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## FIRST NAMES, NICKNAMES AND FAMILY NAMES AMONG THE JEWS OF KURDISTAN <sup>1</sup>

By YONA SABAR, University of California at Los Angeles

THE KURDISH JEWS BORROWED some proper names from the local and neighboring ethnic groups, e.g. *darweš*,<sup>2</sup> *xodeda* (Persian-Kurdish); *xātun* (Turkish); *ḥabīb*, *na'im*, *ṣabrīya*, *zakīya* (Arabic)<sup>3</sup>. However, the majority had Hebrew names which, as in other Near Eastern Jewish communities<sup>4</sup>, were mainly popular Biblical names, namely those of the Patriarchs, some of the twelve tribes of Israel, and other favorite personalities (see the list below). Similarly, the names of the Matriarchs were most common for females. Certain names however, were conspicuously more common among the Kurdish Jews than in other Jewish communities. The name *bnyāme* "Benjamin" was quite popular, probably due to the tradition among the Kurdish Jews, as well as among some Christian tribes, that they are the descendents of the tribe of Benjamin<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> A paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society, Washington, March 20, 1973. It is based primarily on oral communication with Kurdish Jews in Israel and my personal acquaintance with the Jews of Zakho, Iraq, my hometown and the largest center of Kurdish Jews until their emigration to Israel.

<sup>2</sup> The accent on all names is regularly on the penult syllable, as is the case in Neo-Aramaic in general, i.e. *ḏarweš*, *xodēda*.

<sup>3</sup> Arabic names, especially for females, became more common in recent times, probably due to the more frequent contacts with the Arabic speaking Jews of Mosul and Baghdad. Similarly, the Arabic pronunciation of some Hebrew names (see below, p. 2) may be due to their influence.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. among the Jews of Baghdad in M. Benayahu, ed., *Massa' Babel*, Jerusalem, [1955], p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> On this tradition and others that relate the Kurdish Jews to the lost ten tribes of Israel see Y. Ben-Zvi, *Nidḥē Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 132-142; English Translation: *The Exiled and the Redeemed*, Philadelphia, 1957, p. 40 ff.; J. Hamilton, "The Use of Genetic Markers in Oriental Jewish Historical Studies", *JQR*, LXII (4/1972), pp. 288-313.

Similarly, the names *yōna* "Jonah", *nāhom* "Nahum", *murḏaxay* "Mordecai" and *ʿıster* "Esther", were given more frequently due to the popular tradition that associates the Biblical persons carrying these names with shrines in Kurdistan and Persia. The shrine of the Prophet Nahum at Alqush, near Mosul, was visited by thousands of Kurdish Jews every Shavuoth (Pentecost) Holiday, or as it is called by them *ēz-zyāra* "the Pilgrimage Holiday".<sup>6</sup> Due to a similar tradition the names *ḥasqēl* "Ezekiel", *ʿızra* "Ezra", *danīʿēl* "Daniel" were most common among the Baghdadi Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Some proper names, derived from Hebrew abstract nouns, are common to other Near Eastern Jewish communities as well, e.g. *raḥamim* "Mercy", *ḥayim* "Life", *nisim* "Miracles", *sīman ṭof* "Good Omen", *māšīyah* "Messiah", *sāson* "Joy", *simḥa* "Gladness" (f.). The name *ḥāy* "Alive", alone or in the combination *dāūd ḥāy* "David is alive", was also common.<sup>8</sup>

The pronunciation of the Hebrew names is often different from the Massoretic one. A name in daily use may be pronounced differently when read in the Biblical or any Hebrew text,<sup>9</sup> e.g. "Jacob" is pronounced *yaʿqub* in daily use, but *yaʿaqōv* in a Hebrew text. The living pronunciation of some names is influenced by the Arabic<sup>10</sup> form of the Biblical names, e.g. *yaʿqub* "Jacob", *ʿıshaq* "Isaac", *hārūn* "Aaron", *šimʿun* "Simeon", but *ʿavrāham* "Abraham", rather than Arabic *ʿibrāhīm*. Some retained their Hebrew and Arabic

<sup>6</sup> See A. Ben-Jacob, *Kurdistan Jewish Communities* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1961, p. 51; "ʿīd al-Ziyāra be-Baghdād", *ʿEdot*, I/1, (1946), pp. 37-40; Ben-Zvi, *Nidḥē*, pp. 20, 136.

<sup>7</sup> See Benayahu, *Massaʿ*, p. 56; H. Blanc, *Communal Dialects in Baghdād*, Cambridge, 1964, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> On the reverence that Kurdish Jews had for King David, who was a shepherd like many of them, and on their tradition that he is still alive, see Ben-Jacob, *Kurdistan*, p. 12 f.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the pronunciation of Hebrew loanwords in Neo-Aramaic may be different from their pronunciation when read in a Hebrew text ("whole Hebrew"); cf. Blanc, *Communal*, p. 141. See my article, "The Hebrew Elements in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Zakho" (in Hebrew), to appear in *Lešonenu*, vol. 38 (1974).

<sup>10</sup> See n. 2.

pronunciation as well, e.g. *dāwis* (<*dāwid*; cf. “Davis”) or *dāud* “David”, *mōše* or *mūsa* (more rare) “Moses”. The different pronunciation of other names is due to phonetic changes in Neo-Aramaic in general, e.g. *hūza* < *yəhūdā* “Judah”,<sup>11</sup> *ša‘ya* < *yəša‘yā* “Isaiah”, *našše* < *mənašše* “Manasseh”, *mīʾir* < *mēʾir* “Meir”, *āšer* < *ʾāšer* “Asher”.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the Hebrew names have one or more hypocoristic forms, which are a combination of phonetic changes, influenced by the phonetic system of Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic, and hypocoristic suffixes borrowed from Kurdish. Male names take the suffix *-o* (originally vocative), and *-ka* (originally diminutive designating affection or belittling [?] or indefinite sense), and female names take *-o* or *-e*, and *-ke*,<sup>13</sup> e.g. *dāwis* “David” > *dawo*, *dāwīska*; *mīryam* “Miriam” > *mīro*, *mīre*; *hanna* “Hannah” > *hanno*, *hannōke*. The following are some of the major phonetic changes that take place in the hypocoristic forms:

1. Long names (three syllables or more) are shortened by omitting the first or the last syllable, e.g. *ʾavrāham* > *ʾavro* “Abraham”, *binyāme* > *bino* “Benjamin”, *rīʾūven* > *ʾūvo* “Reuben”, *raḥamim* > *ḥamo*.<sup>14</sup> Shorter names simply omit the last consonant, e.g. *nissim* > *nisso*, *ḥayim* > *ḥayyo*, *nāḥom* > *nḥo*.

2. The consonants *s* and *š* may be palatalized, e.g. *sāya* > *čāro* “Sarah”, *sīmanṭof* > *čīmo*; *ʾišaq* > *ʾiččo* “Isaac”, *siyyon* > *čūna* “Zion”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *hōzāya* < *yəhūdāyā* “Jew”.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the shift ʾ(*hamza*, glottal stop) > ʿ(ʿayin in Arabic loanwords in Neo-Aramaic: *qurʿan* < *qurʾān* “Koran”, *qīrāʿa* < *qīrāʾa* “(Arabic) reader”, *ʿašlāya* < *ʾašlī* “original”.

<sup>13</sup> For the various uses of these suffixes in Kurdish dialects see D. N. MacKenzie, *Kurdish Dialect Studies-I*, London, 1961, §§ 258, 259, 262; T. Wahby-C. J. Edmonds, *A Kurdish-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1966, p. 44, *-eke*, p. 70, *-k*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kurdish *mičō* “Mustafa”, *ramō* “Ramazan”, *simkō* “Ismail”; MacKenzie, *Kurdish*, p. 156, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> For the use of *-a* for vocative see MacKenzie, *Kurdish*, p. 60, n. 2: *raša* “Rashid”, *miča/mičō* “Mustafa” (*s/š > č*).

3. A consonant may be doubled due to assimilation, e.g. *'ister* > *'itte* "Esther"; *basya* (<*bityā*) "Bithiah" > *basso*,<sup>16</sup> *'ishaq* > *'iččo*, *'avrāham* > *'avvi*.

4. Initial *y* followed by *av* owel may appear as *'* (glottal stop), e.g. *ya'qub* > *'āqo* "Jacob", *yōsef* > *'ōsika*, *'ūsaka*, *'ōče* "Joseph".

The use of a hypocoristic name was not limited to any age group. A person could be called by such a name all his life without ever using the regular name. For this reason hypocoristic names are common as family names as well, being derived from an ancestor or ancestress. However, among the Ḥakhamim (Rabbis) and dignitaries the regular Hebrew name was usually preferred, e.g. *ḥaxam 'avrāham* "Rabbi Abraham", *ma'allim raḥamim* "Master (Teacher) Raḥamim", rather than *'avro*, *ḥamo*, common among the lay people.

*Family Names.* As in other Near Eastern communities,<sup>17</sup> family names in the strict sense were not very common among the Kurdish Jews. That is why after their emigration to Israel, when they had to use family names for administrative purposes, many, for lack of such a name, adopted such general family names as Mizraḥi "Oriental", Barazani "from Barazan", Barashi "from Barashe".<sup>18</sup> Others simply used their father's name as a family name.<sup>19</sup> In Kurdistan, however,

<sup>16</sup> The name *Bityā* appears in the Bible only once (Chr. II, 4:18) but it is common in the midrash, where it is ascribed to the foster-mother of Moses, and interpreted as *baṭ-yah* "daughter of God"; see L. Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 270 and notes. Through the midrash the name became very popular among the Kurdish Jews. See the Neo-Aramaic epic "Moses and Baṭya, the Daughter of Pharaoh" in J. J. Rivlin, *Šivat Yehūdē Hatargūm*, Jerusalem, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. D. Goitein, "Nicknames as Family Names", *JAOS*, vol. 90 p. 517; Benayahu, *Massa*, p. 56 f.; H. E. Goldberg, "The Social Context of North African Jewish Patronyms", in *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. III, Jerusalem, 1972, p. 251 f.; D. Corcos, "Les Prenoms des Juifs Marocains", op. cit., 143-229: —, "Reflexions sur l'Onomastique Judeo-Africaine", op. cit., vol. I (1970), 1-27.

<sup>18</sup> Barazani, however, is an old family name, common in Kurdistan among Moslems and Jews as well; cf. Ben Jacob, *Kurdistan*, p. 226 f.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in documents and mss. originating in Kurdistan the

a variety of personal nicknames were used instead of family names. Some of these have developed into family names passed on to the descendants as well. A clear mark of a family name is when a name is preceded by the element *be*, an old construct form of *bētā* “house, clan”. The elements from which these family names are derived may be classified as follows:

1. Ancestor’s name or nickname, e.g.: *be ’ūsaka* “Joseph”, *be mīro* “Meir”, *be zāqen* “Old Man” (Hebrew).<sup>20</sup>

2. Ancestress’ name.<sup>21</sup> Mother’s proper name would become a family name, especially after the early death of the father, when she would become the head of the family, e.g.: *be mēram* “Miriam”, *be tāmar*, *be ’ēla*.

3. The names of both an ancestor and an ancestress are used for further identification, e.g.: *be yōsef be nāze*, *be nāhom be hale*, *be ḥamo be tāmar*.

4. Ancestor’s occupation, e.g.: *be šabāḡa* “dyer”, *be kalakvāno* “*kelek* (raft)-logger”, *be ḥalāwčī* “halva maker”, *be ḥamo xānčī* “innkeeper”.

5. Religious or public role, e.g.: *be gabbay* “synagogue treasurer”, *be šēx* “undertaker” (<Arabic “elder”), *be ḥaxam rafā’el* “Rabbi R.” *be ma’allim raḥamim* “Schoolmaster R.”, *be sāson muxtar* “Secretary of the Jewish Community”.

6. Deformity or special quality. Derisive nicknames are common among the Near Eastern people in spite of the Talmudic and Koranic decrees against their use.<sup>22</sup> According to Professor Goitein, derisive nicknames served as family

father’s name, preceded by Neo-Aramaic *bir*, or Hebrew *ben*, “son”, is often used instead of a family name. See the colophones cited in my article on Neo-Aramaic mss., *Sefunot*, X (1966), pp. 345-347; Ben-Jacob, *Kurdistan*, pp. 210-212. Cf. Goldberg, loc. cit. (n. 17).

<sup>20</sup> *Zaqen* is one of the largest families of Zakho. According to the family tradition it originated in North Africa, where *Zāqen* is quite common as a family name.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Goitein, *Nicknames*, p. 522; Benayahu, *Massa*’, p. 58 f.

<sup>22</sup> See Goitein, *Nicknames*, p. 520; Benayahu, *Massa*’, p. 57.

names even in official documents.<sup>23</sup> Similar practices were common among the Kurdish Jews especially in everyday use, e.g. *‘aziz paḷḷunka* “crippled”, *ḥāy qutta* “short”, *šilo bxa ʿēna* “Solomon with one eye”, *ḡazāle šaharta* “blind” (f.), *ʿister čuʿta* “smooth of skin” (f.). Some are so derisive that I hesitate to mention them here. Family names composed of Kurdish numbers such as *čūlmēro* “40 men”, *ḥafšade* “700” are explained as indicating the unusual strength of the ancestor, as being as strong as 40 or 700 men put together.

7. Place of origin. Family names often indicate the place of origin of the family, and as such they serve as a good source for historical information on the ethnic structure of the population.<sup>24</sup>

The Jewish communities in Kurdistan were quite unstable. The Jewish population in villages and small towns with a relatively large population in the past, such as Amidya and Nerwa, had dwindled to a very few Jewish families or none at all. The reports of travelers to Kurdistan at various times reflect this grim situation. While Benjamin of Tudela (12th. cent.) estimates the Jewish population of Amidya as “25 thousands” (an exaggeration, to be sure), there were only about 50 families in recent times (see Ben-Jacob, *Kurdistan*, p. 81). On the other hand, new centers, such as Zakho, became prominent in our time.

Many Jews emigrated there from nearby or distant locations, as it is reflected in their family names and family tradition, e.g., *be kōlo* from the village of Kōlē near Zakho,<sup>25</sup> *be zēkārīko*, from Zēbārī, near ‘Aqra (Mosul District), *be ʿjamāya*, from ‘Ajam “Persia”, *bāšqalnāya*, from Bašqala, Turkey, *mahājirnāya* “immigrant”. Other aspects of family history may be preserved in family names as well. A family in Zakho was called *be ḥajjīya* “Female Haj (pilgrim)” because an ancestress of

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the discussion regarding the Berber origin of some family names of North African Jews, Goldberg, p. 249 f. (see n. 17).

<sup>25</sup> So explained to me by a member of the family, Mr. Šālīḥ Kōlo, or as he is known now in Jerusalem, Mašliyaḥ Kol.

theirs converted to Islam and went to Mecca as a pilgrim.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, a Moslem family in Zakho was called Maḥamade Juhi, meaning in Kurdish “Muḥammad the Jewish”, because their ancestor was a Jewish convert.

8. Personal incident. A large group of family names are derived from a key word of some personal incident by which the ancestor of the family became known. Such family names as *ṭina* “mud”, *parṭe’na* “flea”,<sup>27</sup> *ḫarnāsa* “livelihood” (Hebrew), *dinga* “thick wall”, *baxavōz* (Heb. *bəḳābōḏ*) “with respect”, all have a more or less authentic story behind them, which has become a part of the local folklore. It will suffice to mention two such stories as typical examples of many others. *Be pōxa* “Wind Family” was so named because their drying wool was once blown away by the wind, and they naively began running after the wind and cursing it for doing so, to the amusement of the passers-by. The strange family name *ʿmdak-dūnak*, composed of two Arabic one-word phrases meaning “(I am) here with you”, “You are not”, was given to the ancestor of the family, who was *kelek* (raft)-logger. Once while rowing with some Arab colleagues in Khabur River his *kelek* disappeared behind a rock in a way that he could see them but they could not see him. When one of them alarmingly yelled: *Nissim, wēnak* “Nissim, where are you?”, he answered: *ʿmdak* “Here, with you (I see you)”. But the Arab, who could not locate him, yelled back: *dūnak* “You are not here (I do not see you)”. Finally, however, he was found and rescued, but not without his new nickname, *ʿmdak-dūnak*, which was passed on to his descendents forever after.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the Baghdadi Jewish family *bēt Mešummada* “Female Convert” (Hebrew), Benayahu, *Massa*<sup>c</sup>, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the Biblical family Benē Par’ōsh and the Arab Barghūti, both meaning “flea”, and the explanation of Prof. Goitein, in *Nicknames* (see n. 17), p. 517.



*A List of Common Hebrew Names and Their Hypocoristic Forms* <sup>28</sup>

The list is arranged according to the Hebrew alphabet. The pronunciation given in column (a) is the one in daily use, often different from the one in a Hebrew text. In column (b) appear the hypocoristic names.

*Male Names*

	(a)	(b)
אברהם	'aḡrāham	'aḡro, 'aḡḡi
אהרן	hārūn	—
אליהו	'ilyāhu, 'ēliya	'ilo, 'iko
אלעזר	'āzər	'āzo
אפרים	frāyim	firo, faho
אשד	'āšer	—
בנימין	binyāme	bino
דוד	dāwis	dawo, dāwiska
חי, חיים	ḡayim, ḡāyi	ḡayyo, ḡāyika
יהודה	hūza	—
יהושע	šūwa	—
יונה	yōna	—
יוסף	yōsef	'ōsika, 'ūsaka, 'ōče
יתחקאל	ḡasqel	ḡasqo
יעקב	ya'qub	'āqo
יצחק	'išḡaq	'iččo
ישעיה	ša'ya	ši'o
ישראל	yisrā'el	yisro
מאיר	mī'ir	mīro
מיכה	mīxa	mīxo
מנשה	našše	naššōka
מרדכי	murdaxay, murdax-xāye, <sup>29</sup>	murdax
נתום	nāḡom	nḡo

<sup>28</sup> The list is far from being exhaustive. It mainly includes names with hypocoristic forms or unique pronunciation.

<sup>29</sup> Play on words, meaning "May Murdax live".

	(a)	(b)
נסים	nissim	nisso, ničko
סימן טוב	simantof	čimo
עזרא	‘izra	‘izro
עמנואל	—	‘ammo
פנחס	pinhas	pino
ציון	šiyyon	čūna
ראובן	ri’ūven, rūven	’ūvo
רחמים	raḥamim	ḥamo, ḥamīna
רפאל	rafā’el	rafo
שבתי	šabbasay	šabbo, saptō
שלמה	šalōmo	šilo, šilāne
שמואל	šamū’el	šammo, simo
שמעון	šim ‘un	šī‘ūna
ששון	sāson	sāsōna

*Female Names*

אסנת	’asnat	—
אסתר	’ister	’itte, ’ittōke
בתי	basya	basso, bassōke
בת ציון	bāšiyyon	čiyya
דבורה	davōra	dāde, dādike (?)
זלפה	zilfe (?)	zilfoke
חווה	ḥawwa	—
חנה	ḥanna	ḥanno, ḥannōke
לאה	lē’a	—
מרים	miryam, mēram	mire, miro
סרח	sēraḥ	—
רבקה	rīfqa	—
רחל	rāḥel	raḥlo, čaḥo (?)
שושנה	šōšanna	šanna, šanno, šannōke
שמחה	simḥa	—
שרה	saḥa	čāro, čārōke
תמר	tamar	tamarke