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The House of David

Adaptation, Marketing, and Millenarianism

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ABSTRACT: While some religious groups emphasize separation from society at large, other groups prioritize understanding and utilizing mainstream cultural expressions. The House of David, one of America's most successful communal religious groups, drew on a wide variety of mainstream cultural influences to share the message that their founders Benjamin (1861-1927) and Mary (1862-1953) Purnell were the last in a long line of British millenarian prophets. Finding inspiration in popular evangelists, jazz music, and theme parks, the House of David would successfully adapt the distinctly British tradition of the Southcottian Israelitism to the needs of the American religious market, and gives us a clear example of the role innovation plays in the crowded religious marketplace.

KEYWORDS: Joanna Southcott, Religion and Marketing, Communal Society, Early Evangelicalism, Southcottianism, Benjamin and Mary Purnell, Southcottian Israelitism, Millenarianism, Religious Photography, House of David.

Adaptation is paramount for the survival of religious movements. Those religions that best understand the concerns and wants of the general population are the most successful in the sharing of their message. Though popular discourse about religion tends to focus on its timeless elements, for the historian it is the way that religious movements mirror the concerns and expectations of society of a particular historical period that should be highlighted. This is especially the case with new religious movements, whose very survival is based upon their ability to tie their particular message with

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the nuanced concerns of the general population. Though change is essential for emergent religious movements, it is also quite precarious. The slightest change or shift in nuance can have drastic results for the organization, as extensively documented by the fissiparous nature of new religious movements. Each schism, it is argued here, is exceptionally important for scholars, as each represents a new cultural dynamic and contains essential information about the intellectual climate of its time.

The House of David, located in Benton Harbor, Michigan, is one of America's most successful communal religious movements, and its success arose from its ability to replicate popular forms of American religiosity in the early twentieth century. The House of David had its origin in the world of Southcottian Israelitism,¹ a movement embracing Hebrew Bible principles and codes by a series of popular millenarian preachers in nineteenth-century Britain, most notably the Devonshire prophetess Joanna Southcott (1750-1814). The House of David was quick to embrace the marketing gimmicks as well as the tactics of popular American evangelists to create a distinctly American version of the Southcottian message. This article provides an introduction to both the tradition of Southcottian Israelitism and also how religious movements in general adapt to a spiritual marketplace using innovation and "spectacle." The House of David's embrace of baseball, basketball, jazz, the amusement park, and the printing of images was wildly successful in outreach, and yet was anathema to other groups who adhered to the 'Israelitish' aspect of the Southcottian visitation. Benjamin (1861-1927) and Mary (1862-1953) Purnell, two itinerant preachers and the founders of the House of David, were acutely aware of what was expected of revivalist preachers and marketed their religious claims to fit within a distinctly American niche, the ramifications of which are still being felt within Israelitist groups today.²

This paper traces the beginnings of Southcottian Israelitism with the prophetic career of Richard Brothers (1757-1824) to Joanna Southcott, and then to prophet John Wroe (1782-1863). Wroe's Israelitism would be the source of several associated movements, one of which would ultimately be the House of David. It is important to realize the dynamic nature of the Southcottian movement, and how closely the different groups built off one another, and attention to the chronology is essential to understanding the innovations undertaken by the Purnells. The Purnells knew what it would take to make Southcottian Israelitism work in an American context, and their innovations were profound. In drawing readers to this case study, we expand insight into the role that cultural expectations—and in particular the influence of entertainment—played in establishing new religious identities in what scholar of American Religions R. Laurence Moore has characterized as the American marketplace of religious ideas.³

ISRAELITISM WITHIN THE SOUTHCOTTIAN TRADITION

It should be stated at the outset that Southcottianism proper and Southcottian Israelitism are two distinct, yet connected religious movements. The primary similarity between the two is a shared belief in the prophetic mission of Joanna Southcott. Southcott's prophetic career came from her issuing several prominent prophetic works, which added to the already vibrant interest in millenarianism during the early nineteenth century. She was famous for issuing paper "seals" which were to help in the overcoming of the devil and the return of Jesus Christ.⁴ The most important component of her teachings for the Israelite branch of the movement was her prophecy about the coming of Shiloh, a messianic king-figure who would bring peace and harmony to the globe. Following her death there were several claimants to her prophetic mantle and this split the movement into two broad camps, those who believed in one or more of Southcott's successors, and those called the Old Southcottians. The Old Southcottians only accepted the prophetic authority of Joanna Southcott and did not accept any additional claimants to her prophetic authority.⁵ They also did not create separate religious denominations, choosing rather to continue reading Southcott's prophecies among themselves, while mostly staying within their existing religious affiliation, typically. This particular interpretation of the Southcottian message continues to this very day with the faith being passed down within certain families in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Oftentimes, this amounts to the oldest member of the family reading from Southcott's writings at family functions and dinners, and encouraging their children and grandchildren to be "sealed," that is, signing Southcott's "petition against the devil." This petition "request[s] that death and hell may be swallowed up in victory, and that dust and ashes, whom thou hast created, may set fourth thy praises."⁶

Israelitism, however, was a product of the second group and specifically, the teachings of John Wroe. Israelitism was first introduced into the Southcottian movement in its earliest days, actually preceding the prophetic career of Joanna Southcott, in the work of the prophet Richard Brothers. Brothers' contribution to Southcottian Israelitism was the notion that hidden among the British lived the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Though other traditions of British-Israelism have existed since the 16th century, Brothers had a unique take on the tradition: he believed that British-Israelism was divinely revealed to him, while other proponents generally worked from philological or historical arguments. In 1794 with the publication of *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*, Brothers explicitly tied his prophetic movement to "the restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem by the year 1798 under their revealed Prince and Prophet."⁷ Brothers' work was



Joanna Southcott, engraving by follower William Sharp, 1802. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

received enthusiastically by many. His success is evidenced by how seriously the British government investigated Brothers for possible sedition with them insisting that he be kept in confinement at a private psychiatric asylum. The Israelitist faction would have to wait until after the prophetic career of Joanna Southcott to come to prominence.⁸

Israelitism—meaning here both the Israelite origin of the British and a higher devotion to Levitical law—had almost no role in Joanna Southcott’s theology, though in accepting some of the claims made by Brothers, she established his position within the Southcottian canon.⁹ Southcott instead focused her ministry on justifying the role that women lost during the fall in the Garden of Eden:

Ye cause your Bibles to become a mystery, and all is a mystery; for ye say, all came by the woman, and yet ye say again by the man sin entered into the world. Now I ask, how you prove it? But this I will prove, that all came from the man at first: He was the first in creation, not made of man, but of God; and the bone was taken from man to complete his happiness. But Satan found arts to rob man of that happiness, by breaking the bone; that is, she fell, and broke off all the happiness from man. Now Christ is compared to the second Adam; then there must come a second Eve, to bring the godhead and manhood to a perfect likeness.¹⁰

Southcott's claim to being the Mother of Shiloh became essential for promoters of Southcottian Israelitism.¹¹ The name itself, and the messianic connotations, are taken from Genesis 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (KJV). Shiloh was the most important figure for the Southcottians, and was the herald of a new order, and the return of Christ. All succeeding prophets in the Southcottian Israelite tradition would identify with the character of Shiloh, and through this identification, their claim to prophetic authority.

Southcott claimed that at the age of 64 she was to give birth to the messianic figure of Shiloh, and publicly announced it in *A Third Book of Wonders Announcing the Coming of Shiloh*. Despite showing many signs of pregnancy and convincing some of the most prominent doctors in Britain, she did not physically give birth, dying during what appeared to be a long labor on 27 December 1814. Her death was profoundly discouraging to her followers, and would also provoke a sudden search for a leader to fill Southcott's prophetic position. Shortly after Southcott's death, the birth of Shiloh was understood to have been a spiritual occurrence, with Revelation 12:5 being cited as foretelling the event, "and her child was caught up to God and to his throne." This explanation was useful for many of the claimants to Southcott's ministry, and was utilized in the formation of Israelitism. John Wroe, who was to be one of the most successful of Southcott's successors, used the Shiloh story to orient his own position, and it is with him that we have the origin of Southcottian Israelitism proper. Wroe's central claim was that he was the physical embodiment of the Shiloh spirit, and would be the one to bring forth the kingdom of Heaven on earth. His prophetic career became the main inspiration for subsequent Israelitist groups such as the House of David, being that he placed a strong emphasis on the laws and rituals of the Hebrew Bible.

Wroe's prophetic ministry began in 1819, when following a life-threatening fever, he began to have visions.¹² It was revealed to him that he was the Shiloh that was promised to Joanna Southcott, and that it was his role to bring her vision to completion. Wroe furthermore shifted focus away from Southcott's protofeminist theology, rooted in her being the "woman clothed with the sun" (Rev. 12) whose purpose was to reclaim the rights of women lost in the fall in Eden, to a theology strongly rooted in establishing the millennial kingdom on earth, with a new covenanted people, and he called his movement the Christian Israelite Church.¹³

Borrowing greatly from the work of Richard Brothers, Wroe taught that it was necessary for the descendants of the lost tribes to live a life of separateness and to follow a modified version of the Mosaic Law, and in addition, the Nazarite vow (Num. 21).¹⁴ With the latter, it was important that members not cut their hair or male members their beards, that

they consume no alcohol, and that they wear only single fabric clothing. This earned them the nickname of “the beardies” and this practice was continued in the House of David, with all members of the community sporting long hair and beards. Vegetarianism was also introduced into the Israelite tradition following the prohibition of the eating of blood in Leviticus 17:13-14.¹⁵ From the very beginning of Wroe’s prophetic career, evangelization was at the very heart of his work, and he spent the rest of his life spreading his teachings across the Anglophone world, eventually dying in Australia.¹⁶ Wroe wanted to ensure that all of the “hidden Hebrews” around the British world would have access to his message and would join in following the biblical prohibitions.¹⁷

Wroe’s vision of a new Israel also brought with it a strong communal aspect, and he envisioned a New Jerusalem in the Yorkshire town of Ashton-on-Lyne. In Ashton, Wroe laid out a guide for his new society of Christian Israelites, which emphasized their separation from the world in lieu of their religious commitments, and he was a master in engineering the economic cooperation of his followers.¹⁸ Communitarianism would also be an essential element of the Southcottian Israelite tradition, being embraced by almost all of the communities associated with the movement, especially the House of David.

THE FOUNDING OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID

Benjamin and Mary Purnell would first encounter the Israelite message in Richmond, Indiana, in 1888.¹⁹ The Purnells were attending a tent revival led by followers of James Jerusho Jezreel (1851-1885), a Southcottian Israelite preacher who claimed to be the fulfillment of the prophecies of John Wroe.²⁰ The atmosphere of the tent revival would have been quite familiar to the Purnells, both of whom were raised in the shadow of the second Great Awakening. Benjamin Purnell was born in 1861 in Mason County, Kentucky, an area that had been receptive to the revival spirit since 1807.²¹ Mary Purnell née Stollard, was born in Nickellsville, Scott County, Virginia in 1862, likewise a county with a background in religious revivalism.²² This fact is important as I suggest that the sensuous, almost carnivalesque atmosphere of the tent revival was a model for the type of outreach the House of David would pursue.

The Jezreelites taught what might essentially be called a progressive prophetic doctrine and were the earliest Southcottian communities to conceive that the seemingly random succession of prophetic voices in England were not simply isolated occurrences of God’s speaking, but were part of a unified message, a doctrine that would become very influential in explaining how the Purnells understood their own place in the prophetic economy. In the Jezreelite understanding, James Jerusho Jezreel was the Sixth in a series of Seven Messengers of the Apocalypse, the others being, chronologically, Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott,



Benjamin and Mary Purnell. Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan, Michigan History Center.

George Turner, William Shaw, and John Wroe.²³ Jezreel settled on the “sevenfold dispensation” based on his reading of Revelation 2:2 “And I saw the seven angels which stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.” In a classically chiliastic model, Jezreel placed himself on the precipice of the final voice of the coming atonement, and the final and perfect revelation of God.

The American representative of the Jezreelite message was a man named ‘Prince’ Michael Mills (1856-1918), and it is through Mills that the Purnells would get a thorough exposure to the doctrines of Southcottian Israelitism. In correspondence with Mills the Purnells would learn about the doctrine of the seven messengers, a theological idea that would shape their understanding of their own prophetic ministry. “The seven messengers are warning of the imminent appearance of Christ’s kingdom. The seven days of creation are also seen as paralleling the seven messengers. Each day creation becomes better and better: the light becomes clearer and clearer, until the Seventh day Sabbath rest.”²⁴ In 1891, after over ten years of correspondence, the couple decided to join Mills and the few families who had gathered around him at his commune, the Church of the New Eve in Detroit.²⁵

In 1895, the Purnells declared that they themselves were the final messengers before the Millennium, the seventh trumpet, and this would

eventually facilitate their break with Mills. Mills was quite upset by the claims made by the Purnells, however, according to Ron Taylor, a local historian and member of Mary's City of David, many in Mills' group initially accepted the claim.

In the Spring of 1895, during the late evening, going into the early hours of March 12, the Purnell couple together, received a spiritual anointing in the midst of the congregation. It appears that the group initially accepted them as having acknowledged the spiritual anointing, but soon would turn away from the Purnells, discrediting their previous acceptance. It would be only a short time after the 12th until Mary and Benjamin, with their two children, would depart from Detroit, never to return.²⁶

After 1895 and the break with Mills, the Purnells sought to clarify their unique prophetic vision and spent a good portion of the next three years engaged in intensive study of Southcottian texts. This period would be the foundation of the new theology of the House of David, and it celebrated the couple's marriage as the fulfillment of the entire tradition. The Purnells reintroduced Southcott's concern for the role of women, with a unique interpretation of their marriage. They were the Shiloh only because of their married state, a unification between man and woman. "Joanna who gave birth to the visitation—the living word, made flesh in us; the beginning of which shall be the manifestation of the spiritual Man-Child, crowned by Shiloh, male and female."²⁷

THE NEW WORK

The House of David began utilizing popular marketing techniques to spread their religious message, which was ferociously resisted by other Israelite groups. The American religious landscape is, and was, one of intense inter-religious competition and it is always "a buyers market."²⁸ Religious leaders were acutely aware of their need to make converts, and the Purnells placed this at the center of their effort to gain new members. The Southcottian doctrine was traditionally spread through the circulation of books and pamphlets, all completely without images in keeping with the Israelitist influence on the danger of graven images. However, the Purnells put their confidence in the "new seed," as Benjamin would call it, and sought inspiration in the many popular evangelists of the time.²⁹ "You need to embrace that which will take the message the furthest," Benjamin would write to a critic.³⁰

In the first decades of the twentieth century, there were two cultural movements which strongly colored the prophetic work of the Purnells: the search for new and engaging teachings about the Bible, and what might be called the career of the "public evangelist." The Purnells responded enthusiastically to both pressures and would work tirelessly



Eden Springs. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

to fit their message into these cultural slots. Though there was nothing new about either charismatic preachers or biblical study materials, the period was marked by an intense desire for spiritual and religious meaning. The Purnells responded enthusiastically to this demand by producing both their own study materials, and in taking on the role of celebrity evangelists.

The most famous artifact which epitomizes the public's desire to engage with the Bible is undoubtedly the Scofield Reference Bible, and the Purnells owned several copies. It was initially published in 1909 and included a chronology of world history since its creation. The Scofield Bible also advocated the theory of premillennial dispensationalism, a conception that held that there were periods of divine revelation that progressively built upon one another, ending with the literal reign of Christ on earth.³¹ This idea was exceptionally important to the emerging fundamentalist movement and was also quickly embraced by the Purnells, who emphasized the notion of progressive revelation within the Southcottian tradition.³² In various public circulars, the Purnells made explicit use of dispensationalist thinking, and argued that each of the Southcottian prophets could also be understood in the framework of dispensationalism, with themselves being the final manifestation of the divine will before the coming of the messianic age.³³ The Purnells were also willing to use their prophetic status to clarify inconsistencies in the Bible, which was likewise something that was attempted by the Scofield Reference Bible. In 1922 an ad for the Scofield Bible in the *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* emphasized that the Scofield Bible was equipped to provide “explanations of Seeming inconsistencies” as one of its most important selling points.³⁴ Likewise

the Purnells embraced this language of explanation to promote their own theological movement.

Southcottianism held that the Bible was an exceptionally mysterious book, and that it was impossible to truly understand it without continuing prophetic revelation. As such, every word, and every seeming inconsistency was an opening for prophetic explanation. The Purnells followed this pattern, and their *Key of the House of David* as well as their *Star of Bethlehem* follows the classic Southcottian pattern, which takes, for the most part, an obscure text and provides a systematic re-evaluation of it in light of the Southcottian revelation. However, the Purnells' innovation came in when they took the language of popular biblical exposition and began producing small tracts to provide their own answers to some of the popular questions circulated during the period. It is significant that some of the tracts produced by the Purnells used the language of the Scofield Bible in their formulations, such as *Where did Cain get his Wife? And, What is a Soul?* By using the language of the exposition genre,³⁵ the Purnells were opening a path to provide their own theological innovation, and often went far beyond the rationalizing found in Scofield. Reiterating the Southcottian tradition's emphasis on the mystery of the Bible, the Purnells wished to dismiss the historicizing of the Scofield and underscore their revelatory importance.

In this book we wish to introduce the first rudiments of the—(sic) faith once delivered unto the saints, which was sealed till this the time of the end and day of Visitation; now unsealed, and the mysteries made known to the people of the saints-Israel, to whom the promise was made, which was given by God (who cannot lie) before the world began. And the kingdom shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. Therefore this Message will give a clear conception of what the kingdom is, and to whom it is given—which is Israel, the seed which was to come, to whom the promise was made, which promise is, the redemption of our body; (Rom. 8-23;) when then the kingdom shall be put within them—I am with you, and shall be in you; (John 14-17;)—i.e., when mortal shall put on immortality. And remember, this mortal signifies living people—whose vile bodies shall be changed and fashioned like unto his glorious body; and therefore shall be like him. Phil. 3-21.

The Purnells then go on to reaffirm their own special significance in completing the divine revelation. As they write:

These mysteries having been sealed, Blindness in part happened to Israel till the fulness of the Gentiles be come in; (Rom. 11-25;)—which time has come; and the Lord has set his hand the second time to recover the remnant of his people Israel, and the mysteries are revealed to them. And so it says, Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh—which is the life of the body. So Jesus said, I will shorten the time for the Elect's sake, or no flesh would be saved, but for the Elect's sake I have shortened the days. Matt. 24-22.³⁶

The Purnells were familiar with the genre of biblical exposition and made extensive use of this language in justifying their own positions. As with any other successful marketing campaign, to subvert a genre one must first understand it thoroughly, and there is ample evidence that the Purnells had that expertise.

Modern Evangelism

Another element that colored their missionary campaigns came from the rise of the modern evangelist. The Purnells were witness to the rise of commercial religiosity, which placed a heightened value on the role of the charismatic preacher and entertainment in the worship service.³⁷ Though it is difficult to say exactly which popular preachers the Purnells followed, since they carefully did not name anyone specifically in their writings, the most likely candidate would have been John Alexander Dowie (1847-1907). Scholars of communal societies have long grouped the House of David with the followers of Alexander Dowie, and Dowie was certainly well aware of them, given his attempt to convert members of Mills' group.³⁸ However, as the Purnells fundamentally viewed themselves as being the final voice in prophetic authority, it would be difficult for them to recognize anyone as having an effect on their ministry.

Dowie had moved to the United States from Australia in 1881, and had founded the town of Zion City, Illinois in 1901, directly across the lake from the Purnells in Benton Harbor, Michigan, to be a place where "for the purpose of the extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth . . . where God shall rule in every department of family, industry, commercial, educational, ecclesiastical and political life."³⁹ Dowie was furthermore a strong patriarchal figure who had very specific standards that he held for the believers living in the city. Influenced by the example set by Alexander Dowie in Zion, Illinois the Purnells began reorganizing the small community of Jezreelites in Benton Harbor toward an authoritarian religious community, where "King" Benjamin, as he was called by the press, would take on all decision making for the group.⁴⁰

Aside from Dowie's organizational prowess, his ability to wow the crowd and his overt use of theater in his prophetic and healing ministry would have had an appeal for the Purnells. Hundreds of people crowded the stadium of Zion's Tabernacle to hear Dowie's sermons, where he would appear on stage dressed as a biblical patriarch, attended by a massive choir, and more than fifty assistants.⁴¹ Furthermore, Dowie shared many of the Purnells' core beliefs, and after the fall of Prince Michael Mills, Dowie's successor had tried to convert several of Mills' followers to his movement.⁴² Dowie was an advocate of communalism, temperance, health reform, and pacifism, all of which would be influential to the utopian community envisioned by the Purnells. Dowie was for the Purnells also the perfect archetype of a successful religious promoter;

and his ability to use images to communicate his spiritual message would stimulate a core change in the Purnells' missionary vision as they sought to apply what they had garnered from Dowie into the first successful U.S. marketing campaign of the Southcottian tradition. From 1903—with their initial settlement in Benton Harbor—to 1905, the Purnells had completely revolutionized their perspective on evangelization. In 1904 Benjamin Purnell agreed to have his photograph taken by a local photographer in Benton Harbor, and in a flash ushered in a new wave of Southcottian evangelization which shocked the Israelite world, and whose impact has continued to affect Israelite groups today.

Photography and Eden Springs: Innovation Abounds

This new approach to evangelization, which Benjamin referred to as the “new work” began with the introduction of a series of photographs that would be included with all of the tracts produced by the society. Photography and illustration were strongly embraced by Dowie and other popular evangelists. However, most Southcottian Israelites were scandalized. Basing their view on the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” (Exodus 20: 4), and the precedent of John Wroe, of whom no portrait exists, they felt that Benjamin Purnell had committed a serious violation. Christian Israelites took the prohibition of images so seriously that in the nineteenth century several members of the church would even cover up the maker's mark on their pianos, so Purnell's photographs were extremely controversial. It was also not only the picture of Benjamin, but also the manner in which he was photographed that further enraged traditionally minded Israelites. With his long flowing hair and his pristine white suits, Benjamin was completely aware of his attractiveness, and he leaned on it in his missionary campaigns. Mary likewise was depicted with gorgeous clothing, often with doves and jewels. Secondly, the use of the Purnells' image was ubiquitous in House of David literature, even being printed on the stationary of the movement. The Benton Harbor *News Palladium* ascribed a story to Purnell in their article “Ben says he is an angel . . . and tries to look the part too.”⁴³

The Purnells were also willing to engage in popular sports as a way of spreading their message, and in 1913 started a semi-professional baseball team, known as the “Jesus Boys.” The team members wore long hair and beards and played in a series of exhibition games across rural America. Everywhere the team went, the group followed with a small prayer service wherein members of the community could hear testimonies of their beliefs from the players.⁴⁴ In the baseball stadium at Benton Harbor tickets were even printed with biblical references and information about the Purnells' mission. “We were there to bring the message, the truth . . . and to play a mean game,” said . . .⁴⁵ In addition to the baseball team, the



The House of David Band. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, reproduction #LC-USZ62-75129.

House of David also had a very popular basketball team whose nickname was the “Whiskers.” It was largely a comedic basketball team, not unlike the Harlem Globetrotters, whom they frequently played.⁴⁶ The success of the baseball and basketball teams was substantial, and the House of David began a series of other public entertainment ventures with family-friendly vaudeville acts, which included several jazz bands. Jazz was a particularly interesting venture for the Purnells, because in the 1920s it had an especially controversial reputation as a “corrupting force for the youth.”⁴⁷ In *The Ladies Home Journal* of 1921, an article appears which could be taken as the premier question asked by many white Protestants during the period, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?”⁴⁸

The principal project of the Purnells’ new work, which would significantly outlast the life of Benjamin and Mary Purnell themselves, was the building of an amusement park, Eden Springs. In many ways this was the culminating vision of the two prophets as a physical space dedicated to the space between religion and entertainment. In 1908, a rudimentary version of the park was opened thanks in large part to the financial aid of the Bauschke brothers, one of Michigan’s earliest automobile manufacturing families and arguably the producers of the first automobile in America. The brothers were early converts to the Jezreelite message, and it was on their invitation that the Purnells originally

moved to Benton Harbor. With the Bauschkes' support, the Purnells created a space that embodied their unique blend of religious proselytization and popular entertainment. It would also be in the 1930s one of the most technologically sophisticated amusement parks of the period, incorporating mechanical rides and games.⁴⁹

Eden Springs was designed to be a living embodiment of the Purnells' message, as was apparent by the very names of the gates, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The train that ran through the park, which was purchased from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, gave rides to park visitors, and followed a route with several billboards with quotations from the Bible.⁵⁰ There were public performances of vegetarian cooking and preserving fruit, along with informational talks touting the many health benefits of keeping a vegetarian diet. It is also no surprise that the park's only restaurant served only vegetarian food on tablecloths which celebrated the messianic age. Even popcorn and peanuts were sold out of paper bags with biblical quotations and quotes drawn from the writings of the Purnells themselves.⁵¹ The park was the manifestation of the Purnells' guiding philosophy that there is always a way to open a conversation into the spiritual by using the popular.

As can be expected, this spiritual openness to vaudeville and entertainment was not well received by other Israelite groups. The use of "spectacle" was considered by several other Israelite groups to be unequivocal proof of the satanic inspiration of the Purnells, and it was also distinctly marked as being an example of the American predilection for capitalist excess. Israelites, especially members of the Christian Israelite Church, had placed a strong emphasis on not participating in worldly concerns, and had gone to great extremes to keep their insularity. "We are called to live a sanctified life, not to become a living display," wrote one Australian Israelite.⁵² Given the fact that the Israelite movement had also developed within the context of the Victorian British Empire, the Purnells' embrace of the popular became yet another example of American vulgarity, and there was a strong effort to distinguish the more traditional camp of Israelites from what was taking place with the Purnells.

Old Wine in New Wineskins

More traditional Israelite groups resisted making a high profile for themselves, in spite of their hairstyles and distinctive dress, and relied solely upon public preaching and the distribution of written materials.⁵³ Gordon Allen and Philip Lockley show that for the vast majority of its history, proponents of the Israelite message relied strongly on the distribution of written religious materials to existing networks of Israelite believers.⁵⁴ As Lockley points out, when John Wroe went on his evangelical tours to Australia, he was speaking to communities already

established, and there was very little of the sort of broad evangelization undertaken by the Purnells. Such changes need to be explained.

R. Laurence Moore, in *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, offered one of the first models of the relationship between American religion and popular culture, and specifically the relationship between religious movements, mass marketing, and entertainment.⁵⁵ Without the support of the state, American religious leaders had to seriously consider how their religious teachings would appeal to the broader public, and that religion in America is first and foremost a market-based industry. This was also the case for the Purnells, in that they completely embraced market forces in the creation of their own take on Southcottianism. Unlike the American-born movements studied by Moore, the Southcottian movement arose in the politico-cultural context of England and was then introduced to the politico-cultural contexts of other Anglophone countries. The House of David became America's most successful Southcottian movement because its leaders paid close attention to the demands of the American believing public, and hence the House of David proved to be dramatically different from other Southcottian religious groups.

The British identity of the Southcottian movement was one of its most distinguishing features and went beyond only claiming the British as being descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. In the Napoleonic wars, Joanna Southcott used the imagery of the antichrist to raise support for soldiers of the British army.⁵⁶ John Wroe even went so far as declaring every seventh year a King's or Queen's year, a celebration of the monarch as an example of God's continuing faithfulness.⁵⁷ The Jezreelites, from whom the Purnells were to first encounter the message of Southcottian Israelitism, staunchly embraced the British nationalism inherited within the movement. James Jershom Jezreel was quite insistent that the headquarters of his movement should be located in Kent, the site of the New Jerusalem.⁵⁸ It was in the small town of Gillingham that the Jezreelites would begin constructing a gigantic tower that was to house more than five thousand members of the "new and latter house of Israel," and would be the center of the Jezreelite world after the coming of the messiah.⁵⁹ The centrality of Britain would be one of the most enduring attributes of the Southcottian tradition and would also be one of the earliest points of fissure between the Purnells' movement and other Southcottian Israelite organizations.

In reviewing several documents and letters from Christian Israelites and followers of Jezreel, as well as the media attention following Benjamin Purnell's trial for sexual indecency, it becomes clear that the flagrant "Americanisms" of the Purnells were one of the central reasons for their being rejected by other followers of the Israelite message.⁶⁰ In a private letter from 1927, a member of the Christian Israelite Church mentions that several followers of the Christian Israelite Church had been "seduced" into going to Benton Harbor.⁶¹ The subtext is quite

telling, and was based on a widespread cultural association of the United States as being a place without morals and decency, which is even more amplified given the House of David's support for jazz and popular sports. In one letter from a Jezreelite follower in 1912, we find the statement perfectly expressed: "Can anything of worth come from America? Would anyone ask the same of Sodom or Gomorrah?"⁶²

Although the Christian Israelites were occasionally ridiculed due to their eccentric dress, it seems, due to the lack of coverage by newspapers, that they were almost invisible to the larger society. However, this was decidedly not the case for the House of David. In the 27 January 1917 edition of *Truth* a reporter writing on the link between the House of David and the Christian Israelites had to acknowledge that the former still existed: "At that time a branch of the organization (House of David) existed in Melbourne, toeing an offshoot of the 'Christian Israelites' whose tabernacle is in Fitzroy-street, Fitzroy. The latter sect still exists; but the officials deny that they have anything in common with the people at Benton Harbor."⁶³ Furthermore, there was an article in *Truth*, a tabloidesque Australian newspaper, that sought to discourage young Australians from making the trek to Benton Harbor to throw in their lot with the "Beastly Benjamin."⁶⁴

The cultural gulf between the rest of the Anglophone world and the United States of America is sufficient in and of itself to render the Christian Israelites as acceptable as followers of shared conventions upon acceptable religiosity, and the House of David as emphatically not. In the previously cited letter from 1912, the question about Sodom and Gomorrah immediately marks anything which came from the United States as being marked with the stain of popular entertainment and showmanship. Especially during the early period of the twentieth century, the worldwide success of Hollywood and the entertainment industry led many people to associate anything that could be marked as American with an aura of falseness, of being in appearance only. In the first decades of the twentieth century we find that in the Angloworld all things originating in America must prove themselves worthy in the face of the overwhelming assumption of insincerity and falseness. Thus with the newspaper articles we find the reiteration of the dangers associated with all things American. In the two articles mentioned, we find time and again these cultural warnings of the falseness of American culture and its corrosive effects. However, along with these serial warnings, there is also the lure of the new, which the Purnells were able to embrace with marked success.

CONCLUSION

The Purnells transformed the Southcottian Israelite message to fit within a new and distinctly American context, and in the process created one of the United States of America's longest surviving communal

religious groups. The primary reason for their success, as has been argued here, came from their ability to understand the nuances and intricacies of the American religious marketplace. Through the House of David's embrace of popular entertainment, printed images, and mass advertising it was able to carve out a significant place in American religious history. However, in doing so, the Purnells also alienated the more conservative strain of the Israelite message in the larger world of the British Empire. The Southcottian movement was a thoroughly British religious phenomenon, and it would not have spread in the United States without significant modification. In the House of David, we find a historical example of a thorough transformation of a predominantly conservative religious movement into one that fully embraced popular American religiosity, and in very real terms helped to shape what was acceptable in terms of popular religious expression. As one reviewer of this article pointed out, the evangelist protagonists in the contemporary HBO television program *The Righteous Gemstones* (2019-current), own a religiously themed amusement park, which is taken as a plausible premise in 2022. This is due, in no small part, to the work of the Purnells. The Purnells were among the earliest innovators in the tradition of popular religiosity, and combined faith, entertainment, and the gimmick in new and interesting ways. In the serious study of the mechanisms used by the Purnells in their engagement with popular culture, we get a clear image of the concerns that dominated American religious life before the Great War, important details for cultural historians. Religion is often depicted as the most serious component of human culture; however, if we have learned anything from this study of the Purnells, it is that religion often benefits from the introduction of a little fun.

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In memory of Dr. Lynne Gray, a scholar and a friend.

ENDNOTES

¹ Southcottian Israelitism is a distinct tradition, and has no connection to other groups with similar names, for example the Black Hebrew Israelites.

² The House of David is still discussed by members of the Christian Israelite Church, and opposition to it has formed much of the CIC social engagement.

³ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ For more on Southcottianism outside the Israelite tradition, see Jane Shaw and Philip Lockley, *The History of a Modern Millennial Movement: The Southcottians* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017). The Old Southcottians are also addressed in Frances Brown's work on Southcott's box of prophecy: Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott's Box of Sealed Prophecies* (London: Lutterworth Press, 2003).

⁵ Jonathan Downing, "Southcottians and Shiloh: Genesis 49:10 and the Morphology of a Messianic Hope," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 3 no. 1 (2016).

⁶ M. T. R. letter 1861, family collection. Edinburgh, UK.

⁷ Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Time* (Philadelphia, Robert Campbell, 1795).

⁸ Deborah Madden, *The Paddington Prophet: Richard Brothers's Journey To Jerusalem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

⁹ Southcott seems to have been more interested in Brothers' role as a prophet, rather than his teachings on Israelitism. I am working currently on an article that will address Southcott's relationship to Brothers.

¹⁰ Joanna Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith*, Vol. 6, 1806. Accessed at: www.thethirdtestament.org.uk. 2 September, 2017.

¹¹ Joanna Southcott, *A Third Book of Wonders Announcing the Coming of Shiloh* (London: Marchant, 1814), 18-64.

¹² John Wroe, *The Journal of John Wroe* (Gravesend: Society of Christian Israelites, 1861), Volume I.

¹³ John Green, *Prophet John Wroe: Virgins, Scandals, and Visions* (London: Sutton, 2010).

¹⁴ Samson, the last of the biblical judges, was a famous biblical character who had taken the vow and appears often in Christian Israelite writings. For his story see Judges 13-16.

¹⁵ It is also taken from the Christian Israelite conviction that they are to maintain a life similar to Adam and Eve, before the fall in Eden.

¹⁶ Philip Lockely, "Missionaries of the Millennium: Israelite Preachers in the English Speaking World," *Journal of Religious History* 37, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁷ "Hidden Hebrews" is a term that comes from Richard Brothers.

¹⁸ Philip Lockely, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103-25.

¹⁹ P. G. Rogers claims in *The Sixth Trumpeter: The Story of Jezreel and his Tower* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) that they were in Richmond, Virginia. An anonymous reviewer of this article noted that census data from the area shows that the Purnells were actually in Richmond, Indiana (Wayne County) when they heard of the English Visitation.

²⁰ Rogers, 1968.

²¹ For a period account of the Mason County revivals, consult Elder (Shaker) Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival: Or a Short History of the late and Extraordinary Outpouring of the Spirit of God in the Western States of America* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1846), 26-31. For a more scholarly account see John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 51-60.

²² Julieanna Frost, *The Worthy Virgins: Mary Purnell and her City of David* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press), in the American Communal Societies Series.

²³ See Gordon Allan, "Southcottian Sects from 1790 to Present Day," in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Los Angeles: Baylor University Press, 2006), 215-16.

²⁴ Allan, "Southcottian Sects from 1790 to Present Day," 215-16.

²⁵ Julieanna Frost, "The Rise and Fall of Prince Michael Mills and the Detroit Jezreelites," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 8, no 3 (2014).

²⁶ R. J. Taylor, *About Us*, www.maryscityofdavid.org. Accessed 8 August 2013.

²⁷ Benjamin and Mary Purnell, *The Star of Bethlehem* (Benton Harbor: House of David, 1903), 9.

²⁸ Moore, *Selling God*.

²⁹ Letter from Benjamin Purnell to A. C., 1908. Private collection.

³⁰ Letter from Benjamin Purnell to A. C., 1908. Private collection.

³¹ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall be No More: Prophecy and Belief in Modern American Culture* (Boston: Belknap Press, 1994), 78-111.

³² For more on the early American Fundamentalist movement, see: Matthew A. Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2017) and Ernest R. Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History* 36, no. 1 (1967): 66-83.

³³ Benjamin and Mary Purnell, *The Star of Bethlehem* (Benton Harbor: House of David, 1903).

³⁴ B. M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 189.

³⁵ The phrase "exposition genre," refers to a wide assortment of books, courses, and pamphlets, in wide circulation during the early twentieth century, predominantly in fundamentalist discourse. At their core they sought to improve biblical literacy, with special attention to premillennial prophecy. They frequently borrowed formatting and charting from academic works, like encyclopedias and dictionaries. The term exposition is used because the genre has at its core a desire to strip away biblical misunderstandings for a purer understanding of the scriptures, and to specifically point out false interpretations. For a broader handling of evangelical reading discourse, see Mary M. Juzwik, "American Evangelical Biblicism as Literate Practice," *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2014): 335-49. For use of the exposition genre and the *Scofield Reference Bible* see: Merrill, John L., "The Bible and the American Temperance Movement: Text, Context, and Pretext," *The Harvard Theological Review* 81, no. 2 (1988): 145-70.

³⁶ Benjamin and Mary Purnell, *The Key to the House of David*, 1911.

³⁷ It must be stressed that there were many examples of the kind of religiosity referred to here. Beyond Alexander Dowie additional examples include Ira Sankey, Dwight L. Moody, and perhaps the most representative, Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson, whose career began in Chicago with the Pentecostal Preacher W. H. Durham, was one of the first popular evangelical preachers. Her "illuminated sermons," which were broadcast over the radio, were dramatic spectacles with theater, music, and special effects. Her Angelus Temple in Los

Angeles was the original megachurch, and several thousand parishioners would attend every Sunday. In addition to the use of theater and spectacle, there was a strong emphasis on the personality of the evangelist. Moody, for instance, was famous for his speaking voice and his charisma. Finally, there was a strong emphasis on financial opulence. The evangelist was a representative of God's favor, and they were to live well. The faithful were expected to contribute money both for the comfort of the evangelist and to support the high media presence. Often books and other documents were sold in the church itself, and frequent plugs to purchase additional materials were given in the sermons. We also see in this period the origin of the "prosperity gospel," wherein God's well wishes correspond directly with the financial contribution of the believer. This has come to be called the "great seed" model, with the idea being that with "great seed" will come great harvest. For more on Aimee Semple McPherson, see Kristy Maddux, "The Foursquare Gospel of Aimee Semple McPherson," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2011): 291–326. On her media presence, see Nathan Saunder, "Spectacular Evangelist: Aimee Semple McPherson in the Fox Newsreel," *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 14, no. 1 (2014): 71–90. For more on the prosperity gospel, see: Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), James F. Findlay, "Dwight L. Moody, Evangelist of the Gilded Age: 1837-1899," *Church History* 30, no. 2 (1961): 232, and Paul E. Durrenberger, and Dimitra Doukas, "Gospel of Wealth, Gospel of Work: Counterhegemony in the U.S. Working Class," *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 2 (2008): 214–24.

³⁸ Carol Sonnenschein, "Zion City, Illinois: A Case Study of Commitment within a Religious Utopian Community," (master's thesis, Loyola University: Chicago, 1990).

³⁹ Harris vs. City of Zion 729. F. Supp. 1242 (N.D. Ill. 1990).

⁴⁰ Henri Desroche, "Heavens on Earth": Micromillénaire et communautarisme utopique en Amérique du Nord du XVIIe au XIXe siècle," *Archives de sociologie des religions, 2e Année*, no. 4 (1957): 57-92.

⁴¹ Sonnenschein, 1990, 48-51.

⁴² Robert S. Fogerty, *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014).

⁴³ "Ben says he is an angel," *Benton Harbor News-Palladium*, 24 March 1905, 1.

⁴⁴ Jessie L. Embry and John H. Bambaugh, "Preaching through Playing: Sports and Recreation in Missionary Work, 1911-1964," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 4 (2009): 53-84.

⁴⁵ Fogerty, *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David*, 96.

⁴⁶ Michael S. Burich, "House of David Thrilled County," *Morning Journal*, 25 April 2020, <https://www.morningjournalnews.com/sports/local-sports/2020/04/house-of-david-thrilled-county/>.

⁴⁷ See McMahan, 1998.

⁴⁸ Ann Shaw Falkner, "Does Jazz put the Sin in Syncopation?," *Ladies Home Journal* (August 1921) 16-40.

⁴⁹ Fogerty, 2014.

⁵⁰ Adam Langer, "The Last Days of the House of David," *The Chicago Reader* (30 June 1994). Another description of the park from the same magazine:

Gwynedd Stuart, "The Resurrection of a Bygone Amusement Park," *The Chicago Reader* (14 May 2014).

⁵¹ Photographs of the park show some of these. See the Israelite House of David website: https://m.israelitehouseofdavid.com/amusement_park_photo_gallery.html.

⁵² Letter to C. H. 1910, Private collection.

⁵³ The clothing approved by the Christian Israelites was a plain suit with a long coat and top hat for men. Women's clothing was not to be revealing, and they likewise were required to wear clothing made of only one fabric. The practice comes from Leviticus 19:19: "neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee." They also tended to wear straw bonnets, or other fashionable hats of the period. The only color which was not permitted to Christian Israelites was black, as it was associated with death. Beards and hair were often twisted, making them more manageable. However, the House of David sported long and flowing hair.

⁵⁴ Philip Lockley, "Missionaries of the Millennium: Israelite Preachers in the English Speaking World, 1823-1863," *Journal of Religious History* 37, no. 3 (2013): 369-90.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Selling God*.

⁵⁶ Matthew Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England: The Theology and Apocalyptic Vision of Joanna Southcott* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

⁵⁷ Green, *Prophet John Wroe*, 81-86.

⁵⁸ There is still some confusion about where James Jershom Jezreel was born, with some like Rogers holding he was born in America. Prince Michael Mills, however, had him born in England in 1840. See "Behold the Bridegroom Cometh: Go ye out of him," *The Free Press of Shiloh, Or Michael Your Prince*, 17 July 1896, https://communalsocieties.hamilton.edu/islandora/object/hamLibCom%3A53799?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=58b7fdf95457a8625331&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=0#page/3/mode/1up.

⁵⁹ Rogers, 1968.

⁶⁰ In 1929 Benjamin Purnell would be convicted of "gross immoralities . . . upon the women and girls of the colony, induced by him through his position of spiritual leader and usually upon the representations that sexual intercourse with him is a religious rite." As part of his conviction, Benjamin was forbidden to lead the colony, and this led to a split within the movement. *People v. Israelite House of David*, 246 Mich. 606, 225 N.W. 638 (Mich. 1929).

⁶¹ Letter from M. G. to T. G. 3 April 1927.

⁶² Letter from V. C. to T. C., 1912. Panacea Trust.

⁶³ "Israelites of David," *Truth*, 27 January 1917.

⁶⁴ "Religious Swindles," *Hobart World* (Tasmania, Australia), 14th May 1923.