

A Problem like Maria: Further Reflections on Christian onomastic practices

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Abstract: This paper builds on previous work by G.H.R. Horsley. It examines possible reasons for the popularity of the name Maria in Greek papyri from third-century Egypt, during the time of the Christianisation of Egypt.

This paper arises out of a team project *Papyri from the Rise of Christianity in Egypt* conducted in the Ancient Cultures Research Centre, in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University. It builds on a discussion by G.H.R. Horsley in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 4 entitled '... a problem like Maria' (1987b).¹ Particular acknowledgement for valuable insights is due to the work of R. Yuen-Collingridge and E. A. Judge.

The Christianisation of Egypt from the second (?) to the fourth century (c. AD 324) led to some changing naming patterns for men and women, though the men's names have received far more attention (Bagnall 1982 & 1987; Horsley 1987a; Wipszycka 1986; Choat 2006: 51–56; Depauw & Clarysse 2013). In our surviving evidence from the (mainly Greek) papyri to the fourth century (after which Coptic becomes more prominent), women's names represent a very small proportion (as an approximation around 5%) of all names surviving (Bagnall & Criboire 2006: 19–22). The same pattern has been observed for the Jewish material by Judge (2012: 157).

It has of course often been noted that women generally appear less frequently in papyrus letters, though they do have a documented need both to send and receive letters (Mathieson 2006: 15). In civil documents too, women come to the attention of the authorities less frequently than men and are thus less likely to be named.

The number of names which can be linked to the emerging Christian tradition in Egypt is slight. The surviving evidence for women's names among this corpus is even smaller, and so must be read in light of the male examples in order to discern any possible trends.

In deciding what may indicate the influence of Christianity on naming patterns some initial caveats should be mentioned. Names are given by parents to their children and often honour earlier generations by preserving their names – grandparents in particular. Names given may also convey parental expectations. A biblical name need not necessarily be taken as evidence of the beliefs of the holder, but does seem to indicate some contact with Christianity or Judaism. Classical theophoric names such as Dionysius, Apollonius, Ammonius, among others by no means disappear with Christianisation. They may reflect family traditions divorced from any religious commitment.

There is also a need to address the question not only of baptismal names, but also of deliberate name change. We learn from a pamphlet on the Revelation to John attributed to the classically named Dionysius Bishop of Alexandria from 247–264 by Eusebius (*HE* 7.25.14) that admiration for John the apostle led many to adopt his name. He adds that the names Paul and especially Peter were given by believers to their sons. Of the eighty-seven bishops at the Council of Carthage in 256, only two had Biblical names (Peter and Paul). It is also possible that they took these names on conversion.

A Biblical name may have been adopted as a deliberate and public act of defiance. Eusebius in the *De martyribus Palaestinae* (11.8) speaks of five Egyptian brothers executed at Caesarea by Firmilian. Their original names were based on those of classical gods, but they chose to give their names as Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Samuel and Daniel and their city as the heavenly Jerusalem. This scene implies that individuals could and did change their given names as an expression of their identity and to make an ideological point.

Any diachronic observation about the use of Biblical names is limited by the uncertainties of palaeographical dating. Internal evidence (either of specific dates or temporally determined circumstances) fixes the dating of some, but not all papyrus letters. The more informal the letter, the less likely it is to contain a dating formula. Women's letters in particular rely therefore on dating by palaeographical comparison with documents of a more secure date. Because many documents are securely dated, we can at times rely less on palaeography alone in these instances than in the case of literary papyri. Even in cases where the date of a document can be known with relative certainty, the date at which the individuals within it received their name remains unknown. Names are incidental features of the documentary record. Little information if any is available on why an individual was so named or when.²

The very idea of Christian onomastic practice gives rise to several important questions. Can we distinguish between Jewish and Christian adoption of Biblical names?³ Can we determine whether these names were encountered in the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint? Furthermore, did Christians coin new names (e.g. Athanasia, Anastasia)

or load new meanings on older ones? Do we find in the papyri from late antique Egypt examples of names of women mentioned in the New Testament (Phoebe, Lois, Lydia, Priscilla) in the way Peter, John and Paul were favoured? Might Christian women have turned instead to the Hebrew Bible for female names to adopt? By selecting a single test case, this paper will show how complex the issues can be.

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Why is the name Maria a problem? The name Maria (Μαρία, Μαριάμ, Μαριά(μ)μη) is the most popular Biblical name used for women, especially in the lead up to the fourth century and not only in the Egyptian papyri. Mariam is the most frequent female name in Palestine during the Second Temple Period (Judge 2012: 157). Miriam was well known in the Hebrew Bible as the prophet and sister of Moses and Aaron. There are at least seven different women of the name Mary in the New Testament, with the mother of Christ being the most prominent. The cult of Mary became increasingly prominent during the fourth century and the onomastic prevalence of the name matches this development. The name, however, can also be of Roman origin, as the feminine of the Latin Marius. For instance, the Maria mentioned by Cyprian c. 250 (*Ep.* 21.4, 2; 22.3, 1) is likely to have been a Latin family name as she is linked with a Roman Calpurnius, no doubt her husband. A Maria encountered in the papyri might conceivably belong to any one of these traditions.

Concerning the attribution of Jewish or Christian identity to a particular instance of a name such as Mary, the editors of the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (*CPJ*) established a practice of treating any bearer of a Septuagintal name down to 337 as a possible Jew (*CPJ* I 1957: xvii ff.). Bagnall (1996) argued that this date, though of course arbitrary as all recognise, is too late. To decide between Jewish or Christian identity on the basis of a name alone is impossible.

The history of the study of P.Harris 1.107 exemplifies the issues involved with establishing identity in cases of the occurrence of the name. P. Harris 1.107 is a letter from Besas to his 'mother Maria' now dated palaeographically to the late third and early fourth centuries.⁴ From its first publication in 1936 a wide range of possibilities was canvassed with regard to Besas' beliefs.⁵ The name Maria was originally taken as a possible indication of Judaism or Christianity especially in light of the content of the letter.

In the letter Besas writes to Maria sending many greetings in God (l. 3 ἐν θεῶι πλεῖστα χαίρειν). He prays to the 'Father God of Truth' and to the 'Paraclete Spirit' (ll. 4–7), but without reference to the 'Son'. He asks them to protect his mother in soul, body and spirit (ψυχή, σῶμα, πνεῦμα, see ll. 8–9), then in lines nine to twelve he elaborates on the formula 'for your body, health; for your spirit, contentment; for your soul, eternal life'. Such phrases suggested a Christian milieu, albeit with gnostic

overtones. However in lines eighteen to twenty Besas asks his mother to send him his cloak for the Paschal festival (μη οὖν ἀμελήσης | πέμψαι μοι τὸ ἱμάτιον | εἰς τὴν ἑορτὴν τοῦ Πάσχα). As this festival might be either Christian or Jewish, no firm determination was possible without recourse to further evidence.

A comparison with newly discovered Manichaean letters from Kellis provided a clear parallel and firmly situated this Maria in a Manichaean context (Gardner, Choat & Nobbs 2000). In fact Powell had mentioned the possibility of a Manichaean context but there was at that stage no comparable evidence. Clearly the Manichaean community could encompass the name Maria, as could Romans, Jews and Christians. P. Harris 1.107 represents one of the few occurrences of the name in papyrus letters of our period and yet there are still insufficient grounds to determine whether the name was adopted for religious reasons.

However, the name Maria (Mariam) occurs in nine Greek civil documents from the Egyptian papyrological record dated from the third to the early fourth century (AD 320).⁶ This is many more than is found for any other feminine name found in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament in Egyptian documents from our period. By way of comparison, the name Sarah (Abraham's favoured wife, Gen. 17:15) is attested twice in our period and only a few times in documents from later centuries.⁷ Rebecca (the wife of Isaac, Gen. 22:23) does not appear in the Greek papyri from Egypt until the sixth century.⁸ Rachel (Jacob's wife, Gen. 29:6) occurs first with P.Kell. 1.61 (Kellis IV), l. 5 and then mainly in the sixth century. Ruth is not attested at all in the documents of Palestine or Roman Egypt and seems only to have been taken up as a personal name at a much later date. When seen in this context the occurrences of Maria stand out.

Documents taken from the civil bureaucracy of Egypt (267–324) show no trace of the use of any other Biblical name for a woman. However, in papyrus letters from that period we find one in which the sisters, Esther and Susanna, appear (P.Oxy. 31.2599, ll. 21–23, dated III/IV). There is virtually no known Jewish currency of these names in Egypt; Susanna appears later in the second half of the fourth century (SB 14.11437; dated IV²) and rarely thereafter. There is no clear indication if these sisters come from a Jewish or Christian milieu, though the original editor, Rea, thought Jewish slightly more likely according to the *CPJ* rule (see above).

By way of comparison, a variety of Biblical names for men is attested in the papyrological record from our period. For men, the names of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs, whether in a Jewish or Christian context, are frequently encountered.⁹ John and Peter, as already noted, are common and were joined by Paul (which continued as a Roman name also). From the third to the early fourth century nine Johns are found in civil documents, whilst eighteen Peters are attested, alongside other Biblical names including Elijah (twenty-three), Isaac (nine), Jacob (three), and Joseph (six). In the case of these names,

except for Peter, context is required to determine whether a Jewish or Christian milieu is more likely.

For example, P.Herm. 4¹⁰ is a papyrus letter dated to the first decade of the fourth century, from the archive of an official, Theophanes. In it a John and Leon greet Theophanes as their 'beloved brother' (ll. 1–2: ἀγαπητῶ ἀδελφῶ). Elsewhere the names John and Leon might well point to a Jewish background, but the presence of this peculiarly Christian designation ('beloved brother') suggests an active participation in the Christian thought world (Choat 2006; Choat & Nobbs 2001–2005). In such cases, context, where it can be established, is vital to establishing a self-conscious identification with a particular tradition. The name on its own is insufficient.

By the late fourth to sixth century, we do find examples of women's names other than Maria from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. In this period, of course, they are unlikely to be Jewish, and even then not common.

Aside from Maria, the only other female name associated with Christianity which is attested with some frequency in the fourth century is Thecla. The apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla appear to have popularised the name. Papyrus copies of the Acts were circulating in Egypt at least as early as the third century (see the papyrus codex, P. Schøyen 1.21, dated III).¹¹ The name is usually interpreted as a contraction of Theocleia (i.e. 'glory of God'). No examples are known before the mother of the famous Thecla, mentioned in the apocryphal Acts. The novel coinage and the apparent connection between its popularity and that of the apocryphal Acts suggests that this name is certainly Christian in origin. The papyrus documents from Egypt in the fourth century provide four examples of the name Thecla.¹² Noteworthy from mid-fourth-century Oxyrhynchus is a letter written by Thonios to his sister wife Thecla (P.Oxy. 1.182 = SB 22.15359), greeting her 'in the Lord God' (ll. 2–3).

While the names of New Testament women (e.g. Lydia, Phoebe) do not seem to be taken up even in the fifth century and subsequently, the name Nonna ('aunt' or 'grandmother', not Christian in origin) became current as a personal name in the Greek papyri of Egypt but was later confined to nuns in particular (Mandilaras 1993). Five examples are known in the papyri from the third to the mid-fourth century, but no further contextual details are available to discern whether the individuals so designated are Christian.¹³ The likelihood increases as the date becomes later.

Though Biblical names for women are not found frequently in the papyri, there is some evidence for a growing use of abstracts with Christian resonance, possibly as a result of name change or of baptism. The later history of Christian names for women in Egypt other than Maria seems to lie from the mid-fourth century on with such abstracts. Increasingly we find evidence of names such as Sophia and Irene, not Christian in origin but gradually appropriated as such.¹⁴

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In conclusion despite the fact that we are working from a very small number of examples, some trends in the currency of Christian names for women in Egypt may be suggested. Other than Maria, there is little evidence for the adoption of Biblical names for women. The popularity of Maria, both as a Jewish name and as the name of the mother of Jesus (and many of his associates in the New Testament), dominates the onomastic scene, extending to Manichaean usage also. The variety of names taken from the Jewish or Christian scriptures which could potentially be available were not frequently adopted. The significance of Maria in the Biblical narratives eclipses that of the other women mentioned and the onomastic tradition reflects this priority. This was not the case with Biblical names for men (albeit more richly attested).

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Endnotes

- 1 https://www.mq.edu.au/research/centres_and_groups/ancient_cultures_research_centre/research/papyrology/pce/. Earlier versions of this paper were read to a conference of the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, an Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and a research seminar at the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland. It has benefitted from the discussion on each of these occasions.
- 2 I am grateful for Rachel Yuen-Collingridge for discussion on this point.
- 3 Horsley (1987b: 229): ‘Is this name [Maria] sufficiently distinctive ethnically to allow us to identify its bearers always as Jews, or in the late Imperial period as Christians since it was taken over as a Biblical name from Jews in the NT?’
- 4 The editio princeps dated it tentatively to the third century (Powell 1936); Naldini to the early third (19982); Bell to c. 200 (1944). See for the dating given above Gardner/Choat/Nobbs (2000).
- 5 For an overview see Emmett (1985).
- 6 P.Prag. 1.14 (Arsinoite III1) , l. 16 Μ]άρια; P.Oxy. 44.3184b (Oxyrhynchus; 297), l. 17 Μαρία, mother of Sarmates and wife of Theodorus; SB 1.1727 (Thebes III/IV), l. 3 Μαρία; P.Oxy. 36.2770 (Oxyrhynchus 304), l. 8 Αὐρηλία Μαρία, daughter of Heracleides and Tauonis, divorced from Heracles; P.Oxy. 69.4752 (Hermopolite 311), l. 2 Μαρία, mother of Horion; P.Erl.Diosp. 1a (Diospolis Parva 313/314), p. 54, l. 107 [M]αρία; P.Oxy. 55.3787 (Oxyrhynchus 313/320), col. 2, l. 55 Μαρία, mother of Plutarch; P.Berl.Bork (Panopolis 315/320), col. 13, l. 465 (cf. col. 2, l. 65) Μαρία, wife of Philammon; P.Sakaon 39 (Theadelphia 318), l. 11 Μαρία, mother of Syrus.
- 7 SB 14.11732 (Karnak III), l. 1 Σάρρα and P.Lond. 5.1911 (Herakleopolis early-IV), l. 3 Αὐρηλία Σάρρα, daughter of Isaac.
- 8 P.Flor. 3.297 (Aphrodites kome post 525), l. 150 Ῥεβέκκα Ἐρμείου.
- 9 See, for example, the study by Ilan (2002), Delling (1974–75) and Nobbs (forthcoming).
- 10 Edited initially by B.R. Rees in 1964; see the discussion in Naldini (19982: no. 38, 181–83).
- 11 On the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, see Bremmer (1996).
- 12 P.Oxy. 1.182 = SB 22.15359 (mid-IV); P.Herm. Landlist. I, col. 25, l. 408 (see also P.Herm. Landlist. II, col. 28, l. 624); O.Douch 3.226, l. 2 (IV); SB 20.14888, col. 2, l. 10 (IV).
- 13 B 14.11575, l. 10 (Euhemeria III); SB 14.12140, l. 1 (III/IV); P.Oxy. 10.1288, l. 16 (318–323); SB 8.9931, l. 5 (Hermopolis 330); P.Oxy. 60.4084, r. l. 4 (339).
- 14 Fourth century examples of Irene (a name popular since Hellenistic times) include P.Cair.Isid. 9, r, col. 5, l. 93 (Karani 309) and P. Sakaon 34, l. 5 (Ptolemais Euergetis 321). For Sophia, see P.Oxy. 20.2275, l. 16 (III/IV), M.Chr. 276 (= P.Lips. 1.19), l. 7 (Hermopolis 320) and PSI 7.772, l. 4 (Oxyrhynchus 321).