

# Nuancing the ‘Millennium’ in the Writings of Norman Cohn

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**Abstract:** The great historian of apocalypticism Norman Cohn’s work *The Pursuit of the Millennium* demonstrated that certain anxiety-filled socio-political situations produced apocalyptic expectation among the masses which was exploited by charismatic charlatans who set themselves up as messianic saviours, often with devastating results. Cohn believed that understanding these socio-political and religious factors could help explain why so many people embraced Nationalism Socialism and Communism in the twentieth century. This article argues that while Cohn’s approach towards the medieval and modern movements is valid and important, he nevertheless misrepresents the apocalyptic expectations of intertestamental Judaism and early Christianity by not taking into serious consideration the nuances in their respective approaches towards the ‘last things.’ This article provides definitions of related terms, apocalypticism, eschatology, chiliasm, and millenarianism or millenarism, before demonstrating that Cohn’s conflation of them under the latter—that is, the ‘millennium’—does not accurately reflect the belief of the earliest Christians—exhibited by their main apologetic representatives (Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian)—that God’s kingdom, which was ostensibly meant to be ushered in by the apocalyptic millennium—is experienced already in the Church but will not be consummated until the second coming of Christ (i.e. the already/not yet tension). It contextualises Cohn’s approach and the precipitating factors that led to his assessment in order to demonstrate that, while he indeed set the benchmark for just how scholars analyse the expectation of the end-times in intertestamental Judaism, earliest Christianity and the Middle Ages, more work needs to be done to consistently represent what the intertestamental Jews and earliest Christians believed about the ‘last things.’

**Keywords:** Eschatology, Apocalypticism, Millenarianism, Norman Cohn, Patristics.

## Introduction

Apocalypticism is a multivalent concept. Etymologically, it derives from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*), meaning ‘revelation,’ and indeed many apocalyptic texts are concerned with a revelation of either heaven or hell disclosed by God to a prophet, seer, or saint in the here and now. These revelations may refer to the end of the world (eschatology), or to the beginning of the world (protology), or to the world’s present circumstances; where the world is often understood as comprising spiritual and material realms.

While not exclusive to Christianity, it is nevertheless with the conventional Christian form of apocalypticism that this article is concerned. This form of apocalypticism is manifested in the last book of the New Testament, also called Revelation, from which the apocalyptic genre derives its name. The book of Revelation is just one of many apocalyptic texts that were popular among both Jews and Christians in the first few centuries AD. Apocalypticism is also related to eschatology, a term that derives from the Greek word τὰ ἔσχατα (*ta eschata*) as a noun in the plural tense,<sup>1</sup> which means “the last things.” Generally, these ‘last things’ concern

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the end of the world, which is associated with the second coming of Christ, who in the four Gospels describes himself—in light of Old Testament and intertestamental prophecies—as the “Son of Man,” before whom “all nations will be gathered” before he returns “in his glory” (Matthew 25: 31-32) at his second coming, where he will resurrect and judge the living and the dead. But since Christians believe Christ to have already resurrected, the kingdom inaugurated by Christ, and the resurrectional life that it promises, was believed by the earliest Christian communities as somehow *already* having begun in Christ’s ministry—namely in the Church he founded—but as *not yet* fulfilled. This is described by contemporary scholarship as the already/not yet tension.<sup>2</sup>

In scholarship, apocalypticism, eschatology, and the already/not yet tension, are often related to another concept, that of millenarianism. The late Norman Cohn (d. 2007) is widely considered a pioneer in the study of millenarianism, the belief that, at the end of the present world order, Jesus Christ would return to rule specifically for a thousand years—a millennium—with his saints in a blissful kingdom on earth. However, his return would be preceded by social upheaval and terrible violence perpetuated by his agents, self-styled revolutionary millenarians. This approach towards the study of the end times, or eschatology, overshadowed the very complex and nuanced perception of these phenomena by the earliest Christians, who, we have seen, believed that God’s kingdom had already been established with Christ’s resurrection from the dead and his establishment of the Church, but was not yet consummated, and would not be until his second coming. Moreover, the apocalypse that would precede the consummation of that kingdom was not associated with doomsday, but was, as noted, primarily a revelation from God’s heavenly kingdom to living prophets or seers.

This article contests Norman Cohn’s approach towards millenarianism, which he considered equivalent to apocalypticism and eschatology more broadly, by nuancing these definitions and contextualising and analysing the main factors that influenced his use of the term millenarianism or millennialism in such a way as to denote a terrible end to the present world order initiated by crazed *prophetae*. These factors included not only his own experiences during and in the aftermath of the second World War, but also his assessment of the approach of some early apologetic and patristic writers, Papias (60-130), St Justin Martyr (100-165), St Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202), Tertullian (160-220), Origen (185-254), and St Augustine (354-430), to the ‘millennium’ from a literalistic point of view. This article returns to these sources to demonstrate that their articulation of the millennium should be understood as principally referring to their belief in the experience of God’s kingdom that can be partaken of in the here and now within the Church, but which will not be consummated until the eschaton, the ‘last things.’ It will also analyse the interpretation of the thousand-year duration in Revelation 20:3-4 and 6 by medieval chronographers as demonstrating a deviation from the patristic approach to eschatology by interpreting this chronological period literally. It is the literalistic approach of the chronographers which, this article argues, comprises the main source for apocalypticism understood as millenarianism, i.e., the literal reign of Christ with his saints for a thousand years, which influenced both Cohn and his scholarly milieu.

### Norman Cohn and the Millennium

In scholarly circles, no author better analysed the historical manifestations of apocalypticism than the late Norman Cohn. His seminal work, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, published for

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titled *From the Ancient Near East to Christian Byzantium: Kings, Symbols, and Cities* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 551.

<sup>2</sup> David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 185.

the first time in 1957, gained cult-like status among academics and students when it was first released. Its inclusion in 1995 on the *Times Literary Supplement* list of the 100 “nonfiction works with the greatest influence on how post-war Europeans perceive themselves”<sup>3</sup> indicates that its appeal has still not waned. In fact, Cohn inspired a whole host of academics and popular writers on apocalypticism, or what can be called—in line with his *Pursuit*—millenarianism or millennialism (sometimes millenarism). Millenarianism is derived from the Latin words *mille* and *annum*,<sup>4</sup> and has its “semantic background in the Vulgate version of the New Testament,”<sup>5</sup> i.e., of St Jerome’s Latin translation, specifically verses 3-4 and 6 of Revelation chapter 20, where Christ’s second coming is marked by his rule with his saints for “a thousand years,” which in Latin is *mille annis*.

Millenarianism has been subject to various interpretations, including premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism, that have been succinctly described by G. K. Beale as follows:

Some believe that the millennium will occur after the second coming of Christ [premillennialism] ... Postmillennialism has held that the millennium occurs towards the end of the Church age and that Christ’s climactic coming will occur at the close of the millennium ... Others believe that the millennium started at Christ’s resurrection and will be concluded at his final coming [amillennialism].<sup>6</sup>

In contemporary scholarship, however, millenarianism is often taken as the standard form of eschatology in the early Church and is often misrepresented. This article argues that this misrepresentation of eschatology was popularised by Norman Cohn with *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, which, in the 1962 version of his book, highlighted a relationship between the millenarianism of the Jews of the intertestamental period and the early Christians in the most general sense. Cohn wrote to this end:

...there existed an eschatology, or body of doctrine concerning the final state of the world, which was *chiliastic* in the most general sense of the term—meaning that it foretold a Millennium, not necessarily limited to a thousand years and indeed not necessarily limited at all, in which the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy.<sup>7</sup>

Chiliasm, coming from the Greek word χίλια (*chilia*), just means “one thousand” and consists of an alternate way of referring to millenarianism. In any case, the best part of Cohn’s above definition is the allowance that the millennium as the earliest Christians conceived it is “not necessarily limited to a thousand years,” or at all. Still, the brushstroke association of millenarianism with eschatology, without attempting to delineate the various nuances of the latter, is problematic in this work because one will find therein that all references to millenarianism and, by inference, apocalypticism—and, implicitly, eschatology—essentially mean the same thing: namely that the intertestamental Jews and the earliest Christians were preoccupied with the imminent end of the present world order, which could only come about through violence, “the final struggle between the hosts of Christ and the hosts of Antichrist.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Martin, ‘Norman Cohn, Historian, Dies at 92’, *New York Times* (2007). At: [www.nytimes.com/2007/08/27/world/europe/27cohn.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/27/world/europe/27cohn.html). Last Accessed 21/07/23.

<sup>4</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), p. 125, p. 1144.

<sup>5</sup> Garry W. Trompf, ‘Millenarism: History, Sociology, and Cross-cultural Analysis,’ *Journal of Religious History* (2000), pp. 103-124, esp. p. 104

<sup>6</sup> G. K. Beale (ed.), *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 973.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London: Mercury Books, 1962), p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. xiii.

Cohn was interested to show that since the emergence of this belief, in times of social unrest, particularly in the Middle Ages, the “discontented masses were captured by some millennial prophet,” and that these millennial prophets—particularly the ones active in the Middle Ages—pointed towards the destructive forces of National Socialism and Bolshevism, “the totalitarian movements of our own day.”<sup>9</sup>

Although he admitted that to “identify the world of chiliastic expectation with the world of social unrest” was a “gross over-simplification,”<sup>10</sup> what results from Cohn’s analysis is a sweeping generalisation of the earliest Jewish and Christian beliefs that ostensibly inspired these movements. Cohn was of course correct in relation to some of the medieval millenarian or chiliastic movements that he addressed: the adherents of the people’s crusades, the flagellants, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Taborites and Amorites of Bohemia, and many other “amoral-elitists” and “egalitarians.”<sup>11</sup> These were indeed motivated, at least partially, by social unrest and followed self-styled messiahs. Cohn designated the leaders of these movements as *prophetae* that had materialistic concerns and who often led these groups to violence and disaster. But these groups have very little to do with the disposition of the intertestamental Jews or the early Christians towards the eschaton, and although Cohn correctly pointed out that the official Church in the medieval West was not to be confused with these groups, he still attempted to show that the earliest Christians did unilaterally hold these beliefs, which was evidently not the case. Thus, what results from Cohn’s analysis is an anachronistic construal of early Christianity—his main concern after addressing the Jewish intertestamental period—as anarchic and destructive.

This is not to mention the unfortunate association of early Christian eschatology with modern totalitarianism. In the 1970 reissue of his book, Cohn omitted any references to modern totalitarianism, which were there in both the introduction and conclusion to the 1957 and 1962 editions. Instead, he began by giving a more nuanced assessment of early Christian eschatology; that millenarianism was only one variant of that eschatology, which had to do with:

the belief held by some Christians, on the authority of the Book of Revelation (XX, 4-6), that after his second coming Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and would reign over it for a thousand years before the Last Judgement. According to the Book of Revelation the citizens of that kingdom will be the Christian martyrs, who are to be resurrected for the purpose of a thousand years in advance of the general resurrection of the dead. But the early Christians already interpreted that part of the prophecy in a liberal rather than a literal sense, in that they equated the martyrs with the suffering faithful—i.e. themselves—and expected the Second Coming in their lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

This definition of millenarianism—which does not appear in the previous two editions of the *Pursuit*—does well in trying to show that not all the earliest Christians believed in a literal millennial reign of Christ with his saints. Rather, they believed that they were experiencing the ‘millennium’ before Christ’s second coming, a form of postmillennialism. Yet this is still an oversimplification of the earliest Christian approach towards the eschaton, since the thousand-year duration mentioned in Revelation should be interpreted from the point of view of Christian numerology, where the number ten denotes the perfect reign of Christ and his saints within the

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<sup>9</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. iii-iv.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 15.

Church (*already*) and beyond it (*not yet*). Indeed, Grant R. Osborne, following St Augustine,<sup>13</sup> affirms that “multiples of ten were commonly used by Jewish writings symbolically, and it is likely that this [thousand years] refers to an indefinite but perfect period of time.”<sup>14</sup> Cohn in any case identified, as he did in the previous editions of the *Pursuit*, references to this thousand year reign in the earliest Christian apologists—and thus the main literary representatives of early Christianity—including Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Tertullian, before addressing its persistence into the Middle Ages.

Indeed, Justin,<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>16</sup> and Tertullian<sup>17</sup> seem at first glance to reflect millenarian views. This is noted by Cohn, who asserted that the millennial hope in revelation was advocated in a militant manner by the Montanists, before claiming that Papias, Tertullian, Justin, and Irenaeus held these views.<sup>18</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins<sup>19</sup> and Brian E. Daley<sup>20</sup> take up this approach, along with James D. Tabor.<sup>21</sup> The latter pretty much follows Cohn’s trajectory, without acknowledgment, when he wrote that:

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.<sup>22</sup>

Cohn stated regarding Justin that, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, “Justin replies that, while not all true Christians are of that [millenarian] persuasion, he and many others are united in the confident belief that the Saints will indeed live a thousand years in a rebuilt, adorned, heavenly Jerusalem.”<sup>23</sup> Charles Hill has already demonstrated that Justin does not mention an “expected earthly kingdom of Christ,”<sup>24</sup> but from the *Dialogue* it is clear that Justin referred to this thousand-year period as marked by the resurrection of the dead and the building of a restored Jerusalem as prophesied by Ezekiel and Isaiah:<sup>25</sup> both of whom foresaw the advent of an eschatological or spiritual Jerusalem on earth (thus, heaven and earth are conjoined) and not necessarily a rebuilding of the existing one on the mere terrestrial plane, i.e., an earthly millennial kingdom that is read into these sources by scholars.

In the case of Irenaeus, who dealt with the eschaton in his *Against Heresies*, there is no mention of Christ’s thousand-year reign. Far from espousing a literal belief in the millennium, Irenaeus wrote about an allegorical interpretation of the “biblical promises of an earthly

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* XVIII.36-XX, trans. William Chase Greene (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 287, p. 289.

<sup>14</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 701.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew* LXXXI, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), p. 240.

<sup>16</sup> Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 238.

<sup>17</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), pp. 25-27.

<sup>19</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘The Book of Revelation’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard J. McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein, pp. 195-220 (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), p. 214.

<sup>20</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, pp. 224-227.

<sup>21</sup> James D. Tabor, ‘Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Millennialism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger, pp. 252-266 (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> Tabor, ‘Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Millennialism’, p. 262.

<sup>23</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caeolorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew* LXXXI, p. 240.

restoration of Israel”<sup>26</sup> and opposed Gnosticism by affirming the resurrection of the body at the eschaton and “the inclusion of the material side of creation in the unified [i.e. material-spiritual] plan of God’s salvation.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that the word ‘millennium’ is not mentioned by Irenaeus is surprising, given that Cohn,<sup>28</sup> Daley,<sup>29</sup> Hill,<sup>30</sup> and Tabor<sup>31</sup> all describe him as a millenarian. Tertullian was certainly a believer in the imminent end of the world, yet even he—so often referred to as a believer in the thousand year “restored, earthly Jerusalem”<sup>32</sup>—referred to the resurrection of believers in a divinely built city of Jerusalem that has come from heaven. This is no mere terrestrial city. As for Papias, who wrote allegorically of vines with “ten thousand shoots” and “ten thousand twigs” and “ten thousand bunches” and “ten thousand grapes” as referring to the multiplication of believers: how anyone can read a literal millennium into this, as Daley does, following Cohn and basing himself on Eusebius of Caesarea, is strange,<sup>33</sup> especially in light of what we have said about the numerological significance of the number ten denoting totality or perfection.

If Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian were not necessarily millenarian, then just where does millenarianism—which is, we have seen, one of the main preoccupation of scholars that study the end times—come from? The answer can be found in late antique and medieval chronography. Indeed, millenarian trends can consistently be discerned in the computation of the date of the eschaton, what Richard Landes has called the “sabbatical millennium,” that the world would end around the turn of the year 6000 according to the *Anno Mundi* dating system<sup>34</sup> that corresponds to the seven days of creation in the book of Genesis (where each day equals one thousand years). For some early chronographers, the turn of the 6000<sup>th</sup> year would inaugurate the seventh—sabbatical or eschatological—millennium of the rule of Christ with his saints. This is an emphatic example of premillennialism. This *Anno Mundi* system was replaced in Western Europe only gradually from the sixth century onwards by the *Anno Domini* system invented by Dionysius Exiguus. If we were to use the latter system, we find that the end of the world was variously calculated by these authors as taking place at several distinct junctures, at AD 500, 800, the approach of AD 1000,<sup>35</sup> and AD 1033, who also varied in their pre- and post-millennial approaches to the end of the world.

Nevertheless, I do not agree with Landes’ assertion that, in the early Christian period the chronographical division of the duration of the world into thousand year periods—from its creation to the end of time computed at either the millennial juncture of the year 6000 (500, 800, and 1000 AD) or at the end of 1000 AD (according to the *Anno Domini* system)—may have led to confusion as to just what people were expecting to occur at the eschaton. Since the end, according to this literalist rendering of the phenomenon, is to occur at the end of a fixed thousand-year period—whether calculated according to the *Anno Mundi* or *Anno Domini* system—then the eschaton must also last for a thousand years. But these are not aspects that Cohn addresses in any detail, if at all. In fact, bypassing them meant that he would have to look for the sources of millenarianism elsewhere, in the self-style radical messiahs of the Middle Ages who drew on Judaeo-Christian sources, as we shall see below.

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<sup>26</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Hill, *Regnum Caolorum*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>31</sup> Tabor, ‘Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Millennialism’, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Landes, ‘The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000: Augustinian Historiography, Medieval and Modern’, *Speculum* 75, no. 1 (2000), pp. 97-145, esp. p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Landes, ‘The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000’, p. 111.

Notwithstanding the fact that most Christians have always—and still do—believe in the second coming of Christ at the eschaton to judge the living and the dead and transform the universe, the belief in the earthly reign of Christ—in a manner which precludes the spiritual realm—for a fixed duration of a thousand years does not necessarily correspond to what the early sources, Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian—or even Revelation—say about the end times. Thus, we can safely state that the millennium, as described by Cohn and the scholars mentioned above, seems to be a construct, based on a literal reading of Revelation 20:3-4,6 by late antique and medieval chronographers which has then been read back into the ancient Christian sources by contemporary scholars both before and after Cohn, whose book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* nevertheless put this concept into the spotlight in modern times. Indeed, Cohn's approach has been so influential in the scholarship on apocalypticism/millennarianism that we must now turn to the precipitating factors that influenced him to place such an emphasis on the ostensibly millenarian expectations of the earliest Christians.

### **Contextualising Norman Cohn and his *Pursuit***

Born in 1915, Norman Cohn graduated from Oxford in Christ Church with a first in modern languages before serving in the British intelligence corps throughout the duration of World War II.<sup>36</sup> He therefore began his career as a linguist, but it was in the ruins of central Europe after the War that he began his first historical investigation into the sources of Bolshevik and Nazi ideologies.<sup>37</sup> Having lost several relatives in the Holocaust<sup>38</sup> before being exposed to imprisoned SS troops and Nazi literature while awaiting demobilisation, it was his intention to discover the antecedents of this devastating totalitarianism.<sup>39</sup> With no training as an historian, but with an excellent grasp of Latin, French, and German, he embarked on a lengthy investigation of sources for his book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, published, as we have seen, for the first time in 1957.

The reasons for Cohn's own pursuit of the millennium in these sources is complex. His ground-breaking work, *Warrant for Genocide*, which was first published in 1967, consisted of a detailed study of, as its subtitle indicates, *The myth of the Jewish world conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In it, he described what motivated his interest to research not only this book, but also his *Pursuit of the Millennium*:

In the winter of 1945, while awaiting demobilization in central Europe, I happened to have access to a large library of writings by Nazi and proto-Nazi ideologists and propagandists. Several months of reading, reinforced by contact with SS who were undergoing interrogation and investigation, left me with one pretty strong suspicion—that the drive to exterminate the Jews sprang from a quasi-demonological superstition. I began to suspect that the deadliest form of antisemitism, the kind that results in massacre and attempted genocide, had little to do with real conflicts of interest between living people, or even with radical prejudices as such. What I kept coming across was, rather, a conviction that Jews—all Jews everywhere in the world—form a conspiratorial body set on running and then dominating the rest of mankind.<sup>40</sup>

This quasi-demonological conspiracy can be traced back to the antisemitism of the Middle Ages and to the early Christian period.<sup>41</sup> In the nineteenth century, however, this form of

<sup>36</sup> William Lamont, 'Norman Cohn (1915-2007)', *History Workshop Journal* 67 (2009), pp. 297-298, esp. p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, 'Norman Cohn, Historian, Dies at 92.'

<sup>39</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. xii.

<sup>40</sup> Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elder of Zion* (London: Serif, 1967), p. xii.

<sup>41</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 25-26.

antisemitism was fused with a political motivation that flourished among those strata of society disenfranchised by the growing influence of “democracy, liberalism, and secularism”<sup>42</sup> in the epoch, namely the landed aristocracy and the clergy. These new developments were not interpreted as emerging from the defects of the old order but were rather viewed as the machinations of a world-wide conspiracy of Jews, who were identified either with demons or their servants.<sup>43</sup>

A large body of literature had been proliferating on the subject since the late 1700s, especially in (but not restricted to) France, Russia, and Germany. These works, drawing on more or less similar sources,<sup>44</sup> projected the initiation of a ‘new world order’ led by a Jewish antichrist: *The Great in the Small: Antichrist considered as an immanent political possibility, He is Near, At the Door...Here Comes Antichrist and the Reign of the Devil on Earth*,<sup>45</sup> are just a few titles, the horrific content of which was synthesised into a treatise on world domination in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>46</sup> This sinister work was an obvious forgery, derived from antisemitic texts written in the late seventeen and early eighteen hundreds.<sup>47</sup> Tragically, the desire to discover a scapegoat for social ills, which were violently exacerbated by World War I, meant that the *Protocols* were to spread rapidly throughout Europe, especially in Germany. Disillusioned by their defeat in World War I, the German *völkis-geschichte* (“national history”) became tied up with a *völkisch*-racism,<sup>48</sup> articulated within the framework of an ariosophy that advocated the so-called purity of the Aryan ‘race.’<sup>49</sup> This had little influence before World War I, but in the post-war period it began to exert a great impact on German politics.<sup>50</sup> Cohn observed:

When the Protocols came into contact with the *völkisch*-racist outlook the result was an apocalyptic vision not only of contemporary politics but of all history and indeed of all human existence on this planet. And it was in the name of this quasi-religious world-view that the Nazis and their accomplices undertook the extermination of Jews in Europe, as a prelude to the extermination of Jews throughout the world.<sup>51</sup>

Cohn demonstrated the influence of the *Protocols* on the mind of Adolf Hitler and many of his supporters.<sup>52</sup> To this end, he gave much attention to the theme of the end of history, but his main concern was rather to uncover and analyse the origins and influence of the *Protocols* as the principal source of a virulent, politically motivated antisemitism that led to the Holocaust.

Interestingly, *Warrant for Genocide*, with all its ground-breaking significance, would never have been possible if it were not for Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium* published a decade earlier. An obituary for Cohn written by William Lamont had this to say concerning his work:

Cohn was as accessible as he was erudite. Generations of undergraduates thrilled to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Scholars continue to raid his works for fresh insights.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 73-74, pp. 81-83.

<sup>45</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>46</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>47</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 30-45.

<sup>48</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London: Tauris Parke, 2005), pp. 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>51</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, p. 197.

<sup>52</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, p. 200.

<sup>53</sup> Lamont, ‘Norman Cohn (1915-2007)’, p. 297.



This quote indicates that the *Pursuit* is generally acclaimed as one of the truly seminal works on the history of millenarian ideas and movements.<sup>54</sup> We have seen its popularity in relation to its position on the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1995 as well as the fact that it continues to be frequently referenced by scholars of millenarianism. Richard Landes,<sup>55</sup> Catherine Wessinger,<sup>56</sup> John Gray,<sup>57</sup> Stephen H. Webb,<sup>58</sup> Paul Boyer,<sup>59</sup> Eugen Weber,<sup>60</sup> Richard Kyle,<sup>61</sup> and Damian Thompson,<sup>62</sup> are just a few that refer to Cohn’s work directly, and they almost all invariably refer to Christian eschatology as millenarian. Many others—including John J. Collins, Steven J. Stein, Bernard McGinn,<sup>63</sup> Brian E. Daley<sup>64</sup> and James D. Tabor<sup>65</sup>—while not referencing Cohn directly, still assert that the early Christians were preoccupied with an earthly millennial kingdom that they expected imminently.

The fact that Cohn, despite all of his extremely important work—made all the more clear by Bernard Doherty’s demonstration of its ‘perennial’ significance<sup>66</sup>—continues to be frequently referenced by scholars of millenarianism no doubt exacerbates the continued association of eschatology with the devastating end of the world (i.e., millenarianism). This latter approach is best represented today by Richard Landes, who is perhaps the foremost scholar on millenarianism and inheritor of Cohn’s approach. Landes, for example, takes for granted Cohn’s assertion that the expression in Revelation, “that Christ will establish a one-thousand year reign of the saints on earth before the Last Judgment,” is articulated literally as such in the text as taking place “*here on earth*.”<sup>67</sup> This view however is problematic, for, in light of what we have seen above, to interpret the millennium purely on terrestrial—or non-supernatural grounds—is to preclude those attributes of apocalypticism that first of all ground the phenomenon (according to its etymology) as a supernatural revelation disclosed by God—i.e. from the heavenly realm—to a prophet or saint. This is not to mention that, from the point of view of the earliest Christians, apocalypticism is best understood through the lens of eschatology as usually concerning the experience of the celestial-terrestrial kingdom of God, whether the kingdom that is anticipated as occurring at the second coming of Christ (not yet),

<sup>54</sup> Trompf, ‘Millenarism’, p. 113.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Landes, ‘Millenarianism/Millennialism, Eschatology, Apocalypticism, Utopianism’, in *Handbook of the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, ed. Albrecht Classen, pp. 1093-1112 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), p. 1094, p. 1110.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (cited at footnote 22), p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 4-5, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen H. Webb, ‘Eschatology and Politics’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls, pp. 500-517 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 103.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Boyer, ‘The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (cited at footnote 20), p. 519.

<sup>60</sup> Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs Throughout the Ages* (London: Random House, 1999), p. 4, p. 148, p. 151, p. 153, p. 229, p. 233.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Kyle, *The Last Times are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), p. xii, pp. 60-61, p. 69, pp. 130-32.

<sup>63</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘The Book of Revelation’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, p. ix.

<sup>64</sup> Brian E. Daley, ‘Apocalypticism in Early Christian Theology’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, p. 224.

<sup>65</sup> Tabor, ‘Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Millennialism’, p. 262.

<sup>66</sup> Bernard Doherty, ‘History Without Humility: Reflections on Norman Cohn’s Historiography of Horrors’, *St Mark’s Review* 256 (2021), pp. 66-76, esp. p. 69.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Landes, ‘Millennialism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, Ed. James R. Lewis, pp. 333-358 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 333.

or is conceived as imminently partake-able within the ecclesial context (already)—or both!

Cohn wrote three other major works that were thematically linked and were undoubtedly motivated by his earlier research. These include, we have seen, *Warrant for Genocide*—an important work exposing the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as an impetus for the Holocaust—but also the very popular *Europe's Inner Demons*,<sup>68</sup> and *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*: the former uncovering the demonological beliefs behind the persecution of Christian minorities in the Middle Ages, and the latter seeking out the ancient roots of apocalypticism.

Ultimately, all of Cohn's works could be said to have been influenced by the sources he studied for *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, which indicated to him that millenarianism, especially that militant form of it prevalent in the Middle Ages, was a major factor in influencing the ideologies of both the Nazis and the Bolsheviks,<sup>69</sup> who revived and secularised it: the former with their belief in the thousand year Reich, the latter with their belief in a victory of the bourgeois over the proletariat to inaugurate a final period of world peace. Cohn himself wrote in the foreword to the 1962 Mercury Books edition that the subject of his work:

...is neither social revolt in medieval Europe nor 'heresy' in medieval Europe. These subjects have already been fully dealt with by historians; and so have various aspects of medieval millenarism, particularly in its Joachite forms. My own theme is a different one. It is the process by which traditional beliefs about a future golden age or messianic kingdom became, in certain situations of mass disorientation and anxiety, the ideologies of popular movements of a peculiarly anarchic kind. In other words, the book describes the medieval beginnings of revolutionary messianism in Europe.<sup>70</sup>

This millenarianism was, for Cohn, associated with messianism, which for him concerned "the phantasy of an eschatological savior, the Messiah" that would appear at the end times to bring about the millennium. And he believed that it was evident in the Jewish expectation of the Davidic messiah, which, according to him, was abandoned by the Jews and picked up the Christians,<sup>71</sup> which is a contentious point, since the belief in the coming messiah remains integral to Jewish Kabbalistic and Hasidic beliefs.<sup>72</sup>

Although he believed the Christian reception of the messiah motif is what guaranteed its transmission to later generations, Cohn focused primarily on the leaders of medieval millenarian movements, such as Aldebert of Soisson,<sup>73</sup> Eon the Breton,<sup>74</sup> Tanchelm of Antwerp,<sup>75</sup> Emico of Leiningen, and Thomas Müntzer; all of whom were grouped under the designation *prophetae*. These were undoubtedly either megalomaniacs or imposters, "and many were both at once," but they all had one thing in common: "each claimed to be charged with a unique mission of bringing history to its final consummation."<sup>76</sup> Outlining this belief as arising in "situations of mass disorientation and anxiety,"<sup>77</sup> Cohn sought to establish links between the insanity of the medieval messianic movements—including, we have seen, the people's crusades, the flagellants, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Taborites and Amorites

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<sup>68</sup> Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonisation of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Pimlico, 1975).

<sup>69</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 310.

<sup>70</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. v.

<sup>71</sup> Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 202.

<sup>72</sup> Moshe Idel, 'Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism,' *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 1 (2011), pp. 27-70.

<sup>73</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), pp. 42-44.

<sup>74</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), pp. 44-46.

<sup>75</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), pp. 46-50.

<sup>76</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 318.

<sup>77</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. v.

of Bohemia, and many other amoral-elitists and egalitarians<sup>78</sup>—and the Bolsheviks and the Nazis, personified by figures such as Vladimir Lenin and Adolf Hitler and their promises of future utopias wrought through unmitigated violence against their 'enemies,' who were unjustly and unequivocally demonised. That figures such as Emico of Leiningen and Thomas Müntzer pointed forward to Hitler and Lenin respectively was, for Cohn, "of less interest and importance than that Lenin and Hitler, demonstrably and catastrophically, pointed backwards."<sup>79</sup>

Thus, Cohn was motivated by his sincere desire to demonstrate that "the social situations in which Bolshevism and Nazism rose to power recall in certain striking respects the situations which provoked the outbursts of revolutionary and anarchic millenarianism studied in this book."<sup>80</sup> He used various literary devices in order to try and demonstrate the "hidden continuity"<sup>81</sup> between the medieval movements and modern totalitarianism. For example, he sometimes imposed modern conceptual categories onto the medieval movements which he addressed, such as in his anachronistic use of the conventionally Marxist term 'proletariat' when referring to the lower strata of society in the Middle Ages. All these references, however, disappear in subsequent editions of his book. Moreover, he described these medieval movements in the language of contemporary psychoanalysis popularised in the twentieth century by Carl G. Jung, who often referred to phantasies—associated with the imagination—that constitute the principal activity of psychic life.

Ultimately, Cohn was concerned to map out "how these various bodies of millenarian belief"—these 'phantasies'—"originated and how they were modified in the course of being transmitted to the poor,"<sup>82</sup> especially in the Western European Middle Ages. This would help him understand how the poor—or the masses—were able to be tricked by charlatans claiming to be messiahs, thus enabling him to establish a symmetry with twentieth century totalitarian leaders and their followers. Garry W. Trompf has argued that in the twentieth century the frequent use of the category of eschatology "tended to swallow up millennialism in theological currency,"<sup>83</sup> but Cohn, in bringing the concept of millenarianism to the forefront in academic discussions on the 'last things'—as indicated by the title of his book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*—accomplished a reversal of this trend.

We have seen that in the introduction to the 1962 version of the *Pursuit*, Cohn associated the eschatology of the Jews and Christians generally with millenarianism.<sup>84</sup> It is precisely with this concept that Cohn was preoccupied in his work, wherein he sought a link between modern totalitarian movements such as Nazism and Bolshevism and the millenarian movements of the Middle Ages that were inspired by—as I have argued above—a misreading by medieval chronographers of the book of Revelation that undoubtedly contains references to 'one thousand year' durations and messianic motifs. The thousand years, as already stated, was meant to be read symbolically—as denoting the perfect kingdom of God and his saints already established and not yet consummated—not literally as a chronological reign of Christ and the saints on earth. For Cohn, ultimately what mattered was that the adherents of such a millenarianism frequently projected their insecurities onto identifiable groups that were perceived as the final conspiratorial enemies—which they described via the language of medieval demonology<sup>85</sup>—that needed to be defeated before the inauguration of a new, blissful,

<sup>78</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. iii-iv.

<sup>79</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. vii.

<sup>80</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. vii.

<sup>81</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. vii.

<sup>82</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Trompf, 'Millenarism', p. 108.

<sup>84</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 310.

thousand-year age. This, it is well known, the Bolsheviks did with the bourgeois and the Nazis with the Jews and other minorities, and Cohn skilfully made the connection between these latter groups and those of a similar ilk that plagued the urban life of the Middle Ages.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, we have seen that Cohn was especially concerned with how certain social groups in particularly volatile circumstances could be roused to pursue the millennium. In the forward to his *Pursuit*, where he illustrated his method of approach towards the subject of millenarianism in both the Middle Ages and modern totalitarianism, he remarked:

If it would be a vain undertaking to try to interpret these movements in terms of perennial national (let alone 'racial') characteristics, it is another matter to try to define and compare the *social situations* in which they arose.<sup>87</sup>

These social situations are generally delineated by Cohn as follows. The medieval peasantry in the eleventh century was quite stable.<sup>88</sup> Strengthened by familial bonds, peasants were in secure relationships with their lords within the context of the "manorial *regime*."<sup>89</sup> The breakdown of this regime occurred when, from the eleventh century onwards, commercial enterprises in the town centres grew and the population increased. These powerful industrial centres attracted the peasantry, who departed from their lands in search of material gain. However, as the gap between rich and poor in the towns became wider, the lowest strata, including journeymen, unskilled workers, beggars and vagabonds, eventually found themselves displaced.<sup>90</sup> These dejected masses were prone to revolution in order to better their circumstances, taking for themselves leaders—sometimes a layman or an apostate clergyman—"who imposed [himself] not simply as a holy man but as a prophet and saviour or even as a living god."<sup>91</sup> These 'holy men' had a single obsession: to effectuate a total transformation of society based on the "eschatological phantasies" inherited from "the forgotten world of early Christianity" which provided the disenfranchised with "a social myth perfectly adapted to their needs."<sup>92</sup> Once this millenarian myth had taken hold of the discontented masses, the most powerful echelons of society, both secular and ecclesiastical, were frequently viewed as agents of the devil and the antichrist or the personification of either one or the other.<sup>93</sup>

In light of these contextual factors that influenced Cohn's approach, it is apt to turn to his reading of the sources of an ostensible Judaeo-Christian millenarianism in order to delineate the picture he painted for millenarian expectations from the second century BC to late antiquity. These sources pertain to the Old Testament and intertestamental and New Testament scriptures, which are the bases for the reflections on eschatology by both the apologists mentioned above (Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian) and also the medieval chronographers upon who, it is the contention of this article, responsibility for the literal misreading of millenarianism ultimately falls.

### Cohn's Reading of Judaeo-Christian Sources

Cohn began *The Pursuit of the Millennium* with an assessment of the Jewish and Christian perceptions of apocalypticism in an endeavour to locate and educe the distant antecedents of its revolutionary descendent, that is, millenarianism—which here he erroneously conflates with eschatology:

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<sup>86</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. 308-313

<sup>87</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. 24-25.

<sup>90</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. 29-30

<sup>91</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 32.

<sup>92</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 49, pp. 58-60.

The raw materials out of which a revolutionary eschatology was gradually built up during the later Middle Ages consisted of a miscellaneous collection of prophecies inherited from the ancient world. Originally all these prophecies were devices by which religious groups, at first Jewish and later Christian, consoled, fortified and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or the reality of religious oppression.<sup>94</sup>

In this passage, Cohn referred to ‘revolutionary eschatology’ within the general framework of a medieval apocalyptic worldview. Moreover, he indicated that this eschatology—*sans*, for the time being, millenarianism (which is only introduced by the book of Revelation)—can be traced back to ancient Judaism. The Jews, Cohn stated, were distinct from other peoples of the ancient world when it came to their perception of history. Yahweh was for them the Lord of history, who had chosen them to be his people, meaning that Israel was not only the focus of Yahweh’s will but “alone was charged with the realisation of that will.”<sup>95</sup> This meant that, in near catastrophic circumstances such as the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, the Jewish people, especially the lowest strata, were prone to interpret their “oppression and hardship by phantasies of the total triumph and boundless prosperity of Yahweh” which would be bestowed “upon his Elect in the fulness of time.”<sup>96</sup> It is significant that in his assessment of the distant antecedents for medieval millenarianism, he began with ‘Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic,’ the title of his first chapter.

While in his *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* Cohn described the ‘revelatory’ character of Jewish apocalypses—here understood as pertaining to and precipitating the catastrophic end of the inimical social circumstances and God’s total triumph—he nevertheless insists that the knowledge that these revelations impart is sometimes about the heavenly world, “but chiefly it is about the destiny of this our world.”<sup>97</sup> This anchoring of the apocalypses in the earthly realm can be discerned in his initial description of the ancient Jewish apocalypses in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, where he described them as “directed to the lower strata of the Jewish population as a form of nationalist propaganda.”<sup>98</sup> However, this seems to be a retrojection of later manifestations of millenarianism in the Middle Ages onto these ancient Jewish sources, which undoubtedly gave a suffering people hope in times of distress. Cohn then proceeded to analyse various apocalyptic texts, including the Old Testament book of Daniel (written circa second century BC), where, for Cohn, the text described the oppression of the Seleucid Empire in the language, once again, of “revolutionary eschatology.”<sup>99</sup> In Daniel, four consecutive world empires, the Babylonian and its successors,<sup>100</sup> were represented by four beasts that would culminate with the destruction of that final beast or empire—the Seleucid—by the Son of Man, to whom was given “dominion and glory and a kingdom” by the Ancient of Days, so that:

all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (7:13-14).

This text is interpreted as God’s inauguration of a glorious kingdom that would embrace the entire world: to be ruled by the Son of Man and the “Saints of God.”<sup>101</sup> The nuance that Cohn missed, however, is that Daniel sees this vision of the Son of Man in heaven in the here and now, making it apocalyptic in the revelatory sense that encompasses both the spiritual and

<sup>94</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 163.

<sup>98</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), p. 20

<sup>99</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

<sup>101</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 4.

terrestrial realms. Thus, the fact that this vision could be interpreted in light of an imminent end of the world (the ‘not yet’ of eschatology proper) is a secondary consideration. In any case, Cohn affirmed that in Daniel the Son of Man could be a personification of Israel,<sup>102</sup> but in the intertestamental apocalypses of 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, the same character is most definitely envisaged as a warrior king, a descendent of David.<sup>103</sup> The revelatory nature of these two texts, and the fact that they cannot be merely relegated to the end of the world, is made clear in the fact that both texts reflect a visitation by either God or angels to Baruch and Ezra, not to mention 2 Baruch’s description of protological events. This means that, like Daniel, while these texts can be taken as relating to the last things, this cannot be done exclusively.

In *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, Cohn extended his assessment of Jewish apocalypticism to include 1 Enoch and the book of Jubilees that he reads—along with the Book of Watchers that comprises most of the first part of 1 Enoch—as millenarian.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, the author of 1 Enoch and Daniel are described as people who “certainly thought of themselves as men set apart by God, endowed with a wisdom not available to ordinary mortals, the only ones to understand the past and to foresee the future.”<sup>105</sup> In light of what we have said above of such persons, the implication would be that for Cohn they were afflicted by messianic phantasies. Beyond the messianic preoccupations of the writers of 1 Enoch and Daniel, what is significant is that both books, like 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, contain the motif of the Son of Man. As already discussed, apocalypticism is primarily revelatory in character, although it can also be associated with “the belief that God has revealed the imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history.”<sup>106</sup> Alexander Golitzin confirms this when, in contrast to Cohn, he stated that 1 Enoch—along with the Book of Watchers—betrays “little or no preoccupation with the signs of the end, no *ex eventu* prophecy, only a discrete impression of historical determinism.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, although the text does describe events that may be considered eschatological, it seems to be mostly concerned with protological events, which Cohn in fact describes. This also seems to be the case with the book of Jubilees, which identifies the Garden of Eden with the holy of holies in the temple of Jerusalem within which God was believed to dwell.<sup>108</sup> Thus, we arrive once again at the conclusion that apocalyptic texts are primarily concerned with the revelation of heavenly mysteries granted by God to certain mystics; and while they can indeed deal with eschatology, insofar as that revelation may or may not refer to the end of the end of the historical continuum, they are not circumscribed by the latter. Thus, in interpreting these apocalyptic texts through the lens of radical messianism and phantasies, Cohn has not done the Jewish tradition of eschatology justice.

Returning to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Cohn delineated the history of messianic belief in Judaism: it was taken up by revolutionaries who fought against Rome in AD 70, and even “Simon Bar-Cochba, who led the last great struggle for national independence in A.D. 131, was still greeted as Messiah.”<sup>109</sup> According to Cohn, the bloody suppression of Bar-Cochba’s uprising, however, put an end to the Jewish belief in an “eschatological world-

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<sup>102</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 5.

<sup>104</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 179.

<sup>105</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>106</sup> ‘Introduction’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard J. McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein, pp. ix-xv (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), p. ix.

<sup>107</sup> Alexander Golitzin, ‘Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men’: The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Niketas Stethatos, and the Tradition of “Interiorized Apocalyptic” in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001), pp. 125-153, esp. pp. 128-129.

<sup>108</sup> R. H. Charles. *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 74.

<sup>109</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 6.

empire.”<sup>110</sup> This, instead, was taken up by Christians, that he described as a Jewish sect, at least until what he believed was the establishment of the Catholic Church proper in the fourth century.<sup>111</sup> As a result of his emphasis on the incipient Christian movement, in the 1970 revised edition of the work Cohn further nuanced his definition of eschatology, now articulated exclusively in relation to Christianity, as follows:

The original meaning of 'millenarianism' was narrow and precise. Christianity has always had an eschatology, in the sense of a doctrine concerning 'the last times,' or 'the last days,' or 'the final state of the world'; and Christian millenarianism was simply one variant of Christian eschatology. And in recent years it has become customary amongst historians too, to use 'millenarianism' in a more liberal sense still. The word has in fact become simply a convenient label for a particular type of salvationism. And that is the way it will be employed in this book.<sup>112</sup>

He went on to describe this particular “variant” of Christian eschatology in terms that Doherty has affirmed have “become the benchmark definition of millennialism adopted by scholars.”<sup>113</sup> It is collective, to be enjoyed by all the Christian faithful; terrestrial, “in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven”; it is to be imminent; total, “in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth,” and miraculous, “in the sense that it is going to be accomplished by, or with the help of, supernatural agencies.”<sup>114</sup> The fact that these clarifications did not appear in the first edition of his work published in 1957 is significant. It discloses that he considered it important to define Christian eschatology in a nuanced way, and distinguish millenarianism as simply one variant of that eschatology. However, this nuanced approach is contradicted later in his *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, where he concluded that eschatology comprises “innumerable millenarian movements” that includes various sects in the United States as well as “Marxist-Leninist ideology.”<sup>115</sup>

This grouping together of ancient eschatology, medieval millenarism and its modern expressions in both totalitarian governments and the fanatical cults in the United States as various manifestations of a single tradition is a reductionism. Nevertheless, Cohn asserted in the same work that it was spread worldwide by the “Jesus sect” which he first addressed in the *Pursuit*.<sup>116</sup> In his *Pursuit*, Cohn clarified the Christian appropriation of messianism from the Jews by adding that they identified the latter with Christ, adding that Christ would establish the eschatological kingdom of God with his imminent return. Indeed, he even expressed uncertainty in relation to the degree to which Jewish apocalyptic influenced Christ’s own sayings. But in his later work, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, he described Jesus as “obsessed with the coming of the kingdom and the elimination of the forces that obstruct it.”<sup>117</sup> He stated that in the Gospels themselves Jesus did not give a hint as to whether he thought of himself as the Davidic messiah, “i.e., a military leader who would defeat Israel’s enemies, re-establish the nation as a political power, and install himself as king.”<sup>118</sup> Instead, Cohn was concerned with the fact that Christians represented Jesus as a messianic figure, though not in the Davidic sense, but as a “transcendent Messiah” who would return as judge at the eschaton.<sup>119</sup> In both *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* and *Pursuit* Cohn made clear that

<sup>110</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 14.

<sup>112</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Bernard Doherty, ‘A Deadly Pursuit? Dangerous Ideas at the End of History’, *St Mark’s Review* 237 (2016), pp. 64-85, esp. p. 65.

<sup>114</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), p. 15

<sup>115</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 233.

<sup>116</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 233.

<sup>117</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 194.

<sup>118</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 203.

<sup>119</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 206.

it is precisely the representations of Christ by the early Christians that he wished to address, affirming in the latter in relation to Christ's eschatological pronouncement in Matthew 16 that the "celebrated prophecy [of the end of the world] is certainly of great significance, and remains significant whether Christ really uttered it or was merely believed to have done so."<sup>120</sup>

It is this early Christian representation of Jesus as eschatological saviour that influenced the book of Revelation, and Cohn included lengthy excerpts from this book in order to illustrate that, like the Jews, the Christians saw themselves as persecuted by the ruling elite and interpreted the latter in the language of demonology.<sup>121</sup> They viewed the Roman Empire as a ten-horned beast and, alternatively, as the whore of Babylon, the destruction of which would be followed by the imprisonment of Satan for a thousand years (see Rev 20:1-3). For Cohn, this thousand-year duration was "the original Millennium"<sup>122</sup> that was highlighted also by the reign of Christ with his saints for a thousand years (as we have seen), before the ultimate defeat of the devil and the descent of the new Jerusalem—i.e. God's kingdom—coming down from a new heaven to a new earth.<sup>123</sup> Cohn, however, does not give a detailed explanation of the numerological significance of the thousand years, which we saw above denoted God's perfect reign in the Church that will be fulfilled at the second coming.

Here then, for Cohn, is the beginning of millenarianism proper, that is, the belief in the thousand year reign of Christ with his saints, which, he importantly remarked, did not mean that the early Christians expected a catastrophic end of all things, nor that the kingdom would literally last a thousand years.<sup>124</sup> This might seem to contradict what we have said above about Cohn associating millenarianism with the literal reign of Christ at the end of the world, but he immediately went on to assert that the Christians did expect an imminent<sup>125</sup> end of the present order with the reign of Christ on earth, which, he clarified, could last for an "indefinite period" of time,<sup>126</sup> but was normally construed as a thousand year duration. Like the Jews before them, Christians were suppressed by the Roman authorities, to which they responded by "affirming ever more rigorously, to the world and to themselves, their faith in the imminence of the messianic age in which their wrongs would be righted and their enemies cast down."<sup>127</sup> The popularity of Jewish apocalypses—as well as the book of Revelation, which was undoubtedly influenced by them—proliferated, especially among "the unprivileged, the oppressed, the disoriented and the unbalanced."<sup>128</sup> Associated with this were "phantasies of vengeance and triumph" entertained by the underprivileged against the elite.<sup>129</sup> Nevertheless, Cohn also absolved the institution of the Church for such crimes. Although even "highly educated Christians" believed the eschatological kingdom of God to be an imminent material reality, nevertheless dangers associated with the millennial expectations of the heretic Montanus prompted the Church, from about the mid-second century onwards, to revoke canonical authority from the Jewish apocalyptic texts, until only Revelation remained.<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, we have seen that according to Cohn the eschatological millennium was firmly believed by the eminent apologists of the Church such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus of Lyons up until the work of Origen, who, on account of his Hellenistic worldview, substituted a collective,

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<sup>120</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. 7-9.

<sup>122</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 217.

<sup>123</sup> This is a premillennial interpretation.

<sup>124</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 6.

<sup>125</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, p. 9.

<sup>126</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 7.

<sup>127</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), pp. 14-15.

<sup>129</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 10.



millennial eschatology for an eschatology of the individual soul that would begin in this life and continue into the next.<sup>131</sup> Yet the latter is palpably not true, for while Origen does address at length the individual soul and its provenance, he also affirmed belief in the end times.<sup>132</sup>

In any case, for Cohn, this coincided with the emergence of the Catholic Church as a prosperous and powerful establishment, which “had no wish to see Christians clinging to outdated and inappropriate dreams of a new earthly Paradise.” Cohn suggested that Augustine “propounded the doctrine which the new conditions demanded,” when he affirmed that the millennium “that had begun with the birth of Christianity” had to be interpreted allegorically, as it was already “fully realised in the church.”<sup>133</sup> Although this ‘realisation of the millennium’ might seem like an acknowledgment by Cohn of the ‘already’ of the already/not yet tension, it is instead the case that he polarised the realised eschatology of the Church as an institution to the ‘not yet’ expectations of radical millenarians. In any case, Cohn declared that the aforementioned quickly became orthodox doctrine, and the aberrant notion of the ‘millennium’ was condemned by the third ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431,<sup>134</sup> and passed from the official Church to fringe adherents of the Christian imperial cult who would come to expect the return of the “Emperor of the Last Days.”<sup>135</sup> Indeed, the latter comprised a Christianisation of the ruler cult, which had existed since time immemorial and advocated the ruler as divine.<sup>136</sup> Since Christians could not worship terrestrial rulers, nevertheless from the fourth century onwards—in other words, after the period of persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities had ended—texts such as the *Tiburine Sybil* emerged which advocated the return of a final king at the end times who would defeat the enemies of the Christian people and deliver the terrestrial kingdom over to Christ at his second coming. By the seventh century, these texts became popularised in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, attributed to Methodius of Olympus in the Syriac version, or of Patara in the Greek translation, both of whom lived in the fourth century, which was written as a result of the Islamic conquests of Roman Christian territory.<sup>137</sup> But like early Christian millenarianism, the anticipation of the ‘emperor of the last days’ remained a sub-variant of eschatology. It could not be confused with eschatology proper, nor be taken as normative for the Christians of those times in general. In any case, it was not, as Cohn claimed, the last emperor motif that millenarianism was transmuted into in late antiquity. If something like millenarianism existed, it was brought to the fore by late antique and medieval chronographers, whom, we saw above, tried to calculate the return of Christ based on the thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation, a point missed entirely by Cohn.

## Conclusion

The contextual factors that influenced Norman Cohn in his approach towards Judaeo-Christian millenarianism in his *Pursuit* and other works are complex. It was his exposure to the horrors perpetuated by the Bolsheviks and Nazis, and how their respective leaders—tyrannical demagogues—could take hold of the masses, that led him on a noble quest to search out the antecedents for the social situations that produced these radical movements—a debased form of ‘messianism’—in the Western Middle Ages. This form of messianism had its basis—at least,

<sup>131</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 13.

<sup>132</sup> See Mario Baghos, ‘The Conflicting Portrayals of Origen in the Byzantine Tradition’, *Phronema* 30, no. 2 (2015), pp. 97-100.

<sup>133</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 14.

<sup>134</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 14.

<sup>135</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1962), p. 16.

<sup>136</sup> Mario Baghos, *From the Ancient Near East to Christian Byzantium: Kings, Symbols, and Cities* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), pp. xvi-xvii,

<sup>137</sup> The most recent translation of this text is by Benjamin Garstad in *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius: An Alexandrian World Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

as we have seen, on a literal level—in intertestamental Jewish and early Christian literature, so Cohn, understandably, retrojected the millenarian expectations of the medieval *prophetae* into the Judaeo-Christian context, conflating all forms of apocalypticism and eschatology in that early period.

This is problematic for the reasons we mentioned above: first, that apocalypticism is primarily revelatory in character, and concerns the creation of the world, present events, and the end times—sometimes all at once; second, that because of these reasons Jewish intertestamental literature does not neatly conform to Cohn’s definition of apocalypticism; and third, that the earliest Christians believed that Christ’s millennial kingdom had already been inaugurated within the Church and was not yet consummated. This consummation was believed to take place at the eschaton, which was sometimes—though not always, and certainly not in the writers mentioned by Cohn (Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian)—related to the thousand-year duration that was anyway interpreted allegorically as the perfect rule of Christ with his saints in a heavenly-terrestrial, and not merely earthly, kingdom; the former corresponding to their view of the Church.

Cohn had therefore missed that the preoccupation of Christians with a thousand-year duration began in the late antique and medieval chronographers, and so was compelled to look for the antecedents for radical medieval millenarianism, not in these chronographical sources, but in Jewish intertestamental and early Christian literature, including the scriptures, and the writings of Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. This likewise led him to be assert that the beginnings of the allegorisation of the millennium took place in the third and fourth-fifth centuries with Origen and Augustine respectively, but we have seen that this is not the case and even the earlier writers mentioned above allegorised the millennium. For these reasons, and despite the incredibly significant work of Cohn in uncovering the medieval antecedents of modern totalitarianism and the attendant unjust persecutions endured by minorities and entire peoples, in this article I have had to contextualise, nuance, and even correct his approach to millenarianism in early Judaeo-Christianity in a manner that is more consistent with the early sources and the beliefs they contain.