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Eros and its Discontents: The Israelite House of David and Their Almost Eden

By Shannon McRae

In 1903 an itinerant, long-haired Kentucky preacher named Benjamin Purnell and his wife Mary arrived in a small lakeshore town in southwestern Michigan called Benton Harbor. There, the couple and a few other like-minded people cheerfully began to prepare for the end of the world—the thousand year period of peace and prosperity for the elect that, along with Christ’s return, is promised in the Bible. Soon, hundreds of others came to join them: long-haired bearded men and quaintly-bonneted women, from Australia, England, and other parts of America—the scattered tribes of Israel returned home for the ingathering.

The new arrivals settled down to farming in this temperate, fertile, fruit-growing region. Although farming provided a good living, it was not quite sufficient for raising the necessary capital to house the expected 144,000 faithful, “which were redeemed from the earth,” according to Revelations 14:3. The fact that the new arrivals were well-mannered, soft-spoken, labored as hard at farm work as everybody else in the county, and made a point of paying all their bills in full and on time, did not sufficiently endear them to the provincial and conservative residents of Benton Harbor who increasingly tended to gawk at the unusual strangers.

It was the heyday of the American progressive era. Industrial expansion, technological development, social reform, religious enthusiasm, the rise of a leisure class—all converged into a collective giddiness, a middle-class certainty of inevitable reward for hard work toward a righteous cause, and a yearning for the sort of socially sanctioned indulgence in excessive sensation that only spectacle (another nineteenth-century innovation) could truly satisfy. Benjamin Purnell intuitively understood the nature of this convergence, and acted accordingly. He and his wife chose to attract people to their cause by entertaining them; thus they dedicated just under ten acres of their expanding agricultural holdings to the construction of an amusement park.

The colony was ideally located for such a venture. Benton Harbor, directly across Lake Michigan from Chicago, was already becoming a

tourist destination for the burgeoning middle class and those grown newly wealthy at the height of the Great Lakes lumber boom. In 1908, near the site of a former resort hotel noted for its healing waters, the Israelites built the amusement park called Eden Springs. After a pleasant steamer ride across the lake, visitors to the park were transported from the trolley stop outside the grounds through the woods and over a ravine to the main attractions by miniature trains, built by colony members and modeled after the tiny locomotives that colony members had seen during a visit to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis.



Benjamin and Mary Purnell
(From Hamilton College Library)

The park featured an aviary full of exotic birds, a zoo stocked with exotic animals brought over from Australia, arcade games, ice cream served in cones (another World's Fair innovation the colony brought home and made their own), several bands, and shortly thereafter, a baseball team.

Eden Springs originally served to combine public entertainment with public relations. In his 1999 history of the colony *Brother Benjamin*, Clare Adkin points out that the park, located well away from the colony living quarters, served as “a place to entertain and refresh visitors while maintaining some degree of privacy for members,” and also brought in income that Benjamin intended to reinvest in tourist lodging facilities that could serve as colony housing during the winter.¹ R. James Taylor, secretary of trustees for one of the two surviving branches of the original colony, also notes that the colonists regarded the open-air amphitheater and the hillside auditorium, intended primarily for preaching, as the park's

most important structures. The other attractions served to draw people to hear the religious message that the original colonists regarded as the true attraction.² Thus, souvenir stands around the park sold religious pamphlets written mostly by Benjamin and Mary, as well as colony-made souvenirs.

While they readied themselves for their heavenly accommodations, colonists created, paradoxically, an earthly Eden. Also on the grounds were several large and beautiful community houses, designed and built by Israelites to house the ingathering and centralize administration of its various industries. There were exotic trees brought from all over the world, and various sculptures, made by colony artists from such materials as shimmering crushed shells, concrete, and stones gathered from fields and local beaches.

Israelite theology holds that the settlement represented the fulfillment of a prophecy originally set forth by the seventeenth-century Philadelphian mystic Jane Lead in a document entitled “60 Propositions.” First in the line of seven messengers was Joanna Southcott, whose visions and prophecies in the late eighteenth century drew an enormous following. Purnell together with his wife Mary were the seventh and final messenger of the line. Central to their faith was the belief that the faithful would never die; salvation of both body and soul was possible if only they made their bodies



Open-air amphitheater at Eden Springs
(From Hamilton College Library)

sufficiently pure. To this end, Israelites neither ate meat nor drank alcohol. The men did not cut their hair or shave their beards, according to Biblical proscription. And, as was typical of some other American religious sects, especially the Shakers to whom they are sometimes compared, Israelites were required to remain celibate.

In “Consuming Simple Gifts: Shakers, Visitors, Goods,” Brian Bixby outlines the process by which, over time, the term “Shaker” transformed in popular culture from the name of a religious sect to a description of purchasable commodities—a tourist destination and collectible goods.³ In a somewhat similar fashion, the devout and hard-working Israelite House of David, whose agricultural and technological innovations drove the economy of an entire county for over half a century, became inextricably associated in the national public imagination with entertainment. Their amusement park kept the expanding colony gainfully employed, and provided a venue for public relations as well as public preaching.

It was not unusual for a religious community to sponsor an amusement park. Turn-of-the-century amusement parks, or “pleasure gardens” as they were then called, sought to create within edenic walls a space that allowed families and children to partake of wholesome entertainments while protecting them from seedier elements known to pursue less wholesome public amusements such as taverns, card halls, burlesque shows, circuses, freak shows and dime museums.⁴

Along with the rest of the nation, however, the House of David struggled with modernity. Religious experiments like the House of David that in the nineteenth century flourished as manifestations of progressivism were viewed in the twentieth century as symptomatic of dangerous and supposedly proliferating cult activity that threatened the nation. Peaceful communitarians transformed in the public imagination to threatening communists. For the most part, the colony modernized with impeccable style. The sober, celibate, prosperous colony somehow embodied, in its own high-minded negation of them, the ambient libidinal energies of the American Jazz Age. And to a certain extent, also in the spirit of the age, they flirted with those energies.

The colony was best known for its baseball team, which traveled all over the country and even overseas on the barnstorming circuit, but it was their trademark long hair and beards and comic antics as much as their talent which made them famous. Their many bands were also famous crowd pleasers; several of them played on the grounds day and night.

Locals still remember fondly the sound of music drifting in the summer air, and the Wednesday talent nights that were open to everybody. It is noteworthy, however, that the most famous of their traveling bands was their long-haired jazz ensemble, given that this brand new form of music was inextricably associated with wild dancing and sexual abandon. Like the baseball team, the band capitalized on its exotic appearance, billed in the urban dance halls they played in as “The Long-haired Sheiks of Syncopation.” Publicity shots of both the baseball team and the jazz band nearly always involve a display of the men’s hair, carefully arranged in long waves and beautifully brushed. In these shots, and in accounts of typical performances, their hair became part of the show, displayed not merely as a mark of their faith, but rather a significant aspect of their glamour—an almost eroticized allure of exotic but ultimately unavailable masculinity.

Perhaps Purnell, who was himself always beautifully and dramatically clothed in publicity shots for souvenir postcards, strategically used such media images to associate the desirable young performers with the desirability of salvation. In this, he was not alone. His contemporary, the glamorous evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, made her Foursquare Gospel Church a media sensation, complete with dramatic personal appearances, theatrical preaching and lavish publicity stunts. R. James Taylor offers a different perspective. He points out that the colony in the 1920s was largely populated by young adults who had been raised in the religion by their parents—many of them original turn-of-the-century colonists—but who did not necessarily take it as seriously. Faced with an entire generation of young people as susceptible as any other American youth to the glamour and wild possibility of the Jazz Age, Purnell may have founded the baseball teams, the jazz bands and the like, as a way to “keep the kids occupied.”⁵

If Taylor is correct, these practical but inventive solutions to a typical youth management problem attest to the business sense and psychological acumen of the colony founder rather than any ambivalence on the part of the colonists, many of whom disapproved of the jazz band and were concerned that travel would make the baseball team fall into worldly ways (which in most instances, remarkably, it did not). Indeed, most of the rest of the colony engaged in ostensibly less glamorous business enterprises, but even their more ordinary ventures in farming and trades were quietly spectacular. Many of the colonists were extraordinarily talented. They designed and built glorious houses, some of which still stand on the



A House of David band
(From Hamilton College Library)

grounds. With their striking, somewhat foreign design and shimmering masonry, they remain architectural showpieces. Engineers hand built the miniature trains that conveyed visitors to the park. Artists created sculptures for sale as souvenirs and as decoration for the grounds, as well as spectacular floats for the local parade. Other technical innovations such as improved fruit canning methods and a cold storage facility, along with their entertainment industries and tourist facilities, brought enormous prosperity to an otherwise obscure corner of southwestern Michigan.

Almost single-handedly, the House of David made a nondescript coastal town into an economically thriving region and one of the foremost tourist destinations in the Midwest. But Benjamin Purnell's personal behavior, specifically with regard to the young ladies of the colony, was apparently less than impeccable, a failing that not only led to his spectacular undoing, but which inadvertently provided the American public with yet another twentieth-century novelty — a scandal with sex and money at the heart of it. The ensuing media frenzy kept the sensation-hungry nation enthralled for the better part of the 1920s.

The full truth behind the spectacle is somewhat difficult to ascertain. Living conditions for rank-and-file colony members were spartan. Colonists were required to surrender all worldly goods upon arrival and turn over

to the colony all the profits from their labor. Although they entered into this arrangement voluntarily and could terminate it at any time, it was not an easy one in a nation giddy with the promise of opulent wealth as the reward for hard work, especially when the Purnells, their closest associates, and other members more involved with the stylish public face of the colony lived a more elegant lifestyle. As early as 1907, a few disaffected colonists became increasingly embittered as they realized that their contributions to the colony were contractually non-refundable. It is perhaps no coincidence that whispers of sexual misconduct on the part of Benjamin Purnell became increasingly and publicly audible along with the accounts of financial discontent. Sex is ultimately a much more interesting topic for scandal than voluntary poverty. Thus rumors persisted, and with them, charges of rape and other undesirable sexual conduct that were not substantially proven but never entirely disappeared.

Two spectacular trials involving the House of David garnered the attention of the national media. The first, in 1923, involved a suit brought by the Hansel family, in which they argued that they had been fraudulently induced to become colony members, and suffered losses when they were later coerced to leave. They sought large financial damages, and in support of their claim that the religion was fraudulent, introduced testimony regarding Purnell's sexual misconduct. Newspaper accounts offered salacious descriptions of "King Ben" and "Queen Mary" running a "sex cult" that formed the cornerstone of their sinister theology.

The trial itself was highly problematic. Clare Adkin argues in *Brother Benjamin* that a great deal of the testimony for the prosecution was demonstrably false. The criminal acts of which Benjamin Purnell was accused—inappropriately in a civil suit and for which he never appeared in court as a defendant—were never proven. The Hansels won their case, and were granted a settlement, albeit considerably smaller than what they had hoped. But the issue was far from over. Rumors, complaints, and charges, made almost entirely by a few disaffected colonists, persisted until in November 1926 they reached critical mass. Benjamin was arrested and jailed on a charge of statutory rape, but again tried for religious fraud. Once again financial gain appears to have been the motive based on the ability of the state to dissolve the colony and take its extensive property into receivership.

Purnell's heavily publicized 1927 trial was one of the most luridly sensational the country had yet seen, vying for headlines with the Scopes

monkey trial and the sentencing of Sacco and Vanzetti. Far from revealing the truth, the massive newspaper coverage provided a most salacious form of entertainment to an American public made ever more hungry for sensation by the frenetic excesses of the Jazz Age and ever more anxious and wary of deviance by immigration, the Great War, the “Red Scare” and government scandal.

Conventional wisdom holds that charismatic leaders of unconventional religious groups—especially those leaders whose presumptive failure to practice what they preach generates widespread scandal—are charlatans and frauds, and also that such failure is inevitable given the unnatural constraints of certain religious practices and the psychological profile of cult leaders. Certainly most of the writing that has been done on Benjamin Purnell to date has not moved beyond this set of assumptions. Until Clare Adkin’s thorough study, and more recently Christopher Siriano’s pictorial history *The House of David*,⁶ all accounts of Benjamin Purnell were based solely on sensationalized newspaper accounts or else from court records whose objectivity Adkin has convincingly questioned. Even Robert Fogarty’s scholarly foundational study *The Righteous Remnant*⁷ was limited by the absence of the firsthand perspective of the colonists themselves. Adkin, whose work is based on extensive interviews with surviving colonists and primary sources such as colony records, personal letters, and photographs, provides a valuable corrective to previous accounts which present Purnell almost uniformly as a textbook charalatan.

The full truth regarding the colony seems, Rashomon-like, to be a matter of perspective. Even in Adkin’s careful treatment, witness accounts vary, and sharply disagree on crucial points. The remaining colonists, few though they are, tell their own story. Articulate, intelligent and critical-minded, they defend their leader and remain proud of their faith. Indeed, the colony survived the trials and continued on after Benjamin Purnell’s death, despite an acrimonious split in the membership. Half the colony followed Harry T. “Judge” Dewhirst, who expanded the colony’s business ventures and increased the glamor factor with a number of high-profile building projects, including the spectacular Grande Vista Motor Court and nightclub, tourist facilities in Texas, and holdings in Mexico and Australia, thus entering wholeheartedly into the modernity of 1930s Depression-era America. The other half followed Mary Purnell, who preserved the sober religious foundations upon which the Israelite community had been founded, but also shrewdly developed and expanded her own lower-key

enterprises. These included a hotel, two vegetarian restaurants, and tourist facilities that catered especially to Jewish vacationers, who appreciated the kosher facilities as well as the welcome during notoriously anti-Semitic times. Both sides maintained traveling baseball teams under the House of David name, Mary Purnell's faction managing various teams until the 1950s.

There is no question that the House of David suffered from unduly salacious press coverage and cultural xenophobia. There is also no doubt that however questionable the activities of its founder, the only thing the rest of the colony did to bring negative attention upon itself was to be different not only from the mainstream, but also from more typically conservative religious sects. The House of David was founded upon beliefs and principles that were fairly typical of a myriad other nineteenth-century American religious movements such as the celibate Shakers, the bearded Amish, the prophetically-led Mormons, and the Seventh-Day Adventists whose doctrine is perhaps the most similar. Unlike these groups, however, the House of David profitably participated in the flamboyantly excessive libidinal energies of early twentieth-century America—as did Aimee Semple McPherson. Yet McPherson's message was ultimately more conventional, more within the mainstream of Christian thought, and more media-friendly than the dense, allusive, and somewhat inaccessible writings and sayings of Benjamin and Mary Purnell.

Out of pace with the time and place in which it existed, the House of David, although decidedly anti-modern in its beliefs, nonetheless exemplifies a uniquely American form of modernism. The same strange fusion of spiritual yearning and libidinal excess, within a matrix of industry, commerce, mass entertainment and media-driven sensationalism that characterized the House of David, marks the difference between American modernism and its European counterpart, and the modernist era from the progressivism that preceded it.

In Europe, the modernist aesthetic was shaped mostly by intersecting circles of artistic elites, whereas in America, probably largely due to the popularity of jazz and technological innovations such as the automobile, it both informed and was informed by popular culture. A theme of spiritual reinvention characterized modernism in both Europe and America, of which the European strains were much more hermetic in flavor than the various Christian unorthodoxies that flourished in America. Ancient mythologies offered modernist artists a particularly rich vein of imaginative

source material, not only for their work, but also for the restoration of spiritual energies they regarded as missing in the modern world. The aim on both continents was to infuse a spiritually inert world with elemental forces—life energies that enlightenment rationality had supposedly buried.

This particular view of history was not unique to these artists, but rather, as scholars such as Leon Surette have pointed out, was foundational to modernist thought on both continents.⁸ In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud terms this life force *eros*, and defines civilization as that which curbs the opposing surges of *eros* and *thanatos*, or death drive, that reside in the human psyche. In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse reworks Freud, positing what he terms a gnostic version of European history, in which “*eros* is being absorbed into *logos*.” Marcuse defines *logos* as “reason which subdues the instincts.” With the ascendancy of reason, however, civilization suffered a significant spiritual loss, as “the insights contained in the metaphysical notion of *eros* were driven underground.”⁹ The modernist project to recover ancient mythologies thus endeavored to revitalize inert modern *logos* with mythopoetic *eros*. These erotic energies ultimately have little to do with desire for anything or anybody in particular. Rather, the works are themselves distillations of universal desiring energy, annealed into art by the process Freud termed sublimation.

The many accomplishments and vivid history of the House of David can perhaps be appreciated as the results of sublimated *eros* on a massive scale. There is an intensity about everything the Israelites did, a bright strange light that seems in the remaining photographs and postcards to imbue the park, the beautiful sculptures, and the clear eyes and wide grins or dreamy smiles of the members themselves. A certain tangible aura hangs over the place even now, even though all that remains of it are a handful of bright and interesting old people, a pair of old houses that despite being desperately in need of maintenance still literally shimmer because of the hematite facing that their designers invented, and various outbuildings in various stages of repair. The remaining structures of the razed amusement park are still to be found, partially preserved by the weeds growing over it like some lost Xanadu.

There is something mythic about the place and its founder Benjamin Purnell. On the face of it, he easily exemplifies two uniquely American archetypes, the self-made man and charlatan preacher. But there is something deeper than that. By all accounts, he truly believed in what he



Bethlehem building, House of David. Note the lush and exotic vegetation which almost obscures the three colony members.
(From Hamilton College Library)

was doing, convinced several hundred highly talented people to believe in it too, and built an attraction that made an otherwise nondescript town into a wondrous destination that drew crowds for half a century. Up until his death shortly after his trial, his energy and charisma seemed boundless, and he succeeded in nearly everything he undertook.

The principle of *eros* encompasses both sexual and spiritual desire—a psychological fact that Christian cultures have never handled very well, especially the particularly puritanical strains that characterize most American forms of Christianity. Central to House of David religious doctrine was purification of the physical body, understood in some of the scriptures to be the female body, the potential vessel for the new Messiah. It is possible that the intensely energetic, mystical visionary Benjamin Purnell did not sufficiently differentiate between the two forms of *eros* his own faith rendered incompatible. It is possible that, believing himself to be already purified, he was attempting with young colony women some form of *hieros gamos*. Such practices were not unheard of in some of the mystical communities that resemble the House of David in their theological particulars.

Benjamin Purnell died after he was symbolically ripped to pieces in the media frenzy that attended his trial. His fate suggests another level of myth, that which is found in the Dionysian rites and the death of Orpheus—a kind of martyrdom or scapegoating, not so much because he was entirely innocent as because he was that serious about his cause, regardless of the fact that he may have failed to live up to the rigorous self-denial he required of his followers. The fact that his followers were for the most part able to discipline themselves in ways that he perhaps could not suggests that, on a mythic if not an actual level, Purnell took on all the troublesome desires that his followers could not themselves enact, drawing the inevitably violent consequences on himself so that they might somehow be free of them, thus purified and able to attain the immortality that he never managed. Historically, a spectacular end seems to be the fate of certain leaders, especially those who become larger than life. In his own way, Benjamin Purnell accomplished exactly what the more mystically inclined of the modernist poets were after. He drew ancient forces into the modern world, and made them into something rich and strange.

Notes

1. Clare Adkin, *Brother Benjamin* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1990), 23-24.
2. R. James Taylor, telephone interview by Shannon McRae. March 12, 2008.
3. Brian Bixby, "Consuming Simple Gifts: Shakers, Visitors, Goods," in *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith and History*, ed. Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson, 85-108 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
4. See Judith Adams, *The Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Independence: Twayne Publishers, 1991) for a thorough discussion of the religious roots of the nineteenth-century "pleasure gardens."
5. Taylor, telephone interview.
6. Christopher Siriano, *The House of David* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2007).
7. Robert Fogarty, *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981).
8. Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).
9. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 122.