



Theudas

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Introduction

In his CDAMM article on '[Early Jewish Sign Prophets](#),' Nathan C. Johnson looks at first-century Jewish [millenarian](#) figures as described by Josephus, the Jewish historian writing towards the end of the first century. Here is an excerpt on one figure: Theudas (45 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.97–98; Acts 5:36).

Theudas

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.

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