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Southcottians and Shiloh: Genesis 49:10 and the Morphology of a Messianic Hope

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Abstract: This article examines how a prophetic religious tradition can exploit the gaps of indeterminacy within a biblical text, in order to develop new readings in response to changing circumstances. Using Brennan Breed’s ideas about biblical texts as “objectiles,” which are prone to change throughout their life, this article traces the interpretation of Genesis 49:10 in the history of a modern prophetic movement. The article proceeds to examine how members of the so-called Southcottian visitation – a British prophetic movement started in the early nineteenth century by the self-proclaimed prophet Joanna Southcott – have used this text to shape their identity and beliefs. By examining how Southcottian prophets of different generations have handled this text – ranging from Southcott herself to a female-led organisation called the Panacea Society established in the early twentieth century – we can see how prophetic readers have used their authority to guide interpretation of the text, and have shaped how it ought to be read within their respective communities. The article shows how Southcottian readers generate a range of different readings of Genesis 49:10, exploring a series of alternative identities and genders for “Shiloh,” and developing new reading strategies for ascertaining the meaning of the term. The article concludes by reflecting on how the text is affected by the Southcottians’ treatment, and how prophetic readers can exert their authority to even change the text itself. Examining how such idiosyncratic readers receive – and change – biblical texts is an important area for investigation by reception-historians keen to understand what texts can do when handled by their diverse readers. Looking at the reception of biblical texts within heterodox religious traditions also raises methodological challenges: it underscores how readings within a religious tradition are processual, develop over time, and can be generated through private, archival correspondence as well as in published media.

Keywords: Genesis; Shiloh; Southcottianism; Brennan Breed; messianism; prophetic communities; Revelation.

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1 Introduction

Prophetic communities, who claim both to share in the inspiration of the biblical authors, and to be uniquely equipped to unveil the meaning of scriptural texts, are important and voracious readers of the Bible, capable of using their interpretative authority to catalyze the development of new, idiosyncratic and innovative readings. In many cases, such readings can result in idiosyncratic community identities and theologies. Yet, despite some interest from scholars who have attempted to shed greater light on the biblical interpretation of such heterodox movements, for the most part, the reading activities of prophetic communities remain either too occluded, or perhaps too obviously divergent from the mainstream ideologies underpinning modern biblical criticism, to be considered in depth.¹ And yet, movements which believe that continued revelation from God is not only possible, but is a substantive part of the community's identity, can act as instructive case-studies for the reception-historian. As Brennan Breed has persuasively argued, reception-historical studies of the biblical text have an opportunity to demonstrate the dynamism of texts as they move through time, as they are handled, reproduced and shaped by readers, and as they contribute to the life and development of the interpretative communities they (tentatively) reside with.² Prophetic communities, whose interactions with the Bible simultaneously offer authoritative “meanings” for biblical texts and allow the elucidated texts to shape their praxis and beliefs, provide fertile ground for the Bible's “nomadic” journey through history.

In his work, Breed distinguishes between “readings that play by rules and readings that play fast and loose,” branding the former “readings” and the latter “transmutations.”³ Breed notes the productive nature of these “transmutations,” cautioning against branding them “failed readings” or “misreadings,” but instead focusing on the ways they may be “‘powerful’ or ‘troubling’ or ‘life affirming’ or ‘effective’” within given reading communities.⁴ A vital part of the story of what biblical texts can do, is thus uncovering what readers have done with – and to – texts in order to formulate meaning out of them. Biblical texts, by virtue partly of their alterity, partly out of their authority for Christian and secular readers,

1 An instructive exception to this pattern is provided by Newport, whose study of biblical exegesis in a variety of religious movements, from the early modern to the present day, demonstrates how biblical interpretation can vitiate the beliefs of dissenting religious communities. Kenneth G.C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2 Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text*, see especially 116–41.

3 Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 133.

4 Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 135.

partly out of their canonization into a wider corpus of literature, and partly out of a belief in their ability to offer prophetic insight into future events, create numerous “spaces of indeterminacy” for readers to fill with their own meanings.⁵ A prophetic tradition, which asserts continued access to revelatory insights into the meaning of sacred texts, can exploit the indeterminacies created by influential biblical texts, and highlight specific texts as fertile ground for re-evaluation and reinterpretation in the light of changing circumstances.

In this article, I wish to draw upon one specific text, and one specific prophetic tradition, to investigate how the reading, transmission and transmutation of a biblical text can engender unfurling meanings during its sojourn within the community. The prophetic figures and communities which constitute the Southcottian visitation – a British prophetic movement inaugurated by Joanna Southcott in the early 1800s – levied their claimed prophetic insights to generate new meanings out of biblical texts to support theological claims, to account for shifting contemporary circumstances, and to innovate new praxes and models of community.⁶ In particular, their continued engagement with the text of Gen 49:10, with its promise of an elusive figure named “Shiloh,” becomes the subject of rereading and reinterpretation across the history of the movement. Tracing Shiloh’s trajectory as a textual ‘objectile’ allows us to see how this figure’s unstable biblical origins creates fertile interpretative space for the Southcottians. In their hands, Shiloh assumes new identities, and is read alongside – and into – new biblical and prophetic texts. The Southcottians’ treatment of this text highlights the Bible’s malleability as it vitiates a prophetic tradition.

5 This terminology is drawn particularly from the work of Wolfgang Iser, who noted the ways in which the “negativity” underpinning literary texts, creates “the hollow form in which the meaning is to be poured” by the reader. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 163–231 passim.

6 My focus in this article is on receptions of the “Shiloh” figure within the British Southcottian tradition. Nineteenth-century Southcottianism, however, had considerable international reach, with notable congregations becoming established in Benton Harbor, Michigan, and in Melbourne and in Sydney. These communities were influenced by prophetic claimants such as Benjamin and Mary Purnell (who established the House of David community in Michigan), and the would-be successor to John Wroe, James Fisher, who established the New Church of the Firstborn in Victoria and Western Australia. For detailed studies of these figures, see Guy Featherstone, “The Nunawading Messiah: James Fisher and Popular Millenarianism in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne,” *Journal of Religious History* 26, (2002), 42–64; Clare Adkin, *Brother Benjamin: A History of the Israelite House of David* (Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2000); Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 79–83; Guy Featherstone, “The Seventh Messenger and Australia 1904–1980: Benjamin Purnell and the House of David,” *Journal of Religious History* 29, (2005), 290–309.

2 The Southcottian Visitation

The succession of communities and prophetic claimants that comprise the so-called Southcottian visitation began with the millenarian prophet Richard Brothers.⁷ Brothers' prediction of an imminent judgment upon London amidst the counter-revolutionary war with France scandalized English society. It nonetheless earned him a sizeable and socially diverse following. His anti-war message, his vivid prophetic rhetoric and his support for the republican ideals of the French Revolution attracted support from artisans such as the engraver William Sharp (who was active in London's radical political groups), members of the clergy, and even a Member of Parliament: Nathaniel Brassey Halhed.⁸ After Brothers was committed to an asylum on a lunacy charge in 1795, his following began to gravitate towards the rival prophet Joanna Southcott. After arriving in London in 1802, Southcott began to denounce Brothers' claims, which increasingly led him to proclaim he was the object of many of the Bible's supposedly-messianic prophecies. Southcott, who disseminated her prophetic writings through her prolific publications (between 1801 and her death in 1814 she had published 65 books) and through an active network of private correspondences between her followers, had amassed just under 12,400 professed believers by the time of her death.⁹

The claim that Southcott embodied the "woman clothed with the sun" was central to her prophetic identity from the outset of her career, and provided a hermeneutical key for how later Southcottians should interpret Gen 49:10. In her first published work, Southcott conflated her identity with the woman in Rev 12, and linked that character with the references to the "bride of the lamb" in Rev 19–22:

⁷ For an overview of the different groups and prophetic claimants that can be considered "Southcottian," see Gordon Allan, "Southcottian Sects from 1790 to the Present Day," in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context*, ed. Kenneth G. C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 213–36.

⁸ For Brothers's published claims see Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*, 2 vols. (London: George Riebau, 1794). For Halhed's published defence of Brothers' claims see Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *Testimony of the Authenticity of the Prophecies of Richard Brothers, and of His Mission to Recall the Jews*. (London: R. Faulder, 1795). For modern biographical studies of Brothers and Halhed see Deborah Madden, *The Paddington Prophet: Richard Brothers's Journey to Jerusalem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) and Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, 1751–1830* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983). A summary of the diverse demographics of Brothers' following can be found in J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780–1850* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 66–7; Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 127–8.

⁹ Philip J. Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35.

“the woman in the 12th chapter of Revelations is myself, the 19th and last.”¹⁰ Southcott forged a strong typological connection between the Bible’s opening and closing books.¹¹ She connected Gen 3:15 (“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel”) with the conflict between the woman, the “man-child” and “that old serpent, called the Devil” in Rev 12. Southcott, as the embodiment of this woman, saw her role as correcting the transgressions of the fall through her “perfect obedience.” As early as 1794, Southcott explained how Genesis and Revelation were to be linked in a letter to a dissenting minister in Exeter:

The woman was first in the transgression, and she must be first in perfect obedience (...) Perfect in obedience as Eve was before the fall, that the words might be fulfilled in the Revelations. The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready, readiness is perfect obedience to all the commands of God.¹²

Genesis 3:15 and Revelation’s vision of the Devil’s defeat would be completed – in Southcott’s view – with the acceptance of her prophetic writings, leading humanity to be once again united with God. Her connection between the beginning and the end of the biblical narrative (and God’s plan for human history) exerted an important influence over later Southcottian biblical interpretation.

The events surrounding her death in December 1814 marked the height of Southcott’s public notoriety. She declared that, at the age of 64, she had become pregnant, and the child she would bear would be “Shiloh,” the figure promised in the King James translation of Genesis 49:10.¹³ After experiencing pregnancy-like symptoms, Southcott died on the 27th December, 1814, ostensibly without having delivered her expected son. As Lockley outlines, believers had (broadly) three types of reactions to Southcott’s death: her followers either stopped believing; some asserted that Southcott had somehow given birth prior to her death and the

10 Joanna Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith; with Remarkable Prophecies (made in 1792, &c) of Things Which Are to Come: Also Some Account of My Life* (Exeter, 1801), 42.

11 For an overview of Southcott’s use of Genesis and Revelation in the establishment of her prophetic identity, see especially Gordon Allan, “Joanna Southcott: Enacting the Woman Clothed with the Sun,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, eds. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 635–48; Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 249–91; Matthew Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England: The Theology and Apocalyptic Vision of Joanna Southcott* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 34–67.

12 Joanna Southcott, “Letter to the Reverend Mr. Leech, a Dissenting Minister in Exeter” October 18, 1794, PN101:62–63, Panacea Charitable Trust – Southcott Archive.

13 Joanna Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews* (London: W. Marchant, 1814), 3–4.

child had been taken up to heaven (Rev 12:5); others threw their support behind other prophetic claimants that emerged in Southcott's wake.¹⁴ Over the next century, the Leeds merchant George Turner; the London-based prophet William Shaw; John Wroe, who formed an intentional community in Ashton-Under-Lyne in the 1820s; James Jershom Jezreel (whose most notorious contribution to Southcottian history was the construction of "Jezreel's tower" in Gillingham in 1884);¹⁵ a South African named Helen Shepstone, and a widowed vicar's wife named Mabel Barltrop, who would found the Panacea Society in Bedford, all assumed – or had attributed to them – the prophetic mantles of being Southcott's successors. In addition, many of these figures would offer reinterpretations of Southcott's promise of Shiloh, either by appropriating the title themselves, or by reading Southcott's promise alongside biblical proof texts, among which Genesis 49:10 was key.

What kind of people were attracted to Southcottianism? As indicated above, the following that Southcott inherited from Brothers was economically and socially diverse. Nevertheless, scholarship on Southcottianism has – for the most part – emphasized that the movement in its various guises especially attracted the working class and women. Thus E.P. Thompson memorably drew upon "the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott" alongside "the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver" and "the poor stockinger," in his mission to rescue these working-class figures from the "enormous condescension of posterity." He argued that Southcottianism found its strongest support "among working people of the west and north" and that the movement, in its earliest flourishes, was "certainly a cult of the poor."¹⁶

Thompson's ideas were largely upheld by James Hopkins, whose study of Southcott drew upon the lists of followers that Southcottians collated to make statistical deductions about the demographic makeup of the movement. Hopkins argued that, whilst there were some wealthy, educated followers prominent in the movement – especially Reverend Thomas Foley and Southcott's aristocratic amanuensis Jane Townley – the "vast bulk of the movement" comprised "the small farmers, married women without employers, the self-employed, soldiers and sailors, and all those working for wages."¹⁷ Hopkins' additional claims that

¹⁴ Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 29–30.

¹⁵ See Philip G. Rogers, *The Sixth Trumpeter: The Story of Jezreel and His Tower* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

¹⁶ Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 2nd edn. (London: Penguin, 1980), 12; 420–6.

¹⁷ James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 82; Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 78.

the movement was made up of 63% of women and 37% of men has also bolstered a scholarly consensus that Southcottianism carried a specific appeal for nineteenth-century women. Barbara Taylor argued that Southcottianism after Southcott's death was sustained by "a coterie of the female faithful" attracted by Southcott's prophecies which offered an "explicit defence of women's equal spiritual status." Taylor noted that Southcottian ideas had a profound influence on James Elishama Smith – an important writer and supporter of Owenite socialism – who advanced a "Doctrine of the Woman" which argued for the viability of female messianism and for the female emancipation and equality.¹⁸

Taken together, these perceptions of the social make-up of the Southcottian movement indicate that their interest in the promise of "Shiloh" should be read against a backdrop of political, social and economic upheaval. That underpinning the "search for Shiloh" is a "chiliasm of despair" whereby radical sectarian religion provided a spiritual consolation for a succession of nineteenth-century political and social concerns. Southcottianism offered its working class adherents a sublimatory vessel to respond to the thwarted revolutionary potential of the overthrow of the monarchy in France; the economic turbulence of the Napoleonic Wars; the incomplete extension of the franchise in the lead up to the Reform Bill in 1832; the Industrial Revolution's disintegration of established urban and rural societal structures, and the concomitant "sexual crisis" brought about by shifting gender roles.¹⁹

This hypothesis has been challenged by Philip Lockley, who has identified more precisely the demographic make-up of Southcottian communities in the nineteenth century. Lockley's study of membership lists unearthed at the Panacea Society's archives in Bedford, suggests that Hopkins may have significantly overestimated the numbers of female Southcottians. In fact, numbers of women in individual Southcottian communities across Britain varied, with men outnumbering women in Sheffield and Bradford. Furthermore, the ratio of male and female Southcottians does not appear to have altered when male prophets such as George Turner and John Wroe gained prominence. Lockley's findings demonstrate that the gender split in early nineteenth-century Southcottianism was broadly in line with participation in other contemporary non-conformist

18 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983), 162–3; 167–8. For a more recent study of how Smith's political ideology intersected with his acquaintance with the Wroeite Southcottian community, see Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 209–27.

19 Thompson, *Making*, 411. For a more nuanced picture of the role of gender in radical religion and the emergence of working class identity see Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1995), 107–18.

traditions such as Methodism and Congregationalism. Thus Lockley concludes that despite Southcott's evident interest in articulating a special role for women in her theology, the movement in its first and second generations "appears to have had no distinctive appeal to women."²⁰

Similarly, the rapid economic changes that the Industrial Revolution brought to Southcottian strongholds like the Pennine region means that many Southcottians "were also implicated in industrial change itself (...) trading successfully in its products." Consequently, we must affirm with Lockley that "the acceptance or denial of millenarian Southcottian beliefs was not dependent on wealth or poverty."²¹ By the early twentieth century, whilst it is undeniable that the Panacea Society was female-dominated in its earliest stages, its members were middle-class, and many had considerable personal wealth.²² The Southcottians, then, throughout their history, can be seen as a diverse group, which problematizes any neat relationship between demographics and theological outlooks. The "Shilohs" they generate, of course, are not read in a vacuum, and are forged through an interaction both with the readings of prior prophets and with contemporary events. Yet the prophets that emerged over the course of the movement's history were both male and female, and carried different socio-economic status: no single demographic group had hegemony over Southcottian biblical interpretation. The interpretation of Genesis 49:10 within the Southcottian visitation thus merits attention on its own terms, to see what readings successive communities could produce through their own confrontation with the text.

In drawing on the figure of Shiloh in Gen 49:10 as a scriptural locus for their prophetic authority, the Southcottians generate new meanings for a text which has, throughout its history, been reread in the light of changing contexts and is itself likely the product of an influential narrative being reread to legitimate a new political situation. Put simply, the Southcottian hope for "Shiloh" is built upon a "fractured" text, whose openness to new meanings has been crucial to its enduring appeal as a messianic proof-text.

3 Genesis 49:10: a Fractured Messianic Hope

The text Joanna Southcott used to give a messianic and eschatological import to the dramatic changes her body underwent in 1814, has "provoked more dif-

²⁰ Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 51–5.

²¹ Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 78.

²² Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 71–98.

ference of opinion among Hebraists than perhaps any other in the entire book of Genesis.²³ The verse itself, part of Jacob's testamental blessing of Judah (Gen 49:8–12), is part of a wider section which many scholars believe to be a late insertion into an underlying Jacob-Joseph story.²⁴ The blessing contrasts with the condemnations in Jacob's preceding words to Reuben, Simeon and Levi (vv. 3–7). In the saying's narrative context, Jacob's words are expected to reach its fulfillment in the future, and, as Fishbane observes, later biblical authors viewed the text as a prophetic oracle, prefiguring the ascendancy of the Judahite dynasty (Zech 9:9, and the ironic reversal of Genesis' imagery in Ezek 19; 21:32).²⁵ This text, along with Balaam's oracle in 24:17, formed the basis for Second Temple messianic expectations centered upon the idea of a Davidic king.²⁶ Imagery from Judah's blessing (specifically the leonine imagery of 49:9, conflated with Isa 11:1) forms the basis for the christological declaration of Rev 5:5: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David."²⁷ The strong connection made by the New Testament authors between Jesus and the Davidic line encouraged early Christian readers of Gen 49:8–12 to see Christ as the fulfillment of Jacob's prophetic blessing.²⁸ By the eighteenth century, the connection between

23 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 654–5.

24 David MacClain Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 249, 303–5. Carr notes that chapters 49 and 38 constitute additions to an underlying Jacob-Joseph story, which constitute an *ex eventu* foreshadowing of Judah's eventual ascendancy over the other tribes during, most likely, the putative period of the Davidic monarchy. The exact setting for this later blessing on Judah, however, remains a source for speculation: for alternative views see Johannes Lindblom, "The Political Background of the Shiloh Oracle," in *Congress Volume: Copenhagen, 1953*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1953): 78–87; Edwin M. Good, "The 'Blessing' on Judah, Gen 49:8–12," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963), 427; Marco Treves, "Shiloh (Genesis 49:10)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, (1966), 353.

25 Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 501–2; Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 692–3.

26 William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: Student Christian Movement (SCM) Press, 1998), 26–7.

27 David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 350; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries 19 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 97.

28 On the use of Davidic christological declarations by the NT authors, see Markus Bockmuehl, "The Son of David and His Mother," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 62, (2011), 476–93. On the interpretation of Gen 49:8–12 among early Christian writers, see Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12–50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 2 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 325–35.

this verse and Christ was firmly secured, with, for example, John Wesley commenting that the verse pointed forward to the Davidic reign, culminating in the coming of Jesus, as the Messiah.²⁹ Thus Judah's blessing, which formed a crucial pillar of Southcottian prophetic identity and theology, is a text which has accrued a succession of meanings during its afterlife. Likely inserted into an existing text as part of an effort to counterbalance Genesis' emphasis on the divine favor of youngest children, its original political goals (viz. the legitimation of Judah's right to exercise kingship in the monarchical period) acquired a prophetic and messianic focus in the hands of later readers, culminating in the christological interpretations of the early Church fathers and subsequent generations of Christian commentators.

In addition, Gen 49:10 poses problems for the translator. Following the Masoretic text, the King James Version (KJV) reads "the sceptre 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." (Gen 49:10 [KJV]). This rendering occludes textual problems in the Hebrew, and discrepancies amongst other ancient versions. Firstly, the word "Shiloh" is feminine, but is paired with a verb in the masculine. Secondly, whilst this rendering would seem to denote a person named "Shiloh," elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Shiloh denotes a place in Ephraim, not in Judah (Josh 18; Judg 18:31; 21:12–25; 1 Sam 1–4; 1Kgs 14; Ps 78:60; Jer 7:12–14; 26:6, 9; 41:5). Thirdly, other ancient versions – notably the LXX – do not read "Shiloh," but instead have "until the things stored up come to him, and he is the expectation of the nations." The problems the KJV's rendering poses have been tackled by biblical scholars in a variety of ways, including suggesting emendations to the text to yield the reading "until tribute comes to him," and suggesting that Jacob's apparent "blessing" may in fact be a curse, alluding to the prediction of the end of Solomon's reign by Abihar the Shilohite in 1Kgs 11.³⁰ These philological debates notwithstanding, the majority of scholars have interpreted the verse as a reference to a future

²⁹ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Bristol: William Pine, 1765), 187.

³⁰ For an approach which suggests the emendation of SHILOH see B. Margulis, "Gen. XLIX 10/ Deut. XXXIII 2–3: A New Look at Old Problems," *Vetus Testamentum* 19, (1969), 202. For surveys of the various approaches to the interpretation of this verse see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1994), 477–8; Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50*, 658–61. For the suggestion that the verse refers to Jeroboam's ascendancy over Solomon see Treves, "Shiloh." A variant interpretation which reads the verse as an ironic reflection on Judah's misdeeds in the Tamar narrative of Gen 38 and Judah's treatment of Joseph is provided by Good, "The 'Blessing' on Judah."

ruler, with concomitant messianic interpretations developing amongst early Jewish readers.³¹

The Geneva Bible's annotations confidently declare that Shiloh "is Christ the Messiah, the giver of prosperity who shall call all the Gentiles to salvation." Later readers who saw the "Shiloh" oracle as a reference to Christ would have to contend with the fact that the name does not appear in the New Testament. The influential Scottish preacher Ralph Erskine, writing at the beginning of the eighteenth century, offered a plethora of justifications for a christological interpretation of "Shiloh." He surveyed a range of etymologies for the word, ranging from "peace," "rest," and a connection to the pool of "Siloam" in John 9:7, which the evangelist translates as "sent." Connecting all of these possible meanings with Christ, Erskine thus argued that "[w]hatever of these Meanings you put on the word, they are all significant, and shew, that Shiloh agrees to the Person of Christ."³² Crucially, whilst Erskine insists that all roads from Shiloh lead to Jesus, he does not offer a definitive exposition of the name's etymology. All paths from Shiloh remain open, but this very interpretative openness allows the reader to reach alternative destinations.

Thus whilst the christological interpretation of Gen 49:10's "Shiloh," and the wider blessing it is part of, was an established interpretation by the late eighteenth-century, the difficulties inherent in the verse ensured that this reading was not entirely secure. Shiloh's identity remains occluded, increasingly vanishing from view in modern translations that offer alternative solutions to the textual problem he or she poses.³³ There exists ample interpretative space which could be exploited by readers wishing to advance a rival explanation of this biblical promise. The messianic readings generated throughout Genesis 49:10's reception history, are, to a large extent, created through readers' responses to the 'indeterminacies' embedded in the text. That is to say, the conceptual gaps contained within texts must be engaged with by readers. The reader's imaginative interaction with these textual 'blanks' actualizes the text's meaning.³⁴ Since the text of Genesis 49:10 does not determine the identity of Shiloh, responsibility for

³¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 230–1. The author of 4Q252 and the Targum Onkelos both gloss "Shiloh" as a reference to the Messiah. See Hamilton, *Genesis*, 660; Horbury, *Jewish Messianism*, 11.

³² Ralph Erskine, *The Happy Congregation; Or, the Great Gathering of the People to Shiloh. Being the Substance of Several Sermons, Preached at Sacramental Occasions, Upon Genesis Xlix. 10. In the Year 1725*. (Edinburgh: John Brigs, 1726), 8–9.

³³ The Revised Standard Version (RSV) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) respectively read "until he comes to whom it belongs" and "until tribute comes to him." Shiloh survives in the American Standard Version (ASV).

³⁴ On the Iserian terminology of 'blanks', see especially Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 182–3.

ascertaining the meaning of the Shiloh prophecy falls to the successive communities of readers who have preserved the text, and rendered it meaningful for their own contemporary age. It is in this productive space that the interpretative activity of Joanna Southcott, and subsequent generations of prophetic readers, flourished. The Southcottians drew upon the malleable figure of Shiloh as an anchor for their prophetic identities and hopes, and in so doing continued to find new ways to shape the text's meaning, and to determine how it should be read within their respective communities.

4 Shiloh as Child and Messiah

In 1814, after a career which had so far seen her publish 62 books of prophecies, Joanna Southcott wrote to George Turner. Turner was one of Southcott's most prominent followers, and was himself a self-proclaimed prophet who commanded his own significant following after Southcott's death. Southcott's letter to Turner described a remarkable intensification in her relationship with the prophetic "Spirit" which had hitherto guided her career. Since 1792, Southcott claimed to have received revelations from "the same Spirit (...) that indited all the prophets throughout the Bible."³⁵ Previously, this Spirit had communicated lengthy poetic prophecies to Southcott and mediated visions to her. It had also acted as a supernatural interpreter both of events in Southcott's life and of apparently obscure biblical texts. In her correspondence with Turner, however, Southcott described how "I not only felt a power to shake my whole body, but felt a sensation it is impossible for me to describe upon my womb."³⁶ Southcott, at the age of 64, claimed to have fallen pregnant, further completing her embodiment of the "woman clothed with the Sun" in Revelation 12, whom she had identified herself with throughout her prophetic mission. In her public announcement of her pregnancy, she draws upon Gen 49:10 to identify her expected child, and directly appeals to a Jewish audience, arguing that it is her child that will bring about the expected end-time conversion and "gather" Jews and Christians together. Southcott especially exploits links with Isa 11's vision of the "[b]ranch" of Jesse which will "gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12). This led Southcott to declare that since the Bible's prophetic promises of peace had evidently not been fulfilled through Christ's time on earth, a "second

³⁵ Southcott, *Strange Effects of Faith*, 12.

³⁶ Joanna Southcott, "The Conception Communication. Copied from Joanna Southcott's Letter Address'd to G Turner of Leeds," February 25, 1814, PN124:2, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

child,” borne by Southcott, was inscribed in the Bible’s prophetic hopes and “this is the *CHILD* the Jews are waiting for, the remnant that stands out in unbelief.”³⁷

Southcott’s reading of Genesis 49:10, and a number of other messianic proof-texts from the Hebrew Bible, decouples the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy from the person of Jesus, and allows Southcott to develop a reading strategy which places herself – and the delivery of her child – at the center of the Bible’s future promises. It is a reading strategy which is heavily dependent on typology as a hermeneutical device. Throughout her writings, Southcott describes divine communication, such as that recorded in the Bible, as being replete with “types and shadows:” “[f]rom Types and Shadows all is placed;/From Types at first I spoke.”³⁸ Thus, for Southcott, biblical texts have a direct meaning for the present day, as they typologically foreshadow events in the contemporary world and Southcott’s prophetic career.

This emphasis on typology as a hermeneutical approach to biblical interpretation, which was a constant presence in a number of areas of British culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, allows Southcott to exploit the semi-otic openness at the heart of Genesis 49:10 and leads her to read the text under the assumption that its primary referent is her own prophetic mission.³⁹ In turn, Southcott gains authority to determine the promises of the “sceptre” and “the lawgiver” in the original text. In Southcott’s reading, these symbols stand for “the *PROMISE* that stands on record for the *HEBREWS* in the end” – the opportunity to convert to Christianity. The coming of Shiloh thus acts as a time limit on this promise: this eschatological promise remains open until Shiloh is born, at which point “it will depart from them, if they stand out in unbelief.”⁴⁰ For Southcott, Genesis 49:10 represents scriptural attestation for two specific stages in salvation history: the birth of Shiloh, and the “gathering” of the Jewish people.

In Southcott’s hands, the meaning of Gen 49:10 comes to be found not in the original narrative setting of the blessing of Judah, nor in the political situation of the early monarchical period, but rather in Joanna Southcott’s own body and prophetic mission. Southcott’s reading links Gen 49:10 with Rev 12, and uses Rev

³⁷ Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 17 (emphasis as in original).

³⁸ Joanna Southcott, *A Warning to the Whole World, from the Sealed Prophecies of Joanna Southcott, and Other Communications, Etc.* (London, 1803), 299.

³⁹ On the prevalence of typological interpretation in the culture of this period, see Paul J. Korshin, *Typologies in England, 1650–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); pace Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative; a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁴⁰ Joanna Southcott, *The Fourth Book of Wonders, Being the Answer of the Lord to the Hebrews* (London: E. Spragg, 1814), 65 (capitalization as in original).

5:5's tacit connection of the Judah oracle with Isa 11 to interpret "Shiloh" as a quasi-messianic figure, distinct from the person of Jesus. The nationalistic overtones of the original oracle, with its implicit endorsement of the tribe of "Judah," is reflected by Southcott's conviction that Shiloh's principal appeal would be to the Jewish people. The reading of Gen 49:10 offered by Southcott has important ramifications for the text's interpretations by subsequent generations of Southcottians. In various ways, they all carried forward the idea that the phrase "until Shiloh comes" referred to an entity who had been borne by Southcott, and that the key to understanding this figure's identity lay in its connection with Rev 12:5. Furthermore, Southcott's idea that her son would catalyze the conversion of the Jews also underpins many later Southcottian readings of Gen 49:10.

5 Shiloh after Southcott

As J.F.C. Harrison has noted, Southcott's proclamations about the birth of Shiloh formed a key part of the beliefs of the various iterations of Southcottianism after her death.⁴¹ So called "Old Southcottians" – such as Samuel Jowett, a Leeds-based printer – eschewed subsequent prophetic claimants and maintained a steady praxis of reading Southcott's prophetic works and affirming that Southcott herself would return as a "wonder" and finally give birth to the child, Shiloh.⁴² Similar claims were also made by the Southcottian prophet, William Shaw, whose prophecies were preserved and copied by the members of the Panacea Society: Shaw claimed that Shiloh was Jesus's son, and that he resided in heaven, waiting to be revealed on earth. Resistance to the idea of Shiloh's rule, Shaw proclaimed, would incite God's wrath, and wicked cities such as London would be destroyed: "Oh London! More wicked than Babylon of Old, thou shalt taste My bitter cup, for the end of thee is come."⁴³ Would-be claimants of Southcott's prophetic mantle, such as Samuel Sibley, who established a Southcottian chapel in London that attracted a significant body of followers, offered their take on what the Bible's and Southcott's promise of Shiloh might mean given the disappointment of the prophet's death.⁴⁴ Sibley's

⁴¹ Harrison, *Second Coming*, 135–6.

⁴² Samuel Jowett, "To the Believers in Joanna Southcott's Visitation" (Leeds, 1844), PN603, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive; Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 77.

⁴³ William Shaw, "Communications Given to William Shaw," 1818–1819, PN531, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁴⁴ On Sibley's prophetic career see Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 31, 92–3; Harrison, *Second Coming*, 136–7.

followers were asked to assent to “articles of faith” which stated their belief that Shiloh would fulfill the role of the “Paraclete” in John 14, and that he would be the bodily incarnation of the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

The Southcottians after Southcott, as Lockley has shown, were a divided movement, with schisms forming along political as well as theological lines.⁴⁶ George Turner, a follower first of Brothers and then of Southcott, formed the first major post-Southcott prophetic following after holding his own meetings and distributing his own prophetic proclamations in London from 1816–1821.⁴⁷ Turner, in claiming his own prophetic role, offers an exposition of the Shiloh promise for a new generation of Southcottians, which focuses especially on the idea of Shiloh as a “gatherer” of people.

In prophetic texts published between 1818 and 1820, Turner outlined his prophetic hopes for the future. Turner’s vision picks up on key theological ideas taken up from his predecessors, Southcott and Richard Brothers. From Brothers, Turner takes the idea of the restoration of the Jewish people in Israel, a key theme in Brothers’ prophetic writings.⁴⁸ From Southcott, he takes the idea that this new people will be ruled and governed by Shiloh, the appointed agent of Christ in the millennial world. Turner emphasizes that when Shiloh “comes,” he will take on the roles of “ruler” and “lawgiver” dedicated to Judah in Gen 49:10:

(...) on the throne of David, in Jerusalem, to reign over my people Israel, whose kingdom shall be filled with glory, and he shall reign over all the earth, and be king over all nations, and kingdoms, and people upon earth... and he shall give them the law of life to the uttermost parts of the earth (...)⁴⁹

In Turner’s writings, Shiloh is depicted as the son of Jesus and Southcott, with Turner acting as his prophetic herald and eventually Shiloh’s “adopted father.”⁵⁰ Turner explicitly draws upon the narrative of the woman of Revelation 12 to account for Shiloh’s failure to appear before Southcott’s death, and presents Shiloh’s reign in the restored Jerusalem as the fulfillment of the eschatological

45 Samuel Sibley, *A Copy of the Articles of Faith, as Acknowledged and Believed by the Children of the Faithful, Belonging to the House of Faith, Or, Philadelphian Church; Well Known by the Name of the Followers of the Divine Mission of Joanna Southcott* (London: Dean and Munday, 1819).

46 Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 29–56.

47 Harrison, *Second Coming*, 119–21.

48 Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 191–217.

49 George Turner, *Wonderful Prophecies... Being A Call to the Jews to Return*, vol. 1 (London: A. Redford, 1818), 5–6.

50 George Turner, *Second Part of Wonderful Prophecies*, vol. 2 (London: T. Goyder, 1819), 77.

visions of Revelation 21–22.⁵¹ For Turner, this fulfillment of Jacob’s words to “the Jews” will be symbolic of Jesus’s own kingship.⁵² Shiloh’s regency echoes the contemporary British monarchical crisis between 1811 and 1820, when Britain was ruled by the Prince Regent as a result of King George III’s mental illness. Turner explicitly marks out the restoration of the king’s sanity as a sign of Shiloh’s imminent arrival.⁵³

Turner’s reading of Gen 49:10 is thus manifestly political. For Turner, the text, refracted through Southcott’s apparently failed promise of its fulfillment, points forward to the establishment of a new blessed world power, headed by Christ’s own son. The political undertones of the text’s original setting become transmuted to a new modern situation, as Turner looks forward to the eschatological restoration of Israel under Shiloh’s legal and monarchical stewardship.

Turner’s ideas about Shiloh, and the proper reaction to his impending reign, were modified by the Southcottian prophet John Wroe, who established a distinctive community of “Christian Israelites” in Ashton-Under-Lyne.⁵⁴ Wroe published his prophetic “communications” in a number of editions throughout his lifetime, and circulated an edition of “Private Communications” amongst his followers.⁵⁵ In these communications, Wroe explores the question of the relationship of Jesus to Shiloh. Echoing Sibley’s ideas, Wroe links Shiloh’s identity closely with the Holy Spirit, and again highlights Shiloh’s role as a “gatherer” of people. He argues that “when [the Spirit] rested on Jesus at Jordan, it was Shiloh” who subsequently scattered the people who had gathered to witness Christ’s baptism. The same Shiloh would, nonetheless, be the instrument through which Israel is gathered: “I will reveal my son Shiloh amongst my Israelites, and they shall come forth and go unto that place where I am now sending thee, and shall build Jerusalem – my seat, my throne, that I may cause my Spirit to rest there.”⁵⁶ Whilst in Wroe’s writings Shiloh is consistently designated as Jesus’ “son,” nonetheless there are suggestions that in effecting Jesus’s reign over humanity, the two share an identity. In an exposition of a vision of a man “coming from the clouds to the earth,” Wroe identifies this figure as “Jesus, the tribe of Judah, which is become Shiloh,” and elsewhere records a command to “Proclaim me, Jesus, Shiloh, God,

51 George Turner, *Wonderful Prophecies*, 2:59, 79.

52 George Turner, *Second Part of Wonderful Prophecies*, 2:81.

53 Turner, *Wonderful Prophecies*, 1818, 1:13; Turner, *Wonderful Prophecies*, 1819, 2:88.

54 See Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 103–24.

55 For a discussion of how the discovery of Wroe’s *Private Communications* in the archives of the Panacea Charitable Trust has added to our understanding of Wroe’s life, see Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 109; John Wroe, *Private Communications Given to John Wroe*, 3 vols. (Wakefield, 1845–1853) PN 561–563, Panacea Charitable Trust – Southcott Archive.

56 Wroe, *Private Communications*, 1:24.

and King to the ends of the Earth.”⁵⁷ The link Wroe creates between Shiloh and the Spirit would be developed further by the members of the Panacea Society in the early twentieth century.

In contrast to Turner and to Southcott, Wroe did not set a definitive date for the return of Shiloh and the subsequent inauguration of the messianic age.⁵⁸ Instead, as Lockley as has expounded, Wroe offered his followers a foretaste of life in the restored Jerusalem by building a “sanctuary” in 1825, and enforcing the laws of the Torah (including restrictions on eating practices, male circumcision, and the Nazarite vow of Numbers 6, which led to the Wroelite Southcottians becoming infamously known as “beardies”).⁵⁹ To this end, Wroe’s speculations about Shiloh lose the expectant air of Turner and Southcott. Wroe’s community in Ashton-Under-Lyne, in gathering together and adopting the law that Shiloh would enforce in the millennial age, place an implicit emphasis on the protasis of the Shiloh clause in Gen 49:10: an emphasis on the time before “Shiloh comes” to assume the roles of ruler and lawgiver. The hope for Shiloh still remains focused on the future, but for believers, aspects of that promise could be obtained in the here-and-now by living within the Wroelite community and adhering to its customs and laws.

The years after Southcott’s death saw Southcottian prophets and communities heralding the imminent revelation of Shiloh, but Southcottians’ readings of Gen 49:10 could also lead to individuals claiming to *be* the promised Shiloh. Notable among such claimants was the prophet John “Zion” Ward (1781–1837). Ward’s career saw him become both a religious and political agitator for reform, vehemently opposed to the priestly institutions of Christianity. He garnered the sympathies of radicals in the early 1830s by protesting against the national fast day, and was eventually imprisoned under a blasphemy charge in Derby in 1832.⁶⁰

Ward’s biblical hermeneutic, as Lockley has noted, builds upon the Southcottian emphasis on typology and takes it to its logical extreme. Whereas Southcott maintained that the Bible described both God’s historical interventions in the ancient world *and* typologically represented events in the present, Ward argued that the whole Bible allegorically described *his* revelation as a messianic

⁵⁷ Wroe, *Private Communication*, 1:211; 1:17.

⁵⁸ Turner twice predicted that Shiloh would be revealed, first on October 14, 1820, and then on April 10, 1821. Both times his expectations were disappointed. See further Harrison, *Second Coming*, 119–21.

⁵⁹ Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 110–24.

⁶⁰ See further Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 126–42, 177–208; W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978), 150–74.

figure. Thus in reaction to contemporary trends in biblical interpretation, Ward argued that if established clergy truly had insight into the Bible's meaning: "they would not have read the Bible as an history, but they would have read and understood as it really is – an allegory, from one end to the other; and types, shadows and figures (...)"⁶¹ Ward proclaimed himself to be the "Shiloh" of Gen. 49:10, and indeed argued that "all the prophets, kings, and great men, mentioned in Scripture, were addressed by this title, my lord, because they were types of him that was to come in the end – Shiloh [i.e. Ward]."⁶² Ward's reading of Gen 49:10, then, assumes a connection with a host of other titles and figures and scripture, which all center upon aspects of Ward's own messianic life and personality. In a complex passage in *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, Ward connects the name of Judah to a point in his life "when he is visited of God to be brought forth to the work assigned to him by God." In this way, Gen 49:10's testamental blessing of Judah becomes an instruction for Ward to proclaim God's "promise" to humanity through his eccentric preaching activities, and to be the true "lawgiver" over and against existing religious and secular legislative bodies, until he himself is fully revealed to all as "Shiloh:" "the true light, or the day that shall come."⁶³

Ward's reading of the Shiloh oracle builds upon interpretative trends established by the founder of the Southcottian movement, but notable in Ward's handling of the biblical text is the way in which names and titles across the biblical corpus can be interlinked through their shared reference to Ward's own life and mission. Thus individual letters in names can, for Ward, betray particular significance. "Judah" and "Judas" are both biblical designations for Ward himself; the "s" in the latter refers to Ward when "the serpent was attached unto him – the evil power – by which influence he became the traitor, but he hangs himself – i.e. he repents."⁶⁴ Ward's reading of the Shiloh prophecy is thus deeply intertextual, and allows him to attach meaning to individual consonantal units of biblical names. In this way, Ward both reflects prior Southcottian reading conventions, and generates new ways of interpreting influential texts such as Gen 49:10. In Ward's hands, the Shiloh prophecy can be read alongside an even broader range of biblical texts as the prophetic reader seeks to subsume the entire text to the revelation of his own personal identity.

In the generation of Southcottian readers of Gen 49:10 that followed Southcott's death, the figure of Shiloh – and the expectations that this figure inspired – underwent a series of transformations. Southcottian prophets such as Turner,

61 John 'Zion' Ward, *The Judgment Seat of Christ* (London: C.W. Twort, 1831), 46.

62 John 'Zion' Ward, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, 19.

63 John 'Zion' Ward, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, 149.

64 John 'Zion' Ward, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, 149.

Wroe and Ward generally followed Southcott's expectation that the Shiloh prophecy promised a messianic figure who would arrive in the nineteenth century. The three had divergent theological presuppositions, however, which affected how the promise of Shiloh would be interpreted and experienced. In all three's hands, however, Gen 49:10 could be interpreted in line with the modern prophetic reader's needs, and thus Shiloh's identity could be determined in response to nineteenth-century sectarian political and religious needs. In turn, Shiloh's identity could be further separated from the figure of Christ, and could be attached to new religious and prophetic figures. In the hands of subsequent Southcottians, Shiloh's identity – and the meanings that could be built on Gen 49:10 – would undergo further transformations which would ironically reflect the issues of gender at the heart of the grammatical questions that the verse poses for translators and interpreters.

6 Shiloh in the Twentieth Century – The Panacea Society

Shiloh's journey through the Southcottian tradition culminates in the activities and beliefs of a group of women who founded an intentional community in Bedford called the Panacea Society, which dedicated itself to publicizing the works of the Southcottian prophets, and to lobbying the Church of England to open a sealed box containing Joanna Southcott's prophecies.⁶⁵ The leader of this community, a vicar's widow called Mabel Barltrop, believed herself to be the eighth prophet of the Southcottian Visitation (and hence became rechristened as "Octavia") and, as the society's detailed archives reveal, came to see herself as a living incarnation of "Shiloh." This assumption of Shiloh's identity is vitiated by sustained contemplation of Genesis 49:10, and the intertextual links which earlier Southcottians had used to guide the text's interpretation.

The Panacea Society had its origins in a group of women who shared an interest in Southcott's prophecies, and a confidence in their relevance for the twentieth-century world. Women such as Rachel Fox (who acted as a chronicler for the society, publishing a number of works which articulated the group's beliefs); Kate Firth (who had befriended Barltrop after relocating to Bedford in 1911), and Ellen Oliver (who had discovered Southcott's works after her participation

⁶⁵ For a history of the Panacea Society and their activities, see Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011) and Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott's Box of Sealed Prophecies* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006).

in women's suffrage meetings), communicated with Barltrop about Southcott's writings and the status of the other prophetic claimants and groups that emerged after Southcott's death.⁶⁶ The identification of Barltrop as Shiloh was made by Oliver, who first expressed her belief in a letter to Kate Firth. She notes that after reading earlier Southcottian prophets' reiteration of the idea of Shiloh as a "gatherer" of people and their emphasis on Shiloh as Southcott's "child," this catena of prophetic signifiers seemed to point irresistibly to Barltrop: "[n]o wonder M.B. has a look of Joanna for she is Joanna's Spiritual Child – Shiloh! She is the golden bowl at the top of the 7 staged candlestick!"⁶⁷ Oliver's revelation identifies Barltrop both as Shiloh, and the fulfillment of Zechariah 4:2's vision of a golden candlestick which represents "the word of the Lord" (Zech 4:6), further aligning the ideas of Shiloh as a prophetic figure – a vehicle for God's continued revelations to humanity – and as a quasi-messianic leader of God's earthly kingdom.

Oliver's revelations about Barltrop's identity had obstacles to overcome. Kate Firth, concerned about Barltrop's health, urged Oliver to keep her ideas secret from the would-be Shiloh, and was non-committal about the viability of Oliver's ideas. She questioned: "Of course it is *very* possible that M.B. is Joanna's spiritual child in more senses than one, but is Shiloh *feminine*? I have always imagined S to be masculine (...)"⁶⁸ Despite the overwhelming emphasis on Shiloh as a male figure in Southcottian tradition, stemming from Southcott's conviction that she would bear a "son," the early Panaceans developed strategies to carve out a feminine identity for Shiloh. A firm tenet of the Panaceans' theology was that the godhead contained a feminine element, as revealed by biblical passages such as Gal 4:26 ("Jerusalem which is above (...) the mother of us all). As Jane Shaw has shown, this emphasis on the feminine in the godhead, when combined with the belief in Barltrop as the earthly manifestation of Shiloh, led the Panaceans to develop a quadripartite Godhead, with Barltrop as the fourth "Divine daughter."⁶⁹ Her early correspondences with Oliver reveal a cautious openness to the idea of reading Shiloh as a female: she argued that "*he* & *her* are used indiscriminately in the Bible" and that "the predominate personality in the Godhead will be feminine."⁷⁰ The Panaceans' early correspondence thus shows

⁶⁶ For a biographical sketch of the prominent early members of the Panacea Society see Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, 71–98.

⁶⁷ Ellen Oliver, "Letter to Kate Firth," February 15, 1919, PS 4.2/4, Panacea Charitable Trust – Panacea Archive.

⁶⁸ Kate Firth, "Letter to Ellen Oliver," February 16, 1919, PS 4.2/3, Panacea Charitable Trust – Panacea Archive. Emphasis as in original MS.

⁶⁹ See Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, 40–2.

⁷⁰ Mabel Barltrop, "Letter to Ellen Oliver," February 28, 1919, PS 4.2/3, Panacea Charitable Trust – Panacea Archive. Emphasis as in original MS.

a willingness to destabilize the strong emphasis on Shiloh as a masculine figure that they had inherited from important writings in their own prophetic tradition, and in the biblical texts which Southcottians had drawn upon to develop their ideas about Shiloh's identity.

Once the possibility of a feminine identity for Shiloh had been established, the Panaceans developed new reading strategies to demonstrate how the Bible could point forward to Barltrop/Octavia's new pivotal role. In addition to arguing that the use of gendered pronouns such as "he" or "her" had become obscured over generations of mistranslation, the Panaceans developed linguistic arguments to bolster their beliefs about Barltrop, which call to mind the transmutations of the text made by "Zion" Ward. Fox, for instance, reported that a friend of Octavia's had told her "Sh" was "the sign of the feminine in Hebrew" (and thus Shiloh, as well as the divine name "Shaddai" must have a feminine aspect to their identity).⁷¹ Similarly, the community began to construct ways they could understand the Southcottian connection between Gen 49:10 and the "man-child" of Rev 12:5. Fox claimed that Octavia believed that the phrase "meant merely a *child* of man – of the genus man, in contradistinction to the offspring of any other genus" thus denying that Revelation 12:5 could necessarily reveal anything about Shiloh's gender.⁷² In this context, resultant emendations of the text of Gen 49:10 by Barltrop's followers are perhaps less surprising than they may first appear, such as when Kate Firth wrote to Fox in March 1919, shortly after Oliver's revelation about Barltrop's true identity had been articulated, to claim that "Shiloh is (as you say) the daughter of Jesus Christ and of Joanna (...) To *her* will the ingathering of the people be."⁷³

The Panacean's belief that Mabel Bartrop had embodied the Shiloh of Gen 49:10 led to a radical reappraisal of the meaning of key biblical texts in the Southcottian tradition. Where such texts had gendered implications for the expression of the community's identity, beliefs and future hopes, the Panaceans were able to develop strategies which saw them resisting the masculine bias inherent in the English translations they were consulting. In this instance, the community's own identity, their recognition of standing in a specific prophetic tradition, and their interest in finding a place for a feminine in an otherwise patriarchal godhead led to a direct confrontation with scripture. Key biblical texts such as Gen 49:10 and Rev 12:5 thus elicit two concomitant responses from the early Panaceans. Firstly, they continue to use the texts to shape facets of their identity as a prophetic

⁷¹ Rachel J. Fox, *The Finding of Shiloh or the Mystery of God 'Finished'* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1921), 264–5.

⁷² Rachel J. Fox, *The Finding of Shiloh*, 263.

⁷³ Letter from Kate Firth to Rachel Fox, March 20, 1919; cited in Fox, *The Finding of Shiloh*, 270–1.

community, and to understand their leader's place in the sequence of prophetic figures and communities that form the Southcottian communities. Secondly, influential figures such as Octavia were able to levy their own prophetic authority (imbued, in part, through their reading of these texts) to not only contest received interpretation of these verses, but to alter the very text of these verses to yield supporting scriptural testimony for their theological claims.

In this latter regard, the reading acts of these women begin with engaging 'blanks' within the text of Gen 49:10 and end by transmuting it into a new form which can best elucidate the community's theology. Shiloh's unstable identity, experienced through acquaintance with the claims of prior Southcottian readers, created an interpretative environment in which the Panacean's own theological convictions could act as the determining control over the interpretation of the text. Genesis 49:10, when read by Octavia and her followers, could be made to yield to the demands of the prophetic reader. In this way, Shiloh's identity and gender can be navigated anew, opening up further interpretative possibilities for an already elusive biblical character.

7 Conclusion

Southcottian readings of Gen 49:10 thrive on – and in – the interpretative spaces created within the text itself, and through its association both with other biblical texts, and a tradition of interpretation which links the figure of "Shiloh" to a hoped-for, but not conclusively-identified, messiah. Within this interpretative tradition, the elusive figure of Shiloh assumes new identities, performs new roles, and takes on new genders, according to the needs and theological presuppositions of the given reading community. In his/her journey through the Southcottian visitation, Shiloh becomes read through the lens of Southcott's miraculous pregnancy, through the expectation of an eschatological ruler and lawgiver, and through the conviction that the figure envisaged by Jacob on his deathbed is manifest in specific prophetic claimants inspired by the writings and testimony of Southcott. In the hands of such prophetic readers, Shiloh's identity and the messianic hope that the figure represents, become malleable.

The readings of Gen 49:10 by successive generations of Southcottians present specific challenges for the reception historian. At first sight, there is little that the Southcottians would seem able to contribute to the modern academic task of biblical interpretation, aside from a reminder of the 'blanks' surrounding the verse, and the continued appeal of messianism as a hermeneutical key for understanding the verse's meaning. Yet, when considered as part of the reception history

of the text, and its treatment at the hands of a diverse set of readers, we may note several specific contributions that the Southcottians make to the process of meaning-making in Gen 49:10.

First, we can detect a countercultural trend in exploring alternative identities for Shiloh. Whilst the Southcottians would closely link Shiloh's activity with that of Jesus, and would frequently depict Shiloh as Jesus's child, their affirmation of a distinction between Christ and Shiloh provides space for the Southcottians to explore other roles for this figure.

Second, Southcottian prophets continually exert their interpretative authority over the text, to control the ways in which their readers might think about Gen 49:10 and ascertain its meaning. Figures such as Ward and the early Panaceans would attach deep significance to individual letters in key words such as "Shiloh," encouraging their readers to explore new methods of ascribing meaning in biblical texts. Such 'transmutations' ensure that the gaps of indeterminacy contained in the verse progress to new levels, and provide still further spaces for Southcottian readers to have an input into the text's interpretation.

Finally, we may note how, in the process of tracing the trajectory of an 'objective' text through a diffuse religious tradition, biblical interpretation takes place both in public and in private. Many Southcottian readers published their readings of Gen 49:10, because their ideas about what the verse might mean were felt to be of utmost importance for the wider reading public. However, the process of determining the meaning(s) of Gen 49:10 was also a matter of debate and exploration within Southcottian groups, and thus plays out in private correspondence, as well as in the public sphere of nineteenth and twentieth century print culture. For the modern reception historian, this means that the investigation of what readers have made of biblical texts must necessarily encroach upon the private sphere, upon the archive. The reading of biblical texts, just like their formulation, is 'processual,' with understandings of texts developing over time, and in response to changing circumstances, readers and needs. For prophetic readers such as the Southcottians surveyed above, much valuable reading takes place in the dialogue between members, as the significance of biblical texts unfurls in the light of new revelations and new figures who offer contributions to what the text can – or should – mean to believers.

Genesis 49:10, and its elusive promise of "Shiloh" does not emerge unscathed from its journey through the Southcottian tradition. In the hands of these idiosyncratic readers the text becomes attached to new parts of the canon, and to the prophetic writings of the Southcottians themselves. It is read and understood alongside the gnomic narrative of Revelation 12, and alongside the dramatic pronouncements made by Joanna Southcott in the final year of her life. It is looked to in the search for a solution to the problem of an unstable monarch. It

is understood as a key text for readers to understand the kind of governance that God would eventually institute on Earth, and which is to be modeled by believers in the present. Its meaning is even, according to some readers, to be found in the individual consonantal units which make up key terms such as “Shiloh,” and it can be used to mark out the prophetic identity of the would-be authoritative leader of a prophetic community. Amidst all of this interpretative tumult, Shiloh’s identity becomes a source of hope and contention, in which all aspects of the figure’s identity can be contested by readers claiming a prophetic insight. In the end, the prophetic interpreter can accord themselves the ability to change the verse itself: the words ultimately subjugated to the will of the authoritative reader. The Southcottians’ treatment of Gen 49:10 demonstrates clearly how biblical texts can have far-reaching effects on readers. Yet we should be aware that the influence can clearly extend both ways. Brennan Breed is surely right to encourage biblical scholars to think in terms of a text’s “potential,” asking “what *can* it do?”⁷⁴ A vital part of understanding what a biblical text can do is interrogating what has – and what can – be done to it by its most idiosyncratic readers.

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⁷⁴ Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 118 (Emphasis Breed’s).

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