



Jonathan the Weaver

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

Jonathan the Weaver

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, pre-emptively 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).

References

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