



## The Prophet from Egypt

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### Introduction

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In his CDAMM article on '[Early Jewish Sign Prophets](#),' Nathan C. Johnson looks at first-century Jewish [millenarian](#) figures as described by Josephus, the Jewish historian writing towards the end of the first century. Here is an excerpt on one figure: The Prophet from Egypt. (ca. 55 CE; Acts 21:38; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.261-63; *Jewish Antiquities* 20.169-72)

### The Prophet from Egypt

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Another deemed by Josephus to be a 'charlatan', the [prophet](#) from Egypt (commonly known as 'the Egyptian'), also came to prominence during the reign of Felix (52-60 CE). Josephus's accounts in both *Antiquities* and *War* follow his general account of the wilderness gatherings, and so fit within his narrative of wide social decline precipitated by the Sicarii and false prophets.

*Jewish War* presents an aptly militarized account of the Egyptian prophet's activities. After gathering a following of 'around thirty thousand dupes' (2.261), the prophet led them from the wilderness, where they had gathered, to the Mount of Olives, just east of the temple mount in Jerusalem. From there, the prophet aimed to force his way into the city, subdue the Roman military, and establish himself as king. On this account, it is unclear how exactly the Egyptian prophet envisioned succeeding: even with thirty thousand militants (a typical Josephan exaggeration), the walls of Jerusalem would have been all but impenetrable, as shown in the protracted, months-long Roman siege of the city a little over a decade later. Further, Acts of the Apostles (21:38) gives the more modest estimate of four thousand followers, making the insurgency even less likely.

Josephus's other account (in *Jewish Antiquities*) gives a more plausible, if equally daring, explanation: the Egyptian prophet 'said that he wanted to demonstrate [to his followers] that at his command from the Mount of Olives the walls of Jerusalem would fall, through which he promised to give them entrance into the city' (20.170). Here the [millenarian](#) logic of the attack is clear: Israel's God would aid the movement to overcome the otherwise insurmountable fortifications of the city. The plan of attack, of course, fits the conquest narrative of old, where at Joshua's command the people shouted and the walls of Jericho tumbled

down, and the Israelites rushed in to destroy and conquer (Joshua 6:16). Further, the Mount of Olives symbolized the location from which Jerusalem would be liberated in the [apocalyptic prophecy](#) of Zechariah 14. Thus, what 'an earlier prophet [Zechariah] had imagined', Richard Horsley notes, 'now several thousand peasants, eager to be freed from alien domination', enacted at the behest of a latter-day prophet (Horsley with Hanson 1999, 170).

Further elements of the movement also correspond to Israel's scriptures: like Moses and Joshua, the prophet came from Egypt and went into Judea. Also like them, he 'led by a circuitous route' in the wilderness (*Jewish War* 2.262; Amos 2:10 LXX). Taken together, these references to Israel's past liberation cemented the role of the Egyptian prophet as God's chosen leader, further inspiring confidence among his followers. In short, God had done it in the past, and could do so again in the present.

Once God had acted to level the walls, the prophet would take on the role of king, dismissively labelled 'tyrant of the people' by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.262). Jewish independence would once again be restored. But can these actions be said to be 'millennial', in the sense that something total and final was expected, something encompassing more than just Jewish self-determination?

Collins (2010) believes so, finding the Egyptians' movement to be thoroughly eschatological: 'If indeed the Egyptian expected the walls of Jerusalem to fall down, then his expectations can hardly be reduced to the hope that he himself would rule instead of the Romans. The miracle was surely supposed to be the prelude to a definitive transformation' (217-18). While this goes beyond the evidence, it does fit with the movement's combination of militaristic (the conquest) and [apocalyptic](#) (Zechariah) motifs. Indeed, Zechariah's [prophecy](#) envisions a similarly final scenario: after Jerusalem was taken in battle by a foreign nation, the Lord and an angelic army would fight to take back the city, launching an offensive from the Mount of Olives. Then, 'never again shall it be doomed to destruction; Jerusalem shall abide in security' (Zechariah 14:11). The foreign nations could only return to worship the king and bring him tribute (v. 16); otherwise, if they so much as hinted at war, their flesh would rot off.

Predictably, the Egyptian prophet's dream of a final theocracy was never realized: Felix the procurator sent out heavily armed infantry against the insurgents. Many were killed, others imprisoned, yet the Egyptian prophet escaped—indeed, Paul of Tarsus was later purportedly misidentified as him (Acts 21:38). If Luke's historical account is to be believed, the Egyptian prophet was still at large—or at least his memory was.

## References

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## Article information

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