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JEWISH USE OF MOSES AS A PERSONAL NAME IN GRAECO-ROMAN ANTI-
QUITY – A NOTE

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In a recent paper in this journal¹, it was argued that Moses, while frequently used as a personal name by Christians in Graeco-Roman antiquity, was not at that time part of the Jewish onomastikon. Adopted first as a personal name by the *geonim* of ninth-century Sura in Babylonia, from there it was transmitted, through the mediation of the Arabs, to Spain, whence in due course it “entered the onomastics of the rest of European Jewry”².

While there can be no doubt that in Graeco-Roman antiquity Christians did make heavy use of Moses as a personal name, it is incorrect to claim that the Jews of that period avoided it. To be sure, two of the inscriptions regularly adduced to prove Jewish use of the name do not do so. In CIJ I 714, an epitaph from Athens, Frey’s restoration of the name Moses is not compelling³. And although there can be no doubt about the occurrence of the name in *Inscr. Cret.* IV 509 from Gortyn, the text itself is more likely to be Christian than Jewish⁴. But even when these inscriptions are set aside, good evidence still remains for the use, at least by a very small number of Diasporan Jews, of Moses as a personal name. The clearest example is MAMA III 607 = CIJ II 793, an early Byzantine epitaph from the necropolis of Corycus in Cilicia, which runs *σωματοθήκη [Μ]ωσὶ προταναρίου Ἐβραῖος* = sarcophagus of Moses, head of the guild of goldsmiths, Jew⁵. Nor is this text the only evidence for the use of the name by Diasporan Jews in the early Byzantine era. CIJ I 713, a post-Constantinian epitaph from Athens⁶, has plausibly been restored as follows: *κ(οι)μητήριον Θεοδούλα[ς] καὶ Μωσ[έως]* = burial-place of Theodoula and Moses. The symbols that accompany the text, a menorah, flanked on each side by a lulab, make certain the Jewish identity of this Moses too. Of relevance also to this discussion are the occasional occurrences in documentary sources of Jews bearing the Greek name Mousaios or its Latin equivalent, Museus. These range from third century BCE Tebtynis in Egypt (CPJ I 20), through first century CE Cyrene (CJZC 67 b and e), to third-fourth century Rome (CIJ I 474 = Noy II 74). Although etymologically there is no connection between Mousaios/Museus and Moses, the Jews of Graeco-Roman antiquity may have been ignorant of that fact. If an intellectual such as the Jewish writer Artapanos could equate Mousaios explicitly with Moses⁷, then it is surely not unlikely that far less educated Jews, as the parents of those in our documentary sources by implication will have been⁸, believed that in naming their sons Mousaios or Museus they were using Greek and Latin variants of the Biblical name Moses. While Tcherikover was right to caution against assuming that every Jewish Mousaios was a Moses⁹, the possibility that some of them may have been so cannot be ruled out¹⁰.

Moses, then, was not used as a personal name solely by Christians in Graeco-Roman antiquity. It formed a part, albeit small, of the Jewish onomastikon too.

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¹ T. Derda, Did the Jews use the name of Moses in Antiquity?, *ZPE* 115, 1997, 257–260.

² Derda (n. 1) 259.

³ Hence Lifshitz’s revised version of the text, without the name Moses, at CIJ I², New York, 1975, 83.

⁴ Lifshitz (n. 3) 89, followed by P. W. van der Horst, *The Jews of Ancient Crete*, *JJS* 39, 1988, 195–196.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this text, see the present author in *The Jews of Corycus*, *JSJ* 25, 1994, 281–282.

⁶ For the date, see L.B. Urdahl, *Jews in Attica*, *Symb. Osl.* 43, 1968, 40.

⁷ Cited by Eusebius in *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.27. On this passage and Artapanos generally, see J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, Edinburgh 1996, 127–132.

⁸ While the Mousaios of CPJ I 20 was a Ptolemaic army reservist, the Museus of CIJ I 474 was a member of the Roman plebs.

⁹ CPJ I 20, *comm ad loc.*

¹⁰ For a recent discussion of the Mousaios/Moses equation, see G. Mussies, Jewish personal names in some non-literary sources, in *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, J. W. van Henten & P.W. van der Horst (eds.), Leiden 1994, 246–247.