

ON JEWISH METRONYMICS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN PERIOD

This brief note arises from my work on the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, the multi-lingual epigraphical corpus which is now being prepared in Israel and Germany; the work will contain new or first editions of all inscriptions found in modern-day Israel and dating from the fourth century BCE to ca. the seventh century CE. In the course of our search for unpublished material I have found at least three texts, soon to be formally published, containing a highly unusual feature, the names of persons identified solely by their mothers' names – metronymics. One text is from Beth She'arim and reads:

Φιλόστρατος Ἰουλίας Philostratos son of Julia.

The other two are ossuaries from a private collection and bear remarkably similar names:¹

יהוחנן בר יהוסף בר אלישבע Johanan son of Joseph son of Elisheva²
יהוחנן בר יהוסף בר שלמזיון Johanan son of Joseph son of Shlamzion

How to interpret this phenomenon? The purpose of this note is to offer some basic methodological guidelines.

¹ There is no information about the provenance of these two ossuaries, or even whether they were found together; but the identical hand of the inscriptions, as well as the identical form and material of the ossuaries and the fact that they came on the market and were sold together, indicate that in fact they are indeed related.

² Is Elisheva a man's name? For אלישע from the Judean Desert (4Q342), see A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material I* (Jerusalem 2000) 184. The possibility that these two inscriptions are forgeries will be dealt with in the final publication.

*Principle 1: One must assume that there is some special reason for a person to be identified solely by his/her mother's name, even if that reason cannot always be found.*³

Herodotus (1.173) discovered the practice only among the Lycians of his day, and concluded wrongly⁴ that it was unique with them. Although metronymics appear in literary and documentary sources through the end of the Roman empire, the practice never became a widespread cultural norm, especially not in Judaism,⁵ and special reasons for the exceptions can often be found.

The phenomenon holds obvious interest for Christian historians because of the troublesome appellation 'Jesus son of Mary' in Mark 6:13. The apparent insinuation of illegitimacy was accepted at face value by a few commentators but explained away by most as a manuscript error, as a neutral expression arising from Joseph's death long before the point it is used, as an appellation used of an only son of a widow, or as an indication of the virgin birth. Yet it was not until Harvey McArthur's article in 1973 that a systematic study of metronymics in Jewish sources was attempted, in an effort to put the troublesome passage in context.⁶ Collecting literary examples from the Bible through rabbinic literature, McArthur classed the reasons for metronymics as follows: 'secondary identification' (the mother's name is needed to clarify genealogy); matriarchal families (all examples biblical); the mother is Jewish but the father

³ I do not include here: mothers named after their children (e.g., at Beth She'arim, see M. Schwabe and B. Lifshitz, *Beth Shearim II: The Greek Inscriptions* (Jerusalem 1974), nos. 22, 27, 48, 66, 125, 156, 182, 183; for other examples, Ilan (n. 8 below), 41-42; metonyms appearing together with patronyms (this occurs often in Jewish inscriptions, and is a special mark of Etruscan inscriptions); 'secondary identification' (McArthur's phrase, see below n. 6). I also exclude men's names based on women's names, cf. E. Timm, *Matronymika im aschkenasischen Kulturbereich: ein Beitrag zur Mentalitäts- und Sozialgeschichte der europäischen Juden* (Tübingen 1999). On the exclusion of magical texts, see below. Finally, I have not distinguished here between males and females identified by their metronymics, although that distinction might be meaningful, see texts from Rome, below.

⁴ See SEG XXVI 1050, a Cretan pithos ca. 700 BCE; cf. *Hom.* II. 6.196-206.

⁵ Cf. bBB. 109b: the father's family, not the mother's, is regarded as one's own family; also bYeb. 54b, bKidd. 69a, etc.

⁶ H.K. McArthur, 'Son of Mary', *Nov. Test.* 15 (1973) 38-58; and see this article for bibliography of previous interpretations.

is not;⁷ the mother is a widow, or the son is an only son of a widow; the child is illegitimate ('There is no doubt that this custom prevailed in some cultures, but the curious fact is that in the case of the Old Testament and Rabbinic literature it is difficult to demonstrate that this practice was followed', p. 45). McArthur favors either explaining 'Jesus son of Mary' as an 'informal description' or emending the text to get rid of it.

McArthur's conclusion that Jesus' metronymic was at least not a term of reproach received support in Tal Ilan's much more extensive review of the evidence, including documentary sources.⁸ Ilan rightly rejected some of the examples cited by McArthur, and for those that remained she found that the primary reason for the metronymic, when a reason could be discerned, was the greater distinction of the mother (e.g., Salome's children in Josephus; the sons of Qimhit; the talmudic sages Abba Saul b. Imma Miriam, Samuel b. Martha); she further conjectured that a metronymic was more often used in 'unofficial' contexts.

The results of Ilan's study may help in solving the riddle of the two ossuaries mentioned above, although any explanation is necessarily speculative. If, as seems likely, the two Johanans sons of Joseph were related, the simplest explanation would be that their fathers, both named Joseph, were cousins, and their grandmothers were sisters, daughters of a man perhaps himself named Johanan or Joseph. This great-grandfather was more distinguished than either of his sons-in-law (the husbands of Elisheva and Shlamzion), and while the two Johanans whose bones were placed in the ossuaries would normally – for example in legal contexts – be identified only by their patronymic, in this case, when they were buried in the same chamber, their grandmothers were included in their

⁷ This includes rabbinic examples, but S.J.D. Cohen has demonstrated that the matrilineal principle in Judaism does not pre-date the Mishnah, cf. his *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1999), 263-307; and see Appendix D, 363-377, on whether Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and whose father was 'Greek', was Jewish.

⁸ T. Ilan, 'Man Born of Woman...' (Job 14:1): The Phenomenon of Men Bearing Metronymes at the Time of Jesus', *Nov. Test.* 34 (1992) 23-45. Yet she missed some material: additional Jewish literary sources are cited by Cohen, 293 n. 95; additional documentary sources are discussed below. Note also דָּה אִבְשָׁל(ם)/בֶּר שׁוֹשָׁנָה (third century CE) in H.Z. Hirschberg, 'New Jewish Inscriptions in the Nabataean Sphere' (Hebr.), *Eretz Israel* 12 (1975) 142-148, at 145-146; this reading is taken from J. Milik, in F.V. Winnett and W.L. Reed, eds, *Ancient Records from North Arabia* (Toronto 1971) 163 (*non vidi*); yet it is unclear that שׁוֹשָׁנָה is female.

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