



SAGE
SAINT
& SOPHIST

HOLY MEN AND THEIR
ASSOCIATES IN THE
EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

GRAHAM ANDERSON

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Holy men and their associates
in the Early Roman Empire

Graham Anderson



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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

For Alf and Margaret Smyth

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PREFACE

This book sets out to study the careers and social relationships of an assortment of religious activists in the first three centuries of the Roman Empire. They range from familiar figures such as Jesus Christ and Apollonius of Tyana to the puzzling Peregrinus Proteus, who immolated himself after an Olympic Games, or the Secundus, who defied an emperor with an oath of silence. My object is to bring the climate of belief in these centuries more clearly within the framework of Roman social history. I have set out to examine what we can make out of the career patterns of holy men, their techniques of revelation and persuasion, their relations with patrons, populace and one another; and the growth of cults of individuals. In particular I have been interested in the overlap between a number of categories traditionally divided: the cultural environment of the period made it easy for doctor and medicine man to form part of a single spectrum; so do philosopher, religious antiquarian and magician, or Hellenic intellectual and oriental sage. The result is that most individuals are more complex than is allowed by the sources.

Existing studies of holy men have emerged piecemeal, and an integrated view of their activities for the early Imperial period is lacking. Yet holy men were expected to advise on hygiene during an epidemic, sedate the local rapist, bring down the price of corn, or issue warnings to the Emperor. They were expected to command some brand of wisdom to enable them to make dramatic revelations; and they required and exercised a 'publicity machine' of patrons and supporters to further their ends. The activities of such figures contributed to the climate in later antiquity in which theurgy eventually came to oust pagan philosophy, and monastic saints could take political initiatives. Holy men have remained too long on the fringe of Roman 'senatorial' history as colourful eccentrics and

PREFACE

fringe revolutionaries. Instead they deserve to be recognised as an essential part of the cultural and religious history of the Empire throughout its existence. Charismatic figures have to be all things to all men: this study is about what such 'all things' turned out to be in an early Imperial context. I hope to suggest why it was that such figures commanded the material and spiritual influence they did; or how widespread the tide of irrationalism of the fourth century was in the first three.

The breadth and scope of the subject has imposed some economies. I have attempted to illustrate rather than exhaust, and have been frugal, relatively speaking, with scholarly apparatus. This is not a book about 'the Gospel of Mark and pagan miracle-workers' as so many attempts to survey the field run the risk of becoming; neither is it about the sociology of ancient magic. It is a necessarily eclectic book about a variety of figures themselves eclectic enough to be different from most of their fellow men. It is about the sort of men who were likely to be taken for supermen, and how they were likely to go about it. In a large number of instances I have abandoned detailed discussion of specific episodes in favour of a subsequent series of studies, provisionally entitled *Horresco Referens: Studies in Literature and the Occult in Antiquity*.

My interest in this field has developed from an early interest in ancient religion and in Lucian's reaction to it; it has continued over the years through interests in Apollonius of Tyana and pagan cultural history. Over a long period a number of debts have accumulated: to Alan Galloway and Dermot Ryan, who introduced me to biblical scholarship, and to John Court, who maintained my interest in it; to Ludwig Bieler, who introduced me to the unfamiliar world of early hagiography nearly forty years after his own landmark gave the subject its focus; to Howard Kee, who patiently read the heresies of someone who must have appeared to him as a latter-day Celsus, and contributed constructive criticism from a perspective very different from my own; to my wife, who put up with these exotic intruders; to Geraldine Beare, who compiled the index, and to Richard Stoneman and his staff, who awaited the manuscript for longer than some await the Second Coming. And to the two dedicatees, for their long and supportive friendship over so many years.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABSA</i>	<i>Annual of the British School at Athens</i>
<i>AJ</i>	<i>Antiquitates Iudaicae</i>
<i>AJPh</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>BG</i>	<i>Bellum Gallicum</i>
<i>BJ</i>	<i>Bellum Iudaicum</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CMC</i>	<i>Codex Manichaeus Colognensis</i>
<i>CRAI</i>	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres</i>
<i>EM</i>	<i>Epigraphical Museum in Athens</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>Historia Animalium</i>
<i>HE</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
<i>HSCP</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
<i>IGRRP</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>LCL</i>	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
<i>NA</i>	<i>Noctes Atticae</i>
<i>NH</i>	<i>Naturalis Historia</i>
<i>PCPS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society</i>
<i>PE</i>	<i>Praeparatio Evangelica</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PGM</i>	<i>Papyri Graeci Magici</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>PIR</i>	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Revue de l'Histoire des Religions</i>
<i>SHA</i>	<i>Scriptores Historiae Augustae</i>
<i>SPG</i>	<i>Scriptores Physiognomonici Graeci</i>
<i>TAPhA</i>	<i>Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>VA</i>	<i>Vita Apollonii Tyanensis</i>
<i>VPS</i>	<i>Vitae Philosophorum Sophistarumque</i>
<i>VS</i>	<i>Vitae Sophistarum</i>
<i>WS</i>	<i>Wiener Studien</i>
<i>YCS</i>	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morganländischen Gesellschaft</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

CONCEPTS

The holy man and his milieu

Four years before the Jewish War, according to Josephus,

A man by the name of Jeshua son of Ananias, an ordinary rustic fellow, came to the feast at which all Jews are accustomed to set up tabernacles to God. And in the Temple he suddenly began to shout 'A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against bridegrooms and brides, a voice against the whole people!'. Day and night he would wander all the alleyways with this cry. Some of the leading citizens took exception to these words of ill-omen, seized hold of the fellow and gave him a savage beating. But he did not say a word to defend himself, nor did he divulge anything in private to his persecutors; he just kept shouting the same tirade as before. The Jewish authorities, concluding that some more supernatural force had incited him – as was indeed the case – brought him before the Roman procurator. There, though flogged till his flesh was torn to ribbons, he neither begged for mercy nor shed tears, but lowering his voice to its most mournful register responded to every blow with 'Woe to Jerusalem'.

The procurator, Albinus, actually had Jeshua acquitted as manic but harmless; he had no sooner pronounced woe to himself when he was killed during the siege.¹ The brief adventure of Jeshua is a useful starting-point, since he illustrates in short compass so many of the typical features of an early Imperial holy man. He has access to some information, supernaturally inspired according to Josephus, and arguably fulfilled. He delivers his message in a prominent time and place. He engenders opposition (and belated interest and

support, since he is regarded as right); he engages the attention of the authorities in an indecisive way, and he has a spectacular death. If Jeshua was unfortunately deranged and insignificant, at least he is intelligible in the context in which Josephus presents him: we expect prophets of doom in a context of national emergency. But a century and a half later the curious inhabitants of Moesia and Thrace could not so easily have expected the following:

A little before this same *daimōn*, declaring himself to be Alexander of Macedon, and like him in appearance and accoutrement, set off from the Danube region, after somehow or other making his appearance there, and made his way though Moesia and Thrace performing Bacchic rites; he was accompanied by four hundred men equipped with Bacchic wands and faunskins, but they did no harm. All in Thrace at the time agreed that bed and board were laid on for him at public expense. And no one – no governor, soldier, procurator or local magistrate – dared to confront or contradict him, and he travelled as far as Byzantium as if in some solemn procession, travelling by day, as announced in advance. From there he made his way over to the Chalcedon region, carried out some rites at night, buried a wooden horse, and disappeared.²

In the end one might feel disappointment that this exotic traveller did not claim to be the transmigration of Achilles or Odysseus for good measure. But Dio Cassius' sketch, while not explaining the phenomenon he sets out to describe, at least gives us a portrait which raises the typical questions we shall want to ask about any given holy man, ancient or modern. The first such question is 'Who do you think you are?'. This particular holy man might have answered 'I am Dionysus, and/or Alexander the Great; and I am a *daimōn*'. He would certainly have had to have been a supernatural superman at the least to be a return version of Alexander, dead for nearly five-and-a-half centuries. Next we must ask what would have been the effect on his audience. Alexander, a world-conqueror, might have been expected to worry the secular powers; he would have been someone likely to say 'my kingdom is of this world, and I am going to claim it back'. But the claim to be the god Dionysus would have been more subtle and compelling. Educated rulers in antiquity knew only too well what had happened to King Pentheus when he had opposed the will of Dionysus and tried to imprison the

CONCEPTS: THE HOLY MAN AND HIS MILIEUX

god: he had gone mad and was torn limb from limb. Passing through Thrace, the stamping-ground of Dionysus, this new *daimōn* might not have been unduly surprised to find no further opposition. We might also be tempted to ask how anyone could have 'pulled off a stunt' on anything like this scale. Obviously with such an entourage he would have had the opportunity for some forward planning of his campaign, and we are not surprised to find him duly announced in advance; thus is raised the question of how holy men conduct their day-to-day operations. We then have to ask what was the point of the whole exercise: the wooden horse seems to evoke some reference to Troy – until we reflect that this rite does not seem actually to have taken place at Troy, and that Plato's myth of Gyges knows of a buried horse in a quite different context.³ In the end we seem none the wiser, and not untypically either: holy men have the capacity to arouse expectation, but to keep even their closest followers guessing.

In the period we are dealing with, the early Roman Empire, we expect to find a large number of figures whose activities can be related to those of Jeshua or the pseudo-Alexander: figures who may not always fit readily into the framework of established religions, but who have some distinctive contribution to offer. It is a measure of the controversy they engender that the term 'holy man' itself may not always be the most readily applied to all of them. There is an obvious overlap between the alliterating labels 'sage' 'saint' and 'sophist' in our title: 'sages' include a variety of wise men, from Persian magi, through Greek philosophers of any sect who claim interest or expertise in the divine, down to the local village wise man;⁴ 'saint' in turn need not be an exclusively Christian term, and the concept readily includes pagan holy men; 'sophist' is a still more treacherous term, most commonly applied in our period to rhetorical virtuosi; but in its connotation 'expert', usually with a high media profile, it can be applied to a religious expert or virtuoso as well. Lucian, a satirist both fascinated and repelled by the activities of holy men, can use it both of Jesus Christ and of a mercenary Palestinian exorcist.⁵

In general I have sought for the broadest possible framework and the most flexible kind of label. This has led me to regard as a holy man anyone who can reasonably be called 'a virtuoso religious activist'. Even in such an attempt at definition it is well to recognise that all three terms are contestable. Many men one would wish to include fall short of complete virtuosity, from Simon Magus,

reputed to have had a bad fall when he tried to fly,⁶ to humble priests of Atargatis struggling for a dishonest subsistence in rural Greece with a one-line oracle.⁷ And 'religious' covers a broad spectrum which may well include those who criticise or even deny the gods, as well as figures normally regarded as philosophers who propagate views about them;⁸ while 'activist' is not perhaps the right word for a hypochondriac who proclaims the virtues of Asclepius from a litter in a temple-precinct for more than a decade.⁹ Our sub-title 'and their associates' is equally flexible, and is intended to cover the social context – imitators, rivals, clients, patrons, and any other associates who can throw light on what holy men did. By nature such a formulation will embrace self-seeking villains as well as those who are perceived as sincerely and divinely motivated, and there is likely to be no consensus ancient or modern as to how to separate them in a historically conclusive way.

THE RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

The religious frameworks we are dealing with are not always easily characterised either. 'Paganism' as it comes to be regarded from the perspective of emergent Christianity embraces any number of cults of deities, with any number of priests and religious functionaries.¹⁰ Judaism in turn is the exclusive cult of one such deity, Yahweh, again with his priesthoods, prophets, and a wide variety of religious sects and political pressure groups;¹¹ and Christianity with its gradually developing heresies centres on a figure who might originally have been perceived as a single holy man operating in a Jewish context.¹² The term 'holy man' can be reasonably applied to any 'cult worker' in all three contexts: it could be applied to those who held priesthoods of, say, the Imperial cult, or to those who belonged to a strongly committed Jewish sect such as the Pharisees, or indeed to the initiator of some new but influential Christian heresy. But in practice the restrictions of the evidence tend to force us to concentrate on those who attain special prominence either through their own efforts or those of others. One tends to think of late antique holy men as Syrian or Egyptian monks practising ascetic virtuosity in their respective deserts; but at least some pagan holy men had already achieved substantial recognition also. And the Jewish Jeshua for his part might be said to have attained the most poignant prominence with the least real effort. In fact there had been nothing specifically 'religious' about his message 'Woe to

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Jerusalem!', though any wider perspective of the tradition of Hebrew prophecy would easily accommodate him in the ranks of 'apocalyptic prophets'.¹³ With modern perceptions of mental illness it is easy to dismiss him as the village idiot in an urban context, whose message is so vague as to be easily construed as fulfilled by the siege of Jerusalem. But any number of other such figures elude identification: the silent figures who played their part in the operations of the oracle of Abonouteichos;¹⁴ the now silent proto-Christian opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians;¹⁵ or at the other end of the scale the anonymous and often unwitting con-men who might sell dream-interpretations in any market-place.¹⁶ Nor can any categories be confined to the silent and socially *déclassés*. It would be impossible to talk of holy men without recognising that a distinguished religious antiquarian such as Plutarch himself held a priesthood and was seriously concerned with the justification of oracles, or that a philosophical sophist such as Dio of Prusa could disseminate what he describes as a Persian conception of divinity to a remote Greek community on the Black Sea Coast.

Traditional paganism is not easy to characterise: it is accommodating to anything but the most exclusively monotheist divine manifestation, and to any means of coming to terms with it. Cults had their priests, and by no means all cults had professional priesthoods, so that the phenomenon of the lay priest was commonplace and easily allowed the concept of the religious freelance.¹⁷ So did the standard institutions for consultation of the gods: if a god's wish was not immediately intelligible through prayer or oracle, one would consult anyone competent to interpret – or trust the person who could supply a satisfactory answer.¹⁸ Moreover, the traditional modes of communication by the gods – visions, dreams, or oracles – allowed any individual to experience a call to worship the gods in his own way and encourage others to follow.¹⁹ The proliferating mystery cults of the Early Empire offered initiations, discipleships, priesthoods and further knowledge, protection and even identification with the divine.²⁰

The nature of the philosophical schools offered a further context for the operations of holy men, and an often quite substantial area of overlap. A life professionally devoted to philosophy found room for a wisdom devoted to the gods, and a capacity to give advice about them. This is especially and indeed increasingly true of the Platonism which came to dominate the schools from the second century AD onwards.²¹ Most major schools found no difficulty in

accommodating the concept of the holy or divine man: even Epicureans could see a divinity in their founder, while Stoic, Cynic or Pythagorean²² versions of the species are readily encountered. In practice Stoicism was able to accommodate divine beliefs as diverse as monotheism, the traditional Graeco-Roman pantheon, and astrological determinism; and to relate all of them to the concept of an active life of civic concern.²³ Cynicism on the other hand operated at a more popular and predominantly anti-intellectual level, but a Cynic would have had Heracles as his model, and his basic practical ideals of self-sufficiency and independence would have fitted him for a life of roving iconoclasm which could have claimed in turn to be a different sort of holiness.²⁴ In practice the *Kynikos tropos* allowed a life little different from that of the Christian disciples in the Synoptic Gospels.²⁵ As to Pythagoreanism, it was able to satisfy the dual appetite for mystical discipleship and an ascetic regime, with its abstinence from animal products and sacrifices, and a pure worship of a still traditional pantheon.²⁶ It is unsurprising that it should have been the sect associated with that archetypal holy man, Apollonius of Tyana, whatever he was really like.²⁷

The two linked monotheistic systems of Judaism and Christianity also provided a cultural and religious crucible for the articulate individualist. The Judaism of the early Imperial period had a rich texture of sects, pressure groups and parties, with the ascetic desert-dwelling apocalyptic community of the Essenes as characteristic a part as the purifying Pharisees or their Sadducee rivals: either of the latter groups could provide the High Priest, but it was the last which constituted the aristocratic religious establishment. Political radicals could seek identification with the Zealots devoted to the overthrow of Roman rule in Palestine.²⁸ The whole religious tradition of Israel had looked back to a succession of traditionally charismatic figures, embodied in the patriarchs from Abraham to Moses; and a priestly establishment which had co-existed with a prophetic tradition ever since the foundation of the Israelite kingdom.²⁹ Moreover Palestine was not totally insulated from the outside world of both the surrounding Greek-speaking *oikoumenē*, the legacy of the Empire of Alexander the Great, and the Roman Empire which took possession of it.³⁰ In these circumstances it is no surprise to find charismatic individuals such as John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, both Galileans from a 'mixed' Jewish-Hellenist area,³¹ or Paul, a Pharisee from a Hellenistic city with Roman citizenship.³² Furthermore, Judaism was not static; after the fall of

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Jerusalem in AD 70 a predominantly Pharisaic and rabbinical tone comes to pervade the surviving Palestinian Judaism.³³

With the emergence of Christianity as a new force, the potential for new factions, new identities, and new sub-cults proliferated. It was well into the second century AD before the Christian phenomenon comes close enough to the idea of a church to designate its dissidents systematically as heretics and schismatics.³⁴ Any Gnostic deviant, or any outspoken enemy of Paul, might claim in some meaningful sense to be a holy man. And outside the familiar territory of religious cults and Judaeo-Christian monotheism there is a more exotic fringe which could at least supply some of the inspiration for more familiar holy men.³⁵ The Indian Brahmans were at least dimly perceived in the Early Empire, though often enough through a curtain of literary décor that goes back to the traditions of their encounter with Alexander the Great;³⁶ gymnosophists were reported to exist between Egypt and Ethiopia, and Apollonius of Tyana is presented as having visited both.³⁷ One hears also of supposedly shamanistic figures to the north: the tradition of Abaris and his kind still surfaces in the second century AD, when Lucian presents Greek philosophers as convinced of the supernatural ('when I saw the Hyperborean flying . . .').³⁸ Nor was the far west free of the presence of religio-magical figures who could be variously perceived as philosophers or magicians: the Druids are copiously reported, and only their suppression on the grounds of human sacrifice prevents their engaging the patronage of those in search of more ancient and exotic wisdom.³⁹ Any boundary region of the Empire could produce the impression of religious virtuosity, and inevitably the sense of *omne ignotum pro magnifico* – the awe of the unknown.

To a greater or lesser degree the idea of a sacred functionary can be linked to the traditional priesthoods of traditional deities: the fact that so many such functionaries can also be linked with political life in the cities of the Empire does not necessarily detract from sacred duties and divine connexions.⁴⁰ By the end of the Republic Rome had acquired a variety of priesthoods, sacred fraternities, and official diviners with a variety of functions and different conditions of tenure.⁴¹ Moreover, the strongly archaising sense of identity in the resurgent Greek cities of the Eastern Empire could give rise to a determination to preserve traditional priesthoods as far as possible in their ancient form.⁴²

On the other hand the spread of foreign cults brought an element

of diversity which pagan accommodation did little to check: Apuleius gives us an arresting picture of some wandering priests of the Syrian Atargatis in Greece itself:⁴³ or Plotinus expects to encounter his personal demon in the Temple of the Egyptian Isis in Rome itself.⁴⁴ In total contrast again is the religious variety possible in the Jewish Diaspora, where communities detached from the situation in Palestine itself might find themselves more accommodating to the religious life of the Greek and other communities surrounding them.⁴⁵

RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT: OTHER FORCES

If we cannot too closely define holy men, still less can we be clear about the market for them. There was no lack of those who could challenge any given holy man with the rebuke 'Is your revelation really necessary?'; but still they appear.⁴⁶ We can survey the larger historical forces of the early Empire and supply a kaleidoscope of contexts against which any given religious activist has to be seen. It is necessary to recognise a moral climate in which there were ills of society to be put right and regulation of the social order required.⁴⁷ 'The poor you have with you always' was a sentiment as familiar to the sceptical Lucian as it was to Jesus Christ,⁴⁸ and there is a general consensus among early Imperial moralists on what one might aim for in this mortal life – the virtues of simple life and common man, freedom from fears, tensions and strife through this or that moral code or set of values, or through simple pragmatism. Such needs called for moral advice, moral instruction, and in general for 'consultants' in the art of living.⁴⁹ Not all of these need be religious; but a religious framework of belief was a potent adjunct to such needs. Epictetus stresses as readily as Paul the need to regard nothing as one's own possession, and yield everything to the deity, or presents his addressees as slaves of righteousness;⁵⁰ and he is just as likely as Jesus Christ or Paul to advocate the giving up of physical desires and ambitions.⁵¹

Also a part of this moral universe is the quest for personal security, identity and salvation. Healing the sick is the most obviously immediate need. I have indigestion: Asclepius tells me to moderate my diet. Great is Asclepius when I am healed.⁵² And if I am well a god can earn his living by protecting me from disease.⁵³ Nor is there any limit to the degree of immunisation I can undergo. But if I am well, I can still suffer: there will be basic human

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anxieties, regardless of the current state of society. Shall I get married? Should I change jobs? Is it wise to sail?⁵⁴ And besides the information itself, there will be a need for interpretation ('Is the god really telling me to do such-and-such?'). When the god tells me to kiss my mother three times, does he mean my own mother, or mother earth? But information sought might be more sophisticated ('When Pythagoras told us not to sacrifice living things, what did he mean us to sacrifice instead?'). And there are always more subtle and persistent anxieties which will plague the neurotic, as any page of Aristides' personal religious diaries, the so-called *Sacred Tales*, will reveal. The priest's words to 'Lucius of Madaura' are familiar, that the goddess Isis will provide him with a protection from the buffeting of Fortune, and a salvation from 'servile pleasures'.⁵⁵ In a Hellenistic milieu where institutions and rulers might seem all too remote, the offer of protection was not to be lightly rejected.

Nor are simple human needs the only matter of concern: whatever one's own religious base, the world may be felt to be in the grip not only of Fortune or some similar force of instability but also of demonic powers.⁵⁶ These are common to Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian experience: intermediate forces are felt to exist between gods and men, and may be maleficent, yet capable of mastery by some means or other. Such a belief had obvious propensity for popular acceptance within a polytheistic system, but had also enjoyed intellectual respectability as well: Middle Platonism espoused the notion of demons responsible for the day-to-day operations of Providence, and the philosophers who discuss good and evil spirits in Plutarch or Lucian are perfectly serious about their existence.⁵⁷ It follows that the philosopher or religious operator who can understand or better still control such forces through superior strength, intellect or divine power itself will be highly valued. Demon control is necessary, and calls for proven expertise.

In addition to aspirations for meaning in life and freedom from its ills, a larger belief might intervene: this is that the world may be moving towards a new order in which some single figure will emerge to bring the present world-order to an end. Such belief had a natural receptacle in the Jewish world, with its deep and well-founded dissatisfaction with first Hellenistic then Roman domination.⁵⁸ And it found a central place in the early Christian scheme of things with the identification of Jesus Christ rightly or wrongly and by whomsoever with the Jewish Messiah. But it was hardly incompatible with trends in later Greek philosophy either. The

notion that matter was corrupted and that a divine redeemer would come to free the human soul from bondage in matter found a natural enough expression in a world where Platonism in particular had an increasingly prominent role in intellectual life, and where that Platonism was versatile enough to be constantly updated.⁵⁹

One factor applies across the ancient world as a whole: there was never any total exclusion of new religious forces or manifestations, or of those who might aspire to control them. Gods or numinous forces must communicate their will as they please, and it is up to man to listen; if someone should announce himself as 'Ialdabaoth son of Beelzebub' or the like, then the assumption will be that he will increase the sum of human happiness or a further insurance against disaster. If he says 'I am the mouthpiece of Ialdabaoth son of Beelzebub' he will not have lessened his claim to a hearing, provided that he can show some command over some demons, however defined or undefined.⁶⁰ In the second century we find the anti-Christian Celsus complaining that in Palestine and Syria there are many

who go begging both inside and outside temples, some of them gathering crowds and frequenting cities or camps, and these men are of course urged to prophesy. It is routine for them to be ready with 'I am a god', or 'a son of a god' or 'a divine spirit'; and 'I have come, for the universe is already perishing, and you, men, will die because of your wrongdoing. But I want to save you, and you shall see me once again returning with heavenly power. Happy is the man who has worshipped me on this occasion. Against all the rest, in town and country alike, I shall cast eternal fire. And men who are unaware of the impending punishments will repent in vain and wail, but those I have persuaded I shall protect forever'.⁶¹

Celsus' generalisation is designed to 'level down' Jesus Christ to a type of charlatan familiar enough in his own time. But it also draws attention to what we can identify as a routine. These holy men have a claim of authority, a venue and a means of putting across a message; they have a social relevance, and can conjure up a potent threat. They are operators (in a neutral sense) and mediators able to act on society. And they can combine in quite succinct form the call for moral indignation, personal salvation, and divine judgement.

The role of mediator is specially important. Antique religion saw no need to 'cut out the middleman'. The Hellenistic world on the

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contrary felt a political distancing of men from the centres of power in the material world; the same forces are at work in the spiritual world, where gods can be distant and communication difficult.⁶² One might send sophists from one's city to the Emperor; one can equally readily send intercessors from one's city to the gods or their oracles.⁶³ Nor is there much to jam the channels of communication. There were few voices in antiquity outside Judaism and Christianity to say 'x is the only god and I am his prophet'. But gods or their intercessors had to 'get it right', and they were judged on results. A polytheistic culture had little time for divine forces which had taken early retirement on the job:⁶⁴ gods had to work for their sacrificial sustenance towards the welfare of mankind.

But there is always a market too for the novel and alternative. Tacitus ruefully remarks on the appearance of early Christians in Rome 'into which all things horrific and unseemly congregate and become popular' (*quo cuncta undique atrociosa aut pudenda confluent celebranturque*); while the Acts-author makes a point of observing the love of novelty in Athens. And Lucian time and again emphasises the appetite of his second-century fellow-men for revelation.⁶⁵ There may also be a certain visual impact to a holy man: a bread riot is in progress, and a Roman governor is in danger of being lynched: a Pythagorean vowed to silence dramatically appears, and by communicating to the parties in writing asserts his authority over the situation.⁶⁶ Or a holy man has it announced that he will set fire to himself on such and such a day,⁶⁷ or take on a rival and see who can kill and raise the dead.⁶⁸ There will be a good slanging match and someone may even get hurt.

MODELS OF HOLINESS

There is nothing specifically new about the operations of holy men. Because of the particular literary appeal of the *Iliad*, it is easy to lose sight of the initial situation, in which not one but two holy men are involved. A priest of Apollo in effect brings down a sacred curse on the Greeks at Troy in revenge for a personal slight; and a religious consultant interprets the facts to Agamemnon. What is more, both these operators are highly effective, irrespective of the consequences to their clients: Chryses does procure a plague,⁶⁹ and Calchas prescribes the correct action for averting it. Religious tension and patronage are also at work: Calchas invokes the protection of Achilles from the consequences of a religious ruling to protect

himself against Agamemnon, who duly brings up his unfortunate past record.⁷⁰

Moreover, it is not uncommon to identify a holy man with reference to some standard set by illustrious predecessors: when in the second century AD Alexander of Abonouteichos had established his oracle with great success, 'there was a disquisition between two wise idiots about him, as to whether he had the soul of Pythagoras because of his golden thigh, or another soul like it'.⁷¹ Similarly, when Jesus Christ was carrying out a combination of preaching and healing:

he asked the disciples 'Who do the crowds say I am?' And they replied, 'Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others again one of the ancient prophets'. And he asked them, 'But who do you say?' And Peter replied 'God's anointed one'.⁷²

Both passages illustrate the natural tendency to translate a new religious phenomenon into terms of the familiar, and to be at least divided in drawing conclusions about it.

One figure stands pre-eminent on the Greek side as the paradigm of the holy man: Pythagoras.⁷³ Already too far removed from memory to be easily recoverable, he is none the less the subject of at least three biographies by men of Imperial date not unknown for their 'theosophical' interests: Apollonius of Tyana,⁷⁴ Porphyry, and Iamblichus.⁷⁵ His life, at least as the last conceives it, includes an association with a Thracian Abaris who recognises Apollo in Pythagoras himself and enables the latter to deflect plagues and hurricanes from cities by means of a golden arrow which also served as a mode of travel.⁷⁶ Shipwrecks could be foretold, storms stilled,⁷⁷ snakes driven from the countryside, oxen spoken to,⁷⁸ or predictions made, to say nothing of such feats as bilocation.⁷⁹ Pythagoras is given a wide range of wisdom garnered from Egypt and Babylon,⁸⁰ and it could be translated into political terms when he confronted the tyrant of Agrigentum.⁸¹ A revived Pythagoreanism, of whatever sort, we are at least aware of in the first two centuries AD: Seneca the Younger abandoned a flirtation with Pythagorean regimen under one Sotion,⁸² and that was before the supposed efflorescence of the supposed arch-Pythagorean Apollonius.

Apart from Pythagoras the philosophical tradition enabled other spiritual advisers to lead the holy man in a similar direction. The philosophical cults of the martyred Socrates could present the picture of a man who claimed to be advised by a personal *daimōn*,⁸³

which in itself was a proper subject of serious philosophical investigation, and helps to point the path that will lead in due course to Neo-Platonic mysticism.

Nor is the interest and involvement of Graeco-Roman intellectuals in the irrational fringe a new phenomenon of the Empire. Nigidius Figulus in the late Roman Republic is already established as a figure with an authoritative status in occult art. We find Cicero addressing him as *uni omnium doctissimo et sanctissimo* ('most learned and holy of all') – the kind of appellation that would still fit Plotinus several centuries on.⁸⁴ He is attributed with a successful horoscope on the birth of the future Emperor Augustus in 63 BC;⁸⁵ on a more mundane level we find him tracing a lost sum of money, allegedly with the help of boys inspired by incantation,⁸⁶ or demonstrating the viability of astrology even in the case of twins by using the potter's wheel to represent the speed of heavenly bodies. A summary of Nigidius' known output shows the general direction of his interest: a *de Augurio Privato* and a *de Extis*, a *Sphaera* giving the legends behind the zodiacal signs, and nineteen books on the gods, not excluding Persian and Etruscan materials.⁸⁷

The Near East had provided priestly sages since the earliest Egyptian and Sumerian times. Apart from the lore of the 'Chaldeans' themselves, there was a strong Hebraic tradition of religious virtuosity, parts of which were readily accessible to the Mediterranean world. Elijah offers a suitable paradigm for the Old Testament prophet.⁸⁸ He is able to live in hiding and threaten King Ahab with drought; he is sustained miraculously by the self-replenishing oil and meal of a widow who shelters him, and he revives her dead child. He himself is later sustained still more miraculously in the desert. He can threaten the King and challenge the rival prophets of Baal to a rain-making contest: he himself has a friend in high places, the King's chamberlain Obadiah, who has rescued prophets of Yahweh from the massacre instituted by the King's wife Jezebel. He can condemn the king for taking forcible possession of land through a murder by Jezebel, and Ahab's sick son and successor for turning to Baalzebub. He divides waters for himself and Elisha, and goes up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Besides the prophetic paradigm as such, the Old Testament and intertestamentary literature produces a number of different expectations of a future Messiah or anointed one.⁸⁹ The identities are highly flexible, varying from a Davidic King and conqueror of the Gentiles, through priestly and prophetic figures to Messiahs of

esoteric speculation, including one to be anointed by a successor of Elijah, and not to be conscious of his destiny until such anointing should take place. The variety of such identities made it relatively easy for outstanding radical figures to identify with at least one of them, or to redefine the parameters still further.

Besides the prophets one other figure stands out as a contributor to the tradition of holy men: Moses.⁹⁰ Philo at the beginning of our period and Gregory of Nyssa after the end of it left Greek *Lives* of this central figure in Judaic tradition, as the mediator of the Torah itself to the Israelite nation in the desert. It is not too difficult to see how the biblical presentation of his life accorded with the likely career patterns of holy men. Adopted as a foundling into an Egyptian royal house,⁹¹ he turns against his roots with a murder and exile;⁹² he threatens the Egyptians with plagues, and organises a mass movement into the desert, where he finds the wherewithal for survival.⁹³ He produces legal codes with divine authority, and finally has no known burial site.⁹⁴ Small wonder that a first-century Jewish charismatic should claim to divide the Jordan,⁹⁵ or that Paul should have been mistaken for an Egyptian who led yet another mass exodus in the desert.⁹⁶

From one of a number of allusions in Gregory of Nyssa it is not hard to see the attraction of Moses for the connoisseur of holy men: 'For the story tells us that Moses, outside the visible world and within the invisible shrines (so the cloud indicates) learned the divine mysteries and through his own knowledge of God explained them to the people'.⁹⁷ Here is the ideal authority for anyone with something in the future to reveal. There is no surprise in the way that the same author fits the life of Moses to highlights of his more modern hero, Gregory Thaumaturgus.⁹⁸ The latter is hailed as the Moses of our times, because of his Egyptian learning, his miracles with water, and his encouragement of his people from a distance.⁹⁹ Nor is this merely a fourth-century Christian surge of interest in the patriarch. Philo in the first century had already been able to invest the model with a thoroughly Greek garb of wide-ranging *paideia* under Greek teachers – not leaving out Assyrian letters or Chaldaean science, to say nothing of Egyptian symbolism:

Naturally therefore those close to him and everyone else were amazed, as if struck by a new phenomenon: they wondered at the nature of the soul that dwelt in his body like an image in its shrine, as to whether it was human or divine or a mixture of

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the two: it was so unlike those of most men, but soared above and was exalted to a higher plane.¹⁰⁰

When Moses could be a good Platonist, it is clear that a holy man can be redefined for some new age of his own or the perception of others. And it is to such perceptions that we must now turn.