Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Early Jewish Messiahs

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Published: 6th March 2024
Johnson, Nathan C. 2024. "Early Jewish Messiahs." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 6 March 2024. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/early-jewish-messiahs.

Introduction

Movements often coalesce around a leader able to unify a group toward a common goal. In ancient Judaism, this figure was frequently known as the 'anointed one' or 'messiah' (Hebrew, *meshiach*). The scriptures of ancient Israel feature a number of anointed figures (Collins 2010), but the most popular and common was the royal figure anointed to be king of Israel. David in particular is remembered for establishing a dynasty of anointed kings over Judah. However, after the dissolution of David's line, 'messiah' became a contentious title. Who could claim to be the Lord's anointed? And who would and could recognise such a claim? Would the claim be made and recognised by religiously established organisations? Or could upstart groups appropriate the term 'messiah' for their leaders and thus legitimise their own movements? This article examines this last scenario; namely, how popular figures and movements may have used the term 'messiah' in roughly the first century CE. Whereas most of these groups may have preferred the term 'messiah' for their leaders, extant sources mostly label them otherwise, perhaps in order to minimise their claims to power and legitimacy.

At least two broad types of messiahs can be distinguished in early Jewish sources. The first and most commonly discussed type is the literary messiah, a character (or characters) that show up in texts from Jewish late antiquity. These are often characters in apocalyptic dramas or visions of the end times, but their exploits are found within the literary texts—apocalypses, songs, prayers, interpretations, and visions—that contain these messiahs. The second type might be termed 'historical messiahs.' These are flesh-and-blood figures who, so far as we know, attempted to enact their messianic dreams in history. There is, of course, a strong interrelation between these two basic types of messiahs—legends and expectations about literary messiahs no doubt fuelled the hopes and visions of historical messiahs and vice versa—but the two types are nonetheless different in kind. While textual analysis of the literary messiahs follows a well-worn path, the historical messiahs have received relatively less attention. However, these figures are ripe for examination as examples of millenarian and apocalyptic ideology in action.

This entry examines these messianic movements, all recounted by Josephus, along the lines of apocalyptic and millenarian ideology. Labelling these gatherings as 'messianic movements' is common, though fraught, in modern scholarship. In terms of the available sources on these movements, the first-century

Jewish historian Josephus often serves as our sole source, with a few exceptions noted below. Yet Josephus famously avoids the designation 'messiah' (Greek: *christos*, 'anointed one'). This has caused some uneasiness among modern interpreters in applying the label 'messiah' to the figures discussed below. However, Josephus even fails to identify Israel's historical kings as 'anointed ones.' Matthew Novenson has convincingly argued that the reason for Josephus avoiding the title 'messiah' is not that the figures under consideration were not messianic or would-be royalty, but instead that Josephus is simply translating his Jewish idiom for a Roman audience. Thus, anointed, kingly 'messiahs' become 'diadem wearers'—phraseology that would be readily accessible to Josephus's urbane Roman audience—in the same way Pharisees became 'Stoics' (Novenson 2017, 148). Recovering messianic language in Josephus, therefore, requires both reverse-translation and disciplined historical imagination.

In terms of the anthropological and sociological categories that these movements fit within, there is a broad range of views in current scholarship. While previous scholars such as Martin Hengel tended to paint these figures with religious hues, the pioneering scholarship of Richard Horsley (1987) examined them according to the categories of pre-modern peasant uprisings. Horsley depends upon the English social historian Eric Hobsbawm when analysing these social movements, including the categories of social banditry and resistance, millenarianism and apocalypticism, traditionalism, and the social factors that precipitate such uprisings among a dispossessed peasantry.

These messiah movements can fruitfully be distinguished from other social movements in first-century Palestine due to their political aspirations. For instance, the gatherings around the millenarian 'sign prophets' were admittedly less realistic in their political ambitions and strategies (Johnson 2021). Hobsbawm reckons these millenarian groups "impractical and utopian" since the "followers are not makers of revolution. They expect it to make itself, by divine revelation, by an announcement from on high, by a miracle—they expect it to happen somehow. The part of the people before the change is to gather together, to prepare itself, to watch the signs of the coming doom, to listen to the prophets who predict the coming of the great day" (Hobsbawm 1963, 58–59). Or, as Eric Wolf puts it, "Peasants are often merely passive spectators of political struggles or long for the sudden advent of a millennium, without specifying for themselves and their neighbours the many rungs on the staircase to heaven" (Wolf 1969, 286). These prophetic movements were deeply pre-political in that they did not take hold of any civic levers for change (indeed, they did not have access to these levers), but instead awaited tokens of deliverance from outside this world in the form of apocalyptic deliverance and justice.

On the other hand, local social banditry was another route for resistance to Rome, and one that was entirely practical (robbing and raiding to gain subsistence) but lacked ideological and religious precedent and attraction. Josephus describes this type of social banditry as widespread in the land:

> *And so Judaea was filled with brigandage (lēstēriōn). Anyone might make himself king as the head of a band of rebels whom he fell in with, and then would press on to the destruction of the community, causing trouble to few Romans and then only to a small degree but bringing the greatest slaughter upon their own people. (Jewish Antiquities 17.285 LCL)*

By contrast, and as we will explore below, the messiah uprisings fused the religious fervour of millenarian prophetic gatherings with the rough-and-tumble Realpolitik of social banditry. There was a strategic sense

of when to act and how in order to gain and maintain local power over against the Roman occupiers and pro-Roman elites.

In sociological terms, each represents a *nativist* movement, which hopes "that the foreign invaders will be removed from their lands and that their idealized past way of life will be restored" (Wessinger 2011, 6). Such a nostalgic hope is enacted in the way that leaders acted according to the scripts of Israel's heroes, especially the wily upstart king, David. This had the further effect of legitimising their movements and leadership in view of their followers: "ancient writings scripted these acts of power" (Fredriksen 2018, 177). As anthropologist Anthony Linton noted, the redeemed future hoped for is "modeled directly on the past, usually with certain additions and modifications, and the symbols which are … manipulated to bring it about are more or less familiar elements of culture to which new meanings have been attached" (Linton 1943, 232).

These movements are not fully *millenarian* in comparison to the sign prophet gatherings, wherein adherents "expect[ed] imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation" (Talmon 1968, 349). Instead, they are "more politically aware" than their "pre-political" prophetic counterpart (Horsley 1987, 251). Unlike unarmed prophetic gatherings, the messianic movements "possessed a clear political awareness. They were more cognizant of the concrete political situation than were the prophetic movements: they at least know that self-defense was necessary" (Horsley 1987, 251). But this is not to say that millenarian ideology would not or could not have fuelled their skirmishes against Rome. As Josephus describes it in the lead-up to the Jewish–Roman War, apocalypticism, millenarianism, and messianism were all part of the Palestinian social imaginary:

> *What more than all else incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world. This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. (Jewish War 6.312)*

Likewise, Suetonius and Tacitus report much the same. Tacitus even notes that:

> *Prodigies had indeed occurred.… Contending hosts were seen meeting in the skies, arms flashed, and suddenly the temple was illumined with fire from the clouds. Of a sudden the doors of the shrine opened and a superhuman voice cried: "The gods are departing": at the same moment the mighty stir of their going was heard. Few interpreted these omens as fearful; the majority firmly believed that their ancient priestly writings contained the prophecy that this was the very time when the East should grow strong and that men starting from Judea should possess the world. (Histories 5.13)*

All three of these historiographers apply the prophecy to the declaration of Vespasian as emperor on 'eastern' soil, but the larger point obtains that attention to signs, omens, oracles, and charismatic leaders characterised the Zeitgeist in antebellum Palestine.

There may have been a sense among aggrieved and dispossessed groups that God was on their side, that

their battle was part of the larger and final war against evil, and that the establishment of a utopian future was near at hand. Perhaps they hoped that God would aid them directly with divine armies, as anticipated in the War Scroll of Qumran:

> *Thou wilt muster the [hosts of] thine [el]ect, in their Thousands and Myriads, with Thy Holy Ones [and with all] Thine Angels, that they may be mighty in battle …. The King of Glory is with us together with the Holy Ones. Valiant [warriors] of the angelic host are among our numbered men, and the Hero of war is with our congregation; the host of his spirits is with our foot-soldiers and horsemen. (1QM 12:4–9, trans. Vermes 2004)*

Lacking extant sources from these groups, however, we cannot say with certainty to what degree they exhibited millenarian tendencies, even if it is probable given their messianic orientation and cultural milieu.

Despite the seditious nature of the messianic uprisings, politically and ideologically they were less revolutionary and more restorationist or reformist—returning the social life and arrangements of Palestine to the halcyon 'good old days' of independence and theocratic monarchy. According to Hobsbawm (1963), so-called "primitive rebellions" fit into two categories: reformist or revolutionary.

> *Reformists accept the general framework of an institution or, where abuses have crept in, reform; revolutionaries insist that it must be fundamentally transformed, or replaced. Reformists seek to improve and alter the monarchy, or to reform the House of Lords; revolutionaries believe that nothing useful is to be done with either institution except to abolish them. Reformists wish to create a society in which policemen will not be arbitrary and judges at the mercy of landlords and merchants; revolutionaries, though also in sympathy with these aims, a society in which there will be no policemen and judges in the present sense, let alone landlords and merchants. (Hobsbawm 1963, 11)*

Whereas the millenarian sign prophets may have been idealistic revolutionaries, the would-be kings represented in the messiahs harkened to an older way of life—which they would rule over.

Regardless of the hopes, however, Rome invariably crushed them. Unlike the mostly unarmed prophetic gatherings which were "assaulted millenarian groups"—that is, "often they are mistakenly perceived as dangerous due to prejudice" (Wessinger 2011, 8)—these movements were decidedly militant in response to Rome's imperial violence. What Horsley (1993) terms the "spiral of violence" in Roman Palestine—native inhabitants responding to imperial violence with militant resistance—would eventually descend into full-scale revolution and war in the Jewish–Roman War (67–73 CE).

With this theoretical framework on the religious, political, economic, and historical factors in place, we can now turn to the individual movements and their primary actors, after a final caveat: since our focus is trained upon movements in the lead up to the Jewish–Roman War, we will not cover later uprisings such as Simon bar Kokhba's.

Robber War (4 BCE)

Historical Setting

Popular messianic movements first appear in Judea with the so-called Robber War, which occurred in 4 BCE after the death of Herod the Great (ruled 40 BCE–4 BCE). While it may appear at first glance as though the uprisings associated with this period merely align with the power vacuum caused by the transition in power—what Hobsbawm calls "the revolutionary crisis" (Hobsbawm 1963, 64)—the situation is more complex. In addition to onerous tax policies calculated to appease Rome (see *Jewish War* 2.14), many Judeans were enraged by how Herod had responded to a public demonstration just before his death. In a "popular uprising" (*Jewish War* 1.650), two nationalist rabbis inspired some of their students to carry out an act of holy vandalism. Herod had erected a large golden eagle above the Great Gate of the Jerusalem temple, arguably breaking the second commandment forbidding graven images (Exodus 20:4–6). The students, bolstered by promises that they would be blessed after death for defending their country's traditions and God's law, lowered themselves on ropes and hacked down the supports to the statue. Herod's response was typically draconian, burning alive all involved (*Jewish War* 1.655).

Following Herod's death, a mob gathered to lament the execution of those who had acted in accordance with the divine law and calling for the installation of a high priest of their own choosing. As the protest appeared to veer toward a riot, Herod's successor Archelaus slaughtered scores of Judean nationals while they offered their Passover sacrifice (according to Josephus, who is prone to exaggeration, 3,000 people; *Jewish War* 2.13).

These conditions provide the necessary backdrop for further nationalist uprisings: the feud between the populace and the state (represented by the king and ruling class) had already reached a tipping point of bloodshed and death, with the powers that be attempting to stamp out any forms of revolt.

During the next Jewish festival, Pentecost, seven weeks after Passover and the Eagle incident, pilgrims and city-residents encamped in the city to blockade the Roman forces (*Jewish War* 2.43). Here we witness a level of organisational sophistication in the resistance movement: the "whole mass split up in to three divisions which established themselves in separate camps, one to the north of the temple, one to the south by the hippodrome, and the third near the Palace to the west" (*Jewish War* 2.44). The outcome was a close battle between both sides stationed in Jerusalem. The Romans sustained heavy casualties but were able to torch the temple colonnade and steal from its treasury. This only further incensed the people, who gathered in greater numbers in Jerusalem with the goal of "recovering their traditional independence" (*Jewish War* 2.51).

Meanwhile, several revolts had broken out in the countryside, with messianic/royal claimants leading these movements against the Roman forces.

Judas, Son of Hezekiah (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.56, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.271–72)

The first figure covered by Josephus who can reasonably be deemed a messianic claimant is Judas, the son

of Hezekiah. Hezekiah, known by Josephus as a "bandit chief" with "a very large gang" (*Jewish War* 1.204), had been killed by Herod the Great much earlier (ca. 47 BCE), and then "only with great difficulty" (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.271). In the vacuum of Herod's death, Judas sought to take power, motivated in part perhaps to avenge his father's death. He gathered forces around himself in Sepphoris of Galilee and broke into the king's armoury in order to arm his followers. What became of Judas is unknown, though it is likely that he met his end with the other "ringleaders" who were crucified by the Syrian general Varus at the end of the Robber War (*Jewish War* 2.75).

Since Josephus describes Judas's "ambition for royal rank" (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.272), the title 'messiah' fits readily. However, the application of apocalyptic and millenarian dimensions to his movement are less certain. Did Judas expect divine aid in his fight against the Roman legion? Did he believe that his battle was part of a final, great battle between Good and Evil? In light of the realistic measures Judas took—plundering the palace for wealth and arms (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.271)—Judas and his followers were less dependent on divine aid and more careful in their militant strategy to oppose Rome, establish kingship, and regain Galilean independence. Appealing to millenarian and apocalyptic ideology, though tempting, is unnecessary in this case, even though it may have fuelled their uprising.

Simon of Perea (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.57–59, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.273–77; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.9)

Another messianic claimant to the throne is Simon, who operated on both sides of the Jordan River valley. Simon belonged to the household of Herod as one of his royal slaves and thus had some proximity to the throne and the social networks surrounding it. Josephus paints him as "elated by the unsettled conditions of affairs" with Herod's death (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.273). He "set a crown on his own head," thereby declaring his bid for Judea's kingdom. Unusually, we also possess a brief account of this figure in a Roman source, further suggesting the seriousness of the uprising. Tacitus writes that, "At Herod's death, without waiting for imperial decision, a certain Simon usurped the title of king" (*Histories* 5.9).

Like Judas, Simon was realistically militant in his strategy. He burnt and plundered Herod's palace in Jericho and many of the mansions in that region, though what he did with the booty is unknown. Perhaps he acted as what Hobsbawm calls a "noble robber" (Hobsbawm 1969, 41), redistributing it to the disaffected poor to earn their loyalty. Or perhaps he and his band kept it as part of a war chest of treasure and arms. In any case, he met his end when the Roman legionnaire Gratus surrounded his band with archers, and he was beheaded in battle (*Jewish War* 2.59; *Jewish Antiquities* 17.276).

Despite the strategic militancy of Simon's uprising, he may have employed apocalyptic language concerning God's judgement of the rich and support for the poor and oppressed, as found in 1 Enoch 92–105. Josephus's brief sketches, unfortunately, leave us wondering about the ideological underpinnings of this uprising in the Jordan River valley, and the apocalyptic ferment of the time can only suggest tantalising clues. Since he was enslaved in Herod's household, Simon's uprising may also be characterised as a slave revolt, further explaining why he targeted the wealthy. As Steve Mason notes, Josephus's rhetoric attempts to delegitimise Simon's claim to power by casting him as a slave (Tacitus makes no mention of Simon's status) while also activating the unsavoury memory of other famous slave revolts in the minds of his Roman audience (e.g., the Sicilian slave revolts, ca. 130 and 104 BCE, and Spartacus's revolt ca. 73–71 BCE; Mason 2008, 40).

Athronges (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.60–65, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.278–84)

A final insurgent in the Robber War, Athronges, receives the most detailed description concerning his messianic role. Athronges' strategy was to employ his four brothers, who were evidently physically capable like himself, as "generals and satraps" in control of armed companies of around one hundred men. This "band of brothers" would raid the countryside to gain supplies and munitions, especially targeting "Romans and the royal troops" (*Jewish War* 2.65). Their most daring exploit was to surround a Roman century carrying grain and weapons to their legion. They killed the Roman centurion and about half of the century before retreating to safety, presumably with their spoils. The bands harried the Judean countryside for years according to Josephus. Athronges' four brothers were eventually defeated or rounded up, but what became of Athronges himself is unknown. As with Simon and Judas, the uprising was strategic and targeted.

Josephus heaps up descriptors for Athronges' messianic aspirations: he was a "claimant to the throne," acting "as king," all after setting "a crown on his own head" (*Jewish War* 2.62). The telling in *Jewish Antiquities* is even more detailed:

> *In his bid for the kingdom…each [of his brothers] commanded an armed band, for a large number of people had gathered around them. Though they were commanders, they acted under his orders whenever they went on raids and fought by themselves. Athronges himself put on the diadem and held a council to discuss what things were to be done, but everything depended upon his own decision. This man kept his power for a long while, for he had the title of king and nothing to prevent him from doing as he wished. (Jewish Antiquities 17.281)*

Significantly, Josephus also dismisses Athronges' social status, deeming him "a man distinguished neither for the position of his ancestors nor by the excellence of his character, nor for any abundance of means but merely a shepherd completely unknown to everybody" (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.278). One wonders if this demeaning description would have been sustained in Athronges' local community and networks among the Judean peasantry. Indeed, a shepherd is precisely the role occupied by David when he was anointed to take the throne. As Paula Fredriksen queries, "Who was this Athronges, a mere shepherd, to claim kingship? To this question a follower might have responded: A new David" (Fredriksen 2018, 173).

As with the other movements, it is difficult to determine if Athronges's activities were simply militant, or also apocalyptically motivated. With Athronges role as a 'new David' whose "principal purpose was to kill Romans," it is important to note the role the Davidic messiah was supposed to play in driving out foreigners from the ancestral lands (*Jewish War* 2.62). According to the first-century Psalms of Solomon (17:22), the "king," "son of David," and "messiah" was to "purge Jerusalem" from gentiles, "destroy the unrighteous rulers," and "drive out the sinners from the inheritance" (see Johnson 2023). Nativist grievances could intertwine with national myths of independence and resistance to fuel a more apocalyptically minded uprising, but as ever Josephus leaves us guessing as to these factors.

Between the Wars

The Robber War came at a time of upheaval, interregnum, and nationalist zeal in the face of foreign occupation. As Josephus characterised it, “such was the great madness that settled upon the nation because they had no king of their own to restrain the populace by his pre-eminence, and because the foreigners who came among them to suppress the rebellion were themselves a cause of provocation through their arrogance and their greed” (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.277). The decades following this war were by no means quiet, but the appearance of figures that could be considered messiahs did slow, even as more millenarian prophet movements begin to take root.

John the Immerser/Baptist (ca. late 20s CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.117–18)

The first such figure is the notoriously elusive John the Immerser, better known today as John the Baptist. Presented in the Christian New Testament as the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah, messianic claims nevertheless stuck to the baptiser himself. The New Testament hints at as much, with the Gospel of John staging a dialogue in which the Immerser disclaims his messianic status: “‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but insisted, ‘I am not the Messiah’” (John 1:20; cf. v. 25). Other ancient literature shows religious devotion to John the Immerser as the messiah, and the still-active religious group the Mandaeans continue this legacy (Marcus 2018).

While orthodox Christian literature presents John as the precursor to Jesus, Josephus gives a slightly different portrait: “Herod, who feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.118). John’s execution is seen as an unjust measure by the general populace, since John was primarily a moral teacher according to them: “Herod had killed this good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.117). As Nathan Shedd notes,

> *Josephus condenses John’s preaching to an exhortation of “justice” and “piety towards God.”… These expressions encapsulate Greco-Roman civilization’s chief moral values and showcase Josephus’s attempt to demonstrate for his Greek-speaking readers that Jews exemplify these values. … Josephus transforms the Baptist “into a popular moral philosopher of Stoic hue” (Meier 1994, 21). Accordingly, if there was any apocalyptic language of resistance in John’s preaching, Josephus is either unaware of it or quells it. (Shedd 2021)*

So was John a moral teacher, a would-be messiah, or a sign prophet? In the end, the question posed by those from Jerusalem—“Who are you?”—is as fitting today as it was then, but at the very least we know that messianic rumours and acclamations stuck to the Immerser.

Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 30 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3)

No survey of first-century messiah figures would be complete without discussion of the period's most famous messianic figure, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet precisely because of his fame and variability, it is often difficult to conceptualise Jesus as one of several messiah figures from this time (Novenson 2012). It is, of course, impossible here to do justice to the complexity and volume of early Christian portrayals of Jesus, called 'Christ' (or 'Messiah'). The famous passage in Josephus on Jesus of Nazareth (the *Testimonium Flavianum*) identifies him as "the messiah," but this is certainly an addition by later Christian scribes, not least because Josephus does not use the title *christos* for historical figures (though cf. *Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1). Despite the complexity of covering Jesus, two brief remarks are in order. First, how the Jesus movement parallels other first-century messiah movements, and second, how the Gospel writers sought to distance Jesus from these groups.

As with the other messiah groups, the Jesus movement trafficked in the language of 'kings,' 'kingdoms,' and 'kingship.' Though a dizzying array of other elements are also present—healings, exorcisms, supernatural wonders, moral and exegetical teachings, prophecies, parables, and so on—the tradition of Jesus as proclaimer of God's kingdom has pride of place in the early portions of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus's first words in our earliest Gospel report:

> *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14–15)*

The message is at once millenarian—an impeding cosmic crisis is at hand—and revolutionary—a new divine kingdom promises to challenge, perhaps even overtake, the current world order (Crossley and Myles 2023, 99–126). Thus, just as other movements featured leaders who would act as king of a freshly redrawn kingdom, Jesus proclaims the inauguration of a new kingdom, though he remains cagey about his role as the earthly king of this new domain (see the Messianic Secret, e.g., Mark 8:29–30). However, the means to which this kingdom was established differs between Jesus's and other messianic movements. Despite tortured attempts to argue for Jesus's involvement in violent zealotry, the evidence is thin (see further Brandon 1967; Rubio 2014; countered by Nickel 2021).

Second, we may explore how early writers situated the Jesus movement vis-à-vis other messianic groups. The Gospel accounts admit that Jesus was lumped together with other bandit and would-be messiah figures. When arrested, Jesus is said to ask, "Have you come out as against a bandit (*lēstēs*), with swords and clubs to capture me?" (Mark 14:48). In two Gospels, Jesus is crucified along with two bandits (*lēstai*, Mark 15:27//Matthew 27:38; "criminals" in Luke 23:33). And the Gospels all seek to distance the memory of Jesus from other messianic and prophetic movements, some of which occurred after the time of Jesus of Nazareth: "If anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear" (Mark 13:21–22). Or again, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will lead many astray" (Matthew 24:4–5). Early Jesus followers were clearly aware of rival claims to messianic status—especially in the afterglow of the Jewish–Roman War—and sought to neutralise these claims with explicit denunciations, even as they distanced Jesus from these more militant movements.

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

Following the messianic movement attached to Jesus and possibly John, which occurred during a relatively quiet point in Palestinian history, another figure rose to prominence. The man from Egypt (commonly known as 'the Egyptian') arose during the reign of the Roman procurator Felix (52–60 CE). This Egyptian figure is significant in that he is the only leader in this survey, with the exception of the polyvalent Jesus of Nazareth, to wed both messianic and prophetic roles (Johnson 2021).

In *Jewish War, Josephus* gives one account of the Egyptian's campaign. First, he amassed a following of "around thirty thousand dupes" (2.261), though the Acts of the Apostles (21:38) gives the more modest estimate of four thousand. He led them from the wilderness to the Mount of Olives, east of the temple in Jerusalem. The plan was to enter the city, defeat the Roman military, and establish the Egyptian as king or messiah.

Josephus's other version of the story gives a different account: 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" (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.170). Here, the millenarian logic of the attack is clear: Israel's God would aid the movement to overcome the otherwise impregnable fortifications of the city. And this act would authenticate his prophetic legitimacy.

Once God levelled the walls, the Egyptian would assume the role of king (called "tyrant of the people" by Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.262). Jewish independence would once again be restored. It is in this sense that this Egyptian sign prophet can also be deemed a messiah figure. Since he aimed to rule over the people, and since prophets in Israel were more advisors than rulers, the man from Egypt appears to have envisaged a change of office once he overtook the city. No longer a prophet, he would now reign as Israel's divinely appointed king messiah. As Crossley and Myles note, the Egyptian "could combine the expectation of supernatural intervention with violent subversion such as the overthrowing of Jerusalem," and thus "such categories could be blurred" (Crossley and Myles 2023, 8).

The envisioned theocracy never materialised; Felix the procurator dispatched heavily armed forces against the insurgents, resulting in heavy casualties and imprisonments. Despite this, the Egyptian prophet managed to escape, later becoming the subject of mistaken identity with Paul of Tarsus (Acts 21:38). If Luke's historical account is accurate, the Egyptian prophet remained at large, or at the very least, his memory endured.

Jewish–Roman War (67–73 CE)

The massive war between the Judeans and Romans (67–73 CE) provides a natural backdrop for the actions of militant messiah figures. In the fight against a foreign occupier, the memory of nationalist heroes like David (who defeated the Philistines) and dreams of apocalyptic reversal could serve as potent and deep symbolic reservoirs. Some of the leaders of different factions in the revolt may have had messianic pretensions, such as Menahem, who entered Jerusalem "as a king," but little else is known of their use of

this ideological resource (*Jewish War* 2.434). One such figure, however, clearly styled himself as a messianic leader in the role of David: Simon bar ('son of') Giora.

Simon bar Giora (Josephus, *Jewish War* 4, 7)

Simon began in the role of a social bandit—robbing the rich in the area on the border of Judea and Samaria (Acrabata) with a band of revolutionaries (*Jewish War* 2.652). He later fled with his forces to the fortress at Masada, where he continued to harry local villages and especially the elite. Sensing an opportune moment at the death of the High Priest Ananus, he gathered more followers to himself by proclaiming "liberty for slaves and rewards for the free" (*Jewish War* 4.508). As Horsley rightly notes, "Unless it can simply be dismissed as some secret sympathy for Josephus [whose parents Simon jailed in Jerusalem!], Simon's proclamation ... has both an apocalyptic overtone and a ring reminiscent of prophetic promises" (Horsley 1990, 289). The apocalyptic flavour of his abolition movement continued as set himself up as the charismatic leader of the group, who "obeyed him like a king" (*Jewish War* 4.510). Simon was later drawn to Jerusalem when a rival group, the Zealots, kidnapped his wife to force him to surrender to them, but he was eventually welcomed into the city by other factions as "deliverer and protector" against the Zealots and "master of Jerusalem" (*Jewish War* 4.577). Simon played an active role during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, but he went into hiding in underground tunnels after the destruction of the temple. However, with a flair for the dramatic, he reappeared in royal robes from the tunnels, likely submitting himself in surrender to the Roman general (Rufus) on behalf of his followers (*Jewish War* 7.26). He met his end at the climax of the triumphal procession in Rome, executed as the king of the people and "commander-in-chief of the enemy" (*Jewish War* 7.154). Thus, his royal claim was recognised with finality by Rome, albeit fatally.

In terms of the apocalyptic dimensions of Simon's reign, we must again read between the lines in Josephus. Was Simon a typical guerilla leader, or a self-proclaimed messiah? A few clues hint at the latter. First, he carried himself not just as a general but as a king. His histrionic appearance in royal robes hints at this self-conception. Further, Simon modelled his military career upon Israel's most famous messiah, David: he started as a leader of an upstart gang and ruled over Hebron in the south before becoming master of Jerusalem to the north, as did David (1 Samuel 2:1–11). A leader to whom Josephus ascribes "eloquence" (*Jewish War* 4.505) would likely be able to draw upon the mythic history of Israel's past heroes to bolster his own claim as the divinely appointed king in Judah's time of trial.

Yet Simon also displayed a high degree of military acumen and embattled realism. Josephus describes his fortifications and stockpiles:

> *Near a village called Nain [Simon] had built a wall which he used to secure himself from attack; and in the valley of Pharan he found a number of convenient caves and enlarged many others, using them all to safeguard his treasure and to house the loot. There too he stored the corn he had seized and accommodated most of his armed gangs. (Jewish War 4.512–13)*

With his ambition, realism, and ability to draw on the symbolic resources of messianism, Simon bar Giora stands out as one of the most significant messiah figures of the time, one who was able to claw his way

from low status to being recognised by Rome as the leader of the people, even if in execution.

Conclusion

Each of these movements may be considered messianic inasmuch as they trafficked in the language of divinely chosen leadership from ancient Israel's fund of images. Sociologically and anthropologically, they often appear to be simply guerilla leaders in the fight against Roman imperial aggression. And our primary source, Josephus, certainly encourages this assessment. But by peeling back the layers of Josephus-the-Galilean-turned-Roman-sympathiser, who is writing primarily for a Roman rather than Jewish audience, we discover signs of messianic symbolism: crowns and robes, shepherding and satrapy. These flesh-and-blood figures are an important addition to the literary messiahs featured in Jewish apocalypses, scrolls, and pseudepigrapha. They hint at what the messianic dream for better circumstances looks like in action for oppressed nativist groups in ancient Palestine, and the variety of responses to imperial aggression and domination. Most responded violently to Roman violence, but there are varieties even to these revolutionary impulses, such as the abolitionism of Simon bar Giora, or the millenarian vision of the prophet-king from Egypt. Finally, the endeavour to understand these figures puts Jesus of Nazareth in their company. As Novenson argues, there is no "Jewish messiah/Christian messiah" distinction because "Christian messianism can be thought of as just an extraordinarily well-documented example" of "Jewish messianism," since both negotiate the tension between received tradition and empirical circumstances (Novenson 2017, 196). While Jesus of Nazareth is certainly more than just another messianic figure crushed by Rome, he is not less than this, and appreciation of his contemporaries promises to bring this to light more fully.

Ultimately, the popular messianic uprisings in Roman-period Palestine demonstrate the potency of apocalyptic dreams in action. Messiah figures from this time combine the gritty realism of social banditry with the religious zeal and appeal of sign prophet gatherings. The result is a powerful form of resistance to imperial might, even if the ends of these movements resulted in catastrophe for these would-be kings and their followers.

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Article information

Johnson, Nathan C. 2024. "Early Jewish Messiahs." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 6 March 2024. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/early-jewish-messiahs.