CHAPTER 2

The First Christians and the Tetragrammaton

Nomina sacra in Christian Greek Biblical Manuscripts

While no indisputably early Jewish Greek biblical manuscript currently known has contained *kurios*, no early undisputedly Christian Greek biblical manuscript has been found with the Tetragrammaton written in paleo-Hebrew or Aramaic script or with “*pipi*.” Rather, a set of abbreviations for about fifteen sacred terms, which palaeographers call *nomina sacra*, are taken as generally diagnostic of Christian provenance, though not always without some hesitation.¹ The words abbreviated have a horizontal line or supralinear bar above them as a warning that the word cannot be pronounced as written (which would be fairly obvious once one tried). The words *iesous*, *christos*, *kurios*, and *theos* are consistently abbreviated; *pneuma*, *anthropos*, and *stauros* frequently so; and *pater*, *huios*, *soter*, *meter*, *ouranos*, *israel*, *daveid*, and *hierousalem*

1 The fundamental monograph is Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra* (Munich, 1907), supplemented by A.H.R.E. Paap, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries* (Leiden, 1959), José O’Callaghan, ‘*Nomina Sacra*’ in *Papyris Graecis Saeculi III Neotestamentariis* (Rome, 1970), and Schuyler Brown, “Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*,” *Studia Papyrologica* 9 (1970), 7ff. An important consideration is Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief*, pp. 26–48, 74–78, and 83–84. He considers the system of *nomina sacra* established by the Jerusalem Church before 70 A.D. or slightly later in Antioch, whence it spread to Alexandria and everywhere Greek was written. Equally with the codex form, he considers *nomina sacra* to distinguish Christian books from Jewish and secular books. He stresses the need for a clear set of rules and authoritative exemplars to enable scribes to determine which secondary uses of the names were sacred and which were not, as this was too complicated to be improvised on each occasion. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that scribal practice is not in fact uniform in use of the *nomina sacra*. Dirk Jongkind shows that the several scribes of Codex Sinaiticus have clearly different patterns of use, though none of them is totally consistent, nor is use apparently determined solely by reverence, D. Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (Piscataway, 2007), pp. 62–84. James R. Royce, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 260–261, deals with scribal inconsistencies in the use of *nomina sacra* on p. 46. Christopher M. Tuckett, “*P*52 and *nomina sacra*,” *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001), 544–548, provides further arguments that “*Jesus*” was written out in full in this early papyrus. On p. 545 he points to apparent (and considerable) changes in Robert’s position. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford, 2000), p. 19, considers the *nomina sacra* to constitute a conscious editorial decision on the part of those he boldly imagines producing a canonical version of both the Old and New Testaments in the middle of the 2nd century A.D.
episodically so—presumably depending on whether the scribe thought they had a sacral meaning or not. We do not know whether these markers of sanctity had any effect on what was said in reading—both public and private reading in antiquity was, of course, reading aloud—but we have no reason to think any of these words “ineffable.”

We have considered such evidence as exists for inhibitions in writing the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew: here also it is evident at least that the abbreviation was a mark of special reverence. But it is also evident that, contrary to Traube's initial conviction, the usage of nomina sacra does not go back to Jews of the 3rd century B.C. By the 4th century A.D. contracted examples of kurios may be found exceptionally in Jewish manuscripts and probably should be attributed to the prevailing Christian custom, but for the first three centuries A.D. these nomina sacra appear to distinguish Christian manuscripts alone. C.H. Roberts draws attention to the evidence of Greek inscriptions in Palestine from the Qumran period to Bar Kokhba. He finds 184 instances of kurios in a sacred sense and 109 of theos. There is no case of contraction. This suggests strongly that the Christian nomina sacra are not Jewish—it also, of course, indicates a widespread Jewish use of kurios in a sacred sense. (This in itself might be due to a pre-Christian use of the word in the Septuagint.)

Roberts seeks to integrate his conviction that the Christian abbreviations are sui generis marks of reverence into a reconstruction of Jewish/Christian relations in Egypt. A somewhat greater emphasis upon textual mechanics has led Robert Kraft to suggest the possibilities of greater continuity between Jewish and Christian practice and to find more difficulties in the attribution of manuscripts. This may be taken as indicating some of the uncertainty which still adheres to the evidence, and perhaps also a little circularity in argument.

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2 For a liturgical papyrus, very probably Jewish, of the late 1st century A.D. (P. Fouad Inv. 203), which writes kurios without contraction, presumably not regarding it as a nomen sacrum, see: Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief, pp. 30–31.

3 Thus the inscription of c.360–370 A.D. found in the synagogue at Sardis that has a contracted theos will not change opinions: J.R. Edwards, "A Nomen Sacrum in the Sardis Synagogue," Journal of Biblical Literature 128.4 (2009), 813–821.

4 For completeness it should be noted that nomina sacra appear in Christian texts in Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and Armenian. They also appear in Gnostic texts, such as The Gospel of Truth, Acts of Peter, Acts of John, and the Gospel of Judas. Manichaeans, too, used nomina sacra, see: Malcolm Choat, Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri (Turnout, 2006), pp. 122, 124–125.

5 Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief, p. 34.
