
ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS FOUNDED IN BIBLICAL MANUSCRIPTS AND CHRISTIANS ICONS

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Abstract

Word and image are highly correlated in Biblical codex and eastern icons. This connection is found among the *scripta continua* of the Biblical codex in which many abbreviations were used by scribes to unveil their text to foreign readers or to shorten their efforts. Developed in second or third century, this scribal habit of abbreviation became well established and generic form to refer to God, Jesus, Mary or the cross, until the statement of Christian icon. Later on such abbreviations became distinguished elements easily identifiable for both from the illiterate and the learned, which highlights the correlation of word and image.

Keywords: abbreviation, codex, Sinaiticus, nomina sacra, icon

1. Introduction

Abbreviations have been used as long as phonetic script existed. They were frequently used in early literacy, in which the spelling of a complete word was often avoided and in which initial letters were commonly being used to represent specific words. The reduction of words to single letters was continued in the Greek and Roman tradition. Properly speaking, contractions ought not to be confused with abbreviations or acronyms (including initialisms), with which they share some semantic and phonetic functions. Acronyms and initialisms are abbreviations that are formed by the beginning letters in a phrase or name. Contractions may perform the same function as abbreviations, but omit the middle of a word and are generally not terminated with a full point. Many scholars consider contractions, which are readily observable in ancient papyri, to be mere abbreviations or surrogates of frequently used words. The use of contractions can be naturally explained by considering the labour involved in hand-copying scripture texts. Two reasons, in particular, dispose people to curtail written words: the desire to minimize the time of work by substituting words of frequent recurrence by their abbreviations, and the desire of saving space.

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Christian manuscripts, produced in private or in scriptoria, regularly employed dieresis, breathing marks, punctuation, paragraph markers, section markers and page numbering [1]. *Paragraphoi* mark text divisions in the Christian manuscripts P. Beatty 10 (Daniel and Esther), P. Bodmer 24 (Psalms), P. Freer of the Minor Prophets, and occasionally in tandem with vacant line ends in P. Beatty 6 (Numbers and Deuteronomy). The division in chapters and paragraphs in biblical manuscripts are marked by points followed by one or more vacant spaces. The *paragraphos* was also used to mark the change of persons in a dialogue or the chorus parts in Greek literary texts [2]. The use of *diaeresis* or *trema* over I (*iota*) or Y (*upsilon*) was exceedingly rare until the second century, although it was not entirely unknown before then. Originally introduced as a means to distinguish a vowel which is to be pronounced separately from the vowel which follows it (and with which it would otherwise make a diphthong), the usage was soon extended to vowels standing alone, and it therefore became meaningless. In the earliest Biblical fragmentary materials (P⁵² or Papyrus Rylands, dated somewhere in the second century), we notice the emergent use of the *dieresis* over an initial *iota* of a word following a word that ends in another vowel. In the same period, we also begin to see the use of punctuation and occasional breathing marks. It should also be noted that punctuation, in the form of the medial or high point (·), dicolon (:), diastole (,) and dash (–), can be seen as both lectional aid and text division marker.

The written language that was used to compose manuscripts was not at all standardized. The manuscripts we have from that period bear testimony of the amazing scribal fluidity both at the very early stages of the development of these texts as well as after their composition. Every scribe wrote in his own dialect, since there was nothing even close to a standardized Greek language yet. One thing however, was standardized in the manuscript era: the use of majuscules (capital letters) and minuscules (small letters). The contraction system was a Christian system, an innovation introduced by the Hellenistic Jews who translated from the Hebrew, particularly the authors of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. In the Greek manuscript tradition, it was a common practice to decorate the name of Jahveh with gold or purple letters. The primary motive of presenting these words in a contracted form was a sense of reverence, as already explained, and not a desire of saving time or space, the usual reason for abbreviation and contraction. Occasionally, scribes did not reproduce a text exactly and freely omitted words and recasted the text in the interests of conciseness, clarity and style. In this case, for liturgical use, correctors were to discern the missing words and faults, thereby rendering an acceptable version of the original text.

2. *Nomina Sacra* as abbreviation

Biblical manuscripts can be considered as ‘public documents’, in the sense that they were intentionally produced to be read aloud by lectors at Christian gatherings. Christian monastic scriptoria in major centers maintained

master copies of public gospel manuscripts. Although different copies of each Christian text may have been held, consistency in the transmission of public features (text division, punctuation and lectional aids), production was controlled in Christian scriptoria. Indeed, separating the continuous lines of letters in ancient texts (*scriptio continua*) in order to penetrate the underlying meaning, was not an easy task. In a public setting, where immediacy was called for, text division, punctuation and lectional aids could greatly assist the task of the lector (*anagnostes*) [3].

The Christian monks developed a new system of reading, a system which was based upon the constant and central presence of a book of which the contents were almost known by heart. In the monastic communities, however, reading the Scriptures had a purpose entirely different from that ordinarily attributed to reading: namely, the transmission of knowledge. Despite the centrality of the oral relationship between spiritual master and disciple, the new monastic culture did not give up on the dimension of writing and reading, nor that of *listening* to the book being read or recited [4]. The monk's intellectual activity was centered on reading the Scripture. The Christian adoption of silent reading seems to be directly linked to the practice of private reading of the Bible in monastic milieus during meditation and oration. Such practice permits the conception of an interior book, written not on parchment, but in the heart of the believer (2 Corinthians 3.3). The origin of silent reading among early Christian elites reflects the transformed status of the individual in the new religious system, and it must have been as closely related to it as the use of the codex was [5].

The *nomina sacra* for Christ were: κύριος, θεός, Χριστός, Ιησοῦς and perhaps πνεῦμα. The primary motive of presenting these words in a contracted form was a sense of reverence, as already explained, and not a desire of saving time or space, the usual reasons for abbreviation and contraction. The earliest Christian writers used the *nomina sacra* in three ways. Firstly, suspension: the first two letters of the name are written and the rest are suspended. The second is contraction: the first and last letters are written and the rest are omitted. The third is 'complex' contraction: the first and last letters are written as well as some other letters. Once the scribe wrote down the abbreviated form, a supra-linear bar was placed above the name, which was a common scribal indicator, signifying that the letters below are abbreviated.

2.1. Biblical background in Nomina Sacra

The origin and development of the *nomina sacra* is much debated in scholarly circles and no agreement has been reached. Ludwig Traube, who first called these contractions *nomina sacra*, thought that their origin was to be found in the context of Hellenistic Jews' need of a Greek equivalent for the Hebrew Tetragrammaton IHWH. In Greek the words are generic words, titles, while in Hebrew the word was seen as a proper sacred name. The Greek words and the Hebrew tetragrammaton are different classification of words. We found a

consistent use of *Nomina Sacra* forms for Κύριος (or θεός) restricted to each of the 42 quotations of Hebrew Scripture passages in Greek manuscripts of Christian Scripture and of the tetragrammaton in a limited 237 instances within the Christian Scriptures. Schuyler Brown observes that it was κύριος and not θεός which was used to represent the tetragrammaton. He argued that the initial contraction of κύριος was quickly extended in one direction to θεός and in the other direction to Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός [6].

The eastern form of Greek alphabet contained a special feature from letter S, named *lunate sigma*. This letter, used in medieval manuscripts, resembles the Latin letter C, and can still be found in Greek Orthodox inscriptions. The form of Cyrillic letter C (which are value of S) and Sima letter from Coptic alphabet are derived from *lunate sigma*. It was easily for scribes to use the symbol C and not Σ, thinking that he must wrote fast and carefulness. This letter also replaced the intermediate and final S, which had special forms in the Western Greek alphabet.

Κύριος is a title and common attribute of Jesus in Paul (the name Jesus is more current). Already in the Septuagint, the term was used to make tetragrammaton divine. In Philippians 2.11 'name' underline the dignity of Christ. Κύριος is an attribute that belongs to 'cheering' and the name of Jesus expresses a dignity which causes adoration and confession of his sovereignty. The name given to the envoy God at the resurrection is not 'Lord' or 'Jesus', but an ineffable name. Outside the tetragrammaton that somehow the seal, the mystery of God's name is not highlighted, while the unfathomable mystery of God himself is often proclaimed. Jesus is open to men and it reveals what is important for them, the dimensions of love and holiness of God and his willingness hello. He wears the names whose meaning is given or entered a tradition Jesus explained in Matthew 1.21: "he will save his people from their sins", "Emmanuel", Matthew 1.23, "God with us". 'Christ' is a well known concept in Judaism. 'The Son' shows at least a unique relationship with God the Father. It still has the name "Son of Man" by which is sometimes referred to Jesus as the Gospels and refers apparently it at a figure of the apocalyptic tradition (cf. Daniel 7.13). Finally, Jesus is called 'Lord' in 1 Corinthians 8.6: "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist". The shared title between God and Christ is one of the arguments of those who are convinced that the mysterious name of Philippians 2.9 can only be 'Lord'.

If the confession Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός becomes a necessity, at final of first century appears the necessity to confess cryptically the divine sovereignty.

The second text, Revelation 19.11-16, says: "And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called faithful and true, and with justice doth he judge and fight. And his eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many diadems, and he had a name written, which no man knoweth but himself. And he was clothed with a garment sprinkled with blood; and his name is called, THE WORD OF GOD. And the armies that are in heaven

followed him on white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth proceedeth a sharp two edged sword; that with it he may strike the nations. And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God the Almighty. And he hath on his garment, and on his thigh written: KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” In v. 11 He was named “Faithful and True”, in v. 13 a remarkable name is given to Him, “the Word of God” and in v. 16, it has a title particularly heavy, “King of kings and Lord of lords.” The critical confession was necessary during the persecution times. Perhaps, if in future will be discovered other old Christians texts, this supposition will be demonstrated. Because the oldest texts which contain *nomina sacra* stems from the second century, we don’t know if these abbreviations resulted from cryptical needs or from scribal habits only.

2.2. Abbreviations in Papyrus with biblical text

Papyrus Bodmer II (P⁶⁶), from 200 A.D. contains John 1.1-6.11; 6.35-14.26, 29-30; 15.2-26; 16.2-4, 6-7; 16.10-20.20, 22-23; 20.25-21.9, 12.17. Both *recto* and *verso* are paginated in the standard form for post-Hellenistic codices, beginning with Alpha and ending with Omega. The handwriting of the original scribe is characterized by Comfort as being “a practiced calligraphic hand” (381). The letters are written in majuscule (uncial) fashion, with an overt attempt at making them large, which suggests that the text was meant to be read aloud. Such abbreviated *nomina sacra* in P⁶⁶ include θεός, κύριος, Ιησοῦς, Χριστός, πνεῦμα, ἄνθρωπος (Figure 1). We can compare P66 with P75 in order to observe the evolution of abbreviation for the word ἄνθρωπος (Figure 2).

Papyrus Egerton 2 consists of fragments of three leaves of a codex. Written in the end of the second century AD, the ‘Unknown Gospel’ – popular name attributed on this papyrus - is an oldest biblical document. On both pages of each of these leaves there is one column of text. Only two of them (fragment 1: 11.5×9.2 cm; fragment 2: 11.8×9.7 cm), however, offers a partially coherent piece of text. The third one contains just a few words – it is simply too small to reconstruct this text (6×2.3 cm).

Papyrus Egerton 2 is interesting, not only for its text but also for its paleography, because the fragments indicate that from very early on, Christians seem to have used the codex for their writings instead of the scroll. In this papyrus we have one of the earliest extant witnesses for the Christian practice of using so-called *nomina Sacra*, i.e. shortened forms of important holy names such as “God”, “Lord”, “Jesus” and “Christ” [7, 8]. Papyrus Egerton 2, however, not only contains the most common forms of *nomina Sacra*, but also shortened forms of words such as “Father”, “Moses”, “Isaiah” and “Prophets”[9]. This apostrophe (high comma) was frequently used during the third century, but not during the second.



Figure 1. Papyrus Bodmer II (P⁶⁶), 200 A.D., John 1.8-13
(http://www.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/tc_pap66.html).

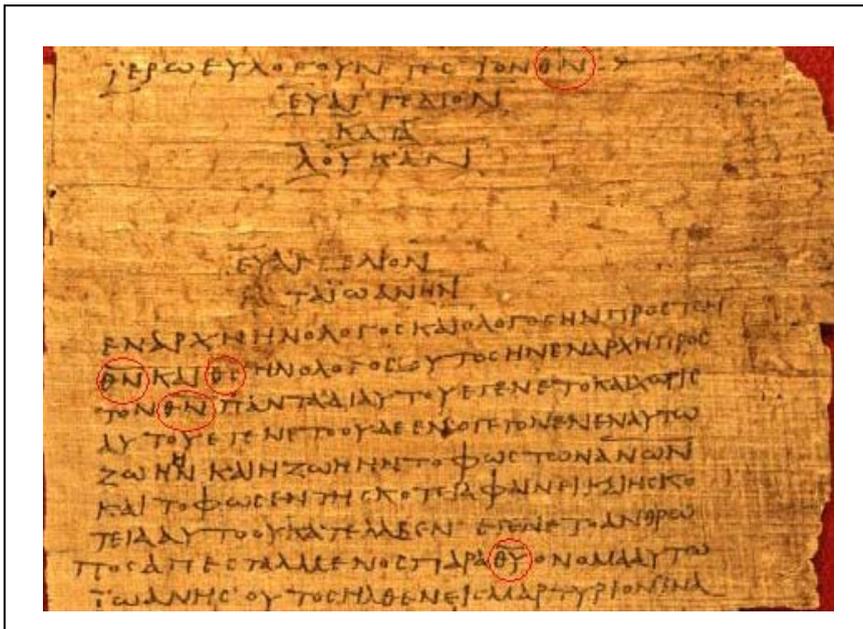
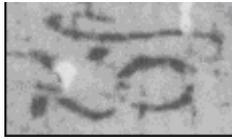
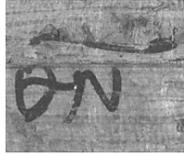


Figure 2. Papyrus Bodmer XV (P⁷⁵), 175-225 A.D., Luke 24.53 – John 1.1-8
(http://www.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/tc_pap75.html).

Another biblical manuscript is Papyrus Lond.Lit.207, a piece from third century, preserved in the British Museum of London. This piece, from the Old Testament text, contains Psalms 11.7 to 14.4. In this manuscript, we find only two *nomina sacra* (Table 1). In his study Don Barker suggested the possibility that Κύριος was first abbreviated word and only later θεός, which indicates an evolution of the scribal habit [10].

Table 1. Samples of abbreviations from *nomina sacra* in Papyrus Egerton 2 and P. Lond.Lit.207 (<http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Egerton/nominasacra.html>).

| English | Latin | Greek | Egerton 2 | Lond. Lit. 207 |
|---------|---------|--------|---|--|
| Master | Dominus | Κύριος |  |  |
| God | Deus | Θεός |  |  |
| Jesus | Jesus | Ιησους |  | --- |
| Moses | Moses | Μωϋσης |  | --- |

2.3. Abbreviations in biblical codex

Only nine of the sixty biblical manuscripts yet discovered contain parts of New Testament which were written before the eleventh century. After this century the biblical manuscripts are written in small caps, with accents and punctuation. The most known are *Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Alexandrinus* (Figures 3 and 4).

The *Codex Sinaiticus* dates back to the middle of the fourth century when Constantine the Great commissioned about 50 copies of the Holy Bible. It was possibly produced in one of the big cities of the Mediterranean Sea, perhaps in Alexandria or Caesarea in Palestine.

Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲙ or 01 Gregory) originally contained approximately 730 vellum leaves in a single bookbinding. One sheet in this codex consists of two conjugate leaves which meet at the fold, thus producing four pages. Konstantin Tischendorf has found this codex in the Saint Catherine Monastery of Mount Sinai in the middle of the nineteenth century.

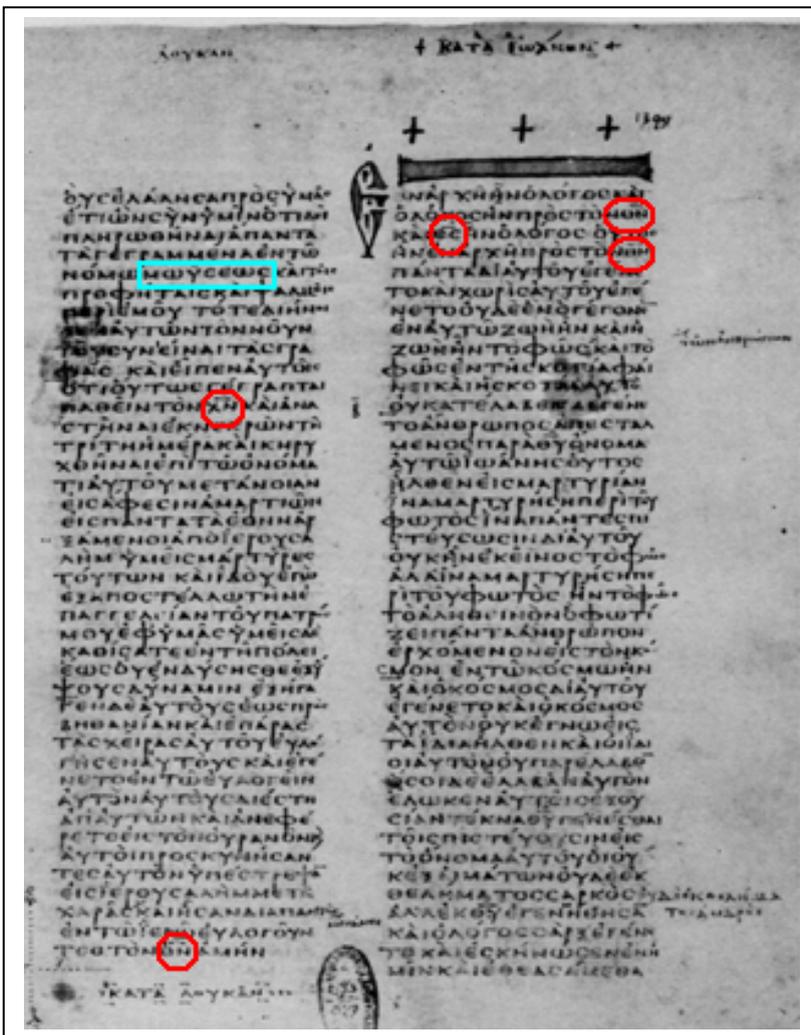


Figure 3. Codex Vaticanus (B or 03 Gregory), 4th century AD, Luke 24.44 - John 1.14 (http://www.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/tc_codexv.html)

Legend: red - *nomina sacra*; blue - *nomina sacra* without abbreviation.

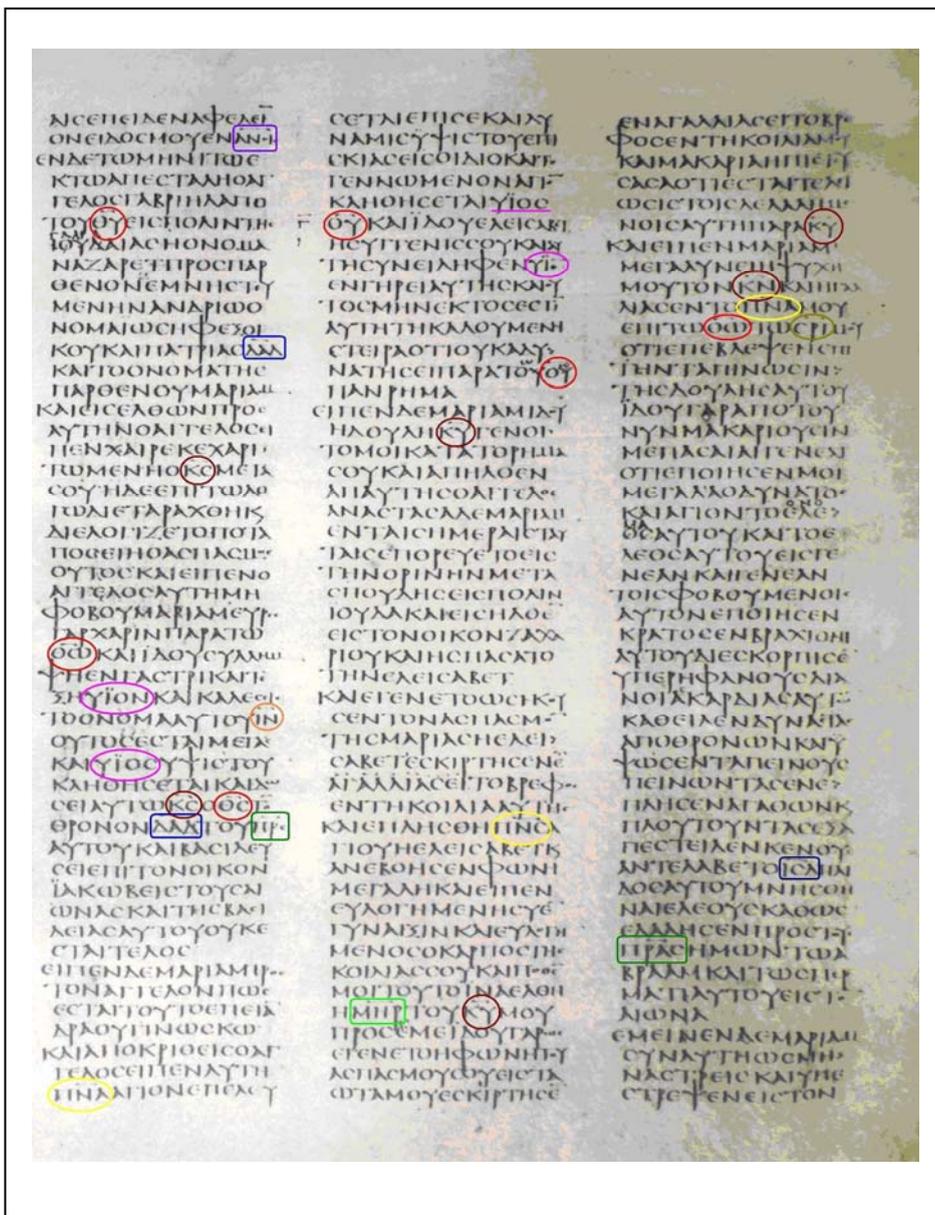


Figure 4. Codex Sinaiticus (ⲛ or 01 Gregory), 4th century AD, Luke 1.25-56 (http://images.csntm.org/Manuscripts/GA_01/GA01_029b.jpg or <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?dir=next&folioNo=5&lid=en&quireNo=77&side=r&zoomSlider=0>).

In May 1844 he found 129 parchment sheets in a basket in the library of the monastery and these were later published under the name of ‘*Codex Frederico-Augustanus*’ to signify the patronage of the king of Saxony. After a second trip to the monastery in 1853, he was informed in February 1859 by the monastery’s librarian that a larger parchment manuscript containing 86 folios was founded [11]. This section contains parts of the Old Testament, the folios of the whole New Testament, the epistle of Barnabas and a part of the Pastor of Hermas.

The surviving ca. 400 leaves were written on exquisite animal skins. Ancient craftsmen were able to fabricate codex sheets with dimensions of at least 33.6 x 54.4 cm. Each leaves of *Codex Sinaiticus* measured approximately 36 x 33 cm; and each leaf contained 4 columns per page (or eight columns to an opening), with a regular pattern of 48 lines per column. Parts of the *Codex Sinaiticus* are stored today in four different places: 12 fragmentary leaves and 14 small fragments remained in Saint Catherine Monastery; 43 leaves are kept in Leipzig University Library since 1844; and a part of five folios are found in The National Library of Russia from Petersburg. The British Library of London possesses 347 leaves of the *Codex*, which contains the complete New Testament and parts of the Old Testament. This codex represents the most accurate variant of Byzantine text.

Milne and Skeat argued that two of three scribes interacted very closely, scribe A, who almost copied the entire New Testament and corrected his own work, and scribe C, who corrected the work of scribe A and contributed to a number of corrections to scribe A’s work (Mark 14.54–16.8, Luke 1.1–56 or Hebrews 4.16–8.1) [13].

L. Hurtado has argued that Ἰησοῦς may have been the first of the *nomina sacra* and that its origin lay in the Christians’ special reverence for the name of Jesus [7]. Trobisch’ argument is that the autographs of the New Testament were written with the tetragrammaton in place. A later editor then changed the Hebrew letters to κύριος. A still later editor copied this original *nomen sacrum* and introduced other divine names in the final edition [14]. These copies were used as exemplars for further copies and those copies would also be copied, producing entire textual families containing *nomina sacra*. The contention that the *nomina sacra* practice began under the influence of the Jewish practice of writing the tetragrammaton seems to be the most likely view that have been introduced to account for their origin. Whether or not this first occurred in copying the Old Testament into Greek or in the *testimonia* [15], these texts would have influenced the Pauline community. Testimonia especially seem a likely candidate for the origin of the *nomina sacra*, in that these texts were collections of Old Testament prophecies that were used to prove the messiahship of Jesus. These prophecies would have contained the tetragrammaton, which would then be rendered as κύριος as the texts were translated to Greek.

The horizontal supra-linear bar written by the first hand to mark a *nomen sacrum* is formed by drawing a near horizontal line which begins and ends with a serif. The serif is either sub-linear or at level with the bar. In a culture in which texts were written without spaces (*scriptio continua*), the superscript line would stand out as a marker. Not only would this marker set aside these words as special (sacred), but also would ease in the reading of the text. The scribes marked these words as special words, reflecting the worship of Jesus, God and the Spirit in early Christianity. The practice of employing *nomina sacra* for all three members of the Godhead demonstrates a Trinitarian belief system in the early Church.

2.4. Letters transformed in symbols

In the *nomina sacra* we also witness the interaction of the early literary culture of Christianity with the early visual culture of Christianity. In these abbreviations we notice not only scribal reverence, but also a move towards visually representing this reverence. As Hurtado notes: “The aim is clearly: to express religious reverence, to set apart these words visually in the way they are written. The beautifully drawn and written manuscripts had an impact on how the relatively new Christian church was perceived in World. This was mainly because old, traditional ornaments or images were incorporated into the manuscripts, thus making people feel they already knew some things about the Gospel. In the *nomina sacra*, we encounter a fascinating manifestation of ancient Christian devotion, and these scribal symbols are perhaps the earliest surviving artefacts of an emerging Christian material culture.” [7]

Echoing an observation by Erich Dinkler several decades ago, I have emphasized that the *nomina sacra* are to be taken as textual/scribal phenomena with an ‘iconographic’ significance [16]. In this way, they form perhaps our earliest extant expressions of an emergent Christian ‘visual culture’ and should be taken into account charting the emergence of early Christian efforts to express their faith visually. Perhaps the *nomina sacra* should be included in our efforts to explore the origins of Christian art and iconography. To quote Hurtado once again: “The use of the *nomina sacra* in Christian manuscripts functioned to signal any equivalent action by readers. So far as we can tell, lectors of these early Christian manuscripts pronounced fully and explicitly the words written as *nomina sacra*, including the key words for God and Jesus. This is why, therefore, I emphasize that the *nomina sacra* registered solely as *visual* phenomena and could be experienced solely by those who read (or otherwise viewed?) the manuscripts in which they were written” [17].

In the Christian church the traditional battle has been waged between literal interpretation of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible and the ancient living Bible version that is more open to a personal connection to metaphor and mytho-poetic aspects of the imagery [18]. In recent decades the Christian world seems to have been ‘taken over’ by a resurgence of Christian churches that base their philosophies and life on an absolutely literal interpretation of the stories

and images in the Bible. As Spong notes, “The very abstractions of theological language can be so difficult as to be emotionally draining. But this also means that these very much literalized symbols will inevitably have to die in the passage of time. The only way to keep symbols alive forever is to crack them open periodically so that they can be filled with new meanings. No symbol can ever remain as a timeless truth, inerrant or infallible.” [19] The symbols of our faith are always literalized. Time moves on and knowledge expands until the literalized symbols begin to break down. The iconoclastic controversies between the supporters and opponents of images that have periodically erupted in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history have generally resulted in replacing one set of images with another, and this case is no exception.

2.4.1. Monograms

The monogram is a combination of two (or, sometimes, more) letters, which refer to the name of a person or to a title. This abbreviation is also called ‘ligature’ or ‘compendia’.



Figure 5. Christograms: (a) on reverse coin dating from emperor roman Constantine the Great (306-336 A.D.); (b) in Catacomb of St. Sebastian, Rome (<http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=1779&table=items>).

The combination between *che* (X) and *rho* (P) from the non-biblical Greek manuscripts expressed either the name of ‘centurion’ (ἐκατοντάρχης) or commander (χιλίαρχος), or the adjective ‘good’ (χρηστός) [20]. For example, *che-rho*, (using the first two letters of the name Χρηστός), made direct reference to ‘Christ’ (Figure 5). When a manuscript used the *iota-eta* (IH), combination, the first two letters of the name Ἰησοῦς with a continuous line over them, was seen by the reader to represent the monogram of the first Christians. We should

also mention that the *iota-che* combination was mainly acknowledged as a combination of the initial letters from Ἰησοῦς Χρηστός. The Christogram (XP), becomes at the end of Constantine the Great's reign (306-336 A.D.) a Christian symbol, as the ruler put the celestial sign, which appeared at Pons Milvius, on the flags (*labarum*) and shields of his fighters [21, 22]. Probably during this period the Christogram converted into stavrogram (the X was turned to fix two sides vertically and two sides horizontally, and the vertical top side was extended through the letter *rho* (P).

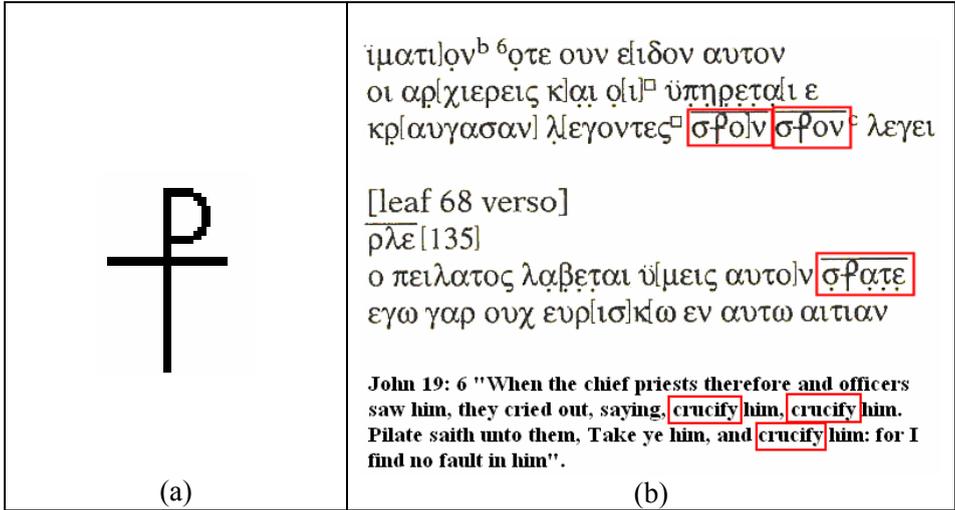


Figure 6. Staurograms: (a) the sign; (b) in P. Bodmer II (P⁶⁶), Geneve, transliterate.

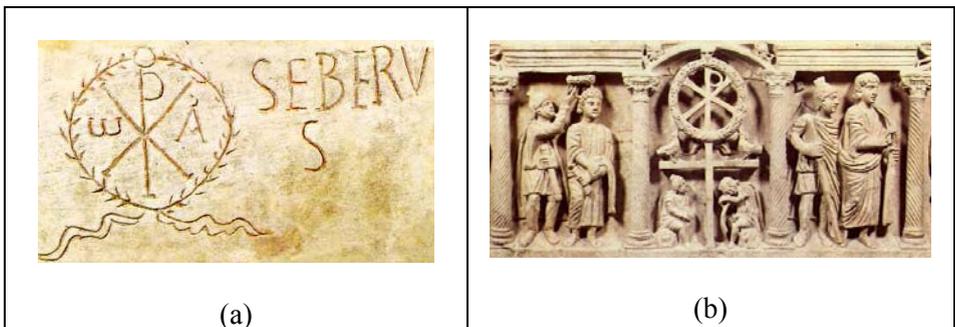


Figure 7. Christograms: (a) flanked by Alfa and Omega in St. Callist Catacombs, Rome (<http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/catacombs/catacombs.htm>); (b) on the sarcophagus of Domatilla, Rome, middle of 4th century, (<http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/ECArchOne/ECArchOne.html>).

The *tau-rho* combination is also found in pre-Christian documents, as abbreviation for *τρόπος* (place), or *τριάκας* (thirteen). Through examples worthy of being highlighted, we should mention the use of this combination on some coins of King Herod's (37-4 BCE), for identifying his thirteenth year of rule.

Table 2. *Nomina sacra* abbreviations deciphering in B. Metzger [12] search. See in Figure 4 the abbreviations colored from each name in Luke 1.25-56.

| No. | English word | Greek word | Nomina- tive | Others flexion abbreviations |
|-----|--------------|------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | God | ΘEOC | ΘC | ΘY |
| 2 | Lord | KYRIOC | KC | KY |
| 3 | Jesus | IHCOYC | IC | IN |
| 4 | Christ | XPHCTOC | XC | XN |
| 5 | Son | YIOC | YC | YIY |
| 6 | Spirit | IINEYMA | IINA | IINC |
| 7 | David | DAYID | ΔΔΔ | |
| 8 | Cross | CTAYPOC | CTC | CTY |
| 9 | Mother(Mary) | MHTHP | MHP | MHC |
| 10 | Father | ΠATHP | ΠAP | ΠAC |
| 11 | Israel | ICPAHA | ICA | |
| 12 | Savior | CQTHP | CHP | CPI |
| 13 | Man | ANΘPΩΠOC | ANC | ANI |
| 14 | Jerusalem | IEPOYCAΛHM | IΛHM | |
| 15 | Heaven | OYPANOC | OYNOC | OYNOY |

The overlap of rho on tau may be conceived as a stylized head of a crucified man (Figure 6). The first abbreviations for *σταυρός* and *σταυρώ* (each time with overline for abbreviation) such as '*nomina sacra*' can be found in Papyrus Bodmer II (P⁶⁶), ten occurrences are found in the Gospel according to John (19.6, 10, 15, 16, 17, 19, 25, 31), where both the noun and the verbal forms are abridged. Especially from the Epistle of Barnabas (12.8), we know that the Greek grapheme *tau* was used by Christians as visual reference to Jesus Christ's Crucifixion [23].

The combination of the letters *tau-rho* becomes rather a visual phenomenon, which was meant probably, just like many researchers suggested, being an early pictographic representation of Jesus crucified (Figure 7). Among other conclusions, L.W. Hurtado states that *tau-rho* heralds the *che-rho* combination from the Christ symbolism of early Christians, naming it “the first perceptible Christian icon” [17, p. 141].

Nomina Sacra does not represent a phenomenon specific to the Greek language, it also appears in the Latin, Coptic, Slavonic and Armenian languages. Nor are they merely found in manuscripts, they are also found in inscriptions, amulets and icons.

Since the sixth century AD, most of the fifteen words treated as nomina sacra were found in the biblical documents following the thorough studies conducted by B. Metzger [12], P. Comfort and D. Barrett [23, p. 199-254], and currently by L.W. Hurtado [24] (Table 2).

2.4.2. Symbols

Symbols provide many ideas, more than the shape of a digit, of some places and decorations, exceeding the historical context. The other three layers of meaning that may be revealed in an icon are described under the meaning of clothing: allegorical, anagogical, and tropological icons are ‘windows’, therefore much more than an ordinary drawing or representation.

In Christian icons, we find around the head of Jesus some inscriptions or abbreviations. In the icon we see the ‘hallo’ or ‘aura’, namely a circle of light around the head of Christ - or of a holy man – who looks at us. The aura was used to demonstrate in ancient times the dignity of some emperors or important people, being later employed by the religious art to emphasize the significance of the uncreated celestial light. In the nimbus surrounding the head of Christ, there are the Greek letters written as a cross: $O \Omega N$ (O ON, “The one who is”). The expression “The one who is” can be found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) the Exodus 3.14, as well as in the New Testament, John 8.58. On the right side of the Lord, on the aura is the letter O , over His head is Ω , and on the left side of Christ is the letter N , by these letters the Christians confessing their faith in Jesus Christ divinity.

Christ is represented holding a book or a papyrus phylactery containing words of the Scripture. His right hand (on our left side), is making a blessing, the index finger and the middle one make an X, the little finger is raised to represent I and the thumb is near the ring finger to symbolize letter C. Thus, the sign of sacerdotal blessing epitomizes Jesus Christ letters (*IC XC*, Greek for Ιησοϋς Χρηστός). The Greek letters, ‘IC XC’, abbreviation for ‘Jesus Christ’ are written on icons, in red colour, with an overline, on both sides of the Lord’s face.

The writing („guilt”) over our Lord Jesus’ head when crucified, uses the Greek letters: *INBI*, or in Latin *INRI*. Few icons have the abbreviations in Greek, Latin or Hebrew, the last one being *INMI* (or from right to left *IMNI* in Hebrew writing). The word which is different in these languages is ‘king’: in Greek

language ‘Basileos’, in Latin ‘Rex’, and in Hebrew ‘Melek’, acronym from *Titulus Crucis* “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”(John 19.19).

The Greek abbreviation *IAΩ* was a manner of replacing the Hebrew tetragram *IHWH*, with the Greek tri-gram (‘three letters’), which states that God or Jesus is the “A to Z” Lord, (Revelation 1.17, 22.13), He is “the beginning and the end” (Revelation 21.6; 22.13) [25]. In the Greek alphabet the first and the last letters are *A* and *Ω*. In some Greek manuscripts, letters were used to symbolize numbers, just like the numerical value of Hebrew letters, but we will not deal with this issue in this study.

In the last canonical book of the New Testament – the Book of Revelation – Saint John gives an interpretation to the holy name, alluding to Isaiah 40-48. Thus, John’s interpretation corroborated with the scribes practice to write *nomina sacra*, defined the sovereignty of Lord Jesus, who is Alfa and the Omega (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Fresco of Christ with Alpha and Omega, Catacomb of Commodilla, 4th century (http://www.religionfacts.com/jesus/image_gallery/4C_bust_of_christ_beard_commodilla.htm).

In addition, the statement from the Book of Revelation 1.8: „I am Alfa and the Omega, says God, One who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty” is acknowledged as an implicit exegesis of discovery of God’s name from Exodus 3.14 or of Jesus in John 8.58. Being aware of the Christians’ belief that *IAΩ* refers to Jesus, John the Apostle applied the alphabetic merism for Alfa and Omega, including them in the divine names, being fully conscious that these ones extend other two symbol-expressions found in Isaiah’s prophecy [26].

Another ancient Christian abbreviation-symbol is the fish sign. The fish – as symbol – was chosen by early Christians to express their affiliation to a certain community of beliefs, as well as to make reference to the miracle of feeding the crowd of people with fish and bread (Matthew 14.13-21, 15.32-39) or to the expression by which Jesus names His disciples “fishermen of people” (Matthew 4.19). They used the Greek letters *ΙΧΘΥΣ* (*ΙΧΘΥC* if the lunate sigma is used) as acrostic for *Ιησοῦς Χριστός θεοῦ Υἱοῦ Σωτήρ* (Jesus Christ Son of God, Saviour) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Fish symbol of Christians.

3. Textual abbreviations used in the Byzantine icons

We may hyperbolize the reality and the signification of words from texts due to their physical shape and we may create paradoxical images around these texts. By achieving this writing- image symbiosis, we are able to comprehend why icons have a powerful significance for Christians. The books and written texts were invested with an early iconic value, creating a habit this way. The fact that some texts were more known than others in certain periods of time does not reduce in any way the iconic function of all texts from that category.

Although it is said that the iconographic art is „the Bible of the illiterates” [27] in these representations we find inscriptions, abbreviations and letters-symbol.

This relation between Scripture and icon is underlined in Hilary of Poitiers words: “But seeing that not every one has knowledge of letters nor time for reading, the Fathers gave their sanction to depicting these events on images as being acts of great heroism, in order that they should form a concise memorial of them. Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord’s passion in mind and see the image of Christ’s crucifixion, His saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is

imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor the material of the Cross, but that which these typify. For wherein does the cross, that typifies the Lord, differ from a cross that does not do so? It is just the same also in the case of the Mother of the Lord. For the honour which we give to her, is referred to Him, who was made of her incarnate. And similarly also the brave acts of holy men stir us up to be brave and to emulate and imitate their valour and to glorify God. For as we said, the honour that is given to the best of fellow-servants is a proof of good-will towards our common Lady, and the honour rendered to the image passes over to the prototype.” [28]

In Byzantine icons we found abbreviations from Jesus and Mother of Christ around their face, in right and left sides, special for distinguish these personalities in compositional scene (Figure 10). Abbreviations is made always around their face (Figure 11a), in the upper section on icon, underlined the relation with Divine Essence.

All icons of the Virgin Mary have the Greek abbreviation: MP ΘY near Her face, standing for Mater Theou (Μήτηρ τοῦ θεοῦ), that is the Mother of God, as She was the Mother of the Son of God as of the moment of His conception [29]. The third Ecumenical Council (431) approved the official title, but the seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 acknowledged the acts of honoring his painted image. Until the eight century the confession about Mariology is expressed in many forms and became a standard image from Christians. She sustains almost in every icon his Son Jesus (Figure 11b), the Divine embodied (Philippians 2.5-11).

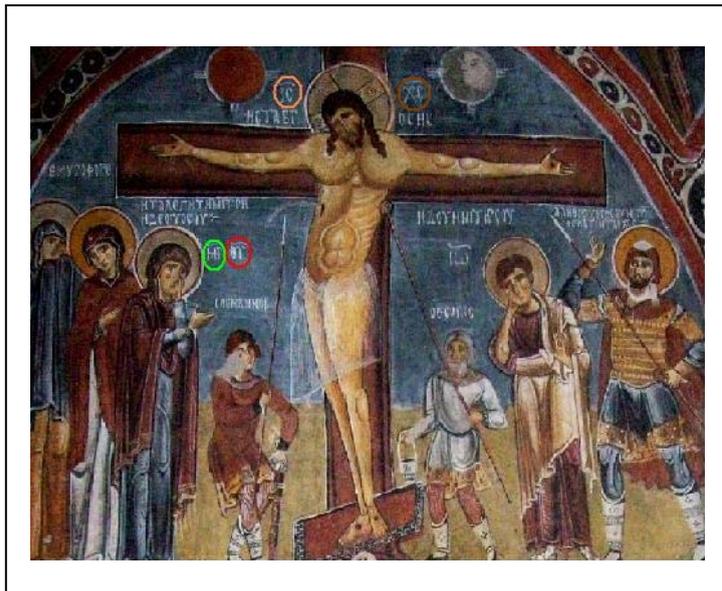


Figure 10. Christ crucifixion, Goreme, Dark Church, 11th century.
See colored mark key in Table 2.



Figure 11. (a) Jesus Christ the lifegiving; (b) Mother of God with Jesus child

4. Conclusions

Scribal documents and ecclesiastical icons are important resources for the historical and theological development of Christian thought and stewardship. These vehicles confirm the unity between letters and images, which represented the sacred word and defined the Christian custom to interact with Jesus, Lord and God in ecclesiastical milieu or private life. The efforts of scribes, painters, readers and hearers changed the Jewish and Greek-Romans tradition into a new paradigm.

Early on abbreviations were used in Christian culture as a scribal habitude, encrypting *nomina sacra* underneath the bema sign. Perhaps ecclesiastical discipline, mixed with Judeo-Christian reverence about the God name, was able to extend the abbreviation practice until the sixth century A.D. to other fourteen names, related on specials persons and things. After the eighth century, the Byzantine culture uniformed this habit and expanded abbreviations to painting works. Abbreviations represented by acronyms, contractions, initialisms, and suspensions became symbols (e.g. the staurogram, the Christogram and the fish symbol) ending to define in them the mental projection about persons and sacred things.

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