

Jewish names in Egypt in the Early Roman period*

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Abstract

In this article I claim that in the Roman period, biblical names used by Jews became very limited in comparison with their variety in the Ptolemaic period. I argue that they are mainly represented by the names of the three patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and of Jacob’s son – Joseph. These four names constitute 73% of all biblical names male Jews used in the early Roman period, before the Jewish revolt in 115-117 A.D.

Keywords

Names, Jews, Bible

As is stated often enough, one of the easiest ways of identifying a Jewish papyrus in the Ptolemaic period is the mention of the term *Ioudaios* in it.¹ In the multi-ethnic Ptolemaic kingdom, ethnicity was applied to most legal entities, and the terms carried no special derogatory undertones. For the Roman administration in Egypt, these legal ethnic categories became redundant, and consequently, the mention of *Ioudaios* disappears almost completely from the papyrological record of this period (and when it appears, it carries completely different connotations, but this is not our topic here).²

As a result of this situation, identification of Jewish papyri has become, to a far greater extent, dependent on what we describe as a Jewish name. If a person bearing a Jewish name is mentioned on a papyrus, obviously s/he is Jewish. But what is a Jewish name? And more importantly, how was a Jewish name defined in Roman Egypt? This is the issue we will be looking at.

I begin by stating the obvious – a Jewish name is a biblical name. The Bible was for Jews scripture, and they used the names found therein to name their children. However, it should be noted that not at all times, all biblical names were equally attractive to Jews. For example, I have long observed that

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¹ E.g. CPJ I, xvii (henceforth O.CPJ).

² We write about it extensively in the Introduction to New CPJ (henceforth N.CPJ; Hacham / Ilan 2020, 6-7; 13-14).

in Palestine, during the Second Temple and in Late Antiquity in general, the names of the three ultimate biblical heroes – Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, Moses, the leader who delivered them out of Egypt, and David, their most admired king, were all taboo.³ Jews simply did not use these names. On the other hand, the biblical names that were much in use at the time – Matthias, Shimeon, Judah, Eleazar, Yohanan and Jonathan – were popular not because of their biblical antecedents, but rather because they were the names of the founders of the Hasmonean dynasty, that determined Jewish history from the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., throughout the remainder of the Second Temple period, and beyond.⁴

In order to inquire, what biblical names were popular in Roman Egypt, we need to look at what Jewish names had been popular in the Ptolemaic period, and observe whether there is continuity or discontinuity between the two. In our introduction to the Ptolemaic period in N.CPJ (Hacham / Ilan 2020, 21-25), we observe (following Sylvie Honigman) that there is definitely continuity between names of Jews of Upper Egypt in the Ptolemaic period and their predecessors in the Persian Period in the same region – the Jews of Elephantine and its environs. The names they used were mostly biblical and distinct, because they do not represent any particular group of biblical heroes, but are rather similar to names found in the lists in the last biblical books, also dating to the Persian period – Ezra and Nehemiah. In N.CPJ vol. IV (the Ptolemaic period) we record 49 male (and 10 female) Jewish names. In N.CPJ vol. V (the early Roman Period) there are only 17 male Jewish names (and 2 female ones). This is the opportunity to say that my discussion from now on will concentrate on the male names. This is not because I am not interested in female names, but rather because the figures for these are so meager that they are not statistically meaningful. In N.CPJ we are dealing with 91 men with biblical names against 3 women.⁵

We are looking, then, at 49 (male) Jewish names in N.CPJ IV against 17 in N.CPJ V. While it is true that there is a smaller number of documentary papyri in N.CPJ (97 papyri in vol. IV; 72 in vol. V), it should be noted that in O.CPJ, where there are many more documentary papyri from the Roman period than from the Ptolemaic period (because of the hundreds of *ostraka* tax-receipts found in the “Jewish Quarter” in Edfu), there is not a single Jewish name documented that does not show up in N.CPJ. This means, of course, that between the Ptolemaic and the Roman period, the pool of Jewish biblical names used by the Jews of Egypt declined dramatically.

³ Ilan 2002, 5-6.

⁴ Ilan 2002, 6-8.

⁵ The names are Rebecca (1 representative – CPJ 659= P.Bon. ISA 3, verso Col. I, l. 4) and Samabathis (2 representatives – CPJ 643=CPR VII 2, ll. 7, 11). Concerning the second name, as I will show below, there is a problem with its biblical/Jewish character. CPJ 643 (a list of names) does not necessarily list only Jews. Additionally, it should be noted that Sambathis can sometimes also be a male name. If we remove this problematic case we are left with only one certain woman with a Jewish name – Rebecca of CPJ 659.

The number of men bearing these names is even more interesting. In the 72 documents of N.CPJ V 89 bear these 17 biblical names. In O.CPJ II, in the 308 documentary papyri, only 78 bear them. This is of course not because there are less Jews recorded in O.CPJ II. It is because there are many more identifiable Jews who bear non-Jewish names there (many of them identified as Jews because they paid the Jewish tax).

In Old and New CPJ in total, there are 167 men bearing biblical names. I present the results in the following table and then offer an analysis.

	Name	N.CPJ	No.	O.CPJ	No.	Total
1.	Abraham	428a-b (=284); 652; 657; 660	4	365; 374; 412; 428	4	8
2.	Ananias?	622; 661	2	212; 229	2	4
3.	Chelkias	645	1	337	1	2
4.	Daleas	628 a-b (=284)	1			1
5.	Elea(zar)?	653; 669	2	428	1	3
6.	Ioannes	636; 661	2	407; 429	2	4
7.	Ionas	644	1			1
8.	Ioudas/nos	626; 635	2	235	1	3
9.	Iasib	659	1			1
10.	Isaac	620 b,g; 644; 648; 651x 10; 653 x 3; 657; 658	18	149; 163; 426; 428 x 2; 430	6	24
11.	Ismailos	633	1			1
12.	Jacob	620 a-c, f; 620 d; 644 x 3; 651 x 7; 652; 655; 659	15	157; 211; 235; 251, 255; 277; 290; 365; 325; 421 x 2; 422; 425; 428	14	29
13.	Jesus	621, 624, 625 a-c; 630 a-c (=220, 298, 304, 311, 321, 405); 637; 659	6	194; 405; 262; 289; 406; 410; 430	7	13
14.	Joseph	631 (=183, 196, 301, 302, 309, 342); 634; 640 x 2; 643; 644 x 3; 647; 649; 651 x 4; 652; 657; 659; 660	18	165; 197; 219; 250; 329; 339; 240; 262; 406; 414; 416 x 2; 427 x 2; 428; 432; 433; 434	18	36

15	Sambathion/ thius	630 a-c (=220, 298, 304, 311, 321, 405); 643; 651 x 8; 654	11	197; 303; 339; 222; 405; 416 x 2; 421 x 2; 428	10	21
16	Shaul	623	1			1
17	Simon	642; 651 x 2	3	145; 157; 161; 167; 231; 233; 273; 195; 223; 405; 421; 422	12	15
	Total:		89		78	167

I begin with expectations. If we divide 167 persons into 17 biblical names, we come up with the average of 10 persons bearing each name. However, the vast majority of the names in the table above are represented by 1-4 men. There are however, 6 names with over 10 bearers, and of these, 4 have more than 20 bearers; and of these, one name – Joseph – is borne by 36 men.⁶ This is not very surprising. The biblical Joseph was the great hero of Egyptian Jewry, because of his positive relations with the Egyptian royal house, which can obviously serve as a model for Diaspora (especially Egyptian Diaspora) Judaism. In the Ptolemaic period, in N.CPJ it is also the most popular name – borne by 14 men.⁷ Even in the corresponding period in Palestine it is the second most popular name, even though it is not Hasmonean. In an article from many years ago I argued that it actually was the name of a less known Hasmonean brother, who is mentioned once in 2 Maccabees (8: 22).⁸

However, the two next names that have over 20 occurrences are tightly connected to Joseph, though they were not similarly popular in the rest of the Jewish world – one is Isaac (24 occurrences)⁹ and the other is Jacob (29 occurrences).¹⁰ In the Bible, the connection between these three names is clear – they are father, son and grandson, and also the forefathers of Judaism. However, in the Ptolemaic period in N.CPJ IV, the name Isaac is recorded for two persons (in a number of *ostraka* both in Greek and in Demotic from Thebes and in a Demotic marriage contract)¹¹ and the name Jacob is recorded once for a member of the Politeuma in Herakleopolis.¹² In O.CPJ I the name Jacob is

⁶ 18 in N.CPJ V: (1) 631 = O.Mus.Crac. 8; (2) 634 = O.Heid. 414; (3-4) 640 = P.IFAO III 43; (5) 643 = CPR VII 2; (6-8) 644 = P.NYU II 52; (9) 647 = P.Mich. XII 638; (10) 649 = SB XVI 13012; (11-4) 651 = P.Harrauer 33; (15) 652 = P.Carlsberg 421; (16) 657 = SB XXVI 16652; (17) 659 = P.Bon. ISA 3; (18) 660 = P.Strass. V 361.

⁷ N.CPJ (1) 522-3; (2) 543 a-b; (3) 545 a; (4) 546; (5) 548; (6) 553; (7) 554; (8-10) 589 x 3; (11) 593; (12) 599; (13) 606; (14) 617 b. I do not give the other names of the papyri because N.CPJ vol. IV has now appeared in print.

⁸ Ilan, 1987; cf. Ilan, 2002, 158, n. 20.

⁹ 18 in N.CPJ V: (1) 620g; b = O.IFAO dem. 51; 462; (2) 644 = P.NYU II 52; (3) 648=SB XX 14525; (4-13) 651=P.Harrauer 33; (14-6) 653 = SB XIV 11426; (17) 657 = SB XXVI 16652; (8) 658=P.Strass. IX 868.

¹⁰ 15 in N.CPJ V: (1) 620 a-c, f = MN 139801+139831, 141806; O.IFAO dem. 5, 462; (2) 629 d = O.IFAO dem. 106; (3-5) 644 = P.NYU II 52; (6-12). 651 = Harrauer 33; (13) 652 = P.Carlsberg 421; (14) 655 = CPR VIII 4; (15) 659 = P.Bon. ISA 3.

¹¹ In N.CPJ IV the same person is recorded in CPJ 545 a, c-d = O.Dem.Brooklyn 12768-1672; O.Wilck. 731; O.Mattha 233. And perhaps also another is recorded in 618 = P.Köln XV 637.

¹² CPJ 562 = P.Polit.Iud. 6.

recorded 4 times and Isaac 3 times (one of them the same person as in N.CPJ V).¹³ In other words, these names were not unknown, but they were certainly not as popular as in the Early Roman period. In Palestine, in the Hellenistic and early Roman period, the name Jacob is no. 11 among the most popular names, and Isaac did not make it into the top-20.¹⁴ In other words, the sudden emergence of these two names among Jews in Egypt in the Early-Roman period is very dramatic, constituting now over 31% of the male population bearing Jewish names. With Joseph, they constitute 53%. I will return to this detail below.¹⁵

The fourth name that has 21 representatives is an especially problematic one – Sambathion and its derivatives. This name has been, over the years, both interpreted as a Jewish name – the Greek form of Shabtai – and as not, since, as O.CPJ nicely explained, it is found often in clearly Greek-non-Jewish, and even in patently pagan settings.¹⁶ In our study we were able to show that it is found in pagan settings even in the Aramaic environment of the Persian period, and in the Egyptian setting of the Ptolemaic period.¹⁷ Yet regardless of whether it is an inherently Hebrew name, adopted by non-Jews, or a pagan name of some sort, it was without doubt favored by Jews. The 11 Sambathion in N.CPJ V are considered Jews not because of their name but for other reasons: One is also called Iesous, which was clearly a Jewish name (CPJ 630 a-c=O.Heerlen BL 334; 335; O.Mus.Crac. 7). 8 are listed in a document probably listing only Jews (CPJ 651=P.Harrauer 33 to which I will return later). Of these, one has a brother called Joseph and another has a father called Jacob. The last two are less certain. Both are recorded in tax lists in which other Jews are recorded; one is the father of a woman called Sambathis (CPJ 643 = CPR VII 2) and the other is a father of a Dositheos (CPJ 654 = P.Vind.Tand. 15). O.CPJ would have included the papyrus based on this criterion alone, but we included it in N.CPJ because of another, much a more certain Jew mentioned in it – Abramos son of Theophilos. Of the 18 Sambathions that O.CPJ included, I consider Jewish only 9 (and one of them is also recorded in N.CPJ) – 4 because they paid the Jewish tax (CPJ 197, 222, 421 x 2); 1 because he is the son of Jacob (CPJ 428) and 3 because they appear with other doubtless Jews in lists (CPJ 405; 416 x 2). On the assumption that Jews who chose this name may have considered it biblical, I include it in my statistics here, though I could have just as well ignored it.

The same can be said for the name Simon (recorded 8 times in O.CPJ and another 3 times in N.CPJ¹⁸) though it was clearly a Greek name, and was probably favored by Jews because they identified it with the biblical Shimeon.¹⁹

¹³ Jacob: (1-3) CPJ 28 x 3; (4) 47; Isaac: (1) CPJ 42; (2) 78-9 (= N.CPJ 545); (3) 136.

¹⁴ Ilan 2002, 56.

¹⁵ This phenomenon was already noted by Victor Tcherikover 1963, 182-183, though he failed to observe how widespread and unique this phenomenon is, perhaps because he did not have at his disposal all the papyri now available.

¹⁶ O.CPJ III, 43-56.

¹⁷ On which see now Szántó 2017 and also Hacham / Ilan 2020, 9-13.

¹⁸ (1) CPJ 642=SB XIV 11640; (2-3) 651=P.Harrauer 33.

¹⁹ See Ilan 2002, 226, n. 2.

Let us take a look at the most significant find of this paper– the exceptional popularity of the names Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, making them responsible for the identification of over 50% of the people as Jewish based on their biblical names. How can we explain this phenomenon? In the following lines I offer three plausible explanations, going from the one I consider as weakest, to the one I consider most convincing.

1. CPJ 651. This papyrus was published (and is otherwise known) as P.Harrauer 33. It is 121 lines long and lists 105 persons paying the poll tax in the earlier Roman period, and also, interestingly the pig-tax. At least 25% of the persons mentioned in this papyrus were Jews and the three names in which we are interested are listed in it 21 times (and Sambathion another 8 times – one of them son of Jacob, one of them brother of Joseph). No other Jewish name is recorded in it. Perhaps the picture is distorted because of this papyrus? If we remove the 29 persons of these names from our inventory, we have only 140 Jews with biblical names. Yet even without this papyrus the names Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph identify 68 persons in our inventory, constituting 48.5%. I do not think we can blame P.Harrauer 33 for these results. It is only responsible for slightly distorting the figures in their favor.

2. The three names are *yod* names. These names were especially popular among Jews, and almost completely absent among Greek names (the name Iason being the exception).²⁰ Indeed, if we add other *yod* biblical names to our three-name list, i.e. Ioannes (4),²¹ Ionas (1),²² Ioudas (3),²³ Iasib (1),²⁴ Ismailos (1)²⁵ and Iesous (13)²⁶ we now find that this component within the biblical names is higher: 112 (out of 169), i.e. 66%. One could argue that Jews understood *yod* names as basically Jewish and preferred them. However, note that the *yod* name Ioudas, which becomes extremely popular later, is very sparsely documented in this list, and that the fourth name in the list – Iesous is recorded only 13 times, which is much lower than any of the three names discussed here.

3. So I come to my last suggestion. I suggest that next to Joseph, the Egyptian Jews of the Roman period became more aware of the broader context of the Joseph story, and began adopting his forefathers as the heroes of their Jewish identity – his father Jacob (who also migrated to Egypt and became the second most popular name with 29 occurrences), and his grandfather Isaac (who became the third most popular name, with 24 occurrences).

It is in this context that I would like to say a word about Abraham – the name of Isaac's father, Joseph's great grandfather, and in fact the father of the Jews. As I had shown in vol. 1 of my Lexicon,

²⁰ For *yod* names in Palestine at the time see Ilan, 2002, 110-181 (i.e. 70 pages; in a book in which 395 pages are devoted to listing names of Jews in all languages = ca. 18%).

²¹ In N.CPJ (1) 636 = O.Claud. I 32 ; (2) 661 = P.Stras. V 361.

²² N.CPJ 644 = P.NYU II 52.

²³ In N.CPJ (1) 626 = O.IFAO dem. 55; (2) 661 = O.Claud. IV 751.

²⁴ N.CPJ 659 = P.Bon. ISA 3.

²⁵ N.CPJ 633 = P.Stras. VII 609.

²⁶ In N.CPJ (1) 621 = O.IFAO dem. 165; (2) 624 = O.IFAO dem. 65; (3) 625 a-c = O.IFAO dem. 623, 624, 625; (4) 630 a-c = O.Heerlen BL 334, 335, O.Mus.Crac. 7; (5) 637 = O.Claud. IV 872 ; (6) 659 = P.Bon. ISA 3.

the name Abraham is literally non-existent in Jewish Palestine of the Hellenistic, Early Roman Period. It shows up in my book only as the name of two translators of the Septuagint into Greek from the Letter of Aristeas.²⁷ This composition is, of course fictitious, and in any case it is likely that it was composed in Egypt, reflecting Egyptian name-giving practices and not Palestinian ones. However, In Egypt the name is recorded and scholars have been debating for a long time whether it was Jewish at all, and whether the persons bearing it were Jews. This would, of course be an especially pertinent question for the Christian era, when the name became particularly popular in Egypt among Christians. But we are speaking of the early Roman period – before Christianity.

Noami Cohen, who was the first person to address this question, had vehemently argued that the name was not Abraham and not Jewish, but rather some Persian name.²⁸ Gidi Bohak claimed that it was a Semitic, not specifically Jewish name.²⁹ Sylvie Honigman, however, showed clearly that the name really was used by Egyptian Jews and argued that «After the Pentateuch was translated into Greek in Alexandria, apparently under Ptolemy II Philadelphus, it became an object of study for Jews, arguably not only in Alexandria but also in other Jewish settlements in Egypt [...] It is probable that these works also contributed to secularizing biblical figures: the latter became heroes of a status similar to that of their Homeric counterparts».³⁰ I agree with her conclusion.

In O.CPJ and in N.CPJ the name is already recorded for Jews in the Ptolemaic period (in N.CPJ IV twice: CPJ 531=TAD D8.4; 607=O.Petrie 24; in O.CPJ I once: CPJ 50) but the rise in the use of the name in the Roman period is quite striking: 4 in N.CPJ V (1. CPJ 284 = O.Mus.Crac. 5, 6; 2. 625 = P.Carlsberg 421; 3. 657 = SB XXVI 16652; 4.660 = P.Strass. V 361) and 4 in O.CPJ (CPJ 365, 374, 412, 428). In light of the fact that the Ptolemaic period is almost 300 years long but the early Roman period is less than 150 years in length, this is an important rise in the representation of the name. I assume that it became more popular, despite the aversion of Jews in Palestine from using it, because it was viewed in Egypt in the early Roman period as one of the (only) four names that really represent what a Jewish biblical name was. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (after deducting the names Sambathion and Simon) constitute in the Roman period 74% of all biblical names male Jews used.

In sum, it appears that in the early Roman period the idea of what a typical Biblical male name (that its bearer definitely identifies himself thereby as Jewish) was drastically reduced to four – the names of the great heroes of the Book of Genesis. These were Abraham, the forefather of Israel, Isaac

²⁷ And twice in fictitious compositions of very late Church fathers, see Ilan 2002, 59.

²⁸ Cohen 1976, 99-112.

²⁹ Bohak 1997, 109-110.

³⁰ Honigman 2004, 296.

his son, Jacob his grandson, who migrated to Egypt and died there and his most prominent son – Joseph – who became Pharaoh's right-hand man.

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