

Nomina Sacra: Scribal Practice and Piety in Early Christianity

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A well-known significant distinction of early Christian documents is the scribal practice of using unique abbreviations for special names. Even the casual observer of ancient Christian papyri can't help but notice the special manner in which certain names have been abbreviated. These abbreviations have come to be known as *nomina sacra* (sacred names) and appear in Christian documents quite regularly and from the earliest available manuscripts. "All of our earliest Christian papyri exhibit the *nomina sacra*, and the effort to explain this fact has been vigorous."¹

The intention of this paper is to briefly review the phenomenon of the *nomina sacra*, to review theories of their origins and to propose a potential theory as to why this phenomenon is so widespread among the earliest Christian papyri.

¹ Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 92.

Introduction

The *nomina sacra* are special abbreviations found in all early Christian documents that contain the set of words used in the practice. Typically the *nomina sacra* are formed by contraction - using only the first and last letter of the word. Sometimes a middle letter or two are also included, and sometimes (in the case of *χριστος* and *Ιησους*) suspension is used instead of contraction (e.g, *χρ* and *ιη*). The dominant practice, however, is to use the first and last letter, regardless of the word. The abbreviation is then highlighted with a horizontal line written above the entire abbreviation.² It is generally accepted that four words were the earliest of the *nomina sacra*: *θεος*, *κυριος*, *χριστος*, and *Ιησους*.³ These four words always appear as *nomina sacra* in the manuscripts when they have sacred referents. Possibly *πνευμα* should also be included in this category,⁴ although most discussions of the *nomina sacra* place *πνευμα* in the second category. The second category includes words that are less commonly abbreviated, less consistent in the manner in which they are abbreviated and appear to be slightly later in origin than the original four. In addition to *πνευμα* these include *άνθρωπος* and *σταυρος*. The

² The best recent description of the phenomenon of the *nomina sacra*, their possible origins and their social significance can be found in Larry Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 95-134 and Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 199-254.

³ Schuyler Brown has correctly pointed out these are not just *nomina sacra* but are *nomina divina* ("Concerning the Origin of the Nomina Sacra," *Studia Papyrologica* 9 (1970): 7-19.)

⁴ In "all the manuscripts of the second and third centuries, where the title *pneuma* (Spirit) occurs, it is written as a *nomen sacrum*." (Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 231. It is only later, in the fourth and fifth centuries that we begin to find manuscripts that don't include *πνευμα* as a *nomen sacrum* (e.g., Codex Vaticanus does not have *πνευμα* as a *nomen sacrum*).

final group includes words that appear later as *nomina sacra* and are inconsistent in form and use: υἱος, πατρος, Δαυιδ, μητηρ, σωτηρ, Ισραηλ, Ἱερουσαλήμ, and οὐρανός.⁵

The fifteen words can all be used in the sacred or profane sense, but only appear to be used in the *nomina sacra* when referring to God. “[I]t is clear that the scribal aim (though not always consistently observed) was to write the words in the form of *nomina sacra* when they had sacred referents.”⁶

Views Concerning Origin

The prevailing theory of the origin of the *nomina sacra* has been largely influenced by Ludwig Traube, who produced the first major work to discuss *nomina sacra*.⁷ Traube argued that the special manner in which Jewish scribes wrote the name of God – the tetragrammaton – led to the origin of the *nomina sacra*. As Jewish Hebrew Scriptures were translated and copied in Greek, the scribes sought to preserve the sacred nature of the holy name. Some scribes attempted to accomplish this by writing the holy name in a special manner.

⁵ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 134.

⁶ Larry Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 655.

⁷ Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kurzung* (Munich: Beck, 1907).

Paap⁸ worked to further and refine Traube's thesis by arguing that the tetragrammaton was written in such a manner as to preserve the mysterious character of the name of God. By omitting the correct vowels the magic power of the sacred name of God remained concealed.

Traube argued that the first *nomina sacra* were developed in a Jewish context.⁹ Jewish scribes invented the practice and first employed it. Later Christian scribes (and Jewish scribes who converted to Christianity) continued the practice as they copied Christian documents in the Greek language.

While Paap agrees with Traube in the Jewish influence and the tetragrammaton as the inspiration for the *nomina sacra*, he demonstrates that the large majority of Jewish manuscripts in Greek do not contain the *nomina sacra*.¹⁰ So rather than a Jewish origin, Paap sees a Jewish-Christian origin.¹¹

While the tetragrammaton may have certainly influenced the origins of the *nomina sacra*, Traube and Paap both argue that the

⁸ A. H. R. E. Paap, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries A.D.: The Sources and Some Deductions* (Leiden: Brill, 1959).

⁹ Traube, *Nomina Sacra*, 30.

¹⁰ Hurtado takes this argument a step further in stating, "There is no undisputably Jewish manuscript in which any of the *nomina sacra* are written." (Hurtado, "The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*", p. 662). It should, however, be noted that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether an Old Testament manuscript written in Greek is Jewish or Christian in provenance. One of the main determinants for distinguishing Christian texts from Jewish texts has been the presence of the *nomina sacra* (e.g., "One of the main reasons we know that the Old Testament manuscripts are Christian manuscripts and not Jewish is the presence of *nomina sacra* in the text." Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, p. 202). It therefore becomes a circular argument to assign texts as "Christian" based upon the presence of the *nomina sacra* and then argue that no Jewish texts contain the *nomina sacra*. Tov lists six possible Jewish 3rd-4th century mss that contain the *nomina sacra* – Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 303-310.

¹¹ Paap, *Nomina Sacra*, 124.

manner in which the *nomina sacra* came to be written (contraction) was influenced by the vowelless manner in which the tetragrammaton was written. The first problem with this theory is that it fails to consider that *all* Hebrew words were written vowelless during the period. Second, this line of argument fails to consider that among the Jewish scribes the reverence for the divine name was primarily in the manner in which it was spoken, not written. While it is true that there was a prohibition against speaking the sacred name, this is not protected by the spelling of the name by scribes. At the same time, there was no prohibition against speaking the replacement words in Greek (θεος and κυριος). Hence this (the Hebrew manner of writing the tetragrammaton) seems less likely to be the sole reason for the origin of the *nomina sacra*. As Schuyler Brown has observed:

However ridiculous it may sound, the fact of the matter is that the entire Traube-Paap hypothesis concerning the origin of the *nomina sacra* rests on a simple confusion between *reading* and *writing*. It is true that the pronunciation of the tetragram was prohibited among the Jews, but this had nothing to do with its being *written* without vowels. And, conversely, the *writing* of the *nomina sacra* in Greek had no bearing whatever on their *pronunciation*.¹²

Trobisch, following the work of George Howard,¹³ argues that the presence of the *nomina sacra* indicates an editorial move to preserve the New Testament writings. He claims that the original autographs contained the tetragrammaton when quoting the Old Testament, but

¹² Schuyler Brown, "Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*." *Studia Papyrologica* 9 (1970): 12.

¹³ George Howard, "The Tetragram and the New Testament", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 63-68.

later Christian canonical editors changed the tetragrammaton to $\overline{\kappa\zeta}$ in order to set their work apart from Jewish scriptures. Theologically, the editors were attempting to blur the distinction between Yahweh and Jesus.¹⁴

C. H. Roberts argued that the *nomina sacra* arose early (before AD 70) in the Jerusalem church, representing an “embryonic creed of the first church.”¹⁵ The *nomina divina* represented the common beliefs shared by all Christians in their reverence for God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. The *nomina sacra* for “Jerusalem” and “Israel” demonstrated the Jewish strain of Christianity found in Jerusalem, as well as a strain of Christianity that was “contrasting in some respects with Pauline Christianity.”¹⁶ Roberts argues that the employment of the *nomina sacra* was contemporary with the earliest authoritative writings. This theory, while certainly plausible, has several weaknesses as presented. First, he fails to grasp the Jewishness of Paul in suggesting that selecting “Israel” and “Jerusalem” as *nomina sacra* demonstrates views in contrast with Pauline Christianity. Second, while he argues that the development of the *nomina sacra* in Jerusalem was contemporary with the first authoritative writings, he fails to consider that the Pauline

¹⁴ David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 66-67. See also Howard, “Tetragram”, p. 78.

¹⁵ C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Belief, and Society* (London: Oxford, 1979), 45. His examination and discussion of the practice extends from pp. 26-48.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Manuscript*, 45.

writings *were* the first authoritative writings, how then can there be a contrast in the simultaneous employment?

Comfort extends Roberts' Jerusalem proposal to suggest that the scribal practices begun there spread to Antioch and Alexandria as the church fled persecution in Jerusalem. From these important centers, copies of manuscripts entered the Christian world containing the *nomina sacra*.¹⁷ This is certainly possible, if not likely, however, in order to have the type of influence necessary to have a universal impact on Christian scribal practices a further explanation seems required. Even the large intellectual centers such as Alexandria and Antioch would require developed scriptoria in order to produce manuscripts on the scale required for this undertaking and there is no evidence that such existed this early.¹⁸ Geographic influence alone doesn't seem capable of accounting for texts that are not originally produced in those centers. Would a scribe writing in Greece or Asia Minor in the late-first or early-second century be fully aware of the scribal practices occurring in Alexandria or Antioch and be influenced enough by these practices to imitate them? More of an explanation seems required to account for this universal practice among Christian scribes.

¹⁷ Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 213.

¹⁸ G. Zuntz has argued that the bishopric of Alexandria possessed a scriptorium which was instrumental in copying biblical manuscripts (*The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford, 1953), 273.) Zuntz, however, has probably placed the scriptoria a bit too early in Christian history. More likely, scriptoria did not begin to appear until Christianity had the political safety and financial resources to undertake such large scribal projects. These circumstances did not appear until the early to mid-fourth century and the conversion of Constantine.

Millard adds further to Roberts' claims by suggesting that the origination of the *nomina sacra* practice may have been in the Levant from scribes who were well versed in multiple Semitic scribal backgrounds. These scribes then converted to Christianity from Judaism. He writes:

[W]e may imagine scribes in Syria or Palestine, converted to Christianity, some from Judaism, continuing the habits they had learned in their scribal training, and those habits becoming normal for copying Christian texts over a wider area... Their habits would include shortening the frequent and significant words in a manner known in Phoenician circles.¹⁹

He imagines that since χρ was already a well-used abbreviation for other Greek words²⁰ Christian scribes could not merely use the normal abbreviation pattern of suspension when writing the abbreviation for Χριστος. So these well-trained Semitic scribes borrowed the Phoenician practice of contraction, writing the first and last letter as an abbreviation.

His argument rests on the fact that the early Christian scribes would have had to have been very well-trained. He writes, "That scribes who wrote the first Christian books would be acquainted with current writing habits goes without saying, whether they were converted from Judaism or paganism."²¹ But how acquainted were early Christian scribes with current writing habits? Certainly they were acquainted

¹⁹ 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*. C. Eyre, A. & L. M. Leahy, eds., (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1994), 224.

²⁰ Especially χρονος, but also χρωω, χρησις, and χρηστος. On Greek abbreviation practices see esp. T. W. Allen, *Notes on Abbreviations in Greek Manuscripts* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1967) and Kathleen McNamee, *Abbreviations in Greek Literary Papyri and Ostraca* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

²¹ Millard, "Ancient Abbreviations", 223.

enough to be able to copy and, for some, compose texts, but acquainted enough to be able to combine scribal practices from Greco-Roman, Jewish and Phoenician contexts as would be required for his argument? This seems a bit of a stretch. Certainly the evidence of scribal practices from early Christianity demonstrates that scribal skill among Christians was average. These were not, for the most part, highly trained scribes. Christian papyri reveal that handwriting is average, errors occur in average numbers and the types of errors are fairly typical.²²

One major problem with Millard's theory is that contraction in this manner (taking the first and last letter) was *not* the *normal* Phoenician practice (though it did occur occasionally). The normal abbreviation practice was suspension, including only the first letter, or sometimes the first letter of each syllable. In addition, Millard's evidence precedes the Christian movement by several centuries²³ and hence, these Phoenician practices seem unlikely to have impacted Christian scribal culture.

There almost certainly *would* have been a few Levantine trained scribes who converted from Judaism to Christianity. One or more of these scribes *could* have even have borrowed Phoenician contraction practices in creating the practice of *nomina sacra*. Would this, however, have been precedent-setting enough to produce the early universal practice of the *nomina sacra*? Again, this seems unlikely.

²² On scribal skill among Christians see esp. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*.

²³ Hurtado, "The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*", p. 660, fn. 15.

Blanchard has suggested that the motivation for the *nomina sacra* practice may have been cryptographic.²⁴ Early Christians could have been attempting to disguise the nature of their documents and hence protect the writings (and themselves) from those looking to persecute Christianity. However, persecution was not widespread and consistent enough in the early period of Christianity to necessitate the widespread use of cryptograms during the first century. In addition, the nature of the text themselves are hardly disguised merely by shortening the names of God and Christ. Millard has pointed out that the names of Peter and Paul are not shortened, nor is the Palestinian setting or the nature of the Gospels disguised.²⁵ Hence, cryptographic motivation for the origin of the *nomina sacra* does not seem likely.

The Influence of the Tetragrammaton on the Nomina Sacra

While competing views on the origin of this distinctive practice exist, it seems clear that the *nomina sacra* did not emerge in a scribal vacuum. Certainly the scribal practices in existence among Jewish and Greco-Roman scribes would likely have had some influence on the formation and employment of the Christian abbreviations. This seems especially true of the Jewish practice of writing the tetragrammaton, since both this practice and the practice of the *nomina sacra* are scribal

²⁴ A. Blanchard, *Sigles et abbreviations dans les papyrus documentaires grecs: recherches de paleographie* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1974), 18

²⁵ Millard, "Ancient Abbreviations", 223.

attempts at displaying reverence for the name(s) of God. The tetragrammaton (or tetragram) was often written in a special manner by scribes to indicate its holiness and to warn the reader that this word was not to be pronounced. It was sometimes rendered with four or five dots, sometimes written in paleo-Hebrew characters (1QpHabakkuk), and sometimes preceded by a colon.²⁶ It is also found written in gold letters,²⁷ written in Hebrew in Greek manuscripts (P. Fouad 266, 8HevXIIgr, P. Oxy. 50.3522)²⁸, written in Aramaic and on some occasions written transliterated as $\pi\iota\pi\iota$ ²⁹ or as $\iota\alpha\omega$ (4QLevb).

It should be pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between the sacred name of God in Hebrew and the Greek $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ and $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ used to translate Yahweh and refer to God. In Greek the words are generic words, titles, while in Hebrew the word was seen as a sacred proper name. The Greek words and the Hebrew tetragrammaton are different classification of words.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Jewish scribal practice of writing the tetragrammaton did not influence the origin of the *nomina sacra*. Reverence for the name of God from Jewish circles and scribal practice may have certainly inspired Christian scribes to reverential

²⁶ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed., (Minn: Fortress, 1992).

²⁷ Scribes in Alexandria wrote the tetragrammaton in gold letters, apparently as a “positive reverence for the name of God.” (Schuyler Brown, “Concerning the Origin”, p. 13).

²⁸ Jerome comments on this phenomenon of writing the tetragrammaton in Hebrew in otherwise Greek texts when he writes, “In certain Greek manuscripts we find the name of God, the tetragrammaton, noted in old script to this very day” (*Prologus galeatus* [PL 28.594-95]). Origen tells us that the tetragrammaton was still written in paleo-Hebrew in the Greek Old Testament of Aquila (*On Psalms*, 2:2).

²⁹ Although this was likely a result of a reading mistake on behalf of the scribe. See, Trobisch, *The First Edition*, p. 114, fn. 27.

practices when writing the names of Jesus and the words for God. In fact, at this time, with the available evidence, this seems to be an influential factor in the origin of the *nomina sacra*. It should be noted, however, that Christian scribes did not merely copy Jewish scribal practices. There are several differences between the *nomina sacra* and the tetragrammaton:

- *Nomina sacra* are not all proper names, but also include titles of God.
- *Nomina sacra* are contractions, where the tetragrammaton is the omission of the vowels. There is no evidence that the divine was contracted or abbreviated in Hebrew, with the exception of the omission of the vowels (which was the normal manner of writing and hence not a contraction).
- *Nomina sacra* include the superscripted line over the abbreviation.
- The reverence for the divine name in Hebrew was primarily oral – the main concern was that the name not be pronounced and the special manner in writing the name seems to be primarily a warning regarding the pronunciation of the divine name.
- There is no consistency in how the divine name was written in Hebrew, where the *nomina sacra* are remarkably consistent.

Greco-Roman Abbreviation Practices and the Nomina Sacra

In addition to Jewish scribal influence, the *nomina sacra* also emerged among a significant Greek scribal culture. Abbreviations are found throughout Greek manuscripts, especially in the documentary texts. Normal Greek abbreviation practice is through suspension. The scribe would write only the first or first two letters and then insert some

type of mark to indicate that an abbreviation is present. These abbreviations occurred for common words (e.g., κκι), familiar titles, and for words at the end of the line. Scribes would occasionally abbreviate the final word on a line in order to maintain column width. When this occurred the abbreviation would be through suspension. The scribe would merely leave off the final letters of the word then insert a superscripted line over the last written letter. This line would extend into the margin and indicate that an abbreviation occurred.

While the *nomina sacra* show some similarity to Greco-Roman abbreviations, there are several major differences between the two:

- Greco-Roman abbreviations are almost always through suspension while the *nomina sacra* are almost always through contraction.
- While there are often marks of some kind to indicate the abbreviation, Greco-Roman abbreviations are lacking the superscripted line that extends across the entire length of the abbreviations. Usually the abbreviations are marked by lowering or raising the last letter or including a symbol of some sort (e.g., dots, diagonal lines, a cross). Greek abbreviations sometimes have a shortened line above the final letter that will extend into the right margin when the final word on a line is abbreviated to maintain column width.
- Greco-Roman abbreviations are mostly used for common words (κκι), while the *nomina sacra* are used exclusively for sacred names/titles.
- Greco-Roman abbreviations are primarily for the purposes of saving space and time while the *nomina sacra* do not seem to serve that purpose. Space saving does not seem to be of interest since the Christian papyri rarely takes other space saving measures. Handwriting in Christian papyri is relatively large. Margins are

actually wider than those found in other Greco-Roman literature.³⁰ Christian writings tended to use comparatively smaller numbers of lines per page and words per line.³¹ Time savings in writing the *nomina sacra* also seems to be minimal, especially when considering that the *nomina sacra* for θεος, by the time the superscripted line is written above the abbreviation, would be no quicker to write than the actual word.

- Abbreviations in Greco-Roman texts are almost exclusively in documentary texts and very rare in literary texts. The Christian documents are almost exclusively literary texts and all contain the *nomina sacra*.
- There is no standardization for abbreviation in the Greco-Roman texts and little consistency (with exception of a few abbreviations used for titles), while the *nomina sacra* are remarkably consistent in the manner in which they are written. Any term in Greek documents might be abbreviated, while the *nomina sacra* are limited to a select group of terms (though there are some variations among the second and third category as to whether or not the scribe would use the abbreviations).

The Extent of the Nomina Sacra

The *nomina sacra* abbreviations are so common within early Christian literature that the presence of one of these forms on even a fragment of a manuscript is enough for papyrologists to identify that fragment as “Christian.”³² The *nomina sacra* are not just a Greek phenomenon, they also occur in Latin,³³ Coptic,³⁴ Slavonic and Armenian sources. Nor are they merely found in manuscripts, they are also found in inscriptions, amulets and icons. The abbreviations occur across all

³⁰ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 171. He suggests these wide margins were for aesthetic benefit, as well as for ease of reading, especially in public reading.

³¹ *Ibid*, 172.

³² Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 96.

³³ On *nomina sacra* in Latin mss see esp. C. H. Roberts “The *Nomina Sacra* in Early Latin Christian MSS.” *Miscellanea Francesco Ehrle* 4 (1924): 62-74.

³⁴ On *nomina sacra* in Coptic mss see eps. Malcolm Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 119-125.

genres and textual families, transcending geographic boundaries. In the words of Tuckett, “we have to note the fact that the phenomenon of *nomina sacra* is attested across the widest range of Christian literature, both ‘canonical’ and non-‘canonical’, as early as our extant sources allow us to see.”³⁵ In a comparatively diverse culture like early Christianity, we find in the *nomina sacra* a remarkable consistency. Hurtado writes, “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.”³⁶ What could have caused this level of standardization? What could have caused this scribal phenomenon to occur consistently in every Christian manuscript that has survived to us today? What could have been inherently significant enough in the *nomina sacra* practice for it to cross a very wide geographic and theological spectrum? Something significant - precedent setting - must have caused these boundaries to be crossed so consistently and to have caused the practice to be adopted universally.

The universal adoption and evolution of a scribal practice like the *nomina sacra* would take quite some time, especially if it originated in one particular regional Christian community. Despite the fairly extensive

³⁵ C. M. Tuckett, “‘Nomina Sacra’: Yes and No?”, in *The Biblical Canons*, J. M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge, eds. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 442.

³⁶ Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*”, 658. David Trobisch writes, “It does not matter when or where the manuscript was written, whether it is a majuscule or a minuscule, whether the text was written on papyrus or on parchment; and it does not matter whether the text is taken from the Gospels, the Letters of Paul, or the Revelation of John. Any manuscript of the New Testament will contain a number of contracted terms that have to be decoded by the reader: the so-called *nomina sacra*, sacred names” (David Trobisch, *The First Edition*, p. 11).

social networks that seem to have existed among early Christians,³⁷ the origin of the *nomina sacra* would still require many generations of copies before anything approaching the widespread, universal use that existed in the early centuries of Christianity would occur. Simple pragmatics bears this out. If the third copy of Paul's letter to Galatians was the first to use the *nomina sacra*, there would still exist the previous two copies of Galatians without the *nomina sacra*. These would then be used as exemplars for other copies that would then also be without the *nomina sacra*. This is not to mention the time required for the practice to make the jump to other Christian books and their copies. Time would be required for all scribes, everywhere, to begin using the practice across all Christian books, not just the originating document(s). Yet, we have no Christian texts surviving that do not use the *nomina sacra*. This certainly suggests that the practice originated extremely early and was

³⁷ On these social networks in early Christianity see L. Michael White, ed., *Social Networks in the Early Christian Environment: Issues and Methods for Social History* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). Speaking specifically on the role of the papyri from Egypt, Eldon Epp notes that there were "extensive and lively interactions between Alexandria and the outlying areas, and also between the outlying areas and other parts of the Roman world (Eldon Jay 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 *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 81). Christian groups throughout the Roman Empire communicated with other groups in distant parts of the empire through a "brisk intellectual commerce." (Epp, 55). Hurtado writes there was "an impressive geographical breadth of communication and interchange between the Egyptian-based Christians whose copies of texts we have and Christians in other places... early Christian circles, whatever their geographical or religious particularities, also seem to have been keen on exchange of texts and ideas with other Christian circles" (*Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 41). It should be pointed out that we are almost completely dependent here upon the texts from Egypt. These texts may not necessarily represent the broader Christian world in this respect, but to date we are limited with this evidence and there is no reason to believe Christians elsewhere did not follow similar communication practices. What we do find, however, is that copies of texts are found spread throughout the Mediterranean within only a decade or two of their composition (see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 82).

precedent-setting enough that this was seen as the only manner in which a scribe could/should write the divine names.

Not only was the practice of employing the *nomina sacra* universal, it was also early. We have papyri dating back into the beginning of the second century and many manuscripts from later in the second and into the third and fourth centuries. Even the earliest use the *nomina sacra*. “By the second century, the four divine epithets... 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.”³⁸

It certainly shouldn't seem surprising that universal devotion for the sacred names would appear in early Christianity. The *nomina sacra* provide textual, artifactual evidence that the church universal held special reverence for the sacred names, especially God, Lord, Jesus and Christ.

In addition to the reverential nature of the *nomina sacra*, the manner in which the abbreviations were written also contributed pragmatic value to the text. In a culture in which texts were written without spaces (*scriptio continua*), the superscript line would stand out as a marker. Not only would this marker set aside these words as

³⁸ Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*”, 660. Though I might argue that even the late first century may not be early enough to account for the universal dispersion across all texts and all geographic regions. Comfort writes, “The *nomina sacra* for Lord, Jesus, Christ, God and Spirit *must have been created in the first century*” (*Encountering the Manuscripts*, 203, emphasis added).

special (sacred), but also would ease in the reading of the text.³⁹ This would be especially valuable for texts intended for public reading (and many of our early manuscripts appear to be just such texts).

This reverence and pragmatic value alone, however, do not explain the universal manner in which scribes chose to demonstrate and practice their textual worship of God. Knowledge of the *nomina sacra* practice had to be universal before it could be employed universally.

Pauline Use of The Nomina Sacra

The practice of the *nomina sacra* could have originated under the inspiration of the Jewish practice of the tetragrammaton, Greco-Roman abbreviation practices, Phoenician abbreviation practices or for cryptographic reasons. The creators could have been Jewish scribes, Jewish-Christian scribes or non-Jewish Christian scribes. The place of origin might have been Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria or elsewhere. None of these theories, however, explain the early standardization and universal acceptance of the practice.

³⁹ It should not surprise us to find a practice that improves readability in the text to be favorable among Christian scribes. While for the most part “Greek manuscripts make very few concessions to the reader” (Colin H. Roberts, “Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 20 (1936): 227), Christian manuscripts regularly employ readers’ aids: diresis (a double dot over an initial vowel to indicate the beginning of a new word), breathing marks, punctuation, paragraph markers, section markers and page numbering are all common in the Christian papyri (See Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 177-185). In addition to these textual readers’ aids other characteristics indicate a special interest among Christian scribes in producing texts that were particularly readable; most notably, fewer lines per column and fewer letters per line than was typical. See Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1977), 84-87.

Regardless of their point of origin, something was still required to inspire the universal adoption of the practice. Some texts or body of texts needed to be in widespread circulation employing the *nomina sacra*. This text or group of texts needed to be influential enough to set a precedent for all Christian writings that would follow.

The universal standardization in the manner in which the *nomina sacra* are written suggests a standard of some sort was in place. A precedent-setting document or set of documents must have been circulating among the earliest churches to set this standard. One example of the need of this standard is the choice of which terms would be chosen for *nomina sacra*. Why were some titles chosen but others not? (E.g., one might expect a *nomen sacrum* for “King” to exist in the New Testament manuscripts, but not once do we find this.) Comfort writes, “The inclusion of certain titles and exclusion of others is significant, for it shows that there was some kind of universal recognition among Christian scribes as to which terms were to be written as a *nomen sacrum* and which ones were not. This points to an early standard or what could be called an early canon for acceptable and non-acceptable *nomina sacra*.”⁴⁰

Trobisch recognizes the need for an early canon as he writes that the *nomina sacra* “seem to reflect a conscious editorial decision made by

⁴⁰ Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 205.

a specific publisher.”⁴¹ Trobisch’s theory, however, rests upon a supposed “Canonical Edition” of the Bible, which underwent several layers of redaction.⁴² His argument is that the autographs of the New Testament were written with the tetragrammaton in place. A later editor then changed the Hebrew letters to $\overline{\kappa\zeta}$. A still later editor copied this original *nomen sacrum* and employed the practice with other divine names in the final edition of this precedent setting work. Trobisch does not attempt to date this “Canonical Edition”,⁴³ yet it hardly seems likely that Christian book production could have advanced to the state required to produce a canonical edition of the entire New Testament, after going through several generations of editing, by the late first century. This date would have been required to influence the universal practice of the abbreviations found in the second century. For his theory to hold there would have had to have been almost immediate production, circulation and acceptance of some of the later New Testament writings and then immediate production and editing of the first edition, immediate production and editing of second edition, and immediate production and editing of the third edition (his theory holds to three rounds of redaction). In addition, this theory would require immediate circulation and acceptance of the final Canonical Edition. Even this

⁴¹ Trobisch, *The First Edition*, 19.

⁴² Tuckett has provided an excellent analysis of Trobisch’s theory that exceeds the limits of this paper. See “Nomina Sacra”, p. 441-443.

⁴³ “I have restrained myself from advancing a theory about exactly where and when and who published the Canonical Edition.” (Trobisch, *The First Edition*, p. 7).

would not have erased the pre-existing copies of New Testament documents that began to circulate before the publication of the Canonical Edition. These copies would then continue to be used as exemplars for further copies and those copies would also be copied, producing entire textual families without the *nomina sacra*. Yet, we have no Christian documents that do not contain the *nomina sacra*.

Instead of Trobisch's "Canonical Edition" theory, one needs to look further back the textual transmission stream. The precedent-setting body of work would have needed to have come earlier in the process. If the arguments presented here are correct in that the precedent must have been set no later than the end of the first century, then only one body of work, only one group of authors, was producing Christian Greek texts on such a scale with such authority that they could have set this precedent – Paul and his scribal team. Comfort recognizes the need for this early precedent and even hints at the possibility the precedent may have come from the originals themselves when he writes, "The earliest copies of the New Testament writings (perhaps some of the autographs themselves) included these specially inscripted forms for the sacred names."⁴⁴

This is not to suggest that Paul or someone from his group of coworkers invented the practice. The contention that the *nomina sacra* practice began under the influence of the Jewish practice of writing the

⁴⁴ Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 202. See also p. 211.

tetragrammaton seems at least among the most likely views that have been discussed for their origin. Whether this occurred first in copying the Old Testament⁴⁵ into Greek or in testimonia⁴⁶ these texts could then have influenced the Pauline community. Testimonia especially seem a likely candidate for the origin of the *nomina sacra*, in that these texts were collections of Old Testament prophecies that were used to prove the Messiahship of Jesus. These prophecies would contain the tetragrammaton, which would then be rendered as $\overline{\kappa\zeta}$ as the texts were translated to Greek. These testimonia were “the earliest written documents that the church would use both in preaching the gospel and in writing the New Testament Scriptures.”⁴⁷ Almost certainly Paul and his fellow evangelists would have employed the use of testimonia such as these in their preaching and writing ministry.⁴⁸

Roberts, writing with T. C. Skeat, later adjusted his Jerusalem theory to argue instead for Antioch as the place of origin for the *nomina sacra*.⁴⁹ Antioch acceptance of the *nomina sacra* practice seems a better explanation for the universal use of the practice, whether the practice was first employed there, in Jerusalem or elsewhere. Antioch was a more influential intellectual center on the early literary culture of Christianity in that Paul and his team was based, at least in the beginning in this

⁴⁵ As in Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 77 and Howard, “The Tetragram and the New Testament”, 63-68.

⁴⁶ As in Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 211.

⁴⁷ Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 211.

⁴⁸ It is beyond speculation to suggest that perhaps these were the parchments he was desiring in 2 Tim. 4:13.

⁴⁹ C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: British Academy, 1983), 60-61.

city. As a result, Paul could have learned the practice or acquired testimonia containing the *nomina sacra* while in Antioch and then employed the practice himself, through his scribes and through his co-workers.

Though direct evidence for this theory is not available (we do not, after all, have the originals), Pauline use of the *nomina sacra* seems to fit the data that we do have.⁵⁰ An early (no later than late first century) precedent is required. This precedent would have to be prolific and authoritative enough to suggest to all Christian scribes that would follow that this was the only manner in which one should write the divine names. With the data that we have, only Paul seems capable of providing such a precedent. Paul is certainly among the earliest Christian authors, well into his writing career by mid-first century. Paul is certainly prolific, writing canonical letters to multiple churches and individuals, as well as non-canonical letters. Paul was familiar with Jewish writing habits in that he was a trained Pharisee. Paul was likely

⁵⁰ It has also been argued that Paul was influential in the acceptance of another distinctive of early Christian scribal practice – the use of the codex. On these arguments see, Eldon J. Epp, “The Codex and Literacy in Early Christianity and at Oxrynychus: Issues Raised in Harry Y. Gamble’s *Books and Readers in the Early Church*,” in *Critical Review of Books in Religion 1997*, ed. Charles Prebish (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 20-22. Karl Paul Donfried (“Paul as Skenopoios and the Use of the Codex in Early Christianity,” in *Paul, Thessalonica and Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 293-304) has also offered up the Apostle Paul as this influence behind the adoption of the codex based on Paul’s use of parchment notebooks (2 Timothy 4:13) and the fact that he was a leatherworker, “it is intriguing to think that Paul might have earned his income in the various cities in which he stayed by leather-working in general and in parchment codex production specifically” (p. 302). For multiple reasons Paul favored the codex; his influence and possibly his collection of letters in codex form then influenced the early Christians to favor this book form. In fact, Donfried writes, “It is quite appropriate to speak of the apostle Paul as the most instrumental factor in the shaping of the book as we know it today, that is, in the form of a codex rather than a roll” (p. 304).

familiar with Greco-Roman writing habits in that he was raised in Tarsus. Paul spent significant time in Antioch, a likely place of origin for the practice. Paul employed scribes in his work, whom also could have contributed their knowledge of scribal practices and continued the practice in other Christian writings.⁵¹ If the traditional authorship of Luke, Acts and Mark are correct, then these works as well would have been written by men who spent time in Paul's company and observed his writing habits. If this theory holds, then the earliest New Testament autographs would have been written and circulating with the *nomina sacra* from the earliest literary history of the church. By the time the later New Testament books were written, the *nomina sacra* would have been the accepted manner in which to write the divine names. Paul and his use of the practice could well explain the universal standardization and acceptance of the scribal practice of *nomina sacra* in early Christianity.

The Social Significance of the Nomina Sacra

The significance of these abbreviations is that even within the very scribal practices of early Christianity reflections of Christian devotion and piety can be seen. “[T]he dominant view by far has been that the *nomina sacra* arose from, and reflect, early Christian piety... the impulse

⁵¹ On Paul's use of scribes see esp. E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); idem, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1991); and M. Luther Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)

was a high regard among early Christians for the referent(s) of these key words.”⁵²

These words were marked off in the text by the scribes as special words, reflecting the worship of Jesus, God and the Spirit in early Christianity. Through these scribal practices the Trinitarian beliefs of the early church come to light. Gamble writes that the *nomina sacra* express a strong community consciousness.⁵³ This practice illustrates the theological setting in which the *nomina sacra* emerged. A setting in which high regard for the divine was shared universally among Christian groups. The practice of employing *nomina sacra* for all three members of the Godhead demonstrates a Trinitarian belief system in the early church. This is especially true in the use of the *nomina sacra* $\overline{\kappa\zeta}$, as it is used equally for both Jesus and the Father.⁵⁴

The *nomina sacra* were a distinctive characteristic of *Christian* documents. While Jewish scribes may have occasionally employed these abbreviations they certainly did not use them on anything approaching the universal scale that is found in Christian scribal practice. As such Christian documents would be visually distinctive. Christians could quickly recognize their documents and hence distinguish them from

⁵² Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 120-121.

⁵³ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 78.

⁵⁴ See Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, 215.

other “Scriptures.”⁵⁵ In the same way these documents and their acceptance helped distinguish Christians from competing belief systems. So, in this way the *nomina sacra* contributed to the group identity of the early church.

We also see in the *nomina sacra* the combining of the early literary culture of Christianity with the early visual culture of Christianity. We have in these abbreviations not only scribal reverence, but also a move towards visually representing this reverence. “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.”⁵⁶

Also contributing to the visual culture of early Christianity was the scribal practice of using the staurogram.⁵⁷ The staurogram is found when writing the Greek word for cross (σταυρος.) “This particular device is a monogram or ‘compendium’ formed by superimposing the Greek letter rho upon the tau.”⁵⁸ Monograms were typically used to refer to a person’s name or title, but here we find the monogram referring to the

⁵⁵ In the words of Trobisch, “With on glance Christian readers were now able to recognize the Canonical Edition and distinguish it from Jewish-Hellenistic publications and other competing editions of apostolic writings” (Trobisch, *The First Edition*, p. 68)

⁵⁶ Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*”, 659.

⁵⁷ On the staurogram see esp. Larry Hurtado, “The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: The Earliest Visual Reference to the Crucified Jesus?”, in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Text and Their World*, Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 207-226. The staurogram was most often written within a *nomen sacrum*, the scribes would employ two devices on this word.

⁵⁸ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 135.

significant event that (at least in part) represents the person Jesus. The staurogram, like the *nomina sacra* then, is a representation of Christian piety and worship of Jesus “with a certain iconographic function and significance.”⁵⁹ Once again we have a textual scribal device used in a visual fashion to represent worship.

An additional monogram known as the Chi-Rho or christogram was also used in place of the word for Christ.⁶⁰ This symbol was formed by superimposing the chi and rho upon one another, forming a single symbol to visually represent the word that was so revered by the early Christians.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised to find visual markers of piety in the work of the early Christian scribes. For Christians, scribal activity itself often became a marker of piety. “Correcting and copying central Christian texts was a religious act.”⁶¹ Scribal work, then, became another ascetic form of worship and this piety is shown in the *nomina sacra*.

⁵⁹ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 139.

⁶⁰ See esp., Matthew Black, “The Chi-Rho Sign – Christogram and/or Staurogram?”, in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce*, W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 319-327.

⁶¹ Anthony Grafton and Megan Hale Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006), 192.

Conclusion

Early Christian scribes demonstrated reverence for God through the practice of using special abbreviations for divine names. These abbreviations, with some variations, were universally employed and fairly standardized throughout the earliest Christian communities. Multiple theories have been put forth in an attempt to explain the origin of the *nomina sacra*, however, none of these theories explain the dispersion of this practice across all theological and geographical boundaries. Regardless of how or where the *nomina sacra* originated, a significant precedent would still be needed in order for all Christian scribes everywhere to begin employing this practice. This precedent would need to be early, prolific and authoritative. Paul and his group of coworkers are the most likely group to have set this precedent. By employing the use of *nomina sacra* in Trinitarian reverence for God, Paul and his fellow authors and scribes would have set a precedent for all later authors and scribes to follow.⁶²

⁶² Other recent works of value on the *nomina sacra* not discussed elsewhere in this work include D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which includes a chapter in which Parker catalogs and discusses every Greek and Latin *nomen sacrum* in the codex. The same is done with the Greek text of Matthew in the Freer Biblical Manuscripts in J. Bruce Prior, “The Use and Nonuse of *Nomina Sacra* in the Freer Gospel of Matthew” in *The Freer Biblical Manuscripts: Fresh Studies of an American Treasure Trove*, Larry W. Hurtado, ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 147-166. The employment of the *nomina sacra* by the various scribes of Sinaiticus is discussed at length in Dirk Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007). Another, not so recent but still valuable work, on the *nomina sacra* is Jose O’Callaghan, <<*Nomina Sacra*>> in *Papyrus Graecis Saeculi III Neotestamentariis* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970).