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). The words given this special treatment fall into three groups: (1) the four earliest attested and most consistently rendered words, `Θεός, Χριστός, Κύριος, Θεός; (2) three additional terms, which appear to be slightly later and less uniformly treated: πνεύμα, ἀνθρωπός, σταυρός; and (3) the remaining eight, πατήρ, νιός, σωτήρ, μήτηρ, οὐρανός, Ἰσραήλ.

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Δαιδ, Ιερουσαλημ, which are abbreviated less consistently and appear to have joined the list of sacred terms latest. 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. Among more recent scholars, C. H. Roberts in particular has emphasized the importance of the nomina sacra as a distinguishing feature of early Christianity. 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. It is, however, particularly significant for the investigation


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 Μιχηλ, Νοέ, Σώρα, Αβρααμ written with a stroke over them, and Pap. Bodmer xiii has the stroke over Αδαμ, δινω, δινω, Αβραμ. 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 (Μωυσης), Ἡσας (Ἡσαίας), Προφας (προφήταις), and one instance of βαλενται (βασιλευσι). The Nag Hammadi Coptic document Gospel of the Egyptians (NH 3.2) has εις θεος with a stroke over it, which likely makes it a nomen sacrum there.


Figure 1. Illustrations of the Nomina Sacra

1. Four Earliest Nomina Sacra (from second century manuscripts onward)
   Ιησους  Contracted form = Ις, Ιυ, etc.; suspended form = Ιη;
           conflate form = Ιης
   Χριστος  Contracted forms = Χς, Χυ, etc.
   Θεος  Contracted forms = Θς, Θυ, etc.
   Κυριος  Contracted forms = Κς, Κυ, etc.

2. Other Nomina Sacra
   Πνευμα  Πνα, Πνυ, etc.
   Γιος  Γς, Γυ, etc.
   Δαιδ  Δαδ
   Μηπη  Μη, etc.
   Πηπη  Πη, etc.
   Ισαηλ  Ιλη
   Ιωην  Ιη
   Ανθρωπος  Ανος
   Ιερουσαλημ  Ιλημ
   ουρανος  ουνος
   σταυρος  στς, and variation, e.g., στρος, στρω, στρυ, σρν

(Also, the "staurogram" [attested in some early manuscripts, e.g., P66, P75 (ca. 200 CE)] = στος)

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-

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. Schnee-
cially written forms appear in Christian documentary and literary manuscripts, the only apparent exceptions being some private texts\(^8\) (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.\(^11\)

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


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., καὶ) 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 (Ὑποσφις, Θεός, Χριστός, Κύριος)

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12 McNamee, *Abbreviations*, xi.


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


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 Tannaitic Sources,” *HUCA* 42 (1971) 159–72; H. Stegemann, “Religionsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zu den Gottesbezeichnungen in den Qumrantexten,” in *Qumrān: 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-Christiant 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 contests 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. Boyce 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.  

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 Ιαω. In the Greek P. Fouad 266 manuscript (Rafs 848, containing Genesis and Deuteronomy), the tetragrammaton appears in square Hebrew characters, and in a Greek scroll of the minor prophets (8HevXIIgr), נְנֵי is written in paleo-Hebrew form. P. Oxy. 50.3522 (first century CE) likewise has נְנֵי in archaic Hebrew characters. 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 ו 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.

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

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18 Emanuel Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 216, 220. In addition to נְנֵי, ינֶה and עַיִּי appear in Paleo-Hebrew characters in the Qumran scrolls. Tov also points to indirect evidence that נְנֵי may have been abbreviated by the initial ו 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 Ιαω for נְנֵי 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 Ιαω and other renderings of נְנֵי 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 Sejval 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).


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," Katros 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 נְנֵי. The abbreviation of נְנֵי 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 Chris-
tian 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 Chris-
tian tradition.23 As Schuyler Brown noted, the four earliest words are more cor-
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 יְהָוָה in Hebrew and Κύριος in Greek. Their various ways of
writing the tetragrammaton were intended both to express reverence and prob-
ably 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 vari-
ety of devices used by Jewish scribes to express reverence for the divine name.
By contrast, Christian practice seems to have limited itself to relatively stan-
dardized 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 distin-
guished it from the Jewish matrix of Christianity.25 Whatever may be the origin
of the nomina sacra, and whatever the relationship to Jewish scibal practices,
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, ἀνθρωπος, Δαυιδ, Ἰσραὴλ, and Ἰερουσαλήμ, and this custom was subsequently adopted by Christians, who then added to the list Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, υἱός, σοφήρ, σωματός, and μήτηρ. Paap agreed that Θεός was the initial nomen sacrum, that the contracted form was an imitation of the consonantal spelling of θεός, 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 θεός, 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 θεός 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 palaiographischen Kontraktion," Eranos 10 (1910) 71–100; idem, Neutestamentlicher Text und Nomina Sacra (Uppsala: Humanistiska Vetenskapssam fundet Skrifter, 1915 [1917]).
27 Traube, Nomina Sacra, 36.
28 Paap, Nomina Sacra, 119–27.
suggested, from the Christian use of κύριοις 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 Ἰσσοῦς 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 יְהֹוָה. 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 Ἰσσοῦς 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 יְהֹוָה 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. First, the early frequency of both the contracted form of Ἰησοῦς (ις and inflected forms, as in fig. 1) and the suspended form (ης), 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, ης, which is probably a conflation of suspended and contracted forms.

Second, it may also be significant that, uniquely among all the nomina sacra, the numerical value of the suspended form of Ἰησοῦς (ης = 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. Both Barnabas and Clement mention the numerical value of ης in connection with explaining the 318 servants of Abraham in Gen 14:14 as representing the cross (the cross-shaped τ = 300) and Jesus (ης = 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. I suggest that the likely early date and Jewish-Christian

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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 ης. The conflated form ης 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,” EncJed 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, “phasis oun einai . . . ,” which, as noted by Roberts (Manuscript, 37 n. 2), “suggests that ης 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 ιησοῦς 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, יַerus, 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, יַרו (ירו = 8; י = 10). This gematria of יַרו 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 ιησοῦς, 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-

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\(^{40}\) The technical term for what I am suggesting is *isopephy* (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).

poses the numerical value of the name "David" in Hebrew characters (\(\pi = 4 + \tau = 6 + \pi = 4\)). 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"?

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. I propose that the familiar horizontal stroke characteristic of the *nomina sacra* began its career in Christian usage over the suspended form of τοῦ Θεοῦ and was initially intended to signal to readers to note the numerical value of τη, 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


43 From a later period, Eusebius (*Praep.* 10.5) associates the Hebrew letter הו (the first letter of the Hebrew word for life) with "life" (ζωή), 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 η. 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.\footnote{Irenaeus refers to Valentinian use of the numerical value of Jesus’ name written as η 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 η. 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 Marcian 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.)} 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, κριστός) 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 χρ for χριστός).

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.”\footnote{Roberts, Manuscript, 37. In his study of \textsuperscript{166} and 167, 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 [Cologny-Geneve: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1956] 29).} If this suggestion is accepted, then the subsequent preference for contraction would have been a case of one practice being...
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 Ιν, 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. 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. 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.

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.” In the Dialogue with Trypho (75.1–2), Justin claims that

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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. 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 ι 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. If, as argued here, the *nomina sacra* may have originated from the early Christian reverence

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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 ι in early Christian inscriptions are given by Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision: History and Archaeology of the Judaico-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. 93–134; 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.” 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.

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., Πλοῆς or Βοθός) 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.

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

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.\footnote{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]).}