**Modalities of Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism**

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Yale

The original meaning of “millenarian,” wrote Norman Cohn, “was narrow and precise. It referred to the belief held by some Christians on the authority of Revelation XX 4-6 that after His Second Coming Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and would reign over it for 1000 years before the Last Judgment.”[[1]](#footnote-1) By the time Cohn wrote, almost sixty years ago, the term had acquired a wider sense among anthropologists and sociologists, and had become “a convenient label for a particular type of salvationism.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Cohn defined the type as follows:

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

1. collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group;
2. terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some otherworldly heaven;
3. imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;
4. 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.
5. Accomplished by agencies which are consciously regarded as supernatural.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Typical examples of this phenomenon were the native American Ghost Dance and the Cargo Cults of Melanesia.

A similar definition was proposed by Yonina Talmon a few years later:

“The term ‘millenarian’ (or ‘chiliastic’) is now used not in its specific and limited historical sense but typologically to characterize religious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Talmon also noted that the majority of millenarian movements are messianic, with a charismatic leader who mediates between the human and the divine. Organizationally, they vary from amorphous and ephemeral to fairly stable and sectlike. The promise of imminent divine intervention energizes 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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Most scholars of millennialism emphasize its this-worldly character. So for example 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.”[[6]](#footnote-6) 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.

So 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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

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.

Modern fundamentalists and dispensationalists are prone to distinguish between premillennial and postmillennial eschatology. According to the former, the Second Coming and its tribulations must come first, before the millennial rule of Christ, while the latter allows that humanity can build God’s kingdom on earth, before the Second Coming.[[8]](#footnote-8) Wessinger adapts this terminology to apply to movements in other cultures besides the Christian West, and speaks instead of *catastrophic millennialism* and progressive millennialism.[[9]](#footnote-9) This, I think, is a useful distinction, quite apart from the debates about specifically Christian eschatology. 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.[[10]](#footnote-10) 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.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The introversionist and utopian categories have also been sometimes 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*

“The oldest form of millenarism of which much is known,” wrote Norman Cohn, “is the messianic hope of the Jews.”[[14]](#footnote-14) He cited Daniel chapter 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.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Cohn was not a biblical scholar, and his characterization 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, he 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.

But even within millenarian scenarios there are distinctions to be made. Cohn is arguably correct in associating the oldest well documented forms of millenarism 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 chapter 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. Jer 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. Philip Esler has taken up Cohn’s characterization of Daniel 7 as a millenarian manifesto.[[16]](#footnote-16) 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 Antiochus Epiphanes.[[17]](#footnote-17) As Esler notes, “deprivation of this sort does not always lead to millenarianism,” and did not in fact evoke the same response from all the people of Judea.[[18]](#footnote-18) The Maccabees, for example, responded quite differently. Esler offers a rather simplified interpretation of the vision:

The relief offered to those affected by the persecution is that sovereignty and power will be transferred from Antiochus to the holy ones. This is a project for the future, since the Seleucid king is still alive at the time of the vision (7:26). Judged by this vision alone, the prospect envisaged may be the establishment of a Jewish kingdom in Israel to replace that of the Seleucids, although plainly some sort of heavenly intervention is foreshadowed (7:26) which will lead to their destruction.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Esler’s interpretation is flawed by his assumption that the “holy ones” and the “one like a son of man” who comes on the clouds are simply the Jewish people. The usage of “holy ones” and the imagery of a figure riding on the clouds in biblical literature, other apocalyptic works such as *1 Enoch*, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, points overwhelmingly to their identification as angels.[[20]](#footnote-20) Esler is still right that Daniel 7 does not speak of a messiah. The “one like a son of man” would be interpreted as a messiah from a very early time, in the *Similitudes of Enoch*, 4 Ezra, and the Gospels, but in Daniel he is most probably the archangel Michael,[[21]](#footnote-21) and while the angel is a deliverer, he is not a messiah in the traditional sense of the word, and he is not given that title. Esler’s reading is also over-simplified insofar as he reads Daniel 7 in isolation from the rest of the book. If it is read in its full literary context, as the first of a series of visions, culminating in the prophecy of resurrection in Daniel 12, the picture is complicated considerably.

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, but it also determines the sequence of kings by which the chapters are dated, including the fictitious Darius the Mede. 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.[[22]](#footnote-22) 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 already realized, the Maccabees were “little help” (Dan 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.

Esler argued that Daniel has “a millennialist perspective,” or a “revolutionist” one in Bryan Wilson’s categories, but he recognized that it was not possible to claim it was written for a millenarian movement.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rather, it “seemed to reflect a group of educated people unhappy with the situation who purported to speak for faithful Israel.”[[24]](#footnote-24) 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 (Dan 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.

It is possible to regard the people in 1 Macc 2: 29-38, who let themselves be killed in the cave rather than fight on the sabbath, as millenarian, but this is hardly a necessary explanation of their action. The main evidence that their thinking may have been millenarian in character comes from an indirect reference in the *Testament* or *Assumption of Moses*, which seems to reflect the Maccabean crisis although the text as we have it is certainly later.[[25]](#footnote-25) There a man named Taxo, who has seven sons, takes them into a cave in a field, and tells them that if they purify themselves and die, their blood will be avenged before the Lord, and then his kingdom will appear throughout all creation (*Testament of Moses*, 9:1-10:1). This passage is certainly evocative of millenarian movements, but it is elliptic and enigmatic, and can hardly bear the weight of proof for a millenarian movement in the Maccabean era.

*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.[[26]](#footnote-26) 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 do 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 tantalizing hint of a period of terrestrial fulfillment before the final judgment, but it is simply too elliptic to admit of 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.[[27]](#footnote-27)

*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.[[28]](#footnote-28) 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.[[29]](#footnote-29) 4 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 chapter 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 400 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.[[30]](#footnote-30) “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?” (7:118-9). 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) 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 one 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. 4 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 (Isa 11:4). After this, he gathers another multitude to himself, that is peaceful. These are the lost tribes of Israel, who will be gathered in 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 . . .”[[32]](#footnote-32) Although the work 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.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the meantime, he argues, “it is the keeping of the Law that matters.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Here, however, he misses the nuance of 4 Ezra, although his analysis fits well the near contemporary apocalypse of *2 Baruch*, which famously concludes that “nothing is left us now save the Mighty One and his Law.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In the case of 4 Ezra, however, the Law is only satisfactory when it is supplemented by apocalyptic visions.[[36]](#footnote-36) In the concluding chapter (chapter 14), Ezra is inspired to restore the Law, which had been burnt in the destruction of Jerusalem. Filled with divine inspiration, he speaks for forty days, while five men write down what he dictates. But his dictation is not confined to the Law of Moses, or even to the traditional Hebrew scriptures. During the forty days, 94 books are written. Then the Most High tells him:

Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them, but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge. (14:45-8).

The twenty-four public books are those we know as the canonical Hebrew Bible. Josephus, writing close to the same time, gives the number as twenty-two, but most scholars assume that he has the same books, counted differently.[[37]](#footnote-37) For 4 Ezra, however, it is not the canonical books that contain the fountain of wisdom, but rather the hidden books, of which 4 Ezra itself is presumably an example.

The Law remains important in 4 Ezra, to be sure, but it is not the Law that mainly sustains the people in the wake of destruction. Rather it is the vision, which is persuasive in ways that doctrinal exposition can never be. It is 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 fervor. 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.[[38]](#footnote-38) 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.”[[39]](#footnote-39) 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. He quoted the influential view of Frank Moore Cross:

The priests of Qumran regarded the Jerusalem sanctuary as defiled, its priests false, its calendar unorthodox. In the end of days, the Essene priesthood would be re-established in the New Jerusalem, the false priesthood overthrown forever.[[40]](#footnote-40)

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.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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.[[42]](#footnote-42) Only a fraction of the Scrolls has been published when Isenberg wrote. 45 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.[[43]](#footnote-43) 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, 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 Pesher Habakkuk that this period had expired, and that the final period was being prolonged (1QpHab col. 7).[[44]](#footnote-44) 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.[[45]](#footnote-45)

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, where the Kittim or Romans figure prominently among the followers of Belial. We do not have sufficient information to trace the growth of anti-Roman sentiment in the Scrolls. The opening column of the War Scroll speaks of the Kittim of Asshur and the Kittim in Egypt, which suggests that the original enemies may have been the Seleucids rather than the Romans.[[46]](#footnote-46) It seems clear enough, however, that Roman rule was unacceptable to the sectarians, as it was, increasingly, for all Judeans in the first century CE. 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 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’ accounts of a number of sign prophets who gained followers in the period before the first Jewish War.[[47]](#footnote-47) 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.” (*Ant* 20.97-8). 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 400 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 “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* 2.169-71). 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 the *War*, Josephus claimed that the Egyptian hoped to enter Jerusalem by force and wanted to “become ruler of the citizen body.” The account in the *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 realized. 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 supplies the quotation from Zech 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 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. It is an idea that is needed as desperately in the early twenty-first century, in an era where corruption and intolerance seem increasingly triumphant, as it was in Judea two thousand years ago.

1. Norman Cohn, “Medieval Millenarism: its Bearing on the Comparative Study of Millenarian Movements,” in *Millennial Dreams in Action. Essays in Comparative Study*, edited by Sylvia L. Thrupp (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 31-43, here 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*. Compare the use of “millenarian” by Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth. A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) and of “millenarism” by Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound. A Study of Cargo Cults in Melanesia* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), xlii-xliv. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*. Compare Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, originally published in 1961), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yonina Talmon, “Millenarism,” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, edited by David Sills (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1968), 10. 349-62. Compare I. C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (Chicago: Regnery 1967), 51; John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community. The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Talmon, *ibid*., 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth. The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 20-21. Landes’s use of the term “apocalyptic” is, on his own admission, idiosyncratic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Catherine Wessinger, “Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mellennialism,* edited by Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford, 2011), 3-24, here 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall be No More. Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992), 68-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wessinger, “Millennialism,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The only example I can think of is *Sibylline Oracles* 4:162-70, which allows that people may avert the coming judgment by a baptism of repentance. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium. A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 18-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*., 21-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cohn, “Medieval Millenarism,” 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Philip Esler, “Millennialism and Daniel 7,” in idem, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds. Social-scientific approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 92-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See my essay, “Temple or Taxes? What Sparked the Maccabean Revolt?” in *Revolt and Resistance in the Ancient Classical World and the Near East. In the Crucible of Empire*, edited by John J. Collins and J. G. Manning. CHANE 85. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 189-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Esler, “Millennialism and Daniel 7,” 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*., 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See my commentary, *Daniel. A Commentary on the Book of Daniel. Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 304-10, and 313-7, with full review of the secondary literature, and most recently Carol A. Newsom, with Brennan Breed, *Daniel. A Commentary. OTL* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 236-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Collins, *Daniel*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Collins, *Daniel*, 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Philip F. Esler, “Social-Scientific Approaches to Apocalyptic Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins (New York: Oxford, 2014), 123-44, here 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*., 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John Priest, “Testament of Moses,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, edited by James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1.919-34; Johannes Tromp, *The Assumption of Moses: A Critical Edition with Commentary*. SVTP 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); G. W. E. Nickelsburg, ed., *Studies on the Testament of Moses* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Stephen B. Reid, *Enoch and Daniel: A Form Critical and Sociological Study of Historical Apocalypses* (Berkeley, CA: Bibal, 1989), 52, 68), suggested that both the *Apocalypse of Weeks* and the *Animal Apocalypse* were “utopian,” while Daniel was “revolutionist,” in Wilson’s typology, but the basis for this categorization is not clear. See the comments of Esler, “Social-Scientific Approaches,” 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 240-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See the sensitive analyses of 4 Ezra by Dereck Daschke, *City of Ruins. Mourning the Destruction of Jerusalem Through Jewish Apocalypse*. Biblical Interpretation 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 103-39, and Hindy Najman, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future. An Analysis of 4 Ezra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the conflicting theologies of Era and the angel, see especially Karina Martin Hogan. *Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra. Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution*. JSJSup 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra. A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress,1990), 31-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Philip F. Esler, “The Social Function of 4 Ezra,” in *The First Christians and their Social Milieu*, 110-30, here 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Esler, “The Social Function of 4 Ezra,” 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid*. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *2 Bar* 85:3. See Matthias Henze, *Jewish Apocalypticism in the Late First Century Israel*. TSAJ 142 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 102-7, 206-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism. Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 2017), 131-3; Hogan, *Theologies in Conflict*, 159-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1. 38-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sheldon R. Isenberg, “Millenarism in Greco-Roman Palestine,” *Religion* 4(1974): 26-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*., 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran*. 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 128-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Isenberg, “Millenarism,” 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. John J. Collins, “The Origin of the Scrolls Community and its Historical Context,” *Henoch* 39(2017): 8-23; *Beyond the Qumran Community. The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), especially 88-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984*, ed. Janet Amitai (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985) 400-07; *Qumran Cave 4. Vol. V: Miqsat Macase Ha-Torah*. DJD 10 (Oxford Clarendon, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See further John J. Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52-70 (“The Periods of History and the Expectation of the End”). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Devorah Dimant, “Men as Angels,” in eadem, *History, Ideology and Bible Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. FAT 90(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 465-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Brian Schultz, *Conquering the World: The War Scroll (1QM) Reconsidered*. STDJ 76 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 127-58; Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. R. A. Horsley, “Popular Prophetic Movements at the Time of Jesus: Their Principal features and Social Origins,” *JSN*T 26(1986): 3-27; Martin Hengel, The Zealots (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), 229-33; Rebecca Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 112-44; John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star. Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 216-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)