

CHAPTER 13

ANCIENT JEWISH AND EARLY CHRISTIAN MILLENNIALISM

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EARLY Christian millennialism is quintessentially reflected in that most classic of all ancient millennial texts at the end of the New Testament, the book of Revelation:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years . . . that he should deceive the nations no more. . . . Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. . . . They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (Rev. 20: 1–4)¹

This specification of a precise period of *one thousand years*, during which Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations of the world and a select group of redeemed humans reign with Christ, gave rise to the term *Millennium* (Latin *mille*, “thousand”; the equivalent term in Greek is *chilias*, which in English becomes *chiliasm*).

Millennialism, as it developed in ancient Jewish and early Christian groups roughly from about 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., is a specific subset of apocalyptic eschatology—the notion that human history is drawing to an imminent, climactic close, at which point God decisively intervenes to usher in a era of peace, justice, and righteousness on Earth (see chapter 2 by Eugene V. Gallagher, this volume). What conditions or “signs” are expected to precipitate this divine judgment, as well as the precise implementation and characterization of the “reign of God,” make up the variables that run through a host of texts during this period. How dire and catastrophic are the conditions to be just before the “end”? Is a messianic figure to act as the key agent to bring about God’s judgment and rule? Who participates in the new era and how is it described? Is this new age of God’s reign to last for a specific period of time

(i.e., a “millennium”), or is it seen as a final “eternal” state of a perfected cosmos? If a specific intermediate period of time is specified between the present age and the eternal age to come, how do the conditions during a “millennial” period (whether precisely one thousand years or not) differ from the state of things thereafter?

What is fascinating about ancient Jewish and early Christian millennialism broadly conceived is that none of these variables are essential. In other words, there are texts that focus on messiah figures, while others have no messiah at all; texts that specify a period of time and those that have no such designations; and texts that describe the reign of God in earthly terms as well as those that envision a transcendent heavenly state.

Given this diversity, a general working definition of a millennial text or movement—at least in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world during this period—is one that expects a sudden end to ordinary human history, brought about by a decisive divine judgment, and followed by an ideal age *with or without* a specified intermediate period. When an intermediate period is expected, it typically functions as a lead-in to the more permanent ideal stage to follow. Such a new age involves a final judgment of humankind—both living and dead—the defeat of hostile angelic powers, and the collective salvation of the entire cosmos from evil, suffering, and death.

Since earliest Christianity can be viewed properly as a stream within the varied forms of apocalyptic Judaism of its time, its essential millenarian elements are paralleled in Jewish texts, and its origins and development are thoroughly Jewish (Collins 1984). The period under consideration—roughly the two hundred years before and after the time of Jesus—might well be called the heyday of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic eschatology. Scholars are divided as to the precise implications of Jesus’s proclamation that the “kingdom of God is at hand,” since there is nothing directly from Jesus that survives in the textual sources, so the methods for recovering the message of Jesus himself yield vastly differing results (Crossan 1992; Ehrman 2001). There is little doubt that the movement Jesus inspired was thoroughly apocalyptic, with a strong emphasis on the imminent arrival of the end of history (Schweitzer 1931; Gager 1975). There is evidence of such a plethora of similar movements and ideas during this period it is important to remember that the Jesus movement is just one of many, regardless of the dominance Christianity eventually achieved in the fourth century C.E. as a new religion separate from Judaism. Christianity’s millenarian roots are firmly grounded in the various forms of apocalyptic Judaism, which flourished and thrived in the two centuries before the birth of Jesus.

THE BIRTH OF MILLENNIAL HOPE

Although there is no strictly defined millenarian scheme in the Hebrew Bible, or in other Ancient Near Eastern texts prior to the second century B.C.E., the historical conditions and conceptual building blocks that gave rise to such a vision of the

future were beginning to emerge (see chapter 12 by Robert Gnuse, this volume). The crises brought upon the nation of Israel by the military invasions of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, resulting in exiles and occupation between 750 B.C.E. through the end of the fourth century B.C.E., set the stage for a response of hope and promise on the part of those pious Israelites who had faith in God and in the historic destiny of the nation of Israel as the chosen people. Although the Hebrew prophets denounced the Israelites for their moral failings and religious apostasy, they also invariably offered sketches of a more ideal future—often conditional upon the repentance of the people.

Millennialism, as it developed in emerging forms of Judaism around 200 B.C.E., was a response to a much older conceptual problem and a specific historical crisis brought on by a program of Hellenization initiated by the Macedonian ruler, Antiochus IV (r. 175–164 B.C.E.), a successor of Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.), who had conquered Syria-Palestine in 332 B.C.E. The conceptual problem was that of theodicy, namely, how could a world so full of injustice, suffering, tragedy, and evil ever be reconciled with faith in an all-powerful and good Creator—particularly one who promised to bless and prosper the righteous and punish the wicked? Why was God silent in the face of evil? “O LORD, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; render to the proud their deserts! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, *how long* shall the wicked exult?” (Psalm 94:1–3). In the most general sense, millenarian hope is a response to this cry of *how long*? If present conditions are seen to be irreparably hopeless, will there ever be a change in the future? The question “how long?” implies just such a hope, namely that God—and God alone as “judge of the earth”—will intervene decisively and bring about a sudden, dramatic, and drastic change of conditions. What will follow will be a new era, in which wars will cease among nations, justice and righteousness will fill the Earth, and even the ferocious nature of animals will be transformed (Isaiah 2:2–4; 11:4–8; 65:17–25).

Ironically, death itself was accepted in the Ancient Near East as the lot of humankind, since humans, made from the dust, to dust must return (Genesis 3:19). All the dead—small and great, good and bad—were destined to descend as shades to the underworld (Sheol), from which there would be no return (Job 3:11–19; *Gilgamesh Epic* 10.3, 7.4; Tabor 1989).

All this changed with the Hellenization policies of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), who apparently sought to suppress by force indigenous Jewish cultural and religious observances in Galilee and Judea. His efforts included sacking the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and setting up in its central sanctuary an altar to Zeus (167 B.C.E.). According to the pious Jewish author of 1 Maccabees, Antiochus burned Torah scrolls, forbade Jews to circumcise their sons, and forced the population to eat pork and offer sacrifices to the images of Greek gods—all under penalty of death (1 Maccabees 1: 20–23, 47–60). An armed resistance ensued, led by a priest named Matthias and his five sons, including the infamous Judas Maccabeus (Judas the “Hammer”).

The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, included in the Apocrypha, are the main sources for this crisis and its aftermath, and provide a very one-sided, pro-revolt,

version of the story.² Apparently, as the author of 1 Maccabees admits, many Jews welcomed the Hellenistic pluralism that Antiochus represented, so his more drastic moves were most likely precipitated by the armed resistance of a pious minority (1 Maccabees 1:41–45; M. Smith 1988; Cohen 2006). The Maccabees and their guerilla forces were successful in forcing the expulsion of Antiochus by 165 B.C.E., a victory celebrated to this day by the festival of Hanukkah. Judas set up an independent Jewish state with his brothers and their successors, forming a priestly royal dynasty known as the Hasmoneans. Ironically, though devoted to their ancestral Jewish laws and customs, the Hasmoneans were remarkably Hellenized themselves (Bickerman 1962, 93–111; Hengel 2003, 1: 267–309). Their control was short-lived, as the Romans under general Pompey (106–48 B.C.E.) invaded the Levant and made Syria-Palestine a Roman client in 63 B.C.E.

It was the religious response to this Maccabean revolt as formulated by the author of the book of Daniel, that shaped the parameters of most forms of apocalyptic millenarian Judaism, including early Christianity, in the centuries that followed. In the book of Daniel, which consists of a series of visions and dreams, the foreign invaders of the land of Israel are pictured as a series of successive ferocious wild beasts with their individual rulers as horns—a lion, a bear, a four-headed winged leopard, and an indescribable ten-horned beast with iron teeth and claws of bronze. The ten horns refer to the Seleucid successors of Alexander the Great—who was represented by the leopard. Antiochus IV is particularly singled out, described as a “little horn” sprouting up among the ten, and characterized as a “contemptible person” who blasphemed God and destroyed the “saints”—those faithful Maccabean martyrs who chose death rather than bowing to the demands of the king (Daniel 7:24–26; 11:21, 31–35).

What Daniel set forth as the solution to the crisis precipitated by Antiochus IV was not merely his defeat, which the Maccabees had accomplished, but nothing less than God’s imminent destruction of all the foreign kingdoms of the world and the sovereignty of the kingdom of God filling the Earth: “And in the days of those kings [Alexander’s successors] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). This victory, as Daniel envisioned it, was a cosmic one in which the people of God would be given rule over all nations: “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them” (Daniel 7:27). Another major component of the visions of the book of Daniel is the inclusion of chronological schemes related to what is called the “appointed time of the end.” Such calculations offer the possibility of a match between predicted events and the question of precisely *when* the end will come, and *how long* a given set of circumstances—usually the persecution of the righteous—will prevail (Daniel 8:19; 11:27, 29, 35). This periodization of history, and particularly of its final events, is gauged in prophetic “days” and “weeks,” which are then correlated with calendar years. For

example, when Daniel asks, “How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?” referring to the complete fulfillment of the end of days, he is told, “Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But go your way till the end; and you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days” (Daniel 12:11–12). Since this final calculation is the last verse in the book of Daniel and the seer himself no longer expects to live to see the culmination of history, here is an example of adjustment to earlier chronological schemes that had tied the “time of the end” to the activities of Antiochus Epiphanes—a prediction that obviously failed (Daniel 11:29–35).

A new and vitally important element in the book of Daniel is his declaration that God’s intervention in history will bring decisive judgment not only on those living at the end of time, but on the dead as well. He predicts that both the righteous and the wicked dead will be raised to life to experience either everlasting life or punishment: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). This passage is remarkable, as it stands as the earliest unambiguous reference to God raising the dead in the entire Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (Tabor 1989).

The book of Daniel becomes foundational for the Jewish or Jewish-Christian millenarian vision of the future that became paradigmatic in this period. It consists of four elements: (1) the expectation of the imminent overthrow of the worldly powers; (2) a series of “signs” or apocalyptic (Greek *apokalupsis* means “to reveal or unveil”) indicators that the end is near, despite a period of persecution and crisis; (3) a chronological scheme leading up to the time of the end that lends itself to calculations as to *when* key events will transpire; and (4) a final judgment in which both the living and the dead are punished or welcomed into the newly established kingdom of God. Each of these elements, particularly the last one, address the fundamental complaint that lies at the heart of any attempt at a biblical view of theodicy, which is reconciling a sovereign God with a world of injustice, evil, and death.

One of the great ironies in the history of Western ideas is that Daniel’s influence on subsequent Jewish and Christian views of the future had such a remarkable influence, given that everything predicted by Daniel *utterly failed!* The Romans soon replaced the Greeks as the latest occupiers of the land, even destroying the city of Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple in 70 C.E.; thousands of Jews and Christians were killed over the next few centuries; all chronological schemes played themselves out, and the dead—wicked or otherwise—were never raised. One might expect that a book that had proven itself to be wrong on every count would have long since been discarded as misguided and obsolete, but, in fact, the opposite was the case. Daniel’s victory was a literary one. As a written text purporting to contain secret revelations of God’s plan of world salvation, including specific events and calculations, Daniel not only survived but its influence increased. The book of Daniel became the foundational basis of *all* Jewish and Christian expressions of apocalyptic millenarianism for the next two thousand years.

Daniel’s essential schema of events, with subsequent and updated chronological calculations, was imposed upon subsequent times and sets of circumstances, in

efforts to find fits between prophecy and fulfillment. It seems that those sectarian Jewish and early Christian groups, who maintained faith in Daniel's predictions, were actually bolstered in their confidence that their millenarian rescue was just around the corner, even though its reality and realization was always one more generation away—never to be realized in one's lifetime. Indeed, this kind of slippage and recovery seems to function at the heart of most systems of catastrophic millennialism (chapter 2 by Eugene V. Gallagher, this volume). Daniel is the clearest example from this period of the "when prophecy fails" syndrome (Festinger, Reicken, and Schacter 1956; chapter 8 by Lorne L. Dawson, this volume). Despite its failed prophecies, the book of Daniel was grasped all the tighter to the collective breasts of those Jews and early Christians who, unwilling to accommodate to the cultural hegemony of Roman rule, continued to hope for God's intervention.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MILLENARIAN SCHEMES

The earliest evidence for the emergence of a millenarian periodization of history with reference to the Endtime comes in the "Apocalypse of Weeks," now found embedded in *1 (Ethiopic) Enoch* in section 5 of the book, titled "The Epistle of Enoch." This section of *1 Enoch* is dated usually to around 170 B.C.E., just before the Maccabean period. Fragments of this text in Aramaic have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, witnessing to its dating from the second century B.C.E. (VanderKam 1996, 33–60).

The pseudonymous author "Enoch" divides human history into prophetic "weeks" of unspecified duration, with an "apostate generation" arising in the seventh week, and at the end of that week, the chosen righteous ones of God triumphing (*1 Enoch* 93). The eighth week is characterized as "that of righteousness," and is followed by ninth and tenth weeks in which the cosmos is gradually subdued under God's rule. Following the tenth week a new creation appears and no further periods are marked. Since the author "Enoch" says he was born at the end of the first week, and the book of Genesis puts the birth of Enoch 622 years after Adam (Genesis 5:18), it is likely that in this book a "week" equals seven hundred years, with each prophetic "day" being one hundred years, so that here, for the first time, is a complete seven-thousand-year scheme of human history.

It is this notion of an allotted period totaling seven thousand years for the existence of creation that gives rise to the notion of a millennium, or thousand-year period, making up one "day" of a seven-day "week" of God. Psalm 90:4 says, "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night," speaking of God's perspective on time in contrast to that of a mere mortal, whose lifespan is said to be the proverbial "threescore and ten," or perhaps "four-score" (Psalm 90:10). Although Psalm 90 itself provides no apocalyptic context, the notion of one day of God equaling one thousand years became enormously

influential. The letter of 2 Peter, written in the late first or early second century C.E., when the fervency of early Christian apocalyptic hope was beginning to wane, warns readers, “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). The author concludes his exhortation with the affirmation, “But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

The appeal of the seven thousand years allotted to human history had to do with its correlation with the six “days” of creation in Genesis followed by a seventh-day Sabbath of rest—the thousand-year Millennium idea! Given this perspective, the chaos of human history with its unending tragedies, wars, injustices, diseases, and deaths appeared ordered, unfolding on schedule according to God’s master plan. Most importantly, human history had a final thousand-year period as its divinely guaranteed termination. Just as God had rested on the seventh day from his work of creation, humankind will experience a thousand years of “rest” from the disruptive chaos of human history.

2 (*Slavonic*) *Enoch*, a Jewish text with Christian interpolations, usually dated to the first century C.E., reflects this scheme, but with an additional reference to an “eighth” day to follow the seventh, in which there will be no more counting of time. God declares:

And I blessed the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, on which he rested from all his works. And I appointed the eighth day also, that the eighth day should be the first-created after my work, and that [the first seven] revolve in the form of the seventh thousand, and that at the beginning of the eighth thousand there should be a time of not-counting, endless, with neither years nor months nor weeks nor days nor hours. (32:3–33:1 in Charles 1896)

The early-second-century text *Barnabas* offers an expository overview of this general scheme, which gets repeated in many subsequent early Christian texts:

Pay attention, children, to what it means that “he finished in six days.” This means that in six thousand years the Lord will complete all things. For with him a day represents a thousand years. . . . And so, children, all things will be completed in six days—that is to say, in six thousand years. “And he rested on the seventh day.” This means that when his Son comes he will put an end to the age of the lawless one, judge the impious. . . . when lawlessness is no more and all things have been made new by the Lord. (*Barnabas* 15:4–7 in Ehrman 2003)

This is undoubtedly the perspective of the author of the New Testament book of Revelation, who assumes that his readers will be familiar with the notion of a final thousand years of millennial rest prior to the creation of the new heaven and the new Earth (Revelation 21:1). The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament makes the explicit connection:

For he has spoken somewhere of the seventh day in this way, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” [...] So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:4, 9)

The *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* (*2 Baruch*), which dates just after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E., explicitly raises the question that is the driving force behind most all apocalyptic and millennial texts of this period: “For how long will what is corruptible endure, and for how long will mortals thrive on earth, and the transgressors in the world continue their pollutions and corruptions?” (*2 Baruch* 21:19 in Sparks 1984). The author does not refer to a specific period of one thousand years, but he clearly describes a time following the revealing of the Messiah and the destruction of the two chaotic sea monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan, who represent satanic forces of evil: “The earth also shall yield its fruit ten thousand-fold; on each vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall produce a thousand clusters, and each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape produce a vat of wine” (*2 Baruch* 29:5 in Sparks 1984). What follows this unspecified era of abundance is the resurrection of all the dead and a period of final judgment, the same scheme reflected in the book of Revelation.

Not all texts of this period that reflect this general millennial pattern specify a period of precisely one thousand years. *2 Esdras* is a composite text, which mixes Jewish and early Christian perspectives, and was also written in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E.³ The author sets out his vision of the future:

For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice *four hundred years*. After those years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. Then the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginning, so that no one shall be left. After seven days... the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it, and the dust those who rest there in silence.... The Most High will be revealed on the seat of judgment. (*2 Esdras* 7:28–33; italics added)⁴

The text goes on to describe the destruction of the wicked in a pit of torment and a paradise for the righteous, who are predicted to be very few in number. This textual tradition, clearly stemming from Jewish sources, shows that Jewish groups were not as attracted to the *one-thousand-year* messianic age as Christians were. But what is more important here is that the general sequence of expectation remains the same: messianic age, followed by resurrection and final judgment, with punishments and rewards for all humankind.

There seems to be more variation in Jewish texts concerning the duration of the millennial age than in Christian texts. This is probably due to the eventual canonical status of the book of Revelation in the New Testament, which put its stamp of approval on the thousand-year Sabbath rest schema. Rabbinic references in the Talmud, looking back from the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., reflect speculative variations, as well as a general despair over all the predictions of the end that had failed. The age of the world is variously put at 4,250 years (eighty-five Jubilees), 4,230 years, and 6,000 years, under a general scheme that makes use of the seven-day creation pattern, but divides it quite differently from the Christians:

Rabbi Kattina taught: Six thousand years shall the world exist, and one thousand, the seventh, it shall be desolate, as it is written, “And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.” [...] Just as the seventh year is one year of release in seven, so is the world: one thousand years out of seven shall be fallow. (*Sanhedrin* 93b in Epstein 1978)

To which Rabbi Eliyyahu replied:

The world is to exist six thousand years. In the first two thousand there was desolation [no Torah]; two thousand years the Torah flourished; and the next two thousand years is the Messianic era, but through our many iniquities all these years have been lost. (*Sanhedrin* 93b in Epstein 1978)

The observation that “all these years have been lost” reflects despair over such calculations, which led one rabbi to declare, “Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end” (*Sanhedrin* 97b in Epstein 1978). The general view of the rabbis of Late Antiquity was, “All the predestined dates for redemption have passed, and the matter depends only on repentance and good deeds” (*Sanhedrin* 97b in Epstein 1978).

WHEN PROPHECY FAILS

The Dead Sea Scrolls were written by an intensely apocalyptic Jewish sect that flourished in the second and first centuries B.C.E. and is often identified with the Essenes mentioned in classical sources (VanderKam and Flint 2002, 239–54). The life of this sect, so intensely tied to the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible including the book of Daniel, offers us a glimpse into the ways in which a group of this period learned to cope with the disappointment that came with the failure of their expectations, particularly in terms of a chronological scheme or date-setting. Following the demise of their founding leader, whom they referred to as the “Teacher of Righteousness,” apparently the community expected the arrival of the Messiah within forty years. They based this on Daniel 9 in which there is a final 490-year period (“seventy weeks of years”) leading to the arrival of the Messiah (Daniel 9:24–27). They understood this period as being ten Jubilees of forty-five years. Since a Jubilee is seven cycles of seven years, the group had calculated that they had reached the point of the “first week of the tenth Jubilee,” or about forty years from the end:

From the day of the gathering in of the Teacher of the Community until the end of all the men of war who deserted to the Liar, there shall pass about forty years. (*Damascus Document* B19 in Vermes 1997)

None of the men who enter the New Covenant in the land of Damascus and who again betray it and depart from the fountain of living waters, shall be reckoned with the Council of the people or inscribed in its Book, from the day of gathering

in of the Teacher of the Community until the comings of the Messiah out of Aaron and Israel. (*Damascus Document* B20 in Vermes 1997)

Another scroll, commenting on the Psalms, also alludes to this forty-year period:

“A little while and the wicked shall be no more; I will look towards his place but he shall not be there” [quoting Psalm 37:10]. Interpreted, this concerns all the wicked. At the end of the forty years they shall be blotted out and not a man shall be found on earth. (*4Q171* in Vermes 1997)

After the forty years passed without any Messiah arriving to lead them in the absence of their teacher, the Dead Sea Scrolls community faced a genuine crisis of faith. Their response is preserved in a commentary written on the book of Habakkuk:

This concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets. For there shall be yet another vision concerning the appointed time. It shall tell of the end and shall not lie. Interpreted, this means that the final age shall be prolonged, and shall exceed all that the Prophets have said; for the mysteries of God are astounding. If it tarries, wait for it, for it shall surely come and shall not be late. (*1QpHab* VII in Vermes 1997)

Here we find two related notions that often come up in texts of this period: first, the age will be prolonged and extend longer than all the prophets declared; and second, if the vision seems to “tarry,” wait for it, for in God’s timing it is not “late.”

A very similar predictive crisis is reflected in the so-called Synoptic Apocalypse of Mark 13, where Jesus predicts the end of the age, connecting it to the desolation of the Jerusalem Temple by a Antiochus-like foreign invader, based on the prophecies of the book of Daniel (Mark 13:1–4, 14). According to this text, the coming of the “Son of Man in the clouds of heaven,” will occur “immediately, after that tribulation, in those days” (Mark 13:24). The prophecy ends with the fateful declaration “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place” (Mark 13:30). Since a generation was thought to be about forty years, the early Christians, based on Mark, expected Jesus’s return—much like those in the Dead Sea Scroll community a hundred years earlier—within forty years of the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 c.e. As the decades passed, they faced the same kind of crisis that apocalyptic Jewish groups had dealt with since the time of the Maccabees—what they most hoped for never came, and what they least expected turned out to be their new reality. In the case of the early Christians, from Mark to the book of Revelation, their hopes and dreams were dashed. Jesus never returned, the “beast” power—now identified with the Roman emperors—thrived and even reached its zenith in the second century c.e. under Hadrian (r. 117–38 c.e.) and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–80 c.e.), and any calculation schema related to a final generation of forty years became impossible to maintain. Those texts that counseled patience concerning apparently failed prophecies, such as 2 Peter, gradually became less and less compelling as history continued and no cosmic salvation was in sight.

MOVE TO A SYMBOLIC MILLENNIUM

Although the history of Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, has millenarian movements in every century, generally, Christians in the second and third centuries C.E. began to deal with apocalyptic and millennial expectations in a less literal and more symbolic way. The emphasis on a literal view of the Millennium continues in the writings of Papias (c. 130 C.E.), Justin Martyr (c. 150 C.E.), and Irenaeus (c. 180 C.E.), but with less emphasis on apocalyptic predictions of precisely when the end might come. By the third century C.E., any literal view of the Millennium was increasingly seen as materialistic and inferior, and apocalyptic interpretations of the book of Revelation were disfavored (Ford 1992, 4:833–34). The early-third-century theologian Origen (185–254), along with his teacher, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), favored a more philosophical Neoplatonic interpretation of the Millennium. Origen suggested that the thousand-year reign of Christ predicted in Revelation 20 referred not to an apocalyptic future, but to the present age in which Christ reigned in heaven as sovereign Lord of the cosmos and those reborn through baptism were its “resurrected” participants (Werner 1957, 269–304). Eusebius (c. 263–339), writing in the early fourth century C.E., explicitly criticized Papias, who was otherwise revered as one who had learned directly from the apostle John:

Among them he [Papias] says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that he got these notions by a perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that they had spoken mystically and symbolically. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.12–13 in Oulton and Lawlor 1932)

The move from the “earthly” to the “heavenly” Christian Millennium found its culmination in the influential work *The City of God*, written in the early fifth century C.E. by Augustine (354–430). Christians increasingly identified any literal interpretations of the Millennium with the “inferior” views of the “Jews,” who had expected an earthly rather than a heavenly kingdom (Bietenhard 1953).

CONCLUSION

Millennialism is a response to the all-too-human yearning for a better world, free from the chaos of nature and vicissitudes of suffering, injustice, and human failure. The more acute the perceived crisis, whether within one’s individual clan, or affecting the fortunes of one’s culture or homeland, the more desperate the longing. Catastrophic millennialism, especially with its apocalyptic overlay, is born in a cry—even a scream—for a sudden and grand deliverance, a collective and instant salvation, the imminence of which is signaled—even guaranteed—by certain prophetic “signs” assuring the believer the time of the end is at hand.

In this formative four-hundred-year period from 200 B.C.E. to around 200 C.E., a more specific millenarian perspective began to develop among *sectarian* forms of Judaism from which Jesus and his movement arose. This was not the view of the mainstream culture, nor even that of the Jewish religious establishment, which had long ago made its peace with the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture that permeated the Levant (Hengel 2003). Even the triumphant Hasmonean rulers of the Maccabean family rushed to make alliances with Rome and lived a lifestyle akin to other Hellenistic monarchs of the time. The social and economic benefits of Roman rule, especially in the reigns of the Roman emperors Augustus (r. 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) and Tiberius (14–37 C.E.), and even under rulers as cruel and capricious as Herod the Great (r. 37 or 36–4 or 1 B.C.E) and his successors, were considerable. Jews, both in the homeland and Diaspora, were given unprecedented freedoms and privileges by the Romans, accommodating their religious scruples. Jews were not required to worship the Roman gods, take oaths of allegiance, or serve in the army. Judaism thrived in all the major population centers of the Mediterranean world (Feldman 1993).

Apocalyptic millenarianism at that time was a minority perspective arising out of a religious fundamentalism based on the biblical promises to Israel, as God's chosen people, and the messianic hopes expressed in the Hebrew Prophets. There is a sense in which these particular millennial hopes, especially in the homeland of Judea and Galilee—the ancient Land of Israel—were based not so much on oppressive social and cultural circumstances as *upon the reading of sacred texts*. One text, in particular, was the foundation of all the apocalyptic schemes and dreams of this period—the book of Daniel. The messianic pro-millennial hopes of books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even the more apocalyptic perspectives of Zechariah, were not specific enough to give apocalyptic ideologies their running legs. Their collective message was that someday, somehow, God would intervene to judge the world and restore the fortunes of God's people. It was Daniel that provided the how, the when, and the where, by means of a set of signs, symbols and chronological possibilities that were flexible enough to be appropriated for the next two millennia, drawing the attention of a host of disparate devotees, from the Dead Sea Scrolls community to Jesus and his early followers, to Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727), to thousands of contemporary fundamentalist Christians today (Collins 2010; Ehrman 2001; Newton 1733; Boyer 1992).

Josephus (37–c. 100 C.E.), the first-century Jewish historian who wrote an eyewitness chronicle of the first Jewish revolt against Rome that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem as well as the Jewish Temple, makes a startling admission as to the causes of the war:

Now, if any one consider these things, he will find that God takes care of mankind, and by all ways possible foreshows to our race what is for their preservation; but that men perish by those miseries which they madly and voluntarily bring upon themselves.... But now, what did most elevate them in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable

earth.” The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. (*Jewish War* 6.310–16 in Whiston 2003)

Josephus’ reference here to an “ambiguous oracle” predicting the “time” when the Messiah would arrive is a clear reference to the “seventy weeks” prophecy of Daniel 9, which a variety of sectarian Jewish groups of the time, including the Dead Sea Scroll community, had calculated to terminate sometime around the first century C.E. Jesus, according to our earliest sources, began his preaching by proclaiming that the “time was fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15), also clearly referring to Daniel’s countdown chronology. In the Synoptic Apocalypse it is a sign from the book of Daniel that signals the end (Matt. 24:15). The apostle Paul refers to the “appointed time” having grown very short, recommending that people not even get married, another clear reference to Daniel (1 Cor. 7:29). The book of Revelation, which became one of the most influential books in the Christian canon, is essentially an elaboration on the prophecies of the book of Daniel.

It can be said that apocalyptic millenarianism among ancient Jewish and early Christian groups is largely a history of footnotes and reappropriations of the perspective of the book of Daniel. The power of Daniel lies in the potential “fit” it provides between chronological schemes, a set of political conditions involving Jerusalem and the land of Israel, and the oppression of a quintessential “final evil ruler” who threatens to slaughter those who do not conform. From Antiochus IV to Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) the pattern is the same, and each time a given group of people, identifying themselves as God’s chosen people, find themselves in such circumstances, the influence of the book of Daniel (and, for Christians, the book of Revelation) thrives.

H. H. Rowley, the incomparable pioneer of twentieth-century academic study of the origins of apocalyptic millenarianism, gave a series of lectures in England in 1942 on the “Relevance of Apocalyptic.” These were the darkest days of World War II, when the fate of Europe hung in the balance. At that time, Hitler had taken most of Europe and General Rommel had orders to march to Jerusalem, link up with Arab allies and crush the Zionists once and for all, while dissident evangelical Christians and other sectarian groups had been imprisoned or killed under the Third Reich. One could hardly imagine a better candidate for the final ferocious Beast of Daniel and Revelation than Nazi Germany with its *Führer*. In both the United States and Britain, the Bible prophecy movement was having a heyday. Rowley made a cautionary but astute observation:

Yet where for more than two thousand years a hope has proved illusory, we should beware of embracing it afresh. The writers of these books were mistaken in their hopes of imminent deliverance; their interpreters who believed the consummation was imminent in their day proved mistaken; and they who bring the same principles and the same hopes afresh to the prophecies will prove equally mistaken. (Rowley 1944, 173–74)

History remains open ended, while the message of the book of Daniel and most of the other millenarian texts of this period speak perennially to humans living in troubled times. Having an understanding of the origins and development of these texts provides an essential interpretive perspective for modern readers who want to approach them today.

NOTES

1. Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. The Apocrypha consists of ten books, most dating to the two centuries before the Common Era, included as part of the Roman Catholic Old Testament canon, which are not accepted by Jews or Protestants as part of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.
3. *2 Esdras* is made up of three works: *4th Ezra*, an apocalypse by a Jewish author of the late first century C.E., and two much later Christian supplements, *5 Ezra* and *6 Ezra*. Although it was not included in the Roman Catholic canon as defined at the Council of Trent in 1546, the Western Church was very attached to it, and it is found in many manuscripts of the Vulgate, or Latin Old Testament. It has no standing in the Greek Church, though the Armenians give it a semi-canonical status.
4. Translation from the New Revised Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha.

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