New Test. Stud. 47, pp. 544–548. Printed in the United Kingdom © 2001 Cambridge University Press

SHORT STUDY

P^{52} and *Nomina Sacra*

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The Rylands fragment of John (PRyl 457, usually known as P^{52}) is widely acclaimed in the standard textbooks as the oldest surviving fragment of the text of the NT. At the time of the publication of the *editio princeps*, it was dated to the first half of the second century.[1] Some doubts have been cast on this in recent years and a slightly later date (second half of the second century) proposed.[2] Nevertheless it is widely agreed that the fragment is one of the earliest NT manuscripts that we possess.

The text form of the papyrus is generally unexceptional. There are no significant variants apart from the probable omission of the second εἰς τοῦτο in John 18.37, since there is probably not enough space on the line to contain the words.[3] For the most part, therefore, the completion of the lines of the fragment has been relatively uncontroversial. The main significance of the papyrus has generally been thought to lie in its very early date and the clear implications this must have for the dating of John's gospel itself.[4]

There is, however, one other feature of the papyrus, occasionally noted, which may have significance, possibly even in relation to the date of the fragment (cf. n. 21 below). This concerns the possible use of *nomina sacra* in the text. The extant fragment itself contains no *nomina sacra,* nor does it contain any of the words which one might have expected to have been abbreviated in this way. However, the parts of the extant lines which are now missing do contain two references to 'Jesus'. Both occur on the recto: in line 2 (John 18.32) and line 5 (John 18.33).

1 C. H. Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester, 1935) 16.

2 A. Schmidt, 'Zwei Anmerkungen zu P. Ryl. III 457', *APF* 35 (1989) 11–12.

3 See Roberts, *Fragment,* 29; D. C. Parker and W. J. Elliott, eds, *The New Testament in Greek IV. The Gospel according to John, edited by the American and British Committees of the International Greek New Testament Project. Volume One. The Papyri* (Leiden, 1995) 72. In addition P^{52} sides with P^{66} B C* D* *et al* in the word order πάλιν εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον (rather than εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον πάλιν) in v. 33.

4 P^{52} effectively ended speculations that John's gospel might not have been written until the second century. (Although this latter theory is not generally seriously entertained today, it may be worth noting that the slightly later date now proposed for P^{52} would not rule this theory out quite so easily!)

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The question then arises as to whether these were abbreviated as *nomina sacra* or not.

In his original edition of the fragment, C. H. Roberts argued that the references to Jesus were probably not abbreviated.[5] He referred in particular to line 5 of the recto where he noted that an unabbreviated form of Ἰησοῦν here would give 32 letters for the line, or 33 if one reads πειλάτος rather than πιλάτος.[6] If one postulated an abbreviated form ι̅ν̅, then the number of letters on the line would be 28, 'whereas the average number of letters per line for the four lines where no possible *nomina sacra* are to be supplied is 33'.[7] However, in his later (and highly influential) chapter on the *nomina sacra*, Roberts appears to have changed his mind, saying that the name Ἰησοῦς, together with θεός, κύριος and χριστός, were all but invariably abbreviated as *nomina sacra* in early Christian manuscripts,[8] a claim

5 Roberts, *Fragment*, 17–19. He repeated this view in his edition of the fragment published in C. H. Roberts, ed., *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library* 3 (Manchester, 1938) 1–3.

6 The former is quite common in the early papyri.

7 Roberts, *Fragment*, 18, noted the possibility of an abbreviation of the form ι̅η̅ν̅, also found in some of the Chester Beatty papyri of the third century (P45, etc.), but referred to the fact that the editors of Papyrus Egerton 2 had suggested that ι̅η̅ may be the earlier form. This is rather uncertain. The suspended form ι̅η̅ does indeed appear in PEg 2 (as well as in fact being the more common form of the abbreviation in P45), though the more normal contracted forms ι̅ς̅, ι̅ν̅ etc. are already attested in e.g. the early Chester Beatty papyrus of Numbers + Deuteronomy (2nd cent.), also in P4 (probably 2nd cent.), as well as in the early Bodmer papyri P66 and P75.

8 C. H. Roberts, '*Nomina Sacra*: Origins and Significance', ch. 2 of his *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London, 1979) 26–48. Actually his meaning is not quite clear. He refers to these four words, 'the abbreviation of which in their sacral meaning may be said to be invariable' (p. 27), and says that 'the abbreviations occur, with such rare exceptions as to be insignificant, in written materials of all kinds from the earliest period of which we have evidence, the first half of the second century' (p. 28). Later he says that these four words 'were regularly contracted' (p. 38), a footnote reference mentioning only the Michigan papyrus of the *Shepherd of Hermas* as a possible exception.

However, quite what Roberts means by 'invariable' is not clear. Certainly the rather different *forms* of abbreviation for Ἰησοῦς (e.g. ι̅η̅, ι̅ς̅, ι̅η̅ς̅) make it clear that the abbreviations as such did vary; if he means that the *fact* that they were abbreviated (in perhaps different forms) was invariable, then it would seem that he had (for whatever reason) ignored his earlier judgement on P52. Certainly too Roberts appears to have changed his mind about the date of the appearance of *nomina sacra*. In 1936 he published the famous Greek fragments from Deuteronomy in the Rylands Library from the second century BCE (*Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester* [Manchester, 1936]). He noted that at one point the text probably had κύριος written in full (otherwise the line would be too short: this does, however, make a big assumption about the way in which the divine name would have been written by [presumably Jewish] scribes at this period; the use of κύριος for the divine name is otherwise unattested in a Jewish manuscript fom this period); and appealing to P52 as well, he claimed that 'the practice [of abbreviating via *nomina sacra*], whatever its origin, did not

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followed by most other recent writers on the subject.[9] Hence later editors of P[52] have often apparently assumed that the written forms of the name of Jesus must have been abbreviated, perhaps working with a fixed presupposition that all early Christian manuscripts (or at least all biblical manuscripts) would have used *nomina sacra*, at least for 'Jesus'. Thus, for example, the editors of the IGNTP edition of the papyri on John (see n. 3 above) confidently fill in the two relevant lines of the papyrus with $\overline{\iota\upsilon}$ and $\overline{\iota\nu}$ respectively.[10]

Roberts's initial judgement can, I believe, be made slightly more secure. Clearly, unless one prejudges the issue by making an *a priori* assumption that every early Christian manuscript used *nomina sacra*,[11] any judgement must be based on the lengths of the lines and the number of letters in each line. One feature of the papyrus which should, however, be noted is that the recto and the verso may have had slightly different margins and hence slightly different line lengths.[12] Hence it may not be appropriate to compare the line lengths of the recto and the verso together: rather we should perhaps consider each side of the fragment separately.

The reconstruction of the text found on the verso of the papyrus is mostly uncontroversial and I therefore start with this. If one accepts the omission by the text of the second εἰς τοῦτο in v. 37, the following reconstruction results:[13]

υτο γεγεννημαι
και εληλυθα εις τον κο]σμον ινα μαρτυ
ρησω τη αληθεια πας ο ων] εκ της αληθε[ι
ας ακουει μου της φωνης] λεγει αυτω

become general till the second century A.D.' (p. 44). In *Fragment*, 19, he also said that the practice was Jewish in origin. However in his later work, Roberts argued that the practice was a Christian innovation, to be dated back to the earliest Christian community prior to 70 CE in Jerusalem and then influencing virtually all other (Christian) scribal activity.

9 Cf. S. Brown, 'Concerning the Origin of the Nomina Sacra', *SP* 9 (1979) 7–19, on p. 18; H. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven, 1995) 75; L. Hurtado, 'The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal', *JBL* 117 (1998) 655–73.

10 *New Testament in Greek IV* (n. 3), 72.

11 Such an assumption is clearly falsified by the evidence of the Christian prayer text POxy 3.405 (3rd cent.) which has no abbreviations at all for θεός, Ἰησοῦς, χριστός. One might appeal to the fact that this is not a biblical text, though it is by no means clear that *nomina sacra* were deemed to be appropriate for biblical texts and inappropriate for others.

12 Noted by Roberts, *Fragment*, 20. He accepts T. C. Skeat's explanation that this may have been due to the fold in the binding, making it more difficult to write if one were writing towards the fold, thus producing a tendency to have slightly shorter lines on this side of the page.

13 This follows the reconstruction of Roberts and the IGNTP edition which agree almost exactly. The one point where the reconstruction might be questioned is in the division of the words between lines 4 and 5: there appears to be plenty of space after the αὐτῷ in line 4 for at least one more letter. Hence the definite article ο may have been on line 4. This would affect the numbers of letters in the lines a little.

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ο πειλατος τι εστιν αληθεια κ]αι τουτο
ειπων παλιν εξηλθεν προς] τους ιο[υ
δαιους και λεγει αυτοις εγω ουδ]εμι[

The number of letters in each full line is then 30, 30, 28, 31, 28, 29.[14] The only slight doubt is in line 5 where one could have 28 or 29, depending on whether one reads ἐξῆλθε (so IGNTP) or ἐξῆλθεν (so Roberts); also the spelling of 'Pilate' as πειλάτος rather than πιλάτος would affect things slightly. But either way the text seems to exhibit a fair degree of regularity with a variation of only 3 (possibly 4) letters per line between the maximum and minimum numbers.[15]

When we turn to the recto, the overall reconstruction is again relatively uncontroversial in general terms:[16]

οι ιουδαιοι ημε[ιν ουκ εξεστιν αποκτειναι
ουδενα ινα ο λ[ογος του ιυ πληρωθη ον ει
πεν σημαινω[ν ποιω θανατω ημελλεν απο
θνησκειν ισ[ηλθεν ουν παλιν εις το πραιτω
ριον ο π[ειλατος και εφωνησε τον ιν
και ειπ[εν αυτω συ ει ο βασιλευς των ιου
δ]αιω[

The number of letters per full line, if one reads the *nomina sacra*, is then 35, 31, 31, 34, 28, 31. The first line may be a little long, though one may note that the first 8 letters of the line take up the same space as the first 5 or 6 of the other lines. If one draws an imaginary vertical line down the papyrus at this point and counts the number of letters implied to the right of this line, then the figures are 27, 25, 26, 29, 22, 25.

This is clearly not an exact science,[17] but it would appear that line 5 on this basis is rather out of step with the other lines on the recto.[18] The variation between the number of letters in a full line varies with a difference of 7 letters between the

14 If one accepts the slightly different division of words in the lines suggested in the previous note, the numbers become 30, 30, 29, 30, 28, 29, thus showing even greater regularity.

15 Or indeed only 2 if one accepts the possibility noted in n. 13 above.

16 I give here the IGNTP version, with the *nomina sacra*.

17 I have, for example, read ἐφώνησε and not ἐφώνησεν here, and also assumed that the possible abbreviation is $\overline{\text{ιν}}$ not $\overline{\text{ιην}}$ (hence the slight discrepancy between the figures given here and those of Roberts). If one read the alternatives, one would have 30 letters in line 5, which would bring it closer to the other lines. On the other hand, Pilate's name has been taken as πειλάτος, not πιλάτος, and the alternative would bring the number of letters back down by one. Cf. Roberts, *Fragment*, 18–19: 'Not much stress can be laid on this argument [appealing to line lengths], especially as we must reckon with the possibility of varieties of spelling or text in the missing passages'. This is of course obvious, but there is unfortunately little else to go on!

18 It would of course fit with the lines on the verso, but one cannot necessarily assume that the two sides had exactly the same margins and the same line lengths: cf. above.

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maximum and the alleged minimum. If one considers the space taken up to the right of the vertical line mentioned above, the variation is still 7, but this is even more significant since the overall space concerned is less.

If, however, one reads the full name Ἰησοῦ in line 2 and Ἰησοῦν in line 5, the figures become rather more uniform: the number of letters in each full line is now 35, 33, 31, 34, 31, 31, giving a range of 4 letters between the greatest and smallest, which is very similar to, if not identical with, the verso.[19]

In addition one may note that, if $\overline{\text{ιν}}$ were read on line 5 of the recto, the line would have been quite short; hence the next word (καί) would probably easily have fitted in at the end there without any awkward break. If then there had been a *nomen sacrum* used here, one might expect the καί not to be held over until the next line. The fact that it does appear on the next line might provide small additional support for the belief that no *nomen sacrum* was used in line 5.

The relative regularity in the number of letters per line on the verso of the fragment suggests that the recto was probably equally regular (at least this seems a reasonable assumption).[20] The evidence of the papyrus considered as a whole would thus suggest that 'Jesus' was written in full in both instances.

All this may have repercussions for any broader study of the *nomina sacra*. If the analysis offered here is correct, then P^{52} may provide an early (but perhaps rare) example of a Christian manuscript which does not abbreviate the name 'Jesus'.[21] This may then cast some doubt on how regular the practice of abbreviating *nomina sacra* in early Christianity really was.

19 In the space after the vertical line mentioned earlier the figures are 27, 27, 26, 29, 25, 25, which again seems more in line with what appears to have been the situation on the verso.

20 In a private communication, Professor L. Hurtado (Edinburgh) said that he thought the writing, and the spacing of the letters, indicated that the papyrus had been written with considerable care. A greater rather than lesser regularity in the line lengths would sit with this observation well.

21 If the slightly later date suggested by some were to be accepted (cf. n. 2 above), then the fragment could be even more significant, since it would provide evidence of *nomina sacra* not being used at a time when most have assumed hitherto that the practice was all but universal. Roberts in fact argued in reverse, claiming that the absence of *nomina sacra* would give some positive support to his proposed early dating of the papyrus (*Fragment*, 19). Clearly there is a danger of arguments becoming circular and depending crucially on what is assumed about the origin and date of the use of *nomina sacra*.

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