

Honi the Circle Drawer: “A Member of the Household” or “A Son Who Implores His Father”?

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Abstract

This article analyzes the meaning of two short metaphors used in the legend of Honi the Circle Drawer that define Honi's relationship with God: Honi referred to himself as a “*ben bayit*” and Shimon son of Shatah called him “a son who implores his father” (m. Ta'an. 3:8). Explaining these metaphors contains the key to understanding the conflict between Honi and Simeon son of Shatah who criticized him harshly. Most of the explanations for this exchange suggested previously involve imposing philosophical issues that are not suggested by the text. This article examines the use of the key term “*ben bayit*” and shows that it indicates a position of a slave who has decision-making powers in God's “house.” This is what Honi presumed to be, and Shimon rejected.

Keywords

Honi the Circle Drawer – rainmaking – Hasid – rabbinic

1 Background and State of the Research

The Mishnah describes a miracle ascribed to Honi the Circle Drawer (hereafter: Honi), and the sharp response he received from Simeon son of Shatah (hereafter: SBS). The text of the Mishnah describes a situation that it was in the middle of the winter, and still it had not rained. The Mishnah says:¹

¹ m. Ta'an. 3:8 and parallel sources that are primarily b. Ta'an. 23a-b, y. Ta'an. 3:8 (66d-67a). The story of Honi is found also in Josephus, *A.J.* 14.22, and in Megillat Ta'anit (Lichtenstein

They said to Honi the Circle Drawer: “pray for rain.”

He said to them: “Go and take in the clay ovens used for Passover so that they not soften [in the rain that is coming].”

He prayed but it did not rain.

What did he do?

He drew a circle and stood in the middle of it and said before him, “Lord of the world! Your children have turned to me, because before you I am like a member of the family (*ben bayit*). I swear by your great name—I’m simply not moving from here until you take pity on your children”!

It began to rain drop by drop.

He said: “This is not what I wanted but rain for filling up cisterns, pits and caverns.”

It began to rain violently.

He said: “This is not what I wanted but rains of good will, blessing and graciousness” . . .

Simeon b. Shatah said to him: “If you were not Honi, I should decree a ban of excommunication against you.² But what am I going to do to you? For you importune before the Omnipresent, so he does what you want, like a son who importunes his father,³ so he does what he wants.”⁴

ed., 92). The current discussion will address primarily the wording of the metaphors in the Mishnah, and only when necessary will relate to the other sources.

- 2 The text follows the Kaufman manuscript. However, in the Vilna text of the Mishnah, in the Babylonian Talmud, and in the Jerusalem Talmud the reading is “You need to excommunicate” (לגדות), which is a figurative way of expressing that would literally mean that Honi has the ability to excommunicate SBS, but of course it is stating that Honi should be excommunicated. In the Parma MS it says: “You need to be excommunicated,” which is more direct.
- 3 The Kaufman manuscript reads “*mithateh le'aviv*” meaning: “he importunes his father.” Neusner translates the Mishnah as “importune before the Omnipresent”; this reading indicates a difference between the relationship of man and God—man importunes before God while a son importunes his father directly. In Maimonides’s commentary of the Mishnah (Kappah ed.), a Yemenite manuscript (Nahum collection), British Library 5508, Munich MS 95, and in an unknown printing (Pizzaro or Constantinople) it says “like a son who importunes before his father.” This reading uses the same language when referring to God or to man. In the Cambridge manuscript (36), Paris MS 328, Munich 140, and Oxford 366, Leiden manuscript, the Mishnah in the Jerusalem Talmud, Pizzaro printing, and a Spanish printing, it states “like a son who importunes on his father.” In the Mishnah that is printed in the Babylonian Talmud and in the Vatican MS 134 “like a son who importunes אצל his father,” which could mean “next to” his father or “addressing” his father. This reading also differentiates between God and man. In the Napoli printing there is a strange reading, simply: “like a *ben bayit* who importunes his father.”
- 4 m. Ta’an. 3:8, according to the Kaufman MS. The English translation is based on Neusner, 312-13. For research of various aspects of this narrative see: G. B. Sarfatti, “Pious Men, Men

There is a conflict here between Honi and SBS. The conflict is so sharp that SBS, who was a very influential leader at the time, says to Honi that he deserved to be excommunicated. This is a very severe action to be taken against a religious personality and rarely takes place in rabbinic literature. The Mishnah does not explain the conflict between the two. It does not explain why SBS scolded Honi and did not agree with the way he was conducting his actions.

Various approaches were taken to explain this exchange. Yasif, Urbach, and other commentators saw the conflict as a reflection of tension between the rabbinic elite and the miracle-makers, particularly rain-makers who were closer to the common people.⁵ They felt that the public would mistakenly

of Deeds, and the Early Prophets," *Tarbiz* 26 (1956-1957): 126-48 [Hebrew]; S. Lieberman, "On Adorations among the Jews," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 183-89; J. Goldin, "On Honi the Circle Maker—a Demanding Prayer," *HTR* 56 (1963): 233-37; S. Safrai, "The Teaching of the Pietists in Mishnaic Literature," *JJS* 16 (1965): 15-33; A. Büchler, *Types of Jewish Piety from 70 BCE to 70 CE* (New York: Ktav, 1968), 196-264; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973), 67-69, 210; D. Daube, "L'Enfant Terrible," *HTR* 68 (1975): 371-76. W. S. Green, "Palestinian Holy Men, Charismatic Leadership and Rabbinic Tradition," *ANRW* 2.19:619-47; G. Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*, trans. G. Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 199; M. Hirschman, "Changing Foci of Holiness: Honi and His Grandsons," *Tura* 1 (1989): 109-18 [Hebrew]; A. J. Levine, "Introduction," in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Levine, D. C. Allison, Jr., and J. D. Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1-39, esp. 2, 28; A. J. Avery-Peck, "The Galilean Charismatic and Rabbinic Piety: The Holy Man in the Talmudic Literature," in Levine et al., *Historical Jesus*, 149-65; S. L. Stone, "On the Interplay of Rules, 'Cases,' and Concepts in Rabbinic Legal Literature: Another Look at the Aggadot on Honi the Circle Maker," *Dine Israel* 24 (2007): 125-55; Ch. Halberstam, "Encircling the Law: The Legal Boundaries of Rabbinic Judaism," *JSQ* 16 (2009): 396-424; M. Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149-66.

- 5 A. Yasif comments on this story in the context of other stories of rain-making in rabbinic literature. The phrasing of most of the stories emphasizes the conflict of the rabbinic establishment with the Hasidim. The rabbinic establishment learned Torah and had normative prayers while the Hasidim were more spontaneous in their religious conduct and were able to bring rain even when the rabbinic system of prayer and fast days failed. In the stories about Honi the circle drawer and his grandson Abba Hilkiyah, the miracle they achieved is not the main issue in the story, it is the conflict between the two social groups. See A. Yasif, *The Hebrew Folktales: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 116, 243; D. Noy, *Introduction to the Aggadic Literature*, ed. M. Gannan (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1966), 39-51 [Hebrew]; H. Z. Hirschberg, "The Keys of Rains," *Yidi'ot Behakirat Eretz Yisrael Veatqoteha* 11 (1945): 46-54 [Hebrew]; Z. Kagan, "The Case of Honi: The Path of Mystical Structure to Modern Hebrew Literature," in *Sefer Hayovel Leshimon Halkin Bimlot lo Shivim Vechamesh Shana*, ed. B. Sachvitz and M. Peri (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1975), 489-501 [Hebrew]. According to Kagan this complex structure of adoration of the miracle-maker, and a tragic end, is typical for legends that deal with miracle-makers. See recently: L. Novakovic,

attribute the miracle to the miracle-maker and not to God. The antagonism of the rabbis was sharper when the miracle-maker presented himself boldly and emphasized his contribution to making the miracle. Honi performed with confidence as if he was in charge, and it could seem that the rain was a result of Honi's actions and not God's.⁶ Alon identified the circles of Hasidim criticized by SBS with the false prophets mentioned by Josephus that were misleading the people.⁷

The drawback of the above explanations is that they do not derive their interpretation from the text. They attribute the disagreement to a general conflict between different approaches and interests. The assumption of the researchers was that the text is too concise and anecdotal to contain a plausible explanation of the conflict. However, there are expressions in the text that can supply explanation of the nature of the conflict.

2 Shimon ben Shatah versus Honi the Circle Drawer Revisited

Honi states that the Jewish people see him as a *ben bayit* in front of God, while SBS relates to Honi as a "son who importunes his father." Exposing the meaning of the phrase *ben bayit* used by Honi and *son who implores on his father* from the textual point of view and through comparison to other sources can explain the basis of the conflict. In this way it is possible to find the principle ideological difference between these two sages and suggest a more accurate reading of this legend than has been suggested previously. Simple translation of the term *ben bayit* as a "member of God's household" would mean that Honi was modest and portrayed himself with a title of a mere "member" of God's household—a title that could fit any Jew. The term "a son" used by SBS makes him even closer to God than a member of the household, giving him more

"Miracles in Second Temple and Early Rabbinic Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. G. H. Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 95-112. These researchers see an inherent conflict between rabbinic sages and miracle workers and therefore did not search for a specific issue in Honi's behavior that justified SBS's harsh reaction.

- 6 E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. A. Abrahams, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 1:103-4, 2:726, n. 19. See also: D. Levine, *Communal Fasts and Rabbinic Sermons: Theory and Practice in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 203 [Hebrew]; A. A. Halevi, *Gates of the Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1982), 171 [Hebrew], esp. n. 6 where Halevi emphasizes that "A human being cannot force his will on God." See also A. Aderet, "Hasipur Besefer Ha'agada," *Alei Siach* 3 (1976): 174-77.
- 7 Josephus, *B. J.* 2.264. See G. Alon, *History of the Jews in the Land of Israel in the Period of the Mishnah and Talmud, Part 1* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1953-1956), 124 [Hebrew].

honor than he claimed for himself. However, careful analysis exposes a different understanding.

Most modern commentary on the Mishnah does not distinguish between *ben bayit* and “son who importunes.” G. Vermes suggests that they are interchangeable.⁸ Neusner states that SBS says about Honi more or less what he had said about himself.⁹ It seems that the reason for this is that they did not carefully analyze the meaning of the term. Melamed explained the term *ben bayit* as referring to a slave who works in his master’s household.¹⁰ They cite the words of Rabbi Yohanan son of Zakkai explaining to his wife why Hashem accepted Haninah ben Dosa’s prayer and not his because he is “like a minister of the King” while Haninah is a “slave of the King” and therefore he always has audience.¹¹ Others explained the term *ben bayit* as a term that means closeness. One dictionary defines it as: “A friend and relative; someone who is a frequent visitor to the house.” A third translation is simply “a member of the family.”¹² According to these explanations, there is no substantial difference between the relation of Honi to God in SBS’s description versus the way Honi described himself. They therefore see the description of Honi as a “member of

8 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 210.

9 J. Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 318-19 and n. 19.

10 E. Z. Melamed, “Lilshona shel Masseket ’abot,” *Leš. 20* (1956): 106-11, esp. 110-11; however, he comments that this interpretation does not coincide with the m. Ter. 3:4, that mentions side-by-side a maid, a slave, and a *ben bayit*, meaning that the *ben bayit* is not a simple slave. Büchler compares the expression to the Latin *familiaris* since a similar word *familia* appears in rabbinic sources in a baraita in y. Soṭah 73c; stated by Rabbi Yishmael and Abba Shaul in Sifra Lev. 19:1, 86c for all slaves in the household.

11 This story appears in b. Ber. 34b. Rashi comments on the two concepts. The slave goes in and out of the king’s audience whenever he wants, while the minister requires an invitation to come to the king. In a similar way Rabbi Samuel Eidels (Maharsha) explains the term Honi used: “I am like a slave of God and therefore I come and go whenever I want” (Maharsha on Ta’an. 23a Hidushei Aggadah). Some researchers accepted this interpretation. See A. Büchler, *Types of Jewish Palestinian Piety* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 203. Safrai also accepts this interpretation and in one place states that the *ben bayit* is like the personal slave of the master. See S. Safrai, *Biymeit Habbayit Uviymeit Hamishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 505, 518 and Sarfatti, “Pious Men,” 129. On the linguistic aspect see Halevi, *Gates*, 169 n. 3; Melamed, “Lilshona,” 106-11. He does not distinguish between *ben bayit* in single and *bonei bayit* in plural.

12 Hirschman, “Changing Foci of Holiness,” 12 n. 12. He proves his interpretation from Qoh. Rab. 2:8. Solomon said: “Uvnei bayit haya li” (Qoh 2:7); the exegesis explains: “that is the divine spirit” that King Solomon contained. However, it is not proof because the expression there is plural and here it is single which is completely different in rabbinic language.

God's household" as the reason that SBS did not excommunicate Honi, even though he objected to the way he operated. A careful examination of the term *ben bayit* shows that the term can have a different meaning that explains the criticism of Honi by SBS.

3 The *Ben Bayit* in Rabbinic Literature

Examination of the term *ben bayit* used by Honi shows that it is not identical to the term "son" used by SBS. This can be seen clearly from the following Mishnah:

[In a case in which one] gave permission to a member of his household (*ben bayit*), to his slave, or to his maidservant to separate heave offering . . . It is valid.¹³

The Mishnah shows that the two terms "slave" and "member of household" are different but does not show what the difference is. Examination of additional Tannaitic literature shows that the term *ben bayit* assumes one of two meanings. One relates to friendship or familial ties: a person who is often in the house. The second is an occupation: one who administrates the house. Both meanings appear side by side in one Tosefta. The Mishnah had said that a man can demand that his ex-partner in business swear that he did not steal from the partnership, even though he does not have a concrete claim. This law applies to sharecroppers, custodians (of orphans), and to the *ben bayit*.¹⁴ The Tosefta explains what the *ben bayit* under discussion is:

The *ben bayit* mentioned is not the kind who comes in and out, rather the kind who brings in fruit and takes out fruit, hires workers and fires workers.¹⁵

The Tosefta clearly sees two possible meanings for the term and is stating that in the case of the obligation to swear, the Mishnah had referred to the type of *ben bayit* who is involved in the business aspect of the home. The obligation

13 m. Ter. 3:4. Translation is based on Neusner, 90.

14 m. Šebu. 7:8.

15 t. Ketub. 8:9. See also b. Šebu. 48b: "The Baraita taught: *Ben Bayit* that was said, not that he enters and exists on his feet, rather he brings him workers and removes workers, brings in fruit and takes out fruit."

to swear shows that the *ben bayit* under discussion was someone who had a measure of independence running the owner's assets and therefore could be suspected of embezzlement. If he had been merely a house worker, then he would be no different than any other worker who does not swear unless his employer has a specific claim against him of whom he is convinced is true.¹⁶ The authority to "hire workers and fire workers" indicates a position of trust that involves a delegation of authority by the homeowner similar to those given to a custodian.¹⁷

This position of the *ben bayit* who has authority over the property of his employer is expressed in a later rabbinic source. It shows that there could be tension between the *ben bayit* and employer when the employer is displeased with the independent actions of the *ben bayit*.

Rabbi Judah says: a parable to a King that had a "ben bayit" and he gave him authority over all that he had. The "ben bayit" went and lent to people through guarantors, to this one he lent 50 gold pieces and to that one hundred and to another two hundred. The borrowers fled. After a while the King heard and felt bad. He said to him: I gave you control over mine for you to destroy! The "ben bayit" answered: I lent and it is my responsibility to pay it all, I have one person who is guarantee for one hundred, another for fifty.¹⁸

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- 16 The Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud understand the term in the same way. The *ben bayit* is a decision maker in the house with periodic inspections or examination by the owner. Similarly the following exegesis presents it: "The homeowner has a *ben bayit*. When he comes to calculate with him . . . what does he say to his *ben bayit*? Pay attention how much wheat you put in storage . . ." (Pesiq. Rab. 10 Ki Tisa [Ish Shalom ed., 35b]); cf. Num. Rab. 4:1; 21:15.
- 17 The difference between the guardian mentioned in the Mishnah and the *ben bayit* is that the former is usually someone appointed to take care of an estate inherited by young orphans or a widow, while the *ben bayit* was appointed to administrate the property of an existing owner that for some reason does not want to do it himself.
- 18 Exod. Rab. (Vilna ed.), Parashat Ki Tisa, Parsha 43. The independence of the *ben bayit* who is the one who lends the money can cause the illusion that he is the owner of the property. This could mislead the *ben bayit* to deny his subservience to the owner. This situation can possibly be seen in the following quote: "What was Pharaoh similar to? A King went overseas and deposited all his property with his *ben bayit*. After some time he came back and asked for his property. The *ben bayit* answered: 'I am not your slave and you did not deposit anything with me.' He took him and hung him in the gallows. He then said: 'I am your slave and everything you deposited with me I will pay'" (Pesiq. Rab Kah. 14, Mandelbaum ed., 245). It seems that the slave was able to deny it because he was a *ben*

Examination of the context in which the concept *ben bayit* is used in the exegesis literature also shows a special relationship between the owner and the *ben bayit* that involves emotional closeness and trust. The *ben bayit* is a servant who feels emotionally close to his master,¹⁹ eats from his table,²⁰ and enjoys his protection.²¹ The master is good to the *ben bayit* beyond supplying his basic needs and provides for him like one of the family.²² The master is not embarrassed to be dressed informally in the presence of the *ben bayit*.²³ The *ben bayit* does for the master the regular service of a slave,²⁴ but is also considered a confident of the master. It is found that the *ben bayit* has much authority in the household of the owner. He employs workers,²⁵ buys and sells property, and even runs the master's treasure.²⁶ Sometimes the *ben bayit* is given the responsibility to take care of the children of the master and their education.²⁷ The

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- bayit* and depositing the property with him meant that he was to manage them and not merely watch them. Therefore, he felt that he can claim to be the owner of the property.
- 19 b. Sanh. 106a: "And then she says to him you are like a *ben bayit*, sit and choose your own."
- 20 Pesiq. Rab. 25 Aser Te'aser (Ish Shalom ed., 126b): "God said: 'I did not say that you should honor me from yours only from mine . . . you are my *ben bayit*, if I gave you and it is in your hand, give me from my own.'"
- 21 y. Ber. 13a and parallel sources: "If a human has a patron and they tell him that his *ben bayit* was captured he says: 'I exist through him.'" Exod. Rab. 15:18 "A parable to a *ben bayit* that was caught by his employer and imprisoned. His master says to him: 'Don't worry, I will come and take you out.'"
- 22 Sifre Num. 78, Lekha Itanu (Horowitz ed., 76): "Is there a *ben bayit* of someone that is not bestowed good?" Cf. also: "A parable to a King who had a *ben bayit* and he gave him a field as a present" (Sifre Num. 117 Vayedaber [Horowitz ed., 135]).
- 23 Lev. Rab. 1:14 (Margaliyot ed., 32), "A parable of a King who appeared to his *ben bayit* in his real face."
- 24 Cant. Rab. 5:3, "Rabban Gamliel had a *ben bayit* who would take a box of forty se'ah and bring it to the baker." Compare Lam. Rab. 4:3 Ma'aseh Shehaya. Yal. Mishlei 950 shows that the master trusts only his *ben bayit* and no other person.
- 25 Sifre Zuṭa Num. 12:5 "A parable about a King who was hosting his friend and needed to say something to his *ben bayit*." Instead of sending his friend outside, he and the *ben bayit* go outside to confer.
- 26 m. Šebu. 7:8: "These swear without a claim: the partners . . . the *ben bayit*." See y. Šebu. 38a.; m. Ter. 3:4 (quoted above; "If he allowed his *ben bayit*, his slave or his maid to separate tithes—it is valid"); and Pesiq. Rab. 10 Ki Tisa (Ish Shalom ed., 35b), that discusses what the *ba'al bayit* calculates with his *ben bayit*. Cf. Num. Rab. 4:1; 21:15.
- 27 Lev. Rab. 2:5: "A parable to a King who had an only son. Every day he would command his *ben bayit*: 'my son ate,' 'my son drank,' 'my son went to school,' 'my son came from school.'"

ben bayit had social esteem because of his position at his master's house, and sometimes he was viewed as a partner in the actions of his master.²⁸

The status of the *ben bayit* contained a legal aspect as well. The above sources indicate that the *ben bayit* had the ability to do various legal actions in the name of the master. He did not have to receive individual permission for each action he did, and they obligated the master even if he would not have authorized it if he had been consulted. This gives the *ben bayit* the ability to make independent decisions.

It is impossible not to notice the built-in dichotomy of the status of the *ben bayit*. On the one hand, he is legally a servant, but on the other he is seen as a family member. On the one hand, he is completely loyal to the master; on the other hand, he can make independent decisions. On the one hand, he owns nothing of his own; on the other hand, he controls much property and can spend much money in the name of his master. He is expected to be subservient, but he has power to do things independently.

Based on the above analysis, I wish to suggest that the concept *ben bayit* that appears in the story of Honi the Circle Maker is a manager who enjoyed the trust of the owner and had the authority to administer his property. Honi is presenting himself as someone who has authority granted to him by God to open the gates of heaven and bring rain. He does not see himself as a mere slave who has to beg things from the master, rather as someone who can make decisions on behalf of the master. Therefore, Honi's request of Hashem for rain is more like a demand than a plea. Honi sees himself as a manager in God's court who has authority to bring rain for the people when they ask him. When the rain comes he even regulates how it should come down: not too soft and not too hard.

4 SBS Objects to Seeing Honi as a *Ben Bayit* of God

SBS does not repeat the term *ben bayit* when referring to Honi. He objects to the self-definition of Honi who compared himself to a *ben bayit*, and instead compares him to a "son who implores his father." On the one hand, SBS

28 Midr. Pss. (Buber ed. 24b): "A parable to a King who had a *ben bayit* in town and the townspeople would honor him saying that he is the *ben bayit* of the King. If the King sold the town to others they started to mistreat the *ben bayit*." Yal. 34 "To a King who had a *ben bayit* that he gave authority over all he had. The people started saying that he is his partner. What did the King do—he dismissed him. Thus God dismissed man from the Garden of Eden."

describes Honi as a son of God rather than a slave, but the difference is that a son has no authority over his father's estate while a slave who is a *ben bayit* does. The BT supplies an explanation for the words of SBS.

SBS sent to him: "If the years were the years of Elijah and the keys of rain were in his hands, would not the name of God be desecrated?"²⁹

This statement is cryptic. I suggest an explanation that since the keys for rain were given to the prophet Elijah, no one else can claim to have them in his possession. This means that SBS is objecting to the claim of Honi that he does not merely pray to God, but that he actually takes action to bring the rain. He says this cannot be true. It could seem that he does have power because when he asks to increase the force of the rain it increases and when he asks to decrease it, it decreases. However, SBS claims that this is not true. It is just God responding to the requests of Honi like a father responds to his child's desires. Indeed, it could be that the story in the Babylonian Talmud is actually later commentary of the event, nevertheless it shows the way the BT explained the antagonism of SBS toward Honi.³⁰

The baraita quoted in the Jerusalem Talmud presents a somewhat different interpretation but there is a similar undertone. The baraita says:

From this it can be learned that SBS did not like it that Honi is using a decree in order to bring rain rather than praying politely in front of God. It also states that only the prophet Elijah can hold the key to rain and no one after him.³¹

SBS does not deny Honi's ability to bring rain. He objects to his aspiration to be an independent player in God's court who was granted power. In order to emphasize this, SBS changes "slightly" Honi's title to "A son who implores on his father." The first thing is that the relationship between Honi and God is not like a slave and master, rather it is like a father and son. But that is not all. SBS describes Honi as a child who is spoiled by his father. He asks many things from his father, who has a soft spot for him and gives them to him. In this way

²⁹ b. Ta'an. 23b.

³⁰ A number of studies were devoted to the agenda of the later rabbis who transcribed the Honi story and the difference between the various accounts of the story in the Mishnah, Jerusalem Talmud, Babylonian Talmud, and possibly the Tosefta. See Avery-Peck, "Charismatic"; Stone, "Honi"; Halberstam, "Legal Boundaries"; and Shoshan, *Stories*.

³¹ y. Ta'an. 66d-67a.

he explains how Honi was able to control the strength of the rain to make it stronger and then to make it weaker.³² In addition he narrows the meaning of the father-son relationship that Honi has with God to the aspect of spoiling, which is especially relevant to a young child and not to the relationship of a mature child who is negotiating with his father.

The Jerusalem Talmud then adds to the father and son metaphor:

He says to him: "Father, take me to wash me in hot water, wash me in cold, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates—and he gives him."³³

The father is willing to fulfill his son's request even though they are numerous and even contradictory. The details of the metaphor require explanation. It seems that it is relating precisely to two episodes that happen in the interaction between fathers and sons. The first episode is when the child asks for a bath. First, he wants hot water. Then, he says the water is too hot, please make it colder. The doting father does it all for his son. The second episode is that the child says he is hungry. He gives him nuts. He eats a bit and asks for something else. The father gives him almonds. He gives him a peach, but the child says he does not like it and the father gives him a pomegranate. SBS is attributing Honi's success at bringing rain as a result of God's mercy and not as a result of power that God gave him.

5 Was Honi a Typical "Hasid"?

There are a number of personalities in rabbinic literature that are referred to as a Hasid. These included a number of individuals who were known primarily for their devotion to God and the miracles they performed, and not for their Torah scholarship. Some researchers identify Honi as a Hasid.³⁴ The source

32 The term used in the Mishnah is *mithaṭṭe*. It is a rare form. Commentators of the Mishnah explained it according to the similar Arabic word that means "spoiled." See Tg. Ps.-Jon. Deut 28:54 when describing a very pampered person; saying "the person that is *meḥaṭṭi*." Similarly in the Samaritan translation, the *Aruch* "*heṭ*," Maimonides in his commentary of the Mishnah translates *mithaṭṭe* as "causes emotion."

33 b. Ta'an. 23b.

34 Safrai, "Pietists"; Sarfatti, "Pious Men"; Vermes, *Jesus*, 13; M. Wilcox, "Jesus in the Light of his Jewish Environment," *ANRW* 2:131-95; J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 140-42; D. Flusser and R. S. Notley, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 113-17; P. J. Tomson, "Jesus and his Judaism," in

that supports this approach is the parallel Tosefta Ta'anit that is similar to the above Mishnah:

Once they said to one Hasid: "Pray that rains may fall." He prayed and rains fell. They said to him: "Just as you prayed and they fell, so pray that they should cease." He said to them: "Go out and see if a man stands at the summit of the Ofel and shakes his feet in the Kidron valley we will pray that the rains shall not fall but we are certain that the omnipresent will not bring a flood to the earth . . ." ³⁵

Other researchers disagree. The debate relates to the question of whether the Mishnah and Tosefta are dealing with the same person that the Mishnah identifies as Honi and the Tosefta "one Hasid," or are the Mishnah and Tosefta independent of each other. This issue goes beyond this local question and relates to the question of the relationship between the Tosefta and the Mishnah in general. If the Tosefta is later than the Mishnah, certainly the story of the "one Hasid" is not describing Honi; had it related to Honi, the Tosefta would mention the name, as well. However, if the Tosefta contains ancient material independent of the Mishnah, it could be another account or version of the story of Honi the rainmaker. ³⁶

However, in light of what was seen above it seems that there is a fundamental difference between Honi and the other Hasidim. This distinction has not been made previously because previous research overlooked the specific meaning of a *ben bayit*, which indicates power and autonomous decision making. The sources do not explicitly refer to Honi as a Hasid. Research found that the typical Hasid defined his relationship with God in the father-son aspect and not the *ben bayit*. Hanina son of Dosa and Rabbi Pinchas son of Yair were

The Cambridge Companion to Jesus, ed. M. Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

35 t. Ta'an. 2:13.

36 Sarfatti, "Pious Men," posits that the Tosefta is a later abridgement of the Mishnah. S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, 10 vols. (Jerusalem: JTS, 1992), 5:1096 maintains that this Tosefta has an independent source. An original approach is that of S. Friedman, "The Primacy of Tosefta to Mishnah," in *Introducing Tosefta: Textual, Intratextual, and Intertextual Studies*, ed. H. Fox and T. Meacham (Hoboken: Ktav, 1999), 99-121. He shows that there are Tosefta that are prior to the Mishnah and the Mishnah is reworking the Tosefta. However, he does not posit that all of the Tosefta is prior to the Mishnah. In this case it is unlikely because the Tosefta seems to be completely different. The personality involved is obscure, but the dialogue between the Hasid and the people is more elaborate. Lieberman's position regarding this Tosefta seems the most valid as will be shown below.

characterized by modesty and not as managers for God.³⁷ Honi sees himself as a *ben bayit*, his self-confidence is evident, and he knows he has power in the divine court. The other Hasidim are modest and humble in front of God. All this leads to the following conclusion: it is unclear whether Honi should be defined as a Hasid. He shared with them the emphasis on his worship of God and his prayer, but was different from the others in that he attributed to himself power and had much self confidence in his ability to perform miracles.³⁸

6 Conclusion

The conflict between Honi and SBS was because Honi saw himself as a *ben bayit* of God, which is someone who is, on the one hand, a slave of a master but, on the other hand, has confidence from his master who gives him authority to make decisions by himself concerning the household. This description seems to be upheld by the way he was able to ask for hard rain or soft rain at will. SBS was afraid that this presentation would lead to divination of Honi by the masses and this, in turn, would be an infraction on the pure monotheism of the Jewish religion. He therefore refers to Honi as “a pampered son” who asks his father for all that he wants and his father grants it to him, even if they are contradictory requests such as hot water and cold water. This definition can explain Honi’s accomplishments without leaving room for divination. This understanding separates Honi from the typical Hasid in that he does not share the humility and simplicity of the Hasid but rather sees himself as a powerful *ben bayit*.

37 Safrai, “Mishnat Hasidim,” 138 n. 13 connects the concept of Hasidism in the Second Temple period with modesty. Vermes as well saw Hasidism in this light.

38 It should be noted that many researchers compare Jesus to Honi. The comparison could be valid even though the term Hasid may not be appropriate for Honi. Jesus, like Honi, saw himself close to God and had self confidence in his ability to act on behalf of God like a *ben bayit* though he did not use the term explicitly. See the sources cited above in comment 34. In addition see Avery-Peck, “Charismatic.”