



Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism

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Published: 15th January 2021

John J. Collins. 2021. "Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/ancient-judaism.

Introduction

The terms 'millenarian' and 'millenarianism,' like 'apocalypse' and 'apocalypticism,' are derived from the book of Revelation. 'Millenarian' originally had a quite specific sense: the belief that after his second coming, Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and reign over it for a thousand years (a millennium) before the last judgment (Revelation 20:4-6; Cohn 1962, 31). In the twentieth century, however, its range of meaning was expanded to denote a particular type of salvationism. [Norman Cohn](#) defined the type as follows:

any religious movement inspired by the phantasy of a salvation which is to be

- a) collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group;
- b) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some otherworldly heaven;
- c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;
- d) total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself. (Cohn 1962, 31; 1970, 15)

Similarly, Yonina Talmon used the term 'millenarian' or 'chiliastic' to characterise 'religious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation' (Talmon 1968, 51). Talmon also noted that the majority of millenarian movements are messianic, with a charismatic leader. Organisationally, they vary from amorphous and ephemeral to fairly stable and sect-like. The promise of imminent divine intervention energises the group, but inevitably leads to a crisis when the promise is not fulfilled. Some movements, however, survive that crisis and take on a more stable institutional form.

Most scholars of millennialism emphasise its this-worldly character. Richard Landes says that millennialism 'designates the belief that at some point in the future the world that we live in will be radically transformed into one of perfection,' and that it 'anticipates the destruction of the current "world order" before the new world can begin' (Landes 2011, 20-21). Catherine Wessinger has sought to modify this understanding of millenarian movements in her introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*:

Cross-cultural studies, including the study of new religious movements, indicate that many millennialists expect an 'otherworldly' or 'heavenly' collective salvation. Often the belief in an earthly collective salvation is blended with belief in a heavenly salvation. Additionally, a number of millennial movements do not rely on a supernatural or divine agent.

She offers an alternative definition:

Belief in an imminent transition to a collective salvation, in which the faithful will experience well-being, and the unpleasant limitations of the human condition will be eliminated. The collective salvation is often considered to be earthly, but it can also be heavenly. The collective salvation will be accomplished either by a divine or superhuman agent alone, or with the assistance of humans working according to the divine or superhuman will and plan. (Wessinger 2011, 4-5)

Wessinger casts a wide net, to include even 'UFO millennial movements.' She is undoubtedly right that many movements through history have envisioned otherworldly salvation. The distinction between terrestrial and heavenly salvation is still significant, but the mixture of this-worldly and otherworldly salvation is especially important in the apocalyptic literature of ancient Judaism.

Wessinger further distinguishes between *catastrophic millennialism* and *progressive millennialism* (Wessinger 2011, 5). The millennialism of the Jewish apocalypses is decidedly catastrophic. She further distinguishes *avertive*, or *conditional apocalypticism*, which involves the belief that humanity can avert disaster by taking appropriate measures. This phenomenon is atypical of Jewish apocalypticism. (But see Sibylline Oracles 4:162-70, which allows that people may avert the coming judgment by a baptism of repentance.) Finally, she notes that many, perhaps most, millennial movements are *nativist*, in the sense that they are looking to restore an ideal past in their native tradition. This category usually entails a hope for terrestrial salvation, but can be either catastrophic or progressive. Not all nativist movements, ancient or otherwise, are necessarily millenarian.

Also influential in the study of the relevant Jewish material is Bryan Wilson's typology of the ways in which movements respond to the world (Wilson 1973, 18-30). Wilson identified eight basic approaches to the quest for salvation. The dominant one was simply acceptance of the world as people found it. The other seven involved rejection of prevailing cultural values, goals and norms. He identified these as conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist, and utopian (Wilson 1973, 21-26). Of these, the *revolutionist* response is especially akin to catastrophic millennialism. It declares that 'only the destruction of the world, of the natural, but more specifically of the social order, will suffice This process of destruction may be divinely wrought' (Wilson 1973, 23). The introversionist and utopian categories have sometimes also been found relevant to the study of apocalypticism. The strength of Wilson's typology is that it offers a spectrum of attitudes, some of which overlap with those associated with millenarianism.

The Jewish Apocalypses

Cohn argued that the messianic hope of the Jews was the oldest form of millenarianism known to us (Cohn 1962, 32). He cited Daniel 7 as 'a millenarian manifesto which foretells how Israel will overthrow the Greek empire and thereafter dominate the whole world for all eternity.' The *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* (or 2 Baruch) 'tells how the messiah will shortly break the power of Rome, exterminate all nations which have ever ruled over Israel and establish a kingdom which will last to the end of the world.' He even claimed that the party of the 'zealots,' who precipitated the revolts against Rome, 'was a truly millenarian movement ... convinced of the imminent coming of a supernatural messiah' (Cohn 1962, 32).

[Cohn](#) was not a biblical scholar, and his characterisation of the ancient material was not always precise. The book of Daniel does not speak of a messiah, and so is not strictly a witness to messianic hope. Nonetheless, Cohn intuitively grasped an affinity between the phenomenon of millenarianism and the Jewish apocalypses, and the Christian book of Revelation from which the idea of a millennium is derived. When we look more closely at the ancient literature, however, what we find is not simple correspondence to the anthropological or sociological model of millenarianism, but a spectrum of ways in which the millennium might be viewed.

Any sociological analysis of ancient literary texts such as apocalypses encounters the obvious problem that these texts are literary constructs, not historical descriptions. In most cases, the authors are pseudonymous (the book of Revelation being the exception). We must begin, then, by distinguishing between millenarian scenarios and millenarian movements. We have plenty of millenarian scenarios, but very few descriptions of movements.

Even within millenarian scenarios there are distinctions to be made. [Cohn](#) is arguably correct in associating the oldest well documented forms of millenarianism with messianic hope. Such hope is found already in the Hebrew [prophets](#), especially in oracles composed after the Babylonian exile. Think, for example, of Isaiah 11, where a shoot from the stump of Jesse will bring about a transformation of nature so that the wolf will lie down with the lamb. Whether it is helpful to call such prophecies millenarian is another question. They do not usually imply a movement of any sort. Sometimes they are wistful hopes—utopian rather than revolutionist, in Bryan Wilson's terms. They do not always bespeak imminent expectation. Jeremiah 33:14–16 affirms the hope for a branch of David, but he will come 'on that day and at that time,' in God's good time. Usually these oracles imply that God will raise up a king, but his advent is not necessarily miraculous. These messianic oracles resemble millenarianism insofar as they expect a permanent change in terrestrial conditions, brought about by the power of God, but they often lack the urgency and enthusiasm we associate with millenarian movements.

Daniel

More typically, scholars associate millenarianism with the apocalyptic literature found in the book of Daniel and in several non-canonical pseudepigrapha. [Cohn](#) characterised Daniel 7 as a millenarian manifesto. The context of Daniel's vision is well known. Like many millenarian movements, it arises from a situation of deprivation. In this case, the deprivation was cultural and religious, due to the suppression of the

traditional law and cult in Jerusalem by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes (reigned 175–164 BCE).

The book of Daniel is structured by a schema of four kingdoms, followed by a fifth, definitive one. This schema is presented explicitly twice, in different ways, in chapters 2 and 7. In line with that schema, Daniel 7:27 predicts that

The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

While the 'holy ones' are the angelic host, the 'people of the holy ones' is presumably Israel. Yet it would be surprising if Daniel's vision envisioned a Jewish kingdom to replace that of the Seleucids, since it never speaks of a king/messiah, and says nothing about the nature of an earthly Jewish kingdom. The fact that the kingdom is given first to the angelic holy ones suggests that Daniel is more interested in sovereignty on the heavenly level than on the terrestrial level. 'Kingdom' and 'kingship' here are equivalent to 'sovereignty' and 'dominion,' and do not tell us anything about the way this sovereignty is exercised.

The sense that Daniel is more interested in the heavenly world than in the earthly is reinforced by the conclusion of the final revelation of the book in 12:1–3. There we find nothing about an earthly kingdom. Not all the Jewish people will be delivered, but 'everyone who is found written in the book.' Some people will wake to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. The *maskilim*, the wise teachers, who are the heroes of the book, will be elevated to shine like the stars, which is to say that they will become companions to the angelic host. None of this is incompatible with a Jewish kingdom on earth, but it suggests that such a kingdom was not the ultimate focus of the author's hopes. The wise *maskilim* have a role to play in bringing about this deliverance. They are to impart understanding to the many, and let themselves be killed if necessary. As Jerome (d. 420 CE) already realised, the Maccabees were 'little help' (Daniel 11:34). The deliverance would be wrought on the heavenly level, by Michael and his angels. The role of the faithful on earth was to keep themselves pure and wait.

Philip Esler argued that Daniel has 'a millennialist perspective,' or a 'revolutionist' one in Bryan Wilson's categories, but he recognised that it was not possible to claim it was written for a millenarian movement. Rather, it 'seemed to reflect a group of educated people unhappy with the situation who purported to speak for faithful Israel' (Esler 2014, 128). The actual author of Daniel is hidden behind the pseudonym. The author of Daniel's visions certainly expected imminent deliverance. Daniel is the only ancient apocalypse that attempts to calculate the number of days until the 'end' (calculating from the desecration of the temple), and it even includes a revised calculation, presumably when the first date passed (Daniel 12:11–12). Nonetheless, the references to the wise *maskilim* in Daniel are not evocative of millenarianism. They seem to have fostered quiet hope rather than a public movement.

Books of Enoch

Neither can we reconstruct a millenarian movement from the books of Enoch. In this case, there does appear to be a movement, reflected in the fact that a series of Enochic books were produced over a period

of time (at least decades, possibly more than a century), and the recurring references to the elect and the righteous (Collins 2016, 89). Much of the revelations of Enoch, in the *Book of the Watchers* (1 Enoch 1–35) and the *Astronomical Book* (1 Enoch 72–82), are concerned with the mysteries of the cosmos. We find millenarian scenarios in the more historically oriented apocalypses, the *Apocalypse of Weeks* (1 Enoch 93:1–10; 91:11–17) and the *Animal Apocalypse* (1 Enoch 85–91). Both of these anticipate a dramatic change by divine intervention. According to the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, in the eighth week ‘a sword will be given to all the righteous to execute righteous judgment on all the wicked ... and at its conclusion they will acquire possessions in righteousness’ (1 Enoch 91:12–13). This is not the final end. In the tenth week the first heaven will pass away and a new heaven will appear. The *Apocalypse*, then, offers a tantalising hint of a period of terrestrial fulfilment before the final judgment, but it is simply too elliptic to admit any kind of sociological analysis. The *Animal Apocalypse* is less elliptic, but the allegorical symbolism renders it opaque. It is usually taken to refer, affirmingly, to the Maccabean revolt (1 Enoch 90:9), but the success of the revolutionary action depends in the end first on angelic intervention and then a divine theophany. The *Apocalypse* appears to end with a terrestrial messianic age, marked by the coming of a ‘white bull,’ and a universal transformation, by which all species are changed into white cattle (1 Enoch 90:37). It may well be that this apocalypse reflects the hopes of a group that supported Judas Maccabee but hoped for a genuinely millenarian transformation, but the text is too obscure to allow us to say much more about it.

4 Ezra

Millenarian scenarios are also found in the apocalypses of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt against Rome. These apocalypses are usually dated to the end of the first century CE, twenty-five to thirty years after the destruction of Jerusalem (Collins 2016, 240–80). Unlike the visions of Daniel, they were not composed in the throes of a rebellion. They are rather reflections after the fact, pondering the injustice of history and looking for consolation. Four Ezra is especially moving in this regard. The first half of the book is taken up with three long dialogues between Ezra and the angel Uriel, in which the angel repeatedly tries to distract Ezra by telling him of the wonders that are to come. The promised future entails a remarkable messianic scenario in 7:28–33:

My son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. And after these years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings; so that no one shall be left. And after seven days, the world which is not yet awake shall be roused, and that which corruptible shall perish. And the earth shall give up those who dwell silently in it; and the chambers shall give up the souls which have committed to them. And the Most High shall be revealed upon the seat of judgment ...

This passage is remarkable for the way in which it combines the hope for a messianic reign on earth (for four hundred years) and the hope for a new creation of an entirely different world. We find a similar dual eschatology in the near-contemporary book of Revelation, where the messianic reign is allotted a thousand years, which is to say a millennium. Neither the messianic reign nor the millennium, however, constitutes the ultimate end. They are intermediate stages before the new creation.

Ezra is not consoled by the angel's account of the future, because it entails a judgment in which most of humanity will be condemned. 'O Adam, what have you done?' he laments. 'For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. For what good is it to us if an eternal age has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death?' (7:118-119). He finds consolation, however, in a series of visions. The first, in which a woman is transformed into Zion restored, is the turning point of the book. It is followed by a classic messianic vision in chapters 11 and 12. The messiah, portrayed as a lion, confronts the eagle, representing Rome. The eagle, Ezra is told, 'is the fourth kingdom which appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel, but it was not explained to him as I now explain it to you' (12:11-12). The lion is the messiah who will arise from the posterity of David, who is being kept for the end of days, and who will execute judgment on Rome. This vision is complemented by another in 4 Ezra 13 that recasts Daniel's 'one like a son of man' as a man who comes up out of the sea and flies with the clouds. Despite his heavenly arrival, this figure too is portrayed in traditional messianic imagery. He carves out a great mountain and takes his stand on it, and the nations gather to attack him. Compare Psalm 2, where the Lord sets his anointed king on Zion, his holy mountain, to repel the nations that rage against him. Four Ezra 13 continues: 'he sent forth from his mouth as it were a stream of fire, and from his lips a flaming breath, from his tongue he shot forth a storm of sparks' (13:10), evoking the shoot from the stump of Jesse in Isaiah 11, who will slay the wicked with the breath of his lips (Isaiah 11:4). After this, this figure gathers another multitude to himself, that is peaceful. These are the lost tribes of Israel, who will be restored in the last days

Esler has insightfully argued that 4 Ezra is more appropriately classified as 'introversionist' than as 'revolutionist' in Bryan Wilson's typology. The defeat by Rome, and the destruction of the temple, had presented the people of Judea with a severe case of cognitive dissonance, a gap between what was supposed to be and what was actually the case. 'The primary social function of 4 Ezra,' writes Esler, 'was to provide a means of managing or eliminating this dissonance. It communicated to its original readers a resolution of this tension and a basis for Israel's continued existence' (Esler 1994, 92-109). Although 4 Ezra looks to a future deliverance that might reasonably be described as millenarian, the deliverance is not imminent. According to 4 Ezra 14:10-12, 'the age is divided into twelve parts, and nine of its parts have already passed, as well as half of the tenth part, so two of its parts remain, besides half of the tenth part.' Esler calculates that the age was expected to continue for some 1,315 years after the death of Ezra (Esler 1994, 124). In the meantime, they are sustained by the vision of the millennial future that provides consolation and resolves the cognitive dissonance brought on by the Roman conquest. It does not, and is not intended to, ignite millenarian fervour. Its message is rather one of resignation and patience. A millenarian scenario, then, does not necessarily spark revolution, or the hope of imminent deliverance. It may also sustain a reliance on fantasy as a refuge from the disasters of history.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Yet another perspective on millenarianism is provided by the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls.

Writing in 1974, Sheldon Isenberg argued that the sectarian movement described in the Scrolls, together with the Jesus movement described in the Gospels, provides a prime example of 'millenarism' or 'millenarianism' in Greco-Roman Palestine. He noted that 'millenarian activities, which may or may not coalesce into movements, generally occur during times of social upheaval and often when there is a

general insurrection underway. When at such times, a group within the larger society feels itself to be deprived and oppressed in a specific way, conditions are ripe for millenarism' (Isenberg 1974, 35). Isenberg assumed, in accordance with the prevailing consensus when he wrote, that the so-called Qumran community was founded in the mid-second century BCE, in the wake of the Maccabean revolt, by Zadokite priests who had been ousted from Jerusalem. As such, it provided a clear example of a group that was blocked from access to power.

The Righteous Teacher of Qumran and Jesus were millenarian [prophets](#):

Both of them spoke to and for groups about power and powerlessness. Both proclaimed the inadequacy of the major redemptive media Both made revelatory proclamations of a new situation, of new rules applicable, of a time to come when the truly righteous would have full access to the divine power ... both proclaimed their revelations in the form of pneumatic exegesis of Torah. (Isenberg 1974, 30)

Viewed from this perspective, the so-called Qumran community could plausibly be described as a millenarian movement.

I will not attempt here to discuss how well Isenberg's model fits the case of Jesus. His understanding of 'the Qumran community' and the Righteous Teacher has been undercut to a great degree by developments in scholarship (Collins 2010, 88-121; 2017, 8-23). Only a fraction of the Scrolls had been published when Isenberg wrote. Forty-five years on, it is apparent that the movement described in the Scrolls was not confined to Qumran, and that it did not originate in a dispute over the High Priesthood. Rather, it originated in disputes about the exact interpretation of the Law, as shown especially by the text called 4QMMT, which was only divulged to the public a decade after Isenberg's article was published. It is now apparent that the movement involved different forms of community, and developed over time, as can be seen from the differences between the Damascus Document (CD), which speaks of camps, whose members married, and the more elite *Serek ha-Yahad* or Community Rule. Messianic and, more generally, apocalyptic expectations developed over time, but they do not seem to have been the driving force in the foundational stage of the movement.

It remains true, however, that the sectarian movement was deeply dissatisfied with the operation of the temple, and attempted to provide an alternative means of atonement in its communal life. The growth of millenarian or apocalyptic expectations seems to have been due to two factors. First and most fundamental was the need for vindication. The sectarians were convinced that God in his glorious wisdom must have ordained an end to injustice, when he would exterminate their enemies (1QS 4:18-19). They did not necessarily expect immediate vindication. Keeping in mind the biblical precedent of the wilderness generation, they supposed that there would be about forty years from the time of the death of the Teacher until the end of all who had turned back with the rival teacher known as 'the man of the Lie' (CD 20:14). There are indications in the Peshar Habakkuk that this period had expired, and that the final period was being prolonged (1QpHab col. 7). It does not seem, however, that the delay caused any great crisis. The movement lasted for more than a century, perhaps for a century and a half. The members, at least the members of the *yahad*, believed that they were already living with the angels, and this presumably relieved somewhat the urgency of the future deliverance.

Rival teachers and those who rejected the sectarian interpretations were not the only enemies whose extermination was desired. Rome cast a long shadow in the centuries around the turn of the era. The most famous quasi-millenarian text in the Scrolls is surely the War Scroll (1QM), where the Kittim or Romans figure prominently among the followers of Belial. The War Scroll lends itself easily to a millenarian interpretation. It envisions an army of angels who would come to the aid of the Sons of Light, under the leadership of the archangel Michael:

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)

Perhaps the sectarians thought matters were coming to a head when the war broke out against Rome. This would not be the last time that people who relied on supernatural aid for the success of their revolution would be disappointed: one thinks of the Ghost Dance of the native Americans, and the belief that the spirits of the dead would return to fight against white invaders. Unfortunately, however, we have no narrative, either in the Scrolls or in the works of contemporary authors such as Josephus, that would clarify the thinking of the self-styled Sons of Light before Qumran was destroyed by the Romans.

It seems to me quite doubtful, however, that the Teacher of Righteousness should be considered a millenarian [prophet](#). He remains a very shadowy figure, but he seems to have been engaged mainly in legal interpretation. He is revered in the Pesharim as the most authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Whether the eschatological views of the movement originated with him, we simply do not know. For most of the history of the movement, the Essenes, like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch but for different reasons, would seem to fit Wilson's introversionist rather than his revolutionist type, insofar as they withdrew from society to pursue a life of holiness and strict observance, even if they were originally caught up in the enthusiasm of the rebellion against Rome.

The Sign Prophets

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 (Horsley 1986). One was named Theudas. He appeared when Fadus was governor of Judea, about 45 CE. According to Josephus, he 'persuaded most of the common people to take their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He said he was a prophet, and that at his command the river would be divided and allow them an easy crossing' (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.97-98). The symbolism recalls both the Exodus from Egypt and Joshua's crossing of the Jordan when he entered the promised land. According to Acts 5:36, he had about four hundred followers.

A similar prophetic movement was led by a figure known only as 'the Egyptian,' when Festus was procurator (52-60 CE). In his account of the Jewish War, Josephus says that the Egyptian 'made himself credible as a prophet and rallied about thirty thousand dupes and took them around through the

wilderness to the Mount of Olives. From there he intended to force an entry into Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison and become ruler of the citizen body' (*Jewish War* 2.269-271). Here again we have the attempted re-enactment of one of the great paradigms of divine intervention in the history of Israel, in this case the destruction of Jericho. In *Jewish War*, Josephus claimed that the Egyptian hoped to enter Jerusalem by force and wanted to 'become ruler of the citizen body.' The account in *Jewish Antiquities* suggests rather that he relied on divine intervention. If the Egyptian expected the walls of Jerusalem to fall down, his expectations can hardly be reduced to political ambition. Unfortunately, whatever his expectations were, they were not realised. The Egyptian himself escaped, but most of his followers were killed by Roman troops.

It is unfortunate that we only know of these figures through the writings of Josephus, which are decidedly unsympathetic, supplemented in one case by the book of Acts. They would seem to be more plausible candidates for the designation 'millenarian prophets' than any of the revolutionary leaders of the Jewish revolts, despite the eagerness of [Norman Cohn](#) to anoint the Zealots in this role.

Jesus?

There was of course another figure in first-century Judea who might well be considered a millenarian [prophet](#). According to the Gospels, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, to shouts of Hosanna to the Son of David. For the biblically illiterate, Matthew 21:4-5 supplies the quotation from Zechariah 9:9, even providing Jesus with two animals rather than one, missing the Hebraic parallelism. It is certainly tempting to understand this incident in light of the sign prophets in Josephus. If indeed Jesus entered Jerusalem as a millenarian prophet, then the subsequent history of his followers provides yet another variation on the modalities of millenarianism.

Conclusion

Even without taking Jesus into account, it is clear that ideas of ultimate, collective salvation played out in many different ways in ancient Judaism. The apocalypses are literary products. They were not broadsheets for revolutionary movements. They fostered hope, sometimes of imminent deliverance (as in Daniel), but sometimes they called for patient waiting. Millenarian hopes seem to be a secondary development in the sectarian movement known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The movements described by Josephus may show the greatest similarity to later millenarian movements, but they were ephemeral, and unfortunately left us no record of their own.

But even if we are uncertain as to how the apocalypses and eschatological writings related to social reality in their day, their importance for later history was enormous. The Hebrew [prophets](#), and more especially the apocalyptic writers, introduced to the world the belief that radical change is possible. They may not have left us with a blueprint as to how it may be brought about, but the idea itself is potent.

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Article information

John J. Collins. 2021. "Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/ancient-judaism.

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