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DID THE JEWS USE THE NAME OF MOSES IN ANTIQUITY?

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DID THE JEWS USE THE NAME OF MOSES IN ANTIQUITY?*

It is commonly believed that Jews used the name of Moses since ever. Many works deal with the etymology of the name and its meaning,¹ but none of them concerns the general question of whether it was used by Jews in Antiquity. It is generally believed that it was.²

While examining the papyrological evidence of how the name of Moses was transcribed in Greek,³ it soon occurred to me that the name Moses was not used by Jews in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Neither the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* nor the corpus of Jewish inscriptions published by W. Horbury, D. Noy, *Jewish inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Cambridge 1992, notes the name. Nor does it appear also in indices to a number of editions of Jewish inscriptions in Hebrew and Aramaic.⁴ On the other hand, in Christian documents the name appears to have been used commonly. One of the earliest documents is *BGU I 343.3*, published by F. Krebs, who failed, however, to propose a date for it. The text is written on the *verso* of a papyrus which on the *recto* has a document, also published by Krebs as *BGU I 178* and dated to the beginning of the 4th cent. A.D.⁵ The next two texts mentioning persons named Moses are *O. Tait 1945.8* and *O. Mich. 588.I.2* – both ostraca dated palaeographically to the 3rd/4th cent. A.D. The earliest certainly-dated documents mentioning persons named Moses originate

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¹ Cf. e.g. J. àerný, Greek Etymology of the Name of Moses, *Annales du Service des Antiquités* 41, 1942, 349-354; J. Döllner, Zum Namen ‚Moses‘ (Ex. 2, 10), *Biblische Zeitschrift* 3, 1905, 151-153; J. Enciso, El nombre de Moisés, *Estudios Bíblicos* 11, 1952, 221-223; J. Gwyn Griffith, The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12, 1953, 225-231; C. H. W. Johns, The Name Moses, *Expository Times* 14, 1901-02, 141-142; S. Krauss, The Names of Moses, *Jewish Quarterly Review* (O.S.) 10, 1898, 726; E. Nestle, Moses–Moyses, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 27, 1907, 111-113; J. M. P. Smith, The Name Moses, *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 35, 1918-19, 110-112; J. R. Towers, The Name Moses, *Journal of Theological Studies* 36, 1935, 407-409; I. Hösl, Zur orientalischen Namenkunde: Maria–Moses–Aaron [in:] *Serta Monacensia Franz Babinger* ..., Leiden 1952, 80-85.

² Cf. e.g. G. Mussies, Jewish personal names in some non-literary sources, [in:] *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, ed. J. W. van Hentzen, P. W. van der Horst (= *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 21), Leiden 1994, p. 243: “Moreover, there are hardly any names in this period [i.e. in Late Antiquity] that are typically Jewish or typically Christian. We may now think such a name as Moses to be the hall-mark of a person’s Jewishness, but the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene, who was a Christian of the VIIIth century, proves the contrary.” This is to my knowledge the most recent expression of a view commonly shared in a number of works concerning Jewish onomastics in Antiquity. It should be added here that the name Moses was in common use among Christians e.g. in Egypt (more on this below).

³ Manuscripts of the Septuagint exhibit many variants (that also reflect uncertainty as to the declension). E. Hatch, H. A. Redpath, *Concordance to the Septuagint, Supplement*, give three lemmas: Μωσῆς (acc. -ῆν or -ῆ; gen. -ῆ or -έως; dat. -εῖ or -ῆ), Μωυσῆ (with a single reference only); and the most common form, Μωυσῆς (voc. -ῆ, acc. -ῆν, or -ῆ; gen. -ῆ or -ῆς(?); dat. -ῆει or -εῖ).

Papyrus documents show yet greater variety in the spelling of the name. F. Preisigke, *Namenbuch*, s.v. Μωσῆς notes the following: Μουσές, Μουση, Μουσης, Μωση, Μωεισης, Μωησης and Μωυσης. F. Th. Gignac, *A Grammar* I, p. 187, reduces these spellings to the following three main forms: Μωυσης, Μουσης (perhaps it would be better to give Μοῦσης) and Μωσης; cf. also H. Wuthnow *Die semitischen Menschnamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri*, Leipzig 1930, p. 150. In discussing the declension of the name, F. Th. Gignac, *A Grammar* II, p. 60, gives two possibilities: genitive -ῆτος or a short genitive -ῆ.

⁴ It must be stressed at this point that my search is not yet completed. With the help of Prof. Kwasman I looked through indices of some editions of Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions.

⁵ *BGU I 178* had been palaeographically dated by F. Krebs to the 2nd/3rd century A.D. but its date was changed to the beginning of the 4th century by H. Cadell, *Papyrologica: à propos de πυρός et de σῆτος*, *Chronique d’Égypte* 48, 1973, p. 332.

from the mid 4th century. They are three papyri from the archive of Flavius Abinnaeus (three different persons of this name: *P. Abinn.* 34.3, 77.A.2 and 78.9). The archive is dated to c. A.D. 350, and this must be when the name became common. Among the dozens of Moses' there is no one who, on the basis of the texts mentioning them, should be considered a Jew.⁶

Outside Egypt the name supposedly occurs two inscriptions from Attica, published in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum: CIJ* I 713 and 714. But in both texts, however, we are dealing with dubious reconstructions.⁷ The reading of an inscription from Wadi el-Mukatteb, *CIJ* 1420, is certain but its Jewish character was suggested exclusively on the basis of the proper names Moses and Samuel occurring in the first fragment, and Aaron in the other. All these names, however, were widely used by Christians, and so there is no reason to doubt the Christian character of this inscription. What is more, if we consider the evidence collected in present paper, the Jewish character of all ancient documents mentioning the people of the name Moses (with the exception, of course, of the Patriarch) is to be questioned if not totally excluded.

Also the 5th-century(?) inscription from Gortyna on Crete, *J. Cret.* IV, p. 414, no. 509, is probably Christian, as was suggested by the editor, M. Guarducci. Opinions to the contrary should probably be rejected. S. V. Spyridakis suggested this the inscription stems from a Jewish milieu chiefly because of the presence of the name Moses.⁸ Spyridakis, following in this point A. Bandy,⁹ pointed out, however, that typically Christian words and phrases are entirely absent from the text, and it should be added that Jewish ones are not to be found either. As for the spelling of the name Moses, Spyridakis suggested that the usual Christian form was Μωσσης and not Μωσης as the text reads. At least as far as the papyrological evidence is concerned, this view does not appear to be true.¹⁰

The set of entries for people named Moses in the *Realencyklopädie* (vol. XVI.1, col. 375) confirms what I have argued above, and it could be significant from another point of view. All the people mentioned there – of course with the exception of the Patriarch – are ecclesiastical (12 bishops, monks or priests). Likewise in the papyrus documents, a great deal of the men named Moses are ecclesiastical. Possibly in this milieu the name of the Patriarch was especially common.

The fact that in Antiquity the Jews avoided to use Moses as a personal name probably reflects a general tendency in ancient Jewish onomastics. As was pointed out by Tscherikower and Fuchs,¹¹ a number of prominent Biblical names – among them: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Sarah, Rebecca – were not in use as normal personal names for a long time. They do not occur, for example, among the numerous Jewish colonists of Elephantine in the 5th century BC. And

⁶ In the age of computer tools it is not necessary, I believe, to give here the whole list of dozens of men of this name in the 4th-7th centuries.

⁷ *CIJ* 713: Κ(οι)μητήριον Θεοδούλα[ς] καὶ Μωσ[έως]. But perhaps we are dealing rather with Καίμως (= Καίμος), a variant of a well-attested Semitic name כַּיִם (cf. Wuthnow, *Die semitischen Menschennamen*, p. 61; for the different variants of the name, see pp. 163-164). If this is correct, then both names, Theodoula and Kaimos, were given in the nominative instead of the genitive, and with a haplography in the last line, or omission of καί. In summary: Κ(οι)μητήριον Θεοδούλα (καὶ) Καίμως (or Κ(οι)μητήριον Θεοδούλα, Καίμως).

CIJ 714: ... Μω]σσης θ[υγά]τηρ κ(εἰ)τ(αι). Ε[ἰ] δ[έ] τ[ις] ἀλλότριος [τολμήση] ἀνορύξε[ι]ν ... The editor considered this inscription to be Jewish on the basis of the very uncertain reconstruction of the name Moses. In view of the evidence gathered in this paper there is in fact no reason for the Jewishness of this text. Moreover, there is no reason for printing the name Μω]σσης at the beginning of the inscription either, and every female name ending in -ουσα, with genitive -ουσης could stand here. In this case we would have a *metronimikon* instead of father's name; this phenomenon sporadically occurs in Greek inscriptions, e.g. *I.K.* 1 (Erythrai) 69; *I.K.* 2 (Erythrai) 382; *IG* X 2, 1, 68.10; 126; 133 (Thesalonike); J. & L. Robert, *La Carie*, p. 192, no. 102 (Herakleia upon Salbake); L. Robert, *Villes d'Asie Mineure*, p. 168 (Oinoanda).

⁸ S. V. Spyridakis, Notes on the Jews of Gortyna and Crete, *ZPE* 73, 1988, p. 173.

⁹ A. Bandy, *The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete*, Athens 1970, p. 140.

¹⁰ Scholars have explained the existence of the two forms either as a result of dialectal differences between Egyptian (Μωσσης) and Alexandrian (Μωσης), cf. E. Nestle, *op. cit.* (n. 1); or as reflecting the quality of mss. of which the better have Μωσσης and the other Μωσης, cf. I. Heinemann, Moses, *Realencyklopädie* XVI.1, col. 360.

¹¹ Cf. *CPJ* I, Prolegomena, pp. 83-84.

many of them appear to have been avoided afterwards. Probably these names were regarded too sacrosanct to be borne by ordinary individuals. Analogously, Christians have in general avoided naming their children Jesus (with the notable exception of Spain).

A question arises: when did Jews begin to use the names that they formerly avoided? We know, for example, that some of them were in common use in the Hellenistic period, at least in Egypt (e.g. Jacob, Isaac and Abraham).¹² But others – Moses and perhaps also David – apparently were not.¹³

When did Moses begin to be used as a personal name by the Jews? Among hundreds of rabbis mentioned in the Talmud there is only one who bears the name Moses. “Moses ben Azri was guarantor for the *kethubah* of his daughter-in-law. Now his son, R. Huna, was a scholar but in poor circumstances” – we read the same in two different books of the Talmud.¹⁴ It is very difficult to say who this Moses ben Azri was, and when he lived, because his presence in the Talmud does not necessarily mean that he lived before the 7th century. The Babylonian Talmud came to completion in the course of the 7th century. Beginning in the 8th century conscious substantive changes were no longer made. From then on additions were mainly the result of marginal notes finding their way into the text and it is not to be excluded that the mention of Moses ben Azri is of so late date.¹⁵

Among the men called Moses entered in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* the earliest are Moses (Mesharshia) Kahana ben Jacob, *gaon* of Sura in years 825-36 (*EJ* XII, col. 432), and a Spanish *rabbi*, Moses ben Ḥanokh, who died c. 965 AD (*EJ* XII, coll. 417-18). There was another man of this name who was also a *gaon* of Sura in the 9th cent. (apparently not identical with Moses Kahana ben Jacob). This second Moses, *gaon* of Sura, is, however, not mentioned in the list of the Sura’s *geonim* in *EJ* VII, coll. 319-20.

The fact that the men bearing the name of the patriarch Moses appear first among the *geonim* of Sura could be of some importance. The *geonim* were the heads of the academies of Sura and Pumbedita in Babylonia. They were recognized by the Jews as the highest authority of instruction from the end of the 6th century or somewhat later to the middle of the 11th. For more than 200 years (ca. 780–1000 A.D.) the office of *gaon* of the Sura academy was held by men coming from only three families, and probably these families were considered (or considered themselves) respectful enough to name their children after the Biblical Moses.

That the above-mentioned *rabbi* Moses ben Ḥanokh was Spanish could be significant for the history of the spread of the name. It might have made its way from Babylonia to Spain under the Arab domination, and from Spain it might have entered the onomastics of the rest of European Jewry. The Jewish “oikoumene” under Arabic rule would, then, be the environment in which the Jews changed their onomastical habits – at least as regards the name Moses.

In conclusion I would like to raise, but not answer, a number of questions. Was the name Moses the last of the names of the Patriarchs avoided by the Jews? Were any other Biblical names avoided as personal names by the Jews until the Middle Ages? Were there other reasons (than that given above) why the Jews introduced the name of Moses into their onomastics? Did the Muslim practice of naming nearly

¹² Ibidem, p. 84; cf. Preisigke and Foraboschi, s. vv.

¹³ In Antiquity the fact that the name Moses was avoided by Jews could have had also another reason. Patriarch Moses was considered a great magician, see e.g. *Greek Magical Amulets. The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae*, Part I: *Published Texts of Known Provenance*, ed. R. Kotansky (= *Papyrologica Coloniensis* XXII/1), Opladen 1994, no. 32: Phylactery of Moses, pp. 126-154; no. 36, pp. 181-201; John G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, Nashville 1972 (= *SBL Monograph Series* XVI), pp. 134-161 Moses and Magic; Raphael Patai, *Biblical Figures as Alchemists*, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54, 1983, pp. 195-229, esp. pp. 213-229 (Moses the Alchemist)

¹⁴ The first place is: *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of Rabbi Dr I. Epstein, *Seder Nezikin* vol. II: *Baba Bathra* (transl. M. Simon and I. W. Slotzki) 174b, p. 769; the second place is: *Seder Qodashim*, vol. III: *Arakin* (transl. Rabbi L. Jung) 23b, p. 135.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Goodblatt, *The Babylonian Talmud*, *ANRW* 2/19/2, pp. 257-336, esp. pp. 264-265.

every boy after the Prophet Muhammad exert an influence on the Jews? Why did the Christians at a very early stage name their children after the great Patriarchs? Did they do so because the name of Jesus now became *the* sacrosanct name to be avoided by normal individuals?

These questions must remain unanswered at the moment. Some of them go far beyond my field of specialization and need to be investigated by other specialists.¹⁶

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¹⁶ I am going to prepare a short study on the history of the name Jesus in Antiquity.