From the Biblical period onward texts and inscriptions indicate that while some Jewish names appear more or less continuously in the sources, other names were more widely used in certain periods and in certain countries only.

A clearer understanding of this phenomenon should contribute an additional dimension to the use of proper names as historical source material.

This study attempts to show that in Antiquity at least, the vogue for certain Jewish names—which may indubitably be termed "Jewish" since they were the appellations of Jews and connoted Jewish associations for their contemporaries—not only reflects a Jewish identification on the part of the name-giver, but provides an indication of the specific non-Jewish cultural milieu to which the name giver wished to belong.

In his pioneering article on the subject, Zunz ¹) noted that not all Biblical names later remained equally popular, for the preferences differed in different periods. Cowley, in his introduction to the Elephantine papyri ²), noted that although numerous Jewish names are found in this material (which dates from the fifth to the early third centuries BCE), those of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, or David, so commonly used later, do not occur here. Tur-Sinai ³), in his discussion of the proper names found in the Lachish Letters, has categorically stated that in Biblical times, except for the names of the Patriarchs and their immediate descendants,

we find no trace of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Reuben, Levi, Shime'on and Joseph used for living people.

Though this last statement is not entirely exact 4), the general assumption behind Tur-Sina'i's remarks remains valid. It is extremely doubtful that the major consideration determining the bestowal of names was their historical or religious significance. Until much later, Jews do not seem to have consciously chosen the names of the Patriarchs and their immediate descendants, and the seeming exceptions to this rule almost certainly primarily reflects other influences on their choice.

Unless we accept this as a working hypothesis, how can we explain the uninterrupted popularity in the Biblical and Second Temple periods of the name Yishma'el 5), Abraham's son by Hagar, while we do not find a single instance of the name Yitsḥaq, until after the Biblical period at any rate?

In the Talmudic period the names Gamali'el and Hillel attained popularity. Yet it is unlikely that anyone would seriously suggest that they are to be considered a reflection of their Biblical parallels, i.e. Gamali'el ben Pedahtsur, phylarch of the tribe of Menasseh in the Book of Numbers (1, 10; 2, 20; 7, 54.59; 10, 23), and the father of Avdon b. Hillel hapiratoni (Jud. 12, 13-15), one of the Judges who ruled part of the Land of Israel before the period of the monarchy. Posed in this manner, it becomes evident that there must have been other cogent reasons for their currency.

I propose to deal here with three names: Abraham, Reuben, and Shime'on, in the hope that findings in respect to these may serve as a methodological pattern to use in other instances.

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4) Actually we do find the name Joseph borne by one of the twelve spies—a member of the tribe of Issachar (Num. 13, 7). Likewise, the genealogical lists in 1 Chron. contains the name Joseph, who was a Levite, and cf. also Ezra 10, 42 and Neh. 12, 14. The name Shime'on appears in Ezra 10, 31.

Similarly, Klär's statement in “Shmoth Bnei Yisrael”, Lesbonain La'am 10/1, that “these names are not found throughout the first temple period”, though true, is misleading. They do appear both before the building of the First Temple by King Solomon, and again, no later than at the very beginning of the period of the Second Commonwealth (and perhaps already in Jeremiah's day, cf. Jer. 36, 14, 21, 23).

5) e.g. 2 Kings 25, 25: “Ishmael the son of Nethaniah . . . of the seed royal . . . smote Gedaliah”, and Jeremiah chapters 40-41 passim, as well as some four other individuals belonging to different times and places mentioned in Chronicles and Ezra.