbal cognates as well. For briefer discussion, but with good illustrations of examples from P66, P75, and *Gospel of Truth* (NH 1.3), see Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early*

Δαυειδ, Ἱεροσολήμ, which are abbreviated less consistently and appear to have joined the list of sacred terms latest.³ Ludwig Traube's 1907 book is usually credited with having drawn the attention of scholarly circles to this subject, and it is he from whom the label "*nomina sacra*" derives.⁴ Among more recent scholars, C. H. Roberts in particular has emphasized the importance of the *nomina sacra* as a distinguishing feature of early Christianity.⁵ The major questions connected with the *nomina sacra* are (1) whether this scribal practice originated in pre-Christian circles or was a Christian innovation, and (2) what the practice represents and what religious impetus lies behind it. In this essay I wish to review the issues involved and offer a proposal as to how and why the phenomenon may have begun in Christian circles.

I

The *nomina sacra* appear in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Slavonic, and Armenian sources, including manuscripts, inscriptions, amulets, and icons as well, down to the Middle Ages.⁶ It is, however, particularly significant for the investigation

Church (rev. ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 381–82. See also Kurt Aland, "Bemerkungen zur Alter und zur Entstehung des Christogramms anhand von Beobachtungen bei P66 und P75," in *Studien zur Überlieferung des Neuen Testaments und Seines Textes* (Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung 2; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967) 173–79.

³ In addition to the more well known fifteen, there are a few other terms written similarly but only in a few Christian sources (e.g., Pap. Bodmer vii and viii has Μτχαήλ, Νῶε, Σάρρα, Ἀβραάμ written with a stroke over them, and Pap. Bodmer xiii has the stroke over Ἀδάμ, δνιν, δυν, Αβρμ. Only the last three are abbreviations, but the stroke written above them appears to signal that they are being treated as sacred terms by the scribe. The Egerton Gospel has Μω (Μωϋσῆς), Ησας (Ἡσαΐας), Προφας (προφήτας), and one instance of βαλευσι (βασιλεύσι). The Nag Hammadi Coptic document *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NH 3.2) has ιχθός with a stroke over it, which likely makes it a *nomen sacrum* there.

⁴ Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung* (Munich: Beck, 1907).

⁵ See esp. Roberts, *Manuscript*, 26–48.

⁶ Traube discussed Greek and Latin evidence. A. H. R. E. Paap (*Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries* [Leiden: Brill, 1959]) updated Traube's discussion and gave reference to evidence that had appeared subsequent to Traube's study. Jose O'Callaghan (*Nomina Sacra in Papyrus Graecis Saeculi III Neotestamentarii* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970]) supplements Paap. See also O'Callaghan's list of Greek manuscripts of the fourth to eighth centuries in *SPap* 10 (1971) 99–122. For treatment of the *nomina sacra* in LXX manuscripts, see F. Bedodi, "'Nomina sacra' nei papiri veterotestamentari pre-christiani," *SPap* 13 (1974) 89–103; and Stanislaw Jankowski, "'I' 'nomina sacra' nei papiri dei LXX (secoli II e III d.C.)," *SPap* 16 (1977) 81–116. For examples of the *nomina sacra* on amulets, see Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Roman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; London: Geoffrey Cumberlege/Oxford University Press, 1950) 172, 183–85. On Slavonic evidence, see Ute Sill, "*Nomina Sacra*" im Altkirchenslavischen bis zum 11. Jahrhundert ("Forum Slavicum" 80; Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972). D. C. Parker has recently compared the *nomina sacra* in the Greek and Latin columns of Codex Bezae (D), with interesting results (*Codex Bezae: An Early Christian*

Figure 1. Illustrations of the *Nomina Sacra*1. Four Earliest *Nomina Sacra* (from second century manuscripts onward)

Ιησους	Contracted form = $\overline{Ις}$, $\overline{Ιυ}$, etc.; suspended form = $\overline{Ιη}$; conflate form = $\overline{Ιης}$
Χριστος	Contracted forms = $\overline{Χς}$, $\overline{Χυ}$, etc.
Θεος	Contracted forms = $\overline{Θς}$, $\overline{Θυ}$, etc.
Κυριος	Contracted forms = $\overline{Κς}$, $\overline{Κυ}$, etc.

2. Other *Nomina Sacra*

Πνευμα	$\overline{Πνα}$, $\overline{Πνι}$, etc.
Υιος	$\overline{Υς}$, $\overline{Υυ}$, etc.
Δαυειδ	$\overline{Δαδ}$
Μητηρ	$\overline{Μηρ}$, etc.
Πατηρ	$\overline{Πηρ}$, etc.
Ισραηλ	$\overline{Ιηλ}$
Σωτηρ	$\overline{Σηρ}$
Ανθρωπος	$\overline{Ανος}$
Ιερουσαλημ	$\overline{Ιλημ}$
ουρανος	$\overline{ουνος}$
σταυρος	$\overline{σς}$, and variation, e.g., $\overline{στρος}$, $\overline{στρω}$, $\overline{στρν}$, $\overline{σρν}$

(Also, the “staurogram” [attested in some early manuscripts, e.g., P66, P75 (ca. 200 CE)] = $\overline{σϛς}$)

of the origins of Christianity that *nomina sacra* (esp. the earliest four mentioned above) are found even in the very early scraps of Christian manuscripts, which take us back perhaps to the late or middle second century.⁷ These spe-

Manuscript and its Text [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992] 97–106). David Taylor (University of Birmingham) informs me that the *nomina sacra* appear in Christian Armenian manuscripts of the NT.

⁷ See, e.g., H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: British Museum, 1935), who discuss Egerton Papyrus 2 and date it in the mid-second century. In personal correspondence (letter 21 June 1997), Skeat points to a small fragment of the Egerton Papyrus that “turned up in Cologne some years ago” (Papyrus Köln 255), which exhibits “the hook-shaped mark between consonants which is common in the 3rd cent. but decidedly rare in the 2nd,” and notes that “this may necessitate revising the dating of the MS.” For discussion of Papyrus Egerton 2 and the Cologne fragment, see now J. Jeremias and W. Schne-

cially written forms appear in Christian documentary and literary manuscripts, the only apparent exceptions being some private texts⁸ (e.g., letters, prayers, magical texts) or errors from a careless scribe. They are found in Christian biblical manuscripts, noncanonical religious texts (e.g., the Egerton Gospel fragment), and in “orthodox” and unorthodox Christian writings (e.g., the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of John*).⁹ All this indicates a remarkable instance of standardization that contrasts with the wide diversity we have come to associate with the earliest centuries of Christianity.¹⁰

These abbreviated words are distinctive in form, subject matter, and function from other scribal phenomena, so much so that it is widely (but not universally, as indicated below) accepted that the presence of any of them in a manuscript is itself a good indication of its Christian provenance. Most familiarly, the *nomina sacra* are abbreviated in a contracted form, usually first and last letters of the particular inflected form of the word, with a horizontal stroke over the letters of the abbreviated form (fig. 1). This distinguishes them from the kinds of abbreviations in non-Christian Greek manuscripts, ostraca, and inscriptions, which are usually abbreviation by “suspension,” the first letter or two written and the rest omitted, with varying marks to indicate an abbreviated word.¹¹

melcher, “Papyrus Egerton 2,” in W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (trans. R. M. Wilson; rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991) 1.96–99, who see the Cologne fragment as requiring that we must “be much more cautious with an early date than hitherto,” and accept suggestions that 200 CE might be a more secure dating. Cf. H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 205–16, who now consents to the later dating of the manuscript, but contends (contra Jeremias, Schneemelcher, et al.) that it is not dependent on the canonical Gospels. On the Bodmer papyri, see F. G. Kenyon, “Nomina Sacra in the Chester Beatty Papyri,” *Aegyptus* 13 (1933) 5–10 (approx. 200–250 CE). More recently, T. C. Skeat has proposed that P4, P64, and P67 are all portions of the same four-gospel codex, and that the manuscript of which these are portions should be dated in the late second century, which would make it among the earliest Christian manuscripts (“The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?” *NTS* 43 [1997] 1–34). Skeat mentions the *nomina sacra* in these fragments on p. 6.

⁸ E.g., *P. Oxy.* 3.407, a third-century CE Christian prayer text that does not abbreviate the *nomina sacra*.

⁹ E.g., *P. Oxy.* 6.849 (*Acts of Peter*); *P. Oxy.* 6.850 (*Acts of John*); *P. Oxy.* 6.851 (unknown apocryphal acts).

¹⁰ This observation is made by E. J. Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in E. J. Epp and G. D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 288.

¹¹ Kathleen McNamee, *Abbreviations in Greek Literary Papyri and Ostraca* (BASPSup 3; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Alain Blanchard, *Sigles et abréviations dans les papyrus documentaires grecs: Recherches de paléographie* (Bulletin of the University of London Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 30; London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1974); Michael Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions [The Near East, 200 B.C.—A.D. 1100]* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1940; reprinted in A. N. Oikonomides, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions: Papyri*

As to subject matter, the four earliest *nomina sacra* are divine names or titles designating the two central figures in early Christian religious devotion (God and Jesus), and the remaining ones are religious terms important in early Christian circles representing other features of belief and devotion. This restricted range of the words, all of them significant terms in early Christian religious vocabulary, sets the *nomina sacra* apart from pagan abbreviations, which tend to be common words (e.g., καί) and other terms that over long usage had acquired sufficient recognition to permit abbreviated forms to suffice (e.g., in inscriptions the names of emperors and titles of officials—in British usage “HRH” would be an analogy), or other easily recognizable words that are abbreviated if they are written at the end of a line.

This brings us to the distinction in *function* between the *nomina sacra* and non-Christian Greek abbreviations. The simple purpose of Greek abbreviation is to save space (especially in inscriptions) and/or time and labor (especially in texts and ostraca). Abbreviations appear frequently in documentary papyri but scarcely in literary texts except in marginal notes and in copies prepared for private use of scholars.¹² Frequently, the words abbreviated are simply those at random that occur at the end of a line. There is no standard system of abbreviation, and scribes appear to have followed their own preferences as to when to abbreviate and how to do so.

In contrast, the *nomina sacra* do not really serve as abbreviations at all. They are not intended to conserve space or labor. They appear more frequently in Christian manuscripts prepared for formal usage, such as public reading, the Christian equivalent of “literary” texts.¹³ As already mentioned, the words involved are a relatively fixed set of terms, all of which have fairly obvious religious meaning. The aim is clearly to express religious reverence, to set apart these words visually in the way they are written. In the *nomina sacra*, we encounter a fascinating manifestation of ancient Christian devotion, and these scribal symbols are perhaps the earliest surviving artifacts of an emerging Christian material culture.¹⁴

In fact, the origin of *nomina sacra* appears to take us back beyond the second-century manuscripts, in all likelihood well back into the first century. By the second century, the four divine epithets (Ἰησοῦς, Θεός, Χριστός, Κύριος)

Manuscripts and Early Printed Books [Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1974]). Blanchard writes, “. . . dans le domaine papyrologique, la contraction n’est qu’un mythe” (p. 2).

¹² McNamee, *Abbreviations*, xi.

¹³ On early Christian use and production of books, see now Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*. Cf. E. J. Epp, “The Codex and Literacy in Early Christianity and at Oxyrhynchus: Issues Raised by Harry Y. Gamble’s *Books and Readers in the Early Church*,” *CRBR* 10 (1997) 15–37.

¹⁴ The other physical phenomenon peculiar to early Christianity often mentioned as indicative of an emerging “material culture” is the Christian preference for the codex. See, e.g., Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 42–66.

are consistently written as *nomina sacra*, and allowing even minimal time for the practice to gain sufficient recognition and standardization would require an origin no later than the late first century. Epigraphical evidence of pagan abbreviations indicates that there is a time lag of at least several decades, and often longer, for terms to become sufficiently familiar to be recognized in abbreviated form by the intended readership.

II

Given that the *nomina sacra* are apparently both distinctively Christian and amazingly early, what relation do they have to the religious and cultural background of the early church, and what influences might have prompted and shaped them? As indicated already, pagan abbreviation practice does not seem to provide either a true analogy or the impetus. In individual scribal features, however, the Christian practice seems to show adaptation of some non-Christian scribal techniques. The horizontal stroke over the abbreviated term, which is standard in the Christian *nomina sacra*, may be compared with the variety of abbreviation marks found in non-Christian inscriptions and texts, among which we often find a stroke sometimes placed over the final letter or two and extending slightly beyond the abbreviation. But the particular form of the stroke used with the *nomina sacra*, placed squarely over the abbreviated form rather than at the end of the form, is different from abbreviation marks in non-Christian Greek materials and is more exactly mirrored in the stroke used above letters when they are intended to be read as numbers, a matter to which I return below. Though the Christian *preference* for contraction is distinctive, occasional contraction is found in some non-Christian sources, and so the basic device may not have been a Christian invention but may have been appropriated and adapted. Moreover, Christian *nomina sacra* abbreviated by suspension, though considerably less frequent in Christian texts, likewise show the appropriation of the mechanics of abbreviation from profane Greek practice.¹⁵

If Greek abbreviation practices provided a quarry of scribal devices to adapt, it is probably in Jewish tradition that we find the closest analogies for understanding the religious meaning and aim involved in the *nomina sacra*. It is well known that by the first Christian century devout Jews were very particu-

¹⁵ Cf. Alan Millard ("Ancient Abbreviations and the *Nomina Sacra*," in *The Unbroken Reed: Studies in the Culture and Heritage of Ancient Egypt in Honour of A. F. Shore* [ed. C. Eyre, A. Leahy, and L. M. Leahy; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1994] 221–26), who has suggested possible relevance of scribal practices found in ancient Phoenician sources. But one problem with his suggestion is that his examples are separated by a few centuries or more from the date of the Christian phenomena. Moreover, even if Millard's suggestion were accepted, we would have only a possible derivation of the scribal device of abbreviation by contraction. The larger historical questions about what the *nomina sacra* signified for early Christians would remain unanswered.

lar about the oral and written treatment of the divine name, *YHWH*.¹⁶ In extant pre-Christian Jewish biblical manuscripts, the divine name is characteristically written in special ways intended to distinguish it from the surrounding text.¹⁷ Emanuel Tov notes that the tetragrammaton is accorded special treatment in a variety of ways in the Qumran Hebrew material: sometimes represented by

¹⁶ See M. Delcor, "Des diverses manières d'écrire le tétragramme sacré dans les anciens documents hébraïques," *RHR* 147 (1955) 145–73; J. Z. Lauterbach, "Substitutes for the Tetragrammaton," *PAAJR* (1930–31) 39–67. The ancient Jewish reverence for the name is reflected in the LXX translation of Lev 24:16, which in Hebrew forbids "blaspheming the name of Yahweh," but in the LXX invokes death on one who "pronounces the name of the Lord." See also Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 2.114, 205; Josephus, *Ant.* 2 §275. On the significance of names, especially divine names, see H. Bietenhard, "ὄνομα," *TDNT* 5.242–83. On rabbinic traditions about the divine name, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) 124–34. See also C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 93–96, for brief discussion of rabbinic notions about God's name and their possible relevance for Johannine Christology.

¹⁷ See the introductory discussion in Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible*, 33–35. On the Qumran materials, see J. P. Siegel, "The Employment of Palaeo-Hebrew Characters for the Divine Names at Qumran in the Light of Tannaic Sources," *HUCA* 42 (1971) 159–72; H. Stegemann, "Religionsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zu den Gottesbezeichnungen in den Qumrantexten," in *Qumrân: Sa piété, sa théologie et son milieu* (ed. M. Delcor; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1978) 195–217; and P. W. Skehan, "The Divine Name at Qumran, in the Masada Scroll, and in the Septuagint," *BIOSCS* 13 (1980) 14–44. For a review of pre-Christian Greek biblical manuscript evidence, see George Howard, "The Tetragram and the New Testament," *JBL* 96 (1977) 63–68; but cf. Albert Pietersma, "Kyrios or Tetragram: A Renewed Quest for the Original LXX," in *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of John William Wevers on his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (ed. A. Pietersma and Claude Cox; Mississauga, Ont: Benben Publications, 1984) 85–101, who argues that the rendering of the divine name in Hebrew characters in some early Greek biblical manuscripts represents an effort at re-hebraizing and that the original practice in Greek biblical manuscripts had been to translate *YHWH* as *Kyrios*. Pietersma also contends against Howard that it is most unlikely that this re-hebraizing process was sufficiently successful to allow for Howard's theory that all pre-Christian, Jewish Greek biblical manuscripts would have had *YHWH* represented in Hebrew characters. More recently, J. R. Roysse has argued (a) that Philo must have read biblical texts with the tetragrammaton written in paleo-Hebrew or Aramaic ("square") characters, not translated by *kyrios*, and (b) that Philo probably pronounced the tetragrammaton as "*kyrios*" in his reading of these biblical manuscripts ("Philo, ΚΥΡΙΟΣ, and the Tetragrammaton," in *The Studia Philonica Annual: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism, Volume III* [ed. D. T. Runia; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991] 167–83).

In some Qumran texts, the Hebrew *El* (used with reference to God) is sometimes written in paleo-Hebrew characters as well, e.g., 1QH 1:26; 2:34; 7:5; 15:25 (noted by Delcor, "Des diverses manières," 147 n. 2; and Skehan, "Divine Name," 17).

Josephus (*Ant.* 12 §89) refers to Hebrew biblical manuscripts with gold characters, probably reserved for the tetragrammaton, and *Aristeas* 176 may refer to the same practice. Codex purpureus Petropolitanus is an example from later times. Origen (*Psalmos* 2.2) refers to the Jewish practice of pronouncing *Adonay* (in Hebrew) or *Kyrios* (in Greek) when reading the scriptures aloud, and he also refers to Jews writing *YHWH* in archaic Hebrew characters in Hebrew biblical scrolls.

four or five dots, sometimes preceded by a colon, and sometimes represented in paleo-Hebrew characters.¹⁸

The divine name is also accorded special treatment in some Greek biblical manuscripts of Jewish provenance. In the Qumran Greek scroll of Leviticus (4QLevb) the tetragrammaton is written as יָוָה .¹⁹ In the Greek *P. Fouad* 266 manuscript (Ralfs 848, containing Genesis and Deuteronomy), the tetragrammaton appears in square Hebrew characters, and in a Greek scroll of the minor prophets (8HevXIIgr), יְהוָה is written in paleo-Hebrew form.²⁰ *P. Oxy.* 50.3522 (first century CE) likewise has יְהוָה in archaic Hebrew characters.²¹ In *P. Oxy.* 7.1007, a Greek manuscript of Genesis from the third century CE, we have the divine name written as a double *yod* (the ױ written in the form of a Z) with a horizontal line through the two letters, another substitute for the divine name similar to substitutes found in later Jewish manuscripts.²²

There is no undisputably Jewish manuscript in which any of the *nomina sacra* are written as we find them in undeniably Christian manuscripts. But it

¹⁸ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 216, 220. In addition to יְהוָה , אֱלֹהִים , and אֱל appear in Paleo-Hebrew characters in the Qumran scrolls. Tov also points to indirect evidence that יְהוָה may have been abbreviated by the initial ױ in some (not extant) Hebrew manuscripts, as seems to be reflected in some LXX readings (pp. 256–57).

¹⁹ P. W. Skehan, E. Ulrich, J. E. Sanderson, P. J. Parsons, *Qumran Cave 4: IV, Palaeo-Hebrew and Greek Biblical Manuscripts* (DJD 9; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); see pp. 168–69 on use of יָוָה for יְהוָה in 4QLXXLevb (Lev. 3:12 [frag. 6]; Lev. 4:27 [frag. 20]). G. A. Deissmann (“Greek Transcriptions of the Tetragrammaton,” in *Bible Studies* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901] 321–36) gives examples of יָוָה and other renderings of יְהוָה in various nonbiblical Greek documents, particularly in magical texts, where it is crucial for readers to be given the pronunciation of the name(s) of the deities being invoked.

²⁰ Emanuel Tov, *The Greek Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever (8HevXIIgr): (The Seiyal Collection)* (DJD 8; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); see p. 12 on the writing of the tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew characters (24 samples in Hand A, 4 in Hand B). This practice may reflect a Jewish adaptation of the use of foreign/exotic characters or signs (called *characteres*) attested in magical amulets (see Bonner, *Magical Amulets*, 12, 194–95).

²¹ P. J. Parsons, J. R. Rea, E. G. Turner, eds., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Vol. 50* (London: British Academy, 1983) 1–3.

²² *P. Oxy.* 7.1007 also has the contracted form of *theos*, which is otherwise attested only in Christian manuscripts. Roberts (*Manuscript*, 33–34) suggests that *P. Oxy.* 7.1007 may come from a Jewish-Christian group, which would account for the apparent mixture of Jewish and Christian writing practices. Kurt Treu argues that *P. Oxy.* 7.1007 is Jewish and that contraction of *theos* was practiced among Jews and may have begun among them (“Die Bedeutung des Griechischen für die Juden im römischen Reich,” *Kairos* n.F. 15 [1973] 123–44). I am inclined toward Roberts’s view in light of the evidence of undisputed Jewish manuscripts. Whatever the case may be, this manuscript is unique in having both a *nomina sacra* form of *theos* and the abbreviation/substitute for יְהוָה . The abbreviation of יְהוָה as ZZ (with a horizontal stroke through the two letters) is also found on some intaglia. For discussion of these data and of other substitutions for the tetragrammaton, see G. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Volume 4* (Sydney, NSW: Macquarie University, 1987) 232.

seems likely that Jewish reverence for the divine name, and particularly the Jewish practice of marking off the divine name reverentially in written forms, probably provides us with the key element in the religious background that early Christians adapted in accordance with their own religious convictions and expressed in the *nomina sacra*. The four earliest *nomina sacra* represent Christian reverence of God and Christ expressed in the special way these key terms were written in Christian texts. But in this desire to show reverence for divine names and titles in the way they are written out, we have a continuity in what we may call religious psychology between Jewish tradition and emerging Christian tradition.²³ As Schuyler Brown noted, the four earliest words are more correctly *nomina divina*, terms that in early Christian devotion function somewhat analogously to the divine name in Jewish tradition.²⁴

There are differences to be noted. First, Jewish reverence for the divine name extended to a reluctance to pronounce it in Hebrew, and a use of oral substitutes such as יְהוָה in Hebrew and Κύριος in Greek. Their various ways of writing the tetragrammaton were intended both to express reverence and probably to signal readers that they should use a substitute for the divine name. There is, however, no indication of early Christian reluctance to pronounce the *nomina sacra* or of the use of substitutes for them in reading aloud.

Second, though our evidence is limited, it appears that there were a variety of devices used by Jewish scribes to express reverence for the divine name. By contrast, Christian practice seems to have limited itself to relatively standardized abbreviated forms of key words, usually contracted forms, with the horizontal stroke over the abbreviated word.

Third and most significant, of course, the Christian *nomina sacra* quickly (perhaps originally) included key terms (names/titles) for God and Christ, reflecting the binitarian shape of earliest Christian devotion, which distinguished it from the Jewish matrix of Christianity.²⁵ Whatever may be the origin of the *nomina sacra*, and whatever the relationship to Jewish scribal practices,

²³ The likelihood of early Christian appropriation and adaptation of Jewish scribal practices is suggested by P. J. Parsons ("The Scripts and Their Date," in Tov, *Greek Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever*, 19–26), who points out that the use of enlarged initial letters at line beginnings, phrase beginnings, and new sections, characteristic of Christian books and in contrast to copies of the Greek classics, seems to have been inherited from Greek-speaking Jewish circles (pp. 23–24). Millard, also, suggests that the Christian scribal practices may have been influenced by Jewish and other West Semitic scribal traditions ("Ancient Abbreviations," 223–24). Finegan points to marginal scribal marks in 1QIs^a that seem to be comparable to marks employed by Christian scribes later (*Archaeology of the New Testament*, 346–48).

²⁴ S. Brown, "Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*," *SPap* 9 (1970) 19.

²⁵ I have explored the emergence of this binitarian devotional practice and its relationship to the Jewish matrix in my book *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1988; 2d ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

the treatment of Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός in the same special way as Κύριος and Θεός is undeniably an early Christian innovation and signifies momentous religious developments.

III

In our earliest surviving Christian sources, the four terms θεός, κύριος, Ἰησοῦς, and χριστός are already established as *nomina sacra*, but scholars wonder if earlier still a reverential practice initially focused on one of these was the point of origin. I shall mention a few theories of others and then offer a proposal of my own.²⁶

Traube proposed that the initial term treated as a *nomen sacrum* was θεός and that the practice of writing it in contracted form began among Greek-speaking Jews who sought thereby to imitate the Hebrew consonantal writing of the divine name by omitting the vowels of θεός.²⁷ From this initial term, Traube posited, the practice spread among Greek-speaking Jews to include contracted forms of κύριος, πνεῦμα, πατήρ, οὐρανός, ἄνθρωπος, Δαυειδ, Ἰσραήλ, and Ἰερουσαλήμ, and this custom was subsequently adopted by Christians, who then added to the list Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, υἱός, σωτήρ, σταυρός, and μήτηρ. Paap agreed that θεός was the initial *nomen sacrum*, that the contracted form was an imitation of the consonantal spelling of יהוה, and that the practice began among graecized Jews. But, citing the dates and provenance of the manuscript evidence, much of it not available to Traube, Paap argued that the development of the fuller list of *nomina sacra* beyond θεός took place among Christians.²⁸

Schuyler Brown pointed to major logical and factual problems in the theories of Traube and Paap, in particular the preference of κύριος (not θεός) among Greek-speaking Jews as the translation and Greek vocalization of יהוה, and Brown proposed that κύριος was the original *nomen sacrum*, written as a contraction and first used by Christian scribes as a reverential way to render the Greek substitute for יהוה in Christian copies of the Greek OT.²⁹ Then, Brown

²⁶ I omit here reference to the theory of E. Nachmanson ("Die schriftliche Kontraktion auf den griechischen Inschriften," *Eranos* 10 [1910] 101–44), who proposed that the *nomina sacra* were more directly influenced by Greek contraction of words as evidenced in Greek ostraca and inscriptions. The evidence Nachmanson cites shows only that the *technique* of abbreviation by contraction was not a Christian invention. The *nomina sacra*, however, are not simply Christian abbreviations, and their function is not accounted for in any way by abbreviations in non-Christian materials. See Paap (*Nomina Sacra*, 121–23) for criticisms of Nachmanson's views. See also Gunnar Rudberg, "Zur paläographischen Kontraktion," *Eranos* 10 (1910) 71–100; idem, *Neutestamentlicher Text und Nomina Sacra* (Uppsala: Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet Skrifter, 1915 [1917]).

²⁷ Traube, *Nomina Sacra*, 36.

²⁸ Paap, *Nomina Sacra*, 119–27.

²⁹ Schuyler Brown, "Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*," *SPap* 9 (1970) 7–19.

suggested, from the Christian use of κύριος to refer both to God and Christ, the practice of reverential contraction was “rapidly extended in one direction to θεός and in the other direction to Ἰησοῦς and χριστός.”³⁰ Thereby, Christian scribes gave “graphic expression to the theological equation already present in the earliest apostolic preaching, in which κύριος, the name for the God of Israel, was used as a title for Jesus Christ.”³¹

More recently, Kurt Treu has registered his preference for the theory that the *nomina sacra* began among *Jews* prior to Christian usage and initially included both θεός and κύριος, written as contractions with a horizontal stroke placed over them to distinguish them in Greek texts where they served as translation equivalents for יהוה. Christians took up the idea and quickly broadened it to include “the remaining persons of their Trinity” and then a wider list of religious terms.³²

George Howard has argued that κύριος and θεός were the initial *nomina sacra*, “first created by non-Jewish Christian scribes who in their copying the LXX text found no traditional reason to preserve the tetragrammaton,” and may have considered the contracted forms of these words “analogous to the vowelless Hebrew Divine Name. . . .”³³

All things considered, however, it seems to me that the most promising option is to follow up suggestions by Colin Roberts, as I hope to show in what follows.³⁴ As he argues, the provenance of the manuscript evidence suggests that the *nomina sacra* are a Christian innovation reflecting the influence of Jewish reverence for the name of God, reverence reshaped under the impact of Christian religious convictions. The early variation in the spellings of some of the *nomina sacra* (contraction, suspension, combinations of both) also suggests that they were a Christian invention and not an already developed practice taken over from Jewish tradition.

Moreover, I think Roberts is probably correct to posit Ἰησοῦς as the first

³⁰ Ibid., 18.

³¹ Ibid., 19.

³² Treu, “Die Bedeutung des Griechischen für die Juden im römischen Reich.”

³³ George Howard, “Tetragrammaton in the New Testament,” *ABD* 6.392–93; idem, “The Tetragram and the New Testament.” In his assertion of a similarity between the “vowelless” tetragrammaton and the contracted forms of Κύριος and Θεός, Howard is subject to the same sort of criticism that Brown directed against Traube: All Hebrew words are written “vowelless,” so in that respect there was nothing special about יהוה that would suggest similarities to contracted forms of Κύριος and Θεός. Also, of course, the contracted form of Κύριος involves not only the omission of vowels but also a consonant! Even more importantly, Howard fails to take account of the other rich evidence that the person and name of Jesus were early and widely accorded divine significance, which included an association of Jesus’ name with the divine name, as noted later in this essay.

³⁴ Roberts, *Manuscript*, esp. 35–48. I am more doubtful, however, as to his speculations about the influence of the Jerusalem church leadership and about a Palestinian provenance for the *nomina sacra* (pp. 42–46).

of the *nomina sacra*, and I wish to explore further the reasons for this view.³⁵ First, the early frequency of both the contracted form of Ἰησοῦς (ις and inflected forms, as in fig. 1) and the suspended form (ιη), over against the much more regularly contracted forms of the other three early *nomina sacra* is consistent with the hypothesis that Ἰησοῦς began to be written reverentially before there was a more standardized scribal practice. If the *nomina sacra* had begun with the convention of contracted forms of θεός and/or κύριος, how and why would the suspended form of Ἰησοῦς have developed so early and spread so widely? The suspended spelling of Ἰησοῦς is attested in earliest sources but gives way later to the contracted spelling or another form, ιης, which is probably a conflation of suspended and contracted forms.³⁶

Second, it may also be significant that, uniquely among all the *nomina sacra*, the numerical value of the suspended form of Ἰησοῦς (ιη = 18) is commented on in early Christian sources. Indeed, I suggest that this is an important clue to the origin of the *nomina sacra*. We know from *Barn.* 9.7–8 that the numerical value of the suspended form of Jesus' name was noted by the early second century; and a passage in Clement of Alexandria appears to refer to this as already a venerable tradition in the late second century.³⁷ Both *Barnabas* and Clement mention the numerical value of ιη in connection with explaining the 318 servants of Abraham in Gen 14:14 as representing the cross (the cross-shaped τ = 300) and Jesus (ιη = 18). That this is a use of gematria in exegesis suggests a Jewish-Christian tradition that is likely earlier still than the sources in which it is now preserved. Clement introduces the exegesis as if it was already venerable by his date.³⁸ I suggest that the likely early date and Jewish-Christian

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶ E.g., *P. Egerton 2* (mid/late second century CE) has the suspended form of Ἰησοῦς with contracted forms of the other earliest *nomina sacra*. See H. I. Bell, T. C. Skeat, eds., *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and other Early Christian Papyri* (London: British Museum, 1935) 2–4, who note variation in the abbreviated forms of Ἰησοῦς and support the view that the suspended form may be the earlier, probably “from the Apostolic age downwards.” *P. Oxy.* 2.210 has ιη. The conflated form ιης is found in *P. Oxy.* 2.208, 3.402 (third century CE), 2.209 (early fourth century), 6.850; and 6.847 (fourth century CE) has both the suspended and conflated forms of Jesus' name. By the third century, the suspended form was clearly giving way to the contracted and conflated forms.

³⁷ Clement, *Strom.* 6.278–80 (ANF 2.499), cited in Roberts, *Manuscript*, 37 n. 2. G. Scholem mentions a rabbinic interpretation of the 318 men of Gen 14:14 as referring to Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, the numerical value of his name in Hebrew characters being 318 (“Gematria,” *EncJud* 7.370, citing *b. Ned.* 32a; *Gen. R.* 43:2; and see also L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* [New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38] 5.224 n. 93 for further references to rabbinic literature). Scholem cogently suggests that the rabbinic interpretation here may have originated as a reply against the Christian interpretation reflected in *Barnabas* and Clement.

³⁸ Clement begins the exegesis with, “*phasin oun einai . . .*,” which, as noted by Roberts (*Manuscript*, 37 n. 2), “suggests that ιη was no longer current [as the preferred abbreviation of Jesus' name] in Clement's day.”

provenance of the suspended form of Jesus' name points to the possible origin of the *nomina sacra* in early Christian reverence for Jesus' name.

It is most unlikely that the suspended form of Ἰησοῦς was derived from this curious exegesis of Gen 14:14. More probably, the Christian gematria of the number 318 in that passage depends on a prior acquaintance with the suspended form of Jesus' name, ιη, and an appreciation of its numerical value as eighteen. But what would have been the significance of eighteen? I suggest that originally it may have been intended to signify an association between Jesus and "life," alluding to the numerical value of the letters of the Hebrew word for life, חַי (ח = 8; ך = 10). This gematria of חַי is well known popularly in later Jewish tradition, but, admittedly, is not explicitly attested in sources early enough to serve as background for earliest Christian groups.³⁹ But it is not necessary that the number eighteen was already bandied about among Jews as representing "life" as it is popularly in more recent times. My proposal simply requires either Christian Jews or Gentiles sufficiently acquainted with the Hebrew alphabet to be able to compute the numerical value of the Hebrew letters for "life," who would then have been able to see the numerical equivalence in the Greek letters of the suspended-form abbreviation of Ἰησοῦς, prompted by their beliefs in the risen Jesus as himself powerfully alive and as life-giver.⁴⁰

This ability to make gematria associations across Hebrew and Greek alphabets is not, I think, too improbable. It is, for example, commonly thought that the 666 of Rev 13:17 and 15:12 requires one to use Hebrew characters to obtain its meaning (Nero Caesar).⁴¹ Likewise, it is commonly accepted that the number 14 emphasized in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:17) presup-

³⁹ A check with specialists, including Philip Alexander, Lawrence Schiffman, and Shaye Cohen failed to produce any known evidence of eighteen being cited as religiously significant in any relevant early Jewish sources. But there is evidence that numbers were a subject of speculation among Jews (e.g., Philo, *De Plant.* 117–25; *Opif. Mund.* 13–14, 89–110; *Quest. Gen.* 1.91; 2.5; *Quest. Exod.* 2.87, reflecting Pythagorean traditions). Note also *Sib. Or.* 1:141–45; 5:12–51; 11:256, 266; 12:16–271; and Rev. 13:17; 15:12 for early examples of gematria. On gematria, see Scholem ("Gematria"); Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Atheneum, 1982) 262–63; Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner, 1922) 91–118; and F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Bampton Lectures 1885* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961) 98–100. For further discussion of early Jewish and Christian evidence of the religious significance of numbers, especially 8, → Reinhart Staats, "Ogdoas als ein Symbol für die Auferstehung," *VC* 26 (1972) 29–52.

⁴⁰ The technical term for what I am suggesting is *isopsephy* (sometimes "isopsephism") the linking/association of two or more words whose letters add up to the same numerical value (in this case, the suspended spelling of Jesus' name and "life"). For discussion of isopsephy, see Dornseiff, *Alphabet*, 96–104; and the rabbinic examples given in Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 98–100, e.g., the equation/linkage of "Menahem" with the royal-messianic "Branch" of Zech 3:8 (in Hebrew both = 138).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) 384–88.

poses the numerical value of the name “David” in Hebrew characters ($\daleth = 4 + 1 = 6 + \daleth = 4$).⁴² The conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead and made the Lord of life for the elect could have suggested the association between “life” and Jesus’ name. Could this association be reflected in John 20:31, where the (Jewish Christian?) author expresses hope that readers will believe in Jesus the Christ and may thus “have life in his name”?⁴³

In further support of this suggestion, I offer an observation about a striking feature of the Christian *nomina sacra* noticed by everyone who has studied the phenomenon but not, to my knowledge, ever satisfactorily explained: the curious horizontal stroke characteristically placed over the *nomina sacra*. As noted already, the placement of this stroke is not really the same as the stroke that is one of the abbreviation marks used in ancient Greek sources. The stroke over the *nomina sacra* is, however, exactly the same as the horizontal stroke placed over Greek letters when they served as number signs.⁴⁴ I propose that the familiar horizontal stroke characteristic of the *nomina sacra* began its career in Christian usage over the suspended form of $\text{I}\eta\sigma\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ and was initially intended to signal to readers to note the numerical value of $\eta\eta$, which was, I suggest, the initial *nomen sacrum*. As other words were quickly added to the growing list of sacred terms to be written in special forms as *nomina sacra*, the original function of the horizontal stroke became irrelevant (the numerical values of these other abbreviations were not particularly significant) and the stroke functioned simply as the Christian scribal device for highlighting the abbreviations as specially sacred words.

The initial numerical significance of the suspended spelling of Jesus’ name as I have described it would have resonated only with (1) Christian Jews with some acquaintance with Hebrew and/or (2) with those sufficiently interested in

⁴² See, e.g., the discussion in R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 74–81, esp. 80 n. 38.

⁴³ From a later period, Eusebius (*Praep.* 10.5) associates the Hebrew letter *het* (the first letter of the Hebrew word for life) with “life” ($\zeta\omega\eta$), an association found also in the *Hypomnestikon* of Joseph 26.15. For the latter, see R. M. Grant and G. W. Menzies, *Joseph’s Bible Notes (Hypomnestikon)* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., *P. Oxy.* 1.108, a monthly meal bill from the late second or early third century CE, which contains many examples. Blanchard states, “le trait horizontal signale la lettre a valeur de chiffre” (p. 3), and notes that when thus used with a letter combination functioning as a number the horizontal stroke is placed squarely over the letter combination, whereas when a horizontal stroke is used to indicate an abbreviation (other than the *nomina sacra*) the stroke does not extend over the whole of the abbreviated word but is fixed over the final letter (p. 21 n. 20). For more extended discussion of abbreviation marks, including the use of the horizontal stroke, see Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations*, 33–39. On the origin of the practice of representing numbers by alphabetical letters, see Karl Menninger, *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968) 262–74. My Ph.D. student William Parkinson kindly checked a large number of Greek papyri to verify the widespread use of this horizontal stroke to designate letters serving as numbers.

Jewish-Christian traditions to appreciate the numerical significance of $\iota\eta$. By the time of the extant second-century sources cited earlier (*Barnabas*, Clement of Alexandria), it appears that there remained a memory that the suspended spelling of Jesus' name equals 18 and that this could be employed in the exegesis of Gen 14:14, but little more as to the significance of this numerical value.⁴⁵ In fact, the particular significance and association I propose for the suspended spelling of Jesus' name may have been lost by the latter part of the first century.

If the *nomina sacra* began with the special abbreviation of Jesus' name, it appears that very quickly the other early-attested "*nomina divina*" (θεός, κύριος, χριστός) were also accorded scribal reverence and written as sacred abbreviations. For reasons about which we can only speculate, the practice of abbreviation by contraction rather than suspension was developed and preferred for this growing list of sacred terms. Perhaps contraction may have been preferred as a standardized technique *because* there was a growing list of words given reverence and there was a need for some standardized abbreviation system for all these words. The convention of contraction afforded a system that permitted a variety of sacred words (including all the inflected forms of them) to be written in a relatively standardized way that could easily be recognized once this basic abbreviation scheme was known among Christian readers of Greek. The principle was simple: (normally) first and last letter of certain important words in Christian religious vocabulary, with occasional orthographic variations (e.g., sometimes $\chi\rho\varsigma$ for $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$).

Roberts suggested that both suspension and contraction may have been appropriated independently of each other and at about the same time, both used initially to render Jesus' name, the suspended form "owing something to number symbolism, the other, perhaps with an allusion to Alpha and Omega, taking the first and last letters."⁴⁶ If this suggestion is accepted, then the subsequent preference for contraction would have been a case of one practice being

⁴⁵ Irenaeus refers to Valentinian use of the numerical value of Jesus' name written as $\iota\eta$ to calculate the number of a set of heavenly aeons (*Adv. Haer.* 1.3.2; ANF 1.319). I owe this reference to my graduate student William Parkinson. This Valentinian interpretation seems to me to reflect a later gnosticizing reinterpretation of the earlier (Jewish-Christian?) tradition that highlighted the numerical value of $\iota\eta$. See the discussion of this passage by Dornseiff, *Alphabet*, 131. In the intricate body of numerological speculation attributed to the heretic Marcus, the numerical value of Ἰησοῦς fully spelled (888) is featured, as is the value of the initial *iota* (10) (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.15.2; cf. 1.16.2). This Marcusean system may likewise represent a much more elaborate development of simpler and more primitive Jewish-Christian gematria involving Jesus' name. (I thank an anonymous *JBL* assessor of this essay for reminding me of this reference.)

⁴⁶ Roberts, *Manuscript*, 37. In his study of P⁶⁶, Victor Martin suggested that both the contracted and suspended forms of Ἰησοῦς go back to the earliest stage of the practice and that the Christian sacred abbreviations began with Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός , followed quickly by Θεός and Κύριος (*Papyrus Bodmer II: Evangile de Jean chap. 1–14* [Cologne-Geneve: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1956] 29).

seen to be more serviceable than the other for the growing list of sacred words being written in abbreviated forms.

There is, however, in my view a slightly greater chance that the practice of writing Jesus' name in suspended form as $\iota\eta$, with the horizontal stroke intended to signal the numerical value of the abbreviation, precedes the practice of sacred abbreviation by contraction. This hypothesis has the advantage of explaining the origin of the horizontal stroke over the *nomina sacra*, which is otherwise not accounted for in other hypotheses.

The hypothesis that the name "Jesus" was the first of the Christian *nomina sacra* is also consistent with the rich evidence of the enormous religious significance attached to Jesus' name, and the ritual use of it in early Christian circles.⁴⁷ New Testament references to Christian baptism as "in/into the name of Jesus" (e.g., Acts 2:38; 19:5) indicate that the rite included the cultic pronunciation/invocation of Jesus' name.⁴⁸ In the NT, Christians can be described simply as those who "call upon the name of the Lord" (e.g., Acts 9:14; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Tim 2:22), which must refer to the ritual use of Jesus' name in the worship setting. Both Rom 10:9 and 1 Cor 12:3 refer to this pronouncing of Jesus' name in worship settings, and in 1 Cor 5:3–4 Paul calls for a disciplinary ritual that involves drawing on the power of Jesus' name to punish an offending member of the church. Jesus' name was characteristically used in early Christian healings (e.g., Acts 3:6) and exorcisms (e.g., Acts 16:18; cf. Acts 19:14–17). In Phil 2:9–11, it is "at/in [ἐν] the name of Jesus" that the universal eschatological submission is to be made; and in Rev 14:1 the elect are marked with the names of the Lamb and God.⁴⁹

Among the striking indications of how Jesus' name was regarded, we can also note the statement in the *Gospel of Truth* (38:6) that "the name of the Father is the Son."⁵⁰ In the *Dialogue with Trypho* (75.1–2), Justin claims that

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Heitmüller, "Im Namen Jesu": Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Neuen Testament, speziell zur altchristlichen Taufe (FRLANT 1/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903) esp. 128–265; Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Chicago: Regnery, 1964) 147–63.

⁴⁸ On the use of Jesus' name in baptism, see esp. Heitmüller, "Im Namen Jesu," 9–127, 266–336; L. Hartman, "Early Baptism—Early Christology," in *The Future of Christology: Essays in Honor of Leander E. Keck* (ed. A. J. Malherbe and W. A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 191–201; idem, "Baptism 'Into the Name of Jesus' and Christology: Some Tentative Considerations," *ST* 28 (1974) 21–48; idem, "'Into the Name of Jesus,'" *NTS* 20 (1974) 432–40.

⁴⁹ Note also *Odes Sol.* 42:20, where Jesus is pictured as saying, "And I placed my name upon their head because they are free and they are mine" (translation from J. H. Charlesworth, *OTP* 2.771).

⁵⁰ The *Gospel of Truth* (Nag Hammadi [NH] 1.3; 12.2) 37:37–41:14 presents one of the most extended and developed treatments of the theme of the Son as God's Name. Daniélou has described this document as containing "a christology of the Name more explicit and more fully developed than any other" ancient Christian text (*Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 157). For other references to Jesus' name in Gnostic writings, see also *Gos. Phil.* (NH 2.3) 56:3–15 and *Gos. Eg.*

Jesus' name is the name of God disclosed to Moses, the name borne by the *angellos* sent before Israel in Exod 23:20, whom Justin sees as Joshua (Gr. Ἰησοῦς). This is unlikely to be an original idea with Justin and thus may have much earlier roots, very possibly in Jewish-Christian circles of the first century. Tertullian bears witness to the same christological exegesis of Exod 23:20, and there seems to be an echo of this tradition also in *Barnabas*.⁵¹ These references all are best accounted for as remnants of a once-thriving tradition that the name "Jesus" was itself of divine significance, as well as being a powerful invocation for various ritual purposes.

IV

In light of the evidence for the ritual use and religious significance of Jesus' name in early Christianity, it is easier to consider the possibility that the practice we know as the *nomina sacra* may have begun with scribal expressions of reverence for the name of Jesus, perhaps initially through the abbreviation of the name as η with the original intention of highlighting the numerical significance of the abbreviation. The horizontal stroke placed over the letters of this abbreviation originally may have been intended to serve its customary role of signaling to readers to calculate the numerical value of the letters. It is the particular advantage of this hypothesis that it accounts for the very early dating of the suspended form of abbreviation of Jesus' name and also accounts for the origin of the curious horizontal stroke that came to characterize the *nomina sacra*, which is otherwise a puzzling paleographic feature.

Whatever the point of origin might have been, from the earliest observable stages of development onward the *nomina sacra* are fascinating evidence of early Christian faith and devotion. The earliest surviving evidence shows already a developed binitarian pattern of devotion reflected in the representation of the terms Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, θεός, and Κύριος with terms referring to Jesus and God treated with the same sort of scribal reverence.⁵² If, as argued here, the *nomina sacra* may have originated from the early Christian reverence

(NH 3.2; 4.2) 65:9—66:24 (translations in J. M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library* [rev. ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1988]).

⁵¹ Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 9 (ANF 3.163–64). In *Barn.* 12.8–10, we have a reference to the Jesus/Joshua theme, with Moses' bestowing of "Joshua/Ἰησοῦς" upon Hoshea, the son of Nun (Num 13:16) taken as prefiguring Jesus. Cf. Philo, *De Mut. Nom.* 121, where the Greek name Ἰησοῦς (Joshua) is referred to in very positive terms. Examples of the abbreviation of Jesus' name as η in early Christian inscriptions are given by Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision: History and Archaeology of the Judaeo-Christians* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1971) 166–69.

⁵² I have referred to this inclusion of Christ with God in the devotional pattern of early Christianity as an apparently distinctive "mutation" in Jewish monotheistic practice (*One God, One Lord*, esp. 93–124; idem, "What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism'?" *SBLSP* 32 [1993] 348–68).

shown to the name of Jesus, then the initial impulse was christological, an expression of what I have termed "Christ-devotion."⁵³ As to the geographical and chronological origin of the practice, I am unable to be specific. For reasons outlined earlier, we probably have to think in terms of a first-century point of origin among Christian Jews able to appreciate the isopsephy I propose, and this seems to suggest (though it does not require) a time prior to 70 CE when we commonly suppose the influence of Christian Jews was greater than in later decades. If a necessary component of a theory of the origin of the *nomina sacra* is a "plausible context," I suggest that the most important context is the evident devotion to Jesus that characterized early Christian groups. The piety of early Christians gives us the impetus for the scribal practice, and the probable primary reason the practice became so quickly and so widely embraced among various Christian groups. More detailed proposals about dates or geography would be little more than speculative and of little heuristic value.⁵⁴

In appreciating the *nomina sacra* as evidence of early Christian devotion, it is interesting to note in passing the words that became *nomina sacra* and those that did not. In addition to the absence of such terms as Λόγος and Μονογενής, it is particularly curious that there are no specifically Gnostic *nomina sacra* (e.g., Πλήρωμα or Βυθός) and that even the Gnostic texts treat as *nomina sacra* words from the same list that we find in other early Christian writings. The words that did become regularly treated as *nomina sacra* all suggest a provenance among "orthodox" Christian circles and probably with a strong sense of connection to the OT and Jewish traditions.⁵⁵

The *nomina sacra* also illustrate powerfully how important it is for NT scholars to familiarize themselves with historical *realia* such as NT manuscripts and not to confine their studies to printed editions (where one is unlikely to find any hint of such things as the *nomina sacra*). These scribal devices are our earliest (though insufficiently appreciated) evidence of an emerging Christian "material culture" that is probably to be traced back to the first century. Not until the third century do we have such things as Christian inscriptions and Christian art. But the *nomina sacra*, though outwardly perhaps less impressive, are significantly earlier indication of Christian desires to register physically and visually their religious devotion. I suggest that the *nomina sacra* can be thought of as "hybrid" phenomena that combine textual and iconographic features and

⁵³ L. W. Hurtado, "Christ-Devotion in the First Two Centuries: Reflections and a Proposal," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 12 (1996) 17–33.

⁵⁴ "Plausible context" is the phrase of an anonymous *JBL* assessor who expressed frustration at my reluctance to situate the proposed origins of the *nomina sacra* more precisely geographically and chronologically. I share the frustration but am bound to observe what I perceive as the limits of the surviving evidence. I welcome suggestions from others who may be more perceptive than I.

⁵⁵ For a provocative study of now widely accepted views of "orthodox" and "heretical" versions of Christianity, see A. J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

functions, with particular sacred words presented in a special written form that was intended to mark them off from the surrounding text and express special reverence for them as visual signs.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ In his survey of oldest Christian artifacts, Erich Dinkler chastised scholars in Christian art history and archaeology for sometimes overlooking the *nomina sacra* (“Älteste christliche Denkmäler: Bestand und Chronologie,” in *Signum Crucis* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1967] 134–78, esp. 176–78 [reprinted in *Art, Archaeology and Architecture of Early Christianity* (ed. P. C. Finney; New York/London: Garland, 1993) 22–66, esp. 64–66]).