

Prophets Reading Prophecy: the Interpretation of the
Book of Revelation in the Writings of Richard Brothers,
Joanna Southcott and William Blake



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Short Abstract

This thesis examines the use and interpretation of Revelation in the writings of the contemporary prophets Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott and William Blake. Contributing to an emerging scholarly interest in the reception of biblical texts within marginalised interpretative traditions, the thesis offers a detailed exploration of how Revelation is incorporated into these authors' prophetic texts, and how it informs the identity of readers who see their activities as bringing about the fulfilment of the text's visions on the historical plane. This aim is achieved by engaging with extant comparative studies of Brothers, Southcott and Blake within historical and literary studies; a comparison with similar contemporary prophetic figures and the contribution of Revelation to their prophetic self-understandings; and contextualising these figures against contemporary constructions of Revelation as a prophetic text, and the recognition of the poetic nature of biblical prophecy in the eighteenth century. In particular, the thesis advocates for the continued exploration of “emic” approaches to these figures, a process started by members of Oxford's Prophecy Project. The thesis thus argues that “prophecy”, rather than “millenarianism,” is the most appropriate way of characterising these authors' scriptural engagement, and explores how prophecy is understood in their writings to delineate commonalities in their understanding of the prophet's role. Finally, it surveys how Revelation is interpreted within the respective works of the writers who are the focus of this thesis. The conclusion offers a hermeneutical reflection on the relationship between the prophetic interpreter and the texts they engage with. It suggests that the reader who claims to be “inspired” faces a tension between offering an interpretation of the authoritative text, and claiming an equivalent level of authority for their own works.

The thesis makes three contributions to existing scholarly debates. Firstly, it demonstrates that attention to these three authors' interpretations of Revelation shows how attention to neglected voices illuminates the history of interpretation of this biblical book. Secondly, it justifies comparing these three authors under the framework of “prophecy”, rather than the anachronistic terminology of “millenarianism.” Thirdly, it explores their readings of Revelation to shed light on how interpretation of a scriptural text such as Revelation is key to the evolution of prophetic vocation; how Revelation's images are developed and transformed in their own prophetic texts; and finally, their sensitivity to hermeneutical questions raised by Revelation's relationship to other biblical texts and the problems posed by its eschatology.

Long Abstract

This thesis answers a single central research question: how is the book of Revelation used and interpreted in the works of Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott and William Blake? In doing so, it contributes to the emerging scholarly interest in receptions of Revelation by readers outside of established modern historical-critical approaches. It offers a detailed study of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of Revelation in their works to ascertain how their encounters with the book's pivotal visions generate meaning within their respective prophetic projects, and help to form the rationale for their prophetic identity.

The introduction defends the choice of Revelation as a case study for investigating Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's biblical interpretation. Whilst they are influenced by other biblical texts, they share a belief that their actions fulfil the prophetic hopes of Revelation, whether through embodying characters in the book's visions, or through transforming the perspective of readers who engage with their prophetic works. This thesis thus builds on the work of Kenneth Newport, who has urged scholars to scrutinise these kinds of readings more closely, despite their divergence from the aspirations of objectivity inherent in modern historical criticism. It also continues the emphasis placed on “emic” approaches to these figures, pioneered by members of the Oxford Prophecy Project, especially Deborah Madden, Matthew Niblett, and Susanne Sklar. Revelation is used by Brothers, Southcott and Blake in a variety of ways, and studying these can help us to elucidate some of the key dynamics underpinning their prophetic insights into this specific text, as well as illuminating the ways self-proclaimed prophets in the eighteenth century engaged with it.

Close attention to their engagement with Revelation helps us unpack how the text informs their eschatological thinking, their conception of themselves as prophets standing in a tradition with John of Patmos, and the relationship of their own works with the biblical text. This in turn opens up important hermeneutic questions which lie at the heart of the prophet's claim to have insight into the interpretation of authoritative texts: how earlier prophecies can be reconciled with other competing visions within a modern prophetic culture; how the influence of a text on the prophet generates different meanings over their career; how far the prophet is able to dissent from, or to transform, the hopes of their predecessors. Paying attention to these authors' readings of Revelation allows us to see how such readers respond to key issues such as Revelation's intertextual relationships with other biblical texts; the roles of human and divine agency in the fulfilment of its prophetic hopes; its characterisation of women and their roles in the end-time drama the text envisions. As the introduction demonstrates, their readings are forged at a time where the exploration of the historical and cultural setting of biblical texts began to emerge as the dominant ground of the text's meaning. Studying the engagement with these issues by interpreters outside of this emerging historical-critical realm, allows us to see how readers such as “prophets” navigate these features of the text. A case study of Blake's use of Revelation 17-8 in *The Four Zoas* is offered to illuminate how apparently uncritical readings can nonetheless shed light on the interpretation of the text.

The main body of the thesis is structured around five chapters. The first two chapters offer a contextualisation of the careers of Blake, Brothers and Southcott: firstly on the basis of their treatment in modern scholarship; secondly in terms of relevant contemporary currents in biblical interpretation. The subsequent three chapters focus in on more detail on the ways that Revelation is used in Brothers's, Southcott's and

Blake's works.

The first chapter of the thesis offers an overview on scholarship in three main areas relevant to the research question. First, I look in detail at Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and Christopher Burdon's *Apocalypse in England* which evoke how the lifetimes of Brothers, Southcott and Blake coincided with an important period in the emergence of modern biblical hermeneutics. I point out that Frei and Burdon privilege certain interpreters and thus exclude figures such as Southcott and Brothers from their research. By contrast, I argue that an increased focus on the reception history of Revelation in biblical studies has paved the way for a detailed consideration of readings offered by interpreters in hitherto marginalised traditions, such as those who claim a prophetic insight into the interpretation of biblical texts. Secondly, I give an account of scholarship which has compared the works of Blake, Brothers and Southcott, focussing especially on a seminal essay by Morton D. Paley which first compared the three's careers and their engagement with the biblical text in detail. I demonstrate that such comparisons are conducted under two principal conceptual frameworks: "millenarianism" and "prophecy". I argue that the latter offers a preferable basis from which to consider the diverse ways in which Brothers, Blake and Southcott engage with Revelation, which benefits from an emic approach that takes seriously how "prophecy" is understood by the authors themselves. Finally, I show that a close reading of the interpretation and appropriation of Revelation in their works can augment our understanding of their individual theological and hermeneutical presuppositions, showing how biblical interpretation informs their world views and praxis.

In the light of using prophecy as a heuristic category, the second chapter situates Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's readings of Revelation within the contemporary discourse of "prophecy". It offers a definition of prophecy which is based upon how the term is used and understood within their works, and use this as a basis to suggest initial tensions and discrepancies between their conception of the role of the prophet, and their concomitant perception of the authority of Scripture. In particular, the three authors share a conception of the prophet as an interpreter of current events and authoritative texts; a conviction that prophetic texts have a salvific message; a capacity for visionary experience; and a belief that the prophet stands in a line which extends back to the prophets of the Bible. I draw upon Max Weber's distinction between the ethical and exemplary prophet to account for the different kinds of authority that Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's prophetic interpretations are intended to have for their readers. The ways they incorporate a prior prophetic vision into their own texts, means that Joseph Wittreich Jr's observations about the prophet's duty to exposit prior hopes, and to create new prophetic texts can particularly help us to understand a key tension in their respective uses of Revelation. I then contextualise Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's engagement with contemporary construals of Revelation as a prophetic text. I explore how their interpretations parallel contemporary attempts to link the book's visions to political and religious upheavals in Europe by examining the use of Revelation by contemporary readers S.T. Coleridge, Joseph Priestley and James Bicheno, who do not claim for themselves the status of "prophet". I then examine the visionary writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg and Jane Lead, before exploring how individuals, whose sense of prophetic vocation resembles that of Brothers, Southcott and Blake, drew on Revelation to construct their respective identities and missions. Finally, I interrogate wider shifts in the conception of the prophet in contemporary culture, focussing particularly on the conflation of the offices of poet and prophet in the works of Robert Lowth, Thomas Paine and

Alexander Geddes. This survey demonstrates the persistent appeal of Revelation as a framework for interpretation in popular culture during Brother's, Southcott's and Blake's lifetimes. It also highlights a fundamental tension in the prophet's use of earlier prophetic texts: the need to offer an exposition of prior visions, whilst also producing new prophetic texts which articulate new future hopes.

The final three chapters of the thesis focus in a more sustained manner on the use of Revelation in the writings of Brothers, Southcott and Blake. Chapter three offers a biographical sketch of Brothers's life, before exploring Revelation's influence in the construction of his prophetic vision across his writings. His writings demonstrate a continued interest in finding references to his prophetic mission in Revelation, and in marking out his lifetime as the moment of the expected fulfilment of God's redemptive promises. I argue that his engagement with Revelation's promise of a New Jerusalem begins in 1798, and that he accounts for the literary relationship between Revelation 21-22 and Ezekiel 40-48 by actualising these texts in two different ways. The former is a metaphorical visualisation of Brothers's mission of restoration, whereas the latter provides an architectural blueprint for Brothers's proposed rebuilding of the city. Brothers's interpretation of Revelation 21-22 demonstrates the hermeneutical problem of reading and actualising contrasting hopes within a prophetic tradition. It also demonstrates how Brothers reads the Bible through the lens of his prophetic self-conception which focusses his attention on the restoration of the earthly Jerusalem.

Chapter four demonstrates how Joanna Southcott uses Revelation to articulate her experiences, and her conviction that she was called upon to carry out a prophetic mission. A biographical sketch demonstrates how interpretation of Revelation was key to her schism with Brothers, and in the development of the Southcottian practice of "sealing" followers. By looking at both her published works and archival correspondence, I survey key trends in Southcott's reading of the Bible including her insistence upon the need for interpretation which is governed by spiritual inspiration, the importance of typology in establishing the meaning of biblical texts, and the connections she draws between Revelation 12 and Genesis 3 over her career. I argue that Southcott's own texts, which are imbued with the authority of the same spirit that she claims inspired the biblical prophets, interprets Revelation in line with shifting events in her own life and career. In my close reading of Southcott's texts, I look particularly at her interpretation of the vision of Revelation 12, and how she connects the woman at the heart of this chapter with other characters in the text (particularly the "Bride" of chapters 19-22). I argue that Southcott exploits John's lack of exposition in chapter 12 and uses the chapter as a flexible imaginative framework to conceptualise her evolving prophetic career. In addition, I look at Southcott's readings of Revelation 21-22 to note that Southcott frequently finds the fulfilment of this vision's promises in the dissemination of her writings. I conclude this chapter with reflections on how Southcott particularly embodies the "pre-critical" interpreter depicted by Hans Frei, and how the process of reading Revelation in the light of current experience is one which is continually enacted in Southcott's prophetic texts.

The fifth chapter focuses particularly on William Blake's interpretation of Revelation 21-22. His engagement with these chapters sees him addressing issues which are key to Brothers's and Southcott's reading of Revelation: the intertextual echoes of the text; how its vision of a new creation is to be understood; and how its depiction of women is to inform his own prophetic interpretation of current events and future hopes. I argue that Blake's emphasis on the prophet as a creative artist, an exemplar of the

“Poetic Genius,” encourages him to appropriate and re-interpret the imagery and symbolism of Revelation to cohere with his own prophetic myth. Blake's engagement with the role of human and divine agency in fulfilling eschatological hopes, the city as a biblical symbol of redemption, and Revelation's treatment of female characters, provide Blake with an opportunity to use John of Patmos's symbolism and language to express new hopes for redemption. My focus on Revelation 21-22 in Blake's works offers an original contribution to Blake scholarship by clarifying Blake's treatment of the hopes for “new heaven and new earth” and “New Jerusalem” across his writings, and the ways which Blake reformulates these symbolic hopes to inspire the kind of imaginative awakening in his reader that he sees as pivotal to prophecy.

In the thesis's conclusion I draw together these strands of enquiry and offer some hermeneutical reflections on the text of Revelation as a result of reading it through the lenses of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's work. I point out that existing comparisons of their interpretations of the Bible have been too reductionist in scope, proceeding under anachronistic frameworks which have emphasised eschatology over other aspects of the prophets' engagement with Revelation. Explorations of their reception of biblical texts which take seriously their own claims and language allows a richer and more nuanced picture to emerge. These writers draw on Revelation in many creative ways in the construction of their own works, and in the development of their self-conceptions as “prophets”. As readers of biblical prophecy who themselves claim to be prophetically inspired, I argue they all have an ambivalent relationship with the source text. John's vision and prophetic status is an important influence on their works, but their own experiences also have an impact on how the New Testament's principal prophetic text is to be understood. This in turn creates a hermeneutical circle which plays out in their writings: how can they interpret the influential words of their prophetic forebears whilst allowing their own prophetic voices to speak to their audiences? In other words, their engagement with Revelation stand as a witness to the perennial problem of how an historically-situated text and author can speak to the later interpreter.

Table of Contents

A note on references and image permissions	i
Introduction	1
Chapter One – Brothers, Southcott and Blake in Modern Scholarship	29
1.1 Biblical Hermeneutics, the Book of Revelation in the Eighteenth Century, and the role of Reception History	30
1.2 Brothers, Southcott and Blake: “Prophets” and/or “Millenarians”	48
1.3 Brothers, Southcott and Blake in Scholarship	62
1.3.1 Richard Brothers	62
1.3.2 Joanna Southcott	66
1.3.3 William Blake	70
1.4 Conclusion	77
Chapter Two – Prophecy and the Book of Revelation in the Long Eighteenth Century	79
2.1 Blake, Brothers and Southcott: “the Spirit of Prophecy” and the Role of the Prophet	82
2.2 Revelation as a Key to Eighteenth-century History	99
2.2.1 Revelation, Emmanuel Swedenborg and Jane Lead	102
2.2.2 Eighteenth-century Prophets and the Interpretation of Revelation	110
2.3 The Prophet as Poet in the Eighteenth Century	122
2.4 Conclusion	129
Chapter Three – Richard Brothers: Revelation and Restoration	132
3.1 Sailor, Prophet, 'Lunatic'	134
3.2 <i>A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times</i>	137
3.2.1 <i>Revealed Knowledge</i> , Biblical Interpretation and Prophetic Inspiration	142
3.2.2 “The Prince of Peace, conducting the Jews to the Promis'd Land”: Brothers and Ezekiel	146
3.2.3 <i>Revealed Knowledge</i> and the Book of Revelation	149
3.3 A New Jerusalem?	156
3.3.1 <i>An Exposition of the Trinity</i>	158
3.3.2 <i>A Letter from Mr Brothers to Miss Cott... with an Address to the Members of his Britannic Majesty's Council</i>	160
3.3.3 Describing Jerusalem	165
3.4 Conclusion	171
Chapter Four – Joanna Southcott: The “Woman” and the World of Revelation	177
4.1 The Making of a Prophet	179
4.2 Southcott's Writings and the Bible	187
4.2.1 Southcott, Interpretation and the Spirit	191
4.2.2 “Types and Shadows”	195
4.2.3 Revelation and Genesis	199
4.3 The Woman Clothed with the Sun	205
4.3.1 “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed	205

	with the Sun”	
4.3.2	“she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered”	211
4.3.3	“the Spirit and the bride say, Come.”	218
4.3.4	“the holy city, new Jerusalem... prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”	221
4.4	Conclusion	225
	Chapter Five - “A City, yet a Woman”: William Blake and the Hope of Revelation	229
5.1	Blake's Life	232
5.2	Blake and the Bible	235
5.3	Blake and Revelation	240
5.3.1	“a new heaven is begun”	242
5.3.2	Blake and the City	247
5.3.2.1	The Illusion of New Jerusalem: <i>Europe, The Four Zoas</i> and <i>Milton: A Poem</i>	231
5.3.2.2	Blake, Golgonooza and New Jerusalem	261
5.3.3	Jerusalem as Bride of the Lamb in Blake's Myth	271
5.4	Conclusion	277
	Summary and Concluding Reflections	284
	<i>Bibliography</i>	293

A Note on References and Image Permissions

References to Blake's works given in the text are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988). Citations from this work are denoted by the letter 'E' followed by the page number, as is commonplace in Blake scholarship.

References to Blake's images are taken from *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake: Text and Plates* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). References are drawn from the plates volume and are denoted by the letter 'B' followed by the plate number.

The works of Emanuel Swedenborg are cited by paragraph numbers, rather than page numbers, reflecting the standard method of referencing his texts.

All citations from the Bible are taken from the Authorized King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

Figure I (*The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*) is used with permission from the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

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Introduction

In 1798, Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), a domestic servant from Devon, was embroiled in a lengthy campaign to persuade a local minister, Reverend Joseph Pomeroy, and other notable local clergymen, that from 1792 onwards, she had received prophetic visitations. The Holy Spirit had revealed to her the fate of the nation's harvests, political and military upheavals in Europe and, crucially, the true meaning of key biblical texts. This spirit, commanding her to write to these local dignitaries, poetically insisted to her that the correct interpretation of a text like Revelation 12 depended neither on the application of clerical or scholarly “wisdom”, nor knowledge of the historical setting of the text, but upon the revelatory actions of the spirit of prophecy:

If they can't see the mystery clear
I'd have them to be mute
And own their understanding's hid
And I will all explain¹

A staunch affirmation of the need for prophetic revelation to underpin biblical interpretation was emblazoned in a book published three years earlier by a London-based contemporary of Southcott, Richard Brothers (1757-1824): “I proceed through the Scripture, regularly uncovering... its Sacred Records WHICH HAVE BEEN RESERVED FOR ME”². As Brothers's book – with its dire warnings about an imminent judgement on London – scandalised the capital, William Blake (1757-1827) printed a poem called *Europe: A Prophecy*. *Europe's* preface states it was “dictated” by a fairy, and on plate 10 Blake draws upon the imagery of Revelation 21-2 to satirise the ideology underpinning the ongoing counter-revolutionary conflict between England and France.³ In his art, Blake

¹ Joanna Southcott, “A Communication given to Joanna Southcott after She Had Been Writing to Chancellor Nutcombe Respecting the Man-Child of Whom Pomeroy Was the Shadow,” March 20, 1798, PN140:75-6, Panacea Charitable Trust, Bedford - Southcott Archive.

² Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies & Times...* (London, 1795), 1:35.

³ William Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy*, plate iii line 24, E24. Blake's use of Revelation in this poem is explored in more detail in 5.3.2.1.

consistently categorises his activity as prophetic, and like Brothers and Southcott, engages with the Bible under the conviction that he has access to “the Spirit of Prophecy” (Revelation 19:10).⁴

All these engagements with the Bible proceed from principles which are anathema to those which have underpinned the task of critical biblical interpretation, from the eighteenth century to today. In their own day, new exegetical paradigms were being explored in European thought, which contrasted strongly with the kinds of readings we encounter in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's works. Key eighteenth-century academic and clerical voices – especially German scholars from Göttingen such as Johann David Michaelis and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Robert Lowth in Oxford (later bishop of London) – increasingly emphasised that the original historical setting of biblical texts would provide the key to their meaning. This set the stage for a dominant focus in the academy on historical-critical approaches to the Bible. This approach to biblical interpretation, has – according to Barton – four principles at its core: an interest in “genetic questions”; concern for the “original meaning” of the text; the development of historical reconstructions of the social and cultural world of the text; and aims “to approach the text without prejudice, and to ask not what it meant 'for me', but simply what it meant.”⁵ As Frei has explored, this historical consciousness which – from the late-eighteenth century on – came to form a benchmark for a “critical” reading of the biblical text.⁶ On this basis, neither Southcott's, nor Brothers's, nor Blake's engagement with the Bible can be said to be “historical”, nor – by implication – “critical”. These are the readings of self-proclaimed prophets who read biblical texts in the light of their own prophetic convictions and projects. Furthermore,

⁴ Blake, *All Religions are One*, E1.

⁵ John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches” in ed. John Barton, *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9-12.

⁶ See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974), 1-5, 16, 51-65. Frei's work is discussed in detail in 1.1.

Brothers's and Southcott's readings of the Bible lead them to identify themselves with pivotal characters in the eschatological drama: the “slain lamb” of Revelation 5 and “the woman clothed with the sun” of Revelation 12, amongst others. From the perspective of modern academic biblical study, such readings can surely only be seen as uncritical, ahistorical misreadings of the text?

And yet, the question underpinning this academic thesis is wholly concerned with such apparent misreadings: how is one specific biblical text – Revelation – used and interpreted in the writings of these three so-called “millenarian prophets”? In answering this research question, this thesis is situated within a burgeoning research area in academic biblical studies: the reception history of the book of Revelation. It responds to recent academic shifts which have prompted a move away from purely historical questions of the origin of biblical texts, towards an exploration of what biblical texts have meant for different readers throughout history. The effect of this growing interest in biblical reception history, and how it has allowed divergent, marginalised voices to be considered in academic discourse, is discussed further in 1.1.

Specifically, the attention to the readings of Revelation by self-proclaimed prophets is prompted by Newport, who argues that, despite the ascendancy of historical-critical enquiry within the post-enlightenment academy, uncritical subjective readings – including readings conducted under the aegis of “prophecy” – have persisted to the present day. He terms such readings biblical *eisegesis*, as opposed to *exegesis* carried out by historical-critics: reading interpretations *into* the text, rather than reading meanings *out* of it.⁷

Eisegetical readings of the Bible are generated under the conviction that “the 'real' meaning

⁷ The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his criticism of the enlightenment's denigration of “prejudice” in the process of understanding, may lead us to question whether Newport's distinction holds: are not historical-critics reading their specific presuppositions, and concern for scientific objectivity, *into* the text? Gadamer's work is discussed in more detail in 1.1.

of the scriptures has been known” to the interpreter, and can be read into biblical texts.⁸

This “real meaning” may be passed on through a specific religious tradition, or it may be articulated by an individual claiming to have received inspiration that has granted them insight into the text's correct interpretation. These readings can – as we will explore in 2.1 – take on varying degrees of normative authority for the reader.

Revelation's influential eschatological vision of the transformation (or destruction) of the earth and earthly powers, and its vision of a new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem – has, throughout its history, attracted this kind of interpretation, with the consequences of such an uncritical standpoint occasionally having tragic consequences.⁹ This study therefore aims to answer Newport's plea to pay greater attention to this kind of interpretative activity: it uses three prominent eighteenth-century prophetic claimants to explore prophetic readings of Revelation, and to draw attention to the diversity of interpretations that this form of engagement with the text can generate. Brothers, Southcott and Blake all claimed to share in the prophetic insight granted to the author of Revelation and – by extension – to the other biblical prophets. This conviction had a profound influence on the ways they interacted with Revelation, how they read its imagery and symbolism, and how the text is subsequently incorporated into their own works. In particular, their works all assert that they have an active role to play in the fulfilment of the text's promises. Looking at how they understand and interpret these promises, and how their relationship to the authors of biblical prophecy empowers them to bring about this fulfilment, can enrich our understanding of the Revelation's reception history. By paying close attention to such readings, biblical studies can expand its remit from what a text may have originally meant,

⁸ Kenneth C.G. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

⁹ See, for example, Newport's study on the theology of David Koresh and the Branch Davidian community at Waco: Kenneth C.G. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: the History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

to how meanings have been generated by readers operating in different historical cultural contexts and under different interpretative frameworks.

Reception History, Interdisciplinarity, and “Emic” Methodologies

As Joyce and Lipton note in their recent contribution to the Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentary series, researchers exploring the Bible's reception history must be cognizant of their vulnerability in engaging with a field of enquiry which, by its very nature, extends beyond biblical studies' standard boundaries.¹⁰ By using Brothers, Southcott and Blake to explore the prophetic interpretation of Revelation, this thesis encroaches on research already carried out within history and literary criticism. A survey of this relevant secondary literature is given in chapter 1 (especially 1.2 and 1.3), but it will be useful to highlight here how this study interacts with – and differs from – key work carried out in other disciplines on these three figures, and their use of the Bible.

By comparing readings of Revelation offered by Brothers, Southcott and Blake, this thesis contributes to an established line of enquiry – particularly in Blake scholarship – of using these authors' writings to contextualise elements of the others' work. Of particular relevance is an essay by Morton D. Paley, which compares the three writers under the banner of “millenarianism”.¹¹ 1.2 recounts Paley's argument in greater detail, and criticises the preponderance of the term “millenarianism” in extant studies of Brothers, Southcott and Blake. My main criticisms are that it is anachronistic, derived from terminology which the writers themselves do not use, and over-emphasises eschatology as key drivers of their thought. By contrast, this thesis is inspired by the methods of a recent research project

¹⁰ Paul Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations Through the Centuries* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 12.

¹¹ Morton D. Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews and the Woman Clothed with the Sun” in Morton D. Paley & Michael Phillips, *William Blake: Essays in honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 260-93.

based in Oxford's Faculty of Theology, whose aim was to explore the history and theology of Southcottian prophets in British religious thought, by paying attention to – and taking seriously – their subjects' own terminology and testimony about their experiences. This project has resulted in the creation of an archive of valuable Southcottian manuscripts in Bedford, as well as shedding light on the theological presuppositions of key figures within the history of this movement, including Brothers, Southcott, and later prophetic claimants such as George Turner and “Zion” Ward.

These two approaches to the study of figures like Brothers, Southcott and Blake, reflect an important debate within the humanities: the balance between *emic* and *etic* methodologies and language. These terms, as they pertain to the study of human culture, were coined by the anthropologist Marvin Harris. *Emic* language is defined by Harris as “logico-empirical systems whose phenomenal distinctions or 'things' are built up out of contrasts and discriminations significant, meaningful, real, accurate, or in some other fashion regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves.” By contrast, *etic* language is derived from “phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers.”¹² Terms such as “millenarian” which derive from *outside* of subjects' own discourses are *etic* conceptual frameworks. In short, they are conceptual tools devised by historians to account for certain features of religious belief. It does not, however, accord with language we find in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's writings. An *emic* conceptual framework, therefore, would be one derived from the writers' own language and would use terms that would be recognisable and meaningful to the subjects of the study.

¹² Marvin Harris, *The Nature of Cultural Things* (New York: Random House, 1964), 571; 575. These terms ultimately derive from linguistic descriptors in the work of Kenneth Pike. A discussion between Pike and Harris on the use of the terms can be found in ed. Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris, *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (London: Sage, 1990). See also Kenneth L. Pike, “Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior” in ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2005), 28-36.

In taking seriously the readings generated through Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's engagement with Revelation, this thesis therefore seeks to use emic language and concepts upon which to build a comparative study. To this end, in 2.1, I draw on Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's writings directly to explore commonalities in their conception of “prophecy” and their prophetic activities. This exploration, which sees visionary experience and interpretation as key features the three have in common, gives us pause to focus more closely on how prophetic writers engage with earlier, authoritative, visionary texts. By seeing these figures as “prophets” rather than “millenarians”, we may be encouraged to expand the remit of earlier comparative studies. In looking at how they use Revelation, we can look beyond eschatology to explore how they could draw on, for example, John's own testimony to spiritual inspiration as a model for the creation of their own prophetic texts.

In similarly emphasising an “emic” conceptual framework for their use of Revelation, this thesis engages directly with the pioneering work of a number of members of the Prophecy Project, who have similarly sought to broaden the academic discussion surrounding modern prophetic figures. In particular, I have benefited greatly from Deborah Madden's study of Brothers's life and thought.¹³ Madden's monograph is the definitive critical book on Brothers's career, and her work is a rich resource for those wishing to understand how Brothers's mission keys into cultural, religious and political cross-currents of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In particular, her exploration of the Bible's influence on Brothers's construction of his prophetic identity, and how his writings formed a flashpoint for debate about prophecy in the aftermath of his arrest in 1795, are particularly relevant to the aims of this study. What I aim to do, in my own study of

¹³ Deborah Madden, *The Paddington Prophet: Richard Brothers's Journey to Jerusalem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

Brothers's works in chapter 3, is to follow Madden's close attention to Brothers's reading of biblical texts, to explore specifically how his readings of Revelation develop and shift during his career. In particular, I suggest that Brothers's recognition of the intertextual relationship between Ezekiel 40-48 and Revelation 21-2 informs his interpretation, as he sees his own activities as the fulfilment of both texts and is sensitive to the hermeneutical contrasts between the two prophecies. Paying attention to how Brothers harmonizes these two texts with his own prophetic vision gives an insight into the ways in which the biblical text exerts a constraining influence over interpretation, and lead a prophetic interpreter to fulfil two related texts in two different ways.

The thesis also aims to complement the work of Matthew Niblett, whose forthcoming monograph explores the framework of Southcott's theology. By charting how Southcott's readings of Revelation's visions shift in reaction to shifting circumstances in her ministry, we can see how prophets draw upon elements of their own lives to unlock the meaning of authoritative texts.¹⁴ In addition, Gordon Allan's work on the contours of Southcott's thought has also underscored the importance of Revelation and Genesis in Southcott's construction of her prophetic identity.¹⁵ This thesis seeks to expand Allan's insights by charting how Revelation's female characters provide a framework through which Southcott understands changing circumstances in her life and prophetic career. This study demonstrates that Revelation provides a persistent, yet malleable, interpretative lens for Southcott. In turn, this can illuminate how prophetic interpretation can involve the revisiting and reinterpretation of authoritative texts in response to changing contexts.

¹⁴ Matthew Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England: The Theology and Apocalyptic Belief of Joanna Southcott* (London: IB Tauris, forthcoming 2015).

¹⁵ Gordon Allan, "Joanna Southcott: Enacting the Woman Clothed With the Sun" in *The Oxford Handbook of The Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 635-48.

Finally, in engaging with Blake's use of Revelation, the thesis also extends Susanne Sklar's close attention to Blake's religious and social context – including his probable engagement with Joanna Southcott's interpretation of Revelation's imagery of “bride” and “woman clothed with the sun” – in her commentary on *Jerusalem*.¹⁶ It broadens the enquiry into Blake's use of Revelation across his poetic corpus; looking closely at how Blake treats Revelation 21-2, and consequently illustrates the prophet's twin role of offering an exposition of prior prophetic texts, and in effect creating a new prophetic text offering new insights. It demonstrates that prophetic interpretation need not involve an uncritical assimilation of a prior prophet's vision, but rather can involve creative dissent from a predecessor's image of the future.

An examination of the reception of Revelation in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's works, then, necessarily benefits from the considerable work already achieved by scholars in other disciplines. The thesis's apparent narrowness of focus is deliberate and is intended to yield useful, broader conclusions about how prophetic readers like Brothers, Southcott and Blake – who were not only interpreters, but allowed prophetic texts to inform their sense of themselves as being prophets in their own right – engage with the Bible. There is an important opportunity for biblical studies to complement the insights of the scholars named above, to consider the place of late eighteenth-century prophetic readers of Revelation within the history of interpretation.

The contribution of this research project thus has diachronic and synchronic elements. Principally, it contributes to the continued scholarly project of tracing the influence and afterlife of the book of Revelation in the influential, yet marginalised, interpretative

¹⁶ Susanne Sklar, *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

tradition of prophetic readers. Additionally, it is hoped that close attention to Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of Revelation helps to continue to shed light on our understanding of three contemporary prophetic figures, whose importance within English intellectual and religious history has been underscored by researchers working on the culture of the Romantic period.

Placing Brothers, Southcott and Blake Together

On the surface, despite their shared use of the Bible and their interest in Revelation, there appears to be a big difference between the poet and artist Blake; Brothers, who announced he would effect “the Restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem, by the year 1798”,¹⁷ and Southcott, who in 1814 announced that she had become miraculously pregnant with a messianic child. We can justify connecting these three authors on the basis that they are contemporaneous, living in comparatively close proximity to one another. After Southcott based herself primarily in London in 1804, the three inhabited the same city and – whilst they were never personally acquainted – had a number of followers and colleagues in common, who were actively engaged in London's diverse religious sub-cultures. This contemporaneity has frequently encouraged scholars to bring the three into conversation (see 1.2). In fact, comparisons between the three began early, with one of Blake's early biographers, Frederick Tatham (writing c. 1832) reflecting upon Blake's and Brothers's shared capacity for visionary experience:

Blake asserted from a Boy that he did see [visions], even when a Child, his mother beat him for running in & saying that he saw the Prophet Ezekiel under a Tree in the Fields... These visions of Blake seem to have been more like peopled imaginations, & personified thoughts... Richard Brothers has been classed as one possessing this power, but he was really a decided madman, he asserted that he was nephew to God the Father, & in a mad House he died... Blake & Brothers must therefore not be placed together.¹⁸

¹⁷ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:1.

¹⁸ Cited in G.E. Bentley Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 319. Tatham's account of Brothers's death is incorrect: he did not die in the asylum where he was incarcerated in 1795, but in the care of his devoted follower John Finleyson in 1824. Tatham's judgment was upheld by

Tatham's reluctance to consider Blake's visionary writings alongside Brothers's reflects his concern that Blake's experiences, and the wider culture of visual inspiration within Blake's social and intellectual milieu, are not tainted by the grandiose claims of Brothers and – by extension – Southcott. Brothers's and Southcott's visions stem from madness, whereas Blake's “peopled imaginations” make him an inspired artist. Nonetheless, Tatham's concern to distance Blake from other, less reputable visionaries, betrays a concern that perhaps the difference between the three could be seen as one of degree and not kind.

An earlier anecdote by Blake's friend Henry Crabb Robinson shows how Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's lives overlapped with one another within the artisan subculture of early nineteenth-century London. In his diary on the 30th January, 1815 (a month after Southcott's death), Crabb Robinson recorded a conversation with Blake's close friend, the sculptor John Flaxman. It shows that at least one member of Blake's extended social circle had attempted to attract Blake to Brothers's and Southcott's causes. William Sharpe, an engraver and dedicated follower first of Brothers, and then Southcott:

endeavoured to make a convert of Blake the engraver, but as Fl: judiciously observed, such men as Blake are not fond of playing the second fiddle – Hence Blake himself a seer of visions & a dreamer of dreams wo^d not do homage to a rival claimant of the privilege of prophecy.¹⁹

Flaxman's perception of Blake as a “rival claimant” to Brothers and Southcott raises a number of important issues about claimants of the power of “prophecy”: the extent to which the experience of “prophecy” is a “privilege” limited to selected individuals; how far prophets could demand “conversion” from their followers; how being “a seer of visions & a dreamer of dreams” affects the perception of other recorded seers and dreamers – both contemporary and those inscribed in established textual and historical traditions (e.g. the

Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews and the Woman Clothed with the Sun”, 293.

¹⁹ Bentley, *Blake Records*, 319-20. Hopkins notes that Blake was also friends with two other Southcottians, the Welsh lexicographer William Owen Pugh and fellow engraver John Pye: James K. Hopkins, *A Woman To Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), 160-4. See also Sklar, *Blake's Jerusalem*, 76-8.

biblical tradition). These issues will be explored in our survey of the three's conceptions of prophecy in 2.1. Most pressingly, however, Crabb Robinson's anecdote reminds us that Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's activities could be correlated with one another, within London's radical cultural, intellectual and religious milieu, even if Brothers and Southcott are remembered today (if indeed they are remembered at all) in a very different light to Blake. This project interrogates Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's works alongside one another, on precisely the same basis that Flaxman highlights: that they stand as contemporary claimants of “prophecy”.

Prophets as Readers

The title of this thesis indicates that this study particularly emphasises one act which might not immediately be seen as “prophetic”: reading. In studying the reception of Revelation in their works, I advocate implicitly that the prophecy in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's thought is intricately tied to the acts of reading and offering interpretation of prior prophecy. This shared tenet of their conception of “prophecy” is explored in greater detail in 2.1, and juxtaposed with testimony from contemporary prophets Dorothy Gott and William Huntington in 2.2.3.

As Juster has shown, late eighteenth-century prophecy is marked by a variety and diversity of behaviours which could be considered “prophetic” (see further 1.2, 2.1 and 2.2).²⁰ This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider the diverse presentations of prophecy and prophets in the Bible, the root of the Christian prophetic tradition. A survey of biblical depictions of prophecy, furthermore, demonstrates that over the course of biblical history, reference to – and interpretation of – prior prophecy, becomes an increasing prominent

²⁰ Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in an Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 57-95.

activity. By the late first century CE – when Revelation was written – this focus on past texts stood alongside revelatory experiences and ecstatic behaviours as part of a prophet's activity.

The Bible's prophetic books, and especially visionary books like Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation, are important texts that Brothers, Southcott and Blake engage with in order to craft their prophetic identities. Yet within these texts, biblical scholars note that prophets engage in a wide variety of practices, transmit their messages in a variety of forms (to consider but one taxonomy: prophecy transmitted orally and prophecy transmitted by text), and concern themselves with a variety of political and religious issues.²¹ In the Pentateuch, the prophet is one whom God communicates with – ideally and uniquely face-to-face as with Moses, but more commonly through “visions” (Numbers 12:6). In I Samuel 9:8-9, the term is also related to the “seer” and “man of God”. Factoring in these related terms, prophets in the Hebrew Bible may also be miracle workers (see, for example I Kings 13:5-8; 17:10-24; 2 Kings 1:9-12). Moses's acts are also remembered as prophetic in Hosea 12:13: “by a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt”.

By the time of the second temple period and early Christianity, prophecy is an even more complex and diverse activity. During this period, the texts which became canonised as “the Prophets” reached their finalised forms, often with many discernible layers of redaction, where the words of the text appear to relate to different contemporary circumstances.

Prophetic heroes of old are remembered and encoded in texts that later editors and writers felt able to contribute to, yielding composite texts (such as Isaiah) that nonetheless preserve

²¹ C.f. the contrast Barton draws between the books of Amos and Jonah: “there is all the difference in the world between the book of Amos and the book of Jonah, not just in terms of the historical background and the religious conceptions or world-views of the two books, but also chiefly at the level of genre.” John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1986), 9.

the fiction of being the words of one author. Similarly, texts such as Daniel 9:1-2 offer interpretations of prior prophetic works (Jeremiah 9:24) that apply earlier prophets' words to the author's own day.²²

Brooke finds in the activities of the Qumran community a range of behaviours which he depicts as “prophetic”, and that provide an important ancient precedent for the importance of reading within a prophetic culture.²³ The construction of “para-biblical” stories about the prophets, such as Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Jeremiah Apocrypha, demonstrates that the community felt prior prophetic figures were able to communicate “matters that needed to be apprehended and appropriated by a new generation”.²⁴ The same instinct, Brooke claims, lies behind the *pesharim* where prior scriptural texts are interpreted in a revelatory framework.²⁵ Prophecy thus underwent an “intellectual transformation” as interpretation was cast “as inspired revelation both continuous with, and pointing to, the heart of earlier revelation.”²⁶ For the Qumran community, prophecy has an interpretative, and generative aspect: new prophetic texts were generated that contained insights gleaned from the inspired reading of earlier prophetic texts, and the invocation of the memory of past prophets.

In the New Testament, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible are quoted in ways which show their words were held to have meaning for the present experiences of the author and their intended audience.²⁷ Along with “the law”, the “prophets” constitute a major source of

²² See Barton, *Oracles of God*, 179-92 for an overview of how biblical prophets came to be read as having foreknowledge of the circumstances of later generations.

²³ George J. Brooke, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Looking Backwards and Forwards”, in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 151-65

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

²⁷ See, for example, Matthew 24:15 (and allusively in Mark 13:14) where the “desolating sacrilege... spoken of by the prophet Daniel [9:27]” signifies a moment of contemporary political crisis heralding an impending eschatological tribulation.

ethical instruction (Matthew 5:17) and give shape to messianic expectations. John the Baptist and Jesus are also described as “prophets”. In Jesus's case, his self-designation as prophet is prompted by the incredulity of the crowds at his “wisdom” when teaching in the synagogue, and at his “deeds of power” (Mark 6:1-5).²⁸ In the Pauline corpus, the act of prophecy conflicts with Greco-Roman ideas surrounding charismatic ecstasy and glossolalia (see I Corinthians 14), but is nonetheless an activity which Paul endorsed: “do not despise prophecies” (I Thessalonians 5:20). Aune infers from Paul's writings that prophecy – connected so intimately with the working of the Spirit – was a prevalent congregational activity within early Christian communities.²⁹ Hill sees in Paul's discussions about prophecy the conviction that one blessed with the gift of prophecy “holds a kind of private discourse with the divine”, which may be used for greater or lesser edification inside and outside the community.³⁰

Alongside these affirmations of the place of prophecy in early Christian tradition, however, is an expectation of the presence of “false” prophets – especially in moments of eschatological upheaval (Mark 13:22; I John 4:1; Revelation 13:12-18).³¹ In these cases the authority that these figures claim comes under particular scrutiny, functioning as a reminder that the act of prophecy may serve diabolical – as well as divine – ends.

Finally, we note that Revelation – often generically characterised by its opening Greek word, ἀποκάλυψις – is framed by the self-definition of “prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-9).

²⁸ Additionally, Acts twice has characters depict Jesus as a prophet like Moses (3:22-3; 7:37), fulfilling the expectation of Deuteronomy 18:15.

²⁹ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 191. For a survey of the nature and status of prophets in early Christian communities see especially 189-231.

³⁰ David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 122.

³¹ Southcott was particularly sensitive to the New Testament's ambivalent presentation of prophecy: “Ye say that false Prophets shall arise in the latter days. On these words ye build your unbelief of the true ones; for it is written also, Prophets shall arise.” Southcott, *A Word to the Wise, Or A Call to the Nation, that they may know the days of their visitation* (Stourbridge, 1803), 7.

The genre of Revelation, which incorporates extensive allusions to the prior prophetic texts Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel, is a disputed topic in New Testament scholarship with scholars wavering between “prophecy”, “apocalyptic” or even the hybrid “prophetic-apocalyptic”.³² Nevertheless, the author is commanded by the “mighty angel” to “prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (10:11). Chapter 11 depicts the two “witnesses” “prophesying” in the “great city” for 1260 days. The identity of these two prophets has been the source of much speculation in the history of interpretation, with many readers considering the witnesses to be manifestations of specific figures or, conversely, as corporate symbols of early Christian communities.³³ Regardless, these figures are presented as wonder-workers, capable of spewing fire from their mouths and turning waters into blood (11:5-6), and tormenting “them that dwelt on the earth” (11:10). The prophets of Revelation 11 are thus set in opposition to the wider culture of the textual “city” and “world” in which they prophesy. They also contribute to the *mélange* of prophetic representations within the text. Prophecy in Revelation can involve the production of text – even the text of the book itself; it can entail confrontation with groups of power within the world; it can involve the working of miracles to complete an established period of prophetic witness; it can lead to the incorporation of prior prophetic visions in a new visionary unveiling of contemporary religious and political conflicts. Prophecy, for the author of Revelation, takes on a variety of forms, messages and modes of

³² For surveys of the discussions surrounding Revelation's genre see Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grant Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 37-43. Schüssler Fiorenza notes that the genres of letter, prophecy and apocalypse are merged within the text. She ultimately affirms that the text was conceived by its author as “a work of Christian prophecy” but nonetheless problematises an either/or approach to the question of whether the text is to be considered “prophecy” or “apocalyptic” due to the close relationship of the two genres in early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 164-70.

³³ See Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 126-30. For modern scholars who favour the “corporate” interpretation of the figures see, to cite but two examples, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 272-83 and Beale, *Revelation*, 573. Both of these interpretations argue that the author alludes to miracles carried out by Moses and Elijah, but in his crafting of the scene, transcends these models to make a wider interpretation possible.

transmission.

As in eighteenth-century culture, “prophecy” and “prophets” are diffuse concepts in the Bible, encompassing a range of practices. The role of the prophet was not immune to shifting perceptions over time, and despite widespread attestation of prophetic practices within early Christianity, many voices in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods argued that the “age of prophecy” had ended with the death of the late canonical prophets.³⁴ Nevertheless, in addition to the variable capacity for miraculous acts or ecstatic experience, a common thread can be discerned across the biblical depictions of prophecy, and in the scribal activity through which the prophetic texts were compiled and interpreted: the transmission of revealed insights and knowledge which have relevance for the present age. These revealed insights increasingly came to have a retrospective focus, with an increased emphasis on the reading and exposition of prior scripture. This facet of prophecy, as 2.1 demonstrates, is also integral to Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's prophetic texts; the interrogation of these reading practices allows us to consider how the prophet – as a reader of prophecy in their own right – shapes their own insights in the light of their biblical predecessors' revelations.

Brothers, Southcott and Blake as Readers of Revelation

This thesis's focus on the readings of Revelation generated by these three authors raises a further question of scope. It is not my intent to eclipse the other parts of the Bible that Brothers, Southcott and Blake engage with. As Madden has shown, Daniel and Ezekiel, as well as the biblical figure of Moses, are important influences on Brothers's identity, and his conviction that he was living at a pivotal moment in world history.³⁵ For Southcott also,

³⁴ Josephus claimed that the activity of “the Prophets” ceased with the death of Artaxerxes in the 5th century *Against Apion* 1:40. Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud claims that the spirit of prophetic inspiration left Israel with the death of the final prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: *b. Sanh.* 11a.

³⁵ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 67-9, 75, 99-100, 127.

reflection on the meaning and significance of the fall narrative of Genesis 2-3 is central to her theology.³⁶ As recent research has also shown, Blake's engagement with the Bible is allusive and eclectic, with echoes of many biblical texts discernible in his works.³⁷ A study of their respective uses of Revelation is, therefore, one choice among many that a reception-historical study could explore. And, in the course of the analysis in chapters 3-5, I will explore the ways in which Brothers, Southcott and Blake bring other biblical texts to bear upon their interpretations of Revelation.

Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which a detailed and specific study of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of Revelation can profitably contribute to existing academic conversations. Specifically, their reception of Revelation draws our attention to two key ways in which the text has been read in the history of interpretation. Firstly, we may note that all three figures invoke Revelation to account for – and critique – contemporary political developments: in an annotation written in 1798 Blake declares “The Beast & the Whore rule without controls” - an evocative critique drawing upon the depiction of Babylon seated atop the “scarlet-coloured beast” in Revelation 17.³⁸ Brothers and Southcott draw upon the text in a similar way, with Brothers equating London of the 1790s with Babylon: “Read attentively the Eighteenth Chapter, and you will perceive described in it, the prodigious wealth, grandeur, and commerce of London.”³⁹ Similarly Southcott continually warns her readers about the Bible's promises of climactic judgment

³⁶ Ibid., 249-89; Allan, “Joanna Southcott”, 640; Christopher Rowland, “Southcott, Joanna (1750-1814)” in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*, ed. Marion Ann Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 460-462.

³⁷ See especially Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2010); Paul Miner, “William Blake's Creative Scripture”, *Literature & Theology* 27:1 (2013), 32-47.

³⁸ Blake, “Annotations to Watson”, E611. Blake also treated this scene visually at a number of different points in his career. He used it to illustrate the title page to the eighth “night” of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, depicting Babylon seated upon a beast whose heads are adorned with symbols of ecclesiastic, political and monarchical power (B344). He also treated the scene as part of his illustrations of the Bible commissioned for his patron Thomas Butts between 1799-1809 (B584).

³⁹ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:31.

“hastening on”, and frequently connects Napoleon Bonaparte with the “Beast in the Revelation, whom they have worshipped”.⁴⁰ Their writings draw on Revelation to unveil the true reality lying behind contemporary political events, revealing them to be manifestations of the characters embroiled in the mytho-political conflict narrated at the climax of the biblical canon. The readings generated by these prophets, as chapters 3-5 will show, are deeply affected by their specific contexts, as the book's visions provide a lens through which the prophet's life and social context can be viewed. Exploring changing dynamics in how prophetic readers of Revelation may draw upon the book to furnish their own prophetic critiques gives us valuable insight into an important and prevalent tenet of this mode of biblical interpretation.

There is another way in which Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's shared use of Revelation invites further focussed scrutiny. All three prophets give themselves an active role in the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and especially Revelation. Brothers too depicts himself as the “Lamb” of Revelation, which in turn gives him control over the opening of the scroll in “the right hand of him that sat on the throne” (5:1), and makes him the focal point of the New Jerusalem (“the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple” - 21:22).

Throughout her works, Southcott identifies herself as “the woman clothed with the Sun” in Revelation 12 and uses this text as an interpretative framework to explain her prophetic role, to define her relationship with her followers and her opponents, and to anchor her soteriology on Revelation's symbol of “the bride” (see further chapter 4). Whilst not taking on an explicit “role” in Revelation like his contemporaries, in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake depicts his own life as a moment of eschatological fulfilment: “a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent”.⁴¹ Similarly, he describes his texts

⁴⁰ Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews* (London, 1814), 32.

⁴¹ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3, E34.

and their production as revelatory and eschatological, fulfilling the expectation of 2 Peter 3:12 and Revelation 20:9-15 that the world would be “consumed in fire”.⁴² We will analyse these texts further in 5.3.1. Additionally, the labour of Los – Blake's prophetic avatar in his mythology – is twice depicted as bringing about the New Jerusalem's descent. All three prophets, through their activities and their writings, see themselves bringing aspects of Revelation's visions to fruition and making them manifest in their activities.

These two ways that Brothers, Southcott and Blake engage with Revelation in their own prophetic works, can be mapped using terminology pioneered by Kovacs's and Rowland's reception-historical commentary on Revelation. The first – the identification of contemporary phenomena and institutions with images from Revelation – is termed “decoding”. Decoding readings of Revelation operate under the assumption that “an image is seen to have one particular meaning” and if the interpreter can understand this meaning, the book “can be rendered in another form, and its meaning laid bare.”⁴³ Brothers, Southcott and Blake thus “decode” Revelation when they map images and symbols from the text onto contemporary political events.

The second – where Brothers, Southcott and Blake assume agency over the fulfilment of the text's promises – is called “actualization”. Initially, Kovacs and Rowland defined actualization as readings which sought “to convey the spirit of the text rather than being preoccupied with the plethora of detail”.⁴⁴ In a later essay, however, Rowland argues that the term ought to have been reserved for instances of figures “acting out” of roles within the text.⁴⁵ Under this latter definition, used in this thesis, the ways that Brothers, Southcott

⁴² Ibid., plate 14, E39.

⁴³ Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Christopher Rowland, “The Interdisciplinary Colloquium on the Book of Revelation and Effective History” in ed. William John Lyons and Jorunn Økland, *The Way the World Ends? The Apocalypse of John in Culture and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2009), 299.

and Blake seize responsibility for bringing Revelation's visions to life on the historical plane of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain are representative of a long tradition of interpretation. This mode of interpretation occasionally yields disastrous results, as the leaders of the Münster rebellion in 1534's identification with the two witnesses of Revelation 11 and David Koresh's self-identification as the Lamb of Revelation 5 demonstrate.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of this mode of interpretation makes the study of their reception of Revelation particularly apposite. Although other texts certainly occupy their attention, it is in their shared actualizations of Revelation that the three share common ground. The close scrutiny of how Revelation is used in their texts can help us to understand how prophetic interpreters might – in their conviction that they have an active role in fulfilling the text's promises – engage with the book in their writings.

By paying close attention to the ways these figures use Revelation, we can see that the text has influence beyond the formation of their eschatological ideas, even when they draw upon the book's closing vision: the descent of the New Jerusalem. The complex mix of decoding and actualisation, with which they approach this text, yields a diverse range of readings. They pick up on, and exploit, the vision's intertextual allusions; they can treat the text as an allegory for their present situation; they can use it to satirise contemporary society, and they can reinterpret the vision and incorporate it at a different point in their own redemptive visions. Prophetic interpretation is an imaginative mode of reading which can generate a number of different meanings from the text across a prophet's career. Exploring Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings in detail will demonstrate the complex ways they invoke, interpret, and are influenced by, Revelation's prophetic visions.

⁴⁶ Kovaks and Rowland, *Revelation*, 9, 72.

Taking (Mis)readings Seriously

Implicit in this sketch of the principal methods employed in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of Revelation in their writings is a conviction that investigating their readings of the text is a worthwhile academic endeavour; that their readings can shed light on the interpretation of the text. In short, that these readers are important not just for the historian, or the literary critic, but that theologians can profitably engage with their their interpretations of biblical texts. Blake and – to a more limited extent – Brothers and Southcott, have long been the subject of interdisciplinary enquiry, but recently, they have started to become subject-matters for research in theology and religious studies. Studies of the Southcottian movement by members of the Prophecy Project have emphasised the importance of engaging with the *theology* of these communities as a route to understanding their perspectives, and their engagement (or lack thereof) with contemporary politics.⁴⁷ Blake similarly stands as a figure who problematises disciplinary boundaries. Artist and poet: the interpretation of his illuminated manuscripts belonging exclusively neither to the art history nor the English department. He stands as a cryptic yet vital resource to the social and cultural historian, providing a window onto the artisan and radical cultures of his day.⁴⁸ He has also been appropriated by twentieth century systematic theologians: Altizer saw Blake as “the most original prophet and seer in the history of Christendom” who consequently demands theologians' attention.⁴⁹ Latterly, he has been heralded by Rowland as a “brilliant biblical interpreter... one of Britain's most insightful exegetes”; a proto-

⁴⁷ Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6. For a theological exploration of Southcott's works see also 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; “Joanna Southcott”; and Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*.

⁴⁸ Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithica, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁴⁹ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Christian Vision of William Blake* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967), xi. See also John Gordon Davies, *The Theology of William Blake* (1948, repr., Hamdon, CT: Archon Books, 1966).

Sachkritik.⁵⁰ Sklar's work has also shown how Blake's work, and especially *Jerusalem*, can be better understood by probing into Blake's engagement with contemporary religious movements, texts and ideas.

Theological engagement with Brothers, Southcott and Blake not only provides us with an “emic” way in to understanding their world-views, a way of understanding their thought by taking seriously their beliefs and self-expression; it confronts us with a mode of engagement with the Bible which stands in stark contrast to modern critical norms. This engagement, alien as it may seem to modern critical sensibilities, nonetheless can provide us with insights into how the rapprochement between text and reader generates meaning.

Let us conclude this introduction by briefly considering one of Blake's appropriations of Revelation as a case study. In the eighth part or “Night” of his unfinished epic *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, Blake presents in densely symbolic language, a macabre vision of “Rahab” impelling the protagonist Jerusalem to “offer her own Children/Upon the bloody altar”. Many interpreters argue that Blake mythologises what he sees as a contemporary political scandal: the established Church supporting the ideology of William Pitt's warmongering government. Blake's crafting of this scene wilfully obfuscates his political critique, and he invokes Revelation to frame his condemnation in a broader theological context. He declares:

John Saw these things Reveald in Heaven
On Patmos Isle & hears the Souls cry out to be deliverd
He saw the Harlot of the Kings of Earth & saw her Cup
Of fornication food of Orc & Satan pressd from the fruit of Mystery.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 1, 239. *Sachkritik* is understood by Morgan to represent “criticism (of a text) in the light of the *Sache*, its intended subject matter”, a term introduced into New Testament Study by Rudolph Bultmann following Karl Barth. Criticism of individual texts proceeds by judging them in the light of what its overall subject is. See further Robert Morgan, “Sachkritik in Reception History”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:2 (2010), 175-90.

⁵¹ Blake, *Vala, or The Four Zoas* 115:3-7, E385-6.

In other words, Revelation's author saw this coming: Blake and John stand as co-witnesses to the inevitable and disastrous complicity of religious and political authorities.⁵² We could dismiss this as simple manipulation of the text: the subjugation of an originating vision-account to the demands of later ideology. We could dismiss Blake's cry: the poet invoking the memory of the authoritative prophet to give weight to his religious and political critique.

But yet does Blake's appropriation of John of Patmos' vision really take us irretrievably far away from the dynamics and ideology of the text? Revelation destabilises the binary of the local and the universal: contained within the address to seven first-century churches in Asia Minor is a suggestion of symbolic universalism, through the use of the number “7”: a number of completion and perfection.⁵³ The author's account presents the visionary experience as taking place on a single day: the “Lord's day” (1:10). Yet the book presents a single, uninterrupted sequence where the visionary is privy to events unfurling over extensive time periods: 1260 days of prophecy (11:3); the woman's shelter in the wilderness (12:6); the “thousand years” of 20:5. In individual narrative sections, tenses oscillate between past, present and future.⁵⁴ Time, as experienced by the visionary prophet, does not proceed according to usual chronological frameworks; his or her perspective on events is seen against an expanded temporal backdrop. This problematises the idea that Revelation is addressed at *a* specific historically- and geographically-defined audience.

Whilst modern biblical scholarship has carefully reminded us that Revelation proceeds out

⁵² Rowland argues that the relationship between the two visions here is not typological, but rather that “John had *already* seen what he, Blake, had seen and was writing about.” Put more strongly, he claims that what Blake is doing here is stressing that Blake's “own myths were already known to John”. The ambiguity in Blake's language here may be deliberate: both readings are feasible. Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 84, 146-7.

⁵³ See Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2006), 90-1.

⁵⁴ See, for example Revelation 5, where the narrator shifts between aorist (εἶδον, v.1), to the present (λέγει, v.4), to the perfect (ἔστηκός, v.6). For a survey of the issues, and for the suggestion that Revelation's use of tenses is not governed by temporal references but rather that by the author's conception of the different processes in his narrative see David Mathewson, *Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation: The Function of Greek Verb Tenses in John's Apocalypse* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010).

of a specific cultural world (albeit one in which the traces of many cultural, iconographic and symbolic traditions can be found fossilised in the text), it by no means follows that Revelation's message is aimed solely at this world. This creates an enticing interpretative space for the decoding of the “mystery” of the name “Babylon” (Revelation 17:6): space which is especially exploited in Blake's and Brothers's works

Blake's invocation of Rahab in *The Four Zoas* plays on ambiguous Old Testament associations with this name. In Joshua 2, Rahab is the “harlot” who concealed and aided the escape of Joshua's spies from Jericho; in psalm 89:10 and Isaiah 51:9 the name is attached to one of the mythological creatures Yahweh defeated at the creation. Blake's “Rahab”, more clearly identified with Revelation 17-18's Babylon in *Jerusalem* 75:1 (E230),⁵⁵ becomes one of the many “prostitutes” that Revelation's Babylon is constructed out of. She joins the women/city-states symbolised as dangerous, deluding women which pervade the Old Testament prophetic corpus. Not least Babylon itself, characterised thus in Isaiah 47 and Jeremiah 51. Revelation's depiction of Babylon as “the great whore” opens up a greater range of conceptual backgrounds than biblical depictions of the ancient Babylonian empire. Readers sensitive to Revelation's allusions to the Hebrew Bible may be reminded of biblical condemnations closer to home. Apart from Tyre and Nineveh (Nahum 3:4), the only city personified as a harlot is Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16:5). Implicit in Revelation's apparent attack on the contemporary Roman Empire, which brings to the fore memories of rival foreign empires, is an echo of those who have used their voices to condemn their own wayward state. “Babylon”, in Revelation is a woman and city who not only sits on “many waters”, but also represents many cities, and is constructed out of many

⁵⁵ Rowland (*Blake and the Bible*, 149) suggests that the conflation of Rahab and Babylon is suggested to Blake by Psalm 87:4 (“I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me”). For a fuller exposition of the function and origins of Rahab-Babylon (which nonetheless misses the conjunction of the two figures in Psalm 84:7) see G.A. Rosso, “The Religion of Empire: Blake's Rahab in Its Biblical Contexts” in ed. Alexander S. Gourlay, *Prophetic Character: Essays on William Blake in Honor of John E. Grant* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002), 287-326.

texts.⁵⁶ Indeed, Revelation recycles its own imagery in the construction of this vision: Babylon is seated upon the beast that rose out of the sea in 13:1-10. This beast was joined by a beast from the earth (13:11-18) who encouraged the “worship” of the first beast: a malevolent vision of the oppressive power of religion, politics and economics. As Beale comments, Revelation's Babylon “expresses herself through the ages in ungodly economic-religious institutions and facets of culture”.⁵⁷

Blake's appropriation of Revelation plays with this open-ended interpretative context. He adds “Rahab” to the cast of characters who contribute to Babylon's construction; he takes Babylon out of first-century Asia Minor and sees her as an active and malevolent presence in his own day. His appropriation invites the question of whether John might have felt himself and his audience to be unique in experiencing Babylon's corruptive influence – or whether Revelation might constitute a warning to ages and churches beyond his own? Thus we can see that paying attention to an apparently uncritical reading of Revelation can raise important interpretative questions, and that prophetic readers can produce useful insights for the book's interpretation.

The expositions of the biblical text offered by the three figures at the heart of this study are a world away from the norms of modern critical scholarship. They see the Bible speaking directly, and personally, to them. And they write, as 1.1 demonstrates, at a pivotal moment in what Rowland terms the Enlightenment “bifurcation” of the interpretation of the Bible and Revelation: a moment when historical-critical sensibilities, developed especially in the

⁵⁶ For parallels in contemporary Graeco-Roman culture which may also have contributed to John's presentation of Babylon, see Jennifer A. Glancy & Stephen D. Moore, “How Typical A Roman Prostitute is Revelation's 'Great Whore'?”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130:3 (2011), 551-69.

⁵⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 859. See also Boxall, who states that “the role of the reader, and the reader's context, are shown to be as crucial as that of the text itself, as the precarious, and dangerous, task is undertaken of discerning the present incarnation of this proud and arrogant city.” Ian Boxall, “The Many Faces of Babylon the Great: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the Interpretation of Revelation 17” in ed. Steve Moyise, *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh & New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 68.

eighteenth century, would marginalise the kinds of self-involving interpretation that Blake, Brothers and Southcott offer.⁵⁸ They do not attempt the “objectivity” that late eighteenth-century thinkers began to emphasise through their increasing focus on the historical setting of biblical texts. Exhuming these apparently uncritical readings of Revelation, and examining how it speaks to authors who consider themselves as possessors of the same “spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10), gives us an insight into the text's effects upon these readers' imaginations. This investigation may reveal little about the “world” of John of Patmos or the church and society of first-century Asia Minor; it possibly reveals much more about Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's worlds, the religious and political cultures of eighteenth-century England. Yet it may also reveal much about the text: how its imagery and its language continue to articulate readers' experiences throughout history – even at a time when emerging cultural, intellectual and “critical” trends sought to delimit John of Patmos' voice to a specific historical, geographical and cultural past.

This introduction has offered a defence for the inclusion of voices such as Brothers, Southcott and Blake in the task of the interpretation of Revelation, arguing that their apparent misreadings of the text can yield valuable insights into the production of meaning(s) by prophetic readers of biblical texts. In the following chapter, we will look closer at how reception history allows to consider these readers as viable conversation partners in the reading of Revelation. It also offers a detailed review of extant research in other fields, which has examined how Brothers, Southcott and Blake contributed to “millenarian” and “prophetic” culture in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, and how they have been treated as individual subjects of study.

⁵⁸ Christopher Rowland, “Foreword” in Moyise, *Studies*, ix.

Chapter One

Brothers, Southcott and Blake in Modern Scholarship

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight ways that a comparison of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's interpretations of Revelation can offer a distinctive contribution to a growing field of academic enquiry: the place of prophetic readers, who claim an active role in the fulfilment of biblical hopes, in the history of interpretation. Three strands of academic scholarship are particularly relevant to this enquiry. First, this study contributes to the recent project of charting Revelation's reception history. In 1.1, I look at works which have traced broader hermeneutical shifts, both in Revelation and wider issues in biblical interpretation, during Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's lifetimes. Such works, I suggest, by focussing on theological and exegetical trends in the burgeoning “critical” discourse about the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have invariably overlooked the interpretation of Revelation by readers like Blake, Brothers and Southcott. I will chart how recent changes within biblical studies – in particular the growing interest in reception-historical studies of biblical texts – has provided an opportunity for greater consideration of marginalised interpreters, such as those who define themselves as prophets.

In 1.2, I will discuss works on late-eighteenth century popular religion – many of which bring Blake, Brothers and Southcott into conversation with one another. I suggest that scholarship on this subject, which has primarily interested historians and literary critics, tends to subsume Blake, Brothers and Southcott into the discourses of “millenarianism” and/or “prophecy”. The former, I argue, constitutes an etic imposition of a conceptual key onto their writings. It has led to an over-emphasis on eschatology as the key to Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's reception of the Bible, and thus risks missing important nuances in their interpretation of the text and especially in their treatment of Revelation. The latter

label, by contrast, is more faithful to Blake's, Brother's and Southcott's self-understanding. There is, however, space to explore how their ideas about prophecy overlap, and how this affects and informs their engagement with Revelation, the biblical prophetic text which is a central concern in their writings.

Finally, in 1.3, I will examine works which focus specifically on Brothers's and Southcott's and Blake's individual careers. I will demonstrate that whilst extant (largely biographical) scholarship has traced Brothers's and Southcott's convictions of prophetic inspiration and their use of scripture, there is room to explore these two facets of their prophetic identity in closer detail. Similarly, whilst recent studies have explored Blake's hermeneutical approaches to the Bible in a sustained manner, his engagement with Revelation and his creative transformations of key images such as the New Jerusalem can be traced more closely. This study can therefore help us to understand how Revelation shapes these prophets' beliefs, and how their experiences of prophetic inspiration affect their interpretation of the book's symbolism and future hopes.

1.1. Biblical Hermeneutics, the Book of Revelation in the Eighteenth Century, and the role of Reception History

Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's lifetimes have been marked by many scholars as a pivotal moment in the Bible's history and its influence upon culture, and the readings of biblical prophecy they produced stood in contrast to emerging historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation. During the long-eighteenth century, Sheehan argues that the “Enlightenment Bible” – forged out of sustained scholarly engagement across a variety of academic sub-disciplines (philology, literature, history) and through sustained efforts to translate the Bible afresh in Germany and in England – caused the Bible's place in modern

European intellectual culture to become cemented. Michael Legaspi has also pointed to the emergence of the “academic bible” as a result of sustained intellectual engagement with the historical setting of biblical texts.⁵⁹ Such enquiries into the morality and historicity of scripture, as well as the implicit criticism of authoritative translations of the Bible through the production of new translations and surveys of manuscript evidence, ensured that the Bible became a central subject of academic enquiry. Popular interpretative approaches – and the very text itself – came under unprecedented scrutiny. The roots of this emergent field of biblical criticism, sewn in this period, had far-reaching effects upon biblical translation, interpretation and have even spawned new disciplinary enquiries – notably literary theory.⁶⁰ The lifetimes of Brothers, Southcott and Blake were indeed tumultuous times in which the authority of “the” Bible (or at least its most popular vernacular translation, the King James Bible) was questioned in new ways, and new methods were applied to determine the text's meaning.

Examples can help to explicate this point. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a number of new translations of biblical texts, challenging the dominance of the King James Version.⁶¹ This interest in developing new biblical translations was prompted by extensive text-critical research. The second volume of Benjamin Kennicott's dissertation comparing all of the Hebrew manuscripts in Oxford, Cambridge and the British Museum was

⁵⁹ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), xii-xiii; Michael A. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-10. Legaspi argues that the efforts of German academics – in particular Michaelis – to historically reconstruct the culture of the ancient Israelites had a decisive effect on interpretation. He argues that the eighteenth century saw a split between the “academic bible”, the subject of historical and literary-critical enquiry; and the “scriptural bible”, a normative text which “furnished [the Church's] moral universe, framed its philosophic inquiries, and fitted out its liturgies.”

⁶⁰ See Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

⁶¹ For a comprehensive survey of the emergence of new translations in eighteenth century Britain, see Neil W. Hitchin, “The Politics of English Bible Translation in Georgian Britain: The Alexander Prize”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999), 67-92.

particularly influential.⁶² Whilst a campaign to revisit and amend the translation of the authorised version failed, new eighteenth-century translations could, nonetheless, be conduits for important claims about the authenticity and reliability of biblical texts.⁶³ Alexander Geddes's preface to his translation of the Bible, published at the end of the century, denied the possibility of Mosaic authorship of the pentateuch, and in his accompanying critical remarks, argued Genesis 1 was “a most beautiful *mythos*, or philosophical fiction, contrived with great wisdom, dressed up in the garb of real history”.⁶⁴ Prophetic readers did not insulate themselves from these contemporary critical endeavours: as Niblett highlights in his forthcoming monograph, Southcott railed against a translation of the Bible published in 1808 for casting doubt on the authenticity of certain biblical books.⁶⁵

The emergence of new translations was not the only way in which criticism during this period affected engagement with scriptural texts. Prominent deist writers like David Hume cast doubt upon the veracity of key biblical stories, such as the Gospels' miracle accounts. Similarly, Anthony Collins questioned how far prophecies in the Old Testament could be seen to be fulfilled by events recounted in the New Testament. This attacked a major crux of typological interpretation: the assumption of a unified divine revelation between the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁶ In addition, nascent historical-critical approaches to biblical texts –

⁶² Benjamin Kennicott, *The State of the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament Considered*, vol.2 (Oxford, 1759).

⁶³ On the failure of the campaign amidst, primarily, Oxford academics of the mid-eighteenth century including Robert Lowth, see Hitchin, “Politics of English Bible Translation”, 83-6 and Scott Mandelbrote, “The English Bible and its Readers in the Eighteenth Century” in ed. Isabel Rivers, *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (London & New York: Leicester University Press, 2001), 35-78.

⁶⁴ Alexander Geddes, *The Holy Bible, or the books accounted sacred by Jews and Christians...* vol. 1 (London, 1792), x; *Critical Remarks on the Hebrew Scriptures: Corresponding with a new Translation of the Bible* (London, 1800), 26.

⁶⁵ Southcott, *The Answer to False Doctrine and the Crying Sins of the Nation*, (London, 1808), 1-2. The version classed Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude and Revelation as “antilegomena”. See Anonymous, *The New Testament in an Improved Version, upon the Basis of Archbishop Newcombe's New Translation with a Corrected Text, and Notes Critical and Explanatory* (London, 1808), vi-vii.

⁶⁶ For more on Hume and Collins' critiques of the Bible see Frei, *Eclipse*, 53-4, and on Collins especially see 66-85.

led especially by German academics in Göttingen – began to stress the idea that biblical texts, like other ancient texts, were historically and culturally conditioned. The “meaning” of a biblical text, then, began to be explored not in terms of what it revealed about God's relationship with the contemporary world, but in terms of what light the text could shed on the cultural context of the author's own day.⁶⁷ As Schaffer has outlined, these German ideas filtered into late eighteenth-century British intellectual culture via figures like the Unitarian Joseph Priestley, and through Geddes' translation of the Bible.⁶⁸ Biblical interpretation in eighteenth-century Europe thus came to focus more heavily than ever before on issues of historicity, the reliability of a biblical text and its narratives, and the cultural and literary setting of biblical authors. In short, biblical interpretation underwent a turn to pay more attention to human authorship than on divine revelation.

The biblical interpretation offered in the works of figures such as Brothers, Southcott and Blake thus compete with emerging critical discourses which, above all, stress the historical and cultural distance between the biblical texts and the contemporary reader. They could resist these scholarly interpretative tendencies, as Brothers and Southcott did, by affirming the continued validity of inspired biblical interpretation and holding the Bible as a unified revelation from God. As Brothers wrote in 1795, although close study of the Bible can “with this superficial acquaintance only... advance thought”, it is only “by the same Holy Ghost [that wrote biblical prophecy], through man, all divine prophecy can only be expounded.”⁶⁹ Or they could attempt a rapprochement with contemporary critical discourses and reconfigure the role of “prophecy” for the modern age, as Blake did (see further 2.3). However, from the perspective of modern academic biblical studies – it is

⁶⁷ Ibid., 156-62.

⁶⁸ E.S. Schaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 24-8.

⁶⁹ Brothers, *Wrote in Confinement. An Exposition of the Trinity. With a Farther Elucidation of the Twelfth Chapter of Daniel...* (London, 1796), 4.

Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's critical contemporaries who have set the agenda for Revelation's interpretation, whilst prophetic readers – until recently – have been consigned to a “pre-critical” interpretative past.

Two studies have, in particular, addressed the contemporary shifts in the interpretative landscape outlined above, and thus are an important part of the conceptual backdrop to this study of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's interpretation of Revelation: Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and Burdon's *Apocalypse in England*. Frei's focus is on a broader trend in biblical interpretation in post-Enlightenment Europe: the steady dismantling of what he terms “the biblical narrative” as a result of the critical developments sketched above. Burdon's project is more specific, charting how Revelation was interpreted in England during the long eighteenth century. In what follows I want to trace their respective studies, before suggesting how paying attention to prophetic interpreters such as Brothers, Southcott and Blake can enrich our picture of biblical interpretation during this period.

Frei underscores three principal facets of biblical interpretation which he sees as dominating pre-modern hermeneutics. Firstly, for biblical stories to have meaning and make sense at a literal level they needed to be seen as describing real historical events. Thus when II Chronicles 32 depicts Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and his defeat at the hands of Hezekiah, it records an actual threat of aggression from a foreign empire thwarted by an angel sent by God at the instigation of the faithful Judahite king.⁷⁰ Secondly, the Bible depicted “a single world of one temporal sequence” and thus needed to be understood as “one cumulative story”. Thirdly, since the Bible forges a singular narrative which describes the historical, real world from beginning (Genesis 1-3) to its anticipated

⁷⁰ The example of Sennacherib is apt since Southcott frequently likens Napoleon Bonaparte to Sennacherib. See Southcott, *The Continuation of the Prophecies of Joanna Southcott. A Word in Season to a Sinking Kingdom* (London: 1803), 54; *Third Book of Wonders*, 73.

end (Revelation 21:1), Frei argues this placed upon the pre-critical interpreter a duty to fit themselves into that world: “he was to see his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era's events as figures of that storied world.”⁷¹ As chapters 3 and 4 will demonstrate, Southcott and Brothers especially fit into this role, seeing themselves as actors prefigured in scripture and bringing about the eschatological promises encoded within the text.

Central to Frei's thesis is the conviction that over the course of the eighteenth century, this relationship between this reliable, coherent and singular narrative projected by the biblical text and its meaning became separated. The world-view of a divine plan of history could still persist, only this history became more and more distinct from the description offered by the Bible.⁷² This, Frei argues, constituted a significant challenge to established modes of interpretation engrained in post-reformation protestant culture. Typological exegesis, where events or figures in the Old Testament pointed forward to events or figures in the New Testament, was particularly vulnerable. As increased attention was paid to authorial intention, it could no longer be simply assumed that events or sayings from the New Testament were designed to “fulfil” prophetic utterances or symbolic events in the Old Testament. Consequently this enabled new avenues for enquiry, and new questions could be applied to the Bible, which heralded the start of modern biblical criticism. The methods of what was termed “higher criticism” were forged in a German context by academics and writers such as Johann David Michaelis, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Johann Gottfried Herder.⁷³ In England, key proponents included Robert Lowth and Alexander Geddes

⁷¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2-3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷³ For the origins of the term “higher criticism” in the works of Eichhorn and Jean Astruc, see ed. S.L. Greenslade, *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 270-1. The term was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to distinguish questions of the historicity of biblical texts, and their literary construction, from “lower” text-critical questions.

(discussed further in 2.3). By focussing upon the cultural context of biblical authors, this form of biblical interpretation problematised the depiction of the Bible as a direct divine revelation, its reliability as an historical witness, and allowed interpreters to hypothesise about the biblical writers' aesthetic norms. Critics like Herder, who emphasised the poetic spirit fuelling the authors of biblical texts, stand as scholarly counterparts to Blake who, as we shall see in 2.1, makes similar claims about the true nature of the inspiration of biblical authors.⁷⁴

Frei's reconstruction of post-enlightenment biblical hermeneutics is one of the most important accounts of the origins and development of modern methods of biblical interpretation. Yet his charting of the “eclipse of biblical narrative” during this period does not tell the full story and leaves open a number of lines of critical enquiry.

Firstly, the interpreters Frei discusses belong to a specific tradition of post-reformation hermeneutics: he engages with predominantly male interpreters who consider prophecy to be a thing of the past – an activity that ends with the closing of the biblical canon.⁷⁵ He fails to consider the rich vein of engagement with biblical prophecy that inspired readers to see themselves in possession of the same prophetic spirit as their scriptural forebears. This tradition, as stated in the introduction, has been particularly highlighted in recent scholarship by Newport. Frei's picture of the erosion of the “biblical narrative” and its concomitant hermeneutical methods, such as typological exegesis, has also been challenged by George Landow. Landow argues that biblical typology experienced a resurgence in early Victorian culture in a wide variety of arenas, such as the art of the pre-Raphaelites, the aesthetic criticism of Ruskin and in the works of churchmen like Keble

⁷⁴ For more on Herder's contribution to biblical hermeneutics see Frei, *Eclipse*, 183-201

⁷⁵ Frei's work privileges a cultural and academic elite which is almost exclusively male. The only two women to find a place in Frei's enquiry are Jane Austin (ibid., 147) and Clara Reeve (134-4).

and Newman.⁷⁶ So too Korshin argues that Frei's limited conception of typological exegesis as “a tool in the interpretation of Scripture” ignores both the extent to which “paradoxically, during the same period... millenarians make progressively greater use of the figural system which draws on Old Testament types”, and the poetic appropriation of typological structures and allusions by the Romantic poets.⁷⁷ Korshin explicitly refers to Brothers and Southcott in his analysis, but is unable to keep value-judgements out of his discussion, depicting Brothers as “the demented chiliastic visionary” who “demonstrates that the ultimate stage of prophetic typology... is madness.”⁷⁸ Landow and Korshin's work shows how considering the Bible's use by figures interested in scriptural interpretation outside of a self-consciously “critical” realm (e.g. an artist like Blake or would-be religious leaders like Brothers and Southcott), a more complex picture of the development of biblical hermeneutics during the long eighteenth century emerges. Work on biblical reception within biblical studies, as we shall see, has opened up space for us to consider these rival eighteenth-century interpretative discourses.

Secondly, Frei's concern is to highlight “realistic or history-like” narratives in the Bible: he especially sees “the stories of Genesis and the gospels” as the main drivers of the development of biblical hermeneutics. This causes him to think about biblical prophecy only in terms of the perceived patterns of prophecy and fulfilment in the reading of the text, rather than how shifts in interpretation affected views of the prophets *qua* prophets.⁷⁹ Shifts in the perception of what the biblical prophets were doing, specifically the discovery that many of the major prophets wrote in poetic forms, had an important effect on the activities and perception of would-be eighteenth century prophets. Chapter two of this thesis – in

⁷⁶ George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought* (Boston, London & Henley: Routledge & Kenan Paul, 1980).

⁷⁷ Paul J. Korshin, *Typologies in England 1650-1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 363-8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁷⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 10; 13.

choosing different conversation partners from Frei – shows how these developments in intellectual and popular culture during the eighteenth century also had an important effect upon how prophets (both biblical and contemporary) and their prophetic acts could be conceived. This in turn forms important background to understanding the hermeneutical moves made by Blake, Brothers and Southcott.

In addition to studying these three authors in order to broaden our understanding of biblical interpretation in the eighteenth century, this thesis builds upon work which has specifically traced shifts in the interpretative approach to Revelation. An important authority on the interpretation of Revelation during this period is Christopher Burdon, who depicts the book as a text which simultaneously invites and resists interpretation.⁸⁰ He argues the text is consistently held up as the “key” to unlock scripture, and yet the “apocalyptic spirit” which vitiates the book makes it impossible to establish a definitive interpretation of the text: “the diversity of 'rhetorical situations' for the reading of the book makes a definition of *the* response or *the* meaning impossible, the hermeneutical question doomed to frustration.”⁸¹ Revelation's ubiquity, and its capacity to speak to diverse contemporary situations during the long eighteenth century, thwarted attempts to unlock a singular meaning behind the text. Thus a range of interpretative strategies developed across the eighteenth century, which had a profound effect on how the book should be read, and how the eighteenth century reader should respond to its imagery.

Burdon impressively traces trajectories of Revelation's interpretation beginning with the influential chronological calculations of Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), extending to the systematic harmonising of the Bible's language by Isaac Newton.⁸² In

⁸⁰ Christopher Burdon, *Apocalypse in England: Revelation Unravelling, 1700-1834* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997), 6, 215.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 34-8, 48-50.

Burdon's analysis, dissatisfaction with such rationalist approaches to Revelation manifested itself through the appropriation of Revelation's language to describe the human condition by the Wesley brothers, William Pantycelyn and Richard Herd.⁸³ Burdon argues that the interpretation of Revelation was particularly sensitive to wider political events during the eighteenth century: the tumult of the French Revolution, for example, constituted a political crisis wherein prophetic texts could speak to present experience, rather than of past and future, thus giving them “a new moral immediacy”.⁸⁴ Revelation concomitantly became a text ingrained in religious and political debate. Contemporaneously, Eichhorn's commentary on the text had influentially depicted Revelation as a poetic response to the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in 70CE. Revelation's meaning, Eichhorn argued, should be found in the culture of the author's first century world and not in its supposed fulfilment in later historical epochs.⁸⁵ For the text to have any normative relevance for modern readers, Burdon argues, a more personal response to the text was required, directing interpretative activity towards literature and poetry. Readers were urged to become a “fellow-seer” with its author, poetically responding to current events by drawing on Revelation's expectation of – and hope for – eschatological restitution. Burdon's enquiry thus extends to the literary sphere with attention paid to reactions to the text by Coleridge, Shelley and – crucially – Blake.

The shifts depicted in Burdon's study of this area of eighteenth century biblical interpretation are extremely noteworthy. His book charts how meaning in Revelation was initially ascribed with reference to its fulfilment in historical events. Under this mode of reading, the text fills in key events in the biblical narrative between the early church and the expected culmination of human history. As the century progressed, Burdon argues,

⁸³ Ibid., 74-83.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 143-5.

interpretation of the book moved through a metaphorical allegorising of images (such as the materials used to build the New Jerusalem), to focus on authorial intention and historical context. By the end of the century, Burdon argues, readers of Revelation were struggling to reconcile two competing needs: to find meaning in the book's historical and cultural setting; and to do justice to the poetic inspiration that enlivened the book's author, and arrested the attention of the modern reader.

On this basis, Burdon argues that interpretation of Revelation during Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's lifetimes was at a crossroads, pointing irresistibly to an engagement with the text which moves “beyond interpretation”. For Burdon, Blake answers this call by rewriting Revelation, sublimating its energy and imagery into a new “post-Christian” construction.⁸⁶ Blake looks back upon the Bible's final book and uses it to “create again... entering [John's] world in order to deconstruct it”.⁸⁷ Blake's ability to undertake this task, Burdon argues, lies in his distance from orthodox Christianity, freeing him from questions about the authoritative text; from the Newtonian interpretative history of measurement and chronology. Blake, for Burdon, stands as a counter-point to the rationalist tendencies of early enlightenment thinkers such as Newton and Locke, which “denied the human imagination” in the interpretation of prophetic texts.⁸⁸

Burdon's work usefully sketches out how Revelation's fragmented narrative and text resists an interpretative consensus at a period when it was consistently the subject of exegetical enquiry. His research, however, leaves open two important further lines of investigation. Firstly, Burdon decided not to concentrate on how the book was being read within what he terms “popular millenarianism”.⁸⁹ In doing so, he constructs a narrative which sees

⁸⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 3.

interpretation of Revelation moving closer and closer towards Blake's recognition of the text's fundamental "indeterminacy".⁹⁰ His delimiting of his material, like Frei, excludes voices such as Brothers and Southcott from the conversation. It begs the question of how the text was read by individuals whose primary concerns were neither academic nor aesthetic. Brothers and Southcott were writers whose expositions of Revelation reached a considerable audience; even if they have subsequently faded into historical obscurity, their interpretation of Revelation and their prophetic careers elicited a significant response, and drove their readers to action as a direct result of their claims. Of course, differences can be sketched out: unlike Blake, Brothers and Southcott are more respectful of the authority of the text and are less explicitly willing to "rewrite" (to use Burdon's terminology) Revelation. Nonetheless, as 2.1 demonstrates, they make an imaginative leap akin to Blake, seeing themselves as inspired by the same prophetic spirit as Revelation's author, John of Patmos. This results in the creation of new prophetic texts, which must then be reconciled with the visions of the New Testament's prophetic book. As Brothers's and Southcott's writings show, there are other ways to navigate this impasse rather than the rewriting of the text.

Secondly, Burdon focusses upon conflicts in wider intellectual trends within the text's history of interpretation during the eighteenth century. As such, he offers a much broader sweep of the text's reception history. This thesis, by contrast, centres closely upon a comparison of the text's reception in three written corpora, as a means of correcting the omissions made in more wide-ranging surveys such as those of Frei and Burdon. My interest is in the reception, interpretation and manipulation of symbols from the book of Revelation and the meanings imbued in them by Brothers, Southcott and Blake. Within Revelation itself certain sections clearly become subjects of special concern for the three

⁹⁰ Ibid., 216.

authors: John's claim to a spirit-driven visionary experience; the vision of chapter 12, "the woman clothed with the sun"; the promises of "New Heaven and New Earth" and "New Jerusalem". Their readings of these chapters point up crucial hermeneutical issues that produce the kind of fragmentary response which Burdon states characterise the text's interpretation during this period.

Frei and Burdon's overviews of biblical interpretation across the long eighteenth century construct essentially linear narratives. For Frei, advances in post-enlightenment intellectual culture successively eroded the credibility of "pre-critical" modes of reading. For Burdon, engagement with Revelation similarly saw the dismantling of authoritative interpretative paradigms (in particular, the assumption that Revelation mapped out events in world history), culminating in the imaginative engagement offered by Blake's "re-writing". These studies are therefore very useful for marking out how the careers of Brothers, Southcott and Blake coincided with dramatic shifts in biblical interpretation. Yet we should note that Frei's and Burdon's conversation partners in their respective studies are an important ingredient for their respective accounts. Neither author is especially interested in how biblical interpretation proceeded within the popular culture of the late eighteenth century. For both authors, these developments are spurred by authors who are (with the exception of Blake in Burdon's account) university educated, male, and occupied high-status positions within academia (Newton, Eichhorn, Michaelis), religious institutions and movements (Wesley, Herder) or in romantic literary culture (Coleridge, Shelley).

The interpretative questions raised by these figures are no doubt influential, and as Sherwood and Moore have argued, the increasing emphasis upon the historical- and literary-criticism of the Bible from the Enlightenment and beyond has been determinative

for the interpretative agenda of biblical studies in the modern age.⁹¹ Yet focussing on early proponents of historical-critical biblical exegesis does not tell the full story of biblical interpretation, and specifically the interpretation of Revelation, during the long eighteenth century. Work on early modern popular culture has identified that the increased production of print materials led to increased cultural and intellectual exchange between the various socio-economic strata of eighteenth century society.⁹² Popular prophets such as Brothers and Southcott caught the attention of London print culture, and their ideas were discussed by members of society across the socio-economic spectrum. Paying attention to autodidacts like the prophets at the heart of this study demonstrates that the move from pre-critical to critical biblical interpretation was not linear in all strata of European, post-enlightenment society. Brothers, Southcott and Blake were not especially concerned with the historical situatedness of biblical texts and narratives. Yet their conviction that they had a prophetic insight into the interpretation of biblical texts ensured that they confronted important exegetical questions in their respective works. This study thus pays attention to how interpretation of Revelation proceeded within religious and artisanal subcultures that stood alongside emerging critical intellectual currents, which influenced the questions that engaged biblical scholarship over the following two centuries.

This project contributes to a burgeoning interest in reception history within modern biblical studies. Rather than limiting the interpretation of biblical texts to their immediate historical contexts, reception-historical approaches have explored what texts have meant to readers in later cultural contexts. This approach to biblical interpretation has its philosophical roots in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his pupil Hans-Robert Jauss. The former, whilst exploring the philosophical question of how understanding is achieved, questioned whether

⁹¹ Stephen D. Moore & Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), x-xi; 46-81.

⁹² See J.M. Golby and A.W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900*, rev. ed (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1984), 32-5.

the removal of “prejudice” favoured by enlightenment historicist enquiry, could ever be achieved. Gadamer argued that understanding of historical texts or events had to both embrace the temporal distance between the interpreter and the object of interpretation, and to recognise that the modern interpreter is conditioned by their own prejudicing traditions.⁹³ A key term that Gadamer coined to underscore the influence of tradition on understanding is *Wirkungsgeschichte* or effective-history. As Evans states, Gadamer stressed that this awareness of one's own historically conditioned state should not coalesce into a stand-alone object of enquiry, but rather that *Wirkungsgeschichte* is “a principle – that alongside the apparent immediacy with which we encounter a text from the past, we need a consciousness that we are already affected by history.”⁹⁴

Gadamer's insights about the temporal distance between the interpreter and object of interpretation being a productive component in the interpretative task were developed further by Jauss.⁹⁵ Jauss, applying Gadamer's ideas to literary history, argued that the role of earlier readers in ensuring the transmission of texts were essential to their survival. The changing use and interpretation of texts, Jauss argued, should inform how the text is interpreted and understood:

[A text] is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to contemporary existence... This dialogical character of the literary work also establishes why philological understanding can exist only in a perpetual confrontation with the text, and cannot be allowed to be reduced to a knowledge of facts.⁹⁶

⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 264-5; 266-7.

⁹⁴ Robert Evans, *Reception History, Tradition and Biblical Interpretation: Gadamer and Jauss in Current Practice* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 8; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268.

⁹⁵ “the important thing is to recognise the distance in time as a positive and productive possibility of understanding. It is not a yawning abyss, but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down presents itself to us.” Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, 264-5.

⁹⁶ Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982)

The Gadamerian terminology of *Wirkungsgeschichte* was influentially applied to the interpretation of biblical texts by Luz, in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Luz argued that the history of interpretation “reminds us of the abundance of the meaning potential in biblical texts.”⁹⁷ In his work, originally part of a “Protestant-Catholic” commentary series (*Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar*), Luz emphasised receptions of Matthew that “influenced the Catholic and Protestant churches as confessions”.⁹⁸ Other reception-historical writers have cast a wider net, drawing upon visual culture, literary texts and the marginalised interpretative communities. This interest in the reception of biblical texts has, in recent years, also given rise to reception history-focussed commentary series. The *Blackwell's Bible Commentary* series has collated interpretations of biblical texts from across the centuries, whereas collections such as *The Church's Bible* and the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series focus on readings of biblical books in patristic authors. Knight argues that this has reminded biblical scholars that historical-critical approaches to the Bible are not the only possible starting points for interpretation. This has allowed readings of texts which engage feminist, liberationist and postcolonial agendas to play a role in the task of academic biblical interpretation.⁹⁹ In their contribution to the *Blackwell Bible Commentary*, Joyce and Lipton have coined the term “reception exegesis” to demonstrate how receptions of biblical texts, outside of historical-critical and academic discourses, might enrich traditional exegetical approaches.¹⁰⁰ Sherwood has proposed that scholars should be still more radical in their engagement with the “afterlives” of biblical texts, arguing that the survival of biblical texts outside established interpretative discourses and media is an important avenue of exploration, which can encourage scholars to think

⁹⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 65.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁹ Mark Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*, Reception History, Reception Theory”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:2 (2010), 141.

¹⁰⁰ Joyce and Lipton, *Lamentations*, 17-19.

carefully about the effects of assigning some reading communities to the “Backwaters”, and affirming others to be “Mainstream”.¹⁰¹ For Beal, reception history gives biblical studies an opportunity to recalibrate itself as the study of “the ongoing, culturally-specific process of relationship between texts and readers.”¹⁰²

It is in this context that Newport's attention to heterodox interpretations of Revelation opens the door for the consideration of self-proclaimed “prophetic” readers. Newport has argued that though readings in which “the text yields to the interest of the reader, with the result that it is made to bear the weight of the reader's own prejudices and concerns” embrace a subjectivity which historical-critical readings attempt to escape from, they should nonetheless still be of interest to the modern academy. Paying attention to such readings can alert biblical scholars to “the power of subjectivity” in biblical interpretation.¹⁰³ The study offered in this thesis answers Newport's call to pay more attention to the relationship between the conviction of prophetic agency, and the generation of meanings through biblical interpretation. For example, in chapter 4, I show how Southcott's changing reception of Revelation 12 functions as a means of accounting for shifting circumstances in her ministry. We can see through this study the evolving interplay between how texts can impose an “element of order on the reader's thoughts”, and the will of the interpreter to encourage a text to yield to their interpretative framework.¹⁰⁴ This is a crucial feature of prophetic biblical interpretation, addressed throughout this study.

¹⁰¹ Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See especially 56-97 for a discussion of how historical-critical readings of Jonah have succeeded in presenting an anti-Semitic image of Jonah as a Jew.

¹⁰² Timothy Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” *Biblical Interpretation* 19:4 (2011), 364. For Beal, this points to an even broader engagement with the Bible's relationship to cultural and material production, rather than merely the study of individual texts' uses over the centuries (371-2).

¹⁰³ Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 19-21.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

Revelation's reception history has provided fruitful testing ground for the role of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in biblical interpretation, and has increasingly come to occupy scholarly attention. Past studies have drawn upon the text's history of interpretation to settle doctrinal debates or to explore the multifaceted resonances of certain scenes in culture.¹⁰⁵ Revelation was the subject of the inaugural volume of the *Blackwell Bible Commentary* Series, which argues that “how people have interpreted the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, a number of recent monographs and studies have attempted to utilise the ways in which receptions and uses of Revelation in media outside of the realm of modern “critical” scholarship can contribute to our understanding of the text's meaning(s).¹⁰⁷

In studying the reception of Revelation by Brothers, Southcott and Blake, we can see how prophetic readers both generate meanings through their engagement with the book, and how Revelation informs their own prophetic identity. In the analysis in chapters 3-5, we will see how Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's interpretations of Revelation highlight key hermeneutical issues in the text: its relationship to other books in the biblical canon; the role of the prophet; the book's depiction of women; the role of human and divine agency in Revelation's vision of eschatological fulfilment. Their responses to these issues are an important window onto a neglected discourse within the modern history of interpretation of Revelation. In addition, as I have suggested above, a study of these figures is particularly apposite, since their subjective and self-involving readings of the text are generated at a point in history where the increasingly objective and historicising methods of modern

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959); Boxall, “The Many Faces of Babylon the Great”, 51-68.

¹⁰⁶ Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, xi.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Natasha O'Hear, *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art: a Case Study in Visual Exegesis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

biblical criticism were being formulated. Brothers, Blake and Southcot, belong to a different but enduring tradition within intellectual history: what Rowland and Roberts describe as people “who were fascinated by the Bible, saw beyond just its literal sense, and looked for ways of comprehending or accommodating themselves to its disparate parts.”¹⁰⁸ This thesis highlights the readings of Revelation offered by three key proponents of this divergent interpretative tradition, which was not eclipsed by historical-critical methods in all corners of modern society: prophetic readers reading prophecy.

1.2. Brothers, Southcott and Blake: “Prophets” and/or “Millenarians”

In addition to augmenting the study of Revelation's reception history, this thesis also engages with scholarship in other disciplines that has brought Blake's works into conversation with Brothers's and Southcott's. In particular, studies of “millenarianism” as a category in intellectual history have drawn on these authors as important case studies to delineate the contours of this mode of thinking. In this section I will sketch out how scholarship has treated these three figures. Through this survey, two conceptual frameworks emerge as dominant paradigms for setting up a comparison between the three: “millenarianism” and “prophecy”. As suggested in the introduction, the former term has obscured the ways in which Brothers, Southcott and Blake reflect upon Revelation, by focussing on their reception of its eschatological schema to shed light on how they fit into the ideological construct of “(popular) millenarianism”. As 2.1 demonstrates, the latter offers a more appropriate definition upon which to base a comparative study, since it is in keeping with the writers' own self-understanding. This opens up space for a more even-handed discussion of their interpretations of Revelation, where the focus is less on using the authors simply to contextualise each other. Rather, the aim of this thesis's comparison is

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, “Introduction”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:2 (2010), 136.

to demonstrate the variety of possible responses to Revelation amongst three contemporary authors who approached the text with a shared conviction of prophetic inspiration.

There is an obvious discrepancy in scholarly treatments of Brothers's, Blake's and Southcott's works. As a “canonical” poet and esteemed visual artist, Blake has remained a subject of academic enquiry since his critical “discovery” in the mid-nineteenth century. Brothers and Southcott, however, have largely been relegated to footnotes in the study of radicalism in the 1790s and early nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹ E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963, helped to rescue Brothers and Southcott from scholarly obscurity, by examining their ministries as part of an attempt to rescue “...even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”¹¹⁰ Thompson instigated a considerable rejuvenation of interest in Brothers and Southcott and their followers. Yet for the most part, scholarship has used these as case studies of plebeian radical religion. In comparison to the myriad of studies centred upon Blake's “sources” and “inspirations”, sustained engagement with the ways in which Brothers and Southcott read and interpret their major source of inspiration – the Bible – has been scant.

There has, however, been a growing tendency to consider Brothers and Southcott alongside

¹⁰⁹ Brothers and Southcott are frequently used by scholars to construct a picture of prophecy and millenarianism in the revolutionary era, and particularly in tumultuous 1790s London. So, for example, Brothers and Southcott feature prominently as case studies in Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians & The French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) and Juster, *Doomsayers*. In historical overviews of the eighteenth century Southcott and Brothers are occasionally mentioned as archetypal examples of plebeian movements popular at the end of the period. See Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 401-2; Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II: Volume II 1689-1833* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 259-60. Prior to the 1960s there were attempts to offer biographical sketches of the two prophets' lives. See Cecil Roth, *The Nephew of the Almighty: An experimental account of the Life and Aftermath of Richard Brothers, R.N.* (London: Edward Goldston Ltd., 1933); Ronald Matthews, *English Messiahs: Studies of Six English Religious Pretenders 1656-1927* (London: Methuen & Co., 1936); G.R. Balleine, *Past Finding Out: The Tragic Story of Joanna Southcott and her Successors* (London: SPCK, 1956).

¹¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), 12.

Blake within modern scholarship. One of the first sustained attempts at a scholarly comparison of Blake, Brothers and Southcott came in an essay in 1973 written by Morton Paley. As stated in the introduction, Paley's essay is particularly relevant since his comparison of Blake with Brothers and Southcott is based upon their interpretation of specific religious – and often biblical – motifs. As a result, I will outline Paley's argument in close detail before offering evaluative comment.

Paley's study commences with the claim that “it scarcely needs to be demonstrated that [Blake's] works are deeply imbued with the idea of the Millennium”. He argues this “millenarian spirit” is derived from biblical eschatology and other apocalyptic texts from “the Jewish and Christian Apocrypha, and the Sibylline Oracles”. He sees its ideology being co-opted at various moments in history, such as in the sixteenth century Münster rebellion and by Joachim of Fiore. His project thus seeks to situate Blake's works within this religious and intellectual tradition, and does so by comparing Blake “to the millenarian movements of his own time” headed by Brothers and Southcott.¹¹¹

Paley's comparison between Blake and Brothers begins by sampling the print controversy surrounding Brothers's incarceration in 1795. He highlights how several members of Blake's social circle were interested in Brothers and his warnings of imminent acts of judgment upon London. He therefore argues that Blake must almost certainly have been aware of Brothers's case and his claims.¹¹² Paley sees a number of parallels between Brothers and Blake, and depicts them as “Christian apocalypticists, seeing in the events of their own time parallels to the apocalyptic and Prophetic writings of the Bible”.¹¹³ He compares, for example, Brothers's and Blake's shared critique of British commercial

¹¹¹ Paley, “William Blake”, 260-1.

¹¹² Ibid., 261-3. Paley further suggests that Brothers's incarceration may have deterred Blake from producing any illuminated books between 1795 and c.1809 (ibid., 267).

¹¹³ Ibid., 268.

practices, and their tendency to place Britain at the heart of the prophetic world-view their texts construct.¹¹⁴ Paley places particular stress on their common use of biblical texts and symbols; their most striking overlap is “the application of Biblical eschatology to the political world of the mid 1790s.”¹¹⁵ He identifies two key contrasts, however: their conception of the prophetic office and the symbol of “Jerusalem”. In both areas, Brothers's interpretation is cast as “literal”, and Blake's “symbolic”. Prophecy, for Brothers, involves presenting himself as an authoritative leader with an ability to predict the future, qualities that Blake denies are a necessary condition for prophecy.¹¹⁶ Similarly, whereas Paley identifies that both authors draw their conception of Jerusalem from the prophetic visions in Revelation 21 and Ezekiel 40-48, Brothers's city is anchored in a concept of a physical city and is thus “lacking symbolic extension.”¹¹⁷ On this basis, Paley agrees with Frederick Tatham, arguing “Brothers and Blake should not be placed together.”¹¹⁸

Paley's comparison of Blake and Southcott notes the overlap between Brothers's followers and Southcott's, and argues that Southcott's movement displayed less “social fervour” and her “tone is often more petulant than prophetic”.¹¹⁹ He also points out that their disagreement was centred upon biblical interpretation, notably with Brothers denying that the sealing in Revelation 7 could justify the Southcottian practice of offering physical “seals”, and that there was no allegorical meaning to the promise about Eve's seed bruising the head of the serpent in Genesis 3:15. Paley argues there is a similar preoccupation with England and the promise of Jerusalem in Southcott's writings, and he draws specific parallels between Blake's depiction of Los's sons cutting the cords around “Albion's hills” with Southcott's account of cutting the cords binding the box of her writings during her

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 268-73.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 272.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 273.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 278.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 280.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 280-1.

trial of 1803.¹²⁰ Paley centres Blake's objection to Southcott on her belief in the possibility of the Virgin Birth, proceeding from Blake's epigram "On the Virginité of the Virgin Mary & Joanna Southcott".¹²¹ Paley argues that Blake's and Southcott's attitude to virginity were antithetical, noting Blake's antipathy to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth and its "concomitant elevation of celibacy and denial of the erotic."¹²² He further observes that Blake and Southcott share an interest in the promise of Shiloh (drawn from the Authorised Version's translation of Genesis 49:10): for Southcott this points to a "literal person"; in Blake's poetry Shiloh symbolically embodies peace in France, paralleling the ideal relationship between Jerusalem and Albion (*Jerusalem* 49: 46-8, E199).¹²³ Paley's study thus concludes that these divergences in interpretation are crucial for distinguishing Blake's mythology from Brothers and Southcott: Blake's "millennium... is to be distinguished from [Brothers's and Southcott's] by its lack of literalism and its imaginative wholeness".¹²⁴

Paley's comparison of Blake with Brothers and Southcott makes a number of important contributions to scholarship. He demonstrates how Blake's poetry is imbued with reflections on religious themes and issues, and identifies how Blake can instructively be read against the backdrop of the inhabitants of eighteenth-century London. His survey of Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's works also demonstrates how biblical interpretation is at the heart of their debate, particularly in their respective treatments of Revelation and Genesis. Finally, it alerts us to the pervasive influence of the promise of Jerusalem, as expressed by texts like Revelation 21-22, as a marker for future hopes across these three

¹²⁰ Ibid., 284. C.f. Blake, *Jerusalem* 15:22-4, E159; Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 23.

¹²¹ Paley, "William Blake", 285. C.f. E501. There is considerable debate surrounding the date of this epigram. The notebook containing this quatrain was used continually by Blake after inheriting it from his brother Robert in 1787 until 1818. Erdman dates the epigram to 1802, predating Southcott's announcement of her miraculous pregnancy. See ed. David V. Erdman & Donald K. Moore, *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, rev. ed. (New York: Readex Books, 1977), 7.

¹²² Paley, "William Blake", 285-290.

¹²³ Ibid., 291.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 292.

writers' corpora.

Yet Paley's investigation does not exhaust the possible insights to be gained from a comparison of Blake, Brothers and Southcott, and it contains a number of methodological drawbacks. Firstly, Paley's interest is primarily in setting Blake within a “millenarian” context, and thus Blake is the connecting thread throughout the study; he has only a passing interest in comparing Brothers and Southcott. Secondly, there is a muddiness in Paley's terminology. The three are described as “visionaries”, “apocalypticists”, “prophets” and “millenarians” with no attempt to differentiate meaning between these terms.¹²⁵ His use of millenarianism as a conceptual framework for his comparative study is one which this study particularly challenges. Finally, we may note that whilst he is sensitive to these authors' shared interest in certain biblical texts, he does not fully investigate how their differing interpretations proceed from reading these same texts. For example, why, when Blake and Brothers read Revelation 21 and Ezekiel 40-48 do they derive such different “Jeruselems”? Is their depiction of this city consistent with the place the city has in the Bible's eschatological scheme? Paley's claim that Blake represents a “symbolic” interpretation and Brothers (and Southcott) a “literal” interpretation is also overly simplistic. We may more properly call Brothers and Southcott's exposition of these promises “physical” or “material” rather than “literal”. Brothers – like Blake – is more than capable of treating certain biblical texts, including Revelation 21, as being “metaphorical” (see 3.3.3). The biblical interpretation of the “literalist” Brothers and Southcott, this thesis argues, is more nuanced than Paley's essay suggests. Paley's work thus opens up rich avenues for further research which are pursued in this thesis: he identifies Blake, Brothers

¹²⁵ Paley's use of the terms “apocalypse” and “millennium” are contestable elsewhere in his work. In his study of these tropes in the major Romantic poets, he continually conflates “apocalypse” with “eschaton” rather than seeing apocalyptic as a mode of revelation which *may* have eschatological content (so Rowland). See Morton. D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 3; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 151.

and Southcott as contemporary readers of Revelation. This thesis's reception-historical approach to their respective treatments of the book, gives an opportunity to clarify how Revelation functions in their texts, and thus invites a more focussed discussion on the interpretative moves they make in their handling of the text.

Paley is not alone in using Blake, Brothers and Southcott to investigate “millenarian” sub-cultures of the 1790s and beyond. Many scholars have noted that the three authors wrote at a tumultuous point in British and European history. In addition to contemporary shifting critical sensibilities, they were writing within a wider culture which interpreted the French Revolution, and the subsequent counter-revolutionary war, as events with eschatological significance (see further 2.2). Fitting Blake, Brothers and Southcott into a “millenarian” discourse thus sheds light on the theological and political presuppositions of this world-view, as it manifested itself in the 1790s and beyond. Thus when Harrison invokes Blake's writings to contextualise Brothers's mission to restore Jerusalem, he does so because “the case of Blake serves to remind us of the existence of millenarian belief outside the 'normal' institutions of millenarianism”.¹²⁶ Harrison resists trying “to enlist Blake into the ranks of Brothers' (or Joanna's) disciples” but acknowledges a shared use of a “common stock of ideas, images and vocabulary”.¹²⁷ Harrison's comparison of Blake, Brothers and Southcott simultaneously demonstrates an interest in using the three figures to shed light on the variety of “millenarian” ideas current during their lifetimes, yet also prevents them collapsing into the same category. In response, this thesis questions whether the attempt to distance Blake from the “millenarianism” exhibited by Brothers and Southcott shows a deficiency in this conceptual framework.

¹²⁶ Harrison, *Second Coming*, 85. Harrison's language of “normal institutions of millenarianism” is itself highly open to question. He sees millenarianism as couched within sectarian religious movements led by charismatic and radical prophets despite acknowledging that belief in an imminent millennial age was a much more diffuse intellectual phenomenon during this period. See further Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 111-2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

Garrett, in his study of eighteenth-century popular religion, features Brothers and Southcott heavily. “Millenarianism” in Garrett’s study is “broadly defined”. It comprises “a diverse body of ideas and attitudes” which includes echoes of biblical prophecy.¹²⁸ This provides an opportunity for a cross-channel comparison of major millenarian figures in the early 1790s. His discussion of Brothers, Southcott and contemporary French millenarians demonstrates how millenarian beliefs could be adapted to individual circumstances.¹²⁹ Garrett’s survey offers a brief reflection upon Brothers’s and Southcott’s interpretation of Revelation: he notes Brothers’s conviction that London was a manifestation of Babylon as depicted in Revelation 17-18; he briefly discusses their disagreement over the identity of the woman of Revelation 12; he points out that the Southcottian practice of “sealing” followers was inspired by Revelation 7:3¹³⁰. Yet Garrett does not interrogate *why* Brothers and Southcott made these interpretative moves, or how their reflections on Revelation – and its relationship to other scriptural texts – inform their thinking. Garrett’s work thus points to the need for a fuller examination of the hermeneutical presuppositions of millenarian authors. He concludes that belief in the “millennium” exhibited by his case-studies “was essentially a religious need, related to the facts of social and political experience, shaped by them, but not arising out of them.”¹³¹ This observation suggests that a study which foregrounds the readings of a key “millenarian” text – Revelation – would provide a fruitful way in to understanding the mindsets of such authors.

In fitting Blake, Brothers and Southcott into a millenarian discourse, Paley, Harrison and Garrett connects these authors to historiographical discussions surrounding the

¹²⁸ Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 13.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 182-3, 219, 221

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

phenomenon.¹³² Historians such as Thompson, Cohn and Hobsbawm had identified millenarianism as a worldview which could instigate an awareness of class consciousness and eventually give rise to revolutionary ideological agendas. The Southcottians' apparent withdrawal from political radicalism led Thompson to depict them, along with early nineteenth-century Methodism, as representatives of a “chiliasm of despair”.¹³³ Cohn's study of millenarian ideology highlights the continual appeal of prophetic texts such as Revelation within such revolutionary movements, despite the fact that official doctrine “no longer had any place” for chiliasm.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Cohn ultimately emphasised psychological explanations for millenarian movements, advancing a deprivation hypothesis which concluded that “phantasies” and “paranoia” instigated outward “revolutionary chiliasm”.¹³⁵ Hobsbawm's definition omits any mention of the Bible, instead speaking vaguely of “Judeo-Christian propaganda”. Thompson simply refers to “their literal interpretations of the Book of Revelation and their anticipations of a New Jerusalem.”¹³⁶ None of these influential studies engage closely with the acts of scriptural interpretation which help form millenarians' religious identity. Millenarians are of interest for their capacity to articulate in religious language the desire for dramatic political change; the hermeneutical moves that generate their interpretations of biblical promises are not of primary interest.

Subsequent reflections upon the use of the term “millenarianism,” or the related “millennialism,” have raised wider methodological problems underpinning their use.

Gribben has recently observed the anachronisms and cultural specificity surrounding these

¹³² Clark Garrett's monograph gives a useful survey of extant historiography on millenarianism. *Ibid.*, 1-15.

¹³³ Thompson, *Making*, 424. This view of political agency is challenged by Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, vii-xi, 6-12, 16-8. See also Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4-18.

¹³⁴ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 22

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 309-10.

¹³⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 57-8; E.P. Thompson, *Making*, 52

terms.¹³⁷ He notes a recent widening of scope within millennial studies and raises concerns about the sub-discipline's terminology, noting that they are recent derivations, stemming from the historiography of evangelism. He argues such they “cannot be used to explicate evangelical millennialism historically, nor can they used as a normative pattern against which other religious traditions... should be compared.”¹³⁸ Applied to this thesis's subjects, we may note that whilst the term “millenarian” was current during Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's lifetimes, they themselves never use it.¹³⁹ Instead, they depict their writings as outputs of “prophecy”. In emphasising too strongly the analytical and scholarly constructs of millenarianism in the study of their works, we risk eclipsing insights can be gained from interrogating their preferred paradigm of prophecy. This thesis thus takes seriously Gribben's call to reverse the traditional approach of reading millennialist texts as emerging out of their contexts, and pay further attention to the texts themselves and how they portray their authors' worlds.¹⁴⁰ A consideration of the writers' own language should therefore be incorporated into the conceptual framework within which they are compared.

A further reason for challenging dominant extant terminologies in the discussion of these writers is to avoid imprecisions about whether their writings can be described as “millenarian”. Whilst at points their texts seem to express a conviction about an imminent eschatological *kairos*, this expectation manifests itself in different ways throughout their lives. Any engagement with how the three interpret the Bible must use terminology which

¹³⁷ Crawford Gribben, “Evangelism, Historiography and the Possibility of Millennial Theory” in *Beyond the End: The Future of Millennial Studies*, ed. Joshua Searle and Kenneth G.C. Newport (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 12-19.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18. Gribben is responding here specifically to the work of Richard Landes, who has attempted to demonstrate the presence of patterns of millenarian thinking within a number of historical and contemporary events and movements, both within Christianity and in other religious traditions, as well as in secular discourse. See Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹³⁹ The earliest use recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary is by William Vaughan in *The Golden Fleece*, who claimed that Tertullian held the “Millenarian heresie”. It also records its use in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1785. *OED Online*, s.v. “millenarian,” accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.oed.com>.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

can incorporate the flexibility of their eschatological expectations. An approach which uses the rubric of “prophecy” invites a closer engagement with the ways that Blake, Brothers and Southcott read the Bible and relate to prophetic contemporaries and forebears. Despite the different conceptions of “prophet” which scholars ascribe to Brothers, Blake and Southcott, it is in this self-designation that the three can be most effectively brought into dialogue with the biblical representatives of the tradition they claim to continue. As explained in the introduction, the study of their use of Revelation can thus be led by an emic approach, which encourages us to use terminology that is meaningful to these writers.

A number of scholars who have surveyed the intellectual culture of the turn of the nineteenth century have used the concept of “prophecy” to describe the types of figures at the heart of this study. In his study of “prophets” and “millennialists”, Oliver attempts to demonstrate that “prophecy... was a normal intellectual activity in early nineteenth century England”.¹⁴¹ Whilst his project does not compare Blake, Brothers and Southcott (the former is a notable omission from Oliver's work), he recognises the importance of biblical interpretation in the construction of the millennialist belief in a total change of a present order effecting a vindication “*on earth*” (emphasis Oliver's).¹⁴² He traces four modes of interpreting the biblical promise of “millennium,” as well as the Augustinian counter-argument that the millennial reign of Revelation 20 is already fulfilled in the life of the Church, and demonstrates that all these views were extant during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.¹⁴³ Oliver's discussion suffers from a lack of a theoretical overview since the term “prophecy” or “prophet” is never properly defined. He emphasises prognostication; yet as 2.1's study of Blake, Brothers and Southcott use of the term demonstrates, prognostication is a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition of being a

¹⁴¹ W.H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Use of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978), 11.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 18-9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25-41.

“prophet”.¹⁴⁴ His analysis of the importance of “prophecy” as an analytical key to individuals within his study proceeds no further than observing these authors' interest in the Bible's prophetic language and texts. This thesis therefore seeks to augment Oliver's analysis of the ubiquity of “prophecy” during Brothers's, Blake's and Southcott's lifetimes. It uses their writings to flesh out ways that they understood themselves as prophets, and investigates other contemporary construals of Revelation as a prophetic text (see 2.2).

Juster offers the most comprehensive framework for understanding “prophecy” in early modern transatlantic culture. Her study of a range of prophets during the “age of revolution” (1765-1815) offers an insight into the ways these figures participated in, and were reacted to by, their contemporary culture. She uses these prophets as “an ideal vantage point from which to survey the political, cultural, and intellectual transformations” of the period.¹⁴⁵ To this end, Juster's analysis does not specifically focus on the “content” of prophecy during this era; she uses figures like Brothers and Southcott to unpack “the atmospheric... side of millenarian culture, the swirl of emotions, ideas, images, and arguments that encircled prophets and their critics.”¹⁴⁶ Prophecy for Juster provides a lens through which late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture can be examined. In her definition of a “prophet,” she emphasises that success in a competitive marketplace depended on them setting themselves up as “skilled exegetes... who enjoyed access to some special source of illumination necessary to understand the enigmatic texts of the Bible.”¹⁴⁷ Biblical interpretation occupies just one of the facets of prophetic identity in Juster's analysis, but her emphasis on prophets as biblical interpreters highlights the need for further research in two ways. Firstly, it suggests a need to understand more fully the hermeneutical moves made by prophets in their engagement with biblical texts. Secondly,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁵ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 17.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.

her stress on the prophet as – in part – an exegete of texts, provides a conceptual framework under which the comparison of Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's readings of Revelation can proceed.

Bar-Yosef's work on perceptions of Jerusalem in English millenarianism instructively brings Brothers, Southcott and Blake into dialogue. His treatment of the three writers touches upon the Bible's influence on their respective hopes for a “New Jerusalem”. His primary motive for discussing their readings of scripture, however, is to draw attention to an increased awareness in England of the physical and political geography of Palestine, brought about through contemporary military interests in the region. His scrutiny of Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's biblical interpretation stems from his interest in the relationship between “the millenarian construction of 'Jerusalem' as a radical utopia” and escalating British interest in Palestine at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁸ As a result, points where – for example – Brothers' reading of specific biblical texts like Revelation 21 seem to be at odds with his customary interpretative approaches are not interrogated further.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, whilst noting a shift in Southcott's interpretation of the hope for “New Jerusalem” (specifically in the books in which she announced her miraculous pregnancy in 1814), Bar-Yosef is more interested in how this reflects a shifting attitude to the Holy Land itself, rather than specifically investigating why Southcott's reading of this text may have changed.¹⁵⁰ Bar-Yosef's work thus sheds a helpful descriptive light on an important theme in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's interpretation of Revelation, but leaves room for further analysis.

¹⁴⁸ Eitan Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture 1799-1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders; The Fourth Book of Wonders, Being an Answer of the Lord to the Hebrews* (London, 1814). Bar-Yosef (*Holy Land*, 50-1) attributes Southcott's inconsistency to a lack of interest in the physical land of Jerusalem and to the dominance of a “Bunyanesque” attribution of England as the idealised, blessed land.

The survey of scholarship above highlights a number of problems within extant historiography of the radical religious cultures that Blake, Brothers and Southcott inhabited. The prevalent tendency to see them as part of a “millenarian” discourse uses anachronistic terminology, and has obscured the extent to which the three's appropriation of Revelation opens up a broad range of hermeneutical avenues and questions for them to explore. To this end, the terminology of prophecy is preferable, not only because it provides an emic interpretative framework but also because helps to draw attention to the variety of ways that Revelation prompts reflection and interpretation in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's work. When we consider that each figure considered themselves to be a “prophet”, we can see how their reading of Revelation shaped their conceptions of inspiration, prophecy's relationship to past, present and future, and the role of prognostication and interpretation in the work of the prophet. Chapter 2, with its account of Blake's, Brothers's and Southcott's understanding of the term “prophet”, and subsequent analysis both of this term and the interpretation of Revelation by other contemporary prophetic interpreters, rectifies this current shortcoming in scholarship.

1.3. Brothers, Southcott and Blake in Scholarship

In addition to comparative studies surveyed above, researchers have also shown an interest in Brothers, Southcott and Blake as objects of inquiry in their own right. This is particularly true for Blake, whose acceptance as a major figure both in literary and art history has ensured an intimidating body of secondary literature has been devoted to studying his works. Only comparatively recently have Brothers and Southcott been the subject of serious scholarly attention. In this section I wish to give an overview of the scholarship that exists on these three figures, especially paying attention to the ways in

which this study's attention to their interpretation of Revelation can contribute to existing scholarly conversations.

1.3.1. Richard Brothers

Early studies of Brothers's life tended to be biographical works.¹⁵¹ Roth's book, based “upon contemporary pamphlets and engravings” is unapologetically unreferenced: the reader is “humbly begged to trust, for once, in the author's veracity.”¹⁵² Matthew's biographical account is presented alongside five other “messianic pretenders” (Southcott included) in a bid to attempt to pathologise the mental illnesses and childhood developmental problems which led to Brothers's scandalising claims.¹⁵³ Balleine's interest in Brothers is as a prophetic forerunner of Southcott.¹⁵⁴ Whilst such accounts have provided later scholars with a useful biographical framework for Brothers's life, they devote little space to his biblical interpretation.

Subsequent treatments of Brothers's career by Harrison and Garrett have been more ambitious in scope. Garrett's work is helpful for clarifying Brothers's relationship to extant religious movements such as the Avignon Society – a mystical sect that two of Brothers's followers (William Bryan and John Wright) visited in 1789.¹⁵⁵ He also contextualises Brothers's claims about the restoration of Jerusalem amidst a wider culture of philosemitism in early modern English culture, and the similar seventeenth-century prophetic claimants John Robins and Thomas Tany.¹⁵⁶ Garrett ultimately argues that

¹⁵¹ For details of the now-lost memoir of Brothers's life written by his publisher George Ribeau which formed a major source both for the *Dictionary of National Biography* entry written by Alexander Gordon and a subsequent “experimental” biography see Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 3-4.

¹⁵² Roth, *Nephew*, 111.

¹⁵³ See Matthews, *English Messiahs*, 85-126, 197-225.

¹⁵⁴ Balleine, *Past Finding Out*, 27-36.

¹⁵⁵ Garrett, for instance, problematises the notion that Brothers's writings contain evidence of the existence of a London outpost of the society, and that Brothers himself may have visited the group *contra* Balleine, *Past Finding Out*, 28. See Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 179, 186-7.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

Revealed Knowledge, “represented traditions long present in English popular religion.” Harrison reaches similar conclusions, arguing Brothers's engagement with the Bible was limited to “the usual millennial mixture from the scriptures”.¹⁵⁷ Such judgements, seeing Brothers as an essentially unremarkable biblical commentator of his times, obscure the evidence presented by Brothers's written corpus. His interpretation of Revelation shows that he is inspired by the Bible in a number of different ways. Whilst his readings may have parallels in the period's wider intellectual culture, his interpretation of key biblical texts are a vital component to understanding his representation of his prophetic mission.

Brothers's incarceration has provided fertile ground for scholars examining the political and legal implications of religious enthusiasm in the charged political atmosphere of the 1790s. Barrell devotes considerable space to Brothers's *Revealed Knowledge*, and the events surrounding his arrest, in his study on imagined regicide.¹⁵⁸ Barrell's investigation is an useful resource for unpacking the wider political implications and the print responses surrounding Brothers's arrest. Yet due to the nature of his enquiry, Barrell's engagement with Brothers's biblical interpretation is descriptive rather than analytical. He acknowledges that Brothers “issued a series of warnings that the events in the war with France were signs of the fulfilment of the prophecies in the Apocalypse and the Book of Daniel” and that his interpretation was driven by his sense of having received unique prophetic revelation.¹⁵⁹ Barrell offers, however, no further reflection upon how Brothers's communications affect his attitude towards the biblical text, or how we may unpack the relationship between prophetic inspiration and scriptural interpretation.

To date, the most substantial scholarly treatment of Brothers's life is Madden's monograph.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 189-90. Harrison, *Second Coming*, 61.

¹⁵⁸ See John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 504-47.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 505-8.

Madden's book is more sensitive than any previous study to the Bible's influence on Brothers's thought. She emphasises that “For Brothers everything begins with the Book... His prophecies and declarations were founded upon Scripture and returned, always, to the Bible.”¹⁶⁰ Additionally, substantial sections of her monograph compare Brothers's thought with that of Blake and Southcott. Madden carefully charts how one of the areas of conflict between Brothers and Southcott centred upon the issue of biblical interpretation – specifically upon their differing expositions of Genesis 3:13-15 and the extent to which the text was open to allegorical interpretation.¹⁶¹ Her work demonstrates how close attention to the nuances in Southcott and Brothers's readings of Genesis 3 sheds light not only upon their individual interpretative stances, but also on difficulties within the text itself.¹⁶² Madden identifies the identity of the “woman clothed with the sun” as a further source of controversy between the two rival prophetic claimants. She also touches on Brothers's and Blake's shared interest in the biblical motif of New Jerusalem and argues that Brothers “represents a type or shadow of what would catch fire from the prophetic tradition in Blake's imaginative works”.¹⁶³

Madden's study of Brothers comprehensively considers the context of Brothers' biblical interpretation as a key part of her investigation. In particular, she charts how in Brothers early work, Brothers's view of London is mapped on to the depiction of Sodom and Babylon in Revelation 11 and 17-18.¹⁶⁴ She notes further that a key aspect of Brothers's reading of the Bible, and especially prophetic texts such as Revelation and Daniel, fits into a tradition of nonconformist interpretation which was oriented towards discerning “God's

¹⁶⁰ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 87.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 253-6.

¹⁶² “In almost every respect the collision between Brothers and Southcott revolved around competing prophetic narratives with mutually incompatible agendas that were highly gendered.” Madden explains that their competing claims stemmed particularly from a conviction that they were able to offer authoritative expositions of scripture. *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

story and Man's place within it."¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, her analysis of the effect of the Bible on Brothers's imagination emphasises the influence the book of Ezekiel has upon his mental construction of Jerusalem.¹⁶⁶ Madden has thus identified key tropes which delineate Brothers's engagement with biblical prophecy.

How can these insights be used within a study of prophetic biblical interpretation's contribution to the reception history of Revelation? The aim of this thesis is to examine Brothers's reading of Revelation, to unearth the interpretative moves made by Brothers in his engagement with the text, and his attempts to reconcile the book to his own prophetic vision. Madden's study of Brothers pioneers a way for us to explore the interplay of authority between text and interpreter, identified by Newport as a pivotal issue in biblical interpretation in modern religious movements (see 1.1). In addition to Brothers's attempted reconciliation of Revelation with Ezekiel, we can examine in detail ways in which Brothers pushes against traditional interpretations of symbolism within Revelation's visions, instead inscribing himself as both the subject and the authoritative interpreter of the Bible's final book. Paying attention to these issues gives an insight into how Revelation's relationship with other biblical texts, and its open-ended symbolism, are explored by prophetic interpreters.

This survey of the major extant studies of Brothers and his works shows how a detailed investigation into his engagement with Revelation will include Brothers as an important, yet overlooked, figure in the history of interpretation. Until recently, Brothers has primarily been seen either as an historical curiosity, or used to contextualise the political and religious sub-cultures of London of the 1790s. Madden's work allows us to take Brothers

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 66-7.

¹⁶⁶ See especially *ibid.*, 193, 201-2, 209, 212-4.

seriously as an interpreter of Revelation, and to continue to explore his relationship with the biblical text.

1.3.2. Joanna Southcott

Interest in Southcott, and the prophetic movements her career inspired, has increased markedly in recent decades. Before 1960, her life was chronicled in the monographs by Balleine and Matthews discussed above. Yet perhaps due to the various groups and figures – such as the Wroeites of Ashton-Under-Lyme, John “Zion” Ward, and James Jershom Jezreel – who continued to consult Southcott's prophecies after her death, her career has retained a greater cultural relevance in the history of modern British Christianity.¹⁶⁷ The Panacea Society in Bedford, founded by Mabel “Octavia” Bartrop in 1919 helped keep Southcott's prophecies in public consciousness, publicly urging the bishops of the Church of England to open a sealed box containing her prophecies.¹⁶⁸

Harrison produced the first modern biographical treatment of Southcott's life, drawing on anecdotes provided in her published books to reconstruct her early life in Devon, and the onset of her visitation in 1792. Harrison's account contextualises Southcott's ministry against the background of the region's rich folk culture.¹⁶⁹ Yet whilst he begins to unpack the centrality of typological interpretation in Southcott's thought, he never fully engages with how she interprets the Bible in her writings. Instead, Harrison's analysis ends with an attempt to pathologise Southcott's prophetic career, arguing her writings betray an

¹⁶⁷ For accounts of the three prophets and their followings mentioned above see Philip Lockley, “Millenarians in the Pennines, 1800-1830: Building and Believing Jerusalem”, *Northern History* 47:2 (2010), 297-317; Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, 150-74; Philip George Rogers, *The Sixth Trumpeter: The Story of Jezreel and his Tower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963). For an account of the afterlives of the sectarian organisations that made up the Southcottian movement after Southcott's death see Lockley, *Visionary Religion*.

¹⁶⁸ See further Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: the Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011); Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott's Box of Sealed Prophecies* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2003).

¹⁶⁹ Harrison, *Second Coming*, 99-102, 104-5.

“abnormal” attitude towards sex, and that her “theological feminism” was a product of her “paranoia”.¹⁷⁰

Hopkins's monograph on Southcott reaches similar conclusions. Hopkins aimed “to place Joanna Southcott and her followers in a meaningful social and intellectual setting” and show how her movement served “as a mediating influence on the radical dreams of English men and women” during her lifetime.¹⁷¹ Yet his treatment of Southcott's life frequently resorts to psycho-sexual pathologising, emphasising her repressed eroticism and “neurotic sensibilities” as central to the development of her prophetic identity.¹⁷² Despite the comparison Hopkins draws between Southcott and Wollstonecraft, as contemporary writers committed “to pushing against the restricted opportunities available to women”, his analysis consistently upholds the patriarchal psychoanalytic discourse of “repressed sexuality” in his account of Southcott's life.¹⁷³ Not only is this a tendentious reading of the available evidence, it means that Hopkins, particularly in his treatment of Southcott's pregnancy, does not reflect adequately on how her identification with the “woman” of Revelation 12 shapes her view of key life events. Biblical interpretation is a constant topic of discussion in her works, and Hopkins's failure to unpack her approach to reading scripture is an important omission from the picture of her career he constructs.

In recent years there has been growing interest in exploring Southcott's interpretation of biblical texts, as compared with biographical accounts and/or studies of the social composition of her following. Tremlett sees Southcott and her followers contesting the dominant patriarchal hermenutic of the contemporary Anglican church.¹⁷⁴ His work,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 108-9.

¹⁷¹ Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People*, xx.

¹⁷² Ibid., 12-20 *passim*. See also 207: “The Spirit, whose very existence was due to these unacknowledged and unexpressed desires...”

¹⁷³ So Juster, *Doomsayers*, 246.

¹⁷⁴ Paul-François Tremlett, “Utopia as Praxis: the case of Joanna Southcott and the Panacea Society”,

however, does not attempt to expound the contours of Southcott's interpretation of scripture, only noting that the praxis of the sect constituted an enactment of Revelation that provided an alternative to the Church's appropriation of the text. Furthermore, as 4.3.1 expounds, there are impediments to Tremlett's construction of Southcott as a proto-feminist challenging a male-dominated hermeneutical landscape.

For many researchers, Southcott's writings provide an insight into female participation in religious and political discourse in the long eighteenth century. Clarke has read Southcott's claim to embody biblical women such as Eve, Mary and the woman of Revelation 12 alongside other similar prophetic claimants, arguing that the “rich metaphorical language of Revelations and Genesis... allowed female prophets to justify their authority.”¹⁷⁵ She notes the tendency of prophets like Southcott and Sarah Flaxmer to invoke the enmity between the woman and the dragon to articulate their own prophetic vocations. Clarke's work thus gives us an insight into how Revelation was used by Southcott and her prophetic contemporaries in order to participate in the religious discourse of the capital. Yet it necessarily provides a limited picture of the resources Southcott found in Revelation and the wider biblical corpus. As demonstrated in chapter 4, Southcott also draws directly upon Revelation's accounts of visionary experiences (e.g. the vision of the descent of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21) to equate her own prophetic authority with those of the biblical prophets.

Allan's extensive work on Southcottianism goes some way towards sketching the key tenets of Southcott's reading of the Bible. He notes that Southcott's “well-developed theology, and an interpretation of the scriptural text” is often overlooked in scholarship.¹⁷⁶

Scottish Journal of Religious Studies 20:1 (1999), 89-102.

¹⁷⁵ Anna Clarke, “The Sexual Crisis and Popular Religion in London, 1770-1820”, *International Labour and Working Class History* 34 (1988), 59.

¹⁷⁶ Allan, “Southcottian Sects”, 218.

Biblical interpretation, in Allan's view, is integral to the development of Southcott's authority, and provides a means of “‘proving’ her claim to be a prophetic biblical figure.”¹⁷⁷ Allan identifies Genesis 3 and Revelation as the texts which are pivotal to understanding Southcott's biblical hermeneutic, and draws attention to Southcott's language of “types and shadows”, both with regard to events in her life, and in her appropriation of biblical texts.¹⁷⁸ Allan offers a useful précis of trends in Southcott's interpretation of scripture, and his work therefore points to a need for further studies of Southcott's writings, and her engagement with the texts at the heart of her constructed self-identity.¹⁷⁹

As part of Oxford's Prophecy Project, Allan's work contributes to a recent scholarly trend to take seriously the theological and hermeneutical trends encoded within the Southcottian's own writings. In a forthcoming volume, Matthew Niblett offers a systematisation of Southcott's theology and hermeneutic approaches. Whilst his focus is not specifically on Southcott's interpretation of Revelation, he usefully sketches out dominant themes in her hermeneutical approach (in particular the importance of typology) and helpfully points out other contemporary readings of the Bible that she reacts to and argues against in her writings.¹⁸⁰ This thesis thus builds on the emic methodological approach championed by these members of the Prophecy Project and asks: how does Southcott incorporate the Bible, and Revelation, into her written texts? What is the relationship between her identity as a “prophet,” and the interpretation of “prophecy” in the Bible's climactic book? Paying attention to these questions, I argue, allows us to unpack and clarify Southcott's theological views: in order to do this we must engage in a sustained manner with what she herself said about the text which informs her identity – Revelation.

¹⁷⁷ Allan, “Joanna Southcott”, 637.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 640-1; “Southcottian Sects”, 218-9.

¹⁷⁹ Rowland's short article on Southcott's reading of the Bible sets out key passages (Genesis 3 and Revelation 12) as key areas of concern but is unable to expand further on Southcott's interpretative approach. Rowland, “Southcott, Joanna”, 460-462.

¹⁸⁰ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation*.

1.3.3. William Blake

Since Blake's "discovery" in the nineteenth century (especially catalysed by Alexander Gilchrist's 1863 biography), Blake's poetry and art have garnered a considerable amount of critical attention.¹⁸¹ In addition, as indicated in section 1.2., the religious subjects Blake treats in these mediums have often prompted speculation about Blake's own theological background. Giving an account of the extant critical scholarship on Blake could itself fill a volume. As a result, in this section I intend to delineate only the major trends in Blake studies, focussing particularly on works that engage with Blake's biblical interpretation. I will assert that a close study of Revelation's reception in Blake's works will both enhance our understanding of Blake's hermeneutical methods, and clarify the role that the book plays in the construction of his poetic mythology.

The Bible's importance in Blake's thought has long been recognised. Northrop Frye saw *Jerusalem* as a "recreation of the Bible... We are expected to make every dry bone in the Bible live".¹⁸² Frye's work went some way towards capturing the imaginative hold that Revelation had over Blake's art. Frye argues that Blake's work insists upon adopting the same revelatory framework that Revelation provides in the Bible: "if all art is visionary, it must be apocalyptic and revelatory too: the artist does not wait to die before he lives in the spiritual world into which John was caught up."¹⁸³ For Frye, Blake's art is a visionary appropriation of the Bible's narrative, beginning with creation and proceeding through "to the final blinding flash of revelation, the vision of the completed City of God and the

¹⁸¹ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 2nd ed. (1880; repr., London: J.M. Dent, 1942). For more on Blake's reception in the nineteenth century see Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century: his Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969).

¹⁸² Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 360.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 45.

disappearance of nature.”¹⁸⁴ In turn, Blake's poems, ending with the grand flourish of *Jerusalem*, were an attempt to create his own canon, his own “poetic testament” as Frye terms it.¹⁸⁵ This explains both Blake's interest in the Bible, and the ways he invites his readers to reconfigure their readings in terms of imaginative engagement, rather than the rationalistic dissection prevalent in the rationalist and deist traditions of his day. Yet can we go further? Frei accepts that Blake's own poetic “canon” is not merely a restatement of the biblical canon.¹⁸⁶ Given this, where does Blake diverge from scripture's vision of history? What relationship do the two corpora have to one another? We can examine how Blake's engagement with Revelation subverts and resists the eschatological vision of John of Patmos. This will be most clearly demonstrated in the detailed study of Blake's treatment of the vision of New Jerusalem in chapter 5.

Scholars such as Erdman have attempted to ground Blake's mythological art – and his appropriation of the Bible – firmly in the historical events of his day. Complementing attempts to see Blake as part of aesthetic, philosophical and religious discourses alongside historical figures and traditions such as neo-Platonism, Jacob Boehme and Emanuel Swedenborg, the “historical Blake” scholarly tradition emphasises Blake as an inhabitant and commentator on eighteenth-century England. Thus Erdman's commentary on Blake's corpus depicts him as a “Prophet against Empire”, and decodes his dense and cryptic imagery in line with contemporary historical events, arguing that previous biographies (especially Gilchrist's) suffer as much from “a failure to enter imaginatively into Blake's times as... from a failure to enter Blake's imagination.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 404.

¹⁸⁶ “even essential sources such as the Bible and Milton are of value only as sources of analogues.” Ibid., 12.

¹⁸⁷ David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* 3rd ed., (1977 repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 5.

Mee, in his own attempt to situate Blake within the radical culture of London in the 1790s argued that Erdman's approach of linking Blake's language to contemporary historical events misses the political critique inherent in the *forms* of Blake's poetic works. Texts such as *The Book of Urizen*, Mee argues, are a poetic engagement with contemporary radical debates surrounding biblical interpretation. *The Book of Urizen*, which does not contain "explicit historical or political references", is therefore not a retreat from a political debate, but in fact reflects contemporary controversies surrounding the Bible's authority which, in the 1790's repressive culture, had distinct political ramifications.¹⁸⁸ Paying attention, therefore, to how Blake's writings relate to contemporary popular culture and how he uses the biblical text become vital subjects of inquiry in order to appreciate the extent of Blake's political critique. Mee pays particular attention to Blake's and Brothers' attitude to the Bible's authority, pointing out that where Brothers upholds the authority of the biblical text, Blake "sought in his work of the early 1790s to actively disrupt and not merely reinterpret and supplement scriptural authority."¹⁸⁹ This thesis has, at the same time, a wider and a narrower scope than Mee's work. Mee limits his analysis to the 1790s and studies how Blake's works engage with broader contemporary debates about the normative authority of the biblical text in society. By contrast, this thesis explores how Blake specifically treats the book of Revelation throughout his prophetic corpus. Looking closely at his treatment of this text, we can see how Blake uses the eschatology of Revelation to problematise the prophetic office and the capacity for humanity to bring about redemption.

Mee's work stands alongside other attempts to contextualise Blake against a wider radical religious culture, including comparisons with Brothers's and Southcott's works. In keeping with his earlier comparative project, Paley's reads the city of Golgonooza in Blake's later

¹⁸⁸ Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1-2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

works against contemporary trends in the interpretation of texts such as Ezekiel 40-48 and Revelation 21, but does not interrogate in detail Blake's direct engagement with these biblical visions.¹⁹⁰ Morton suggests that Blake's appropriation of Revelation 14:6's reference to "the Everlasting Gospel" betrays his link to Joachite tradition.¹⁹¹ This claim is refuted by Rix, who argues that Blake's appropriation of biblical language is best viewed against the influence of Swedenborgian ideas in the capital.¹⁹² Attempts have also been made in recent scholarship to clarify the relationship of Blake's ideas to those articulated within Methodist and Moravian churches.¹⁹³ In addition, Cho and Worrall have looked at the works of Dorothy Gott, a contemporary prophet to Blake who attended the same Swedenborgian conference in 1789, as a means of identifying possible origins of Blake's "prophetic mode".¹⁹⁴ Such works rightly underscore the importance of contextualising Blake within the diverse religious cultures of late eighteenth-century London. This thesis is conducted in sympathy with such a task, but wishes to supplement this endeavour by tracing out specifically how Blake engages with Revelation, which occupied a prominent place in such traditions and cultures.

The work of Susanne Sklar is particularly relevant to the aims of this study. A member of the Prophecy Project in Oxford, Sklar's commentary on Blake's *Jerusalem* reads the poem as "visionary theatre". Sklar's reading is sensitive to the many "theatrical effects" inherent in the poem, including monologues, shifts in location, and songs.¹⁹⁵ She argues that this heuristic device – one which encourages the reader to engage imaginatively with texts, and

¹⁹⁰ Morton D. Paley, *The Continuing City: Blake's Jerusalem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

¹⁹¹ A.L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: a Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1958).

¹⁹² Robert Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2009).

¹⁹³ Michael J. Farrell, "Blake and the Methodists" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2010); Keri Davies, "The Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family: Snapshots from the Archive", *Literature Compass* 3:6 (2006), 1297-1319; Elisabeth Maria Engell Jessen, "Conversion as a Narrative, Visual, and Stylistic Mode in William Blake's Works" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2012).

¹⁹⁴ Nancy Jiwon Cho and David Worrall, "William Blake's Meeting with Dorothy Gott: The Female Origins of Blake's Prophetic Mode", *Romanticism* 6:1 (2010), 60-71. Gott's ideas are discussed further in 2.2.3.

¹⁹⁵ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 1-3

to read its action at once sequentially and synchronically – is also inherent in early modern readings of Revelation. Sklar suggests that Blake may have been inspired by texts such as Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* and David Paraeus's *Commentary Upon the Divine Revelation*, which respectively encouraged readers to look at Revelation holistically, “as if it were a dramatic collage” and as a theatrical series of visions.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, Sklar reads *Jerusalem* with sensitivity to Blake's interest in divergent religious discourses and influences. In particular, she charts affinities between Jerusalem's protagonist and Southcott's embodiment of “the Woman clothed with the sun”.¹⁹⁷ She also detects veiled criticism of Brothers and Southcott's tendency to find themselves inscribed in the biblical text.¹⁹⁸ Sklar's work is thus an important conversation partner for this thesis. Her commentary of *Jerusalem* demonstrates how Blake's work could be inspired by his interest in Revelation, and she marks out how Blake's thought stands alongside other contemporary visionary receptions of the text. Sklar has contributed to an important turn to religion in the interpretation of Blake's art. It is my aim in chapter 5 of this thesis to draw upon Sklar's insights, and to look at how Blake incorporates themes and symbols from Revelation throughout his poetic works.

Two additional works have underscored the importance of biblical interpretation in understanding Blake's often cryptic writing. Tannenbaum's study of Blake's “Lambeth Books”¹⁹⁹ illuminates Blake's debt to biblical tradition, but he narrows his focus to explore Blake's shaping of biblical traditions within a small chronological selection of Blake's works. Tannenbaum usefully contextualises Blake against shifting norms of biblical interpretation but his study does not explore a comparison with grass-roots religious

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 20-3.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 75-83.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 236

¹⁹⁹ Defined by Tannenbaum as *America: A Prophecy*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, *The Song of Los*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*. Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition*, 7.

movements, spearheaded by figures like Brothers and Southcott. Tannenbaum emphasises the effects that figures such as Jacob Boehme, Tom Paine, the Wesley brothers and mythologists such as Jacob Bryant had on late eighteenth-century biblical interpretation.²⁰⁰ Whilst acknowledging the difficulty in charting a complete survey of biblical hermeneutical activity in the eighteenth century, Tannenbaum's relative lack of attention to "sectarian" movements and their interpretative norms leaves open further room for exploration.²⁰¹

Rowland's work emphasises more than Tannenbaum the continuity of Blake's attitude to the Bible throughout his lifetime, and his study thus has a much broader chronological scope. He uses Blake's *Illustrations for the Book of Job* (1826) to highlight distinctive features of Blake's hermeneutic, including an emphasis upon the redemptive power of vision. Rowland more effectively opens up the possibility of comparison between Blake, Brothers and Southcott in his work, describing them as "prophets" who were "Blake's exact contemporaries".²⁰² It is important to note, however, that his interest in Brothers and Southcott is – like Paley before him – primarily in contextualising Blake's work, rather than fully drawing out their approaches to the interpretation of the Bible. The possibility for a more even-handed comparison of their readings of the Bible remains open. Furthermore, as chapter 5 demonstrates, Rowland's reading of Blake's reception of Revelation could be enriched by a more detailed consideration of how Blake appropriates, yet also creatively dissents from, Revelation's eschatology. Once again, attention to this text, an important scriptural touchstone for all three authors at the heart of this thesis, provides a useful heuristic lens to focus this comparison.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 8-24.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 16-7.

²⁰² Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 122-6

Finally, three studies of Blake show how eschatology has dominated scholarly discussion of Blake's reading of Revelation and other prophetic texts. In his study of the relationship between "apocalypse and millennium" in Romantic poetry, Paley discusses Blake's treatment of the eschatological transition that he sees as pivotal to the biblical hope: an apocalypse which "characteristically brings the reader to the end of time" and a "period of life in a regenerate society, known as the millennium".²⁰³ Similarly, Damrosch probes logical inconsistencies in Blake's theories of perception and about God. He points to Blake's difficulties in reconciling a commitment to a dualist world view with the insights of monism, which prevents him from ever achieving a definitive "apocalyptic" resolution to his narrative.²⁰⁴ Finally, Goldsmith highlights Blake's dissent from Revelation's authoritative and destructive eschatological resolution and attributes this to Blake's political standpoint. He argues that Blake's concern to protect the imaginative freedom of the reader means he must present an alternative to the type of ahistorical, infallible perspective shown by prophetic texts such as Revelation 22:18-19.²⁰⁵

All these readings of Blake's poetry rest upon an understanding of apocalyptic which is tied too closely to eschatology. Blake's works may offer an alternative resolution to Revelation, but as Rowland has argued, other interests in apocalyptic texts that pertain to the author's present situation and the experience of being privy to revelatory experiences should not be eclipsed by future hopes.²⁰⁶ This is an important facet of Revelation's reception history, where a study of Blake's use of the text can shed helpful light. Furthermore, none of these studies offer a detailed examination of Blake's treatment and use of Revelation 21-22. This

²⁰³ Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 2-3.

²⁰⁴ Leopold Damrosch Jr., *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 337 and *passim*.

²⁰⁵ Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 139.

²⁰⁶ Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 71.

thesis therefore augments the contributions of Paley, Damrosch and Goldsmith by looking closely at how Blake's dissent from the eschatological schema of Revelation affects his use of symbols and imagery drawn from this text.

1.4. Conclusion

The review of extant literature relevant to the aims of this thesis offered in this chapter suggests three ways in which an investigation of the interpretation of the book of Revelation in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's works adds meaningfully to the ongoing conversation within this academic sub-discipline. Firstly, as I have demonstrated, whilst Blake's works are discussed in Burdon's important study of Revelation's influence in the eighteenth century, voices of popular prophets like Brothers and Southcott are a notable omission from his study of the Bible's interpretative history. It is the contention of this thesis that their interpretations of Revelation, formulated contemporary to the development of modern principles of historical-critical biblical hermeneutics, are a neglected and important topic in the history of exegesis. Their readings of Revelation, and the ways they draw upon the text to make sense of their own prophetic missions, are examples of an underexplored discourse within the history of the book's interpretation.

Secondly, a more focussed study of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's appropriation of Revelation allow us to challenge the appropriateness of conceptual frameworks such as "millenarianism," under which much academic study has hitherto proceeded. Specifically, paying attention to the many ways that the text influences their writings, beyond simply their interpretation of its eschatology, opens up discursive space to consider their identity as "prophets". How their conception and adoption of this identity affects their engagement with such an important, prior, prophetic text, forms a major subsidiary research question of

this thesis – one which has not received sufficient attention in extant scholarship.

Finally, I argue, the substantial work already carried out on the biographies, theology and historical and cultural contexts of these three writers can be augmented by a focussed consideration of their use of Revelation. The Bible is recognised as an important influence on their writings. This thesis advocates that we should interrogate this influence to greater depths: paying attention to their interpretation of a specific biblical book helps throw their theological and hermeneutical presuppositions into greater relief. In this way, biblical studies can engage with, and contribute to, research conducted in other disciplines, by exploring how these figures may contribute to the history of interpretation of the Bible's final book.

Chapter Two

Prophecy and the Book of Revelation in the Long Eighteenth Century

The principal aim of this chapter is to explore what it means to be a “prophet reading prophecy” in the long eighteenth century. I have argued that this study can contribute to a neglected area of Revelation's reception history: the role of readers who believe they are prophetic agents, and thus have a crucial role in actualising the text's visions, and fulfilling its promises. I suggested that one of the barriers to a sustained engagement with Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's interpretation of Revelation is the preponderance of the term “millenarianism” in comparative studies of the three's works. By contrast, the term “prophecy” provides a conceptual framework derived from their own self-understandings, which encourages us to explore how they engage with Revelation outside of their eschatological convictions. This chapter thus explores “prophecy” as a heuristic lens for the comparison their reception of Revelation.

To examine how Brothers, Southcott and Blake's reception of Revelation can contribute to our understanding of “prophetic” readings of the Bible, however, we need to ascertain the basis that the three can be understood to share the title of “prophet”. I therefore consider how their understandings of prophecy, and the prophet's function, overlap in their works. I draw upon their writings to construct a shared understanding of “prophecy” and argue that, for all three, there is a productive tension between interpreting biblical prophecy, and the creation of new prophetic texts.

In the introduction, I identified Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's shared interest in actualising Revelation's visions through their prophetic activities. Their attempts at bringing the text's promises to its fulfilment, and embodying key characters within

Revelation's visions, stand alongside other contemporary understandings of how the book could function as prophecy. To contextualise their readings we must therefore explore how Revelation was conceived to be a prophetic text during this particularly turbulent period in British and European history. Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings of Revelation, which invest in the text the capacity to unveil the true reality underlying contemporary events, coincides with a parallel interest in the book amongst commentators who did not consider themselves to be “prophetic” in the same way. How did other readers, like Joseph Priestley, S.T. Coleridge and James Bicheno, writing from a non-conformist standpoint, construe New Testament prophecy as providing the key to European late eighteenth-century political turmoil?

Revelation was also an important text for other eighteenth-century writers, who, like Brothers, Southcott and Blake, stressed the importance of visionary experience as a way in to understanding the text's meaning. The influential figures Emanuel Swedenborg and Jane Lead particularly stressed the need for visionary insight in order to exposit the text's promises accurately. We will explore how their visionary approaches to the interpretation of Revelation share common ground with Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's writings.

Finally, how was Revelation interpreted by authors who also claimed to share the same source of inspiration as the biblical prophets, and – in many cases – claimed to embody characters in the text? Brothers, Southcott and Blake share ideas about the prophet's interpretative insights with a number of contemporary prophetic writers. Additionally, in their invocation of passages such as Revelation 12, the symbol of “the bride”, and their interest in using Revelation to mark out their lifetimes as a pivotal historical moment, they share common ground with other prophetic readers. Brothers, Southcott and Blake thus

contributed to a counter-culture of prophetic interpretation within late eighteenth-century Britain, where the correct interpretation of New Testament prophecy formed a central concern.

Whilst Brothers, Southcott and Blake share common ground with one other, however, there are nonetheless clear differences between the types of prophetic texts they produce, especially insofar as prognostication is an important determining criteria for a prophet's success. One way to understand these differences, and to justify attaching the label "prophet" to Blake – primarily known as a poet and artist – is to explore how ideas about the poetic nature of biblical prophecy became prominent in radical discourses that Blake participated in. Exploring this confluence between the poet and prophet – popularised by the English translation of Robert Lowth's work in 1787 – also allows us to see how Brothers's and Southcott's own poetic writings problematise hard and fast boundaries between their conception of prophecy and Blake's.

This three-tier contextualisation of Brothers, Southcott and Blake has an important function within this thesis's overall argument. It is my contention that the Revelation influences prophetic readers in a number of different ways and not simply in the shaping of eschatological convictions. Their interpretation of the book should not simply be measured against the book's visions of cosmic and political upheaval, leading to a millennial peace on earth before culminating in the descent of the New Jerusalem. Rather, we should be sensitive to important claims which arise through their engagement with Revelation: the possibility of experiencing the "spirit of prophecy"; the extent to which John's visions and prophetic experiences are exclusive to the biblical prophets; and the tensions between commenting on earlier prophetic texts and creating new ones.

2.1. Blake, Brothers and Southcott: “the Spirit of Prophecy” and the Role of the Prophet

The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.²⁰⁷

In one of his earliest illuminated books – first printed c.1788 – Blake echoes a pronouncement made by an angel to John of Patmos in Revelation 19:10: “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The complexities of the Greek construction of this phrase notwithstanding, the King James Version's rendering of the verse leaves open the interpretative possibility that the voice of prophecy lives on through Christian declarations of faith.²⁰⁸ Later in the text, the implications for John as one who recorded “the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2) are explained to him by one of the seven angels of Revelation 15-16: John is a “fellowservant” of the angels, “and of thy brethren the prophets” (22:9). John's accession to the status of the prophetic brethren stands as an implicit challenge to contemporary claims that the age of prophecy had ceased. Blake's appropriation of this phrase offers a still further challenge: the claim to prophecy is not tied to one specific religious tradition, but stands as the basis of all religious experience in every nation and age. It is also synonymous with the “poetic genius”, an important witness to the increasing congruence between the office of “poet” and “prophet” in eighteenth-century European thought.

We find similar declarations in Brothers's and Southcott's writings which speak to the

²⁰⁷ William Blake, *All Religions are One*, E1.

²⁰⁸ The interpretation of this verse is complicated by the debate over whether the genitives are to be translated as objective or subjective constructions. If they are objective, then the sense of the verse is “the testimony that is borne *about* Jesus is the spirit of prophecy which Christians now bear”. If they are subjective, the sense would be “the testimony that Christ himself gave (e.g. about God) is the essence of prophetic utterance.” Commentators are divided upon this issue. See Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 486-7 for a survey of scholarly positions.

importance of “prophecy” in their theological outlook. Brothers repeatedly refers to himself as a prophet and directly cites Revelation 19:10 in *Revealed Knowledge* as part of an extended quotation from Revelation 19 which, “alludes to the present state of the world”.²⁰⁹ Southcott also, in addition to frequently underscoring and defending her prophetic status, draws upon Revelation 19:10 as a means of legitimating her claims. She writes “without the Spirit of Prophecy, how can the testimony of Jesus come?”²¹⁰ Thus “prophecy” is an important conceptual framework for Blake, Brothers and Southcott in the formulation of their works, and Revelation's implicit endorsement of prophecy in Christian experience looms large within their understanding. To be sure, the meanings they construct for these words have important differences. Yet despite this, all three seize upon the title of “prophet” as a means of understanding their activities. What do they mean by this term and is there any overlap in how they present the function of the prophetic office?

Blake, in contrast to Brothers and Southcott, offers in his writings a number of attempts to define “prophecy”, commencing with the introduction of the “Spirit of Prophecy” or “Poetic Genius”, of which the Bible is “an original derivation.” The experience of the prophetic spirit, for Blake, is one which is primal and universal: “As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various) So all the Religions & as all similars have one source”.²¹¹ One of Blake's central hopes is that all may come to recognise this prophetic experience; this is the force of his citation of Numbers 11:29 at the conclusion of the lyric preface to *Milton: A Poem* “Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets”.²¹² Thus for Blake, prophetic insight is not one which is necessarily limited to select individuals: prophecy is a tool which ideally is to be exercised by everybody. This implicitly problematises certain features of biblical prophetic texts, such as claims of being “set apart” or specially “called”

²⁰⁹ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:9.

²¹⁰ Southcott, *Sound an Alarm in my Holy Mountain* (Leeds, 1804), 1-2.

²¹¹ William Blake, *All Religions are One*, E2.

²¹² *Milton: A Poem*, E96.

to prophesy (as in Jeremiah 1:5 and Amos 7:15).

Blake's 1798 marginalia sets out more clearly his conception of the prophet's role and activity. Annotating *An Apology for the Bible* – a riposte to Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason* by an Anglican bishop – Blake writes:

Every honest man is a Prophet he utters his opinion both of private & public matters/Thus/If you go on So/the result is So/He never says such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer not an Arbitrary Dictator.²¹³

For Blake, a prophet is not an infallible prognosticator; the prophet's insight pertains to the present. Blake sets this definition in contrast to contemporary understandings of the term, singling out Jonah as the exception that proves his rule:

Prophets in the modern sense of the word have never existed Jonah was no prophet in the modern sense for his prophecy of Nineveh failed²¹⁴

Blake's critique here mirrors Paine's critique of the modern concept of prophecy being imputed onto the Hebrew prophets in the second part of *The Age of Reason* (1795). Paine also complained about the application of the idea of prognostication to the Hebrew prophets, a connection he claimed was bolstered by Christian interpretation:

It became necessary to the inventors of the Gospel to give it this latitude of meaning, in order to apply or to stretch what they call the prophecies of the Old Testament to the times of the New; but according to the Old Testament, the prophesying of the seer... had reference only to things of the time then passing, or very closely connected with it...²¹⁵

Blake and Paine are thus united in their conviction that prognostication is not an essential feature of the prophecy. The prophet is not a predictor of the future: they are a social commentator and critic, highlighting causes and consequences of individual and collective human activity which otherwise may remain occluded.²¹⁶

²¹³ *Annotations to "An Apology for the Bible"*, E617

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Thomas Paine, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Phoner (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), 561

²¹⁶ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 127 articulates this distinction in the conception of prophecy as the difference between prophecy as "fore-telling" and "forth-telling".

Blake's definition of prophecy manifests itself in his own works, especially those he explicitly titled "Prophecies": the poems *America* and *Europe* written in 1793 and 1794 respectively. These texts, written after the events they describe took place, do not seek to predict the future of the American and French revolutionary states. Rather, they narrate what Blake sees as the fundamental energy behind these events: the spirit of revolution symbolised by the serpentine Orc.²¹⁷ At their heart, they are mythological representations of the political possibilities of revolutionary ideology: the possibility of turning back the tyranny of Albion (*America*) or the repetition of the errors of terror and repression (*Europe*).

A further insight into how Blake conceived himself as fulfilling a prophetic role through his art comes through his strong identification with the character Los. From his first introduction into Blake's mythology, Los is identified as "the Eternal Prophet", in conflict with the rationalistic Urizen.²¹⁸ Los, throughout Blake's poetic corpus, is depicted as a blacksmith. Through this metaphor, Blake links the activity of the prophet with industry, creativity and manufacturing: the prophet must comment *and* create. As with many aspects of Blake's exploration of humanity's fallen psychological state,²¹⁹ Los's labours can have negative as well as positive effects. In Blake's last major poetic work, *Jerusalem*, Los's furnaces allow him to create the redemptive city Golgonooza in London; in *The Book of Urizen* Los forges a chain which he uses to restrain the infantile Orc.²²⁰ For Blake, therefore, the prophet is not necessarily in a privileged moral position: he or she is as prone to error as any other individual.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 136.

²¹⁸ *The Book of Urizen* 10:7, E75; 13:35, 40, E77; *The Song of Los* 3:1, E67.

²¹⁹ Los' introduction in *The Book of Urizen* emphasises that Urizen had been "rent from his side" (6:4, E74).

²²⁰ *Jerusalem* plate 10, E152-4; *The Book of Urizen* 20:23-4 (E80).

Blake's identification with Los is a trend which becomes strengthened throughout his writings. In *Milton*, Blake himself appears as a character, and becomes united with Milton who descends from "Eternity" to "Earth".²²¹ This episode with Blake's mythologised poetic predecessor foreshadows an eventual union with his archetypal poet-prophet Los. Upon kissing Blake, Los becomes united with the author:

And I became One Man with him arising in my strength:
Twas too late to recede. Los had enterd into my soul:
His terrors now posses'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength.²²²

As Paley observes, this poetic union with Los is prefigured in an 1802 letter to Thomas Butts, in which Blake recounts a visionary experience where Los appeared, "flam'd in my path", resulting in Blake experiencing "fourfold vision".²²³ Whilst we ought to guard against reading "Los" simply as Blake's mythological *alter ego*,²²⁴ it is nonetheless clear that, through Los, Blake crafts an archetypal "eternal Prophet" who shares his interests and concerns.²²⁵ In doing so, Blake forges an implicit link between himself and John of Patmos. At the climax of John's vision he is shown the descent of the New Jerusalem out of heaven, a vision which Los also sees in *Jerusalem*.²²⁶

²²¹ *Milton* 15:49, E110.

²²² *Milton* 22:12-4, E117. In his illustrations, Blake may well have given this union sexual connotations. In copies A and B of the poem, Blake inserted an illustration of this scene (plate 21). It depicts him kneeling before Los in a posture which implies, but does not fully illustrate, oral sexual contact. In later copies (C and D), the plate is moved to plates 43 and 47 respectively. Hobson suggests the illustration demonstrates a wider tendency in Blake's illustrations to depict male homosexual acts as furthering "an accession of prophetic power and mission, contrary to the teachings of antisexual religion". See further Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 130-43.

²²³ E722; Morton D. Paley, *Energy and the Imagination: The Development of Blake's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 142, 245.

²²⁴ As Foster Damon does in *Jerusalem*, despite acknowledging that Blake does at one point watch Los at work (15:21, E159). S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1965), 251. For Blake's letter (22 November 1802), see E720-722.

²²⁵ It is perhaps not coincidental that *Milton* was mostly written as Blake's occasionally troubled sojourn in Felpham, Surrey, was coming to an end. At the end of the poem, Blake describes himself as waking from his journey into Los's world in Felpham. He depicts Los and his female emanation Enitharmon rising "over the Hills of Surrey", their clouds rolling over London, as Los grows angry at the cry of "the Poor Man" in London (42:31-5, E144). We can perhaps see Blake and Catherine's return to London represented here.

²²⁶ *Jerusalem* 86:1-21, E244-5. So also Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 63.

For Blake, prophecy entails social commentary, industry and creativity. It is an activity which can connect the prophet to the imaginative faculty, which is the very essence of his or her own being. Experience of this “Poetic Genius” allows the prophet to derive the same kinds of “Imaginations & Visions” with which “The Whole Bible is filld”.²²⁷ For Blake, the resultant fruits of prophecy in any age can have salvific significance: note in *Milton* the seven-fold repetition of “Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation”.²²⁸ The Bible records past prophetic imaginative openings of vision, thus in Blake's visionary conversation with Isaiah the prophet describes his call (Isaiah 6):

my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and I was then perswaded...that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God²²⁹

The prophets assumed this title through having their senses rejuvenated and experiencing new powers of vision, and articulating their perception of the world around them.

Brothers's adoption of the mantle of “prophet” is made far more explicitly and is a much more privileged title than in Blake's works. The title page of the first volume of *Revealed Knowledge* describes him as a “Revealed Prince and Prophet” to the “Hebrews”. The title also describes his text as written “under the direction of the Lord God”, its contents as “Not Revealed to any other Person on Earth.” In the book, Brothers imparts in detail his conception of the office of the prophet. Firstly, he argues that the prophet is privy to special revelation from God: he describes how God commanded him to publish a calculation of the “true” age of the world “in a vision at night”.²³⁰ The language here strongly echoes the accounts of God's revelations to Zechariah and Daniel in “night visions” (Zechariah 1:8; Daniel 2:18; 7:2, 7, 13), as well as God speaking to Paul “in the night by a vision” (Acts 18:9). Additionally, Brothers explicitly connects his experience of prophecy with those of

²²⁷ *Annotations to Berkley's “Siris”*, E664.

²²⁸ *Milton*, 2:25, E96; 3:5, E96; 3:20, E98; 7:16, E100; 7:48, E101; 9:7, E102; 11:31, E105.

²²⁹ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 12, E38.

²³⁰ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:2

his biblical forebears. He claims

the Prophet Daniel, and St. John, the Apostle, were instructed in the same manner to write what they have.²³¹

This “manner” of instruction includes “visions and revelations” in which the prophet is given privileged access to – and instruction from – God: modes of revelation that Brothers shares with the author of Revelation and his prophetic predecessors.

Secondly, Brothers declares that the main focus of such prophetic revelations is the interpretation of the Bible. He claims authority to proceed through scripture “uncovering, by Revealed Knowledge as I go, its sacred Records WHICH HAVE BEEN PRESERVED FOR ME”.²³² Brothers's prophetic office allows him to provide to his contemporary audience a clear and authoritative exposition of the ancient promises of the Bible: “what was written by Daniel at Babylon, EXPLAINED IN LONDON”.²³³

Whereas Blake's “prophet” shuns prognostication, the prophetic office for Brothers hinges upon a conviction that he can predict future events. The prophet is not only able to reveal information about the present and the past,²³⁴ but can confidently predict future social upheavals. Brothers predicts the outcomes of future conflicts: for example, he predicts an imminent declaration of war against England, and France's loss of all its West Indian territories.²³⁵ Most importantly, an inherent part of his prophecy centres upon the promise emblazoned on the first volume of *Revealed Knowledge*: that of “the restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem, by the year of 1798”. Brothers's conception of the prophetic office is one which is therefore modelled partly on the expectation of Deuteronomy 18:15: the

²³¹ Ibid, 1:35.

²³² Ibid., 2.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Part of Brothers's revelation, he claimed, concerned the history of his family: “It is fifteen hundred years since my family was separated from the Jews... the last on record in the Scripture is JAMES... *Told me by Revelation.*” Ibid., 34. See further Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 96.

²³⁵ *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:31.

promise that “the Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet... *like unto me*”.²³⁶ Just as Moses was a prophet privy to visions of his people's future, he was also the leader of God's chosen community. In seeing himself as the fulfilment of Moses's prophecy, Brothers adopts a prophetic model which requires him to lead God's people once again into deliverance. Such a prophet is not simply called upon to interpret the scriptures, to broadcast visions of future judgement and to articulate future hopes. He is also called “to order the Restoration of the Children of Israel in the latter days”: a prophet, yet also a prince.²³⁷ This trope of the prophet as a leader of a blessed community also emerges in Southcott's writings, and in the contemporary Buchanite and Shaker movements.

We may note two further important divergences from Blake's conception of “prophecy”. Firstly, Brothers insists the experience of prophecy is one which is limited to select individuals. Secondly, the use of the Bible by the two writers differs markedly. Brothers foregrounds and explicitly cites scriptural texts and offers comment and elucidation of points of perceived difficulty and significance: in short, he offers a commentary on the biblical text. Blake, on the other hand, uses the Bible allusively and rarely cites texts directly. Miner, commenting on the densely-woven allusions to the Bible in Blake's works, comments that “his borrowings distil, integrate, expand, and sometimes exquisitely exacerbate this poet's making of meaning (and counter meaning).”²³⁸ For Brothers, the prophet “unlocks” a hidden meaning contained within the text of the Bible. In a note discussing Southcott's writings, Rowland alludes to a potentially fruitful comparison with the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran which may help us articulate this point of difference between the three authors under discussion.²³⁹ The authors of the Habbakuk

²³⁶ Ibid., 71.

²³⁷ Ibid., 71. Brothers's self-designation of “Prince and Prophet” appears on the title pages of the respective volumes of *Revealed Knowledge*.

²³⁸ Miner, “Blake's Creative Scripture”, 33.

²³⁹ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 253.

pesher interpret 2:2 (“that he who reads may read it speedily”) as the Teacher of Righteousness receiving the means to interpret certain scriptural texts from God.²⁴⁰ Analogously, both Southcott and Brothers claim, in their writings, that they have been accorded a unique capacity to exposit the Bible. Blake makes no such claim. His method of “interpretation” is perhaps more akin to that of the author of Revelation, but without that author's prohibition on altering his works (22:18-9). Blake weaves the Bible's vocabulary and imagery into his own to generate new meanings. The reader is not led to a specific interpretation which accords with the author's: they are free to generate their own readings through following Blake's “golden strings” (*Jerusalem* 77, E231). In both cases, the language of scripture may be accessed to formulate a response to the present situation, but in the latter its meaning is not exhausted by its application to current events.

Southcott's awareness of herself as a “prophet” is evident from her earliest published writings. Like Brothers, the business of “prophecy” is partly tied up in prognostication: her acclaim as a prophet was in part dependent upon her ability to correctly predict the future. In her first published book, Southcott recalls her assistant describing to a sceptic that “I had told of these things when there was no appearance of them”.²⁴¹ Furthermore, Southcott's prophetic talents had an international focus: she reports that she was able to predict the fates of “Italy and England, in 1797”.²⁴²

Yet despite this apparent emphasis on an ability to accurately predict the future, the bulk of Southcott's early works are comprised of defences and explications of her role as prophet. Like Brothers and Blake, Southcott argues that her writings stand in continuity with the

²⁴⁰ “interpreted this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets.” IQpHab 7:4-6. Geza Vermes, ed., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 2004), 512.

²⁴¹ Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith, With Remarkable Prophecies (Made in 1792, etc) of Things Which Are to Come* (Exeter, 1801), part 1, 12.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 13

biblical prophets: “the same Spirit that indited my writings, inspired all the prophets throughout the Bible”.²⁴³ This conviction is strengthened by one early account of a visionary experience in which Southcott directly replicates the vision of the author of Revelation 21. As John of Patmos before her, Southcott's interpreting “spirit” states to her “thou wast on a high mountain, where John saw the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of God that hath visited thee.”²⁴⁴ The experience of prophetic inspiration thus manifests itself as a reiteration of visionary experiences of the biblical prophets: Southcott sees *as*, and in this case she sees *what*, they saw.

Southcott's ability to prophesy does not just allow her to stand in continuity with the prophets of scripture: it also has implications for the interpretation of their writings. Just as Brothers claimed that one of the primary subjects of his prophetic utterances was the true interpretation of the Bible, so Southcott claims “the mysteries of the Bible, with the future destinies of the nations have been revealed to me.”²⁴⁵ Similarly, both are concerned to demonstrate how they may legitimately be the chosen recipients for such revelations. Brothers emphasises how biblical prophets were chosen from a wide range of social backgrounds, ranging from the royal David and Solomon to Amos - “a poor Herdsman of Tekoa”: in this context Brothers' humble military background is no barrier to being granted prophetic insight.²⁴⁶ Southcott saw her prophetic visitation as the fulfilment of biblical predictions about the end days. Central to her self-identity from her earliest writings is the conviction that “the woman in the 12th chap. of Revelation is myself, the 19th and last”.²⁴⁷ Southcott defends the notion that saving knowledge will be mediated primarily through a female prophet. In a passage which conflates Acts 2:17f., Joel 2:27 and I Thessalonians

²⁴³ Ibid., 75.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁴⁶ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:iv-vi.

²⁴⁷ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, 42.

5:19f., she writes:

Quench not the Spirit; despise not prophecy; for the time is come, that your women shall prophesy, your young men shall dream dreams, your old men shall see visions; for the day of the Lord is at hand.²⁴⁸

Acts 2 and Joel 2 are central to Southcott's defence of her prophetic inspiration: they not only indicate that women *can* engage in prophecy, but – as a result of the emendation in Acts 2:17 to “in the last days” – that salvific revelations *must* be given to a woman.

In a passage of *The Strange Effects of Faith*, Southcott outlines the implications of her prophetic visitation:

now the spirit of prophesy (sic) is given to a woman... men will join with men, and women will join with women, in persecution... till the anger of the Lord be kindled to destroy them. So it will end like the days of Noah and Lot.²⁴⁹

Southcott's prophecies stand as a warning to the wider world: her words precipitate a future moment of cataclysmic judgement and those who heed her warnings will be saved from it. Furthermore, the insights she gained into the interpretation of the Bible had profound implications for the authority of her own writings. An unpublished manuscript prophecy from 1806, held by the Panacea Charitable Trust in Bedford, indicates that Southcott considered her writings to be an interpretative key to the Bible and that they could be visualised as a “second Bible”. Southcott records a command to bind and boil a Bible, before taking it out of the pot and noting the passages it opened at in a second Bible. This second Bible, she is told:

is thy Prophecies which all men will find is the word of God, like the Bible that is bound up and sealed up from man as it appeared in the Vision of thy Dream, but the way it will be fulfilled is told in thy Books.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 25. Southcott repeats the connection between Joel 2:27 and Revelation 12 in a letter she sent to parliament in 1802: arguing that her visitation “fulfils the Scripture. See the 2nd chap. of *Joel*, the 12th chap. Of the Revelations, the 19th and the last”. Southcott, “Letter of Joanna's to the House of Lords and Commons”, 29 May, 1802, PN104:23-9, Panacea Charitable Trust Bedford – Southcott Archive.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 64.

²⁵⁰ Southcott, “Communication given to Joanna Southcott: On Boiling the Bible”, April 3rd, 1806, PN114:216-7, Panacea Charitable Trust, Bedford - Southcott Archive. See also Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 124.

Southcott's books are thus like the Bible in their own right, in so far as they are both the product of the “word of God”, but her works also explain how the promises of the original biblical text will unfold. Southcott's prophetic convictions thus lead her not only to offer authoritative expositions of prior prophetic texts, but the resultant texts themselves come to have the same authoritative status: the prophetic interpreter is both the reader and creator of prophecy.

Towards the end of her life, Southcott announced that she had become pregnant with a messianic figure named Shiloh – an event which would fulfil the words of the King James Version of Genesis 49:10.²⁵¹ The book which she published to make this announcement, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews*, is replete with references to biblical texts which Southcott interprets as predicting her own pregnancy. Yet whilst her role in the eschatological drama may ostensibly have shifted to that of the deliverer of a new redeeming figure, she still uses the language of “prophet” to describe her role. The bestowal of prophecies on Southcott is linked to an inability on the part of “men” to interpret the Bible correctly: “if the Lord of Life would stoop so low, as to visit thee by prophecies, no more do men understand the scriptures”.²⁵²

The title of “prophet” and the activity of “prophecy” thus contribute to the identity of all three of the writers discussed in this thesis. Whilst there are clear differences in what they mean by this term (particularly insofar as it is connected with prognostication), there are four points of similarity in their conceptions of what a “prophet” does.

- 1) The act of prophecy, for all three writers, is *an act of interpretation*. The mantle of prophet gives all three authors a special insight into areas in which the true nature

²⁵¹ “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.”

²⁵² Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 51.

of things is otherwise obscured. This insight may centre upon contemporary or historical events, or the prophet may be an authoritative interpreter of texts. In any event, prophecy is a means by which the true meaning of things is revealed and communicated.

- 2) *Identification with prophetic forebears from the Bible* is an important part of how the three consider themselves to be prophets. For Blake, this manifests itself through his conviction that all prophets share the same source of inspiration: the “Spirit of Prophecy”.²⁵³ For Southcott and Brothers, their continuity with biblical prophets is ensured both by claiming they are the fulfilment of various prophesied figures and by sharing modes of revelation with their canonical predecessors. For all three, the mantle of “prophet” establishes a continuity of revelation and inspiration which extends back at least as far as the prophets recorded in scripture.
- 3) All three insist that *their writings carry a salvific significance*. Such saving words may not be the unique preserve of the writers themselves: Blake's repeated “Mark well my words” in *Milton* does not preclude others creating texts which inspire and lead to a rejuvenation of perception. Brothers and Southcott are more inclined to argue that their writings are uniquely privileged in containing information which can save their reader, allowing them to survive an impending cataclysmic judgement. Nevertheless, in all cases, their writings claim to create important insights for the reader to engage with.
- 4) Central to Blake's, Brothers's, and Southcott's experience of prophecy is *the potential for receiving visions*. These visions need not be Christocentric or Theocentric. Even as a child, Blake reported seeing angelic figures in trees,²⁵⁴ in his later writings, the act of prophecy is expressed as a visionary communion with the

²⁵³ Blake, *All Religions are One*, E1.

²⁵⁴ Bentley, *Blake Records*, 7.

archetypal “eternal prophet”. For Southcott and Brothers, communications in an auditory and visionary form with God (Brothers) or a divine intercessor (Southcott's “spirit”) are integral to their prophetic authority.

Acknowledging these similarities must not overshadow the very real differences between the three figures. Blake does not share the compulsion of Brothers or Southcott to “prove” his writings, because the “truth” of his claims is not to be found in an exclusive or extraordinary appeal to divine inspiration or in prognostication. We may contrast Southcott's continued invitation to “twelve Ministers” to authenticate the divine origin of her writings and Richard Brothers's claim that the “Testimony of Scriptural Evidence” seals the truth of his claims.²⁵⁵ Similarly, Blake's prophecies differ from those of Southcott and Brothers in form: the latter quote explicitly and extensively from scripture – Brothers in particular frequently offers detailed commentary of biblical texts in a manner which emulates the extant scholarly commentary tradition. Blake, on the other hand, rarely offers anything in the vein of sustained commentary on the biblical text and instead alludes to the text or draws upon it to highlight facets of a contemporary situation which can be elucidated through reference back to the Bible. For Southcott, an important aspect of her understanding of her experience of prophecy is that it provides the proof that she, just like many women in the Bible, has a vital role to play in the process of salvation. The resultant prophetic texts which the three writers produce thus take on very different forms, and engage with earlier scriptural texts in very different ways. This inevitably raises a question: despite their shared terminology are all three writers “prophets”? And if so, how can we use this term in a way which accounts for the similarities outlined above, whilst also incorporating their diverging idiosyncratic expressions of prophecy?

²⁵⁵ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, part 1, iv; Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:2.

Firstly, we may note along with Susan Juster that “‘Prophet’ was a fairly elastic term in the late eighteenth century, “a handy label to be applied liberally to a variety of exegetical practices.”²⁵⁶ It is a title which can be applied to those who experienced visions or dreams which in some way explained the world around them; to those who dabbled in folk-magic and simple prognostication; to those who explicated the mysteries of ancient languages and esoteric texts to offer insight. Juster's analysis of prophets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century highlights that – as prophets – Brothers, Southcott and Blake fit into a broad spectrum of praxis in their own time. Yet despite the considerable diversity of prophetic *practices* which Juster illuminates, key to her definition of eighteenth-century prophecy is the notion of “exegesis”. She sees prophets in this period as concerned with something akin to Frei's “Biblical narrative”: “the conceit that biblical references and current events form a single providential history.”²⁵⁷ The exposition of the Bible, then, became central to offering a coherent understanding of this providential history. An emphasis on the prophet as an interpreter is implicit here: Juster's definition points to an expectation that the prophet will be equipped to say something which uniquely illuminates the contemporary situation. Through their embrace of the prophetic mantle, authors such as Brothers, Southcott and Blake are able to shape the contours of this narrative through their readings of the biblical text, carving out a role for themselves as an authoritative interpreter of human history. When interpretation is drawn from an earlier prophetic text, such as the book of Revelation, interpreters engage in an activity that Gallagher describes as “reading prophetically”. Blake, Brothers, Southcott and their fellow contemporary prophets, operate under the conviction that the book of Revelation has relevance for “today”. Texts and contemporary situations are thus read side-by-side:

The texts' authority is reinforced and enhanced to the extent that they can be understood as making sense of the present, and the present situation yields its

²⁵⁶ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 4.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

full meaning in the clarifying light of the authoritative traditions.²⁵⁸

How may we account for the divergent forms of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's resultant interpretations? Work on the figure of the prophet in two other disciplines – sociology and literary criticism – may be of use here. Weber's deconstruction of “the prophet” provides us with a heuristic tool to unpack why Brothers and Southcott offered their prophetic readings of the Bible by seeing themselves as uniquely authoritative scriptural exegetes, and why their prophetic role led them to attract committed followers, when Blake did not. Weber distinguishes between two different types of prophet: the ethical and the exemplary.²⁵⁹ The former believes they have received divine instruction, which bestows a demand for obedience upon their followers. The exemplary prophet, however, makes no such demand, choosing instead to demonstrate methods by which salvation can be achieved and appealing to “the self interest of those who crave salvation” to invite them to follow in their footsteps.²⁶⁰ Blake falls into this latter category. His artistic works provide his audiences with an opportunity *they* may choose to pursue in order to help unlock their imaginative faculties.²⁶¹ Weber's distinction – etic though it admittedly is – allows us to hold Blake together with Brothers and Southcott as prophets. What unites the two types is a common conviction: “a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated and meaningful attitude toward life.”²⁶² We can find examples of such unified views within the writings of all three authors – be it a conviction that salvation

²⁵⁸ Eugene V. Gallagher, “Reading Prophetically: Millennialism, Prophecy and Tradition” in *Beyond the End: The Future of Millennial Studies*, ed. Joshua Searle and Kenneth G.C. Newport (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 148. Gallagher's definition of this concept is forged within a study of millennialist movements but his insights have resonance for types of biblical readers outside this specific classification of religious belief.

²⁵⁹ Harrison (*Second Coming*, 11-2) draws upon Weber's definition of “the prophet” in an attempt to find a way in to categorising the leaders of millenarian movements. Harrison does not, however, reflect upon the bifurcation of “ethical” and “exemplary” which is an important facet of Weber's definition.

²⁶⁰ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 4th ed., trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 55.

²⁶¹ “I give you the end of a golden string/ Only wind it into a ball:/ It will lead you in Heavens gate,/ Built in Jerusalem's wall.” Blake, *Jerusalem*, 77, E231.

²⁶² Weber, *Sociology*, 58-9.

comes through the reintegration of fallen human personality, the conviction that history is entering its final stages, or in the belief in the imminent arrival of a foreshadowed messianic agent.

Joseph Wittreich Jr., in his study of Blake's use of Milton, pays close attention to Blake's reception of prior authors, and, in doing so, draws a parallel with the author of Revelation and his use of prophetic texts. Wittreich comments on the dense web of scriptural allusions weaved into Revelation:

The Book of Revelation draws upon previous prophecy, inverting its patterns, correcting and amplifying its visions... Though a new prophecy, Revelation serves as a commentary on older ones; it invokes contexts that it interprets and projects a vision requiring interpretation similar to that which it provides for previous prophecy.²⁶³

For Wittreich, this tension between the interpretation of prior prophecy and the creation of new prophetic texts is a dialectic integral to Blake's art:

The prophet makes two assumptions about his art: one is that he must offer a sharper articulation of his precursor's visions; the other, that he is the recipient of a new revelation which he is charged with purveying. In the first instance, he functions as a commentator; in the second as a creator.²⁶⁴

This dialectic is at work in all three prophets at the centre of this study. Brothers, Southcott and Blake all engage with Revelation's continued capacity to elucidate the reality lying behind the present day. Yet they also articulate their own prophetic visions for the future, which may be constrained to a greater or lesser degree, by the eschatological vision offered by the Bible's final book. The emphasis each places on these twin facets of prophetic writing has a strong influence on the forms their texts take. Depending on their emphasis on the prophet's role as commentator, rather than creator, the text of earlier prophecy – such as Revelation – looms larger in the works of Brothers and Southcott than in Blake. Blake,

²⁶³ Joseph Wittreich Jr., *Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 191.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

unlike Southcott, for example, is never directed by the Spirit to specific biblical passages for interpretation (see further 4.2).

In addition to aiding our understanding of Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's use of the Bible, these twin roles of commentator and creator that Wittreich observes at the heart of the prophetic office are prominent in the wider discourse surrounding prophecy in the eighteenth century. These prophets wrote at a time when many rival prophetic voices emerged to interpret the promises ingrained in biblical prophecy. Many figures also looked to the book of Revelation to find ways to account for present events. Others claimed prophetic insight for themselves, and thus stressed their own interpretative insights, offering expositions of the same passages Brothers, Southcott and Blake draw upon. The three prophets' reception of Revelation can thus be further contextualised against other contemporary readings of the text, especially against other prophetic and visionary interpreters who offered alternative expositions of the text's meaning.

2.2. Revelation as a key to Eighteenth-century History

As prophets, Brothers, Blake and Southcott entered a competitive print marketplace. They inhabited a culture in which, as Coleridge exclaimed “The Gospel lies open in the market-place, and on every window seat, so that... the deaf may hear the words of the Book!”²⁶⁵ As Juster notes, by appropriating Revelation into their works, Brothers, Southcott and Blake claimed insight into a text that had been combed over thoroughly by generations of readers.²⁶⁶ Sermons, popular commentaries, chapbooks and periodicals were all popular mediators of biblical commentary and criticism in the eighteenth century.²⁶⁷ Facing fierce

²⁶⁵ Coleridge, *Works*, 6:6.

²⁶⁶ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 44.

²⁶⁷ Biblical commentaries proved particularly popular, and were among the most-loaned items from libraries in the eighteenth century. See Thomas R. Preston, “Biblical Criticism, Literature, and the Eighteenth-Century Reader” in ed. Isabel Rivers, *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 99. On chapbooks as a popular mediator for religious and eschatological

questions about their legitimacy, prophets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century also had to contend with a thriving public appetite for prophetic discourse and interpretation.²⁶⁸ By using Revelation in their works, Brothers, Southcott and Blake were writing at a time when interest in the text increased, due to its perceived capacity to elucidate the true cosmic significance of the French Revolution and its aftermath.²⁶⁹

Brothers, Southcott and Blake were far from the only readers of Revelation during this period who claimed to have insight into the book's meaning. The Bible's prophetic books, and especially Revelation, were a key centre of interpretative interest. Dissenting preachers and radical thinkers drew heavily upon the book to make sense of contemporary political events during the tumultuous period surrounding the French Revolution. The prominent Unitarian Joseph Priestley's 1794 Fast Day sermon illustrates how central Revelation was in shaping public perception of this moment of history:

This great event of the late revolution in France appears to me, and many others, to be not improbably the accomplishment of the following part of the Revelation, chap. xi. 3...An earthquake, as I have observed, may signify a great convulsion, and revolution, in states; and as the Papal dominions were divided into ten parts, one of which, and one of the principal of them, was France, it is properly called *a tenth part of the city*, or of the mystical *Babylon*.²⁷⁰

James Bicheno, a Baptist minister from Newbury in Berkshire, also drew on Revelation to unveiling the true significance of the French Revolution within the context of biblical

ideas, see Deborah M. Valenze, "Prophecy and Popular Literature in Eighteenth-Century England", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 29:1 (1978), 75-92.

²⁶⁸ On "authenticity" as an important element of late eighteenth century prophetic discourse, see Juster, *Doomsayers*, 33-56.

²⁶⁹ See Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, 43. Oliver detects a particular interest within prophetic texts which linked the fates of the papacy with the French monarchy and the equation of both with the Antichrist. Ruth Bloch notes that a similar surge of interest in eschatology occurred in America, with Bloch estimating that between five and ten times more works were produced per year on eschatological themes between 1793 and 1796 compared to the period of 1765-1792. Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 121-2.

²⁷⁰ Joseph Priestley, *The Present State of Europe compared with Ancient Prophecies; A Sermon, preached at the Gravel Pit Meeting in Hackney, February 28, 1794, Being the Day appointed for a General Fast* (London, 1794), 25-6.

history. His *Signs of the Times*, published in four editions between 1793-4, decodes imagery from Revelation in terms of the battle to overthrow antichristian papacy from Europe, brought to a head at the French Revolution.²⁷¹ In *Religious Musings*, purportedly written on Christmas day 1795, Coleridge identifies the present day with the opening of the fifth seal of the scroll in Revelation 6:9-11,

...Rest awhile
 Children of Wretchedness! More groans must rise,
 More blood must stream, or ere your wrongs be full.
 Yet is the day of Retribution nigh:
 The Lamb of God hath opened the fifth seal²⁷²

Coleridge specific invocation of the opening of the fifth seal parallels Brothers's claim in *Revealed Knowledge* that, in 1795, “The FIFTH SEAL is now opened”.²⁷³ Although this may be coincidental, Coleridge had quipped about Brothers's detention earlier in 1795.²⁷⁴ Both authors use Revelation 6 as a structuring device, using the martyrs' cries for justice as an idiom to illustrate contemporary revolutionary fervour. As the following three chapters shows, Revelation also provides a structuring narrative against which Brothers, Blake and Southcott can situate their interpretations of contemporary political and historical events. In doing so, the three contribute to an active interpretative culture, which extended beyond plebian and artisanal circles. Just as Southcott decodes the beast of Revelation 13 as a prefiguration of Napoleon, and Blake draws upon the image to critique state-sanctioned political repression, so also in the 1790s, biblical texts, and especially the New Testament's central prophetic text, were used to determine where contemporary events lay in the Bible's divine plan of history.

²⁷¹ James Bicheno, *The Signs of the Times: or the Overthrow of the Papal Tyranny in France, the Prelude to the Destruction of Popery and Despotism, but of Peace to Mankind*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh, 1794).

²⁷² S.T. Coleridge, “Religious Musings”, lines 300-4, *Works* 16 I, 1:186.

²⁷³ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:91.

²⁷⁴ “Poor Brothers! They'll make him know the Law as well as the Prophets!” S.T. Coleridge, *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Volume 1 1785-1800*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 156. For discussions of Coleridge's engagement with radical prophecy in the 1790s see Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 126-7; John Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 143-4.

2.2.1. Revelation, Emmanuel Swedenborg and Jane Lead

Implicit in the readings of Revelation explored in the section above, is the conviction that an attentive eye on the Bible and contemporary events will reveal the significance of Revelation's imagery. This interpretative trend, however, stands alongside other influential voices in the eighteenth century which advocated that the meaning of biblical prophecy needed to be *revealed* to the interpreter. Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's emphases on inspiration in prophetic biblical interpretation thus have important precursors within eighteenth-century religious culture. For many readers, Blake's works created an irresistible parallel with an influential recent mystical tradition.

The emphasis on visionary experience stressed in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's conception of the prophetic office can also be seen in the works of two important precursors to their respective missions: the eighteenth- and seventeenth-century visionaries Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and Jane Lead (1624-1704). The former had an important imaginative influence over prophets, artists and radical religious groups in the late eighteenth century. The latter, as a female visionary who wrote commentaries of scriptural texts, was an important forerunner of late eighteenth-century women like Southcott who claimed visionary insight into scriptural texts. Swedenborg's and Lead's expositions of Revelation – read widely throughout the eighteenth century – give an important insight into influential attempts by authors of earlier generations, who claimed to receive visionary experiences that directly fed into their interpretations of Revelation.

To take the later writer first, we may note that Swedenborgian ideas were especially in vogue in London in the late-eighteenth century. A Swedish engineer-turned mystic,

Swedenborg published several extensive theological treatises which identified his visionary experiences of heaven, and conversations with angelic figures, as pivotal to the correct interpretation of the Bible.²⁷⁵ During his lifetime, the religious movement of Swedenborgianism failed to garner much traction in Britain. After his death, however, a small – but significant – presence became established in London: first in the Theosophical Society for the Purpose of Promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem, and later through the breakaway sectarian New Jerusalem Church. This latter community was led by the bookseller Robert Hindmarsh and was influential in disseminating Swedenborg's writings and doctrines in the capital. William and Catherine Blake attended a conference organised by the Church in April 1789 and signed a declaration of support for Swedenborgian doctrines.²⁷⁶ A particularly active member of this community was William Sharp, an engraver contemporary to Blake, who became a prominent supporter first of Brothers, and then of Southcott.²⁷⁷ Southcott herself attests to being aware of Swedenborg's claims of conversing with “Spirits invisible”, although she herself did not believe them to be true.²⁷⁸ We should thus be aware that the presence of apparent Swedenborgian adherents close to Blake, Brothers and Southcott does not necessarily entail a shared philosophy or – crucially – mode of biblical interpretation. In 1818, Coleridge remarked that the visionary qualities of Blake's *Songs* indicated he was “a man of Genius – and I apprehend, a

²⁷⁵ For a biographical treatment of Swedenborg's life and works, see Cyriel Sigrid Sigstedt, *The Swedenborgian Epic: The Life and Works of Emmanuel Swedenborg* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1952).

²⁷⁶ The contents of the declaration can be found in Bentley, *Blake Records*, 50-3. As Erdman points out, this does not mean that William and Catherine joined the Church. See David V. Erdman, “Blake's Early Swedenborgianism: A Twentieth Century Legend”, *Comparative Literature* 5:3 (1953), 253. The Blakes' attendance at the conference has proven to be fertile ground for scholars who have sought to locate Blake within the religious culture of late eighteenth-century London. See, for example, Cho and Worrall, “William Blake's Meeting with Dorothy Gott”, 60-71.

²⁷⁷ Connections between Brothers and Swedenborgianism also centre upon William Bryan, who disseminated Swedenborg's works in the 1780's and later became a prominent supporter of Brothers. See Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*, 7; Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 103-5.

²⁷⁸ Southcott, *The First Book of Sealed Prophecies* (London: 1803), 99. In her unpublished writings Southcott claims that although “some strange things/Were brought before his View”, Swedenborg had not been shown the visions of heaven that he claimed. See Southcott, “Communication given to Joanna Southcott at Market Deeping. In Answer to Baron Swedenbourg's [sic] Description of Heaven,” July 10th 1802, PN222: 461-67, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

Swedenborgian – certainly, a mystic *emphatically*²⁷⁹ Blake himself, however, shows considerable ambivalence towards Swedenborg, particularly in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where Swedenborg's writings are “the linen clothes folded up” (plate 3, E34), an allusion to the garments left behind after Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:12; John 20:5-7).²⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Swedenborgian ideas, and his extensive writings on Revelation, were influential in the religious culture of eighteenth-century London.

For Swedenborg, as for Brothers and Southcott, the correct interpretation of the Bible (and particularly its prophetic texts), must stem from revelatory experiences. Swedenborg frequently recounts visionary experiences of heaven and conversations with angels which reveal that all earthly phenomena have a correspondence with a heavenly reality, including the words which constitute the biblical text. Consequently:

No-one can know what all the things contained in the Apocalypse signify and involve unless he knows the internal or spiritual sense of the Word, for whatever is therein contained was written in a style similar to that of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, in which every word means something spiritual... moreover those things that are in the Apocalypse cannot be explained as to their spiritual sense except by him who knows how the church was brought to its very end, and this cannot be known except in heaven...the contents of the Apocalypse can never be explained by anyone save he to whom there have been revealed the successive states of the church in the heavens.²⁸¹

Revelation's correct interpretation, then, *depends* on visionary experience: without Swedenborg's vision accounts, the text would remain hopelessly obscure with its true

²⁷⁹ Bentley Jr., *Blake Records*, 337.

²⁸⁰ Blake scholars have been particularly keen to pinpoint the nuances in Blake's relationship to Swedenborgianism. Schorer argued that Blake “changed dull lead into silver and bright gold” in his borrowings from Swedenborg. Erdman, writing in what he described as an age of “prescientific” biographical treatments of Blake, attempted to clarify the extent to which Blake could have been exposed to Swedenborgian literature and teachings. Erdman, “Blake's Early Swedenborgianism”, 247-257; Mark Schorer, “Swedenborg and Blake”, *Modern Philology* 36:2 (1938), 157-78. See also G.E. Bentley Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), 126-9.

²⁸¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Last Judgment and Babylon Destroyed showing that all the Things which are Foretold in the Apocalypse, are at this Day Fulfilled from Things Heard and Seen, also a Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment and the Spiritual World*, trans. P.H. Johnson (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1951), §40.

meaning forever occluded. More than this, Swedenborg's words highlight the considerable complexity involved in forging meaning from Revelation: “*every word* means something spiritual” (emphasis mine). The obscurity of biblical prophecy requires an inspired interpreter to expound its meaning. We may detect similar moves in Brothers's claim that the meanings of the biblical books “HAVE BEEN PRESERVED FOR ME”.²⁸²

Swedenborg's “correspondences” theory poses important questions for the relationship between biblical language and its referents. He proposes that reading the Bible in an external (i.e. literal) sense, creates misreadings of Revelation and its key doctrines, such as the last judgment and the promise of a “new heaven and new earth”. Surface readings of passages such as Revelation 20-21, which depict a climactic scene of future judgment, occlude the reader to the fact that a definitive last judgment has already taken place, in 1757.²⁸³ Despite biblical texts that appear to point to an earthly setting for the last judgement (e.g. the resurrection of the dead in Daniel 12:2 and Revelation 20:11-15; the judgment in Matthew 25:32-3) Swedenborg insists that the last judgment takes place exclusively in heaven, restoring the equilibrium of good and evil.²⁸⁴ The references to “a new heaven and a new earth” are not to be interpreted as a literal rejuvenation or recreation of the physical realm. Rather, they represent respectively the new community established in these realms as a result of the judgment. As he states:

In the spiritual sense of the Word 'to create' also means to form, to establish anew, and to regenerate, thus 'to create a new heaven and a new earth' means to inaugurate a new church in heaven and on earth.²⁸⁵

Revelation 21's imagery points to the establishment of a “new church” both in the newly-

²⁸² Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:2.

²⁸³ Swedenborg, *Last Judgment*, §45.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. Swedenborg's conception of these judgments are complex: once the hell-oriented inhabitants of the spiritual world outnumber those who are heaven-oriented, then “the wicked are cast into hell and the good raised to heaven” (Ibid). There is perhaps a parallel here with Blake's conception of the Last Judgment as the burning up of “Error or Creation” which allows “Truth or Eternity” to appear (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E565). See Schorer, “Swedenborg and Blake”, 177.

²⁸⁵ Swedenborg, *Last Judgment*, §4.

judged heavenly realm, and in the reorientation of Christian worship on earth. We can detect, here, an important parallel with interpretative moves made by Blake and Brothers. Both authors link Revelation's "new heaven and new earth" with a transformation of human society and, for Blake, of human powers of perception and social integration (see further 3.3.2 and 5.3.1). Swedenborg similarly advocates a non-literal interpretation of Revelation's promise of a "New Jerusalem". Swedenborg is adamant that the expectation of a physical city, matching the description of Revelation 21:12-24, is mistaken. The phrase "New Jerusalem" instead signifies "the heavenly doctrine" of the new church; the references to the city's dimensions, gates and adornment with precious stones represent qualities connected to the implementation of this new doctrine.²⁸⁶

Swedenborg's approach to the Bible stresses that the text's "spiritual" meaning is both more obscure – and more edifying – than its surface meaning. The Bible is a document to be deciphered, and understanding Revelation is crucial to understanding the era of religious and ecclesiological change which Swedenborg's works predict. Notably, he insists that Revelation's promises had – in an important sense – already been realised, and their ramifications would eventually filter through to earth in the institution of a rejuvenated church.²⁸⁷ Like Blake, Brothers and Southcott, Swedenborg places visionary experience at the heart of his teachings. His subsequent readings of Revelation, present Revelation 21-2 as a vision of transformation, rather than cataclysmic destruction, and underscore how the

²⁸⁶ Swedenborg, *The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine According to what has been Heard from Heaven with an Introduction concerning the New Heaven and the New Earth*, trans. Rudolph L. Tafel (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1923), §1.

²⁸⁷ Clark Garrett, "Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45:1 (1984), 81, argues that "Swedenborg's message had helped to communicate the sense of millenarian sensibility that made the era of the American and French Revolutions one of unparalleled excitement, spiritual as well as intellectual." This reading requires some nuance. It was only after Swedenborg's death, and through the mediation of institutions such as the New Jerusalem Church (i.e. after his works had inspired a sectarian, rather than a reformist movement) that his writings came to have an influence within the dissenting political and religious climate of London. It is specifically Swedenborgianism refracted through this lens that provides the grounds from which we might wish to compare the writings of Brothers, Blake and Southcott. See Rix, *Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*, 83-4.

text requires revelatory insight into unlock its true meaning.

The writings of Jane Lead also highlight the importance of a mystical engagement with scripture in the long eighteenth century. Lead has been seen by many scholars as an influential mediator of Behmenist ideas in England and, as McDowell argues, her claims about inspiration and perception in many ways anticipate Blake's ideas.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, Lead's visions of the important female figures Sophia or Wisdom form a visionary trope, Gibbons traces into the writings Ann Lee, Elspeth Buchan and Southcott herself.²⁸⁹ Whilst not necessarily influencing Brothers, Southcott and Blake directly, Lead is an important witness firstly to the prevalence of “visionary” approaches to the interpretation of Revelation, and secondly, to the influence of female prophetic interpreters of the Bible in the early modern world.

The title page of Lead's exposition of Revelation underscores the need for a “spiritual” engagement with the text to interpret its symbolism. She describes her work as an attempt to interpret “the Seven Seals, the Seven Thunders, and the New-Jerusalem State. The which have not hitherto been brought to light (except by the Spiritual Discerner) to any degree of satisfaction”.²⁹⁰ In this book, like Southcott in *The Strange Effects of Faith*, Lead claims to “have oft been take up to see the wonderful Plat-form of the New-Jerusalem.”²⁹¹ What follows is a detailed description, “the Pattern of the heavenly Houses and Mansions”, the

²⁸⁸ Paula McDowell, “Enlightenment Enthusiasms and the Spectacular Failure of the Philadelphia Society,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35:4 (2002), 515-33. The relationship between Lead and Boehme is nuanced by Hirst, who notes that Lead's theology departed from Boehme's in significant ways. See Julie Hirst, *Jane Leade: Biography of a Seventeenth-Century Mystic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 7. Boehme's influence on Blake is discussed at length in Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 28-34.

²⁸⁹ B.J. Gibbons, *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and its Development in England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 143. Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 7, 141, traces her influence through William Law to the early Methodist leaders and notes that her works were reprinted in Britain up to early nineteenth century. Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 48-9, also suggests that *Revealed Knowledge's* language indicates that Brothers may have known Boehme's, Swedenborg's and Lead's writings

²⁹⁰ Jane Lead, *The Revelation of Revelations: Particularly as an Essay Towards the Unsealing, Opening and Discovering the Seven Seas, the Seven Thunders, and the New-Jerusalem State...* (London, 1683).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

“great Foundation Stone” the city was built upon, and several “Seraphick Bodies... and several rows of various Spiritual Forms” bordering the foundation stone.²⁹² The detailed depiction of the city's structure parallels the visionary architectural description found especially in Brothers's works, but also in Blake's intricate descriptions of Golgonooza. Lead narrates the city's descent to earth, and the entry of souls who “had put on the glorified Body”.²⁹³ Finally, she describes:

a sensible rising and spreading over all my Heart, Head and Body, as if all were covered with a Cloud of Sun-heat, giving out light, by which I could see what was inwardly done, as well as feel it. Then it was further spoke in me, that I should take notice that this was also the bright Garment of the Sun.²⁹⁴

There are clear allusions here to Revelation 12:1, with Lead herself receiving the woman's “garment” through her own visionary experience of the New Jerusalem. She describes the garment giving “further Revelation, to shew what the Holy One is about to do” and is commanded to “Co-operate” with its inspiration “till it have concentrated thee in the Deity.”²⁹⁵

Lead's subsequent exposition of the seals of Revelation 6 underscores the importance of spiritual visitation to unlock the text's meaning:

what in *John's Revelation* is mentioned concerning these things, is very obscure and mystical, and there is no fathoming of it to the utmost, until the Lord himself come with the Plummet-Line of the Holy Spirit to measure out the meaning... I shall set down in order [an interpretation of Revelation 6], according as it was acted in my own particular, through my Soul's waiting with the Lamb's-rising Power, in a particular experience of my own in the *divine Mystery*.²⁹⁶

Lead's interpretation of the text proceeds directly from her experience of enacting the vision of Revelation 12. We find the same trope of the interpreter embodying a character within Revelation, and using this as a basis for an authoritative exposition of the text, in

²⁹² Ibid., 6-7.

²⁹³ Ibid., 7.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 12.

Brothers's and Southcott's writings, with Southcott especially drawing on the vision of Revelation 12 as the foundation for her self-identity.

Lead's writings underscore the need for an interpreter to enter into Revelation's visionary world in order to elucidate its symbolism. This interpretative approach is also advocated by Blake. It is not enough simply to see images or read text:

If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought if he could Enter into Noahs Rainbow or into his bosom or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images...then would he arise from his Grave then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy²⁹⁷

Blake invites his audience to embrace a subjective engagement with the Bible and bring its images and characters to life. The imaginative leap he endorses, encourages a widespread adoption of the hermeneutics of prophetic readers of the Bible such as Lead, Brothers and Southcott, who argue that the key to obtaining insight into the text is to see their lives inscribed in the book of Revelation. In doing so, they are able to enter into the text and reveal its meaning. As Sklar has demonstrated, however, Blake's enthusiasm for this kind of imaginative engagement has limits: he critiques the kind of exclusive appropriation of biblical characters advanced by Brothers and Southcott. In *Jerusalem*, Blake argues “No Individual ought to appropriate to Himself/... any of the Universal Characteristics/ Of David or of Eve, of the Woman, or of the Lord.”²⁹⁸ For Blake, entry into the imaginative world of the Bible is a universally-possible prophetic act; this participation cannot be limited to specific individuals. This embodiment of biblical characters, however, is central to Lead's exposition of Revelation, and is claimed by many prophetic claimants contemporary to Blake, Southcott and Brothers.

²⁹⁷ Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E560.

²⁹⁸ Blake, *Jerusalem* 90:28-30, E250; Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 236.

2.2.2. Eighteenth-century Prophets and the Interpretation of Revelation

In the politically-charged public spaces of the eighteenth-century, the use of biblical prophecy to interpret current events, coupled with a mystical emphasis upon interpretation proceeding from revelatory experiences, created a demand for readers of the text who could authoritatively decode the Bible's promises, and could reliably interpret prophetic texts. Thus an anonymous compiler of a collection of prophecies, who reprinted Brothers's biblical expositions alongside those of Swedenborg and seventeenth-century prophets Anna Trapnel and Christopher Love, remarked:

The same spirit which inspired the scripture prophets can surely dispense the same power to any other person. It can never be supposed that the most sublime, awful, and interesting passages contained in the sacred depository of all faith and religion, should remain, at any period of time, without its chosen and inspired interpreters.²⁹⁹

Brothers, Southcott and Blake, in defining themselves as prophets, implicitly answered this call for prophetic interpretation through their belief that prophetic insight could vitiate the tasks of biblical interpretation and contemporary social critique. In doing so, their works competed with other prophetic readings of Revelation. Such readers, like Brothers, Southcott and Blake, all claimed to share the prophetic inspiration of Revelation's author.

This section explores how these rival prophets contributed to a culture of prophetic interpretation during Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's lifetimes. This exploration includes – but is not limited to – figures who have a demonstrable connection to Brothers, Southcott and Blake. Sarah Flaxmer, William Bryan, John Wright, Samuel Whitchurch and William Huntington, all offer interpretations of Revelation in direct response to Brothers's works.³⁰⁰ Dorothy Gott, on the other hand, has been recently invoked as a possible source for some of Blake's ideas. Others, such as Elspeth Buchan and Ann Lee, are discussed because they

²⁹⁹ Anonymous, *Wonderful Prophecies. Being a Dissertation on the Existence, Nature, and Extent of the Prophetic Powers in the Human Mind...*, 4th ed. (London, 1794), 16.

³⁰⁰ For a broader survey of reactions to Brothers's prophetic claims, see especially Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 148-64.

offer rival actualisations of Revelation to Brothers, Blake and Southcott, but it is not necessarily possible to trace direct links between them. Nonetheless, there is still value in exploring their receptions of Revelation. The ways Revelation works upon their imagination, and the parts of the text they appropriate, can shed light on Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings by analogy. Taken together, these prophetic readers demonstrate the variety of ways that the interpretation of Revelation could influence and shape eighteenth-century prophetic activities.

We have seen how Jane Lead drew upon Revelation's mythologised female figures as a way of conceptualising her sense of mystical inspiration. In a similar vein, Clarke has noted that a number of late eighteenth-century female prophets drew on Revelation 12, and explored its intertextual resonances, to construct an authoritative prophetic identity.³⁰¹ Sarah Flaxmer, writing in the wake of Brothers's incarceration, declared herself to be “the appointed person to reveal Satan.”³⁰² This belief arose partly as a result of a visionary experience that closely parallels that depicted by John in Revelation 4:1: both see a “door” open in heaven and are beckoned to “come up hither”.³⁰³ It is also, however, forged from a close reading of Revelation 12, which Flaxmer interprets as a metaphor for the relationship between herself and the incarcerated Brothers. She interprets being “cloathed with the sun [sic]” as “*The grace, the love, and the righteousness of Jesus Christ, given to a Woman... called by his power to give light to the world, by revealing of Satan.*”³⁰⁴ The woman's delivery of the “man-child” (12:5) indicates that Brothers is “to be brought forth by the power of God, resting upon a Woman.”³⁰⁵ Solidifying her claim that she will be a crucial

³⁰¹ Anna Clarke, “Sexual Crisis and Popular Religion”, 59-62.

³⁰² Sarah Flaxmer, *Satan Revealed; or The Dragon Overcome. With an Explanation of the Twelfth Chapter of the Revelations. And also, a Testimony, that Richard Brothers is a Prophet sent from the Lord* (London, 1795)

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

actor in these dramatic events, Flaxmer juxtaposes Revelation 12 with Jeremiah 31:22: “the Lord has created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a Man”. Flaxmer draws this out further to construct a typological relationship with Mary and Jesus: “*when the Blessed Virgin brought forth the Messiah, the Jews did not receive him... they must receive him in these latter days, through the singular visitation of God to the afore-mentioned Woman.*”³⁰⁶ Flaxmer's engagement with Revelation 12, thus leads her to other prophetic texts and biblical figures who can validate her prophetic claims, and provide the symbolic resource to express her relationship to another prominent figure at a pivotal eschatological moment. A similar connection between the woman of Revelation 12 and Mary is forged across Southcott's writings, and explored by Blake in *Jerusalem*. It also has a rich presence throughout the history of interpretation, with Revelation 12 functioning as an important proof text for beliefs about Mary's assumption as early as the fifth century.³⁰⁷ Prophetic interpretation of Revelation 12, then, frequently invokes other parts of the Bible, as well as the prophet's own experiences, to inform the interpretation of this narrative. In our exploration of Southcott's use of Revelation, we will see how deeply ingrained her reading of Revelation 12 is with the narrative of Genesis 2-3, and with the figure of Mary.

Like Flaxmer, other prophetic readers of Revelation 12 use the text to express their identity, and conceptualise relationships with important male figures. The Scottish prophet Elspeth Buchan was the focal point of a sect that settled in New Cample, Dumfriesshire in 1784, after being expelled from the town of Irvine. The movement disbanded after Buchan's death in 1791, four years after Buchan's prophecy of an imminent translation to heaven had failed.³⁰⁸ Buchan draws extensively on Revelation 12, and uses the image of the woman

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 15-6.

³⁰⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 2000), 93-4; 246-7. Prigent traces this tradition back to Tychonius's writings, where “the woman of Revelation 12 is the Church, but she is also the Virgin Mary who is its figure or type.” (my translation). Prigent, *Apocalypse 12*, 23.

³⁰⁸ For Buchan's biography and the Buchanites' history see Harrison, *Second Coming*, 32-8; John Cameron,

and her child to align her activities with the former Relief minister Hugh White, when they led their community in Irvine:

God, your Heavenly Father, knoweth my birth-pains of heavenly love have been far surpassing the love of women. But oh, come and behold a wonder now! I am bigger than ever! I am pregnant with His own glory...³⁰⁹

For Buchan, as for Flaxmer, Revelation's pregnancy imagery provides a metaphorical resource to mark herself out as a prophetic figure. For both women, Revelation 12 is used to interpret enmity to their respective prophetic missions. For Buchan, Revelation's depiction of the woman pursued by the "great red dragon" (12:3-6) provides the perfect symbolic framework to interpret the antipathy her community attracted in Dumfriesshire: "I have been, these ten years past, the very butt of the great red dragon's wrath".³¹⁰ Flaxmer's decoding of this imagery has broader political scope: the dragon represents "*The English Government*", his redness signifying the "*army being cloathed with red, their crimes red... dyed and deluged with human blood.*"³¹¹ Southcott too uses this text to conceptualise a conflict with her follower Elias Carpenter in 1805.

Contemporary female prophets' expositions of Revelation 12 did not just provide alternative actualisations to Southcott. By reading the retreat of the woman into the wilderness as a prefiguration of his journey to Jerusalem, Brothers parallels other appropriations of this text to account for the migration of a population. After arriving in Albany, New York in 1774, the leader of the Shaker community, "Mother" Ann Lee depicts the settlement as the "wilderness" of Revelation 12:6.³¹² In the international scope of their

The History of the Buchanite Delusion: 1783-1846 (Dumfries: R.G. Mann, 1904) and T.F. Henderson, "Elspeth Buchan" in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen & Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1908), 3:178-9. The earliest historical study was conducted by Joseph Train, *The Buchanites from First to Last* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1846), who drew on conversations with the sect's last surviving member, Andrew Innes.

³⁰⁹ Elspeth Buchan, letter to Hugh White, dated April 1783, cited in Train, *Buchanites*, 21. See also Hugh White, *The Divine Dictionary; or, a Treatise indicted by Holy Inspiration* (Dumfries, 1785), 35.

³¹⁰ Letter to the Reverend Gabriel Russell cited in Train, *Buchanites*, 85.

³¹¹ Flaxmer, *Satan Revealed*, 14.

³¹² Clarke Garrett, *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 162 n.5. For a biographical treatment of Lee's life see Richard

respective missions, Revelation 12 provides a framework by which the intended (Brothers) and the actual (Lee) relocation of communities could be understood as the fulfilment of biblical prophetic promises. Their readings of this passage thus use geography to decode the text, transplanting John's original vision off the coast of Asia Minor, and mapping it onto the eighteenth-century world as imagined, and traversed, by contemporary prophetic claimants. Just as the Shakers understand the “wilderness” in Revelation 12 through their relocation to America, so also the Holy Land, and contemporary London, become important influences over Brothers's interpretation of Revelation.

One of Revelation's key images that Southcott uses in her writings is that of “the Bride”. In the text, there are repeated allusions to the “marriage” of the Lamb, and in the vision of New Jerusalem in chapter 21, the city appears “as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). Southcott argues that Revelation – in using this language – prophetically prefigures to her own visitation, through which she is marked out as Christ's prototypical “bride”. In this specific regard, Southcott's interpretation has parallels with the prophetic identity assumed by the London-based prophet Dorothy Gott. Gott's *The Midnight Cry* narrates her prophetic awakening, and draws heavily on autobiographical accounts of experiences of inspiration. In one account, a description of a spiritual visitation in an inn at Epping, Revelation's language looms especially large:

a great weight passed through my body, and then a light breath seemed to pass over that; and as the light came in, the voice said, 'Fear not the Holy Ghost. Thee bears this burden this day for self-will in man.' And immediately I was lifted up on my feet... and a voice said in me, 'The Bridegroom is come, and this is my bride.'³¹³

Her identity as “the bride” is confirmed when she is directed to Revelation's conclusion:

“words which I repeated at Epping, which before I did not know were in the Scripture; the

Francis, *Ann The Word: The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers, the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000).

³¹³ Dorothy Gott, *The Midnight Cry, “behold the Bridegroom Comes!”*, or an Order from God to get your Lamps Lighted (London, 1788), 53.

17th verse of the last chapter of the Revelations [“the Spirit and the Bride say 'Come...’”].” Gott records that she was “shewed Scripture for my work – the New Jerusalem, which I had never read before to my knowledge, or not with that understanding.”³¹⁴ Gott's use of Revelation 21-2 here, serves a dual purpose. It allows her to depict her mission as the fulfilment of a scriptural prophetic promise: of the “Spirit and Bride” speaking together to deliver a salvific message to humankind. It also provides an eschatological *telos* to her prophetic work: her warnings about the imminence of the “midnight cry” of Matthew 25:6 heralds the arrival of “the bridegroom”; her preparatory warnings, as “the bride,” lay the ground for the establishment of the Bible's final vision of future hope.

Gott's use of Revelation is especially important background for Blake and Southcott. In their shared use of Revelation's “bride” imagery, as well as their shared tendency imbuing elements of their own experience with a prophetic significance, Gott stands as an important contemporary counterpoint to Southcott's writings and her career.³¹⁵ Both interpret Revelation's “Bride” as a human figure, and use this to establish their own prophetic identities. Scholars have shown that Gott and Blake may have met: the two attended the same meeting of the New Jerusalem Church in 1789. Cho and Worrall argue that Gott's writings may well have provided Blake with an important forerunner for his own prophetic works. They detect specific parallels between Gott's and Blake's descriptions of prophetic inspiration in *The Midnight Cry* and *Jerusalem*: both draw on the concept of perceptual “enlightening” or “expansion” as they describe the process of writing prophetic texts.³¹⁶ Gott also, like Blake and Southcott, depicts her inspiration as being prototypical: “I received great power to sing, and mighty things opened in that, as if a book was opened, and great light, which enlarged the meaning according to the promise. And this will be your

³¹⁴ Ibid, 65-6.

³¹⁵ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 67, argues that Gott contributed to a “celebration of the quotidian” within prophetic literature of the revolutionary period.

³¹⁶ Cho and Worrall, “Dorothy Gott”, 64.

experience”.³¹⁷ We can see through this exploration of Gott's writings, and her points of connection with Blake and Southcott, that all three prophets were participating in a thriving discourse, in which the Bible's imagery – and the very claim to prophetic inspiration – is territory shared with other prophetic writers, whose receptions of Revelation often tread similar ground.

In many cases, as in the examples above, prophetic expositors of the Bible could offer their readings and actualisations of the text with relative independence from one another. For example, there is little to suggest that the success of the Shaker community – first in North-West England, and then in America – deterred Elspeth Buchan from offering her own readings of the narrative of Revelation 12. Furthermore, Southcott's own claim to embody the “woman clothed with the Sun” does not recognise the existence of earlier, similar claims. Occasionally, however, prophetic expositions of Revelation came into direct contact – and conflict. Prophets could use their own readings of scripture to discredit one another, directly competing for the authority to unveil the meaning of the text. As Madden has noted, this competition is central to the battle of wills between Brothers and Southcott.³¹⁸ Other prophets of the period, however, also attempted to engage Brothers on his own exegetical terms, and his reading of Revelation forms a particular point of contention amongst both his supporters and detractors.

Many of Brothers's supporters with their own prophetic leanings, endorsed his reading of Revelation: that Britain and London were perilously close to suffering God's destructive wrath. Whilst Brothers attracted support from reputable corners, such as the MP Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, prophets like William Bryan also lent their assent to Brothers's claims.

³¹⁷ Gott, *Midnight Cry*, 66.

³¹⁸ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 289.

Bryan, along with fellow prophet and Brothers supporter John Wright, had travelled to the Avignon Society in 1789 under the command of the Holy Spirit.³¹⁹ Bryan's writings support Brothers's claims that certain members of the British people were descended from the lost Jewish tribes, and he saw the *telos* of Brothers's mission – the restoration of Jerusalem – as part of the fulfilment of Revelation's eschatological hopes:

it being the time of the first resurrection, and the commencement of the period mentioned by St. John, in his Revelation, in which the Lord shall reign with his saints upon the earth... The serpent and dragon, being chained down in the abyss, shall have no longer a manifestation in man...³²⁰

Bryan invokes Revelation 20:5 to conceptualise Brothers's predicted restoration of Jerusalem. For Bryan, Brothers's successful restoration of the Jews would be the marker of the millennial age. Bryan, like Brothers, thus uses his prophetic insight to demonstrate how Revelation's end-time promises will be fulfilled, and to act as an agent of this fulfilment, by testifying to the efficacy of Brothers's mission. For his part, John Wright gave credence to Brothers's diagnosis of contemporary society incurring the imminent wrath of God. Reprinting oracles he encountered at Avignon, Wright connects Jeremiah's and Revelation's critiques of Babylon to signify an approaching eschatological intervention from God:

The ANGEL of the ETERNAL who stands before the *face* of the LAMB is sent to sound the trumpet upon the mountains of BABYLON; to advertise the nations, that the GOD of heaven will soon arise at the gates of the earth to change the face of the world...³²¹

Another of Brothers's supporters, Samuel Whitchurch, writes in support of Brothers's claim

³¹⁹ For an account of the melange of esoteric beliefs expressed and discussed within the religious community at Avignon, see Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 97-120. For the first-hand accounts of Bryan's and Wright's journey to Avignon, see William Bryan, *A Testimony of the Spirit of Truth, Concerning Richard Brothers, The Man Appointed of God to Govern the Hebrews... With Some Account of the Manner of the Lord's Gracious Dealing with His Servant William Bryan, One of the Brothers of the Avignon Society, and by Revelation from God Declared to Be a Jew of the Tribe of Judah*. (London, 1795), 20-9; John Wright, *A Revealed Knowledge of some things that will Speedily be Fulfilled in the World, Communicated to a Number of Christians, Brought Together at Avignon, by the Power of the Spirit of God, from all Nations* (London, 1794), 5-20.

³²⁰ Bryan, *A Testimony of the Spirit of Truth*, 9-10.

³²¹ Wright, *Revealed Knowledge*, 40. The connection that Wright's text forges between Jeremiah and Revelation is particularly evident in Revelation 18, where the angel's symbolic judgement of Babylon in 18:21-24 echoes that of 51:62-4.

for prophetic illumination, attacking contemporary Christians who, “on a vain supposition that they have attained the *Ne plus ultra* of divine knowledge, repel the force of New Prophecy”.³²² Whitchurch was particularly scathing of influential commentators who had interpreted biblical prophecy: “those dotards the Fathers, or the learned Grotius, or the assiduous Mead, or the mitred Newton” vainly attempted to interpret “what the *Holy Spirit* had determined should not be understood till the LATTER DAY”.³²³ Whitchurch, supporting Brothers's use of Revelation to unveil the true nature of the events of the mid-1790s, highlights Revelation 7:15-16's vision of the humbling of world powers:

Any person possessing common sense, and a mind untainted with prejudice, may if he will examine for himself, descry in the Scriptures, a faithful account of modern revolutions, and the awful signs of the times... that grand epoch, that eventful period, which is to usher in “*the great and dreadful day of the Lord*” ... when all the men of blood, the promoters of war, the proud destroyers of the earth, and mighty tyrants of the universe, shall hide “*themselves in the dens, and in the rocks of the mountains – and say to the mountains and rocks – Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne...*”³²⁴

Whitchurch's prophetic text interprets the opening of the seals in Revelation 5-7 as markers of eschatological fulfilment in the present day, a trend discernible in the works of Bicheno, Priestley and Coleridge, as well as in Blake, Brothers and Southcott. His reading of Revelation leads him to expectt a radical overthrow of the existing social order, echoing Brothers's own expectation of the fall of the major European monarchies in *Revealed Knowledge*. For Whitchurch, Revelation provides a scriptural reference point to authenticate his own expectation that the fulfilment of biblical prophecy necessitated the spreading of revolutionary activity throughout Europe, therein completing God's eschatological plan.

Other commentators with prophetic convictions, however, challenged Brothers's exegesis

³²² Samuel Whitchurch, *Another Witness! Or Further Testimony in Favor of Richard Brothers: With a few Modest Hints to Modern Pharisees, and Reverend Unbelievers* (London, 1795), 7.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

of Revelation directly. William Huntington S.S. [a Sinner Saved], was a popular preacher who founded the Providence Chapel in London in 1783.³²⁵ A fervent polemicist, Huntington recorded a vision of Christ in 1773, and made his own forays into prophecy by predicting the defeats of Napoleon and the Papacy.³²⁶ His visionary experience had a distinctive revelatory function, and a deep impact on his biblical interpretation:

I could read the Bible in the language of my own experience; and could trace the spirit and feelings of the inspired penmen... My spirit and experience could pursue them, go where they would.³²⁷

Huntington's testimony gives a powerful insight into the ways in which prophetic interpretation of the Bible proceeds. He voices a conviction that scripture can be interpreted through the lens of one's "own experience", and that following this hermeneutical principle could illuminate the "spirit" of the biblical authors. In chapters 3-5 we will see consistently how Brothers, Southcott and Blake draw on their own experiences to make sense of Revelation's prophetic visions. There is also a close correlation here with their appeal to the "spirit of Prophecy" to vitiate the task of biblical interpretation. These four prophets all see their prophetic role giving access to the spirit of their prophetic forebears and, consequently, find themselves able to offer expositions of these earlier texts.

Having access to the inspirational spirit behind texts such as Revelation in the modern day, however, raised for Huntington – as it does for Southcott and Brothers – important questions about the authority of other, divergent expositions. Brothers's proclamations about an imminent judgement upon London, and his exegesis of Revelation's visions, perturbed Huntington, and he wrote a stinging rebuke entitled *The Lying Prophet*

Examined. As Garrett has identified, a key motivator for Huntington's riposte was the

³²⁵ For a biography of Huntington see Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Huntington, S.S.* (London: Farncombe & Son, 1909).

³²⁶ William Huntington, S.S., *The Kingdom of Heaven Taken by Prayer; Or, an Account of the Author's Translation from the Kingdom of Satan to the Kingdom of God*, 4th ed. (London, 1798), 198-203. On his predictions of the fall of the papacy and Napoleon see Wright, *Life*, 70, 256.

³²⁷ Huntington, *Kingdom of Heaven Taken by Prayer*, 206-7.

credence given to Brothers's prediction of an earthquake in London on June 4th 1795, when a number of citizens attempted to flee the city before the expected cataclysm.³²⁸ One of the important focuses for Huntington's critique, Garrett notes, is Brothers's exposition of the Bible's end-time promises and his tendency to equate meteorological phenomena such as thunderstorms with the voices of angels in Revelation.³²⁹ Huntington argues against Brothers's exposition of the promise of “new heavens and new earth” as a prefiguration of a regeneration of human society, claiming that Revelation 20-1 and 2 Peter 3:12-3 entail the destruction of the physical world.³³⁰

Additionally, Huntington directly refutes Brothers's reading of Revelation 17-8, and his identification of two separate cities described by this text: Rome and London. Whereas Brothers exploits the multiplicity of “great cities” in Revelation, and uses the unstable spiritual geography of the text to find references to more than one city in the urban settings of chapters 11, 17, and 18, Huntington argues for the unity of Revelation's coded critiques of “Babylon” (14:8, 16:19; chapters 17-18), “Egypt” and “Sodom” (11:8) as a condemnation of Rome and its papacy: “it is plain that Sodom, Babylon, and Egypt, in this book, mean one and the same city.”³³¹ He dismisses Brothers's claim that the city of Revelation 17, because it is situated in “the wilderness” and therefore inland, must refer to Rome, pointing out that 17:3 describes John's vantage point for his vision of Babylon, not the location of the city.³³² For Huntington, therefore, Brothers's decoding of Revelation 17-8 is untenable: “there is but one city that is spiritually or mystically called *Babylon*, or *Sodom*, and that city is neither to be found in the wilderness, nor on the banks of the

³²⁸ Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 203; William Huntington S.S., *The Lying Prophet Examined, and his False Predictions Discovered; being a Dissection of the Prophecies of Richard Brothers* (London, 1795), v.

³²⁹ Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 202; Huntington, *Lying Prophet*, 61.

³³⁰ Huntington, *Lying Prophet*, 27-8.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³³² *Ibid.*, 52-3.

Thames.³³³

In this specific conflict between Brothers and Huntington, biblical interpretation – and specifically the exegesis of Revelation – forms a pivotal flashpoint. We can see the debate as a precursor to the battle for the hearts and minds of followers in the later disagreements between Brothers and Southcott. For Huntington – as for Southcott later – Brothers's credibility as a prophet is shown to be lacking on account of his failure to offer a convincing reading of Revelation's visions. Their dialogue highlights how integral biblical interpretation could be for the successful construction of prophetic identity, in the religious and political discourses and cultures in which Brothers, Southcott and Blake participated.

This survey of voices contemporary to Brothers, Southcott and Blake has aimed to shed light on how Revelation could be invoked within the discourse of prophecy in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Britain. In surveying these voices we can discern a number of important themes and trends which can augment our understanding of what it meant to engage with the Bible – and its concluding book – under the aegis of prophetic inspiration in the late eighteenth century. Brothers, Southcott and Blake, with their respective engagements with Revelation 12, contribute to a particularly contested area of speculation within contemporary prophetic writings. This text was actualised in diverse ways, especially by female prophetic claimants of the period. In particular, we can see that actualisations by these prophets are adapted to fit a number of specific circumstances, as the text gets read in the light of their individual experiences. For instance, pregnancy imagery in Revelation 12 can be employed metaphorically by eighteenth-century “women clothed with the sun” to conceptualise their engagement with other prominent male figures. More widely, we can discern how for prophets, Revelation could provide narrative frames

³³³ Ibid., 56.

for contemporary experiences, both at a local level (in the case of the Buchanites and the migration of the Shakers to America), and in a wider political context (in Flaxmer's equation of the "dragon" with the British army, and in the writings of Whitchurch, Wright and Bryan). In Huntington's writings, we can see how crucial biblical interpretation could be for a prophet's legitimacy, and how prophetic exegesis could demand close attention to the text of biblical prophecy. This generated fierce debate over the finer points of the text of Revelation, and its evocation of future hope.

2.3. The Prophet as Poet in the Eighteenth Century

Pivotal context for the eighteenth-century construction of prophetic identity, however, can also be found in other areas of the period's intellectual culture, outside of the visionaries, non-conformist expositors of prophecy and prophetic claimants outlined above.

Specifically, many scholars have pointed to the broader confluence of the roles of poet and prophet in reconstructions of ancient Israelite culture as having a specific influence on Blake's ideas, and the indeterminate ways he structured many of his works.

In 1753, Robert Lowth published the thirty-four lectures he had given as the Oxford Professor of Poetry between 1741 and 1750: *De Sacra Hebraeorum Poesi* (or *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* in the two-volume English translation by George Gregory in 1787). In these lectures, Lowth shows a concern that the literature and poetry of the Bible was not accorded the same esteem and treatment as that of classical civilisations:

It would not be easy, indeed, to assign a reason, why the writings of Homer, of Pindar, and of Horace, should engross our attention and monopolize our praise, while those of Moses, of David and Isaiah pass totally unregarded.³³⁴

Lowth thus set out to establish that Hebrew verse was governed by a hitherto unrecognised

³³⁴ Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews...*, trans. G. Gregory (London: 1787), 1:44.

metrical system, suggested by the parallelism prevalent throughout many biblical texts.³³⁵ Lowth argued that these “distichs”, whereby lines or verses correspond to one another such as in the chanting of the Seraphim in Isaiah 6:3, are particularly prevalent in the Bible's prophetic corpus.³³⁶ This formalist argument was supported by an aesthetic claim which eclipses the strict demands of classical poetic form: key to the appreciation of the Bible's poetry was the recognition that it conveys the author's overwhelming emotional response to God's providence. Thus the Bible's poetic texts, far from being an inferior ancient cousin of Latin and Greek traditions, is the finest example of “sublime” poetry.³³⁷

Lowth's work was important for the development of the perception of the biblical prophets in eighteenth-century culture, since he insisted that the Bible's prophetic corpus was especially replete with sublime poetry.³³⁸ In doing so, Lowth created a close correspondence between the offices of poet and prophet in ancient Hebrew society, which had implications for how prophetic texts ought to be interpreted and translated. In particular, Lowth stressed that whilst the biblical prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit, their writings were nonetheless the product of their own human creativity:

Though the writings of Moses, of David, and of Isaiah, always bear the marks of a divine and celestial impulse, we may nevertheless discover in them the particular characteristics of their respective authors.³³⁹

Their writings thus provided evidence of the literary and poetic conventions of an ancient

³³⁵ Ibid., 2:32. Crucially, Lowth does not claim that parallelism *is* the Hebrew metrical system, but rather that it provides evidence for formal structuring in poetic texts. See further James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1981), 74.

³³⁶ Lowth argued that parallelism evolved from ancient Hebrew psalmody which he claimed had a “call-and-response” structure (*Lectures*, 2:25-32).

³³⁷ Anna Culhed, “Original Poetry: Robert Lowth and Eighteenth-Century poetics” in ed. John Jarick, *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 30-1. For Lowth's definition of sublimity, which emphasises the capacity for a composition to “excite the passions” of the reader, see Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:307. Compare Longinus, *On The Sublime* 7-8.

³³⁸ Isaiah, in particular, is singled out as being the most “poetic of the prophets” (Lowth, *Lectures*, 2:87). Lowth accorded the other major prophets similar poetic status, but argued that Daniel and Jonah contained little poetic material, and that the later prophetic books pointed towards a deterioration of the quality of poetry from the exile onwards (*ibid.*, 2:261, 100).

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:347.

people, albeit conventions which were now largely lost to history. The demand Lowth subsequently places on the modern reader, however, is to overcome this historical lacuna via the imagination: to “read Hebrew as the Hebrews would have read it.”³⁴⁰ Lowth's challenge had two ramifications. As Legaspi has noted, it tacitly encouraged readers to reconstruct the original setting of prophetic texts, so that the modern reader could attempt such an imaginative engagement.³⁴¹ In turn, this emphasised the human creative crafting of biblical prophetic poetry, which meant that these newly-appreciated aesthetic conventions could be emulated by modern poets.³⁴²

Lowth's reconfiguration of the biblical prophets as poets resonated widely within eighteenth-century Europe.³⁴³ In Britain, his ideas were transmitted in English, even prior to Gregory's translation, through the publication of his lectures in *The Christian's Magazine* in 1767.³⁴⁴ And whilst Lowth himself remained conservative in his conjectures about how his ideas may impact subsequent biblical interpretation, others would develop his ideas to forge new ways of engaging with the biblical text.³⁴⁵ His appeal to consider the aesthetic and literary qualities of the biblical text ran counter to a wider tendency within early modern culture not to read the Bible for literary appreciation.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 1:114.

³⁴¹ Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*, 115. Legaspi shows that Lowth had particular influence on Michaelis, and the German scholar's attempts to “restore the Israelites as a people of flesh and blood” through historical enquiry.

³⁴² Murray Roston, *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 70-1, 104.

³⁴³ German scholars particularly embraced Lowth's ideas, especially Michaelis and Herder, who similarly explored the emotional and didactic appeal of prophetic writings in his works. See further Brian Hepworth, *Robert Lowth* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978); Burdon, *Apocalypse in England*, 86-9; Prickett, *Words and the Word*, 49-50, 115-23 and Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, 105-28.

³⁴⁴ Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition*, 11.

³⁴⁵ Lowth refused, for example, to comment on how his ideas may affect questions about the veracity of biblical texts, claiming not to wish to “impudently break in upon the sacred boundaries of Theology.” (*Lectures*, 1:53).

³⁴⁶ This tendency was perhaps most famously typified by Samuel Johnson. See further David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature: Volume 2 – From 1700 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53-9.

His ideas found an audience within late-eighteenth century radical circles, particularly amongst the groups of thinkers, artists and writers acquainted with the publisher Joseph Johnson. Lowth's recasting of the prophet – not as a simple prognosticator, but as an ancient poet whose works were inspired praises of God – proved fertile ground for thinkers and writers who critiqued and called into question received norms of biblical interpretation. It was Johnson who published Gregory's translation of Lowth's *Lectures*.³⁴⁷ Lowth's connections to this world of Dissenting religion and radical biblical criticism can also be traced through Alexander Geddes. Lowth had, earlier in his career, called for new translations of the Bible and further research into the literature and culture of the Old Testament. In answering this call, Geddes sent his *Prospectus* for his planned translation of the Bible to Lowth, then Bishop of London, who commented warmly on its merits: “[Lowth] cannot help wishing, that Dr. Geddes would publish it: it would not only answer his design of introducing his work, but would really be a useful and edifying treatise for young Students in Divinity.”³⁴⁸ Geddes's translations contained radical critiques of the biblical text that went beyond Lowth's more conservative conjectures, but which nonetheless imbibed Lowth's ideas about the importance of early Hebrew literary culture. Geddes drew attention to the contradictions and repetitions in the Old Testament and accounted for them by claiming that the Bible had its origin in the oral traditions of the ancient Hebrews.³⁴⁹ This connection with Geddes provides a further link between Lowth and the social circle surrounding Joseph Johnson's print enterprises: Johnson chose Geddes

³⁴⁷ Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1979), 114.

³⁴⁸ Alexander Geddes, *Doctor Geddes's address to the Public, on the Publication of the First Volume of his new Translation of the Bible* (London, 1793), 8. Lowth particularly voiced the need for further research into Hebrew texts in a 1758 sermon in Durham, where he called for new vernacular translations based upon new manuscript evidence: see Robert Lowth, *Sermons, and other Remains of Robert Lowth with an Introductory Memoir by Peter Hall* (London: Routledge, 1995), 258. For an account of Geddes's and Lowth's acquaintance see Norton, *Bible as Literature*, 2:59-60, n.10.

³⁴⁹ Alexander Geddes, *Critical Remarks on the Hebrew Scriptures*, 26. On Geddes's project of producing a vernacular version of the Bible, his approach to biblical narratives as “myth”, and his probable influence on Blake's *The Book of Urizen* see Mark Goldie, “Alexander Geddes at the Limits of the Catholic Enlightenment”, *The Historical Journal* 53:1 (2010), 68-72; Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 164-71, 174-8.

to be the chief theological reviewer for his *Analytic Review* periodical.³⁵⁰ Lowth's ideas about the literary value of biblical poetry, and its concentration in the Bible's prophetic books, thus found an audience beyond his initial Oxford lectures, as his ideas were disseminated through the prolific and eclectic London radical networks clustered around Johnson.

Given that Lowth's ideas found traction amongst Johnson's clients, it is therefore notable that Lowth's ideas about the prophet-as-poet are also echoed in Thomas Paine's writings. Paine was a regular attendee of Johnson's weekly dinners hosted at his shop, alongside Geddes, Gregory, and other prominent writers and thinkers such as Anna Barbauld, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.³⁵¹ In his discussion of the Hebrew Bible's prophetic texts, Paine rails against the emphasis on the prophets-as-prognosticators trope implicit in Christian interpretation, which saw Jesus and the early church as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophetic pronouncements:

There is not, throughout the whole book called the Bible, any word that describes to us what we call a poet, nor any word which describes what we call poetry. The case is that the word *prophet*, to which the latter times have affixed a new idea, was the Bible word for poet, and the word *prophesying* meant the art of making poetry.³⁵²

Paine reconfigures the prophet as a poetic author, whose writings were later read against an anachronistic interpretative framework of “prophecy and fulfilment”. Thus Paine saw the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel not as “fortune tellers”, but as authors whose imagery “had reference only to things of the time then passing, or very closely connected with it”.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 88.

³⁵¹ Tyson, *Joseph Johnson*, 120-121. Johnson initially published and sold Paine's *Rights of Man* in his bookshop, before swiftly withdrawing his association with the book. See further *ibid.*, 123-4; Braithwaite, *Romanticism*, 105-11.

³⁵² Paine, *Complete Writings*, 475 n.

³⁵³ Paine, *Complete Writings*, 561.

Through this reflection on the concept of the biblical prophets as poets amidst key figures in Joseph Johnson's circle, we can trace Lowth's influence on Blake. It is plausible that Blake was familiar with Lowth's works: Johnson frequently commissioned Blake as an engraver in the year following the *Lectures*' publication.³⁵⁴ Mee has suggested that Blake had attempted, not successfully, to ingratiate himself with Johnson in order that his works might reach an audience through the bookseller: Blake's rhetoric during the 1790s demonstrates a desire to align his thoughts on the Bible's authority with the criticisms offered by prominent members of Johnson's social circle.³⁵⁵ Indeed, scholars have claimed Blake's works show evidence of a direct familiarity with Lowth's works. Prickett, for example, seizes upon Blake's use of the phrases “the Spirit of Prophecy” and “poetic genius” as evidence for Blake's acquaintance with Lowth's ideas.³⁵⁶ Lowth's work placed the poetry of the Bible on the same aesthetic level as Greek and Latin poetry, and thus poets such as Blake could emulate its forms, satisfied in the knowledge that they were producing sublime poetry liberated from the rigid formalism of neo-classicism.³⁵⁷ Furthermore, Lowth's insistence that the prophets themselves were active authors, interested in crafting aesthetically and rhetorically effective texts, fed into Blake's own creation of prophetic texts through the medium of poetry. This led to Blake's emphasis on what Mee terms “the hortatory, rather than the predictive, function of prophecy”.³⁵⁸

On this basis, it may be tempting to chart the distinctions between the prophetic office as understood by Blake and radical critics such as Geddes and Paine on the one hand, and

³⁵⁴ Tyson, *Joseph Johnson*, 114.

³⁵⁵ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 169.

³⁵⁶ Prickett also argues that Lowth's description of the fragmented text of Aristotle's *Poetics* as “the Great Code of Criticism” is adapted by Blake when he described the Bible as “the Great Code of Art” in the *Laocoön*. Prickett, *Words and the Word*, 116-7; Robert Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation; with a preliminary dissertation, and notes critical, philological, and explanatory* (London, 1778), 1:lx.

³⁵⁷ Prickett, *Words and the Word*, 117. Murray Royston argues that Lowth's work on Hebrew poetry lies behind Blake's apology for not writing in blank verse in the prefatory address “To The Public” in *Jerusalem* (E145-6): see Royston, *Prophet and Poet*, 165.

³⁵⁸ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 27.

Brothers and Southcott on the other. Blake would thus emerge as a contemporary poet-prophet influenced by Lowth's reconfiguration of the biblical prophets. Brothers and Southcott, by contrast, see their prophetic roles as concerned with foretelling and prognostication. To use Mee's terminology again: Blake-as-prophet emphasises the hortatory; Brothers and Southcott the predictive. Katz has argued that figures such as Lowth, who emphasised the literary qualities of the Bible's prophetic texts, catalysed the "aesthetization (sic) of millenarianism". For Katz, what separates Blake from Brothers and Southcott is the way the the former "transformed the unthinkable sublime into the merely beautiful."³⁵⁹ Blake thus becomes Weber's exemplary prophet, inviting his audience to open up to an imaginative engagement with the world; Brothers and Southcott become the ethical, refusing to transform what they see as normative commands created through their prophetic readings into an aestheticized expression.

The evidence suggests a more nuanced picture, however. We can find echoes of the idea of the prophet as the producer of poetry even in Brothers's and Southcott's apparently "more exciting millenarianism".³⁶⁰ As Madden points out, Brothers's *The King's Song*, included in his *Dissertation on the Fall of Eve* (London, 1802), lyrically presents the vision of restoration he set out in prose a year earlier in *A Description of Jerusalem*. She claims that Brothers's verse reflected the contemporary preoccupation – instigated by Lowth – with the "proximity of poet and prophet".³⁶¹ Similarly, whilst Southcott may not have had direct acquaintance with Lowth's ideas, it is striking that in one of her earliest published works, she defends her extensive poetic communications: "Verse is an addition to words, and so is

³⁵⁹ D.S. Katz, "The Occult Bible: Hebraic Millenarianism in Eighteenth-Century England" in ed. James E. Force & Richard H. Popkin, *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture (Volume III): The Millenarian Turn: Millenarian Contexts of Science, Politics, and Everyday Anglo-American Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 2001), 119-21.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 192-3.

mine to the Bible: Verse is an echo, and it is the voice of the Lord echoing back to man.”³⁶² Contained within this defence, we find the important Lowthian themes of the divine inspiration of poetry, and the concept of poetry being an elevation of everyday language. Southcott conceives of her language, mediated through her communications with the Spirit, as “adding” to the language of the Bible, whilst simultaneously drawing upon its language and rhetoric. The appropriation of the “poetic” implications of prophecy thus had broader ramifications, problematising the distinction Katz draws between Blake on the one hand, and Brothers and Southcott on the other. All three of these authors, to admittedly different extents, imbibe the contemporary cultural discourse about the poetic nature of prophetic texts and subsequently use poetic forms to augment their engagement with the biblical text.

2.4. Conclusion

The survey of material offered in this chapter has put Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings of Revelation in context in two ways. Firstly, it has fleshed out what “prophecy” meant for Brothers, Southcott, Blake and wider eighteenth-century culture, and has explored how their resultant engagement with Revelation fits into contemporary interpretative discourses. Secondly, it has explored how eighteenth-century ideas about the literary outputs of the biblical prophets could be a contributing factor to the different forms of their own prophetic works. This contextualisation has had two key purposes: to highlight how their reflections on the book of Revelation contribute to active interpretative debates within late-eighteenth century British print culture, and to help us understand how Blake, Southcott and Brothers can be “placed together” as fellow prophetic readers of Revelation.

We have seen that the meaning of “prophecy” for Brothers, Blake and Southcott has four overarching common features. The differences in the form and content of their resultant

³⁶² Southcott, *Strange Effects*, part 2, 1.

prophetic writings centre on the importance of prognostication, and in the ways they use the Bible in the creation of their own texts. I suggested that Weber's models of the exemplary and the ethical prophet, and Wittreich's identification of the interplay between commentary and creation in prophetic texts, might provide helpful ways of explaining the divergent forms of Blake's works on the one hand, and Brothers's and Southcott's on the other, and their different ways of incorporating biblical texts into their own prophecies.

I explored how Brothers, Southcott and Blake fit into the wider culture of the interpretation of Revelation during this period. I noted that their respective careers coincided with an increased interest in Revelation amidst an expectation that the text could illuminate contemporary political upheavals in Europe. Additionally, their appropriations and readings of the book stand alongside other prophetic claimants, whose readings of the text indicate how prophetic inspiration could enrich understanding of the meaning of biblical texts. I have also highlighted how the interpretation of Revelation was an important subject for debate amongst would-be prophetic interpreters, with Revelation 12 especially proving to be a fruitful source of speculation for female prophets during the period. Additionally, I have also highlighted how prophets would draw extensively upon their own experiences, as well from broader events, in order to elucidate Revelation's symbolism, ensuring that it could continue to speak to the concerns of the contemporary prophet and their audience. Finally, I investigated the important conflation in eighteenth-century thought of the biblical prophets with the poet, and suggested ways we can see this reflected in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's works, as they describe how their texts could be seen as the outpouring of prophetic inspiration.

This chapter has demonstrated how the reading and interpretation of the Bible, and

especially the book of Revelation, was a central facet of prophetic identity during the eighteenth century. Prophets could often be careful readers, who could find meaning and significance in the smallest details of the biblical text. Moreover, their interest in Revelation, was not restricted to its eschatological vision. Rather, prophets engaging with the book could use it to articulate elements of their current experience; how it might inform their own prophetic identities, and how far the text could or should be incorporated into the formulation of a new prophetic text. In the following three chapters, we will look more closely at the engagement with Revelation by Brothers, Southcott and Blake, to ascertain more closely how the twin imperatives of prophetic interpretation and the production of new prophetic works, are reflected in their receptions of the text.

Chapter Three

Richard Brothers: Revelation and Restoration

Revelation never directly quotes or cites a text from its author's prior scriptural tradition. And yet, the book is steeped in allusions to prior prophetic texts. Symbolism from visionary texts, especially Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, are the building blocks upon which Revelation's author builds his own prophetic critiques and future hopes. Eighteenth-century readers recognised that this engagement with influential prior prophetic texts is a key ingredient in Revelation's own vision. John Wesley describes the book as “the Sum, and the Key to all the Prophecies which preceded, but likewise a Supplement to all”.³⁶³ Wesley's comments identify that interpretation of Revelation must grapple with the way in which it alludes to prior prophetic hopes, whilst also nonetheless forging its own unique message. For would-be prophets who engage with Revelation, a similar interpretative tension presents itself. The prophet's vision is forged through an engagement both with his influential texts in his own prophetic tradition, and their own unveiling of contemporary society.

For the prophets at the heart of this study, this poses a hermeneutical problem which has a significant impact on how they approach Revelation. How does John's prophetic vision key into their own? And how does Revelation relate to other prophetic texts in the Bible? For Brothers, these questions loom large when we consider his reading and exposition of Revelation. He sees himself as standing in a prophetic “line” which extends back to John, but also Daniel, Ezekiel, and the other prophets of the Bible: all “had the Divine Spirit of the Living God and prophesied from it”.³⁶⁴ He also consistently finds in Revelation references to himself and his mission to restore the Hebrew people. Brothers's reception of

³⁶³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London, 1755), 673.

³⁶⁴ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:84.

Revelation, therefore, throws the question of the intertextuality of prophetic interpretation and hope into sharp relief. He uses Revelation in different ways during his career to draw out themes and ideas that are integral to the evocation of his prophetic identity and his expectations for the future: the feeling of living in the perceived end-times; the promise of a New Jerusalem; the roles of human and divine agency in fulfilling prophetic hopes.

Brothers is far from alone in drawing these issues out of a reading of Revelation. In subsequent chapters we will explore in more detail how Southcott and Blake also draw out these themes of Revelation within their own prophetic works. For Brothers, however, the question of how Revelation fits both into his own prophetic ministry, and can cohere with other biblical prophets' visions, is an especially prominent feature of his interpretation of the text. At the centre of his future hope is the hope for a restored city of Jerusalem, a hope he shares with Revelation and a number of other biblical texts, but especially the book of Ezekiel. The harmonisation of these visions is an important aspect of his engagement with – and his interpretation of – Revelation.

Madden has demonstrated that the twin influences of the Bible, and Brothers's powerful sense of a prophetic vocation, shaped his perception of the world.³⁶⁵ The interplay between scriptural interpretation and the publication of new prophetic insights and revelations is thus a constant dialectic in Brothers's works. What follows is an attempt to isolate specifically how this dialectic affects his interpretation of Revelation. Madden has already identified key tropes in Brothers's appropriation of Revelation in his works: the use of the text to give shape to human history and current events; using it to solidify his prophetic identity; marking out London as a site of impending judgement.³⁶⁶ I want to draw on these

³⁶⁵ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 87.

³⁶⁶ On the use of Revelation as the hermeneutical key behind current events see *ibid.*, 67-8, 101, 117; for the use of Revelation in the construction of Brothers's prophetic identity see 90, 117, 135-6, 142; for the correlations Brothers draws between London and Babylon see 132-2, 135, 139.

insights to explore how paying attention to prophetic readers of Revelation can show us how the compulsion to “act out” the text, interacts with the act of reading. Brothers's use of Revelation, as I will demonstrate, changes during his lifetime, in keeping with a shift in theological outlook that Madden observes across his writings: from pessimism about contemporary society, to an optimistic view of the possibility of coexistence between established world powers and his own future reign.³⁶⁷ There is, however, a further facet of Brothers's use of Revelation which is of particular relevance to this study of prophetic readers of biblical texts. I suggest that Brothers's recognition of a literary relationship between the visions of Revelation 21-2 and Ezekiel 40-48 has an important effect on his conception of the New Jerusalem. In turn, this can help us to understand how prophetic readers of the Bible navigate key differences between apparently complementary biblical texts.

3.1. Sailor, Prophet, 'Lunatic'

While war continues in the world, JERUSALEM, the Capital of the KING OF PEACE is decreed to lie desolate.³⁶⁸

The profoundly anti-war tone of Brothers's early writings marks a powerful counterpoint to his life before his experience of prophetic calling in 1792. Brothers was born in Newfoundland in 1757 and joined the Royal Navy, serving with distinction in various campaigns in the Caribbean (including the Battle of the Saints in 1781) before retiring as a lieutenant in 1783. Between this point and 1791 little concrete information about Brothers's life and travels can be discerned aside from the fact that he was married to Elizabeth Hassall in 1786 before settling in London in 1787 – the marriage broke down when Brothers, returning from sea, found her cohabiting with another man.³⁶⁹ In 1789, Brothers

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 194.

³⁶⁸ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:5.

³⁶⁹ On the gaps in Brothers's early life and the now lost source used by early biographers to chronicle this period, see Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 3. A number of biographers suggest that Brothers was a member of the Merchant Navy after his retirement, and that this allowed Brothers to travel to France and

began to refuse to accept his half-pay pension, on the grounds that it was conditional upon swearing an oath of allegiance to the monarch.³⁷⁰ He admitted to the workhouse for his failure to pay rent in 1792, before suffering eight weeks' incarceration in Newgate Prison at the end of the year. Three years later, in the second volume of *Revealed Knowledge*, Brothers reflects upon the conditions he faced in the prison. The cramped conditions and meagre food allowances prompt Brothers to rail against the injustice in the treatment of the “entirely destitute” poor. It is this ordeal which he directly cites as evidence for his equivocation of London and “the Great City” of Revelation 11, the “Sodom” of the same chapter, and the doomed “Babylon the Great” of Revelation 18:2.³⁷¹

By 1792, Brothers became convinced he had been given a prophetic calling, which motivated him to take political action in the face of an imminent and cataclysmic moment of judgement upon Britain. He began writing letters to the government and to George III prophesying the deaths of a number of European monarchs.³⁷² He also recounts a number of visions in which he interceded on behalf of London to convince to postpone God's judgement, once in January 1791 and again in August 1793.³⁷³ In 1794, Brothers turned to a new medium of disseminating his prophetic message: the publication of a book. Brothers published two volumes of *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies & Times* through the radical publisher George Ribeau. He revised these volumes until they reached their final forms in September 1794 and February 1795 respectively.³⁷⁴ These books collated some of Brothers's visionary experiences as well as containing extended quotations of biblical

Spain. Cf. Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 47; Roth, *Nephew of the Almighty*, 19; Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 179.

³⁷⁰ Brothers narrates this episode in *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:57-8. See also *A Letter of Richard Brothers, (Prince of the Hebrews) to Philip Stephens, Esq...* (London, 1795), 3-6.

³⁷¹ *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:53. See further Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 134.

³⁷² *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:8.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1:27-30, 33.

³⁷⁴ For the compositional history of *Revealed Knowledge* see especially Barrell, *Imagining*, 506 and Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 188-9.

passages to which he added his own commentary and interpretation.

This document attracted crowds of visitors to Brothers's residence in Paddington Street, and Brothers even attracted a defender in the noted Orientalist, and MP Nathaniel Brassey Halhed.³⁷⁵ It also finally earned Brothers the attention of the governing authorities, who began to suspect that Brothers's anti-war proclamations may have been a front for a wider network of revolutionary activists. Of particular concern was Brothers's prediction – addressed to the King – that “your Crown must be delivered up to me, that all your power and authority may instantly cease.”³⁷⁶ Brothers was arrested on 4 March 1795 and tried before the Privy Council; a *De Lunatico Inquirendo* declared him to have been a lunatic since 1791.³⁷⁷

Brothers was committed to the Fisher House private asylum in Islington, where he remained until his release in 1806. During his incarceration, the majority of his followers (including Halhed) fell away or gravitated towards Southcott following her initial arrival in London in 1802. Nonetheless, Brothers was still able to rely upon his supporters to smuggle his writings out of the asylum, and was able to engage with Southcott's rival teachings.³⁷⁸ In 1806, a former lawyer from Scotland named John Finleyson secured his release and Brothers remained with him until his death in 1824. After Brothers's death, Finleyson published one of Brothers's works and continued to publish defences of

³⁷⁵ Halhed published a defence of Brothers's prophecies entitled *Testimony of the Authenticity of Richard Brothers and of his Mission to Recall the Jews* (London, 1795). After Brothers's arrest he also gave an impassioned speech to Parliament in support of his motion – which found no seconder – to have Brothers released (a transcript of Halhed's speech can be found in the April 1st, 1975 edition of the *Morning Chronicle*). See further Barrell, *Imagining*, 510-3, 539-42; Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and The Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 156-99; Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 79-80, 160-2; Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 191-4, 197-9;

³⁷⁶ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:106.

³⁷⁷ For a comprehensive investigation of the arrest and trial of Brothers as well as an overview of reactions in newspapers and pamphlets, see Barrell, *Imagining*, 504-47.

³⁷⁸ See Brothers, *Dissertation on the Fall of Eve* (London, 1802). For an account of Brothers life and writings up until his release from Fisher House see Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 165-284.

Brothers's teachings under his own name until his own death in September 1854, when he was interred with Brothers in St. John's Wood cemetery.³⁷⁹

Brothers's life saw him travel across the Atlantic ocean and through Western Europe before coming to a standstill in an Islington Asylum. From there, he turned his gaze Eastwards and towards his prophetic destination of Jerusalem, which lay permanently beyond his physical reach. It is a life which begins and ends in obscurity, punctuated by a brief nine-month tenure of notoriety when the eyes of London society, government and print culture were focussed upon him. Throughout all of these upheavals, the Bible, and Revelation, is a constant companion, as Brothers draws on the text to shape and articulate his prophetic mission. As we shall see, Brothers's use of Revelation shows that his prophetic readings are highly contextual, as Brothers levies details from his own life as keys to the interpretation of the text. In this manner, his readings have much in common with Southcott and Blake, who also bring their own local contexts to bear on their readings of the Bible. He also, however, reads the text in the light of other biblical texts, especially the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. What follows is an attempt to isolate the ways that this text captures Brothers's imagination change over this period, and the reading strategies he employs to engage with it. I begin this analysis by looking at how Revelation is used in Brothers's first printed texts, *Revealed Knowledge*.

3.2. A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times

A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times... Wrote under the direction of the LORD GOD, and Published by his Sacred Command... containing, with other great and remarkable things, Not Revealed to any other

³⁷⁹ Brothers, *The New Covenant Between God and His People; or, The Hebrew Constitution and Charter with the Statutes and Ordinances* (London: 1830); for a full list of John Finleyson's publications see Alexander Gordon, 'Finleyson, John (1770–1854)', rev. Timothy C. F. Stunt. In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9470> (accessed 9 May 2012). For an account of Finleyson's life after Brothers's death see Ronald Matthews, *English Messiahs*, 123-5; Roth, *Nephew*, 99-108.

Person on Earth, The Restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem, by the year of 1798: Under their Revealed Prince and Prophet.³⁸⁰

Madden has suggested the title of Brothers's first volume contains the nucleus of a theological outlook which Brothers retained throughout his lifetime.³⁸¹ Its full title makes five claims which are key to uncovering Brothers's interpretative standpoint on the Bible and its final canonical book. He claims to write “under the direction of the Lord God”; that the text is “the first sign of warning for the benefit of all nations”; that its contents are “not revealed to any other person on earth”; that it foretells “the restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem by the year of 1798” and that the leader of this restoration will be under a “revealed Prince and Prophet”. This paradigmatic mission statement has a consistent influence not only on Brothers's prophetic mission, but also on his engagement with biblical texts.

Immediately we may draw out three key inferences from Brothers's title which demonstrate the function of the document and its hermeneutical approach to the Bible. Firstly, we may note that *Revealed Knowledge* is – above all – a political document, addressing itself to “the nations” (cf. Revelation 10:11). Underpinning Brothers's text is a conviction that the interrelationship between the “prophecies” and “times” contains a powerful message of international concern.³⁸² This in turn gives us a useful insight into how Brothers approaches the task of interpreting the Bible: as for other commentators in the 1790s (see 2.2), contemporary history and scripture interpret one another. The Bible's prophecies point forward to the political events of Brothers's own day; the social upheavals wrought in Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution help to decode scripture's cryptic symbolism. *Revealed Knowledge* thus demonstrates the process of “reading prophetically”

³⁸⁰ *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:1.

³⁸¹ “We may, in fact, see how the very title of the first volume represented an intense moment of original clarity that summarised the author's entire mission.” Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 88.

³⁸² This is specified even more strongly in the title of the second volume which is more specific in outlining “The sudden and perpetual Fall of the Turkish, German and Russian Empires”. *Revealed Knowledge 2:1*.

identified by Gallagher (see 2.1).³⁸³ Brothers's reading of the Bible, like those of the other prophets examined in this study, has a dual focus: the text is read through the lens of what is taking place in the present; present circumstances are explained using the idioms of the text. As we saw in chapter 2, this interpretative role is an important component of prophetic identity. For our purposes, it is important to note therefore that Brothers expected events in the Bible, especially those alluded to in prophetic texts such as Revelation, Daniel and Ezekiel, to be acted out in human history. Brothers expected that the texts could be decoded by considering how contemporary events cohered with scriptural narratives, and that visions that had not been fulfilled could be actualised by an inspired prophet taking on pivotal roles contained within the Bible's plan for human history. This has an important effect on Brothers's attempt to harmonise the visions of Jerusalem in Revelation 21-2 and Ezekiel 40-8.

Secondly, Brothers presents himself as the unique key to unlocking the Bible's vital message for the present. The correct discernment of God's word is exclusively made available to Brothers himself, it is not revealed "to any other person on Earth". This is no small claim. Thanks to critics such as Paine and Geddes, the 1790s saw the question of the authoritative interpretation of scripture become extremely vexed, which – to a certain degree – destabilised the very text of the Bible.³⁸⁴ Through this declaration, Brothers denies that any other body or individual is able to offer a "correct" exegesis of the Bible's promises – not the established Church; academic critics of the text; His Majesty's government nor any other prophet. As we shall see in the following chapter, the establishment of the prophetic reader as an uniquely authoritative interpreter of the text is a

³⁸³ Gallagher, "Reading Prophetically", 148

³⁸⁴ McCalman argues that Brothers's emendations of the text and his citations of apocryphal texts such as 2 Esdras reflect a scepticism of received knowledge by self-made intellectuals and radicals of the period. Iain McCalman, "New Jerusalem: Prophecy, Dissent and Radical Culture in England, 1786-1830" in ed. Knud Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 312-335.

claim also made by Southcott.³⁸⁵ Brothers states that part of the revelation that his text imparts is the “Prince and Prophet” who effects the Bible's promises. The Bible thus points forward to its own revealer. Madden seizes upon Burdon's depiction of John of Patmos as a “prophet-seer” in order to describe Brothers.³⁸⁶ In doing so, however, Madden adds to Burdon's original description by claiming that a prophet-seer “weaves into his prose allusions to the Old Testament prophets, who foretold his arrival.” In fact, this places Brothers in a completely different category to John of Patmos who, as Burdon correctly states, depicts himself as a successor to – and not the fulfilment of – the earlier prophets he weaves into his vision.³⁸⁷ There is, however, an important difference between Brothers and the author of Revelation: John may reinterpret, modify and recontextualise their images and language but he does not, as Brothers does, make himself the subject and fulfilment of their prophetic utterances. Brothers does claim to be the recipient of the same revelatory spirit as John of Patmos: “the Prophet Daniel, and St. John, the Apostle, were instructed in the same manner to write what they have.”³⁸⁸ Yet he does not simply “borrow” imagery from his biblical predecessor. Revelation is a part of the scriptural web which points irresistibly to the one who can offer the ultimate interpretation of the Bible's promises. In taking on the prophetic mantle, Brothers is simultaneously uniquely able to interpret John's visions, whilst also being foreshadowed within them. In presenting himself thus, Brothers places himself above any other human interpreter of scripture (the obvious exception of Christ is painstakingly placed on a completely superhuman plane).³⁸⁹ The Bible can thus only be understood in the light of Brothers's prophetic text, which unveils its real meaning.

³⁸⁵ “The word of God is as a book that is sealed... till he thought proper to break the seals, and reveal it to a Woman”. Southcott, *Strange Effects*, part 1, iii.

³⁸⁶ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 96.

³⁸⁷ Burdon, *Apocalypse in England*, 11.

³⁸⁸ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:35.

³⁸⁹ See Brothers, *An Exposition of the Trinity*, 7-9 when Brothers claims that Jesus assumes human “form and likeness” by appearing as Melchisedek in Genesis 14. He states “Christ, though he suffered the rigours of torture under the form of and like a man, could become visible and invisible as he pleased” (*Exposition*, 9). The inherent docetism in Brothers's avoidance of terms such as “incarnation” and in his suggestion that the Trinity consists of a God with three names but not three persons is noted by Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 92-4.

Brothers is responsible for not only making sense of the Bible's cryptic future hopes, and in doing so correcting the judgements of other commentators, but he is also responsible for bringing the text to its fulfilment through his own writings and actions.

Finally, whilst the Bible commentates on contemporary events in world history, it nonetheless also furnishes the reader with a vision of the future which is yet to be fulfilled. A careful reading of scripture reveals that the world of 1794-5 stands on a climactic precipice in which history is shortly to be brought to its conclusion. As Madden demonstrates, Brothers arrives at this conclusion through a combination of complex calculations of the age of the world, based on Daniel 8 and 9, and through his association of London with the doomed Babylon.³⁹⁰ Yet the Bible also indicates that life will in fact go on, and a new order will be established in the form of the Holy City's restoration. The explicitly Hebraic character of this restoration demonstrates Brothers's indebtedness to the prophetic writings which express their future hope in the rebuilding of a sacred city, Jerusalem. These texts are – for the most part – concentrated in the Old Testament, yet they persist in the New Testament in the form of a heavenly, or new, Jerusalem, in Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 12:22 and, crucially, in Revelation. Brothers's commitment to this promise for the future has a profound effect on both his writings and his view of the world as his circumstances change. Fundamentally, however, it is the lens through which we can see Brothers's relationship with the Book of Revelation change over the course of his writings. The emphasis Brothers places on Jerusalem as a place of restoration encourages him to think about Revelation in tandem with Ezekiel, which imagines Jerusalem first as a place of desolation and ruin, and eventually as a place of God's presence on earth. The relationship between these two texts in Brothers's thought forms the basis for the analysis which follows: how do the intertextual allusions which pervade Revelation influence the

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 69, 131-41.

readings offered by a prophetic interpreter charged with the responsibility of bringing its future vision to fulfilment.

3.2.1. Revealed Knowledge, Biblical Interpretation and Prophetic Inspiration

A first glance at the two volumes of *Revealed Knowledge* demonstrates the importance of the Bible for Brothers's thought. The two volumes are comprised of large blocks of scriptural citations, which Brothers occasionally interrupts with his own commentary. In his introduction to his first volume, he states that “SCRIPTURE is the only great Fountain of Knowledge, or Book of written Truth in the World”.³⁹¹ The Bible, as Madden has observed, is central in Brothers's thought: “His prophecies and declarations were founded upon Scripture and returned, always, to the Bible.”³⁹² The Bible provides him with precedents for – and points forward to – his own prophetic mission, and his prophetic writings provide a uniquely authoritative exposition of the text's promises.³⁹³

Yet this text is not inviolable: Brothers questions the received interpretation of key scriptural texts and, where necessary, modifies them to suit his purposes. Throughout his writings, he repudiates the charge that he is misquoting scripture with such claims as “The alterations I have made in copying some of the Prophecies, is by the direction and command of the Lord God.”³⁹⁴ We see here the extent to which receiving prophetic revelation can affect and impinge on the authority even of scriptural texts. Despite the Bible being exalted as a unique source of “knowledge” Brothers is nonetheless, on account of *his* prophetic visitation, justified in making alterations to the Authorized Version. Further

³⁹¹ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:2

³⁹² Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 87.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, see especially 88-90.

³⁹⁴ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:27. In truth, Brothers mostly remains faithful to the text of the King James Version. On the title page of *An Exposition of the Trinity*, however, he alters the text of Psalm 2:6 from “Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion” to “Yet, Notwithstanding all their Opposition, I *will* set my King upon my holy hill of Zion” (emphasis mine).

justification can be found in the introduction to the second volume of *Revealed Knowledge*, where Brothers imbibes contemporary critiques of the instability of the dominant vernacular translation, noting that “Length of Time, change of Countries and Governments, corruption of Language” has rendered some parts of the Authorized Version “erroneous”.³⁹⁵ Whilst this does not unduly affect “the truth of its sacred records,” it provides Brothers with interpretative wiggle-room to make *his* reconstructions of the biblical text the uniquely authoritative record of God's word:

There is no other man under the whole Heaven that I discover the errors of the Bible to, and reveal a knowledge how to correct them, so that they may be restored as they were in the beginning, but yourself.³⁹⁶

Brothers, as God's prophet, is uniquely qualified to exposit the biblical text partly because the true text can only be known through direct divine revelation. Other commentators, relying on a text corrupted by generations of (mis)translation, cannot hope to interpret the text correctly.

For Brothers, prophecy and scripture are woven together so intimately that one cannot be known without the other. This directly impacts Brothers's attempts to harmonise biblical prophetic texts. For example, in *An Exposition of the Trinity*, Brothers attempts to negotiate a discrepancy between the date of the exile recorded in Daniel 1:1, and a conflict between Ezekiel writing in the “thirtieth” year of King Jehoiakin's reign (Ezekiel 1:1) about events which took place during the “fifth” year of his kingship (1:2). Brothers suggests that the text originally must have read “in the thirteenth year” of Jehoiakin's reign, and thus the corruption of the original text demonstrates the need for direct revelation in order to rescue the true text.³⁹⁷ Brothers's keenness to harmonise disparate biblical texts underscores his

³⁹⁵ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:iii.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ See Brothers, *An Exposition*, 21-22. Brothers's “revealed” emendation for the text in fact hits upon a long-standing crux in the text-criticism of Ezekiel. For a full survey of the issues surrounding this text see Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 65-6.

conviction that the Bible and his prophetic writings form the beginning and end of God's unified story of history. We can discern, here, an important discrepancy between Brothers and Blake. The latter, as explained in 2.1 and 5.2, was untroubled by the possibility of discrepancies between biblical texts, as he saw the texts' prophetic status subsisting in the creative imagination of their individual authors. Brothers, by contrast, seeks to ally his prophetic mission with a univocal command from God, mediated by the Bible and his own revelatory experiences. Brothers's consequent desire to harmonise the different prophetic visions given by God, as we shall see, plays an important role in his interpretation of Revelation's future hope.

The importance of visionary experience as a means of legitimating Brothers's claims, therefore, cannot be underestimated. The two volumes of *Revealed Knowledge* are replete with descriptions of visionary episodes in which Brothers is directly instructed by – and converses with – God. These visions fulfil a number of different functions. Certain visions aid Brothers in his interpretation of the Bible, for instance the vision in which he is informed that the “Thunders” heard in London between 1791-1793 are the “voices” of the angels in Revelation 7, 16, 18 and 19.³⁹⁸ Others are resonant of those experienced by biblical prophets and seers. In this latter category, we may include the extraordinary vision in which Brothers sees “Satan walking leisurely into London, his face had a smile, but under it his looks were sly, crafty, and deceitful.”³⁹⁹ or indeed the vision in which Brothers sees “a large river run through London coloured with human Blood.” This latter vision carries clear parallels with the plague of blood in Exodus 7:20-24 and its recapitulation as part of the third bowl of wrath in Revelation 16:4.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:28.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:29.

⁴⁰⁰ This vision also constitutes a neat inversion of the utopian visions of Revelation 22:1 and Ezekiel 47:1-12 in which the redeemed Jerusalem will have a rejuvenating river of life running through it.

Ultimately, these visions bring Brothers into direct continuity with biblical visionaries, and it is in this respect that Brothers is “instructed in the same manner” to write.⁴⁰¹ The mode of revelation that Brothers appropriates to support his messianic claims is one with strong canonical pedigree. Just as Daniel and John incorporated their prophetic predecessors in their own visions explicating their present circumstances, so too Brothers sees his actions as signifying the fulfilment of Daniel and John's cryptic symbols:

I proceed through the Scripture, regularly uncovering... its Sacred Records WHICH HAVE BEEN RESERVED FOR ME... what was wrote by Daniel at Babylon, EXPLAINED IN LONDON...⁴⁰²

Brothers composes his text by co-opting the Bible's authority, yet it is his own writings which are of primary importance.⁴⁰³ What *Revealed Knowledge* presents is both the “correct” meaning of the Bible for contemporary readers, and a fresh revelation from God – a reopening of the channels of communication which inspired the Bible's prophets visionaries. In the following sections, I draw on Brothers's *Revealed Knowledge* to reflect on his prophetic interpretation of the biblical text in two ways. First, I wish to outline how the biblical text influences Brothers's conception of Jerusalem, noting especially Brothers's application of Ezekiel's descriptions of Jerusalem's desolation to the present day. Second, I trace how Brothers draws on Revelation in these volumes, noting especially Brothers's emphasis on the first nineteen chapters of the book, rather than the eschatological vision of Revelation 21-2. Brothers's interest in these chapters, I contend, is important evidence for how the shift in theological outlook that Madden identifies impacts his reception of the biblical text.

⁴⁰¹ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:35.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 1:1.

⁴⁰³ Mee paraphrases the *Analytical Review*'s depiction of Brothers as a “prophet commentator” who claimed to interpret and *add to* the biblical canon through his own visions. Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, 97.

3.2.2. “The Prince of Peace, conducting the Jews to the Promis'd Land”: Brothers and Ezekiel

One of the aspects of Brothers's early writings which caught the popular imagination – both positively and negatively – was his claim that in 1798, he would lead a community of Jews to the Holy Land where they would construct a city which would fulfil the biblical promises of restoration to the land. This aspect of Brothers's prophetic project has attracted particular interest from later scholars, who have found in this declaration the key to the failure of the popular movement supporting Brothers and the seedbed of the ideas behind the British Israelite movement.

Brothers obliquely states in the title of the first volume of *Revealed Knowledge* that part of his unique commission is to effect “The Restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem, by the year 1798: Under their Revealed Prince and Prophet”. It is in texts published during, and after, his incarceration in Fisher House asylum that Brothers elaborates in painstaking detail his vision for the restoration of Jerusalem. Yet *Revealed Knowledge* nonetheless points to the dramatic transformation of the Holy Land that Brothers's mission will bring about. He draws especially on the book of Ezekiel as a proof text for the prophecy of the restoration of Jerusalem. He writes “The Prophet Ezekiel in the visions of God to him, describes the great extent, and grandeur of Jerusalem at a future time; and likewise of its being governed by a human Prince.”⁴⁰⁴ Ezekiel 36:45 encapsulated the expected radical transformation of the land: “The land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste, and desolate, and ruined cities, are fences, and are full of inhabitants.”⁴⁰⁵ Consequently, Brothers believed that Jerusalem in the mid-1790s was “a heap of rubbish and levelled with the ground”.⁴⁰⁶ It is this desolate land upon which Brothers imaginatively

⁴⁰⁴ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:76.

⁴⁰⁵ Cited in *Revealed Knowledge* 1:20.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

builds his Jerusalem through his writings at Fisher House. Furthermore, it is Brothers's selective reading of the Bible's restoration prophecies that provides him with an empty land, ready for the post-eschatological community to be instituted.⁴⁰⁷

The key to Brothers's prophetic self-conception is his continued insistence that biblical prophecies which refer to a restoration of (or return to) Zion are in fact testifying directly about him and his mission. Thus when Ezekiel 37:21-25 alludes to the regathering of “the Children of Israel” from “among the Heathen... in the land that I have given to Jacob my servant”, this refers not to the restoration of Judea after the Babylonian exile, but rather “The Vision of Ezekiel relative to Jerusalem, alludes to the grandeur and extent of it when rebuilt by the Jews after their return in the year of one thousand seven hundred and ninety-eight”.⁴⁰⁸ Biblical terms such as “the Children of Israel” are also subject to radical reinterpretation. Seizing upon the idea that ten of Israel's tribes were lost after the conquest of the Northern Kingdom, Brothers postulates that there are a group who may properly profess Christianity but that, like him, are ethnically Jewish:

For I declare by his sacred command, that the visible Jews are few in number, compared to the great multitude professing Christianity, but all descended from the former Jews in the Land of Israel, the forefathers of the present visible ones; which were, at different times led captive into all nations.⁴⁰⁹

Just some of those revealed to Brothers during a divine revelation were: the King and his family, William Pitt, the Earl of Buckinghamshire, and a man named Henry Phipps whose

⁴⁰⁷ Madden also notes the influence of contemporary travel literature, which Brothers quotes frequently in *A Description of Jerusalem*. She notes that one of Brothers's preferred writers is Robert Wood, whose *Ruins of Palmyra* and *Ruins of Balbec* were both extremely popular during the late 1790s and early 1800s, but also corroborated Brothers's belief that the Holy Land was a land which essentially lay in ruins. See further Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 205-6. Bar-Yosef further reflects upon Brothers's attitude of Palestine as an empty land, and connects this to his ignorance about the native peoples of the Levant. See Eitan Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land*, 55-6.

⁴⁰⁸ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:20.

⁴⁰⁹ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:85. Madden finds parallels between Brothers's language of “hidden” and “visible” Jews and the thought of Margaret Fell (1614-1702), which distinguishes between “inward” and “outward” Jews. Fell's interest is not to establishing a similar ethnic origin for English Jews and Christians, like Brothers, rather to make a distinction between outward signs of election (e.g. circumcision) and inner Christian faith (following Romans 2:28-9). See Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 60.

brother once did Brothers an act of friendship.⁴¹⁰ The members of this to-be-revealed Jewish community, then, are those to whom Brothers is already predisposed towards or those who he hoped to win over with his prophetic campaign.

Brothers's theory that the British were in fact descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel could be viewed as another iteration of the philosemitism which a number of scholars have discerned as a continual theme in English protestant culture during the long eighteenth century, centring on the expectation the restoration of the Jews to Israel.⁴¹¹ Indeed, scholars have noted that Brothers's conviction that the English were – in some sense – a chosen people, has deep roots within early modern Protestant thinking.⁴¹² Many aspects of his prophetic mission have parallels with religious and political figures and movements of the previous 150 years.⁴¹³ Yet Brothers's specific insistence that he and certain other Englishmen were direct ethnic descendants of the twelve tribes ensured that part of his legacy was that of the founder of British Israelism.⁴¹⁴ Even this, however, has become a contested point in scholarship on Brothers, with Madden and other writers pointing out that later British Israelites were extremely reluctant to look to Brothers as the originator of their tradition.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁰ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:28. Brothers own line of descent proceeds through the apostle James, who – as Christ's brother – was of the tribe of Judah, making Brothers a descendent of King David and “Nephew of the Almighty” (*Revealed Knowledge* 2:87).

⁴¹¹ See N.I.Matar “The Controversy over the Restoration of the Jews: from 1754 until the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews”, *Durham University Journal*, 51:1 (1990), 29-44; Mayir Vreté, “The Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 8:1 (1972), 3-50.

⁴¹² Bar-Yosef reflects specifically upon Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* as embedding within English Protestant consciousness the notions of “Jerusalem in England” and the English being God's chosen nation. He argues that both of these themes are clearly manifest within Blake, Brothers and Southcott's writings. See Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land*, 54, 59-60. See also Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 30-2.

⁴¹³ Garrett provocatively states that “the more peculiar features of Brothers's revelation all had their base in English popular religion” (*Respectable Folly*, 225). Cromwell's well-documented desire to allow Jews to settle in England during his protectorate may well have stemmed from his interpretation of the Bible. McCalman offers a number of other 17th Century parallels of individuals who reflected a “literalist and activist strand of Jewish restorationism”. See Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 61; Iain McCalman, “New Jerusalem”, 324.

⁴¹⁴ So Matthews, *English Messiahs*, 89-90; Balleine, *Past Finding Out*, 36; Matar “Controversy”, 33-34.

⁴¹⁵ Madden particularly highlights how Brothers claims a Jewish heritage for a select group of individuals rather than the whole Anglo-Saxon race. She also points out that Brothers – as well as a number of other

Whatever Brothers's legacy to later social and theological movements may have been, what is important for our purposes is to note Brothers's reliance upon Ezekiel as a proof-text for his hopes for the restoration of Jerusalem. It is this text that legitimates his prophetic mission and thus it is foremost in his mind when he seeks to actualise the Bible's hope for a New Jerusalem.

3.2.3. Revealed Knowledge and the Book of Revelation

In her study of Brothers's life, Madden identifies an important shift in his theological outlook which she astutely observes highlights the problems with neatly categorising Brothers's as a “millenarian” or “pre-millennialist.” Madden finds Brothers's treatment of London in his works as symbolic of a “move from millenarian doom to postmillennial optimism between 1795 and 1801.”⁴¹⁶ There is an additional trend in Brothers's writings which confirms her reading. The shift Madden identifies is, fundamentally, a change in perspective on the interplay between the present and the future: the compatibility between the current political, economic and religious context and Brothers's conviction of a future hope centred upon his rule in Jerusalem. In *Revealed Knowledge*, Brothers's focus is on the shortcomings of the present day. A key objective is to demonstrate that London in 1794-5 is a city filled with moral decay whose destruction at the hands of God is dangerously imminent. This focus on the present, I argue, has an effect on the texts that Brothers engages with in his writings. Specifically, it means that Brothers is interested far more in

individuals – claimed descent from the tribe of Judah which was not lost (Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 58-61). Bar-Yosef uses the more nuanced term “proto-British-Israelism” to describe Brothers's contribution to this religious tradition (*Holy Land*, 55). Similarly, Wilson considers Brothers to be an important predecessor to the modern movement, but notes that neither Brothers nor Finleyson identified the lost tribes with any one single nation (“Brothers was intent on establishing his position as the leader of the chosen people, and it appears to have been of secondary importance to him where these people now resided”). See John Wilson, “British Israelism: The Ideological Restraints on Sect Organisation” in ed. Bryan R. Wilson, *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 249-52; Allen, “Southcottian Sects”, 231-2. See also Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002), 36-57.

⁴¹⁶ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 194 (see also 10-11, 55-6).

the first twenty chapters of Revelation – texts which he sees as engaged with the present moment – than he is in the future hope enshrined in the book's closing chapters.

Revelation makes its first explicit appearance in Brothers's writings well over half way through *Revealed Knowledge*. In a section titled, “The Judgments of God” Brothers declares that

The very loud and unusual kind of Thunder that was heard in the beginning of January 1791, was the voice of the Angel mentioned in the Eighteenth chapter of the Revelation, proclaiming the judgement of God and the fall of Babylon the great.⁴¹⁷

From this point of the text until its conclusion Revelation is used heavily as the scriptural basis upon which Brothers constructs his view of contemporary society, his place in God's plan for history and his prophetic identity.

One of Revelation's key functions in *Revealed Knowledge* is to act as an interpretative key to the institutions who are most engaged with the key upheavals of the period, especially the British monarchy and government, a trend noted in the previous chapter. Thus Revelation 16:13, which depicts “three unclean spirits” proceeding from the mouth of the Dragon, refers to a doomed proclamation by the King and Council for Parliament to gather; Armageddon in 16:16 is interpreted as the Houses of Parliament where Brothers predicts they will meet destruction.⁴¹⁸ Similarly, in his interpretation of the vision of Revelation 12:1, Brothers claims that the moon under the feet of the woman represents “the Turkish Empire in Asia”.⁴¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, the vision of Revelation 13 is fertile ground for this strand of Brothers's exegesis. The beast from the sea represents the English monarchy, with the head which suffered a mortal wound but was healed in 13:12 representing the execution

⁴¹⁷ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:27

⁴¹⁸ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:28-30.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

of Charles I and the monarchy's recovery under Charles II.⁴²⁰ The beast that emerges from the earth in 13:11 signifies the “Elector of Hanover” and the Hanoverian ascension to the monarchy in the eighteenth century.⁴²¹

Revelation is also an invaluable source text for Brothers as a result of the text's frequent and ambivalent treatment of cities, a feature of the text which also interests Blake. Brothers uses John's city visions as a key to understanding the London of his own day.⁴²² Perhaps unsurprisingly – given the connections he had begun to forge in Newgate – Revelation's presentation of Babylon is formative for Brothers's own depiction of London. A number of features of contemporary life in London cement this association. London is marked out thus partly on account of the tremendous commercial activity taking place in the city, and particularly that generated by maritime trade.⁴²³ He quotes in full Revelation 18:11-20 which depicts the mourning of the merchants and the sea-traders, and consequently claims that Revelation 18 describes London: “the greatest Sea Port, for Ships, Wealth, and Commerce, in the World”.⁴²⁴ Brothers thus seizes on Revelation 18's prevalent critique of imperial economic dominance to show how the text speaks directly to contemporary life in the capital: “Read attentively the Eighteenth Chapter, and you will perceive described in it, the prodigious wealth, grandeur, and commerce of London”.⁴²⁵

Brothers does more than simply identifying London with the city-state presented in

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 11, 101-2. Brothers mistakenly cites 13:13 as the verse which contains the description of the head with the wound.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 102.

⁴²² See further Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 131-47.

⁴²³ As White notes, the number of ships entering the port of London doubled over the course of the century, with around 14,800 ships entering the port in 1795, carrying with them shipping goods worth more than £31 million. Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012), 168-9.

⁴²⁴ *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:30.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 31. For a discussion of Revelation 18's critique of the economic dominance of 1st century Rome, see Allen D. Callaghan, “Apocalyptic as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21 (1999), 46-65.

Revelation 18, however. He in fact conflates a number of Revelation's city scenes to interpret them as referring to London in the 1790s.⁴²⁶ In doing so, Brothers exploits the fluid connection between cities and their names in Revelation: in Revelation 11:8 the “great city” where “our Lord was crucified” is “spiritually called Sodom and Egypt”. The reference to Jesus' crucifixion may point to Jerusalem as the reference to the vision (so Aune), but the use of the phrase “the great city” is also used of Babylon and by extension Rome in chapters 16-8 (so Beale). Boxall thus suggests a dislocated “great city” which “can never be located on a terrestrial map” which “can manifest itself in any city in the world where God's sanctuary is attacked.”⁴²⁷ Brothers's capacity to see London enshrined in both of Revelation's “great cities” is thus an interpretative move which exploits Revelation's inherently unstable spiritual geography. For Brothers, London is at the same time the “Great City” and “Sodom” of Revelation 11, and also “ROME, Spiritually called BABYLON the GREAT”.⁴²⁸ London's commercial ambitions, its ill-treatment of God's chosen eschatological agent and its refusal to accept the divine plan of history (by failing to recognise that “the Revolution in France, and its consequences, proceeded entirely from the Judgment of God”) confirms to Brothers that it is the doomed city appearing under various guises in Revelation.⁴²⁹

Revelation, then, is used by Brothers as a key to understanding the true reality between the established structures of power in his own day. The ominous portents of the 1790s also point towards the fulfilment of the book's many threats of judgement. He declares: “The FIFTH SEAL is now opened, and the secret Prophecy contained under it, is published for

⁴²⁶ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 131.

⁴²⁷ David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 52B, Revelation 6-16* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 620; Beale, *Revelation*, 591-3; Boxall, *Revelation*, 165-6. Elsewhere, Boxall has identified a long-standing interpretative tradition of interpreting place names in Revelation symbolically. See Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, 19-22.

⁴²⁸ *Revealed Knowledge*, 2:53.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

the Information and benefit of all Men.”⁴³⁰ The opening of the next seal points forward both to the expectation of judgement for the wicked, but also to his own revelation to the Jews.⁴³¹ Revelation thus also, like Ezekiel, contributes to Brothers's prophetic self-conception. In his account of Revelation 5 and 6 he argues that the contents of the scroll are focussed upon Brothers's own day and do not depict already-fulfilled events. Furthermore, the one who opens the scroll's seals, is “the designated spiritual person” which is – of course – Brothers.⁴³² The scroll's contents, Brothers claims, “have been carefully preserved FOR ME”. He further uses Revelation 6 to make perhaps an even more important claim about the text of *Revealed Knowledge* itself. He states: “the contents of the spiritual book... is known, and a REVEALED KNOWLEDGE of it published in this Visible Book”.⁴³³ The interpretative space given to Brothers by Revelation – insofar as the *contents* of the scroll are never explicitly read out in the text – allows him to give himself and his text the weight of its authority. Brothers's own words are inscribed upon the scroll which only the Lamb may open (Revelation 5:9). His connection with Revelation's lamb is further strengthened when he argues that he is the Lamb on Mount Zion in Revelation 14:1 where Zion alludes to his promised rebuilt Jerusalem.⁴³⁴

Brothers's reading of Revelation thus proceeds under the conviction that he is one of the text's central protagonists. We can see, here, how pivotal and complex the concept of “agency” is for a prophetic biblical interpreter. Brothers, like Southcott, reads the text under the conviction that his life and mission are inscribed within it. In both cases, the text

⁴³⁰ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:91.

⁴³¹ This latter aspect of the interpretation comes from the connection he draws with the emergence of Michael in Daniel 12:1. Revelation and Daniel are often very closely linked in *Revealed Knowledge*. For example, he states that Revelation 19 “means the same things, though differently described, as the prophet Daniel does in the seventh chapter” (*Revealed Knowledge*, 2:9).

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 2:51-2. There is an intriguing parallel here with David Koresh, whose own belief in himself as the one ordained to open the seals on the scrolls and interpret their meaning instigated the tragic events in Waco, Texas in February-April 1993. See Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 183-4.

⁴³³ *Revealed Knowledge* 2:52.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:104.

“reveals” their identity, and in turn, they are responsible for revealing the text's meaning. Their inspired human activities and writings are part of the divinely-controlled plan for the unveiling of human history, itself inscribed by God through the biblical prophets. We will see this tension emerge as a frequent theme in Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings of Revelation, as the role of human agents in the interpretation and fulfilment of prophecy is explored in each prophet's engagement with the book.

Brothers's use of Revelation to establish his prophetic identity allows him to reflect upon the interpretative possibilities of the vision of Revelation 12. Uniquely for Brothers's use of Revelation in *Revealed Knowledge*, he interprets Revelation 12 as a vision which allows him to understand his own future role in the events of the end and the society which will continue after it. He identifies himself as the “sun” which clothes the woman. This sun is the “Prince” which will “enlighten the World”, whereas the woman is “his consort” and not, as commonly supposed, the Church nor the “Mother of Christ”. The crown with twelve stars which she wears is interpreted as a sign of Brothers becoming “prince of the twelve tribes”. The reference to the woman retreating into the wilderness signifies her and Brothers's journey to Jerusalem, a city which is “situated *far inland* from the sea”. Brothers also interprets the woman's child as a reference to him, and the child being caught up to the Throne of God is explained as “the child going up to Jerusalem, where the throne of God will be on Earth.” The dragon which pursues the woman and her child represents a malevolent European Prince who seeks to persecute Brothers with “Proclamations and Manifestos”.⁴³⁵ As shown in 2.2.2, in claiming that the vision of Revelation 12 points to his own prophetic identity, Brothers enters deeply contested interpretative space. Most notably, Southcott would proclaim in 1801 that *she* was the living embodiment of the woman of John's vision and would give her a central role in the salvific scheme she outlined. As

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 2:75.

Madden suggests, the gnomic narrative of Revelation 12, with a dramatic mythological conflict featuring mostly anonymous protagonists, provided a template for a number of competing prophetic actualisations and interpretations.⁴³⁶ Brothers found in this text a prefiguration of his own future rule in Jerusalem; a microcosm of the transformation that he expected to bring about through his fulfilment of other biblical hopes for restoration.

In *Revealed Knowledge*, Revelation serves a twofold purpose: it is an important tool both to solidify his status as a prophet, and a means of properly understanding “the times”. The text marks out the 1790s as a moment of crisis. Through its interpretation, Brothers assumes John's mantle of “prophet” and indicates that he is the one chosen to effect God's redemption for those who would follow him to Jerusalem. The prophetic insight Brothers receives into the interpretation of Revelation puts the present moment and the imminent future into their proper perspective. Yet in *Revealed Knowledge*, Brothers does not draw on the whole book: he omits any reference to the final two chapters. In a passage in the first volume, he does interpret the biblical promise of new heavens and new earth and argues that this refers to “an entire regeneration of man through the power and knowledge from the Spirit of God.”⁴³⁷ Yet Brothers is – in this section – dealing with the promise as it occurs in Isaiah 65:17. The echoed hope of Revelation 21-22 is not directly referenced. We can thus see a tension in the prophet's engagement with Revelation which appears still more markedly in some of his later works. Revelation 1-20 is an essential source for Brothers to support his perception that the world is entering its last days. Yet by not citing the text's final two chapters, it is clear he has reservations about building his own vision of future hope upon Revelation 21 and 22. *Revealed Knowledge* reflects instead upon the radical transformation of the Holy Land depicted in Ezekiel 40-48. Revelation is an invaluable

⁴³⁶ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 143.

⁴³⁷ *Revealed Knowledge* 1:16.

window on the present; its view of a blessed future reign with God, however, remains untouched by Brothers at this stage of his prophetic ministry.

3.3. A New Jerusalem?

As noted above, Madden isolates Brothers's incarceration as a turning point in the tone and content of Brothers's writings. As he spent more time in the asylum, his writings focus more strongly on the restoration of Jerusalem, and his prophetic pronouncements of doom against contemporary London become less frequent and more nuanced. His thoughts turned to the future, to the restored Jerusalem. Rather than being condemned by God for rejecting his prophet, Brothers also increasingly saw a role for present-day England in the (re)construction of his city.⁴³⁸ Removed from the political turbulence of mid-1790s London, Brothers's interest in applying Revelation's visions to contemporary British and European history fades. From this point onwards, Brothers's interest in the text increasingly furnishes his imaginative reconstruction of New Jerusalem and provides a resource to articulate his frustration at his incarceration.

During his incarceration, Brothers was able to publish eight works thanks to the help of his supporters. Of particular importance for our understanding of how Brothers's attitude and use of the Bible changed during this period are *Wrote in Confinement. An Exposition of the Trinity* (1796); *Letter to Miss Cott, the Recorded Daughter of King David... With An Address to the Members of His Britannic Majesty's Council and through them to all Governments and People on Earth* (London: repr. Edinburgh, 1798), *A Description of Jerusalem: its Houses and Streets, Squares, Markets, and Cathedrals, The Royal and Private Palaces, with the Garden of Eden in the Centre, as Laid down in the Last Chapters*

⁴³⁸ “the city changes from mystical to magnificent, from sublime to beautiful, from apocalyptic to utopian: its terrifying power has been tamed by the benevolent hand of Providence.” Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 194.

of *Ezekiel* (1801) and *A Letter to the Subscribers for Engraving the Plans of Jerusalem* (1805).⁴³⁹ A large proportion of these works are dedicated to imagining life in the New Jerusalem.

This focus on Jerusalem has an effect on the scriptural texts that Brothers engages with. Two trends are particularly worthy of note. First, Revelation as a whole becomes steadily less prominent in Brothers's thought over the years of his incarceration. Second, we have seen in 3.2.2 that Brothers sees himself as being called to effect Ezekiel's hoped-for restoration of Jerusalem, but now he also offers interpretative comment on Revelation 21-2 – a text he had previously ignored. Brothers's interest in the conclusion of Revelation foregrounds the relationship between these two prophetic visions of “New Jerusalem”. The task of reconciling these texts within the framework of Brothers's own vision for the restoration of Jerusalem on earth, is thus an important facet of his reading of Revelation. Revelation 21-2 may contain many allusions to Ezekiel 40-48, yet the author of Revelation 21-2 exercises his own creative freedom in shaping Ezekiel's visionary hope for a new city to suit his own theological purposes: readers may be struck by the vision's similarities but “the differences are no less significant”.⁴⁴⁰ As Brothers argues that the two prophets look forward to the establishment of New Jerusalem under his leadership, he is faced with the task of showing how his prophetic mission can fulfil the related – but distinct – visions of his prophetic forebears.

Alongside tracing other notable appropriations of Revelation in his later writings, this

⁴³⁹ Other works that Brothers had published during this time included *Notes on the Etymology of a Few Antique Words* (London, 1795), a riposte to Southcott entitled *Dissertation on the Fall of Eve* (London, 1802), and a tract entitled *Wisdom and Duty* (London, 1805) which further outlined the character of legal and civic life in the New Jerusalem. On these latter two texts see especially Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 218-91 *passim*.

⁴⁴⁰ Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 82.

section particularly explores Brothers's engagement with Revelation 21-2. The ways Brothers navigates the differences between these two texts highlights an important dynamic in prophetic biblical interpretation. How does Brothers's interpretation of Revelation 21-2 square with his attested commitment to actualise the restoration of Jerusalem envisaged by Ezekiel? The response Brothers offers to this question, highlights key issues in the interpretation of Revelation 21-2: its relationship to other prophetic texts; the symbolism of the city, and the interplay between human and divine agency in the fulfilment of biblical prophetic hopes. These are themes that we will see recurring in the reception of Revelation in Brothers's contemporaries, Southcott and Blake.

3.3.1. *An Exposition of the Trinity*

Brothers's first prophetic writing published after his incarceration in Fisher House is a tract published in two editions (the latter printed on 18th April 1796). Its foreword shows Brothers beginning to soften the claims he made in *Revealed Knowledge* about being a uniquely authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Whilst he still insists that he is “more eminently distinguished and more constantly communicated with” than any extant sect or denomination, he does not “assume the least pretence of monopolizing all knowledge of the Scripture and of the present times”.⁴⁴¹ He affirms, however, that the only correct interpretation of biblical prophecy is one which proceeds through the agent which created it, the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴² Prophetic texts still require a spirit-led interpretation – and Brothers is still best placed to offer such an interpretation – but inside the walls of Fisher House he publicly admits he is not the only possible expositor of prophecy. This is, however, still a far cry from the democratisation of prophecy which we find in Blake's thought. Furthermore, Brothers's insistence that correct biblical interpretation must proceed from

⁴⁴¹ Brothers, *An Exposition of the Trinity*, 3.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

spiritual inspiration would lead to conflict with Southcott in their respective publications after 1802, rather than an acknowledgement of her prophetic status.

There is considerable continuity between Brothers's interpretation of the Bible from *Revealed Knowledge* and *An Exposition of the Trinity*. Appended to the latter text is a commentary on Daniel 12. In this, Brothers again takes up the kinds of mathematical calculations of the end times he offers in *Revealed Knowledge*.⁴⁴³ Daniel 12:1, with its reference to the emergence of “the great prince” Michael who shall emerge in “a time of trouble” is embodied by Brothers himself.⁴⁴⁴ Furthermore, Brothers continues the interpretative method he established in *Revealed Knowledge* by decoding various meteorological phenomena in the light of the various pronouncements by angels in Revelation. What these pronouncements convey, crucially, is the same sense of living at a propitious moment of human history which punctuated his first written volumes. In an appended letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer (dated August 17th 1795) Brothers argues that thunder heard on 13th August was the voice of the Angel of Revelation “announcing from Heaven the End of time.”⁴⁴⁵

In a footnote, Brothers goes on to define more precisely his conception of “the End of Time”. He explicitly denies that he (or the Bible) means “the entire destruction of man, or dissolution of the world”. Rather, the event refers to “the end of human government in its present form, which will terminate at the commencement of the Reign of Christ on earth”.⁴⁴⁶ This is an important statement for understanding how Brothers's interprets those parts of the Bible which speak about a destruction and rejuvenation of the created order (notably, of course, Revelation 20-22). It is not until Brothers's next published volume, *A*

⁴⁴³ *An Exposition of the Trinity*, 17-30; *Revealed Knowledge* 1:3-7.

⁴⁴⁴ *An Exposition of the Trinity* 17-8.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Letter from Mr Brothers to Miss Cott (1798), that he more fully expounds his interpretation of the future hope expressed at the climax of Revelation.

Nevertheless, we find in *An Exposition of the Trinity* a continuation of some of the key beliefs which underpinned Brothers's biblical interpretation before to his incarceration. The conviction that he and his readers were living in the last days, and that the prophecies of the Bible pointed forward to – and informed – his own prophetic identity, are all themes prevalent in *Revealed Knowledge*. It is in this text, also, that his alterations to the Authorized Version of the Bible are most clearly seen. He argues that Daniel 12:7 ought to read “it shall be for a time – times – and half *an* [sic] *half*” (emphasis mine).⁴⁴⁷ This change allows him to calculate the date of his restoration to Jerusalem to 1798. His concern about the “inattention” of copyists of the Bible – which he initially raised in *Revealed Knowledge* – legitimises his claim to be able to alter the very text of scripture.

3.3.2. A Letter from Mr Brothers to Miss Cott... with an Address to the Members of his Britannic Majesty's Council

“this is the hour of trial; it is the hour that tries the faith of every living soul on earth.”⁴⁴⁸

Two years after the final edition of *An Exposition of the Trinity*, the year of Brothers's predicted restoration had arrived. Now that the climactic moment of world history which the Bible had foretold was here, it was beholden upon Brothers to outline more extensively how his impending revelation as Prince of the Hebrews would fulfil scripture's eschatological promises. Brothers's *Letter to Miss Cott* and his *Address to the Members of His Britannic Majesty's Council* were published together in 1798. The former was written

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴⁸ *A Letter to Miss Cott*, xi.

soon after Brothers's incarceration in 1795 (the letter is dated 27th of June 1795), whereas the latter is dated March 18th, 1798. This was the year that Brothers had predicted he would be revealed to the Jews, leading them to fulfil the biblical promise of restoration.

It is here that Brothers engages most fully with the future expectations of Revelation 20-22. He was not alone in pinpointing this year as a propitious moment and using Revelation to uncover its significance. Blake, in his annotations to *An Apology For The Bible* declared that in 1798, “the beast and whore rule without controls” (E611). During the preceding years the Pitt administration had taken measures to clamp down upon radical opposition, introducing the Newspaper Publication Act of 1797 which gave magistrates power to carefully supervise publishers.⁴⁴⁹ London's economy was also characterised by a series of sharp contrasts. Whilst an act to build the West India docks was passed in 1797 to capitalise upon London's continual strength as a shipping centre, wages in real terms for London craftsmen declined from 1794, reaching a low in 1800.⁴⁵⁰ Brothers's conception of London, however, is one of unrivalled economic prosperity:

Her spreading downs are covered with sheep, her fields are full of corn, and her meadows are full of cattle! Her harbours are full of ships, and her cities are full of manufactures.⁴⁵¹

For Brothers, England is a well-resourced land which must melt down its weapons and convert them into “plough-shares and reaping-hooks” in order to escape the impending divine judgement (Micah 4:3).⁴⁵²

In the preface to the *Letter to Miss Cott*, Brothers once again draws on Revelation to affirm his own unique identity. Upon meeting his fellow inmate, Frances Cott, Brothers claims

⁴⁴⁹ Leonard W. Cowie, *Hanoverian England: 1714-1837* (London: Bell and Hyman Limited, 1967), 382.

⁴⁵⁰ George Rudé, *Hanoverian London: 1714-1808* (1971; repr., Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 230-1, 250-1.

⁴⁵¹ *A Letter to Miss Cott*, 64.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 65. See also Blake's *The Four Zoas* 124:19-22, where “the iron edges of destruction” are broken down to form “the spade the mattock & the ax” before the final harvest at the climax of night nine (E393).

that she was “the very exalted female alluded to by St. John in the Revelation”.⁴⁵³ His incarceration, combined with his descent from the Davidic line allows him to identify further with the “slain Lamb” of Revelation 5, and hence the only one able “to open the seven seals of the Revelation”.⁴⁵⁴ In the same passage, Brothers also claims that Revelation 11's reference to “the holy city... trod under foot” does not allude to an actual city, but rather is a coded reference to Brothers's own predicament after his incarceration.⁴⁵⁵ We see here a reinterpretation of this chapter from *Revealed Knowledge*: the text's meaning is renegotiated in light of Brothers's shifting personal circumstances. Now that the political critique which was so prevalent in his earlier writings has become less prominent, the text can be re-read as a metaphor for Brothers's own life. To this end, the meaning of Revelation's imagery is malleable and determined primarily by Brothers's own prophetic rereadings. As chapter 4 demonstrates, this is a feature which Brothers shares with Southcott in their use of Revelation. For Southcott too, Revelation's visions can be reread and reinterpreted in the light of the prophet's individual experience, allowing the prophet to find in the text new ways to understand their prophetic mission.

Brothers's interest in Revelation is affected by this evolution of his prophetic mission from *Revealed Knowledge*. In *Revealed Knowledge*, part of Revelation's function was to illustrate the grim judgements in store for the world's governments if they did not accede to Brothers's demands. In *An Address to the Members of His Britannic Majesty's Council*, his forecast moment of judgement and eschatological renewal has arrived. Brothers writes:

Human opposition to the restoration of the Jews, and the revelation of their prince for that glorious purpose... would compel God to fulfil not only the 18th chapter of the Revelation, but also the 18th Psalm, to convulse the world, shew the channels of the deep, and, as St. Peter in his 2d Epistle avers it to be, to burn the face of the globe with fire.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 75. For more on Cott see Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 171.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., x.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., xi, 41.

⁴⁵⁶ *Address*, 36-7.

The warnings given by Brothers in 1795 can be put off no longer and the stakes are now global. Unless humanity assists Brothers in his mission of restoration, the localised judgement of Babylon/London in Revelation 18 would be fulfilled as part of the world-wide conflagration by fire predicted by 2 Peter 3:10.

After the expected end-time purgation, which Brothers claims can be avoided through complicity with his mission to Jerusalem,⁴⁵⁷ Revelation's closing chapters describe a new mode of existence for God's chosen people in the New Jerusalem. In outlining his own promise for the eschatological restoration of Jerusalem, Brothers finally offers an interpretation of Revelation's visions of new heavens, earth and holy city. Once again, however, the symbols used in Revelation's closing chapters have a dual function: they can both describe Brothers's imagined Jerusalem and they can be prefigurations of Brothers and his mission. The text provides material to flesh out the nature of life in the rebuilt Jerusalem, proving the peaceable nature of Brothers's proposed restoration. 21:24-26 – showing the nations of the saved and the kings of the earth bringing their “glory and honour” into the New Jerusalem – demonstrates that Brothers's mission “does not... imply an hostility to all other governments” provided that they acknowledge his power.⁴⁵⁸ Yet specific features of the city, such as “the Lamb and Temple of God” in Revelation 21:22 represents Brothers himself, the Shiloh of Genesis 49:10 who “collects the Jews from all nations under heaven to their own in the latter days of the world”.⁴⁵⁹

Brothers maintains his tendency to interpret biblical material which refers to an eschatological act of recreation in terms of a rejuvenation of the human personality and society. In the *Address*, Brothers interprets Revelation's expectation of a new heaven and

⁴⁵⁷ An extended section of Brothers's *Address to His Majesty's Council* is dedicated to outlining the resources that he will require from the various nations of the world. Ibid., 48-66.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 35-6.

earth. He writes that the declaration of “Behold I make all things new,” which John hears in Revelation 21:5-6, heralds the moment when humanity is “changed and regenerated by the spirit of God as to become a new being worthy to adore his Maker”.⁴⁶⁰ Rather than imagining a bodily resurrection at the eschaton, Brothers claims that the Bible points towards man being given “a new life to live longer, and a new understanding to live better.”⁴⁶¹ Thus Revelation's new creation points forward to a new mode of living rather than the complete destruction and recreation of the physical world. Provided his audience do not force God's hand by hindering Brothers in the fulfilment of his prophetic mission, human life as we know it will not come to an 'end' but will rather continue under a new blessed, Brothers-led government. His reading of Revelation here thus marries the widespread expectation of a cataclysmic cosmic upheaval with the toned-down eschatological expectations we saw in Swedenborg's works (2.2.1). Blake also depicts the eschaton as a shift in human perception, “an improvement of sensual enjoyment.”⁴⁶² Brothers's interpretation of the text leaves both options open: God can choose to destroy creation, or humanity can choose to be renewed through their commitment to Brothers's prophetic vision.

In his writings of 1798, Brothers invokes Revelation and its final chapters to demonstrate that world history is at a turning point. The present, however, is now far more compatible with Brothers's vision of the future than it was in 1795. Brothers's writing instead highlights his hope for a radical transformation in how humanity is to be organised and how it will respond to God. He engages, for the first time, with Revelation's symbol of a New Jerusalem. The city foreshadows a peaceful community, living in harmony with neighbouring nations, with Brothers himself as its focal point – the light-giving temple at

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 42-3.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁶² Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14, E39.

Jerusalem's centre. He affirms that what John sees in his vision is the city which Brothers himself has been called upon to construct. This text now emerges, alongside the hopes for restoration particularly expressed by Ezekiel, as a prophetic vision which will be fulfilled through Brothers's actions and writings. We need to look forward to the new century, after the pivotal moment of 1798 had come and gone, to see precisely how Brothers sees his mission to Jerusalem fulfilling John's vision of a god-given city descending out of heaven.

3.3.3. Describing Jerusalem

By 1801, Brothers's hope to be revealed as the Hebrews's leader and to establish the rebuilt Jerusalem in Palestine had been thoroughly disappointed. Still in the confines of the asylum, he nonetheless clung to the belief that his vision of a New Jerusalem was to be constructed and that he would one day be installed as its leader.⁴⁶³ This continued hope is expressed in *A Description of Jerusalem*, where Brothers continues to affirm himself as “the King and Restorer of the Jews”.⁴⁶⁴

Brothers introduces *A Description of Jerusalem* as the fulfilment of a command by God “to describe the Plan of Jerusalem, as laid down by Ezekiel, from the 40th to the 48th chapter of his book, so plain that the Hebrews and all nations may clearly understand it.”⁴⁶⁵ Glossing Ezekiel's unnamed visionary city as Jerusalem, the ensuing document sets down an extremely detailed vision of the city, with the exact dimensions of buildings and streets which will surround Jerusalem's centrepiece – the Garden of Eden and the King's Palace. Brothers's description of the city draws upon contemporary London architectural trends to

⁴⁶³ Madden creatively describes Brothers's continued efforts to write about and plan for the restoration of Jerusalem during his incarceration as an attempt “to reconstruct a magnificent cityscape to which he can escape whilst confined at Fisher House”. Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 175.

⁴⁶⁴ Richard Brothers, *A Description of Jerusalem: its Houses and Streets, Squares, Markets, and Cathedrals, The Royal and Private Palaces, with the Garden of Eden in the Centre, as Laid down in the Last Chapters of Ezekiel* (London, 1801), 1.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

imaginatively fulfil the imperative given to Ezekiel in 40:4 to “declare all that thou seest to the house of Israel”.⁴⁶⁶ Brothers sees his work as physically realising the “spiritual plan” handed down to Ezekiel. He writes:

the spiritual appearance then is now realized in an actual visible existence of the man so represented at the time: and as it was first by the man spiritually God gave a plan of Jerusalem, so now, by the same substantially, does God realize the former appearance in spirit into the present in substance.⁴⁶⁷

Brothers's role vis à vis Ezekiel is complex. Ezekiel's vision of the restored city in 40-48 foreshadows Brothers's commission to construct the city. Yet they also exist in typological relationship to one another: both Brothers and Ezekiel are the recipients of independent divine revelations that communicate the contours of the urban centrepiece of the redeemed world. Ezekiel sees the city and is told to set down its plans in text; Brothers sees the city in his visions and is commissioned to carry Ezekiel's plans out.

It is in this text that the visions of Ezekiel and John are brought together within Brothers's prophetic writings. Brothers links his text very closely with John's own vision of the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven. In an illustration detailing an aerial plan of the city, entitled “Plan of the Holy City the New Jerusalem” Revelation 21:2 is cited as an epigram.⁴⁶⁸ Clearly Brothers saw his city as a fulfilment of Revelation's. This is fleshed out more fully in the text of the *Description* when he states that John saw the “similitude” of Brothers's city.⁴⁶⁹ The interplay between the three cities imagined by these prophets is complex: what God shows John descending out of heaven in Revelation 21 is the city described by Ezekiel in 40-48. which Brothers imaginatively “builds” in 1801.

⁴⁶⁶ Bar-Yosef points out that Brothers's “Garden of Eden” is “a glorified Hyde Park” and notes that the description of the city is reminiscent of John Nash's work in Regent Street. Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land*, 53-4. See also Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 209.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶⁸ *A Description of Jerusalem*, 16.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

There is a curious tension here between Revelation's New Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, and Brothers's New Jerusalem that Ezekiel inspires him to build from human agency. It is a tension which Brothers himself recognises. On the basis of texts like Revelation 21:2 Brothers states “divine power is really necessary to effect” the city's splendour.⁴⁷⁰ This is perhaps most dramatically borne out when Brothers considers the difficulties involved in including the “river of life” of Revelation 22 – correlated with the revitalising river of Ezekiel 47:1-12 – in his rebuilt city. Believing that his city was to be built at the site of the original Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-14), Brothers claims that at the flood, the garden was destroyed and hills raised to create the site where Jerusalem currently stands. In order to have the river of life run through the city, Brothers argues that “it now belongs solely to God to restore it at least to some part of its original level”.⁴⁷¹ The strategy Brothers suggests to effect this change is the removal or levelling of the Mount of Olives, for which he turns to Zechariah 14:4 for scriptural support.⁴⁷² Bar-Yosef sees this passage as important evidence for the Bible's primacy in shaping Brothers's imagined Jerusalem: “the existing topography must yield to the biblical text”.⁴⁷³ Madden points to moments like these in Brothers's later writings to challenge the distinction often drawn between “millennial” and “utopian” writings, pointing particularly to the oscillating emphasis on human and divine agency to set up and maintain life in Jerusalem.⁴⁷⁴ The difficulties Brothers's texts pose for employing this type of etic classification highlight how attention to Brothers's reading strategies provide a fruitful alternative way of unpacking these dynamics of his thought.

So if, as Bar-Yosef states, the biblical text is Brothers's prime resource for the mental

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 18.

⁴⁷³ Bar Yosef, *Holy Land*, 53.

⁴⁷⁴ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 236.

construction of his city, it provides materials which do not tessellate without difficulty. It is Ezekiel, rather than Revelation, that opens up the possibility for a human agent to bring about the construction of the city and – via the figure of the “prince” in 37:25 – to govern over it.⁴⁷⁵ It is thus undoubtedly this earlier text, with its far more extensive description of the restored city which provides the principal inspiration for Brothers's Jerusalem. At one point in his account of the city, Brothers states “I am still standing in the parliament-square and looking due east.”⁴⁷⁶ Madden correctly points to similarities with Ezekiel's vision of Jerusalem, in which the prophet does not merely “see” the future city but walks within it.⁴⁷⁷ In contrast, John's description is given from the vantage point of a “great, high mountain” (21:10) and he is never explicitly shown entering New Jerusalem's walls. Furthermore, scholars have noted that Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem strongly emphasises divine agency, and the city's heavenly origin, in its account of its descent to earth: “it owes its existence to the condescension of God and not to the building of men.”⁴⁷⁸ Brothers's actualising interpretation of Ezekiel in *A Description of Jerusalem* has a number of similarities with the medieval rhetorical technique of *ekphrasis*, in which the subject of the text's description is experienced by “the mind's eye”.⁴⁷⁹ Ezekiel's experience of his visionary city provides Brothers with a map upon which he can construct and arrange the contours of his own vision.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁵ *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:20

⁴⁷⁶ *A Description of Jerusalem*, 25.

⁴⁷⁷ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 233.

⁴⁷⁸ G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A&C Black, 1966), 271. See also George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Oliphants, 1974), 308. Boxall, *Revelation*, 294, suggests that Revelation leaves room for human agency by noting that the bride's clothing is described as “the righteousness of saints.” (19:8). Bock suggests that in envisioning eschatological restitution through the symbol of a city, “the future cannot come into existence without the collaboration of Man.” Bock suggests that Revelation 21 contrasts Babylon through the *method* of building, with the New Jerusalem vision emphasising the need for “the grace of Heaven” to influence construction. Emil Bock, *The Apocalypse of Saint John*, trans. Alfred Heidenreich (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1986), 183-4.

⁴⁷⁹ See further Mary Carruthers, “The 'Pictures' of Jerusalem in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 156” in ed. Lucy Donkin & Hanna Vorhold, *Imagining Jerusalem in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 97-121.

⁴⁸⁰ Carruthers, referring to a medieval manuscript which illustrates the text of Ezekiel with illustrations of Ezekiel's envisioned city, states “That kind of meditative collation, so typical of medieval homily, is invited by this 'map' of a wholly imagined city, a map that both helps to invent and to arrange further

Where does this leave Revelation 21-22 in the formation of Brothers's prophetic hope for a new life in Jerusalem? Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem contributes to Brothers's city through its close coherence with Ezekiel's initial visionary experience. Revelation 21-22's principal function, however, is to legitimate Brothers's own vision of Jerusalem. It demonstrates that Brothers's city has been anticipated by God and his prophets since the reign of Domitian in the late first century CE.⁴⁸¹ He describes John's vision in his *Letter to the Subscribers*, published in 1805, as follows:

This elevated description, tho' it must be taken in a metaphorical sense, nevertheless identifies the reality; and that it will be superb in appearance; it is also fully corroborated by the knowledge of futurity... recorded in the scripture for the purpose.⁴⁸²

Brothers's insistence that John's vision is primarily a metaphorical depiction of the city he is commissioned to reconstruct is matched by other dissenting writers of the period. James Bicheno in 1800 interpreted Revelation 21-22 as describing the inception of the Kingdom of God after the restoration of the Jews “in all the sublimity of eastern metaphor”.⁴⁸³ The distinction which Saul Katz sees between the “aestheticization” of millenarianism, in the tendency to see the Bible as a literary work in the eighteenth century, and the more “messianic” millenarianism of Brothers somewhat breaks down here.⁴⁸⁴ The prophet Brothers – like the commentator Bicheno and the poet-prophet Blake – is a reader of the Bible and is capable of seeing it as a text imbued with metaphor, which invites creative interpretation by the inspired reader. John's vision of the New Jerusalem is metaphor, not

composition upon it.” (Ibid., 110). Similarly, Lara has perceptively described how Ezekiel 40-48 has a long history of being used as an architectural model for utopian city planning. Jaime Lara, “Halfway between Genesis and Apocalypse: Ezekiel as Message and Proof for New World Converts” in ed. Paul M. Joyce and Andrew Mein, *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 144-5.

⁴⁸¹ Brothers explicitly dates Revelation to “sixty-three years after the Savior was on earth” in *A Letter to Miss Cott*, 31.

⁴⁸² Brothers, *A Letter to the Subscribers*, 38.

⁴⁸³ James Bicheno, *The Restoration of the Jews, the crisis of all nations; or, an arrangement of the scripture prophecies, which relate to the restoration of the Jews...* (London, 1800), 84.

⁴⁸⁴ Katz, “The Occult Bible”, 129.

law. The ways in which Brothers's reading of Ezekiel diverges from his reading of Revelation highlight the different actualisations of biblical texts required when apparently congruent visions nonetheless diverge in their finer details. Ezekiel gives the utopian blueprint upon which Brothers can build his city; Revelation provides the metaphorical corroborating witness to his prophetic convictions. Thus Brothers can build Ezekiel's city, whilst still being in accord with what John “saw”.

We may see two motivations lying behind this turn towards elaborate, physical descriptions of Jerusalem. We may draw an etic comparison with movements such as the Levellers and Diggers of the seventeenth century, who underwent what Hill termed “the experience of defeat” after their revolutionary hopes failed.⁴⁸⁵ An expected moment of divine intervention (1798, for Brothers) had passed, with the expectation of vindication defeated. An instructive parallel can be drawn with Gerrard Winstanley's last publication *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652). Hill characterises this document as a text written “after defeat,” offering “a programme for the introduction of a communist society by state action, *example having failed*.”⁴⁸⁶ The failure of Brothers's millennial expectations in 1798 similarly drives him to a new means of expressing his hope for a transformation of human society.

Alternatively, we can see this turn to the description of his promised city as a manifestation of Brothers's commitment to the Bible as the basis for articulating his prophetic missions. Undeterred by the apparent failure of his revelation as “Prince and Prophet” of the restored Hebrews, he once again turns to the Bible to elaborate the instructions laid down by Ezekiel so that God's people “may observe and follow the entire plan and all its

⁴⁸⁵ For Brothers's hopes for the governance and the constitutional structure of Jerusalem see especially *Wisdom and Duty* (London, 1805) and *The New Covenant Between God and His People* (London, 1830).

⁴⁸⁶ Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and some Contemporaries*, rev. ed. (London: Bookmarks, 1994), 36. Emphasis mine.

ordinances” (43:11). His experience of disappointment leads him to expound more thoroughly what it means to build Ezekiel's city. In doing so, the alternative vision of Revelation must be fulfilled in a different way, and thus John's text stands as a visionary and metaphorical foretaste of the physical construction Brothers hopes to draw out of Ezekiel's text.

3.4. Conclusion

Brothers's Jerusalem remains an unrealized fantasy; lacking symbolic extension, it now lacks meaning except as a record of failed aspiration. In contrast Golgonooza... is a mental model of human reality. It is not tied down to literal predictions; rather it is what Blake calls a 'divine analogy'.⁴⁸⁷

Brothers died in 1824 never seeing his textual reconstruction of Jerusalem realised in reality. Yet across his writings, we find the enduring symbol of the Bible's last city-state: humanity's destination after God's dramatic intervention into the world. The parallels with Blake's mode of thought and construction of cities in his poems (especially *Jerusalem*) are often cited by scholars seeking to contextualise and to contrast these writers' modes of interpreting and reappropriating the Bible's imagery.⁴⁸⁸ How does Brothers arrive at his more concrete Jerusalem? And how does his conviction of a prophetic calling shape his readings of texts such as Revelation which would appear, at least on the surface, to cohere with his eschatological hopes? Here we will briefly recap dominant tropes which govern how Brothers used Revelation in his writings – focussing particularly on his treatment and appropriation of the symbol of New Jerusalem. On this basis, we will interrogate further whether Paley's distinction between Brothers's “literal predictions” and Blake's “divine analogy” is a fair one.

⁴⁸⁷ Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed With the Sun”, 278-9.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 261. See also Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 22, 194; Bar-Yosef *Holy Land*, 51-60; Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 184.

Brothers appeals to Revelation to confirm his sense of a prophetic vocation in two ways. He notes that his experience of divine revelation coheres with the types of “dreams and visions” which inspired John of Patmos and Daniel to write their texts. As a recipient of communications from God, which gives special insight into his purposes for humanity and the world, Brothers stands within a prophetic tradition in which he and John are both inspired to write by being “in the Spirit”. In this regard, Brothers's self-conception as a prophet is comparable to the author of Revelation's. As a result of attaining the “spirit of Prophecy”, John of Patmos becomes a member of the prophetic brethren recorded in the Hebrew Bible and thus continues their work of writing to God's chosen people “what thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (1:19). Brothers too, after being visited by the spirit of prophecy, is able to see anew the fulfilment of the Bible's prophetic hopes.

In addition, Brothers's status is inscribed by Revelation and Ezekiel in a more direct way. Brothers himself is the subject and fulfilment of John's prophetic utterances. This tendency in his interpretation of the text is particularly clustered around passages which place characters such as “the Lamb” or “the man-child” at the centre of events in the text. A passage from his *Description*, where Brothers comments on the throne vision of Revelation 5:11-12, perhaps best illustrates this facet of his interpretative approach:

'the four beasts with eyes before and behind' (metaphorically my four principal friends that see forward into futurity, as well as they see, backward, past events) – the elders – (metaphorically my other counsellors and friends) – the angels (metaphorically the Hebrew believers, and all others God chooses) are, with the angels and multitudes of people, represented as being before the throne of heaven, saying, that I who could encounter such distress and difficulties, 'am worthy to receive honour and riches, glory and power,' for not only having redeemed them from oppression by suffering myself, but also by saving them from destruction by my compassion and entreaty to God.⁴⁸⁹

Brothers exploits the concentric circles of worshipping figures in John's vision, centred

⁴⁸⁹ Brothers, *Description*, 154-5.

upon the Lamb, and decodes it in the light of his own experience to depict himself as the subject revealed by the vision. Revelation thus validates his prophetic claims firstly by demonstrating that his own, additional experiences stand within a recognised prophetic tradition. Secondly, as a result of this “revealed knowledge,” he can be assured that his prophetic writings and actions are explicitly foretold by the text. *His* reading of Revelation, then, is underwritten by the text itself.

In this way, Brothers himself takes centre stage as the ground and arbiter of meaning in the text. When we consider the interplay that Newport establishes as a key tenet of eisegetical interpretation – between the text and the “interest of the reader” – we can see how Brothers consistently makes prior prophetic texts “bear the weight of the reader's own... concerns.”⁴⁹⁰ His reading of Revelation is thus informed by the mission he felt called to carry out: the restoration of the Jewish people and of the city of Jerusalem. This commitment to the desolate holy land's transformation becomes the dominant lens through which texts such as Revelation 21-22 ought to be read. What Brothers first reads out of the Bible is a commitment to become a leader and restorer of a people and nation, this commitment then subsequently gets read back in to the Bible, as he reacts to developments which allow him to reevaluate how this commission can be fulfilled. This interplay between the Bible, Brothers's prophetic mission, and contemporary society and culture is noted by Madden who reads Brothers's Jerusalem as a “discursive space” which he shares with Blake. It is a space made possible through their participation in a “tradition of Scriptural prophecy”, which in turn allows them to read biblical prophetic hopes in the light of their own visions of contemporary society.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 19.

⁴⁹¹ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 194-6.

Yet, as Newport highlights, Brothers's interpretative control over the text is not absolute, and our investigation has shown that Revelation's persistent intertextual allusions do affect on Brothers's reading.⁴⁹² Reading the Bible through an interpretative lens which fixes hope upon a physical city, leads Brothers into an encounter with two texts which express a similar hope but diverge in small, yet significant ways. By reading into Revelation 21-22 his hope for a rebuilt Jerusalem, Brothers engages – in a different way – with a hermeneutical problem also occupied a contemporary biblical commentator of a more academic bent. John Wesley observed:

Ezekiel also describes the Holy City, and what pertains thereto... The descriptions of the Prophet and the Apostle agree in many Particulars. But in many more they differ... Yet that which he [John] describes is the same City; but as it subsisted soon after the Destruction of the Beast.⁴⁹³

Brothers's solution is to likewise affirm that John and Ezekiel describe the same city, but that the prophet is called to actualise them in different ways, clinging more closely to the text which invites a physical urban construction carried out by human agents: Ezekiel. The city which John saw “descending out of heaven from God” stands primarily as a figurative witness to Brothers's own mission, a visionary foretaste of what is to be physically built at the close of the eighteenth century.

By paying attention to the ways a prophetic reader like Brothers navigates the relationship between Revelation and earlier prophetic texts, we can gain an important insight into the ways that intertextual resonances in the text can affect interpretation. As Moyise has noted, Revelation's allusions to – and divergences from – Ezekiel's vision of the restored city, place an interpretative responsibility on the reader:

The reader is caught in a dilemma. Much of the book sounds familiar, yet he or she is constantly having to wrestle with the 'literary landmines' in the text... the

⁴⁹² “The text imposes at least some element of order on the reader's thoughts and gives the interpretation a basic structure.” Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 19

⁴⁹³ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 751-2.

vision of the new city is a complex mixture of similarities and differences which have to be thought out. The reader is not expected to create a synthesis and then retire from the exegetical task.⁴⁹⁴

Brothers's engagement with Revelation 21-22, and his decision to identify the city described within it with the cities revealed both to Ezekiel and to Brothers himself, therefore creates an important hermeneutical problem. How can the later prophet, following his own divinely-communicated imperatives, nonetheless bring to fruition the visions of the earlier prophets? For this reason, Paley's dichotomy between Brothers's "literal predictions" and Blake's "mental analogies" are an unhelpful simplification of the former's prophetic interpretation. Significant differences between prophetic texts, which nonetheless stand in a literary relationship with one another, become highlighted in a very different way when they are invoked by an interpreter who seeks to "act out" their promises. Brothers's solution to the interpretative impasse is to emphasise the "metaphorical" over the physical. In its own way, however, this is an important rereading of John's own visionary claims. This does not necessarily preclude us from seeing Brothers as a careful and sensitive reader of the text. In making himself the subject of the text's claims and promises, however, Brothers's own prophetic call to action becomes the focal point which all prior visions and revelations must harmonise with. How far a text supports or complicates Brothers's vision determines how the text is to be acted out and explained. We can thus see how Brothers's interpretation of Revelation is guided and influenced by the twin influences that Wittreich identifies as inherent in the prophetic reader: the need to exposit earlier prophecy, and to articulate new revelations.

Brothers's interpretation and actualisation of Revelation 21-2 rests on the assumption that part of what the book reveals is Brothers's integral role in the fulfilment of God's purposes for humanity. Brothers reads Revelation under the conviction that he himself is inscribed in

⁴⁹⁴ Moyise, *Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, 83.

it. As we have shown in the previous chapter, contemporary prophets such as Brothers, Southcott, and Blake draw upon Revelation in a number of ways to cement their belief that they too share the same “spirit of prophecy” as Revelation's author. For Brothers, this manifests itself in the conviction that he, and his personal circumstances, are directly inscribed in the Bible's final book. Revelation provides a narrative by which he can make sense of the prophet's mission and the tribulations that hinder its fulfilment. In this specific regard, Brothers's reading of Revelation has much in common with his contemporary, and eventual rival, Southcott. In the following chapter, we will explore how Southcott's interpretation of Revelation – which likewise places the prophetic reader at the core of the text – reconciles the book's prophetic narrative with the changing contexts of a prophetic mission. This task – played out in both publicly-available publications and in private correspondence circulated among supporters – sees Brothers and Southcott's interpretations of Revelation's promise of New Jerusalem, and the identity of the woman in Revelation 12, compete with one another for authority over the right to explain the text's promises. Both prophets demonstrate that prophetic biblical interpretation is deeply concerned with the connection between prophetic identity, tradition, and future hope.

Chapter Four

Joanna Southcott: The “Woman” and the World of Revelation

We have seen through the study of Brothers's writings how Revelation could be read by a prophetic interpreter so that they find themselves inscribed as an actor within the biblical narrative. This, in turn, affects the interpretation of the text, forcing the prophetic reader to confront and navigate relationships between other biblical prophetic visions and texts. It also, as 2.2.2 showed, can create conflict with other rival prophetic actualisations of the text. In *Revealed Knowledge*, Brothers offers an interpretation of Revelation 12 which marks him out as a pivotal character in the divine plan of history, and asserts that the vision's principal function was to prefigure his forthcoming journey to Jerusalem. In this exposition, the figure of “the woman clothed with the sun” becomes actualised as a supporter of Brothers's messianic aims, relegated to the level of his “consort”, with her celestial accoutrements signifying Brothers's future rule.⁴⁹⁵ Southcott offers a competing actualisation of this text: the woman becomes the dominant actor within the end-time drama and possesses her own prophetic power. These different readings of Revelation 12 constitute one of the major theological and interpretative conflicts between the two prophets.

From the outset, Southcott's writings and mission demonstrate the importance of the book of Revelation and the vision of chapter 12 in the construction of her prophetic identity and world-view. This chapter offers an account of the ways the book is received and interpreted throughout Southcott's extensive body of writings.⁴⁹⁶ Southcott's biblical interpretation is deeply informed by events that took place during her life. The chapter therefore begins

⁴⁹⁵ So Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 270-1.

⁴⁹⁶ During her lifetime, Southcott published 65 books, beginning with *The Strange Effects of Faith* in 1801 (first printed in Exeter, reprinted in London in 1802), and concluding with *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace* in 1814. In addition to these published writings, the Southcottian archive at the Panacea Society in Bedford has preserved a large collection of unpublished manuscript prophecies, which have also been consulted for this chapter.

with a biographical sketch, before looking more broadly at her relationship to the Bible, which has three key emphases: the need for prophetic revelation to unlock the meaning of the text; the importance of typology as a method of interpretation and the need to read Revelation intertextually, linking the book's visions both to other parts of the Bible and to events in her own life.

I then chart Southcott's conviction that she embodies key female characters in Revelation and how her engagement with these texts recur and shift over her lifetime. I analyse her interpretation of four key scenes and characters from Revelation which furnish her self-conception as a prophet, and her eschatological expectations. First, I examine her treatment of Revelation 12 and her actualisation of the "woman clothed with the sun". Second, I discuss how she interprets the chapter's pregnancy imagery over her career. Third, I explore how her identity as the "bride" functions in her writings. Finally, I examine her treatment of the concluding vision of Revelation 21-22, paying particular attention to how she interprets the symbolism of the New Jerusalem. These texts are important because the readings of these visions that Southcott produces touch on key themes which are generated by Brothers's and Blake's prophetic readings of Revelation. Her insistence upon actualising the woman of Revelation 12, and the bride of the book's closing chapters causes her to consider not only the roles of human and divine agency in effecting end-time promises, but the specific role of women in God's redemptive plan. These ideas are especially key to Blake's reception of Revelation. Southcott's interpretation of Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem demonstrates tensions between seeing the city in physical, material terms, and as a symbolic prefiguration of her visitation. Her readings, as shown especially in 4.2.3, are intertextual, bringing Revelation into conversation with other key biblical narratives where women play a prominent role. Like Brothers and Blake we can also see that Southcott's

engagement with Revelation is not limited to eschatology, as she uses the text to present herself as a successor to John's prophetic visitation.

Southcott's reading of Revelation is driven by a life-long conviction that the text provides the narrative frame not only to understand the world around her, but events in her own life. Her immersion into Revelation's narrative marks her and her followers as key players in a cosmic eschatological drama. In turn, the text directly inspires the movement's activities, which sought to fulfil the book's promises. Southcott's use of Revelation demonstrates again how the competing authorities of text and interpreter dynamically interact within an interpretative framework of prophecy. Brothers makes the text yield to the contours of his own prophetic convictions; for Southcott, Revelation – and the role it gives to female characters in its vision of the end-times – provides a structure to her thoughts, even as she applies her own prophetic hermeneutical lens to the text. In Southcott's writings, the text interprets her life and ministry, just as much as her prophetic visitation gives her an insight into the correct interpretation of the text. The prophet asserts a shared authority with the text, and thus the two are in a constant interplay as Southcott uses Revelation to affirm her actualisation of “the woman clothed with the sun.”

4.1. The Making of a Prophet

Southcott was born in 1750 near Ottery St Mary in Devon and grew up in the small village of Gittisham, finding employment as a domestic servant in a number of households in Exeter. Her religious background was in the established Church but she nonetheless demonstrated an interest in Methodism and she was ordered “by divine command” to attend class meetings in December 1792 and formally join the Methodist movement. Her attempts to explain her prophetic vocation to the class-leader and his congregation were

met with scepticism and hostility, causing her to abandon her interest in Methodism and commit her mission to the Anglican Church.⁴⁹⁷ 1792 marked a turning point for Southcott's prophetic identity, as she claimed:

in 1792, I was strangely visited, by day and night, concerning what was coming upon the earth. I was then ordered to set it down in writing, I obeyed...and so it has continued since.⁴⁹⁸

Despite strong opposition from her family, from 1801 Southcott began to publish these prophetic communications from the “the same Spirit that... inspired all the prophets throughout the Bible.”⁴⁹⁹ Her claims attracted broader repudiation. One of her most notable opponents was Joseph Pomeroy, a vicar in Bodmin, Cornwall. After he visited Southcott in 1795, Southcott became convinced that he endorsed her prophetic claims, and handed over her writings to him, sealed seven times, as the scroll of Revelation 5:1.⁵⁰⁰ Pomeroy later retracted his support when he saw that Southcott had published his name in her writings.⁵⁰¹ Thus began a campaign against Pomeroy which continued until 1813, with Southcott and her supporters castigating him for backsliding on his belief in her visitation. Southcott's pursuit of Pomeroy gives an insight into the importance of the support of members of the established Church. She repeatedly lobbied the clergy to examine her writings in line with the Bible, to determine the truth of her claims.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁷ Southcott, *Strange Effects* (part 8), 84-92. See Hopkins, *Woman*, 44-49; Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott: The Woman Clothed With the Sun*, (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002) 48-52.

⁴⁹⁸ *Strange Effects*, (part 1), 5.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁰⁰ Southcott, *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 13. Southcott was instructed to solicit Pomeroy's support by the Spirit, after hearing him preach on John 12:35 in which he interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem as a warning for modern European states: Southcott, “On Mr Pomeroy's Sermon in 1794,” January 28, 1794, PN303: 5, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁰¹ Southcott, *Divine & Spiritual Letters of Prophecies, Sent to Reverend Divines and other Spiritual Good Women and Men* (London, 1802), 62-4. Pomeroy stated in a letter to William Sharp in October 1804 that he only met Southcott “out of compassion to the disordered state of her mind”. *The True Explanation of the Bible. Revealed by Divine Communications to Joanna Southcott* (London, 1804-5), 69. See also Southcott, “Letter of Pomeroy to Mr Foley,” November 14, 1804, PN111:18-37, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁰² “The bishops, and clergy in general, were particularly invited to search into these matters”. Southcott, *The Trial of Joanna Southcott, During Seven Days, which Commenced on the Fifth, and Ended on the Eleventh of December, 1804. At the Neckinger House, Bermondsey, Near London* (London, 1804), iii. For a discussion of the Panacea Society's twentieth-century petitioning of the Anglican Church, see Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, 275-316.

Her writings, when published in London, attracted the attention of a number of Brothers's followers, including the clergymen Stanhope Bruce and Thomas Foley as well as the engraver William Sharp. Upon making contact with Brothers's supporters in 1801, Southcott travelled to London for the first time in 1802 and lobbied parliament to attempt to secure his release.⁵⁰³ Until 1806, Southcott's career was intertwined with Brothers's but their relationship was uneasy. She acknowledged his prophetic status, and wrote in 1802:

The name of Brothers is a Mystery to mankind. The Spirit of Prophecy being given to him in that name, and Christ calls every man Brother that are his Friends and Followers; and now ye should all join as Brothers in the Second Coming of Christ. Believe him and plead the Promise made [to] the Woman at First.⁵⁰⁴

Even before her journey to the capital, however, Southcott expressed reservations about Brothers's reliability, and in a letter to Thomas Webster dated 21st June 1801, wrote: “you may rely on some of Brothers' words, but you cannot believe all that the prophet hath told you.”⁵⁰⁵ Southcott's ambivalence towards Brothers is reflected in her typological interpretation linking his incarceration to Jonah's punishment in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2).⁵⁰⁶ Although she acknowledged his prophetic claims, Southcott warned her readers about Brothers's self-aggrandisement, suggesting this caused his incarceration. Brothers, like Southcott, received a prophetic visitation, but his writings incited God's intervention, to prevent his messianic claims from disastrously misleading his followers:

I suffered a lying Spirit to deceive him, as some that believed in him judged him more than man... as long as his mad believers judge him more than man... the Prophet will never have the power to work one miracle.⁵⁰⁷

Whilst the two prophets never met face-to-face, they achieved a form of dialogue through

⁵⁰³ See Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 111; Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 265-7.

⁵⁰⁴ Southcott, “Dream of Miss Harper’s,” March 5, 1802, PN103:118-24, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive. (underlining as in the MS).

⁵⁰⁵ Southcott, *Divine & Spiritual Letters*, 4.

⁵⁰⁶ Southcott, *True Explanation of the Bible*, 439-440.

⁵⁰⁷ Southcott, *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* (London, 1802), 112.

their respective publications.⁵⁰⁸ As Madden demonstrates, Brothers's *Dissertation on the Fall of Eve* immediately created a conflict between the two prophets by explicitly rejecting Southcott's allegorical interpretation of Genesis 3.⁵⁰⁹ Southcott, however, claimed that since Brothers's reading did not give the serpent any form of diabolic agency, that his words were “blasphemy... as he makes God to be the author of the temptations to Eve, speaking through the Serpent with a lie...”⁵¹⁰ This, coupled with Brothers's insistent claim that the vision of Revelation 12 neither stood in typological relationship with the promise of Genesis 3:15, and only referred to his consort in the rebuilt Jerusalem, made a split inevitable. Southcott alluded to this possibility when she offered an expanded explanation of a vision first recounted in *Strange Effects of Faith* of two wagons travelling down a hill, going ahead of Joanna's own wagon and sinking into the ground.⁵¹¹ The resultant exposition claimed that one of the wagons represented Brothers imminent “fall from the height he has stood in his own wisdom!”

Despite their paths diverging as a result of Brothers's writings – a process completed in 1806 when Southcott responded to a now-lost publication of Brothers – Southcott never denied Brothers's status as a prophet. They, after all, held the common goals of alerting England to a rapidly approaching judgement and the expectation of a renewed Jerusalem.⁵¹² Brothers's flaw was that “he had placed the Scriptures to himself, and in what manner he had deceived others, by his being deceived by an evil spirit”, and by doing so “it was not the Lord who had deceived him, but he had deceived himself, and would bring shame and sorrow upon himself in the end, if he did not repent.”⁵¹³ His refusal to repent (Finleyson

⁵⁰⁸ William Sharp's journal records the two glimpsing one another through a window at Fisher House asylum, where they were able to salute one another, but no conversation could take place. See Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 111.

⁵⁰⁹ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 250-5.

⁵¹⁰ Southcott, *A Communication given to Joanna, in Answer to Mr. Brothers' Last Book*, (London, 1802), 1.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11-3. C.f. *Strange Effects* (part 2), 60-1.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵¹³ Southcott, *An Answer to Mr. Brothers' Book, Published in September, 1806. And Observations on his*

returned Southcott's missive to Brothers unopened) confirmed that it was Southcott who possessed the true spirit of prophecy.⁵¹⁴

Amidst Southcott's debates with Brothers, and the subsequent assumption of most of his following, she also took steps to distinguish her own movement. She staged three public "trials" of her writings between 1801 and 1804.⁵¹⁵ These trials aimed to attract ministers to examine her writings, to establish that her prophecies were of divine origin. Whilst she failed to attract any members of the Anglican clergy to attend, she did attract a group of over 50 to declare their belief in her claims. This developed into the collation of lists of signatures and the creation of one of the Southcottian's most distinctive practices: the production and distribution of "seals". The "sealing" of believers was inspired by Revelation 7:3, a practice Southcott saw as a fulfilment of the promises of Revelation 21-22.

However confident men may be...they will find there is no man will have part in the Tree of Life whose name is not found written, and the seals given then: for these are the leaves for the healing of the nations.⁵¹⁶

Southcott's reading of Revelation thus acts as a catalyst for the development of her movement's praxis. The Southcottian's activities are presented as direct fulfilments of John's visions.

Nonetheless, after her 1804 trial, other prophetic claimants attached to her movement

Former Writings... (London, 1806), 2. The charge that Brothers "places Scriptures to himself that did not belong to man", even whilst accepting that "many of his prophecies, that he foretold in 1791, and 1792, concerning the way... came perfectly true" is one which Southcott returns to throughout the book (ibid., 16).

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 3. For Southcott's letter to Finleyson see "A letter to Richard Brothers... the failure of Brothers' Statements and refutation of his placing of the Scriptures", 6 May, 1806, PN137:293-302, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵¹⁵ The first constituted an examination of her prophecies by the group known as her "seven stars" in Exeter in 1801 (*Strange Effects* part 7, 38-49). The second took place in January 1803 in London – see Southcott, *A Word In Season to a Sinking Kingdom*, 2; Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 124-5 – and the proceedings of the third, which took place in December 1804, are recorded in *The Trial of Joanna Southcott*.

⁵¹⁶ Southcott, *The Answer of the Lord to the Powers of Darkness* (London: 1802), 104.

created schisms among her followers. One of her followers, Elias Carpenter, would acrimoniously split from the movement in 1805, due to his patronage of another visionary named Joseph Prescott, whose visions Southcott had previously interpreted.⁵¹⁷ Southcott would repudiate Carpenter in print, and Carpenter went on to perform his own rival “sealings” and base a rival ministry out of his “House of God” chapel in South London.⁵¹⁸ Like Buchan and Flaxmer, Southcott invokes Revelation 12's vision of the “great red dragon” to conceptualise this enmity. In an 1805 communication, Southcott links the dragon's persecution, and his casting down of “the third part of the stars of heaven” (Revelation 12:4) to Carpenter's apostasy, and his followers who “fall from their share in the Tree of Life”.⁵¹⁹ Southcott thus uses Revelation's visions to account for setbacks in her ministry, and the meaning of the text unfurls and develops in response to developments in her career.

After Southcott began a preaching tour of England in 1803-4, the seals became popular; she records a leap in signatories from 58 to over 8,000 in one year.⁵²⁰ The seals were a folded piece of paper with the insignia “IC” incised upon the wax, with recipients' names recorded on lists.⁵²¹ They became highly sought after, not least because Southcott insisted in 1804 that only those who were of “the sealed” would withstand a French invasion.⁵²² As the seals' reputation grew, Southcott took steps to ensure they were only possessed by true believers, by requiring ownership of – or otherwise proving familiarity with – one of her books. Thus the Spirit declares in *Sound an Alarm in My Holy Mountain* “let no man sign

⁵¹⁷ On the split between Southcott and Carpenter, see Hopkins, *Woman*, 132-3; Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 181-3, 186-9. For Southcott's interpretations of Prescott's paintings and visions see *The First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 113-20 and *The Second Book of Visions* (London, 1803).

⁵¹⁸ Southcott, *The Controversy between Joanna Southcott and Elias Carpenter; One of her Judges, Made Public*, 5 vols., (London, 1805). See also Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 331-2.

⁵¹⁹ Southcott, “Communication of the Red Dragon Beginning from a Vision of Mr Hows,” September 9, 1805, PN113: 222-8, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵²⁰ Hopkins, *Woman*, 105, following Southcott, *Sound an Alarm*, 24.

⁵²¹ Hopkins, *Woman*, 104.

⁵²² Southcott, *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 11. As Hopkins notes (*Woman*, 105), this was particularly timely since a threat of invasion was imminent as Napoleon massed forces at Boulogne in 1804.

his name, till he hath read this book and judged for himself".⁵²³ The lists of the sealed, as well as records from the network of Southcottian chapels formed after 1811, have proven to be extremely useful for subsequent scholars to determine the size, geographical distribution and demographics represented within the movement.⁵²⁴

Throughout her lifetime Southcott's inner circle of followers comprised prominent male supporters and female followers. Pre-eminent among the latter were two women who were Southcott's constant companions after 1804. Jane Townley and her servant Ann Underwood acted as aides and amanuenses, transcribing Southcott's texts from her dictation. Townley also took charge of managing Southcott's correspondence, and communicating with the growing network of believers which Southcott had begun to attract nationwide.⁵²⁵

Southcott's final year would see her thrust still further into the public eye and would, in many respects, overshadow the memory of her prophetic career.⁵²⁶ In January 1814, Southcott published a text addressed to "the Jews" in which the spirit declared

This year, in the sixty-fifth year of thy age, thou shalt have a SON, by the power of the MOST HIGH, which if [the Jews] receive as their Prophet, Priest, and King, then I will restore them to their own land...⁵²⁷

Southcott's announcement that she would become pregnant, and deliver the Shiloh promised in the Authorised Version of Genesis 49:10, scandalised English society and instigated nationwide print responses.⁵²⁸ Despite widespread incredulity at her claims,

⁵²³ Southcott, *Sound an Alarm*, 49. Later in her career, Southcott demanded that subscribers be familiar with her *A Caution and Instruction to the Sealed, that they may know for what they are Sealed* (London, 1807). See further Hopkins, *Woman*, 107.

⁵²⁴ See Hopkins, *Woman*, 75-85. For a revised account of the make-up of the movement after Southcott's death, based on evidence from the collections at the Panacea Charitable Trust, see Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 30-56.

⁵²⁵ Townley would continue to be an influential member of the movement after Southcott's death, see *ibid.*, 45-6.

⁵²⁶ So Juster, *Doomsayers*, 246.

⁵²⁷ Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 4.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3. For a survey of the newspaper responses to Southcott's announcement see Hopkins, *Woman*, 201-6.

Southcott nonetheless began to show symptoms of pregnancy, including the swelling of her breasts and a growth which undulated “in the same manner as a foetus”. Seventeen physicians who examined her reported a possible diagnosis of pregnancy.⁵²⁹ Her pregnancy and the expectation of her miraculous child became a focal point for the movement. The extent of her followers' belief is perhaps best illustrated by the vast number of gifts Southcott received, including a ornately decorated crib valued at £200.

The Southcottians' hopes for the prophet's delivery of Shiloh did not materialise, at least not as a child, as the Spirit initially declared. Rather, Southcott's condition began to deteriorate with frequent fits of vomiting. Southcott eventually died in the early hours of Tuesday 27th December, 1814.⁵³⁰ Her funeral was carried out in secret on the 1st January 1815 at St John's Wood with only three attendees: William Sharp, William Tozer and Colonel William Tooke Harwood.⁵³¹ Subsequent Southcottian prophets continued to reflect on her writings and the promise of Shiloh, with Southcottian groups persisting to the present day.⁵³²

The relationships between prophetic revelation, biblical interpretation, and the authority of the modern prophet's own writings are consistent themes throughout Southcott's visitation. For Southcott, as for the other contemporary prophets discussed in 2.2.2, the Bible could give insight into – and lend significance to – events that arose through her life and mission.

Her insistence that events in her own life could shed light on the meaning of biblical texts

⁵²⁹ Richard Reece, *A Correct Statement of the Circumstances that Attended the Last Illness and Death of Mrs. Southcott...* (London, 1815), 10; P. Mathias, *The Case of Johanna Southcott, as far as it Came under his Professional Observation, Impartially Stated* (London, n.d.); see further Juster, *Doomsayers*, 248.

⁵³⁰ See Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 285-94 for an account of Southcott's final days.

⁵³¹ As Lockley notes, the three men's reaction to Southcott's death proved to be emblematic of the wider response within the Southcottian network. Tooke Harwood renounced his faith; Tozer would reopen his chapel and throw his support behind George Turner, and Sharp believed that the child had been born just prior to Southcott's death and “taken up to God and his throne” (Revelation 12:5). See Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 30-1.

⁵³² For a survey of the various Southcottian groups and their genealogies see Allan, “Southcottian Sects”, 213-36.

means that texts such as Revelation 12 and Genesis 2-3 provide her with durable interpretative frameworks to understand her own mission, and her relationships with those around her. This can give us an insight into how prophetic interpretations of Revelation draw deeply from – and can be affected by – the specific circumstances of the prophetic reader.

4.2. Southcott's Writings and the Bible

As her sixty-five publications and the extensive collection of unpublished manuscript prophecies in Bedford, London and Texas indicate, Southcott was a prolific author. Her texts comprise revelations from the Spirit, transmitted to the prophet in a number of different forms: “sometimes from parables, sometimes from types and shadows, sometimes from dreams and visions, and also from the Bible”.⁵³³ Her writings are filled with long prose and verse communications from the Spirit, contain frequent digressions and changes of speaker, and she often invites the reader to cross-reference other publications and “weigh” both texts together. She leaves parabolic stories and visions unexplained only to return to them in later texts. In one particularly frustrating case, Southcott had Sharp and Foley each publish half of her autobiography and accounts of visions (“thus they are both printing a book they cannot understand”).⁵³⁴ This obscurantism, however, is given deep significance: the two now-unintelligible texts are an enacted parable to show “that they both must be compared together; perfectly so stand the LAW and the GOSPEL, which I shall bring together to compare with thy Books”⁵³⁵

⁵³³ Southcott, *Strange Effects* (part 1), iv.

⁵³⁴ *Copies and Parts of Copies and Letters and Communications. Written from Joanna Southcott and Transmitted by Miss Townley to Mr W. Sharp in London* (London, 1804); *Letters and Communications of Joanna Southcott, the Prophetess of Exeter; Lately Written to Jane Townley* (Stourbridge, 1804).

⁵³⁵ William Sharp and Joanna Southcott, *An Answer to the World, for Putting in Print a Book in 1804, Called 'Copies and Parts of Copies and Letters and Communications written from Joanna Southcott'* (London, 1806), 56.

Despite the opacity of her writings, many scholars have identified Southcott's impressive rate of publication as an integral factor in the wide dissemination of her ideas.⁵³⁶ Her book *A Call to the Wise* was printed to explain her already-voluminous prophecies “in a small compass, for the sake of the poor, that no excuse may be found” for not owning a copy and engaging with her predictions.⁵³⁷ Southcott's supporters – and especially those that Lockley identifies as “old Southcottians” who rejected the claims of later Southcottian prophets – read her books as an act of community praxis long after her death.⁵³⁸ By engaging with Southcott's texts, and signing their names on her lists, her readers fulfil the hope for the defeat of Satan.⁵³⁹ This stimulated the production of further texts which elucidated the hopes of Southcott's own prophecies. One of her followers created an “index” to her writings and produced a collection of hymns adapted from her poetry.⁵⁴⁰

In his forthcoming monograph, Matthew Nibblett raises the question of how far Southcott and her supporters considered the prophet's writings to be “scriptural”. He demonstrates how Southcott considered her writings as an interpretative key to the Bible, and that they could be visualised as a “second Bible”, similarly inspired by God. In an 1806 communication, a dream reveals her writings' unique status. Southcott records a command to bind and boil a Bible, before taking it out of the pot and noting the passages it opened at in a second Bible. This second Bible, she is told:

is thy Prophecies which all men will find is the word of God, like the Bible that

⁵³⁶ Harrison, *Second Coming*, 88; Hopkins, *Woman*, 33; Juster, *Doomsayers*, 171-2. Hopkins (*Woman*, 84-5) estimates that 108,000 copies of Southcott's works were published between 1801 and 1816, selling well above other contemporary religious and political tracts.

⁵³⁷ Southcott, *A Call to the Wise*, 1.

⁵³⁸ Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 58.

⁵³⁹ “Now the womans seed that join with her in faith to sign their names for Satans destruction and Christ to be in all to bruise the Serpents head. (sic)” Southcott, “Joanna Southcott’s Visitation and the Scriptures in a Chain,” January 12, 1803, PN105:156, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁴⁰ Philip Pullen, *Index to the Divine and Spiritual Writings of Joanna Southcott* (London, 1815); *Hymns, or Spiritual Songs, Composed from the Prophetic Writings of J. Southcott* (London, 1813). A later Southcottian also produced a commentary on Revelation, drawing from her writings and manuscripts: ed. Lavinia Elizabeth C. Jones, *The Scriptures of the Holy Trinity. The New Testament Explained by the Voice of the Spirit of Christ to Joanna Southcott* (London, 1865).

is bound up and sealed up from man as it appeared in the Vision of thy Dream, but the way it will be fulfilled is told in thy Books.⁵⁴¹

Southcott's books are thus themselves Bible-like: both are the product of the “word of God”, but Southcott's works also explain how the promises of the original biblical text will unfold.

In her published works also, Southcott indicates that her texts are to be placed on a comparable status with the Bible: “now I shall fulfil thy prophecies, and fulfil my Bible, for they both stand together”.⁵⁴² Her prophetic texts and the Bible represent:

a chain so joined together, that it is out of the power of man to put it asunder, unless he is determined to break the chain that hangs together, for our Redemption, and have no part in the Tree of Life.⁵⁴³

In an unpublished manuscript, Southcott represents this chain visually. With a chain drawn down the centre of the page, on one side, Southcott gives scriptural citations; on the other, she describes how her prophetic ministry has fulfilled the cited verses.⁵⁴⁴

Rev. 12 ch. A Wonder was seen in the heavens, a Woman clothed with the Sun travailing in birth crying to be delivered, and the Woman fled from the face of the Serpent, the Serpent cast out floods after her and the Earth helped the Woman, and the Earth opened her mouth and swallowed up the floods.

Now I have been Eleven years travailing in birth to be delivered not knowing whether it is a Spiritual Birth as it was said to me or a delusion, the Serpent hath cast out floods against me and the Earth helped me. I fled from the face of the Serpent, that first appeared to the Woman, and the Serpent cast out floods after me.

Southcott's own writings thus take on a scriptural status for her believers: they elucidate the Bible's obscure prophecies and supplement its revelations, by expounding God's plan for the culmination of human history.

⁵⁴¹ Southcott, “On Boiling the Bible,” April 3, 1806, PN114:216-7, Panacea Charitable Trust – Southcott Archive. See also Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 124.

⁵⁴² *True Explanations of the Bible*, 597.

⁵⁴³ *The Long-Wished-For Revolution Announced to be at Hand in a Book Larely Published by L. Mayer...* (London, 1806), 60.

⁵⁴⁴ “Scriptures in a Chain”, PN105:158.

Through Southcott's insistence that her writings share the authority of the biblical text, we can see a similar circularity underpinning prophetic interpretation that we saw in Brothers's works. By encoding himself, and his writings, in the biblical text, Brothers's subsequent expositions of the biblical text are themselves an extension of God's revelation to humanity. Similarly, Southcott's insistence that her writings are “joined” with the Bible ensures that her readings of biblical texts are inspired texts which deserve to be studied as prophecy in their own right. In Southcott's writings, the prophetic tasks of interpretation and creation identified by Wittreich are completely intertwined: the Bible, Southcott's dreams and visions, and the poetic expositions of the Spirit are all interconnected parts making up God's revelation to humanity through his prophets.

Her readings of biblical texts, however, are not fixed. Instead, as she revisits texts – and indeed her own visions – at different points in her career, new meanings in the text are revealed. Revelation, in particular, provides a consistent symbolic resource, and her texts layer a number of different readings onto John's images, visions and narratives. Three features of Southcott's hermeneutic allow her to generate this multiplicity of readings, whilst nonetheless maintaining that her books constitute providential expositions of Revelation's promises. First, Southcott's insistence that prophetic revelation alone provides the key to the correct interpretation of scripture. Second, her emphasis on typological reading allows her to posit a number of different typological fulfilments of texts throughout her writings. Finally, her juxtaposition of Revelation with the story of the Fall in Genesis 2-3 creates a rule for reading the text which means that “when we come to the Revelations we must go back to the creation to the man & woman.”⁵⁴⁵ This hermeneutical guideline

⁵⁴⁵ Southcott, “Letter from Joanna to Brothers,” June 7, 1802, PN104:40, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

allows her to project conflicts that took place during her life as manifestations of the paradigmatic conflict between man, woman and Satan, inaugurated in Eden. In turn, her identity as the “woman clothed with the sun” and the “bride” of Revelation, vindicates her prophetic claims and underscores her role in bringing this conflict to its resolution.

4.2.1. Southcott, Interpretation and the Spirit

As noted in 2.1, Southcott identifies the spirit of her visitation with the spirit that she believed inspired the biblical prophets. Across her texts, this spirit acts almost as an interpreting angel, akin to those found in many prophetic texts (e.g. Daniel 7-12, Uriel in 4 Ezra, and Revelation 17:7-18), explaining the true significance behind the visions, biographical anecdotes and biblical citations that she records. Like Brothers, Southcott derives authority for her biblical expositions from this experience of spiritual inspiration. Divine revelation, Southcott claims, is integral both to her own prophetic authority and the Bible's correct interpretation. She castigates one of her opponents for claiming to expound the Bible without receiving divine revelation: “to unveil the prophecies of the Scriptures, and the mysteries of God in them, he hath now presumed to aspire to, without professing any revelation from God”.⁵⁴⁶ For Southcott, as for Brothers, acts of prophecy are only possible as a result of spiritual visitation from God (we may also compare the affirmation of the need for prophetic interpreters of the Bible by the compiler of *Wonderful Prophecies*, discussed in 2.2). In turn, only interpreters who are privileged to receive such a prophetic visitation are able to offer the true interpretative key to the Bible.⁵⁴⁷

The ubiquitous presence of this Spirit in Southcott's writings raises important questions

⁵⁴⁶ *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 58.

⁵⁴⁷ Sklar, who reads Blake's characterisation of Jerusalem as – in part – a repudiation of Southcott's claims to unique prophetic authority, notes that Blake invites his readers to become fellow-prophets, whereas Southcott's writings urge the reader to submit themselves to her reading of the Bible. See Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 82.

about how far Southcott presents herself as the “author” of her texts. Her writings are introduced with the claim that she was “ordered” to commit her visions and communications to text. She consistently introduces blocks of material under the auspice of having been “commanded to insert” a particular segment of text. The impression received from Southcott's writings is one of complete dependence upon the Spirit for inspiration:

I could as well have made the world, and formed the whole creation, as I could invent such writings of myself... Without the Spirit I am nothing, without the Spirit I know nothing, and without the Spirit I can do nothing; so whether you judge the Spirit good or bad, to that Spirit you must allude the whole.⁵⁴⁸

Southcott's attribution of her writings to the Spirit points to the muddiness of the question of agency when applied to prophetic writings. Blake and Brothers, to different degrees, also depict their writings as being dictated by supernatural figures. Blake, for example, in a letter to Thomas Butts in 1803, he claims to have written *Milton* “from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my will.”⁵⁴⁹ Similarly, the title of the first volume of *Revealed Knowledge* proclaims that it is “Published by [God's] Sacred Command” and Brothers claims that the book comes from “the Divine Spirit of Truth” and “God, who instructs me in all things”.⁵⁵⁰ Southcott's own invocation of the inspiration of the Spirit parallels similar claims in the writings seventeenth-century female prophets such as Mary Cary and Anna Trapnel. In her study of these authors, Hinds notes that sectarian and prophetic female writers of this period customarily described their decision “as a *call* or command to write, emanating from God and requiring obedient acceptance.”⁵⁵¹ Hinds further notes the ubiquity of the language of “instrument” in these texts, which she claims helps to “efface the significance of the author-figure, and [provide] a way of relocating the responsibility for the writing

⁵⁴⁸ *A Warning to the World*, 57.

⁵⁴⁹ Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy*, plate iii line 24, E24; Letter to Thomas Butts (April 25, 1803), E729.

⁵⁵⁰ Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge*, 1:2.

⁵⁵¹ Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-century Radical Sectarian Writing and Criticism* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 87.

with God”.⁵⁵² Southcott uses similar language when she depicts herself as “God's chosen instrument”, elected to explain the Scriptures.⁵⁵³ The Spirit has ultimate responsibility for the creation of Southcott's texts. This in turn guarantees the authenticity of her prophecies: that “the Lord hath chosen the weak and foolish things of this world, to confound the great and mighty.”⁵⁵⁴

Southcott's reading of the Bible, despite her and her supporters' protestations that her works were created without recourse to other books, is set in opposition to other claimants to scriptural interpretation.⁵⁵⁵ The opening to *Divine and Spiritual Communications* laments

Men are departed from the Faith once delivered to them by the Prophets, Apostles, and from the LORD of LIFE and GLORY... I must call to your remembrance what erroneous doctrines and blasphemy have been published against the Bible within these few years past... and how full our land is of Deists and Atheists.⁵⁵⁶

Southcott's mission is thus a counterpoint to Satan's machinations, exemplified by the perceived prevalence of writers and intellectual movements who would deny the Bible's status as a normative and authoritative text. For example, one of her texts is a detailed riposte to the third part of Paine's *The Age of Reason*, which references Josephus's account of the activities of Jesus and John the Baptist in *Antiquities* 18.3.3.⁵⁵⁷ Paine's denial that the Bible contains genuine prophecy or divine revelation, and his insistence that the natural world is sufficient evidence for “God's word”, are particularly abhorrent to Southcott. She argues, “we find a revelation [in the Bible], to give us light and understanding... that we

⁵⁵² Ibid., 89.

⁵⁵³ Southcott, *A Few Remarks & Inquiries on a Sermon Preached by the Rev. Joseph Cockin, Independent Minister at Halifax...* (Leeds, 1806), 42.

⁵⁵⁴ *Strange Effects*, Part 2, 69.

⁵⁵⁵ Southcott claimed to be “a simple woman, and was never brought up to high learning”. Similarly in his defence of her writings Foley declared “she has had no assistance whatever, from men, books, or any other source, but the Invisible Spirit that directs her.” Southcott, *Divine and Spiritual Communications*, 9; Thomas Foley and Joanna Southcott, *The Answer of the Rev. Thomas P. Foley to the World, Who Hath Blamed His Faith in Believing it was a Command of the Lord to put in Print such Parables, as he Printed Last Year at Stourbridge...* (Stourbridge, 1805), 5.

⁵⁵⁶ *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, i.

⁵⁵⁷ Joanna Southcott, *An Answer to Thomas Paine's Third Part of the Age of Reason, published by D.I. Eaton...* (London, 1812), 11.

could never find out by looking at the Creation, if we had no further revelation given us.”⁵⁵⁸

For Southcott and other prophetic authors of the era, the Bible provides – and points to the continued need for – divine revelation to guide the interpretation of human history. What opponents of this idea lack, in Southcott's estimation, is an appreciation of the necessity for God to unlock the truth of the scriptures at the correct moment of history. Southcott's description of her picking the buds off flowers prematurely as a child serves as an illuminating metaphor to describe such critics' errors.

this is the perfect likeness of professors of religion: they have picked away the beauty of the Gospel, all the beauty of the Prophets, and my Disciples; and made the Gospel appear with no more beauty in it, than there was in the flowers, which thou hadst spoiled, by thy eager desire to know their colour, before the full time was come to discover themselves.⁵⁵⁹

Only by taking seriously Southcott's expositions of the Bible, dictated to her by the Spirit, can humanity successfully interpret the mysterious and cryptic future hopes that the text transmits.

Southcott's writings bear witness to the transformative effects of her experience of a prophetic visitation. Her conviction that God had chosen her to reveal the Bible's true meaning, yields writings which are complexly constructed and deeply allusive, both to Scripture itself and to her own published corpus. Her experience of the Spirit's visitation allows her to speak as God's pre-eminent messenger, and to publish texts which simultaneously unpack and match the prophetic significance of the Bible. They also stand as a riposte to those who would claim to have the means of interpreting the Bible's future hope without spiritual visitation. In turn, this authoritative spiritual underwriting of Southcott's expositions, encourages her to place herself as the subject of key biblical texts: the Spirit continually directs her to see events in her life as typological manifestations of

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁵⁹ *Fourth Book of Wonders*, 59.

key biblical scenes and visions. Consequently, texts that the Spirit reveals as integral to Southcott's identity – especially Revelation 12 and Genesis 2-3 – are revisited again and again.

4.2.2. “Types and Shadows”

As discussed in 1.1, typological exegesis of the Bible was one of the main interpretative norms threatened by emergent historical-critical enquiries in the eighteenth century. Yet, nonetheless, it is one of the crucial interpretative devices Southcott applies to the Bible. She asserts throughout her works that God speaks to mankind through “types and shadows”. At its root, typological exegesis assumes that “God placed anticipations of Christ in the laws, events, and people of the Old Testament.” By the eighteenth century, this method had wider applications through the identification of biblical texts as “types” prefiguring events in contemporary history.⁵⁶⁰

Typological interpretations are applied to a whole range of materials used by Southcott in her texts. Biblical citations, accounts of dreams and visions, even apparently mundane occurrences could stand as “types”, signifying a deeper meaning and a future fulfilment. In one of her earliest manuscript prophecies, Southcott describes a woman entering her church mid-service, and walking up to the altar. The disapproving reaction of the presiding bishop and archdeacon is understood as a “type” of their subsequent refusals to acknowledge Southcott's visitation.⁵⁶¹ Her capacity to imbue every aspect of her life with symbolic significance is an example of what Landes terms “semiotic arousal”: “all things become signs, messages... The tiniest occurrence must be 'read'; everything has meaning.”⁵⁶² Thus

⁵⁶⁰ Landow, *Victorian Types*, ix; Korshin, *Typology in England*, 31.

⁵⁶¹ Southcott, “Type of the Lady in St Peter’s Church,” 1793, PN101:1-5, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁶² Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 98-9.

even a kettle falling off a stove becomes an omen of imminent judgement.⁵⁶³

Southcott's typological interpretative approach is deeply-ingrained. Discussing the Hebrews sprinkling their doorposts with blood in Exodus 12:7, Southcott writes "I was taught from my cradle, that the sprinkling of the door posts was the sprinkling of the blood of Christ".⁵⁶⁴ The Spirit affirms that the typological interpretation of the Bible is the correct one: "From Types and Shadows all is placed;/From Types at first I spoke"⁵⁶⁵ Southcott's prophetic visitation thus underscores the necessity of a typological reading of the Bible that, when carried out, corroborates Southcott's claims to prophecy. Her writings also highlight the prevalence of typological readings of the biblical text, and typology's persistence as an interpretative method, in eighteenth-century popular culture.

Revelation's inclusion in the biblical canon is a vital link which sustains this figural reading of the Bible's prophetic material. As we saw with Brothers's engagement with the visions of Ezekiel 40-8 and Revelation 21-2, eighteenth-century prophets could draw upon the visions of earlier prophets to posit themselves as the typological fulfilment of unrealised hopes. As Korshin states, interpreters from across the ecclesiastical spectrum in the eighteenth century agreed that "prophecies, especially those in the Book of Revelation, applied equally well to secular history, both past and present".⁵⁶⁶ Southcott therefore stands within a well-established and widespread interpretative tradition, which sees Revelation's visions being fulfilled within post-biblical history, and realisable in the present day.

Her reliance on typology, and her conception of divine revelation taking place through

"types and shadows" allows her to develop a number of diverse readings of biblical texts

⁵⁶³ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, Part 6, 275.

⁵⁶⁴ *True Explanations of the Bible*, 299.

⁵⁶⁵ *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 27.

⁵⁶⁶ Korshin, *Typologies in England*, 341.

over the course of her career. Biblical “types”, such as the Fall and Revelation's visions, stand as reusable symbolic resources through which she can unveil the true nature of unfolding events. Thus her readings of Revelation's visions, such as “the woman clothed with the sun” and “the bride,” shift and change in response to her own situation and relationships. Reading the Bible typologically allows Southcott to hold these divergent readings together across her career.

To give an example, in *Strange Effects of Faith*, Southcott's spirit offers a decoding of the “seven stars” of Revelation 1:20. In the text, these stars are in the hand of the “one like unto the Son of man” seen by John in 1:13, and are decoded as “the angels of the seven churches.” Southcott, however, offers a further meaning for the vision:

They were the seven mysteries of God: The first was, when he made man; the second, when he made the woman; the third, the promise of redemption; the fourth, the Angel appearing to the Virgin Mary; the fifth, Christ's birth; the sixth, Christ's death; the 7th, his revealing the secrets to a woman, as one standing alone.⁵⁶⁷

We can see here Southcott's keenness to interpret Revelation's visions as signifiers of her future prophetic mission, which in turn binds her ministry to the events of the Fall and to Jesus' birth. The subsequent poetic communication, however, leaves room open for further typological decodings of Revelation's imagery:

Then in the night the stars will shine,
And in the midst there's sev'n,
Which never shall divided be,
Until the whole are leaven'd.⁵⁶⁸

Shortly after making contact with eminent supporters of Brothers in London, Southcott found a new manifestation of the “seven stars”: seven of her earliest followers who initially judged her prophetic claims in Exeter. In an 1802 communication, Southcott writes, “there is a mystery in the Seven men that came... The Seven Stars are the Seven Spirits of God

⁵⁶⁷ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, Part 2, 56.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

which mean in seven men are the spirit of God.”⁵⁶⁹ Southcott's rereadings of Revelation 1:20 finds room for multiple typological interpretations of the text. In the original vision, it refers to the seven angels who receive Christ's message on behalf of the seven churches. Southcott reads a sequence of seven divine promises and visitations into the image, which culminate in her own prophetic career. Subsequently, she draws upon John's juxtaposition of the stars with the “seven spirits of God” in Revelation 3:1 as a metaphor for her prophecies' acceptance amongst her earliest judges and followers.

Southcott's typological approach thus allows for multiple decodings of Revelation's imagery to take place over her lifetime. The resultant effect of these cumulating typological expositions of the biblical text resembles – to borrow a term from literary theory – a palimpsest. A palimpsest is formed when “on the same parchment, one text can be superimposed on another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through.”⁵⁷⁰ Southcott's interpretations of texts evolve and change over the course of her writings, but later prophetic decodings do not invalidate those that have come before. Rather, Southcott's interpretation, which places her own ministry as the typological fulfilment of key biblical texts, encourages her to re-engage with biblical visions and narratives, to keep seeing her life as a manifestation of biblical “types”. Reading events in her life consistently through the lens of key texts such as Genesis 2-3 and Revelation, ensures that Southcott's life and career are written into the biblical narrative. These successive confirmations of her pivotal role within this story assures her that her visitation heralds the imminent fulfilment of the Bible's promises.

4.2.3. Revelation and Genesis

⁵⁶⁹ Southcott, “On the Seven Stars the Seven Spirits of God,” March 3, 1802, PN103:115, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁷⁰ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 2nd ed, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 398-9.

As Madden has rightly explained, the question of the correct reading of Genesis 3 was a key component of the disagreement between Brothers and Southcott in 1802.⁵⁷¹ For Brothers, Southcott's conflation of the dragon pursuing the woman in Revelation 12 with the serpent that tempted Eve in the garden of Eden is a misinterpretation. For Southcott, however, her conception of her prophetic role is built upon the typological connection she constructs between the Fall, Christ's birth, the woman of Revelation 12, and her own prophetic ministry. Brothers's dissent, far from dissuading Southcott from making such links, in fact strengthens Southcott's tendency to read Revelation in the light of Genesis 2-3.

Aune argues that Revelation 12:9 “provides the only explicit biblical identification of Satan with the serpent who tempted Eve in Gen 3:1-7”.⁵⁷² Southcott takes this identification and extends its scope, arguing that the “woman clothed with the sun” – and the “bride,” with whom this figure is closely identified – should be read through the lens of Genesis 2-3.

Southcott makes this interpretative move early. In a letter sent to a Exeter-based dissenting minister in 1794, Southcott writes:

And now come to the Creation. The woman was first in the transgression, and she must be first in perfect obedience Rev xx... 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.⁵⁷³

The link between Revelation 12:9 and Genesis 3 is picked up later in the letter:

The Lord did not come to Adam to reprove him till he had done as the Woman desired him... Now it is assigned to me that the Lord will not fulfil his promise in justifying man and bringing him back to a perfect state of happiness as he was before the fall, and cast down Satan the great accuser of the brethren till they have done as the woman hath desired them.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 250.

⁵⁷² Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 696. Boxall, *Revelation*, 182, notes that the two are also conflated in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 2:24.

⁵⁷³ Southcott, “Letter to the Reverend Mr. Leech, a Dissenting Minister in Exeter,” October 18, 1794, PN101:62-3, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, PN101:65.

In embodying the woman of Revelation 12, Southcott sees herself as integral to correcting the transgressions of the Fall. The woman's triumph over Satan is linked to Southcott's "obedience", and mankind's acceptance of her visitation. The wider context of this letter, as part of an attempt to enlist the support of a local male religious leader, is paradigmatic of later uses of these texts. The link Southcott forges between Revelation and Genesis is frequently invoked when her authority is challenged by prominent male figures. In these circumstances, Southcott reaffirms her belief that her mission represents the fulfilment of Revelation's promises, which she reads as the typological reversal of the transgressions of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. We may compare a communication from 1799:

All the Learned must submit
 She pluck'd the Fruit, and we did eat;
 And now we All may eat again
 We judg'd the Fruit from whence it came
 And all her Writings must be True⁵⁷⁵

The typology that Southcott builds around the female characters in these two texts is summarised in her first published text: *The Strange Effects of Faith*. Southcott links her prophecies to Eve picking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 3:6:

by the account of the tree of knowledge, that knowledge must come to man
*from the woman. As she at first plucked the fruit, and brought the knowledge of
 the evil fruit, so at last she must bring the knowledge of the good fruit.*⁵⁷⁶

Southcott further binds Genesis and Revelation together through the stress she places upon the promise of Genesis 3:15: "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". Southcott sees this verse's fulfilment taking place in two stages. Initially, the heel of the woman's seed is bruised at the crucifixion: "when they nailed my hand and feet to the cross". The

⁵⁷⁵ Southcott, "A Communication on What Will Happen When the Great & Learned Come Forward to Search into the Truth of Her Writings," 1799, PN102:210, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁷⁶ Southcott, *Strange Effects of Faith*, Part 1, iii.

promise would then be completely fulfilled when “the woman” is able to bruise Satan's head and bind him (Revelation 20:2).⁵⁷⁷ This is accomplished through Southcott's visitation. She asserts: “Now Christ is compared to the second Adam; then there must come a second Eve”.⁵⁷⁸ Paul's depiction of Adam as “the figure” of Christ in Romans 5:14 points to the need for a new “Eve” to reverse the primordial temptation and to cast punishment back upon Satan.

An important middle-term in the fulfilment of the promise of Genesis 3:15, in Southcott's thinking, is Christ's birth. She makes an important typological connection between her visitation and Mary. In an early manuscript, she writes:

the Holy Ghost came to the Virgin Mary to warn her of his coming, and First filled her with the Power of the Holy Ghost, Before he appeared to man. Now this was his First coming in the Flesh, He then warneth you of his Second Coming... Then the Shadow must come before the Substance... he must come to a Woman to Bear Record of his Coming, and this must be by the Power of the Holy Ghost to Inspire her with words... And all the Mysteries of the Bible must be Revealed to her.⁵⁷⁹

In an illuminating poem in *True Explanation of the Bible*, Southcott weaves a complex connection between herself, the woman and Mary. She establishes Mary giving birth to Christ as a “type” to foreshadow her own visitation.

Then Mother she must surely be,
A MOTHER so to Man,
The *same* as MARY was to ME,
Though *flesh* from her did come;
In SPIRIT here the END must clear⁵⁸⁰

The Spirit's subsequent exposition of this verse fleshes out the connection further. Both Mary and Southcott are presented as “the WOMAN... condemned by the MAN, for the

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., Part 3, 101-2.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., Part 6, 277.

⁵⁷⁹ Southcott, “On the Comforter, the Holy Ghost,” November 1799, PN102:202, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive. Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 71-2 observes that Southcott shares common ground with Blake, when he creates and explores resonances between his heroine Jerusalem and his artistic depictions of other biblical women.

⁵⁸⁰ Southcott, *True Explanation*, 93-4.

transgression of the FALL”. When Christ was born he “condescended to raise [Mary] up, by making her the MOTHER of the SON of God”. As a result, humanity must raise up Southcott, “joining with her in the PROMISE that was made in the Fall”. The typology is extended further through the identification of both women as “mothers”:

she is the SPIRITUAL MOTHER for all men, as Mary was a TEMPORAL MOTHER for ME: yet know, she had a SPIRITUAL SON, by whose SPIRIT and POWER, the *redemption of Man must be brought in*. So now the TEMPORAL MOTHER is become the SPIRITUAL MOTHER, by the visitation of the LORD unto her, and must bring in her SPIRITUAL CHILDREN.⁵⁸¹

Revelation 12's maternal imagery allows Southcott to connect the stories of both Mary and Eve and to see her visitation as the culmination of a conflict between God, humankind and the Devil. Additionally, through the reference to the woman's “seed” in Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12:17, Southcott's demonstrates that her visitation is the means by which all of mankind can become “spiritual children,” and thus participate in Satan's defeat.

For Southcott, this crucial typology is threatened when her claims are denied, or contested, by male critics. Thus, whilst her argument with Brothers centred partly upon the issue of their disagreement about the interpretation of Genesis 3, Southcott's response demonstrates her propensity to see conflicts of this kind as a typological manifestation of the Fall.⁵⁸²

Writing to Halhed in 1802, Southcott claims that Brothers's fall from revered prophet to deluded blasphemer:

shews us the Fall of Adam, how soon he fell from a state of perfection to Imperfection which was said to proceed from the Woman. But now the man is alone, no woman to cause his Fall, and if you mark his last Book he cleareth both men and Devils and casts the whole blame on his Maker⁵⁸³

In a similar letter to Brothers, Southcott reaffirms her reading of Brothers's plight as a

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁸² Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 275, also cites Southcott's objection to “the marginality of Woman” in Brothers's narrative, and his indirect blaming of God for both the Fall and his imprisonment.

⁵⁸³ Southcott, “An Important Letter and Communication Sent to Mr. Halhed on the Fall of Mr Brothers,” December 18, 1802, PN105:131, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

“type” of Adam's Fall, demonstrating how her typological relationship to Eve and the bride of Revelation can heal his estrangement from God. She argues that “time will convince you the Old Serpent called the devil has deceived you with as great lies as he did the woman in the Garden of Eden.” To escape his imprisonment, Southcott urges Brothers to “say with your Maker It is not good for the man to be alone, let the woman be my helpmate to complete my happiness according to thy word”. Southcott's invocation of Genesis 2:18 urges Brothers to see his rival, as the true herald of God's salvific plan:

as in Adam all died even so in Christ shall all be made alive, through the woman when the Sun of Righteousness arises with healing in his wings to heal the fall of the woman. Then may you stand with your other brethren as a star upon her head, and have one of the 12 Crowns to bring in the twelve tribes of Israel.⁵⁸⁴

Southcott's insistence that salvation would come through her activities, *contra* Brothers's claims, forced their readers to make a choice between salvation through a new Eve, or condemnation through a new Adam once again duped by Satan. In her published work that year, the Spirit spoke – through Joanna – to her and Brothers's shared following:

Here's Eve and Adam both before you lay!
And back to the creation now you'll come,
Join with the Woman, or I'll tell your doom;
That you will surely die in ADAM'S fall⁵⁸⁵

Southcott also drew upon the typological relationship between Genesis and Revelation to account for Pomeroy's refusal to endorse her prophetic claims. As with Brothers, Southcott reads Pomeroy's behaviour as a “type” of the Fall. Prior to his repudiation, Southcott represented Pomeroy as a type of John the Baptist: a forerunner who would go “before” Southcott to “bear” the Spirit's “record”.⁵⁸⁶ By 1804, however, Pomeroy's refusal to hand back Southcott's writings leads her to read him as a further victim of Satan's continued

⁵⁸⁴ Southcott, “Letter from Joanna to Brothers,” June 7, 1802, PN104:40-1, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁸⁵ Southcott, *Communication... In Answer to Mr. Brothers*, 11-2.

⁵⁸⁶ Southcott, “Communication Sent to the Rev. Mr Pomeroy,” 1797, PN101:204-5, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

campaign to thwart her mission. The Spirit reassures her that Pomeroy's condemnation of her claims to divine inspiration are a recapitulation of Adam's actions:

You know the Woman he blamed there
 When she the fruit to him had given
 And I did blame (The God of Heaven)
 And I ask'd why the thing he'd done
 His answer was, the Woman's hand
 And so he cast the blame on Me
 That I the Woman gave to he⁵⁸⁷

Pomeroy received “good fruit”, in the form of Southcott's prophecies. When Satan convinced him that Southcott was led by “the Devil,” he repeated Adam's transgression of “blaming” God, by refusing to accept the divine origin of Southcott's salvific prophecies.⁵⁸⁸

Southcott's invocation of the Fall not only allows her to construct a sophisticated and complex typological relationship between Genesis 2-3 and the characters in Revelation she embodies, it also acts as a lens through which she interprets a series of conflicts with male opponents throughout her career. Such opposition, when it reveals itself, further underscores her conviction that a fundamental aspect of her prophetic role is to bring about the eventual defeat of Satan, first promised in Genesis 3:15. Opponents to her visitation become manifestations of the conflict between man, woman, and devil first inaugurated in Eden, which will be brought to its resolution through the fulfilment of Revelation's vision of the triumph of the “woman clothed with the sun” and the Bride over the “ancient serpent.”

4.3. The Woman Clothed With the Sun

We have explored three key facets of Southcott's hermeneutic which shape her readings of Revelation. What looms large is the way that Southcott draws upon elements of her own

⁵⁸⁷ Southcott, “On Pomeroy a Mystery to All Men till the End. A Communication given to Joanna Southcott on Friday Morning & Saturday Evening,” September 21, 1804, PN110:92, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., PN110:93

experience to augment and bolster her commitment to her actualisation of the women of Revelation 12, 19 and 21-2. Like William Huntington, whose responses to Brothers we discussed in 2.2.2, Southcott's prophetic experience convinces her that the Bible can be read in the light of her own experiences. Crucially, the reverse is also true, as events in her life are explained through typological links to pivotal biblical narratives. In turn, this leads to a plurality of different “decodings” of biblical texts across her career; her life itself becomes a text in which her Spirit reveals connections with promises embedded in the biblical text. The prophetic interplay between text and inspired interpreter, which we have identified as a key dynamic in prophetic readings of Revelation, is thus tightly drawn in Southcott's writings and thought. As a result, the question of what texts like Revelation 12, and 21-2, “mean” to Southcott is the subject of constant reinterpretation as evolving events in her life yield new typological manifestations of these visions. In charting these rereadings through Southcott's career, we can see that these texts are consistent interpretative frameworks through which Southcott interprets the world around her, thus producing a series of divergent and evolving readings as her world changes. In this section I will explore how Southcott's actualisations of Revelation's visions of the woman clothed with the sun, the bride, and the descent of New Jerusalem develop over her career.

4.3.1. “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the Sun”

Southcott exploits her identification with the woman clothed with the Sun in a number of ways throughout her published writings. In her earliest manuscripts, Southcott includes a number of visions which carry strong echoes of the imagery used in Revelation 12. In 1793, Southcott records her friend Lucy Taylor's dream, in which she sees “a woman in the air with a Serpent twisted round her and an angel stand [sic] close behind her.”⁵⁸⁹ In another

⁵⁸⁹ “Dream of a Friend. Woman in the Air with a Serpent Twisted Around Her,” 1793, PN101:6-10, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

vision in 1796, Southcott imagined herself “in the air in rich apparel... I thought I was caught up to fly along, and carried to a beautiful street.”⁵⁹⁰ Neither of these visions are directly decoded in terms of Southcott's identity as the woman of Revelation 12, and yet their use of motifs central to this vision (the woman appearing in the air; the juxtaposition of serpent and woman; the vision of the “beautiful street” carrying echoes of the “great street” in Revelation 21:21) are striking. At their core, however, they implicitly cement an association present in Southcott's earliest writings, and emblazoned in Southcott's first published text: “the woman in the 12th chap. of Revelation is myself, the 19th and last.”⁵⁹¹

The flexibility with which Southcott is able to interpret this chapter, and use it to express her unique relationship with God, is made possible by features present within the Authorised Version. Firstly, Southcott seizes upon the Bible's description of the woman as a “wonder”, the King James's translation of the Greek *σημείον*. She writes: “the wonders which were seen in heaven by John, must come on earth to men.”⁵⁹² Her focus here is on demonstrating that the events in the chapter have not unfolded in the past and thus are fulfilled in her visitation. Whilst she sees her visitation as a typological successor to Mary giving birth to Christ, she denies the possibility that Revelation 12 mythologically recapitulates the story of Mary giving birth to Christ.⁵⁹³ Elsewhere, the word “wonder” is seized upon to rule out a number of alternative possibilities. The term, for Southcott, is used to indicate something astonishing and inexplicable. She thus argues that the word tells against interpreting the fulfilment of the vision as something that will occur in the heavenly

⁵⁹⁰ “Dream of Going to Church and Joanna Southcott Seeing Herself in the Air in Rich Apparel” July 2, 1796, PN140:60-61, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁵⁹¹ *Strange Effects of Faith*, Part 1, 42.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, Part 6, 284.

⁵⁹³ This Maryan reading is prevalent in the history of interpretation of the chapter, particularly amongst Eastern patristic authors such as Andrew of Caesarea and Oecumenius. See Rowland and Kovaks, *Revelation*, 137. Southcott's rejection of this reading centres upon her conviction that what John sees must be taking place after Christ's birth. Southcott claims it is an absurdity then to depict Mary “travailing with child after Christ ascended into glory”. *Strange Effects of Faith*, Part 6, 284.

realm, rather than on earth: “It is no wonder in heaven to see a woman clothed with the sun”. After all, this is the realm where – as Philippians 3:21 and 1 Corinthians 15:53 tell us – “our bodies are made like Christ's glorious body, and mortal hath put on immortality”. Thus the sight of a woman “clothed with the sun of righteousness” would scarcely constitute a “wonder” in heaven; the real wonder would be seeing the vision play out in earth through a prophetic visitation.⁵⁹⁴

Disputing with an opponent called Lewis Mayer, Southcott again focusses upon the word “wonder”. Here it is marshalled as an argument against Mayer's conviction that Revelation 12 depicts the Church and historical persecutions against it. Southcott frequently counters this interpretation in her writings.⁵⁹⁵ Responding to Mayer, Southcott asks “what wonder could appear to man, to see the Church in a persecuted state?” She argues that the Bible is replete with accounts of God's people being attacked, from the destruction of Solomon's temple to the martyrdoms suffered by the early Church. This is so familiar to contemporary interpreters and to John himself, Southcott claims, that it cannot be considered a “wonder” for the Church to experience persecution. By contrast, the visitation of the Spirit to a lowly woman “is a wonder that is astonishing to all”. So also is seeing “the Scriptures so clearly explained... to think that mankind should be so blind, not to discern the mystery...”⁵⁹⁶

Southcott also uses the term to construct a “type” out of John's experience of the vision to account for others' lack of belief in her prophetic claims: “the wonders John saw in heaven were but a Type of what was to come upon the earth. Therefore I do not marvel, ye all

⁵⁹⁴ *Divine and Spiritual Communications*, 15-6.

⁵⁹⁵ Southcott's objection to this decoding of Revelation 12 is expressed early: see Southcott, “Answer to a Woman Who Said 'The Woman Clothed with the Sun' Was Christ's Militant Church on Earth,” 1798, PN102: 193-6, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive. See also *Sound an Alarm*, 65-6; *True Explanation of the Bible*, 296-7; *Long-Wished for Revolution*, 13. Southcott follows Brothers's claim that “the woman is not the Church, nor yet the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of Christ, as has always been likewise erroneously supposed” (*Revealed Knowledge*, 2:75).

⁵⁹⁶ Southcott, *Long Wished For Revolution*, 14.

wonder at me.”⁵⁹⁷ Southcott's focus on the term “wonder,” to buttress her own interpretation of Revelation 12 against more established interpretative approaches, underscores the close attention she pays to the text of this chapter. The King James's translation of Revelation 12:1 leaves open the possibility for the actualisation of the vision that Southcott offers in her writings.

A second feature of 12:1 which gives Southcott the interpretative space to embody the woman of Revelation 12 is the allusive potential of the descriptor “clothed with the sun”. Southcott finds a proof-text to explain this imagery, and thus interprets “the sun” as the “sun of righteousness” in Malachi 4:2. This is a connection which was very much prevalent in eighteenth-century biblical commentaries.⁵⁹⁸ Southcott uses this juxtaposition to express a wider soteriological hope: the union between the woman and “the sun” will eventually be shared with all believers. Southcott writes:

The Sun of Righteousness is come
With healing in his wings appears
...
And so the woman now he'll free
That heirs of God we all might be.⁵⁹⁹

Southcott interprets the “Sun of Righteousness” as a reference to Christ. Thus the “sun” in Revelation 12:1 becomes Christ's avatar in the text, acting in conjunction with the “woman” to effect “his father's” will. In *The Third Book of Wonders*, the text in which she announced her imminent delivery of Shiloh, she connects Revelation 12:1-2 with the reference to the “marriage of the lamb” in 19:7. “Being clothed with the Sun is the Sun of Righteousness... but how could it be said, the Bride, the Lamb's wife, without a spiritual visitation, to prove that as the BRIDEGROOM I meant to come in Spirit...”⁶⁰⁰ The

⁵⁹⁷ *The First Book of Prophecies*, 33.

⁵⁹⁸ See, for example, Phillip Doddridge, *The Family Expositor: or, a Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament with Critical Notes, and a Practical Improvement of Each Section*, 6th ed. (Edinburgh, 1772), 6:449.

⁵⁹⁹ Southcott, *A Word to the Wise*, 50.

⁶⁰⁰ *Third Book of Wonders*, 11.

connection of Revelation 12:1 with Malachi 4:2 thus serves to cement the conviction that Southcott's prophecies are an established part of the end-time events narrated by the Book of Revelation.

We have seen, therefore, how the Bible's presentation of the woman of Revelation 12 provides considerable interpretative space which Southcott is able to exploit to construct and defend her decoding of the chapter. This wiggle-room is noted by modern commentators on the text, who observe the variety of interpretations in the reception history of the chapter, but also the woman's anonymity and the allusiveness of John's description.⁶⁰¹ Interpreters have found allusions to Zion (c.f. Isaiah 66:6-9); Egyptian "Isis" mythology; a Babylonian "combat myth"; the contemporary Hellenistic myth of Leto pursued by Python; celestial constellations and the primordial temptation of Eve at the hands of the "serpent".⁶⁰² Those who present the woman as an allegory of God's faithful community (whether Israel or the Church – or both) maintain that this mythologised woman has an important corporate identity.⁶⁰³ Keller argues that such a wealth of "metaphorical options" is welcome; the anonymous woman provides an opportunity to "read an anonymous goddess back *into* this grimly androcentric text."⁶⁰⁴ For Southcott, this interpretative openness allows her to read *herself* back into the text, to become a character which she (and arguably John of Patmos) places at the heart of the story of God's reconciliation with mankind. In doing so, her exposition of this verse sets out a number of

⁶⁰¹ "the vision intends a multivalent mythological symbolization of transpersonal divine realities." Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 81.

⁶⁰² For a summary of the possible backgrounds to the imagery of Revelation 12:1-2 see Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 191-8; Adela Yarbro-Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for Harvard Theological Review, 1976); Boxall, *Revelation*, 175-9; Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 667-74, 679-82; Beale, *Revelation*, 624-32. Tina Pippin comments that the woman "is so historicized that she has almost lost her place as a character in the story in her own right." Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: the Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 74.

⁶⁰³ Boxall, 178.

⁶⁰⁴ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 64-5.

important convictions: that her visitation was foreordained in the biblical text, that it is of divine origin and that it has clear cosmic, soteriological and eschatological implications.

Given the prominent place Southcott gives in her writings to the redemptive role of the woman of Revelation, it has been tempting for some researchers to present her as a proto-feminist. Harrison argues Southcott's interpretation of the woman of Revelation 12 is "intelligible as a kind of theological feminism." Tremlett depicts the Southcottian movement as "an historically articulated struggle or intervention to contest a patriarchal Biblical hermeneutic." Similarly, Rowland claims that one of Southcott's main contribution to the history of ideas was "her interpretation of the fall, putting woman in the right and man in the wrong, which laid a foundation for later feminist thinking."⁶⁰⁵ Yet such labels and reconstructions must be treated with nuance. In her writings, Southcott does call into question established expectations about women and the role they could play in religious life. Her clarion call from her earliest writings is that women not only could receive prophetic visitations, but that it was essential to God's eschatological plan that saving revelation *must* be delivered by a woman. Similarly, when her supporter Maria Bruce asked if she could travel to Exeter to examine her writings, Southcott replied:

I answer, yes. There are no bounds set to women...As one and all were included in the fall of Eve; so woman has a just right to hear their cause pleaded...⁶⁰⁶

Southcott thus affirms that her visitation is intended to deliver both men and women.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Southcott considered her mission to be primarily oriented towards men. Reflecting upon the outcome of her trial in 1804, Southcott was struck that in addition to the men who declared their belief, many women "who before were full of

⁶⁰⁵ Harrison, *Second Coming*, 108; Tremlett, "Utopia as Praxis", 99; Rowland, "Southcott, Joanna (1750-1814)", 462.

⁶⁰⁶ Southcott, *Divine and Spiritual Communications*, 39.

unbelief” were convinced by the examination. This delighted Southcott since “the Lord showed no wondrous workings to convince them, nor ever promised to do it to convince women... all his promises are to convince the unbelief of men”.⁶⁰⁷ Similarly, whilst Southcott's interpretation of Genesis 3 blames the devil for misleading the woman, nonetheless “woman must know, they are the transgressors, and not the man.”⁶⁰⁸

Additionally, when she reflects upon prominent female leaders in the Bible, Southcott does not accord them any genuine agency, instead depicting their actions as being firmly under God's auspices and control:

Is it a new thing for a Woman to deliver her People? Did not Esther do it? Did not Judith do it? And was it not a Woman that nailed Sisera to the ground? But by those power do *you judge* it was done?... these wondrous works were never done by Women without my strength and protection?⁶⁰⁹

Southcott's task is to redeem the man's initial sin and to demonstrate that God was not mistaken in providing the Eve as Adam's helpmate. Thus, as Clarke has demonstrated, Southcott's writings show the difficulty many contemporary female prophets had in translating “the symbolic power of the biblical Eve... into a message of temporal female emancipation.”⁶¹⁰

4.3.2. “she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered”

By far the most notorious facet of Southcott's actualisation of the woman of Revelation 12 is her announcement of her pregnancy in 1814. However, this material realisation of Revelation 12's imagery of pregnancy and birth is only one reading of this text generated across Southcott's writings. Southcott produces a number of different interpretations of this part of the vision at different points in her visitation. Though Southcott's final publication would attempt to show how passages from earlier works could be interpreted as “the

⁶⁰⁷ Southcott, *Trial*, 143.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁰⁹ Southcott, *A Warning to the World*, 51.

⁶¹⁰ Clarke, “The Sexual Crisis and Popular Religion”, 61.

identification of the man-child”,⁶¹¹ her earlier expositions reveal that this aspect of Revelation's imagery could have a broader, metaphorical significance.

In one of her earliest manuscript prophecies, Southcott records an assurance that “the manchild shall be born”. Little further explanation is offered, aside from an assurance that “travail pains thou long for man must bear”. The wider context of the communication, however, is on the acceptance of the truth of her visitation by clergymen in Exeter. Thus the invocation of Revelation's pregnancy motif may be a means of expressing her hope for the fulfilment of Revelation's wider hope for the defeat of Satan.⁶¹² This is in keeping with her interpretation of the image in *Strange Effects of Faith*: “I am still complaining to be delivered; for till my writings are proved by the standard fixed for me, I shall never be delivered...”⁶¹³ A similar reading is offered in an 1802 publication, where Southcott links the woman's birth pangs to her inability to understand her writings: “How couldst thou be travailing in birth and in pain to be delivered, if I had not placed thy writings in such a manner, to confuse your mind before the twelve Stars were gathered together.”⁶¹⁴ In her early career, then, Southcott's writings are the conceptual framework through which the pregnancy motif is interpreted. Her texts, which offer the salvific revelation of the fulfilment of the promises of Revelation and Genesis 3:15, provide a symbolic focus for her yearning for her visitation to be understood by the wider world. This reading is best exemplified in a communication published in 1805:

let men discern in what manner I have led thee on, in FAITH and FEAR that thou mayest be compared to a Woman travailing with Child, that knoweth not till the Child is born, whether she shall have a Son or a Daughter:- whether the Child will live or die...⁶¹⁵

The communication continues by explaining that Southcott's “pregnancy” would be

⁶¹¹ So Allan, “Joanna Southcott”, 644.

⁶¹² Southcott, “Type of the Lady”, PN101:5.

⁶¹³ *Strange Effects*, Part 4, 189.

⁶¹⁴ *Answer of the Lord*, 111.

⁶¹⁵ Foley and Southcott, *Answer of the Rev. Thomas P. Foley*, 35-6.

realised when “thy Children are born; to see the clear and perfect day.” Revelation's imagery of the pregnant woman thus serves as a metaphor for Southcott to conceptualise her role as the leader of a prophetic movement, whose cryptic writings – when properly judged – would engender a new community of sealed followers who would bring about Satan's defeat through their loyalty to God.

The “man-child” delivered in Revelation 12:5 is a subject for speculation in a number of Southcott's texts. During her time in Devon, she clearly identifies Pomeroy as the “shadow” of the man-child:

To thee twas come to all be't known
 And all might see it clear
 To travail on from man to man
 Till Pomeroy did appear:
 And as a Child tho' often foil'd
 The letters did receive
 But could not see the mystery
 In faith and peace believed
 So still unborn to all be't known
 Thou'st travailed with the Child⁶¹⁶

We may note, however, that this communication uses the image of the man-child of Pomeroy to mark him out as a fore-runner of a wider hope.

Though Pomeroy I did name
 To be the man where I would come
 But shall I leave the rest?
 Mark deep the vision now of John
 Then every man is bles't
 So now begin to wear your crowns
 Like stars begin to shine⁶¹⁷

As a member of the clergy esteemed by Southcott, Pomeroy's expected conversion is marked out as a “shadow”, which Southcott expects to catalyse the wider acceptance of her prophetic claims.

⁶¹⁶ Southcott, “Respecting the Man-Child of Whom Pomeroy Was the Shadow,” PN140:73. Later in the communication she decodes the vision of the child being taken up to heaven (12:5) in terms of Pomeroy's delight when he accepts Southcott's message and is “born” (PN140:74).

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., PN140:75.

When her advances are firmly rebuffed by Pomeroy, the character is acted out by other figures. In part seven of *Strange Effects*, Southcott interprets the death of Stanhope Bruce's son through the imagery of the man-child in Revelation 12:5. Basil Bruce is depicted by Southcott as being “caught up to God and to his throne” to thwart Satan's attempts “to devour his faith”.⁶¹⁸ This episode gives rise to a further typological interpretation of Revelation 12. Southcott's Spirit affirms that “Mr. B. Bruce has been represented as a type of Christ... let every man know that as Mr. Bruce is called the shadow, I am now clothed with his clothing, sent to me by his worthy bride”.⁶¹⁹ The vision of Revelation 12 thus serves as a malleable metaphor for Southcott both to express her relationship with Christ, and with her followers and early supporters.

We can see here, as in her decodings of the “seven stars” imagery, Southcott's tendency to use Revelation to present herself and key followers as active agents in God's plans. Her readings, with the exception of the woman clothed with the sun (so Sklar), tend to be inclusive in nature, showing how her supporters can see themselves as typological representations of characters in Revelation.⁶²⁰ This is particularly the case with Southcott's interpretation of Revelation's imagery of “the bride” (see 4.3.3). Her interpretation of the man-child's birth undergoes a similar development when she writes to a follower Jonathan Priestley, whose wife had suffered a series of miscarriages. In this communication, Southcott links Revelation 12:5 with Jesus's discussion with Nicodemus in John 3:5-6:

I shall tell thee the meaning of the man child being born. Know what I said to Nicodemus ye must be born again, being born [25] again is of the Spirit, is to believe the spirit and the visitation that is from on high⁶²¹

⁶¹⁸ *Strange Effects of Faith*, Part 7, 32.

⁶¹⁹ *Strange Effects of Faith*, Part 7, 50.

⁶²⁰ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 82. See also Allan, “Joanna Southcott”, 641.

⁶²¹ Southcott, “Copy of a Letter from Joanna Southcott to Jonathan Priestly,” January 20, 1801, PN307: 9, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive. The dating of this communication is uncertain: a copy of the letter in PN111:194-206 dates the correspondence to 20th January, 1805.

Southcott's early writings, then, interpret Revelation's vision of the birth of the man-child not as a prefiguration of her own miraculous pregnancy, but of the metaphorical rebirth of her followers when they accept her visitation as genuine.

Prior to her own experience of pregnancy-like symptoms in 1814, Southcott encounters other claims to miraculous pregnancies. In 1807, responding to reports of a woman who claimed to have conceived a child through the Holy Spirit, Southcott describes such claims as “lying wonders from the devil who now looketh in various ways to bring prophecies into scorn”. She reaffirms her interpretation of the birth as a metaphor for conversion: “the meaning of the Man child being born hath a Spiritual allusion of bring born by faith.” Crucially, and ironically, given her declarations in 1814, she warns her correspondent:

no woman will ever conceive by the Holy Ghost to bring a man child into the world, and no such thing will happen as she hath asserted for her to have a Child born of the Visitation of my Spirit, but Satan's arts will be many to deceive mankind that unbelief may abound⁶²²

Declarations such as this, and the ways Southcott conceptualises Revelation's imagery of pregnancy and birth as typological prefigurations of the success of her prophetic career, call into question Anne Mellor's claim that Southcott, “because she was a woman... could conceptualize the Second Coming of Christ only as a literal pregnancy and birth”.⁶²³

Mellor's argument is bound up in her wider study of female romantic writers Mary Anne Browne and Mary Shelley, arguing that despite an apparent, and unusual, embrace of apocalyptic thinking, all three retain traces of the hope for new birth and therefore reject the eschatological emphases of their male counterparts. Mellor argues that an

eschatologically-oriented relationship with time is “antithetical” to the “feminine mode of

⁶²² “A Communication in Answer to Mr Crook’s Letter Giving an Account of a Woman Who Declared That She Had Conceived by the Holy Ghost, and Should Bring Forth the Man-Child into the World,” March 12, 1807, PN117: 213-4, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁶²³ Anne K. Mellor, “Blake, the Apocalypse and Romantic Women Writers” in Tim Fulford (ed.), *Romanticism and Millenarianism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 149.

thought” in the Romantic period.⁶²⁴ This conception has parallels with Kristeva's identification of time experienced within female subjectivity as both “eternal” and “monumental” in its repetition, which is consequently bound up with the experience of birth.⁶²⁵ Browne's, Shelley's and Southcott's apparent embrace of the eschaton as the goal of history eventually, and in the case of Southcott irresistibly, gives way to seeing “the apocalypse as a process of growth or gradual transformation within historical time, as a biological process within the female human body”.⁶²⁶ Southcott's eventual experience of pregnancy is one which is read through the lens of Revelation 12, which had provided the interpretative key to the entirety of her prophetic visitation to date. In Southcott's writings prior to 1814, I can find only one instance where Southcott intimates a physical experience of labour. In a catena of dream accounts in 1804, Southcott records departing from a large dinner, before “at last I felt myself parted as it were in two, and life came out of me like a Child”.⁶²⁷ This is not a simple prefiguration of Southcott's pregnancy, however. The vision is not explained, save for words spoken when Southcott awakens: “The night is far spent, The Day is at hand.”⁶²⁸

Thus the emphasis in Mellor's claim that Southcott “was incapable of separating her conception of Revelation from her physical body” perhaps ought to be placed the other way around. It is not that a change to Southcott's physical body was the only outcome of her identification with the woman of Revelation. Rather, her capacity to apply this vision typologically to a diverse range of circumstances in her life, provided the most natural interpretative framework to understand the dramatic changes to her body in her final year.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 140-4.

⁶²⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Women's Time”, trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7:1 (1981), 16-8.

⁶²⁶ Mellor, “Romantic Women Writers”, 149.

⁶²⁷ Southcott, “On Her Dream of Being Naked and Parted in Two When Life Came out of Her like a Child,” July 6, 1804, PN108:237-8, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., PN108:239

Southcott's first describes her pregnancy in a communication to George Turner. She describes "a power to shake my whole body... a sensation it is impossible for me to describe upon my womb."⁶²⁹ The visitation occurred when Southcott was meditating on Mary's virginity, further strengthening the typological link present from Southcott's earliest writings. In her published announcement, her child unveils the true identities of prominent figures in Revelation:

when he is born; then the nations will begin to shake; and then they will know, if thou art the WOMAN mentioned in the Revelation, to bring the MAN-CHILD into the world; then BUONAPARTE is the Beast in the Revelation, whom they have worshipped.⁶³⁰

Southcott's expectation that she would deliver a child thus has manifestly political implications. Not only would it entail the defeat of the "beast" of Revelation 13 – symbolised by Napoleon – it would also fulfil the expected end-time restoration of the Jews. The use of Genesis 49:10 as a proof-text to interpret Revelation 12:5 places the fulfilment of the text in the context of the restoration of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. Southcott's successful miraculous delivery would bring about a conversion to Christianity: "if I have a Son, this year; then, in like manner our Saviour was born, And now [the Jews] must look on him who they have pierced, and believe in the THREE-ONE-GOD, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."⁶³¹ Southcott's experience in 1814, and the expectations she places upon these physical changes, solidifies her conviction that she, and her followers, are called upon to fulfil Revelation's visions on the historical plane.

Revelation 12's pregnancy motif thus performs a variety of functions across Southcott's writings. She uses it to conceptualise her visitation, and the transformation it will bring upon those that accept her prophetic claims. Fundamentally, the pregnancy functions in

⁶²⁹ "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.

⁶³⁰ Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 32.

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Southcott's thought as a metaphor, a scriptural anchor for her hope that her prophecies will be understood and followed. As a result, throughout her career, a number of different male candidates emerge as feasible representations of the “man-child,” a pivotal character who can lend legitimacy to Southcott's prophetic claims. Southcott's overwhelming focus on her visitation, and the establishment of its divine origin, as a hermeneutical key to her reading of Revelation, perhaps helps us to understand why – prior to 1814 – she is reluctant to give credence to interpretations of Revelation 12:2 and 12:5 which look forward to a physical birth. Until her own body undergoes a dramatic change, these verses are flexible images used to emphasise the spiritual and soteriological ramifications of her visitation. She thus decodes them in the figurative ways outlined above, or defers the interpretation of characters such as the “man-child” who appear in the text.⁶³² We should therefore guard against readings which see Southcott's readings of Revelation 12 as inevitably culminating in the announcement of her miraculous pregnancy. Her announcement of Shiloh is merely one final reading inscribed over a variety of metaphorical and typological interpretations explaining relationships and events at different points in her career.

4.3.3. “the Spirit and the bride say, Come.”

Southcott's interpretation of “the woman” of Revelation 12 connects this figure with a number of other positively-depicted female characters within the text: principally “the bride” of chapters 19 and 21-2. In this way, Southcott contributes to a rich seam of interpretation in which the women depicted in Revelation's visions are often interlinked and compared.⁶³³ All of these biblical women combined explain Southcott's true identity

⁶³² “concerning the MAN-CHILD, it will not be cleared up till the END; and then will every one see clear the perfect mystery of the MAN-CHILD”. Sharp and Southcott, *An Answer to the World*, 78.

⁶³³ Frequently, this is expressed in terms of a perceived opposition between the woman of Revelation 12, the city-bride of Revelation 21-2 and the “whore” of chapter 17. So Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 250; Boxall, *Revelation*, 242; W. Gordon Campbell, *Reading Revelation: A Thematic Approach* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2012), 240-1. The reading offered by Collins interprets the women of Revelation through Jung's ambivalent “Great Mother” archetype and the text's depiction of the victory of the woman as Bride, as the defeat “of the Great Mother under her deadly aspect”: Adela Yarbro Collins, “Feminine Symbolism

and significance in the eschatological events she argued she was heralding. What emerges most strongly from Southcott's interpretation of Revelation's bridal imagery, however, is how her own visitation stands as a paradigmatic foretaste of the eventual union of Christ with the Church.⁶³⁴

In her early communications, Southcott asserts that she is the first to be unveiled as a “Bride” of Christ through her visitation: “no one falsely might the Bride assume/Till every thing together I make clear/Conceal no longer that the Bride is here”.⁶³⁵ This embodiment, however, prefigures a wider experience of God dwelling with humanity. For instance, in *Strange Effects of Faith* she quotes from a letter of 1796: “the marriage of the Lamb meaneth when he cometh to unite all nations, to be as one sheep under one shepherd... The Lamb's wife meant a woman, that all these things should be revealed...”⁶³⁶ She subsequently relates a poetic communication from the Spirit as proof that “what is the shadow to me is the substance to all”:

So now then come, as she hath done;
Believe my Bible true,
Then now as brides you all shall be;
The Bridegroom all shall know.⁶³⁷

Jesus' own words provide Southcott with a proof-text to further flesh out this idea. She recounts a communication from the Spirit in January 1794 in which the Spirit directed her attention to the parable of the leaven in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21: “I will open to thy view the Revelations; and when thou hast leavened it, thou shalt leaven the whole lump... the Lamb is come, and the Bride hath made herself ready.”⁶³⁸ Southcott's visitation is the

in the Book of Revelation, *Biblical Interpretation* 1:1 (1993), 20-33. Keller resists the attempt to connect and conflate the women of Revelation, but ultimately finds a connection inevitable: “I would not want to identify the anonymous Sun Woman of Apocalypse 12 with the over-named New Jerusalem... But a hint of their female solidarity – veiled from the text – suggests itself.” Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 83.

⁶³⁴ This feature of Southcott's interpretation is noted by Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 82; Allan, “Joanna Southcott”, 641 and Madden, *Paddington Prophet*, 264-5.

⁶³⁵ Southcott, “Type of the Lady”, PN101:3.

⁶³⁶ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, Part 1, 40.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, part 1, 45.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

prelude to the climactic reunion of humankind with Christ, depicted in the “marriage of the Lamb” in Revelation 19:17. This is reasserted in the third part of *Strange Effects*:

I tell you all, Christ styleth himself the Bridegroom; and whoever hath his mind and will written on his heart, the same is the Bride; for Christ is the Bridegroom, the Church is the Bride.⁶³⁹

This reading recurs at a number of points in her publications. In the account of her “trial” in 1804, Southcott states “This is but the shadow in ONE of what the substance will be to ALL, when the bridegroom cometh.”⁶⁴⁰

Integral to Southcott's use of Revelation's bridal imagery, is her continued reflection on – and invocation of – Revelation 22:17 - “the Spirit and the bride say, Come.” This joint invitation gives Southcott a further means of underscoring the significance of her prophetic texts:

I am come to visit in the spirit to warn by prophecies & throw open my bible to explain the mysteries & to invite all men to come to the Knowledge of the good by the same hand you say tempted man to the Knowledge of evil.⁶⁴¹

Southcott sees her visitation as actualising the Bible's closing invitation, and Revelation's depiction of two voices offering this invitation, provides Southcott with the interpretative space to make this claim. As a female prophet, revealed to be the paradigmatic “bride” of the Lamb, Southcott is the vessel through which the Holy Spirit can invite humanity to reconcile with God.

Southcott's actualisation of the “bride” in Revelation signifies that her visitation constitutes a climactic moment of history. In *The First Book of Prophecies*, the Spirit declares:

⁶³⁹ Ibid., part 3, 99. In the ensuing explanation, Southcott draws upon Jesus' words in Matthew 12:48-50 (and its parallels): “Who is my mother, or my brethren?... whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven...” to demonstrate that how the bride can be interpreted as the Church rather than as a specific individual.

⁶⁴⁰ *Book of the Trial*, 138.

⁶⁴¹ “A Communication in Explanation of the Last Chapter of the Revelations,” June 2, 1807, PN171:14, Panacea Charitable Trust - Southcott Archive.

'Tis time to publish now the Banns,
Or Licence bring to me,
That may abound, and make the sound,
THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB.⁶⁴²

In announcing herself as the bride, Southcott urges her followers to prepare for the imminent marriage feast, the event which in the text precedes the millennial reign of Christ (Revelation 20), and the institution of the new heaven, new earth, and the new Jerusalem. This subsequently gives urgency to the Southcottians' praxis of “sealing” believers, the actualisation of Revelation 7. Through this sealing, Southcott presents her ministry as a fulfilment of the predicted union at the climax of Revelation: “In the day that I see perfect obedience in the WOMAN, and MEN to copy after her, ye shall surely live and possess the TREE OF LIFE.”⁶⁴³ In adopting this role, Southcott is able – through her writings – to embody the call made jointly by “the Spirit and the Bride” in Revelation 22:17.

4.3.4. “the holy city, new Jerusalem... prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”

Like Jane Lead before her, Southcott records a visionary experience which directly parallels that of John of Patmos in Revelation 21:10. Upon reading this verse and doubting the nature of the Spirit that had been communicating with her, she was answered:

Thou wast in the spirit, when thou saw the New Jerusalem descending, with all the host of heaven; and thou wast on a high mountain, where John saw the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of God, that hath visited thee.⁶⁴⁴

Southcott's and John's vision of the New Jerusalem is one which is interpreted in different ways in Southcott's writings. Like Brothers, Southcott advances the expectation of the physical city being “rebuilt” and the restoration of the Jewish people to the city. Yet, in addition, Southcott allegorically decodes features of John's depiction of the New Jerusalem.

⁶⁴² *First Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 6.

⁶⁴³ Joanna Southcott, *The Full Assurance that the Kingdom of Christ is at Hand, from the Signs of the Times* (London, 1806), 40.

⁶⁴⁴ *Strange Effects*, Part 1, 48.

As Bar Josef demonstrates, Southcott's conception of the hope for New Jerusalem is far less strongly tied to the physical city of Jerusalem, than it is in Brothers's reading.⁶⁴⁵ Yet nonetheless, interest in the physical restoration of the city does appear at a number of points in her writings. In part 7 of *The Strange Effects of Faith*, the Spirit dictates a poetic vision of the lavish rebuilding of the city in which hidden “gold mines” will be revealed, and “every precious stone” will be used “To build Jerusalem up again”.⁶⁴⁶ In expressing this hope for a rebuilt Jerusalem, Southcott shows a concern for the physical land of Palestine, which is integral to her end-time expectations that the Jewish people be restored to the region: “know the last days must come, that a remnant of those that were cast off must be gathered in and made a strong nation.”⁶⁴⁷

This facet of Southcott's future hope becomes prominent in the texts where she announces the coming of Shiloh. Both the third and fourth of her “books of wonders” are addressed to “the Hebrews”. As a restorer of the Jewish people, fulfilling Jacob's final words in Genesis 49:10, Shiloh is a necessary forerunner of Christ's eventual second coming: “I have told thee, from my first coming... that they may see, in the end, the way I meant to visit again, to set my SON on the holy hill of Zion.”⁶⁴⁸ Similarly, she imagines people travelling from afar to assist with the rebuilding of the city:

The promised Land for main I'll gain,
And they shall know their call.
To distant Lands, I say to man,
My chosen they must go,
Jerusalem's low walls to build⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁵ “The Holy Land as a geographical reality that might contradict or complicate her interpretation of prophecy did not seem to trouble the prophetess.” Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land*, 51.

⁶⁴⁶ Southcott, *Strange Effects*, Part 7, 16.

⁶⁴⁷ *True Explanations of the Bible*, 457.

⁶⁴⁸ *Fourth Book of Wonders*, 26.

⁶⁴⁹ *Warning to the World*, 96.

Yet despite Southcott's interest in the Holy Land as the site of Shiloh's restoration of the Jews, this interest is not consistently applied even in these pivotal texts. Rather, she claims, "The New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, meaneth where the visitation is made known: it does not mean Jerusalem where it stood".⁶⁵⁰ England emerges consistently as a nation in balance – simultaneously the recipient of the promise of end-time blessing and a nation on the verge of judgement and invasion. She writes: "I say into this land, if this year that hath begun in sorrow, does not end in joy, it is your own faults: for England may be a blessed land; and the first redeemed of all the earth."⁶⁵¹ Similarly, in *The Third Book of Wonders*, Southcott depicts England as the site of Jesus's intervention in the world:

such a visitation as hath been to thee this year never happened in England, since it was a nation; and the blessings that will attend it, which I have told thee shall follow, will make this a happy land⁶⁵²

England emerges as the immediate recipient of the Bible's promises, but this is contingent upon the acceptance of Southcott's prophecies and the overcoming of "Satan's malice" in opposing her visitation.

Southcott further dislocates the promise of New Jerusalem from the Holy Land through a tendency to allegorise various details in the vision of Revelation 21-22. The scriptural promise of a new heaven and new earth is read as a rejuvenation of the existing order – paralleled in Blake's, Brothers's and Swedenborg's thought – and expressed through the idiom of the "church militant" and "church triumphant":

now it will appear, to all men, when the church militant joins the church triumphant, when sorrow and sin are done away...: it will be a new heaven to the saints, when they have free liberty to come down and converse with the saints below: it will be a new earth to man, when sin and sorrow, pain and misery, are all done away...⁶⁵³

The description of the tree of life and the river of life flowing from God's throne also call

⁶⁵⁰ Southcott, *Third Book of Wonders*, 16.

⁶⁵¹ *Strange Effects*, Part 3, 98.

⁶⁵² *Third Book of Wonders*, 49. See also *Communication Given to Joanna, in Answer to Richard Brothers*, 22.

⁶⁵³ Southcott, *The Second Book of Visions*, 56.

for further exposition. The river, Southcott argues “is the PURE WORD OF GOD” and thus does not require the reshaping of a physical landscape that Brothers's conception of the city necessitates. Similarly, the tree of life growing around the river is a metaphor for God's communication with humanity, via Southcott's writings:

By every Leaf that's given from the Tree:
And every Leaf that's given I do mean,
It is the Seals that must the Heirship gain
...
These are the Leaves for healing do appear;
To heal the Nations as they all do come...⁶⁵⁴

The vision of the tree with its healing leaves is fulfilled in the publication of Southcott's writings and her practice of “sealing” her followers. As the already-revealed Bride, Southcott's own texts and seals contain the promises of the end-time. The leaves of the tree become embodied in the paper she writes upon. All her followers need to do to inherit their healing properties is to “sign their names.”⁶⁵⁵ As such, the promise of New Jerusalem is not solely a reality for a future eschatological age: believers in Southcott's prophecies can participate in its community through aligning themselves with the “bride” in the present. Southcott's writings, and her prophetic visitation, thus form the dominant hermeneutical lens through which Revelation's vision is to be read.

John's vision of the New Jerusalem is to be interpreted symbolically, liberated from the need to tie the city to a specific geographical locale. Despite its largely metaphorical nature, the promise of Jerusalem remains a focal one in Southcott's writings. Her believers are still to believe in the unity of the faithful in earth and heaven, and to hope for the day “the Lamb sitteth on the throne for ever and ever”.⁶⁵⁶ All of these hopes are fulfilled through Southcott's visitation and its status as the final stage of the conflict between God,

⁶⁵⁴ *Answer of the Lord to the Powers of Darkness*, 104.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁶ *Long-Wished For Revolution*, 48.

humanity, and Satan.

4.4. Conclusion

In or around 1805, William Blake composed a watercolour entitled *The River of Life*.⁶⁵⁷

Centred in the foreground of this picture, which Blake explicitly marks out as an illustration of Revelation 22:1-2, is a figure swimming through the crystalline river of life winding through the New Jerusalem. This figure, whose gender cannot be ascertained with certainty, leads two children towards the sun in the background, surrounded by the heavenly host. In the same year, Southcott published a vision as part of *The Second Book of Sealed Prophecies*:

I dreamt this evening, that I was swimming upon a large and spacious river; the water was clear as crystal... When I came to the bank, I thought I was taken up in the air and carried over many houses and curious buildings; and I was thinking to myself what beautiful places I should see.⁶⁵⁸

I do not wish to suggest outright that Blake's watercolour is directly modelled upon Southcott's dream account, yet I would like to suggest that Blake's striking depiction of a figure swimming *in* the river of life – swimming *in* the river at the climax of the promises of Revelation – captures something about Southcott's own engagement with the text.

Through the study of Southcott's writings above, we can see that Revelation serves as one of the principal building-blocks of her identity. From her earliest published works, Revelation provides the narrative framework with which she articulates her conviction of being called to carry out a prophetic mission which fulfils God's promises, written down by prophets centuries ago. Her writings evince a commitment that Revelation contains “types and shadows” which provide an interpretative key to current tumultuous events and also to the significance of her visitation and the movement she inspires.

⁶⁵⁷ B586.

⁶⁵⁸ Southcott, *The Second Book of Sealed Prophecies*, 22.

In this way, Southcott coheres almost perfectly to Frei's characterisation of the "pre-critical interpreter", inserting herself as "the woman clothed with the sun" into the biblical narrative and thus finding authoritative meanings for historical events within the visionary world of the text. Her prophetic reading of Revelation, and her conviction that her own texts continue and fulfil the revelatory actions of the spirit which vitiated John of Patmos, forms the dominant guide for her interpretations. Her visitation – in and of itself – is the fulfilment of the visions of Revelation 12, 21 and 22. Moreover, her commitment to typology as the hermeneutical key to the Bible's interpretation, allows her to generate a series of readings which, when viewed synoptically over the whole of her corpus, appear to be in tension. Yet, for Southcott, her prophetic career itself is an unfurling text, in which a series of typological manifestations of Revelation's key visions become apparent, that successively solidify her actualisation of the "woman clothed with the sun".

Her interpretation of Revelation's imagery, as we have seen, clearly diverges from Brothers's. The prophets offer competing answers to the questions of who the characters in Revelation 12 represent, and how the promise of the descent of the New Jerusalem is to be understood. Yet their approaches to the interpretation of these images do, in fact, share common ground. Their shared – but differently applied – assertion that the text's visions should be read alongside other key biblical texts (Ezekiel for Brothers; Genesis and the infancy narratives for Southcott) is not in itself distinctive. The implicit claim that all of these texts have to be reconciled within the interpretative framework of their respective prophetic careers and missions, however, is notable. Just as Brothers's reading of Revelation 21 is coloured by his commitment to a physical restoration of Jerusalem, led by a human agent, so Southcott's reading is guided by her belief that, fundamentally,

Revelation points forward to her unveiling as the Woman, whose obedience will repair the transgressions of the fall. Both assert themselves to be the subject of the text's visions, inscribing themselves and their missions in the text's characters and narratives. This, in turn, shapes how the text's promises are to be borne out in their prophetic missions. Brothers's externalised hope for a restored city demands Revelation 21-2's vision to be metaphorical; Southcott reads her life, writings and career as the climactic stage of a typological chain which stretches back to the catastrophic events in Eden.

Whilst, as shown in 4.3.1, Southcott's actualisation of Revelation 12 does not fully escape the dominant patriarchal framework of her day, her interpretations do provide an opportunity for "the Woman" to speak alongside John of Patmos about what is about to befall the world. This, combined with the flexibility with which she is able to draw upon Revelation's imagery in interpreting the text, raises questions about the status the book has for her readers. The prophetic interpreter who claims divine inspiration for their readings of the Bible places their own texts alongside those of the biblical authors as records of God's word. At the same time Southcott's texts ask to be seen in accordance with Scripture, they also demonstrate that it is in *her* writings that the true meaning of the text is to be found. The interplay between the authority of the text and its interpreter, which we have identified as pivotal in the prophetic interpretation of Revelation, is a tension which is not resolved in Southcott's writings. Instead, the framework provided by the text's visions, and the evolving and shifting circumstances in her life, are read against one another: Southcott's life justifies her readings of Revelation; Revelation shapes Southcott's perception of what is occurring during her life. Text and reader share authority, in Southcott's interpretation of Revelation, as they are both prophetic outpourings of the same Spirit.

Southcott's immersion in Revelation's visionary world therefore makes the book the primary, malleable lens through which her own life experiences should be interpreted. Just as Revelation is a text that recapitulates and re-envisioned the oracles of its scriptural predecessors, so also Southcott's writings interpret anew the text's promises of the "man-child", "the marriage of the Lamb" and "New Jerusalem". Significantly, they do so in ways which intimately link their fulfilment to the acceptance of Southcott's prophetic mission. Revelation points forward to Southcott's unveiling as the bride acting in accord with the Spirit: both the Spirit and the Bride offer the invitation to "Come... let him take the water of life freely" (22:17). In recording this, John of Patmos gives Southcott the responsibility of inviting readers to share in the book's climactic vision. Southcott's prophetic reading of Revelation thus emphasises the role that women play in the fulfilment of the book's future hopes. Blake too, in his poetic prophecies, similarly reflects how Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem – as a city and a woman – is to be incorporated into his prophetic plan. Like Southcott, he accords women a pivotal role in his vision of redemption, but he also seeks to go beyond Revelation's vision, to articulate his own vision of a redeemed society. In the following chapter, we can see how Blake's prophecies creatively dissent from his contemporary visionaries, as well as John of Patmos.

Chapter Five

“A City yet a Woman”: William Blake and the Hope of Revelation

My survey of Brothers's and Southcott's engagement with Revelation has highlighted a shared interest in the visions of Revelation 12 and Revelation 21-22. Blake also treated these scenes from Revelation in his poetry and visual art.⁶⁵⁹ Blake's illustrations of Revelation 12 for Thomas Butts, which he completed between c.1805 and 1809, depict two images of the dragon confronting the woman, visualising Revelation 12:4 (B580) and 12:18 (B581) respectively. Reading these images alongside one another, Blake depicts the woman in two contrasting states, the latter shown in Figure I below. One supine, perhaps overwhelmed by the dragon's onslaught; the other resistant, throwing out her hands in a mirror image of the dragon.⁶⁶⁰ In doing so, Blake explores the woman of Revelation 12 as both vulnerable to the dragon's wrath and also emboldened by the protection she receives from God (12:11-17). Blake's woman clothed with the sun, like Southcott emboldened by the Spirit, does not retreat into the wilderness as the passive recipient of God's protection, but becomes an active combatant offering her own resistance to the violent threat of Satan.

The active role Blake gives this character mirrors the creative role he accords to the prophet in his poetic works (see the discussion in 2.1), and is reflected in Los's defiant cry in the opening plates of *Jerusalem*:

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans

I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ For a survey of the range of Blake's illustrations of scenes from the Apocalypse which include the throne vision of Revelation 4-5 (B577), the emergence of “death” after the opening of the fourth seal in 6:8 (B578), the vision of the “great angel” in Revelation 10 (B579), the vision of the two beasts in Revelation 13 (B582-3), the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17-18; B584) and the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 (B585) see Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 224-8.

⁶⁶⁰ *Contra* Rowland (*Blake and the Bible*, 226), who reads the image as the woman looking up “startled and fearful”.

⁶⁶¹ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 10:20-1, E153.



Figure I: William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, c. 1805, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, B520.

This affirmation of the artist and prophet's creative autonomy extends to Blake's reading of the Bible. We have seen that Brothers's and Southcott's readings of Revelation are shaped

by their prophetic convictions: for Brothers his commitment to the physical restoration of Jerusalem affects his treatment of the relationship between Revelation 21-2 and Ezekiel 40-8; Southcott finds and exploits typological connections between Revelation 12's visions and events in her own life. What has loomed large in the studies of these prophetic readers is the way that their interpretation of Revelation is shaped by their specific prophetic convictions and goals. So too Blake's engagement with the text creates a tension between his appreciation of John of Patmos's prophetic insight and Blake's own sense of his prophetic mission: the need to create and craft his own vision through his art.

In this chapter, I offer a close reading of Blake's writings – and his visual art where appropriate – to look at how Blake incorporates Revelation's language and symbolism into his own creative endeavours. I begin by offering a brief biographical sketch of Blake's life and career, noting particularly how he interacts with contemporary religious trends in his works. I then offer a more focussed discussion of Blake's interest in Revelation, using his treatment of the concluding vision of Revelation 21-22 as a heuristic focus. Blake draws out of Revelation 21-22 themes and motifs which are at the heart of Brothers's and Southcott's readings of the book: the allusive nature of the text; its depiction of women; and the role of human and divine agency in the fulfilment of eschatological hopes.

This close study of Blake's engagement with Revelation 21-22 draws out three key motifs which have a significant bearing upon the development of his mythology and his future hopes. Firstly, Blake is influenced by Revelation's depiction of a last judgment followed by the emergence of a new created order. Secondly, Blake's interest in the symbol of the city (especially contemporary London) affects his interpretation of cities in Revelation. Finally, I chart Blake's interest in Revelation's depictions of women, in particular the rival city-

women of Babylon and New Jerusalem. In creating his own rival characters of Vala and Jerusalem in his myth, Blake explores the implicit contrast in Revelation's visions of these women in chapters 17-18 and 19-22. Blake's engagement with these tropes in the book – coupled with his belief that the actualisation of the office of prophet involves the imaginative expression of “honest indignation” – leads to a new reading of Revelation's eschatological vision, drawing upon its imagery and symbolism to construct his own prophetic unveiling of contemporary society and to express his own future hopes.

5.1. Blake's Life

With the exception of three years spent in Surrey with his patron William Hayley from 1800-3, Blake lived in London for his entire life.⁶⁶² Blake's mother likely belonged to a Moravian church but Blake was baptised at St James's Church, Westminster. As an adult, however, he never formally belonged to any one church.⁶⁶³ After an engraving apprenticeship with James Basire (1772-1779), he married his wife Catherine in 1782.⁶⁶⁴ Around 1788 Blake produced his first two illuminated books, *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*. For the next seven years, Blake continued to produce illuminated prophetic texts (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America: A Prophecy*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, *The [First] Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, *The Song of Los* and *The Book of Los*) which may have comprised the “Bible of Hell” he alludes to in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.⁶⁶⁵ During this period, living in Lambeth in London, he produced his celebrated *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*,

⁶⁶² The most in-depth biographical account of Blake's life is offered in Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise* but see also Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Minerva, 1996) and Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*.

⁶⁶³ For Blake's mother's Moravian background see Davies, “The Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family”, 1297-1319; Jessen, “Conversion as a Narrative, Visual, and Stylistic Mode in William Blake's Works”.

⁶⁶⁴ Sklar notes that his apprenticeship with Basire would have familiarised Blake with Freemason ritual and iconography, which she argues use biblical imagery as part of a “visionary theatre” that demands imaginative engagement, just as Blake's *Jerusalem* does. See Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 35-40.

⁶⁶⁵ Plate 24, E44. See especially Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition*, 7.

which drew the particular commendation of Coleridge who described Blake as an “apo- or rather ana-calyptic Poet”.⁶⁶⁶

After 1795 Blake did not publish any more illuminated books until the publication of *Milton: A Poem*, produced between 1804 and 1811. During this period he took a number of commissions, including a celebrated series of illustrations of biblical scenes for his patron Thomas Butts, which conclude with the series of illustrations of Revelation mentioned above.⁶⁶⁷ He also illustrated “Nights” 1-5 of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* between 1796 and 1797. This work may well have provided the inspiration for his poem *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, similarly structured into nine “nights”. He worked on *The Four Zoas* from c.1796, before abandoning it a decade later, incorporating many of its scenes into his later epics *Milton: A Poem* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*.⁶⁶⁸ These works were completed after Blake had returned to London from his sojourn in Surrey where, after an initial period of contentment and productivity, his relationship with his patron Hayley became strained and he was tried for sedition after an argument with a soldier in his garden.⁶⁶⁹ The Blakes settled in South Molton Street off Oxford Street (“I write in South Molton Street what I both see and hear/ In regions of Humanity, in London's opening streets” - *Jerusalem* 34:42-3, E180) before moving to 3 Fountain Court off The Strand in 1821. There Blake lived out his last days, completing the *Illustrations of the Book of Job* before his death on August 12th 1827.

⁶⁶⁶ Bentley, *Blake Records*, 336. For an exposition of this description, with its echoes of 2 Corinthians 3:13-18, see Michael Ferber, “Coleridge's 'Anacalyptic' Blake: An Exegesis”, *Modern Philology* 76:2 (1978), 189-93.

⁶⁶⁷ On the dating of Blake's Revelation watercolours see David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1977), 164-5.

⁶⁶⁸ Rosso depicts *The Four Zoas* as Blake's “prophetic workshop”, where he tried out and revised ideas that would reach their full fruition in later illuminated books. G.A. Rosso, *Blake's Prophetic Workshop: A Study of the Four Zoas* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993).

⁶⁶⁹ See Bentley, *Stranger*, 251-66.

This brief account of Blake's life and major works highlights the importance of the Bible and religion as subjects for his artistic endeavours. He syncretises an eclectic range of ideas from his religious, intellectual and cultural milieu in his works, without wholeheartedly assenting to any specific creed. Thus Mee depicts Blake as a bricoleur, a term he adapts from Claude Lévi-Strauss, denoting Blake's capacity to draw upon different discourses, forms and traditions and transforming them to forge his own artistic creations:

Blake took full advantage of the potential the complex nexus of languages he inherited opened up for subversion and parody. Many radicals in the 1790s took up the role of the bricoleur; they relished breaking down those discourses which had cultural authority and creating from them new languages of liberation.⁶⁷⁰

We can see this dialectic of influence and reappropriation at work in Blake's relationship with contemporary religious and intellectual traditions. As discussed in 2.2.2., the Blakes attended a conference organised by the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church in 1789. They did not subsequently join the church and Blake castigates Swedenborg's pretensions to revelatory insight in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books.”⁶⁷¹ Yet this critique does not prevent Blake from incorporating specific Swedenborgian ideas and teachings into his writings. In *Jerusalem* Blake depicts Albion (his archetypal symbol for both humankind and Britain) slumbering on a bejewelled couch constructed out of biblical books:

The Five books of the Decalogue, the books of Joshua & Judges,
Samuel, a double book & Kings, a double book, the Psalms & Prophets
The Four-fold Gospel, and the Revelations everlasting⁶⁷²

These texts exactly match Swedenborg's own list of books which he argued constituted “the Word” and were highlighted as scriptural on the declaration that Blake signed at the

⁶⁷⁰ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 9.

⁶⁷¹ Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 21, E42.

⁶⁷² *Jerusalem*, 48:9-11, E196.

New Jerusalem Church's conference.⁶⁷³ Blake's engagement with Swedenborg here demonstrates his capacity to glean raw materials from surrounding culture and incorporate them into his own creations. In doing so, he often exploits such borrowings for satire or parody. Albion's biblical couch is therefore an ambivalent symbol. Its construction is an act of mercy performed by Jesus as a counterpoint to the "Druidic" and sacrificial temples which Albion's sons are constructing around his lifeless limbs.⁶⁷⁴ Many critics see it as a positive image, giving Albion/Britain respite in the face of the sacrificial actions of his children.⁶⁷⁵ Yet from the narrator's perspective from "Eternity", this is "an image of Eternal Death!" (*Jerusalem* 48:12, E196). Blake's allusions to Swedenborg betray an ambivalence towards the salvific potential of his "Word". In a poem which points forward to Albion's triumphant awakening, this scriptural couch may provide a preferable resting place for fallen Britain, but it is also another structure which keeps him asleep.

5.2. Blake and the Bible

The Bible is a vital resource for Blake's artistic endeavours throughout his career. His statement that "The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art" underscores the centrality of biblical symbols and imagery in his art and poetry.⁶⁷⁶ In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake lauds the imaginative insight contained within scripture: "The Hebrew Bible & the Gospel of Jesus are not Allegory but Eternal Vision or Imagination of All that Exists".⁶⁷⁷ Critics are thus in broad agreement that the Bible constitutes an important hermeneutical key to unpacking Blake's mythology: "Blake's poetry is all related to a

⁶⁷³ Swedenborg, *New Jerusalem*, §266; Rix, *Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity*, 58.

⁶⁷⁴ *Jerusalem* 46:10-15, E195-6.

⁶⁷⁵ Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1963), 401. See also Minna Doskow, *William Blake's Jerusalem: Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982), 101. For a survey of the connotations of druidism in Blake's poetry – which often carries overtones of sacrificial religion, allegorising political sacrifice through the pursuit of warfare, and often symbolises deism – see Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 108-110.

⁶⁷⁶ *Laocoön*, E274.

⁶⁷⁷ *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E555.

central myth; and... the primary basis of this myth is the Bible.”⁶⁷⁸

Yet whilst the Bible is a dominant influence within his prophetic works, Blake also imbibed contemporary criticism about the biblical text and the basis for its authority as well as developing his own critiques. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake claimed that “All Bibles or sacred codes” have caused “errors”, such as creating the idea “That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.”⁶⁷⁹ Blake was, of course, far from alone in questioning the authority and morality behind the biblical text at this time. Of particular relevance for our purposes are the points of contact between Blake's work and Geddes's criticism and proposed translation of the Bible, which McGann argues would have been familiar to Blake.⁶⁸⁰ Geddes's translation drew attention to the contradictions and repetitions in the biblical text, and accounted for them by claiming that the Bible had its origins in the oral traditions of the ancient Hebrews.⁶⁸¹ In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake already casts the development of ancient priesthood as a perversion of the intentions of the “Ancient Poets”, who:

animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses... Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood.⁶⁸²

Mee observes that Blake shares Geddes' scepticism about the nature of the Bible's authority and thus engages with the Bible in a way which respects its origins as popular mythology and which the modern-day prophet may emulate.⁶⁸³ Thus *The First Book of Urizen* subverts

⁶⁷⁸ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 109. See also Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 4: “Throughout his life the Bible dominated Blake's imaginative world”. Bernard Blackstone, *English Blake* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1966), 346: “Of the three great influences on his writing – Ossian, Milton and the Bible – the last was the deepest and the most pervasive.”

⁶⁷⁹ Blake, *Marriage*, plate 4, E34. Blake's use of “code” probably denotes contemporary usage of the word as a book or volume of writings. See Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 5.

⁶⁸⁰ See Jerome J. McGann, “The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes”, *Studies in Romanticism* 25:3 (1986), 303-324. For an overview of Geddes's thought and works see Goldie, “Alexander Geddes”, 61-86.

⁶⁸¹ Geddes, *Critical Remarks*, 26.

⁶⁸² Blake, *Marriage*, plate 11.

⁶⁸³ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 167.

the story of the Genesis creation narratives, even whilst he emulates the form and layout of contemporary bibles.⁶⁸⁴ As Sklar has shown, Blake shows himself capable of subverting texts that he alludes to in his poems “when they do not uphold the gospel of forgiveness and transformation embodied in his Jesus and Jerusalem.”⁶⁸⁵ To draw anew on a dynamic we have seen at the heart of Southcott's and Brothers's use of the Bible, any authority the text may possess is subordinate to Blake's prophetic authority to use the text to shape his own prophetic critiques and visions.

Once the human authorship and the talents and stylistic quirks of its authors are recognised, then a naïve acceptance of the Bible as an authoritative revelation from God is no longer tenable. Imbibing Paine's critique of the morality of many biblical narratives, Blake claims any recognition of the Bible's “Divinity” must acknowledge the morally repugnant actions of its central characters:

I cannot conceive the Divinity of the Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at that time or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another but in the Sentiments & Examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful... This sense of the Bible is equally true to all & equally plain to all.⁶⁸⁶

The value of the Bible, for Blake, lies in its ability to inspire the reader, to “rouze the faculties to act”, rather than in providing an historically reliable record of salvation history.⁶⁸⁷ Blake's engagement with scripture, therefore, is primarily aesthetic: the prophetic exegete is to use texts which can inspire the imagination in his or her own creative endeavours:

What is it sets Homer Virgil & Milton in so high a rank of Art. Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other book. Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination & but mediately to the

⁶⁸⁴ For a reading of *Urizen* which underscores Blake's critique of Genesis's theological rationale of creation, see Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition*, 201-224.

⁶⁸⁵ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 148.

⁶⁸⁶ *Annotations to An Apology for the Bible*, E618.

⁶⁸⁷ *Letter to the Revd Dr Trusler*, August 23 1799, E702.

Understanding[?]⁶⁸⁸

The product of such an aesthetic engagement is a canon whose meaning is inherently contestable, conditioned by the reader's perspective. This view is rendered evocatively in *The Everlasting Gospel*, written c.1818:

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my Visions Greatest Enemy
Thine has a great hook nose like to thine
Mine had a snub nose like to mine

Blake puts this to his imagined interlocutor still more provocatively: “Both read the Bible day & night/But thou readst black where I read white”.⁶⁸⁹ Blake draws inspiration from the dialectical possibilities that this clash of perspectives creates. The transformative power of reading the Bible from contrary perspectives is dramatised both in the final “Memorable Fancy” of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in his *Illustrations to the Book of Job*. In the *Marriage*, Blake depicts a confrontation between a devil and an angel over the issue of whether Jesus gave “sanction to the law of ten commandments” in which the devil argues that Jesus broke all ten commandments and concludes “no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not rules.”⁶⁹⁰ The angel subsequently embraces the devil “& he was consumed and arose as Elijah.” The angel emerges from this conversion as a prominent biblical prophet. By embracing the devil's perspective and embracing “impulse” over “rules” in his reading of Jesus' life, the angel arises with a new prophetic identity.⁶⁹¹ He and Blake are subsequently

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., E702-3. See Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 5-7.

⁶⁸⁹ Blake, *The Everlasting Gospel*, 33:1-4, 13-4, E524. Paley correctly identifies Blake's interlocutor as a horribly stereotyped Jew who acts as Blake's “contrary” in their shared reading of the text. Morton D. Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 199-200. The issue of Blake's treatment of Jews in his writings is covered in depth by Karen Shabetai, “The Question of Blake's Hostility toward the Jews”, *ELH [English Literary History]* 63:1 (1996), 139-152.

⁶⁹⁰ Blake, *Marriage*, plates 23-24, E43.

⁶⁹¹ For the emphasis on the *Marriage* as a conversion text see especially Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 86-7. For commentary on these plates see Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 94-5 and A.A. Ansari, *William Blake's Minor Prophecies* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001), 22-5.

able to read the Bible together, “in its infernal or diabolical sense”.⁶⁹² The prophetic reader thus emerges out of the engagement with an opposing perspective, able to read the Bible through a new and invigorated interpretative lens.

Blake presents a similar transformation in the engagement with sacred texts in his engravings of Job (see Figures II and III).⁶⁹³ The first and last plates in the series both depict Job worshipping with his family, and are constructed with identical border patterns. In the first (Figure II), Job and his family's attention is focused on the texts open on Job and his wife's laps. They ignore the musical instruments hanging on the tree above them – a visual allusion to the exiles of Psalm 137 – and the plate is captioned with the words “Thus did Job continually” (Job 1:5). Blake foregrounds this detail in the text's prologue (which, Clines suggests, functions as an “ominous prelude to an irruption” into the continuity of Job's life⁶⁹⁴) juxtaposing it with Paul's words from II Corinthians 3:6 (“The Letter Killeth, the Spirit giveth life”). Thus a scene ostensibly evoking Job's piety, with attention centred upon the bound books at the heart of the image, is in fact a vision of spiritual exile. After Job's trials and his confrontation with God, Blake depicts Job and his restored family in a similar scene of worship (Figure III): now the family are standing up and playing the instruments, and his daughters carry scrolls rather than books. The upper portion of the border has the words of the “new song of Moses and of the Lamb” of Revelation 15:3, which echoes the song sung by the Israelites after their deliverance from Egypt and closely parallels Moses's song in Deuteronomy 32.⁶⁹⁵ Job and his family, as a result of their direct vision of God, are survivors of a new Exodus and now stand in the presence of God's

⁶⁹² *Marriage*, plate 24, E44.

⁶⁹³ For an in-depth commentary on these engravings see Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 13-72, who uses them to draw out key facets of Blake's hermeneutic approach to the Bible. See also Joseph Wicksteed, *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job*, 2nd ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1924) and Andrew Wright, *Blake's Job: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁶⁹⁴ David J.A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 17.

⁶⁹⁵ Boxall, *Revelation*, 218-9.

throne.⁶⁹⁶ The centrality of texts, mediated through two different media, illustrates the transformative reading practices Blake depicts in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Job, seeing God face to face, can approach the Bible in a new way, using it not in repetitive and alienating acts of duty, but in celebratory and creative acts of worship.

For Blake, then, an engagement with the Bible which proceeds from an appreciation of the “impulse” that runs through the text, rather than from the morality which it imposes on contemporary society, can transform the reader into a prophet in their own right. The prophetic interpreter should read the Bible as a text which acts as a springboard for vision, with a willingness to offer subversive and creative readings. This has a profound effect on how Blake interacts with specific biblical texts, and, as we saw in 2.1, scholars such as Wittreich Jr. have linked his creative reuse of biblical imagery to the ways Revelation reshapes prior prophetic visions. This chapter thus unpacks how Blake incorporates John's vision into his own prophetic poetry and, in doing so, how he interprets the vision of his prophetic predecessor.

5.3. Blake and Revelation

Revelation permeates Blake's writings and visual art and provides a constant subject for engagement and interpretation. As Sklar notes, Blake identifies his visions with John of Patmos's twice, in *Milton* and *The Four Zoas*.⁶⁹⁷ In his writings we find allusions to almost every major scene in the text. The letters to the seven churches are reinterpreted as sexual gratification from “the prince of the pearly Dew”, Antamon (*Europe* 14:15, E65).⁶⁹⁸ Blake invokes Revelation's seven-fold structuring, for example in *Milton's* “Seven Angels of the Presence” (14:42, E09). The characters of the “great red Dragon” and Babylon take on a

⁶⁹⁶ Wright detects a visual allusion to Revelation 21:22 by noting that the church or temple that is visible in the background of the first plate in the series is absent in the last. Wright, *Blake's Job*, 51.

⁶⁹⁷ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 97. Blake, *Milton*, 40:22, E142; *Four Zoas*, 115:4, E387.

⁶⁹⁸ See Helen P. Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (London: MacMillan, 1997), 175.

number of guises in Blake's myths and act as antagonists throughout the later epics, *The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem*.

Sklar's monograph on *Jerusalem* has convincingly shown how Blake reflects, imbibes, and challenges a range of contemporary readings of Revelation's imagery. She notes especially how Blake's use of the "woman" of Revelation 12 diverges from Southcott's actualisation. We will discuss this issue further in 5.3.3. Crucially, however, Sklar's reading of *Jerusalem*, and the use of Revelation within it, emphasises the transformative power both of Blake's text, and of reading Revelation as a "visionary theatre," where the audience is invited to engage with the text imaginatively, to "enter into [characters] as actors".⁶⁹⁹ Sklar's reading highlights how Blake's engagement with Revelation is active, imaginative, and transformational: it "reconfigures, and even subverts key imagery" as it is put to use in Blake's own "mythopoetic montage".⁷⁰⁰

The complexity of Blake's visionary poems requires us to be selective in our examination of his engagement with Revelation. I have therefore opted to focus special attention on his treatment of Revelation 21-22. His treatments of these chapters draw out themes and motifs which we have seen play out in Brothers's and Southcott's prophetic readings: the symbol of the New Jerusalem; the chapters' relationship to other biblical visions; the depiction of Revelation's female characters, and the respective roles of human and divine agency in bringing eschatological hopes to fruition. The purpose of this section of the chapter is to examine these tropes, to elucidate his interpretation of these motifs, and to depict how they function after their assimilation into Blake's own works.

⁶⁹⁹ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 43.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 25, 20.

5.3.1. “a new heaven is begun”

In one of the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*'s earliest layers, Blake proclaims “As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent... Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise.”⁷⁰¹ On an initial reading, these words seem to proclaim Blake's confidence that the prophecy of Revelation 21:1 has already been fulfilled. Mankind's access to Eden – barred by the cherubim and flaming sword in Genesis 3:24 – is ostensibly restored in Blake's own lifetime. Like Southcott, he seems to affirm that the eschatological reversal of the transgressions of the Fall is a possibility *now*. For both, the hope of Revelation 22:14 is a present possibility, that their readers “may have right to the tree of life”. He informs us that this “new heaven” is thirty three years old, making its inception the year 1757.⁷⁰²

Blake's isolation of 1757 as the apparent fulfilment of this eschatological promise is significant: it was the year of Blake's own birth, and it was also the year that Emmanuel Swedenborg had proclaimed that a Last Judgement had taken place in heaven.⁷⁰³ Blake's words here indicate a sense that the year the text's composition constitutes a pivotal moment in his life as an artist.⁷⁰⁴ Yet they are also tied up with Blake's disillusionment with Swedenborg's teachings: the text satirises contemporary Swedenborgian teachings and parodies Swedenborg's visionary “Memorable Relations” through Blake's own encounters with prophets and angels in his “Memorable Fancies”.⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰¹ Blake, *Marriage*, Plate 3, E34. In his analysis of the compositional history of the text, Viscomi argues that the sustained attack on Swedenborg in plates 21-24 (E42-44) constitutes the earliest layer in the text and provided the springboard for the composition of the rest of the document. See Joseph Viscomi, “The Evolution of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58:3-4 (1997), 281-344.

⁷⁰² Blake's intention in referring to this date can be discerned from copy F (Pierpont Morgan Library) where he inscribed “1790” above the words “New Heaven”. So Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 33.

⁷⁰³ Swedenborg, *Last Judgment*, §45.

⁷⁰⁴ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 88.

⁷⁰⁵ See especially Robert Rix who uses *The Marriage* to trace the exact quarrel which Blake experienced with Swedenborg, arguing it offers a vigorous defence of antinomian theology against the increasingly legalistic outlook of Robert Hindmarsh's New Jerusalem Church. Robert Rix, “In Infernal Love and

The seemingly confident opening of Plate 3 is, however, an incomplete biblical quotation. Unlike Revelation 21:1 and its parallels in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, Blake only declares the advent of a “new heaven” rather than the “new earth”. Instead, Blake's “new heaven” paves the way for the revival of “Eternal Hell” which Revelation 20:14 declares will be destroyed in “the lake of fire”. Despite Blake's claim that “now” is the moment of the restoration of humanity to paradise, the antimonies of heaven, hell and earth which characterise Revelation's pre-eschatological state remain firmly in tension with one another.⁷⁰⁶ To explain this, we need to flesh out what these three terms mean in terms of *The Marriage* and within the context of Blake's more developed thought later in his career.

Blake's omission of “new earth” from Plate 3's declaration is explicable in the light of Swedenborg's teaching concerning the Last Judgement. As discussed in 2.2.1, in 1757 Swedenborg claimed that a Last Judgement had taken place in the spiritual realm, meaning that the established churches were now defunct, replaced by a new church with a focus upon internal understanding. Yet whilst Swedenborg had seen a definitive eschatological event in the spiritual realm, its ramifications had not fully played out on earth. Thus in the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church – based in Great Eastcheap Street – the effort to discern how Swedenborg's revelation would affect their religious movement was continuous and ongoing.⁷⁰⁷ Swedenborg had declared that Revelation's “new heaven” had been instituted; the “new earth” it promised had not yet tangibly emerged. Furthermore, Blake depicts Swedenborg and the subsequent movement he inspired as actively hindering the restoration of the paradisaical state, which ought to be a possibility “now”.⁷⁰⁸ In

Faith': William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Literature & Theology* 20:2 (2006), 107-125.

⁷⁰⁶ Sklar points out that Blake holds these three states in coexistence at the outset of *Jerusalem*. Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 141.

⁷⁰⁷ See Rix, “In Infernal Love”, 114.

⁷⁰⁸ Blake's use of the name “Swedenborg” in *The Marriage* has a more corporate sense comprising both the historical figure himself and the wider movement and ideas he inspired. So Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 37.

reinforcing the legalistic structures of the churches it sought to replace, the New Jerusalem Church inhibited the release of creative energies that this new eschatological age ought to bring about. If Swedenborg's vision of a new heaven were correct, man ought to have already returned to Paradise. Instead, Swedenborgianism directs its followers attention to dead, discarded letters – symbolised by “the linen clothes folded up” (*Marriage*, plate 3, E34) – and thus the hoped-for rejuvenation of human society is once again delayed. As an aside, we may note that Blake's repudiation of Swedenborgianism differs from Southcott's: Southcott questions Swedenborg's assertion that he had communed with heavenly beings (see 2.2.1); Blake criticises the legalising ramifications that Swedenborg extracts from these communications.

Blake offers a further challenge to the vision of Revelation 21:1 through the engagement with “hell” depicted throughout the *Marriage*. In Plate 14, Blake affirms his commitment to the idea of the world being “consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years” through “an improvement of sensual enjoyment”. The biblical eschatological climax is thus primarily internal and mental. His citation of Isaiah 34 and 35 on plate 3 demonstrates that this psychological shift can have political effects when experienced on a wider scale – the tribulations of revolution and conflict lead to the rejuvenation of human senses and the institution of peace.⁷⁰⁹ There are parallels here with Brothers's focus on the Bible's promise of a “new earth” as being a renovation of the created order, rather than necessarily entailing its physical destruction. Blake depicts his own prophetic endeavours, his “printing in the infernal method”, as the key to bringing about this sensory rejuvenation. The success of Blake's printing process is dependent upon engagement with the perspectives and methods of “Hell”.⁷¹⁰ In this text his very act of printing, relying on acid corroding away the surface

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁷¹⁰ Frye is correct to point out that Blake uses the term “hell” in two distinguishable ways in his writings. The first (its meaning in *The Marriage*) is ironic: it is the erroneous perception of energy and desire by orthodoxy as diabolical rather than creative. The second refers to the “hell” of selfhood caused by the

of his copper plates, is revelatory; described from the perspective of hell as being “salutary and medicinal”, yielding the “infinite” which is hidden behind “apparent” surfaces. Unlike the depiction of the new heaven in Revelation, Blake's hope for the rejuvenation of human society depends upon active engagement with hell, rather than its destruction and defeat by the “new Heaven” and its inhabitants (Revelation 20:14).

This reading of Revelation's climactic vision as a rejuvenation of perception recurs throughout Blake's career. In his later work *The Four Zoas*, Blake again takes up Revelation's promise of new heaven and new earth and casts this as an internal event as they open “Threefold within the brain within the heart within the loins”.⁷¹¹ Again, the prophecy of a new heaven and new earth is not completely fulfilled. The “threefold” vision instigated through Los's construction of Golgonooza, falls short of Blake's idealised “fourfold” vision (see further 5.3.2.2).⁷¹²

In his writings, Blake ultimately shies away from the biblical language of “new heaven” and “new earth”. The terms only appear in conjunction twice in his corpus: in the example from *The Four Zoas* considered above and in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*. In this latter text, which is Blake's extended commentary on a now-lost painting, Blake represents many aspects of the account in Revelation faithfully: Christ sits in judgement alongside the twenty-four elders as heaven and earth pass away, while the new heaven and earth descend.⁷¹³ Blake affirms that what he has in view here is once again the rejuvenation of

tyranny of concepts of “moral good” and “moral evil”. Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 197-8.

⁷¹¹ *The Four Zoas*, 87:10; E368.

⁷¹² See Blake's poetic description of his visionary experience in his letter to Thomas Butts, 22nd November 1802 (E722) “Now I a fourfold vision see/ And a fourfold vision is given to me/ Tis fourfold in my supreme delight/ And three fold in soft Beulah's night” (lines 83-85). Beulah, as the place of dreamy repose, occupies the middle ground between Blake's idealised Eden and our material world, Ulro. See Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 42-44.

⁷¹³ *A Vision of the Last Judgment* E555-6. Blake in fact here conflates Revelation's account of the last judgement before the great white throne in Revelation 20:11-15 and John's vision of the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4-5.

human perception. Echoing Swedenborg's conception of "Last Judgments" occurring when "the church is at its end", Blake depicts the last judgment taking place when

Imaginative Art & Science [are] looked upon as of no use & only Contention remains to Man then the Last Judgment begins & its Vision is seen by the Imaginative Eye of Every one according to the situation he holds.⁷¹⁴

The New Heaven and Earth which Blake depicts here, then, is not the cataclysmic act of destruction and recreation prophesied by John in Revelation 21. Rather, it is a symbolic depiction of the renewed vision which Blake experienced, and hoped to elicit in his audience.

Consistently, in Blake, the expectation of a new heaven and new earth is reinterpreted not as a new act of creation, but as a symbol for humankind entering a new state of perception. The key to understanding his resistance to this strain of the Bible's eschatology is in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. True progress for Blake consists in the language of "Contraries", which in his later works becomes dramatised as "intellectual War" and "Mental Fight"⁷¹⁵. By contrast, the eschatological image of "New Heaven and New Earth" projected by Revelation consists of God's eternal reign, where engagement with "hell" has been rendered impossible (Revelation 21:27).⁷¹⁶ In order to retain this creative dynamism, inherent in Blake's "Eden", the symbols of new heaven and new earth must lose their eschatological sting. Blake's resistance to interpreting Revelation 21:1 as an act of physical destruction, however, is one well-engrained in the history of interpretation.⁷¹⁷ Blake reads

Revelation 21:1 through the lens of his own convictions about the redemptive power of the

⁷¹⁴ Blake, *VLJ*, E554. For Swedenborg's exposition of the last judgment see *Last Judgment* §45-6.

⁷¹⁵ *The Four Zoas* 139:9, E407; *Milton* 1:13, E95.

⁷¹⁶ Even the tantalising hints of openness in the city (21:24-26, 22:2) reflect earlier prophetic hopes for the end-time institution of God's rule even over outsiders. See Allan J. McNicol, *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

⁷¹⁷ For modern readings of 21:1 which view the text as pointing towards a renewal of the created order rather than a profound break see Boxall, *Revelation*, 293. See also Schussler-Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 109 who speaks of "a qualitatively new and unified world" standing in continuity with the old created order. Many other modern commentators, however, read the text as denoting a radical break and an emphasis on the destruction of the old heaven and earth. See Rowland and Kovaks, *Revelation*, 220; Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1117; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 306-7.

imagination and his hope for a rejuvenation of human perception and society. This hope lends itself more naturally to an interpretation of “new heaven and new earth” which emphasises continuity with the prior age. It is a society akin to Brothers's vision of a society transformed in the wake of his reconstructed Jerusalem, but formed through the continued presence of contraries, rather than the subjugation of the world under Brothers's rule.

5.3.2. Blake and the City

Many scholars have noted the continual presence of cities in Blake's poetry.⁷¹⁸ For instance, Frye argues that Blake's art sketches a view of human history which aspires to the perfected civilized life of the New Jerusalem, but which is also littered with monuments to the failure to realise heaven on earth.⁷¹⁹ To this end, Blake's poetry emulates the urban eschatological vision presented by the Bible, where “time stops with the revelation of a utopian architectural space, the New Jerusalem”.⁷²⁰ The Bible's presentation of cities, however, is ambivalent. The first biblical city, Enoch, was built by Cain, the first murderer (Genesis 4:17). The city of Jerusalem can be a powerful symbol of redemption and an idealised urban space, or it can be an arrogant sinner – a just target for Yahweh's judgement.⁷²¹ Similarly, Jerusalem and Babylon are consistently presented in antipathy with one another in a rivalry which extends right up to the closing chapters of the Bible's final canonical book.⁷²² Cities are a complex and ambivalent symbol in the Bible; Blake's incorporation of

⁷¹⁸ Kathleen Raine, for example constructs Blake as “of all English poets, the supreme poet of the City”. Kathleen Raine, *Golgonooza, City of Imagination: Last Studies in William Blake* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1991), 100. The fullest analysis of this trope in Blake's works is offered by Jennifer Davis Michael, *Blake and the City* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006).

⁷¹⁹ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 224.

⁷²⁰ Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem*, 5. Revelation is, of course, not the only biblical text whose climax posits the imposition of a divinely-ordered urban space upon history. The visions of the canonical books of Ezekiel and Isaiah both proclaim the institution of a restored Jerusalem as a sign of God's undisputed dominion over human history (c.f. Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:18-23; Ezekiel 40-48).

⁷²¹ Isaiah 1:21-23; Ezekiel 18; Lamentations 1:8-9; Matthew 23:37-38.

⁷²² See Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999).

the Bible's city motifs into his poetry reflects this complexity.

Johnston has instructively traced Blake's differing attitudes to the city in his career.⁷²³ It commences with the antipathy he shows towards to the ancient cities of “Babel” “Nineva” and “Tyre”, forged through the creative union of “Ambition” and “Pride” in his early poetical sketch *Then She Bore Pale Desire* (lines 10-21, E446). In this early text, Blake ascribes the origins of “the Kingdoms of the World & all their Glory” to the wickedness of “ambition”. As the poem concludes, Blake depicts the city as the place where “Policy”, “Guile” and “Fraud” rule supremely (lines 85-6, E448).

Blake returns to this theme of the city as a place of repression and despair in “London”. The poem's narrator wanders through the streets of London, and shares his vision and experience with the poem's reader. The experience is revelatory, perhaps echoing Ezekiel 8's visions of the abominations practised in Jerusalem, and calling to mind Brothers's visionary unveiling of Satan walking through London. The narrator “marks” in every face “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (line 4, E26-7), and hears how “the hapless Soldiers sigh/Runs in blood down Palace walls” (lines 11-12, E27). Blake's depiction of London draws upon his local knowledge and eye for detail, but also upon the Bible's prophetic and visionary texts as a means of articulating a critique of his increasingly “charter'd” city. Thompson argues that the threefold repetition of “mark” in the first stanza create an allusion to the “marks of the Beast” of Revelation 13:16-17.⁷²⁴ This argument is bolstered both by the commercial overtones of the term “charter'd”, a term Thompson argues was central to contemporary Whig ideology, and by the poem's illustration which he associates with a passage in *Jerusalem* in which an aged “London” is led by a child through “the

⁷²³ Kenneth R. Johnston, “Blake's Cities: Romantic Forms of Urban Renewal” in ed. David V. Erdman & John. E. Grant, *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 414-5.

⁷²⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180-3.

Streets/of Babylon” (84:11-2, E243).⁷²⁵ For Blake, as for the visionary prophets Ezekiel and John, the city is a place where a prophetic eye can reveal and expose the true suffering of its inhabitants.

Despite the prophetic critique of the city in “London”, as Blake's poetic career matures he finds increasing redemptive potential in cities, and especially in London. Furthermore, we see that throughout his career he continually interacts with the Bible's model of a redemptive city, the New Jerusalem, exploring the artistic and salvific potential of this symbol in a number of creative ways. He rarely uses the exact phrase “New Jerusalem” in his writings; it occurs only three times. In his annotations to Francis Bacon's *Essays Moral, Economical and Political*, Blake sardonically states “Bacon supposes that the Dragon Beast & Harlot are worthy of a Place in the New Jerusalem Excellent Traveller Go on & be damnd” (E627). This utterance is Blake's response to Bacon's suggestion that events such as “triumphs, masks, feasts, weddings, funerals, capital executions” are “not to be neglected” in an ideal society. Secondly, in his description of *The Design of the Last Judgment*, he describes how his painting shows families being resurrected together and celebrating the descent of the New Jerusalem (E553). Finally, in *Jerusalem*, Los sings that he sees the New Jerusalem descending into England out of Albion's emanation Jerusalem (85:22-86:21; E244-5). Blake's direct references to New Jerusalem are broadly congruent with the city's depiction in Revelation: it is an idealised state which will descend to Earth and “shut out” the “Dragon”, “Beast” and “Harlot”, who are destroyed in Revelation 20. Blake's deviations from this picture stem from his conviction that it will be England which will first receive the New Jerusalem (akin to Southcott's declaration that the vision of “New Jerusalem” denotes “where the visitation is made known”) and that this city will not

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 177, 183. For the full background to the term “charter'd” in contemporary political discourse, see 175-9. I suggest also that the “harlot” in the fourth stanza, may invoke Babylon as the “Mother of Harlots” in Revelation 17:5.

necessarily be a gift from a transcendent deity.

Predominantly, Blake's references to the New Jerusalem symbol are allusive, and there are two important facets of Blake's treatment of New Jerusalem which we must explore in our discussion. The first concerns the illusory New Jerusalems in Blake's poetry, parodying the city of Revelation 21-22. The second concerns Blake's own redemptive city, Golgonooza, which scholars frequently equate to Revelation's New Jerusalem.⁷²⁶ While Blake sets great store in this city to express both humanity's fallen and redeemed state, he ultimately resists presenting New Jerusalem as the end goal of rejuvenated humanity. Instead, New Jerusalem becomes a stage in the process of recapturing vision rather than the final form of redeemed vision. As Sklar correctly observes with regards to the use of Revelation 21-2 in *Jerusalem*, whilst scholars have noted Blake's use of this vision, they have insufficiently considered how he “reconfigures” it (Sklar's reading of New Jerusalem in *Jerusalem* is discussed in 5.3.2.2).⁷²⁷ This process of reconfiguration is at work across Blake's works. Like Southcott and Brothers, Blake's commitment to his prophetic vision controls how he uses images from his prophetic predecessor, John of Patmos. Examining Blake's motives in using this symbol gives us an insight both into how the city's construction in Revelation influences Blake's artistic response and how he problematises the the text's hopes.

5.3.2.1. The Illusion of New Jerusalem: *Europe, The Four Zoas and Milton: A Poem*

Even the New Jerusalem is presented in Revelation not as a man-made city, but one that descends fully formed from heaven. By asserting that “we” must build Jerusalem, Blake thus flies in the face of orthodoxy and recuperates human creativity and invention for divine purposes.⁷²⁸

Davis Michael reads Blake's hope for the construction of Jerusalem at the conclusion to the

⁷²⁶ So Raine, *Golgonooza*, 107; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 148; Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed With the Sun”, 278-9; Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91.

⁷²⁷ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 139-40.

⁷²⁸ Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 130.

preface of *Milton* (E95-6) through the lens of John's vision in Revelation 21-22, and argues that Blake subverts this hope by placing the responsibility for the building of this city into human hands. As we will show in 5.3.2.2. Davis Michael's conflation of *Milton's* "Jerusalem" with the New Jerusalem of Revelation requires nuance. Yet we must also note that Blake depicts several human attempts to "build" this city throughout his poetic corpus, only for them to turn out to be the "monuments of man's failure" identified by Northrop Frye.⁷²⁹

Blake's first sustained engagement with the New Jerusalem symbol occurs in *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794). Three years earlier, at the conclusion of *A Song of Liberty* in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake confidently proclaims "Empire is no more! And now the lion & wolf shall cease" (plate 27, E45) – an allusion to Isaiah 65:25. Blake repeats this claim in *America: A Prophecy* in 1793, which predicts that the fiery spirit of the American revolution would reverberate in Europe and especially France.⁷³⁰ A mere year later, however, the optimism with which Blake had presented the process of revolution could no longer be sustained. In France, the "terrors" – designed to suppress counter-revolution – had been instituted, sending the revolution into self-destruction.⁷³¹ Similarly in Britain, war had been declared against France in January 1793 which crippled the nation's finances.⁷³² The search for a utopia through revolution was a project which appeared to be doomed to failure. Thus in *Europe* Blake vividly demonstrates how, when incorporated into the rhetoric of the establishment, the promises of New Jerusalem can be dangerously

⁷²⁹ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 224.

⁷³⁰ *America: A Prophecy*, 6:15, E53; 16:12-23, E57-8.

⁷³¹ See Erdman, *Prophet*, 314-5; Clara Tuite, "French Revolution" in ed. Iain McCalman, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 513-4.

⁷³² Despite the government's protests that the decline in trade was unconnected to the war with France. See Erdman, *Prophet*, 210. Pitt's borrowing to support the war effort resulted in him adding twice as much to the national debt as he had borrowed which, coupled with a poor harvest in 1795, triggered an economic crisis. See Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 237-8.

perverted.

Plate 10 of *Europe* depicts “Albion's Angel” emerging from a ruined council hall to travel along the Thames to “golden Verulam” (*Europe*, 9:14-10:5, E63) in search of an “ancient temple serpent-form'd” under the auspice of “The fiery King” (10:2). Verulam is the site of a building of “massy stones, uncut” (10:7) and “stones precious; such eternal in the heavens,/ Of colours twelve.../ Plac'd in the order of the stars.” (10:8-10). There are a complex set of historical allusions in this passage. The “Angel” is most likely William Pitt, who assumed control of the government in December 1793.⁷³³ The serpentine temple he seeks is a symbol of druidic religion which is frequently connected in Blake's poetry to human sacrifice and is often used to symbolize Deism.⁷³⁴ Verulam also carries unfavourable Blakean associations. It was the title of the Barony given to Francis Bacon in 1618, who is part of the rationalist triumvirate with Locke and Newton that Blake sought “to cast off... from Albions covering”.⁷³⁵ The angel's journey to Verulam, then, signifies a retreat to the errors of druidic sacrifice, caused by the veneration of Bacon's political ideology. In his annotations, Blake rails against Bacon's advice to quell sedition, calling him a “Contemptible Knave”.⁷³⁶ If this plate is to be read as a contemporary political allegory, then it reflects Blake's condemnation of the political repressions of the Pitt administration, its continuation of the war against France, and its complicity in the self-sacrifice of British soldiers.

⁷³³ Ibid., 212. Blake's elevation of Pitt to the figure of an angel may well be an early example of the sardonic “apotheosis” which Fallon discerns in his painting *The spiritual form of Pitt, guiding Leviathan* (B877). David Fallon, “‘That Angel Who Rides on the Whirlwind’: William Blake's Oriental Apotheosis of William Pitt”, *Eighteenth Century Life* 31:2 (2007), 1-28.

⁷³⁴ See *Jerusalem* 66:1-9, E218.

⁷³⁵ Blake, *Milton*, 41:5, E142. The trio are, however, rehabilitated and rise alongside Milton, Shakespeare and Chaucer at the climax of *Jerusalem* (98:9, E257). Tannenbaum further discerns an analogy with the biblical Jerusalem and Babylon, noting that as Verulam is situated to the north of London, so too the exiled Ezekiel looks southwards from Babylon towards Jerusalem in Ezekiel 20:46 (Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition*, 183).

⁷³⁶ Blake annotation is of Bacon's advice to “let princes against all events, not be without some great person... near unto them, for the repression of seditions in their beginnings.” E625.

Yet Blake also imbues his description of Verulam with a dense web of biblical allusions, centred upon Revelation's New Jerusalem, which extant commentaries on the poem have not fully explored.⁷³⁷ We note that Verulam is presented here as a “golden” city imbued with twelve precious stones. Similarly, the foundations of New Jerusalem's walls are adorned with twelve types of precious stones and the city “is pure gold” (Rev 21:18-19). Their ability to “give light in the opake” further echoes the New Jerusalem; a city with “no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it” (Rev 21:23).⁷³⁸ Verulam is thus a city with utopian potential. As the narrative progresses, however, we note that its emulation of the New Jerusalem is a dangerous illusion. The temple limits humanity's access to the infinite in two ways: it reduces all human imagination to fallen sensory experience (10:10-15) and it leads humanity to crown God as a “tyrant” regulating imaginative experience (10:24). Instead of the cubic New Jerusalem, what Verulam preserves is a serpentine temple, where history is shut up in “finite revolutions” rather than pointing forward to an everlasting ideal community.⁷³⁹

In presenting this illusory New Jerusalem, Blake deftly picks up on intertextual echoes inherent in Revelation's description. A city adorned with precious stones and gold is to be found in John's description of Babylon in 17:4, but it also parallels the King of Tyre in

⁷³⁷ The associations with New Jerusalem are missed by Michael Ferber, “The Finite Revolutions of *Europe*” in Jackie Di Salvo, G.A. Rosso, and Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake, Politics, and History* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 230-1. Similarly, despite his extensive exploration of the sources lying behind Blake's construction of this plate, Hazard Adams's focus on Blake's serpent imagery in this plate means he fails to consider the biblical resonances in Blake's description of the Verulam Temple. See Hazard Adams, “Synecdoche and Method” in ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher and Donald Ault, *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1987), 41-71.

⁷³⁸ Michael Tolley and Morton Paley are unique amongst commentators on this plate in noting the possible allusion to Revelation 21:19. See Michael J. Tolley, “Europe: “To Those Y'Chain'd in Sleep””, in ed. David V. Erdman & J.E. Grant, *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 135; Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 65.

⁷³⁹ Bloom notes the possible play on words here, suggesting that “Blake already understands the cyclic nature of political revolutions” (Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 156). I am grateful to Dr Philip Lockley for suggesting the imaginative comparison which can be drawn with Notre Dame in Paris, which had been defaced and occupied by the Cult of Reason and then by the Cult of the Supreme Being in the latter part of 1793.

Ezekiel 28:13, who has “every precious stone” as a “covering”. The biblical allusions on this plate of *Europe* extend even further, however. Blake's reference to twelve precious stones call to mind the arrangement of twelve stones on the breastplate of Aaron in Exodus 28:15-21.⁷⁴⁰ Blake states that the stones of the city are welded to the zodiacal temporal pattern, “Plac'd in the order of the stars” (*Europe* 10:10). Frye notes that in Josephus, the stones on Aaron's breastplate correspond to the constellations of the calendar year and the Zodiac.⁷⁴¹ In contrast to the biblical New Jerusalem, which signifies the collapse of the established temporal structures (Rev 21:23, 21:25, 22:5), the serpent temple of Verulam is inherently connected to the endless destructive cycle of history. This pushes mankind further from the visionary experience of the infinite.⁷⁴²

In *Europe*, Blake depicts how seeking the New Jerusalem in the repressive ideological structures of the past can lead to disastrous errors. Later in the decade, as he begins work on the epic *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, Blake draws upon the language and symbolism of Revelation 21-22 to show how humanity can create an illusory utopia through an act of creation. In one of the earliest layers of the poem,⁷⁴³ Blake once again uses the figure of Urizen, to parody God's act of creation in Genesis 1-3, and to criticise a rationalist reorganisation of society.

The Four Zoas is structured in 9 parts or “nights”, echoing the structure of Edward Young's

⁷⁴⁰ If we were to push the type of historical allegory offered by Erdman (*Prophet Against Empire*, 210-25) further, we may suggest that Blake is attacking the clergy of the established church who by and large failed to dissent from Pitt's political agenda. It is not necessary to view Blake's biblical allusions here in such specific historical terms, however. Within this poem, Blake is exploring the failings of two thousand years of the Christian church, symbolised by the eighteen hundred-year sleep of Enitharmon (9:1-5). Blake's attack may thus centre upon a fallen priesthood which, under the influence of Deism, has diminished the importance of imagination from religious life. See Tolley, “Europe”, 135.

⁷⁴¹ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 141; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.7.7.

⁷⁴² Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 155

⁷⁴³ For the suggestion that the second “night” of the Four Zoas was the poem's original starting point see Brian Wilkie & Mary Lynn Johnson, *Blake's Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 38 and Rosso, *Blake's Prophetic Workshop*, 71.

Night Thoughts, which Blake had illustrated between 1795 and 1797. It is a composite text showing several layers of development,⁷⁴⁴ but in its final form it attempts to outline Blake's myth of humanity's fall and redemption, narrated as a division and reintegration of human personality.⁷⁴⁵ It is an important work, as it demonstrates how Blake's thought develops from the illuminated "Lambeth books" of the mid-1790s through his sojourn at Felpham in 1800-1803 before progressing in his later poetic career to *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.⁷⁴⁶

Revelation's influence is evident from the manuscript's first page. The poem's title is derived from the Greek of Revelation 4: the four ζῶα who surround God's throne. Blake allegorises these characters as four different aspects of human personality: Tharmas, the "Parent power"; Urizen, humankind's power of reasoning and rationality; Urthona, humankind's creative power; and Luvah, humanity's capacity for love.⁷⁴⁷ The poem depicts what happens to the archetypal human Albion when these four parts of his personality fall out of alignment. Throughout the poem, Blake draws on Revelation and especially upon Revelation 21-22 when describing constructions and creations in the poem.

In the poem's final form Urizen creates a world called "the mundane shell" (24:6-8, E314). This is a response to his fellow Zoa Tharmas's fall into the "sea" in *Night the First* (E302)

⁷⁴⁴ C.f. Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala, or The Four Zoas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) who offers a reading of the text which divides the poem's development into three distinct stages.

⁷⁴⁵ "Fairies of Albion, afterwards Gods of the Heathen; Daugher of Beulah Sing/ His fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity." (4:3-4, E301)

⁷⁴⁶ Rosso's analogy of *The Four Zoas* as a prophetic workshop is particularly instructive here. Indeed, in the construction of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* we can see Blake mining his manuscript epic for material (see, for example, Blake's symbol of "The Seven Eyes of God" which first appear in 21:9-15 which is significantly expanded in *Milton* plate 13 and *Jerusalem* 55:31-35).

⁷⁴⁷ These characters occur throughout Blake's mythology and divide into further "emanations" as the archetypal man falls further from perfection in Eden. Their characterisations are extremely fluid and attempts have been made to systematise their characteristics, emanations and associations (see notably Frye *Fearful Symmetry*, 227-8). Yet as Sklar notes with Blake's characterisation in *Jerusalem*: "the poem's principal figures are uncannily dynamic. They can morph into one another, and they can be both a context and an individual." For this reason, no attempt is made here to systematise these characters in *The Four Zoas* beyond these main identifying characteristics. See Sklar, *Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre*, 44.

and the subsequent chaos that ensues: “Pale he beheld futurity; pale he beheld the Abyss” (23:15; E313). It is tempting to read Urizen's creation of the Mundane Shell here as a continuation of Blake's parody of the creator Jehovah in *The Book of Urizen*.⁷⁴⁸ Yet scholars have rightly noted that Blake's presentation of Urizen in the second night of *The Four Zoas* shows his developing attitude to this character and his creative acts.⁷⁴⁹ In this poem, Urizen's imaginative construction of his “Golden World” (32:8, E321) means that he retains the quality of divinity (“the Architect Divine” 30:8, E319), *pace* his introduction in *The Book of Urizen* where he is depicted as “a shadow of horror” (1:1, plate 3, line 1, E70). Yet despite this ameliorated presentation, Blake insists that Urizen's construction of the golden world accentuates flaws which will lead to his own fall in Night III (42:19-43:4; E328).

The setting of Urizen's act of creation, with a “divine” creator attempting moulding order from a watery chaos, inevitably brings to mind the biblical accounts of creation in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38. It is, however, important to note that Urizen's creation of a world is expressed through the metaphor of a city.⁷⁵⁰ Thus when examined closely, we may note that the mundane shell carries a number of important associations with the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22. Specifically, the numbers four and twelve are important structural markers throughout the description of Urizen's creation. The city is “quadrangular” and “four halls” proceed from each of the building's domes, creating a total number of twelve halls, named after the sons of Urizen (E319). This parallels the “foursquare” city of

⁷⁴⁸ E.g. Rosso who suggests that “Night II functions... as Blake's version of the first Genesis Creation” Rosso, *Blake's Prophetic Workshop*, 71.

⁷⁴⁹ Michael Ackland has convincingly suggested that the developments in Blake's presentation of Urizen reflect internal tensions and diversity within contemporary enlightenment thinking and movements. Michael Ackland, “Blake's Critique of Enlightenment Reason in *The Four Zoas*”, *Colby Library Quarterly* 19:4 (1983), 174. See also Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 53 and David Fuller, *Blake's Heroic Argument* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 103.

⁷⁵⁰ So Jennifer Davis Michael who connects Urizen's construction to the city Enoch built by Cain in Genesis 4:17. Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 93

Jerusalem (21:16) and its twelve gates which are named after “the twelve tribes of the Israelites” (21:12, see also Ezekiel 48:30-34) who take their name from the twelve sons of Jacob (Genesis 49). Like *Europe's* Verulam and Revelation's New Jerusalem, the world which Urizen creates is “Golden”.⁷⁵¹ Similarly, whilst scholars have noted comparisons with *Paradise Lost* with regards to the golden world being set against the chaos outside the windows,⁷⁵² we see also that outside the New Jerusalem the judged suffer in the lake of fire (22:15).

Whereas a number of commentators have pointed out that the Mundane Shell is designed to act as a limit for man's fallen consciousness,⁷⁵³ or to provide “a vision of divine creativity and care”,⁷⁵⁴ none have picked up on the echoes of Revelation 21-22 which are discernible in this scene. This is somewhat surprising given that on page 42 of the manuscript, immediately prior to Urizen's brutal rejection of Ahaniah (E328), Blake scrawled in pencil the question “Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not”.⁷⁵⁵ This revision indicates that Blake at one point saw this uncertainty as confusion between idealised Jerusalem and tyrannical Babylon. This shows that during the development of Nights II and III, the “mundane shell” aspired to the title of “New Jerusalem”.

Urizen's aims notwithstanding, the building he creates is far from the city envisaged in Revelation 21-22. Firstly, it is created through the toil and suffering of Luvah's emanation

⁷⁵¹ So too the main hall (30:27) and its altar (31:32; E320). We may also discern similarities to the ark of the covenant overlain with “pure gold” (Exodus 25:10-40) and to Solomon's construction of the temple (I Kings 6; 2 Chronicles 3).

⁷⁵² “For many a window ornamented with sweet ornaments/ Lookd out into the World of Tharmas, where in ceaseless torrents/ His billows roll...” (33:8-10; E321). Lincoln suggests that the mundane shell echoes Chaos, visible through the gates of hell in *Paradise Lost* Book II 890-927 (Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 55). Frye suggests parallels with Satan's construction of Pandemonium in Book I 670-799 (Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 286).

⁷⁵³ Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 212.

⁷⁵⁴ Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 82.

⁷⁵⁵ These lines are uttered by the “fugitives” in *Jerusalem* 43:81-2 (E193). C.f. Cettina Tramontano Magno & David V. Erdman, (eds.), *The Four Zoas by William Blake: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987), 156.

Vala, who cries out from the kilns “Our beauty is covered over with clay & ashes, & our backs/Furrowed with whips, & our flesh bruised with the heavy basket.” (31:13-14, E321). This carries strong echoes of the treatment of the “Holy Ones of the Most High” who are “worn out” by the Beast in Daniel 7:25.⁷⁵⁶ Secondly, Urizen's act of creation leads to the heavens being “closed”. This further separates Urizen from the Lamb who instead makes his appearance in the fallen Luvah's “robes of Blood” rather than the beautifully adorned mundane shell (33:13-15, E321). Conversely, the New Jerusalem removes the distinction between heaven as God's dwelling-place and earth as humanity's dwelling-place (21:3).⁷⁵⁷ Ultimately, Urizen's creation is imperfect, and his inspiration ultimately leads to further division and separation, as well as his own fall, corrupted by his own power.⁷⁵⁸ We see again an allusion to the dialectic presented to readers of Revelation 17-22 between the “whore” Babylon (17:1) and the “bride” Jerusalem (21:2). Urizen fails to restore Albion's emanation Jerusalem which “is become a ruin” (21:1; E312). Bloom correctly asserts that Blake's description of Urizen's creative act is a parody of philosophical and theological traditions (such as natural religion and the Bible's creation account) which seek to “measure” and contain fallen creation, rather than work to redeem it and restore humanity to its proper liberty.⁷⁵⁹ Humanity's faculty for reasoning, when it seeks to express its dominance through the creation of New Jerusalem, can at best only create an illusory parody of utopia which enslaves and suppresses creativity. In her study of *Jerusalem*, Sklar notes that Urizen engages on another building project, a temple which echoes Ezekiel 47, to similarly repressive results, a temple-city “not essentially imaginative... not filled with

⁷⁵⁶ Davis Michael also detects allusions here to Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego's treatment in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (Daniel 3:19-23): Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 96.

⁷⁵⁷ See, for example, Caird, *Revelation*, 263; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 114; Boxall, *Revelation*, 295.

⁷⁵⁸ “Am I not God said Urizen. Who is Equal to me/Do I not stretch the heavens abroad or fold them up like a garment” (42:19-20, E328).

⁷⁵⁹ Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 216-7. Bloom is alone amongst critics in considering the significance of Blake's marginal notes to the description of Urizen's fall, but this does not prompt him to investigate the description of the mundane shell for parallels to Revelation's depiction of the New Jerusalem.

compassion.⁷⁶⁰

The failure to discover New Jerusalem either in the structures of the past or in the creative acts of rationalist thinking leads Blake to attempt to create his own Jerusalem in his final epic poems *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. *Milton's* preface makes this mission statement clear:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.⁷⁶¹

This lyric can be read as a neat summary of Blake's purpose – and impediments – as he reaches the final stages of his poetic career. In his portrayals of the constructions of New Jerusalem in *The Four Zoas*, Blake problematises the notion that Jerusalem can be “built” in a fallen world by a fragmented human society. Similarly, the questions which Blake asks at the opening stanzas of *Milton* – which expect the answer “no” – imply that utopia cannot be found within the present fallen era.⁷⁶² Instead, Jerusalem will be built through the recapturing of “prophetic vision” which Blake's art attempts to inspire in his audience. It is only through the fulfilment of Numbers 11:29, which Blake cites at the end of the poem that redemptive history will be completed.

Two points are worthy of note here. The first is that in this preface, Blake appropriates a pattern of eschatology already identified as a hallmark of the biblical prophetic books: the end of history culminating in a idealised city. Like Brothers and Southcott, his project grapples with how Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem can, or ought to be, fulfilled in his own prophetic vision. The second is that Blake's project is still plagued with the problems

⁷⁶⁰ See Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 133-4.

⁷⁶¹ Blake, *Milton*, 1:13-16, E95-6.

⁷⁶² 1:1-8, E95. So Nancy M. Goslee, “In Englands green and pleasant Land!: The Building of Vision in Blake's Stanzas from “Milton””, *Studies in Romanticism* 13:2 (1974), 111; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 120-121.

of agency that Damrosch identified in his analysis of Blake's theory of perception.⁷⁶³

Interpretations which argue that “there is no disjunction between human activity and divine activity”⁷⁶⁴ in the preface, need to more fully engage with the imperatives in the third stanza, where Blake calls for the tools of prophecy. Who is the figure which Blake calls upon to “bring” him Elijah's “Chariot of fire”?

Goslee has argued Blake's use of this image invokes Milton's image of the “Chariot of Paternal Deitie/Flashing thick flames, Wheele Within Wheele undrawn” (*Paradise Lost* 6:750-751). We can thus see the continued influence of Ezekiel's merkhaba vision which originally proceeds out of “a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself” (Ezek. 1:4).⁷⁶⁵ Blake's language allusively point to an enthroned divinity, which elsewhere he roundly satirises. Humanity, and Blake himself, is still yet to reclaim its prophetic tools from an abstract God.⁷⁶⁶ The tension between divinity and humanity persists in this preface, despite its popular presentation as an enthusiastic celebration of humanity's ability to effect eschatological change.⁷⁶⁷ This has important implications for considering what Blake may mean when he talks of building “Jerusalem”.

Blake's words are often glossed as referring to Revelation's “New Jerusalem”.⁷⁶⁸ Yet we must note that Blake, like Brothers, inherits from the Bible's visionary texts two models of

⁷⁶³ “The Divine Vision is not easily achieved, and we require the intervention of 'Divine Mercy' to set us free.” (Damrosch, *Symbol and Truth*, 30).

⁷⁶⁴ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 121.

⁷⁶⁵ For an extensive discussion of the possible allusions invoked by Blake's “Chariot of fire” see Goslee, “In Englands green and pleasant Land”, 115-119. On Ezekiel's merkabah vision as a continual focus and catalyst for visionary experience, see Michael Lieb, *The Visionary Mode: Biblical Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Cultural Change* (Ithica, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁷⁶⁶ In the present fallen world Blake narrates in the poem, “though God is the perfection of man, man is not wholly God: otherwise there would be no point in bringing in the idea of God at all.” Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 31.

⁷⁶⁷ See especially Brian Wilkie, “Epic Irony in 'Milton'” in ed. Erdman, & Grant, *Visionary Forms Dramatic*, 363; Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 30-2.

⁷⁶⁸ e.g. Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 120-121. Goslee is perhaps more correct in stating that the concept of New Jerusalem “is only implicit” in *Milton's* preface (Goslee, “And did those feet in ancient time”, 124).

a redeemed Jerusalem: the visions of Revelation 21-22 and Ezekiel 40-48. In *The Four Zoas*, Blake refused to depict the New Jerusalem as a city which can simply be built by humanity's fallen faculty of reason. In his lyrical preface to *Milton* he finds himself in a similar uncertain situation. If the New Jerusalem is indeed in Blake's view in this lyric, then it is mediated through a problematic conflation of Revelation's bestowed city, and the city to be constructed in Ezekiel's prophetic vision. Blake's attempt to unite these two models finds asserts itself through repeated descriptions of a city built through human creativity, which is itself bestowed by divine mercy. This city of art is given the name Golgonooza, and its construction is a project which dominates Blake's final illuminated poems.⁷⁶⁹ Importantly, the imagery of New Jerusalem permeates Blake's description of this visionary city. Yet as has been the case throughout our investigation, the symbolism and imagery of Revelation 21-22 is not incorporated into this mythic city without important modifications.

5.3.2.2. Blake, Golgonooza and New Jerusalem

In his final three major poems *The Four Zoas*, *Milton: A Poem* and *Jerusalem*, Blake expends much creative energy in describing Golgonooza. In the four accounts of the city's genesis,⁷⁷⁰ Golgonooza is produced through Los's creative activity. It is in this city that many scholars have detected Blake finding fulfilment in the prophetic promises of Revelation 21-22, considering Golgonooza to be Blake's version of the New Jerusalem.⁷⁷¹ Sklar argues this conflation is overly-simplistic: "this visionary structure has... some

⁷⁶⁹ The etymology of "Golgonooza" has been discussed at length in Blakean scholarship. The majority of commentators link it with Golgotha (Raine, *Golgonooza*, 107; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 148; Paley, "William Blake", 278-9; Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91; Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 26). Nelson Hylton's suggestion that it is a partial anagram of λόγον ζωης in Philippians 2:16 is tendentious: *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (London: University of California Press, 1983), 236.

⁷⁷⁰ *Four Zoas* 59:25-60:5, E340 (Night 5); 87:2-14, E368-7 (Night 7a); *Milton* 3:37-43; *Jerusalem* 10:17-21, E153.

⁷⁷¹ So Raine, *Golgonooza*, 107; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 148; Paley, "William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed With the Sun", 278-9; Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 91; Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 26.

affinity with biblical temple visions... but it is very much Blake's own creation."⁷⁷² Sklar's work reminds us that Blake transforms images he receives from other visionary texts, and paying attention to how he adapts symbols in his prophetic texts gives us an important insight into how he views these prior prophetic hopes. Thus when we examine Blake's descriptions of Golgonooza across his works, two things become apparent. First, whilst Blake does incorporate imagery from Revelation 21-22 in his description of Golgonooza, it is ultimately a stage in the plan of redemption rather than its final destination. Second, the place Golgonooza has in this process of redemption develops considerably across these final major poetic works.

The first reference to Golgonooza in Blake's poetry occurs in night V of *The Four Zoas*, which recapitulates Los' actions in *The Book of Urizen* where Orc is born and Los binds him to a mountaintop out of jealousy.⁷⁷³ There are disconcerting similarities with the depiction of Urizen's creation of the mundane shell in night II. Just as Urizen's "mundane shell" is built upon (and against) the chaotic abyss, so Los builds Golgonooza at a place of liminality: "He builded Golgonooza on the Lake of Udan Adan/Upon the Limit of Translucence he builded Luban" (60: 3-4; E340). The "Lake of Udan Adan", or "Limit of Translucence" alludes to the Greek οὐδεν (nothing) making the lake a symbol of "formlessness".⁷⁷⁴ Thus just as Urizen constructs the "mundane shell" to protect against "Non Existence", so Los's building of Golgonooza rescues him from formlessness.

Blake's language shows that Golgonooza falls short of the status of a utopian, eschatological city like New Jerusalem. Despite the "fourfold" nature of the construction,

⁷⁷² Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 134. Sklar also points out that the city has parallels with "Norse and Masonic imaginative spaces."

⁷⁷³ See *The Book of Urizen*, 20:1-29. Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 233

⁷⁷⁴ So Paul Miner, "Blake's Lake of Udan Adan", *Notes and Queries*, 55:4 (2008) 417-8; Damon, *Blake Dictionary*, 416.

the materials the city is constructed from “pillars of iron/And brass & silver & gold” (59:28-60:1, E340), which are the materials found in the description of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue (Daniel 2). In the Danielic context, the elements refer to four successive kingdoms whose destruction is prophesied. In the same way, then, from the very beginning of Blake's depiction of Golgonooza, the structure is imbued with temporality, unlike the eternal New Jerusalem. As the Mundane Shell must be destroyed in order to effect eschatological resolution (117:6-9, E386), so too the materials from which Golgonooza is constructed point both to its role as a “stage” on the way to salvation and also a structure which is temporary in nature.⁷⁷⁵

Golgonooza's creation is retold in Blake's second version of night VII.⁷⁷⁶ In this version of the story, Los's decision to build Golgonooza is a result of “a World within/ Opening its gates” (86:7-8, E368) and working together with his “spectre”. Once again, Golgonooza is constructed at a place of liminality (the “Limit of Translucence” 87:12, E369), but on this occasion we begin to see the salvific potential of Los's creation, opening “new heavens & a new earth beneath and within/Threefold” (87:8-9, E368). As noted in 5.3.1., the construction of Golgonooza does not effect a complete rejuvenation of vision, but it does, for the first time, point forward to the awakening Blake eventually narrates in night nine.⁷⁷⁷

Yet in the poem's extant form, there is a sinister counterpoint to Los' creation. A speech

⁷⁷⁵ Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 107. Lincoln, *Spiritual History*, 139-140 argues that the four elements are a metaphor for Los' prophetic tradition dividing history into four ages which look forward to the “consummation of the world of fixed space.”

⁷⁷⁶ This second draft of Night VII (pages 77-85; 95-98, E352-60; 368-71) is often titled Night VIIa, despite almost certainly being a later insertion into the manuscript. The manuscript thus contains two “drafts” of Night Seven. For a summary of the critical decisions which underpins the presentation in the critical edition of Blake's works, see David V. Erdman, “Night the Seventh: the Editorial Problem”, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 12:2 (1978), 135-9. Setting these compositional questions aside, Bloom's counsel to avoid the terminology of “two versions” with the connotation of one replacing the other when describing this section of the poem is instructive: “They are rather alternative versions of a crucial section of the poem, and might better be called rival versions.” (Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 244).

⁷⁷⁷ Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 246.

from Urizen describes a systematic attack on the poor (“Compell the poor to live upon a Crust of bread) which is Malthusian in tone.⁷⁷⁸ Similarly, in Night VII(b), Blake describes Urizen's “Universal Empire” where humanity is enslaved in the interests of trade and commerce. There are clear echoes here to Babylon's depiction in Revelation 17-9, not least in Urizen's commercial “ships” bearing “slaves” (95:25-30, E260-1; cf. Rev 18:13) and in Los's cry for “the flesh of Kings & Princes” (88:24, E361; Rev 19:18). These alternative visions of cities in the fallen world once again evoke Revelation's contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon. Yet unlike in Revelation, Golgonooza and the Universal Empire exist alongside one another in the present, acting as symbolic possibilities for contemporary Britain, rather than a future vision of an idealised city superimposed onto the ruins of a destroyed empire.

In the poem's conclusion, Blake reveals more clearly how Golgonooza fits into his story of redemption. Jesus is first seen in Golgonooza (100:10, E372), pointing forward to the final fulfilment of Revelation's prophecy of New Jerusalem in Night IX. On page 122 (lines 1-20, E391), Jerusalem descends after Los tears apart the mundane shell; the repentant Urizen is shown Jerusalem's descent as “a City yet a Woman”. This directly echoes Revelation's presentation of New Jerusalem both as the city where God and the Lamb reign, but also metaphorically as “a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).

Significantly, however, Golgonooza drops out of the story before the climax of the poem – it is never named in the poem's final night. At the start of the Night, Los and Enitharmon begin the project of “building Jerusalem”, unable to discern that Jesus is beside them all the while, rather than in the “Crucified body” over which they weep (117:1-5, E386). In the

⁷⁷⁸ 80:9-21, E355. For the political critique behind this section see Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York: Henry Holt, 1946), 277-8.

poem's final form, Jesus' appearance in Golgonooza merely foreshadows Jerusalem's descent (through which the "Lamb of God" can be seen). In *The Four Zoas*, New Jerusalem replaces Golgonooza as a redemptive symbol. Furthermore, we may note that Blake is consistent with Revelation, by presenting Jerusalem's eschatological restoration as a descent rather than a human construction (122:18, E391), following an act of destruction. In this poem, Jerusalem is bestowed from above and thus contrasts with Los' and Urizen's previous attempts to "build" the redemptive city.⁷⁷⁹ We may also note that Blake's preferred model in this poem for expressing the climactic reunification of the human personality is not the urban New Jerusalem. Instead, the structures of the city are stripped away as Tharmas manages his flocks and children play around Albion's "tent" (138:33-35, E406), returning to a primarily pastoral idyll. Unlike Brothers, then, Blake resists using the Bible's imagery and symbolism to organise his climactic vision of harmonized humanity. Yet he returns to the idea of the redemptive city in his final major works, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where he more fully fleshes out the symbol of Golgonooza and its role in the fulfilment of the Bible's eschatological promises.

Allusions to Revelation are an important structural marker in the construction of Golgonooza in the opening plates of *Milton*. Golgonooza first appears in the poem in Plate 3 (3:39; E97) as the labour of Los and his subdued Spectre after "Terrified Los stood in the Abyss" (3:28). The Abyss is created after the passing of seven ages and states of "dismal woe" (3:9-27; E96-97) where Los descends from an imaginative being into one of mere

⁷⁷⁹ Davis Michael has noted that Jerusalem's inception in the poem "seems to contradict Blake's usual insistence that Jerusalem is constructed, not given". She argues that Jerusalem is in fact "created" through the restoration of Albion's vision (Davis Michael, *Blake and the Bible*, 111). Davis Michael alludes to the tension already identified between human and divine agency in the creation of Jerusalem. I do not feel, however that the case can be made that the descent of Jerusalem in *The Four Zoas* is a human act. Not least because in this poem, Albion is not fully redeemed and resides in "Beulah" and not "Eden" (125:37, E395; 133, 30, E402). As numerous studies of the poem have indicated, *The Four Zoas* fails to narrate a final eschatological redemption of humanity, but instead points forward to works which will more fully "justify the sense in which Los and his City of Art constitute an agency of salvation for man." (Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 284). See also Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 308-9.

sensory perception. Blake's presentation of seven distinct periods of time, corresponding to the deterioration of the human condition and culminating in the inception of a city, evokes Revelation's repeated sevenfold cycles of seals, trumpets and bowls. The juxtaposition of the redemptive city with fallen sensory experience continues when Blake resumes his description of Golgonooza in plates 5-6 (E99). On Plate 6, Blake identifies Golgonooza as "the spiritual Four-fold London eternal" (6:1). Blake's conception of eternity differs from the static presentation of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22. Whereas that city's inhabitants "reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22:5), London-as-Golgonooza is "ever building, ever falling" (*Milton* 6:2).

This direct association of Golgonooza with London shows a marked development from Blake's presentation in *The Four Zoas*: it is in *Milton* that Golgonooza is first explicitly identified as a "city".⁷⁸⁰ Los's creative activity from this point on is depicted in terms of the regeneration of London's spaces. It is in "Lambeths Vale" that Jerusalem's foundations are to be rediscovered (6:14-5, E99). Blake's own return to London from his Felpham sojourn will make "Jerusalem return & overspread all the Nations" (16:18, E100). We have noted Brothers's preoccupation with London as a focus for his prophetic critiques, and the inspiration he draws from the city in his own visions of Jerusalem. This serves as a reminder that the prophetic readings generated by these figures are powerfully wedded to their respective historical and cultural contexts. They all carry a conviction that the visions of Revelation can be related to their own lives and places of residence. Blake, through his prophetic activity in "Golgonooza", seeks to transform London and – in time – the whole world.⁷⁸¹ Similar interpretative moves occur in Brothers's and Southcott's readings.

⁷⁸⁰ Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*, 101.

⁷⁸¹ Erdman persuasively suggests that Los's speech in 25:17-62 (E121-2) alludes to an expected regeneration of places around Hercules Road, where Blake lived in the 1790s, such as the "Asylum" on New Road (line 49) and the "Apollo" pleasure garden situated at the end of Hercules Road. See Erdman, *Prophet*, 288-90.

Southcott reads the vision as a typological representation of the spread of her movement and the dissemination of her writings. Brothers similarly envisages a transformation of the world's governments when they submit to the authority of his rule. All three prophets thus interpret Revelation 21-2 as a vision that points forward to a wider social transformation, wrought by the fulfilment of their respective prophetic hopes.

In *Milton*, Golgonooza is where Revelation 21-22's promises begin to be fulfilled. In plate 35, Blake describes two streams of "crystal" flowing into Golgonooza. One flows directly into the city, before going "thro Beulah to Eden" (35:51, E136). The other passes "thro the Aerial Void & all the Churches/ Meeting again in Golgonooza beyond Satans Seat" (35:52-3). Bloom correctly argues that the crystal streams allude to the river of life in Revelation 22:1, which is "clear as crystal".⁷⁸² Yet we once again must note that Golgonooza remains only a stage on the way to eschatological fulfilment. The ultimate goal of these crystal streams is the state of Eden. In Blake's hierarchy, Golgonooza is situated two levels below this state in "Generation". Whilst Blake's creative city is a necessary stage in his salvific programme, it is not the end of the process. Revelation's future vision is only inaugurated – not completed – by the creative reorganisation of London, foreshadowed by Los's and Enitharmon's return to the city (42:29-35, E143-4).

The task of describing Eden is thus left to his final epic, *Jerusalem*, where Golgonooza once again becomes a pivotal symbol to narrate the transformation of human society into embodiments of Blake's symbol of liberty, Jerusalem. It has been read by some scholars as Blake's most determinedly "urban" poem, his "most positive utopian vision".⁷⁸³ Certainly,

⁷⁸² Ibid., 351. There is also an allusion to Ezekiel 47 in Blake's insistence that the first stream flows through "Los's western Wall" (36:51). In Ezekiel, the waters flow through the Eastern wall to invigorate the waters of the Dead Sea (47:7-12).

⁷⁸³ Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 170-1. See also Paley, *Continuing City*, 136.

Golgonooza looms large in the shaping of *Jerusalem's* narrative (insofar as a consistent plot can be discerned in the poem), and once again the language of Revelation 21-22 is important in Blake's depiction of the city. As Sklar has shown, Golgonooza's potential in *Jerusalem* remains decidedly ambivalent: "Golgonooza can generate error as well as truth,"⁷⁸⁴ complicating the connection that Blake forges between the city and New Jerusalem.

Yet again, Los's construction of Golgonooza is depicted as a human response to a crisis: the ascendancy of the "Holy Reasoning Power" of mankind (10:15-19, E153). In 12:45-13:33 (E156-7), Blake gives his fullest description of Golgonooza. In this passage's wider context, Golgonooza is again intimately connected with Blake's London, transforming the places of incarceration and execution at "Tyburn" and "Paddington" into "a building of pity and compassion" (12:25-9, E155). In the ensuing description, biblical depictions of redeemed Jerusalem have a clear influence. Blake expands the "fourfold" nature of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 40-8: "every part of the City is fourfold; & every inhabitant, fourfold" (13:20, E157).⁷⁸⁵ He also, as Sklar states, conflates the vision of the "four living creatures" in Ezekiel 1:5-14, highlighting how, for Blake, cities are fundamentally human structures and symbolically represent their creators.⁷⁸⁶ The purpose of Golgonooza is explained in 13:56-66: to preserve "every little act/Word, work, & wish, that has existed" (13:60-61, E157-8); it is built out of human mental endeavour.

Blake returns to Los's labours in Golgonooza throughout the poem, culminating in Los's

⁷⁸⁴ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 134-8 has a thorough analysis of Blake's treatment of Golgonooza in *Jerusalem*. This thesis seeks to add to Sklar's persuasive reading by pointing out specific ways iBlake incorporates Revelation 21-2 into his construction of the city.

⁷⁸⁵ As Paley notes, Ezekiel's Jerusalem is the primary inspiration for Blake here, as shown by the fact that in both cities, one of the gates is closed (the eastern-facing outer sanctuary gate in Ezekiel 44:1; Golgonooza's Western gate in 13:6). Paley, *Continuing City*, 141.

⁷⁸⁶ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 137-8.

vision of New Jerusalem's descent on Plate 86. As in *The Four Zoas*, the heavenly city's descent is seen from the constructed city of Golgonooza, and the scene alludes to Revelation 21-22 throughout. Just as John “saw” the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, so Los declares in his vision of the winged female Jerusalem “I see the River of Life & Tree of Life/I see the New Jerusalem descending out of Heaven” (86:18-19, E244). Sklar points out that the city is Los's labour: “Los sings Jerusalem into being”. Furthermore, she notes that as in *Europe*, the city is connected with Exodus's description of Aaron's breastplate, through the inclusion of the motto “holiness is the Lord's” (86:12).⁷⁸⁷ Yet Blake is again reluctant to depict Revelation's New Jerusalem as the ultimate *telos* of Los's labour. Descending on Britain, Jerusalem is “lovely Three-fold/In Head & Heart & Reins, three Universes of love & beauty” (86:2-3). Even in this climactic vision of New Jerusalem's descent, fourfold vision is deferred to the future. At the poem's conclusion, when fourfold vision is attained through the self-sacrifice of Albion, Blake describes Los's visionary city as “the great City of Golgonooza in the Shadowy Generation” (98:55). In the end, Golgonooza remains in the world of Generation, below the sleep of Beulah and the idealised Eden.

Expanding Sklar's claim that Los's vision of New Jerusalem represents an incomplete actualisation of the city,⁷⁸⁸ I would suggest that Blake never intends the city to be definitively actualised in the way that, for example, Brothers and Southcott do through their respective prophetic missions. Sklar's convincing reading of *Jerusalem's* conclusion notes how Blake subverts Revelation's “militaristic” vision of the marriage of the lamb in favour of a model of coexistence in the divine body. There therefore remains room to reflect on how Blake's specific treatment of New Jerusalem as a city might give insight into

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

Blake's prophetic reading of Revelation 21-2, especially in view of his use of this symbol in his other works.⁷⁸⁹

In all of Blake's later poems, Golgonooza is a means to an end for humanity recapturing imaginative vision. It is furthermore telling that at *Jerusalem's* conclusion, the language of New Jerusalem is abandoned in favour of humanity's return to an Edenic paradise, with its "Four Rivers" (98:25). Blake's eschaton emphasises Revelation's vision of a return to a garden (22:1-2) over the urban superstructure which contains it. Revelation's symbol of New Jerusalem, then, is an anchoring point for the restoration of vision; a model to be adopted when human creativity turns to the ordering of urban spaces that must nonetheless pass away when humanity is redeemed. In a sense, this rejection of New Jerusalem as an organising structure for Blake's eschaton is unsurprising when we consider his treatment of the symbol in his poetic works. His poetry betrays a profound scepticism both of humanity's ability to construct an idealised city, and of apparently god-given urban structures. No matter which biblical formulation of redeemed Jerusalem Blake adopts in his works, it is a structure destined to pass away in favour of a discursive prophetic vision, centred on relationships rather than urban constructions.⁷⁹⁰

Blake's incorporation of Revelation 21-22's city motif into his poetry shows Blake's difficulties in reconciling the Bible's eschatological vision with his own prophetic convictions. For the prophet who values human creativity and industry so highly, the vision of a new city "descending out of heaven from God" is a problematic anchor for future hope. Blake, like Brothers, thus encounters a problem in actualising the vision of

Revelation 21-22 in his creative works. This is partly a recognition of the difficulties of

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., 245.

⁷⁹⁰ Williams' reading of Blake's utopia in *Jerusalem* as "an eternal conversation" is equally applicable to the conclusion of *The Four Zoas* and indeed Blake's insistence on "contraries" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. See Williams, *Ideology and Utopia*, 173-4.

reconciling the Bible's prophetic vision of a city bestowed by divine fiat, and one created through human industry. But for Blake there is also the additional problem of the city excluding those “outside”, superseding the destroyed Babylon. For Blake – who at the end of *Jerusalem* depicts all of the characters in his myth finding redemption and transformation by embracing the “Forgiveness of Sins which is Self Annihilation” – a city that stands in contrast to the torture of those outside cannot be the eventual goal of humanity.⁷⁹¹ Blake solves this contrast between his prophetic vision and that of the Bible by creatively re-working John of Patmos's vision. The hope for New Jerusalem is thus recast as an imaginative symbol which inspires humanity to begin reordering society to effect a redemptive transformation of vision and interpersonal relationships.

5.3.3. Jerusalem as Bride of the Lamb in Blake's Myth

In Blake's first explicit account of the descent of the New Jerusalem, he emphasises that it is “a City, yet a Woman” (*The Four Zoas* 122:18); in his final three major poems he explores the feminine personification of the city found throughout the Bible. Just as Golgonooza is a product of Blake's final three major poems, so too Jerusalem makes her first appearance in *The Four Zoas* (4:6-9; E301), and becomes *Jerusalem's* eponymous heroine. In his construction of Jerusalem, Blake draws on a number of biblical models, but he particularly engages with Revelation's female characters.

We have seen how Southcott connects the various visions of women throughout Revelation by drawing upon the text's expectation of “the bride” as a hermeneutical key to the vision of Revelation 12 and her own prophetic mission (see 4.3). Furthermore, Sklar has shown how Blake's reading of Revelation's feminine personifications challenges the actualisations offered by Southcott in her writings, by problematising the exclusive embodiment of the

⁷⁹¹ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 98:23, E257.

woman of Revelation 12 that Southcott proclaims for herself.⁷⁹² Nevertheless, both tread similar interpretative ground. Blake, like Southcott, emphasises Revelation's depiction of New Jerusalem as God's "bride" in *The Four Zoas*, but also in *Milton* where the consummation of creation foreshadows "the Supper of the Lamb & his Bride; and the Awakening of Albion our friend and ancient companion." (25:60, E122; Rev 19:17-18). In *Jerusalem*, the protagonist is called the Lamb's "bride" throughout the poem, and in the opening to the first chapter, she resembles the personified Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs.⁷⁹³ Blake's innovation to Revelation's schema, and to Southcott's use of the image, is the simultaneous presentation of Jerusalem as "bride" and "harlot". Blake develops this theme first in *Milton*, where Swedenborg's visions are perverted by the rationalist thinkers Voltaire and Rousseau, with the intention of destroying Jerusalem and "To raise up Mystery the Virgin Harlot Mother of War/ Babylon the Great" (22:48-9, E117).

When viewed through the lens of moralising religion, Jerusalem's message of liberty is misinterpreted and presented as dangerous harlotry.⁷⁹⁴ Echoing the mythologised accounts of Jerusalem taken into exile in Lamentations 1, Blake presents Jerusalem as "left to the trampling foot & the spurning heel!/A harlot I am calld. I am sold from street to street!" (*Jerusalem*, 62:3-4, E212).⁷⁹⁵ Through engagement with the risen Jesus, this journey of punishment is transfigured into a new Exodus, as Jesus provides Jerusalem with "milk & wine" from the "hard rock" (62:25-6, E213; Exodus 16-17). The presentation of a woman taken into exile only to be redeemed and revealed as Christ's bride strongly echoes

⁷⁹² See Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 75-83; 236.

⁷⁹³ "Thy Emanation that was wont to play before your face... Where hast thou hidden thy Emanation lovely Jerusalem" (4:14, 16, E146; compare Proverbs 8:22-31). See further Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 369; Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 67. For references to Jerusalem as Christ's bride, see *Jerusalem* 20:40, E166; 27:7, 20, E171-2; 41:28, E189; 72:37, E227.

⁷⁹⁴ "in Blake's conception Jerusalem's harlotry is in the eyes of the beholders" Paley, *Continuing City*, 180.

⁷⁹⁵ Jerusalem depicts herself as "trodden... as in a winepress" by God in Lamentations 1:15. This verse is also invoked in Revelation, when God's wrath is visualised as the treading of a "winepress" (14:19-20; 19:15). See Joyce and Lipton, *Lamentations*, 86-7.

Revelation 12-22. Like Southcott, Blake allusively identifies the “bride” of Revelation's closing chapters with the “Woman clothed with the Sun” tormented by the dragon in Revelation 12.⁷⁹⁶ In plate 86, where Blake narrates the New Jerusalem's descent, he presents Jerusalem as a female “Wingd with Six Wings”, conflating the eagles' wings given to the woman in Revelation 12:14 and the wings of the seraphs surrounding God's throne in Isaiah 6:2. Blake thus depicts the descent of the “bride” Jerusalem as a vision of a being intimately connected with divinity.

Blake's presentation of Jerusalem as a harlot places her in good company. In plate 61, Jerusalem receives a comforting vision of Joseph and Mary. As we saw in the previous chapter, Southcott too connects Revelation's women with Mary, seeing them as part of a typological chain which culminates in her own revelation as God's prophetic agent. Blake, however, explores a different dynamic.⁷⁹⁷ Here Mary is absolved of her adultery and provides a paradigm for Jerusalem, reborn “lovely as a Virgin in his sight who am/Indeed a Harlot drunken with the Sacrifice of Idols” (61:37-8; E212). At the conclusion of this plate, Mary embraces Jerusalem, and places Jesus “into her hands in the Visions of Jehovah” (61:48). Recognising herself as part of a long line of redeemed women, Jerusalem embraces her role as the deliverer of the divine vision.⁷⁹⁸ Her “harlotry” is a state she must pass through in order to be revealed as the true bride of the lamb, as Blake refuses to expunge the sexuality of the Bible's idealised female.⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁹⁶ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 238, notes that in *Jerusalem*, contrary to Revelation 12, the woman clothed with the sun is in fact devoured by the dragon, only to see her arise from the dragon's stomach in plate 92. Blake's poetry thus contrasts the actualisations of Southcott, Elspeth Buchan and Sarah Flaxmer where the dragon's enmity is resisted and overcome.

⁷⁹⁷ Sklar suggests that Blake, in his presentation of Jerusalem, repudiates Southcott's attitudes towards sexuality and the authority derived from her virginity. See Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 78-81.

⁷⁹⁸ Duskow's reading of plate 61 as Blake correcting Mary's label of “adulteress” which is forced upon her through Natural Religion's denial of the possibility of the Virgin Birth seems to me erroneous. It fails to take into account Mary's claim that “if I were pure, never could I taste the sweets/ Of the Forgiveness of Sins!” (61:11-12, E211). Duskow, *Jerusalem*, 120.

⁷⁹⁹ This is visualised in plate 99, which depicts the risen Albion passionately embracing Jerusalem.

Blake draws upon the castigation of Jerusalem as “harlot” to explore another aspect of the “two cities” paradigm inherited from the Bible's prophetic tradition. In *The Four Zoas* and *Milton*, Blake invokes John of Patmos' visions of the harlot “Mystery” also known as Babylon.⁸⁰⁰ In these depiction, however, Blake conflates the “whore” of Revelation 17 with both the Rahab in Joshua 2 who shelters Joshua's spies from the king of Jericho and the vanquished dragon of Isaiah 51:9 and Psalm 89:10. Rahab also appears alongside Babylon as a place where Zion as the birthplace of David is celebrated in Psalm 87:4. Blake conflates all of these epithets in his presentation of Jerusalem's rival “harlot” who, despite projecting a “Moral Virtue” is in fact “Religion hidden in War” (*Milton* 40:20-1, E141-2)⁸⁰¹. In *Jerusalem*, Blake develops this depiction of the seemingly virtuous harlot through the character of Vala, Jerusalem's frequent antagonist.

It is important to note that whilst Blake frequently connects Vala/Rahab/Babylon to the great whore depicted in the book of Revelation, he also picks up on one of the nuances in John's presentation which creates a continuity between Babylon and New Jerusalem. In Revelation, both Babylon and Jerusalem are presented as lavishly “adorned” with “gold and jewels and pearls” (17:4; 21:2, 9-21). The choice between these two cities is not an evident, binary choice; both women are seductive entities whose true nature is only revealed with full prophetic understanding. Blake plays upon the parallelism in the Bible's presentation of these personified cities, presenting both Jerusalem and Vala as emanations of Albion's wife, Brittannia (32:28, E178). As Sklar writes, from the idealised perspective of Eden, “the harlot and the bride are part of one whole.”⁸⁰² Thus in Blake's mythology, Jerusalem and Babylon are not opposites of one another, but are rather two ends of a spectrum.⁸⁰³

⁸⁰⁰ *The Four Zoas* 115:1-7, E387-8; *Milton* 40:17-22, E141-2.

⁸⁰¹ See further Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 139-40.

⁸⁰² Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 70.

⁸⁰³ Paley, *Continuing City*, 189.

This congruity between Jerusalem and Vala allows Blake to rewrite Babylon's fate in Revelation. In the Bible, Babylon is violently “cast down” in 18-19, to make way for the descent of the “bride” who ultimately replaces Babylon as the dominant female character in the text. In Blake's mythology, the destruction of Babylon is retold as a redemption where Vala is reunited with Jerusalem when Britannia awakes in Plate 94 (E254).⁸⁰⁴ Britannia's repentance at her emanation's murder of Albion, is what first stirs him from death; his conversation with Jesus instigates his eventual redemption (94:22-95:4, E254-5). Vala's status as a “harlot” is just as much a tragic fall as Jerusalem's, only it is brought about by Vala's own self-delusion and her desire to dominate Albion's consciousness. In Plate 29, Vala seduces Albion into believing that she alone was his true “Bride & Wife” (29:39, E175). Parodying Jerusalem's resemblance to New Jerusalem, Vala presents herself as the idealised city,

I was a City & a Temple built by Albions Children.
I was a Garden planted with beauty I allured on hill & valley
The River of Life to flow against my walls & among my trees⁸⁰⁵

Vala is deceiving Albion into accepting her priority over Jerusalem,⁸⁰⁶ yet Vala's claims are not without truth.⁸⁰⁷ In the poem's conclusion both Vala and Jerusalem are reunited, and the “Rivers of Paradise” return. This is presented as a return to an earlier, unfallen stage of human existence: whilst the *fallen* Vala distorts the biblical symbols of the “River of Life”, “City” and “Garden”, the eternal *unfallen* Vala embodies them. The conclusion of *Jerusalem* leaves no character unredeemed, finding a place for all among the “Visionary Forms Dramatic” conversing in Eden (98:28, E257).

⁸⁰⁴ So also Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 93.

⁸⁰⁵ *Jerusalem* 29:36-8, E175.

⁸⁰⁶ So Paley, *Continuing City*, 201; Doskow, *Jerusalem*, 75.

⁸⁰⁷ Sklar argues that Vala's claims are indicative of a time when “Jerusalem and Vala were a composite emanation.” Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 175.

In his depictions of Jerusalem and Vala, Blake is again influenced by biblical imagery. Revelation's rival "bride" and "harlot" loom large in this allusive network. Yet Blake refuses to incorporate key patterns in Revelation's treatment of personified cities without modification. Firstly, he problematizes the concepts of "bride" and "whore", showing that each status is assigned according to individual perception; that the qualities of both have their part to play in the redemptive process. Secondly, he wholeheartedly rejects the notion that salvation requires the Babylon's annihilation. The erroneous moralistic structure she builds around herself must be stripped away, but the character herself must survive and participate in the eschatological community. Blake refuses to let Babylon be destroyed and supplanted by the New Jerusalem.

There is one final modification to Revelation's eschatological pattern present in Blake's treatment of Jerusalem. We may note that after Jerusalem finally spreads over the nations, she is asked to "come away" (97:4). From this point, until *Jerusalem's* final line, the principal female characters disappear from the story, making way for a vision where humanity walks "To & fro in Eternity as One Man" (98:39, E258). Blake's ultimate vision of redemption, then, is one in which the language of "Brotherhood" is paramount.⁸⁰⁸

Damrosch suggests that the contours of Blake's myth require him to write out the language of "male" and "female" from *Jerusalem's* climactic vision of Eden. He notes that in Blake's writings, the very division of human personality into male and female emanations is a symbol of fallenness and separation.⁸⁰⁹ He argues that the imagery of spousal embrace, depicted on Jerusalem's penultimate plate, can only be accommodated in Beulah, the penultimate level of human redemption. It is thus an ambiguous symbol. On the one hand Eden is a place of activity, and sex is one of Blake's primary metaphors for energy; on the

⁸⁰⁸ See also *The Four Zoas* 133:13.

⁸⁰⁹ Damrosch, *Symbol and Truth*, 182-3.

other hand for this to take place, humanity has to be divided into male and female. For Blake, Revelation's presentation of a marriage between the holy city and the Lamb can only be an imperfect vision.⁸¹⁰ Sklar's reading of Jerusalem's conclusion sees Blake idealising an original human form which “was and is androgynous”.⁸¹¹ Thus, for Blake, a “marriage” between the female city and male lamb must point forward to a more radical conjoining of energies. As we found in Blake's treatment of New Jerusalem as city, Revelation's “bride” takes us only to a penultimate stage in his programme of redemption. Blake moves beyond Revelation, and Southcott, where the Spirit and Bride offering a univocal invitation to the reader. He posits a vision whereby this still-gendered framework is transcended, in order to access a truly Edenic, undivided, human existence.

5.4. Conclusion

What readings of Revelation 21-2 does Blake produce? In his reflections on these chapters, mediated through allusions embedded in his poetic myth, Blake – like Brothers and Southcott – reads Revelation's symbols in the light of his own circumstances, and against the London of his own day. When engaged thus, Revelation's climactic visions function as imaginative resources which, when engaged with creatively, can inspire transformation: of individual perspective and of the warring ideologies underpinning contemporary society. We also see that, for Blake, the chapters contain a great deal of allusive potential, suggesting parallels with the stones on Aaron's breastplate in Exodus 28, in addition to their relationship to Ezekiel's climactic vision. This allows Blake to reflect deeply on how human creativity can bring about radical social transformation, and why it has hitherto failed to do so. My analysis shows that, across a number of works, Blake pays close attention to the fact that New Jerusalem “descends” out of heaven in Revelation, and

⁸¹⁰ So *ibid.*, 185-6.

⁸¹¹ Sklar, *Visionary Theatre*, 244.

juxtaposes this with fallen human attempts to “build” utopian urban structures in his poems. He also highlights how Revelation personifies New Jerusalem as a woman. Like Southcott, he explores how this woman functions as a symbol pointing towards human redemption. In his writings, he also draws on New Jerusalem to explore contrasts and similarities with Revelation's other women, reflecting especially on the antipathy between New Jerusalem and Babylon.

Like Brothers and Southcott, Blake is inspired by Revelation's images and narratives. And like his prophetic contemporaries, he seeks to find ways that they can be incorporated into his own prophetic vision. Where Brothers and Southcott seek to harmonise Revelation's visions with their prophetic projects – through Brothers's insistence on Revelation 21's metaphorical nature, or Southcott's attempt to equate the vision with the spread of her prophetic movement – Blake incorporates Revelation's imagery into his prophetic texts, but also pushes beyond it. I agree with Sklar's contention that the key to understanding Blake's thought lies in paying attention to how he transforms the images and symbols he incorporates into his art. Proceeding thus, we can see how Blake's own prophetic vision dissents from Revelation's in a number of key ways. He rejects the destruction of “hell” wrought by the inception of the new creation in Revelation 21:1. Instead, he seeks ways in which these contrary forces and states can coexist to engender further creativity.

Furthermore, whilst the descent of the New Jerusalem forms an important marker for transformation in his later poems, ultimately Blake opts to have the image of the city pass away, choosing alternative scenes of resolution. We find a similar dissent in his reception of Revelation's women. He focusses on how the antipathy of Babylon and Jerusalem might point forward to a reconciliation of the two city-women, rather than the former's destruction, before finally dissolving the binary between “male” and “female” altogether,

implicitly urging his audience to find new ways of expressing community.

Blake's readings of Revelation 21-2 raise an important question about prophetic interpretation of the Bible. In responding to a prior influential prophetic text, how far is the prophet bound by the vision of their predecessor? As we saw in chapter 2, there is a dialectic at the heart of prophetic engagements with biblical texts: interpretation of prior visions, and the creation of new prophetic texts. We have seen how, in Blake's poetry, the vision of Revelation 21-2 is a catalyst for redemptive transformation, but it is not the end point of this transformation. In this way, Blake asserts his prophetic authority over John of Patmos's. Revelation may provide useful raw materials for Blake's prophetic project, but Blake, who sees his prophetic role subsisting in his creative autonomy, uses them to fashion his own vision.

Blake's engagement with Revelation has a number of points of comparison with his prophetic contemporaries, Brothers and Southcott. All three see themselves as agents who are active in bringing about a redemptive transformation in their readers and supporters. All three find in Revelation symbols and ideas which inspire and cohere with their own projects. Revelation's vision of an idealised city inspires Brothers and Blake to think about how prophecy can transform and rebuild urban structures. Yet Blake struggles, as Brothers does, in his actualisation of new Jerusalem, with the respective roles of divine and human agency in the construction of this city. The emphasis Revelation places on "the woman clothed with the sun" and the "bride" inspires both Blake and Southcott to think about how women can be active agents in bringing about redemption. Like Southcott, he connects bride's story with other biblical characters, especially Mary. Unlike Southcott, however, redemption is not wrought through the actualisation and embodiment of Revelation's

female characters. Instead Blake invites his readers to creatively engage with Revelation's women to transform relationships and perceptions in the present day. Blake's emphasis upon seeing “human forms”⁸¹² – products of human imaginative endeavours – in the Bible, encourages him to develop a different approach to his prophetic contemporaries in reading these hopes. Rather than using prophetic interpretation to harmonise Revelation's images and narratives with his vision, he instead gives space to dissent to the text's ideology. This is how the “spirit of prophecy” manifests itself. In this way, Blake – like Brothers and Southcott – reads the text through the lens of his own prophetic commitments: to inspire the prophetic faculties in his own readers, rather than demanding obedience to his redemptive vision. Blake's prophetic engagement with the Bible requires him to move beyond commentary and exposition: it must inspire creativity, an imaginative response to the Bible's articulation of the hope for human redemption.

This chapter began with a reflection on Blake's illustration of the woman of Revelation 12. I argued that her posture suggests her active resistance to Satan's advances, emboldened by the divine assistance she has been given. In Revelation, these wings will transfer her to a place of seclusion where she will be protected and arguably drop out of the story. In his image, however, Blake imbues her with the power of resistance and defiance. She meets Satan as an equal: their outstretched arms mirroring one another. This image provides a visual metaphor for the kind of transformed prophetic reader that Blake describes elsewhere in his poetry and visual art. The prophet faces their predecessor as an equal and reflects their shared prophetic spirit in their own works. Just as the transfigured woman resists the previously overwhelming power of the dragon, so too the prophet's vision can be influenced by, but not dominated by, the hopes of those who have gone before.

⁸¹² *Jerusalem* 99:1-2, E258



Figure II: William Blake, "Thus Did Job Continually", *Illustrations for the Book of Job* (1825), Trinity College, Oxford,



Figure III: William Blake, "So the Lord Blessed the Latter End of Job", *Illustrations for the Book of Job* (1825), Trinity College, Oxford.

Concluding Reflections

The research question stated at the outset of this thesis was as follows: how is Revelation used and interpreted in the works of Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott and William Blake? My study demonstrates several shared points of interest in the text. Certainly, an interest in the text's eschatology: all three prophets navigate and reconcile John's vision for a "new heaven and a new earth" and "new Jerusalem" with their own prophetic hopes. They explore and find significance in the text's intertextual allusions, drawing on other parts of the biblical canon to explain how their respective prophetic missions can constitute the correct reading – and the fulfilment of – Revelation's visions. They also draw upon the text's images and visions to unveil the true nature of their contemporary society. Brothers and Southcott largely draw upon on contemporary events to "decode" scenes within Revelation and to mark out their day, and their own prophetic missions, as a pivotal moment in God's plan for humanity. Blake reads the visions within Revelation, such as the vision of the "mystery" Babylon, as scenes which can recur at a number of points in human history.

Yet, as I have shown, Revelation does not only provide a prophetic framework to explain external events and hopes. Their readings of the text have a marked influence on the development of their self-conceptions as prophets. It is from the account of John of Patmos's prophetic visitation that Brothers, Southcott and Blake all derive inspiration for their own prophetic office. They all stress that they possess the same "spirit of prophecy" and Brothers and Southcott point to shared modes of communication with God as legitimation of their prophetic claims. Blake and John are both able to offer insight into the true nature of political and religious authority, through their imaginative engagement with their contemporary situation, and the writings of their prophetic predecessors. For all three,

John's experience of "being in the spirit" opens up, rather than closes down, the possibility for subsequent prophetic revelation.

Yet in affirming the continuing need for prophetic readers of prior prophetic texts, Brothers, Southcott and Blake all face the same hermeneutical tension: how can their prophetic visions stand in line with those that have gone before, yet still articulate a new message? This question is at the heart of prophetic readings of Revelation, and the answer to it, I contend, varies depending on how far the prophet feels bound by the authority of their predecessor's vision. Here we can see a contrast between Brothers and Southcott on the one hand, and Blake on the other. Brothers and Southcott affirm the enduring validity of the biblical text and give recourse to scripture to validate their own prophetic claims. Blake sees the Bible's value not in the normative theological system it creates, but in the imaginative resource it provides for the reader; its capacity to empower all its readers to become creative prophets in their own right. Brothers and Southcott thus attempt to find references to themselves and their prophetic calling within John's account, to indicate that John's vision is pointing forward to their own missions. For Blake, the "poetic genius" he shares with the author of Revelation allows him to transform John's message and imagery to forge a new prophetic creation: the prophet can be inspired by, but cannot be "enslav'd" by the prophetic visions recorded in the Bible.

The conclusion drawn by Paley in his comparison between the three's reading of the Bible – that Blake's reading of ideas such as New Jerusalem and the virgin birth are "symbolic", where Brothers's and Southcott's are "literal" – requires nuance. All three, in fact, produce readings that are guided by a concern to find a place for Revelation's visions within their own prophetic projects. Taubes's comments on messianism in Judaism and Christianity can

perhaps help us to articulate better the distinction between the three's prophetic hopes.

Taubes draws upon the idea that the Christian interpretation of Jewish messianic promises constitutes a “turn towards inwardness” and considers this an essential response to the apparent failure of messianic ideals:

consider the dialectics in the Messianic experience of a group at the moment when prophecy of redemption fails. The “world” does not disintegrate, but the hope of redemption crumbles. If, however, the Messianic community, because of its inward certainty, does not falter, the Messianic experience is bound to turn inward, redemption is bound to be conceived as an event in the spiritual realm, reflected in the human soul... How else can redemption be defined after the Messiah has failed to redeem the external world except by turning inward?⁸¹³

The difference between Brothers, Southcott and Blake, I suggest, is better articulated in terms of their respective “turns towards inwardness” in the expression of their prophetic identity and hopes, the extent to which the fulfilment of their prophetic missions fixates on external and material transformations on the historical plane. For Blake, redemption primarily comes through the transformation of individual perspective, the embrace of imaginative creativity, which subsequently will manifest itself in the return to the “Universal Brotherhood of Eden” (*The Four Zoas* 3:5, E300). For Brothers, the redemptive hope is aimed towards an historical intervention and transformation, symbolised by the restoration of the Hebrew people and the city of Jerusalem. Southcott occupies the middle term between these two positions. Her hope is external in the sense that it is contingent upon the acceptance of, and obedience to, her prophetic visitation. Yet, the outward signs of acceptance of Southcott's prophetic authority – such as the typological representation of scenes from Revelation 12 in her life, and her insistence on her followers collecting “seals” – are indicators of a belief in a redemption that is ultimately effected through the transformed perspective Southcott's writings and mission inspire in her followers: “this is the only revolution that ought to arise in our hearts – a revolt against the power of evil; and

⁸¹³ Jacob Taubes, “The Price of Messianism” in ed. Marc Saperstein, *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 552.

that our delight may be to walk with the Lord...’’⁸¹⁴. All three prophets participate in the dialectic Taubes identifies between redemption manifesting itself “in the spiritual realm”, and in “the world”. The differences in their prophetic interpretation of Revelation can thus be plotted more accurately against this spectrum, rather than in the imprecise labels of “literalist” and “symbolic” fulfilment of the biblical future hope.

Despite these different results, by placing Brothers, Southcott and Blake under the shared banner of “prophecy”, we can discern a common trend in their reading of Revelation. All three interpret the quintessential New Testament prophetic text through the lens of their own prophetic convictions. For Brothers, this means reading Revelation in ways that reveal him to be an authoritative interpreter of the text, and point forward to his mission to restore the city of Jerusalem; to navigate the text's intertextual echoes in a way that does not threaten his claim that a human agent is required to effect the construction of a new Jerusalem. For Southcott, it involves reading Revelation in ways which demonstrate that the visions and hopes of the text are fulfilled typologically in her own writings and life, which in turn marks out her visitation as the decisive blow in the battle between God, humankind, and the devil which began in Genesis 3. For Blake, it means seeing John of Patmos as a fellow “voice of honest indignation” (*Marriage*, plate 12, E38) who can fire Blake's own imagination to create prophetic works, just as Ezekiel, Isaiah and Daniel inspired John. For all three, their prophetic mission functions as the hermeneutical key that unlocks the significance of Revelation for the contemporary reader.

This thesis has explored readings of Revelation brought about by interpreters whose approach to the text diverges sharply from the methods and aims of modern-day historical criticism. In the light of this, a question stands out as particularly pressing: why should we

⁸¹⁴ Southcott, *Long-Wished-For Revolution*, 1.

take seriously the interpretations of idiosyncratic writers living two centuries ago? The dominance of the historical-critical method in biblical scholarship since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has led to an instinctive distrust of those who would claim to have *the* meaning of a biblical text revealed to them, instead binding the meaning of the text to the cultural and historical world of its author and immediate audience. Rather than ascribing the text's meaning to its first century context, Brothers's, Southcott's and Blake's readings assume that Revelation has meaning for their own day, and tie its symbols intimately to their present circumstances. They assert that a text written off the coast of Asia Minor unveils truths about London at the end of the long eighteenth century; about the plight and mission of the creative artist; about the remarkable life of a Devonshire domestic servant, her followers and opponents. From the perspective of "critical" contemporaries, and their descendants in the modern academy, readings such as those offered by these self-proclaimed prophets are *misreadings*, or, to use Kenneth Newport's terminology, offer *eisegesis* of Revelation rather than *exegesis*.

The language of "misreadings" or "pre-critical" readings blinds us to the ways in which Brothers, Southcott and Blake only read their prophetic convictions *into* Revelation because they have formulated these convictions *out of* the text. Their "misreadings" of the text are in fact *rereadings*: Brothers, Southcott and Blake offer interpretations which proceed under a different hermeneutical framework. They are bound not by the need to situate Revelation within a particular historical milieu, but by the need to situate its message within contemporary culture. This does not prevent them from being sensitive and careful readers of the text. They grapple with complex hermeneutical questions, enthusiastically exploit the allusive nature of John's text, and take up the invitation to apply "wisdom" to the parts of the text where John leaves his meaning obscure (17:9).

Writing prophetic readings back in to the history of modern biblical interpretation reminds us that modern critics are answering the same call to offer interpretation. Prophetic readers are confronted with the same problem of reconciling Revelation's visions to their own hermeneutical presuppositions. We have seen how the text resists simple conformity to the later prophet's insights and inspires new prophetic interpretations, just as the historical-critical tradition continues to generate new readings and new debates over the text's construction and its reflection of its first-century world. Engagement with how prophets like Brothers, Southcott and Blake read biblical prophecies by no means solves this impasse, but it reminds us that Revelation continually inspires and invites imaginative engagement across a range of interpretative traditions. John of Patmos's prophecy, throughout the history of its interpretation, has always had profound resonance within marginal interpretative communities. The project of charting the reception history of Revelation, if it is to truly capture the variety of ways this text has been used in history, must take seriously the kinds of marginal readings unearthed by this study.

Directions for Future Research

This thesis opens up scope for further research on three major fronts. Firstly, through justifying the comparison of Brothers, Southcott and Blake by categorising them under their shared language of “prophecy”, this thesis has looked at them primarily as readers and interpreters of the Bible. I believe that this opens up the possibility for further research on how these figures treat specific biblical texts and images. The tendency to see these figures as contemporary participants in a “millenarian” tradition has encouraged a focus on texts which inspire their eschatological hopes. It is my contention that we should explore their wider use and engagement with the Bible and examine how other texts are assimilated into

their respective prophetic interpretative frameworks.

Secondly, there is considerable scope to widen the investigation into the interpretation of Revelation by studying other eighteenth-century prophets. Prophets like Sarah Flaxmer, Elspeth Buchan and Ann Lee have played only a marginal, contextual role in this study. Yet their readings of Revelation and other biblical texts would help us to flesh out more fully the range of interpretations that prophets generated during this period. This in turn would augment our understanding of how, and which, biblical texts were being engaged with in popular culture, during this important period in the history of biblical interpretation.

Finally, Blake's assimilation into the "canons" of western art and literature has meant that Blake's engagement with the biblical text has received greater attention within scholarship. Brothers and Southcott, by contrast, have rarely had their writings subject to sustained scrutiny from those interested in their contribution to the Bible's reception history. Their interest in drawing on the Bible to legitimate their personal authority and significance, as opposed to Blake's more aesthetic appropriation, perhaps has deterred researchers from looking in detail at what they have to say about particular biblical texts. Yet, over the course of my research I have been struck by the creative ways in which figures such as Brothers and Southcott approach and find meanings in the biblical text. I am also continually struck by how small details in the text can be used to generate surprising readings and how often these result from a close and meticulous engagement with the text. Brothers, for example does not ignore the complex interpretative questions raised by the recognition that Revelation 21-2 borrows considerably from Ezekiel 40-8, yet presents a markedly different vision of the institution of an idealised city. On the contrary, Brothers's reading of Revelation 21-2 as a "metaphorical" prefigurement of his fulfilment of Ezekiel's

vision demonstrates how Revelation's intertextuality creates a dynamic engagement with other prophetic texts, in turn drawing the reader in to an interpretative debate. Similarly, Southcott's commitment to using Revelation 12 as an interpretative framework for events across the course of her life gives her an opportunity to explore the relationships between key characters in Revelation's vision. Her reading of the conflict between the woman and the dragon, and the link the text creates to the events of the fall, allows her to give prophetic agency to the woman clothed with the sun, which the text leaves anonymous and silent. Such readings highlight the ways that Revelation inspires, and shapes the thinking, of prophetic readers who claim for themselves unrivalled authority to unlock its meaning, and to embody its promises.

It has struck me that these heterodox and sectarian readers, and the interpretative communities they create, are important drivers for the re-interpretation and rereading of biblical texts. The meanings they generate play a significant role in the survival and developing afterlife of these texts and narratives. Specific research projects which might spin out of this research might be to trace the interpretation of key biblical texts through sectarian religious traditions. Work carried out by members of the Prophecy Project, for example, which looks at how the subsequent Southcottian prophets and communities interpreted a text such as the "Shiloh" prophecy of Genesis 49:10 or the vision of Revelation 12 has generated many insights which ought to be of interest to scholars interested in the Bible's influence within interpretative communities outside of the academic, critical sphere. We can examine how the text functions at different stages of the tradition's development, and in the hands of different prophetic readers. Such focussed research would enrich the contemporary scholarly project of reading the Bible through the lens of its receptions, by engaging with heterodox communities and traditions of

interpretation which conduct their readings of the text under different hermeneutical presuppositions. In turn, this would provide further insight into the role of biblical interpretation in the development of community identity, praxis and theology. Crucially, however, it would enrich our understanding of how biblical texts generate meanings, when they are used by different readers in different intellectual, cultural and religious contexts.

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