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The Visitation

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Introduction

The term ‘visitation’ with reference to the Spirit of God and/or a distinct prophetic line is associated with the Southcottians, the followers of the millenarian prophet Joanna Southcott (1750–1814). Those who rejected successor prophets to Southcott and focused on the uniqueness of Southcott’s prophecies (the ‘old Southcottians’ or ‘old believers’) referred to the ‘visitation’ of the Spirit of God to Southcott, which involved guidance in biblical interpretation and expectations of the coming millennial kingdom. For others, such as later Southcottian groups like the Panacea Society, the Visitation (capitalised and the focus of this entry) referred to a belief in an ongoing revelation associated with a distinct tradition of prophets or messengers that emerged in England from Southcott onward, or even earlier still (from the seventeenth century onward). While several scholars have discussed these prophets as a more or less unified tradition based on their connection to Southcott and her teachings (Allan 2006, 224; Shaw 2011, 9–10; Shaw and Lockley 2017; Lockley 2017a; Lockhart 2019, 17–21), another understanding is that their commonality arose from their understanding of a messianic Shiloh figure (derived from Genesis 49:10) (Gray 2019, 12).

In addition to Southcott, prophets understood as part of the Visitation have included Jane Lead (1624–1704), Richard Brothers (1757–1824), George Turner (d. 1821), William Shaw (d. 1822), John Wroe (1782–1863), and James White/James Jershom Jezreel (1840s–1885). Others have been identified as part of the Visitation within particular groups, though without the wider recognition attained by these prophets. For example, Helen Shepstone/Helen Exeter (c. 1853–1918) and Mabel Barltrop (née Andrews)/Octavia (1866–1934) were recognised by the Panacea Society; Prince Michael Mills by the Detroit Jezreelites; Benjamin and Mary Purnell by the Israelite House of David and Mary’s City of David; and James Fisher by the Fisherites.

While there were assumed continuities among followers of the individual prophets, there were other claimants for leadership after Southcott’s death. This meant that an ordered prophetic line was constructed on what was otherwise a more chaotic early period in Southcottian history (Lockley 2017a). Furthermore, the concept of a distinct line of numbered prophets or messengers continuing the visitation of the Spirit of God gathered momentum from Wroe onward, with the idea of a line of seven common in Southcottian circles from Jezreel onward (Allan 2006, 216). Nevertheless, some of the conceptual groundwork was in place from the beginning. Southcott herself believed she belonged to a prophetic line

connected to biblical figures, while Turner offered the basis for what became the Visitation tradition in proclaiming continuity with the visitation of the Spirit of God to Southcott (Madden 2017a).

Richard Brothers (1757–1824)

Though born shortly after Southcott, Richard Brothers is typically (but not exclusively) understood by believers in the Visitation as the first of its messengers through his preaching in 1790–1792. Brothers was born in Newfoundland, then a British colony, and went on to serve in the Royal Navy and reach the rank of lieutenant in 1783. In light of his developing religious convictions, Brothers left the Navy permanently in 1789 and claimed to be the recipient of divine revelation, which would lead him to be sent to an asylum. Brothers believed he was descended from King David and (therefore) the family of Jesus, that it was revealed to him that he would lead the Hebrews back to Jerusalem, and that he would lead the return of Jews to Palestine, thereby heralding the millennium. Southcott herself believed in Brothers's visions, though departed from him after disputing the scriptural validity of some of his claims. Some of Brothers's followers likewise shifted allegiance to Southcott.

For further details, see the CDAMM entry on Richard Brothers. On the prophetic role of Brothers and the Visitation, see, for instance, Allan 2006, 217; Lockley 2017a; Lockhart 2019, 19–20.

Joanna Southcott (1750–1814)

The popular millenarian prophet Joanna Southcott was born in 1750 on Taleford Farm in Devon. In the 1790s, she claimed to receive visions and published millenarian prophecies priming England for imminent transformation at the turn of the nineteenth century, notably in *The Strange Effects of Faith* (Southcott 1801). She believed she received a 'visitation' from the Spirit of God, inspiring her millennial revelations (see Niblett 2017). Her distinctive views included a belief that she was "the woman clothed in the sun" mentioned in Revelation 12. She is perhaps best remembered for her related claims about childbirth later in her life. In her sixties and a virgin, she claimed to be pregnant with the second messiah named Shiloh (based on Genesis 49:10). This event would prepare the way for the Second Coming of Christ and his rule on earth in an Edenic state. The pregnancy did not come to pass, and Southcott died on 27 December 1814.

There was a range of beliefs about the significance of Southcott among her followers. While the 'old Southcottians' focused on the singular importance of Southcott, other Southcottians looked to comparable prophets for the development of their doctrines. Some figures made claims to be Southcott's successor, mostly unsuccessfully. Although the idea of a line of (for instance) seven prophets developed from Wroe onward, other elements of a tradition developed with Southcott and her early followers. Her writings were collected, copied, and disseminated. Southcott herself believed (based on, e.g., Joel 2:28–29) that she was one among other prophets who were recipients of revelation or divine messengers, including biblical women such as Esther and Judith (Allan 2006, 216; Niblett 2017).

Other aspects of Southcott and her teaching lent themselves to the development of a tradition in Southcottian movements and among interpreters of Southcott's authority. Southcott's writings were sealed

in a box and were only to be opened by or with the authorisation of twenty-four Anglican bishops in a time of national crisis (based on Revelation 4). The box was passed down by and to those sympathisers and was eventually claimed by the Panacea Society. Speculations about the fate of Shiloh continued after her death among her followers. While some believed Shiloh was a person active in the present time, some of Southcott's followers held different interpretations. For example, Shiloh could also be understood as someone who had in some sense been born, resided in heaven, and would someday return as a leader. Future interpreters of Southcott were therefore able to use this prophecy with reference to their own messianic expectations, such as in the case of the Panacea Society and Mabel Barltrop (Shaw 2011; Lockhart 2019).

For discussion of Southcott and her followers (with bibliography), see CDAMM entry on Joanna Southcott.

George Turner (d. 1821)

Among the sparse detail we have about the biography of George Turner is that he came from a Methodist and mercantile background in Leeds. He followed Brothers while simultaneously believing himself to be a prophet. Turner then became a follower of Southcott in 1801, and the pair spent some time together in Leeds as Southcott's ideas spread across the north of England. When Southcott died, Turner became a Southcottian leader (though not accepted by all), claiming he had visionary experiences, including of Southcott. He believed himself to be a prophet in the line of his predecessors, continuing their work through the visitation of the Spirit to him alone (Turner 1821, 22–23). Turner's development of an authoritative series of divine messengers, with biblical precedent, provided the basis for later constructions of the Visitation (Madden 2017a). His public proclamations led to him being accused of treason and committed to an asylum for three years (1817–1820). On release, Turner continued to prophesy, including predictions about the return of Shiloh, and claimed his followers belonged to the tribes of Israel. He died in 1821.

For details on Turner, see, for instance, Allan 2006, 220–21; Lockley 2017a; Madden 2017a; Lockhart 2019, 20.

William Shaw (d. 1822)

Probably based in London, it is difficult to establish details of the life of William Shaw, and we owe his published works to the Panacea Society. Shaw was engaged in prophetic activity supportive of Turner and expected the imminent return of Shiloh. Shaw died in 1822, shortly after Turner.

For details on Shaw, see, for instance, Allan 2006, 222; Lockley 2017a; Lockhart 2019, 20.

John Wroe (1782–1863)

Born close to Bradford, John Wroe was a wool-comber. In 1819, he claimed to have visionary experiences.

Wroe was a follower of Turner and declared himself Turner's successor after his death. The movement around Wroe became known as Christian Israelites, and some congregations are still active today. They incorporated observance of Old Testament laws in their teaching, including the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6, which meant followers had distinctive long hair. Wroe was active in Ashton-under-Lyne and Wakefield, though the Christian Israelites established the movement in Australia (and, to a lesser extent, in America), and Wroe himself died in Melbourne in 1863. While Wroe having an interest in Southcott's writings is moot (Harrison 1979, 139), he was interested in her prophetic authority. In this respect, Wroe played his part in the development of the Visitation tradition as he saw himself as the next messenger continuing the visitation of the Spirit of God, following on from Southcott and Turner, an identification of a lineage that does not seem to have been advocated by his predecessors, Brothers, Southcott, Turner, and Shaw (Allan 2006, 216). In Ashton, the "whole of the believers," were said to have "subscribed to their belief of the visitation of the Spirit of God to John Wroe, and that he had chosen him as an instrument through whom to guide and direct his children after the death of his other servants" (Wroe 1834, 21), a reference which included the deceased Shaw (Wroe 1834, 18; Lockley 2013, 108–9).

For details on Wroe and the prophetic line, see, for instance, Allan 2006, 216, 222; Lockley 2013, 103–124; Lockley 2017a; Lockley 2017b; Madden 2017b; Lockhart 2019, 20–21.

James White/James Jershom Jezreel (1840s–1885)

Little is known about the life of James White, who took on the name James Jershom Jezreel. He was an army private, and, in 1875, he joined a Christian Israelite group in Chatham called the New House of Israel. He soon claimed to have received messages from the Spirit and, with the support of most of the Chatham New House of Israel, formed the New and Latter House of Israel, known as the Jezreelites. His most prominent publication was *Extracts from the Flying Roll* (Jezreel 1879–1881), which Jezreel claimed involved biblical and eschatological secrets revealed to him as the messenger. Jezreel preached internationally before settling in Gillingham, Kent. Work was started on the construction of a Jezreelite temple that was expected to house 20,000 people. The building project—which was never completed—drew in supporters who expected to be among the 144,000 who would reign on earth with Christ (Revelation 7). Jezreel died in 1885, and his wife, Esther Jezreel (Clarissa Rogers), took over the leadership before she died in 1888.

Jezreelites represent another important development in the idea of the Visitation. They believed in a tradition of authoritative prophetic interpreters. Jezreel's biblical self-referencing included his claim that he was Joshua to Wroe's Moses—just as Joshua was able to carry on from Moses and lead the Israelites to the promised land, so Jezreel would now lead the movement onward (Windscheffel 2017, 168). This tradition included the idea that Jezreel was the sixth messenger and successor to Wroe, with a seventh expected, based on an interpretation of the seven trumpets of Revelation 8:2 (Rogers 1963, 14–15; Stunt 2004). This provoked speculations about the identification of a seventh messenger before Shiloh.

For details on Jezreel and the Jezreelites and the prophetic line, see Allan 2006, 214–17; Windscheffel 2017; Lockhart 2019, 21.

After Jezreel

‘The Visitation’ typically came to refer to believers in some version of the above prophetic line. There were different claims to leadership and the identification of, for instance, a seventh prophet following the death of Esther Jezreel (e.g., R. C. R. Indent, Alice Harvey/Esther Israel, Michael Mills/Prince Michael). The New and Latter House of Israel abandoned belief in the seventh prophet before the coming of Shiloh, while Christian Israelites see the revelatory tradition ending with Wroe (Allan 2006, 224). Having been members of the New and Latter House of Israel, the husband-and-wife team, Benjamin (1861–1927) and Mary (d. 1953) Purnell, founded the House of David community in Michigan, and were identified jointly both as the seventh and Shiloh. After Benjamin’s death, the original House of David rejected Mary’s role, and she went on to found Mary’s City of David (see, e.g., Allan 2006, 224; Madden 2017c; Lockhart 2019, 68–70).

The Panacea Society believed that Helen Exeter/Helen Shepstone was the seventh in the prophetic line. The Panacea Society further thought that the seven offered true insight into the prophecies of Jane Lead (1624–1704), leader of the Philadelphian Society (Lockhart 2019, 16–17, 19). Consequently, the first leader of the Panacea Society, Mabel Barltrop (1866–1934), was understood, among other things, to be the eighth prophet, hence she was known as ‘Octavia.’ Further details (with bibliography) can be found in the CDAMM entry on the Panacea Society.

Jane Lead (née Ward) (1624–1704)

Thanks to strong consonances between their theologies, Jane Lead was retrospectively adopted as a de facto Southcottian prophet (she died nearly fifty years before Southcott was born) in a number of Visitation groups. Lead had been brought up in a well-to-do family in Norfolk and began to receive divine messages as a teenager. Following the death of her husband in 1670, she joined a group led by the mystic and follower of Jakob Boehme, John Pordage, and began to publish mystical writings in her own right. While relatively unknown in England, Lead seems to have been well-known in Germany and the Netherlands, where her writings circulated widely. She formed a community called the Philadelphian Society (see Revelation 1:11 and 3:7) in London in the 1690s, which was also a period of prolific publishing for Lead, including fifteen new books and new editions of earlier publications (Bowerbank 2004). Lead’s mystical vision was centred on Sophia, the feminine personification of wisdom, developing “a less explicitly patriarchal and more gynocentric form of Christianity, presenting…Sophia as the emphatically female dimension of the Christian mystical tradition,” and a millenarian vision including “an imminent apocalypse which would result not from God the Father’s inexorable judgement, but from Wisdom’s love and intuitive wisdom” (Hirst 2005, 5, 6).

There were parallels between the careers and trajectories of both Lead and Southcott. While Southcott’s writings show no direct evidence of the influence of Lead, and she was resistant to being associated with other earlier or contemporary prophets, Lead and Southcott were conceptually and prophetically linked by Southcottians after Southcott’s death. Both Lead and Southcott had an emphatically feminine apocalyptic vision, and both rejected the association of the “woman clothed with the sun” of Revelation 12 with Mary, connecting the figure with a new messianic process, and linking the passage to an overcoming of the Fall and to Genesis 3 (Lockley 2016, 244–48). Philip Lockley has referred to “an

underlying—unacknowledged—influence of Lead's ideas on Wroe," and James Jezreel explicitly recommended Lead to his followers amongst whom copies of her works circulated (Lockley 2016, 256, 257). John/Zion Ward (1781–1837), who some Southcottians recognised as Shiloh following the death of Southcott, drew on Lead's writings and arranged for new printings of her work (Lockley 2016, 250–52). Lead was also important to the Panacea Society as a precursor to Southcott; they published extracts from her writings and regarded themselves as the outworking of her prophecies (Lockhart 2019, 16).

Scholarship

Accounts of the Visitation and the key figures are presented in, for instance, Allan 2006; Shaw 2011, 9–10; and Lockhart 2019, 17–25. For a detailed account of the early Southcottians and those claimed as part of the Visitation, see Lockley 2013, 2017a, 2017b, and Madden 2017b. For dated treatment before key primary source material was readily available, but still with helpful details, see, for instance, Harrison 1979.

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