



Joanna Southcott

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Introduction

Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) claimed to receive visions and published millenarian prophecies priming England for imminent transformation and divine judgement. Among her distinctive views were claims that she was the Bride of the Lamb (Revelation 19) and “the woman clothed in the sun” mentioned in Revelation 12 who would help defeat evil and bring about the millennial transformation. She believed that evil was introduced into the world through Eve and thus a woman would bring about the fall of Satan. Southcott 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. The birth did not occur, and Southcott died on 27 December 1814. While notorious, caricatured, and publicly ridiculed during her lifetime, she was also a popular millenarian figure. She continued to have influence long after her death, with Shiloh, her teachings, and her authority understood differently among various Southcottian movements and interpreters.

Life

Southcott was born (25 April 1750) on Taleford Farm in Devon and brought up a pious Anglican in Gittisham near Exeter. While her literacy skills were limited, the Bible, its application, and theological understandings of the world were important features of her life as she grew up, as were the devotions of her great-aunt Sarah. Her adult life mostly involved working in various positions in households. It was not until the early 1790s that she claimed visionary experiences and issued prophecies. As well as prompting her to join a local Methodist society, these occurrences warned about coming war, famine, and various socioeconomic issues. Her description of her initial experience gives a flavour of these ideas:

...in 1792, I was strangely visited, by day and night, concerning what was coming upon the whole earth. I was then ordered to set it down in writing. I obeyed, though not without strong external opposition; and so it has continued to the present time.

In 1792, my Sister told me, I was growing out of my senses. She said, "You say there will be a war. Who shall we go to war with? The French are destroying themselves. As to the dearth of provision you speak of, you are wrong; for corn will come down very low; I could not make 4s. 6d. a bushel of the best of the wheat this year. As to the distresses of the nation, you are wrong there; for England was never in a more flourishing state than it is at present." I answered, "Well, if it be of God, it will come to pass, however likely or unlikely it may appear at present. If not, I shall hurt no one but myself in writing it. I am the fool, and must be the sufferer, if it be not of God. If it be of God, I would not refuse for the world, and am determined to err on the safest side." My Sister thought she should err on the safest side, by preventing me from doing it; and said, I should not do it in her house. However, I took advantage of her absence; and, in 1792, I wrote of what has since followed in this nation and all others; but the end is not yet. I left my writings at Plymtree, and came back to Exeter.

In 1793, the war broke out; and in this year, three remarkable things happened, which I had written of in 1792. These events strengthened my judgment that it was of God; for it was said, "Whatever I put into thy mouth, I will do upon the earth." (Southcott 1801, 5-6)

Southcott also endeavoured to have representatives of different denominations assess her prophecies, evidently with little success and much scorn and rejection (Southcott 1801; see Hopkins 1982, 37-62). Nevertheless, with her predictions seemingly ratified by events at the end of the eighteenth century (e.g., war with France), her prophetic conviction hardened and her following grew (cf. Brown 2002, 126).

From 1801, Southcott began publishing her popular prophecies. Her following expanded when she moved to London and undertook a mission further around the country, preaching about the coming millennial transformation of England. There were overlaps between Southcott and the [popular movement developing around Richard Brothers](#). Brothers believed 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 accepted some of Brothers' visions but departed from Brothers after disputing, among other things, the scriptural validity of some of his claims (Southcott 1802). Some of Brothers' followers likewise shifted allegiance to Southcott. These included a group of seven men of material means who came to Exeter to assess her prophetic claims and were instrumental in her move to London. Southcott referred to this core group as the "Seven Stars" of Revelation 1:16, three of whom were clergy (Thomas P. Foley, Thomas Webster, and Stanhope Bruce) (Harrison 1979, 116).

Inevitably, perhaps, more ridicule and criticism came with her widespread popularity, including from clergy. She even had the dubious honour of having imposters (Southcott 1814a, 63). Southcott rose to both greater acclaim and public infamy when, in her sixties and a virgin, she believed she was pregnant (through the Holy Spirit) 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 (e.g., Southcott 1814a; 1814b). Hoping to avoid being "stigmatized by illegitimacy" (Hopkins 1982, 207), she married John Smith, who would be the earthly father figure to Shiloh, as Joseph was for Jesus (Bowerbank 2004). While her belief was apparently confirmed by a number of doctors who examined her (Reece 1815, 23), the birth did not come to pass, and Southcott died on 27 December 1814. While believers initially disputed whether she was indeed dead or whether to expect her resurrection, there was eventually an autopsy, and she was soon buried on 1 January 1815.

For the details on Southcott and her times, see, e.g., Balleine 1956; Hopkins 1982; Derrett 1994; Brown 2002; Bowerbank 2004; Juster 2003, 239–59; Lockley 2013a, 1–6; Goss 2023.

Beliefs

Through her visionary experiences, Southcott believed she was revealing the mysteries of the Bible, notably the book of Revelation, and the fate of the nations of the earth, culminating in the Second Coming and the Day of Judgement (e.g., Southcott 1801). While followers of Southcott remained members of their own church, there was some acknowledgement of their additional affiliation to Southcottian views through adhering to core beliefs and ‘sealing’ (based on Revelation 7 and in the expectation of being numbered among the 144,000). This process involved demands that Satan be overthrown and the Kingdom be established on earth. The would-be believer signed their name on a document above the inscription, “The Sealed of the Lord, the Elect precious. Man’s Redemption to inherit the Tree of Life. To be made Heirs of God and Joint-Heirs with Jesus Christ.” Southcott signed below and added her seal bearing the initials of Jesus Christ. With a shift towards focusing on dedicated believers (rather than believers and unbelievers) with the sealings, knowledge of certain works of Southcott (e.g., Southcott 1804; 1807) became important for Southcottian affiliation (on sealing and affiliation, see, e.g., Harrison 1979, 93–94; Bowerbank 2004; Lockley 2013a, 34–40).

The significance of a female leader was important for Southcott and her followers, grounded in visions and biblical texts (see, e.g., Southcott 1804; cf. Juster 2003, 239–40). She turned to Genesis 3:15 and the claim that God put enmity between the woman and the serpent and her seed will bruise his head. Where evil had come into the world through the sin of Eve, Southcott claimed, so a woman would now bring about Satan’s fall (Southcott 1803). She saw herself as the Bride of the Lamb from Revelation 19 and “the woman clothed in the sun” from Revelation 12 who would help defeat evil and enable the millennial transformation (Southcott 1806). Southcott further believed (based on, e.g., Joel 2:28–29) that she was one among other prophets who were recipients of revelation or divine messengers, a tradition including biblical women such as Esther and Judith (Allan 2006, 216; Niblett 2017).

On Southcott’s apocalyptic theology, mission, prophecy, and millenarian context, see, e.g., Garrett 1975, 216–23; Harrison 1979, 86–134; Hopkins 1982; Brown 2002; Juster 2003, 239–59; Holloway 2015; Niblett 2017.

Legacy

By conventional metrics, Southcott’s movement was nationally popular. It is estimated that well over 100,000 copies of her works were published and that by 1815 there were around 20,000 followers who had received her sealing (Harrison 1979, 109; Hopkins 1982, 83–85, 109; Bowerbank 2004). Philip Lockley challenged the claim of 20,000 followers, criticising the inclusion of unbelievers among recipients of the sealing and suggesting a (still sizable) figure just shy of 12,400 dedicated followers around the time of Southcott’s death (Lockley 2013a, 35–36; see also Lockley 2013b on the demographic breakdown of Southcott’s followers). After her death, the movement fragmented and continued in different forms, some of which exist to this day. With no medical signs of childbirth detected following her death, different

interpretations of the fate of Shiloh likewise continued among her followers. Her close associate Ann Underwood still believed Southcott was an inspired prophet but had been mistaken about Shiloh. Some believed Shiloh was a person active in the present time, while others believed Shiloh had, in some sense, been born, resided in heaven, and would someday return as a leader. Later 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).

Following her death, there was a range of beliefs about her ongoing significance among her followers (see the CDAMM entry on [the Visitation](#)). 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. Her writings were collected, copied, and disseminated. Southcott sealed prophecies in a box a decade before her death which was then passed down by and to sympathisers after she passed away (Brown 2003, 38). The box was eventually claimed in the twentieth century by the Panacea Society, along with the belief that it could only be opened by or with the authorisation of twenty-four Anglican bishops in a time of national crisis (based on Revelation 4). It remains unopened.

On the Southcottian legacy, see, e.g., Brown 2003; Allan 2006; Shaw 2011, 9–10; Shaw and Lockley 2017; Lockhart 2019, 17–21.

Southcott's Works

Southcott's 65 published books, as well as her unpublished writings, are collected on the website [Joanna Southcott – English Prophetess](#).

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