

A Gentile's Invitation to Shiloh, House of David

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Much to my surprise and considerable delight, Brian Ziebart, trustee and historian of the House of David, invited me to tour the Shiloh building at the House of David in August 2017. Brian and I had become email friends shortly after the publication of my *Descriptive Bibliography of Israelite Imprints from the House of David and Mary's City of David, 1902–2010* by Couper Press of Hamilton College in 2014. His compliments were especially meaningful because it was evident that he was well acquainted with the colony and the documents printed by their print shop from 1903 to 2010. However, we had not met in person because I reside in Wyoming and travel rarely to Michigan.



*Shiloh, the main dwelling of the Israelite House of David
in Benton Harbor, Michigan.*

I accepted Brian's invitation with alacrity for two reasons. I planned to visit my home town, Vicksburg, Mich., in August 2017. Vicksburg is approximately thirty-five miles from Benton Harbor. Second, I had learned very little about the colonies' buildings and grounds in all my years researching and cataloging Israelite imprints. My parents made a family trip to Eden Springs, the House of David's famous amusement park, when I was ten or twelve years old. We rode one of the miniature steam trains into the Park. I was thrilled to drive, alone, one of the miniature race cars multiple laps around a small track. We purchased waffle ice cream cones from a bearded Israelite. Years later I learned that members of the House of David invented the waffle cone. We listened to a man, possibly Maestro Chic Bell, play Clarinet Polka in the outdoor beer garden. He was accompanied by a musical group composed of men with very long hair and deep beards. It was all innocent, 1950s fun. We went home happy and learned nothing about the intentional communal society the Israelite House of David.

As much as I can remember, my parents knew nothing about the existence of Mary's City of David located two blocks east of the House of David on Benton Harbor's Britain Avenue. Nor did I until some fifty-seven years later, in 2009, when Ron Taylor made it possible for me to examine and catalog City of David imprints. It was then that I learned how important this colony's imprints are to the canon of Israelite literature. Subsequently, as my friendship with Ron Taylor matured, I learned that he has worked steadily beginning in 1991 to preserve the entire fabric that is Mary's City of David.

In January 1987, Mr. Tom Dewhirst, Trustee and Secretary of the House of David granted me an extensive interview in his Shiloh office. He met me at a side door, and then we stepped no more than three or four paces to his office. I had requested an interview with Mr. Dewhirst because I was just beginning to research Israelite imprints. Mr. Dewhirst cordially responded to all of my questions. His information about chronological developments at the colony as well as numbers for various House of David post office boxes subsequently enabled me to establish printing dates for many, many Israelite publications. The House of David Israelites rarely dated their publications. It was imperative to establish printing dates because without them I could not order the bibliography. Furthermore, future scholars may require some historical context to consider and evaluate Israelite imprints.

After our interview concluded, Mr. Dewhirst did not invite me to see any other part of the building or the colony. Nor did I as a Gentile expect to meet any members or to visit any part of the colony. In that time period it was well understood in southwest Michigan that Gentiles were not permitted access to the colony.

Post 1987, the House of David communal society fell upon very hard times. Members became very elderly. Once splendid buildings were not/ could not be maintained. The carefully tended grounds grew into a near jungle. Suddenly in the early 2000s, Michigan friends told me that efforts had been made to restore the HOD amusement park. An email from Ron Taylor informed me that two City of David members helped to found an amateur House of David “base ball” team. Games were played with vintage uniforms and equipment governed by 1858 rules. Still, Brian Ziebart quite amazed me with his congratulatory email when my Israelite bibliography was published in 2014 by Couper Press. What could be happening in Benton Harbor?

We continued a sporadic email exchange after Brian’s first email. He mentioned that he had ordered multiple copies of my bibliography. What better compliment can any author receive! He also pointed out that after comparing some of the imprints he had with my bibliography he was beginning to accumulate a number of House of David imprints not included in my list. That, of course amazed, but did not surprise me. It was most encouraging to learn that Israelite imprints not held by archives and special collections somehow had survived, but I was well aware that the House of David print shop had created literally thousands of documents during one hundred and seven years from 1903–2010. Naturally, I wondered how many Israelite imprints unknown to the Gentile world Brian had discovered and identified. In another email, Brian provided the most amazing news. He had, in hand, a copy of the second, 1903 edition of *The Star of Bethlehem* that differed substantially from the four volumes I had cataloged as numbers 12, 13, 14 and 15 in my bibliography.

It was most encouraging to learn by email that Brian had engaged Shannon McRae, professor of English, State University of New York, Fredonia, and native of Benton Harbor, to curate and catalog all of the House of David imprints held by the House of David. Prof. McRae and I began an email correspondence as well. She informed me that the House of David collection also contained a large amount of ephemeral materials: train tickets, restaurant menus, stationery, advertising posters

and more. That, too, was an exciting piece of information. Although I am not personally inclined or professionally trained to evaluate and catalog ephemera, I am convinced that printed ephemera from the House of David constitute a very rich lode that should be of considerable value to future communal studies scholars as well as printing historians.

An enormously, heavy rain drenched Benton Harbor as I drove through Shiloh's tall iron gates. Brian Ziebart and Shannon McRae greeted me with umbrellas in hand at the side door where I had entered in January 1987. We moved past Mr. Dewhirst's former office door, and stopped in a reception room to shake off the rain. Brian asked if I would like to see any imprints. Naturally, I wanted to examine what I have come to think of as Benjamin's second, 1903 edition of *The Star of Bethlehem*. It was immediately apparent that substantial differences exist between the books that were in front of me and what I had described and annotated as items 12, 13, 14, and 15 of my Israelite bibliography. This cover was white and framed with thin red and yellow rules. The cover illustration was a Shiloh trumpet ensign device that appeared quite similar to the illustration on the cover of the first, 1902 *Star of Bethlehem*. I opened the front cover and thought that the type font employed to print the text differed notably from what I remembered as the type font used to print Mary's second, 1903 edition of *The Star*.

A hovering question begs an answer. How can there be two, clearly different second editions of any title? It defies all of my instincts, education and experience as a librarian/bibliographer. The two physical entities vary notably. If each cover differed, but the type font employed to print the text was the same, one could be State A and one State B depending upon priority of creation. However, different type fonts clearly indicate that type has been reset. It is also possible that textual changes may have been made from one imprint to another. Therefore, they are two different editions. Nonetheless, both are dated 1903 on the title page. In the nonce, I content myself, but likely not other bibliographers, with the concept that one, with the cover enclosed with thin red and yellow rules framing a Shiloh trumpet ensign device, is Benjamin's second, 1903 edition of *The Star*. The other with the cover enclosed with a thin red rule and a thick blue rule framing a large, gold watch with the stem a female figure graced by a tiara of five and then seven diamonds, is Mary's second, 1903 edition of *The Star*. "PROVE ALL THINGS! Hold Fast to the Good," as Benjamin commanded.



*The back of the Shiloh building showing the porte-cochère with walkway
above connecting it to the Cash Office (at right).*

Brian suggested we begin our Shiloh tour on the third floor. We left the archives room, and walked into a large central stairwell. To my right was a large anteroom that served Shiloh's main entry on Britain Ave. To my left was a large, ornate wooden stair that ascended to the third floor via multiple stairs. Above me was the first landing where the stairs split into two separate stairs, left and right, to ascend to the second level. House of David members were celibate as their faith required. Perhaps these stairs were segregated by gender as those elegant stairs were at the Pleasant Hill Shaker colony.

We paused a bit before climbing, and I wondered if new members, being ingathered at Shiloh to become colony members, were conducted through the large, imposing main entry doors, thence into the anteroom, and finally into the central stair well. Benjamin and Mary may have stood above them on the first landing to welcome them into their new home at the House of David in Benton Harbor. The name Shiloh, of course, comes from Genesis 49:10: "Until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be."

Shiloh's third floor contains individual members rooms, and leads into the twin turrets that grace the east and west sides of the third floor. Brian suggested we go into the turret on the east side. That was a most happy suggestion because as a child, cupolas, widows' walks, turrets, and towers on Michigan's many Victorian mansions always fascinated me. The view from this east turret far above Britain Avenue was magnificent, yet completely detached from the Gentiles' mundane world below. Israelites were, indeed, a people intentionally apart by their communal society, their work, and their architecture of this building.

Turning around, we could see the multi-groined roof that covers the very large building that is Shiloh. The roof shingles were clearly new and matched the building's original architecture perfectly. I remarked that the new roof must have cost considerable time and financial resources to achieve. Brian agreed. He said that prior to re-roofing it was necessary to replace badly decayed rafters and decking before shingles could be laid. Over years of neglect Shiloh had literally degenerated into tatters certain to implode. All of Shiloh's contents could have been destroyed quite easily. The continuously drenching rain made the Israelite paper documents recent peril most poignant.

We stopped to chat on the third floor landing. Brian pointed to a corner, and said that when he came to Shiloh there had been three



Three-level central staircase in Shiloh.

old railroad or steamer trunks languishing there. Each was locked, and despite homeless people inhabiting the turrets and third floor the locks were undisturbed. He decided to investigate one day and found the locks opened quite easily. Each trunk was stuffed full with Benjamin Purnell's holograph manuscripts. Zowie!

In all my years researching House of David imprints, I had only seen one sample of Benjamin's hand. It was a small document in the Don Allen House of David Collection when the collection was held by the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming. These steamer trunk manuscripts might become a veritable gold mine for future communal studies scholars.

We descended to second floor. Brian showed us three bedrooms: Benjamin's, Mary's, and Cora Mooney's. Cora Mooney was Mary Purnell's constant companion and possibly bodyguard at the House of David and Mary's City of David. Somewhere in my research I remembered reading that a colony member said about Cora Mooney, "she packed a pistol, ya know." No pistols were evident—just heavy, Victorian bedroom furniture. It is worth noting that Cora and her husband, Silas, were part of the original group of five Israelites plus Benjamin and Mary who came to Benton Harbor in early 1903 to found the House of David.

We descended to the first floor landing, and on a whim I asked Brian, "how many steps are on the stairs between first and third floors?"

"I'll count them," Shannon said, and skipped lightly back up to the third floor.

Brian and I descended to first floor.

She returned to us on the first floor, and said, "35."

Brian and I smiled at each other. He said, " $7 \times 5 = 35$."

Seven and references to seven appear constantly in Israelite imprints

Benjamin and Mary were accepted by their followers as the seventh and final messengers before the Millennium. As stated above, the two Purnells came to Benton Harbor with five followers from Fostoria, Ohio in March/April 1903. *The Star of Bethlehem*, the Israelites' primary theological work, always appeared in four physical volumes divided into seven books. *The Star* is paginated from the first volume continuously to page 780 of the seventh book, fourth volume. New members were required to read and master, *The Book of Wisdom*, an introductory work, before being permitted access to *The Star of Bethlehem*. *The Book of Wisdom* ultimately was printed in seven volumes containing one hundred pages/volume. Daily testimony



A closet door in Mary Purnell's sitting room in Shiloh.

of the famous 1927 trial brought by the State of Michigan to break up the House of David was printed by the House of David print shop in seven volumes and paged continuously, of course, from volume one through volume seven ending at page 5,286. It should not be surprising that the Israelite master carpenters carefully crafted Shiloh's stair steps to express the significant number seven in an arithmetical progression.

We needed lunch, and adjourned to Benton Harbor's Bread Bar for sinfully delicious French Onion soup, crisp French bread and gorgeously aromatic coffee. I noticed a floridly engraved degree hanging on the wall indicating that the owner/chef had graduated from a French culinary institute. Things have started to move very up-scale in downtown Benton Harbor.

Before dessert, an excellent crème brûlée, I expressed some concern to Brian about *This Code Book*, item 75 in my bibliography. The text certainly appeared genuine, but the paper of the copy I examined was much higher quality than most House of David imprints. Brian chuckled and said, "I've found twenty copies at Shiloh." End of concern.

We returned to Shiloh after lunch. We spent the remainder of the day inspecting some of the House of David imprints Brian has discovered that do not appear to be included in my bibliography. Shannon showed me how she has used the item numbers in my Israelite bibliography to order Shiloh's Israelite imprints on the shelves. Furthermore, she has been using my somewhat idiosyncratic method of bibliographic description to catalog and annotate the Israelite imprints not listed in my bibliography held at Shiloh. It is, of course, flattering to know that she has found my bibliographic methods useful to her work. Their considerable list of new Israelite imprints is a valuable supplement to my 2014 bibliography.

Brian's cordial invitation to Shiloh made a most amazing day, and one I had never anticipated. I had ample time for reflection on my drive home to Vicksburg. Long ago, as a graduate student at the Université d' Aix-Marseille, I learned how medieval cathedrals were intentional, physical expressions of Catholic faith and theology. Expansive west porticoes welcomed large crowds of the faithful into the great naves that soared to heaven and the brilliant rose windows glorified the morning sun from the east; all pointed to the promise of a glorious heavenly reward to the faithful. So, too, it seemed to me that the House of David's Shiloh must be seen as a physical expression of Christian Israelite faith and theology. Shiloh is crowned by a triune group, a tall tower and two turrets, that

plainly echoes Calvary's three crosses. New members were ingathered into the communal society at Shiloh and lived in their communal society to await the Millennium as announced from the small balcony directly below Shiloh's central tower. Shiloh certainly expresses and embodies their faith as cathedrals did for the faithful of the middle ages. Neither the House of David nor Mary's City of David had church or chapel. Neither colony held worship services on Sunday. Nonetheless, the gentle members of each colony lived/practiced their faith seven days/week as members of their intentional communal societies.

Brian Ziebart's active, informed presence at the House of David could not have come at a more critical and decisive time. The very rich cultural and theological inheritance that is Shiloh would have been irretrievably lost without his presence and intervention. At the present time and for the foreseeable future Shiloh is not open to the public. It is a religious colony that exists for the members and must be respected as such. Nor is all the restoration work complete. Physically unsafe areas exist, and that creates serious liability issues. Nonetheless, this day at Shiloh greatly encouraged me because so much that might have been lost has been saved to continue the House of David's existence and to preserve the enormously rich Christian Israelite theological and cultural history on the shores of Lake Michigan in Benton Harbor.

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