

Magicians, Demons and the Birth of Monotheism: The Holy Man in Late-antiquity

Dr. Gal Sela

Block-seminar

11567 | 24-26.04.2026 | 09:30-14:30 | CIP-Pool VG (VG 0.09)

Course Description

From the birth of Abrahamic religions to the present day, the figure of the charismatic holy man has stood at the center of cultural, social, and political imagination. In this block course we will explore how such figures, who are often associated with miracles, ascetic practices, and claims of divine authority, were represented in Jewish, Christian, and later Islamic traditions. While our focus is both historical and literary, we will pay particular attention to the ways stories about holy men function simultaneously as religious texts, as literature, and as folklore moving across cultural boundaries.

Alongside questions of theology and religious history, the course will introduce students to methods from literary studies and folklore research. We will practice close reading, discourse analysis, and comparative approaches, examining how motifs, symbols, and narrative structures give meaning to these traditions. By the end of the course, students will have gained not only a deeper understanding of the holy man archetype, but also critical skills for analyzing religious traditions as part of wider literary and cultural systems.

Learning Goals

- To familiarize students with the shared late-antique literary and cultural formation of Judaism, Christianity, and adjacent Islamic traditions.
- To introduce the holy man as a comparative category linking miracle stories, ascetic practice, charisma, and institutional authority.
- To develop working distinctions among ritual, magic, theurgy, asceticism, canon, and folklore.
- To practice close reading, discourse analysis, and comparative folklore analysis through tale-type, motif, ecotype, and conglomerate.
- To prepare students to write a short analytic paper grounded in a small primary-source corpus.

Requirements and Assessment

Attendance & Participation (50%)	Full attendance is expected in a block seminar. Students should come prepared to discuss both primary and secondary readings posted on GRIPS.
In-class Project 1 (10%)	Comparative close-reading worksheet (Day 1): prophecy, miracle sequence, and the emergence of the holy man.
In-class Project 2 (10%)	Object/text analysis (Day 2): ritual, asceticism, demons, or magical writing.
In-class Project 3 + Final Paper (30%)	Day 3 paper abstract and source-plan workshop (10%) plus a final paper of approx. 750 words (20%), due one month after the seminar, final due date: 26.05.2026.

All primary texts are to be provided in translation on GRIPS. Students who wish to work with Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, Arabic, or Latin texts can do so in consultation with the instructor.

Schedule of Meetings

Day 1 — Framing the Holy Man: Method, Scripture, and Charisma

Time	Content	Class Task	Sources
09:30–10:45	<p>Introduction: How to read religion as text, discourse, and folklore. Focus: the holy man as analytic category; monotheism, charisma, canon/fanon, and the problem of comparison.</p>	Opening discussion and concept map: how they would distinguish prophet, saint, sage, monk, magician, and holy man.	<p>Handout 1: Secondary: short excerpts from Michel Foucault, <i>The Order of Things / “Of Other Spaces”</i>; Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” (excerpt).</p>
11:15–12:30	<p>From prophet to holy man: miracle sequence and shared scriptural repertoire. Focus: Elijah/Elisha typology, Jesus miracle traditions, and rabbinic miracle workers, Mohammad in post-Quran literature.</p>	First task: Guided comparative close reading in pairs.	<p>Handout 2: Primary: 1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4: 8-37; Luke 7:11–17; Berakhot 34b; Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, <i>Subul al-Hudā wa-l-Rashād fi Sīrat Khayr al-‘Ibād</i>, vol. 10, “On His Miracles in Reviving the Dead and Hearing Their Speech.”</p>
13:00–14:30	<p>Of snakes and saints: Tale-types and early models of charisma: ATU 672. Focus: Moses, Hanina ben Dosa, Thomas, Abba Moses, and the social function of the holy man.</p>	In-class discussion: short comparative analysis using ATU 672 to understand authorize charismatic power.	<p>Handout 3: Primary: Genesis 1:21; Exodus 4:1–5; Isaiah 27:1 Palestinian Talmud 5:1 (9a); Acts 28:3–6; Simeon Stylites and the serpent; Qurān; 20:9–21. Secondary: Eliezer Diamond.</p>

Day 2 — Theurgy, Asceticism, Demons, and the Natural Order

Time	Content	Class Task	Sources
09:30–10:45	Demons and magical writing. Focus: demons as knowledge category; bowls, adjurations, and the porous border between piety and magic.	In-class debate: analyzing objects and short narrative (historiola) through fan fiction as methodological lens.	Handout 4: Primary: Anastasius of Sinai, Collection I: <i>Tales of the Sinai Fathers (14 & 21)</i> : Vayikra Rabbah 24:3: bPesakhim 112b; Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaean incantation bowl selected Hanina ben Dosa narratives. Secondary: David Frankfurter, “The Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity.”
11:15–12:30	Law versus charisma: Theurgy, magic and prayer in ATU 827. Focus: drought, rainmaking, prayer, and the difference between institutional ritual and magic efficacy.	Second task: Does the holy man challenge or reinforce religious institutions?	Handout 5: Primary: bTa’anit 23a; The Lives of Simeon Stylites (1992), 157–59; Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Istisqā’, nos. 1013–1014, 1033.
13:00–14:30	Law versus charisma: Theurgy, magic and prayer in ATU 827. Focus: drought, rainmaking, prayer, and the difference between institutional ritual and magic efficacy.	In-class debate: Religious law versus religious charisma	Handout 5

Day 3 — Same Story, Different Religion: Folklore, Long Sleep, and Institutional Appropriation

Time	Content	Class Task	Sources
09:30–10:45	Folklore method for religious texts. Focus: tale-type, motif, ecotype, and conglomerate as tools for reading rabbinic and cross-religious narratives.	Third task: One Tale-Type, Three Institutional Logics Recurring motifs across parallel traditions and test the usefulness of folklore taxonomy.	Handout 6 Primary: 4 Baruch 5–6; yTa’anit 3:10 (66d); bTa’anit 23a; Qur’an 2 and 18; Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; Tha’labi on Ezra/Jeremiah; Pieter van der Horst; Gal Sela on ATU 766
11:15–12:30	The long sleep of the holy man (ATU 766) across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Focus: divine providence, cultural continuity, and what changes when the ‘same’ tale enters a different religious discourse.	Comparative source workshop in triads.	Handout 6 Secondary: Dan Ben-Amos, “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres.”
13:00–14:30	Conclusion: ATU 759, The holy fool and the struggle over sanctity. Focus: how institutions appropriate charismatic figures; revisiting Brown through literary and folklore analysis.	In-class Project 3: final paper abstract (120–150 words), tentative thesis, and list of 3 primary sources + 1 method lens.	Handout 7 Abba Hilkiya (bTa’anit 24a): Holy fool traditions.

Final Paper (approx. 750 words)

Choose one charismatic tradition treated in class and analyze it through a small comparative or methodological lens. Possible topics include Honi the Circle-Maker, Hanina ben Dosa, Rashbi in the cave, Simeon Stylites, Abba Moses, the Seven Sleepers, or the long sleep tradition across religions.

- The paper should identify a focused question, not merely summarize the story.
- It should work with at least one primary text discussed in class and at least one secondary reading.
- Students are encouraged to compare how institutions, genres, or tale-types reshape charismatic authority.
- **Due date:** one month after the end of the block seminar: 26.05.2026.

All relevant materials will be handed in class, for a full list of secondary sources see:

Ben-Amos, Dan. “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres.” In *Folklore Genres*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos, 216–42. University of Texas Press, 1976.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. “Miracles: Elisha and Hanina ben Dosa.” In *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, edited by J. C. Cavadini, *Notre Dame Studies in Theology* 3, 57–81, 2001.

- Brown, Peter. "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity." *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.
- Diamond, Eliezer. "Lions, Snakes and Asses: Palestinian Jewish Men as Masters of Animal Kingdom." In *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire*, edited by Richard Lee Kalmin and Seth Schwartz, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 3, 251–83. Leuven: Peeters, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, 1970.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.
- Frankfurter, David. "The Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity." In *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, edited by David Frankfurter, 626–58. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- Shaw, Gregory. "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 4 (1999): 573–99.
- Sela, Gal. "Theorizing Rabbinic Folklore: The Miraculous Sleep of the Holy Man." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* 3 (Fall 2024): 22–47.
- Uther, Hans-Jörg. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia / Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004.
- van der Horst, Pieter W. "Pious Long-Sleeping in Pagan, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity." In *Tradition, Transmission and Transformation from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, edited by Hillel Newman et al., 248–66, 2015.