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PRE-CONSTANTINIAN NOMINA IN A  
MOSAIC AND CHURCH GRAFFITI

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## *Pre-Constantinian Nomina Sacra in a Mosaic and Church Graffiti*

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Eleven years ago prison workers digging for a renovation of the Megiddo prison in Israel discovered one of the earliest extant house churches in the world: possibly dating to AD 230. Three years ago archeologists published the preliminary report from this site.<sup>1</sup> Since it has a mosaic that adds to the meager *nomina sacra* evidence in ancient Christian graffiti, it is time to examine this evidence along with that found at the house churches at Capernaum and Dura-Europos. This article will examine the information in the excavation reports for each of these three archaeological sites.<sup>2</sup>

What are *nomina sacra*? These “sacred names” are abbreviated (suspended) or contracted forms of “Jesus” and related sacred words. They appear in most ancient Greek Bible texts (OT and NT) copied by Christians

<sup>1</sup>Yotam Tepper, and Leah Di Segni, *A Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century C.E. at Kefar ‘Othnay (Legio): Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006), 5. This is the preliminary excavation report, and it is the only published report to date.

<sup>2</sup>There are other extant possibly pre-Constantinian churches, but the ones at Megiddo, Capernaum, and Dura-Europos have the best published epigraphic evidence for this study. In addition to the preliminary report mentioned above, this article will make primary use of: Emmanuele Testa, *I Graffiti Della Casa Di S. Pietro*, vol. 4 of Cafarnao (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1972); and, Carl H. Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, part 2 of *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII* (New Haven: Dura-Europos Publications, 1967). Other possibly early churches include ones at Aqaba, Yotvata, and the site of the Cenacle on Mt. Zion. See S. Thomas Parker, “An Early Church, Perhaps the Oldest in the World, Found at Aqaba,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 61 (1998): 254; Gwyn Davies and Jodi Magness, “The Roman Fort at Yotvata, 2006,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 57 (2007): 106–14; Bargil Pixner, “Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (5–6/1990): 23–26.

(but not by Jews) as well as on ancient mosaics, church walls, coins, lamps,<sup>3</sup> ostraca,<sup>4</sup> ossuaries,<sup>5</sup> frescoes, and papyrus personal letters.<sup>6</sup>

Were these *nomina sacra* simply shorthand such as what today's seminary students use in taking class notes: X for Christ, Θ for God and HS for Holy Spirit? No. Huge mosaics, such as the ones in the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul, have plenty of space to spell out Ἰησοῦς Χρῆστος ("Jesus Christ"). Yet, they use the simple  $\overline{\text{IC}} \overline{\text{XC}}$  with a line over each *nomen sacrum* (note: the capital sigma was often written as 'C' rather than 'Σ'). So, if using *nomina sacra* was not for saving space, what was its purpose? There is general agreement among scholars that the practice had a sacral or reverential use.

Most writings about *nomina sacra* focus on the biblical texts; yet, the use of *nomina sacra* in a house church mosaic and wall graffiti is almost as ancient as the oldest extant New Testament manuscripts. This article will explore the use of *nomina sacra* in a mosaic inscription and graffiti in three ancient house churches—in Capernaum, Megiddo, and Dura-Europos—in order to ascertain its purpose for use in these media as compared with other media, such as Scripture texts. First, some background information will help orient the reader: a description of *nomina sacra*, mosaics, and house churches. Second, this article will describe the three ancient house churches and the *nomina sacra* found in each one. Third, some conclusions will show common elements and compare these findings to the present state of studying *nomina sacra* in ancient Christian writings.

### Description of *Nomina Sacra*

L. Traube coined the term "*nomina sacra*" and wrote the first book on the subject just over 100 years ago.<sup>7</sup> Paap carried the research forward with the next monograph on these sacred names and showed their abundance in early papyri.<sup>8</sup> More recently, L.W. Hurtado has written a number of

<sup>3</sup>See S. Loffreda, "The Greek Inscriptions on the Byzantine Lamps from the Holy Land," in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land. New Discoveries: Essays in Honour of Virgilio C. Corbo*, ed. G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni, E. Alliata (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1990): 475–96.

<sup>4</sup>Ostraca are broken pieces of pottery (potsherds) that have writing on them, like people use scraps of paper or Post-it notes today.

<sup>5</sup>An ossuary is a stone burial box for bones—much smaller than a sarcophagus.

<sup>6</sup>For *nomina sacra* in papyrus personal letters, see AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Harvard Theological Studies 60 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 57–78.

<sup>7</sup>L. Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung* (Munich: Beck, 1907), 17–18.

<sup>8</sup>Anton Herman Reinier Everhard Paap, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries AD: The Sources and Some Deductions* (Leiden: Brill, 1959).

articles shedding more light on the origin and significance of *nomina sacra* in Scripture. He proposes that the use of *nomina sacra* began in the late first century AD.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that the use of *nomina sacra* among Christian scribes was widespread from the second century on. Hurtado points out, “Among the 300 or so indisputably Christian manuscripts from before 300 CE, those that demonstrably did not have any *nomina sacra* forms can be counted on fingers of our two hands.”<sup>10</sup> He importantly notes the impressive factors of the early emergence and the surprisingly wide adoption of *nomina sacra* among Christian scribes.<sup>11</sup>

Roberts gave a helpful classification of the fifteen *nomina sacra* that Traube identified: (1) the four consistent and earliest words used as *nomina sacra*: Ἰησοῦς (“Jesus”), Χριστός (“Christ”), κύριος (“lord”), and θεός (“God”), (2) the three words found as *nomina sacra* fairly early and relatively consistently: πνεῦμα (“spirit”), ἄνθρωπος (“man”), and σταυρός (“cross”), and (3) eight words used irregularly as *nomina sacra*: πατήρ (“father”), υἱός (“son”), σωτήρ (“savior”), μήτηρ (“mother”), οὐρανός (“heaven”), Ἰσραήλ (“Israel”), Δαυεῖδ (“David”), and Ἱερουσαλήμ (“Jerusalem”).<sup>12</sup> *Nomina sacra* appear in three forms: (1) suspension, as was common in secular abbreviations, such as  $\overline{\text{IH}}$  for  $\text{IHCOYC}$  (“Jesus”), (2) contraction,<sup>13</sup> in which the first and last letters of the word are used, which is helpful in depicting the grammatical case of the word, such as  $\overline{\text{KN}}$  for  $\text{KYPION}$  (“Lord”), and (3) a longer contraction, in which one or more intervening letters appears along with the first and last letter, such as  $\overline{\text{IHC}}$  (thus,  $\overline{\text{IHS}}$  on modern Lord’s supper tables) for  $\text{IHCOYC}$  or  $\overline{\text{PNA}}$  for  $\text{PNEYMA}$  (“Spirit”).<sup>14</sup> In addition, a bar appears over most *nomina sacra* letters. This overbar signified to the reader that the word could not be pronounced

<sup>9</sup>Larry W. Hurtado, “p52 (P. Rylands Gk. 457) and the *Nomina Sacra*: Method and Probability,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003): 4. See also, Idem, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 655–73. This writer would like to thank Larry Hurtado for reading this article and offering helpful corrections.

<sup>10</sup>Hurtado, “p52,” 5. Roberts, in an important chapter on *nomina sacra* (see ch. 2), cites the few exceptions not using *nomina sacra*. Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38. However, Hurtado notes that none of those examples used texts that eventually formed the OT or NT canon. Hurtado, “p52,” 5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief*, 27. This paper will refer to these three groups of *nomina sacra* as category one (most consistent and early), category two (fairly consistent and early), and category three (inconsistent). Hurtado mentions a few other *nomina sacra*, but they are rare, such as  $\overline{\text{MICH}}$  (“Michael”),  $\overline{\text{NOWE}}$  (“Noah”),  $\overline{\text{SAR}}$  (“Sarah”), and  $\overline{\text{ABRA}}$  (“Abraham”). Hurtado, “The Origin,” 656.

<sup>13</sup>Rarely contractions used letters from the beginning and middle of the word, such as  $\overline{\text{KPI}}$  for  $\overline{\text{KYPIW}}$  or  $\overline{\text{OP}}$  for  $\overline{\text{OWTIPPOC}}$ . Paap, *Nomina Sacra*, 102, 112.

<sup>14</sup>Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to the NT Paleography & Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 200.

exactly as written. Scribes used a similar practice for writing numbers as letters, such as  $\overline{IA}$  for eleven and  $\overline{IB}$  for twelve, but this overbar was *never* used for contraction of regular words. However, contraction with an overbar was the most common form of *nomina sacra*.<sup>15</sup> *Nomina sacra* appear mostly in Greek texts, but they also appear in Armenian, Latin, Coptic, and Slavonic.<sup>16</sup> Yet, there is no consensus as to why Christian writers used *nomina sacra*. Hopefully, this article will shed some light on the subject.

Few people in antiquity would have actually seen *nomina sacra* in the biblical texts for several reasons. First, books and scrolls were expensive, and private ownership was prohibitive except for the wealthy. Second, few people actually read Scripture. Rather, they heard Scripture as one reader read aloud the text a congregation owned or borrowed. So, only the reader would see that a *nomen sacrum* was present, and when he came to that place in the text no doubt he said the full word aloud. Thus, the listener would likely not even have known there was a *nomen sacrum* in the text. Third, literacy was rare in ancient times: only 10–20 percent of an ancient population was literate.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, most scholars focus on *nomina sacra* in the medium where it was seen the *least* by early Christians: the biblical text. Of course, the most abundant extant evidence of *nomina sacra* is in the biblical texts, and this goes back into the second-century texts—likely with origins in first-century texts.<sup>18</sup> The abundant extant evidence has allowed fruitful examinations. However, this paper will look at *nomina sacra* where it was seen the *most* by early Christians: in mosaic inscriptions on the floors and

<sup>15</sup>Comfort notes scribes commonly used overbars for abbreviations (by suspension, not contraction), and this practice, along with using an overbar for numbers written as letters, may have influenced the use of the overbar in *nomina sacra*. Ibid. However, Hurtado notes the common word abbreviation overbar appeared differently: over the final letter or two and extending a distance to the right of the abbreviation. Hurtado, “The Origin,” 660.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 656.

<sup>17</sup>Harris wrote about how many people could read and write in the Greco-Roman world. He proposes only a 10–20 percent general literacy in the ancient world because the important preconditions necessary for widespread literacy were never present in the Greco-Roman world. W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3, 12–13, 327. Gamble concurs with these findings but uses different methods to reach his conclusion. H. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3–7. However, see Millard, who notes the high expectation of literacy among ancient Jews. Also, he notes “all of the considerations, together with the material presented in Chapter 4, suggest many non-professionals wrote to some extent, keeping accounts, putting names on pots, ossuaries, and other possessions, perhaps writing for their own information memoranda and notes and even copying books in Aramaic or Hebrew or Greek, as we know others did in Egypt at the same time and at Dura Europos [sic] a century or two later (179).” A. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 157, 179.

<sup>18</sup>Hurtado, “The Origin,” 659.

in graffiti on the walls of house churches. Much of this epigraphic evidence has come to light only in the last few decades—some in the last few years.

### Mosaics

Mosaics were the carpets of the ancient world. Although pebbled floors date as far back as the eighth century BC, mosaic floors date back to the fourth or fifth century BC in Greek, Roman, and Punic areas. They started with simple geometric designs, but in the Roman period the pictures became quite complex with many nuances of colors and shading.<sup>19</sup>

Mosaicists used tesserae: small, colorful, cubed stones, for their work. One can find mosaics in ancient houses, villas, palaces, shops, sidewalks, churches, and synagogues.<sup>20</sup> They have excellent durability since they often employ the natural colors of stone—thus with no paint to rub off. For instance, limestone occurs naturally in various shades of white, yellow, red, and green.<sup>21</sup>

Until the last century, archeologists and historians paid little attention to the historical value of mosaics. They preferred examining architectural remains, literary texts, ceramics, and coins. Yet, now they understand the valuable religious, social, and political information mosaics reveal.<sup>22</sup>

Archeologists have discovered the remains of hundreds of churches in ancient Palestine dating to the Roman-Byzantine period—mostly from the sixth to eighth centuries. They typically had mosaic carpets on the entire central floor as well as in the naves, aisles, inter-columnar area, entrance, and courtyard.<sup>23</sup> Dedicatory inscriptions on mosaics listing the donor are common in these churches. Most are in Greek, but there are some inscriptions in Aramaic, Armenian, Syriac, Latin, Arabic, and Christopalestinian. They occur in rectangular, circular, and *tabula ansata* (a panel with handles or “wings”) form.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Herr, “Magic Carpets,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (3–4/1996): 3. Ben Dov and Rappel call the Byzantine era the golden age of mosaics in the Holy Land. Meir Ben Dov and Yoel Rappel, *Mosaics of the Holy Land* (New York: Adama Books, 1987), 37. However, this article focuses on a pre-Byzantine mosaic at Megiddo.

<sup>20</sup>Herr, “Magic Carpets,” 3.

<sup>21</sup>Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 279.

<sup>22</sup>G.W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>23</sup>Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends; Selected Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 219–20.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 232. The inscriptions also sometimes contained Scripture verses, dates, names of bishops or other clergy, builders, emperors, notable church members, and the name of the mosaicist (236).

There is little known about the mosaicists. However, archeologists can make assumptions based on the similarity of motifs and patterns, stylistic idiosyncrasies, tesserae size and consistency, and letter styles to determine if one or more mosaicists laid the mosaics in a church as well as compare the work from church to church. Sometimes the mosaic inscription mentioned their name. From the names mentioned, it is evident that usually Jewish mosaicists laid mosaics in synagogues and Christian mosaicists did their work in churches.<sup>25</sup>

### House Churches

L. Michael White calls the original meeting place of Christians—typically an unaltered house—a house church, well-attested in Paul’s mission and letters (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5; Phlm 1–2; Col 4:15).<sup>26</sup> Then—likely over an indeterminate period of time (from extant data available)—Christians renovated it into a *domus ecclesiae*<sup>27</sup> (a “house of the church”), such as the Dura-Europos church.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Christians at Dura enlarged the dining hall (*triclinium*), now called room four. There is

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 240–42. However, some mosaic workshops may have serviced both churches and synagogues, so a Jewish or Christian artist may have worked in both types of worship buildings (240).

<sup>26</sup>L. Michael White, *Building God’s House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews and Christians*, vol. 1 of *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, Harvard Theological Studies 42 (Valley Forge, PN: Trinity Press, 1997), 149. See an in-depth description of the ancient literature and architecture of house churches in L. Michael White, *Texts and Monuments for the Christian Domus Ecclesiae in its Environment*, vol. 2 of *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, Harvard Theological Studies 42 (Valley Forge, PN: Trinity, 1997), 33–120 (literature), 121–257 (architecture).

<sup>27</sup>This Latin term can be either genitive singular (“house of the church”), nominative plural (“house churches”), or genitive plural (“houses of the churches”), depending on the context.

<sup>28</sup>Michael White, *Building God’s House*, 111. Although many scholars do not differentiate between a house church and a *domus ecclesia* (or *domus ecclesiae*—see above), this writer likes White’s nuanced distinction and will use the terms in this way. Contrast this use with Tzaferis, who says Christians used “congregation rooms” in the apostolic age and in the rest of the first century. In the second century they used the provisional *domus ecclesia* (“house church”). These were houses in which members of the congregation lived, and the congregation moved from house to house, not dedicating any of them as permanent places of worship. Towards the end of the second century and into the third Christians used more permanent places dedicated not only to worship but also used for teaching rooms, vestries, apartments for clergy, and other uses. At this time the so-called (by Patristics) *domus Dei* (house of God), *ecclesi*, or *dominicum* became more like a synagogue in that it was the center of the religious and social life of a Christian. The Eucharist table (*trapeze eucharistion*) and offering table (*trapeze proforon*) became fixed objects in the church. There was a relative peace for Christians from the second half of the third century until the persecution under Diocletian (AD 303–313). Vassilios Tzaferis, “To God Jesus Christ: Early Christian Prayer Hall Found in Megiddo Prison,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (3–4/2007): 45, 48.

no clear evidence Christians used the house as a house church prior to this renovation.<sup>29</sup> Yet, that is the nature of extant house churches today. Since the building was not altered at first there is usually no evidence Christians used it. In the second half of the third century Christians needed a larger room in the structure, and they used an *aula ecclesiae* (“hall of the church”). Then after AD 313 they adopted the basilica style of civic buildings.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the Megiddo prayer hall seems to be an early and unique example of an *aula ecclesiae*, being a part of a civic building which also housed Roman army officers.<sup>31</sup>

### Caveat Lector

Several weaknesses of this study must be disclosed. First, there are few extant mosaic inscriptions in house churches and *domus ecclesiae*. The House of St. Peter<sup>32</sup> at Capernaum (first century AD) and the Dura-Europos *domus ecclesiae* by the Euphrates River in Syria (AD 232) have none.<sup>33</sup> However, the recently-discovered prayer hall at Megiddo (AD 230) has three mosaic inscriptions (but only one with *nomina sacra*). Graffiti and dipinti<sup>34</sup> fare better: the House of St. Peter yielded 175 inscriptions, and the Dura-Europos church has twenty. Second, in examining the ruins of ancient house churches, unless a given church was mentioned in an early church council or by Eusebius as being orthodox, it could be the ruins are from a heterodox or otherwise quasi-Christian group, thus not reflecting the norm. Third, some graffiti readings are unclear due to the fragmentation of the plaster surface on which they were carved. Fourth, the date of the Megiddo church is in much debate, so its findings may have less impact if it is post Constantinian in date.<sup>35</sup> Fifth, this writer is not a paleographer and must depend upon those who are to date the evidence, so most of the Capernaum graffiti have a range of two centuries.

<sup>29</sup>Michael White, *Building God's House*, 120–21.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 127–28, 134.

<sup>31</sup>Yotam Tepper, and Leah Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 5–6, 21–22.

<sup>32</sup>Although this writer does not believe in specifying certain Christians as saints (all Christians are saints: Acts 9:13, 32; 26:10; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2), the conventional name for this house is the House of St. Peter.

<sup>33</sup>The fifth-century octagonal church at Capernaum has a mosaic, but this article is focusing on pre-Constantinian Christian mosaics.

<sup>34</sup>A graffito (plural: graffiti) is an inscription or figure that is carved on a wall or object; whereas, a dipinto (plural: dipinti) is an inscription or figure that is painted on a wall or object.

<sup>35</sup>Helmut Koester warns that the enthusiastic early date of hundreds of ancient churches had to be revised after later assessment. “Oldest Church Found. Well, Maybe,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (11–12/1998): 22.



## The House of St. Peter in Capernaum

This *domus ecclesiae* is likely the oldest extant church in the world. It is located in what was likely Jesus' headquarters city in his Galilean ministry. Capernaum is located on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee. Excavations began at Capernaum in 1905 and continued until 1914. When excavations resumed in 1921, Gaudence Orgali discovered the ruins of a Byzantine octagonal church, which he misidentified at the time due to incomplete excavation. Excavations did not resume until 1968. As a result of renewed excavation, the original structure is identified as the first-century house of the apostle Peter (see Mark 1:29–31; 2:14; Matt 8:14–15). In the fourth century it was rebuilt; in the fifth century the octagonal church was built above it.<sup>36</sup>

The *domus ecclesiae* was a part of the larger house of Peter. Of course, there is no way to prove this house belonged to Peter, and there are scholars who dispute this claim.<sup>37</sup> Yet, this is the traditional claim, and Christian veneration of this site clearly goes back into the first century. There is no compelling reason to doubt the genuineness of this site.

The fifth-century octagonal church has a large mosaic floor in the venerated hall number one with a peacock in the middle, an ancient Christian symbol for eternal life. Underneath the mosaic excavators recovered thousands of fragments of plaster, broken from the walls of the *domus ecclesiae*, some of which have graffiti from an earlier time.<sup>38</sup> Emmanuele Testa wrote the definitive book on this graffiti, and he dates the oldest graffiti back to the early third century AD on paleographic grounds, and other graffiti date as late as the early fifth century. There were 151 samples in Greek, 13 samples in Paleo-Estrangelo, 9 in Aramaic, and 2 in Latin.<sup>39</sup> Testa believes the graffiti were pious messages left by Christian pilgrims, and many of the graffiti contain Semitic names.<sup>40</sup>

Of the 151 sections of Greek inscriptions (some composed of several fragments pieced together), some of them contain only one letter (e.g.,

<sup>36</sup>Virgilio Corbo, "The Church of the House of St. Peter at Capernaum," in *Ancient Churches Revealed*, ed. Yoram Tsafrir (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 71–72, 74. Virgilio C. Corbo, *The House of St. Peter at Capharnaum: A Preliminary Report of the First Two Campaigns of Excavations, April 16–June 19, Sept. 12–Nov. 26, 1968*, trans. Sylvester Saller (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1969), 1–3, 69–71. Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 11.

<sup>37</sup>Joan E. Taylor, "Capernaum and its 'Jewish-Christians': A Re-examination of the Franciscan Excavations," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 9 (1989–1990): 26.

<sup>38</sup>Corbo, *The House*, 69.

<sup>39</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 183. See a different number in Stanislao Loffreda, *A Visit to Capharnaum* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1976), 32.

<sup>40</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 9, 183.

fragments #2, 7, 54, 55, 76), some contain just a fragment of a letter (e.g., #4, 5), and many contain just two letters (e.g., #15, 16, 18, 26, 30, 31, 32, 58, 61, 63, 65, 84).<sup>41</sup> The following inscriptions contain more than two letters as well as certain or probable *nomina sacra*, given in their order of importance for this study.

Number 89 contains three category one (see note 12 above) *nomina sacra*, all with overbars:  $\overline{K[E]} \overline{IC} \overline{XE}$ ,<sup>42</sup> paleographically dated to the third century (due to the square sigma and epsilon). It is an invocation deeply carved inside a rectangular frame on the red plaster, just next to the white-cream plaster, so it may be about the donor. The epsilon of the first *nomen sacrum* is missing (the piece is broken there, but due to the small amount of space present it is clear that it is a *nomen sacrum* next to the other two). This inscription is in six pieces fitted together, but the inscription is clearly legible. It reads  $\overline{K[E]} \overline{IC} \overline{XE} \text{ BOH}\Theta\text{I} \dots [?] \text{N KAI IZI}[?]$ , and it likely had other lines and ended with  $\overline{AMHN}$  (“Amen”).<sup>43</sup> Written out in full, the first line would be  $\overline{K(YPI)[E]} \overline{I(HCOY)\overline{C}} \overline{X(PICT)\overline{E}} \text{ BOH}\Theta\text{I}$ , “Lord Jesus Christ, help!” This was a typical Christian prayer, and the verb  $\beta\omicron\iota\eta\theta\iota$  is linked with the number 99—the number of sheep the Good Shepherd had after the one was lost.<sup>44</sup> “Jesus” is in the nominative rather than the vocative case ( $\overline{IY}$ ), but Testa says it was probably because both “Jesus” and “God” were such popular names in the nominative case.<sup>45</sup> All three *nomina sacra* are contractions, the most common form of *nomina sacra*. Since this is probably a dedicatory inscription, and such inscriptions invoked help from a god (for the pagans) or God (for the Jews), clearly this Christian inscription is treating Jesus as God.

Number 44 has a contracted category one *nomen sacrum* and possibly a second one, but it is broken after the theta, so there is no way of knowing about the second one. It is small: 4.5 x 4.5 cm and 0.7 cm thick. It reads  $\overline{XE} \Theta[?]$ . The first word is missing the left side of the chi, but it has an overbar (even though the overbar extends some to the right of the word),

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 52, 56, 61, 63, 68.

<sup>42</sup>This article will follow the common convention using parentheses, ( ), to indicate supplied letters the *nomina sacra* omit and using brackets, [ ], to indicate missing letters: either no longer visible or being broken off of the surviving fragment. A question mark indicates undetermined missing letters of a word, and ellipses indicate undetermined missing words. Obviously letters supplied in brackets are guesses, but they often are very accurate educated guesses!

<sup>43</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 68, 72–74.

<sup>44</sup>P.E. Testa, *Il Simbolismo Dei Giudeo-Cristiani* (Gerusalemme: Tipografia Dei PP. Francescani, 1962), 396–99. Adding the Greek letters in  $\beta\omicron\iota\eta\theta\iota$  equal to 99:  $\beta = 2 + \omicron = 70 + \eta = 8 + \theta = 9 + \iota = 10$ . Thus, the epsilon in the imperative  $\beta\omicron\iota\eta\theta\epsilon\iota$  was dropped to fit the symbolism:  $\beta\omicron\iota\eta\theta\iota$ . Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 74.

<sup>45</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 73, 75.

so it is most likely  $\overline{XE}$ , the contracted vocative form of Christ. On the next word the right side and top of the theta is broken off, so it is not possible to know the other letter(s) or if an overbar was originally present, but Testa ventures a plausible educated guess. It is most likely the contracted vocative form of God,  $\overline{\Theta(E)[E]}$ , because that matches  $\overline{XE}$  and is more common than the suspended form. Less likely is the suspended vocative,  $\overline{\Theta(EE)}$  or  $\overline{\Theta[E](E)}$ , or the suspended or contracted nominative form of God,  $\overline{\Theta(EOC)}$ ,  $\overline{\Theta[E](OC)}$ , or  $\overline{\Theta(EO)C}$ . If this inscription does read “Christ God,” it is of great theological and epigraphic value,<sup>46</sup> similar to the mosaic inscription recently discovered at the Megiddo church.

Number 94 contains one definite category one contraction *nomen sacrum* with an overbar and one possible category three suspension *nomen sacrum*. It measures 9 x 6 x 1.3 cm, and it is five pieces which were glued together in situ. It reads  $Y\Psi ICT[W] \overline{XO} CWT[HPI]$ .<sup>47</sup> Written out in full, it says  $Y\Psi ICT[W] \overline{X(PICT)O} CWT[HPI]$ , “Most High Christ Savior.” It was common in ancient inscriptions to use  $\upsilon\psi\iota\sigma\tau\omega$  for a god by pagans or for God by Jews, so it was natural for a Christian to use it for Jesus. The omicron in “Christ” is unfinished on the right side, and it is possible the person was wavering between whether to use an omicron or an omega. Testa says those two vowels were used interchangeably in inscriptions and symbols.<sup>48</sup> Due to fragmentation it is impossible to know if “Savior” were written in full or as a suspended *nomen sacrum* or if it had an overbar. However, since it followed a contracted *nomen sacrum* and CWT was definitely not a contracted *nomen sacrum*, it was probably written in full.<sup>49</sup>

Number 90 has a clear contracted category one *nomen sacrum* and one word usually appearing as a *nomen sacrum* that is spelled out. This two-lined graffito is 6.5 x 3 cm and is less than 1 cm thick. It is on the white cream wall near a red border. The two words appear on two lines with inscribed lines above and below both rows of text, so it is impossible to know if an overbar were present for the *nomen sacrum*. It reads  $KYPI[E] XE$ , and written in full it is  $KYPI[E] X(PICT)E$ , “Lord Christ.”<sup>50</sup>

Some graffiti contain words fully written that usually appear as *nomina sacra*. Here are two examples that are unusual because each

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 56, 59.

<sup>47</sup>Note the capital omega ( $\Omega$ ) was often written as a large lower-case omega ( $\omega$ ).

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 78, 79. Thus, one finds  $\overline{XO}$  or  $\overline{X\omega}$  rather than the more correct  $\overline{X\Omega}$ . Interestingly, it looks as if a lower-case omega were carved originally and an omicron carved on top of it. In his description Testa wrongly shows the second word as  $X\rho\iota\sigma\tau(o)$  rather than  $X(\rho\iota\sigma\tau)O$  or  $X(PICT)O$  (78).

<sup>49</sup>See Paap, *Nomina Sacra*, 96, 112, which lists no suspensions of  $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho$ , 12 contractions, and 30 occurrences of it written in full in first through fifth-century Greek papyri. He notes one inscription with the suspension  $\sigma\rho$  for  $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho\varsigma$ .

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 68, 76.

contains a category one word, which may reflect an early date. Even though the left and right sides of number 88 are broken off, it reads [XPI]CTE ΕΛΕΗC[ON], “Christ, have mercy [on us],” so Χρίστε was clearly written out on this 3 x 4 cm graffito.<sup>51</sup> Number 40 measures 4.5 x 4.5 cm and reads ΕΙΠΕΝ Ο ΘΕΟ[C] . . . ΝΙΚΗ ΤΗ ΓΥ[ΝΑΙΧΙ],<sup>52</sup> “God said . . . victory to the woman.” The right side of the omicron in “God” is broken off, but most likely the entire word was written.<sup>53</sup>

Some other inscriptions have nothing to do with *nomina sacra*, but they are interesting. For instance, #34 has WA—the alpha and omega (in reverse order). Number 36 has IWA[NNHC], “John,”<sup>54</sup> and #77 has [I] ΧΘΥC, the Greek word for “fish” used by Christians as an acrostic for the phrase “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior.”<sup>55</sup>

The graffiti at the House of St. Peter also contain some symbols and monograms.<sup>56</sup> Of the eighteen carved on the walls of the church, number 121 is noteworthy. It is 5.5 x 5.5 cm. It reads IHC T (or, less likely, IH C T). The “T” stands underneath IHC (or IH C) but it clearly is from the same hand and probably stands for the cross of Christ. So, written in full the *nomen sacrum* is either a contraction IH(COY)C T (“Jesus” + the cross), or it is two suspensions: IH(COYC) C(WTHP) (“Jesus Savior” + the cross). It is probably a contracted *nomen sacrum* since the eta is closer to the sigma than it is to the iota. There is no overbar over IHC, but since the piece is broken it is hard to be sure.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, a Hebrew monogram  $\tau\eta$  appears twice—both with the letters superimposed on each other (or connected to each other in a stylized manner) as a monogram, and one monogram above the other—to the left of the tau and underneath the iota of the first word.<sup>58</sup> To the left of both Hebrew monograms is an archaic, angled Hebrew tau. It is hard to know which inscription was written first, but Testa says the Hebrew one is an attempt to have Hebrew letters that looked like Greek letters mirror the IH of Jesus—the Greek eta (H) mistakenly written as a

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 68, 71–72.

<sup>52</sup>All three epsilons were written as lowercase. Ibid., 56.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 63, 66.

<sup>56</sup>A monogram is a combination of two or more letters, sometimes superimposed, to form a symbol.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 163–65.

<sup>58</sup>Testa, *Symbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani*, 378–79. This monogram looks like what Testa says is the most archaic monogram to express the word IH(COUC), “Jesus,” a graffito on an ossuary in the Dominus Flavit church in Jerusalem. See other similar examples on p. 379.

Hebrew he (ה) and the iota written as a yod, and it was written twice for good luck!<sup>59</sup>

Number 114 is a 7 x 7 cm fragment with a combination of a monogram and a category one *nomen sacrum*. It reads Y KYP. The upsilon is a monogram with four applications: ὕ(ιός), “son,” to refer to Christ, ὕ(ιοθεσία), “adoption,” to refer to Christians, to indicate the two ways of light and darkness by the way the top of the upsilon points in two directions, and to represent “the cross of two horns,”<sup>60</sup> a typical stylized monogram cross that has the top and/or both horizontal ends split into two directions like a upsilon. The KYP is a suspended category one *nomen sacrum*. Written in full, it is KYP(IOC) (“Lord”).<sup>61</sup>

Number 127 is a 5 x 3.5 cm monogram of IHC (or, less likely, IH C—see #121 above) with no overbar: either a contracted *nomen sacrum*, IH(COY)C (“Jesus”), or it was two suspended *nomina sacra*, IH(COYC) C(WTHP) (“Jesus Savior”). The piece is broken on both the left side of the iota and the right side of the sigma, so it is possible that the name was written in full, or it may be a *nomen sacrum* or *nomina sacra* with an archaic tau following, as in monogram number 121. It does appear that a beginning of a letter starts next to the sigma which could be the crossbar of the tau.<sup>62</sup>

Testa notes the following aspects of faith and belief the pilgrims reflected in their graffiti at the House of St. Peter in Capernaum: (1) the divinity of Jesus Christ, (2) faith in Christ’s redeeming work on the cross, (3) private prayer—especially asking Christ for help and rescue, and (4) respect for the Bible (since they reflect biblical truth).<sup>63</sup> Thus, they are an important ancient Christian witness.

### Prayer Hall in Megiddo

While digging to prepare the ground for an expansion of the Megiddo high-security prison compound, workers unearthed some remains of the ancient Jewish village of Kefar ‘Othnay on the Megiddo police-station hill. It was located next to a Roman legion camp, from which this Legio region got its name (El Laijun). From 2003–2005 some 3,000 square meters (three dunams) were excavated, including a large residential building in area Q on the outskirts of Kefar ‘Othnay. Measuring twenty by thirty meters, this building contained four wings, twelve large rooms, other service rooms,

<sup>59</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 164, 166.

<sup>60</sup>Testa, *Symbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani*, 247–48. See many examples on p. 248.

<sup>61</sup>Testa, *Casa Di S. Pietro*, 154, 158.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 164, 169.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 187–89.

an outer courtyard and an inner courtyard. Part of the building was used as quarters for Roman army officers. The western wing contained what Tepper and Di Segni call a Christian prayer hall, consisting of an anteroom and a service room some five by ten meters in size.<sup>64</sup> It may date to ca. AD 230. Although there is debate about this early date, the first excavation report dates it so.<sup>65</sup> In addition to Tepper's early dating of the prayer hall, epigraphic expert Di Segni dates the mosaic to the first half of the third century on the words used and style of lettering.<sup>66</sup>

The best preserved part of the complex is the mosaic floor in the Christian prayer hall. It was covered through the years by many broken pieces of plaster from the colorful frescos on the walls. The uniform size and shape of the mosaic tesserae indicate a single mosaicist did all of the work, even though the craftsmanship is not professional. Composed of ten shades of limestone tesserae, the mosaic floor consists of four panels that surround a podium, upon which the Lord's Supper table likely sat—the focal point of the room. The east and west panels contain geometric patterns—common in ancient pagan, Jewish, and Christian mosaics.<sup>67</sup>

On the north side of the podium, the north mosaic panel includes a medallion containing two fish in it—one of the earliest symbols for Christianity, predating the cross symbol by 200 years. It also contains the Gaius inscription in Greek, the church dedicatory inscription. It measures 37 x 287 cm, with black letters 8–10 cm in height, a white background, and a black band surrounding the inscription. It lists the benefactor and the mosaicist. It contains no *nomina sacra* nor any words typically used as *nomina sacra*. Interestingly, it does contain a Greek chi above a rho: a common abbreviation for ἐκατοντάρχης, “centurion,” in the second and third centuries AD.<sup>68</sup>

The southern mosaic panel contains two Greek inscriptions opposite each other, facing out. The inscription on the western side is the Akeptous inscription. It is a 67 x 80 cm rectangle with a black frame and black letters, which are 7.5–9.0 cm in height. The fourth line contains three *nomina*

<sup>64</sup>Yotam Tepper, and Leah Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 5, 10, 13, 24–26.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 50. This date is based on evidence from ceramics and coins. However, this is the preliminary report. Future reports will give additional archeological findings from subsequent digs at this site. See Vassilios Tzaferis, “To God Jesus Christ: Early Christian Prayer Hall Found in Megiddo Prison,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (3–4/2007): 40. Yet, some scholars date it to the fourth or fifth century. Although they raise no convincing arguments, see the doubts from Edward Adams in “The Ancient Church at Megiddo: The Discovery and an Assessment of its Significance,” *The Expository Times* 120 (2008): 65–67 and Andrew Lawler, “First Churches of the Jesus Cult,” *Archaeology* (9–10, 2007): 49.

<sup>66</sup>Tepper and Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 34.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 24–26. See Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements*, 8–11.

<sup>68</sup>Tepper and Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 26, 34–35.

*sacra*: Θ̄W̄ IȲ X̄W̄, which written in full is Θ̄(E)W̄ Ī(HCO)Ȳ X̄(PICT)W̄. There is a dot after Akeptous and a dot before and after each *nomen sacrum*. It reads: ΠΡΟΧΝΙΚΕΝ ΑΚΕΠΤΟΥΣ Η ΦΙΛΟΘΕΟΣ ΤΗΝ ΤΡΑΠΕΣΑΝ Θ̄W̄ IȲ X̄W̄ MNHMOCYNON,<sup>69</sup> “The god-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial.”<sup>70</sup> Tepper and Di Segni believe these three *nomina sacra* are the earliest extant epigraphic occurrences; however, some graffiti *nomina sacra* at Capernaum may be older.<sup>71</sup>

The dedication part of this inscription is similar to dedications in pagan temples. There is no parallel to the name Akeptous in this region, but it may be a feminized form of the common western Empire name *Acceptus*.<sup>72</sup> The use of *nomina sacra* and the verb προσήνικεν (“he has offered”) are common to later, Byzantine mosaics.<sup>73</sup> However, several notable elements in this mosaic are different from Byzantine mosaics in this region, which may attest to its early, pre-Constantinian origin (thus, pre-Byzantine). First, μνημόσυνον (“memorial”) does not appear in other mosaic inscriptions (but it is used in Matt 26:14; Mark 14:9; and Acts 10:4). Second, φιλόθεος (“God loving”) is used in early Patristic writings, but it is not used in Byzantine inscriptions in this region.<sup>74</sup> Rather, φιλόχριστος (“Christ loving”) is the preferred word for these Byzantine mosaics (but not in early Patristic writings). Third, the phrase “God Jesus Christ” is unusual but not without scriptural precedent. Both Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 have “God and Savior, Jesus Christ,” and the phrase is used by some Patristic writers.<sup>75</sup> Also, other Scriptures affirm the divinity of Christ, such as John 1:1, 14; 10:30. Pre-Constantinian Christian mosaics and mosaic inscriptions are rare, but how rare is the use of *nomina sacra* in them? At Megiddo it is 33 percent—of the three mosaic inscriptions found here, one

<sup>69</sup>Typical for mosaic inscriptions, there were no spaces in between words, but this article supplies them in order to make the reading easier. Note: the uppercase zeta in τράπεζαν is written like an English uppercase S, although more angular. In lowercase accented form it reads: Προσήνικεν Ἀκεπτοῦς ἡ φιλόθεος τὴν τράπεζαν Θ(ε)ῶ Ἰ(ησο)ῦ Χ(ριστ)ῶ μνημόσυνον.

<sup>70</sup>Tepper and Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 36.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 41. The -ους endings are typical of just a small group of female names in Greek, such as Philous and Pallous.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>74</sup>Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.12.10.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.1.8.7.1; 7.1.4.1.1; 7.1.4.2.1; Origen, *Sel. Ps.* 12.1181.24, 28; Athanasius, *Apol. ad Constantium imperatorem* 1.21; 15.24.

<sup>75</sup>Tepper and Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 37, 41. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.6; Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* 7; 15; *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* 8; *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans* 3; Tertullian, *Res.* 24; *Praescr.* 44; Ignatius, *Epistulae interpolatae et epistulae suppositiciae* 3.9.4.2; 6.6.6.6; Athanasius, *Apol. ad Constantium imperatorem* 3.25; 28.4; *Historia Arianorum* 53.2.2.

of them contains three of the four category one *nomina sacra*. This evidence affirms the use of *nomina sacra* in Christian mosaics in the early third century.<sup>76</sup> Will earlier instances be found? Only time will tell.

At the eastern end of the southern mosaic is the Women inscription. It is a 38–86 cm rectangle with a black frame and black letters, which are 7.0–7.5 cm in height. In the first and fourth lines are ligatures of letters. It contains no *nomina sacra* nor any words typically used as *nomina sacra*.<sup>77</sup>

### *Domus Ecclesia in Dura-Europos*

Dura-Europos is “the Pompeii of the Syrian desert.”<sup>78</sup> Located on the Euphrates River midway between Aleppo and Baghdad, Dura was never a major city—nor was Pompeii. However, since 1921 enough finely-preserved ruins in Dura have been excavated by Yale University that “Dura rivals Pompeii in the beautiful state of preservation of its ruins, and in the quantity, quality, variety, and state of preservation of the objects found in them. . . . Furthermore, Dura, like Pompeii, is a veritable museum of decorative wall-painting.”<sup>79</sup>

There is little debate that the Dura-Europos house church dates to AD 230–40.<sup>80</sup> It was a typical private house in Dura: its mud brick and rubble walls covered with plaster. A flat roof covered the box-shaped rooms that surrounded the courtyard. The outside of the house looked like other houses in the area. It was the inside of the house that Christians slightly modified to be a *domus ecclesiae*.<sup>81</sup> Inside there are twenty texts (graffiti and dipinti) on the wall plaster. Only one gives a date (corresponding to Oct. 232–Sept. 233). Five of them are partial or complete alphabets: four in Greek and one in Syriac. Five graffiti appear in room six—the baptistery—the most renovated room in the house when it was converted into public use, complete with an upper room built above it.<sup>82</sup> Four of these baptistery graffiti (#16–19) were applied after the wall decorations on the plaster since they appear within the features of the decoration.<sup>83</sup> They date between AD 232–256, although likely in the 240s.

<sup>76</sup>However, subsequent excavations may date this mosaic later, as stated above.

<sup>77</sup>Tepper and Di Segni, *Christian Prayer Hall*, 41.

<sup>78</sup>M. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and its Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), 2.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>Lawler, 47. Lawler notes this church is the “only undisputed early Christian worship site.” The final report posits the original private house was built ca. 232 and was converted into a Christian building in the mid 240s, thus serving as a *domus ecclesiae* for only ten to fifteen years prior to the Sassanian destruction of the Dura-Europos in 256 (34, 38–39).

<sup>81</sup>Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 3.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 23, 25, 28, 95.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.



Two of the baptistery graffiti contain three clear examples of category one *nomina sacra*, with one suspension and two contractions, and all three containing the overbar. Number 17 is “on the south wall between the doorways, at the left of the niche. . . . A deep, coarse, graffito, length, 29 cm., height, 8 cm., letters, 1–2 cm.”<sup>84</sup> Hopkins says the niche to the right of the inscription would have contained holy oil, used to anoint the baptismal candidate in Syrian baptisms.<sup>85</sup> The inscription text contains the *nomen sacrum*  $\overline{\text{XPIC}}$ . It reads TON  $\overline{\text{XPIC}}$  MNHCKECTE CICEON TON TAPIINON,<sup>86</sup> and the suspended *nomen sacrum* in full form is  $\overline{\text{XPIC}}(\text{TON})$ . One rendering is “Christ (with you). Remember Sisaeus the humble.” The accusative is an acclamation, and the “you” is understood. It was a typical practice of early Christians to refer to themselves as “humble.”<sup>87</sup> The abbreviation of  $\text{X}\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\nu$  with an overbar is not the usual form of a *nomen sacrum* for “Christ.”

Number 18 is a graffito below and to the right of number 17. It sits above the scene of David and Goliath and below the scene of Paradise. The letters fit within a decorative green band that frames the David and Goliath scene.<sup>88</sup> Its length is about 1.3 m, and the letters are large, coarse, and square: 4–5 cm.<sup>89</sup> It contains the *nomina sacra*:  $\overline{\text{XN}} \overline{\text{IN}}$ . It reads TON  $\overline{\text{XN}}$   $\overline{\text{IN}}$  YMEIN MN[H]CKEC[ΘE] [ΠΠ]OKΛΟΥ, “to our Christ

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 95. Avi-Yonah incorrectly said none of these three *nomina sacra* have the overbar, and he called them “individual freaks.” Michael Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions*, Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine (Jerusalem: Government of Palestine, 1940), reprinted in Alan N. Oikonomides, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions: Papyri Manuscripts and Early Printed Books* (Chicago: Ares, 1974), 27. However, his information came from a preliminary report. The final report (Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 95) clearly reflects the overbar in each of the three *nomina sacra* at Dura-Europos. Unfortunately the full volume of the inscriptions at Dura-Europos (V:2) was planned but never printed—a sad but frequent occurrence with archeologists: eager and quick to dig, but slow to publish—sometimes going to their grave with unpublished findings. Also, the Dura-Europos *nomina sacra* are no longer lone “freaks” since the discovery of *nomina sacra* at Capernaum and Megiddo.

<sup>85</sup>Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 115–16. The candidate was anointed with oil before and after immersion.

<sup>86</sup>It was common in Hellenistic Greek for a tau to replace a theta when following a sigma ( $\mu\eta\iota\sigma\kappa\epsilon\theta\epsilon$ ), and Dura-Europos contains several other examples of this. Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 96.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid. See A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 115, where he cites  $\tau\alpha\pi\epsilon\iota\nu\acute{o}\varsigma$  as an example of a common koine Greek word that Christians embraced and gave distinctive meaning.

<sup>88</sup>Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 96, plate XXXIII; Hopkins, *The Discovery*, 115.

<sup>89</sup>Hopkins, *The Discovery*, 115; Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 96. Only the most upper part of the theta is visible.

Jesus. Remember Proklus.” Proclus may have been the benefactor.<sup>90</sup> Or, it could be “Remind Christ of Proclus among yourselves,” a call to specific intercessory prayer.<sup>91</sup>

Three words from categories one and three *nomina sacra* appear in two of the baptistery graffiti, but they are all written in their full form rather than as *nomina sacra*. Number 15 has letters 1.5 cm and is “on the west jamb of the doorway leading from the Courtyard.”<sup>92</sup> It reads ΕΙC ΘΕΟC ΕΝ ΟΡΑΝΩ (“to God in heaven”), which is a Christianized version of a typical pagan greeting. It uses θεός (“God”), a word almost always appearing as a *nomen sacrum*, and ὀρανῶ (“heaven”), a word sometimes appearing as one.<sup>93</sup> Number 19 has 1 cm, deeply-cut letters, is 5.5 cm wide, and is located between the doorways of the south wall. It is cut on the raised right forearm of David as he is using his sling in the fresco scene. It reads ΔΑΟΥΙΑ (“David,” spelled Δαουίδ, which was a common spelling along with Δαουείδ or Δαβίδ).<sup>94</sup> This name is from the third category of *nomina sacra*.

### Conclusion

The *nomina sacra* count<sup>95</sup> in this study is as follows: of Robert’s list of 15 *nomina sacra*, three appear only in full words (savior, heaven, and David), one appears only as a *nomen sacrum* (Jesus), and three appear both ways (Christ, Lord, and God).<sup>96</sup> There are 23 uses of these 7 words: 7 appear in full and 16 appear as *nomina sacra*. The 16 *nomina sacra* include only the category one words: Jesus (5), Christ (7), lord (2), and God (2). Thus, all four category one *nomina sacra* appear, and “Jesus” and “Christ” account for 75 percent of the *nomina sacra*. There are 2 suspension and 14 contraction *nomina sacra*. Thus, the words used seem to reflect an early period of *nomina sacra* use, and the contracted form preference seems to

<sup>90</sup>Hopkins translates it “Christ Jesus is yours: remember Proclus.” He connects the saying with Luke 17:20–21, where Jesus said the kingdom of God is within reach of all who believe in him (117).

<sup>91</sup>A.D. Nock and C. Hopkins, “Additional Note,” in *Christian Church at Dura-Europos*, reprinted from *Preliminary Report of Fifth Season of Work October 1931–March 1932* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 48.

<sup>92</sup>Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, 95.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid. The missing upsilon (ὀρανῶ instead of οὐρανῶ) was common in late Greek.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 97, plate XLI.

<sup>95</sup>In instances where the reading is unclear, the count includes the most likely possibility as reflected in this study.

<sup>96</sup>The monogram letters are not counted in this study. Thus, the one *nomen sacrum* in #121 and #114 are counted, but the four monograms in #121 and one monogram in #114 are not counted.

reflect a later period when contraction became a fixed form. However, non-scriptural *nomina sacra* may have developed slightly differently than its use in Scripture.

What are common characteristics of this pre-Constantinian Christian mosaic inscription and graffiti, and what do these examples show about the use of *nomina sacra*? First, they help establish the important visual aspect of *nomina sacra*.<sup>97</sup> Certainly they had greater visual impact and more public accessibility than *nomina sacra* in Scripture texts. Of course, the number of people who saw *nomina sacra* varied according to the medium on which the words appeared. For example, the readership of a typical personal letter was very limited.<sup>98</sup> Even a Scripture text read aloud in a church would have just one reader and a number of hearers, who likely would not even be aware of each *nomen sacrum* since the reader would no doubt orally substitute the regular word for each *nomen sacrum* in the text. Of the extant uses of *nomina sacra*, mosaic inscriptions and graffiti instantly had the most visibility and readership in a *domus ecclesiae*. Of course, there are no extant first or second-century examples, and there is no reason to think the earliest house churches had Christian mosaic inscriptions for a while. Yet, when they did appear, they had the most visibility. Thus, this study shows *nomina sacra* had more visibility than may be typically understood.

For scholars focusing solely on the biblical texts, it is commonly proposed that scribes learned about *nomina sacra* from scribal schools, such as at Antioch. However, if mosaic inscriptions and/or graffiti were common in house churches in the early *second* century, it could be that the use of *nomina sacra* in this medium is what spread the knowledge and use of *nomina sacra* more than any scribal school. Certainly not every copier of Scripture was a scribe that went to a scribal school.

Second, this study shows *nomina sacra* had more writers than is typically proposed. Each medium bearing *nomina sacra* potentially had different writers: scribes or literate Christians for the biblical texts,

<sup>97</sup>Hurtado rightly mentions the importance of the visual nature of *nomina sacra* in L. Hurtado, "The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the *Nomina Sacra* and the Staurogram," in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 277.

<sup>98</sup>Surely studying ancient papyri letters is an indiscreet task since they were originally intended to be private correspondence! Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, 2. However, NT personal letters had an original intention of being read aloud to the church (1–2 Tim, Titus, Phlm). Even then, the number of people who actually read the letters may have been limited by literacy or accessibility.

mosaicists<sup>99</sup>—likely belonging to a guild—for the mosaic inscriptions, artists for the frescoes, religious pilgrims for graffiti, such as at Megiddo, and literate Christians for the papyrus letters, ostraca, ossuaries, and general graffiti. Although one can only guess about a detailed description of any group except for the scribes, it is significant that such diverse groups used *nomina sacra*. Of course, there was likely some overlap between the groups, such as a scribe or artisan writing a personal letter.

Third, the use of *nomina sacra* in mosaics and graffiti is an important non-scriptural use. The greatest number of extant examples of *nomina sacra* is in OT and NT texts, but other media deserve study. Mosaics and graffiti were not Scripture, and they rarely quoted Scripture. Along with other non-scriptural uses, such as on lamps, ostraca, ossuaries, and personal letters, these examples show the widespread use of *nomina sacra* outside of writing Scripture. So, it was not a practice limited only to the writing of Scripture—it was pervasive throughout everyday life (see also the next two points as proof).

Fourth, these are original writings, not copies (as opposed to extant biblical manuscripts, which always are all *copies*). Fifth, these were occasional writings (unlike copying Scripture),<sup>100</sup> varying between being carefully planned (mosaic inscriptions and graffiti/dipinti used as picture captions or dedicatory inscriptions) and ad hoc (pilgrim or general graffiti).

Sixth, they often followed convention in form and style, such as word usage, phraseology, color, letter shape, and the use of a border for a dedicatory inscription. Even ad hoc graffiti writers often followed convention, such as using common phrases and monograms. Thus, similar to people who copied Scripture, mosaic and graffiti writers were clearly influenced by other writings on these media.

Seventh, graffiti writers sometimes used *nomina sacra* in monograms and symbols—certainly showing more variety in how *nomina sacra* appear than in Scripture texts. However, since this usage employed no overbar, used letters as pictograms (i.e., a superimposed chi rho so the rho looks

<sup>99</sup>Little is known about ancient mosaicists. Writers—usually of the upper class—virtually ignored them. They were artisans lumped in with all other artisans, and the upper class looked at people who made a living from their hands as inferiors. Regardless of how skilled they were, they were still doing menial labor, according to the upper class. A mosaicist could work out of a small shop consisting of just himself and his son or an apprentice. Or, he could be part of a larger shop with a number of craftsmen. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 269, 275.

<sup>100</sup>Certainly the original writing of each letter and book in the Scripture was occasional, but the copying of them was not—it was simply the copying of a writing originally penned for a specific situation. Of course, each copy did have a specific purpose (for a certain church to have that copy).

like Christ on a cross), often merged letters into each other or used stylized letters, they are in a different category than *nomina sacra*.

So, the use of *nomina sacra* in a pre-Constantinian Christian mosaic and graffiti helps to show the use of *nomina sacra* at least by the third century AD may have been common among literate Christians—not just Christian scribes. Trained mosaicists used them, pilgrims etched them as graffiti in the House of St. Peter in Capernaum, and either clergy or members of the congregation etched them on the wall of the Dura-Europos *domus ecclesiae*. Although one cannot prove that common people made these mosaics or carvings, there is no doubt that common people saw them as they worshipped in these *domus ecclesiae*. Even an illiterate person could see the unusual feature of the overbar with the few letters of *nomina sacra*.

The graffiti at the House of St. Peter in Capernaum and the *domus ecclesia* at Dura-Europos give important epigraphic evidence of *nomina sacra* that is contemporary to the proposed AD 230 date for the mosaic at the Megiddo prayer hall. Although they do not use the exact phrase “God Jesus Christ” as at Megiddo, graffito #44 at Capernaum may say “Christ God,” #94 says “Most High Christ Savior,” #89 treats Jesus as God, and all of these graffiti use some *nomina sacra*.

Mosaic inscriptions shed light on some reasons that were clearly *not* possibilities as to the use of *nomina sacra*. First, it was not to save time. Putting a mosaic line (overbar) above the *nomen sacrum* likely took the same amount of time as completing the word. Second, it was not to save space. Granted, there was limited space on a mosaic inscription and even more limited space on lamps, coins, medals, medallions, and ostraca. It was common to abbreviate long words on these mosaics, often signified by an angled sigma after the abbreviated word (like a period is used in modern English abbreviations); however, the examples above show the *nomina sacra* were usually contractions rather than abbreviations, and there were frequently words *not* abbreviated that were longer than the *nomina sacra* words.

To date the evidence shows the use of *nomina sacra* started with the copying of Scripture for several reasons: (1) it has the earliest extant evidence: second-century papyri,<sup>101</sup> (2) there is more variety in the extant words used as *nomina sacra* in Scripture texts, although it makes sense that a mosaic text (typically dedicatory) and graffiti (often: “Lord, remember \_\_\_\_\_”) would focus on a few key words (Jesus, Lord, and God),<sup>102</sup> and (3) it fits with the best theories of the origin of *nomina sacra*. It appears that

<sup>101</sup>Paap, *Nomina Sacra*, 6–7.

<sup>102</sup>See the statistics at the first of the conclusion above.

*nomina sacra* were used to show reverence for words related to salvation—to show reverence for both God and Jesus, through whom salvation is offered. This reverence extended to words relating to Jesus’ office and atonement. The high frequency of Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός as *nomina sacra* on mosaics and graffiti fit the theory that says the practice of *nomina sacra* started with these words and then spread to related words.<sup>103</sup> They were special forms for sacred words used by a variety of literate Christians.

<sup>103</sup>For reasons positing that ἸΗ (Ἰησοῦς) was the first *nomen sacrum*, see Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief*, 35–48; Hurtado, “The Origin,” 665–73.