

Inspiration, Revelation, and Scripture: The Story of a Shaker Bible

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FOR MORE than two hundred years the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, a religious community commonly known as the Shakers, has been involved with publishing. In 1790 'the first printed statement of Shaker theology' appeared anonymously in Bennington, Vermont, under the imprint of 'Haswell & Russell.'¹ Entitled *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, according to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ*, this publication marked a departure from the pattern established by the founder, Ann Lee, an Englishwoman who came to America in 1774. Lee, herself illiterate, feared fixed statements of belief, and forbade her followers to write such documents. Within the space of two decades, however, the Shakers rejected Lee's counsel and turned with increasing frequency to the printing press in order to defend themselves against

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1. See Mary L. Richmond, *Shaker Literature: A Bibliography* (2 vols., Hancock, Mass.: Shaker Community, Inc., 1977), 1: 145-46. Richmond echoes the common judgment concerning the authorship of this tract, attributing it to Joseph Meacham, an early American convert to Shakerism.

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hostile attacks and to disseminate their distinctive beliefs and practices. During the next two centuries they were responsible for an astonishing number of diverse publications, including broadsides, pamphlets, catalogues, articles, and books.² Today a handful of Believers remaining at Sabbathday Lake, Maine—the only remnant of the United Society—continues this tradition of interest in publishing and even possesses its own printing press.³

This essay focuses on one of the most unusual chapters in the long history of Shaker publications, specifically on a volume published in 1843, *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book; from the Lord God of Heaven, to the Inhabitants of Earth: Revealed in the United Society at New Lebanon, County of Columbia, State of New York, United States of America*.⁴ The story of the *Sacred Roll* touches directly on issues of primary concern to researchers working on the history of the book in America, including authorship, publication, and reception. Furthermore, it demonstrates the Shakers' interest in their own publishing activities as well as in the broader history of religious publishing. Finally, this account confirms the close relationship between spiritual activity within the United Society and religious developments in the wider world of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.

The *Sacred Roll* appeared at a moment of great religious excitement across the United States. The adventist movement associated with William Miller had aroused widespread anxiety and curiosity. On the basis of his reading of the apocalyptic portions of

2. In volume I of *Shaker Literature*, Richmond lists more than 1,700 items published by the Shakers before 1972. Jerry Grant has announced plans to update this bibliography. See the inaugural issue of *The Shaker Historical and Bibliographic Register* (1995).

3. For a history of Shakerism in the last half century, see Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 355–442. The Sabbathday Lake Shakers publish *The Shaker Quarterly* and assist with a newsletter entitled *The Clarion*, published by the Friends of the Shakers. They also continue to publish books.

4. [Philemon Stewart], *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book; from the Lord God of Heaven to the Inhabitants of Earth* (Canterbury, N.H.: The United Society, 1843). The title page also includes the further explanation, 'Received by the Church of this Communion, and Published in Union with the Same,' and the exhortation, 'Read and understand all ye in mortal clay.' Hereafter references to the *Sacred Roll* will be gathered in the footnote at the close of each paragraph in the order of their occurrence.

the Bible, Miller predicted an imminent physical return of Christ to the earth and a corresponding end to the present order. The *Sacred Roll* also appeared at a moment of great religious excitement within the United Society, a period referred to by historians as the Era of Manifestations. It was a time marked by a superabundant outpouring of diverse spiritual gifts, including visions and revelations. Both of these contexts are evident in the text. The *Sacred Roll* voiced the Shaker response to the Millerite movement by reasserting the society's traditional claims regarding Ann Lee's identification with the Second Coming of Christ. It also reflected the Believers' preoccupation during the Era of Manifestations with the spiritual presence of the founder in their midst. In other words, the *Sacred Roll* served both apologetic and confessional functions.

The claims for authorship of the *Sacred Roll* made in the text are unusual. Angels were said to have been commissioned by God to read this revelation to a mortal instrument who was ordered to write it down. The chosen 'Inspired Writer' was Philemon Stewart, a Shaker brother living in the village at New Lebanon, New York. Stewart disavowed all 'natural wisdom' and maintained that he 'knew nought of the subject' until it was 'opened and brought forward, word after word, by the mighty Angel.' This description of origins and Stewart's disclaimers about responsibility underscored the sacred and inspired character of the text for the Shakers who regarded the *Sacred Roll* as a new scripture authored by God. What we discover is a close relationship between the privileged position enjoyed by this text within the society and Stewart's status as the recipient of the revelation. The two were linked inseparably. At the heart of this story, therefore, are issues involving the respective roles of inspiration and authority within the Shaker community.⁵

The processes involved in the publication of the *Sacred Roll* as described by the Believers are also unusual. According to the text, an angel had a hand in overseeing the printing and production of

5. *Sacred Roll*, 214-15, 219-20, 160-61.

the volume that took place principally at the Shaker village in Canterbury, New Hampshire. The procedures were dictated by revelation. For instance, a rather strange ritual accompanied the presswork. Henry Clay Blinn, one of the Canterbury brothers working on the project, recalled the following:

After the first impression of each sig.⁶ Br Philemon and three of the printers form a square in the press room, facing the four points of the compass. Each person was provided with a tin trumpet. The one that Br Philemon used was three feet long & made a very deep, bass; the other trumpets were common length. At a given signal a long blast was made as a sign that the gospel would be published to the four quarters of the earth. After using the trumpets all would kneel in silent prayer, & at the close of this exercise, return to their several duties.⁷

After copies were bound, the Shakers distributed them throughout the society and to high-ranking religious and political figures in the United States and throughout the world in accord with the command of the angel. The Believers viewed these directions as further confirmation of the inspired status of the *Sacred Roll* and its place as scripture.

The months involved in the production of the *Sacred Roll* were the time of Stewart's greatest prominence within the society. His influence expanded as expectations rose over the prospect of having this special revelation in published form. But the reception of the printed volume was not as positive or as sustained as the Believers had hoped. It occupied center stage in the Shaker world as a new 'bible' for a short time, as the testimonies comprising the second part of the publication bear witness. But the response outside the society was more negative from the start. The fortunes of the volume were tied closely to Stewart's situation within the community. Stewart moved from outsider to insider and back again to the margins of the society in a relatively short time. When he fell from favor, he dragged the *Sacred Roll* down with

6. I.e., signature.

7. Blinn, 'A Historical Record,' cited in the documentation that accompanied the exhibition entitled 'Receiving the Faith: The Shakers of Canterbury, New Hampshire' at the Museum of Our National Heritage, Lexington, Massachusetts (1992-93).

him. The volume quickly faded into the background, becoming the province of historians rather than of the living, worshipping Shaker community.

Recovering the story of this unusual publication is more than an act of antiquarianism. The *Sacred Roll* distinguished the Shakers from the Millerites and reaffirmed the Believers' distinctive understanding of the Second Coming. The story of this Shaker 'bible' documents how closely the religious culture of the United Society was attuned to the larger world of nineteenth-century Protestantism. The rise and fall of this text demonstrates the critical role that one individual played in the fortunes of this publication and how individuals influenced the history of the book in America.

The *Sacred Roll* appeared on the scene at a time when the United Society of Believers was in religious turmoil. The story of the Era of Manifestations within Shakerism is now familiar to many.⁸ Beginning late in the summer of 1837 and lasting for more than a decade, a wave of spiritualistic activity swept across the society. (Spiritualism is the belief that it is possible to communicate directly with the spirits of the dead.⁹) Members of the society who received these communications or visions were called 'instruments' or 'visionists.' Today the more common term would be 'mediums.' A number of the first instruments among the Shakers were 'young girls' at Watervliet, New York, aged ten to fourteen. Most of those who received spirit messages were women, but not all by any means.

Astonishment and excitement filled the Shaker dwellings when instruments told of spirit journeys to the invisible world where

8. For three historical accounts dealing in different ways with the Era of Manifestations, see Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963); Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986); and Stein, *Shaker Experience*.

9. For useful accounts of spiritualism in America, see R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

they witnessed scenes of celestial glory as well as places of eternal torment. They reported conversations with Ann Lee, the founder of Shakerism, and with other early leaders and former Believers. They carried messages of encouragement and exhortation back to their fellow Shakers from the spirit world. It was commonplace for some of the visionists to enter a trancelike state when communicating with the spirits; others shook or whirled. Soon the visionists were reporting the presence of the spirits among the Believers—in their meetinghouses, their shops, and their retiring rooms. The manifestations became more and more elaborate.

Some of the trances went on for hours. Those who received these 'gifts'—and that is the proper Shaker category for the manifestations—often spoke in tongues, testified and prophesied, and issued warnings and threats. They consistently called for repentance on the part of the Believers. All of this activity aroused a great deal of commotion within the society and unbridled curiosity among outsiders. The public meetings overflowed with spectators. Even the most skeptical among the Shakers backed away from open criticism of these unusual events. Before this flurry of spiritualistic activity subsided—which at most villages was not until the close of the 1840s or later—the Shakers were visited by biblical personalities such as Noah and Isaiah, political figures the likes of Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin, historical personages such as Pocahontas, 'untamed' native Americans, Jesus Christ, as well as both the male and female aspects of God, Almighty Father and Holy Mother Wisdom. Thousands of messages were conveyed through the instruments in spoken and written word, in song and in dance.

These years of spiritualistic activity were especially rich with ritual innovation. The Believers had already acquired a reputation for distinctive worship forms that included song, dance, and marching. Those patterns continued, but in addition the instruments received instructions for a host of new rituals that were, in some instances, to be enacted in the meetinghouse, and in other cases, at special locations throughout the village. Some of these

innovations involved ecstatic possession as the instruments spun, or stooped, or rolled on the floor. Many required that the Shaker brothers and sisters act out in mime the activities commanded by the spirits—eating, drinking (sometimes to excess or to the point of drunkenness), fighting, sweeping, washing, planting, harvesting. Each of these actions potentially possessed spiritual meaning for the Believers as they followed directions delivered through the instruments.¹⁰

The most elaborate rituals during this period were the 'passover' feasts held at the sacred fountain sites prepared at each village and given a special name. Twice a year the Believers celebrated daylong outdoor 'feasts' at these special locations where they sang, and marched, and testified, where they washed in the spiritual fountain and drank of its waters, where they ate together an abundant spiritual banquet, and where they were visited by Holy Mother Wisdom and others from the spirit world who bestowed marvelous gifts on them. All of these actions were in mime; the food and the drinks and the gifts were spiritual, not material. At each of these feast locations a 'fountain stone,' called 'THE LORD'S STONE' (made of real stone, not imaginary), marked the site. On it were engraved words of warning and prophetic counsel that included a call to heed 'the word of the Lord.' The passover rituals were occasions on which the Believers engaged in creative, imaginative, spiritual 'play.' Yet these were the holiest of holy moments for them, even though they may seem unusual or bizarre to observers today.¹¹

The Shakers were not the only religious group in America in the early 1840s experiencing unusual times or engaged with the effort to unlock the prophetic secrets of Scripture through insights obtained by gifted leaders. Over the course of the preceding four decades the young American republic had witnessed the

10. On Shaker rituals in general, and on song and dance in particular, see Daniel W. Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

11. For a firsthand description of an 1843 passover meeting at Hancock, Mass., see Jean M. Humez, ed., *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 250-55.

tumult of the unending series of evangelical revivals, called by historians the Second Great Awakening, an explosion of religious energy that produced institutions as diverse as camp meetings and benevolent societies and that ignited a variety of new popular religious movements, including Mormonism.¹² The *Sacred Roll* was published in the year that William Miller, the Baptist farmer/preacher and millenarian from New York state, declared 'the last year that Satan will reign in our earth' because Jesus Christ was coming to dash to pieces the 'kingdoms of the earth.'¹³ The excitement set off by his prediction and by the success of the Millerite movement far exceeded the commotion found within the ranks of the Shakers.¹⁴

The Believers themselves were very aware of the surrounding evangelical revivals and of the interest in prophecy throughout the United States. They were watching the adventist surge with more than idle curiosity. The following 1843 journal entry at New Lebanon is very revealing.

Millerism about these days runs high in various parts of the country, great excitement, the world is to be burnt up, some act upon these beliefs, sell off cheap, neglect the concerns of this life, some run crazy, some preach to the rest, & others are laughing and ridiculing.¹⁵

In July of the preceding year members of the North Family at the same site had spent some time with a Millerite named Beach who tried to convince the Believers that Christ was coming the next year and that the world would be 'consumed by fire.' The com-

12. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Hatch underscores the populist and democratic qualities of the movements he describes.

13. William Miller, 'A New Year's Address,' *Signs of the Times*, Jan. 25, 1843, cited in Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1994), 83.

14. Recent years have witnessed a burst of historical publications dealing with prophecy and especially the rise of adventism in America. See, for example, Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

15. 'Records Kept by Order of the Church' (New York Public Library), 208.

mentary in the record epitomizes the Shaker response. It reads, 'The man truly appeared sincere, & we should be glad to have the world burned up, & we but little care how soon, as we believe it is that world which the Apostle described, namely, *The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye & the pride of life.*'¹⁶

The Era of Manifestations formed the immediate setting for the *Sacred Roll*. The larger backdrop included the Second Great Awakening and the widespread fixation on prophecy. But the revelation itself was more than just another spirit message. The Shakers singled it out for special attention and unusual care, in part because of the instrument who received it, Philemon Stewart.

Philemon Stewart, who was born in 1804 in Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, was brought by his father to the society at New Lebanon in 1811 at the age of seven with two older brothers, Charles and Amos. All three were admitted on March 5, 1811. They did not, however, fare equally well as Shakers. Charles Stewart, the oldest, signed the covenant in 1821 at the age of twenty-two and stayed in the community for fifteen years before leaving in 1836. Amos, three years younger than Charles, signed the Shaker covenant three years after his brother. He became a faithful lifetime Believer, who rose quickly through the ranks, taking on ever-increasing responsibilities. In 1849, which is ahead of our story, he entered the Central Ministry of the United Society and became second in the male lead under Rufus Bishop, and then, following Bishop's death in 1852, served as first in the ministry until 1858, when he was released from those tasks.¹⁷

Philemon, the youngest of the three, like his brother Amos became a lifetime Shaker, but the story of his career as a Believer is much more complex. He spent many years on the outside of the

16. 'A Daily Journal of passing events; begun May the 19th 1839. at Watervliet; By Rufus Bishop, in the 65th year of his age' (New York Public Library), July 24, 1842. (Hereafter cited as 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.')

17. 'Shaker Membership Card Index Compiled by the Western Reserve Historical Society under the Direction of Wallace H. Cathcart,' Shaker Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio (hereafter OCIWHj), reel 123.

power structure, apparently wishing that he could be part of it, often publicly criticizing those in positions of responsibility. For a number of years before the outburst of spiritualistic activity, Philemon Stewart was in charge of the gardens of the Second Family at New Lebanon, a task he took seriously and performed well. He was especially interested in the cultivation of grapes, and was personally responsible for planting a grape arbor at the Second Family.¹⁸

But the Era of Manifestations opened new horizons for Philemon. He was probably the first male instrument at New Lebanon. Considerable evidence suggests that Stewart became very active early on as a visionist at that site. In April 1838, for example, in the evening meeting, he delivered a message from Ann Lee that took two hours. Some of his communications conveyed to the ministry were general denunciations of community behavior; others were particular prohibitions involving diet, fashions, pets, or luxuries. Sometimes he comforted individual Believers; other times he castigated them for their lack of humility.¹⁹ On one occasion, Giles Avery—a leading elder at the village—complained that Philemon spent so much time with the spirits that he had ‘time to tend little else.’²⁰ It was, therefore, as an instrument that Stewart began to move from the outside to the inside of the Shaker establishment. He quickly became one of the principal, if not *the* principal instrument, at New Lebanon, the headquarters for the entire society. His visionary gifts were undoubtedly responsible for his transfer in September 1838 into the First Order and his subsequent appointment a few months later to the position of caretaker of the boys. In 1841 he was advanced to the eldership.²¹ These promotions were signs of growing influence among the Believers. By the spring of 1842 Stewart was playing a central role

18. Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 96–97.

19. See, for example, ‘Copies of Messages and Extracts of Messages from Mother Ann, through Philemon Stewart’ (OCIWHi, VIII B 112); and “‘The Holy Orders of God,’ being a compilation of inspired messages from Father James through his instrument, Philemon Stewart’ (OCIWHi, VIII B 150–150a).

20. Giles B. Avery, ‘Journal’ (OCIWHi, V B 104–126), May 14, 1838.

21. See Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 126.

in the spiritualistic revival and enjoying expanded influence and prestige within the community.

Then came the most significant of Stewart's revelations. It all began, according to his account, early on the morning of May 4, 1842, when a 'Holy Angel' appeared to him. Three days earlier members of the church at New Lebanon had celebrated the first passover feast at the fountain site called Holy Mount. Now Philemon was commanded to go back to that location, and there, kneeling by the side of the fountain, to receive a revelation. As he approached that feast ground, his 'soul' was agitated, and he heard 'noise as of a mighty rushing wind, or as of distant thunder.' When he seated himself, he became 'calm,' although he still felt 'a consuming fire within.' He was instructed by the angel that he was to write 'the word of the Lord.' In fact, he was told that he should be prepared to take dictation for six hours each day until the roll from heaven was complete, and the rest of each day he should expect to suffer 'severe distress of soul, and great anguish of spirit.' It was to be his lot to suffer in order that God's word might be delivered 'pure and uncorrupted' to the 'children of men.' For fourteen days Stewart went to the fountain site and wrote what he was commanded. The resulting manuscript eventually became Part I of the *Sacred Roll*.²²

The first part of the *Sacred Roll* is an extended statement of the central affirmation of the Shaker gospel, namely, that God has sent forth his spirit in two distinct manifestations. The first was the 'blessed Son,' the 'Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who [writes Stewart] stands as the first true Anointed One.' The second was 'the Daughter of Zion, . . . a spiritual Mother, the second Anointed One,' who is 'MOTHER ANN LEE.' The twofold coming of Christ forms the primary proclamation of the revelation. Side by side with that affirmation is a solemn warning repeatedly intoned against those who do not heed the divine commands revealed in the first and second appearances. Those, Stewart writes, God will

22. *Sacred Roll*, I, 8-10, 214-15.

visit with 'sore destruction and desolating judgments, till mountains sink and valleys rise, and kingdoms into pieces rend.' God's wrath will cause 'terror and dismay' over the face of the earth.²³

The text of the *Sacred Roll* moves between these two themes—on the one hand, declaring the multiple dispensations of God's grace to mankind throughout history and, on the other hand, warning about the effects of disobedience and of refusing the offers of grace. It is the unique claim of the Shaker gospel that God's grace culminates in the figure of Ann Lee, who stands with Jesus 'at the head of [the] new and spiritual Creation'—that is, the true church, or the United Society of Believers. The same spirit that once dwelt in Jesus, is again on earth, 'making an end of sin, and bringing in everlasting righteousness.' In the '*female witness*' was perfected the work of the gospel. She (Ann Lee) was 'the DAUGHTER of Zion, the BRIDE, the LAMB'S WIFE.' In her 'the spirit of Christ appeared, with a full and complete salvation.'²⁴

A major portion of Part I consists of biblical passages supporting these claims of the Shaker gospel. According to the text, the angel required that Stewart insert the passages into the manuscript, and for that purpose Stewart used the King James version of the Bible—the only source he employed during the dictation process. Eight of the thirty-three chapters are principally quotations from the Bible. Interspersed among the biblical citations are brief expositions providing commentary. For example, following the first thirteen verses of Revelation 14, which speak of an impending judgment, these words appear: 'Give ear, all ye inhabitants of the earth, saith the Lord; These days, just spoken of, are near at your doors, and you know it not.' As commentary on the promise of the spirit contained in the ascension story in Acts 2, the *Sacred Roll* contains this statement attributed to God: 'And for

23. *Ibid.*, 30, 3. The earliest public systematic statement of Shaker theology is Benjamin Seth Youngs, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in this Latter-day* (Lebanon, Ohio: John M'Clean, 1808).

24. *Sacred Roll*, 30, 80, III.

the reception of this spirit, I did prepare, with my holy power, a female, of my own choosing, upon whom I did, for many years, cause deep and heavy sufferings of soul to fall, that she might be cleansed and purified from the nature of sin, and fitly prepared for the holy office'—an obvious reference to Ann Lee.²⁵

Chapter 28 contains Bible passages pointing to what Stewart called 'the present work of inspiration in Zion.' Chapter 29 provides commentary on those verses by describing the 'strange operations and exercises' that are to be anticipations of the end times. They include '*Violent shaking*, until thrown heavily upon the floor, or ground; Every limb of the body made stiff and unyielding; . . . Gestures and bodies exhibiting frightful attitudes; Little children speaking with great power. . . . Females greatly exercised in turning and suddenly stopping, declaring to the surrounding multitude the visions of God they have seen [including] [t]he comfort and happiness of the saints in Heaven, and the awful cries, screams and screeches of those who are bound in hell . . . [and] [s]inging melodious and heavenly songs, given directly from the spiritual world [as well as] conversing familiarly with unbodied spirits.' These were precisely the activities that filled the days and nights of the Shakers during the Era of Manifestations.²⁶

Chapter 32 is entitled 'A Prophecy from the Spirit of the Ancient Prophet Isaiah, communicated through his Archers, in six parts.' This chapter comprises an extended lamentation and an exhortation to repentance. The archers are both watchmen crying out warnings and those who execute judgment. This section, the longest discourse in the entire publication, ends on an apocalyptic, prophetic note. The Sixth Archer warns that 'the time is come that the earth and her inhabitants, are ripened for harvest; her cup of wickedness and abomination is filled to overflowing.' And yet there is opportunity to escape the fulfillment of these threats. The chapter closes with these words, 'That true repen-

25. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

26. *Ibid.*, 161, 169-70.

tance which God your Heavenly Father requires, is to cleanse the heart, by ceasing to do ill and learning to do well.²⁷

The logical link between parts I and II of the *Sacred Roll* is made explicit in the last chapter of Part I and in a supplementary personal statement by Philemon Stewart. Chapter 33 tells of the angel who first commanded Philemon to go to the fountain site. That angel and three others who assisted in reading the words of God made known their names in their own language: HOLY ASSAN' DE LA JAH', MI'CHAE L VAN' CE VA' NE, GA' BRY VEN' DO VAS' TER REEN', and, VEN DEN' DE PA' ROL JEW' LE JAH'. The first of these angels denounced the critics who were likely to suggest that this book was 'madness, blasphemy and fanaticism.' On the contrary, he stated, it 'contains the word of the God of Heaven' by which every person on earth will be judged. The angel compared the *Sacred Roll* with the Bible. 'Let mortals, before judging or condemning, candidly read this Sacred Book from beginning to end; then pause, and consider whether it contradicts, in any way, the sacred writings of the scripture, or is in any way prejudicial to the principles of your Lord and Savior, in his first appearing; or in any way tends to operate against the principles of justness, morality, virtue, uprightness and goodness, or the well being of any good and wholesome society.'²⁸

The angel went on to describe the process of dictation to Philemon Stewart. It was a 'word for word' transcription, done through the 'view and hearing of the spirit' rather than by natural eyes. The angel commanded Stewart to sign his name to the *Sacred Roll*, and he also stated that God required a 'goodly number' of instruments throughout the society—both female and male—to testify under divine influence to the 'truth' of what is contained in the revelation.²⁹

The angel's comments were followed by Philemon Stewart's testimony that the contents of the *Sacred Roll* were true and were

27. *Ibid.*, 187, 213-14.

28. *Ibid.*, 214-17.

29. *Ibid.*, 217-18.

of God. He denied any role in the composition of the revelation, stating that he possessed only 'a common country school education.' Stewart proclaimed his own unworthiness repeatedly, calling himself more than once 'a poor worm of the dust.' He testified that no one in the society had compelled his actions as 'the inspired writer,' but rather that he operated under the 'irresistible power of God.' And finally, Stewart suggested that his own 'fear and love' of God was 'indisputable evidence' that the 'true gospel light' was reflected in the pages of the book, for it was by works and not words that all will be judged.³⁰

Part II of the *Sacred Roll* comprises an additional 180 pages of text in the printed version. It is a compilation of more than ninety diverse testimonies received by instruments throughout the society. Their collective intent was to confirm the claims of Part I and to support Philemon Stewart. For example, Myra A. Bean, an instrument at Canterbury, copied under inspiration 'A Short Roll Written by the Holy Patriarch Noah' in which Noah called Philemon Stewart 'a humble and devoted servant' of God and his revelation a 'holy and sacred word.' Bean compared Stewart with the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Daniel. She testified that she had witnessed his sufferings while he was engaged with the revelation. (That part of the story, by the way, can be documented from other sources. The ministry at New Lebanon, for example, took note of the fact that late in 1842 Stewart was 'rather unwell a few days, & . . . so violently seized that he showed some derangement, but it was of a serious and religious kind.') Susan H. Whitcher, another instrument at Canterbury, recorded the 'Testimony of Simon Peter' in which he (Peter) testified that he stood at the side of Jesus and Ann Lee in heaven when the 'Heavenly Father commissioned his holy Angels to go forth with the sacred Roll and Book' to be copied on Holy Mount. Harriet Goodwin received under inspiration the 'Testimonies of Eleven Mighty Angels, that Attended the Writing of the Roll.' One of these reads as follows: 'I, the mighty Angel of the Lord, by name,

30. *Ibid.*, 219-22.

Con' sole te' re Jah mon' shue, do solemnly testify that my eyes have beheld the word of the Lord correctly written by mortal hand; and it is in truth the invariable word of the Lord, which will stand unalterable through time and in eternity.³¹

Many of the testimonies in Part II are simply signed and dated statements commending the *Sacred Roll*. Caleb M. Dyer, for example, a visionist at Enfield, New Hampshire, confessed his 'perfect confidence' in the revelation that it was 'the word of God, given by the inspiration of his holy spirit.' Six female instruments at Canterbury, including one who later became a prominent elder, signed a testimony, stating their belief that the *Sacred Roll* had been 'written by and through the influence of that same . . . holy Spirit of eternal truth and revelation, which caused the Prophets of old, and the Apostles of Jesus Christ to write the sacred pages of that holy Book [the Bible]. . . .'³²

Some of the witnesses testified that they had experienced visions about the *Sacred Roll* long before Philemon Stewart was commanded to go to the fountain site. Hiram Rude, for example, reported that in 1820 he had seen that Stewart would be chosen by God 'to do a work for Him' of the exact nature that had occurred in 1842. Several of the testimonies in Part II were signed by leading figures in the United Society, including Seth Y. Wells, one of the most prominent intellectuals in the East, and Benjamin Seth Youngs, one of three missionaries who had carried the Shaker gospel to the Ohio Valley in 1805 and who had served for many years as an elder at South Union, Kentucky. In a long autobiographical testimony, Youngs offered the judgment that the *Sacred Roll* was 'the greatest act of condescension, of mercy and loving kindness, the Almighty Eternal Father ever did bestow upon mortals' since humans were on the earth.³³

The next to last word in the *Sacred Roll* was given to the Mighty

31. *Ibid.*, 231-33, 253, 290. The reference to Stewart's illness is in 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.,' Dec. 24, 1842.

32. *Ibid.*, 352, 370. Dorothy Durgin later became a prominent leader at the Canterbury village.

33. *Ibid.*, 294, 371-74, 381.

Angel of God who examined all the testimonies and approved their inclusion. The angel declared all that was contained in the book to be the 'solemn and unalterable truths of God.' He also warned that if instruments fell from the faith and denied their testimonies, that would not alter the truthfulness of their statements. (This proved to be a convenient caveat, because later a group of prominent instruments did apostatize, to the great embarrassment of the society.) Those who left, the angel stated, would suffer great 'horror and condemnation' because they had once possessed a 'greater privilege.' The last word went to Philemon Stewart, who signed his name at the end of the publication and the words, 'Inspired Writer.'³⁴

It is impossible to ignore the timeliness of the *Sacred Roll*, which must be understood in considerable measure as a Shaker rebuttal of the claims of the Millerite movement. Shakerism in America, of course, preceded the rise of Millerite adventism by more than fifty years. In its own distinctive way, the Believers' proclamation concerning Ann Lee was 'adventist,' but with a difference. Rather than pointing to an impending or a distant parousia, the Shakers announced that the Second Coming had already taken place through the person of the female Ann Lee. The scandal of this Shaker belief was a substantial affront to orthodox Christians; it was a direct challenge to the Millerite movement.³⁵

Philemon Stewart's revelation left little doubt about its opposition to William Miller's view on prophecy. At the close of chapter 3, Stewart writes, 'Look not for the second coming of my blessed Son in the natural clouds of heaven; for I have already sent him, and the foundations of my new Heavens and new earth, are al-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 401-2. On the apostasy of Shaker instruments, see Stein, *Shaker Experience*, 184.

³⁵ In addition to Youngs's *Testimony* (1808), which was explicit in linking the Shakers with prophecy and apocalyptic, see also Calvin Green and Seth Y. Wells, *Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, (Commonly Called Shakers.) comprising the Rise, Progress and Practical Order of the Society; together with the General Principles of their Faith and Testimony* (Albany: Packard and Van Benthuyzen, 1823), for the Believers' use of the language of millennialism.

ready laid, never more to be overthrown, and ye believe it not.' He compared the people of his day to the 'Jews of old' who, he said, were misinformed about the manner of Christ's first appearance. He described the Millerites as 'looking into the natural heavens, for the millennial day, or the coming of the Savior, to appear the second time.' By drawing 'their own plans for his second coming . . . [t]hey deny the Lord's Christ, who has the second time come forth, [through a chosen female] upon the earth, to make an end of sin.'³⁶

Stewart then moved his attack against Millerite adventism onto ground which they themselves claimed, namely, the interpretation of the biblical passages concerning the establishment of God's kingdom 'in the latter day of glory, as recorded in the sacred volume' so venerated and esteemed by Christians 'as sacred truths.' Chapters 12 and 13 of the *Sacred Roll* focus on 'Passages of Scripture, Referring to the Second Coming of Christ.' Stewart's challenge was direct and unveiled. Commenting on Matthew 24:30, which refers to the 'Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory,' he asks, How could his contemporaries interpret this passage in 'a literal and natural sense' in opposition to Christ's declaration in John 14:19 that the world would see him no more? 'Surely then,' affirms Stewart, 'his personal presence could never again be seen by the world; and he could never be seen again [but] only by those who should come into his life.'³⁷

Stewart also interpreted another classic adventist text, I Thessalonians 4:16-17, in a spiritualizing manner. Those who are to 'be caught up . . . in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air' when the trump sounds should not be deceived about the clouds and the air. 'These clouds are spiritual clouds of his eternal light and brightness, shining forth in his true and faithful witnesses. And this air, is the uncontaminated and undefiled air of purity, in which spiritual element, Christ, and all his true followers *live*, and can *live* in no other.' As a result, Stewart declared,

36. *Sacred Roll*, 28, 52.

37. *Ibid.*, 30, 74-75.

There can never be the same local, and material body, again upon earth, as it was in his first appearing; though the earth should remain for thousands of years to come, and mankind should be suffered to remain thereon as long, waiting, and looking for the second coming of the Messiah in this way, they would wait and look in vain, saith the Holy Angel; for this never will be.

This negative critique of adventism was but preparation for the fundamental affirmation of the *Sacred Roll*.³⁸

Stewart now took the offensive against the Millerites, turning to 'Passages of Scripture, Referring to the Second Coming of Christ in the Female.' Chapters 15 and 16, among the longest in the publication, focus exclusively on the claim that 'the sacred and inspired writings of past dispensations . . . refer to the second coming of Christ and that his appearance would be in a female. Stewart turned to the language of the Bible, linking references to the Daughter of Zion, the Queen of Zion, the Bride, and the Mother, to 'the spirit of the Lord's Christ, revealed in a Mother, whose name was ANN LEE!' He placed the hermeneutical clue to his judgments in the mouth of 'the over-ruling and GREAT FIRST CAUSE of all created things' who said that 'the natural order of things [is] figurative of that which was spiritual.' Therefore the spirit of Christ has 'appeared the second time, without sin unto salvation, in the *female*, or *Spiritual Mother* in Israel.' Those who participate in the life of Christ's spirit—as defined by the Shaker community—take part in his second coming. They have no need of watching the natural sky or clouds.³⁹

The cloud of witnesses who testify to the truthfulness of the *Sacred Roll* fills Part II. They are an answer of sorts to the thousands who embraced the Millerite gospel of Christ's physical return and an impending end to the present order. Their collective affirmation of the spiritual realities described by Philemon Stewart and the witness of the Shaker community constitute a final rejection of the adventist proclamation. When the Great

38. *Ibid.*, 75-76.

39. *Ibid.*, 88, 104-6.

Disappointment occurred in 1843-44 with the attendant disenchantment of millenarian hopes, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing was one of the alternatives to which some ex-Millerites turned in hope of salvation.⁴⁰

The *Sacred Roll* was written at New Lebanon, but printed at Canterbury. Already before it was published, however, the Believers handled it with special care. Shaker leaders at New Lebanon, often accompanied by Philemon Stewart, traveled to the eastern villages and read the text of the revelation to select groups of Believers. This appears to have been an effort to secure widespread approval and support. It was also a strategy designed to stir up enthusiasm that would translate into a willingness to share the cost of printing the book.⁴¹

The printing process itself involved Believers from New Lebanon as well as those at Canterbury. Philemon Stewart, Giles Avery, and Seth Wells all spent time at Canterbury, assisting in the preparation of materials for the press. An 'Advertisement' at the beginning of the book stated that the publishers had followed the 'style' in which the revelation had been written originally. At spots the editors supplied words in square brackets to facilitate understanding. They divided some of the chapters for clarity and added chapter summaries and captions. The Shakers also cautioned potential buyers that since this was 'the first printed book ever issued by the United Society at Canterbury, among whom there is no regular printer, the mechanical execution may be not perfect in all respects.' On the other hand, they asserted confidently that they had 'answered the requirement of God unto them' with this first printing of the *Sacred Roll*, and they took no responsibility for subsequent editions.⁴²

40. For brief discussions of the interaction of the Millerite and Shaker movements, see Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 150-53, and Stein, *Shaker Experience*, 209-11. See also Lawrence Foster, 'Had Prophecy Failed? Contrasting Perspectives of the Millerites and Shakers,' in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, 172-88.

41. Robert F. W. Meader, 'The Vision of Brother Philemon,' *The Shaker Quarterly* 10:1 (1970) 9-10.

42. *Sacred Roll*, 'Advertisement,' n.p. Among the New Lebanon expenses itemized for

The directions contained in the revelation for its publication and distribution left little unsaid. The angel specified that 500 copies were to be bound 'in yellow paper, with red backs' and yellow edges and to be distributed free of charge to the world. The ministry, however, decided that only Part I would be circulated outside the community, and therefore initially the two parts were bound as separate volumes. Permission was given subsequently for Believers to bind the two parts together, if they desired. The revelation contained a harsh warning against tampering with the contents of the book. Those who trifle with the text will have their names 'erased from the records of Heaven.'⁴³

A detailed account of the materials, equipment, and labor involved in publishing, advertising, and shipping the *Sacred Roll* was kept by the leaders at Canterbury. The largest single expenditure was \$498.00 for 166 reams of paper. Setting the type and the presswork itself cost \$274.59 and \$309.00 respectively. A variety of smaller expenditures—'Folding, gathering and examining printed sheets, &c.,' purchase of cloth for the backs and covers and of packing boxes, charges for postage and freight—appeared on the same statement. On the positive side of the ledger, 1,469 books were sold at \$.70 each, to be given to Believers east and west as well as to 'those out of the Society.'⁴⁴

Once printed and bound, the volumes were distributed among the Shaker villages, where they were greeted with considerable excitement. Believers traveled long distances during the winter of 1843-44 in order to get access to the books. For example, Jesse Leonard came from Groveland in western New York to Watervliet outside Albany to pick up copies for his village. When it was in hand, the Believers read the *Sacred Roll* in worship meetings

the *Sacred Roll* were the following: 'Giles 77 days @ 1.00 — \$77.00; Philemon 198 days — \$92.33; Br. Seth's 12 days — \$12.00' ('Expenses printing the Sacred Roll and Book at Canterbury 1843' [OCIWHI, II A 2]).

43. *Sacred Roll*, 161. For a description of 'Circulars' sent to the leadership of scattered Shaker villages containing regulations for the distribution of the volume, see Richmond, *Shaker Literature*, 1: 64. The books were apparently bound at more than one Shaker location.

44. 'Expenses printing the Sacred Roll.'

and in private. As a case in point, Rufus Bishop noted on October 27, 1844, that a selection was read in the meeting at New Lebanon. In the short run the reception was very positive. One Shaker writing from North Union, Ohio, called the work 'a kind warning voice of Almighty God to the inhabitants of the Earth.' He expressed the desire that all would 'carefully give heed to it and Observe the Holy requirements and Laws contained therein.' Those who do not, he asserted, face the prospect of not escaping 'the awful judgments which will eventually fall on the hard hearted and impenitent soul.'⁴⁵

The *Sacred Roll* directed ministers of the gospel (outside the Shaker society) to obtain a copy of the volume and to keep it 'sacred in the pulpit of their house of worship' and to use it in their 'assemblies with awe and with reverence.' Boards of 'Foreign Missions,' likewise, were to translate this revelation into other languages and to print copies for distribution throughout the world. A special blessing was promised those who translated the text 'correctly.' No one was to make a profit off this publication: those who reprinted it were to charge only enough to cover expenses.⁴⁶

The ministry authorized society trustees to distribute the volumes to public figures throughout the world. Copies were carried to Hartford and Boston by Grove Wright, Grove Blanchard, and Joseph Myrick, leaders at the Harvard village, and to New York City by Frederick Evans and Issachar Bates, prominent Shakers at New Lebanon. In those cities the *Sacred Roll* was given to foreign consuls and to religious leaders. In the case of the Boston effort, the delegation had 'good success in disposing of the Sacred Roll.' The Shakers were 'treated with great respect by the Counsels,' which led them to suppose that 'some invisible agency' had favorably prepared the hearts of those dignitaries. The Harvard Believers reported that a 'convoy' composed of 'the Blessed Savior, good Mother Ann & a host of Angels were seen to ac-

45. 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.,' Jan. 10, 11, 12, 18, Oct. 27, 1844; John P. Root, Dec. 20, 1843 (OCIWHI, VII A 16).

46. *Sacred Roll*, 11-12, 161.

company them from Harvard!' One copy of the *Sacred Roll* was sent to Queen Victoria with a letter from Giles Avery asking her to accept it as a 'present, not as from the people, deridedly called Shakers, but from the living God.' Two were set aside for the governor of New York and four for the President of the United States.⁴⁷

Four copies were forwarded to Pope Gregory XVI through Bishop John Hughes of New York accompanied by a letter stating that the 'book was written by divine inspiration, and printed by the Society agreeable to the command of the Almighty.' Fearing that the volume might be dismissed 'as the effects of a highly wrought state of phrenzy and fanaticism,' the Believers defended its inspiration, fully 'convinced that it could proceed from no other source, than from the infinite wisdom of the Creator of Heaven and earth.' They sent the volumes to the Pope with 'all due respect' as 'friends, and well wishers.' Hughes's covering letter to Rome identified and described the Shakers briefly. Among their distinctive ideas, he wrote,

they believe not only in the guidance of the Bible—as a rule of faith, but also in the arbitrary communication of the Holy Spirit to individual members. Revelations, visions, & communications from Angels are things of frequent occurrence among these deluded, ignorant, but simple people. The books, which are now presented, are the offspring of a revelation by one of these angels.

Hughes continued, 'They boast that the writer of it, was an uneducated man, which can be readily believed by those who read it.' He also described the delegation of Shakers that brought the volumes, adding, 'I was much amused at the pains which they took to satisfy me how near their religion approaches to the Catholic faith.' We do not know if the Pope ever saw the *Sacred Roll*.⁴⁸

The fate of the other copies sent to world leaders is, in general, unknown. Evans and Bates, for example, took sixty volumes to

47. 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.,' Dec. 4, 15, 16, 1843, Feb. 6, 1844; Giles Avery to Queen Victoria, Nov. 28, 1843 (OCLWHI, IV A).

48. Meader, 'Vision,' 11-16.

New York City in February 1844. Later the Shakers received at least one response from a 'crowned head' of Europe through the chargé d'affaires of the King of Sweden and Norway in the United States. A letter dated November 15, 1848, sent to Richard Bushnell and Frederick W. Evans at New Lebanon, stated: 'My Government has ordered me to communicate to you that the King, my Gracious Sovereign, after the death of His Father, has received and accepted with pleasure the Book, that you, by a letter dated the 29 Nov. 1843, sent to His Majesty the late King of Sweden and Norway. . . .' And it added 'His thankfulness for this present.'⁴⁹

Not all outsiders were so kind in their response to the revelation or to Philemon Stewart. One critic, writing from Campobello, said that his friends condemned the *Sacred Roll* on biblical grounds. One of them denounced it as 'an Awful Compound of Antichristianity, Arianism, and popery, Subversive of all truth,' the product of 'a Most Vile Blasphemer.' Another called Stewart many uncomplimentary things, including 'a deluded Enthusiast, Exceedingly ignorant, and very dangerous,' one who compounds and confuses 'Truth & Error.' Still another proclaimed him 'a Monomaniac' deluded by Satan. Criticisms of this sort, no doubt, contributed to the ultimate outcome of the story.⁵⁰

The great hopes voiced for the *Sacred Roll* within the text did not materialize. Likewise, the prominence and influence Stewart may have anticipated were not realized. In fact, already during the printing process there were signs of growing irritation and aggravation among the society's leaders. Candid letters were exchanged with Stewart at Canterbury in which he was criticized for elevating his own role in the revelation and for soliciting too many testimonies in support of it. Stewart denied these charges by claiming that he was merely following the commands of God conveyed

49. 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.,' Feb. 6, 1844; Meader, 'Vision,' 17.

50. W. P. Owen to Allen Bong, Jan. 20, 1847 (United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine).

through the angel. The ministry accused him of self-enhancement and of a lack of humility. He responded with hurt and surprise, promising solemnly in a letter that they would always find him 'on the Lords side in true obedience' to his 'Visible Lead.' He restated his loyalty to the ministry and the requirements imposed on him by God: 'All things I have freely submitted, for your decision beloved Lead; I have only done what God required of me to do. . . .' And he spoke of his ultimate fear that if there were more complaints against him, he would not live to see New Lebanon again.⁵¹

Stewart, however, did live to see New Lebanon again. Exactly one day after he wrote that letter to the ministry, Giles Avery set out from New Lebanon to bring Stewart back from Canterbury, where he had been since mid-April. The ministry wanted him closer at hand where they could exercise more immediate supervision. He was not returned to his former position as an elder. For a time he tried his hand at doctoring. He was a strong advocate of the water cure and dietary regimens and a sharp critic of patent medicines, including those the society was now producing. Two years later, he was reassigned to his favorite task, gardening. By that time he had apparently lost favor among the leaders of the society.⁵²

That does not mean Philemon Stewart quietly faded from the scene. On the contrary, he resumed his role as critic of the establishment and became a 'thorn in the side' of the ministry. He allied himself with the small conservative faction in the society and repeatedly criticized compromises being made with American culture. For example, he voiced opposition to the behavior of the younger members, to the more tolerant attitude of the ministry, and to the commercial practices of the trustees. He accused the society of being materialistic, of abandoning agriculture for industry, of engaging in promiscuous travel in the outside world (especially on railroads), and of ignoring the virtues of a vegetarian

51. Philemon Stewart to Rufus Bishop, Sept. 12, 1843 (OCIWHI, IV A 5).

52. 'Ministry Journal, 1839 ff.,' Sept. 19, 1843; Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 126.

diet and other such health regimes. He believed that the society was constructing too many new buildings. There were, in fact, very few developments in the years after the Era of Manifestations that Stewart approved. In 1858 he was removed from the Second Family and reassigned to the Second Order. Two years later he was sent to the Poland village, part of the Maine bishopric, where he served rather unsuccessfully for a time in the Gathering Order before being recalled to New Lebanon in 1863.⁵³

Stewart never gave up his identity as a visionist. Even after the spiritualistic era had waned, he continued to receive revelations which he frequently addressed to the ministry, to their consternation and irritation. His standard judgment was that the problems of the society were a result of the fact that the Believers had not followed fully the messages received during the Era of Manifestations. He believed that the Shakers had turned their back on those visions. In fact, what had occurred was the reassertion of ministerial authority over that of the instruments. There also had been some collective embarrassment with the revelations and rituals, with the instruments and their behavior. A move away from ecstatic activity followed.

But Philemon Stewart was an unrepentant visionist. In 1863, in a message sent to the ministry, he wrote, 'If the Lord in ancient times could speak thro' an Ass, [to the prophet Balaam] and reprove the Madness of the Prophet, I have not yet been able to either see or feel, but what he will always hold the same power, to speak to his people on Earth, either for praise, or Reproof, as his own wisdom may direct. . . .'⁵⁴ It was under that conviction that he continued to reprove the ministry. On one of these occasions after being upbraided by him, the Central Ministry summoned Stewart and stated forthrightly that they 'could not accept' his counsel as 'the Word of the Lord.' They directed him to 'cease writing anything more to them in the line of Inspiration.' Less

53. Brewer discusses a variety of Stewart's criticisms in *Shaker Communities*, 165, 172-73, 176, 183-84, 194-95; Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 415-16.

54. 'One of Philemon's Manifestos to the Ministry,' 1863 (OCIWHI, VII B 124), 88.

than five years later, Stewart was dead. Finally the leadership no longer had to contend with him and his revelations.⁵⁵

The story of the *Sacred Roll* and of its author is not simply the tale of a failed scripture and a maverick Believer. On the contrary, it is a highly instructive chapter in the religious history of the United Society and of American religion generally.

The publication of Philemon Stewart's revelation is perhaps the fullest public expression of the theological assumptions informing the Era of Manifestations. Those assumptions include the belief that God reveals messages to the church on earth through visions from the spirit world, that the fundamental proclamation of the Shaker gospel involves the person of Ann Lee and her place within the redemptive process, that the United Society of Believers constitutes the true church on earth, and that the world faces an impending severe judgment if it does not heed the call to repentance issued through the Shakers.

Stewart emerged as the most influential of all the instruments—we might also say, one of the most gifted, creative, and imaginative. As a result of his status, the *Sacred Roll* was regarded as the single most important message received during the spiritualistic outburst. For a time it was granted special authority as scripture within the society.

It is clear that Stewart was very knowledgeable about the Bible, that there were many other Shakers also thoroughly acquainted with Scripture, and that the entire society reflected the biblical outlook widespread throughout nineteenth-century American Protestantism.⁵⁶ Students of Shakerism have often overlooked the scriptural dimension of Shaker religious life by accenting features of the society's communal practices that separated the Believers from other Americans. The culture of the United States in the

55. Philemon Stewart, 'Brief Weekly Journal,' May 1870, cited in Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 184.

56. See Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

nineteenth century was suffused with a biblical mentality. The story of the *Sacred Roll* demonstrates how central such ideas also were among the Believers—the inspiration of the Bible, the authority of revelation, the physical care of sacred texts, the distribution of bibles, and the proper attitude toward Scripture. The Shakers were part of nineteenth-century biblical culture.

Philemon Stewart and the editors (or God and the angel, according to the document) patterned the form and function of the *Sacred Roll* after the Bible. The language was Jacobean. The text was divided into chapters and verses. The contents complemented, intersected with, and in some cases duplicated the contents of the Bible. In the eyes of the Shakers, Stewart's revelation confirmed rather than contradicted the essentials of the Christian gospel.

The same pattern is one of the principal arguments used to explain the remarkable success of an earlier nineteenth-century American 'bible'—the *Book of Mormon* published in 1830. The *Book of Mormon* and the *Sacred Roll* both attempt to fill in details and to supplement the Bible. Both speak directly about their origins and make claims for their special status. In effect, both are nineteenth-century American commentaries upon the Bible. But the similarities cannot overshadow the striking contrast between the two volumes. The *Book of Mormon* has become a foundational scripture for America's most successful indigenous religious tradition, a church that is now a world-wide organization, whereas the *Sacred Roll* has virtually disappeared from view, even from the view of historians. One element in the contrasting reception of the two scriptures is the difference between the fortunes of the two communities. The Mormons experienced an expanding growth curve, whereas the Shakers were already on a downward numerical slide by the 1840s. The Shaker community is comprised today of only a handful of the faithful.⁵⁷

As long as the *Sacred Roll* spoke with force to the Shaker com-

57. The literature on Mormonism and Mormon scriptures is vast. For an excellent study of the centrality of the Bible in the tradition, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

munity, it was received as scripture and accorded biblical status. But Stewart's revelation proved to be a short-lived bible. The publication did not attract the same kind of attention as Joseph Smith's 'Golden Bible.' The response of outsiders was disappointing in great part because it was largely a non-response, or in one case, an embarrassing response. In 1872 the ministry reported that a 'monomaniac by name of Edward U. Blake from Ohio' appeared at New Lebanon with 'sentiments' from the *Sacred Roll* printed on his knees, breast, hat, and 'all sides of his carriage.'⁵⁸ Even within the community it seems to have faded in importance rather quickly. The annual celebration of the date on which the revelation was 'brought forth to earth,' namely, February 2, never materialized as part of the Shaker religious calendar, although it was a command contained in the text; much less was it observed by 'all nations.'⁵⁹

No doubt, the fortunes and temperament of Philemon Stewart played a part in that rapid decline. Had he continued to exercise influence throughout the society, the fate of the book might have been different. The *Sacred Roll* was read in public meetings for a few years and even displayed publicly in later times, but apparently not always with pride. (When Charles Nordhoff visited the western Shaker communities in the early 1870s and saw copies of the *Sacred Roll*, he was told by one elder 'that their best use was to burn them.'⁶⁰) The fact that Stewart was a constant critic of the leadership of the society could not help but dampen their enthusiasm for his revelation and the claims it made for his special status as the 'inspired writer.' Stewart's fall from grace almost certainly sealed the fortunes of the book.⁶¹

58. 'A Register of Incidents and Events Being a Continuation from other Records kept by the Ministry Kept by Giles B. Avery Commenced Oct 20th 1859' (New York Public Library), Mar. 14, 1872.

59. *Sacred Roll*, 177.

60. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), 250.

61. In 1848 Philemon Stewart corresponded with the ministry at New Lebanon concerning a proposal to reprint the *Sacred Roll*. It was not pursued further by the Shakers. See Stewart's letter of Feb. 10, 1848 (OCIWHI, IV A 39).

The story of the *Sacred Roll* shows the favorable disposition of nineteenth-century Americans, including the Shakers, toward the Bible and toward new bibles. The same story demonstrates the critical role played by the believing community in the process of scripture formation and ultimately in its rejection, too.⁶² In other words, inspiration and revelation are not necessarily a guarantee of lasting scriptural status.

62. I have developed this theme further in my Presidential Address to the American Society of Church History, 'America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, Community,' in *Church History* 64 (1995): 169-84.

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