CHAPTER FOUR

THE ONOMASTICON OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ROME: JEWISH VIS-A-VIS NON-JEWISH ONOMASTIC PRACTICES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Introduction

Some scholars interpret the employment of non-Jewish names by the Jews of antiquity as indicative of their Hellenization or Romanization. Other scholars believe, however, that name-giving practices tell us little or nothing about the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in the ancient world. In this chapter we will study this old question afresh on the basis of the rich onomastic evidence contained in the Jewish funerary inscriptions from Rome. Along with Jewish name-giving practices in Rome, Edfu (Upper Egypt), Beth Sheʿarim (Galilee), and Venosa (southern Italy), non-Jewish onomastic evidence will be studied, too, to determine the characteristics of third- and fourth-century C.E. Jewish onomastic practices in Rome.

Inasmuch as it may serve as an introduction to this complicated subject, let us first turn to an investigation of Leon's analysis of Jewish onomastic evidence from Rome.

A Critique of Leon's Interpretation of Jewish Onomastic Evidence From Rome

To date, Leon's investigation of the names contained in the Jewish epitaphs from the Jewish catacombs is the only substantial study to deal with this particular aspect of Jewish funerary epigraphy in Rome. Although new inscriptions have come to light since Leon first published the results of his research, these new discoveries do not affect significantly the figures and percentages Leon originally calculated. Presenting most of the evidence in the form of tables, Leon discovered that among the Jews of ancient Rome Latin names were more popular than Greek and Greek more popular than Semitic names. He also noted that Latin names outranked Greek ones not merely in Jewish

1 I have excluded from the following survey the names of Roman Jews that are mentioned in literary sources (see the list in Solin 1983, 658-61). The limited number of these references precludes using them for statistical purposes.
2 Leon 1960, 93-121.
funerary inscriptions written in Latin, but also in Jewish epitaphs composed in Greek. Recent counts have confirmed Leon’s conclusions. In Rome, the Jewish onomastic repertoire as recorded in inscriptions consists of 274 Latin names, 230 Greek names, and 79 names of Semitic origin.³

Leon then attempted to explain some of the patterns he observed in terms of a higher or a lesser degree of Romanization. After determining how often Semitic, Greek, and Latin names occur in the four major Jewish catacombs of Rome, Leon concluded that “the Appia [that is, Vigna Randanini] group included the most Romanized congregation, the Monteverde the most conservative, and the Nomentana [that is, the two Jewish catacombs under the Villa Torlonia] the most Hellenized and least Romanized.”⁴ This conclusion was based on the following table.

Table 1: Language of name by catacomb = Leon’s Table IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Vigna Randanini</th>
<th>Monteverde</th>
<th>Villa Torlonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some Latin</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Greek</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Semitic</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading the columns in Table 1 from left to right, it is clear why Leon believed that the names preserved in the three main Jewish catacombs in Rome reflect different degrees of Romanization. In the Vigna Randanini, or, to use Leon’s terminology, in the most Romanized of all Jewish catacombs, Latin names occur more often (63.3%) than in the Monteverde (55.0%) or Villa Torlonia catacombs (48.3%). Comparably, Greek names are more common in the Villa Torlonia (or most Hellenized) than in the other two Jewish catacombs (45.0% versus 38.1% and 34.3%, respectively). Differences in the percentages of Semitic names further complement this picture. The fact that the percentage of Semitic names in the Monteverde catacomb is as high as 20.1% seems to justify an identification of this Jewish catacomb as the most conservative.⁵

Yet, there exist several other ways to interpret the data collected by Leon. In addition to pointing out which percentages are higher than others, it is no less essential to keep in mind how much higher some percentages are in comparison to others. For example, the percentage

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³ Solin 1983, 711.
⁴ Leon 1960, 110.
⁵ Note also that the percentage of double names made up of a Latin and a Semitic names is highest in case of the Monteverde catacomb. Duo and tria nomina in the Jewish epitaphs will be discussed infra, see “The Influence of Roman Name-Giving Practices on the Jewish Onomasticon in Late Ancient Rome: The Question of the Duo and Tria Nomina.”