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*"A white and seamless robe":  
Celibacy and Equality  
in Shaker Art and Theology*

by JANE F. CROSTHWAITE

THE Shakers have attracted public attention for most of the two hundred years of their existence. The reasons for that interest have varied over time, but once attracted, most of the curious have found that the Shakers' long history and their sophisticated insights have provoked increased investigation, if not conversion. In the present day, the "world's people"<sup>1</sup> are drawn to further study not only by chance encounters with the furniture, the music, or the food but by the substantial rewards of learning from a society which aimed to practice what it taught: celibacy, perfection, harmony, communal ownership of property, and, just possibly, gender equality.

Gender equality has become a concern of Shaker studies recently because of its relevance to contemporary social discussions. If the Shakers actually preached—and practiced—equality, then there may be resources in their literature or their history which would help to improve social opportunities for women and men who seek a more balanced and equitable world. As this study will argue, however, the Shaker example of equality hinges on a prior commitment to celibacy; the Shaker practice of social justice rested on a religious pedestal. The Shakers placed their religious vision at the heart of all their work, a practice made particularly clear when evidence from the Shaker gift drawings is added to the historical and theological record. Although usually isolated in a separate category for study, the gift drawings offer helpful insights into the theological ideas and religious practices of the Shakers. This study will add a glimpse of the drawings done by Sarah Bates as further evidence that the "world's people" will have to follow a unique religious path to learn about gender equality from the Shakers.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Shakers themselves began presenting their society as a social model which could transform American culture. Recognizing in themselves an exemplary case of the equality being advocated by the women's rights supporters, the Shakers made knowledgeable appeals to their own achievement. Elder Frederick W. Evans explained Shaker success with great confidence in his famous "Autobiography of a Shaker," first published serially in the popular

1. As with many other separatist religious organizations, the Shakers drew clear and distinct lines between those believers who joined the Shaker society and the people who chose to remain in the world.

*Atlantic Monthly* in 1869. Elder Evans described the Shakers as a community “where ‘Woman’s Rights’ are fully recognized, by first giving her a Mother in Deity to explain and protect them; where equal suffrage for men and women, and equal participation in the government of an order founded by a woman, was an inevitable necessity.” And, approving of recent social improvements in the larger world, such as the end of slavery, he observed, “Equal rights for women is next in order.”<sup>2</sup>

The Shakers believed they were the Millennial Church and called themselves The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing. Thus Elder Evans was able to argue that the final dispensation was at hand and that the Shakers would lead “the earthly order of a mere civil government (however just and orderly) into the pure and holy sphere of abstract Christianity.” In this new world he was able to foresee “. . . a civil government (having a balance of power, being composed equally of men and women; that is, the Senate being the *female* branch of the government, as the House will be the *male* branch. . .).”<sup>3</sup>

There is undeniable delight in reviewing Elder Evans’s vision — delight in both its hope and its naivety. Therefore, it is all the more important to point out, albeit gently, not only that Elder Evans’s assessment of the larger political world was naive but that his presentation of the Shaker situation was also slightly off-center. In spite of his claims, the jury is still out and still debating whether the Shakers actually achieved gender equality — and, more importantly, whether they intended to do so. A brief excursion into Shaker history, theology, and art will highlight the fact that equality was *not* a primary intention of the Shaker society. This assertion is so obvious to Shaker students that it has seldom been exposed to examination, perhaps because a second, equally obvious factor has materially contributed to this silence, namely the fact that equality was actually a by-product of that most notorious, but crucial, Shaker tenet — celibacy.

It is almost painfully ironic that establishing equality between the sexes by a direct appeal to justice has been next to impossible while it seems to have appeared almost effortlessly — or, as Elder Evans said, as an “inevitable necessity” — in the wake of an alternative vision. And yet that alternative vision is a most difficult one: celibacy would appear here, in the chilling light of analysis, to be the unique prerequisite of equality. If the “world’s people” have been unable to disentangle the multiple cords which constrict women’s opportunity and achievement, the Shaker example teaches that all their many legal, educational, and moral strategies are but weak competitors with the power of celibacy to clear the way for level social ground.

Celibacy has always been the primary stumbling block in understanding — not to mention uniting with — the Shakers. Even sophisticated scholars recognize their own hesitations in the incessant refrain of casual

2. Frederick W. Evans, “Autobiography of a Shaker,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 23 (April 1869), 424, 419.

3. Evans, “Autobiography of a Shaker,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 23 (May 1869), 603.

observers: "Gosh, they are really wonderful . . . but . . . celibacy?" Still, as all those who come near and particularly as the Shakers themselves most vividly must know, celibacy is the issue. It is an issue which is at once incidental and central; although an overwhelming obstacle to the outsider, sexual abstinence becomes but a minor first step to the believer. Sexual purity is only the outward sign of the larger spiritual journey taken by the Shaker; it is the external proof—and promise—of a pure heart. By uniting the incidental with the symbolic, however, celibacy transforms a daily life into a deliberate spiritual venture and makes heaven visible on earth.

When Mother Ann Lee called on her followers to unite in a daring religious vision, she did so by offering a new interpretation of sin and its cause in the world.<sup>4</sup> As the early records about Mother Ann stated:

By the immediate revelation of God, she henceforth bore an open testimony against the lustful gratifications of the flesh, as the source and foundation of human corruption. . . . She testified in the most plain and pointed manner, that no soul could follow Christ in the regeneration, while living in the works of natural generation, and wallowing in their lusts.<sup>5</sup>

Having identified sin and its cause—"the lustful gratifications of the flesh"—Mother Ann then taught that the cessation of sexual intercourse, which was made possible through the confession of sins and the assumption of the cross of celibacy, would return the believer to the perfection first established in the Garden of Eden.

Perfection, fall, and restoration: Mother Ann offered a reasonable and welcome solution to worldly distress and to the apparent failure (or, at least, slowness) of the Christian message. Most significantly, her location of the error in sexual misconduct made it possible to accept the solution from a woman. Shaker interpretation of Eve's responsibility for the Fall has varied from blaming Eve to assignment of equal responsibility to the man and the woman; what they have understood consistently, however, is that since a woman was present and part of the sexual misdeed, she had to be a primary party in the redemption story. Thus it was axiomatic to the Shakers that the revelation of this addition and completion of the Christian message was itself proof of the promised Second Appearing of the Christ, this time made manifest by a woman. As the Shakers themselves most succinctly stated:

The light and power of God revealed in Ann, and through her . . . had such sensible effect in giving them power over all sin, and filling them with visions, revelations, and gifts of God, that she was received and acknowledged as the first spiritual Mother in Christ, and the second heir of the *Covenant of Life* in the *New Creation*.<sup>6</sup>

4. Ann Lee was born in Manchester in 1736 and died near Albany, New York, in 1784, having spent ten years in America working to establish a community of like-minded believers. Born into a poor, working-class family, she married a blacksmith named Abraham Standerin, and they had four children who died in infancy or early childhood. She and her husband separated soon after coming to America. For further information, see Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Dover, 1953), pp. 3–53.

5. *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee* . . . (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1888; AMS Reprint, 1975), p. 5.

6. *Testimonies*, pp. 5–6.

Ann Lee's gospel, as expanded into the theological system and social organization of later generations of Shakers, gave evidence of a primary bipolar order of creation. A dual God created a dual universe to be inhabited by both men and women; this world had later to be saved by a dual Christ and finally to be lived out by a dually organized community, of which the Shaker sisters and brothers were the living examples.<sup>7</sup> But if the Shakers discovered that the world was ordered and balanced by two genders and that they could live in harmony, and even relative equality, the initiative for this discovery did not come from a search for equality. Some might like to think that Mother Ann had a so-called hidden agenda to correct social inequities, but there is no such evidence.

Carnality, not inequality, was the sin which destroyed humanity. Furthermore, Mother Ann did not have time in her brief ministry to address the social reorganization which her teaching would entail. Travelling and gathering followers for only four years before her death, she left the believers to find their own way into church order and unity. Writing about the early formative years, Stephen Marini describes the crisis of leadership that followed Mother Ann's sudden death in 1784, and he says it took almost another four years before Joseph Meacham began building the distinctive Shaker community. Marini observes that Father Joseph had to struggle against a reluctant membership to "establish separate lines of authority for men and women" and to gain recognition for a joint leadership with Mother Lucy Wright.<sup>8</sup>

The organizational and social equality which resulted was gratifying and publicly promoted, especially after 1850, but as the accounts of the early years attest, the triumphs of equality were gained in the name of Mother Ann's desire for freedom from sin and her concomitant discovery of celibacy as a means of seeking perfection. Those triumphs were then enhanced by Mother Ann's sense of personal authority and the accompanying need to legitimate that authority in theological terms and, finally, by the organizational experimentation necessary to implement a celibate community.

If, however, celibacy made equality a possibility, did equality then become a reality? As with all interesting questions, the answer is unclear. Actually, it is not surprising that there are few broadly-based conclusions about the women in Shaker life. After all, it is impossible to generalize about up to ten thousand women, separated into nineteen communities in seven states, over a period of two hundred years. And the Shakers were not a static society. Both inside and outside the communities, there were major changes to consider; whether one looks at the Civil War or women's suffrage movements without or at changes in dancing and music, community

7. See, especially, Benjamin S. Youngs and Calvin Green, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, 2nd. ed. (Albany: E. and E. Hosford, 1810), p. 446.

8. Stephen Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 110, 127-28.

industries, or leadership within, few factors remain stable enough for a single universal judgment. And, to be sure, the interpretative stances of the critics themselves have modified any conclusions. Thus it is possible to find in the scholarly literature those who praise the attempt, those who see its limitations, and those who announce its failure.<sup>9</sup>

One group of Shaker women who have not yet been consulted on questions of gender equality is the artists who produced some 190 extant drawings between 1841 and 1859.<sup>10</sup> Working primarily during the revival period known variously as Mother's Work or the Era of Manifestations, the women developed a symbolic system which both recorded and extended their theological world.<sup>11</sup> It would appear that their works articulate a broad and imaginative commitment to celibacy while having little to say directly about equality, and yet the balanced and orderly structures of most works combined with the persistent integrity of the artistic commitment do speak to the freedom and the authority which the artists found and expressed.

The artistic productions of Shaker women are only just beginning to be adequately studied.<sup>12</sup> Questions remain about proper nomenclature and whether the works are even to be understood as "art." Daniel Patterson has suggested that "gift drawing" is an appropriate term since the works were commonly received as a "gift" from the spirit world and, further, were usually intended as gifts for some designated members of the community. Others speak of them as "spirit drawings" in order to underscore their inspirational source. Each of these terms emphasizes the fact that general Shaker laws and practice consistently forbade the display of art or the enjoyment of beautiful or worldly possessions.<sup>13</sup> Proper designations are, however, less interesting than the theological messages and insights which the women did, in fact, express in these documents. The artists variously referred to their works as "messages," "gifts," "emblems," or "rolls," and these terms were imbedded in the drawings themselves in such a way that the drawings were situated securely within the symbolic, ritual, and

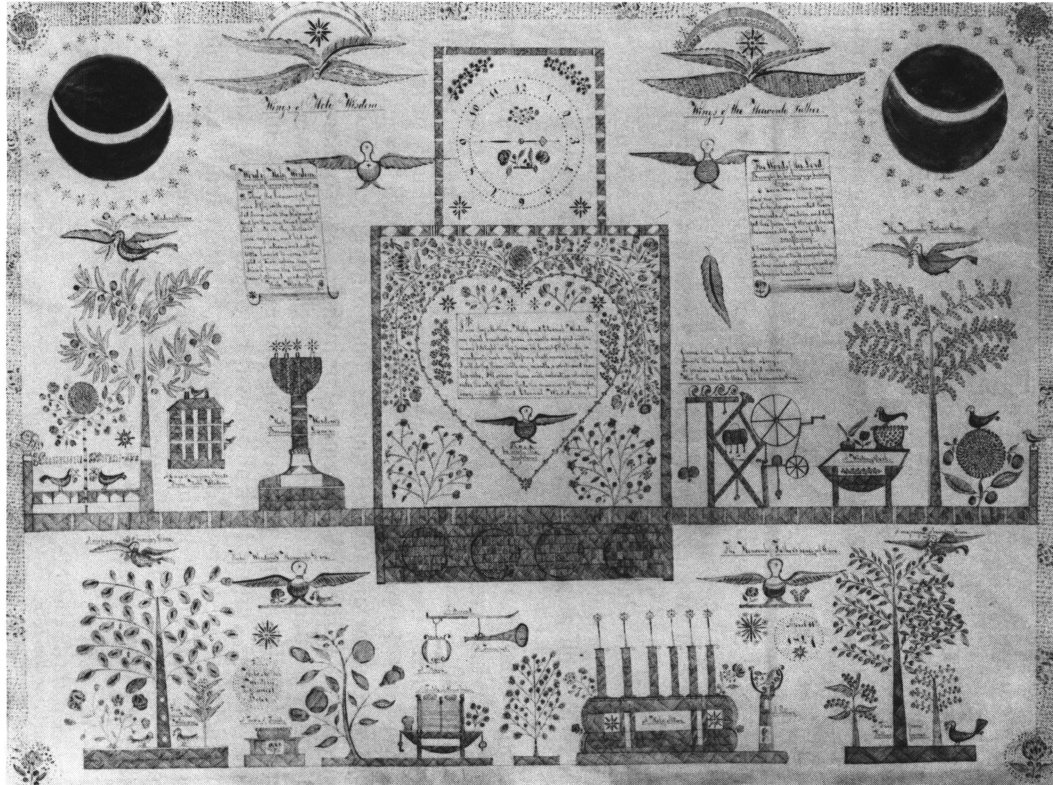
9. For such a range, see Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981); D'Ann Campbell, "Women's Lives in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised—1810–1860," *The New England Quarterly*, 51 (March 1978), 23–38; Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1985); and Louis Kern, *An Ordered Love* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1981).

10. Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song: A Study of Two Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake, Maine: The United Society of Shakers, 1983), pp. 7–9.

11. Beginning in 1837, the Shakers entered a period of revival in which the spirits of departed Shakers, well-known "world's people," and other heavenly figures regularly visited the communities to censure, encourage, or instruct the believers. For almost fifteen years the societies reported spirit manifestations. It was a complex time, not yet fully explored or understood. For a basic presentation, see Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*, pp. 152–76; see also Daniel Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 316–23.

12. In addition to Patterson's exemplary work, see Edward D. Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (Charlottesville: Published for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum by the University Press of Virginia, 1969); June Sprigg, *The Gift of Inspiration: Shaker and American Folk Art, 1803–1880* (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 1979); and David Sellin, "Shaker Inspirational Drawings," *Philadelphia Museum Bulletin*, 57, no. 273 (Spring 1962), 93–99.

13. The Millennial Laws of 1845 stated: "No maps, Charts, and no pictures or paintings, shall ever be hung up in your dwelling rooms . . ." Quoted in Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*, p. 272.



From Mother Wisdom to Daniel Boler, April 11, 1847, Shaker Manuscript Collection, VIII:C-6, The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

theological context of the Shaker vision. The artists were not drawing "real" trees, but spiritual trees; they were transmitting messages, emblems, and rewards.

It is clear that these works of art were theological and social descriptions of the Shaker universe and not emotional, naive, or childish effusions. Patterson has suggested that ". . . Shaker women tended to express themselves emotively, men intellectually."<sup>14</sup> But as the work of Shaker women, these many and varied pieces of art tell us how the women structured a vision of the Shaker world view. The Shaker women's art speaks more to the possibility of mapping out a new universe of belief and behavior elaborated by Shaker theologians and Shaker communities and more to the simplicity, order, and pleasure of living within millennial times than to whether the women were more or less emotional than the men.

To stand before the work of Sarah Bates, for example, is to see in a collection of eight similarly constructed pages which she called "sacred rolls" a highly structured and systematic world. When Sarah Bates died in 1881 at the age of eighty-eight, she had been a Shaker for over seventy years. Patterson believes that she was the creator of seventeen drawings executed between 1845 and 1848 when she was in her mid-fifties.<sup>15</sup> Although we have nine drawings which might be called "sacred rolls," a term which she used in the earliest dated piece, one contains no writing and differs from the others in such a way that it deserves separate treatment at another time.<sup>16</sup>

Like other Shaker artists, Sister Sarah blended visual and verbal terms to convey her understanding; several critics have noticed the so-called Protestant impulse to secure the images with words, to prevent those images from seducing the imagination away into flights of fancy or into too private a vision.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps themselves fearful of unbridled images, Shaker artists drew very few unanchored images. That is not to say, however, that every element of a drawing is explained. For instance, each of Sarah Bates's sacred rolls is divided into three horizontal levels, but the viewer, and not the artist, identifies them as cosmic (or universal), as heavenly, and as earthly.<sup>18</sup> In turn, cutting vertically down the page, one sees a dual division in which cosmic symbols for the Heavenly Father, usually a combination of wings, sun, moon, or stars and designated messages, dominate one side and a variation of those figures representing Holy Mother Wisdom dominates the other. (Sarah Bates was not always consistent in choosing

14. Patterson, p. 15.

15. Patterson is the source of most of the information concerning Sarah Bates. He identifies her as the daughter of Issachar Bates, one of the most important early leaders. Sarah Bates was known to work as a tailoress and as a schoolteacher for the Shakers. See Patterson, pp. 61-65.

16. Pictures of the "sacred rolls" may be found in Andrews, *Visions*, and in Sprigg. The reproduction featured in this publication is figure #11 in Andrews and is located in the Western Reserve Historical Society, VIII:C-6. It is dated 1847.

17. Don Yoder, *Pennsylvania-German Fraktur and Color Drawings* (Lancaster, Pa.: Landis Valley Associates, 1969), p. [5].

18. Patterson, p. 23.



sides.) Unifying both vertical and horizontal divisions in all of the eight rolls is a large decorated heart bearing a message from Holy Mother Wisdom. Such is the way in which Sarah Bates uses a repeated structure to display an ordered universe of belief. Although labeling many small images and then articulating rather fulsome messages from Holy Mother Wisdom and other leaders, the artist also relies upon the viewer (generally assumed to be a believer) to recognize the formal structure of her system.

The structure of the rolls shows that a Shaker woman could describe her world with theological accuracy (if the men's theological books are to be the standard) and could also give her own gracefully elaborated version therein. Sarah Bates pictured the bipolar world described in the theological works. All of the major theological works began with the assumption that God's creation of Adam and Eve expressed the original truth that God was both male and female, as they quoted Genesis 1:26-27.<sup>19</sup> But Sister Sarah also gave status to the revival's revelation that the mother in God was to be called Holy Mother Wisdom.<sup>20</sup> And she further placed Holy Mother Wisdom not only in the cosmic metaphysical level as the complementary and balancing partner of the Heavenly Father, but she located her as well in the central, loving heart which brought heaven and earth together.

In a world such as the Shakers envisioned and embodied, where heaven and earth are balanced so logically and completely with a male and female God, a male and female Christ, and Shaker brothers and sisters, it would be surprising if equality were not a substantive component. Sarah Bates's rolls "should" speak strongly for equality, yet she does not seem to make such an argument, at least not overtly. The male and female sides of the top level do not extend programatically down to the level of human (or Shaker) history. Elder Frederick Evans made this connection more explicit because he was addressing the world; Sister Sarah, by contrast, was speaking to the community, and thus her message was more theological in nature.

Having pictured a re-made heaven with an explicit gender balance, it comes as a surprise to those seeking equality that the newly recognized order in heaven does not extend to earth. The middle or heavenly level is populated with ritual images of trees, flowers, altars, and musical instruments. The lower level tells stories about Mother Ann's salvation history and her suffering, and it sometimes carries messages from her and other departed leaders, but it is not even loosely divided into genders or

19. Youngs and Green, p. 443; Calvin Green and Seth Y. Wells, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church* . . . (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1848; AMS Reprint, 1973), p. 127.

20. One of the spirit manifestations of the revival period who commanded significant attention and respect was Holy Mother Wisdom, a figure identified as the female partner of the Heavenly Father. The Shakers had long viewed God as both male and female, and Holy Mother Wisdom was the manifestation of that understanding. See also the text produced during this time which further presented the work of Holy Mother Wisdom: Paulina Bates, *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom* . . . (Canterbury, N.H.: United Society called "Shakers," 1849).

roles or social functions the way one might imagine if equality were an intended social strategy. Instead, the focus of the entire piece moves from the firm duality on the highest plane to the loving heart in the center.

The heart announces the pure love of the heavenly parents and, in turn, summons an equally pure love from the children. The heart speaks much more directly to the issue of celibacy, to being followers of the heavenly parents, than to equality. The central heart messages, dressed in the voice of Holy Mother Wisdom—or simply of Wisdom—convey passages of comfort and promises of reward:

I am thy Mother, Holy and Eternal Wisdom, my spirit breatheth peace on earth and good will to man; I delight in the pure in heart & the lowly in mind; unto such my blessing shall never cease to flow. I will clothe them with my mantle, a white and seamless robe, I'll crown them with salvation when they enter the city of their God, the mansions of the righteous, with Holy and Eternal W.i.s.d.o.m. Peace be unto the righteous.<sup>21</sup>

Sarah Bates has molded traditional biblical language into a peculiarly Shaker statement; celibate Shaker believers are the literal children of faith. Bearing the cross of celibacy identifies them as the lambs, as the children, and as “the pure in heart & the lowly in mind.” The imagery of purity, white clothing, and special mansions may apply to any dedicated Christian, but there is a singular fit for the celibate believer who slips into those seamless garments with little or no alteration.

Those of us in the late 1980's seeking models of equality necessarily trip at this point—where celibacy becomes adequate as the powerful and all-encompassing vision for the Shaker. Not only do we hunger for the complete translation of cosmic structure into the social dimension, but we are also distressed by the language of childhood and innocence. Out of this dis-ease, we fault the Shakers with naivety and the Shaker women with emotionalism or simplicity. Unable or unwilling to follow the centrality and the subsequent sacrifices of celibacy, we often fail to see the strength of their restructured universe or their own satisfaction with their vision. Sarah Bates's sacred rolls, however, are models of an integrated vision, and the hearts which she placed at the center of those rolls to convey Holy Mother Wisdom's messages are carefully enclosed within strongly constructed square boxes, some decorated with geometric patterns and all with extended platforms or pilings reaching into the lower level. Within the balance between the logical square and the curved heart, then, one finds a graciously elaborated flowering of vines and flowers and trees and shrubs. The vision is both secure and generous, both disciplined and rewarding. There is no complaint here, only order and joy.

If, then, pure equality was not instituted or necessarily argued for in Shaker communities, the critic with a different social agenda need not despair or seek blame. Equality was, at the very least (and there was a great deal more), made possible, and one can see that promise not only in the

21. Text is taken from Andrews, *Vision*, fig. 11.

structure of Sarah Bates's sacred rolls but in the purity and peace which were the rewards of celibacy and in the lives of the believers for whom the rolls were intended.

As a final example of the union of Shaker celibacy and equality, Sarah Bates and her sister artists utilized a symbol at once so common and so distinctive that it, too, could be easily slighted. Daniel Patterson has brought this image into careful view as a means of identifying the styles of different artists. His attentive eye led him to the Shaker doves as almost ubiquitous in the art and allowed him to distinguish several different artists.<sup>22</sup> To follow Patterson's lead and to focus on the wonderful little birds with light bulb heads or starry eyes is to see, certainly, the untutored hands of the artists; it is also to come to think that the artists chose deliberately to intensify their simple and naive forms in order that the religious message not be obscured by a facile image. Critics are removed by time and conviction from the Shaker artists and their recipients, and this circumstance can never be blurred or ignored when studying religious folk art.<sup>23</sup> Thus the simply drawn bird was a doubly appropriate carrier of the Shakers' message of simplicity, even as it serves as a warning to present-day scholars.

If the doves were ubiquitous in the art, they were no doubt equally visible in the communities themselves. Doves are blundering, cooing, sexually indistinguishable models of innocence and childhood, and as such, they are appropriate emblems of both innocent celibacy and its companion, humble equality. To be sure, the artists also had biblical precedents for messenger doves, ranging from Noah's dove, to the dove present at the baptism of Jesus, to Hosea's "silly dove."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Shaker doves convey many messages. In one drawing, Sarah Bates included at least seventeen doves who seem to thrive on every level. Even the symbols for Holy Mother Wisdom and the Heavenly Father were depicted by vast, overarching wings embellished with stars; they are abstracted images of the hovering, heavenly presence. As the scroll borne by one of the doves announces: "Thro' the heaven of heavens I fly with my wings loaded down with the blessings of God for thee my true & faithful child. . . ."

The doves and pigeons on the Shaker farms became messengers of the Heavenly Parents just as the Shaker sisters and brothers became saints in the new millennial world. Both the celibate saints and the humble doves moved back and forth between earthly and heavenly realms bearing messages, promises, and warnings to their communities and to the world. So, too, can the sacred rolls drawn by Sarah Bates be seen as messages to the "world's people." They warn the visitor from the world that "celibate spirits" may move more quickly to heaven than "equality spirits," and as

22. Patterson, pp. 16-18.

23. Jane F. Crosthwaite, "The Spirit Drawings of Hannah Cohoon: Window on the Shakers and Their Folk Art," *Communal Societies*, 7 (1987), 1-15.

24. Genesis 8:8-12; Matthew 3:16-17; Hosea 7:11.

the Shakers themselves might paraphrase the scriptures, if you would seek equality, seek ye first the kingdom of heaven.<sup>25</sup>

25. "Behold the fowls of the air . . . ," Matthew 6:26-33.