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# Call Me by God's Name. Onomaturgy in Three Early Christian Texts

**Abstract:** Why, in the English-speaking world, is nobody is given the name "Jesus" while in Spain and Latin America this theophoric name is quite popular? Any confessional argument is ultimately insufficient and unsatisfying and therefore the quandary remains unsettled. And what of theophoric names in early Christ religion? How did early Christian writers who adopted theophoric names for themselves, or employed them for others, navigate the fine line between misuse and honor, religious qualm and religious tribute? Did they navigate it at all? In his two-volume work, the writer known as Luke calls his Christ-believing addressee "Theophilos"; the real or putative Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, nicknames himself "Theophoros"; the anonymous author of the small tract *To Diognetus* probably invented the designation to formally address a prospective non-Christian audience. Are such names ("beloved of god"; "sprung from Zeus") merely hackneyed commonplaces? Or do such practices bestow "peer/gentlemanly honor" (Appiah 2010) as a manly quality shared by both sender and recipient? Or, as the meta-theophoric "bearer of God" seems to suggest, are theonyms used to rank positions and claim religious prestige? Focusing on three early Christian texts, the paper will try to work its way through these intriguing questions.

## 1 Abusing a Name or Honouring a God?

One might wonder why, in the English-speaking world, nobody is given the name "Jesus" while in Spain and Latin America this theophoric name[1] is quite popular. Googling the question, we came across a short post on an American website for Catholic parents that offers this sensible explanation:

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**1** The modern expression "theophoric names" is derived from the Peripatetic Clearchus of Soli, who distinguished between ἄθεα ὀνόματα and ὁ. θεοφόρα (fr. 86 Wehrli 1969, 32, from Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 10.69, 448e). Yet this seems to be a deliberate device to extend the sense of the ordinary word θεόφορος by transferring the pitch from proparoxytone to paroxytone, modelled on words such as πυρφόρος, νικηφόρος, κοπροφόρος, σκευοφόρος (taken at random from Xenophon), just as ἄθεος never ordinarily means "lacking reference to a divine name" but normally implies a strongly negative moral judgment.

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**Note:** Chap.1 and 2.1, i.e., pp. 569-574, are to be attributed to Emiliano R. Urciuoli, chap. 2.2, 2.3 and 3, i.e. pp. 574-580, to Richard Gordon.

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> In observation of the commandment against misusing God's name, English and American Protestants have historically taken a more conservative view on religious names [. . .] For many Catholics from Spanish and Portuguese cultures, on the other hand, naming a child is considered a way to honour God rather than a violation of a commandment.[2]

The confessional argument, however, does not apply to Italy, a traditionally Catholic country where countless children are named after a saint and yet Jesus is not used as a given name. Honouring the son of God by naming a newborn male after him and thus putting this latter under the former's protection seems to be a taboo. In fact, no law seems to forbid it: Italians just do not do it. The quandary remains unsolved.

This national exception to a world-wide Catholic praxis suggests us the topic of this chapter. How did early Christian writers who adopted theophoric names for themselves or employed them for others navigate the line between misuse and honour, religious scruple, and religious tribute? Did they indeed navigate it at all? In this short contribution, we limit ourselves to a discussion of three intriguing cases dated to the end of the 1st century and the long 2nd century CE: on two occasions, the writer known as Luke calls the explicit addressee of his two-volume work "Theophilus"; the real or putative Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, nicknames himself "Theophórus"; the anonymous author of the brief tract *To Diognetus* may well give himself this designation so as to address a perceptive audience more elegantly. Is dubbing somebody vaguely "Beloved of God" (Theophilos) or "Zeus-born" (Diognetos) just a dull semiotic practice for signalling and activating a "reading event"?[3] Or perhaps a witty Christian appropriation of their semantic potential for playful uses in puns and riddles at symposia?[4] Or are such devices a shorthand expedient for showing "peer/gentlemanly honour" as a manly quality shared by both sender and recipient?[5] Yet again, might theonyms rather be used to rank positions and claim religious prestige before listening-and-reading publics, as the sobriquet "God-carrying" (Theophóros) regularly claimed by Ignatius seems to suggest?

Without pretending to offer a *passe-partout* answer that applies to all three cases, this chapter will work through such questions and in doing so offer a slightly new take on such naming strategies, which deliberately ignore the syntactic aspect of lan-

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**2** https://www.catholicmom.com/articles/2018/04/18/why-isnt-jesus-used-as-a-given-name-in-english/ (seen 12.07.2023).

**3** For this quite self-explanatory notion, see Johnson 2000. For its expansion, see Keith 2020.

**4** See Parker 2000, 53.

**5** "In an honour world, some people are defined as your honour peers, because the codes make the same demands of you as of them" (Appiah 2010, 88). Appiah also explains how "gentlemanly honour", understood as the kind of honour owed to peers above a certain social standing, encompasses and overcomes social hierarchies: "the respect that gentlemen were supposed to show each other in eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century England was just such respect among equals, grounded not in esteem but in recognition. You owed the same courtesy to one gentleman as you owed to all the others. Provided you were of the right social standing, the respect to which you were entitled as a gentleman, your gentlemanly honour, was no greater whether you were a magnificent military success, like the Duke of Wellington, or an ordinary country squire" (Appiah 2010, 16).

guage in favour of an exclusive attention to semantics.[6] We end up by suggesting the possible value in this context of the word "onomaturgy", which is entered neither in the Oxford English Dictionary nor in Merriam-Webster, but represents a straightforward anglicisation of the late Greek word ὀνοματουργία, "production of names",[7] albeit with a slight twist on Cratylus' claim in Plato's homonymous dialogue – which may go back to Pythagoras[8] – that "there is a fitness to names" (εῖναι ὀρθότητα ὀνομάτων).[9]

# 2 The Beloved of God, The God-Carrying, and the Zeus-Born

## 2.1 The Beloved of God

First, we will briefly sketch out the context and summarize the scholarly discussion relating to our four cases.[10] We will follow a chronological order assuming that, whatever the 1st or 2nd century origin of Luke-Gospel and Acts, these canonized scripts are likely to predate the earliest extant collection of the Ignatian corpus and the composition of *To Diognetus* – according to the most persuasive dating options of both.[11]

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**6** Cf. Genette 1976, 16–17: as if *nom propre* meant *nom proprement dit*.

**7** The sole surviving occurrence of the abstract noun ὀνοματουργία is in Proclus, *in Crat.* §88 Pasquali, in the context of Socrates' discussion of the essential appropriateness of proper names in Homer (Pl., *Crat.* 391d-393d). Plato coined the agentive ὀνοματουργός (*Crat.* 388e-89a) to denote the Lawgiver's role in assigning "true, natural" names (φύσει τέ τινα ὀρθότητα ἔχον εῖναι τὸ ὄνομα: 391b8). The ancient debate was fatally conditioned by the ambiguity of ὄνομα between "personal name/person" and "noun". On Socrates' ambivalent position in *Cratylus* between linguistic conventionalism and so-called naturalism, see still Genette 1976, 11–37.

**8** The 5th century atomist philosopher Democritus is cited by Proclus as ascribing the ultimate source of Cratylus' claim to Pythagoras (Procl., *in Cra.* §16 Pasquali); see further Salem 1996, 283–286.

**9** Plato *Crat.* 427d. See also Socrates' claim that personal names ought to reflect the moral character of their bearer (394d-396c). In this passage, he actually cites the name Theophilos as an example of one inappropriate to a miscreant person (394e).

**10** We have adopted the following general principles regarding proper names of persons of whatever ontological status: 1) Standard English forms where they exist, e.g. Luke, Joseph, Plato, Philo, Plutarch; 2) Latinate forms for other ancient authors (e.g. Clearchus, Democritus, Ignatius, Josephus) and the names of Roman officials (Claudius Diognetus); 3) Latinate forms for persons with Greek names in Christian texts where these are most familiar (Theophilus, Diognetus); 4) Latinate forms for persons with Greek cognomina resident in Rome (Epaphroditus); 5) Greek forms for residual cases of Greek names (Artemisios, Asklepios, Theodoros). On occasion these conventions may give rise to apparent inconsistencies.

**11** For the (still) few proponents of the thesis of the 2nd century provenance of the canonized gospels, the *ad quem* for the so-called canonical redaction of the Luke-Gospel cannot be later than the 160s (Vinzent 2014). Over the last two decades, the dating options of the earliest collection of Ignatius' letters ("Middle Recension") have ranged from the first to the last quarter of the 2nd century (an over-

*Ev. Luc.* 1.1–4 and *Act. Ap.* 1.1–2 read, respectively, as follows:

Ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων, καθὼς παρέδοσαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου, ἔδοξεν κἀμοὶ παρηκολουθηκότι ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, ἵνα ἐπιγνῷς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been ful-filled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eye-witnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you, *most excellent Theophilus*, so that you may gain assurance of the things about which you have been instructed.[12]

Τὸν μὲν πρῶτον λόγον ἐποιησάμην περὶ πάντων, ὦ Θεόφιλε, ὧν ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς ποιεῖν τε καὶ διδάσκειν, ἄχρι ἧς ἡμέρας ἐντειλάμενος τοῖς ἀποστόλοις διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου οὓς ἐξελέξατο ἀνελήμφθη.

In the first book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.[13]

In the article we have already referred to, Robert Parker noted that Greek theophoric names, namely personal names for human beings formed from those of deities, whether specific or generic meta-human powers, could be created in three ways: using literal the-onymy (e.g., Ἄρτεμις), adding a suffix to the god's or goddess's proper name (e.g., Ἀρτεμί-σιος) or compounding it with a second meaning-bearing element (e.g., Ἀρτεμιδώρα).[14] Θεόφιλος – like the other two names discussed in this article – belongs to this latter cate-gory. Though tempering Aristotle's generalized statement that single parts of a "com-pound sound" do not bear meaning, so that "god-bearing" onomastics do not disclose religious preferences/attitudes/affiliations on the part of the bearers and their families,[15] Parker acknowledges that we have no clue whether, and if so how, significant the differ-ences between the various types of theophoric names may have been. At the same time, once passed down through (usually alternate) generations and/or adopted beyond the original location of use, a god-derived name could certainly outlive the possible religious context in which it was originally bestowed.[16] In conclusion, we have no compelling evi-

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view in Alciati/Urciuoli 2022). A date before the mid 2nd century for *To Diognetus* is highly implausi-ble. For a very recent assessment of the dating range, see Ruggiero 2022, 22–24.

**12** Ed. Nestle-Aland; transl. NRSV (slightly modified; our emphasis). Scholars who follow the tradi-tional dating of Luke-Gospel (i.e., about 85–95 CE) can reasonably affirm that "Luke offers the most textually self-conscious statement yet among Jesus followers" (Keith 2020, 124).

**13** Transl. NRSV, our emphasis.

**14** Parker 2000, 57–59. As Clearchus points out in the continuation of the fragment cited in n.1, polytheo-phoric names, too, are possible – and equally fashionable in some specific chronotopes (Benaissa 2009).

**15** Ἐν γὰρ τοῖς διπλοῖς οὐ χρώμεθα ὡς καὶ αὐτὸ καθ'αὑτὸ σημαῖνον, οἷον ἐν τῷ Θεοδώρος οὐ σημαίνει (Arist., *Po.* 20.1457a12–14).

**16** Horsley 1987, 3.

dence that real persons named Θεόφιλος were expected to have a stronger relation (i.e., either dearer or more devout) to the divine than others. Rather, as a working principle, we should exclude it.[17]

Used by both Greek-speaking polytheists and Jews, Θεόφιλος as a proper name first appears in Attic inscriptions in the very late 5th century BCE and becomes popular already in the 4th.[18] A late 2nd century bishop, heresiologist, and advocate of Christ religion, Theophilus of Antioch, bears this name too. Thanks to its theological neutrality, Θεόφιλος continued to be used also when recognizably Christian onomastic patterns – whether Bible names of Jewish origins (e.g. Joseph), taken from evangelical eponyms (e.g. Paul) and early Christian heroes and heroines (e.g. Thekla), or formed on a Greek pattern but incorporating new religious meaning (e.g. Eusebius) – started slowly disseminating.[19]

To our knowledge, no attempt at connecting Luke's Theophilus to a known historical figure, as first proposed in the 4th century Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, bears scrutiny.[20] Therefore, we are dealing either with an unknown financial patron of Luke's enterprise, such as Ambrose will be to Origen in 3rd century Alexandria,[21] or with a literary fiction loosely indicating the Christian-ness of a specific addressee or that of the wide readership – Θεόφιλος the recipient is dear to the same θεός of Luke the author. Whatever the case, Luke does not seem to assume an in-depth training in Christian matters on the part of his declared audience. If not a neophyte, Theophilus certainly needs further guidance to gain more doctrinal confidence (ἀσφάλεια).[22] The question whether we are to interpret the appellation κράτιστος ("most excellent") as an intentional reference to some specific public official will be discussed later in this paper in relation to the parallel formula of *To Diognetus*. For the time being, we sim-

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**17** "As a working principle, one has no choice but to treat the differences between the different types of theophoric names as non-significant, no significance having been established" (Parker 2000, 61). On the debated topic of the relationship between naming practices and beliefs/affiliation to specific religious traditions, see Choat 2006, 51 (with bibliography).

**18** *LGPN* 2, 222. Interestingly enough, the appearance of the name seems to coincide with the rise in the use of the adjective θεοφιλής ("loved/favoured by god"). The adjective seems then suddenly to have come into fashion – in Xenophon (*Ap.* 32; *Cyr.* 4.1.6; *Lac.* 4.5 etc.) and even more so in Plato (see esp. *Euthphr.* 7a, 8a, 10e, 15c; also *Crat.* 394e). According to *LSJ*, Philo is the earliest author to use θεοφιλής in an active sense, "God-loving", which may suggest that it was in late Hellenistic Jewish circles that the transfer of the sense of the name Θεόφιλος became plausible. We consider at least Philo, *Spec.* 2.180; 3.126; *Virt.* 179; *Praem.* 27; *Prov.* 2.16; *QG* 2.16; 4.208 clear examples of this shift.

**19** For the unimportance of personal names as indexes of religious commitment in the first centuries CE, see Rebillard 2012, 13. For their general unreliability well into the 4th century, see Choat 2006, 51–56; Frankfurter 2014. For the slow dissemination of new naming styles, see Marrou 1977.

**20** 10.71: "a leading man in Antioch". Rüpke 2021, 60–61 cites the opening of Luke, and the address to Theophilus, to emphasize its unquestioning assumption of urban styles of written narration and polite intercommunication.

**21** Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 5.1.2.

**22** Fitzmeyer 1981, 289–290.

ply note that, in the other three Lukan occurrences, the word does apply to high-ranking Roman officials.[23]

The closest analogy with Luke's prologues is offered by the opening lines of Josephus' *Against Apion*. In this work of defence of the Judean code of laws, written no earlier than 94 CE, we also find: (a) the presentation of the work as a sequel and a supplement of a same author's former composition (i.e., Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*); (b) a reference to concurrent scripts and accounts on the same topic/s that tempt the writer not just to vie for superiority over prior or contemporary attempts but also strive for accuracy for the sake of instruction of sympathetic readers;[24] (c) a dedicatory dyad consisting of an honorific epithet and a theophoric name – "In the history of our *Antiquities,* most excellent Epaphroditus (κράτιστε ἀνδρῶν Ἐπαφρόδιτε), I have, I think, made sufficiently clear to any who may peruse that work the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race . . .".[25] As we know from prologues and epilogues of other Josephan works,[26] Epaphroditus is no doubt a real person, most likely a patron constantly encouraging and sponsoring most of Josephus' literary activity in Rome. As for his identity, two major options have been canvassed but no consensus yet achieved.[27]

## 2.2 The God-Carrying

The second debated occurrence of a theophoric name in early Christian literature does not feature in a dedication but in a salutation and works as a declaration of authorship, in brief: as a signature. It appears in the opening sentence of all seven letters composing the so-called Middle Recension of the epistolary corpus of Ignatius of Antioch.[28] As an example, we can take the greeting formula of *To the Ephesians*:

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**23** Namely the two Roman procurators of Judaea immediately prior to 66 CE: Marcus Antonius Felix (*Act. Ap.* 23.26 and 26.25) and Porcius Festus (*Act. Ap.* 26.25). Yet only in the former case does κράτιστος occur in an official document, namely a formal letter sent by the tribune Claudius Lysias to the procurator Antonius Felix, whereas the others are invented speeches.

**24** See the serviceable notion of "competitive textualization" in Keith 2020.

**25** J., *Ap.* 1.1 (ed. and transl. Thackeray 1926).

**26** *AJ* 1.8–9; *Vit.* 430.

**27** This theophoric name was very common in 1st and 2nd century Rome, especially for slaves and freedmen. The identification with Epaphroditus, the freedman grammarian (see the Suda, s.v. "Epaphroditos"), is chronologically much more plausible: Rajak 1983, 224 n.1; Barclay 2007, 4 n.3.

**28** Since the end of the 19th century, the Middle Recension (MR) has generally been considered the oldest and most genuine of the three extant collections of letters transmitted under the name of Ignatius (the other two are termed the "Long" and "Short" Recensions). However, in the last fifty years, this consensus on the authenticity of the MR has been repeatedly challenged (most recently by Vinzent 2019, 266–464). For a detailed overview and critique of the dissenting positions, see Brent 2007, 95–143. The MR contains six letters addressed to as many Christ groups based in six different cities (Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna) and one to bishop Polycarp of Smyrna.

Ἰγνάτιος, ὁ καὶ Θεοφόρος, τῇ εὐλογημένῃ ἐν μεγέθει θεοῦ πατρὸς πληρώματι, τῇ προωρισμένῃ πρὸ αἰώνων εἶναι διὰ παντὸς εἰς δόξαν παράμονον ἄτρεπτον, ἡνωμένην καὶ ἐκλελεγμένην ἐν πάθει ἀληθινῷ, ἐν θελήματι τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τῇ ἀξιομακαρίστῳ, τῇ οὔσῃ ἐν Ἐφέσῳ τῆς Ἀσίας, πλεῖστα ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ καὶ ἐν ἀμώμῳ χαρᾷ χαίρειν.

Ignatius, *who is also called Theophorus*, to the church that is blessed with greatness by the fullness of God the Father, a church foreordained from eternity past to obtain a constant glory which is enduring and unchanging, a church that has been unified and chosen in true suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God; to the church in Ephesus of Asia, which is worthy of all good fortune. Warmest greetings in Jesus Christ and in blameless joy.[29]

The fragment of Clearchus aside, it is quite doubtful whether there is any assured instance of an active sense "god-carrying / -bearer" (accentuation: θεοφόρος) before the mid-late 2nd century CE.[30] Until then, the word-cluster centred on the passive sense "borne/inspired by god" (accentuation: θεόφορος), attested from the mid 5th century BCE onwards, is overwhelmingly dominant.[31] Both senses would be possible and equally meaningful here, but the former is surely preferable on account of its close correspondence with the use of -φόρος compounds in a later passage of *To the Ephesians*: "And so you are all travelling companions bearing God, bearing Christ, bearing the temple, and bearing the holy things, adorned in every way with the commandments of Jesus Christ" (ἐστὲ οὖν καὶ σύνοδοι πάντες, θεοφόροι καὶ ναοφόροι, χριστοφόροι, ἁγιοφόροι, κατὰ πάντα κεκοσμημένοι ἐν ταῖς ἐντολαῖς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).[32] The list of epithets

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**29** Ignatius, *Eph.* Praef. (ed. and transl. Ehrman 2003, our emphasis).

**30** Apart from the Clearchus-fragment (see n.1), the only possible case is Aeschylus frg. 225 Radt: καὶ νίπτρα δὴ χρὴ θεοφόρων ποδῶν φέρειν | λεοντοβάμων ποῦ σκάφη χαλκήλατος, "a bowl of beaten bronze resting on a lion must carry water (for washing his?) . . . feet", cited by Pollux 10.77 from *Sisyphus* in connection with containers for water. In our view, Pietruczuk 2011, 136 n. 27 is right to argue, against *LSJ*, that a passive sense "guided by gods" is at least as plausible as an active one ("god-bearing feet"), given that the force of the genitives is unclear, the context and reference entirely hypothetical, and Aeschylus' use of the passive sense confirmed from *Ag.* (see next n.). The earliest clear experiment with an active sense (in this case: θεοφόρητος) is [Lucian], *Asin.* 37, but in an ironic sense: the donkey carries the goddess' statue, while the eunuch priests stage ecstasy. Probably likewise in the late 2nd century, Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 9.32 uses θεοφορῶ once to mean "treat/consider as a god".

**31** Θεόφορος, first recorded in Aeschylus (together with ἐπίσσυτος, qualifying δύαι: "violent, god-inspired miseries" [*Ag.* 1150, lyr.]; cf. θεοφόρητος with φρενομανής, 1140), is very rare in Classical Greek, but the nouns θεοφόρησις and θεοφορία are well-attested in the imperial period in the sense 'ecstatic state', while the adjective θεοφόρητος and the verb θεοφορῶ occur frequently in the passive, meaning 'possessed by a god' (e.g. Menander's comedy ἡ θεοφορουμένη, frag. 142 Austin; of Cassandra: Dio of Prusa, *Or.* 11.56; 61.18). These senses are very common in Philo (e.g. *Somn.* 1.2; 2.232; *Her.* 46; 69; *Mos.* 1.20; 283; 2.69, 251, 265 etc.), continuing into Christian usage, e.g. Justin, *1 Apol.* 33.9; 35.3 and Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7.13. Clement self-consciously juxtaposes θεοφόρος and θεοφορῶ in the active and passive senses at e.g. *Strom.* 6.12.104.2; 7.13.82.3; cf. *exc. Thdt* 1.27. From the 4th century the distinction between the two words seems to disappear, with θεοφόρος taken as the norm.

**32** *Eph.* 9.2. This was argued already by Lightfoot 1889[2], 21; cf. Bremmer 2021, 410. For a list of other uses by Ignatius of words compounded with θεο- in the MR, see Vinzent 2019, 302.

recalls the sequence of functionaries in pagan processions and is here leveraged to evoke the image of a Christian parade.[33]

The formula ὁ καί plus the fact that Θεοφόρος is not otherwise documented at the time as a proper name indicate that we are dealing with a laudatory appellative used as a second name.[34] If Ignatius is the author's real name, as most specialists still assume,[35] then Theophorus is an additional name or sobriquet adopted at a certain point to further individualize the bearer through stressing a particular quality or commemorating a peculiar life-experience – rather like the glorious epithets of Brazilian footballers known as Pelé, Garrincha, Zico, Careca, Cafu. If Ignatius is a pseudonym,[36] then we are facing an onomaturgic practice as sophisticated as designations like "The Artist (formerly known as Prince)", where a nickname adds to another one. In the present case, a nom de plume (Θεοφόρος) would then rather supplement (ὁ καί) a pseudonym (Ἰγνάτιος).

Egyptian papyri and inscriptions across the Mediterranean show that, from slaves and businesspersons to rulers, Greek double names in the form of "X also called Y" were extremely fashionable in the Roman empire at the time and would remain so for centuries.[37] Yet, since Theophoros was not used as a personal name in the 2nd century Greek and Roman world, it could not have been given to Ignatius at birth. The circumstances of the name-giving are hard to pinpoint. Rather than bestowed on him by others as a title of honour, it is more likely that Ignatius himself "made the adjective [θεοφόρος] into a name [Θεοφόρος], surely in the metaphorical meaning" and as a token of his

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**33** See Dölger 1934, 67–80; Schoedel 1985, 67. Disregarding Ignatius' term θεοφόρος, both ναοφόρος and ἁγιοφόρος are hapaxes evidently invented by him and used in no other author – only χριστοφόρος had a future, albeit in a different sense ("inspired by – "). Yet e.g. ἱεραφόρος, κανηφόρος, κλειδοφόρος, μελανηφόρος, παστοφόρος, σινδονοφόρος and others still are known from the cult of Isis, θεοφόρος, θυρσοφόρος, ναρθηκοφόρος, and στεφανηφόρος in Dionysiac associations, ῥαβδοφόρος at Andania. These non-Christian words are all accented paroxytone.

**34** Indeed, *LGPN* does not catalogue it as an epigraphically-attested name at all in the volumes covering mainland Greece, Cyrenaica, western Greece and coastal Asia Minor. Nor does the MAP database record it. There is one possible attestation in Galatia.

**35** The name is most probably a hellenisation of the Latin *gentilicium* Egnatius, which in Greek manuscripts and inscriptions is often written Ἰγν- or Αἰγν- (e.g. *SEG* 42, 1110; Bithynia, Roman period). Such a name, here not necessarily still a *gentilicium*, probably marks descendants of the *familia* of the equestrian L. Egnatius Rufus, a friend of Cicero with business interests in the province of Asia. A derivation from the supposed name of mythical creatures on Rhodes, ἴγνητες, is unlikely.

**36** Joly 1979 is generally recognized as the first serious challenge to the historicity of an early bishop-figure who authored, among other letters, *To the Philadelphians*. According to Joly, Ignatius bishop of Antioch is an invented figure, his journey to martyrdom pure fiction, and his epistolary corpus a forgery produced in the late 2nd century.

**37** Already Lambertz 1913. Jan Bremmer has recently affirmed that "the use of ὁ καί for double names is attested throughout the entire Byzantine and Arabian periods, right until the end of the use of Greek in Egypt in the eighth century" (Bremmer 2021, 410).

Christian and – possibly – even christo-mimetic obligations.[38] Walter Schoedel argues that it was "adopted by Ignatius at his baptism despite the fact that the adoption of Christian names was not common until the middle of the 3rd century."[39]

Whether a baptismal choice or a martyrial signifier, the sobriquet must have reflected a "shift in self-perception" analogous to the religious reorientation experienced by to "Saul, also known (ὁ καὶ) as Paul" (*Act. Ap.* 13.9).[40] After all, contemporary writers like Plutarch and Aelius Aristides, too, refer to "theologically significant" names (Thespesios and Theodoros, respectively) being used after a religious transformation.[41] Especially in the case of Aristides, the by-name spells out the divine endorsement of a powerful healing god, Asklepios – " 'First of all', he [i.e., Asklepios] said, 'it is necessary for (your mind) to be moved away from its ordinary state, and once it has been changed, to associate with God and, by this association, to transcend the human condition [. . .]'. And the name Theodoros was given to me in the following manner . . .".[42]

## 2.3 The Zeus-Born

The case of *To Diognetus* is the most intensely debated of the three, in that a possible identification of a historical persona behind the theophoric name would offer a most critical clue for locating the author of the text.

Ἐπειδὴ ὁρῶ, κράτιστε Διόγνητε, ὑπερεσπουδακότα σε τὴν θεοσέβειαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν μαθεῖν καὶ πάνυ σαφῶς καὶ ἐπιμελῶς πυνθανόμενον περὶ αὐτῶν, τίνι τε θεῷ πεποιθότες καὶ πῶς θρησκεύοντες αὐτὸν τόν τε κόσμον ὑπερορῶσι πάντες καὶ θανάτου καταφρονοῦσι καὶ οὔτε τοὺς νομιζομένους ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων θεοὺς λογίζονται οὔτε τὴν Ἰουδαίων δεισιδαιμονίαν φυλάσσουσι, καὶ τίνα τὴν φιλοστοργίαν ἔχουσι πρὸς ἀλλήλους, καὶ τί δή ποτε καινὸν τουτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν βίον νῦν καὶ οὐ πρότερον· ἀποδέχομαί γε τῆς προθυμίας σε ταύτες καὶ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, τοῦ καὶ

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**38** Bremmer 2021, 411, closely following Lightfoot 1889[2], 22. Schoedel 1985, 36 argues against a reference to martyrdom.

**39** Schoedel 1985, 36. As far as name changes are concerned, the only documented case before the legalization of Christ religion is that of some Egyptian confessors who exchanged their theophoric birth names for those of various Jewish prophets (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Mart. Pal.* 11.8). Corsten 2019 surveys several different types of epigraphically-attested onomastic change, but deliberately omits consideration of religiously-motivated changes in non-Christian contexts because of their extreme rarity.

**40** Horsley 1987, 2 and 7–8.

**41** Plu., *Mor.* 564c; Aristid., *Or.* 26 333–334 [= *HL* 4.52–53], cf. Schoedel 1985, 36–37 n. 17. In urging during the late 4th century that no one should name his children after family members but after martyrs, bishops and apostles, John Chrysostom was no doubt aware that few would pay heed (*De inani gloria* 47, p. 146 Malingrey). This is one of very few texts that suggest an explicit desire, if not a policy, in this regard on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. (We thank Robert Parker for the reference.)

**42** ἔφη [i.e., Asklepios] χρῆναι κινηθῆναι τὸν νοῦν ἀπὸ τοῦ καθεστηκότος, κινηθέντα δὲ συγγενέσθαι θεῷ, συγγενόμενον δὲ ὑπερέχειν ἤδη τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ἕξεως· [. . .]. καὶ μὴν τοὔνομά γε ὁ Θεόδωρος οὕτως ἐπωνομάσθη μοι (ed. Keil 1898; our translation).

τὸ λέγειν καὶ τὸ ἀκούειν ἡμῖν χορηγοῦντος, αἰτοῦμαι δοθεναι ἐμοὶ μὲν εἰπεῖν οὕτως, ὡς μάλιστα ἂν ἀκούσαντά σε βελτίω γενέσθαι, σοί τε οὕτως ἀκοῦσαι, ὡς μὴ λυπηθῆναι τὸν εἰπόντα.

Since I see, *most excellent Diognetus*, that you are extremely eager to learn about the religion of the Christians and are making such an exacting and careful inquiry about them, wishing to discover which God they obey and how they worship him, so that they all despise the world and disdain death, neither giving credence to those thought to be gods by the Greeks nor keeping the superstition of the Jews, and what deep affection they have for one another, and just why this new race or way of life came into being now and not before, I welcome this eagerness of yours and ask God – who enables us both to speak and to hear – that I may be allowed to speak in such a way that you derive special benefit by hearing, and that you hear in such a way that the speaker not be put to grief.[43]

The way Diognetus is addressed and greeted at the very beginning of the homonymous text is strikingly similar to the preface of Luke-Gospel. In this brief and mysterious[44] treatise, too, we find a name based on the common theonym Διόγνητος, "Zeus-born" or "sprung from Zeus", preceded by the appellation κράτιστος, used here to designate an addressee who is eager to be instructed in the Christian doctrine.

Conjectures regarding the identity of Diognetus date back to as early as the 17th century.[45] One persistent suggestion has been the Diognetos mentioned in *Meditations* 1.6 as a teacher of the youthful Marcus Aurelius.[46] The most influential, and thus most debated, proposal of the last century was made by the French patrologist Henri-Irénée Marrou, in his edition of the text. Marrou thought the text was written in late 3rd century Alexandria, and argued that κράτιστος indicates a specific rank within the equestrian order corresponding to the Latin *egregius*; our Διόγνητος is to be identified as Claudius Diognetus, an equestrian procurator bearing this very title and active in Alexandria between 197–203 CE.[47] However, on the one hand, as several commentators have noted, κράτιστος was also widely and flexibly used, like the Latin *optimus*, as a honorific appellation for socially respected gentlemen regardless of their actual office or official rank[48] – rather like the title "Dottore" (Doctor) as used in Italy to salute same or higher

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**43** *Diogn*. 1 (ed. and transl. Ehrman 2003, our emphasis).

**44** A fresh look into the many ambiguities of this text is offered by Urciuoli 2021.

**45** That is, almost as early as the serendipitous discovery of the text, on which see Marrou 1951, 6–10.

**46** Against the identification of this Diognetos as a Stoic philosopher, see von Arnim 1903. Whereas von Arnim doubted the claim of Hist. Aug. *Marc.* 4.9 that Marcus' Diognetos was a painter, it is accepted as a fact by Birley 1993, 37; Eck 1999, 870 and Fündling 2008, 41–42.

**47** Marrou 1951, 254–259. On this man, see Pflaum 1960–61, 659–662 and 991–992 no. 246 = PIR$^2$ C 852 (starting in 197 as *proc. Aug. vice archiereos Aegypti*, rising to *proc. Aug. adiutor rationalis Aegypti* in 202/3), and thought to be identical to the man of the same name who became successively *praefectus* of the fleet at Ravenna (206) and then at Misenum (209): Roxan 1978, 92–93 no. 73 (at 93 n.2); Roxan 1994, 318–319 no. 189 (at 319 n. 5).

**48** It is clear from other literary sources that κράτιστος, which is after all just a superlative of ἀγαθός, could be used to address persons of very different (ontological and social) statuses, from the imaginary god Ploutos (Ar., *Pl.* 230) to Moses in Ezekiel's Hellenistic tragedy *Exagoge* (l. 243), and Ammaios, the

rank persons, whether graduated or not. On the other, the identification with Claudius Diognetus seems to depend too strictly on the reasonable, and yet far from conclusive, assumption that the place of composition of the text is the Egyptian metropolis.[49]

Διόγνητος, which is a contraction of Διογένητος and far less common than the etymologically synonymous Διογενής, is no less plausible than Θεόφιλος as a proper name of an individual addressee. As a nickname, on the other hand, "Zeus-born" might well work as the pagan counterpart of "Beloved of God" and thus appeal to an intended audience of non-Christians who are at the same time socially respectable, well-off, well-read and educated, and open-minded enough to desire to know more about this new religion.[50]

To sum up: of the three theophoric names, one is certainly an epithet/second name (Theophorus), the other two can be both proper names and literary fictions (Theophilus, Diognetus). Two of them refer to Christ-believing individuals endowed, however, with very different levels of insider knowledge and thus religious capital (Theophilus, Theophorus), the other may indicate a perceptive non-Christian pointedly regarded as a prospective Christian (Diognetus). None of them is derogatory: even the pagan etymology of "Diognetus" is compensated by the title of excellence that adorns it with social respectability – something less than Nathan the Wise, more than the Noble Savage. Altogether, they bespeak a cross-Mediterranean field of cultural production where self-styled religious experts[51] communicate in a language of class and honour including the names of the gods and, potentially, harnessing the power enshrined by them. Yet what kind of power is here at stake?

# 3 Conclusion

In our three examples, the power resulting from a careful selection and combination of linguistic sequences is not of the kind that may be ritually activated, as in amulets or curse tablets. Rather, it is *semiotically* manufactured and conveyed in order to contribute to wider strategies serving the agenda of the writers.

Luke, the Christian history writer, attempts to establish the superiority of his own textualized narrative of Jesus over the other existing Jesus stories by relying on the kind of "assurance" that only an orderly literary arrangement of the facts underlying

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addressee of Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *De antiquis oratoribus* (§1). As for the papyri, the more than 850 examples of the word in the vocative available on *Diogenes* [https://d.iogen.es/d/; cf. https://www.text kit.com/greek-latin-forum/] suggest that any superior, from the *praefectus Aegypti* to a centurion, could be so addressed in official documents – the examples are mostly from the 2nd century onwards.

**49** Ruggiero 2020, 25; Menestrina 1997, 216–217.

**50** Menestrina 1977, 218. For Diognetus as a signifier indexing a man/men of means, see Horst and Robinson 2021.

**51** Stowers 2016; Wendt 2016.

the doctrine is able to provide to a certain milieu of perceptive readers. Ignatius, the Christian ambassador, aims to outcompete a regionally variable set of opponents by combining the promotion of a universal pattern of church order with a self-advertising strategy based on the imitation of Christ's suffering. The anonymous author of *To Diognetus*, the Christian teacher, wants "the religion of the Christians" to stand up to the polytheists and the Jews by outlining an intellectually competitive doctrine and sponsoring an affordable Christian way of life across the social spectrum.

What we have called "onomaturgy" can be seen as part of these strategies. Understood here as the self-conscious semiotic manipulation of compound names of which one element refers to the Christian God or another deity, it shows the implicit intention of exemplifying a Cratylean "justice" in naming.[52] Each of these names fits like a glove. The excellent "Beloved of God" indirectly signals the higher quality of Luke's literary products with regard to his predecessors and current rivals; "God-carrying" bolsters Ignatius' credibility as a death-seeking emissary and ambassador of Christ; the excellent "Zeus-born" proves that there is no degree of social adequacy, involvement, and responsibility that is incompatible with an existential turn to Christ religion. By the same token, dropping such names on the page can be expected to have an impact also on the receiving end of the "extended situation" generated by the written text.[53] The audience, indeed, is implicitly invited to measure up to the demands articulated by/via the name either he/she or the writer bears. The implicit and intended audiences of Luke, Ignatius, and the anonymous author of *To Diognetus* are called upon to belong to, and be worthy of, a "reading community"[54] enhanced by divine favour, inspiration, and even descent.

It is, after all, of minor importance whether there was originally one body or none behind these names. Given the popularity of theophoric names in the Roman empire, calling oneself or somebody else by god's name might serve several different purposes at once, have different *fitting* affordances: enhancing one's own or the addressee's "competitive" or "reflective individuality",[55] acknowledging a shared urbanity across the religious spectrum,[56] paying gentlemanly respect – even peer recognition – to the intended reader, or indeed marshalling the divinity to support the literary and community-building project.

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**52** Genette 1976, 18–19 emphasizes the indeterminacy of "justice" here.

**53** Keith 2020, 97. The concept of "extended situation" (*zerdehnte Situation*) is taken from Assmann 2006.

**54** On this concept, see again Johnson 2000, 602–603.

**55** For this typological differentiation of individualities, see Rüpke 2016, 709–711.

**56** Rüpke 2021.

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