

Claiming the Holy: The Legacy of Jesus as a Folk Hero in Rabbinic and Ecclesiastic Literature after the First Council of Nicaea

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“Society is founded on Hero-worship. All dignities of rank, on which human association rests, are what we may call a *Heroarchy* (government of heroes).”¹ Thomas Carlyle

This article explores the cultural background and doctrinal formation of Jesus at the First Council of Nicaea within the broader discourse on the holy man in late antiquity. In the Roman Empire, the figure of the charismatic miracle worker emerged as a popular religious folk hero, a pattern evident in monastic, ecclesiastical, and rabbinic literature. The paper investigates the conditions that enabled the emergence and spread of such a figure within Jewish and Christian communities after the destruction of the Second Temple. It argues that the terminology adopted at Nicaea to define the divine nature of the Holy Son was shaped, in part, by the need to distinguish Jesus from the broader phenomenon of the charismatic holy man. By examining traditions of rainmaking asceticism and comparing Honi the Circle Maker and Simeon the Stylites in canonized fifth-century texts, this study analyzes how the holy man was appropriated into both rabbinic and ecclesiastical discourses.

Keywords: *Holy man; Charisma; First Council of Nicaea; Asceticism; Rabbinic Literature; Ecclesiastical Literature; Theurgy; Magic; Canon; Rainmaking.*

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In hindsight, the first half of the first millennium introduced popular culture to a timeless protagonist, the charismatic holy man of late antiquity.² Initially emerging in the eastern regions of the Roman Empire and later

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¹ Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes*, ed. Henry Duff Traill (London: Chapman & Hall, 1897), 5:2.

² Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101; Menachem Hirshman, “Mokdey Kdushah Mishtanim: Honi VeNekhadave,” *Tura: Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1989): 109–18, (Hebrew).

spreading westward, these figures captivated Christians and Jews, as well as various subgroups within these communities. They were drawn to the holy man's ascetic lifestyle and perceived magical and theurgical abilities, reminiscent of pre-Nicaean "Jesus-like" figures.³ Scholarship provides an extensive account of the processes surrounding Jesus' alleged divinity and the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE).⁴ However, discussions about God the Son and the concept of *homoousios* are often explored separately from the study of the holy man, as if one is grounded in theology and history while the other pertains to broader sociocultural and historiographical questions of that time. Present in para-canonical and popular texts of all periodical genres, naturally, the holy man was also woven into the emerging canon of Christianity and post-biblical Judaism.⁵ In this paper I wish to cross this line in the sand between "canon and fanon" and consider the holy man as the leading folk hero of late antiquity and the center of a cultural phenomenon to which we can also affiliate Jesus.⁶ When rethinking folk religious discourse at late antiquity,

³ Ramsay MacMullen, "The Place of the Holy Man in the Later Roman Empire," *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 1 (January 2019): 1–32; Mélanie Houle, "The Practice of Exorcism in Egyptian Monasticism: A Popular Panacea? On the Reconciliation of Hagiographical and Magical Texts," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 7 (2015): 49–61; Richard Lee Kalmin, "Holy Men, Rabbis, and Demonic Sages in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire*, ed. Kalmin and Seth Schwartz, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 213–49. The concept of *theurgy* describes a reciprocal relationship between humans and the divine, where human actions intentionally influence God. The term *theurgy* (*theourgia*) combines *theo* (god) with *ergon* (action or operation) and holds a dual meaning: divine action (on humans) and human action on the divine. For a working definition of theurgy, see Yair Lorberbaum, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–12.

⁴ The literature on the topic is broad and rich from theological and historical perspectives. For an abbreviated reference list that reflects development in scholarship, see Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 1st Image ed (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1979), 25–44; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed., [Repr.] (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), 65–125; Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 132–72.

⁵ Several terms refer to late antique literature not included in Jewish and Christian scriptures and canonical writings. The term "para-biblical" is inaccurate when considering rabbinic literature as part of the Jewish canon. Therefore, I will use the term "para-canonical." For more information on the concept of para-biblical texts, see Tobias Nicklas, *The Canon and Beyond: Collected Essays on the History and Hermeneutics of Biblical and Parabiblical Traditions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024), 77–97.

⁶ For discussion on canon and fanon in late antiquity see Monika Amsler, "Martyrs, Athletes, and Transmedia Storytelling in Late Antiquity," *Transformative Works and*

one of the most significant periods in the formation of Jewish and Christian monotheism, we must pause and ask: What exactly are we exploring when studying the holy man?

From the late 19th century, with the emergence of Jewish studies, through to 1970, there was consistent growth in scholarship focused on comparing Jesus' miraculous accounts with those of leading Judaic charismatic figures from that era.⁷ This comparison allowed modern scholarship to examine Jesus' Jewishness in the text, rather than as a general statement.⁸ In 1971, Peter Brown wrote an overview of the rise of the Eastern Church in late antiquity; He made a distinction between antiquity and Medieval times based on the appearance and growth of "the charismatic holy man" in monastic communities.

Brown argues a causal relationship between the "natural death" of polytheism and the decay of temple cults and the rise of the charismatic holy man and the outgrowth of Christian ascetic ideology in the third century.⁹ According to Brown, the charismatic holy man was a prominent religious leader in the rural areas of the Roman Empire, associated with high social ethics, intense prayer, and, chiefly, the practice of highly ascetic regime.¹⁰ One of the most important characteristics of the holy man that Brown chooses to overlook is the extensive miraculous abilities attributed to holy men and their great popular appeal.¹¹ Recent studies show that the monastic holy men of late antiquity were not primarily identified as religious leaders; rather, they were better known for their magical and theurgical abilities, which were believed to be acquired through a transformative ascetic regime designed to overcome urges associated with bodily and demonic inclinations.¹²

Cultures 31 (December 15, 2019).

⁷ Adolf Büchler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety from 70 BCE to 70 CE: The Ancient Pious Men*, vol. 8 (Oxford: Jews' College, 1922), 68–127; Géza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Fontana, 1976), 80–211; David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1988), 150–209.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Brown, "The Rise."

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ MacMullen, "The Place."

¹² Houle, "The Practice." Another aspect usually overlooked concerning the holy man phenomenon of late antiquity are the persecutions of Persian converts to Christianity in the Sasanian Empire between the third and the sixth centuries, in effect turning its victims into martyr-saints, as evident from numerous hagiographical collections and Passion literature echoing this tradition. See Marina Detoraki, "Greek Passions of the Martyrs in Byzantium," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, vol. 2, 2014, 61–74; Aaron Michael Butts and Simcha Gross, *The History of the "Slave*

Crossing Imperial borders the rapid “viral” spread of holy man narratives to the east associated ascetic behavior with the holiness and piety of Jesus, turning it to devoted laymen path to divine salvation.¹³ Scholarship asks us to be suspicious of this “martyrs’ boom,” since the historical evidence indicates to dramatically less occurrences than the written literature suggests.¹⁴ However concerning this discussion, the gap between actual historical events and their excessive representation in literature is but another strong indication to the massive scope of the widespread phenomenon at hand.

In the past 50 years Brown’s concept of the charismatic holy man is a leading working premise. It offers a non-theological comparative framework that enables a systematic examination of Christian charismatic miracle workers, saints and martyrs, on their own and alongside their counterparts in rabbinic literature.¹⁵ Free from theological implications, Brown’s historical model of the holy man inadvertently steered scholarship away from further exploring Jesus in that context. Paradoxically creating reluctance to engage with the most explicit well-known prototype of holy man.¹⁶

of Christ”: *From Jewish Child to Christian Martyr*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Texts and Translation 6 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 1–79; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “Martyrdom in the Persian Martyr Acts and in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein and Geoffrey Herman (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 175–210.

¹³ Detoraki, “Greek Passions.”

¹⁴ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Nachdr., Figurae Reading Medieval Culture (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 1–22.

¹⁵ Alan J. Avery-Peck, “The Galilean Charismatic and Rabbinic Piety: The Holy Man in The Talmudic Literature,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levin, Dale C. Alison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 149–65; William Scott Green, “Palestinian Holy Men: Charismatic Leadership and Rabbinic Tradition,” in *Aufstieg Und Niedergang Der Römischen Welt II, Principat*, ed. Haase Wolfgang, vol. 19.2 (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1979), 619–47; Baruch M. Bokser, “Wonder-Working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina Ben Dosa,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 16, no. 1 (1985): 42–92; Hirshman, “Mokdey Kdushah”; Kalmin, “Holy Men, Rabbis”; Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and The Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Alan Dundes, “The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus,” in *In Quest of The Hero*, ed. Robert Alan Segal, Mythos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 179–216; Otto Rank, “The Myth of the Birth of the Hero,” in *In Quest of The Hero*, ed. Robert Alan Segal, Mythos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39–43.

The rapidly spreading “cults of the saints” culture was far from being just textual or oral narrated phenomena.¹⁷ Expounding on the cultural background that enabled the growth of the monastic holy man, we cannot ignore its strong ties to the rapid spread of ascetic praxis mimicking the saints, local pilgrimage, magic practices and relics worshipping style.¹⁸ In other words, we are looking back on dynamic and generative fan fiction-like culture constantly renewing, adding, and innovating an existing core tradition; in Tom de Bruin words: “Early Christian writings are written by fans, most often for fans. They are very readily works of fiction, or at least contain fictional aspects, and are based on famous people or source text.”¹⁹

Folk heroes function as universal archetypes, reflecting the evolving norms of society.²⁰ When analyzing the holy man as a central, charismatic folk hero through a folkloristic perspective, as the one who inspired the evident fan fiction culture of late antiquity, it is crucial to move beyond traditional definitions of folk literature and consider the socio-cultural context without imposing anachronistic interpretations.²¹ The enduring appeal of folk heroes lies in their ability to embody timeless human experiences. In essence, folk heroes are not merely stories; they act as discursive agents that reflect entire societies’ values, hopes, and struggles, thereby influencing national and ethnic identities by amplifying core cultural ideals.²²

Scholarship shows that holy men served as a key discursive category for rethinking the relationship between man and God, earthly and divine, after the destruction of the Second Temple and the dissolution of the Judaic temple cult.²³ These heroes serve as potent symbols that shape collective imagination and cultural identity while simultaneously inspiring

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Paperback ed., [Nachdr.], Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, N.S., 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 86–128.

¹⁸ Amsler, “Martyrs, Athletes”; Houle, “The Practice of Exorcism”

¹⁹ Tom De Bruin, *Fan Fiction and Early Christian Writings: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Canon*, Library of New Testament Studies, volume 673 (London: T&T Clark, 2024), 15.

²⁰ George R. Goethals and Scott T. Allison, “Making Heroes,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 46 (San Diego: Elsevier, 2012), 183–235.

²¹ See: Amsler, “Martyrs, Athletes.”

²² Goethals and Allison, “Making Heroes.”

²³ Daniel Boyarin, “Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Me’ir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (January 2009): 523–51; Gal Sela, “Theurgy in The Babylonian Talmud: A New Taxonomy of The Holy Man” (PhD, Haifa: University of Haifa, 2021), 1–34, ProQuest (29311252) (Hebrew).

fan cultures that reinterpret and renew renditions surrounding the hero.²⁴ Recognizing this challenge, the current study will apply Foucauldian discourse analysis, following the socio-political model of Matthew Flinders and Matthew Wood, to explore the process of deification of folk heroes during periods of moral panic or intense societal euphoria.²⁵ This reading method will help me examine how discourses function as epistemic structures that shape knowledge construction without being consciously selected.

The period between the Second Temple's destruction, or better yet after the gross failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt, and the Roman Empire's Christianization, was a time of profound confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty for Jews and Christ-followers.²⁶ Putting it in Flinders and Wood theoretical notions, these were times marked by alternating social panic and euphoria phases, in which deification processes of folk heroes accrues. As Orrin E. Klapp decisively argued: "An age of mass hero worship is an age of instability."²⁷ This period was a crucial juncture in the history of monotheism; it was a time that urgently demanded a coherent, updated perception of the world, of God.²⁸ Due to the moral fortitude discursively assigned to their behavior by the general folk, holy men were perceived as agents of social concern and divine providence, thus undergoing a: "process of symbolization framing, and discursive commentary through which certain agents become associated with almost God-like qualities."²⁹

As this study sets out to compare how two institutions curate the same charismatic repertoire of holy men, we need to better understand

²⁴ There is a lot of literature on the topic, for examples see Meredith Warren, "My OTP: Harry Potter Fanfiction and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha", *Scriptura*, no. 8 (2006): 53–66; De Bruin, *Fan Fiction*, 1–22; Amsler, "The Making of Hanina Ben Dosa: Fan Fiction in the Babylonian Talmud," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 31 (December 15, 2019): 87–96; Amsler, "Martyrs, Athletes"; Kasper Bro Larsen, "Fan Fiction and Early Christian Apocrypha: Comparing Hypertextual Practices," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 73, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 43–59; Tony Burke, *Early Christian Apocrypha in Contemporary Theological Discourse*, ed. Andrew Gregory et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 441–57.

²⁵ Matthew Flinders and Matthew Wood, "From Folk Devils to Folk Heroes: Rethinking the Theory of Moral Panics," *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 8 (2015): 640–56.

²⁶ See: Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Repr. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr, 1994), 120–38.

²⁷ Orrin E. Klapp, "The Creation of Popular Heroes," *American Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2 (1948): 135; David A. deSilva, *Judea under Greek and Roman Rule*, *Essentials of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 154–82.

²⁸ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 69–101.

²⁹ Flinders and Wood, "From Folk Devils," 644.

the operative Christian theological frame from the first to the fourth centuries. A concise NT-to-Nicaea overview clarifies that Jesus' status was not already fully defined exegetically and liturgically before the fourth century.³⁰ Stating this received Christological grammar allows the holy man evidence to be read as institutional curation rather than doctrinal invention.

Already in the early second century, Ignatius frames an explicitly high Christology within an episcopal and anti-docetic horizon: he confesses "Jesus Christ our God," insists on real flesh, passion, and resurrection, and binds right belief to the Eucharist and the bishop.³¹ These are not ad hoc flourishes but an ecclesial received grammar of worship and order.³² At the same time, we should note that the extant witnesses to his letters are much later than the realities they report; medieval codices and ancient versions transmit a text whose theological profile is nonetheless corroborated by wide patristic citation. This combination – pre-Nicene depictions preserved in later manuscripts and translations – warrants methodological care while still allowing us to treat Ignatius as evidence of a stable, pre-Nicene Christological core. On that foundation, the pre-Nicene exegesis of Origen of Alexandria, and Nicene consolidation Athanasius of Alexandria render the doctrinal through-line explicit emphasizing Jesus divine nature.³³

In this light, the Greco-Roman repertoire of the *theios anēr* – the wonder-working "divine man" – is perceived as shared cultural background,

³⁰ Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search For the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381*, Latest impression (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 318–81.

³¹ Michael W. Holmes and Joseph Barber Lightfoot, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3. ed., 2. print (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 166–271.

³² Khaled Anatolios and Brian Daley, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 15–36.

³³ Origenes and John Behr, *On First Principles*, First edition, Oxford early Christian texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), II.9; III.28–29; VII.67–69; Athanasius, *Select Works and Letters*, Repr. (d. Ausg.) 1891, ed. Archibald Robertson, A Select Library of [the] Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church / Transl. into Engl. with Prolegomena and Explanatory Notes under the Ed. Supervision of Philip Schaff, 2. ser., vol. 4 (T&T Clark, 1991), Book II. See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 1. publ. in paperback (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 11–132. It is important to note that in his writings Athanasius presents Nicaea as the church's scriptural confession formalized: the Son is uncreated, eternally begotten, and worthy of worship with the Father. Re-reading Prov 8:22; Ps 110; Heb 1; and John 1 against Arian proposals, he shows the Nicene Creed functions as a hermeneutical rule, not a doctrinal novelty, hence his insistence on the Son's homoousios with the Father.

not strict template.³⁴ Early Christian writers could appropriate elements of that repertoire (miracle, ascetic discipline, charismatic presence) while refusing to classify Jesus as merely one holy man among many; Origen's rebuttal to Celsus makes the point explicitly, and Nicene authors stabilize the same logic in conciliar grammar.³⁵

Yet given the chronological distance of our manuscript witnesses from the events they describe and from their earliest textual strata, the comparison that follows treats the rabbinic and ecclesiastical dossiers on the holy man as institutional curation within evolving theological frameworks rather than as the sources of those frameworks. The lateness of many manuscripts, together with likely redactional accretion and rhetorical amplification, counsels methodological caution.³⁶

Considering the scholarly foundation of the newly established religious institutions of late antiquity, which aimed to mediate divinity and holiness to the people through scriptural exegesis and standardized ritualistic practices, this study will explore two different institutional responses to the popularity of the holy man in late antiquity. One response emerged from rabbinic circles, while the other originated from the newly formed ecclesiastical order. By building on the rich scholarship on the monastic holy man and suggesting to perceive this hybrid model of holiness, asceticism, and magic as the prototypical folk hero of late antiquity, this paper seeks to rethink the religious institutions' efforts to appropriate this model into their monotheistic logic. To easily emphasize the institutional discourse domesticizing the holy man within its written canonic accounts, over analyzing the fascinating fiction associated with this protagonist, I choose two well-familiar written renditions: the rainmaking account of Honi the Circle Maker in rabbinic literature and the Church's depiction of Simeon Stylite's rainmaking tradition.

Beyond their familiarity, rainmaking miracle accounts juxtapose the earthly and the divine in a reciprocal connection. In late antiquity, rain was a symbol rich with meaning in both Judaism and Christianity, representing, among other things, scripture, fertility, nourishment, life, vitality,

³⁴ Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana. 1: Books I - IV*, The Loeb classical library 16 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005). See also Larry W. Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no. 71 (1999): 3–26.

³⁵ Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, ed. Henry Chadwick, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953), 73–75; 162–65; 433–36; Athanasius, *Select Works and Letters*, I.19–23; II.18–20.

³⁶ Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 47–82.

natural genealogy, and, of course, God's providence. In this last context, the role of rain, and its absence, serves as a divine linguistic register at God's disposal, allowing Him to communicate with His people or, conversely, to ignore and punish them.³⁷ The question of providence becomes increasingly complex in the face of drought, as it raises the issue of how God could withhold essential rain from His creation, causing suffering, starvation, decay, and ultimately, death.³⁸ Into this drama, the ascetic holy man is inserted as a powerful charismatic figure capable of bringing rain in times of drought.

1. Rabbinization of the Holy man: The Holy Man at the Crossroads

Traditionally, Jewish Studies has approached this topic by comparing the monastic charismatic figure to the rabbinic one. This approach assumes that rabbinic circles reacted passively to the widespread influence of the pre-Constantine holy man phenomenon in the Eastern Church.³⁹ According to this perspective, rabbinic accounts of the holy man are seen as a secondary adaptation, reluctantly crafted by the sages as a critical response to the emergence of this Christian model of piety and sanctity.⁴⁰ However, in this discussion, I challenge this assumption, proposing instead that rabbinic circles, as well as the Jewish diaspora in the Roman and Sasanian Empires, were active participants in the same popular trend. They shared the same cultural anxieties and turned to the same periodical folk hero for relief, creatively shaping their own distinct version of this religious model of holiness.⁴¹

There are notable similarities between rabbinic and early Christian accounts of the holy man.⁴² First, in both traditions, the holy man masters magical language and can influence the divine according to his will; second, in both, this protagonist lives in poverty and simplicity, often on the outskirts of society; third, the charismatic figure enjoys popular appeal while being in conflict with religious institutions.⁴³ The significance

³⁷ Yair Eldan, "Mishnat Ta'anit: Phenomenologia Shel Tzibur HaHay BeTzel Niduy," *Acdamut* 19 (2007): 165–81 [Hebrew].

³⁸ Sela, "Theurgy in The Babylonian," 24–26.

³⁹ This is a recurring premise, for examples see Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature*, 1–34; Green, "Palestinian Holy Men"; Kalmin, "Holy Men,"; Avery-Peck, "The Galilean Charismatic and Rabbinic Piety"; M. Bokser, "Wonder-Working."

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ See: Sela, "Theurgy in The Babylonian," 355–60.

⁴² Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature*, 117–18; Kalmin, "Holy Men," 213–18; M. Bokser, "Wonder-Working," 49–92; Green, "Palestinian Holy Men," 628–32; Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 69–72.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

of these evident similarities is the subject of an ongoing and passionate scholarly discussion focused on the channels of religious and cultural “influence” between Second Temple traditions, late antique Judaism, and early Christianity.⁴⁴ However, in most case studies, it is nearly impossible to determine the precise religious origin of shared traditions, motifs, narratives, genres, and broader cultural intersections.⁴⁵ Amidst this complex interplay of shared symbols and traditions, the holy man emerges as a consistent, recognizable, and easily identifiable protagonist, despite the numerous variations across traditions.

There are two predominant perspectives regarding the concept of rabbinic holy men. The first uses narrated depictions of the holy man to delineate the scope of rabbinic asceticism, particularly concerning the practice of intense scriptures study and Jewish monasticism (i.e., Nazariteship).⁴⁶ The second scholarly perspective focuses on the literary portrayals of charismatic miracle workers within Midrash and Aggadah.⁴⁷ Although both lines of research reference Brown’s concept of the holy man, the rabbinic interpretation of the compelling thaumaturgic interplay between asceticism and magical abilities that symbolize the holy man of late antiquity remains insufficiently addressed.

⁴⁴ Yishai Kiel, “Study versus Sustenance: A Rabbinic Dilemma in Its Zoroastrian and Manichaean Context,” *AJS Review* 38, no. 2 (November 2014): 275–302.

⁴⁵ For example see Sinai (Tamas) Turan, “A Neglected Rabbinic Parallel to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6L22-23; Luke 11:34-36),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008); Menahem Kister, “‘First Adam’ and ‘Second Adam’ in 1 Cor 15:45-49 in the Light of Midrashic Exegesis and Hebrew Usage,” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. R. Bieringer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 351–65; Menahem Kister, *Dynamics of Midrashic Traditions in Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature* (S.l.: THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY MAG, 2024).

⁴⁶ Steven D. Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Age*, ed. Arthur Green, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1986); Michael Satlow, “‘And on the Earth You Shall Sleep’: ‘Talmud Torah’ and Rabbinic Asceticism,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 204–55; Kalmin, “Holy Men”; Siegal, *Early Christian*, 133–69; Yishai Kiel, “Study versus Sustenance: A Rabbinic Dilemma in Its Zoroastrian and Manichaean Context,” *AJS Review* 38, no. 2 (November 2014): 275–302.

⁴⁷ Green, “Palestinian Holy Men”; Avery-Peck, “The Galilean Charismatic”; Bokser, “Wonder-Working”; Hirshman, “Mokdey Kdushah”; Suzanne Last Stone, “On the Interplay of Rules, ‘Cases,’ and Concepts in Rabbinic Legal Literature: Another Look at the Aggadot on Honi the Circle-Drawer,” *Dine Israel* 24 (2007): 125–55; Gad Ben-Ami Sarfatti, “Hassidim Ve’Anshei Ma’ase VeHanevi’m HaRishonim,” *Tarbiz* 26 (57 1956): 126–53 (Hebrew); Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Were the Sages Aware of the Concept of Folklore?,” in *Higayun le-Yunah: New Aspects in the Study of Midrash, Aggadah and Piyut*, ed. Joshua Levinson and Galit Hasan-Rokem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 2007), 199–229 (Hebrew).

In the Talmud, the rabbinic holy man is typically depicted as a family man who is committed to providing for his family while adhering to his lifelong dedication to the study of scripture and Jewish law, particularly Torah studies, within the Jewish academy, known as the Beit Midrash.⁴⁸ Which means that the rabbinic holy man does not subject to the same ascetic doctrine as his monastic contemporaries; instead, he follows a different form of asceticism that aligns with rabbinic law (Halakha) and Jewish ideals.⁴⁹ For example, in accordance with conventions found in rabbinic literature, the holy man is often addressed to as a Rabbi only to face significant criticism for deviating from standardized rabbinic norms while mitigating his shortcomings through magic.⁵⁰

In one-sided discursive contention, the rabbinic institution grappled in the Talmud with a profound questions the holy man model of righteousness and sanctity provokes: Who mediates divinity to the people, and how? Is it through “halakhically” standardized rabbinic logic grounded in scriptural exegesis and Jewish law, or through popular ascetic and magical practices inspired by the holy man model? This core conflict, which indicates to the depth and scope of the holy man phenomenon, is not merely a historical footnote but represents a significant challenge for the relatively nascent rabbinic institution.

The written origins of this tradition can be traced back to early rabbinic literature (70–200 CE), where the holy man is depicted as a pious miracle worker, often living during late Second Temple period, typically near its destruction.⁵¹ In the Mishna and Tosefta, the proto-rabbinic holy man emerges as a prominent and well-established protagonist, undergoing the initial stages of appropriation in tannaitic literary.⁵² Like in the case of the monastic holy man, early traditions ascribe two defining characteristics to the proto-rabbinic holy man, one ascetic and the other magical. The first is a radical and zealous devotion to specific pre-rabbinic commandments delineated in the Torah, particularly fervent prayer, Shabbat observance, Jewish purity laws, and almsgiving, which was thought to

⁴⁸ Satlow, “And on the Earth”; Kiel, “Study versus Sustenance.” Lawrence M. Wills, “Ascetic Theology before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 902–25.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Green, “Palestinian Holy Men,” 634–35; Avery-Peck, “The Galilean Charismatic,” 156; Hasan-Rokem, “Were the Sages,” 216; Hirshman, “Mokdey Kdushah”; Stone, “On the Interplay of Rules,” 148–54.

⁵¹ Green, “Palestinian Holy Men”; Sarfatti, “Hassidim Ve’Anshei Ma’ase VeHanevi’m HaRishonim.”

⁵² Bokser, “Wonder-Working.”

endow them with thaumaturgic abilities.⁵³ The second is the ability to perform miracles in synergy with the divine, as we can see in following account told about Hanina ben Dosa:

They said about Rebbi Hanina ben Dosa that he was standing in prayer when a snake came and bit him. He did not interrupt his prayer. They went and found that snake lying dead upon the entrance of its hole. They said, woe to the human who is bitten by a snake, but woe to the snake that bites Rebbi Hanina ben Dosa. [...] His students asked him: Rabbi did you not notice [the snake bite]? He said to them: May it come upon me as my heart intended in prayer if I truly felt it! Rebbi Isaac ben Eleazar said, the Holy One created a well under his feet, to fulfill what has been said «He will do the will of those who fear Him, He will hear their entreaties and save them» (Psalms 145:19)⁵⁴

Before the emergence of Brown's holy man paradigm, the prevailing assumption was that the tannaitic "first pious men" and "men of deeds," (i.e., Hassidim haRishonim and 'Anshei Ma'ase/מידיסארה/השנא), like Hanina ben Dosa, constituted isolated groups of devotees, akin to monastic holy men.⁵⁵ It was assumed that these early rabbinic holy men and their families lived in closed communities. However, unlike their monastic contemporaries, no historical evidence clearly supporting the existence of such communities. Thus, despite their pivotal role as protagonists in Midrash and Aggadah, it remains impossible to determine whether the tannaitic holy man operated within a communal framework.⁵⁶ This discrepancy between the absence of historical evidence and the existence of rich literature can be understood in various ways. Thus in this context, it serves further as another compelling evidence to the scope and significance of the holy man as a folk hero and subject of many tales, already in tannaitic literature. Paraphrasing Daniel Boyarin's known argument about martyrdom as literature: being an ascetic is a lifelong recurring event, asceticism and magic in holy man accounts, are a literary form, a genre.⁵⁷

⁵³ Shmuel Safrai, "Hassidim Ve'Anshei Ma'ase," *Zion* 50 (185 AD): 133–54 [Hebrew].

⁵⁴ yBera 5:1 (9a). See also bBera 32a, tBera 3:20. All translations to rabbinic literature were done by the author.

⁵⁵ Amsler, "The Making of Hanina Ben Dosa"; Haim Lapin, "Rabbis and Public Prayers for Rain in Late Roman Palestine," in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Adele Berlin, Studies and Texts in Jewish History and Culture (Bethesda: University press of Maryland, 1996), 105–29; Safrai, "Hassidim Ve'Anshei Ma'ase."

⁵⁶ Chana Safrai and Zeev Safrai, "Rabbinic Holy Men," in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 59–78.

⁵⁷ "Being killed is an event. Martyrdom is a literary form, a genre." Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 116.

Like other folk heroes, it is evident from early textual depictions that the rabbinic holy man is not defined by a single narrative or trope. Rather, this protagonist serves as the inspiration for multiple tales showcasing theurgic and magical abilities from rainmaking to healing. Moreover, the Mishna and Tosefta are but two sources among others that recount the tales of early rabbinic holy men within this cultural multiverse. In amulets, historioli, Jewish mystical literature, magical compositions, and non-rabbinic story sequences, from Palestine and Babylonia we can identify parallels featuring the same holy men.⁵⁸ Contemplating fanfiction and Hanina ben Dosa's tradition, Monika Amsler convincingly argues: "The standards with which the texts are crafted within the two settings (i.e., canon and fanon) became the *tertium comparationis*, the respect against which fan fiction and rabbinic texts are compared."⁵⁹ In other words, the extra-textual multiple existence of this protagonist in uncanonical compositions, folklore, and magical traditions emphasizes the generative, fanon-like magnitude of the holy man in late antiquity Jewish diaspora, not only in rabbinic circles.

1.1 Adaptation, Domestication, and Theological Authority: Honi the Circle Maker Rainmaking Tradition

To get a sense of how the rabbinic institution appropriated the popular holy man into its canonical discourse, I will revisit the well-known rabbinic rendition of Honi the Circle Maker. There are two central folkloric traditions linked to Honi: rainmaking after a long drought and a miraculous 70-year long sleep, which, according to the Palestinian Talmud, began on the verge of the First Temple's destruction and the Babylonian exile and ended with the return to Zion and the construction of the Second Temple.⁶⁰ Although both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds construct their accounts of Honi using the same tale type as building blocks according to Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale-type index (ATU) classifies them as tale types ATU 827, "*Miraculous Rainfall During a Drought*," and ATU 766, *"*The Seven Sleepers of the Cave*" (with a collective protagonist), each presents its own narrated interpretation for what seems like the same popular traditions.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Sela, "Theurgy in The Babylonian," 268–74.

⁵⁹ Amsler, "The Making," 88–89.

⁶⁰ yTa'an 3:10–12 (66d–67a); bTa'an 23a–b.

⁶¹ Sela, "Theorizing Rabbinic Folklore: The Miraculous Sleep of the Holy Man," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* 3, no. 1 (September 2024): 22–47. Hans-Jörg Uther, "The Types of International Folktales. 1: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales,

Concentrating on the *miraculous rainmaking rendition will help demonstrate the appropriation process of the holy man in these corpora*. The Honi dossier exemplifies rabbinic domestication of charismatic theurgy into halakhic authority and communal order. Read alongside the Christian material, it highlights that ecclesial embrace of charisma presupposes a Logos-Wisdom ontology already secured exegetically, rather than deriving Christology from holy man performance.

The rainmaking account is a tale of many versions.⁶² When Mishnah Ta'anit outlines the ritualistic order of communal fasts for rain at time of drought, it presents a halakhic decree that forbids prayer to stop massive rainfall, as it always is God's blessing.⁶³ The decree is followed by casuistic account, the Ma'ase (i.e., act; deed; casus), of Honi haMe'agel.⁶⁴ The story begins during a prolonged drought in the Second Temple period. Desperate for relief, the people of Jerusalem turn to Honi, a renowned charismatic, pleading with him to pray for rain. When his initial powerful prayer proves ineffective, contrary to expectations, Honi resorts to magic. He draws a circle, stands within it, and invokes God's Tetragrammaton. This bold act compels the heavens to respond, and rain finally begins to fall:

He drew a circle and stood within it, and said before Him: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me as I am like a member of Your household before You. I swear an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children.⁶⁵

This magical formula, also known to us from Hekhalot literature is recited, and God immediately respond with rain.⁶⁶ Yet it is light rain. Honi is dissatisfied and demands it grow stronger. God increases the rain. But this time, it falls with fury. And again, Honi is unhappy. God finally heeds Honi's request, and rain begins to fall regularly yet it does not stop falling. The way this account depicts God's reluctance to respond to the

and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction," 2. print, FF Communications / Ed. for the Folklore Fellows. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 284 = Vol. 133 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2011), 424, 465.

⁶² Vered Noam, "Honi HaMea'agel Morid Geshamim," in *Entsiklopedyah shel ha-sipur ha-Yehudi: sipur 'okev sipur*, ed. Yoav Elstein, Avidov Lipsker, and Rella Kushelevsky, vol. 3 (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 773), 29–61 (Hebrew).

⁶³ mTa'an 3:8.

⁶⁴ Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45–49.

⁶⁵ mTa'an 3:8.

⁶⁶ Cairo Genizh fragment JTS828; Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, 1st ed, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, v. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 212–14.

acts of the holy man, reveals very clearly the extensive powers that the rabbis affiliated with this protagonist and the unease it incites. Jerusalem is flooded and its people approach Honi once more, this time asking him to break the opening halakhic decree and pray for the rain to cease.

Recalling on Goethe's famous poem, this trope, centered on a magician's apprentice unable to control the magic forces he has unleashed, is known as "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (ATU 325). However, in the version before us, the magician is no apprentice; he knows how to stop the rain from overflowing Jerusalem. He must renounce rabbinic law and pray for the rain to cease. The sentiment of the rabbinic institution concerning this acute conflict is very clear from the critique Shimon ben Shetah harshly throws at Honi:

Shimon ben Shetah, was sent to him (saying): Were you not Honi, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You plea and nag (mithate; מִתְחַתֵּם) God and He fulfills your will, like a son who pleads before his father and the father fulfills his request. After you, the verse states: «Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice» (Proverbs 23:25)⁶⁷

Echoing the rabbinic discourse, Shimon ben Shetah's words reflect the rabbinic institution's anxiety over the intimate, familial relationship between the holy man and God.⁶⁸ In its amoraic version, redacted approximately 300 years later, this institutional anxiety about the father-son dynamic intensifies, accompanied by heightened criticism of the holy man as a religious model:

Shimon ben Shetah, was sent to him (saying): If you were not Honi, I would have decreed you ostracism. For if these years were like the years of Elijah, when the keys of rain were in Elijah's hands, would not the name of Heaven be profaned because of you?⁶⁹ But what can I do to you, as you nag God and He fulfills your will, like a son who pleads and nags his father and his father fulfill his will. He says to him, Father, bathe me in hot water, rinse me in cold water, give me nuts, peaches, almonds, and pomegranates – and he gives them to him. About you,

⁶⁷ mTa'an 3:8.

⁶⁸ Dina Stein, "Zehut, Headrut Veshiva," in *Zikaron Yaldut Ve-Shikhebah: Keri'ot Hadashot Be-Tsilkat Shel Odise'us*, ed. Vered Lev Kenaan and Noga Weiss, Mitosim Ha-Mekhavanim Shel Mad'e Ha-Ruah 1 (Hefah: Hotsa'at ha-Sefarim shel Universitat Hefah : Pardes hotsa'ah la-or, 2018), 189–202 (Hebrew).

⁶⁹ See: bTa'an 2a; bSanh 113a: "Rabbi Yohanan said: Three keys are at the hand of the Holy One, Blessed be He, which were not entrusted to an emissary. And they are: The key of rain, the key of birthing (a living soul), and the key of the resurrection of the dead".

Scripture says: «Your father and mother will be glad and she who bore you will rejoice» (Proverbs 23:25)⁷⁰

This is not the only noticeable change attesting to the long textual appropriation processes of the holy man in rabbinic literature. From early to late rabbinic literature, the rainmaking charismatic from Jerusalem is transformed from an independent unaffiliated miracle worker into a rabbi with disciples, who is also a temple priest that stops the rain by sacrificing a bull as a thank offering. The Talmud does not stop here, and after the rabbinization process of the charismatic holy man, he is also harshly criticized through the stories of his grandkids, the holy fools Abba Hilkiyah and Hanan the Hidden that cannot justify the grandfather magical legacy.⁷¹ Hirschman addresses this issue: “The stories about the descendants, as told in Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 23a-b, aim to fundamentally undermine any remaining faith in the holy man who performs miracles, particularly in bringing rain. To this end, they “continue” the story of Honi and “update” us on the actions of his rain-bringing descendants.”⁷²

The depiction of Honi arrogantly and authoritatively positions himself as a representative of the people, compelling God to bring them rain, express the rabbinic institution’s anxiety of the holy man. This fear stems from the close, immediate, and reciprocal relationship with God that the holy man discourse offers the folk, in contrast to the mediated and regulated relationship with God advocated by the rabbis. This dynamic establishes a triangular structure of sage, holy man, and the divine, as emphasized in the Honi rendition. And as known from other rabbinic accounts, such as “The Oven of Akhnai,” the institutional Rabbi cannot depend on God to validate his theological approach with miracle and sings.⁷³ On the contrary, God’s actions often seem to oppose it, leaving the sages, and us, with law and Torah as the only way to divinity.

2. Ecclesiastication of the holy man: Between Popular Devotion and Institutional Authority

Early Christianity exhibits a broad range of literary genres and compositions, most perceived today as para-canonic materials; apocryphal in the

⁷⁰ bTa’an 23a.

⁷¹ The term “fool-holy” originates from Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. This designation, known in English as “*Fools for Christ*,” has garnered significant attention in analyses of the *Desert Fathers* stories. Like Abba Hilkiyah, these figures exhibit madness, foolishness, violence, and provocative behavior that challenges normative perceptions.

⁷² Hirshman, “Mokdey Kdushah,” 113. The author’s translation of Hirshman.

⁷³ For example see bBava Metzia 59a-b.

broadest sense possible. While the New Testament canon comprises four pivotal genres: Gospels, Acts, Epistles, apocalyptic literature, whereas the para-canonical materials encompass an open-ended array of genres and compositions.⁷⁴ That is to say that early Christianity literature was a rich tapestry of theologies, ideas, narratives, poetic structures, and genres, reflecting the polyphony of “Christianities” that created these materials reflecting the pre-Constantine era.⁷⁵

From a retrospective vantage it is tempting to construe a single, internally coherent Christian stance on Jesus’ divinity running seamlessly from the New Testament through pre-Nicene authors to Nicaea; yet that coherence is an *ex post* pattern discerned across diverse corpora.⁷⁶ Nicene grammar can be read as the codification of long-available exegetical trajectories, but it should not be mistaken for inevitability;⁷⁷ it reflects a theological choice among competing hermeneutic possibilities, one that also engaged and delimited the contemporary appeal of the charismatic holy man as a quasi-religious cultural phenomenon.⁷⁸

Looking back on Christianity between the destruction of the Second Temple and the First Council of Nicaea will reveal the variety, diversity and array of practices and religious ideals performed by different groups of Jesus followers of all kinds.⁷⁹ In hindsight, these movements, whether organized around theological agenda or specific charismatics, display a wide range of geographical locations, cultures, social settings, and languages, including Greek, Syriac, Latin, and Coptic. This cultural diversity led to unique expressions of faith, and regional and political conflicts often

⁷⁴ For an elaborated discussion on the topic, see David Edward Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1987), 1–7; Kelsie G. Rodenbiker, “Disputing with the Devil: Jude, Michael the Archangel, and the Boundaries of Canon (2019): 267,” n.d., 267–82.

⁷⁵ Michael Slusser, “Diversity, Communion, and Catholicity in the Early Church,” in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, vol. 45, 1990, 1–14; David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–28.

⁷⁶ Nongbri, *God’s Library*, 47–82.

⁷⁷ Origenes and Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, II.9; III.28–29; VII.67–69; Athanasius, *Select Works and Letters*, I.19–23; II.18–20; Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity.”

⁷⁸ Athanasius, *Select Works and Letters*, I.19–23; II.18–20; Brown, “The Rise and Function”; Garth Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (November 1982): 33–59; Anatolios and Daley, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 15–36; Andrei-Dragoș Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea, and The Synthesis of Constantinople: Revisiting Trajectories in The Fourth-Century Christological Debates*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, volume 200 (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2024), 23–106.

⁷⁹ Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea*, 23–106.

stemmed from these differences.⁸⁰ Unity in the upcoming church was a constant grave issue, primarily achieved through the shared Eucharist (communion), whereas decisions on schism and fellowship were rooted in personal relationships among bishops, not yet in doctrinal agreements.⁸¹ Alongside this unforged still-forming ecclesiastical structure “cults of saints,” of martyrs and holy ascetics, were shaped by local communities and patrons, emphasizing regional identity and local political and religious conflicts.⁸² Thus, despite this diversity, the narrative variations and tropes were repetitive, resorting to the same tale types, pointing to the popular fan-like culture built around the holy man. As we can see in the following account of Simeon Stylites and the serpent:

30. [...] At that time he (Simeon) was standing and praying at night, Satan brought against him a very fierce serpent. It swelled up and hissed, it rushed against him and coiled itself between his feet and wound itself in many coils round the saint's leg up to his knee. It bound him right like a rope to frighten him and make him stop his prayer. The saint, however, was not frightened but continued patiently to pray. When he had finished praying, the serpent uncoiled itself and went to go away. When it had gone a little way from him, the angel of the Lord smote it and ripped it from top to bottom.⁸³

The resemblance to the Hanina ben Dosa and the serpent account is striking, as is its similarity to the well-known trope about Paul and snake in Malta, or the one from *The Acts of Thomas*, and other similar accounts in the *Desert Fathers* literature as if animating the core sentiment in Mark 16:18: “they will pick up snakes; if they should drink anything deadly, it will not harm them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will get well.”⁸⁴ These accounts telling the account of the snake that bites a holy man but does not harm him mostly belong to ATU 672: *The serpents crown* or *The Serpent and the Holy Man*, and some to ATU 285B: *The child and the snake* where the serpent is actively defeated. Whether the

⁸⁰ J. David Ray, “Nicea and Its Aftermath: A Historical Survey of the First Ecumenical Council and the Ensuing Conflicts,” *Ashland Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (2007): 19–32.

⁸¹ Slusser, “Diversity, Communion”.

⁸² Amsler, “Martyrs, Athletes. See also Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Paperback ed., (Nachdr.), Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, N.S., 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁸³ Robert Doran, Theodoretus, and Robert E. Darley-Doran, eds., *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, Cistercian Studies Series 112 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 119.

⁸⁴ Acts 28:3–6; Acts of Thomas, ch. 3–4.

snake dies from biting the holy man, or stricken to death immediately after, the “cultural DNA” of the above-quoted version and the Hanina ben Dosa account remains distinct.⁸⁵ I argue that the key distinction between the monastic and rabbinic holy man is not the narrative but the meaning assigned by each tradition to ascetic practices and their outcomes. While rabbinic corpora construct a causal connection between ascetically induced observance of commandments and Torah study with divine magical abilities, the monastic holy man follows a different ascetic logic. Here, physical suffering and endurance were perceived as the path for divine grace, modeled after Old Testament prophets and Christ.⁸⁶

To understand Church’s response to the strict devoted asceticism of the monastic holy man we need to rethink the concept of theurgy in late antiquity.⁸⁷ In the 3rd–4th centuries the Neoplatonist Iamblichus expanded Plato’s four levels of wisdom leading to the divine wisdom of the One (e.g., *Phaedo*), by adding the hieratic or theurgic level at the top of this hierarchy.⁸⁸ The Neoplatonic hierarchy was incorporated into Christianity by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who described this hierarchy as a symbolic and ritualistic allegorical framework linking the cosmological and heavenly order to the structure of the church clergy and rituals.⁸⁹ According to this ascetic model, to ascend the theurgic lev-

⁸⁵ Eliezer Diamond, “Lions, Snakes and Asses: Palestinian Jewish Men as Masters of Animal Kingdom,” in *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire*, ed. Richard Lee Kalmin and Seth Schwartz, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 251–83.

⁸⁶ S. Ashbrook Harvey, “The Sense of a Stylite: Perspectives on Simeon the Elder,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 4 (December 1988): 381–89.

⁸⁷ Nelstrop and Magill, *Christian Mysticism*, 109–14; Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis*, vol. 71, PIMS, 1984, 136–40; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154–73.

⁸⁸ Nelstrop and Magill, *Christian Mysticism*; Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society.”

⁸⁹ Lorberbaum, *In God’s Image*, 156; Nelstrop and Magill, *Christian Mysticism*, 109–14; Louth, *The Origins*, 110–22; Gregory Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 1999): 573–99; Lawrence M. Wills, “Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 902–25. See: Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 95–100; Eric Robertson Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 287–96. Grace Jantzen argues that the celestial hierarchy is a symbolic construct. However, unlike the aforementioned, she argues that the celestial hierarchy imitates the ecclesiastical one, not the other way around. In contrast, Dodds, for example, was convinced that the theurgical concept, which passed from Neoplatonism into the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, is: “A

el, the holy man must overcome bodily inclinations through self-deprivation regimens aggressively suppressing human urges, accompanied by complete devotion to the welfare of others.⁹⁰ To the point of fulfilling a model of “angelic life” representing hybrid holy existence, semi-human semi divine.⁹¹

Yet this is not the only arena in which the holy man’s human body is tormented and demised in achieving divine elevation. In late antiquity, Christianity developed a rich and elaborate textual tradition of martyrdom recorded in various genres and textual collections, narrating the suffering, death, and often the miraculous endurance of early Christian martyrs.⁹² According to Yosef Dan, the martyr, as God’s witness, embodies a profound paradox: while God may appear to fail in saving the most devout believers from persecution and death, the martyr’s spiritual endurance and unwavering faith represent the triumph of his faith.⁹³ This aporia, where physical bodily suffering affirms the believer’s faith and glorifies God, embodies the religious turmoil and anxiety experienced by many followers of Christ across denominations and “cults of saints,” transforming their day-to-day struggle and needless deaths into a meaningful and ultimate act of faith as “athletes of Christ”. This dynamic, which also elevated Jesus to the status of Christ, emphasizes the importance of asceticism and martyrdom, imbuing these experiences with deep divine significance.

Scholarship often compartmentalizes discussions on pre-Constantine asceticism and martyrdom, separating the holy man’s historical-cultural and social role analyses from theological discussions concerning the Christ doctrine. Yet, as Sebastian Brock aptly wrote: “The ascetic is in many ways the successor of the martyr, [...] an ideal replaced by that of the ascetic, whose whole life was often regarded in terms of martyrdom.”⁹⁴

manifesto of irrationalism, an assertion that the road to salvation is found not in reason but in ritual,” *Ibidem*, 287.

⁹⁰ MacMullen, “The Place of the Holy Man,” 1–15; Houle, “The Practice of Exorcism,” 49–52; Peter Brown, *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity*, Richard Lectures for 2012 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 1–17.

⁹¹ Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199931934.001.0001.

⁹² Detoraki, “Greek Passions.”

⁹³ Yosef Dan, “A’serah Harugey Malkhut: Martyrologia VeMysthika,” in *Minhah LiMnabem: Qwbes Ma’amariym LiKbwd HaRab Mnabem HaKohen*, ed. Haim Be’er, Hanna Amit, and Aviad Hacohen (Tel Aviv: HaKibutz HaMeuhad, 2007), 367–90 (Hebrew).

⁹⁴ Sebastian Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 2.

Dividing “active” asceticism and “passive” martyrdom when interpreting accounts of the holy man as a separate phenomenon overlooks the exact body-related core mechanism that operates both in canonic and “fanom-ic” contexts.

The Pre-Nicaean historical Jesus is not much different from other holy men, at least in many diverse circles of Jesus’ followers.⁹⁵ These circles were excluded by Nicaea along with other perceptions of the divine.⁹⁶ The well-documented dispute between Arianism and the “Orthodox,” often framed as one of the most pivotal theological and political reasons for assembling the First Council of Nicaea, was only one prominent disagreement concerning the core monotheistic principles of the emerging religion.⁹⁷ Later classified as heretical or schismatic movements, theological attributes of the divine held by groups such as Docetism, various strands of Gnosticism, Montanism, Sabellianism, Donatism, and others were gradually pushed beyond the boundaries of acceptable Christian doctrine.⁹⁸ This exclusion was in favor of Christology, in which God the Son is equivalent to God the Father, rather than being depicted as merely a distinguished man of God or yet holy man even if of the highest prophetic station. Taking into account the holy man’s folk hero status, the fan culture he inspired, and the persistent undercurrents of social anxiety, the First Council of Nicaea’s decision on Jesus’ divine nature can be seen not only as a resolution to a theological debate but also, *de facto*, as a means of distinguishing Jesus from the broader popular phenomenon. Examining this process through the lens of discourse as an epistemic structure allows for an exploration of how such distinctions emerge as part of a larger framework that shapes knowledge and beliefs.

The process of venerating Jesus and distinguishing him as Christ, God the Son, while separating him from the Apostles, saints, and holy martyrs, began in the early third century. This development, which established a unique category of divinity for Jesus, did not occur overnight.

⁹⁵ Avery-Peck, “The Galilean Charismatic.”

⁹⁶ Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea*, 1–20; Michael Peppard, “Archived Portraits of Jesus: Unorthodox Christological Images from John and Athanasius,” in *Portraits of Jesus: Studies in Christology*, ed. Susan E. Myers, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. As emphasized by Andrei-Dragoş Giulea, early scholarship focused on polarizations, such as Nicene vs. Arian, or Eastern vs. Western, while later scholarship re-evaluated categories like “Eusebian alliance” or “Arianism” to reflect the epoch’s theological diversity. Scholars now analyze “theological trajectories,” emphasizing evolving theological grammars and metaphysical concepts, as demonstrated in this work.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁸ Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 2. edition, MyiLibrary (London–New York–Routledge, 2004), 48–56.

The bishops' assembly at the First Council of Nicaea was not successful in uniting Christianity under a single core theology or eradicating competing ideas and practices, and at the time did not carry the ultimate authority they would later achieve.⁹⁹ The decisions of the First Council of Nicaea were subject to intense and passionate polemical aftermath, particularly concerning Jesus' homoousios, which was still under alert debate also after The Council of Constantinople (381) that was aiming to achieve church unity by imperial efforts to enforce Nicene orthodoxy.¹⁰⁰

2.1 The Holy Man in Theological Frameworks: St. Simeon the Stylites' Rainmaking Tradition

The Roman Empire's official acceptance of Christianity as the state church accelerated the institutionalization of growing monastic communities by granting their once-eccentric leaders clerical titles and authorities, thus affirming their ascetic doctrines post factum.¹⁰¹ However for an intricate understanding of the appropriation process of the holy man in the ecclesiastical canonical discourse, I will analyze the institutional appropriation of the holy man in the well-known account of Simeon Stylites's rain-making ability, that like Honi's story belongs to ATU 827, *Miraculous Rainfall During a Drought*. Simeon Stylites is the protagonist of numerous miracle-working narratives. However, the most significant tradition linked with him, his disciples, imitators, and followers is the rigorous ascetic regime he is renowned for, enduring on a small platform atop a pillar for an extended period, a testament to his profound devotion.¹⁰²

Like rabbinic literature, it is assumed that the manuscript evolution of the accounts and sayings of the monastic holy man primarily developed through oral transmission, which were later recorded by other monks and church officials.¹⁰³ There are three written sources from late antiquity recounting the life of Simeon Stylites in Syriac and Greek, offering narratives that seldom overlap in content but provide similar biographical outlines of the saint presenting parallel accounts of a. Simeon's conversion and b. the healing miracle that occurred at his funeral.¹⁰⁴ Two of the texts

⁹⁹ Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea*, 107–32.

¹⁰⁰ Slusser, "Diversity, Communion."

¹⁰¹ MacMullen, "The Place of the Holy Man," 1–32.

¹⁰² Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite."

¹⁰³ John Wortley, ed., *The "Anonymous" Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–7.

¹⁰⁴ Doran, Theodoretus, and Darley-Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 33; Dina Boero, "The Context of Production of the Vatican Manuscript of the Syriac Life of Simon the Stylite," *Hugoye* 18, no. 2 (2015): 319–59.

also include an apologia for Simeon's ascetic practices, featuring a list of Old Testament prophetic figures whose eccentric and outwardly unusual behavior symbolized devotion to God: Isaiah walking barefoot, Jeremiah placing his neck in a collar, Ezekiel shaving his head, and Hosea marrying a prostitute.¹⁰⁵

Each composition, while sharing common elements, also features unique miracle stories attributed to Simeon.¹⁰⁶ As previously discussed in relation to the tannaitic holy man, this diverse array of traditions, genres, languages, and compositions all centered on the same protagonist strongly supports the idea that Simeon can be seen as a prominent folk hero of late antiquity. His unique ascetic practices drew pilgrims from across the Roman Empire.¹⁰⁷ This massive response, akin to a fandom, prompted a swift and significant reaction from the Church.¹⁰⁸ The Church quickly built a chapel to commemorate Simeon's tradition of stylites, monitored the pilgrimage, and edited indoctrinated versions of his accounts.¹⁰⁹

After reflecting on Honi's circle as part of the magical language employed by the rabbinic holy man, we can better understand the significance of enduring life on a small platform atop a pillar, exposed to rain and sun, with minimal food and water, as a profound theurgical act. Like Honi's circle, Simeon's pillar-top serves as a synecdoche of the folk hero and, as such, embodies the core semiotics that define him. Beyond its ascetic implications, the pillar, as a "high place," symbolizes the holy man's unmediated communion with God, giving tangible physical meaning to the term "angelic life." Atop the pillar, the charismatic figure becomes the sole inhabitant and ruler of his own microcosm, from which he invokes the Lord of the Universe, miraculously intervening as a mediator of divinity.

Other than the obvious historical evidence that the Church "domesticized" Simeon Stylites and his pilgrimage, there are also traces of that endeavor in the manuscripts themselves.¹¹⁰ The Vatican manuscript of the

¹⁰⁵ Doran, Theodoretus, and Darley-Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 54–65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ Billy D. Mann, "Christian Pilgrims and Holy Men in Late Antiquity," *Vulcan Historical Review* 16 (2012): 134–44.

¹⁰⁸ Amsler, "Martyrs, Athletes."

¹⁰⁹ Almut-Barbara Renger and Alexandra Stellmacher, "The Making of the Stylite in the Interplay of Text, Image and Performance: On the Exercise of Saint Simeon," in *Norm and Exercise: Christian Asceticism between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, ed. Roberto Alciati, 1. Auflage, Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 65 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018), 165–86.

¹¹⁰ Boero, "The Context of Production"; Mann, "Christian Pilgrims and Holy Men in Late Antiquity"; Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite."

Syriac Life of Simeon the Stylites dated to 473, demonstrates the interplay between orthodoxy and competing interpretations of doctrine and scripture.¹¹¹ This suggests that the manuscript reflects broader ecclesiastical and doctrinal debates of its time.¹¹² In this composition we can find an elaborated account of ATU 827, “*Miraculous Rainfall During a Drought*” with Simeon Stylites as its protagonist.

As much as the poetic conventions, theological background, and historic context are clearly distinct, the narrative of Simeon Stylites’ rainmaking account, the narrative resemblance to the amoraic version of Honi in the Babylonian Talmud is again uncanny.¹¹³ Both stories open in a long drought, and a request of the holy man to use his powerful prayer and break the drought, since the standardized communal fasting for rain is not effective, hence God is ignoring the gesture. Simeon gathers the people of the church and the public for a communal plea for rain. Ridiculed by the priests, and scared that the folk will think he is the source of rain, not God, Simeon:

75. [...] raised his eyes to heaven and to the ground. He beat his breast three times inside his cloak, he clasped his hands behind him and placed his face on his knees. He remained bowed a long time [...], all of a sudden a misty white cloud appeared. Deep thunder growled behind [...]¹¹⁴

This detailed description of the theurgic language used by the holy man not only recalls the elaborate depiction in the Babylonian Talmud of Honi’s use of magical language to bring rain, but it also closely resembles the gestures Hanina ben Dosa employs to heal a dying child, according to a different Talmudic rendition.¹¹⁵ That is to say, the redactors of these accounts, both Jewish and Christian, shared a pre-existing cultural perception of the magical and theurgical knowledge holy men possessed and the manner in which they were expected to invoke their powers.

Simeon performs the set of gestures described above, and heavy rain begins to pour. As in the rabbinic version, the people run to take shelter from the rain, and the holy man scolds them for not enduring God’s blessings, whether sun or rain. Only when the holy man prays and offers a blessing does the heavy rain stop. This is the point at which the two versions diverge from each other. Simeon’s rainmaking account also

¹¹¹ Boero, “The Context of Production.”

¹¹² Vatican Syriac Manuscript 160, 1–79; *Ibid.*, 333–50.

¹¹³ Also see Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic*, 117–18.

¹¹⁴ Doran, Theodoretus, and Darley-Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 157.

¹¹⁵ bBera 34b; Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic*, 117–18.

concludes with an aftermath that reflects the religious institution's sentiments toward this protagonist and his theurgical abilities. However, in this version, the same folk hero is fully embraced as an advocate of ecclesiastical ideas and Christ doctrine:

77. [...] They praised God for the excellent and fine reports of Simeon that they heard (i.e., the rainmaking miracle). What our Lord said in his Gospel was fulfilled in the saint: "Blessed is that servant on whose account the name of his Lord is praised." For by his diligence and industry he profited himself and many others, and the name of God was praised on his account and because of him from the raising of the sun to its setting. Thousands, countless, limitless multitudes, who were not aware that there is a God were converted because of the saint; they came to know God their Creator and worshipped him and sang his praises.¹¹⁶

This version does not incorporate the "*Sorcerer's Apprentice*" (ATU 325) trope into the rainmaking account, an element that in the rabbinic version builds a critical perspective of the holy man, as if God does not willingly comply with his wishes until Simeon ben Shatach appears.¹¹⁷ There, the representative of the rabbinic institution delivers a blunt and elaborate critique of the charismatic figure and his use of divine powers, while also presenting a perspective in which God fosters and enables the holy man, albeit critically. By contrast, in the Vatican manuscript, after Simeon stops the massive rainfall, the story glorifies the holy man, aligning him with Christological perceptions while distancing him from the heretical movements of the time.¹¹⁸ After legitimizing the holy man as Christ's direct successor, the concluding institutional message of the rainmaking miracle account becomes clear: it underscores the public appeal of the holy man and how this appeal should be utilized in a religious context to aid in converting the masses.

However, we must remember that this is only one example. The holy man's ascetic practices, miraculous powers, and role as a mediator between the divine and secular realms were appropriated and integrated by the Church to support Christology.¹¹⁹ Much like the "rabbinization" process of the holy man, we can observe textual efforts to appropriate a popular folk hero through a process of literary "ecclesiastication," portraying him as a figure who embodies and fulfills Christ's divinity as God the Son, serving as a testament to His greatness.

¹¹⁶ Doran, Theodoretus, and Darley-Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 158–59.

¹¹⁷ Uther, "The Types of International Folktales. 1," 207–9.

¹¹⁸ Boero, "The Context of Production."

¹¹⁹ MacMullen, "The Place of the Holy Man"; Boero, "The Context of Production."

We can now identify two distinct processes of appropriation: the rabbinic model, which imposes the sages' conventions on the holy man only to critique him for failing to meet their standards, and the ecclesiastical model, which assimilates the monastic holy man into theological discourse as further validation of Christology. Read within Nicene grammar, Simeon's feats operate as pedagogy of Christ's power – a devotional vector that channels folk-hero motifs into Christological proclamation and ecclesial authority, rather than into competition with Jesus or independent charisma.

3. The Holy Man between Heaven and Earth: Religious Institutions and the Struggle for Sanctity

Periods of political, social, and religious uncertainty often serve as fertile ground for the emergence of folk heroes, who function as embodiments of collective hopes and anxieties. As late antiquity clearly demonstrates, both Jewish and Christian communities engaged in the deification of exemplary figures, transforming them into powerful symbols of sanctity, mediation, and divine intervention.

This study focused on how rabbinic and ecclesiastical institutions engaged with and redefined the widespread popularity of the charismatic holy man by integrating his model into their respective theological frameworks within received biblical-exegetical trajectories (e.g., Wisdom, Son-of-Man, royal enthronement) rather than deriving doctrine from charisma. The "rabbinization" process appropriated the holy man into rabbinic literature, simultaneously endorsing his piety while limiting his authority within the halakhic order. The "ecclesiastication" process assimilated the monastic holy man into Christian theology, curating charisma within those trajectories and elevating his role as a tool for religious conversion. In both cases, institutional authority sought to domesticate the folk hero, transforming him into a vessel for official religious narratives.

However, as Flinders and Wood have shown concerning deification processes at times of social panic, when inflated societal expectations for a positive resolution to a dire situation clash with realistic outcomes, a cultural disillusionment process often follows – a reminder that social dynamics, not only doctrinal debate, shape how communities curate sanctity.¹²⁰ This process profoundly affects the perception of the folk hero and redefines its characteristics.¹²¹ As this paper suggested, such a

¹²⁰ Flinders and Wood, "From Folk Devils."

¹²¹ *Ibidem*.

transformation can be observed in the depictions of the monastic holy man in late antiquity, particularly between the first and fifth centuries, in both rabbinic and ecclesiastical texts following the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century.

While this paper has considered the institutional adaptation of the holy man, against the background of those received exegetical frames, one significant area remains underexamined: the relationship between the holy man and late antiquity's messianic traditions. Further research should examine the holy man's role in eschatological narratives and the mechanisms of future redemption in Jewish and Christian thought. This line of inquiry offers the potential to enhance our understanding of the connection between asceticism and divinity, which continues to be a cornerstone of sacred ritualistic practice in both religious traditions.

By examining the holy man through the intersecting lenses of popular devotion, institutional authority, and theological discourse, this study reconsiders how his role evolved in response to the shifting religious dynamics of late antiquity. Rather than viewing the holy man as an isolated figure, we must recognize him as a central protagonist in the evolving religious landscape, whose image was continuously redefined to serve the needs of his time.