



Early Jewish Sign Prophets

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Introduction

Discussions of apocalypticism and millenarianism in first-century Judaism often focus exclusively on literary figures and types from this time period, such as the 'son of man' (Daniel 7:13) in the Parables of Enoch or 4 Ezra. However, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus also witnesses to another, and arguably more promising, way to examine millenarianism. As John Collins notes, 'it may be that the best evidence for millenarian movements in ancient Judea is found in Josephus's accounts of a number of sign prophets who gained followers in the period before the first Jewish War' (see [Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism](#)). Josephus narrates the rise and fall of a number of prophetic figures in first-century Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and northern Africa. Their activities and followings hint at what millenarian expectations looked like on the ground in antiquity.

This article examines these 'sign prophets' in Josephus through the lens of millenarianism. Scholars use the label 'sign prophets' to group various figures in Josephus together, since Josephus himself says several of them claimed to be 'prophets' and characterized their miraculous deeds as 'signs' (Greek *sēmeia*; Gray 1993, 114). For each figure, this entry offers a historical description, including what can be known or surmised about the chronological, geographical, political, and social context of their movements. It also often reads against the grain of Josephus's account of their movements—his is often the only witness—to recover the circumstances and ideologies animating these charismatic groups. In doing so, it is necessary to discuss the roles of prophecy, revelation, and 'signs' in these movements—that is, how and why these leaders claimed God's authorization.

Previous sociological examination of these figures has focused on issues of 'class conflict', pitting the popular leaders and followers of these movements against the elite, both Roman and Judean (Horsley with Hanson 1999, xiv). However, only one of the movements below explicitly mentions class struggle. Thus, though class conflict may be a factor in these movements, aligning them too closely with peasant uprisings appears problematic. The more promising sociological comparison, argued for here, is that of *millenarian movements*. Further, though this categorization has surprisingly not been made previously, this entry specifies that these are *nativist* millenarian groups (i.e. groups that link their millenarian ideas to ideas about their identity and their territory, often in opposition to oppressors from outside their cultures). Thus, a description of the understanding of 'nativist millenarianism' used here is in order.

Millenarian Types

Since, according to Yonina Talmon (1968, 351), millenarian movements will often have a 'charismatic leader' who successfully sways the masses to follow them, the sign prophets appear ripe for analysis in these terms. Though there is variation, Josephus's presentation of these figures generally follows a similar pattern:

- A prophetic figure arises and attracts a large following.
- The prophet leads the people somewhere, often into the wilderness.
- The prophet then promises to show an authenticating and/or liberating 'sign' to his followers.
- Before the prophet has occasion, the Roman military intervenes and violently disbands the movement.

From this brief sketch, we can make sociological observations about the millenarian ideologies that may have fuelled these movements.

Following Bryan Wilson's (1973, 24) eight-fold typology of religious protest movements and their response to 'the world', we can initially place these groups in the 'thaumaturgical' category. That is, salvation from present social ills (in this case related to Roman occupation) will be accomplished by God's miraculous intervention, which will occur in unmistakable form through a sign given to or by the prophet. In this way, the 'sign' is at once self-authenticating (proving the prophet is truly God's messenger) and liberatory (showing God is on the side of the movement vis-à-vis 'the world').

These movements can be described as *millenarian* inasmuch as adherents 'expect[ed] imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation' (Talmon 1968, 349). Millennialists, like many, are focused on what Paul Tillich called 'ultimate concern'—that is, 'the predominant goal, mission, or commitment that members of a collective acknowledge or demonstrate that they strive for and are willing to die for' (Rosenfeld 2011, 91). But, for colonized groups, stability is seemingly impossible to achieve by normal means since they are, to use Talmon's phrase, 'politically helpless' (1968, 355). So the aid of outside, heavenly forces is invoked: 'reliance is now placed entirely on supernatural action' (Wilson 1973, 272). And since followers are often in crisis, the coming of this heavenly deliverance must be imminently approaching. Dire circumstances lead to the white-hot intensity of expectations for salvation.

In the groups discussed here, such salvation, as we shall see, never arrived, and Rome violently put down these gatherings. In light of this iron-fisted response, the question arises whether or not these movements had violent intentions. Though a handful of sign-prophet gatherings were armed, these movements were not all violent *per se*, and Josephus even notes that some of the slain throngs were 'unarmed' (*Jewish War* 7.450). In Catherine Wessinger's (2011) terms, then, these were mostly 'assaulted millenarian groups'—that is, 'often they are mistakenly perceived as dangerous due to prejudice. Believers may be assaulted to suppress and eradicate the movement' (8). As a parallel, [John the Baptist](#), though peaceable, was killed by the authorities because of the sway he held over the people, which to them could easily have spilled into sedition (Fredriksen 2018, 178).

The leaders of these movements were persuasive, drawing large crowds into desolate, out-of-the-way

areas to hear their messages and see dramatic 'signs'. As such, they fit the description of a 'charismatic leader', 'in the sense that followers believe that they have access to an unseen divine or superhuman source of authority'; they had 'strong faith in their personal mission [and] strong communication skills; and the ability to create the impression that they possess extraordinary qualities' (Wessinger 2011, 7).

As for their hopes and expectations, the movements all had nationalistic aims that were backlit by the presence of foreign occupiers in Roman Palestine. Their hope was that God would banish these occupiers, actualizing what appeared in an earlier Jewish text, Psalm of Solomon 17:22, to 'purge' the land of gentiles and 'drive out the sinners from the inheritance'. In sociological terms, each represents a *nativist* movement, the hope being 'that the foreign invaders will be removed from their lands and that their idealized past way of life will be restored' (Wessinger 2011, 6). Appeals to supernatural aid against foreign occupiers ground the nativist millenarian hope since they lacked the numbers and might to 'organize for the purpose of defending and furthering their interests by secular means' (Cohn 1970, 41).

The study of nativist millennialism is based on the seminal works of anthropologist Ralph Linton. One of Linton's four types of nativist movement is *revivalistic-magical nativism*, in which a return to indigenous religion is signalled through supernatural signs or symbols. Such movements:

usually originate with some individual who assumes the role of prophet and is accepted by the people because they wish to believe. They always lean heavily on the supernatural and usually embody apocalyptic and millennial aspects. ... [The revival of moribund elements of culture] is part of a magical formula designed to modify the society's environment in ways which will be favorable to it. The selection of elements from the past culture as tools for magical manipulation is easily explainable on the basis of their psychological associations. The society's members feel that by behaving as the ancestors did they will, in some usually undefined way, help to recreate the total situation in which the ancestors lived. (Linton 1943, 232)

In the case of the sign prophets, the appeal to signs that recall Israel's past—specifically the exodus and conquest narratives—points to the similar goal of freedom and indigenous repossession of the land. The nativist millennialist also uses supernatural phenomena to cement their role and point to imminent deliverance: 'the new millennial world is heralded by signs such as cosmic prodigies, the return of a hero or god, the resurrection of the ancestors, the sudden repossession of the land and disappearance of the invaders, and an altered landscape' (Rosenfeld 2011, 92). The nativist hope is, of course, rooted in land and a threatened subculture. Others have expanded upon this terrestrial dimension, noting nativist movements' orientation towards *irredentism*, 'the drive to redeem territory that members of a nation claim as exclusively theirs' (Rosenfeld 2011, 91).

Relatedly, these movements may be characterized as *nostalgic*—that is, the nativist leaders deliberately echo past figures or symbols in the social group's holy mythology to legitimize their movements and leadership. As Linton (1943) noted, the redeemed future hoped for by the native millennialist is 'modeled directly on the past, usually with certain additions and modifications, and the symbols which are magically manipulated to bring it about are more or less familiar elements of culture to which new meanings have been attached' (232). For the prophets examined below, we could further specify that this nostalgia is *scripturalist*. That is, each sign, as will be explored below, 'recalled biblical episodes from Israel's

foundational history' and 'ancient writings scripted these acts of power' (Fredriksen 2018, 177). Indeed, the daring of these signs and their dependence on divine aid all but required grounding in God's mythical past actions to liberate Israel—how else could one convince followers to gather en masse unarmed? It was the belief that God had liberated Israel in the past, and so God should and would do so again in the present, that bolstered adherents' faith in their leader and his forthcoming, liberatory sign. As such, not only did the sign echo Israel's past but it also proved crucial to the prophet's self-presentation. In successfully enacting a sign like one of Moses's or Elijah's, the prophet would then appear as a new Moses or Elijah—God's chosen prophet to free God's people. In this way, these sign prophets resemble other ancient and modern millennialists who 'quarry their deposits of traditional wisdom, particularly scriptures and other authoritative sources, to find paradigms that can illumine the present and immediate future' (Gallagher 2011, 147).

A key debate in scholarship revolves around the terminology used to refer to these Jewish figures, and hence how to categorize them. Earlier scholarship often lumped these prophetic leaders together with the so-called messianic claimants—bandit figures whose activity Josephus also describes at length. Scholarship since Rebecca Gray's (1993, 136) analysis has cautioned against calling these figures 'messianic prophets' or 'messiah figures.' As Matthew Novenson (2017) notes, 'Josephus maintains a rough but consistent distinction between "prophets" (whom he cynically calls *goētes*, "sorcerers") on the one hand and would-be "kings" (whom he cynically calls *lēstai*, "bandits") on the other' (141). This article uses the designation 'sign prophets.' These figures were *prophets* inasmuch as they claimed to be the authoritative recipients and/or interpreters of 'supernatural or inspired knowledge' (see [Prophets and Prophecy](#)). They were *sign* prophets inasmuch as they sought to reveal this knowledge with a dramatic, supernatural sign (parting the Jordan, felling city walls, or revealing hidden tablets). Notably, these signs also have an [apocalyptic](#) function inasmuch as they reveal previously unseen or unseeable heavenly realities (God's power to deliver, or revelations of cryptic artefacts).

With these definitions and delineations narrowing the scope of sign prophets under consideration to six figures in Josephus, we can now turn to examining the millenarian dimensions of these movements in chronological sequence.

The Samaritan (36 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.85–87)

The first figure to offer a self-authenticating sign in Josephus appeared in Samaria and threw the nation into 'uproar' (85). According to Josephus, this anonymous Samaritan was a populist leader who 'catered to the mob in all his designs' (85). His adherents followed him to Mount Gerizim, the most sacred mountain in Samaritan lore and the site of a former temple that had been destroyed by the Judean Hasmoneans in the second century BCE. The leader claimed he would show his followers 'the sacred vessels which were buried there, where Moses had deposited them' (86). Whatever these vessels were (perhaps instruments used in the tabernacle and temple, as elsewhere in *Antiquities*), their revelation would link the Samaritan to Moses, the great liberator of his people. Thus, in one sign, the prophet-leader brought together deliverance (from Rome and the Judeans), restoration (of worship and perhaps eventually the temple), nativism (restoration of ancestral customs vis-à-vis a foreign presence), and self-authentication (as a new Moses).

The nationalistic and revolutionary import of his message was not lost on followers, who 'found his speech convincing' and 'came armed' (86). Whatever the Samaritan leader's original designs, the movement appears to have taken on defensive and/or militant aims. That the group may be characterized as a 'revolutionary millennial group' (Wessinger 2011, 7) is hinted at in the way followers were 'stationed at a certain village' (86). before their planned ascent of Mount Gerizim. Arms and strategic organization demonstrate a degree of realism in the face of what the movement was up against, even as hopes of finding Mosaic implements suggest a belief that God was with the movement.

Their ascent, however, never happened. The governor of the wider region, Pontius Pilate, headed them off with cavalry and well-armed infantry. Many of those stationed in the village were killed or imprisoned, while others fled. The ringleaders were executed—including, we must assume, the Samaritan himself.

The combination of the prophet's authenticating sign, nativist and scripturalist themes, and armed organization give the movement a strongly millennial character. The Samaritan leader appears to have held powerful sway over adherents, since 'the report that [followers attempted to] proceed up the mountain despite being blocked by Roman troops suggests that the yearning for liberation had reached a fevered pitch and emphasizes their absolute trust in the prophet's message of divine deliverance' (Horsley with Hanson 1999, 164). As in other revolutionary millenarian movements, the belief that salvation was at hand outweighed the clear and present dangers of opposing forces. Nor was the leader a cynical opportunist, rousing the masses without believing the message himself—he appears to have been executed along with many of his supporters. Though his religious aspirations never materialized, the Samaritan's uprising did have the surprising effect of Pilate's demotion and the return of another set of holy instruments—the vestments of the high priest—to their native inhabitants.

Theudas (45 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.97–98; Acts 5:36)

During the period in which the Roman appointee Fadus was procurator of Judea (44–46 CE), another popular sign prophet arose. In typically pejorative language, Josephus calls him a 'charlatan' or 'impostor', though the leader, Theudas, apparently referred to himself as a 'prophet' (97). Theudas appears to have amassed a considerable following, since Josephus reports that 'the majority of the common people' followed him (97). The New Testament book Acts of the Apostles also witnesses to Theudas's prominence, though the number of his followers is reckoned at a more modest four hundred (Acts 5:36). But Josephus's higher indication seems more likely given Rome's swift and stern response to the perceived threat. Theudas's adherents also appear to have been enduringly committed to his cause, since in following his lead they 'took along their possessions' (97); indeed, this is a common characteristic of millenarian movements, where 'the intense and total commitment required by millenarianism is summoned forth by leaders who are considered to be set apart from ordinary men and endowed with supernatural power' (Talmon 1968, 351).

Whatever this collective's destination, it required them to cross the Jordan River. There, Theudas promised to enact a sign laden with scriptural references: at his command, the Jordan River would be parted so that his people could pass through. The intent of this sign is much debated. Was Theudas acting as a new Moses, bringing these Israelites into the wilderness through liberatory waters that their enemies could not cross? In this scenario, he may have been going westward, away from Judea. Or was he rather acting as a

new Joshua, bringing followers westward *into* Judea in order to reconquer the land and take it back from the foreign occupiers? Or, in a third alternative, was he perhaps taking on the mantle of the esteemed prophets Elijah and Elisha, who also demonstrated their prophetic powers by parting the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8,14)? Based on Josephus's report, it is impossible to know with certainty; however, if Theudas can be characterized as a millenarian leader, the likelihood is strong that several or even all of these meanings were in place. The more scriptural resonances, the stronger the prophet's validation. Thus, Theudas was 'evoking a world of hoary, salvific memories and so casting symbolic shadows all about' (Allison 1998, 164).

Related to the intent of the sign, Josephus does not indicate whether or not Theudas's followers were armed. Again, the scriptural allusions activated by Theudas's promised sign are equivocal. If Joshua's entrance into Jericho was meant, then divine aid in crossing might be followed by militant conquest and holy war. If Moses's Red Sea crossing was intended, then God would have fought for the people (though later traditions relayed by Josephus himself show the Israelites being miraculously armed after they cross through; Gray 1993, 115).

Whatever the degree of armament, the movement was easily crushed when Fadus's squadron of cavalry unexpectedly arrived. Many were taken prisoner, but others were slaughtered. Theudas himself was captured and decapitated, with his severed head paraded around Jerusalem as a show of Roman might and the dangers of rallying together around a native leader.

Questions persist about millenarian dimensions of the movement. Was the notice that adherents took along their possessions akin to, though not exactly the same as, other nativist millennial movements, in which 'members frequently relinquish their daily work and material possessions' (Rosenfeld 2011, 92; see also Allison 1998, 89)? If Theudas was entering the land, did he expect a total and final reversal of fortunes? John Collins (2010) believes so: 'there can be no doubt that [the motif of a new Exodus] intimated imminent divine intervention and the dawn of the eschatological period' (217). Did Theudas expect an eschatological scenario like the one articulated later in 4 Ezra 13:46-47, where God stops up a river so the exiles can return 'in the last times' (in turn echoing the messianic vision of Isaiah 11:15-16; see Gray 1993, 199 n. 7)? Unfortunately, we have no manifesto from the group or its leader, and their intentions are lost to history.

Wilderness Gatherings (ca. 54 CE; Josephus, Jewish War 2.258-60//Jewish Antiquities 20.168; 52-60 CE)

A common setting for later prophetic millennial movements in Josephus is away from urban areas, the centres of both power and surveillance, and out 'in the wilderness' of Galilee and Judea, as is the case with this and the following two movements. The early Jesus-movement even attests to this, as [Matthew's Gospel](#) has Jesus warning against 'false messiahs and false prophets' who draw a following into 'the wilderness' ('do not go out', he cautions; Matthew 24:11)—corroboratory evidence of Josephus's claim that these movements flourished away from cities.

While several of figures also gathered 'in the wilderness', Josephus speaks too of general gatherings during the period when Felix was procurator of Judea (52-60 CE):

Moreover, imposters and deceivers called upon the mob to follow them into the wilderness. For they said that they would show them unmistakable marvels and signs that would happen according to God's foreknowledge. Many were, in fact, persuaded and paid the penalty of their folly; for they were brought before Felix and he punished them. (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.168, author's trans.)

The account is paralleled in Josephus's *Jewish War*, though with notable differences:

Besides these [the Sicarii, i.e., daggersmen] there arose another body of villains, with purer hands but more impious intentions, who no less than the assassins ruined the peace of the city. Deceivers and imposters, under the pretence of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes, they persuaded the multitude to act like madmen, and led them out into the wilderness under the belief that God would there give them tokens of deliverance. Against them Felix, regarding this as but the preliminary insurrection, sent a body of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry, and put a large number to the sword. (*Jewish War* 2.258-60; mod. trans. Collins 2010, 217)

Here, as with the Samaritan, the thaumaturgical impulse turns revolutionary, and the signs work to both authenticate the charismatic leaders and point to their followers' impending freedom from oppressive circumstances and rulers. Felix evidently perceived danger within this impulse and so crushed it. We might also compare the anonymous prophet of wilderness salvation during the time of Festus (60-62 CE), when 'a certain impostor' appeared promising his followers 'salvation and rest from troubles' in the wilderness. Festus dispatched cavalry and infantry, killing both the leader and his followers, whose number Josephus fails to estimate (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.188).

The degree to which these wilderness movements were nativist and scripturalist is debated. Gray (1993) finds little in Josephus's short description to make a sustained connection to Israel's scriptures. Collins (2010) disagrees, arguing that the setting in the 'wilderness' is not innocent but rather draws upon the scriptural symbolism of the Israelites fleeing to the wilderness to worship their God and returning to conquer the land promised to them. Indeed, this was what the sectarian community at Qumran envisioned. In a sectarian document among the Dead Sea Scrolls, they committed to separating themselves from the 'men of sin to walk in the wilderness in order to open there [God's] path' (1QS 8.13-14). Thus, though flight to the wilderness may be understood pragmatically 'as a guerrilla tactic' for the Sicarii (daggersmen) in Josephus, for Collins (2010) 'in the case of the prophets it is better understood as a re-enactment of the Exodus. ... Scripture provided the model for the action' (219). It may, however, be the case that gathering in the wilderness was both pragmatic (escaping surveillance and mustering forces) and scriptural, as these options are not mutually exclusive.

In terms of the millenarian expectations of these groups, it is difficult to discern what the 'unmistakable marvels and signs' were. Whatever their form, in the account in *Jewish War* their content is undoubtedly political: 'tokens of deliverance' mandated by 'divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes' (*Jewish War* 2.259). These signs and wonders apparently signalled, at the very least, freedom and divine approval.

If the signs signified deliverance, how would it materialize? Would God deliver, or the faithful fighting with and for God? That is, were these groups passively 'assaulted' or actively 'revolutionary' millennials? Once

again, the significant parallel in Josephus of the authorities' response to [John the Baptist's](#) movement decades earlier is instructive. As Josephus notes, though his movement was not violent, John was nevertheless put down for fear of 'sedition'. The authorities' violent response is no guarantee of violent internal aims within a group—any sizable gathering could ostensibly be construed as seditious and therefore in need of quelling. In the case of the next figure, however, the revolutionary intent is much clearer.

The Prophet from Egypt (ca. 55 CE; Acts 21:38; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.261–63; *Jewish Antiquities* 20.169–72)

Another deemed by Josephus to be a 'charlatan', the prophet from Egypt (commonly known as 'the Egyptian'), also came to prominence during the reign of Felix (52–60 CE). Josephus's accounts in both *Antiquities* and *War* follow his general account of the wilderness gatherings, and so fit within his narrative of wide social decline precipitated by the Sicarii and false prophets.

Jewish War presents an aptly militarized account of the Egyptian prophet's activities. After gathering a following of 'around thirty thousand dupes' (2.261), the prophet led them from the wilderness, where they had gathered, to the Mount of Olives, just east of the temple mount in Jerusalem. From there, the prophet aimed to force his way into the city, subdue the Roman military, and establish himself as king. On this account, it is unclear how exactly the Egyptian prophet envisioned succeeding: even with thirty thousand militants (a typical Josephan exaggeration), the walls of Jerusalem would have been all but impenetrable, as shown in the protracted, months-long Roman siege of the city a little over a decade later. Further, Acts of the Apostles (21:38) gives the more modest estimate of four thousand followers, making the insurgency even less likely.

Josephus's other account (in *Jewish Antiquities*) gives a more plausible, if equally daring, explanation: the Egyptian prophet 'said that he wanted to demonstrate [to his followers] that at his command from the Mount of Olives the walls of Jerusalem would fall, through which he promised to give them entrance into the city' (20.170). Here the millenarian logic of the attack is clear: Israel's God would aid the movement to overcome the otherwise insurmountable fortifications of the city. The plan of attack, of course, fits the conquest narrative of old, where at Joshua's command the people shouted and the walls of Jericho tumbled down, and the Israelites rushed in to destroy and conquer (Joshua 6:16). Further, the Mount of Olives symbolized the location from which Jerusalem would be liberated in the apocalyptic prophecy of Zechariah 14. Thus, what 'an earlier prophet [Zechariah] had imagined', Richard Horsley notes, 'now several thousand peasants, eager to be freed from alien domination', enacted at the behest of a latter-day prophet (Horsley with Hanson 1999, 170).

Further elements of the movement also correspond to Israel's scriptures: like Moses and Joshua, the prophet came from Egypt and went into Judea. Also like them, he 'led by a circuitous route' in the wilderness (*Jewish War* 2.262; Amos 2:10 LXX). Taken together, these references to Israel's past liberation cemented the role of the Egyptian prophet as God's chosen leader, further inspiring confidence among his followers. In short, God had done it in the past, and could do so again in the present.

Once God had acted to level the walls, the prophet would take on the role of king, dismissively labelled

'tyrant of the people' by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.262). Jewish independence would once again be restored. But can these actions be said to be 'millennial', in the sense that something total and final was expected, something encompassing more than just Jewish self-determination?

Collins (2010) believes so, finding the Egyptians' movement to be thoroughly eschatological: 'If indeed the Egyptian expected the walls of Jerusalem to fall down, then his expectations can hardly be reduced to the hope that he himself would rule instead of the Romans. The miracle was surely supposed to be the prelude to a definitive transformation' (217-18). While this goes beyond the evidence, it does fit with the movement's combination of militaristic (the conquest) and apocalyptic (Zechariah) motifs. Indeed, Zechariah's prophecy envisions a similarly final scenario: after Jerusalem was taken in battle by a foreign nation, the Lord and an angelic army would fight to take back the city, launching an offensive from the Mount of Olives. Then, 'never again shall it be doomed to destruction; Jerusalem shall abide in security' (Zechariah 14:11). The foreign nations could only return to worship the king and bring him tribute (v. 16); otherwise, if they so much as hinted at war, their flesh would rot off.

Predictably, the Egyptian prophet's dream of a final theocracy was never realized: Felix the procurator sent out heavily armed infantry against the insurgents. Many were killed, others imprisoned, yet the Egyptian prophet escaped—indeed, Paul of Tarsus was later purportedly misidentified as him (Acts 21:38). If Luke's historical account is to be believed, the Egyptian prophet was still at large—or at least his memory was.

Anonymous Prophet of Temple Salvation (70 CE; *Jewish War* 6.283-87)

The next, penultimate figure was less certainly the leader of a sustained 'movement,' yet bears mentioning as a charismatic leader who appealed to eschatological hopes in circumstances of crisis.

Before the final destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Roman forces, an anonymous 'false prophet' encouraged people to go to the top of the temple's outer portico to 'receive there the signs of their deliverance' and to 'await help from God' (*Jewish War* 6.283). A throng including women and children—estimated by Josephus at six thousand—gathered at the time and place indicated by the prophet. Tragically, but predictably, deliverance did not arrive. After Roman soldiers set fire to the structure, some plunged to their deaths below, while others died in the flames; apparently, all perished.

While the prophet predicted 'this-worldly', imminent, and collective salvation (cf. Talmon's millenarian criteria), there is nothing in Josephus's account to indicate that the expectation was ultimate and total. One could, of course, imagine the kind of scripturalized and eschatological rhetoric employed by the prophet to encourage his desperate audience that God would, despite appearances to the contrary, intervene to save them. God had done likewise for the Israelites when pressed against the Red Sea by a foreign army. Why would he not again 'fight for' them if only they 'kept still' (Exodus 14:14)? But Josephus's account leaves us without firm conclusions and with only guesswork as to what ideological hopes animated this desperate group.

Jonathan the Weaver (ca. 73 CE; Jewish War 7.437–450; Life 424–25)

In the denouement of the temple's destruction, and with the inevitable triumph of Rome in the Jewish War after the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE), a final figure appeared in the northern African coastal province of Cyrenaica. A weaver by trade and a refugee whom Josephus associates with the failed Sicarii of Alexandria, Jonathan gained a following among 'the poor' (*Jewish War* 7.438), estimated at two thousand elsewhere in Josephus (*Life* 424). In what is by now a familiar script, he led his followers into the wilderness and promised 'to demonstrate to them signs and wonders' (*Jewish War* 7.437). As happened previously in Alexandria, however, Jewish men of rank reported his activity to the Roman-appointed governor (Catullus), who quashed the unarmed multitude with cavalry and infantry. Jonathan temporarily escaped but was later apprehended, used as an informant, tortured, and eventually burned alive in Rome at the command of Emperor Vespasian (*Jewish War* 6.450).

Again, the promise of thaumaturgical proof of God's support lends the movement to millenarian categorization. Despite Jonathan's alleged association with the Sicarii, the unarmed status of his adherents marks this as yet another 'assaulted' millenarian group (though cf. *Life* 424–25, where Jonathan accuses Josephus of supplying 'arms and money' to the movement). Rome was once again the aggressor, preemptively stamping out perceived threats.

That a millenarian ideology associated with nativism and restorationism could gain traction outside Judea is of interest, intimating how durable, attractive, and adaptable the millenarian impulse could be among an oppressed religious group. Further, since it is 'the poor' that Jonathan led, and since the Jewish elite informed on him, this is the only sign-prophet movement that Josephus explicitly frames as a peasant uprising and/or class war, though it is possible to describe other movements within this framework (Gray 1993, 121).

Conclusion

At a time when oracular prophets and mantic figures operated both within and outside Palestine, it is unsurprising that numerous prophetic figures led popular movements that trafficked in supernatural signs and phenomena. The fortuitous surprise, in this case, is that we have a historical record of such figures in the works of Josephus (and, in two cases, the Acts of the Apostles). Though these sources are heavily biased against these movements, and especially their leaders, we can attempt to read between the lines to reconstruct the circumstances, ideologies, and sociological aims of these groups. Josephus himself—put up rather comfortably in Rome by the Flavian dynasty, whose victory in Judea he helped to secure—advances his own theory of what inspired these movements and their followers:

Humans are readily persuaded in adversity: when the deceiver actually promises deliverance from the miseries that envelop them, then the sufferer becomes the willing slave of hope. So it was that the unhappy people were beguiled at that stage by cheats and false messengers of God. (Jewish War 6.287)

Each of these prophets promised what their indigenous audience most ardently hoped for in the form of deliverance from Rome and native flourishing, what one prophet advertised as 'salvation and rest from troubles' (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.188). This 'deliverance from the miseries that envelop[ed]' was often to be proven with a sign, an unmistakable indication that God was with a movement (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.188).

Sociological and anthropological comparison leads to identifying these first-century Jewish movements as *nativist millennial movements*. These collectives exhibit the characteristics of *nativist* groups, including irredentism, restorationist nostalgia, and appeals to supernatural phenomena. Though Jean Rosenfeld (2011), and indeed few other scholars of millennialism, does not examine the sign prophets, her conclusions about nativist millennialism fits their characterization:

Since occupation of the homeland is connected to the indigenous people's loss of power and prestige, charismatic shamans, seers, and prophets proclaim revelatory messages of deliverance. They instruct followers to relinquish their possessions and roles in the alien culture in expectation of a total world transformation based on a past golden age that will occur miraculously. Through various kinds of symbolic and/or sacrificial transactions, power returns to the land and restores the old ways. Those who heed the message are energized by renewed hope. However, when the anticipated cosmic regeneration fails to take place, millennial movements decline and disappear.
(109)

Indeed, beyond Josephus's decidedly hostile record of these movements (and two brief mentions in Acts), no other trace of them remain. The movements died and disappeared with their charismatic leaders, failing to coalesce into the routinized or institutionalized forms some other millenarian movements attain (see [Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism](#)).

Moreover, since they appear to be oriented towards final, imminent, and total solutions to the problem of foreign occupation and domination, these movements can fruitfully be characterized as *millenarian*. At times, not every aspect of millennialism is present in Josephus's description—for instance, the 'totality' and finality of what was intended by the anonymous prophet of temple salvation cannot be known. But, in appealing to sociologically and transculturally similar movements, we are enabled to see a host of similarities with other nativist millennialist movements.

Each of these movements shares the *nativist* orientation towards the past and nostalgia. In wandering the wilderness, stopping up rivers, supernaturally felling fortifications, and unearthing a hero's holy vessels, each of these movements pointed back to liberatory and miraculous events in Israel's national history. In this way, these movements are not only nostalgic but also more specifically *scripturalist*.

Lastly, the millennialists behind these movements were all skilled at persuading the masses to take great risks in following them, even or especially in the shadow of Rome's might. Some movements were 'militant', others unarmed and later 'assaulted', but all were gathered around charismatic, visionary prophets—just as all were violently crushed by the very foreign occupiers the movements longed to resist.

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