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WINGFIELD SCOTT WATSON AND HIS STRUGGLE
TO PRESERVE THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST
OF LATTER DAY SAINTS (STRANGITE)
AFTER THE DEATH OF ITS FOUNDER

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APPROVAL SHEET

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLL	The Book of the Law of the Lord
BofC	Book of Commandments
BofM	Book of Mormon
BofM (1830)	Book of Mormon, 1830 ed.
<i>CDBY</i>	Brigham Young, <i>The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young</i> , ed. Richard S. Van Wagoner (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009)
CHL	Church History Library
CV	Chronicles of Voree
D&C	Doctrine & Covenants
D&C (1835)	Doctrine & Covenants, 1835 ed.
<i>EMD</i>	Dan Vogel, ed., <i>Early Mormon Documents</i> , vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996)
<i>E&MS</i>	<i>Evening and Morning Star</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Elders' Journal of the Church of Latter Day Saints</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Dan Vogel, ed., <i>History of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition</i> , 8 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015)
<i>Hist. Reorg.</i>	Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, <i>History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints</i> , 8 vols., 4th ed. (Lamoni, IA: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1911)
JJSP	James Jesse Strang Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT
JS–H	Joseph Smith–History (Pearl of Great Price)
JSP	The Joseph Smith Papers
<i>JSP C50</i>	Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., <i>The Joseph Smith Papers</i> :

*Administrative Records, Council of Fifty Minutes, March 1844
January 1846* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press,
2016)

- JSP D1 Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 1, *July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2013)
- JSP D2 Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 2, *July 1831–January 1833* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2013)
- JSP D3 Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Brent M. Rogers, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 3, *February 1833–March 1834* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2014)
- JSP D4 Matthew C. Godfrey, Brenden W. Rensink, Alex D. Smith, Max H. Parkin, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 4, *April 1834–September 1835* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2016)
- JSP D5 Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimburger, Max H. Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 5, *October 1835–January 1838* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2017)
- JSP D6 Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Brenden W. Rensink, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 6, *February 1838–August 1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2017)
- JSP H1 Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard J. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories*, vol. 1, *Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2012)
- JSP H2 Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories*, vol. 2, *Assigned Histories, 1831–1847* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2012)
- JSP J1 Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 1, *1832–1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2008)
- JSP J2 Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 2, *December 1841–April 1843* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2011)
- JSP J3 Andrew Hedges, Alex D. Smith, Brent M. Rogers, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 3, *May 1843–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2015)

- JSP MRB* Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2009)
- JSP R1* Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, vol. 1, Manuscript Revelation Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2011)
- JSP R2* Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley, Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, vol. 2, Published Revelations* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2011)
- JSP R4* Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, vol. 4, Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2018)
- LofA* Letter of Appointment
- M&A* *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*
- MS* *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*
- NI* *The Northern Islander*
- SH* *The True Latter-Day Saints' Herald*
- T&S* *Times and Seasons*
- TPJS* Joseph Smith, *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007)
- VH* *Voree Herald*
- WWP* Wingfield Watson Papers, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite), Burlington, WI
- ZR* *Zion's Reveille*

PREFACE

This dissertation was birthed from a friendly conversation with Dr. Richard Bennett. I was searching for a topic, wanting to explore territory within Mormon history on trails few have traveled, but I did not know which trailhead to enter. As an accomplished Latter-day Saint historian, I knew Dr. Bennett could point me in the right direction, so I asked for advice. “You ought to do Strang,” he suggested. It was the first time I ever heard the name James J. Strang, so I asked for clarification. He smiled and replied, “Oh, he’s an interesting fellow.” Years later, I have learned that Dr. Bennett’s comment was an understatement. The Mormon king of Beaver Island has captured my imagination ever since.

Thank you, Bill Shepard, for helping me narrow my topic to Wingfield Watson and for providing kind mentorship, invaluable resources, and research assistance in the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite). This dissertation would have been impossible without your guidance. Thank you, Dr. George Martin, for your supervision and counsel. Special thanks to the staffs of the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Harold B. Lee Library of Brigham Young University, and the archives of the Community of Christ for aiding me in my research. Finally, thank you to my beautiful bride, Heather, for your incredible support in this pursuit. Soli Deo Gloria.

Kyle Beshears

Mobile, Alabama

December 2021

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1856, gunfire rang out across the harbor of St. James on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan. The Mormon prophet, James J. Strang, fell victim to an assassination plot by dissidents, following in the tragic footsteps of his predecessor, Joseph Smith.¹ Their respective religious movements suffered from schism in the wake of both men's death. During his life, Smith grappled with dissenters threatening his leadership, but fracturing rapidly accelerated after his murder.² During this fragmentation period, between 1844–1860, Mormonism splintered into various branches due, in large part, to the absence of any explicit plan of prophetic succession.³ Strang was a beneficiary of this confusion. Having only converted to Mormonism months before Smith's death, Strang rose quickly to prominence and notoriety by leading one of the

¹ See the subsequent section on definitions for an explanation on the use of the word "Mormon" and related terminology.

² For example, Warren Farr Parrish, who, having become dissatisfied with Smith's leadership, left to form a church that practiced "the old standard" of Mormonism in 1837, which attracted the membership of Martin Harris, the primary benefactor behind the publication of the Book of Mormon. Thomas B. Marsh, "Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff," *EJ* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 36–37. Perhaps the most notable dissident was William Law, a member of Smith's closest council who sought to reform the Church from its polygamous activity. Law published an *exposé* of the Church with his press, *The Nauvoo Expositor*. The first and only issue of the *Expositor* was published on June 7, 1844. Three days later, on June 10, 1844, the Nauvoo city council met to discuss its accusations, accusing it of libel. Turning his eyes toward the printing press, Joseph, acting as head of the Nauvoo militia, ordered his marshal "to destroy the Nauvoo Expositor establishment" believing the move to be within the legal confines for chartered cities in Illinois to "prevent and remove" public nuisances. Andrew Hedges, Alex D. Smith, Brent M. Rogers, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 3, *May 1843–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2015), 470, fn. 434. These actions directly led to Smith's arrest and, eventually, to his murder.

³ Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Restoration Research, 1990), 11. Many factors contributed to the schismatic fracturing of Mormonism after the death of its founder in 1844, e.g., political power, socio-economic issues, internal doctrinal disagreement, etc. However, none was more influential than the sudden and unexpected murder of Joseph Smith and the power vacuum left in the aftermath without a clear plan for succession. Historian D. Michael Quinn has identified eight possible scenarios for succession in the wake of Smith's death. See D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1976): 187–233.

largest branches of Mormonism in the late-1840s to mid-1850s. Strang ascended to his position of power through a surprising, vigorous, and persistent campaign of gathering disoriented and disenfranchised Mormons scattered across the American Midwest by the sudden and unexpected loss of their first leader. Ironically, Strang also failed to establish a clear line of succession, and, after his unanticipated death, the branch of Mormonism he created likewise fractured into smaller expressions and nearly dissolved.

Schism in Mormonism runs contrary to its central identity as a unifying restoration of Christianity in the imminent end times, or “latter days”. According to Mormon thought, apostasy loomed during the apostolic era and eventually metastasized into a universal rebellion that infected the entire church. Over time, “plain and precious truths” of the gospel were replaced with convoluted and (soteriologically) ineffectual dogma, e.g., Trinitarianism, original sin, and predestination.⁴ This “great apostasy” stripped the church of its authority, which, consequently, robbed believers the opportunity of the fulness of salvific exaltation.⁵ Denominational fracturing within Christianity was seen as evidence of this apostasy.⁶

After nearly two millennia, recovery from apostasy began in the 1820s when God restored ‘true’ authority and its associated doctrine and practices through the

⁴ The term “plain and precious truths,” which is ubiquitous in LDS writing (both past and present), originates in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 13:26, 28–29, 32, 34–35, 40; 19:3).

⁵ Like the term “plain and precious truths,” “great apostasy” is widely used in Mormon literature to describe the period of time between the post-apostolic era to the mid-nineteenth-century renewal of apostolic teaching and authority.

⁶ Smith claimed to begin sensing the apostasy after making an “intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository [and] I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst–McGee, and Richard J. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories*, vol. 1, *Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 11. Smith was not alone in his conviction. Notably, members of the Stone-Campbell movement viewed denominationalism, or “sectarianism,” as a delegitimizing force that perpetuated division among Christians. See D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., “Emergence of the Stone-Campbell Movement,” in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*, (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2013), 9–29.

prophetic mission of Joseph Smith. The coming forth of the Book of Mormon—within its pages was said to be found the “fullness of the everlasting gospel”—filled the hollowness of sectarian dogmatics while angelic ordination to sundry offices of authority endowed Smith with power, sourced in the eternal being of God, to act on his behalf.⁷ In this last dispensation, with God *via* Smith as its fount, all proper doctrine and practices were restored until the end of time and, according to Smith, “shall never be taken again from the earth.”⁸ This restoration would ultimately culminate in the millennial reign of Jesus Christ at his future return.

The hope of Mormonism in this present “dispensation of the fulness of time” is to act as the unifying power of Christian belief and practice. Not that all of Christendom should fold into Mormonism, but that there might be, among myriad churches, one standard of God’s authority in a single, unified institution endowed with proper doctrine and authority.⁹ The success of the Mormon mission is, in part, measured by internal unity, as Smith taught; “when the Saints of God will be gathered in one . . . and all things whether in heaven or on earth will be in one, even in Christ.”¹⁰ Smith believed that Mormonism, with its principles and authority given to him and dispensed among his faithful, “will unite with the earthly [authority], to bring about those great purposes.”¹¹ Unlike evangelical visions of eschatological union, which anticipates the gathering of all believers from across the denominational spectrum, Smith taught such a

⁷ Dan Vogel, ed., *History of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015), 1:12.

⁸ D&C 13:1, cf. D&C 110:16.

⁹ Joseph Smith, *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 521, cf. Eph 1:10.

¹⁰ *TPJS*, 513–14.

¹¹ *TPJS*, 214.

gathering must occur within the restoration of “Latter-day glory.”¹² In the molten heat of the latter days, the dross of denominationalism would float to the top and only the religion based on Latter Day Saint restorationism would remain.¹³ Mormonism alone could unify Christian division because it alone held the proper principles and authority.

Thus, the succession crisis that occurred after Smith’s death was more consequential than the question over who ought to lead the movement. Schism within the religion undermines its own *raison d’être*. Unsurprisingly, after Smith’s death, faithful Latter-day Saints sought continuity of prophetic authority from the first prophet to the next, whomever it may be. Candidates for succession who made the most convincing argument for such continuity won followers. While most Mormons followed Brigham Young, various contenders, like James Strang, also gained converts. Mormonism split into Mormonisms under various leaders, e.g., Sidney Rigdon, James Strang, Alpheus Cutler, Granville Hendrick, and, eventually, Joseph Smith III, becoming a refracted image of the denominationalism is sought to repair.

The promise of ecclesiastical unity, though, did not fade. Each sect called to the other for repentance into the “true” church. For Wingfield S. Watson, a convert to Strang, the “true” church was on Beaver Island, headquarters to Strang’s society at the time of Watson’s conversion in 1852. Watson maintained this conviction when, four years later, he tended to his mortally wounded prophet while he laid bleeding on the dock.¹⁴ After Strang’s death, Watson and his family were exiled from the island and, for the next ten years, lived quiet lives in the Strangite diaspora, hidden from the public out of fear.¹⁵

¹² *TPJS*, 186.

¹³ For a definition of “Latter Day Saint restorationism,” see the subsequent section on definitions.

¹⁴ Wingfield Watson, “Autobiography of Wingfield Watson,” 19 (unpublished autobiography, typeset, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [Strangite]), Burlington, WI. Hereafter cited as *WWP*.

¹⁵ One family, the Kinneys, assumed pseudonyms to conceal their identity in the aftermath of Strang’s assassination. Kyle Beshears, “Eunice Kinney: A Strangite Woman Alone in the Faith,” presented at the John Whitmer Historical Association, September 21, 2018. For more on the Strangite diaspora, see

By the early 1860s, Lorenzo Dow Hickey, an apostle and pillar of Strangite leadership, began advocating for membership in the church led by Joseph Smith III, the oldest son of Smith. Hickey counseled his fellow Strangites to join with “young Joseph,” as he was called, arguing that Strang had secretly ordained Joseph to the First Presidency when he was a child.¹⁶ Watson, however, opposed Hickey’s proposal, fearing that Strangite distinctives would evaporate if they were to fold into young Joseph’s church, thus forfeiting Strang’s claim as an authentic prophet from Smith’s authoritative line and, in consequence, jeopardizing the very purpose of LDS restorationism. Watson stepped forward from among the Strangites to defend his martyred prophet against a chief rival, Joseph Smith III, and the internal decay caused by Hickey’s proposal. For Watson, the rejection of Strang as a prophet by churches led by young Joseph and Brigham Young was tantamount to a rejection of the core principles of LDS restorationism. Were unity ever to be regained, it must be under the banner of Strang lest the unifying project of Mormonism come crumbling down.

For this reason, Watson embarked on a lifelong mission to stop the hemorrhaging of the Strangite movement by reinforcing Strangite distinctives (e.g., sustaining Strang’s claim to authority and unique Strangite scripture and teaching) and bidding Mormons to recognize Strang as Smith’s rightful heir. In short, Watson argued that Strang was Smith’s legal successor for the following reasons: 1) Joseph Smith’s

chap. 4 of this dissertation. Vickie Cleverley Speek, “*God Has Made Us a Kingdom*”: *James Strang and the Midwest Mormons* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2006); Vickie Cleverley Speek, “From Strangites to Reorganized Latter Day Saints: Transformations in Midwestern Mormonism, 1856–79,” in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 141–60.

¹⁶ John Cumming, *Lorenzo Dow Hickey: The Last of the Twelve* (Mount Pleasant, MI: Clarke Historical Library), 12. Original reprinted from *Michigan History* 50 (March 1966): 50–75. Joseph Smith III, however, denied that Strang was ever a prophet, which, in addition to other reasons, Watson believed disqualified him from the office. Watson campaigned for Strang as the only legitimate successor to Smith. Hickey’s argument led to many Strangites joining the Reorganization, which resulted in the erosion of their distinct religious identity over time. Watson pugnaciously argued for separation from any other form of Mormonism, which resulted in some Strangites maintaining their unique identities. Had the Strangites followed Hickey’s counsel, then Strangism would have altogether disappeared. Hickey later recanted his argument.

successor could only ascend to the vacant office by direct revelation; 2) this direct revelation could only come through Joseph Smith as prophet, seer, and revelator, and not through any other means, i.e., common consent, as was the case with Brigham Young, or lineal descent, as was the case with Joseph Smith III; 3) Smith's successor must be ordained under the hands of angels; and 4) the successor must also possess the tools of a seer (i.e., the Urim and Thummim) and ancient scriptural records.¹⁷ Watson believed Strang met this four-fold criteria, arguing that "Mr. Strang claims to have thus been ordained, after having been duly appointed by revelation through Joseph the Prophet."¹⁸ If this were the case, then authority in Mormonism lies with those whom Strang ordained and the promised unity in the latter days was hidden among exiles of his church. Yet, despite tremendous effort on Watson's part, he nor any other Mormon leader were able to unify completely the movement after the death of Joseph Smith that was, ideally, marked by a gathered unity. Today, there exists over a dozen denominations of Mormonism and numerous small schisms, creating an ironic state of fragmentation for a project rooted in the struggle for unification.

Why God allowed Strang to be taken from the earth without appointing another prophet was a mystery to Watson. It was clear to him, however, that the other schisms failed to maintain fidelity to core principles of Mormonism. An examination of Watson's struggle to preserve the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) after the death of its founder will yield a clearer understanding not only of the branch itself but the issue of authority in Mormonism generally, especially regarding its foundational claim to the restoration of Christianity under a unified power. Indeed, the undercurrent of authority is strong throughout this dissertation, pulling the narrative along as it winds through the decades. Who is God, and who says so? Watson would spend

¹⁷ Terminology will be defined in subsequent sections.

¹⁸ Willard J. Smith, *The Watson-Blair Debate . . . 1891* (Galiien, MI: Willard J. Smith, 1892).

much of his life upholding Strang as the source of answering these questions in direct challenge to other Mormonisms with different answers.

Definitions

Terms, titles, and concepts can lead to confusion within Mormon Studies. Before the thesis question can be asked, a foundation of vocabulary must be constructed to understand what is being asked and why it is being asked. Therefore, I have (somewhat abnormally) placed this section of definitions before asking my thesis question. Throughout this dissertation, I will utilize the following terms for the Mormon religion and its adherents as they evolved over time and through myriad schisms. This set of vocabulary counterintuitively does not begin with Mormonism, for Mormonism as a religion has sprung from its source of Latter Day Saint restorationism.

Latter Day Saint Restorationism

“Latter Day Saint restorationism,” or LDS restorationism, is the belief that the offices of prophet, seer, and revelator in combination with “priesthood authority” are necessary for the eschatological (i.e., “latter days”) restoration of Christianity, which began in the mid-nineteenth century with Joseph Smith.¹⁹ LDS restorationism is a prominent *leitmotif* throughout the history of Mormonism. As previously noted, Smith believed that divine authority—the sanction to act and speak on behalf of God—had long been stripped from humanity by the time of his life. Shortly after the deaths of biblical and mormonic apostles, the church fell into total apostasy when corrupt leaders, whether through naive negligence or intentional deviation, misused and distorted ecclesiastical offices and ordinances.²⁰ The power of the gospel was diminished because without proper

¹⁹ The term “priesthood authority” will be defined in a subsequent section.

²⁰ The term “mormonic” describes anything deriving from the Book of Mormon, similar to the term “biblical” to describe anything deriving from the Bible, e.g., “mormonic prophets” and “biblical prophets.” The term “mormonic” avoids the cumbersome phrasing of “Book of Mormon” to describe its people, narrative, events, theology, e.g., “Book of Mormon prophecy” and “Book of Mormon people” vs.

authority and performance of ordinances human potential for divine exaltation is dramatically curtailed. This era of a total turning away from God is described as the “great apostasy”.

Early Mormon leaders grounded the basis of their new religious movement in the need for a complete restoration of Christianity. For Smith, the apostasy was patently clear. According to him, “there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”²¹ The absence of spiritual gifts and presence of denominational confusion were the primary pieces of evidence for his position. Smith’s thought was unlike his Protestant restorationist contemporaries, and while there were many restoration projects occurring congruently with early Mormonism, the Stone-Campbellite movement sought to expunge Christianity of any foreign intrusion into beliefs and practices of NT Christianity during the post-apostolic era.²² They believed in a second Reformation, one that would complete what the likes of Luther and Calvin began. Smith, however, thought this project was insufficient because it would simply lead to yet another set of Christian denominations. The faith did not need merely another Reformation to its NT roots but a complete *restoration* of the ancient order of things, i.e., a priesthood and its related practices spanning as far back as Genesis.²³ Although it was a necessary correction to Smith, the Reformation was ultimately

“mormonic prophecy” and “mormonic people.” It is not to be understood as a derogatory slight against the text nor the religion and culture it informs. In his critique of a previous work of mine, LdS apologist Jeff Lindsay speculated that my use of “mormonic”—a term he felt evokes similar sounding words like “demonic” or “moronic”—was unnecessarily pejorative. Lindsay is right to guard against such uncharitable slurs, were that to be the case; however, he misinterpreted my intention. Jeff Lindsay, “Too Much or Too Little Like the Bible? A Novel Critique of the Book of Mormon Involving David and the Psalms,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018), 32.

²¹ *JSP* H1:11–12. The subsequent chapter features a section on early Latter Day Saint conceptions of apostasy.

²² The term “Stone-Campbellite Movement” here is used in exchange for the more common, and less pejorative, “Restoration Movement” to avoid confusion with “Latter Day Saint restorationism.”

²³ For a comparison of Campbell and Smith’s thought, see RoseAnn Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: 19th-Century Restorationists* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2017).

inadequate and resulted in myriad denominations that added more unharmonious voices to a cacophonous choir, e.g., Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Coptic traditions, and so on. Christianity could not be reformed unless it was restored back to its original, ancient ways. Sectarian and doctrinal confusion and contention was too powerful to overcome by mere reformation.

Oliver Cowdery, an early and influential LDS leader, evidenced the apostasy by denominationalism:

There is no fact plainer in the world, than the fact that the church of Christ has disappeared. . . . and this is one of the great reasons of their present confusions and darkness; of their strive and partyism, because they cannot agree as to the order of a church, as originally established by the apostles. . . . they have yet, never been able either to restore to the world the church, or the gospel on which it was founded.²⁴

Smith believed it was patently obvious that something fractured the faith. “Look at the Christian world,” he instructed, “and see the apostasy [*sic*] there has been from the Apostolic platform.”²⁵ The hope for redemption from “sectarian wickedness and their iniquity” was the “light of the latter day glory” to break through darkness.²⁶ “They have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant,” warned the voice of God through Smith’s first canonized revelation.²⁷ Thus, the project of LDS restorationism from its earliest days was a reordering of Christianity *via* restored authority for the rediscovery of doctrines and the renewal of ordinances.

Contemporary LdS scholarship, however, trends toward rejecting such a flagrant dismissal of Christianity in total. John D. Young notes how several LDS authors, including some church leaders, have evince an awareness that

²⁴ *Messenger & Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 39.

²⁵ Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 2, *July 1831–January 1833* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 352. Throughout the dissertation, to avoid the tedium of pointing out grammatical abnormalities, I will offer quotes exactly as they were written.

²⁶ *JSP* D2:352.

²⁷ D&C 1:15.

many of the historical accounts upon which their traditional narrative of the Great Apostasy has been constructed are either tendentious, discredited, or insufficiently supported by objective historical research.²⁸

Consequently, he calls for a revision of the apostasy narrative while cautioning its abandonment because the narrative has “both utility and power in Mormonism.”²⁹ A common re-narration of the apostasy sees God divinely inspiring people towards faith and good lives despite the absence of the priesthood authority.³⁰ Mormon eschatology allows for post-mortem salvation; therefore, those who lived faithful and good lives during the apostasy may be presented with an opportunity to experience the fullness of salvation as if they lived during apostolic or latter days.

How, exactly, this restoration ostensibly occurred will be detailed in Chapter 2. For this section, however, it is sufficient to understand the definition of LDS restorationism as outlined above.

Mormonism

“Mormonism” is the religious, cultural, and historical elements that form the worldview and tradition stemming from LDS restorationism.³¹ The word “Mormon”

²⁸ John D. Young, “Long Narratives: Toward a New Mormon Understanding of Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 309. Young concludes that a construction, rather than reconstruction, of the Great Apostasy narrative is warranted. He suggests a threefold version. First, that God inspired people throughout the Great Apostasy for restoration. Second, that God inspired those developments so that people might have faith in Christ and live moral lives, even in the absence of the priesthood. Third, Latter-day Saints can expand their own understanding of doctrines and practices by studying those of other faiths.

²⁹ Young, “Long Narratives,” 309.

³⁰ See Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2005); Robert L. Millet, “Great Apostasy,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, ed. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2011), 46–50; Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26–34.

³¹ Recently, the term “Mormonism” has come under scrutiny within a large segment of the religion after the seventeenth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russell M. Nelson (1924–), called for members and non-members to cease using “Mormonism” and related terms, e.g., “Mormon,” “Mormon Church,” “LDS,” “LDS Church,” etc. These terms, he argued, deviate from the Christocentrism of LDS restorationism by removing “Jesus Christ” or shortening “Latter-day Saint,” which, in turn, adopts abusive language that undermines the movement. Nelson said he was motivated to make the announcement after God impressed upon him the need for maintaining the official, divinely-given

derives from the religion's keystone scripture, the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon self-presents as an ancient compilation by three historian-prophet redactors, primarily from a man named Mormon, concerning the history of their people, the Nephites. These people were descendants of Jewish emigrants from sixth-century-BC Jerusalem to the Americas. The narrative climaxes with a post-resurrection visit from Jesus Christ, who, similar to his biblical ministry, taught the people and ordained mormonic apostles with priesthood authority. The book ends with the extermination of the Nephites by their rivals, the Lamanites, as Moroni, the last of the Nephites and son of Mormon, collected and buried the content of the Book of Mormon on metallic plates for future generations to discover.

To believer and non-believer alike, the Book of Mormon distinguished the Mormon movement from traditional Christianity. The term "Mormon," while initially a derogatory slight used by anti-Mormon critics, eventually transformed into an epitaph of honor worn by early Latter Day Saints in defiance of their opposition and, eventually, matured into a standard synonym for any person who identifies with an ecclesiastical tradition rooted in LDS restorationism. In 1844, with the death of Joseph Smith, multiple Mormonisms necessitated distinguishing identifiers for the various schismatic branches that tapered from Smith's movement, e.g., Brighamite, Josephite, Strangite, etc.

"Saint(s)" means any person that identifies themselves with LDS restorationism, past or present. "Mormon(s)" means any person that identified themselves

name of the Church, citing an 1838 revelation to Smith (D&C 115:4), although use of this title varied in Smith's life before and after the revelation was given. Consequently, the Church has published guidance for its members—and non-members willing to abide by their request—to prefer the official title (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) in lieu of "Mormonism" and, when needed, synonymous terms such as "the Church," the "Church of Jesus Christ," or the "restored Church of Jesus Christ." This request, however, cannot be honored in full by members of Christian traditions that reject such an overreaching truth claim and, furthermore, does not represent wider Mormonism, in which the term still holds value, especially as a historical identifier. Therefore, when suitable, I will oblige Nelson by honoring the present desire of the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Utah) not to be identified as the "Mormon Church" and its members as "Mormons". Otherwise, the term "Mormonism," with its derivatives and related terminology, will appear in line with its historical use, i.e., to describe the religious, cultural, and historical elements that derive from all of LDS restorationism.

with LDS restorationism during Wingfield Watson’s day, as was common usage at the time. The “LdS Church” means The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, predominantly in the Intermountain West, both past and present. “Latter-day Saint(s)” and “LdS” mean any person who presently identifies as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³²

“The Brighamite Church” is a synonym for the LdS Church after the death of Joseph Smith and during the presidencies of Brigham Young (1847–1877), John Taylor (1880–1887), Wilford Woodruff (1889–1898), Lorenzo Snow (1898–1901), Joseph F. Smith (1901–1918), and Herber J. Grant (1918–1945). These presidents served during the time when Wingfield Watson was active in defending the Strangite movement, and “Brighamite” was his preferred term for what I will call “Intermountain West Mormonism,” the religious, cultural, and historical elements that form the worldview and tradition of the LdS Church. “Brighamite(s)” means any person that identified themselves with the LdS Church during the same period of the Brighamite Church.

“The Community of Christ” means the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, presently. “The Josephite Church” means the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints during Wingfield Watson’s day, as this was his preferred term for the organization. “Josephite(s)” means any person that identified themselves with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints during the same period of time and for the same reason as stated for the Josephite Church. “Josephite Mormonism” means the religious, cultural, and historical elements that form the worldview and tradition the Josephite Church.

“The Strangite Church” means the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite), both past and present. “Strangite(s)” means any person that identifies

³² Capitalized and hyphenated forms of “Latter-day Saint,” “Latter-Day Saint,” and “Latter Day Saint” are intentional and based on present and historical uses.

themselves with the Strangite Church, both past and present. “Strangite Mormonism” means the religious, cultural, and historical elements that form the worldview and tradition of the Strangite Church.

Priesthood Authority

“Priesthood” and “priesthood authority” are elastic terms within the broader Mormon tradition. In some ways, they are familiar concepts to outsiders. Christian traditions utilize “priesthood” to mean a community of clergy and their associated responsibilities, e.g., the Levitical “priesthood.” A priesthood, then, is a collection of ordained individuals who represent God and perform and administer sacred acts and ordinances, e.g., temple sacrifices, baptism, Lord’s Supper or eucharist, etc. Similarly, in Mormonism, “priesthood” means the power and authority to govern and perform ordinances on behalf of God. Priesthood holders are organized in quorums according to offices, which structure and govern their respective responsibilities.³³

Historically, Smith envisioned the priesthood as an eternal source and system of power and authority. He taught that “The Priesthood is an everlasting principle & Existed with God from Eternity with God from Eternity & will to Eternity, without beginning of days or end of years.”³⁴ This eternal priesthood exists in varying “portions or degrees,” which are systematized into two orders of divine power and authority, a lesser and greater priesthood.³⁵ The lesser or lower priesthood is formally known as the “Aaronic priesthood.” Named after the biblical high priest, Aaron, and identified with the Levitical priesthood, this authority enables the priesthood holder to administer “outward

³³ For a definition of these offices, see subsequent sections.

³⁴ Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Brenden W. Rensink, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 6, *February 1838–August 1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 543.

³⁵ *TPJS*, 180.

ordinances,” e.g., baptism.³⁶ Smith claimed that it was conferred on him and his associate, Oliver Cowdery, by John the Baptist on May 15, 1829.³⁷ Smith wrote that the lower priesthood “[holds] the keys of the ministering of angels, and to administer in outward ordinances, the letter of the gospel, the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”³⁸

The “Melchizedek Priesthood,” the higher of the two orders, was named after the OT figure Melchizedek, to whom Abraham presented an offering (Gen 14:17–20). This “Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” must be held by those who seek the “right of presidency” in order “to administer in spiritual things” *via* the “keys of all spiritual blessings of the church.”³⁹ Holders of this priesthood are endowed with special responsibility of leading the church in various roles. It is unknown when this priesthood was conferred to Smith; however, he claimed to have received it from the apostles Peter, James, and John who received the “Keys” from “The Savior, Moses, & Elias” on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1–3).⁴⁰ The Aaronic Priesthood is dependent on the Melchizedek Priesthood; the former was described by Smith as an “appendage” to the latter.⁴¹ According to him, the Melchizedek priesthood “is the channel through which all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important matter is revealed from heaven.”⁴² In other words, the greater priesthood enables the priesthood

³⁶ “On Priesthood,” in *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints . . . Elders of Said Church* (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 83. Hereafter cited as D&C (1835). Since its publication, the *Doctrine and Covenants* has been revised and canonized as scripture in the Lds Church; therefore, subsequent citations will not italicize the title of the work.

³⁷ *Hist.* 1:33–34.

³⁸ D&C 107:20.

³⁹ D&C 107:3, 8, 18.

⁴⁰ *JSP* D6:543; Douglas J. Davis, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212.

⁴¹ D&C 107:14.

⁴² *Hist.* 4:207.

holder to assume ecclesiastical offices, e.g., apostle, seventy, high priest, and elder.⁴³ For early Mormonism, priesthood was not a separate class of clergy nor a special calling on select members to serve in ecclesiastical roles. Rather, it was, in addition to the power of salvation, the authority to act in the offices to which one was called.

Presently, the LdS Church defines the priesthood as the eternally extant “power and authority of God . . . through this power, He exalts His obedient children [and] is the power and authority that God gives to man to act in all things necessary for the salvation of God’s children.”⁴⁴ It is important to note that the priesthood, the “power and authority of God,” is given through divine transfer (God “gives to man”); it cannot be obtained through any other means. The priesthood is passed down by laying on of hands and is conferred to initiates through participation in formal ceremonies. Additionally, only worthy adult males in the LdS Church can possess the priesthood.

In Strangite scripture, the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods are also referred to as the “Priesthood of life” and the “Priesthood of an endless life,” respectively.⁴⁵ Strangite ecclesiology is hierarchal, wherein authority given to one man can only come from another man holding an equal or higher “royal authority.”⁴⁶ When God appoints and ordains prophets, the act must be done by the laying on of hands by either a current prophet or divine agent (e.g., angel) because priesthood ordination can only be given from a higher to a lower position.⁴⁷ Like the LdS Church, the Strangite tradition passes the priesthood through the laying on of hands by those in authority over the priesthood candidate.

⁴³ These terms will be explained in a subsequent section.

⁴⁴ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019), 7.

⁴⁵ James J. Strang, *The Book of the Law of the Lord . . . Notes and References* (St. James, MI: Royal Press, 1851), 214. Hereafter cited as BLL.

⁴⁶ BLL, 163.

⁴⁷ BLL, 163–4. For instructions on angelic ordination, see BLL, 165–6.

Although Mormon traditions view priesthood differently in nuanced ways, all of Mormonism is bound by the common conviction that the priesthood is a restored power and authority from God, i.e., LDS restorationism. Without this priesthood, religious leaders, even those within Christianity, act and teach insufficiently and illegitimately, regardless of their sincerity.

Mormon Ecclesiastical Terminology

The following terms are both historical and modern vocabulary used in the wider Mormon tradition. These definitions will be considered both in their historical contexts of origin, both early Mormon and Strangite history, and present-day use. The first three definitions are a triplet linked together that empowered Smith's mission as prophet, seer, and revelator.⁴⁸ These three offices, whose distinctive functions are found in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 8:12–18), represent the highest ecclesiastical authority within early Mormonism. They endowed Smith and, under certain circumstances, select others (e.g., his brother, Hyrum, and other Mormon apostles) with special abilities and responsibilities.

“Prophet.” A “prophet” is a person chosen by God and endowed with the gift of prophecy to speak on his behalf. Mormonism holds this gift and its office central to the religion. The gift of prophecy is not restricted to the office of prophet because, in a general sense, God can reveal prophecy to individuals *via* the Holy Ghost.⁴⁹ Moreover, Smith taught that what constitutes a prophet is a profession of the “spirit of prophecy,” and, “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such.”⁵⁰ Today, the LdS Church holds a universal ‘prophethood of all believers’ wherein “faithful members of the Church

⁴⁸ D&C 124:94; 107:91–92.

⁴⁹ D&C 28:4.

⁵⁰ *Hist.* 5:215, 265.

can be prophets, not only as they teach truth and possess a testimony of Jesus but also as they receive spiritual guidance within their own stewardships.”⁵¹

However, the office of prophet in the LdS Church is restricted to one man, a priesthood holder and apostle, who is chosen by God as its principle leader.⁵² This prophet speaks as God’s appointed representative, giving his “commandments”⁵³ and “revelations,”⁵⁴ holding the “keys of the mysteries,”⁵⁵ and teaching people what they mean and how they are to be understood and practiced.⁵⁶

Although he had been acting in the role, Smith was officially recognized as the first “prophet” of the “Church of Christ” after the restoration on April 6, 1830, the day of the LDS Church’s organization.⁵⁷ The LdS Church believes that an unbroken chain of prophets has guided the religion since the death of Smith in 1844, beginning with Brigham Young (1801–1877) to Russell M. Nelson (1924–), their present-day prophet. The early Community of Christ rejected Young’s authority, believing instead that an unbroken chain of prophets spans from the calling of Joseph Smith III (1832–1914) to Stephen M. Veazey (1957–), their present-day prophet. The Strangite Church likewise rejected Young’s authority but believes that only one other prophet, James Strang, has been called since the death of Smith. Until God calls another prophet, the Strangites

⁵¹ Brent L. Top, “Prophet,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011), 515. LDS theologian Bruce R. McConkie used the language of “legal administrator” to describe the prophet. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1979), 169.

⁵² “There is never but one [prophet] on the earth at a time” (D&C 132:7).

⁵³ D&C 21:4.

⁵⁴ D&C 28:3.

⁵⁵ D&C 28:7.

⁵⁶ D&C 43:7.

⁵⁷ Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations*, vol. 1, *Manuscript Revelation Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 22–23, cf. Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley, Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations*, vol. 2, *Published Revelations* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 57–58 (BofC 22:1, 14; D&C 21:1–2, 11).

believe this time to be an interregnum toward a future season when the dispensation of the fulness of time begins.

“Seer.” A “seer” is a person who is specially endowed with the ability to perceive or see spiritual reality. In the Book of Mormon, a seer is defined as someone who possess “a gift from God” to translate ancient records. For this reason, “a seer is greater than a prophet [because] a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come.”⁵⁸ As seer, Smith was gifted seer tools, the Urim and Thummim, to translate ancient records (i.e., see the past) and receive revelation (i.e., see the future). Strang also claimed seership when he translated ancient records by the Urim and Thummim.⁵⁹ In the words of LDS theologian Brent L. Top, “a seer not only tells forth God’s truths but is also a foreteller.”⁶⁰ Seership is reserved for those whom God calls to be prophet, seer, and revelator, i.e., the head of the LDS Church.

“Revelator.” A “revelator” is any person who is gifted with the ability to make known a previously unknown ‘truth’ *via* revelation, whether it was something new or something forgotten or suppressed in the past that God revived to living memory. Smith was given this gift by God so that he might know “the certainty of all things pertaining to the things of [God’s] kingdom on the earth.”⁶¹ In a general sense, all people are able to be revelators, for the Holy Ghost, whom Smith described as a revelator, gives personal

⁵⁸ Mosiah 8:13, 15–17.

⁵⁹ “Chronicles of Voree: A Record of the establishment and doings of the Stake of Zion called Voree in Wisconsin, made by the Scribes appointed to that office,” 23, typeset facsimile copy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) archives, original in private hands. Hereafter cited as CV. This edition is a transcription compiled by John J. Hajicek (Burlington, WI: J. J. Hajicek, 1992); *Voree Herald* 1, no. 1 (January 1846). Hereafter cited as *VH*.

⁶⁰ Brent L. Top, “Seer,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011), 582.

⁶¹ D&C 100:11.

revelation to whom he will.⁶² However, like prophecy, there is a specific office of “revelator” reserved for those whom God ordains to act as principle revelator on earth. As with ability of seership, this revelator practices far more than mere interpretation or discernment concerning spiritual matters. They act as spiritual antennae that receive divine information to recover or rediscover lost revelation. As revelator, Smith served as the only person to declare new or previously forgotten truth from God. He acted “like unto Moses” in that there was no other person “appointed unto [the Church] to receive commandment and revelations.”⁶³

A man who holds the combined offices of prophet, seer, and revelator is *de jure* the president of the LdS Church. A president is the highest authority of the LdS Church, head of the Office of the First Presidency (along with two counselors), holding the power to assign and direct all uses of priesthood authorities under their purview, i.e., the power to appoint or remove individuals from any ecclesiastical position, from apostles to missionaries. Similarly, the prophet of the Community of Christ also bears the titles and responsibilities of seer and revelator.⁶⁴ Presently, the three-fold office is vacant in the Strangite tradition.

“Apostle.” An “apostle” is a Melchizedek priesthood holder who bears a “special witness” to God, i.e., to act as high authorities when teaching and correcting religious praxis.⁶⁵ As president, Smith considered himself the chief apostle of the LDS Church, a tradition which still lives on today. The president of the LDS Church is promoted from within the ranks of apostle (typically, the most senior apostle) without losing his apostolic status. Apostles are called by the president of the church and have

⁶² *Hist.* 6:58.

⁶³ D&C 43:3; 107:91–92.

⁶⁴ *The Priesthood Manual*, 24.

⁶⁵ D&C 107:23.

“equal in authority and power” to him in unanimous quorum.⁶⁶ They hold authority over the Seventies.⁶⁷ In the Strangite tradition, apostleship is one of two orders in the “priesthood of an endless life” (i.e., the higher priesthood), with the other order being that of “Priests.”⁶⁸ Apostles are described in relation to God as “witnesses of his Law” and “witnesses of his name and Kingdom.”⁶⁹ They are considered under-shepherds to the chief shepherd, the prophet, in addition to being special witnesses. They “exercise royal authority in the Kingdom,” which are pseudo-legal roles of administration in the kingdom of God on earth, i.e., the Strangite community.⁷⁰

“Seventy.” A “seventy” is a Melchizedek priesthood holder who is called “to preach the gospel, and to be special witnesses unto the gentiles,” i.e., non-Mormons.⁷¹ This office is modeled after the seventy elders whom God called with Moses to enact his covenant (Exod 24:1). Seventy members collectively constitute a “Quorum of Seventy.” Historically, their role was primarily for proselytizing, for the seventies were ordered, “to go into all the earth, whithersoever the Twelve Apostles shall call them.”⁷² Seventies are under the authority of apostles; however, a Quorum of Seventy is equal in authority to the apostles (but not the president) in unanimity.⁷³ Each Seventy is selected by apostles and is given administrative authority to oversee an aspect of the LDS Church. Their ultimate role is to assist the apostles in carrying out apostolic duties. In the Strangite tradition, up

⁶⁶ D&C 107:24.

⁶⁷ For a definition of “Seventy,” see the subsequent section.

⁶⁸ BLL, 214.

⁶⁹ BLL, 49, 191.

⁷⁰ BLL, 191.

⁷¹ D&C 107:25.

⁷² *Hist.* 2:201–2.

⁷³ D&C 107:26–27.

to seven quorums of Seventies are possible; however, the movement was never (nor is presently) large enough to sustain multiple quorums.⁷⁴

“High priest.” A “high priest” is a Melchizedek priesthood holder and the prerequisite office for a person serving in the positions of bishops or higher. Modeled after the biblical position, high priests were charged by Smith “to administer in spiritual and holy things, and to hold communion with God.”⁷⁵ He established the church presidency as fastened to the office of “Presiding High Priest over the High Priesthood of the Church,” i.e., over the entire Melchizedek priesthood of the church.⁷⁶ In the Strangite tradition, the Presiding High Priest is *de facto* the leader of the church in the absence of a prophet and after the death of higher-ranking leaders, e.g., apostles. Wingfield Watson acted in this office, having been ordained by Lorenzo Dow Hickey in 1898, and held the position until his death in 1922.⁷⁷

“Elder.” An “elder” is both a general term and official title in Mormonism. As with the Christian tradition, an “elder” is someone who may be advanced in years, considered wise by their peers, and holds ecclesiastical authority and responsibilities. Unlike the Christian tradition, however, an “elder” in Mormonism is someone who holds an office within the Melchizedek priesthood. Smith tasked elders with the following responsibilities:

to baptize; And to ordain other elders, priests, teachers, and deacons; And to administer bread and wine—the emblems of the flesh and blood of Christ—And to confirm those who are baptized into the church, by the laying on of hands for the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, according to the scriptures; And to teach, expound, exhort, baptize, and watch over the church; And to confirm the church by the laying on of the hands, and the giving of the Holy Ghost; And to take the lead of

⁷⁴ BLL, 194.

⁷⁵ *Hist.* 1:338.

⁷⁶ D&C 107:65–66.

⁷⁷ See also Cumming, *The Last of the Twelve*, 25.

all meetings.⁷⁸

Today, this office is the most public for the LdS Church, especially among non-members, because all male missionaries hold it. It is likely, then, that the first personal encounter with the LdS Church by a non-member is with an elder. The Community of Christ and Strangite traditions follow a similar pattern set earlier by Smith in which elders fulfill lay-level ministerial responsibilities.

Thesis

In this dissertation, I will ask whether Wingfield Watson's apologetic was in continuity with the teachings of James Strang, and, if so, whether Watson's leadership was a contributing factor in preserving Strangite distinctives after the death of James Strang. I will measure Watson's success on his ability to uphold a continuity of Strangite doctrine, in fidelity to Strang's teachings, for retaining Strangite distinctives and convictions among members of the Strangite Church. Watson's level of success will be measured qualitatively by the continuity of Strang's and Watson's argument for the Strangite claim as the authoritative and "true" LDS restoration *via* Smith's appointment of Strang and his subsequent ordination to the office of prophet. I will examine and outline Strang's argument for his right to succession, and then compare his argument to that of Watson's argument. The goal of this dissertation is not to attribute definitively the success or failure of the post-Strang church to Watson, i.e., I am not seeking to determine whether Watson held the church together. Instead, this dissertation will closely examine the efforts made by Watson to ensure continuity between Strang's teachings and claims of authority as a possible factor for Strangite staying power during Watson's life.

Thus, this dissertation will expand knowledge of Mormon history in general (i.e., divergent views of prophetic succession) and Strangite history in specific (i.e., Wingfield Watson and his role as its most prominent apologist). In general, this

⁷⁸ D&C 20:38b–44.

dissertation will also speak to the implication of Mormon schisms in their relation to the religion's claim to unify Christian division as the only holder of "true" doctrine and ecclesiology.

Limitations and Delimitations

The purpose of this dissertation is to ask whether Watson's efforts to preserve Strangism were in continuity with the teachings of James Strang, and, if so, whether Watson's leadership was a contributing factor for preserving Strangite distinctives after the death of James Strang. Therefore, I will delimit the answer to my research question to the religious life and apologetic of Watson: his early life before his conversion, his conversion, the years preceding his career as an apologist, his apologetic for the Strangite movement, his deathbed conviction, and the legacy of his efforts in the post-Watson Strangite community. All preliminary matter (chapters 2–3) will be presented in support of understanding Watson's beliefs, motivations, and arguments. The dissertation will then focus on his life and work between 1863–1918, the years when Watson was most active as a Strangite apologist (chapters 4–5). This dissertation, especially chapter 5, will also pay more attention to Watson's published and unpublished works—especially his religious pamphlets and correspondence with fellow Strangites—than to common biographical details in order to understand his apologetic and refine the core reason(s) for the staying power of the Strangite religion in the post-Strang diaspora.

Additionally, secondary sources on the post-Strang Strangite Church are scarce, so I will rely heavily on primary sources. Finally, most sources related to this project are written, often handwritten, in American English between the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, limiting language barriers to mere illegibility due to penmanship or the wear and tear of some documents.

Methodology

I will answer my research question by using historical and source analysis methodologies. These methods will guide my efforts toward the analysis and examination of primary documentary evidence to understand the past, especially from its own context and perspectives rather than from a contemporary lens, thus creating a dialogic against which I may subsequently determine any continuity that may exist between Strang and Watson. Documentary evidence will mainly include primary documents retrieved from archival research, especially that of the Wingfield Watson Papers, an assembly of original, facsimilia, and typeset copies of correspondence from Watson's papers, Strangite meeting minutes, journals, papers, and periodicals currently stored at the archive of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) in Burlington, Wisconsin.⁷⁹ Additional primary material has been collected from the Church History Library archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections from Brigham Young University, the Jesse Strang Collection from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, the Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University, the Special Collections Division of the J. Willard Marriott Library of the University of Utah, and the DeGolyer Library of Southern Methodist University. Secondary sources will be used when a primary source is unavailable or to aid in constructing historical analyses, i.e., building on previous analyses. Due to the long period of time that has elapsed between the subject of this dissertation and today, no oral histories or ethnographic data are available for collection and inclusion in my methodology.

⁷⁹ At the time of writing, the Wingfield Watson Papers is under the stewardship of Strangite historian William Shepard and is located in the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) in Burlington, Wisconsin.

CHAPTER 2

LATTER DAY SAINT RESTORATIONISM

In his early adolescent years, Joseph Smith entered a private grove near his home in western New York to pray. Like so many of his contemporaries, the young boy had become disturbed by his sinfulness and sought divine forgiveness. But unlike many of his neighbors, Smith was led to privacy rather than a pastor due to a disquieting sense that serious deficiencies had corrupted the Christian faith, thus robbing clergy of their authority and, consequently, legitimacy and authenticity. At the root of Smith's motivation to pray was the issue of religious authority.

The American Social Landscape Preceding LDS Restorationism

Smith asked his question during radical changes across the socio-economic and religious life of his immediate and national context. The decades surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century were marked by significant population growth, industrialization, political evolution, and westward migration.¹ The significant increase was due, in part, to the 2.5 million immigrants, mainly young families, who arrived on American shores between 1820 and 1850.² Smith, however, grew from thoroughly Yankee stock, the son of Joseph Smith, Sr. (1771–1840) of Massachusetts, and Lucy Mack Smith (1775–1856) of

¹ In 1790, about four million (3,929,000) people lived in the United States. “A1 North America: Population of Countries,” in *International Historical Statistics: The Americas 1750–2010*, *International Historical Statistics*, ed. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2013), 17. Just forty years later, its booming population (12.8m) rivaled England and Wales (13.8m). “A1 Population of Countries at Censuses,” in *International Historical Statistics: 1750–2010: Europe*, *International Historical Statistics*, ed. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2013), 34.

² According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, approximately 2.46 million immigrants arrived between 1821–1850. See Maldwyn A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607–1992*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 694.

Vermont.³ The Smiths and Macks were farmers, subsisting on any success they could eke out of rural New England's meager economy. For most Americans, farming was the only way to make a living.

Yet, with the rise of industrialization and improved technologies, spurred by intellectual property rights and standardization, new industries such as manufacturing and mining appeared while existing markets, like agrarian commodities, were streamlined. Eastern cities swelled as towns on the frontier, from Rochester to St. Louis, grew into small cities.⁴ Smith's hometown, Palmyra, New York, benefited from the canal network being developed during his lifetime. The Erie Canal linked neighboring Rochester to the Atlantic Ocean *via* the Hudson River. Palmyra was connected to the canal by 1822 and, after a few years, became a trading center as agricultural and commercial goods flowed between Lake Erie and New York City.⁵ Farmers benefitted greatly, selling their produce to larger cities. The Smiths would have enjoyed the economic and cultural influence of the canal. Palmyra was no "cultural backwash," wrote Whitney Cross, who noted how its citizens reveled in a share of the same "vigorous and cosmopolitan" energy found in New England.⁶ Every week, canal traffic brought new faces, goods, news, and ideas. Consequently, Joseph enjoyed relative leisure compared to earlier generations and even his contemporaries who settled far from the canal. He worried less about basic survival on the frontier than he did about his soul, and he was free to pursue ventures that were

³ Lucy was born in New Hampshire and briefly lived in Massachusetts. In 1794, her family moved to Tunbridge, VT where she married Smith on January 24, 1796. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 14.

⁴ Between 1820–1850, on the eastern seaboard, New York grew from 131,000 to 696,000 (+136%), Philadelphia from 119,000 to 340,000 (+96%), and Boston from 43,000 to 137,000 (+104%). In the frontier during that same period, Rochester grew from 2,000 to 36,000 (+178%) while St. Louis grew from 4,000 to 78,000 (+180%). "A4 North America: Population of Major Cities," in *International Historical Statistics 1750–2010: Americas*, *International Historical Statistics*, ed. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2013), 1–2.

⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 31.

⁶ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 140.

not available to everyone, e.g., religious study, community debate, and even treasure-seeking.

But what kind of nation would emerge from this rapid development? In 1783, at the close of the War of Independence, questions lingered concerning the future success of the new democratic republic. In 1787, at the close of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was famously (and perhaps mythically) asked in public what Congress had produced. “A republic,” he replied, “if you can keep it.”⁷ His response captured the mixture of hope and uncertainty about the nation’s future. What would be the relationship of federal institutions to the states? Could Americans successfully settle the vast tracts of wilderness that lay west of Appalachia? Would democracy prevail among competing interests at the local, national, and international stages?

Woven through these questions was speculation over how fidelity to Christian principles would relate to America’s destiny. John Adams believed a direct link existed between the “general Principles of Christianity” and the “general Principles of American liberty,” where the former caused and sustain the latter.⁸ Naturally, Enlightenment principles played a monumental role in shaping the founders’ thought, but because Christianity helped to birth liberty, fidelity to Christian principles would aid in sustaining it. The Great Experiment risked collapse if general Christian principles were abandoned.

Nevertheless, by the turn of the nineteenth century, it seemed to many Americans that destiny was on their side. By 1783, the Treaty of Paris pushed the United States’ western border to the Mississippi River, and its territory effectively doubled

⁷ Luther Martin, “Papers of Dr. James McHenry on the Federal Convention of 1787,” *The American Historical Review* 11, no. 3 (April 1906): 595.

⁸ Reminiscing on the cause of unity in diversity during the Revolution, Adams argued; “the general Principles of Christianity, in which all [the] Sects were United: And the general Principles of English and American Liberty, in which all those young Men United, and which had United all Parties in America, in Majorities Sufficient to assert and maintain her Independence.” John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1813, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series*, vol. 6, 11 March to 27 November 1813, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 236–9.

overnight with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The young nation projected global power with its budding navy in the First Barbary War (1801–1805) and secured domestic safety by staving off the mighty British Empire in the War of 1812. Cities and industries grew, wealth was created, and democracy spread across the continent. Surely, God was blessing the new nation toward an extraordinary destiny.

Not everyone, though, was so optimistic. Over time, a chasm between Jefferson’s “natural Aristocracy” and the common man fomented distrust.⁹ For disenfranchised proletarians, the elites came to represent the very tyranny that first-generation Americans fought to displace. The peace, unity, and patriotism that followed the War of 1812 gave way to contention, division, and anxiety not only between religious groups but also classes and political parties, e.g., the rise of abolitionism, debate over Monroe Doctrine, economic disparity between the industrializing North and the agricultural South, growing distrust of Federalism, etc. These cultural cross-pressures inspired some reformers to action, but others felt skeptical of America’s future.

During this season of frustration and skepticism, Andrew Jackson rose to power on the belief that the nation needed rescue from a “crisis of corruption.”¹⁰ He vehemently opposed what he saw as “the marshaling of power and influence by a few institutions and interests that sought to profit at the expense of the whole.”¹¹ As a result, Jackson earned the reputation as a “defender of the common man” who wrested authority away from a select few and disbursed it among the many.¹² Jacksonian reforms restructured federal systems and expanded the electoral franchise to all white men. For

⁹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 15, 1813, Founders Online, National Archives, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6198>.

¹⁰ Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 52.

¹¹ Meacham, *American Lion*, 52.

¹² Henry W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Double Day, 2005), 471.

the newly enfranchised, America's future looked bright again. Democracy was, once more, destined to continue its advance across the continent and, for Christians, the gospel with it.

Still, others were pushed further to the margins. Slavery in southern states expanded, indigenous Americans were resettled in the west, and the wealth gap continued to balloon between the eastern elites and rural agrarians. Religious minorities, like Methodists, were marginalized by established denominations, like the Congregationalists in New England and Presbyterians in the mid-Atlantic states, typically led by well-educated clergy and housed in well-funded churches. For some evangelicals, the vision of America's future was, yet again, threatened to become one of disaster and ruin, not progress and liberty. They cast their hope forward to a heavenly rescue, one to come from a New Jerusalem rather than the District of Columbia. Low church evangelicals found an opportunity in lands newly opened for settlement where dissent from the mainstream found little resistance. Subsequently, Baptists and Methodists grew in leaps and bounds in the south and west despite the missional presence of other denominations.¹³ But, with so many kinds of faith, another question of authority arose, like the one Smith asked: Who, of all the denominations, held the purest fidelity to the gospel principles outlined by Christ and his apostles? In other words, if governmental authority now truly lies with the people, with whom does religious authority lie?

Toward Christian Restorationism

Authority in Christianity, with its attendant themes of legitimacy and authenticity, stood at the forefront of religious debate in nineteenth-century America, especially in its frontier. Nearly three centuries earlier, papal authority was challenged by

¹³ Alan Taylor, "The Free Seekers: Religious Culture in Upstate New York, 1790–1835," in *From the Outside Looking In: Essays on Mormon History, Theology, and Culture*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Matthew J. Grow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.

a country priest. Martin Luther's revolution wrenched religious authority from *ex cathedra* to *sola scriptura*. Scripture and reason, not man and his traditions, was the highest earthly authority. In the Reformation that followed, Reformers sought to recapture a legitimate expression of authentic Christianity under the warrant and custom of scripture. Protestantism was driven by a mission to revive and practice an unblemished form of Jesus's teachings and NT apostolic theology.

It found no freer laboratory in which to experiment than the United States. Since 1791, with the passing of the First Amendment to the Constitution, the United States forbade the federal establishment of religion. Gone were the days when bishops, in tandem with magistrates, dictated orthodoxy through authoritative prescriptions and reinforced their power through the royal scepter. Each congregation or community self-governed to ensure doctrinal purity and encouraged orthopraxy within their own spheres. The people, not magistrates, determined the religious fabric of society. The church, once a top-down governmental structure, became a flattened democratized matrix.

As a result, the new nation enjoyed unparalleled religious freedoms, becoming a free market of religious ideas and expressions, unique among societies at the time. By the end of the eighteenth century, a nation that began with a handful of fledgling Congregationalist settlements grew into an impressive forest of religious expressions. Ordinary citizens could join any society they wished or start a new organization if present options felt wanting.

Yet, with religious freedom came religious confusion, or what one early Mormon leader described as religious "division, misrule [and] countless tomes of controversy about doctrine."¹⁴ In the cacophony of competing doctrine, the impulse to rediscover an authentic expression of NT Christianity invigorated seekers who believed

¹⁴ Benjamin Winchester, *A History of the Priesthood . . . Now Extant* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert Publishing, 1843), iii.

that Protestantism had come to suffer the same fate of theological and ecclesiastical sully that led the reformers to break from Rome. Compounding the question of authority was that of authenticity. As early as the sixteenth century, theologians bemoaned an apostasy that they believed had corrupted the church and, worse, left Roman residue in Protestant doctrine and practices. English Separatist Henry Barrowe was bewildered by those who agreed that the “Church of Rome is no true Church”—that its “ordinations and sacraments are ineffective”—but could not recognize that the Church of England was rooted in a void ministry.¹⁵ He further argued that the only true church is the one “expressly set down and manifested in the testament of Christ.”¹⁶ Similarly, dissenter Roger Williams imagined the history of the church in three phases: first, “a *Time of purity and Primitive Sinicurity*” marked by churches that upheld the “*Institutions and Appointments of Christ Jesus*,” second, a “time of *Transgression & Apostacy*,” infected by a “many *Flocks* pretending to be Christs;” and third, an eschatological “time of the coming out of the *Babylonian Apostacy & Wilderness*.”¹⁷

This sentiment carried forward into nineteenth-century American faith, as, for many, the concept of apostasy and hope for restoration drove them in search of an authentic church. The outward corruption of the visible church, with its superstitious doctrines and practices, was indicative of an invisible, spiritual corruption. Although the church had become corrupt in its ways, all was not lost. The true authority of the church still existed, i.e., the Bible, which ruled over an invisible class of true believers. What was need after the *reformation*, then, was a *restoration* of the faith.

In America, a new class of restorers called on Christians to reject false doctrine

¹⁵ Quoted in Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1988), 50.

¹⁶ Quoted in David W. Atkinson, “A Brief Discoverie of the False Church: Henry Barrow’s Last Spiritual Statement,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 48, no. 3 (September 1979): 269.

¹⁷ Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg’d Out of His Burrowes*, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A66448.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>. Emphasis original.

and corrupt practices to rediscover a truer and purer form of Christianity. Restorationists like Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell of the Christian Movement envisioned a renewed faith purged of all doctrine, practices, and missions not explicitly outlined in the NT. The movement called on every Christian to transcend sectarian divisions in pursuit of unity under the banner of a purely apostolic gospel, free from the constraints of the myriad historical episodes that led to denominational fracturing. If authority was to be found, it was in a revived call to a *sola scriptura*—or, better, *nuda scriptura*—with an eye to restoring the NT church.

These restorationists believed their mission was possible through a hermeneutic of common-sense rationalism coupled with their rejection of Calvinism and, even earlier into ecclesiastical history, disregard for ecumenical councils and creeds. Alexander Campbell argued that any person could read and understand scripture through inductive reasoning.¹⁸ Smith expressed this same sentiment when, in the winter of 1823–1824, he cautioned his mother, Lucy, against joining any congregation. He reasoned cynically that he could “take my Bible and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours, than you can learn at meeting in two years.”¹⁹ That Smith was never a part of any Campbellite tradition is a testimony to the pervasiveness of its hermeneutic.

Campbellite restorationism encouraged people to judge soteriological matters in the Bible for themselves, which, in turn, led to a striping of Christian theology to salvific, biblical minimalism, i.e., for doctrinal statements to hold utility, they must have a direct connection to soteriology and scripture. Consequently, Campbellites rejected

¹⁸ Carisse Mickey Berryhill, “Common Sense Philosophy,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnivant, Paul M. Blowers, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 231. As Nathan Hatch noted, this hermeneutic was appealing for three reasons: 1) “it proclaimed a new ground of certainty for a generation perplexed that it could no longer hear the voice of God above the din of sectarian confusion”; 2) “[it] dared the common man to open the Bible and think for himself”; and 3) “[the] obvious success in befuddling the respectable clergy.” Nathan O. Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (December 1980): 560.

¹⁹ Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996), 307.

denominational traditions for muting the plainly revealed religious truth and prescribed religious behavior of the Bible, championing instead a new tradition captured in the slogan, “no creed but Christ.” In an ironic twist of fate, the Christian Movement founded new denominations, e.g., the Christian Connexion, the Disciples of Christ, the Churches of Christ, and independent Christian Churches. For other seekers, a truer restoration was yet to come.

Millenarianism

Alongside restorationist impulses was a growing sense of Christ’s imminent return based on apocalyptic prophecy in the book of Revelation. In biblical prophecy, believers are promised citizenship in a utopic kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace under a thousand-year-reign of Christ inaugurated at his second coming (Rev 20:1–10).²⁰ Ambiguity in the prophecy as to when exactly the millennium begins have led commentators to theorize myriad options. Two prominent theories dominated the American imagination in the nineteenth century. One theory, “*premillennialism*,” held that Christ’s return initiates the kingdom, while the other theory, “*postmillennialism*,” taught that the millennium occurs before Christ may return. Many postmillennialists believed the new republic of the New World was a new promised land. Christians, as God’s chosen people, were to build up John Winthrop’s “City on a Hill,” a beacon of liberty and righteousness to inspire the world. America was a place where people from all nations, kindreds, and tongues could gather in an asylum from oppression to worship in liberty before God’s throne. American optimism colored their beliefs.

Others disagreed, preferring a premillennial outlook of America’s future.

²⁰ Ruth H. Bloch noted that while one meaning of “millennialism” constitutes the unfolding of Revelation 20, another definition carries a more generalized “vision of a future golden age,” i.e., an Enlightenment secular utopianism. For pre- and post-revolutionary Americans, however, the former millennialism captivated the public’s imagination, i.e., prophecies from the Bible. Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xv.

Pessimism concerning the collapse of America shaded their ideas. The premillennial view carries with it a mounting tension of expectation that Christ's return could occur at any moment, which led the most zealous believers to radical preparation for the imminent eschatological kingdom. One such radical, German preacher Johann Georg Rapp, taught that the second coming of Christ would occur in the United States in 1829.²¹ In 1805, his followers emigrated from Germany to settle in western Pennsylvania and later in the wilderness of Indiana.²² The Rappites lived communally until Rapp's prophecy failed to come true and his movement dissolved.²³ William Miller similarly perpetuated the immediacy of the *parousia* with a precise estimation that the end would come during the year 1844. When his prediction came and went without apocalypse, Miller's legacy was cemented as the Great Disappointment. Other preachers sensed the end was near but restrained their expectancy to generalized predictions about signs of the times.²⁴ This pervasive anticipation of the millennium led historian Nathan Hatch to opine that "the first generation of United States citizens may have lived in the shadow of Christ's second coming more intensely than any generation since."²⁵ Smith was born and raised amid this eschatological intensity.

But not all people lived beneath that apocalyptic shadow. For one religious

²¹ Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society, 1785–1847* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 75–76.

²² George Browning Lockwood, *The New Harmony Communities* (Marion, IN: The Chronicle Company, 1902), 23; Karl J. R. Arndt, "The Strange and Wonderful New World of George Rapp and His Harmony Society," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 57, no. 2 (April 1974): 162–3.

²³ Rapp died in 1847. His followers continued to work and worship together but suffered decline in membership until their society was disbanded in 1905. Eileen Aiken English, "The Road From Harmony," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (January 2007): 13.

²⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 478–81; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 184–9; Jon R. Stone, "Nineteenth- and Twentieth Century American Millennialism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 492–514; Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1999), 17–23.

²⁵ Hatch, *Democratization*, 184.

minority, their community believed the millennium had already arrived. The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, colloquially (and pejoratively) known as Shakers, envisioned God as male and female with divine incarnations occurring first in Christ and later in the Beloved Daughter, whom they believed to be Ann Lee.²⁶ Believers, as they were also called, worked to establish her millennial reign outside Albany, New York.²⁷ Known for their egalitarian communes, celibacy, and charismaticism, the millennial kingdom was evidenced by the renewal of NT spiritual gifts (e.g., tongues, visions, and prophecy) and ecstatic worship (e.g., whirling, rolling on the floor, trembling, and "shaking"). The climax to this ecstatic state was personal revelation, sometimes flowing from the mouths of members, that supplanted even scripture in their authority, i.e., an "inward Christ" indwelling the Believers.²⁸ The Shakers weathered severe opposition from critics who rejected these practices as heteropraxy rooted in heresy. Shaker Benjamin Youngs defended their worship, framing the peculiar spiritual activities in millennial terms as evidence that "the work of the latter day, spoken of by all the prophets, hath verily commenced."²⁹ Other Shakers agreed: true worship marked "the restoration of the church, and the latter day glory." It was hoped that the eschatological kingdom would "gather the saints into one harmonious communion."³⁰ Theirs was the

²⁶ See Stephen J. Stein, "Historical Reflections on Mormon Futures," in *From the Outside Looking In: Essays on Mormon History, Theology, and Culture*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Matthew J. Grow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66.

²⁷ Ann Lee was believed by her followers to be the woman spoken of in Revelation, a coredeptrix, the "true mother of all living in the new creation," who would complete the atoning work of Christ in the end times. Benjamin Seth Youngs, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing . . . in This Latter-day*, 2nd ed. (Albany, NY: E.&E. Hosford, 1810), 439.

²⁸ According to Youngs, "[The] testimony of living witnesses, is considered of the highest authority, and superior to any written record whatever . . . the living testimony of God is not of the *letter*, but of the *spirit*; for the *letter* killeth, but the *spirit* giveth life." Youngs, *Testimony*, xv, 377. Emphasis original.

²⁹ Youngs, *Testimony*, xv.

³⁰ Calvin Green and Seth Wells, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church . . . Shakers* (Albany, NY: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1823), 17.

“purified and restored” community of believers, the “church of Christ in the latter day.”³¹

The Burned-Over District

In the winter of 1816–1817, the Smith family arrived in Palmyra.³² By 1820, Joseph Smith, Sr. had leased land in neighboring Farmington (later Manchester) at the southern border of Palmyra township and move his family there in stages between 1819–1822.³³ Like so many families before them, the Smiths left the old towns of the east

³¹ Green and Wells, *View of the Millennial Church*, 402.

³² Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 30.

³³ When, exactly, the Smiths moved to their Manchester property from Palmyra is complicated by discrepancies in various descriptions given by Smith for the First Vision, which will be explained later in this chapter. He wrote that his theophanic experience occurred in the spring of 1820 after revival broke out near his home “sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester.” Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard J. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories*, vol. 1, *Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 208. In the third draft of this history, Smith adds that he was “about 15 years old,” i.e., 1820, which corroborates another account. *JSP* H1:209. Given that Smith was born on December 23, 1805, this necessitates the First Vision occurring no earlier than December 1819—Smith said spring of 1820—and, consequently, the move to Manchester sometime in 1817–1818. *JSP* H1:212, 213. The 1820 date is recognized by the LDS Church. Other accounts, however, muddy the waters. In an 1835 journal entry, Smith stated he was “about 14 years old,” or 1819, when the vision occurred. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 1, *1832–1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 88. Yet, in his earliest account of the event (1832), Smith places it “in the 16th year of my age,” or 1821—the phrase was inserted by Smith’s scribe, Frederick G. Williams. *JSP* H1:12. Given the length of time that elapsed from the event to known accounts—at the earliest, 1832, nearly a decade had passed—it is possible that Smith misremembered the exact year. However, Michael Marquardt and Wesley Walters contended that, according to extant census data, Joseph Smith, Sr. lived on Palmyra’s Main Street in 1817 and moved to a log cabin near Manchester by 1820. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994), 3–4. Joseph Smith, Sr. did not hold residence in Manchester until after the summer of 1822. Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 7. Moreover, Marquardt and Walters argued that revival would not break out in Palmyra until the fall and winter of 1824–1825, citing increase in extant church membership documents. Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 15. Adding to the complication, Smith’s mother, Lucy, said a revival occurred around the 1823 death of her son, Alvin, which acted as a catalyst for Smith seeking spiritual truth (the statement was subsequently crossed out). *EMD* 1:306. If this is the case, then the First Vision could not have occurred until after 1820. Bushman suggests that even though the Smiths had not taken up residence in Manchester, they were nevertheless working the land there while technically still living in Palmyra, thus making possible 1820 as the date for the First Vision. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 32, fn.10. Others have argued for sporadic revival occurring in and around the periphery of Palmyra, affecting the town due to its proximity to the canal, which could account for Smith’s memory of the event. Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (1969): 82–100; Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1971), 73–74, 79–89; Steven C. Harper, “A Seeker’s Guide to the Historical Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *The Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 12, no. 1 (2011): 165–76. It is likely, therefore, that some form of religious excitement stirred Smith in his adolescence, which blossomed into a visionary experience sometime in the early 1820s. That the First Vision necessitated its origin in the Palmyra revival of 1824–1825 is unnecessary given the sporadic nature of revivals in the area during the early nineteenth century, although, due to a matrix of conflicting information, an 1820 date ought to be held with a degree of uncertainty.

seeking fortune in the untapped potential of the rapidly settling frontier. As people migrated westward, they also left their established churches, hoping to discover a livelier faith that eluded them in the dispassionate congregations of the east. Many of the older congregations had, by the end of the eighteenth century, fallen into “routine observance and even inertia and disintegration,” according to historian John Wolffe.³⁴

In the wake of the First Great Awakening, new generations were born that had not experienced the same spiritual revival that led previous their parent’s and grandparent’s conversion. While revivals were never truly absent, they occurred only in spurts isolated to geographic regions around the new nation.³⁵ Many second- and third-generation Americans never tasted the revival, which developed a hunger in them for powerful and intimate encounters with God. Such was the case with Smith. Historian Alan Taylor noticed how these emigrants to the American frontier brought with them a hunger for fresh spiritual experiences. He identified three causes: first, “evangelicals left behind orthodox ministers who asserted their prestige against the folk longing for the daily intervention of spiritual power in this world;” second, “frontier hardships produced intense mood swings between despair and hope, an emotional dialectic that induced more vivid dreams;” and third, “the troubling competition of denominations demanded some supernatural criteria for determining their truth claims.”³⁶ By the dawn of the nineteenth century, fresh revival swept through the wilds of the young nation, and Smith emerged from the whirlwind as the pinnacle authority over a new religion.

Frontier Missions and the Second Great Awakening

With the rapid settlement of the American backwoods, churches found it

³⁴ John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 48.

³⁵ Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*, 48.

³⁶ Taylor, “The Free Seekers,” 18.

difficult to keep up with the growth. And while many of the migrants were pious heirs of the First Awakening, frontiersmen nevertheless developed a reputation for immoral and reckless living, some even converting to the skepticism of Paine. To serve—or, better, to *save*—the growing population, denominational organizations in the east employed traditional models of training clergy and assigning them to posts but had gotten a late start. Pioneers arrived long before preachers, and it was too costly and difficult to train enough clergy, let alone convince them to leave prestigious posts to enter the harsh conditions of the unknown. Sending congregations soon realized that the cost of producing clergy from authority-granting institutions to preach in sanctioned spaces was too high. Missionaries and itinerant clergy were deployed to fill the void as the center of authority drifted from the seminary licentiates to amateur laity. Nathan Hatch noted how the missionaries inspired the change by welcoming “hundreds of common people into the ministry, creating a cadre of preachers who felt and articulated the interests of ordinary people.”³⁷ Authority no longer rested on *bona fides* but in the “validity of lay proclamation.”³⁸ The truth, utility, and affective power of the message became more authoritative than the messenger.

By the close of the eighteenth century, domestic missionary efforts began to blossom, and with the missionaries came a fiery passion that would ignite a second Great Awakening. At the spear tip of revival was Presbyterian minister James McGready, who moved to southwest Kentucky in 1797. There, he preached with the hope of eliciting in his congregation a “sensible thing,” i.e., an affective response, to a stagnate congregation in the state of “general deadness.”³⁹ By summer 1800, revival broke out as “the divine

³⁷ Hatch, *Democratization*, 8.

³⁸ Hatch, *Democratization*, 134.

³⁹ James McGready, “Narrative of the Commencement and Progress of the Revival of 1800,” printed in *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend and Pious James M’Gready, Late Minister of the Gospel in Henderson, KY* (Nashville: J. Smith’s Steam Press, 1837), vi.

flame spread through the whole multitude.”⁴⁰ Soon, there were too many people to fit in the cramped chapel as “multitudes crowded from all parts of the country [from] the distance of forty, fifty, and even a hundred miles.”⁴¹ Families set up camp or slept in wagons, lingering in the revival for days on end listening to preaching and participating in sacrament. One participant, Barton Stone, would go on to lead a revival in Cane Ridge a year later with an estimated ten to twenty-five thousand attendees.⁴² Hardened frontiersmen, steeped in worldly vices, brought their families to listen to evangelists belt calls for repentance from crude, simple platforms. One witness described how the message was as elementary as the platforms from which it came, merely the “plain and essential truths of the gospel.”⁴³

Sectarianism in the Burned-Over District

Revivals in the west paralleled spiritual renewal in the east, arousing Smith’s parents in their personal quests for religion prior to their western migration.⁴⁴ In 1803, revivals in Connecticut spurred Smith’s mother to explore her faith having become “wholly occupied upon the subject of religion.”⁴⁵ Yet, with so many competing theologies, it was difficult to discern truth. She scurried from “place to place” seeking “some congenial spirit, who could enter into my feelings” and strengthen her fidelity to God.⁴⁶ To her dismay, that spirit constantly eluded her, leading her to the determination

⁴⁰ McGready, “Narrative of the Commencement,” ix.

⁴¹ McGready, “Narrative of the Commencement,” ix.

⁴² Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 433.

⁴³ “Rev. John Lyle’s account of the great Cain Ridge camp meeting, August 1801, Lyle Diary, 21–35,” printed in Catharine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West 1797–1805* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 187.

⁴⁴ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 24–25.

⁴⁵ *EMD* 1:240.

⁴⁶ *EMD* 1:241.

that “there was not then upon earth the religion, which I was seeking after,” further resolving that the “the Bible should be my guide to life and salvation.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, she attended church services accompanied by her seeker husband.⁴⁸ Joseph Smith, Sr., however, eventually rejected institutional and evangelical churches, preferring mystical means for discerning truth. Around 1811, after a powerful dream that envisioned Christianity as a barren field devoid of truth, he arrived at the conclusion that “there was no order or class of religionists that knew any more concerning the Kingdom of God, than those of the world.”⁴⁹

In the wake of the War of 1812, New England congregations experienced a renewed call of fidelity to God, though not as enthusiastic as those in the western marches.⁵⁰ Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher oversaw “orderly revivals” in Connecticut (1821) and Boston (1826).⁵¹ His contemporary, evangelist Asahel Nettleton, likewise preferred a quiet method, one more “decorous and unsensational” compared to McGready and Stone, that relied on personal discipleship and pastoral visitations.⁵²

Such sporadic eruptions of revival—be they enthusiastic or subdued—dotted western New York where Smith was raised. As historian Paul Johnson noted, religious enthusiasm there “sputtered for twenty years [~1810–1830], arbitrarily descending on one congregation or community while neighboring churches slept.”⁵³ Smith recalled how during the early 1820s “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” began to stir his

⁴⁷ *EMD* 1:242.

⁴⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 25.

⁴⁹ *EMD* 1:256.

⁵⁰ Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*, 62–69.

⁵¹ Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*, 62–63.

⁵² Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 421.

⁵³ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 4.

town as it had “the whole district of Country.”⁵⁴ Over all, church membership effectively doubled from 1800 to 1835 as a new “middle-class orthodoxy” of free agency, perfectionism, and millennialism engulfed the region.⁵⁵

While frontier life promoted what Taylor called “cordial interdenominational relations,” doctrinal disagreements on soteriology and fiscal concerns inevitably created friction between otherwise cooperative evangelicals, which led to the “troubling competition of denominations.”⁵⁶ Protestants stood unified in their condemnation of Catholicism—and evangelicals in their rejection of Unitarianism and Universalism—but Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians nonetheless turned their zeal for mission against each other, which, according to Cross, “often relentlessly and increasingly sharpened sectarian antagonisms.”⁵⁷ Taylor described the religious atmosphere as “an open-ended, fluid, porous, multivalent, and hypercompetitive discourse involving multiple Protestant denominations and many autonomous clusters of seekers.”⁵⁸ In a bid to win converts, preachers publicly debated core Protestant doctrine by addressing questions related to doctrine, practice, and society. “Never before,” wrote Taylor, “had so many people engaged in such an open-ended and wide-ranging discourse about spiritual fundamentals as on the broad and expanding settler frontier of the early American republic.”⁵⁹ As a result, people frequently shifted their theological positions and their membership, inviting the ire of ministers who lost sheep to other flocks. The fire of revival and debate swept across western New York throughout the early nineteenth century, scorching communities

⁵⁴ *JSP* H1:208. The term “district” could refer to the Methodist district in which Palmyra and the surrounding area belonged, thus broadening revival activity beyond the Palmyra-Manchester area.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 4–5.

⁵⁶ Taylor, “The Free Seekers,” 18.

⁵⁷ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 43.

⁵⁸ Taylor, “The Free Seekers,” 13.

⁵⁹ Taylor, “The Free Seekers,” 23.

in the “Burned-over district.”

Palmyra was one such community, and amid fiery revivals, the Smith family struggled finding a church to call their own. Theirs was a fractured belief, with Lucy and some children then attending a Presbyterian church and Joseph Smith, Sr. refusing to attend anywhere at all.⁶⁰ Smith himself was more partial to the Methodists.⁶¹ In 1823, however, the death of Smith’s eldest brother, Alvin, sent the family on a spiritual quest for answers. Lucy recalled how the family “could not be comforted because [Alvin] was not,” likely her reflection on the calloused intimation of Reverend Benjamin Stockton, who, at Alvin’s funeral, suggested that the young man faced damnation for lacking baptism and church membership at the time of his death.⁶²

It was around this time, according to Lucy, that the waters of revival were stirred in Palmyra.⁶³ She recalled a “great revival in religion and the whole neighborhood was very much aroused to the subject and we among the rest flocked to the meeting house to see if their was a word of comfort for us that might relieve our overcharged feelings,” i.e., their present state of grief.⁶⁴ Smith remembered being caught up in the “unusual excitement” among churches, which caused “no small stir and division among

⁶⁰ Smith recalled that his “father’s family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that church; namely, my mother Lucy, my brothers Hyrum, Samuel, Harrison, and my sister, Sophonia.” *JSP* H1:208.

⁶¹ *JSP* H1:210.

⁶² Alvin’s funeral was held at Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra, presided over by Benjamin Stockton, who preached, before the whole community, that Alvin had died in a state of reprobation. The family, Lucy said, “wept over our irretrievable loss.” Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2004), 55; *EMD* 1:306.

⁶³ Smith places the revival in the spring of 1820, thus complicating the timeline. Some scholars have argued that the revival was stoked by Methodist elder George Lane stoked revival in 1823, which continued to 1824, thus causing Lucy to like the religious stir to the death of Alvin. They further argue that the lack of evidence for increased church members in newspapers in 1820 indicates a lack of revival then. While it is possible that both 1820 and 1824 could have experienced some form of revival, it seems most likely that the revival Smith speaks of concerning his First Vision actually occurred in 1824, but, for reasons unknown, he later believed the revival occurred in 1820. For a thorough debate concerning the precise dating of the revival, see Wesley P. Walters and Richard L. Bushman, “The Question of the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1:59–81.

⁶⁴ This statement was crossed out at a later time and does not appear in the second draft. *EMD* 1:306.

the people.”⁶⁵ There was seemingly no end to the reach of the excitement as “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties.”⁶⁶ Revival was in full swing. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians “were active in getting up and promoting [to] have every body converted.”⁶⁷

Amid the excitement, Smith sought answers for his questions concerning salvation, no doubt spurred by the death of his brother. Much to his dismay, however, he became disillusioned by the sectarian “strife of words [and] contest about opinions.”⁶⁸ The unifying spirit that initially characterized revival immediately gave way to harsh disagreement and proselytizing. Smith recalled that “priest contending against priest, and convert against convert so that all their good feelings one for another (if they ever had any) were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.”⁶⁹ Consequently, he was compelled to receive answers directly from the highest authority *via* personal experience. In doing so, Smith followed a familiar pattern set forth other seekers.

Methodist evangelist Jacob Young was, according to historian John Wigger, “typical in many respects” of his contemporaries and an archetype of experience carried through the Second Great Awakening.⁷⁰ After falling under conviction at a tent meeting, Young was hesitant to seek guidance anywhere, “for this was a dark time in the Church, and I knew of no one to whom I could go to instruction.”⁷¹ At a later time, overwhelmed

⁶⁵ *JSP* H1:208.

⁶⁶ Dan Vogel, ed., *History of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015), 1:5.

⁶⁷ *JSP* H1:208.

⁶⁸ *JSP* H1:208.

⁶⁹ *Hist.* 1:6.

⁷⁰ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 53.

⁷¹ Jacob Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer . . . Reflections* (Cincinnati: R. P. Thompson, 1860), 27.

by distress, Young took to prayer in the night. He described how a “light appeared to shine from the south part of heaven, and God, in mercy, lifted up the light of his countenance upon me, and I was translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.”⁷² Finally, conversion arrived. Baptist preacher Jacob Knapp, too, shared a similar experience. During the summer of 1817, in the wake of the death of his mother, Knapp recalled a “deep anxiety about the future welfare of my soul.”⁷³ He took his Bible and “repaired to the woods, with a determination never to return without relief to my soul [far away] from human sight or hearing.”⁷⁴ As he meditated, the weight of his sin crushed him. “I felt myself sinking down into despair [as] the earth seemed to open beneath me, and hell appeared to be yawning for my reception,” he recalled.⁷⁵ Soon after, his burden was lifted. “[I] turned my eyes towards heaven, and thought I saw Jesus descending with his arms extended for my reception.”⁷⁶ Knapp was saved.

Smith would have a similar, albeit it conspicuous, experience. Stranded in the “midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions,” he searched the Bible for answers.⁷⁷ Soon, Smith claimed to receive an answer that would come to define his life and millions after him.

The Birth of LDS Restorationism

In the early 1820s, Smith retreated to a private grove near his home to pray.⁷⁸

⁷² Young, *Autobiography*, 41.

⁷³ Knapp, *Autobiography*, 13.

⁷⁴ Knapp, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁷⁵ Knapp, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁷⁶ Knapp, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁷⁷ *JSP* H1:210.

⁷⁸ What follows in this section is a matter of historical religious controversy. That Joseph Smith claimed to restore Christianity *via* divine encounters, angelic ordinations, and the coming forth of new scripture is obviously contestable and disputed. I echo the sentiment of Terryl Givens that “the disputability of the facts is too obvious to bear repeating on every page. I have therefore avoided constructions like ‘Joseph Smith’s *alleged* vision,’ or ‘the *purported* visit of Moroni,’ as they would

His primary motivation was to acquire knowledge from God. “Information,” he said, “was what I most desired at this time.”⁷⁹ Yet, having fallen under the weight of conviction, as so many before him, Smith also yearned deeply for grace. “I become convicted of my sins,” he confessed, and worried that no church could help him.⁸⁰ Who held authority to act for God, Smith wondered? With so many competing religious voices, he did not know “who was right or who was wrong,” especially as it pertained to matters of “eternal consequences.”⁸¹ After making an “intimate acquaintance” with the various denominations and a thorough “searching the scriptures,” he concluded “that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the truth and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”⁸²

His conclusion was by no means novel. At the core of the Restorationist impulse was a concern for retrieving the apostolic-era Christianity ostensibly lost through the ages. Smith’s apprehension toward churches echoed those of his contemporaries, especially the Shakers. In his book *Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing*—a mere decade before Smith’s prayer—Benjamin Youngs argued that “there was a falling away [and] that no true church, nor the perfect way of God, was known on the earth, for many ages; but that [it] was to be opened in the latter day.”⁸³ Other Shakers described the falling away as a period of time when “the corruptions of those false churches which had

become tiresome and pedantic if repeated on every page.” Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ii.

⁷⁹ *JSP* J1:88.

⁸⁰ *JSP* H1:11.

⁸¹ *JSP* J1:87.

⁸² *JSP* H1:11.

⁸³ Youngs, *Testimony*, 615.

assumed the name and authority of Christ.”⁸⁴

Consequently, if Smith were to receive forgiveness, it must occur by an authoritative, immediate experience rather than mediation *via* an unauthorized, wayward church. After heeding the advice of James 1:5, Smith sought wisdom not from home or pastorate but directly from God himself.⁸⁵ He entered the privacy of the woods, quietly lifting up a prayer that might cleans his guilty conscience, for, he said, “there was none else to whom I could go.”⁸⁶ Aside from finding divine mercy, Smith also hoped to learn “which of all the sects was right,” if there was truth to be found in them at all.⁸⁷ This was the knowledge he sought.

What followed would alter the trajectory of Smith’s life. As he prayed for forgiveness and guidance, Smith claimed that a “thick darkness” crept toward him from the woods; “the noise of walking [drew] nearer,” muted his tongue, and caused him to feel “doomed to sudden destruction.”⁸⁸ Suddenly, from high above him, he reported

⁸⁴ Green and Wells, *A Summary View*, 183.

⁸⁵ “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jas 1:5, AV). In 1893, Smith’s younger brother, William, directly linked Lane’s 1823 revival to Smith’s prayer. “[Rev.] Mr. Lane of the Methodists preached a sermon on ‘what church shall I join?’ And the burden of his discourse was to ask God, using as a text, ‘If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally.’ And of course when Smith went home and was looking over the text he was impressed to do just what the preacher had said.” “Another Testimony,” *Deseret Evening News* vol. 27, no. 50 (January 20, 1894). For the exact dating of the First Vision, see fn. 35 of this chapter.

⁸⁶ *JSP* H1:12.

⁸⁷ *Hist.* 1:7. The parenthetical phrase “for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong” is added to the canonical version of this account (JS–H 1:18), but is absent in *Hist.* The phrase is present in multiple source documents for *Hist.* *JSP* H1:203, 214–15; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times & Seasons* 3, no. 11, April 1, 1842; “History of Joseph Smith,” *MS* 3, no. 2 (June 1842). In a draft of his history, Smith similarly “supposed that one of them [churches] were so [right].” *JSP* H1:215. Concerning discrepancies in the First Vision account, see fn. 35 of this chapter. This discrepancy is the most challenging to understand because it suggests a significant difference in the motivation for Smith seeking divine counsel aside forgiveness of sins. Had Smith come to his own conclusion that the Christian faith apostatized or did he need divine revelation to learn about the apostasy or was it a bit of both? If it were a bit of both, then why at certain times does Smith seem very confident that his own study led him to the conclusion of apostasy, e.g., “I found that mankind [had] apostatized from the true and living faith,” while at other times he seems to be unaware of apostasy, e.g., “it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong”? *JSP* H1:11; JS–H 1:18.

⁸⁸ *JSP* J1:88; H1:212.

seeing “a pillar of light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun,” gradually descending toward him.⁸⁹ “I saw the Lord,” Smith said, later clarifying that the Lord was two “personages,” God the Father and Jesus Christ.⁹⁰ The first personage pointed to the second, commanding Smith: “This is my beloved Son, Hear him.”⁹¹ Smith listened as the second personage “spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.”⁹² Finally, Smith found absolution directly from salvation’s pinnacle authority. With an absolved soul, he then inquired about which church he should join. The second personage cautioned that he should “join none of them,” further dishallowing denominations by stating that “they were all wrong [and] all their Creeds were an abomination [and] those professors were all corrupt.”⁹³ A great apostasy had occurred, stripping authority and authenticity from the faith.⁹⁴ However, Smith was promised that “the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made know unto [him].”⁹⁵ When the vision ended, Smith found himself on his back.⁹⁶

While Smith’s experience was common among his contemporaries, the message he received was unprecedented. Such visionary tales of personal remittance of sin from Jesus Christ were commonplace in the Second Great Awakening. Yet, whereas these visions pushed men and women deeper into their churches, Smith’s vision pushed

⁸⁹ *JSP* H1:214; J1:88.

⁹⁰ *JSP* H1:214.

⁹¹ *JSP* H1:214.

⁹² *JSP* H1:12–13; cf. H1:88.

⁹³ *JSP* H1:214.

⁹⁴ Lincoln Blumell suggests that the “creeds” in question were “more likely [the] professions of believe of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries” rather than “the creedal statements of ancient Christianity.” Lincoln Blumell, “Rereading the Council of Nicaea and Its Creed,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 201. In other words, it was a long, wayward path from purity to apostasy that led catholic Christianity into the myriad creeds that were believed and promulgated in Smith’s day.

⁹⁵ *JSP* H1:494.

⁹⁶ *JSP* H1:214.

him out. When he relayed his experience to his neighbors, he was met with disbelief and acrimony. A Methodist preacher—whose cessationist sensibilities evaporated any patience for spiritual charisma—reportedly attempted to persuade Smith that visions and revelations “ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.”⁹⁷ The vision was “of the Devil,” warned the minister, likely cautioning Smith against sharing it with anyone else.⁹⁸ But Smith refused to abandon his story. “I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages,” he contended, “and they did in reality speak <un>to me . . . I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it.”⁹⁹ So, Smith pressed on.

Angelic Visitations and Ancient Artifacts

Over the next few years, Smith’s holy experience gave way to habitual sin. Having been forbidden to join a church, he also forfeited the company of convictional Christians. “I was left to all kinds of temptations; and mingling with all kinds of society,” he confessed, later clarifying that his sins were not grievously mortal.¹⁰⁰ They were, nevertheless, “not Consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been.”¹⁰¹ Possibly, Smith referred to his involvement with scrying in his late teenage years.¹⁰² In the early nineteenth century, “money-digging was epidemic in upstate New York,” wrote historian Richard Bushman. “Stories of spirits guarding buried treasure were deeply enmeshed in the region’s rural culture . . . buried

⁹⁷ *JSP* H1:216.

⁹⁸ *JSP* H1:216.

⁹⁹ *JSP* H1:218.

¹⁰⁰ *JSP* H1:220.

¹⁰¹ *EMD* 1:144.

¹⁰² Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 64.

treasure and lost mines were detected through dreams, divining rods, or stones.”¹⁰³

Historian Michael Marquardt noted how Smith “was thought to be able to locate lost goods with a special seer stone and magical religious ceremonies.”¹⁰⁴ The stone, Smith claimed, allowed him to see things that were invisible to the naked eye, but he was charged with swindling a business partner after coming up empty handed on quests.

Sometime during his scrying days, Smith began to lament his sin and again turned to God for forgiveness. On the evening of September 21, 1823, the Smith family were up late discussing and debating the veracity and authority of the various denominations.¹⁰⁵ Lucy recalled that her son seemed especially solemn as he pondered “in his mind which of the churches were the true one.”¹⁰⁶ Smith, however, said his dejection was rooted in a different soil. After retiring to bed, he found it difficult to fall asleep as he meditated on his “past life and experience.”¹⁰⁷ “I was well aware I had not kept the commandments,” he added.¹⁰⁸ Smith was stirred to prayerful repentance, hoping for pardon once again.¹⁰⁹ During his prayer, he noticed a strange light that grew brighter until it illuminated the room beyond the noonday sun. Suddenly, there appeared a man,

¹⁰³ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 50.

¹⁰⁴ Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 63.

¹⁰⁵ Lucy recalled: “Joseph who never said many words upon any subject but always seemed to reflect more deeply than common persons of his age upon everything of a religious nature. After we ceased conversation he went to bed and was pondering in his mind which of the churches were the true one.” *EMD* 1:289. It is challenging to understand why Smith was wrestling with which denomination to join just a few years after being personally forbidden by God to join any of them because they were all corrupt. Adding to the puzzle is Lucy’s comments that it was during the evening of September 21, 1823 (not the spring of 1820) when Smith learned from the angel (not God) that, “there is not a true church on Earth No not one < and > has not been since Peter . . . The churches that are now upon the Earth are all man made churches.” *EMD* 1:290. It is likely, then, that either Lucy misremembers when this episode took place, wrongly assumes that Smith was contemplating which church was true, or later revisions of the First Vision by Smith convolutes the timeline of this story. See fn. 35 of this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ *EMD* 1:289.

¹⁰⁷ *JSP* H1:116, 220.

¹⁰⁸ *JSP* H1:116.

¹⁰⁹ *Hist.* 1:12.

adorned in white clothing and standing, as it were, in midair.¹¹⁰ Smith's immediate fear gave way quickly to a sense of peace as the heavenly messenger began to speak.

His name was Moroni, an angel sent by God to comfort Smith with absolution.¹¹¹ Smith's pardon came with a mission, the likes of which had never been seen nor would ever be overshadowed. God had chosen him "to bring to pass a marvelous work and wonder."¹¹² This work would begin with the recovery of ancient records. Smith was told about "a book deposited, written upon golden plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang."¹¹³ The exact location of the artifacts was revealed, Smith explained, as a "vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited."¹¹⁴ The book, Moroni claimed, contained "the fulness of the everlasting Gospel . . . As delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants."¹¹⁵ Accompanying these plates were the Urim and Thummim, the high priestly instruments mentioned in the OT, which were bound in silver bows and fastened to a breastplate.¹¹⁶ The angel further explained that these stones constituted "seers" in ancient times, and that "God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book."¹¹⁷ "When they are interpreted," Moroni added, "the Lord will give the holy priesthood to some," i.e., true authority would be restored on earth.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ *Hist.* 1:12.

¹¹¹ *Hist.* 1:12, Oliver Cowdrey, "Letter IV," *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835). The angel was initially identified as Nephi, both names drawing from the BofM. The earliest extant record of the account attributes this discrepancy to clerical error. *JSP* H1:223.

¹¹² *JS-H* 1:33, Oliver Cowdrey, "Letter IV," *M&A* 1, no. 5 (February 1835).

¹¹³ *JS-H* 1:34.

¹¹⁴ Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith" *T&S* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842).

¹¹⁵ *JS-H* 1:34.

¹¹⁶ *JSP* H1:222; Exod 28:30.

¹¹⁷ *JS-H* 1:35.

¹¹⁸ *JS-H* 1:33, Oliver Cowdrey, "Letter VIII," *Messenger & Advocate* 2, no. 1 (October 1835).

On September 22, 1823, Smith claimed he discovered the location of the plates, buried in the ancient hill of Cumorah. Smith ascended the hill, which stood about three miles southeast from the family farm. He excavated the container and saw the plates with his “natural vision.”¹¹⁹ Accompanying the plates were the Urim and Thummim, just as the angel had said. Smith returned to the site annually until retrieving the artifacts on September 22, 1827.¹²⁰ Over time, the promise of a complete restoration, heralded by the coming forth of new scripture, unfolded as Smith worked toward translating the plates.

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

The plates were not inscribed with a language that Smith recognized. In fact, no one in his day could have recognized its characters, which were described as “reformed Egyptian.”¹²¹ Moroni informed Smith that the plates “cannot be interpreted by the learning of this generation; consequently, they would be considered of no worth, only as precious metal.”¹²² Even if they were written in a known language, Smith was hardly a candidate for the translation project. He was an agrarian young man who, by his own pen, wrote that he had been “deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was

¹¹⁹ Oliver Cowdrey, “Letter VIII,” *M&A* 2, no. 1 (October 1835). Here, “natural vision” is likely contrasting against “spiritual” or “mystical vision,” communicating that the plates were real and not merely fictional.

¹²⁰ *JS-H* 1:59; Oliver Cowdrey, “Letter VIII,” *M&A* 2, no. 1 (October 1835).

¹²¹ Mormon 9:32, cf. Mosiah 28:11, 13. Martin Harris described the plates as being written in “Arabic, Chaldaic, Syriac, and Egyptian” based on an encounter with Charles Anthon, a classicist from Columbia College, who was shown a facsimile of the characters. “Mormonism—No.2” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, May–July, 1859, 162. Anthon, however, described the characters on the facsimile as “rude imitations of Hebrew and Greek characters together with various delineations of sun, moon, stars, &c.” “Charles Anthon to Rev. and Dear Sir,” *New-York Observer* 23, no. 18 (May 3, 1845). Lucy claimed that Smith was instructed “to make a *fac-simile* of some of the characters, which were called reformed Egyptian.” *EMD* 1:343. Joseph Smith also identifies the script as “reformed Egyptian” in the *Times & Seasons*. “To the Editor of *Times & Seasons*,” *T&S* 4, no. 13 (May 15, 1843). One of the earliest, systematic criticisms of Mormonism echoes early LDS use of the term “reformed Egyptian.” Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 18. Smith noted that the language was ordered “the same as all Hebrew writing in general,” i.e., from right to left. *Hist.* 1:53.

¹²² Oliver Cowdrey, “Letter VIII,” *M&A* 2, no. 1 (October 1835).

nearly instructed in reading writing.”¹²³ The plates could only be translated “by the gift and power of God.”¹²⁴ The ability to translate was the first gift given to Smith by God as a seer, but it would prove too intriguing a gift to keep private for long.¹²⁵

By late fall of 1827, nosy neighbors and avaricious treasure seekers created an unwelcome and risky environment for translating in Palmyra.¹²⁶ With the aid of Martin Harris, a prosperous farmer, Smith relocated to Harmony, Pennsylvania to live with his wife, Emma Hale, and her family.¹²⁷ By mid-April 1828, Smith and Harris began to translate the plates.¹²⁸ Smith never described the translation process in detail, only that “the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book.”¹²⁹ He initially did not find it necessary to relay any details, for “it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”¹³⁰ He maintained this conviction for the rest of his life. According to one of his most detailed, extant accounts, Smith tersely explained that he “obtained them [the plates], and the Urim and Thummim with them; by the means of which, I translated the plates; and thus came the book of Mormon.”¹³¹

Witnesses provided more details. The spectacles were two translucent or

¹²³ *JSP* H1:11.

¹²⁴ Oliver Cowdrey, “Letter VIII,” *M&A* 2, no. 1 (October 1835).

¹²⁵ D&C 5:4; Nephi 3:6–7, 11, 14–15; Mosiah 8:13, 15–17.

¹²⁶ Martin Harris claimed that “money-diggers” sought the plates as reparations from Smith. “Mormonism—No.2” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, May–July, 1859, 166.

¹²⁷ “Mormonism—No.2” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, May–July, 1859, 169. On January 18, 1827, Smith married Emma Hale, the daughter of Pennsylvanian farmers Isaac and Elizabeth Lewis Hale. *JS–H* 1:57; Joseph Smith III, “Late Testimony of Sister Emma,” *SH* 26, no. 19 (1 October 1879).

¹²⁸ *Hist.* 1:19.

¹²⁹ Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8. “Letterbook 1,” *JSP*, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/11>.

¹³⁰ Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 2, *July 1831–January 1833* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 84.

¹³¹ *Elders’ Journal of the Church of Latter Day Saints* 1, no. 3 (July 1837).

opaque stones, called “interpreters,” fashioned together by wires.¹³² The stones of the interpreters were associated with the Urim and Thummim.¹³³ A scribe—typically Emma, Harris, or two other men—sat across from Smith. The plates were either veiled in linen and situated between them or set aside elsewhere.¹³⁴ Smith then donned the spectacles and, having blocked out daylight by covering his face in a hat, he gazed into the darkness until, according to one testimony, a sentence “would appear in Brite Roman Letters then he would tell the writer [i.e., scribe] and he would write it then that would go away the next sentence would come and so on.”¹³⁵ Emma recalled that Smith would sit across a table from her “with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”¹³⁶ Errors in transmission were prevented when the

¹³² Joseph Knight, Sr. described this device as “glasses.” Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2002), 15. Oliver Cowdery described them as “two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows.” A. W. Benton, “Mormonites,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* 2, no. 15 (April 19, 1831). Lucy Smith further described the spectacles as “two smoothe three-cornered diamonds set in glasses, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way, as old-fashioned spectacles.” *EMD* 1:328–29. David Whitmer, a witness to the translation, alternately described the stones as chocolate color, nearly egg shaped and perfectly smooth, but not transparent.” “Mormonism,” *Kansas City Journal*, June 5, 1881. These memories may have conflated the “Interpreters,” translucent spectacles, with Smith’s seer, a brown stone. JS–H 1:35; D&C 17:1; Mosiah 8:13, 15–17; “Golden Bible,” *Palmyra Freeman*, August 11, 1829; “Dear Brother,” Oliver Cowdery, *M&A* 1, no. 1 (October 1834).

¹³³ Eyewitness descriptions of the “Interpreters” appear confused between the terms “Urim and Thummim” and “seerstone(s).” While it is clear that a device called the “Interpreters,” associated with the Urim and Thummim, were found with the plates and used in the earliest days of the translation, it is equally clear that Smith preferred a single seer’s tone toward the end of the project, yet associated it, too, with the Urim and Thummim. Apparently, “Urim and Thummim” was not strictly the spectacles found with the plates, but a nomenclature associated with any device capable of transmitting divine information. See Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, “Joseph Smith: ‘The Gift of Seeing,’” *Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (1982): 49–68; JS–H 1:35, 59; D&C 10:1–3; 17:1; “The Book of Mormon,” *E&MS* 1, no. January 8, 1833; “Dear Brother,” Oliver Cowdery, *M&A* 1, no. 1 (October 1834); William W. Phelps, “Letter No. 10,” *M&A* 1, no. 12 (September 1835); Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 18; “History of Joseph Smith,” *T&S* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842).

¹³⁴ Emma Smith recalled that, at times, the plates sat “on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth.” Joseph Smith III, “Late Testimony of Sister Emma,” *SH* 26, no. 19 (October 1, 1879). Oliver Cowdery reported that, as Smith’s scribe, the Seer would translate “from plates through ‘the Urim and Thummim’ and the plates not be in sight at all.” Oliver Cowdery, “Defence,” (Norton, OH: Pressley’s Job Office, 1839), 3.

¹³⁵ *EMD* 4:17–18.

¹³⁶ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: 1887), 13; David Whitmer, quoted by Zenas H. Gurley, cited in van Wagoner and Walker, “‘The Gift of Seeing,’” 54; “Mormonism,” *Kansas City Journal*, June 5, 1881; “Joseph Knight Reminiscences,” n.d., MS 3470, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

illuminated text stopped progressing if a word was written incorrectly.¹³⁷ Smith later utilized his seer stone in lieu of the interpreters, apparently for convenience.¹³⁸

In summer 1828, Harris lost a substantial portion of the manuscript, and the translation project was placed on hiatus. In April 1829, Smith enlisted a new scribe, Oliver Cowdery, who was tasked by revelation to aid Smith with establishing the “cause of Zion.”¹³⁹ The pair completed nearly the entire translation between April and June 1829. On June 11, 1829, the manuscript was delivered to the U.S. district court in Utica to obtain a copyright.¹⁴⁰ Smith secured publishing 5,000 copies in Palmyra and the book was published on March 26, 1830.¹⁴¹

Content of the Book of Mormon

By the time his translation was published, Smith learned that the record was deposited at the conclusion of an epic battle between two warring nations, the Nephites and Lamanites. Moroni, the final custodian of the plates, mourned the annihilation of his kin: “I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people [for] the Lamanites have hunted my people, the Nephites . . . even until they are no more (Mormon 8:3, 7).” Moroni buried the record in the 420s AD where it rested undisturbed for centuries.¹⁴² The record was a library of other sets of plates, which were copied,

¹³⁷ *EMD* 4:18.

¹³⁸ Edward Stevenson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Deseret Evening News*, Salt Lake City, December 13, 1881.

¹³⁹ *JS-H* 1:66; Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 1, *July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 35.

¹⁴⁰ The title page submitted to the court has written on the back: “‘Book of Mormon,’ Joseph Smith, Jr. Filed 11 June 1829.” “Title page for The Book of Mormon,” Library of Congress, accessed February 24, 2019, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/General.60778.1>.

¹⁴¹ *JSP* H1:352; *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra, NY, March 26, 1830.

¹⁴² Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6; Paul Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 7; John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2013), 689.

edited, abridged, and commented by one of its last custodians, Mormon, after whom the English translation was named.¹⁴³ Only a portion of the entire volume was available for Smith to translate. A sealed section, containing eschatological visions of the end times could not be translated until a future moment when the gentiles, i.e., non-Mormons, “shall repent of their iniquity, and become clean before the Lord” (Ether 4:6; cf. 2 Nephi 27:8).

Moroni’s burial of the plates in the fifth century AD concluded a centuries-long history of the rise and fall of an ancient, religious civilization in the Americas. The BofM tells the story of post-exilic Jews who were divinely spared from the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and resulting Babylonian Captivity of the sixth century BC. Lehi, a member of the Tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3) and patriarch of the clan that bore his name, gathered his family and fled the Judean capital for the Western Hemisphere, where his descendants flourished. The timeline of these mormonic Jews runs parallel with exilic and post-exilic Israel.

Upon arriving in the new promised land, two of Lehi’s sons, Nephi and Laman, became fierce rivals whose descendants, the Nephites and Lamanites, carried out generational conflict in the wake of their fathers’ rivalry.¹⁴⁴ Despite the conflict, the

¹⁴³ These sources, and their corresponding English translations, included: The Small Plates of Nephi (1 & 2 Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni); The Large Plates of Nephi (Lehi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, 3 & 4 Nephi); The Plates of the Words of Mormon (Words of Mormon); The Plates of Mormon (Mormon); The Plates of Ether (Ether); and The Plates of Moroni (Moroni). These materials were either copied or abridged into The Plates of Mormon, which were translated, in part, into English and published as the BofM. The material of the Plates of Lehi does not appear in the BofM after Martin Harris, Smith’s first scribe, lost the English transcript during the translation process. Smith was barred by revelation from retranslating the Plates of Lehi out of concern that his opponents might alter the original translation and then accuse Smith of lying when the finished project was published. Those who had stolen the manuscript would say the ‘original’ reads “contrary from that which you translated and caused to be written” (D&C 10:11). Consequently, Smith was instructed to translate another portion of the plates, which contained information about the same period (D&C 10:39–42).

¹⁴⁴ On this point, the BofM theorizes that the Lehi’s descendants seeded the indigenous population of the Americas who were, in part, descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, i.e., Native Americans were the descendants of Jews. According to the BofM, the Lehiites split into two factions, the Nephites and Lamanites, shortly after arriving to their new lands. As a result of their rebellious obstinacy, the Lamanites were cursed by God with dark skin (1 Nephi 12:23; 2 Nephi 5:21–22; Mormon 5:15). This interpretation offered a spurious explanation for the pigmentation of Native Americans and their supposedly backwards civilization. LDS apostle Parley Pratt summarized the early LDS view: “The

mormonic people grew in culture and economy, even colonizing vast tracts of the western hemisphere. The narrative climaxes in a visitation from the post-ascension Christ to the Nephites and Lamanites, where the messiah ministered to his “other sheep” (3 Nephi 16:1). A subsequent time of peace between the two factions was violently interrupted by relentless and devastating warfare that culminated in the annihilation of the Nephites around 421 AD. The records of the Nephites were consolidated and abridged by a redactor, Mormon, after whom the book is named. Mormon’s son, Moroni, assumed the narration, concluded the record, and buried it near a hill in modern upstate New York for Smith to discover in the nineteenth century, some fourteen centuries later.

The BofM offers its readers astonishing—albeit questionably anachronistic—clarity into many of the theological and ecclesiastical debates that permeated nineteenth century American Protestantism, especially as they relate to authority and the authentic expression of Christianity.¹⁴⁵ It advocated for religious freedom (Alma 30:7, 11) while

Lamanites became a dark and benighted people, of whom the American Indians are still a remnant.” Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning to All People . . . Latter-day Saints*, 8th ed. Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854), 95. Still, as Richard Bushman has argued, the BofM was, in some sense, more charitable to indigenous people than it seems. The BofM upholds the mormonic people as chose by God and destined for the retrieval of their covenant status and reception of a promised inheritance. At a time when natives were viewed by the public as a dangerous nuisance, the BofM proposed that they were, in fact, the apple of God’s eye and destined for greatness. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 259–60. The theory of Hebrew origins for the indigenous people was by no means novel; many people before and after wondered the same thing. Elias Boudinot (1740–1821) proposed Jewish origins, suggesting that a migration of Jews could have passed through the Kamchatka Strait *via* the Aleutian Islands. Elias Boudinot, *A Star in the West . . . Jerusalem* (Trenton, NJ: D. Fenton, S. Hutchinson, and J. Dunham, 1816), 74.

¹⁴⁵ In addition to the material referenced in the body text, the BofM also squarely rejected Calvinism, arguing that God’s sovereignty was *apredeterminarian*. God’s grace extends to “all who believe on his name” (Alma 32:22) *via* the “infinite atonement” of the Son of God, which is sufficient “for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:12). Relatedly, foreknowledge was not, as the Reformers argued, an effective power of salvation based on God’s intimate knowing (i.e., covenantal love) of his elect. Rather, God’s foreknowledge and subsequent calling was contingent “on account of their exceeding faith and good works (Alma 13:3).” Indeed, it was the wayward Zoramites, a breakaway civilization from the Nephite (i.e., orthodoxy) tradition, who “had fallen into great errors [and] did pervert the ways of the Lord in very many instances” (Alma 31:9, 11). One such error was the doctrine of election, wherein the Zoramites declared to God that “thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell (Alma 21:16–17).” While the BofM acknowledged a mitigated form of original sin—owing to the fall that “our natures have become evil continually” (Ether 3:2)—its total effects (i.e., depravity) were consumed by the atonement (Mosiah 3:1). Consequently, children are born in a state of innocence, “for they are not capable of committing sin” (Moroni 8:8), and, therefore, are improper candidates for baptism, needing “no repentance, neither baptism” (Moroni 8:11). Indeed, the BofM considered it a “gross error,” one of “solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children” (Moroni 8:6, 9). When an adult convert seeks baptism, it must be through complete immersion. The BofM describes Jesus Christ explicitly instructing his mormonic disciples to “immerse them [i.e., converts] in the

rejecting atheism (Alma 30:37–44) and agnostic deism (Alma 30:48). It pushed against *sola scriptura*; the BofM describes how the Bible—a record of “the prophets” and the “twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:39)—suffered degradation and corrupt at the hands of a “great and abominable church,” as it stripped from scripture “many plain and precious things” (1 Nephi 13:28). Consequently, the “plainness” of the gospel was lost, causing “an exceedingly great many [to] stumble” (1 Nephi 13:29). Part of the purpose of the BofM is to correct the errors in the Bible, and, moreover, to prevent its readers from drifting into apostasy. The need to maintain pure faith is a major recurrent theme throughout the entire narrative.¹⁴⁶

Moreover, the very existence of the BofM suggested to early Mormons that revelation did not end with the biblical apostles but finds a tradition in mormonic prophets and apostles well into the fifth century AD, i.e., beyond the early Christianity of councils and creeds. Relatedly, readers are promised a spiritual mechanism to glean revelation in a more personal and intimate way (Ether 4:7; Moroni 10:4). The BofM identifies the medium for personal revelation as the Holy Ghost, who, LdS historian Grant Hardy noted, “will manifest truth to inquiring believers” after sincere invitation. In the BofM, this personal revelatory gift is “a major theme of Jesus’ teachings and is explicitly offered to latter-day Gentiles” (3 Nephi 30:2). “In short,” Hardy concluded, in the BofM “Jesus wants to engage his people in an *ongoing* dialogue.”¹⁴⁷ And, as the charismatic spiritualism of early Mormon history testifies, the first readers responded to its invitation.

water, and come forth again out of the water (3 Nephi 11:26).” He further warns against “disputations” concerning the doctrine of baptism (3 Nephi 11:28). The BofM also offers specific instructions for the means and mode of the Lord’s Supper. An elder or priest—ordained by the laying on of hands according to a benediction (Moroni 3)—distribute wine and bread (3 Nephi 18:6–7), consecrating the elements with a prescribed encomium (Moroni 4–5).

¹⁴⁶ Mario S. DePillis, “The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 88.

¹⁴⁷ Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 212. Emphasis added.

The Role of the Book of Mormon in LDS Restorationism

The BofM played a major role in legitimating LDS restorationism. For early Mormons, its publication rang out like a carillon for spiritual seekers yearning for radical restorationism. The BofM was touted as more trustworthy than the Bible; it was “the most correct of any book on earth,” Smith claimed.¹⁴⁸ The information in the BofM was inscribed onto durable, metal plates and kept safe for centuries hidden in the ground. The last set of hands placed on the plates before Smith’s were those of Moroni, its final author and editor. Biblical manuscripts, however, were vulnerable to corruption. Some Christian scribes performed their duties faithfully, if not imperfectly; others, however, did so with an unsavory agenda, stripping away many of the “plain and most precious parts of the gospel” as agents of the “abominable church.”¹⁴⁹ The BofM, though, was translated *via* the gift and power of God, according to Smith. Unlike his restorationist contemporaries, who built their authority on the foundation of biblical hermeneutics, Smith constructed his claims to the latter-day authority on the foundation of the BofM.

In a sense, the BofM was Smith’s solution to the dissonance between reason and revelation that plagued early nineteenth century evangelicalism.¹⁵⁰ The two were not pitted against one another in an age of reason, as Painean skeptics argued, but neither was it sufficient to build authority on a rational hermeneutic from corrupted biblical texts. For Smith, reason and revelation were formerly estranged partners of truth who rediscovered one other in the latter-day restoration of God’s true authority on earth. The BofM was proof positive of their reunion and, consequently, Smith’s authority.

Indeed, the mere existence of the BofM, regardless of its content, was reason enough to entrust Smith with his prophetic authority to his believers. To early believers

¹⁴⁸ *Hist.* 4:456

¹⁴⁹ 1 Nephi 13:26, 29, 32, 34.

¹⁵⁰ See Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and skeptics alike, the primary function of the BofM was to buttress Smith's authority. Indeed, it would be difficult for Smith not to read himself into the pages of its prophecies. The BofM reveals a previously unknown prophecy by the biblical Joseph who foresaw a future "seer," whose "his name shall be called after me [i.e., Joseph]; and it shall be after the name of his father [i.e., Joseph Smith, Sr.]" (2 Nephi 3:6–7, 14–15). This latter-day Joseph, God promised, would bring "knowledge of their [i.e., mormonic Jews] fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants" and deliver his "people unto salvation" (2 Nephi 3:12, 15).

The BofM's presence in the world is as significant as its content, if not more so for the earliest Saints who would not have a chance to read and digest its content in the founding days of the Mormonism. As LdS theologian Terry L Givens noted, "the 'message' of the BofM *was* its manner of origin."¹⁵¹ The first Mormon leaders pointed to the BofM less as a source of information and more as evidence of renewed divine action in the world. It was a prophet in its own right, warning the world that the latter days were present and the Second Coming was imminent. Skeptics were encouraged to pray for confirmation in their spirit of its truth rather than analyzing and evaluating its content. In the first edition of the first Mormon newspaper, skeptical readers were implored about the BofM: "We request all that wish the truth on this great subject to enquire of the Lord, who will always answer the pure in heart."¹⁵² The BofM was, essentially, the first miracle of the post-apostasy world—a miracle that heralded the restoration.

When the BofM became read and known, the book's content not only self-authenticated the movement but would become, as Smith said, "the keystone of our religion."¹⁵³ The book prophecies a time when its own presence would usher in the latter

¹⁵¹ Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 84.

¹⁵² "The Book of Mormon," *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832).

¹⁵³ *Hist.* 4:456.

days.¹⁵⁴ For the first Mormon converts, the BofM, far more than the First Vision, authenticated LDS restorationism. Since then, Mormonism has generally recognized the First Vision as the foundational episode upon which the authority of the BofM was built. The BofM did not restore authority; rather, authority restored the BofM. It was the divine election and subsequent ordination of Smith that led to the restoration of the fountainhead of power that gave rise to the BofM—priesthood authority.

The Restoration and Development of the LDS Priesthood

“We can never understand precisely what is meant by restoration, unless we understand what is lost or taken away,” wrote LDS apostle Parley Pratt in 1837.¹⁵⁵ The Great Apostasy represented an incredible loss of doctrinal clarity, scriptural purity, ecclesiastical authenticity, and, consequently, the salvific efficacy of all three. At the core was the most detrimental loss of all—the disappearance of both divine power and authority on earth, i.e., the priesthood. Benjamin Winchester, an early LDS leader, wrote in 1843 how the “Holy Priesthood” was

to a certain extent [the] principle by which the Lord works among men, and is the channel through which all the spiritual gifts . . . are obtained; and is also, the authority by which individuals are legally inducted into the kingdom of God.¹⁵⁶

Without the priesthood, emigration into the kingdom of God, with its attendant signs and blessings, would forever elude humanity. Consequently, Winchester argued, when the priesthood authority “ceases to exist on earth, the church falls into darkness, and

¹⁵⁴ BofM (1830), 21–35, cf. 1 Nephi 10–14.

¹⁵⁵ Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 147.

¹⁵⁶ Winchester, *History of the Priesthood*, iii. Winchester (1817–1901) converted to the LDS Church in 1833 and was later appointed as a Seventy. He presided over the Philadelphia branch, published the *Gospel Reflector*, and worked on the *Times & Seasons* in Nauvoo. In the succession crisis that followed Smith’s death, Winchester sided with Sidney Rigdon against Brigham Young. Consequently, in September 1844, Winchester was excommunicated “for unchristian like conduct, slandering the Church, and railing against, and speaking evil of the Twelve and others.” “Notice,” *T&S* 5, no. 18, October 1, 1844. See David J. Whittaker, “East of Nauvoo: Benjamin Winchester and the Early Mormon Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 2 (1995): 31–83.

ultimately degenerates into apostasy.”¹⁵⁷ In his widely-read *Voice of Warning*, Pratt lamented how this scenario had, in fact, occurred in past the dispensation as “the kingdom of God became *disorganized* and *lost* from among men, and the doctrine and churches of men, instituted in its place.”¹⁵⁸ Such had been the case, Smith claimed, according to the First Vision.

But the priesthood was not merely an organizational blueprint for ecclesiastical hierarchy or religious organization, as it is among the clergies and presbyteries of Christianity. Rather, it was the very power by which humans may “see the face of God,” i.e., salvific exaltation.¹⁵⁹ So Smith, in an 1843 sermon:

All the ordinances, systems, and administrations on the earth are of no use to the children of men, unless they are ordained and authorized of God, for nothing will save a man but a legal administrator, for none others will be acknowledged either by God or angels.¹⁶⁰

Winchester further described the priesthood as an authority from God given to men that enables them to act on behalf of God. “In other words,” he explained, “the Lord does a part of His work by proxy, or employs righteous men as His agents, and the priesthood is the commission or power given to them.”¹⁶¹ So seriousness is the priesthood that “no one has a legal right to administer in the name of the Lord without this authority,” argued Winchester.¹⁶²

Lost in the darkness of apostasy, then, was not merely “plain and precious truths,” i.e., doctrinal clarity and scriptural purity, and nor was it merely ecclesiastical

¹⁵⁷ Winchester, *History of the Priesthood*, iii.

¹⁵⁸ Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 20. Emphasis original.

¹⁵⁹ *JSP* D2:295.

¹⁶⁰ “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843] [addenda],” *JSP*, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/287>.

¹⁶¹ Winchester, *History of the Priesthood*, 7.

¹⁶² Winchester, *History of the Priesthood*, 7.

integrity, but a general efficacy of salvific practices.¹⁶³ Spiritual activities such as prayer, repentance, baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Supper were all affected, some to greater degrees than others, as a result of apostasy. At a minimum, for centuries no sacred practice in Christianity had been performed authoritatively and, consequently, authentically and in full effect. Thus, according to early Mormons, the LDS restoration not only opened the possibility of bringing forth new scripture but also marked the beginning of a new dispensation in which the Christian faith and its ecclesiastical body could become fully restored by the power of divine authority.

If the BofM represented the restoration of God's voice in the written word, then the restoration of the priesthood represented the renewal of God's authority on earth. Indeed, without priesthood restoration, Christianity would have continued to float unmoored in the turbulent seas of corruption and confusion. John E. Page, an apostle to both Joseph Smith and James Strang, put it bluntly: "*Where the christian PRIESTHOOD IS, there the CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS; and where the christian priesthood is NOT, there the christian church IS NOT.*"¹⁶⁴

Given the evolving nature of Mormon doctrine, the LDS concept of priesthood developed over years as the movement grew, primarily in response to prophetic revelation *via* Smith but also to meet the needs of organizational forming and restructuring. The following sections will trace the development of the LDS priesthood from its origins, loss, and restoration. Then, in the subsequent chapter, the contentious debate, replete with disputes and ill feelings, over the continued lineage of the restored priesthood will be explored in detail because this debate features prominently in the apologetic of Wingfield Watson for James Strang's legitimate claim to the office of prophet.

¹⁶³ *JSP* H1:214.

¹⁶⁴ *Zion's Reveille* 2, no. 22 (August 19, 1847). Emphases original.

The Origin and Constitution of the Priesthood

In early June 1831, John Whitmer, acting in his new role as church historian, kept minutes for a “general Conference” of the church that occurred in Kirtland, Ohio.¹⁶⁵ The meeting, which spanned the course of a few days, featured the ordination of select elders “to the high Priesthood under the hand <of> br. Joseph Smith jr.”¹⁶⁶ With this mundane record, Whitmer, likely unaware of the significance, jotted the earliest extant reference to the priesthood in Mormon records.¹⁶⁷ According to LDS restorationism, though, the priesthood is much older than the nineteenth century. In fact, perhaps unknown to the men at that time, the priesthood to which they had just entered spanned backward through eternity, being as ancient as the Ancient One himself.

“The Priesthood,” Smith later taught, “is an everlasting principle & Existed with God from Eternity & will to Eternity”¹⁶⁸ and “is without begining of days or end of years.”¹⁶⁹ His description echoes that of the mormonic prophet Alma who taught that the “High Priesthood, is without beginning or end.”¹⁷⁰ The eternity of the priesthood is linked to divine attributes, i.e., God’s omnipotence and sovereignty.¹⁷¹ Acting in his priesthood power, God created and governs the universe. But this distinction between power and authority was not prominent in the early LDS Church. Instead, as LdS scholar

¹⁶⁵ *JSP* D1:317, 324.

¹⁶⁶ *JSP* D1:326.

¹⁶⁷ If considered an LDS record, then the first time the term “high priesthood” appears is the BofM. BofM (1830), 232, 259, 260; cf. Alma 4:20; 13:6–8, 10, 14, 18.

¹⁶⁸ “Discourse, between circa 26 June and circa 4 August 1839–A, as Reported by Willard Richards,” *JSP*, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-between-circa-26-june-and-circa-4-august-1839-a-as-reported-by-willard-richards/1>.

¹⁶⁹ *JSP* D2:295. Strang would later likewise describe the eternity of the priesthood as the “power of an endless life, without beginning of days or end of years.” *Northern Islander* 4, no. 64 (September 28, 1854). Hereafter cited as *NI*.

¹⁷⁰ BofM (1830), 259; cf. Alma 13:8.

¹⁷¹ Brent L. Top, “Priesthood,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, ed. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2011), 501.

Gregory Prince noticed, early Mormonism focused on the proper authority that derived from the priesthood.¹⁷² Still, it is not as though the theme of power was entirely absent. In 1832, just two years after the founding of his church, Smith wrote that it was only through the “authority of the Priesthood” that “the power of Godliness” could manifest.¹⁷³ Over time, the importance of priesthood power rose to meet the prominence of its authority. By 1842, Smith described how God sits enthroned while “clothed with power & authority [with] a crown of Eternal light upon his head; representing, also, the grand Key words of the Holy Priesthood.”¹⁷⁴ Writing on the priesthood in 1847, Mormon apostle and future LdS prophet, John Taylor, taught that the priesthood was not merely an authority, but an authoritative power. True, he wrote, the priesthood is an authority, “the government of God, whether on the earth or in the heavens,”¹⁷⁵ but it is also “by that *power* [that] all things are upheld and sustained,” he added.¹⁷⁶ For Taylor, the priesthood is the authoritative power of God that “governs all things—it directs all things—it sustains all things—and has to do with all things that God and truth are associated

¹⁷² Gregory Prince, “Mormon Priesthood and Organization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167. Compare the early Church’s emphasis on authority to Brent Top’s recent definition of the priesthood as “the *power* of God on earth and in the heavens. [It] is the power by which worlds, the sun, moon, and stars were created. It is the power that gives life and light to all things. It is the power by which all things are governed.” Top, “Priesthood,” 501. Emphasis added.

¹⁷³ Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 457.

¹⁷⁴ *JSP* R4:279. These comments were made by Smith’s interpretation of a facsimile of an ancient Egyptian hypocephalus, then thought to have depicted an ancient account of the biblical Abraham’s life. The hypocephalus, along with a collection of various Egyptian papyri acquired by Smith and his associates in 1835, are believed by the LDS Church to have provided the source text for Smith’s translation of the book of Abraham, a narrative of the patriarch’s activities while in Egypt. Modern Egyptologists have identified the extant fragments of this collection as ancient Egyptian funerary documents. See H. Michael Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers: A History,” in *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, ed. Robert K. Ritner (Salt Lake City, UT: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 11–56 and *JSP* R4:xiii–xxix. There is little evidence to suggest that James Strang regarded the book of Abraham with any authority.

¹⁷⁵ *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 9, no. 21 (November 1, 1847).

¹⁷⁶ *MS* 9, no. 21 (November 1, 1847), emphasis added.

with.”¹⁷⁷ Contemporary Mormonism broadly has not veered from Taylor’s definition. It envisions the priesthood as the “power of life emanating from God,” the very “power and authority of God,” and, “through the priesthood, God created and governs the heavens and the earth.”¹⁷⁸

As it has been implied, the priesthood is not *ad intra* to God unlike other divine attributes. Its two-fold power and authority are communicated beyond the Godhead, freely given by God to humanity through ordination, thus qualifying select persons to act as viceroys submitted to God’s authority and with his divine power. “The rights of the priesthood,” taught Smith, “are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven [and] the powers of heaven cannot be controled nor handled only upon the principals of righteousness.”¹⁷⁹ In other words, divine power communicates to righteous men through the priesthood, and by no other means. Those who are called to it and remain in it, says the BofM, “become High Priests forever”¹⁸⁰ as an unbroken chain of ordination “continueth in the church of God in all generations,” said Smith, flowing uninterrupted throughout “all the generations of the Jews.”¹⁸¹

The priesthood was first given to humanity by God, who “revealed [it] to adam in the Garden of Eden.”¹⁸² Smith later clarified: “The Priesthood was first given To Adam: he obtained the first Presidency & held the Keys of it, from generation to

¹⁷⁷ *MS* 9, no. 21 (November 1, 1847).

¹⁷⁸ *The Priesthood Manual*, 16; Gary James Bergera, *Statements of the LDS First Presidency: A Topical Compendium* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2007), 345.

¹⁷⁹ “Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church, circa 22 March 1839,” JSP, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/2>.

¹⁸⁰ BofM (1830), 258–9; cf. Alma 13:3, 9.

¹⁸¹ *JSP* D2:295.

¹⁸² *JSP* R4:279; *TS* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842); PGP 36–37.

Generation.”¹⁸³ Following the first ordination, a “linage [of] fathers,” unrecorded in biblical texts but revealed by revelation, provided an unbroken provenance from Adam to Melchizedek, whose ordination of Abraham continued to Moses.¹⁸⁴

A September 1832 revelation clarified the duality of the priesthood. A “greater” (or “high”) order, it was revealed, “administereth the gospel and holds the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God [and] the authority of the Priesthood.”¹⁸⁵ This priesthood was the superior of the two for its salvific power of exaltation. “The power of Godliness is manifest” in the Melchizedek priesthood, and, without it, “no man can see the face of God.”¹⁸⁶ The very power of salvation is hidden within it. A “lesser Priesthood,” named after the high priest Aaron, was given to equip the Levitical class with power and authority—albeit it, a *lesser* power and authority—to administer “temporal matters and outward ordinances of the law and the gospel.”¹⁸⁷ The Aaronic priesthood, said the 1832 revelation, “holdeth the keys of the ministring of Angels and the preparatory gospel [of] repentance and of Baptism, and the remission of sins, and the Law of carnal commandments.”¹⁸⁸ In other words, among other roles, it empowered the efficacy of the OT sacrificial system, thus extending to Israel a degree of redemption. This priesthood continued in the OT priestly system down to John the Baptist.¹⁸⁹ God commissioned John to prepare the world for the return of the

¹⁸³ *JSP* D6:542.

¹⁸⁴ *JSP* D2:293–5.

¹⁸⁵ *JSP* D2:295.

¹⁸⁶ *JSP* D2:295.

¹⁸⁷ Andrew C. Skinner, “Aaronic Priesthood,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, ed. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2011), 3. See previous chapter for a more detailed definition of the Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthoods.

¹⁸⁸ *JSP* D2:296.

¹⁸⁹ *JSP* D2:296.

Melchizedek priesthood, which was fully restored by Christ and passed down by him to the twelve apostles. Ideally, the apostles would, subsequently, ordain devotees who, in turn, would continue the priesthood lineage. Beyond the apostolic age, however, the totality of the priesthood lineage, both greater and lesser orders, was completely broken.

The Loss of the Priesthood in the Great Apostasy

“All men are liars who say they are of the true church without the revelations of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of Melchizedek,” said Smith in a June 16, 1844 sermon, his final, delivered just weeks before his death.¹⁹⁰ For Smith, the question of the “true church” had been answered years prior in the grove, but, still, a question lingered: when and how had Christianity degraded to such a miserable state? In other words, when did the apostasy begin, why did it occur, and how did it affect the state of Christianity?

Despite the essentiality of the apostasy to the core of Mormon thought, early Saints rarely discussed it and struggled to reach consensus about its scope and timing of loss when they did.¹⁹¹ However, it was universally agreed that deficiencies in the faith were caused by a forfeiture of authority. For example, in an early Mormon periodical, Oliver Cowdery attributed denominational confusion, the “great strife and noise concerning religion,” to an absence of authority. “None had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel,” he stated as a matter of fact.¹⁹² When, though,

¹⁹⁰ *Hist.* 6:569.

¹⁹¹ According to LdS historians Christopher Jones and Stephen Fleming, early Mormon conceptions of the apostasy were dynamic, oscillating on a spectrum: “While all Mormons agreed that an apostasy had occurred and that a restoration of ecclesiastical authority and a new divinely mandated church were necessary, individual understandings and articulations of what that apostasy entailed range from harsh and blanket condemnations to more conciliatory and nuanced views of Christian history, existing alongside one another . . . One view holds Christianity before the advent of Mormonism to be inauthentic, while the other maintains that it is incomplete.” Christopher C. Jones and Stephen J. Fleming, “‘Except among that Portion of Mankind’: Early Mormon Conceptions of the Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57.

¹⁹² Oliver Cowdery to William Phelps, September 7, 1834, *M&A* 1, no. 1 (October 1834).

was the authority lost?

The beginnings of apostasy. According to the common narrative of the apostasy, long ago in the NT era, priesthood authority orchestrated a symphony of order and righteousness. It was only after that authority was removed from its high position that the church universally succumb to the cacophony Cowdery described. Smith reasoned that apostasy materialized in the “old Catholic Church,” which he likened to a corrupted apple tree, and spread to all its branches, i.e., Protestantism. It was obvious (at least) to Smith and his contemporaries, both LDS and Protestant, that Catholicism was a debased institution. Yet so too were all forms of Christianity that sprung from its tradition. Taking aim at Protestants, Smith asked: “If the whole tree is corrupt, are not its branches corrupt?”¹⁹³ Protestants, regardless of their attempt at reform, could not purify the church. For, Smith asked, “if the Catholic religion is a false religion how can any true religion come out of it?”¹⁹⁴

Likewise, without naming Rome, the BofM describes the formation of a “great and abominable church,” founded by the devil and bathed in opulence and violence, having persecuted “the saints of God.”¹⁹⁵ This church also corrupted the Bible, stripping from its pages “many plain and precious things,” and perverted ecclesiastical orthopraxy by disregarding “many Covenants of the Lord.”¹⁹⁶ Consequently, the BofM contends, “because of these things which are taken away out of the Gospel of the Lamb, an exceeding great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them.”¹⁹⁷ The blame, it would seem, lay at the feet of the “abominable church,” which

¹⁹³ *Hist.* 6:598.

¹⁹⁴ *Hist.* 6:568.

¹⁹⁵ BofM (1830), 28 (1 Nephi 13:6–9); cf. Rev 13:7–8; 17:4–5.

¹⁹⁶ BofM (1830), 30; cf. 1 Nephi 13:26–28.

¹⁹⁷ BofM (1830), 30; cf. 1 Nephi 13:29.

harbored and embolden corrupt religious powers throughout history as they manipulated scripture, complicated the simplicity of its message, and perverted Christian practices.

But, unlike the first-century-Christianity of the Mediterranean world, authority carried on for centuries in the Americas well after the NT apostolic era. The BofM narrative concludes in the fifth century AD with the death of its final prophet, Moroni. Some early Saints took this timing into consideration when attempting to identify the beginning of apostasy.¹⁹⁸ Still, consensus on when exactly the apostasy occurred has never been reached. Winchester theorized that the apostasy occurred “about the time the popish hierarchy supplanted the primitive order.”¹⁹⁹ Most Saints followed Winchester’s advice, echoing LdS apostle Erastus Snow’s belief that while the exact time when the priesthood was lost is unknown, the apostasy began during the apostolic era and was a “gradual decline.”²⁰⁰

The cause and consequences of apostasy. What was the cause of this apostasy and the removal of both orders of the priesthood? Rebellion, or *apostasía*. Winchester rehearsed a biblical pattern of rebellion, from Sinai to the apostolic era, in

¹⁹⁸ In 1830, an Ohio resident recalled how LDS missionaries preached the invalidity of baptism outside their church’s authority, “for there was no legal administrator, neither had been for fourteen hundred years.” “History of the Mormonites,” *The Evangelist* 9, no. 6 (June 1, 1841), quoted in James B. Allen and Milton V. Backman, Jr., “A Non-Mormon View of the Birth of Mormonism in Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 308. LDS apostle Orson Hyde, too, posited the departure of the priesthood in the fifth century. In a tract, he wrote that the earth had endured “long and tedious [moral] darkness . . . for the last fourteen hundred years.” Orson Hyde to Joseph Smith, June 15, 1841, *T&S* 2, no. 23 (October 1, 1841). William W. Phelps, likewise, reveled in the thought that the prayers of the Saints were made effective for the first time in “about fourteen hundred years.” *T&S* 1, no. 12 (October 1840). Given that 1,400 years is the same length of time in which the golden plates laid dormant until their recovery in 1827, it is likely, then, that according to these early Saints, the great apostasy began not with the death of the last apostolic figure, i.e., the apostle John, but with last mormonic authority figure, i.e., Moroni. According to the BofM, the last prophet and writer of its ancient source, Moroni, compiled his record around 420 years after the birth of Christ. BofM (1830), 585; cf. Moroni 10:1. But a fifth century date was not consensus. Smith himself suggested an earlier date, implying that by the second century “the church [at] that time was degenerate.” *T&S* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842).

¹⁹⁹ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 78–79.

²⁰⁰ Erastus Snow, “E. Snows Reply to the Self-Styled Philanthropist of Chester County,” (1840?), n.p., 8, *Nineteenth Century Mormon Publications: The Beginning to 1846*, Nineteenth Century Mormon Publications, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

which people habitually refused to remain beneath the authority of the priesthood. The Melchizedek priesthood lineage passed unscathed from Adam to Moses, who, during his life, was alone in holding it. As a result, Moses met with God face to face, enjoying divine communion by “Urim and Thummim, through the agency of angels, by visions, and by the Spirit of God.”²⁰¹ Yet, near the end of his life, Moses was prevented from ordaining his successor “in consequence of the wickedness of the children of Israel.”²⁰² The lineage of the higher priesthood was ruptured as “Moses was taken from them, and no one was ordained to succeed him and hold the same office.”²⁰³ Only the Aaronic priesthood, restricted to the tribe of Levi, carried forward.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, throughout the OT, Levitical priests so badly abused the lower priesthood that they had “lost their efficacy; or in other words, were made void,” teetering on the brink of total apostasy.²⁰⁵

But a new dawn was on the horizon. Christ came, in part, to reorganize the kingdom by ordaining his apostles, “and other official members of the primitive church,” to the higher priesthood given to him by God the Father.²⁰⁶ Equipped with the Melchizedek priesthood, the apostles were “Christ’s envoys extraordinary, endowed with plenipotentiary power” to advance the authority of the kingdom of God throughout all the world.²⁰⁷ The NT church enjoyed participation of the priesthood’s ecclesiastical offices

²⁰¹ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 35.

²⁰² Winchester, *Priesthood*, 35.

²⁰³ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 35.

²⁰⁴ Winchester offers a caveat that, on special occasions, the higher priesthood reappeared for a brief season and for a specific purpose. He hypothesized: “It is quite probable; that several of the Jewish prophets, by their faith received the Melchisedec priesthood from God, or an angel sent to confer it upon them. It is evident, that Samuel, David, Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah and others, received [the Melchizedek priesthood].” Winchester, *Priesthood*, 36–37.

²⁰⁵ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 40.

²⁰⁶ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 47, 49–50, 55.

²⁰⁷ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 51.

and signs.²⁰⁸ According to the BofM, Jesus duplicated these efforts in the Americas.²⁰⁹ Never again could the priesthood be taken from the righteous “unless they apostatized, and rendered themselves unworthy of them.”²¹⁰ Yet, as with the OT Saints before them, so too would the post-NT Saints invite the same curse by their rebellion. The church tolerated “insubordinate apostates,” who, acting in a foreign authority, disregarded priesthood law and manipulated the ordinance of baptism, which, in turn, broke the “everlasting covenant.”²¹¹ In place of Christ’s church arose the creedal churches that became altogether “destitute of the holy priesthood.”²¹²

The apple tree and all its branches were guilty of participating in apostasy by “supplanting primitive institutions of the kingdom.”²¹³ The list of evidence was long:

the sale of indulgences, amalgamation of numerous pagan rites and ceremonies with those of the church, the worship of images, the celibacy of the clergy, monkery in all its horrid forms, the flagitious court of inquisition, exorcism, the nunnery system, and scores of other equally absurd notions and practices.²¹⁴

And, despite Protestantism’s rejection of these practices, the reformers nevertheless followed in Rome’s footsteps by denying “immediate revelation from God to themselves” and making “no pretensions to the administration of angels.”²¹⁵ An 1830 revelation made clear the sad state of Christianity: “my vineyard has become corrupted evry whit & there is none that doth good save it is a few only,” yet, even they “err in many instances

²⁰⁸ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 58, 68.

²⁰⁹ BofM (1830), 492–3 (3 Nephi 18:26–39).

²¹⁰ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 68.

²¹¹ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 84–86.

²¹² Winchester, *Priesthood*, 92.

²¹³ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 86.

²¹⁴ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 86–87.

²¹⁵ Winchester, *Priesthood*, 90.

because of Priest crafts.”²¹⁶ And, while a remnant of core elements of the true faith survived throughout the ages, that core rediscovered its ends in the restoration. Smith bade Christians, who had some portion of the faith, “to come and get more.”²¹⁷

Thus percolated a common narrative of corruption, regardless of its pervasiveness or severity, that began to infect the church sometime during the apostolic era, blossomed in early Christianity, and spread to any church that broke from Rome. As a result, like the OT era, the Melchizedek priesthood was stripped from earth. Yet, so too had the Aaronic priesthood evaporated, unlike the OT era. A great apostasy evaporated God’s power and authority from earth and required an even greater event to restore it.

The Restoration of the Priesthood

One of the earliest explanations of the priesthood was written by Smith during summer 1832.²¹⁸ In the introduction, he announced the restoration *via* a multi-stage progression of divine activity in his life spanning nearly a decade, between the early-1820s to spring 1830, two stages of which have already been discussed.²¹⁹ First, he received a personal testimony “from on high,” i.e., the First Vision.²²⁰ Then, he experienced divine appointment by “the ministering of Angels,” i.e., his angelic visitation by Moroni.²²¹ Finally, he obtained “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel—the Law and commandments as they

²¹⁶ *JSP* D1:207.

²¹⁷ *Hist.* 5:246.

²¹⁸ *JSP* H1:10.

²¹⁹ Gregory Prince noticed this four-episode introduction to the priesthood by Joseph Smith. I have molded my brief survey of the history of the priesthood based on Prince’s example. Prince, “Mormon Priesthood and Organization,” 167–77.

²²⁰ *JSP* H1:10.

²²¹ *JSP* H1:10.

were given unto him—and the ordinances.”²²² This reception made his calling sure through

a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Keys of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c.²²³

This third stage, the “reception of the holy Priesthood,” occurred in the late spring of 1829.

In May, Smith and Cowdery were in the midst of their translation work when they came to a portion of the BofM text prescribing the mode and means of proper baptism.²²⁴ Cowdery recalled them wondering how salvific baptism was possible if “none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel.”²²⁵ Smith, who had yet to become baptized at all, was apparently so concerned about the matter that he interrupted the translation to pray for guidance, perhaps specifically for divine authorization to perform the ordinance. As Prince noted, this event “proved a major transitional point, for it was the first time that Smith sought formal ordination, rather than acting under the implicit authority by which he published the Book of Mormon.”²²⁶ According to Lucy Smith, after consulting the Urim and Thummim, Smith and Cowdery were commanded to “repair to the water, and attend to the ordinance of baptism.”²²⁷ Lucy gave no indication how the men received ordination, only that “they had now received

²²² *JSP* H1:10.

²²³ *JSP* H1:10.

²²⁴ This section was likely the BofM (1830), 477–9, cf. 3 Nephi 11:21–38.

²²⁵ Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, September 7, 1834, *M&A*, 1, no. 1 (October 1834); *JSP* H1:42; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 74.

²²⁶ Prince, “Mormon Priesthood and Organization,” 170.

²²⁷ Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996), 381.

authority to baptize” and performed the ordinance on each other.²²⁸ Later accounts offer precise and astounding clarity as to how the men were able to receive baptism.

According to Cowdery, writing years after the event, while the two were in the midst of prayer, “the voice of the redeemer spake peace” to the men as “the angel of God came down clothed with glory” to deliver the “keys of the gospel of repentance.”²²⁹ “Upon you my fellow servants,” the angel said, “in the name of Messiah I confer this priesthood, and this authority.”²³⁰ Smith later identified the heavenly messenger as John the Baptist glorified. He laid his hands on Smith’s and Cowdery’s heads, conferring on them “the priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys [of] baptism by immersion for the remission of sins,” the first time a man had held the priesthood since the apostolic era. Following their ordination, the men waded into the nearby Susquehanna River to baptize each other “by immersion for the remission of sins.”²³¹ John the Baptist then promised that a second authority, the Melchizedek Priesthood, would be conferred to them in due time by Peter, James, and John.²³² It is unknown when the restoration of the greater priesthood occurred; however, Smith claimed that it took place under the hands of the apostles, who, like John the Baptist, held the keys to confer their respective priesthood.²³³ After their ordination and baptism, Smith donned the title “apostle of Jesus Christ [and] an elder of this church,” and Cowdery, likewise, ascended to apostleship, having been

²²⁸ *EMD* 1:381.

²²⁹ *JSP* H1:42.

²³⁰ *JSP* H1:43.

²³¹ *JSP* H1:292.

²³² *JSP* H1:294, 295.

²³³ *JSH* 1:39. Smith possibly references this event in a letter to the LDS Church dated September 6, 1842, in which he declared: “The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times!” *D&C* 128:20. Additionally, the glorified apostles are alluded to in a letter from Smith that promises Oliver Cowdery the reception of the “holy priesthood under that hands of they who had been held in reserve for a long season, the hand of the Messiah. *JSP* D5:513–14. When this event occurred, however, is unknown.

“ordained under his [Smith’s] hand.”²³⁴ Thus, after centuries of corruption and confusion, the priesthood power and authority was restored.

It is important not to overlook the monumental significance of these events to LDS restorationism, the very existence of which depends on Smith’s ordination by the hands of angels. For centuries, the purity, authority, and efficacy of the church had eroded. As historian Jan Shipps noticed about early Mormon histories of the restoration, they believed they were witnessing “light breaking into darkness” after generations of groping in the spiritual dead of night.²³⁵ For generations, humanity wallowed blindly though inconceivable loss and, were it not for divine intervention, Christendom would have remained in such a sorry state. While contemporary LdS scholarship seeks to reimagine the apostasy narrative in inclusivistic and pluralistic terms, the core of the narrative remains: salvific power and authority, once lost to humanity, were restored by God through Joseph Smith.²³⁶ In the words of Givens, the restoration, as Smith described

²³⁴ BofC, 48.

²³⁵ Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 2.

²³⁶ Contemporary LdS scholars rightly recognize the importance of the apostasy to their faith and its organization. As LdS historian Eric Dursteler put it; “the concept of an apostasy is one of the linchpins of the Mormon faith: Without an apostasy, there would have been no need for Joseph Smith or for the Restoration.” Eric Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (2002): 23–24. Yet, he called into question the common Mormon view of the apostasy, especially LdS authorities’ conception of the Middle Ages as dark centuries in which ignorance, superstition, and ecclesiastical tyranny reigned. For Dursteler, his contemporaries bore the responsibility to build on their predecessors to reconstruct a more charitable, nuanced, and realistic view of the Christian faith from the apostolic era to Joseph Smith’s day. Instead of “depicting the apostasy as an age of complete degradation, of moral stupor, and of intellectual stagnancy,” Dursteler recommended conceptualizing it as “simply as an age in which priesthood authority did not exist, a view which may be closer in some ways to those of the apostasy in Mormonism’s earliest days.” Dursteler, “Inheriting,” 58. Since Dursteler’s article, a growing desire to reimagine and reframe—but never to forget or discount—the apostasy in new narratives has caught the attention of many LdS. John Young summarized recent LdS scholarship as “exploring the tension between the fundamental LDS belief in a restoration after a period of apostasy and a historical record at odds with some of the ways the story of that apostasy has been told.” Young, “Long Narratives,” 309. The apostasy is critical to the identity of Mormonism, but the way in which the apostasy has been narrated deserves reevaluation, and scholars have taken up the challenge. For example, LdS scholar Miranda Wilcox, a medievalist, suggests apostasy narratives that pull from past and present sources for their incorporation into a “new fullness of the gospel of Christ,” thus carrying on the tradition started by Smith. She also hopes for a reorientation of the “future responsibility and potential rather than past loss.” Miranda Wilcox, “Narrating Apostasy and the LDS Quest for Identity,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 118.

it, was “a crescendo of heavenly voices, visitations, epiphanies, and revelations that marked this as the final dispensation, the dispensation of the fullness of times.”²³⁷ Thus, Smith’s claim to authority among his religious peers was unparalleled. Only he was called directly by God, guided by an angel, and conferred priesthood authorities by glorified NT figures. The light of the priesthood shone bright; the voice of the Lord was heard again.

In the LDS Church, with Smith as head of its earthly hierarchy, was the fulness of salvation to be found. “I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain,” he claimed, an unstoppable boulder that destroys, among other obstacles, “religious bigotry” and “priestcraft.”²³⁸ “Salvation is for a man to be saved from all his enemies, for until a man can triumph over death, he is not saved; a knowledge of the priesthood alone will do this,” claimed Smith.²³⁹

The Birth and Rise of Mormonism: April 1830 to March 1836

Smith spent most of his prophetic career exercising his new authority to structure and restructure the priesthood system of his new church. The organizational structuring of the priesthood evolved in stages, forming and reforming according to new revelation, oftentimes in response to pragmatic needs. Consequently, its development seems ambiguous and oftentimes confusing. Smith was no bureaucrat, but he nevertheless demonstrated a penchant for organization. As Bushman noted, “almost all of his major theological innovations involved the creation of institutions—the Church, the City of Zion, the School of the Prophets, the priesthood, the temple,” all of which are

²³⁷ Givens, *Wrestling*, 33

²³⁸ *Hist.* 5:423.

²³⁹ *Hist.* 5:425.

explored in this section.²⁴⁰

The month following the publication of the BofM, on April 6, 1830, a handful of people gathered to hear Smith organize the “Church of Christ,” the communal manifestation of the “cause of Zion.”²⁴¹ A revelation on doctrine and organization, recorded around the same time, provided the budding church theological and ecclesiastical structure beneath its charismatic leader. Aside from brief allusions to Smith’s encounters with Moroni—and, oddly, no reference whatsoever to the First Vision nor angelic ordination—the “Church Articles & Covenants” was fairly commonplace.²⁴² As Bushman noted, the early church viewed itself within the scheme of Christianity, and its doctrinal statement “presented the Church of Christ as a church among churches, stable, disciplined, and orthodox.”²⁴³ What is unique, however, was a separate revelation given on the day of the Church’s founding—the first revelation to the new community—that expanded Smith’s offices from merely apostolic elder to “seer & a Translator & A Prophet.”²⁴⁴ From the earliest days of the church, Smith donned the mantle of God’s prophet on earth. In claiming to be prophet, Smith ascended all religious hierarchy to sit atop the pinnacle *cathedra* on earth. Eventually, his religious chair would evolve into a

²⁴⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 251.

²⁴¹ BofC, 1, cf. 34; BofM (1830), 507; cf. 3 Nephi 26:21; *JSP* D1:130, “The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ,” *E&MS* 2, no. 13 (June 1833). By 1834, the name was expanded to the “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” perhaps in an attempt to distinguish it from restorationist churches that bore the “Church of Christ” title. The church’s name was officially changed to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints” following a revelation on April 26, 1838 (D&C 115). Still, alternative names were common to the early church.

²⁴² While the document notes that Smith was “called of God,” a potential allusion to the First Vision, Oliver, too, was said to have been “also called of God.” It is unlikely, then, that the phrase “called of God” captures the First Vision; rather, it appears to reference Smith and Oliver’s ordination in May 1829 by John the Baptist. Bushman believed that the “First Vision and the visit of Moroni were mentioned [briefly],” but, lacking compelling evidence, it appears that only Moroni’s encounter was mentioned. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 112.

²⁴³ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 112.

²⁴⁴ Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations & Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 27. For definitions, see previous chapter. Interestingly, the “Church Articles & Covenants,” apparently written for both members and the public, omit “prophet” and, after initially including “seer,” struck it out. *JSP* MRB, 77.

governmental throne, merging the church and state into a millennial Zion.

As the church grew, so did opposition to it. The Mormons would not remain in New York for long. Later that fall, in September 1830, a new revelation required the “Elect” to be “gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land” so that the Saints might “prepare their Hearts & be prepared in all things against the day of tribulation & desolation” that was “soon at hand.”²⁴⁵ Smith envisioned this gathering place to be a new Zion, one modeled after Enoch’s “City of Holiness,” an addition to the book of Genesis made by Smith.²⁴⁶ Enoch’s Zion was a peaceful utopia of unity, righteousness, and economic flourishing as “there was no poor among them.”²⁴⁷ Later revelation encouraged the Saints to relinquish excess land and property among the “poor and needy” to church leaders who, in turn, were commissioned to “[purchase] Land & [build] up [the] New Jerusalem which is here after to be revealed that my covenant people may be gathered in one.”²⁴⁸ This new Zion would not be far off in Jerusalem but nearby, somewhere in the heart of a new promised land. And, like the Christian hope of the multicultural New Jerusalem, so the Saints were not the only invitees to gather in the new Zion.

Around the same time that the “Elect” received their revelation to gather, Cowdrey was commanded to set out on mission to proselytize among “the Lamanites,” i.e., the presumed progenitors of indigenous American people as proposed by the BofM.²⁴⁹ The revelation, given in September 1830, came just four months after the *Indian Removal Act* was signed into law, authorizing federal powers to displace indigenous people west of the Mississippi. Cowdrey’s westward travel coincided with the

²⁴⁵ *JSP* D1:179.

²⁴⁶ Moses 7:19.

²⁴⁷ Moses 7:18.

²⁴⁸ *JSP* D1:252. Given on February 9, 1831.

²⁴⁹ *JSP* H1:439.

dawn of the forced migration of countless native people. For the Mormons, this was opportune timing. According to the revelation, as many natives who heard and accepted the Mormon gospel would be welcomed into the coming Zion, an eschatological community that included both “Jew” and gentile. In addition to Lamanite conversion, Cowdery’s mission also carried with it a promise to the Saints that the location of Zion would soon be revealed. “No man knoweth where the city shall be,” it said, offering instead a small clue: “it shall be on the borders of the Lamanites.”²⁵⁰

In winter 1831, the Saints took their first step toward that borderland. Spurred by opposition in New York, they were forced to relocate to Kirtland, Ohio. There, more revelation about the coming Zion was given. The Saints would have “no King nor Ruler” because God himself would their king.²⁵¹ They would “have no laws but my laws,” the revelation said.²⁵² Their community would be a holy, theocratic refuge amid the impending judgement, an ark amid the eschatological flood. But an important question lingered. Where, exactly, was Zion to be built?

Establishing Zion

As the church grew in Ohio, so did its priesthood hierarchy. At its inception, the church was ruled over by Smith and Cowdery, who served as the First and Second Elders, respectively. These men were aided by various ecclesiastical officers as outlined in the Articles & Covenants (e.g., apostles, elders, priests, teachers, and deacons), but the association of the priesthood with those duties was not clearly articulated. By mid-1831, a developing clarity knit together the relationship between the priesthood and the various offices of the LDS Church. On June 3, 1831, at a conference of the church, select men were ordained to the priesthood by Smith, endowing them with authority to act in their

²⁵⁰ *JSP* H1:441.

²⁵¹ *JSP* MRB, 73.

²⁵² *JSP* MRB, 73.

positions.²⁵³ On November 11th, a revelation further clarified that atop these ecclesiastical offices was “the high Priest hood which is the greatest of all.”²⁵⁴ The revelation welded together the authority of the priesthood and the newly-established office of Presiding High Priest, occupied by Smith on January 27, 1832, who functioned as the “President of the high Priest hood of the Church,” i.e., the leader of the whole organization.²⁵⁵ By the end of 1831, local congregations (branches) were overseen by officers, and a new office of “bishop” was created to preside over branches in a geographic region.²⁵⁶

Such restructuring was needed to prepare a social infrastructure on which to build Zion. Earlier, on June 6, 1831, a revelation identified Missouri as the land God promised to “consecrate unto my People,” both the “remnant of Jacob,” i.e., natives, and “those who are heirs according to the covenant,” i.e., the Saints.²⁵⁷ Smith and Sidney Rigdon, a former Campbellite preacher and recent convert to the church, were dispatched with a small posse of elders to survey their “everlasting inheritance.”²⁵⁸ They chose Jackson County, near the town of Independence. The location seemed perfect—convenient access to the Missouri River, proximity to Lamanite territories, and a

²⁵³ *JSP* D1:326.

²⁵⁴ *JSP* D2:134; Gary Bergera, “Church Organization and Government,” in *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall (Santa Barbra, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 229.

²⁵⁵ *JSP* D2:134; Bergera, “Church Organization and Government,” 229.

²⁵⁶ Bergera, “Church Organization and Government,” 229. For definitions of these and the following offices, see previous chapter.

²⁵⁷ *JSP* D1:328; *T&S* 1, no. 2, (December 1839). Early Saints must have imagined themselves fulfilling prophecy in their new scripture. The BofM foretold of a day when God would “establish my church among them [‘the house of Israel’], and they shall come in unto the covenant, and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob, unto whom I have given this land for their inheritance, and they shall assist my people, the remant of Jacob; and also, as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city, which shall be called New Jerusalem; and then shall they assist my people that they may be gathered in, which are scattered upon all the facts of the land, in unto the New Jerusalem.” BoM (1830), 501; cf. 3 Nephi 21:22b–24.

²⁵⁸ *JSP* D2:11.

promising future for pioneer migration at the trailhead of the Oregon Trail. Although Independence was a backwater trading outpost, it nonetheless met the Saint's hope for a network hub to gather the elect to Zion, both indigenous and gentile converts. The next month, on July 20th, Smith received confirmation that God had indeed "appointed & consecrated" land in that county "for the gathering of the Saints [in] the City of Zion."²⁵⁹ Gentile settlers had already arrived in the area, having founded Independence in 1827, but the Mormons were, in a sense, instructed to resettle it as a holy city. A temple was to be built near the courthouse and the Saints were commanded to acquire all land between the temple lot and the state's western border.²⁶⁰ Church members were then implored "to come to this land as soon as possible & plant them in their inheritance."²⁶¹ Little by little, Mormon settlers began to arrive as the settlement grew.

By September 1832, Smith received a new revelation that further advanced the Saints' understanding of their priesthood, bifurcating between the "greater" (or "high") and "lesser" priesthoods, i.e., Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthoods.²⁶² Offices of elder and bishop were said to be "appendages" of the higher priesthood, with its attendant office of high priest, while teachers and deacons sprung from the lower priesthood.²⁶³ The former offices were commissioned to travel for proselytism work while the latter were tasked with overseeing the local affairs of the church.²⁶⁴ Later that year, the Mormons were called to build a temple in Kirtland for religious practices that would also serve as a training facility, a "school for the Prophets."²⁶⁵ By June 1833, the temple had not been

²⁵⁹ *JSP D2:7–8.*

²⁶⁰ *JSP D2:8.*

²⁶¹ *JSP D212.*

²⁶² *JSP D2:295, 296, 297.*

²⁶³ *JSP D2:297.*

²⁶⁴ *JSP D2:299, 303.*

²⁶⁵ *JSP D2:345, cf. 367.* The revelation, given on December 27, 1832, called on the Saints in

built, nor the Saints yet to break ground. The delay incurred God's disappointment, and, in a revelation given on the first of the month, they were chastised and warned not to allow the project tarry any longer.²⁶⁶ Construction began five days later and completed in spring 1836.²⁶⁷

Rejection from Jackson County

Meanwhile, the western Zion of Missouri continued to grow, but local gentiles, leery of the Saints, grew resistant to their plans. In addition to religious suspicions, slave-owning Missourians found the opaqueness of the Latter-day Saint position on slavery unsettling. Many of the Saints were resettling in Missouri from New England and the British Isles, bringing their unease toward slavery with them. Rumors began to swirl that Mormons encouraged disobedience among slaves while promoting interracial marriage and Black equality amid national concerns of the same.²⁶⁸ The accusations were not entirely unfounded. While very few members were Black, a select number received the priesthood and many Saints held abolitionist convictions, though not to the extremes of which they were accused.²⁶⁹ Mormons represented a third of the county population and

Kirtland to "establish, an house [of] Learning . . . an house of God." *JSP* D2:345. Later, in a January 11, 1833 letter, Smith clarified that the revelation "commended us in Kirtland to build an house of God, & establish a school for the Prophets." *JSP* D2:367.

²⁶⁶ *JSP* D3:107.

²⁶⁷ *JSP* MRB, 659.

²⁶⁸ Warren A. Jennings, "Factors in the Destruction of the Mormon Press in Missouri, 1833," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 35 (Winter 1967): 64; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 287.

²⁶⁹ One notable example, Elijah Abel, was ordained and called to the office of elder. Eunice Kinney, letter to Wingfield Watson on September 1891, WWP; Elijah Ables Elders' Certificate, March 31, 1836, Kirtland Elders' Certificates, General Church Recorder, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT; Russell W. Stevenson, "'A Negro Preacher': The Worlds of Elijah Ables," *Journal of Mormon History* 39 (Spring 2013): 165–254. Writing decades after the fact, Eunice recalled that Elijah's ordination came at the hands of Joseph Smith. Eunice Kinney, letter to Wingfield Watson on September 1891, WWP. The LDS Church later forbade ordination to the priesthood for Black men under Brigham Young until 1978; however, evidence suggests such a ban was only possible after Smith's death.

seemingly grow in influence and power by the day.²⁷⁰ To make matters worse, rumors began to swirl that the Mormons were plotting violence. Mormon leaders reluctantly agreed to abandon Zion but moved too slowly for the gentiles. By the fall, vigilantes attacked the Mormons.²⁷¹ In November, around 130 Saints—men, women, and children—fled across the freezing Missouri River into neighboring Clay county to safety.²⁷²

Meanwhile, in Kirkland, priesthood organization continued to evolve. On February 17, 1834, Smith assembled the “Presidents Church Council,” later named the “High counsel,” which acted as a special advisory and judicial council for judging disciplinary issues within the church.²⁷³ Smith sat atop the council as its *de jure* president, occupying the same position as Peter had in the Jerusalem council.²⁷⁴ One week later, messengers arrived from Missouri to update the council on the grim plight of the exiled Saints.²⁷⁵ gentile Missourians were called “enemies,” and Smith vowed to travel to Zion with a posse “to assist in redeeming it.”²⁷⁶ The council blessed Smith, entitling him with the moniker “Commander in chief of the Armies of Israel.”²⁷⁷ That same day came a revelation vowing revenge on the gentiles, on whom God promised to “pour out of my

²⁷⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 222.

²⁷¹ “The Outrage in Jackson County, Missouri,” *E&MS* 2, no. 15 (December 1833); “The Outrage in Jackson County, Missouri,” *E&MS* 2, no. 16 (January 1834); John Corroll to Oliver Cowdery, “The Outrage in Jackson County, Missouri,” *E&MS* 2, no. 16 (January 1834).

²⁷² John Corroll to Oliver Cowdery, “The Outrage in Jackson County, Missouri,” *E&MS* 2, no. 16 (January 1834).

²⁷³ *JSP* D3:436. Smith claimed his council modeled those of antiquity, assuming a seat of the council’s head as the apostle Peter once had.

²⁷⁴ *JSP* D3:442; D3:437; cf. Acts 15:2–35.

²⁷⁵ *JSP* D3:454.

²⁷⁶ *JSP* D3:456, 457.

²⁷⁷ *JSP* D3:457.

wrath without measure in mine own time.”²⁷⁸ It also instructed the Saints to gather a camp, between 100 and 500 men, to aid the displaced Saints in returning “to the lands of their inheritances.”²⁷⁹ Yet, despite the saber rattling, the militia disbanded after arriving in Missouri. “Joseph’s military flourishes usually stopped short of battle,” Bushman observed.²⁸⁰ Instead, after their pleas for redress to state and federal authorities fell on deaf ears, they shored up defenses in Jackson county.²⁸¹ The Missouri Saints were joined by members of the “Camp of Israel” (or “Zion’s Camp”) between May and June 1834.²⁸² Still, tension between Mormon and Missouri gentiles continued to grow, pressing and stressing the church.

Expansion and Deepening of the Priesthood

By early 1835, Smith set his eyes on expanding the horizon of the church’s proselytizing mission. On February 14th, he selected twelve men from Zion’s Camp to be appointed to the newly established office of apostle (although Smith had held the title as early as June 1829 and the term was used synonymously with “elder,” especially those who preached).²⁸³ Their selection and ordination marked the fulfillment of an earlier revelation commanding that twelve men be called “to declare my gospel, both unto Gentile and unto Jew.”²⁸⁴ The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as they came to be called,

²⁷⁸ *JSP D3:459.*

²⁷⁹ *JSP D3:462.*

²⁸⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 236.

²⁸¹ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 236.

²⁸² *JSP D4:69–77*; Matthew C. Godfrey, “The Acceptable Offering of Zion’s Camp,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 213–8.

²⁸³ *JSP D4:233–4*. In a June 1829 revelation, Smith’s calling was “even as unto Paul mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called.” *Hist.* 1:46.

²⁸⁴ *JSP D1:72.*

were commissioned with urgent missional roles to “bear the tidings of salvation to nations, tongues and people” and “gather the Elect” in anticipation of the eschaton.²⁸⁵ On February 23rd, in support of the Mormon apostolic mission, 43 men, also from Zion’s Camp, were subsequently ordained to support their new apostles to “go forth and preach the everlasting gospel.”²⁸⁶ The newly formed group constituted the nascent Quorum of the Seventy, despite being 27 men short.²⁸⁷

The following month, the apostles were planning their first mission to the “Eastern States,” during which Brigham Young would take a leading position.²⁸⁸ Clarity for their mission apparently eluded them, so they requested, through their Seer, “a revelation of [God’s] mind and will concerning our duty the coming season.”²⁸⁹ In response, Smith crafted a document that detailed and summarized the purpose, roles, and responsibilities of all priesthood offices that had been instated since the inception of the LDS Church.²⁹⁰ Pertinent to the forthcoming mission, the authority and relationship between the apostles and Seventies was outlined. The apostles, who were primarily “traveling councilors,” formed a quorum “equal in authority and power, to the three presidents,” i.e., the First Presidency.²⁹¹ (This authority will later sit at the center of the Strang controversy, which Watson will return to time and again in support of his prophet). The Seventy, likewise, were called “especial witnesses,” who formed a quorum

²⁸⁵ *JSP D4*:228, 229. See chap. 1 for a definition of “apostle.”

²⁸⁶ *JSP D4*:259.

²⁸⁷ For a definition of “Seventy,” see chap. 1.

²⁸⁸ *Hist.* 2:217.

²⁸⁹ *Hist.* 2:281.

²⁹⁰ *Hist.* 2:218–22; cf. D&C 107. Due to the influence of this document, much of its content has been reviewed in previous sections of the past two chapters, e.g., the bipartite relationship of the Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthood, their office appendages, priesthood lineage, and so on. Therefore, the revelation will not be rehearsed fully here.

²⁹¹ *Hist.* 2:219.

“equal in authority to that of the twelve especial witnesses or Apostles” when decisions were reached in unanimity.²⁹² Moreover, the Twelve were called a “traveling, presiding high council,” a mobile version of the LDS Church councils in Ohio and Missouri, authorized to “regulate all affairs” under the guidance of the presidency.²⁹³ The apostles and seventies were subsequently tasked with establishing stakes, who were equipped and left to self-govern.²⁹⁴ With roles and authorities defined, on May 4th, the men departed for their northeastern mission.²⁹⁵ Smith was building up the priesthood through a network of ecclesiastical nodes.

The summer of 1835 proved busy for the publication and translation of new revelation. In May, the first edition of *Doctrine & Covenants* was put to typeset, later published in September. In it, readers were given detailed information and instruction on the priesthood, the first of its kind since the foundation of the LDS Church.²⁹⁶ Additionally, the church acquired a collection of Egyptian artifacts, including rolls of papyri, from an itinerant antiquities exhibitor, Michael Chandler.²⁹⁷ Smith theorized that the papyri contained ancient writings from the biblical patriarchs and, by March 1842, translated a portion of the collection as the book of Abraham.²⁹⁸ The book of Abraham

²⁹² *Hist.* 2:219.

²⁹³ *Hist.* 2:219.

²⁹⁴ *Hist.* 2:219–20.

²⁹⁵ *Hist.* 2:228.

²⁹⁶ D&C (1835); 82–99.

²⁹⁷ *Hist.* 2:240.

²⁹⁸ As early as 1860, Egyptologists disputed the biblical connection that Smith believed was present in the texts. Théodule Devéria, an Egyptologist employed by the Louvre, published his conclusion that the MSS were illustrations of Egyptian funerary rites, not, as Smith had claimed, scenes and revelations of Abraham. Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City* (London: W. Jeffs, 1861) 2:540–6. The original collection, including mummies, were sold and resold until finding a home in a Chicago museum. After the Chicago Fire of 1871, the collection was thought to be lost to history. However, a portion of the collection had been transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and, on November 27, 1967, was transferred to LDS Church ownership. “An Interview with Dr. Fischer,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (winter 1967): 55. Once translated, the skepticism of Devéria and others was confirmed; the fragments were all sourced from Egyptian funerary materials. Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers,” 53–54. Considering this evidence, Smith’s work is best understood, in

sources the priesthood of Abraham in his conferral to the office of High Priest by his forefathers (Abraham 1:2–4), and the Abrahamic blessing was amended to add the priesthood (Gen 12:1–3; cf. Abraham 2:9, 11). Thus, Smith created a stronger scriptural tie to the priesthood lineage through the patriarchs than had existed previously.

By the spring 1836, Zion’s redemption would take a major step forward. In the early hours of a cold Sunday in March 1836, hundreds of Saints gathered in and around the recently completed Kirtland temple.²⁹⁹ For the first time, the priesthood organization was on full display. The two priesthood orders flanked the lower auditorium. On the west side sat the Melchizedek officers and on the east side sat the Aaronic officers.³⁰⁰ The assembly was asked to affirm and uphold their priesthood leadership, and, after an overwhelming show of support, the ceremony went on to include sermons, prayers, and hymns.³⁰¹ So pleased was God with the scene that he reportedly sent an emissary to manifest his delight. Toward the end of the ceremony, Frederick Williams, then a member of the First Presidency, described how “an angel of God came into the window” and sat among the Melchizedek pulpits.³⁰² The angel, Smith said (according to one witness), was

the words of Egyptologist Lanny Bell, as an “esoteric interpretation of hieroglyphics” that envisions the characters as symbolic rather than literal. Lanny Bell, “The Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’ the Mormon ‘Book of Abraham,’ and the Development of Egyptology in America,” in *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon his Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University, June 2005*, ed. Stephen E. Thompson and Peter Der Manuelian (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2008), 30. In turn, some LdS scholars note the possibility that the extant MSS are not all that were available to Smith and, in echoing Bell, some of Smith’s translation work “involved not an ancient text but rather inspired pondering of the existing text” Julie Marie Smith, “Mormon Scripture,” in *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 269. Shortly after receiving the collection, he commenced translating the documents, first by deciphering the hieroglyphs into an alphabet—the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, first cracked in 1822, was then being debated by Egyptologists—unlike his method for translating the BofM. Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers,” 67. The book of Abraham was published in *T&S* March 1842. *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842).

²⁹⁹ *JSP* D1:200.

³⁰⁰ *JSP* J1:201.

³⁰¹ *JSP* J1:204.

³⁰² Stephen Post, “Journal, March 27–31, 1836,” Stephen Post Papers, 1835–1921, MS 1304, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed November 6, 2019, http://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2236708.

none other than the apostle Peter.³⁰³ The following month, on April 3rd, Smith and Cowdery reported a visitation by Jesus Christ and the OT prophets Moses, Elisha, and Elijah. Christ promised the Saints incalculable blessings and that “the fame of this House” would reach international renown.³⁰⁴ Zion’s future looked bright despite its struggles.

Conflict in Zion: April 1836 to June 1844

The Kirtland temple dedication would come to be a continental divide of Smith’s prophetic career. “After its completion,” noticed Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s life descended into a tangle of intrigue and conflict.”³⁰⁵ Internally, rumors of illicit sexual activity—rooted in Smith’s polygamous relationship with his first plural wife—created tension within and outside the LDS Church.³⁰⁶ The year prior, Smith was reportedly visited by an angel who commanded him to engage in plural marriage.³⁰⁷ Sufficient gossip about illicit behavior warranted a response as early as 1835 in D&C to address accusations of “the crime of fornication, and polygamy.”³⁰⁸ The church reaffirmed its declaration of traditional marriage. But, in 1838, Cowdery lambasted Smith for his “dirty, nasty, filthy affair,” and was excommunicated in April of that year.³⁰⁹ By late 1840,

³⁰³ Angell, *Autobiography*, p. 16; see also Archie Leon Brown and Charlene L. Hathaway, *141 Years of Mormon Heritage* (Oakland, Calif.: Archie Leon Brown, 1973), 124–5; and Truman O. Angell Sr., “His Journal,” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1958–77), 10:198.

³⁰⁴ *JSP* J1:222.

³⁰⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 322.

³⁰⁶ Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, vol. 1: *History* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 85–151.

³⁰⁷ Brian C. Hales, “Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 61.

³⁰⁸ D&C (1835), 251.

³⁰⁹ Oliver Cowdery to Warren A. Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Quoted in William Shepard and H. Michael Marquardt, “The Relationship of Oliver Cowdery with Joseph Smith,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 38, no. 1 (spring 2018): 119; Zion (Missouri) High Council and Nauvoo Stake High Council, “The Conference

polygamy was becoming an open secret as other men were being invited to participate.³¹⁰

Externally, things in Missouri deteriorated rapidly. Although the Mormons were removed to Clay County in November 1833, opponents wanted to see them expelled from the State altogether. “We are looked upon as slaves,” lamented William Phelps, “despised, belied, slandered, whipped, mocked, buffeted, reproaches, and considered, by the other professors among the sects, ‘the jest and riddle of the world.’”³¹¹ Little had changed over the course of two years. By summer 1836, the issue of abolitionism once again incited gentile concern over the growing Mormon presence. Like their neighbors, Clay County residents also wanted the Saints removed out of fear that “clouds of civil war” were gathering over the area.³¹² “We earnestly urge them to seek some other abiding place,” they wrote in committee, adding a veiled threat that the Mormons should heed their advice “if they regard the welfare of their families.”³¹³ Their request was granted. On June 22, 1836, Smith secured land from the federal government northeast of Clay County, and Saints began to settle what would become Far West, Missouri.³¹⁴ By late 1838, around 5,000 Saints would populate their new Zion that only a few years prior was untamed prairie.³¹⁵

Meanwhile, in Kirkland, Smith failed to navigate the church through dire financial straits. Mormons struggled to raise money to fund yet another resettlement, let

Minutes, and Record Book, of Christ’s Church of Latter Day Saints,” Minute Book 2, 6 Apr. 1838–[ca. June 1838], [ca. Oct. 1842], [ca. June 1844], *JSP* (accessed August 11, 2019).

³¹⁰ Brian C. and Laura H. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 45.

³¹¹ *JSP* D4:118.

³¹² “Public Meeting,” *M&A* 2, no. 11 (August 1836).

³¹³ “Public Meeting,” *M&A* 2, no. 11 (August 1836).

³¹⁴ *Hist.* 2:452.

³¹⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 343.

alone the Kirtland temple construction, which left them in debt.³¹⁶ Leaders devised a solution to raise capital; the LDS Church would form its own bank. The Kirtland Safety Society was organized on November 2, 1836, along with numerous other frontier banks in Ohio.³¹⁷ The timing, however, proved to be unfortunate. Just as soon as the Society's doors were opened, the violent winds of the Panic of 1837 blew them shut. Both Mormons and non-Mormons lost investments. The financial blow was so devastating that leaders were forced to mortgage the Kirtland temple. Dissatisfaction with Smith's leadership resulted in charges of "lying & misrepresentation [and] extortion" brought against him on May 29th.³¹⁸ Smith wrestled throughout the rest of the year with dissension, resulting in the excommunication of many church leaders in December, including Martin Harris.³¹⁹

By the turn of the New Year 1838, internal dissent, external opposition, and financial instability threatened to ruin Smith. Some dissenters, including church leaders, organized a rival church, which they dubbed the "Old Standard," with plans to meet in the temple and threatened to uphold their new organization "by the shedding of blood" if necessary.³²⁰ Many members left the religious community altogether. One historian calculated that "possibly two or three hundred Kirtland Saints withdrew from the Church," about ten to fifteen percent of the church.³²¹ Kirtland was in the midst of an

³¹⁶ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 329.

³¹⁷ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 330.

³¹⁸ *JSP* D5:397.

³¹⁹ H. Michael Marquardt, "Martin Harris: The Kirtland Years, 1831–1870," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 12–13.

³²⁰ Hepzibah Richards letter to Willard Richards, January 18, 1838, Willard Richards journals and papers, 1821–1854; Incoming correspondence; Letters, 1837–1839; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed August 10, 2020, [https:// catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=106d974b-d7f3-4f0b-99ca-fc4c2cbeec7e&crate=0&index=1](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=106d974b-d7f3-4f0b-99ca-fc4c2cbeec7e&crate=0&index=1).

³²¹ Milton V. Backman, *Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Books, 1983), 328.

apostasy crisis. In a blow to Smith's leadership, three witnesses to the BofM plates, one of the members of the First Presidency (Frederick Williams), and four apostles were among the dissenters.³²²

To make matters worse, Smith faced substantial debts that he could not pay. A portion of Smith's assets were seized and auctioned off to pay off debts.³²³ The Kirtland printing shop was attacked, then sold at auction by those looking to recoup lost investment, but subsequently destroyed by an arsonist on January 15th. "Kirtland was all in flames," said one resident, speaking of the printing press but describing the wider scene. "Many are preparing to flee, believing that if they remain they shall be driven out by a lawless mob," wrote resident Hepzibah Richards.³²⁴ Smith, in fact, had already fled. On January 12th, he received a very timely revelation instructing the First Presidency to move westward "as fast as the way is made plain before their faces."³²⁵ Plans were expedited after Smith was warned of an impending arrest by the county sheriff.³²⁶ He departed Kirtland that night under the cover of darkness.³²⁷

Respite and Tumult in Missouri

Smith arrived in Caldwell County mid-March 1838.³²⁸ By then, Far West had grown over the past two years by the efforts of the resettled Missouri Mormons. That fall,

³²² Scott C. Esplin, "The Fall of Kirtland: The Doctrine and Covenants' Role in Reaffirming Joseph," *The Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 8, no. 1 (2007): 20.

³²³ *JSP* D5:491–2

³²⁴ Hepzibah Richards letter to Willard Richards, January 18, 1838, Willard Richards journals and papers, 1821–1854; Incoming correspondence; Letters, 1837–1839; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=106d974b-d7f3-4f0b-99ca-fc4c2cbeec7e&crate=0&index=1>; Kyle R. Walker, "'As Fire Shut Up in My Bones': Ebenezer Robinson, Don Carlos Smith, and the 1840 Edition of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (winter 2010): 5–6.

³²⁵ *JSP* J1:283.

³²⁶ Luke Johnson, "History of Luke Johnson," *MS* 27, no. 1 (January 7, 1865).

³²⁷ Luke Johnson, "History of Luke Johnson," *MS* 27, no. 1 (January 7, 1865).

³²⁸ *JSP* J1:237.

city growth would accelerate rapidly. A camp of around five hundred Saints, having left Kirtland in the summer, joined Smith and the other Missouri Mormons on October 2, 1838.³²⁹ The migration of all Saints to Far West came as a response to a revelation calling for consolidation given on April 26th. The revelation commanded church members to gather in Far West, “a holy and consecrated land,” where they could build up a new Zion, complete with a new temple (this time being forbidden to incur debt).³³⁰ Smith spent the remainder of spring resuscitating the priesthood organization and building up Zion. Among his newest apostles was John E. Page, who would figure prominently in the early Strangite Church.

Still, trouble followed the Saints from Ohio. Several dissenters followed the Kirtland camp to Far West threatening lawsuits and undermining church leadership. In June, Sidney Rigdon, then a member of the First Presidency, delivered firebrand sermons calling on the removal of apostates from the community and, according to one witness, vowing “a war of extirmination” if the Saints were further harassed.³³¹ Rigdon’s actual words appear to have been a bit more tempered, pleading for relief from threats of lawsuits and imploring gentile neighbors to honor their religious freedom.³³² But gentiles heard Rigdon’s oration as a serious threat, reviving old prejudices and fomenting conflict in what would come to be known as the 1838 Mormon War. By fall, Mormons and gentiles were locked in armed conflict suffering destruction of property and deaths on both sides. In October, Governor Lilburn Boggs, a resident of Jackson County, issued an extermination order against the Mormons, just as the 500-member camp from Kirtland

³²⁹ Kirtland Camp (Organization). Constitution, 13 March 1838. CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ee641835-dea0-4576-83f0-5659845714a5/0/>.

³³⁰ *JSP* J1:258, 260.

³³¹ *JSP* H2:169; Sidney Rigdon, *Oration delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon, on the 4th of July, 1838 at Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri* (Far West, MO: The Journal Office, 1838).

³³² LeSueur, *1838 Mormon War*, 52.

was arriving.³³³ The rapid increase in Mormon population only agitated anti-Mormon fears. By December, the First Presidency, along with other key leaders, were charged with treason and jailed in Liberty, Missouri.³³⁴

In their absence, Brigham Young, who had earlier led the apostle's eastern mission, facilitated the Saints' exodus from Missouri.³³⁵ Little by little, the beleaguered Saints migrated eastward across the Mississippi River into neighboring Illinois.

The Church in Nauvoo

"Escaped April 16th," read the first entry in Smith's new journal.³³⁶ One week later, he was welcomed by Saints who had taken refuge in Quincy, Illinois.³³⁷ They would not remain there, however. Throughout the summer, the LDS Church secured acreage in Commerce, Illinois and its surrounding area.³³⁸ Nestled against the Mississippi River, spectators hoped it would become a central commercial port between northern mining operations and southern farming communities.³³⁹ The Saints quickly set to work building, for a third time, their urban Zion. Major proselytizing efforts resumed that summer as Smith, on July 2nd, discussed plans for sending the Twelve to Europe on mission.³⁴⁰ LDS

³³³ *Hist.* 3:164. While contemporary use of the word "exterminate" elicits destruction and death, in the mid-nineteenth century, it expressed rooting out or driving away and eradication. Noah Webster defined "exterminate" as "to drive from within the limits or borders." Noah Webster, "Exterminate," in *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (New York: S. Converse, 1828), 710. Boggs's order clarified that the Mormons "*must be exterminated* or driven from the State." Emphasis original.

³³⁴ *Hist.* 3:199.

³³⁵ Brigham Young, then 37 years old, was chosen from among the Twelve by seniority following Smith's instruction to "appoint the oldest of those of those Twelve who were first appointed, to be the President of your Quorum." "Letter to Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young, January 16, 1839," JSP, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-heber-c-kimball-and-brigham-young-16-january-1839/2>.

³³⁶ *JSP* 1:336.

³³⁷ *JSP* 1:336.

³³⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 384.

³³⁹ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 384.

³⁴⁰ *JSP* J1:344.

apostles John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, both future presidents of the LdS Church, were the first to depart as other apostles followed in subsequent months.

The trials of Ohio and Missouri fractured Mormon confidence in American democracy and fostered a sense of Christ's imminent return. While imprisoned, Smith instructed the Saints to compile affidavits containing "<a> knowledge of <all> the facts and suffering and abuses put upon them by the people of this state."³⁴¹ On May 5, 1839, church leaders resolved to set off to Washington with the grievances "to lay our case before the general Government."³⁴² The commission, led by Smith, made their case before Martin Van Buren and members of Congress beginning in November 1839 and lasting into the following spring, but their pleas for redress of lost property and life ultimately fell on deaf ears.³⁴³ "Gentlemen, your cause is just," Van Buren reportedly told them, "but I can do nothing for you."³⁴⁴ Apparently, the president feared that supporting the Mormons would cost him the Missouri vote.³⁴⁵

Smith's experience in Washington left him, in the words of a contemporary reporter, "disappointed, and chagrined."³⁴⁶ To Smith, the Capital boasted "little solidity and honorable deportment" among the representation but an abundance of "pomposity and show."³⁴⁷ Instead of abandoning democracy, however, they would seek to reform it in line with the kingdom of God on earth. And they would need to do it soon; the

³⁴¹ "Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church, circa 22 March 1839," JSP, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/2>.

³⁴² "Minutes, 4–5 May 1839," JSP, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-4-5-may-1839/3>.

³⁴³ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 392–8.

³⁴⁴ *Hist.* 4:64.

³⁴⁵ *Hist.* 4:64.

³⁴⁶ "Discourse, 1 March 1840," JSP, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-1-march-1840/1>.

³⁴⁷ "Letterbook 2," JSP, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-2/91>.

apocalypse drew nearer every day. During the same month that the commission set east for Washington, the first edition of the newest LDS periodical, *Times & Seasons*, encouraged the Saints to abide in patience and faithfulness in the last days. God would soon have his revenge, and, amid the chaos of collapsing kingdoms, “Zion shall blossom as a rose” in their renamed city Nauvoo, related to the Hebrew *na’ah* “lovely, beautiful.”³⁴⁸

A three-year period of relative peace, between 1839 and 1842, offered Saints the space to recover and Smith the opportunity to expand priesthood doctrine. In October 1840, Smith delivered a discourse on the nature of the priesthood to a quorum of elders in which he set Adam atop the patriarchy of the priesthood. According to Smith, Adam directs the priesthood throughout all dispensations of time. He is, in effect, a First Presidency overall. The OT practice of offering sacrifices, too, was expanded, at least in time. Smith taught the restoration of offering sacrifices was a sign of the latter days, clarifying that “those things which existed prior to Moses’ day, namely, sacrifice, will be continued.”³⁴⁹ Other unique doctrines developed during the Nauvoo era including baptism for the dead, the doctrine of eternal progression, and the official teaching on plural marriage.

On August 16th, faced with the financial and logistical challenges that attended the wave of Mormon emigration, Smith offer his apostles unparalleled power within the ecclesiastical structure. It was time, he said, for them “to stand in their place next to the First Presidency.”³⁵⁰ The Twelve would continue to ascend in power as Smith distributed his responsibilities. Eventually, their jurisdiction would come to include holding key positions on the Nauvoo city council, supervise the *Times & Seasons*, and have general

³⁴⁸ *T&S* 1, no. 1 (November 1839).

³⁴⁹ *Hist.* 4:202–3.

³⁵⁰ *Hist.* 4:400.

control over economic and ecclesiastical affairs domestically and abroad.³⁵¹

But not all was well in Nauvoo. Tension between Smith and John C. Bennett, then a prominent leader in the community, resulted in Bennett's excommunication during the summer of 1842. Bennett retaliated by fomenting dissension that would come to breed scandal within the church and opposition outside of it. He accused Smith of dispatching an assassin to Boggs, who survived an assassination attempt earlier that May.³⁵² Efforts to arrest and try Smith for the crime failed. Later that year, Bennett published an *exposé* accusing Smith of despotism, treason, and polygamy, which he called the "spiritual wife doctrine."³⁵³ By June 1843, Bennett's accusation of treason led the newly elected governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, to issue a warrant of expedition for Smith to be charged in Missouri. The prophet, however, slipped their bonds to the frustration his opponents. These events caused Smith to recognize the vulnerability of Nauvoo, and he began to strategize the future security of the kingdom.

To secure its future, Smith eyed opportunities both to the east and west. To the east, in Washington, he leveraged the upcoming presidential election to secure federal support. Once more, the Saints appealed to Congress and various political candidates for redress in exchange for public support but received few listeners. For Smith, the United States was impotent to protect the rights of minority religious groups, thwarted by political gridlock and incompetence that bred social and economic stagnation.³⁵⁴ By

³⁵¹ D. Michael Quinn, "The Evolution of the Presiding Quorums of the LDS Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974), 29.

³⁵² Morris A. Thurston, "The Boggs Shooting and Attempted Extradition: Joseph Smith's Most Famous Case," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (January 2009): 4, 11.

³⁵³ Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 230.

³⁵⁴ So Smith: "Our nation, which possesses greater resources than any other, is rent from center to circumference, with party strife, political intrigue, and sectional interest; our counsellors are panic struck, our legislators are astonished, and our senators are confounded; our merchants are paralyzed, our tradesmen are disheartened, our mechanics out of employ, our farmers distressed, and our poor crying for bread. Our banks are broken, our credit ruined, and our states overwhelmed in debt." *T&S* 3, no. 18 (July 15, 1842).

January 1844, Smith took his plans to a higher level. If the Mormons could not secure assistance from Washington, then perhaps they could secure its executive branch. On January 29th, the Twelve nominated Smith for president of the United States, and, that spring, he announced his candidacy with his running mate, Sidney Rigdon.³⁵⁵ Smith rejected both Democrat and Whig parties and instead aimed to reinvigorate Jacksonian democracy, which he called “*acme* of American glory, liberty, and prosperity.”³⁵⁶ Perhaps Smith saw in himself a bit of Jackson, whose candidacy ran as a political outsider who championed the plight of disenfranchised citizens. His independent platform called for the eradication of slavery by 1850 and the annexation of western territories. In fact, Smith’s eye had been on America’s western frontier for some time.

The Saints felt that the same kind of opposition and persecution that drove them from Ohio and Missouri was on the horizon. They reasoned that settlements in western territories, far from the reach of gentile settlers and contentious or impotent government, might offer the best opportunity for protection. On February 20th, Smith instructed the Twelve to commission a delegation to explore Upper California and Oregon Country—both outside or disputed U.S. territory at the time—as possible locations for the Saints to relocate “where we can build a city in a day, and have a Government of our own,” high in the mountains, “where the Devil can not dig us out.”³⁵⁷ Smith also seriously considered the Republic of Texas, and even mulled the idea of a

³⁵⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 514; Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 190; Timothy L. Wood, “The Prophet and the Presidency: Mormonism and Politics in Joseph Smith’s 1844 Presidential Campaign,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 93, no. 2 (summer 2000): 185; John Taylor, *General Smith’s Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States* (John Taylor: Nauvoo, 1844). Bushman notes that scholars debate whether Smith believed his U.S. presidency was winnable and, if so, whether the kingdom of God would incorporate the United States. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 658, fn. 48.

³⁵⁶ Taylor, *General Smith’s Views*, 7.

³⁵⁷ “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” p. 1896, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/268>.

settlement in Wisconsin Territory after a new convert, James J. Strang, suggested its timber-rich southeastern region.³⁵⁸

In spring 1844, Smith assembled a secret council of key leaders to plan for Mormon settlement in the west and the establishment of the literal kingdom of God on earth. On March 11th, Smith organized his Council of Fifty to establish a government that “was designed to be got up for the safety and salvation of the saints by protecting them in their religious rights and worship.”³⁵⁹ But, more than this objective, it also envisioned itself as a commission to bring about a theocratic utopia, “according to the will of Heaven, planted without any intention to interfere with any government of the world.”³⁶⁰ The expectation was that the governments of the world would return the same noninterventionist favor. The council walked a delicate line between the laws of the government they desired and the laws of the land in which they lived. Emphasis was placed on their desire for an “independant government” from the U.S. as a *kingdom* (e.g., “Kingdom of God” governed by the council of “The Kingdom of God and his Laws,”) with its ultimate head as God, i.e., a theocracy.³⁶¹ Yet, the council also admired the U.S. Constitution, not wanting to dismiss American republicanism altogether. “The constitution provides the things which we want,” said Smith, “but lacks the power to carry the laws into effect.”³⁶² On March 21st, the council appointed a committee to draft a new constitution that embraced “those principles which the constitution of the United

³⁵⁸ Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Administrative Records, Council of Fifty Minutes, March 1844–January 1846* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 140–6; “Chronicles of Voree: A Record of the establishment and doings of the Stake of Zion called Voree in Wisconsin, made by the Scribes appointed to that office,” 23, typeset facsimile copy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) archives, original in private hands. Hereafter cited as CV. This edition is a transcription compiled by John J. Hajjcek (Burlington, WI: J. J. Hajjcek, 1992), 8–9.

³⁵⁹ *JSP* C50:48.

³⁶⁰ *JSP* C50:88.

³⁶¹ *JSP* C50:20, 36, 48, 127.

³⁶² *JSP* C50:129.

States lacked.”³⁶³ The next month, on April 11th, Smith received by the council as the “Prophet, Priest & King” of the budding theocracy, a New Jerusalem, not delivered down from heaven but built up from below in the west, far away from government interference, with King Joseph as its head.³⁶⁴ If Zion could not succeed within the bounds of American states and laws, then perhaps it might succeed away from both. “We consider ourselves the head,” said Smith, “and Washington the tail. We can make laws and send them abroad and not say anything to them about it, untill we get ourselves firmly set beyond their power.”³⁶⁵ Eventually, though, the kingdom would come to rule over the whole world during the millennial reign of Christ.³⁶⁶

The Fall of the First Mormon Prophet

While Smith’s plans for the kingdom of God unfolded, so did confidence in his leadership. Of all the issues dissidents took up with Smith, perhaps none had more immediate and lasting power than the accusation of polygamy. The doctrine of plural

³⁶³ *JSP* C50:54. At this time, Willard Richards served as the chairman for the committee to draft a constitution for the council. *JSP* C50:652. On April 18th, Richard’s committee presented what had been written of their first draft. Echoing the U.S. constitution, it read: “We, the people of the Kingdom of God . . . [knowing] that all nations have obtained their power, rule and authority by usurpation, rebellion, bloodshed, tyranny and fraud:—And knowing also, that no government, which has thus originated, has the disposition and power to grant that protection to these persons and rights of man, viz. life, liberty, possession of property, and pursuit of happiness . . . We have supplicated the great I am, that he would make known his Weill unto his servants, concerning this, his last kingdom . . . And the voice of the Lord unto us was,— Verily thus saith the Lord, this is the name by which you shall be called, the kingdom of God and his Laws.” *JSP* C50:110–3. The new constitution gave unparalleled power to the prophet who, “holding the keys and authority, pertaining to my holy priesthood,” would alone revive “my laws, my statures, my ordinances, my Judgements, my will and pleasure concerning my kingdom on the earth.” *JSP* C50:113.

³⁶⁴ *JSP* C50:96; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 521.

³⁶⁵ *JSP* C50:128.

³⁶⁶ Brigham Young taught, “The Lord God Almighty has set up a kingdom that will sway the sceptre of power and authority over all the kingdoms of the world, and will never be destroyed, it is the kingdom that Daniel saw and wrote of.” Richard S. Van Wagoner, ed., *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2009) 1:491. While Young believed that “the American Government is second to none in the world in influence and power, and far before all others in liberal and free institutions,” he nevertheless believed that, due to the American people’s rejection of Smith, the government would be destroyed and only the righteous kingdom of Zion would stand for “the second coming of our Lord and Savior to dwell upon the earth.” *CDBY* 2:898, 904.

marriage, which, by 1843, had become an open secret despite years of public denial.³⁶⁷ Within the first six months of 1843, Smith married twelve women. In November, he took his last plural wife, Fanny Murray, a widowed sister of Brigham Young.³⁶⁸ Smith's first wife, Emma, oscillated in her support of the practice, which, on July 12th, incurred a divine warning to "receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph," remaining with him, lest she succumb to God's divine wrath.³⁶⁹ "[If] she will not abide this commandment," said the revelation, "she shall be destroyed, saith the Lord; for I am the Lord thy God, and will destroy her, if she abide not in my law."³⁷⁰ The warning was so extreme because marriage *per se*—now with the possibility of plurality—was attached to the priesthood, a "new and an everlasting covenant" that, if rejected, resulted in damnation.³⁷¹ By mid-1844, Smith would have married roughly three dozen women, and 29 other men took on an additional 50 plural wives.³⁷²

Many within the church opposed plural marriage, seeing it as a sign of Smith's own apostasy. Even Emma took aim at polygamy. As head of the Relief Society, an influential women's organization, she lambasted the plural marriage in a local newspaper, dismissing it as a mere excuse to "seduce women" and calling on husbands to "let

³⁶⁷ Readers of the *T&S* were warned of a Samuel Rogers who, it was discovered, had "two others wives." *T&S* 3, no. 4 (December 15, 1841). The editor later referred to the teaching on marriage in the D&C, the "only rule allowed by the church," which forbade and criticized the "crime of fornication, and polygamy." *T&S* 3, no. 21 (September 1, 1842). The following month, the "secret wife system" was denounced and monogamy championed. *T&S* 3, no. 23 (October 1, 1842). The following spring, the editor felt the need to deny the charge that the Saints were "advocating a plurality of wives." *T&S* 4, no. 9 (March 15, 1843). By fall, the accusation lingered with good reason—some of the Saints had been teaching the "the doctrin of plurality of wives," Smith wrote in his journal. *JSP* J3:107. Despite his multiple marriages by this time, Smith's public position was clear: "No man shall have but one wife." *JSP* J3:107. Months later, some of the Saints were still teaching that "a man *having a certain priesthood*, may have as many wives as he pleases," to which Hyrum Smith called a "*false doctrine*" and subject to ecclesiastical discipline. *T&S* 5, no. 6 (March 15, 1844).

³⁶⁸ Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 25.

³⁶⁹ *Hist.* 5:604, cf. D&C 132:52.

³⁷⁰ *Hist.* 5:604, cf. D&C 132:54.

³⁷¹ *Hist.* 5:601, cf. D&C 132:4.

³⁷² Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2.

polygamy, bigamy, fornication, adultery, and prostitution, be frowned out of the hearts of honest men.”³⁷³ Though her comments were aimed at other men, Smith doubtless felt the heat of her fury. Another notable opponent, the second counselor in the First Presidency, William Law, came to believe that Smith was a fallen prophet. The men’s relationship had begun to sour over political differences but completely unraveled when Law came to oppose the practice of polygamy, which, by summer 1843, had become official church doctrine.³⁷⁴ He was expelled from the First Presidency by January 1844 and excommunicated on April 18th.³⁷⁵ To make matters worse, Smith suspected his other counselor and running mate, Sidney Rigdon, of conspiring with apostates, and threatened him with excommunication.³⁷⁶ The presidency of the LDS Church was fracturing. The same month that Law was expelled, he, along with other dissidents, formed a competing church, which threatened to repeat the schism of Kirtland. Smith’s political ambitions, secret schemes, and polygamous relationships proved too much to endure for some Saints. Once more, dissidence was fomenting in Zion.

At a general conference in April 1844, Smith dismissed accusations of his apostasy as “too trivial nature to occupy the attention” of the church.³⁷⁷ He reassured his followers that he was not a fallen prophet, and, in fact, felt in “better standing with God than ever I felt before in my life.”³⁷⁸ His opponents would not hear it. Accusations of adultery, heterodoxy, and the shrinking gap between church and state set dissenters on a

³⁷³ Emma Smith, “Virtue Will Triumph,” *Nauvoo Neighbor* 1, no. 47 (March 20, 1844).

³⁷⁴ Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, 163; D&C 132

³⁷⁵ Grant H. Palmer, “Why William and Jane Law Left the LDS Church in 1844,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 32, no. 2: 48; *JSP* J3:232. As Palmer noted, Law also strongly disagreed with Smith’s budding plans to create a competing government within the territory of the United States.

³⁷⁶ *JSP* J2:303–75; J3:3–59.

³⁷⁷ *T&S* 5, no. 9 (May 1, 1844).

³⁷⁸ *T&S* 5, no. 9 (May 1, 1844).

quest to bring the prophet down. Law aired his grievances publicly after acquiring a printing press. The first and only issue of his *Nauvoo Expositor* was published on June 7th.³⁷⁹ Three days later, the city council met to discuss its accusations, accusing it of libel.³⁸⁰ Turning his eyes toward the printing press, Smith ordered his marshal “to destroy the printing press from whence issued the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” believing the move to be within the legal confines for chartered cities in Illinois “to declare what shall be a nuisance and to prevent and remove the same.”³⁸¹

This order would prove to be a fatal misstep. Dissenters were beside themselves, shocked that a Mormon posse would so flagrantly transgress the right to freedom of the press. The news about the *Nauvoo Expositor* spread in the region like wildfire. On June 12th, a local paper, the *Warsaw Signal*, published inflammatory remarks to incite violence against the Mormons. William Clayton recorded that an anti-Mormon threatened that “the Temple should be thrown down and not one stone left upon another,” echoing Christ’s famous prophecy.³⁸² Another aggressor threatened destruction of Smith’s home.³⁸³ When initial attempts to arrest and charge Smith failed, anti-Mormons called on the Governor Ford to aid them. In response, Smith ordered the militia to stand guard over the city.³⁸⁴

On June 18th, Smith declared martial law in Nauvoo, mustered the city militia, and read aloud the edition of the *Warsaw Signal* that had threatened violence against the Saints.³⁸⁵ This action would later lead to his arrest for treason. According to Clayton,

³⁷⁹ *Nauvoo Expositor* 1, no. 1 (June 1844).

³⁸⁰ *JSP* J3:276.

³⁸¹ *JSP* J3:276–7; “To the Public,” *Nauvoo Neighbor* 2 no. 7 (June 12, 1844).

³⁸² *JSP* C50:194; Matt 24:2.

³⁸³ *JSP* C50:194.

³⁸⁴ *JSP* C50:196.

³⁸⁵ *JSP* J3:290–1.

Smith advised the men to prepare for war; “to arm themselves. Those who had no rifles, get swords, scyths and make weapons of some kind.”³⁸⁶ If the occasion called for it, they were to “die like men of God and secure a glorious resurrection.”³⁸⁷ In a show of force, the militia paraded through the city as some fifty anti-Mormons assembled in neighboring Carthage.³⁸⁸ Once more, war felt inevitably imminent.

Toward the end of June, Smith, fearing trial by mobocracy, ordered the Council of 50 minutes buried and planned to flee into Iowa Territory.³⁸⁹ He was convinced to remain in Illinois, and, on June 25th, was jailed in neighboring Carthage, along with his brother, Hyrum, to await trial for treason.³⁹⁰ Two days later, on June 27th, an impatient mob, concerned that Smith might slip away before trial, surrounded the small jail. The band of disaffected Saints and angry gentiles raided the jail and attacked the prisoners. Willard Richards, who survived the assault, wrote the Saints in Nauvoo: “Joseph and Hyrum are dead.”³⁹¹ With their deaths came the birth of a struggle for authority in the LDS restorationist movement, one that initially manifested in competition for filling the abrupt and unexpected vacancy of the first presidency.

³⁸⁶ *JSP* J3:336.

³⁸⁷ *JSP* J3:336.

³⁸⁸ Joseph Smith, “President Joseph Smith’s Journal,” *Journal*, 4 vols., Dec. 1842–June 1844; handwriting and signatures of Willard Richards; 1,045 pages; Joseph Smith Collection, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

³⁸⁹ *JSP* C50:198.

³⁹⁰ *T&S* 5, no. 12 (July 1, 1844); *T&S* 5, no. 14 (August 1, 1844).

³⁹¹ *Hist.* 6:697.

CHAPTER 3
PROPHETIC SUCCESSION AND STRANGITE
MORMONISM

The death of Smith shocked the Mormon community. William Clayton recalled how, on June 28th, the bodies of the slain prophet and patriarch were processed through the streets of Nauvoo as “almost the whole inhabitants fell in a procession,” mourning the loss of their leaders.¹ “An universal feeling of gloom and anguish prevailed,” he explained.² The Mormon’s remorse mixed shock and sorrow with vengeance. Wounded, they yearned for revenge but feared that anti-Mormon assailants would assault and evict the leaderless Saints.³ Anti-Mormons, too, feared the Mormons would retaliate. To make matters worse, most of the church’s leadership were away on an eastern mission campaigning for Smith’s presidential bid. Only two members of the Twelve—John Taylor and Willard Richards—were in Nauvoo at the time of Smith’s death, both men having survived the Carthage assault.

The loss was especially bitter against the backdrop of LDS restorationism. Why would God allow his latter-day prophet of the restoration, endowed with the highest priesthood authority, to be taken from earth prior to the parousia? An 1837 revelation indicated that such a scenario would not occur. “I am with him [Joseph Smith],” read the oracle, “and my hand shall be over him; and the keys which I have given him . . . shall

¹ Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Administrative Records, Council of Fifty Minutes, March 1844–January 1846* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 204.

² *JSP* C50:204.

³ Dan Vogel, ed., *History of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015), 6:700–701.

not be taken from him until I come.”⁴ Yet, for reasons unknown to the Mormons, God’s hand was apparently withdrawn from their slain prophet, and with him, the keys he held. Thus, two questions arose immediately for the Saints: who would lead the LDS Church, and where would the church find safety?

The first question would prove difficult to answer. Smith did not leave a clear mechanism for succession. Yet, a key belief of LDS restorationism is that a single prophet would be present in the latter days, and, according to an 1843 revelation, “there is never but one on the earth at a time, on whom this power and the keys of this Priesthood are conferred.”⁵ This prophet would ideally remain in his station, according to an 1830 revelation, holding the “keys of the mysteries and revelations,” i.e., authority, “until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead.”⁶ With only one, divinely appointed prophet one earth at a time, the church had not faced the dilemma caused by his absence. Amid the confusion, the pinnacle position of the LDS hierarchy was exposed to competition, dropping the church at an unexpected and unwelcome crossroad. “During these days,” wrote historian Ronald Walker, “the church might have taken several paths or, with the passing months, fractured beyond remedy.”⁷ Historian Steven Shields rightly identified this moment as “the single most divisive issue the Latter Day Saints church has ever dealt with,” resulting in a schismatic “fragmentation period” for Mormonism.⁸

⁴ Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimbürger, Max H. Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 5, *October 1835–January 1838* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 416.

⁵ *Hist.* 5:601; cf. D&C 132:7.

⁶ *Hist.* 1:78; cf. D&C 28:7.

⁷ Ronald W. Walker, “Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844,” in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 161.

⁸ Steven L. Shields, “The Latter Day Saint Movement: A Study in Survival,” in *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 61; Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Restoration Research, 1990), 11.

Religious schisms occur for myriad and complex reasons.⁹ Chief among them are disputes over ideology, praxis, authenticity, and authority. Differences in beliefs and practices arise from dissidents who come to view their parent organization as having gone astray during a perceived delegitimizing episode or season. When dissidents lose faith in their group, conflict over “what is ultimately true and how that truth should affect human lives” divides the ‘true’ believers from wayward ones, argued sociologist Nancy Ammerman.¹⁰ Ultimately, said Ammerman, schism occurs when “one or each of the bodies has come to see the other as deviant, as too different to be recognized as part of the same religious brotherhood.”¹¹ However, religious schism is never merely about internal forces. External dynamics, too, play an important role.¹² Economic difficulties and political differences, for example, place pressure on religious organizational structures, sometimes wresting authority away from leaders.¹³

Certainly, both internal and external forces were stressing Mormon leadership before Smith’s death. Even during his lifetime, a small number of schisms broke fellowship with the main body of Mormons, but never grew beyond small enclaves of disenfranchised opponents.¹⁴ In Smith’s sudden absence, and no clear direction forward, a

⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1929); Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism, and Secularism* (New York: Routledge, 1989); James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis, *Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Nancy Ammerman, “Schism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8153.

¹¹ Ammerman, “Schism,” 8151.

¹² Phil Zuckerman, “Gender Regulation as Source of Religious Schism,” *Sociology of Religion* 58, no. 4 (1997): 353–73; Phil Zuckerman, *Strife in the Sanctuary: Religious Schism in a Jewish Community* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 217; Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Understanding Schisms: Theoretical Explanations for Their Origins,” in *Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide*, eds. James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14–18; Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

¹³ Ammerman, “Schism,” 8152–3.

¹⁴ Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, “Introduction,” in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 1–24.

leadership vacuum rapidly filled with schismatic activity. Within the first few years after Smith's death, Mormonism cleft into myriad branches led by different leaders touting conflicting and competing truth claims. That Smith's death sowed such discord and confusion threatened to deconstruct the foundational narrative of LDS restorationism. Divergence from the eschatological unity heralded by the renewal of the priesthood undermined the movement. After all, how could God have ordained the Saints to reestablish the "true" church from the darkness of divisive sectarianism only to be threatened by it merely fourteen years later? And why would God issue, let alone tolerate, conflicting revelations to a cast of competing prophets? The stakes for keeping unity within the wider Mormon movement were incredibly high.

This chapter will examine the succession crisis, primarily to consider the contested claims of James Strang to ascend to the pinnacle of the Mormon priesthood. Watson spent the bulk of his efforts to maintain the Strangite identity by echoing and buttressing Strang's claims to succeed Joseph Smith. Consequently, a large majority of this chapter will examine in detail the immediate years after Smith's death as Strang contended for power. The chapter will conclude with a brief history of the Strangite church until Watson's conversion in June 1852 to provide crucial background into his experience.

The Early Days of the 1844 Succession Crisis

Who would succeed Joseph Smith as prophet, if such a succession were warranted and necessary? Historian D. Michael Quinn discerned eight possible methods of succession that Smith had, in one way or another, recommended.¹⁵ Of these eight, three are pertinent to this dissertation. Succession was possible by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a special appointment, or by a descendant of Joseph Smith. The last

¹⁵ D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1976): 1.

possibility was unfeasible in 1844—Smith’s oldest son, Joseph Smith III, was only eleven years old; however, in years to come, it would stand at the forefront of division between Strangite and non-Brighamite Mormons. Until then, the preceding three possibilities dominated the claims of potential successors.

Succession by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

The first contender for Smith’s office was not a member of the Twelve, but the lone survivor of the First Presidency. Sidney Rigdon was in Pennsylvania at the time of Smith’s death but returned quickly to Nauvoo after news of the prophet’s fate reached him. Because Hyrum Smith perished alongside his brother, and no one had served as Second Counselor after the removal of William Law, Rigdon argued that, as the last surviving member of the First Presidency, he ought to ascend to power. Brigham Young, however, privately determined with the Twelve that they would serve as an interim presidency until an official First Presidency could be restored.¹⁶ According to the Twelve, the First Presidency had effectively dissolved in June; the Mormon apostles, then, were the ranking authority. Most Saints sided with the Twelve, rejecting Rigdon largely due to his past record of instability and on the premise that he lacked the proper authority to don the prophetic mantle. Still, Rigdon persisted. He organized a clandestine shadow priesthood of loyal members, which resulted in being placed on ecclesiastical trial and eventually excommunicated.¹⁷

¹⁶ Van Wagoner, “The Making of a Mormon Myth: The 1844 Transfiguration of Brigham Young,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1 & 2 (2001): 166.

¹⁷ Defeated, Rigdon left Nauvoo for Pittsburg where he convinced Saints there to accept his leadership in the new “Church of Christ.” Like dissidents before him, Rigdon published a new periodical to galvanize his following, partly through air grievances against clandestine teachings of the Church, including the “debasement” and “strange” doctrine of polygamy. *The Latter Day Saint’s Messenger and Advocate* (Pittsburgh) 1, no. 1 (October 15, 1844), 13. Rigdon reimagined himself as the replacement of a fallen prophet rather than a mere guardian proxy to Smith. But his movement began to unravel in 1846 after polygamy was introduced and his followers lost their confidence in his prophetic powers. Rigdon retreated to isolation, appointing a devoted follower, Stephen Post, as his spokesman. Quinn, “Mormon Succession Crisis,” 4. Rigdon died in 1876, but his movement continued under the leadership of convert William Bickerton. The church still exists today. Daniel P. Stone, *William Bickerton: Forgotten Latter Day Prophet*

At the trial, John Taylor undermined Rigdon’s argument by asking a question that cut to the core of priesthood succession. “Can a teacher ordain a priest? Can a priest ordain an elder? Can an elder ordain a high priest, or any to the former ordain an apostle?”¹⁸ In effect, Taylor questioned: whether a lower office (teacher) could ordain a higher office (priest) within the Aaronic priesthood; whether an Aaronic office (priest) could ordain a Melchizedek office (elder); whether, within the Melchizedek priesthood, a lower office (elder) can ordain a higher office (high priest); or whether any subordinate office of either priesthood could ordain an apostle? The answer, of course, was no. “[It] is contrary to the order of God,” he argued.¹⁹ Offices in the priesthood can ordain below their station in the hierarchy but never above; therefore, because Rigdon was lower than a prophet, he could not ordain himself to the higher office. To ordain an apostle requires a prophet, but the ordination of a prophet—the highest priesthood authority on earth—requires a high station that cannot be found terrestrially. The ordaining official must come from heaven. To ordain a prophet requires an angel, thus the angelic ordination of Smith by John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John.

This argument, however, presented a new predicament for the LDS Church. If there was no head of the priesthood, no First Presidency, then what becomes of the church’s leadership, let alone its authenticity and organization? William Marks, who empathized with Rigdon, pointed out this obvious problem at Rigdon’s trial:

I had always been taught that the first presidency would remain and always be with the church. I had always understood that the church would be imperfect without a quorum of three to stand as a first presidency, and I cannot find any law to say that this quorum should ever be dropped.²⁰

For Young, however, the LDS Church was without a prophet, but the Twelve were

(Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2018).

¹⁸ *Times & Seasons* 5, no. 13 (October 1, 1844), 662.

¹⁹ *T&S* 5, no. 13 (October 1, 1844), 662.

²⁰ *T&S* 5, no. 13 (October 1, 1844), 665.

sufficient to sustain it, at least until a new First Presidency could be established. Perhaps it seemed unnecessary to Young that a prophet needed to be named, or, as rumor had it, a prophet had already been named, but he was too young to fulfill the office. According to George Miller, a close confidant of Smith, it was Joseph Smith III whom the prophet had appointed to succeed him, but the appointment was kept secret due to the intensity of anti-Mormon hostility.²¹ Miller claimed that church leaders, aware of the supposed appointment, feared that the boy might fall victim to an assassination attempt.²² At any rate, the D&C endowed equal authority for the Twelve to that of the “quorum of the presidency of the church,” i.e., First presidency. The “twelve apostles,” it said, “form a quorum equal in authority and power to the three presidents.”²³ This passage, argued Quinn, “provided a scriptural basis for the succession claim of the apostles [but] was far less important as a proof-text of succession than the actuality of the ecclesiastical, economic, and political powers that Joseph Smith had conferred upon the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles” in the years preceding Smith’s death.²⁴

In an epistle from the Twelve, written on August 15, 1844, Young reiterated his stance that the Saints, although they were without a prophet, were still under legitimate authority: “You are now without a Prophet present with you in the flesh to guide you; but you are not without Apostles.”²⁵ He further pressed the point: “Let no man presume for a moment that his [Joseph Smith’s] place will be filled by another for, *remember he stands*

²¹ George Miller, who left the Church midway through his emigration west, would later join the Strangites in 1850. His testimony, printed in the Strangite *Northern Islander*, seems to undermine both Brighamite and Strangite claims, lending it some credibility. Strang, however, would contend that Joseph Smith III lacked angelic ordination, disqualifying him from potential appointment by his father. Miller experienced the hospitality of Wingfield Watson on Beaver Island, living with the family for a season. Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 180.

²² *Northern Islander* 5, no. 10 (September 6, 1855).

²³ D&C (1835), 84.

²⁴ Quinn, “Succession,” 16.

²⁵ See appendix 2.

in his own place, and always will; and the Twelve Apostles of this dispensation stand in their own place and always will, both in time and in eternity, to minister, preside and regulate the affairs of the whole church.”²⁶ For the moment, the LDS Church was without a prophet, and claims to the contrary were to be rejected. Those who claimed to be Smith’s successors, especially by revelation, were not to be trusted. “As to Elder Rigdon’s revelations,” Young later said in October, “they are from the same source as Oliver Olney’s, Gladden Bishop, Mr. Strang’s, &c. There are from the Devil.”²⁷

Merely four months after Smith’s death, a handful of men were already vying for his position. Little did Young know, but one of those men, “Mr. Strang,” would prove to be the Twelve’s most formidable opponent in the years immediately following.

James J. Strang and the Succession Crisis

John Whitmer, the LDS Church’s first historian, penned the following in 1847 concerning the successor to Joseph Smith’s office.

God knowing all things prepared a man whom he visited by an angel of God and showed him where there were some ancient Record hid, and also put in his heart to desire of Smith to Grant him power to establish a stake to Zion in Wisconsin Territory, whose name is James J. Strang. Now at first Smith was unfavorably disposed to grant him this request but b[e]ing troubleed in spirit and knowing from the things that were staring him in his face that his days must soon be closed— therefore he enquired of the Lord and behold the Lord said appoint James J Strang a Prophet Seer & Revelator unto my church for thou shalt shurly die a martor, thy Cup is bitter &c Shortly after this appointment of Strangs the mob gathered and . . . murdered them & thus the Lords annointed fell by the brutal hand of men. & they are gone the way of all the earth. & Strangs Reigns in the place of Smith.²⁸

²⁶ Emphasis original.

²⁷ *T&S* 5, no. 13 (October 1, 1844): 667. Oliver Olney, a member of the third quorum of seventy, grew disaffected with Smith and was excommunicated in 1842 for “setting himself up as a prophet & revelator in the Church.” Richard G. Moore, *The Writings of Oliver H. Olney: April 1842 to February 1843 – Nauvoo, Illinois* (Draper, UT: 2019), xii. Francis Gladden Bishop was chastised by the Twelve for advancing “heretical doctrines” and excommunicated on March 11, 1842. *Hist.* 2:274; *JSP* J2:43. In his bid for succession, Gladden argued that Smith was given his prophetic office by virtue of receiving “sacred things which were put into his hands,” i.e., Urim and Thummin, plates, etc. Bishop claimed both divine appointment and possession of the items, thus authenticating his bid for church presidency. Francis Gladden Bishop, *An Address to the Sons and Daughters of Zion, Scattered Abroad, Through All the Earth* (Kirtland, OH, May 13, 1851), 4, 47.

²⁸ Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *The Joseph Smith*

The passage, which supported Strang's claims, was later stricken after Whitmer changed his mind about the new prophet. Strang "professes to be appointed by a letter received from Joseph as being appointed Seer Revelator Profit & Successor of him [drew] away a portion after him," he wrote.²⁹

Whitmer's initial acceptance and subsequent rejection of Strang was the experience of hundreds of Saints in the tumultuous years following summer 1844. For those Saints who were reluctant to follow the Twelve's leadership, Strang offered a compelling alternative. As proof of his authority, Strang produced a letter of appointment, apparently written by Smith, naming Strang the next prophet by revelation. Strang would also claim angelic ordination, revelatory visions, and the discovery of ancient plates, all echoes of Smith's Palmyra experiences that gave birth to the LDS Church. Perhaps, some Mormons thought, the church was being reborn under Strang. Although he converted just four months before Smith's death, Strang did not allow his neophyte status to prevent him from vying for the church's highest position. Strang's move seemed audacious in his day, leading many to ask, who is James Strang?

The Early Life of James Jesse Strang

Jesse James Strang was born on March 21, 1813 in Scipio, Cayuga County, New York to farmers Clement Strang and Abigail James. Joseph Smith and James Strang were born seven years and roughly 200 miles apart, but, as fate would have it, both men were raised in the same heat of the Burned-over District, although Strang was far less affected by religious enthusiasm than Smith. By his own recollection, Strang led a simple and uneventful childhood, though it was plagued by persistent illness and his

Papers: Histories, vol. 2, *Assigned Histories, 1831–1847* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 104.

²⁹ *JSP* H2:110.

“extraordinary mental imbecility.”³⁰ Still, he harbored incredible ambition. His diary, cyphered in some parts, is filled with both open and secret aspirations of devoting his life “to the service of mankind,” partly through his “great designs of revolutionizeing governments and countrie[s].”³¹ He dreamt of rivaling the likes of Caesar and Napoleon before the age of nineteen with none other than British Princess Victoria by his side as his wife.³² “My mind has allways been filled with dreams of royalty and power,” he confessed in code.³³ Moments when he considered settling into a modest life were brief. “[The] dreams of empire are so thoroughly imprinted on my mind as not to be easily erased,” he wrote.³⁴ Perhaps, he wondered, whether the union would dissolve into civil war (a subject in which he showed great interest). If that were the case, and the nation required a heroic leader to unite it, “may I be the one,” he wrote. “I tremble when I write but it is true.”³⁵ Regardless of the path, Strang was determined to achieve greatness. “I now solemnly confirm, to be a Priest, a Lawyer, a Conquerer, and a Legislator,” he swore to himself.³⁶ But, as each year slipped by, he wrestled with not meeting his goals. He lamented: “Twenty years of my life are all ready passed, and what have I done? Ah! what have I done? Nothing! Nothing!”³⁷

³⁰ James J. Strang, “Ancestry and Childhood of James J. Strang, written by himself in 1855,” JJSP.

³¹ Mark A. Strang, *The Diary of James J. Strang: Deciphered, Transcribed, Introduced and Annotated* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1961), 9, 15. The diary was deciphered by his grandson, Mark A. Strang, who published it in 1961. It covers some of Strang’s most formative years, from 18 to 23, abruptly ending mere months before his accession to the New York bar and marriage to his first wife, Mary Perce. The diary testifies of a brilliant, enigmatic mind that wrestled with the fears of irrelevance and mediocrity. Strang exhibited extreme interest in national politics, especially as it related to the mounting tensions between northern and southern states.

³² Strang, *Diary*, 19.

³³ Strang, *Diary*, 17, 19.

³⁴ Strang, *Diary*, 15.

³⁵ Strang, *Diary*, 32.

³⁶ Strang, *Diary*, 22.

³⁷ Strang, *Diary*, 37. Strang had, in fact, busily prepared for the life of influence that he felt was just beyond the horizon. In his teenage years, he swapped his first and middle names to go by James

Still, Strang prepared for a distinguished future. He was a voracious reader, consuming works on ecology, history, philosophy, drama, and government while, in his spare time, leading small scientific and literary societies.³⁸ He honed his oratory skills through public speaking and mastered persuasion in a local debate club.³⁹ He took a keen interest in global and national politics, studied westward expansion and law, crafted poetry and songs, and described himself as a “cool Philosopher.”⁴⁰ By the age of 23, he had been a militia member, school teacher, temperance lecturer, lawyer, and postmaster.⁴¹ In 1843, he added publisher and editor to his *curriculum vitae* with his acquisition of the *Randolph Herald*.⁴²

Strang was not a particularly religious youth, despite being raised in a Baptist home, being a member of a Baptist church, and eventually marrying the daughter of a Baptist clergyman.⁴³ Outwardly, he attended services and revivals, but, privately, he

Jesse Strang, perhaps in a bid to distance himself from the infamous hanging of Jesse Strang in Albany on August 24, 1827. This Jesse Strang was executed after he confessed to murdering the husband of his lover. The story shocked the region, and, for a man whose social and political aspirations were great, it was perhaps best for Strang not to be associated with the tragedy. In his private, partially cyphered diary, Strang refers to himself as “Jesse J. Strang” from July 1831 to February 1832 when he simply called himself “J. J.” On January 1, 1833, he began to call himself primary “James J. Strang.” Perhaps, as he matured and developed aspirations for fame, Strang decided to distance himself as far as possible from Jesse Strang. Jesse “Joseph Orton” Strang was accused of murdering his lover’s husband, John Whipple, on May 7, 1827. Strang was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Thousands attended the sentence, which was carried out publicly on August 24, 1827, and was the last of its kind in Albany. The story was a scandalous sensation, gripping imaginations across the region. It would have been difficult for James Strang to shake off the association on his way to becoming a great general or politician. P. R. Hamblin, *United States Criminal History* (Fayetteville, NY: Mason & De Puy Printers, 1836), 259–66; George Rogers Howell and Jonathan Tenney, *Bi-centennial History of Albany: History of the County of Albany, N.Y., from 1609 to 1886* (New York: W. W. Munsell & Co. Publishers, 1886), 459; Cuyler Reynolds, *Albany Chronicles: A History of the City Arranged Chronologically* (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon Co., 1906), 467–8.

³⁸ Strang, *Diary*, 6, 23.

³⁹ Strang, *Diary*, 10–11.

⁴⁰ Strang, *Diary*, 38.

⁴¹ Strang, *Diary*, 7, 20, 22, 63; Milo Quaife, *The Kingdom of St. James* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930), 8.

⁴² Quaife, *Kingdom*, 8; Vickie Cleverley Speck, “God Has Made Us a Kingdom”: *James Strang and the Midwest Mormons* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2006), 12.

⁴³ “Refuge of Lies,” *Voree Herald* 1, no. 5 (May 1846). When Strang was nine years old, the Scipio Baptist Church was formed with 56 members by the uniting of the Second, Third, and North-East

preferred the isolation of his library in the company of freethinkers like Paine and Volney.⁴⁴ At 18, Strang reluctantly agreed to preach by invitation, but confessed in his deciphered diary, “Sometimes I consent just to please the people.”⁴⁵ The reason was simple: “it is a long time since I have really believed these dogmas but every examination leaves less evidence and I have about given it up.”⁴⁶ What religious beliefs remained were buttressed by rationalism, a worldview that preferred reason and knowledge to dogma and visions. “I am a perfect atheist,” he wrote in cypher, fearing that such an admission would send his Baptist father “with sorrow to the grave.”⁴⁷ Strang was, in many ways, on the frontier of an upcoming American social evolution. He was Jacksonian in political convictions, an abolitionist, pro-temperance, and a proponent of the Delphian Society, a national organization that promoted women’s education.⁴⁸ His oath to the “service of mankind” clearly involved social reform.

James Strang’s Conversion to Mormonism

A month after his invitation to the New York state bar, on November 20, 1836, Strang married Mary Abigail Perce, the niece of his best friend, Benjamin Carpenter Perce, whom he considered his only intellectual rival of his youth.⁴⁹ The year before the

Baptist Churches. The Strangs likely belonged to Scipio Baptist Church, pastored by Ichabod Clark from 1824–1831. Clark would eventually receive a calling to pastor in Rockford, Illinois, some fifty miles southwest of the land that would become Strang’s Voree. Elliot G. Storke, *History of Cayuga County, New York, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1879), 426; *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*, ed. William Cathcart (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 226.

⁴⁴ Strang, *Diary*, 20.

⁴⁵ Strang, *Diary*, 10.

⁴⁶ Strang, *Diary*, 27–28; Don Faber, *James Jesse Strang: The Rise and Fall of Michigan's Mormon King* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 11.

⁴⁷ Strang, *Diary*, 21.

⁴⁸ Strang, *Diary*, 34.

⁴⁹ Strang, *Diary*, 4.

wedding, Benjamin had resettled in the Wisconsin Territory with his brother-in-law, Moses Smith, and Moses's brother, Aaron Smith (no known relation to Joseph Smith).⁵⁰ Moses Smith made his jackknife claim off the banks of the White River, near present-day Burlington, Wisconsin, while Perce homesteaded a couple of miles west, founding what would become Spring Prairie.⁵¹

In 1832, Moses Smith converted to Mormonism, and, six years later, was ordained to the priesthood along with Aaron Smith to oversee the affairs of the church in the region.⁵² By 1837, the Smith brothers had established a branch in Burlington with six members, which, by one account, grew to about one hundred members in the years following.⁵³ Mary's father (and Benjamin Perce's brother), William Perce, also resettled in the area after acquiring land in Burlington. As early as summer 1840, William Perce began urging his son-in-law to relocate his family to Wisconsin Territory.⁵⁴ By fall 1843, the Strangs joined the Smiths and Perces, settling in Spring Prairie. There, Strang began practicing law with his partner, Caleb P. Barnes, who, like the Perce family, owned land near Burlington.⁵⁵

In October 1843, just as the Strangs were settling into their new lives on the frontier, tragedy struck. Their first daughter, Mary, just five years old, died from serious illness. It was perhaps the death of his daughter that moved Strang to find answers in

⁵⁰ Strang, *Diary*, 63.

⁵¹ "Obituary," *Gospel Herald* 4, no. 13 (June 14, 1849); *History of Racine and Kenosha Counties, Wisconsin* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1879), 193.

⁵² "Obituary," *GH* 4, no. 13 (June 14, 1849).

⁵³ *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 9 (June 1837). Moses wrote the editor to ask about receiving instructions for the six members in Foxville (now Burlington). See also "Obituary," *Gospel Herald* 4, no. 13 (June 14, 1849). That one hundred members constituted the branch may be an exaggeration as no known evidence corroborates the claim.

⁵⁴ Vicki Speck, *Kingdom*, 13.

⁵⁵ I. F. Scott, "James J. Strang in Voree," *The Saints' Herald* 35, no. 52 (December 29, 1888); Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 32.

religion. Although he was a skeptic in his early years, either his atheism had evaporated or the cruelty of death stirred him to investigate the religion of his neighbors. Strang never mentions Mormonism in any extant journals or correspondence prior to his conversion, but it is difficult to imagine he had never heard of it prior. Strang spent the first thirty years of life in western New York. Had he never met a missionary nor heard of Mormonism through word of mouth, then surely, throughout the mid-1830s and early '40s, he came across it while a lawyer, postmaster, and editor.⁵⁶ How could Mormonism have eluded him all those years, especially in professions where knowing current affairs is critical to success? As journalist James Gordon Bennett asked his readers in 1831, “You have heard of Mormonism—who has not?”⁵⁷ But Mormonism never appealed to Strang until after the death of his daughter.

In early 1844, Aaron Smith invited Strang to accompany him to Nauvoo. There, according to Strang, the First Presidency taught him personally in the faith.⁵⁸ Though their acquaintance was brief, Smith apparently took fondly to Strang, who became convinced of the Mormon message and was baptized on February 25, 1844 by the prophet himself in the basement of the unfinished temple. Later, in his home, Smith laid hands on Strang in the presence of witnesses saying “I seal upon thy head against God’s own good time the keys of the Melchisedec Priesthood [and thou] shalt talk with God face to face.”⁵⁹ One week later, on March 3rd, he was ordained an elder in the LDS Church by Hyrum Smith, who prophesied that God would “save the pure of his people”

⁵⁶ Strang was born on March 21, 1813, and moved from western New York to the Wisconsin Territory sometime in the fall of 1843.

⁵⁷ “Mormonism,” *Morning Courier & New-York Enquirer* (September 1, 1831).

⁵⁸ “Chronicles of Voree: A Record of the establishment and doings of the Stake of Zion called Voree in Wisconsin, made by the Scribes appointed to that office,” 23, typeset facsimile copy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) archives, original in private hands. Hereafter cited as CV. This edition is a transcription compiled by John J. Hajicek (Burlington, WI: J. J. Hajicek, 1992), 6.

⁵⁹ CV, 6; James Strang, *The Prophetic Controversy: A Letter from James J. Strang to Mrs. Corey* (Saint James, MI: Cooper & Chidester, 1856), 9

through Strang.⁶⁰ Moses and Aaron Smith were witnesses to both the baptism and ordination.⁶¹

Strang joined the church on the eve of tumultuous times. Having endured the years of persecution in Missouri, critics from within and outside were making Nauvoo vulnerable to oppression yet again. Non-Mormons, threatened by Nauvoo's growing political influence and militia power, made known their dissatisfaction with the Mormon presence. Within the community, a growing chorus of criticism began airing grievances concerning Smith's leadership and teachings, especially regarding the "spiritual wife doctrine."⁶²

On March 11, 1844, the Council of Fifty assembled to discuss relocating the Saints somewhere far from the reach of persecution and threat of dissenters. Strang doubtless was made aware of these plans and claims to have been consulted by Smith about westward expansion.⁶³ Strang suggested the possibility of settling the Saints in southeastern Wisconsin Territory near his family property. Smith, however, favored resettling further west; however, he was intrigued by the thought of settling a new "Stake of Zion" in Wisconsin.⁶⁴ The Saints were busy establishing pineries in Wisconsin to meet the rapid growth of Nauvoo and looking for new ways to access economic hubs throughout the region. Strang's proposal would situate a new settlement near the southwestern ports of Lake Michigan with access to the future Illinois and Michigan Canal, then in the midst of construction. Strang was tasked by Smith with surveying land along the White River for "full examinations of the country with direct reference to the

⁶⁰ CV, 6.

⁶¹ Speck, *Kingdom*, 18.

⁶² *JSP* C50:192.

⁶³ CV, 7.

⁶⁴ CV, 8.

advantages it might offer to the Saints.”⁶⁵

Strang returned to Wisconsin to survey the land, completing his mission by May 24, 1844.⁶⁶ He wrote to Smith about his findings the following week.⁶⁷ In the letter, now non-extant, he recommended a stake to be planted on land directly west of Burlington.⁶⁸ In exchange for choosing that site, Strang promised to give Smith a tenth of the profit from the sale of lots “for being so very kind as to appoint the Stake in that place.”⁶⁹ The stake, once planted, needed a president, a position that Strang believed was best suited for himself.⁷⁰ This arrangement later led skeptics to accuse Strang of speculating the land for financial gain.

Meanwhile, in Nauvoo, animosity toward the Mormons was heating to boiling point. The day after Strang finished his letter, Smith was indicted for adultery by a grand jury in Carthage.⁷¹ William Law, whose frustration with Smith’s leadership led to his excommunication on April 18th, ran his *exposé* the following month.⁷² The *Nauvoo Expositor* was destroyed by Mormons in retaliation, which, in turn, caused violent anti-Mormonism to flare.

The Letter of Appointment

According to Strangite tradition, sometime during the chaos, Smith also responded to Strang concerning the proposed settlement in Wisconsin. When, precisely,

⁶⁵ CV, 8.

⁶⁶ CV, 8.

⁶⁷ CV, 9. The letter was sent “about the last of May” according to CV, or June 1st according to men familiar with the story. See I. F. Scott, “James J. Strang in Voree,” *Saints’ Herald* 35, no. 52 (December 29, 1888); “James J. Strang of Voree, Wis.” *The Ensign of Liberty* 1, no. 2 (April 1847).

⁶⁸ CV, 8.

⁶⁹ “James J. Strang of Voree, Wis.” *The Ensign of Liberty* 1 no. 2 (April 1847).

⁷⁰ “James J. Strang of Voree, Wis.” *The Ensign of Liberty* 1 no. 2 (April 1847).

⁷¹ *JSP* J3:260.

⁷² *JSP* J3:231–2; *Nauvoo Expositor* 1, no. 1 (June 1844).

Smith began to write the letter is unknown. The week leading up to its mailing on Wednesday, June 19, 1844, was extremely turbulent for him. After publicly issuing his reason for destroying the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Smith was arrested the following day but released shortly thereafter.⁷³ Two days later, gentile militias convened and resolved to push the Mormons out of settlements into Nauvoo.⁷⁴ Legal maneuvers from Governor Ford and rumors of a would-be assassin, Thomas Sharp, weighed heavy on Smith's mind.⁷⁵

On Tuesday, June 18th, Strangite records claim that Smith wrote—or, at least, finalized—his letter to Strang; an impressive feat considering the day's events. Lieutenant General Smith declared martial law that day and mustered the city militia in anticipation of war.⁷⁶ Sometime during the tumult, Smith dictated, wrote, or completed his three-page letter to Strang. The following day, on June 19th, the letter was stamped with a red postmark at the Nauvoo post office and sent to Burlington.

In his final week, Bushman observed, “sometimes Joseph sensed his doom approached and foretold his imminent death; then his native optimism would return and he predicted survival.”⁷⁷ It was at one of these low moments, Strang claimed, that the prophet wrote to him.⁷⁸ In the letter, Smith confessed to initially balking at the idea of a Wisconsin settlement, but Hyrum convinced him otherwise. After seeking direction from God, Smith decided that Burlington had something good to offer the Saints.

Then, the letter took a shockingly abrupt turn. Smith strongly implied that the

⁷³ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 541; *JSP* J3:279.

⁷⁴ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 541.

⁷⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 542.

⁷⁶ Andrew Hedges, Alex D. Smith, Brent M. Rogers, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, vol. 3, *May 1843–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2015), 336.

⁷⁷ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 543.

⁷⁸ For all quotations from and references to the LofA, see appendix 1.

new settlement in Wisconsin would be more than a mere stake; it would be *the* Stake, i.e., “a second Nauvoo,” called Voree, led by a new prophet, James Strang.⁷⁹ What could prompt Smith to hand over the reins to an unknown, new convert without consulting the First Presidency or any other Mormon leadership? Smith soberly confided that he felt his end was near, that he would soon be called to “the land of the Spirits,” adorned with “the double crown of martyr and king in a heavenly world.” Death felt imminent, so his concern for the church grew. Smith wondered what would become of the Saints if their prophet were slain? It was during this pensive time that God gave Smith a vision of things to come.

The letter gives no indication when the vision occurred, but the four-week period between May 24th and June 18th is most likely, the time during which Smith debated and responded to Strang’s proposal. The vision began with Smith, indwelt with the “spirit of Elijah,” as he was taken to the “hill of the Temple” in Nauvoo. There, Smith looked heavenward to see “light in the heavens above and streams of bright light” flowing from the sky, “gentle yet rapid as the fierce lightning.” It was God, rising from his throne, clothed with “light as with a garment,” yet, strangely, also accompanied by “low and sad” music, a dirge that “sounded the requiem of martyred Prophets.” In his heart, Smith knew what this meant. Soon, God confirmed his suspicion. Smith would suffer a “very bitter” punishment preceded by a “whirlwind” of dark clouds, i.e., chaos would usher in his death.

Smith asked what would become of the church in his absence. The answer must have shocked him. James Strang was revealed as a new prophetic shepherd in a new Zion, not one far off in the western wilderness, but in the peaceful prairies of Wisconsin,

⁷⁹ “Another Chapter in Mormonism,” *Cincinnati Commercial*, reprinted in *The Delaware Gazette* (Delaware, NY), 27, no. 22, March 11, 1846.

where they would live free from the disaster that would soon be upon them.⁸⁰ Strang later claimed that Smith secretly recorded this revelation in the “confidential archives of the Church at Nauvoo” before relaying the information in the letter.⁸¹ Because no such record is ever mentioned in any other sources, it must be assumed that it is non-extant; only the letter survived.

Although neither the letter nor the vision explicitly appointed Strang as successor, readers are clearly meant to infer such a conclusion. The entire vision is framed in the “spirit of Elijah,” which, considering the content of the vision, evokes a prophet’s death and succession. Just as Elisha followed Elijah after he taken “into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kng 2:1, 12–13),” so Strang would follow Smith after being taken bitterly by a “whirlwind” of dark clouds. Moreover, Smith’s final words to Strang evaporate any doubt as to the prophet’s intentions. “Thy duty is made plain,” he ended the letter, “and if thou lackest wisdom ask of God . . . & he will give thee unsparingly for if evil befall me thou shalt lead the flock to pleasant pastures.” It is no coincidence that Smith’s final advice to Strang is the same prelude to his own prophetic career. Just as the wisdom of James 1:5 led to the calling of the first latter-day prophet, so it would do the same for the second.⁸² The prophetic baton was being passed.

James Strang’s Visionary Experiences

Little did Smith know, but Strang, too, received a vision on the same day the letter was mailed. That afternoon, on June 18th, Strang was in a “*grove* above the stone quarry,” a minor detail with major import.⁸³ Like Smith, Strang’s first recorded visionary experience occurred in the privacy of the woods. Strang explained that he was suddenly

⁸⁰ See appendix 1.

⁸¹ PC 1:12.

⁸² “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842).

⁸³ CV, 9.

“carried away in the spirit” to a high hill overlooking the landscape west of Burlington.⁸⁴ He did not expect to see what laid before him. Instead of uncultivated marshes and prairies, he saw a bustling community with stone houses and gardens. Then, the vision changed. Strang watched as the townspeople all made their way toward the same destination at a “lively pace and smiling countenances thronged the streets and passed by.”⁸⁵ Soon, he learned where they were going. The citizens had “all assembled in a vast hall, and James J. Strang, surrounded by wise men, and counsellors, and priests, and eloquent orators, arose and taught the people; and the spirit of Prophecy witnesseth unto him.”⁸⁶ The vision abruptly ended.

The visions of June 18, 1844, complement one another, linking together as a couplet prophecy about the future of the Saints. Smith’s vision, frame in the *motif* of Elijah’s whirlwind, signaled his imminent end and anticipated Strang’s future. If Smith’s visions prophesied safe prosperity for the Saints under a new prophet, then Strang’s vision promised the same. Smith’s vision looked forward to a day when a new stake of Zion would be built at Voree. Moreover, as Moses had Aaron and Smith had Hyrum, so Strang would have a “counsellor.” The vision implicitly predicts the death of Hyrum and names Aaron Smith as his replacement. Strang’s vision was a sneak preview of that reality. Moreover, the prelude to Strang’s vision, set in a private grove, and the end of Smith’s letter, a recitation of James 1:5, bookend the paired visions, and whispered to those in the know, ‘let the reader understand.’

In Nauvoo, Smith finalized his letter appointing Strang the next prophet. On June 27th, nine days after Smith finished the letter, he and Hyrum were murdered. News of Smith’s death would come quicker to Strang than even those in Nauvoo. Strang

⁸⁴ CV, 9–10; *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846).

⁸⁵ *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846).

⁸⁶ CV, 10; *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846).

claimed that at precisely 5:30 p.m., during the very hour of Smith’s death, he experienced a life-altering visionary encounter.⁸⁷ As before, Strang was “in the Spirit” when suddenly the “Angel of God” (or “the Angel of the Lord,” as it was also called) approached and greeted him. The angel then immediately “stretched forth his hand unto him [Strang] and touched his head” to anoint him with oil and ordain him to “the greatness of the Everlasting Priesthood.”⁸⁸ Already a holder of the Melchizedek priesthood, having been ordained under Smith, this angelic ordination served to heightened Strang’s authority over all men. The angel then revealed to Strang that he was being called by God to a “great work” so that “the voice of the Lord, by the mouth of Joseph will be fulfilled,” i.e., the letter of appointment (LofA) would come to fruition.⁸⁹ The angel reiterated the significance of his message. “God hath anointed thee with oil and set [thee] above all they fellows,” it said.⁹⁰ Strang received a divine commission to “bring salvation” to the Saints, for, the angel explained, “unto thee has the Lord thy God given salvation.”⁹¹ The angel concluded his visit by commanding Strang, “go thy way and be strong.”⁹²

Key details of this event are remarkably similar to the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood in 1829. As with Strang, a “messenger from heaven descended” to meet Smith and immediately “laid his hands upon us, he ordained us,” being Smith and Oliver Cowdery.⁹³ Smith was then conferred “the priesthood of Aaron,” an authority that

⁸⁷ CV, 10; CV 1, “Extract from the Records of the Church,” no. 8 (August 1846).

⁸⁸ *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846); CV, 10–11. The “Everlasting Priesthood” is associated with the Melchizedek Priesthood. As Smith taught, “The Melchizedek Priesthood holds the right from the eternal God [and] that priesthood is as eternal as God Himself.” *TPJS*, 323.

⁸⁹ *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846); CV, 10.

⁹⁰ *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846); CV, 11.

⁹¹ “Thou shalt save his people from their enemies when there is no arm to deliver . . . unto thee has the Lord thy God given salvation . . . thou shalt rule among his people . . . thou shalt prepare a refuge for the oppressed, and for the poor and needy.” *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846); CV, 10–12.

⁹² *VH* 1, no. 8, no. 8 (August 1846); CV, 12.

⁹³ “History of Joseph Smith,” *T&S* 3, no. 19 (August 1, 1842).

empowered salvation *via* the “ministering [of] the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion, for the remission of sins.”⁹⁴ As the priesthood was restored to Smith, so would it be received by Strang would in like manner. This point was not lost on him. Strang would argue throughout the succession crisis that this visionary encounter was his *bona fide* credential for hold his prophetic office.⁹⁵

Strang would go on to frame his visionary encounter in Smith’s angelic ordination, frequently pointing out that John the Baptist—and also Peter, James, and John—were, in fact, angelic beings.⁹⁶ Indeed, as Smith said, it was the miraculous appearances of “divers Angels” throughout his career that restored the priesthood, “line upon line; precept upon precept; here a little and there a little.”⁹⁷ Not even his death could prevent this work. For Strang to be the recipient of appointed by Smith meant to “receive mysteries and revelations” and was confirmed by God after he “sent his Angels unto me to charge me with this ministry in the same hour that Smith was taken away.”⁹⁸

In Burlington, rumors of conflict in Nauvoo set the Mormons on edge by the time the LofA finally arrived in Burlington on July 9, 1844 *via* Chicago. Nothing about its appearance raised “the least suspicion of its regularity,” Strang recalled, but people were itching for the latest news.⁹⁹ Caleb Barnes, Strang’s law partner, immediately

⁹⁴ “History of Joseph Smith,” *T&S* 3, no. 19 (August 1, 1842).

⁹⁵ So Strang: “And at the same moment in which Joseph was slain I was visited by an Angel of God, accompanied by a numerous heavenly train, and anointed and ordained to the Prophetic office, as Moses and Joseph had been before me. So I was called by the voice of God, and sent by the hand of Angels, as were the chief Prophets before me.” PC 1.

⁹⁶ For example, in his proselytizing tract, *The Diamond*, Strang reminded readers that, of course, Smith was ordained by John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John, but they were no longer merely men. Quoting D&C 50, Strang reminds the reader that these men were then angels by following their names with “(an angel)” and “(angels).” James J. Strang, *The Diamond . . . Kept Up* (Voree, WI: Gospel Herald Print, 1848), 2.

⁹⁷ “Letter from Joseph Smith,” *T&S* 3, no. 23 (October 1, 1842).

⁹⁸ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

⁹⁹ James Strang to Louisa Sanger, December 5, 1844, CR 1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

delivered it to Strang who, along with Aaron Smith, read it together.¹⁰⁰ Its contents were hardly surprising to Strang. He had already experienced the vision of Voree and had been ordained by the angel days before. It was less a shock than it was confirmation.¹⁰¹

The Dawn of Strangite Mormonism: June 1844 to December 1847

Strang wasted no time in making his bid for the presidency after receiving the LofA and angelic ordination. On July 26th, he set out on foot eastward, likely to meet with church leadership before they could return to Nauvoo. Strang and his first counselor, Aaron Smith, set out for Florence, Michigan to present their case at a conference.¹⁰² Moses Smith was preaching in the area, which is perhaps why the men chose this location to make Strang's case publicly. They were received on August 5th—two days after Rigdon had arrived in Nauvoo—by a group of thirteen elders who had convened a conference the day before.¹⁰³ Strang presented the letter, explaining how God had called the Saints to gather in Voree under his leadership. According to Strang, he was received warmly, and it was “unanimously resolved” to send Moses Smith, then a resident of Nauvoo, and an elder, Norton Jacobs, with a copy of the LofA and conference proceedings to Nauvoo.¹⁰⁴

Crandell Dunn and Harvey Green, however, grew suspicious of Strang's claims and confronted him before a select group of other leaders.¹⁰⁵ They argued that an

¹⁰⁰ CV, 9.

¹⁰¹ Strang read the letter as rendering “every part of it sure as prophecy fulfilling.” James Strang to Louisa Sanger, December 5, 1844, CR 1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹⁰² CV, 13.

¹⁰³ CV, 13; Crandell Dunn papers, 1842–1895; Volume 1, 1849 June–1850 December, 1842 July–1847 March; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹⁰⁴ “Obituary,” *Gospel Herald* 4, no. 13 (June 14, 1849); *VH* 1, no. 8 (August 1846).

¹⁰⁵ CV, 13; Crandell Dunn papers, 1842–1895; Volume 1, 1849 June–1850 December, 1842 July–1847 March; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT; *NI* 4, no. 66 (November 2, 1854).

appointment by Smith was alone insufficient to ordain a prophet according to ecclesiastical law.¹⁰⁶ While Strang claimed to have an official appointment, he lacked the necessary ordination.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the letter itself was suspicious. Dunn found fault with the postmark, accusing Strang that the stamp was “not like the one at Nauvoo for yours is black and [the] letters are different shape.”¹⁰⁸ Norton Jacobs, tasked with delivering the letter to church leadership, became one of its fiercest skeptics. He echoed Dunn’s concern about the color of the post mark, contending that every stamp “issued from the [Nauvoo post] office was uniformly red.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, the postmark would prove to be authentic. A small dot at the left of the “J” in June, caused by a speck of material wedged in the stamp, was discovered on other postmarks stamped on the same day. The odds that the forger

¹⁰⁶ “Letter from Elder Dunn to Elder Appleby, of Philadelphia,” *MS* 8, no. 6 (October 15, 1846), 93; *NI* 4, no. 66 (November 2, 1854).

¹⁰⁷ According to Dunn, Strang denied being ordained by anyone at all. “Letter from Elder Dunn to Elder Appleby, of Philadelphia,” *MS* 8, no. 6 (October 15, 1846): 93; *NI* 4, no. 66 (November 2, 1854). If Dunn’s testimony is true, then it is possible that Strang was armed only with the LofA, perhaps unaware that a more convincing argument for the position should include both an appointment and an ordination, and, because Strang sought the zenith position, such ordination could not come from a mortal. Thus, it was only after he understood this proceeding that he began to include his angelic ordination as part of his bid. Strang, however, vehemently opposed such an accusation. He claimed he had told a consistent story about being ordained by an angel since June 27th during the very hour of Smith’s death. Strang argued that “...on the same day on which Smith was slain, it became known in the family in which I boarded near Burlington, Wisconsin, that I had had a wonderful vision, in which I was visited by a numerous host of angels, with one of whom I had had a conversation of great importance, or that I so asserted, and the next day the matter was public in the neighborhood . . . Since that time down till this day, a period of above ten years, I have constantly declared my ordination by the hands of an angel, and have so preached in all the principal cities in eighteen States.” *NI* 4, no. 66 (November 2, 1854). Moreover, Strang denied that he was never ordained. Harvey Green popularized the position that Strang received appointment yet without ordination, claiming to have confronted Strang about the deficiency in his calling at the conference. So Strang: “[A] statement made by Harvey Green, and industriously circulated by the Brighamites to the effect that the Conference at Florence, Michigan, August 5th, 1844, he inquired of me if I had been ordained by an angel, urging upon me that it was necessary, and pointing out to me the revelation, (D. & C. 1., p. 2, 3,) showing the necessity, and that I confessed that I had not been so ordained. The only truth contained in this statement is, that we conversed on the subject. Mr. Harvey Green did not inquire if I had been ordained by an angel. He did not urge upon me the necessity of such an ordination. He did not point out or mention the revelation showing that necessity, and I did not know of its existence till several months later; and I did not tell him that I had not been so ordained.” *NI* 4, no. 66 (November 2, 1854).

¹⁰⁸ Crandell Dunn papers, 1842–1895; Volume 1, 1849 June–1850 December, 1842 July–1847 March; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹⁰⁹ Norton Jacobs, Journal, “Autobiography,” The Joseph Smith Foundation, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://josephsmithfoundation.org/norton-jacob-journal/>.

could have known to include such a detailed flaw were infinitesimal, argued Strang.¹¹⁰ But Dunn thought the signature, too, was wrong. And even if the postmark was authentic, the content was “altogether bombastic unlike the work of God.”¹¹¹ These arguments would set the tempo for future criticism on Strang’s letter.¹¹² Strang denied this version of the confrontation, claiming instead that Jacobs reneged his support and “preached against the revelation with great violence,” while “Elders Dunn and Green . . . attempted to forbid Elders Strang and Smith proceeding on their mission” after threatening them with violence.¹¹³

Nevertheless, Moses Smith and Norton left Florence for Nauvoo on August 13th with a copy of the LofA as Strang and Aaron Smith set off for New York to continue their mission.¹¹⁴ Moses Smith and Norton arrived on August 25th and delivered it to the

¹¹⁰ PC 1:33.

¹¹¹ Norton Jacobs, Journal, “Autobiography,” The Joseph Smith Foundation, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://josephsmithfoundation.org/norton-jacob-journal/>.

¹¹² The letter, presently stored in the JJSP collection at Yale University, consists of two foolscap sheets which constitute three pages of body text. The first sheet contains the bulk of the letter, two pages to “My Dear Son.” The other sheet contains the last page of text on recto with the address on verso. This sheet was used to envelop the others and bears a red postmark from Nauvoo dated June 19th. The entire letter is written in block script with the exception of one cursive word, “Paid,” written above the address. The signature matches with the body text, i.e., the hand that wrote the letter appears to have also signed it. Modern analysis agrees with early skeptics that the document is a forgery. Neither the body text nor the signature match any extant handwriting samples of Smith nor any of his scribes. Charles Eberstadt discovered that the physical characteristics of the two leaves did not match—one leaf is woven paper while the other is laid paper, which served as the envelope bearing an authentic postmark. He theorized that, “the first leaf could . . . have been detached and a blank substituted, leaving three blank pages on which to forge the letter, tied as it would have been by an authentic postmark.” The mistake on the forger’s part was “in substituting wove rather than laid paper.” Eberstadt, “Letter That Founded a Kingdom,” 8. It is curious, however, to note that the supposed authentic leaf, bearing the Nauvoo postmark on verso, has written on recto directions by Smith for the apostles and other Church authorities to lead the Saints “round about the city of Voree . . . for if evil befall me thou [Strang] shalt lead the flock to pleasant pastures.” If this leaf is authentic, then either the text on recto is also authentic—with its apparent appointment of Strang—or it has yet to be explained how the forger substituted the original language. One possible explanation is that the envelop leaf was originally blank on recto, giving the forger one authentic page to close the letter.

¹¹³ CV, 13.

¹¹⁴ Crandell Dunn papers, 1842–1895; Volume 1, 1849 June–1850 December, 1842 July–1847 March; CHL, Salt Lake City, UT: 78; Norton Jacobs, Journal, “Autobiography,” The Joseph Smith Foundation, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://josephsmithfoundation.org/norton-jacob-journal/>; James Strang to Moses Smith, October 25, 1844, CR1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT. Strang indicates that he left Florence for Buffalo, but failed to ever arrive in New York due to illness.

Twelve the following day.¹¹⁵ By then, Rigdon had been rejected, so, unsurprisingly, another claimant, especially such a farfetched one, was coldly received by the Twelve. Moreover, just ten days earlier, on August 15th, the apostles had published their epistle warning any would be contender for Smith's office to not "presume for a moment that his place will be filled by another; for *remember he stands in his own place*, and always will; and the Twelve Apostles of this dispensation stand in their own place and always will."¹¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, then, Strang was immediately excommunicated, and the Saints were notified the following week.¹¹⁷ Moses Smith remained in Nauvoo and was persuaded to follow the Twelve. Meanwhile, having failed to encounter church leadership and after falling ill, Strang was forced to turn back. By September 4th, Strang disembarked at Southport (later renamed Kenosha in 1850) *en route* to Voree.¹¹⁸

On October 25th, Strang wrote Moses Smith, still in Nauvoo, to address criticisms of the LofA. Strang put it in stark terms:

Either my appointment must be sustained or the book of Covenants must fall, for that provides for such an appointment & for no other as there is no other such in existence Either my appointment is genuine or none has been made & the book of covenants has failed & the organization of the Church is lost."¹¹⁹

Two passages of that provision appear repeatedly in Strang's rhetoric (D&C 28:6–7; 43:4). Both require divine appointment for the "head of the church," thus disqualifying the Twelve from doing so.¹²⁰ Strang also expressed his hope to Moses Smith "to have the

¹¹⁵ Norton Jacobs, Journal, "Autobiography," The Joseph Smith Foundation, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://josephsmithfoundation.org/norton-jacob-journal/>.

¹¹⁶ See appendix 2.

¹¹⁷ *T&S* 5, no. 16 (September 2, 1844).

¹¹⁸ CV, 14.

¹¹⁹ James Strang to Moses Smith, October 25, 1844, CR1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT. Mailed October 30th from Burlington.

¹²⁰ D&C 28:6–7 reads: "And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church; For I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead." D&C 43:4 reads: "But verily, verily, I say unto you, that anyone else shall be appointed unto this gift except it be through him; for if it be taken from him he shall

revelation [LofA] published in the *Times & Seasons* but of course I can not expect it.”¹²¹

He was correct. If Strang wanted the LofA in public circulation, it would need to come by his own publication means, but he would need more than wider circulation of his appointment and ordination as prophet. Still, Strang began to win converts.

Later, on October 12, 1845, Strangites convened to discuss the creation of a new organ to publish the “the testimonies of the work of God in the building up of Voree.”¹²² It would be first published as the *Voree Herald* and, within the year, changed its title to *Zion’s Reveille*, both appropriate names for a community bidding other Saints to gather in a new Zion.¹²³

Yet, even with greater reach, Strang quickly learned how difficult it was to persuade church leadership to accept his leadership. On December 5, 1844, Strang responded to a letter from Louisa Sanger of Nauvoo who questioned his claims.¹²⁴ In it, he addressed her concerns and asked that the letter, along with his earlier correspondence with Moses Smith (who had by then rejoined Strang), be offered to church leaders.¹²⁵ When Sanger approached the apostles, she was quickly dismissed. It seemed that Strang’s bid for the presidency was over before it had begun. However, he remained determined, and would soon make known to the church that his leadership, unlike that of Young’s and Rigdon’s, would fulfill the entirety of Smith’s vacant role. Not only would Strang claim

not have power except to appoint another in his stead.”

¹²¹ James Strang to Moses Smith, October 25, 1844, CR1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹²² CV, 33.

¹²³ As a former newspaper editor in New York, Strang knew the value of media and kept a relatively unbroken line of newspapers flowing from Voree and Beaver Island between January 1846 and June 1856, the month of his assassination. First was *Voree Herald*, which ran from January to October 1846. It was renamed *Zion’s Reveille* in November 1846 and ran through September 1847. The name was changed a third time to *Gospel Herald* from September 1847 through June 1850. That fall, Strang relocated his printing office to Beaver Island and started a new paper, the *Northern Islander*, which was published from December 1850 through June 1856. The move created the only gap in publishing—between July and November 1850—from the time Strang printed the first issue of *Voree Herald* until his death.

¹²⁴ James Strang to Louisa Sanger, December 5, 1844, CR 1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹²⁵ James Strang to Louisa Sanger, December 5, 1844, CR 1234, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

to be the latter day prophet, but he would also claim to be the latter day seer and translator.

James Strang as Latter Day Seer and Translator

On January 5, 1845, Strang and a few followers held their first public meeting in the house of Aaron Smith.¹²⁶ Two weeks later, Strang announced that, in a revelation, God had promised the Saints that in exchange for their obedience to Strang, the new prophet would be given “the plates of the Book that was sealed that he may translate them for you.”¹²⁷ The sealed plates likely referred to an inaccessible portion of the same plates excavated by Joseph Smith. According to the Book of Mormon, God would reveal their mysteries to faithful gentiles at a future time.¹²⁸

This promise was reiterated later that fall. On September 1, 1845, Strang experienced a third vision. As with his previous divine encounter, the “Angel of the Lord” appeared to Strang adorned in brilliant light, which he described as being “above the brightness of the sun,” a phrase evocative of the First Vision.¹²⁹ The angel displayed the sealed plates and gave Strang custody of the Urim and Thummim.¹³⁰ Then, from “out of the light came the voice of the Lord,” instructing Strang that he was to receive an “immutable testimony” of his prophetic calling. He was to be given, “by little and little,” the seal recorded that was kept from Smith.¹³¹ This section, presumably, is the same spoken of in the Book of Mormon as part of the “things which are sealed up” that were

¹²⁶ CV, 14.

¹²⁷ CV, 18.

¹²⁸ Ether 4:4–5. See also Hardy, *Understanding*, 244.

¹²⁹ CV, 21; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³⁰ CV, 21; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³¹ CV, 21; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

not translated by Smith.¹³²

Until then, Strang would be allowed to uncover and translate a small set of plates buried near Voree. “Go to the place which the Angel of the presence shall show thee,” the angel instructed, “and there thou shalt dig for a record of my people in whose possession those dwellest.”¹³³ Strang then said that when he was “yet in the Spirit the Angel of the Lord took me away to the hill [and] there he shewed unto me the record buried under an oak tree.”¹³⁴ He saw the records, he said, “by Urim and Thummim, and I returned the Urim and Thummim to the Angel of the Lord and he departed out of sight.”¹³⁵

Nearly two weeks later, on September 13, 1845, Strang took four men as witnesses to excavate the records. They dug at the location disclosed by the angel until striking a case covered by a flat stone that contained three brass plates fastened together by a ring.¹³⁶ Strang took the records and translated them by the Urim and Thummim.¹³⁷ A week later, curious followers gathered in a barn as Strang read aloud the translation.

The record contained a short history of a lamenting king, Rajah Manchou of Vorito, whose people had perished in battle. A hushed audience listened intently as Strang read:

My people are no more. The mighty are fallen and the young slain . . . They sleep with the mighty dead, and they rest with their fathers . . . The word of God came to me while I mourned . . . Other strangers shall inhabit thy land. I an ensign will setup there. . . . The forerunner men shall kill, but a mighty Prophet there shall dwell [and] he shall bring forth thy record. Record my words and bury it in the hill of

¹³² 2 Nephi 27:7–11; Ether 5:1.

¹³³ CV, 22; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³⁴ CV, 23; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³⁵ CV, 23; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³⁶ CV, 26; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846); *GH* 2, no. 23 (September 1847).

¹³⁷ CV, 30–31; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

Promise.¹³⁸

The parallels and prophecy would have been obvious to the audience. Two decades earlier, Smith was also visited by an “angel of the Lord,” who, he said, “delivered the records into my hands.”¹³⁹ The angel first visited Smith during the night on September 21, 1823. He said he was awakened from sleep to discover “a light appearing in the room which continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noon-day.”¹⁴⁰ The angel told Smith that a “history was written and deposited not far from that place,” and that he would translate them “by the means of the Urim and Thummim.”¹⁴¹ The exact location of the plates, buried in a hill near to Smith’s home, was miraculously revealed to him. In 1827, after a series of annual visits to the site, Smith said that the angel “who deposited the plates [in] a hill . . . appeared unto me [and] I obtained them, and the Urim and Thummum; by the means of which, I translated the plates.”¹⁴² Accompanying the plate was “a curious instrument which the ancients called ‘Urim and Thummim,’” and, Smith explained, it was “through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God.”¹⁴³

By the time his translation was published in March 1830, Smith learned that the plates were deposited in the hill under tragic circumstances at the conclusion of an epic battle between two warring nations, the Nephites and Lamanites. Moroni, son of Mormon, and final custodian of the plates, lamented the annihilation of his kin: “I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people [for] the Lamanites

¹³⁸ CV, 30–31; *VH*, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹³⁹ “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

¹⁴⁰ “History of Joseph Smith,” *T&S* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 753.

¹⁴¹ Oliver Cowdery, “Letter IV,” *The Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 80.

¹⁴² *EJ* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 43.

¹⁴³ “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

have hunted my people, the Nephites . . . even until they are no more; and great has been their fall (Mormon 8:3, 7).” Moroni then deposited the plates in the hill where they would rest undisturbed for centuries.

The similarity between Joseph Smith’s and James Strang’s supernatural experiences attracted converts to Voree. While some viewed the similarities as conveniences that pointed to deception, others, like Eunice Kinney, interpreted them as irrefutable evidence of Palmyra echoing in Voree. Kinney, a lifelong follower of Strang, reasoned that the calling of a “God-made Shepherd [belongs] to the Lord and he will perform it at his pleasure and bring to pass his strange acts as seemeth him good.”¹⁴⁴ If God chose to transfer the office of prophet in familiar ways, then who is any man to critique him? Moreover, none of the Twelve made claims to seership as Strang had. Not only had they argued the prophet would not be replaced, but neither would the attendant offices of seer and translator. For some Mormons, this deficiency caused them to take a second look at Strang. One convert, Benjamin Chapman, reflected how it was Strang’s claims to seership that ultimately converted him. “I go in for the man that has the Tools. Alias [Orricals Urum & Thimim] For I know that the [President] must have those things or he Cannot Be A Seer and Translator.”¹⁴⁵ Early converts of Strang believed he was the medium through which dynamic aspects of the LDS restorationism continued to march toward the millennium.

James Strang’s Argument for Succeeding Joseph Smith

As implausible as Strang’s claim sounded to skeptical Mormons, such an appointment was technically possible within the LDS restorationist schema. The Twelve

¹⁴⁴ Eunice Kinney, letter to Wingfield Watson on June 29, 1881, WWP. The term “God-made prophet” appears in the *Diamond*, in distinction from a “man-made prophet” like Brigham Young. Strang, *Diamond*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Benjamin Chapman to James J. Strang, March 24, 1846, JJSP.

secured common consent to lead, which fulfilled a revelation that leadership must secure public affirmation for all things, including ordination, by vote from church members.¹⁴⁶ However, as Michael Quinn noted, Smith often delayed voting until long after practices and appointments were made. At Nauvoo, he introduced new endowment ceremonies, plural marriage, and organized the Council of Fifty without common consent.¹⁴⁷ Some of Smith's chief authorities were appointed and acting in their roles long before a vote of affirmation, e.g., Sidney Rigdon as counselor, Oliver Cowdery as Assistant President, and Hyrum Smith as Presiding Patriarch.¹⁴⁸ In each case, votes of affirmation followed their ordinations. Thus, Quinn concluded, "these precedents therefore accustomed the Saints to voting for the highest officers in the Church in public long after the ordination or appointment had occurred in private."¹⁴⁹ However unlikely it may have seemed to some Saints, Strang's ostentatious claim was not illegitimate.

Over the years, Strang honed his argument for succession, printing it in various publications such as the pamphlet titled *The Diamond* (1848), *The Book of the Law of the Lord* (1851), and the *Prophetic Controversy* (1854), a pamphlet based on a letter from Strang to "Mrs. Corey".¹⁵⁰ These works would later provide the baseline of Wingfield Watson's apologetic. In them, Strang rested his succession on two columns: first, that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, and second, that James Strang was rightly appointed and ordained to replace Smith.

¹⁴⁶ D&C 20:65–7; 26:2; 28:13; D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1976): 5.

¹⁴⁷ Quinn, "Succession," 5.

¹⁴⁸ Quinn, "Succession," 5.

¹⁴⁹ Quinn, "Succession," 5.

¹⁵⁰ *The Diamond*, published April 1848, is a collection of critical early Strangite documents, including a copy of the LofA, an account of Strang's angelic ordination, and his general epistle to the Saints. The BLL is part of the Strangite canon, said to have been an ancient record translated by Strang. PC 1 is a published edition of a lengthy letter to a "Mrs. Corey," a Brighamite who wrote Strang seeking evidence for his claims.

First, Strang refused to view Smith's mission as a failure, unlike other potential successors who claimed that Smith's death was proof he had become a fallen prophet. For Strang, his experience was not one of renewal from a fallen prophet but of continuity from a Saint who presently "wears the crown of King and Martyr."¹⁵¹ Smith was "a true prophet" who, having never been "rejected of God, nor removed out of his place," remained "in the favor of God till the end of his life."¹⁵² Strang cemented this position 1846 when, at a conference in Kirtland, members unanimously resolved that "we believe Joseph Smith [was] a prophet of the most high God, called to be a Prophet, Seer, Revelator and Translator, an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, and an Elder of the Church" and that God had given him the power and authority "to introduce this dispensation and institute this Church."¹⁵³ Strang's authority stemmed, in part, from Smith's fidelity to his prophetic responsibilities.¹⁵⁴

Moreover, Strang aligned with Smith on every fundamental doctrine of LDS restorationism. The Great Apostasy occurred, and, consequently, the priesthood "disappeared from the earth," necessitating its restoration.¹⁵⁵ "There is not a single one of all the Christian Churches which makes the slightest pretension to having a Priesthood, so called and ordained," argued Strang.¹⁵⁶ Like Smith, he reiterated the importance of the ecclesiastical system of Mormonism in addition to belief in LDS restorationism. It was not belief in the first principles alone that made someone Mormon, but "belief in the Church of God—in a living priesthood—in a living prophet."¹⁵⁷ For Strang, the gospel is

¹⁵¹ PC 1:2.

¹⁵² PC 1:12, 29.

¹⁵³ *VH* 1, no. 9 (September 1846).

¹⁵⁴ PC 1:2.

¹⁵⁵ BLL 241.

¹⁵⁶ BLL 230–1.

¹⁵⁷ CV, 172.

not merely good news which, by itself, effects salvific change within a person. It must be complemented with proper priesthood authority and ecclesiology, especially one's relationship to and practice within both. "[The] gospel does not consist in doctrine only," reasoned Strang, "but also in sacraments, and in the power from God to administer those sacraments."¹⁵⁸ The question that arose from Smith's death, then, was not whether the priesthood was in jeopardy but whether the priesthood was being usurped by an unlawful *coup d'état*. The very integrity of the priesthood rested on Strang as its apex leader, and none other. For, "to dispute my prophetic calling," Strang claimed, "is to say that Joseph Smith is an impostor, and Mormonism a lie."¹⁵⁹

Second, consolidating Smith's teachings on succession, Strang laid out his case according to a carefully crafted rule:

That whenever Joseph ceased to act on earth in the prophetic office, whether removed by death, by transgression, or by whatever means, another should be raised up in his stead, who should be called by revelation of God, given unto Joseph, and be ordained as he was, but the hand of angels.¹⁶⁰

To this rule, Strang believed he alone qualified as truly appointed and rightly ordained, and formulated arguments *via positiva* and *via negativa* to bolster his claim.

In the positive, Strang maintained Smith's testimony of ordination. In *The Diamond*, echoing the opening words of Hebrews, Strang explained how God had "spoke on divers occasions and in many ways to the house of Israel by the prophets," but, in the last days, he "restored the gospel to the earth by the ministry of angels, and the priesthood which he conferred on the prophet Joseph by their hands."¹⁶¹ Smith was both "called by the voice of God," i.e., appointed, and "sent by the hand of Angels," i.e., ordained to the

¹⁵⁸ BLL 243.

¹⁵⁹ PC 1:1–2.

¹⁶⁰ PC 1:2; cf. D&C 27:5–13; 35:18; 28:2–3, 7; 90:3–4; 43:3–7a.

¹⁶¹ Strang, *Diamond*, 11; cf. Heb. 1:1–2.

fullness of the priesthood.¹⁶² In continuity with Smith's bifurcation of the priesthood, Strang taught that a division existed between the "Priesthood of an endless life [which] is commonly called the Melchizedek Priesthood" and the "Priesthood of life," i.e., the Aaronic priesthood.¹⁶³ Strang contended that Smith had held both priesthoods and faithfully fulfilled their church offices, e.g., "Apostle, Prophet, Seer, Revelator and Translator," having been "faithful over many things."¹⁶⁴ Thus, Strang's ordination to the priesthood by Smith after his conversion to the LDS Church came by genuine hands. In other words, Strang's admission into the priesthood was authentic because Smith acted legitimately in his calling. Because of Smith's fidelity to his office, any appointment he made would likewise be legitimate.

Strang argued vehemently that it was Smith's prerogative alone *via* divine permission, according to revelation, to appoint his successor. He wove together a tapestry of Mormon revelation, what he called a "multitude of testimonies," to highlight this point.¹⁶⁵ Prominent among them were four passages. First, D&C 35:18, which declared that ultimately it is God who would "appoint . . . another in his [Smith] stead." Strang argued he had, in fact, been chosen by God as was evidenced by Smith's revelation naming Strang successor recorded in the letter of appointment.¹⁶⁶ Second, D&C 90:4, which demonstrated that God's chosen method of transfer authority from Smith: "through you [Smith]," says the revelation, "shall the oracles be given to another." Again, it was the LofA that fulfilled this requirement. Third, D&C 43:4, which confirmed that the only

¹⁶² PC 1:14.

¹⁶³ BLL, 166, 214.

¹⁶⁴ LofA; BLL, 214.

¹⁶⁵ PC 1:2.

¹⁶⁶ "And now behold my servant James J. Strang hath come to thee from far for truth when he knew it not and hath not rejected it but had faith in thee the Shepherd and Stone of Israel, and to him shall the gathering of the people be, for he shall plant a stake of Zion in Wisconsin and I will establish it" (CV, 3).

reason Smith could forfeit his office is “to appoint another in his stead,” as was the case in the LofA. Fourth, D&C 27:5–13, which necessitated the ordination by an angel to legitimate any appointment made by God through Smith, thus Strang’s visionary experience with the “Angel of the Lord” at the very hour of Smith’s death.¹⁶⁷ “Nothing plainer than this is contained in the English language,” Strang argued, “nothing clearer has been spoken by the voice of prophets, or written by the finger of God.”¹⁶⁸ Strang placed the onus of belief on believers.

For Strang, that God had appointed him through Smith was beyond question. Surely, skeptics might be suspicious of Strang’s revelatory experiences, i.e., angelic ordination, due to its subjective nature. For his appointment, however, Strang had evidence. Strang’s angelic ordination was his *bona fides* and the LofA was his certificate of authenticity. Despite persistent rejection by skeptics, he showcased it in print and on missionary trips. By 1854, Strang would make the audacious claim that a “quarter of a million” people had examined it.¹⁶⁹ For him, the letter was more important to his prophetic claims than even the Voree record, demonstrating the lengths at which Strang ground his authority less in his own seership and more in the seer who had come before him. Still, there was one facet of his succession above all—angelic ordination. Material evidence, like the LofA and Voree record, acted as a platform on which his visionary experience rested. Strang had claimed, as Smith before him, that his ordaining authority came directly from heaven and not by earthly means. A legitimate calling could not come from common consent nor by horizontal authorities within the priesthood. “[A] prophet of this dispensation cannot be either elected or ordained of man, but must be chosen by

¹⁶⁷ CV, 10.

¹⁶⁸ PC 1:2.

¹⁶⁹ PC 1:32.

revelation and ordained by angels,” Strang argued.¹⁷⁰ To put it more plainly: “[The] successor of Joseph should be ordained by the hand of an Angel,” Strang said. “He could not be ordained by any of the surviving Priesthood; because none were equal to Joseph in authority, and the less is blessed of the greater.”¹⁷¹ And, after Smith’s death, Strang argued that he was the only person to have been so ordained. “I, and I alone, have stood up as a prophet of God, claiming to have been appointed by revelation of God through Joseph, and to have been sent by the hands of Angels, as he was.”¹⁷² Strang habitually emphasized this point: he believed that he alone was “ordained by the highest instituted power in heaven or on earth” [i.e., the angel], so that any competitor to the office of prophet was illegitimate.¹⁷³ As evidence of his legitimate successorship as Prophet, Strang acted in the roles of Seer, Revelator, and Translator, e.g., visionary experiences, new revelation, custody of the Urim and Thummim, and translation of ancient records.¹⁷⁴

Strang felt he had supplied sufficient proof, both anecdotal and material, grounding each piece of evidence in LDS restorationist scripture and narrative. Either Mormons accepted him as the prophet or they did not, but a rejection of Strang was, in kind, a rejection of LDS restorationism.

In the negative, Strang labored to cast the Twelve as neither guardians of the priesthood nor Brigham Young as a potential successor, but as a band of usurpers. While other men vied for the presidency, Strang recognized that his most formidable competitor was Young. Strang argued that the Twelve were in violation of ecclesiastical law and

¹⁷⁰ Strang, *Diamond*, 14.

¹⁷¹ BLL, 166

¹⁷² PC 1:3

¹⁷³ BLL, 224.

¹⁷⁴ So Strang: “As a Seer, I have seen the visions of the Almighty, and as a Revelator have received knowledge of his purposes and commandments, and made them known among the children of men. As a translator, I have brought forth hidden treasures, and revealed the old record to all who love the truth, and seek unto it.” PC 1:38.

guilty of not following revelatory standards set by Smith.

To begin, Strang rejected the Twelve's earliest position that the priesthood could function without a First Presidency, at least for a short time. Instead, he argued, God had organized the latter-day church to require a prophet to lead it always. There could never be a break in succession, thus the immediacy with which the angel ordained Strang. In Strangite publications, he gleefully parroted Young's insistence in August 1844 that no one could "presume for a moment his [Smith's] place will be filled by another."¹⁷⁵ He further argued that Young was only named the prophet after the Mormons "suddenly turned and acknowledged [that] the Strangites had adhered to the original constitution of the Church, and they had departed from it."¹⁷⁶ In order to correct their error, Strang argued, the church elected Young as prophet and reestablished the First Presidency in December 1847.¹⁷⁷ As for the apostles' claim that Smith had rolled "the kingdom upon the shoulders of the Twelve,"¹⁷⁸ even if that were the case, Strang argued, either it was only a temporary duty or Smith meant something different than the apostles' interpretation.¹⁷⁹ After all, the God of Mormonism was one of consistency. If he had ordained one prophet by a specific set of circumstances, it only stood to reason he would do it again in like manner. "Common sense and revelation perfectly concur in this rule," wrote Strang, further arguing:¹⁸⁰

Whatever amount and kind of authority it took to inaugurate the initial First President and prophet, the same it takes to make his successors in all time. As the predecessor was called by revelation, so the successors must be; and as the predecessor was consecrated and set apart by the ministration of angels, so the

¹⁷⁵ PC 1:4; cf. appendix 2.

¹⁷⁶ PC 1:5.

¹⁷⁷ PC 1:5.

¹⁷⁸ PC 1:6.

¹⁷⁹ PC 1:7.

¹⁸⁰ James Strang to Zenos H. Gurley, *GH* 3, no. 21 (August 10, 1848): 82.

successors must be.¹⁸¹

Finally, Young lacked the lineage to be a proper candidate as prophet. Young was not of Judean descent whereas, apparently, Smith and Strang were. So Strang:

In the last days Joseph Smith, of the tribe of Ephraim, was called to the Prophetick office, the Shepherd and Stone of Israel, according to the prophecy of Jacob [and] after him was James, of the tribe of Judah, and of the lineage of David.¹⁸²

By his very nature, let alone his blatant disregard for LDS restorationist doctrine and norms, Young was unqualified to lead the Saints in the latter days.

Early Missionary Efforts of the Strangite Movement

By fall 1845, Strangite missionary efforts began to bear fruit. On September 29, 1845, a Strangite missionary set off for Nauvoo with published copies of Strang's revelations, testimony from the four witnesses, and the translation of the Voree plates.¹⁸³ Over the winter of 1845–1846, missionaries Moses Smith and Samuel Shaw, with others, proselytized in Nauvoo, even preaching Strang's succession at the temple.¹⁸⁴ Strang also wrote a general epistle in which he laid out his case as Smith's successors and pled with the Saints not to believe the "blinding fables" of the Twelve's claim to authority.¹⁸⁵ After all, Strang later argued, "the Twelve have never in any known publication claimed either for themselves or any one of their number to be first President of the Church or President of High priesthood."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ James Strang to Zenos H. Gurley, *GH* 3, no. 21 (August 10, 1848): 82.

¹⁸² BLL, 219.

¹⁸³ CV, 31.

¹⁸⁴ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, *A Card to the Kind and Brave People of Utah* (Monte Vista, CO: Lorenzo Dow Hickey, 1896), 5.

¹⁸⁵ CV, 44.

¹⁸⁶ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846); CV, 42. The Twelve had, in fact, drafted such a declaration. On March 25, 1845, apostle Orson Hyde presented the Council of Fifty with a draft of the "certificate," which he "wrote for publication concerning pres. Joseph Smith appointed the Twelve to take responsibility of leading the church." *JSP* C50:378. In it, Smith reportedly was "somewhat depressed in spirit," sensing that an "important scene" loomed over the horizon. Baugh and Holzapfel, "I Roll the Burthen," 15, 18. "It

What they had made known, however, was their unease with anti-Mormons in Illinois. Young planned to evacuate the Saints in Nauvoo for the Rocky Mountains, then the frontier of Mexican territory.¹⁸⁷ For many, the plan was unthinkable. Its cost was too high, both financially and physically, especially for the elderly and infirmed. Some struggled to sell their land at reasonable prices, preventing them from raising the necessary funds to make the trip. Others feared the west as dangerous and inhospitable. Its land offered little prospect for agricultural success and any attempt at permanent settlement invited perils brought by native resistance. Capitalizing on these fears, Strang warned Mormons not to trek into the “unexplored wilderness among savages.” “The voice of God has not called you to this,” he added.¹⁸⁸ Instead of venturing far off in the dangerous hinterlands of the American west, was it not better to remain relatively close in

may be that my enemies will kill me,” he speculated, and fear that, should such a scenario unfold, it was possible that “the keys and power which rest on me [would] not be imparted to you, they will be lost from the Earth.” Baugh and Holzapfel, “I Roll the Burthen,” 18. Even so, the Latter Day work would continue on through the Twelve. “Upon the shoulders of the Twelve must the responsibility of leading this church hence forth rest until you shall appoint others to succeed you,” said Smith, and, afterward, the Twelve were “received confirmed by the holy anointing under the hands of Joseph and Hyrum.” Baugh and Holzapfel, “I Roll the Burthen,” 18. However, according to LDS historians, this important pronouncement was, so far as it is known, “never issued publicly or published by the Twelve.” Baugh and Holzapfel, “I Roll the Burthen,” 6. Baugh and Holzapfel suggest that secrecy was of the utmost importance, pointing to other meetings where, according to witnesses, “Joseph required perfect secrecy of them.” Baugh and Holzapfel, “I Roll the Burthen,” 11. Given the sensitive nature of the “last charge” meeting, it is plausible that Smith demanded discretion. Moreover, Ronald Walker sees evidence of Brigham Young drawing from the “last charge” language in one of his first addresses to the Saints shortly after the assassination. Walker, “Six Days in August,” 174. At Rigdon’s trial, Orson Hyde hinted at such a charge, claiming that “a short time before the difficulties, President Joseph Smith in one of their councils, told the Twelve that he had given them all the keys and ordinances which had been committed to him.” *T&S* 5, no. 19 (October 15, 1844): 686. However, the long delay in drafting the document warrants some suspicion of the possibility of expansion, embellishment, or even fabrication of Smith’s speech to meet the rising challenges posed by Strang. If the Twelve were charged by Smith to secure leadership of the Church in the event of his death, it is strange that the quorum took nearly a year to draft a document to that effect and then never to publish it. Yet, the Twelve maintained truthfulness of their declaration: “This [is] our testimony,” they wrote, “[and] we expect to meet in a coming day when all parties will know that we have told the truth and have not lied, so help us God.” Joseph Young, a seventy, wanted the last phrase removed for an unknown reason, but it remained. *JSP* C50:379. Still, Hyde’s document ranks atop the most important concerning prophetic succession, but it was never made public. Strang’s bold claim seems to substantiate the historians’ finding. They theorized that the Hyde’s certificate was aimed primarily at Rigdon but also spoke to Strang. Their assessment is likely. Just two months earlier, Strang had published his revelation about the sealed plates. Yet, even if the Twelve had published their declaration, some Saints would still have given Strang their attention for two reasons: uncertainty about westward emigration and opposition to polygamy.

¹⁸⁷ Speek, *Kingdom*, 26.

¹⁸⁸ CV, 45–46.

the peaceful prairies of the Wisconsin dales?

Moreover, for Mormons uncomfortable with plural marriage, Strang promised a more traditional community. Unlike Young, Strang firmly opposed polygamy, which perpetually fomented tumult among the Mormons.¹⁸⁹ In 1846, the Strangite Church solidified and publicized their opposition to plural marriage at a conference in Kirtland. In contrast to the Brighamites, the Strangites declared, under the direction of Strang, that “[we] utterly disclaim the whole system of Poligamy known as the spiritual wife system.”¹⁹⁰ They further vowed that they would “neither practice such things nor hold any fellowship with those that teach or practice such things.”¹⁹¹ Strang initially kept this word. In the early years of the Strangite Church, he made a habit of expelling men who practiced or even taught the “spiritual wife doctrine.”¹⁹² A year later, he reiterated his stance: “I have uniformly and most distinctly discard and declared heretical the so called ‘*spiritual wife system*’ and every thing connected therewith,” he wrote in *Zion’s Reveille* for the world to read. “My opinions on this subject are unchanged, and I regard them as unchangeable.”¹⁹³ “[If] a man wanted more than one curse, let him get more than one wife,” Strang said tongue-in-cheek.¹⁹⁴ For those Saints who upheld Mormonism as true but rejected plural marriage, Strang offered a viable alternative.

¹⁸⁹ Earlier in his life, Strang witnessed firsthand the potential for sorrow that multiple marriages bring families. On October 15, 1832, he complained how his aunt had married a man, a Baptist minister, who was already wedded to another woman. Strang, *Diary*, 23. “I opposed the match with unshaken firmness,” he wrote, but watched in vain as she “sold herself to misery.” Strang, *Diary*, 22. She spent her days “in care and distress, and her nights in misery and mourning,” Strang lamented. Strang, *Diary*, 22. When the truth was finally revealed, the man abandoned his aunt to poverty. Strang, *Diary*, 23. Also during his youth, Strang was propositioned to have an affair with a woman. He declined to act, fearing that the “evil [is] easier avoided than corre[c]ted,” but, he confessed in cipher, “I am fond of female company.” Strang, *Diary*, 12, 13–14.

¹⁹⁰ *VH* 1, no. 9 (September 1846).

¹⁹¹ *VH* 1, no. 9 (September 1846).

¹⁹² *CV*, 107, 130, 149, 153, 157.

¹⁹³ *ZR* 2, no. 21 (August 12, 1847).

¹⁹⁴ Elisha C. Brown, “In Evidence,” *SH* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1882): 6.

Early Influential Converts

By January 1846, Strang acquired a printing press and published the first edition of the *Voree Herald*, in which he curated his favored content in support of his succession.¹⁹⁵ In a bold yet subtle declaration, the name of the publishing agency was tucked away on the last page at the bottom of the first edition: “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”¹⁹⁶ Immediately above the title was a blatant jab at the Twelve, especially Young: a quote of declaring that the church, after Smith’s death, was “now without a prophet to guide you in the flesh,” and a second quote from Parley P. Pratt, “A church without a Prophet, is not the church for me, It has no head to lead it, in it *I* would not be.”¹⁹⁷ A thousand copies were printed for only a handful of subscribers, but Strang had bigger plans for the paper.¹⁹⁸ It would act as a proselytizing medium, akin to a religious tract, to be distributed by an army of missionaries. Copies were sent to Nauvoo and other Mormon settlements in the region.¹⁹⁹ One early convert recalled the powerful effect that the *Voree Herald* had on his decision to follow Strang. “[To] my utter astonishment I Could not Reject one word of it,” wrote Benjamin Chapman, “for my hart was so Rejoised that the Great God had fulfilled his word in appointed A man through our Beloved Joseph to fill his place when he was taken.”²⁰⁰

Another convert, Reuben Miller, noted how he found Strang’s argument “reasonable” after reading the *Voree Herald*. Miller, a trusted confidant of Young, was dispatched from Nauvoo to northern Illinois to prepare a company of 100 families for the

¹⁹⁵ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹⁹⁶ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹⁹⁷ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹⁹⁸ Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 38.

¹⁹⁹ Speek, *Kingdom*, 29.

²⁰⁰ Benjamin Chapman to James J. Strang, March 24, 1846, JJSP.

westward trek.²⁰¹ Many Mormons worked on the Illinois & Michigan Canal to help pay for their travel.²⁰² Strang was also in the area proselyting when the two met on January 7th in St. Charles. The two agreed to debate ecclesiastical authors on the following day.²⁰³ Strang spoke first, but Miller's counterarguments were never heard. He was intrigued by Strang's case, as were around 300 additional converts.²⁰⁴ Miller became enchanted by the prospect of divine manifestation as evidence of Strang's authority.²⁰⁵ He returned to Nauvoo resolved to "see what discoveries I could make" regarding the LofA and the Twelve's claim to the presidency.²⁰⁶ He also returned with a summons from Strang for the Twelve, in which Strang reminded the apostles not to step out of their place. As traveling authorities, their "keyes" were limited to opening "the Gospel to the nations" (i.e., external missions) and not "of ordinances blessings and revelations."²⁰⁷ "You can do nothing, except it be under the direction of the Presidency of the Church," he scolded them, demanding that they "cease all [their] usurpations in the Church" and report immediately to Voree to stand trial in the upcoming April conference.²⁰⁸ The letter was signed "Jas. J. Strang Pres. Ch. J. C. L. D. S."²⁰⁹

Unsurprisingly, the Twelve ignored Strang's threats. According to Young, he dismissed Miller as peddling "nonsense" and ended conversation with him abruptly,

²⁰¹ CV, 50.

²⁰² At the time, James Strang advised emigrating Mormons to work on the I&M Canal. *Voree Herald* 1, no. 4 (April 1846).

²⁰³ CV, 52.

²⁰⁴ CV, 57.

²⁰⁵ Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Reuben Miller, Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *BYU Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1968): 283.

²⁰⁶ Miller, *Strang*, 1.

²⁰⁷ James Strang to the Twelve, January 13, 1846, JJSP.

²⁰⁸ James Strang to the Twelve, January 13, 1846, JJSP.

²⁰⁹ James Strang to the Twelve, January 13, 1846, JJSP.

explaining his “time being too precious to be spent in hearing and even talking about such trash.”²¹⁰ In reality, Young was deeply concerned that they could lose so many to Strang’s fold. The Twelve responded indirectly to Strang by issuing an epistle to the Saints in Ottawa, Illinois. The letter, signed by Young, lambasted the LofA as “a lie—a forgery—a snare.”²¹¹ In a separate manuscript, Orson Hyde echoed Young by calling the LofA “a notorious forgery” and further argued that it ought to be dismissed because Strang had no witnesses of Smith writing it.²¹² Besides, Hyde wrote, the Twelve possessed something that Strang did not—“common consent.”²¹³ The Twelve’s letter further argued that the Twelve rightly ascended to power through “the door of the peoples’ will.”²¹⁴ If the Ottawa branch would not turn away from Strang, then the letter’s courier, Reuben Miller, was instructed to “cut you off from the church.”²¹⁵ Miller, however, did not deliver the letter. Instead, he remained in Nauvoo for the next six weeks preaching Strang’s call to gather in Voree as thousands crossed the frozen Mississippi River westward.²¹⁶ On February 15th, Miller wrote Strang an update on the Strangite mission in Nauvoo. He happily reported that “the work of god is progressing with unexpected rapidity,” further adding that “There are many that will be at Vore in the course of 6 weeks.”²¹⁷ Strangites held conference that spring in Voree, and, on April 7th, Miller was sustained as the president of the stake in Voree. He was also among a handful of Strangite authorities who excommunicated seven of the Twelve, including Young,

²¹⁰ Quoted in Anderson, “Reuben Miller,” 282.

²¹¹ Quoted in Quaiife, *Kingdom*, 23.

²¹² Orson Hyde, JJSP, 11.

²¹³ Orson Hyde, JJSP, 11.

²¹⁴ Quoted in Quaiife, *Kingdom*, 23.

²¹⁵ Quoted in Quaiife, *Kingdom*, 23.

²¹⁶ Miller, *Strang*, 1; Speck, *Kingdom*, 32–33.

²¹⁷ Reuben Miller to James Strang, February 15, 1846, JJSP.

Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, John Taylor, and Willard Richards.²¹⁸

Notably absent from those excommunicated was John E. Page, who had also been swayed by the *Voree Herald*, calling Strang's argument for appointment "unquestionably correct" but wondered if his claims were true in his case.²¹⁹ On February 1st, Page admitted to Strang in a letter that he felt the church was in a state of disarray and was willing to entertain Strang's succession.²²⁰ Page was removed from the Twelve the following week and subsequently excommunicated after joining the Strangites that spring.²²¹ Strang won the temporary allegiance of other influential men, including Martin Harris, William Marks (who served as president of the Kirtland, Far West, and Nauvoo stakes), and William Smith, the younger brother of Smith, who represented more than himself. By spring 1846, rumors circulated that members of Smith's family, including Emma, accepted Strang's leadership.²²²

William saw in Strang an opportunity for power he never had under his brother's church. William was a member of the Twelve, the Council of Fifty, and the patriarch of the church from May 24, 1845 to his excommunication just five months later.²²³ In the wake of his brothers' deaths, William, desiring the savant presidency, publicly accused Young and the Twelve of "usurpation and anarchy" in the *Warsaw Signal*, the notoriously anti-Mormon paper that had fanned the flames of violence the year prior.²²⁴ He was excommunicated on October 19, 1845. The follow spring, William

²¹⁸ CV, 67–68.

²¹⁹ John E. Page to James Strang, February 1, 1846, JJSP.

²²⁰ John E. Page to James Strang, February 1, 1846, JJSP.

²²¹ *JSP* C50:612; CV, 62.

²²² "Ho! For Voree," *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, reprinted in *VH* 1, no. 3 (March 1846); William Smith to James J. Strang, April 12, 1846, *VH* 1, no. 6 (June 1846).

²²³ Kyle R. Walker, *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet*. Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015, 306.

²²⁴ William Smith, "A Proclamation," *Warsaw Signal* 2, no. 32 (October 29, 1845); Quinn,

had cast his lots with Strang.²²⁵

In May 1846, William wrote to Strang that the “whole Smith family excepting Hyrum’s widow uphold Strang.”²²⁶ The same month, his mother, Lucy, also denounced the Twelve, remarking, “I am satisfied that Joseph appointed J. J. Strang.”²²⁷ William provided supporting evidence of the LofA by claiming that Emma recalled “that Joseph received a letter from Mr. Strang” and responded.²²⁸ He also claimed that she remembered Smith experience a vision with precise details found in the LofA. Naturally, William’s letter was republished in the *Voree Herald*. William removed to Voree in summer 1846 and was immediately named the Strangite patriarch.²²⁹ Other men with lesser renown, like Zenos H. Gurley and Jason W. Briggs, also found Strang’s argument compelling. Gurley, a Seventy, and Jason W. Briggs, who established two branches in Wisconsin, would both cast their lot behind Strang.²³⁰

Yet, like John Whitmer, each of these men would abandon the Strangite community. Likely, Strang’s magnetism was powered more by his rhetoric than his person. He lost converts as quickly as he gained them. Already by December 1846, Strang complained about dissenters, “vile imposters” whom he pejoratively nicknamed “pseudos.”²³¹ Most notably, Gurley and Briggs would become founding apostles of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Josephite), bearing the brunt of

“Succession,” 202–4.

²²⁵ William B. Smith to James J. Strang, March 11, 1846, in *VH* 1, no. 4 (April 1846).

²²⁶ *VH* 1, no. 6 (June 1846).

²²⁷ *VH* 1, no. 6 (June 1846).

²²⁸ *VH* 1, no. 7 (July 1846).

²²⁹ *VH* 1, no. 6 (June 1846).

²³⁰ “Gurley, Zenos Hovey, Sr.,” in Susan Easton Black, *Early Members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1993), 1:625.

²³¹ “The Pseudo-Mormon Clique,” *ZR* 1, no. 11 (November 1846).

Watson's criticism of what he would call "Gurleyism."

Many Mormons who, after initially accepting Strang's claim, found themselves repulsed by his lack of discernment in populating his priesthood leadership. Not only had Strang appointed the infamous William Smith, but the new prophet also attracted other notorious men like John C. Bennett and George J. Adams. Bennett, who previously served Smith in the First Presidency, was excommunicated in May 1842 on charges of adultery and, in retaliation, published his *exposé* of the LDS Church later that year.²³² Adams, an itinerant actor turned zealous missionary, was expelled from his seat on the Council of Fifty and subsequently excommunicated in April 1845 for returning from a mission in the British Isles with wife and child despite already being married.²³³ By fall 1846, William and Adams were serving in Strang's first presidency with Bennett as general-in-chief.²³⁴ Strang gave these men a second chance, which would prove to erode confidence in his leadership among Mormons who knew them.

Secret Orders and Hints of a Coming Kingdom

In July 1846, the Strangites received new revelation commanding them to build Strang a house, complete with "a room for translations . . . [of] ancient records [and] hidden truths," as well as a house of the Lord.²³⁵ The temple would serve as a sacred space where members could receive "an holy endowment" and instruction in the "mysteries of my Kingdom," just as the Saints practiced in Nauvoo.²³⁶ The timing of the

²³² In June 1842, Smith publicly addressed Bennett's sin, accusing him of having gone "to some of the females in the city . . . and began to teach them that promiscuous intercourse between the sexes was a doctrine believed in by the Latter Day Saints." *Hist.* 5:34. Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel*, 61-72, 86-90.

²³³ "Notice to the Churches Abroad," *T&S* 6, no. 7 (April 15, 1845): 878; Speck, *Kingdom*, 39.

²³⁴ Speck, *Kingdom*, 49-50.

²³⁵ "Revelation," *VH* 1, no. 7 (July 1864).

²³⁶ "Revelation," *VH* 1, no. 7 (July 1864).

temple revelation coincided with the arrival of John Bennett in Voree during the summer, and with him, the import of secret orders and rumors of a coming kingdom.²³⁷ Bennett, who had long ties to Freemasonry, likely introduced Smith to Freemasonry in Nauvoo as a way to alleviate persecution.²³⁸ If Nauvoo's neighbors were anti-Mormon, perhaps they were not anti-mason, so a shared bond between Masonic communities had the potential to alleviate tension. On March 15, 1842, the Nauvoo Masonic lodge met for the first time; Bennett served as its Grand Secretary.²³⁹ Elements of the Masonic ritual influenced the Nauvoo temple endowment, e.g., keys, signs, degrees, secret words, etc. On May 4, 1842, Smith presided over the first temple endowment ceremony, during which select members of church leadership, including Young and some members of the Twelve, received "washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of Keys."²⁴⁰ Notably absent from the ceremony he influenced was Bennett who had been excommunicated the following week and expelled from the Nauvoo Masonic lodge two months later.²⁴¹

Strang also had a background in Freemason. In his early life, Strang utilized Masonic icons and forms in his ciphered journal, and, when the Voree record was discovered in 1845, it too bore uncanny resemblance to Masonic emblems. When Bennett arrived to Voree with information about the Masonic-inspired temple endowment, Strang

²³⁷ Miller, *Strang*, 18; Van Noord, *King*, 48.

²³⁸ Buerger, "Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony," 88. Bennett had a checkered past with Freemasonry. Around 1827, he joined a masonic lodge but was expelled for misconduct (Smith, *Saintly Scoundrel*, 5, 25). Then, in 1841, he was named the Grand Secretary prior of the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge only to be expelled the following year.

²³⁹ *JSP J2:45*.

²⁴⁰ *JSP J2:53–54; Hist. 5:3*.

²⁴¹ Charges of adultery were read aloud to the lodge on June 24, 1842 ("Record of Na[u]voo Lodge Under Dispensation," 1842–1846, MS 3436, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=dafc2c46-c417-41d2-a25f-fceb98ca2f09&crate=0&index=101>). On July 7, 1842, Bennett was expelled from the lodge as his name was "stricken from the rolls." The lodge went further, regarding "him as totally unworthy [of] the fellowship, or regard, of all good and honorable men or masons. "Record of Na[u]voo Lodge Under Dispensation," 1842–1846, MS 3436, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT, accessed May 13, 2019, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=dafc2c46-c417-41d2-a25f-fceb98ca2f09&crate=0&index=114_.

was quick to adopt them, but not all Strangites felt the same. Reuben Miller accused Strang and Bennett of introducing “secret associations, and secret societies” into the church at Voree, something the BofM fiercely forbade.²⁴² Strang flatly denied the charges, yet during the summer of Bennett’s arrival, Strang also formed the “Order of Illuminati,” a secret society that also doubled as a governmental structure. The Order was, in effect, a Strangite Council of Fifty. Induction rituals featured symbolic tokens and cyphers. On July 8th, new members swore an oath of loyalty to Strang as “the Imperial primate and actual Sovereign Lord and King on Earth.”²⁴³ Later, on New Year’s Day, 1847, members participated in a special meeting of the Illuminati during which participants were anointed with an oil that glowed mysterious in the dark. It was later discovered that the oil was mixed with phosphorus.²⁴⁴

Strang’s introduction of the Order infuriated some of his followers. As each day passed, it seemed to some converts that the Strangite church was becoming the other church they fled. On February 1st, an entire Strangite branch in Boston unanimously passed a resolution to “firmly and solemnly protest against the introduction of any, and every, secret Society . . . with the greatest aversion and abhorance” adding that members “cannot nor will not fellowship or sustain any man, or body of men, engaged in propagating any such secret combinations.”²⁴⁵ Strang, however, rebuffed such charges. The letter from the Boston branch also chastised George Adams who had taught the branch how “Adultery under certain circumstances” was permissible.²⁴⁶ Members

²⁴² “The Pseudo-Mormon Clique,” *ZR* 1, no. 11 (November 1846); 2 Nephi 9:9; Alma 37:30; Helaman 6:21–31; Ether 8:19, 22–23; 11:22.

²⁴³ Speek, *Kingdom*, 364–5.

²⁴⁴ Speek, *Kingdom*, 53.

²⁴⁵ “At a Meeting of the Boston branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints,” February, 1 1847, JJSP.

²⁴⁶ “At a Meeting of the Boston branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints,” February, 1 1847, JJSP.

demanded an answer from Voree, suspended all future meetings until they received word.²⁴⁷

To make matters worse, by fall 1847, familiar accusations against Bennett's character surfaced. At the October conference, Bennett was excommunicated for "aspotasy" and "various immoralities."²⁴⁸ As quickly as Bennett arrived, he was gone, and, over the years, he tried fruitlessly to regain his former position among Strang's advisors. That same conference saw the excommunication of William E. McLellin for "Apostasy and falsehood."²⁴⁹ Such instability in the highest levels of the church eroded confidence in some of Strang's early followers if they had not already felt unease with secret societies.

Still, Voree continued to welcome newcomers, which, for many Mormons, was still better than the Brighamite alternative. At an October 1845 conference, the Twelve announced their plans to migrate the LdS Church just west of the Rocky Mountains, then outside of U.S. jurisdiction. The Saints felt pressured to leave quickly, fearing more persecution, which caused them to rush in preparation. Most of the families were poorly outfitted and unprepared for what lay before them when advance parties began the arduous trek in February 1846. Mormon resources and spirits quickly faded as they traversed the unforgiving terrain of Iowa. By September, Young decided to temporarily settle in Nebraska on the banks of the Missouri River. Winter Quarters, as it was called, functioned like a refugee camp for exhausted travelers and the hundreds of other Saints who fled from Nauvoo after weathering more violence by anti-Mormons determined to drive them from Illinois once and for all. Hundreds died that winter, most from illness.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ "At a Meeting of the Boston branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints," February, 1 1847, JJSP.

²⁴⁸ CV, 151; *GH* 2, no. 30 (October 14, 1847): 122.

²⁴⁹ CV, 151.

²⁵⁰ Bennett, *Winter Quarters*, 131–47.

“An almost entire destitution prevails,” wrote Strang to his followers, likely based on reports from news and his own missionaries.²⁵¹ By mid-April, the resilient Brighamites once more set out westward, finally arriving in the Salt Lake Valley by July.

The Expansion of Strangite Mormonism: January 1847 to July 1852

As the Brighamites were emigrating westward for Zion in the Great Basin, Strang published a revelation that announced Zion in the Great Lakes.²⁵² In January 1847, Strang described a vision he had the previous fall.²⁵³ In the vision, he saw an island “covered with large timber, with a deep broad bay” replete with fisheries and home to indigenous tribes.²⁵⁴ The Strangites were commanded to establish “a stake and a cornerstone of Zion” on the island so that the gospel would be “established among the Lamanites.”²⁵⁵ The location of this “Indian Mission,” as it was later named, would be revealed to Strang.²⁵⁶ On the return trip to Voree, a storm on northern Lake Michigan forced Strang’s boat to seek harbor in the deep, natural bay of Beaver Island, the land promised to Strang in his vision.²⁵⁷

Big Beaver Island, the largest in Lake Michigan, is an island in an archipelago strategically located about 70 miles west of Mackinac Island, then the economic hub of the region. Contemporary observers described it as “one of the most delightful spots on earth, fertile, salubrious, and picturesque; which an enterprising population could make

²⁵¹ “News from the Camp,” *ZR* 2, no. 1 (January 14, 1847).

²⁵² *ZR* 2, no. 1 “Revelation” (January 14, 1847).

²⁵³ Strang claimed the vision occurred on August 25, 1846. *ZR* 2, no. 1 “Revelation,” (January 14, 1847).

²⁵⁴ *ZR* 2, no. 1 “Revelation” (January 14, 1847).

²⁵⁵ *ZR* 2, no. 1 “Revelation” (January 14, 1847).

²⁵⁶ *ZR* 2, no. 1 “Revelation” (January 14, 1847).

²⁵⁷ Speck, *Kingdom*, 54.

an earthly paradise.”²⁵⁸ The island boasted some 50,000 acres of timbered land, fertile soil, and inland lakes surrounded by plentiful fisheries. Even though the Strangites had yet to face the same kind of persecution Mormons had endured in Nauvoo, Strang nevertheless feared opposition as his movement grew. Relocating the seat of his church to an isolated island offered protection through a natural barrier year-round, whether water in warmer months or ice in the winter. The revelation declared to the Strangites that they had been given “the Islands in the Great Lakes for a possession,” further promising “there shall you dwell apart from the Gentiles, and none shall make you afraid.”²⁵⁹ Finally, Mormons had the divine answer to a question they had asked since Smith’s death. Where could the Saints go where they would remain safe from persecution?

Immediately upon returning to Voree, Strang made plans to colonize the island. That summer, a few families moved to the island, but only eighteen remained over the winter. Emigration was difficult. The island was sparsely populated by a handful of gentile fishermen and indigenous tribes. Once winter set in, vacating the island on anything larger than sled dog was impossible. Newcomers were warned: “*All* who go to the island should supply themselves with a *year’s provisions* . . . No one should think of going with a less supply.”²⁶⁰ Despite the difficulties, the population grew from a few to 62 by 1848.²⁶¹

Meanwhile, Voree continued to grow even as it became obvious that some in Strang’s leadership ranks were haunted by the same vices that led to their previous excommunications. By October, both Bennett and William had been expelled from the

²⁵⁸ “Fron the West,” *ZR* 1, no. 12 (December 1846).

²⁵⁹ CV, 180.

²⁶⁰ *ZR* 2, no. 1 (January 14, 1847).

²⁶¹ Speck, *Kingdom*, 54–55.

community for “various immoralities” and “adultery.”²⁶² Corrupt leaders were not the only problem Strang needed to solve. Despite the inviting and utopian language in which Voree was advertised, Strangites suffered through poverty. Strang’s garden of peace was more a hamlet of destitution. To alleviate privation, on January 12, 1848, Strang formed the United Order of Enoch, a communal association that covenanted to share resources for the common good. Property was “consecrated” to the church to be used at the direction of its leadership. By the end of the year, approximately half of Voree’s citizens were members.²⁶³ The Order paved the way for life on Beaver Island. On January 7, 1849, the Strangites received a revelation reprimanding them for retreating into individualism, having robbed the Order and church resources to build the Voree temple. “If ye are not one,” it warned, “ye are none of mine.”²⁶⁴ Should they “put away covetousness” and repent, however, they would receive an “inheritance” on Beaver Island as a “perpetual possession.”²⁶⁵ In exchange for faithful tithing to the church, Strang issued each family a land inheritance on the island for homesteading families. How, exactly, Strang acquired federal land to redistribute among his followers would become a matter of severe contention between the Strangites and gentiles.

For the time being, however, the Mormons were welcomed among the local population. Elizabeth Williams, a gentile resident at the time, recalled fond memories of playing with her Mormon neighbors. Although her family “knew very little about them, so far they had been very kind and pleasant.”²⁶⁶ Williams recalled how Strang was “so friendly” and his wife, Mary, was “a bright, sensible, noble woman, and we found her

²⁶² CV, 151, 152.

²⁶³ Speck, *Kingdom*, 56.

²⁶⁴ “Revelation, Given Jan. Seventh, 1849,” *GH* 3, no. 43 (January 11, 1849).

²⁶⁵ “Revelation, Given Jan. Seventh, 1849,” *GH* 3, no. 43 (January 11, 1849).

²⁶⁶ Elizabeth Whitney Williams, *A Child of the Sea; And Life Among the Mormons* (Harbor Springs, MI: Elizabeth Whitney Williams, 1905), 68.

friendship was true.”²⁶⁷ Still, other gentiles feared what the future may bring. “I have no faith in Strang at all,” said the wife of Peter McKinley, owner of a dock in Beaver Harbor.²⁶⁸ “I fear he is misleading those people and I am afraid they will cause us all lots of trouble before long.”²⁶⁹

The Prophet’s Secretary

By summer 1849, progress in Voree and Beaver Island progressed, but the rate was slowed by rumors that Strang had mismanaged finances for the Order.²⁷⁰ Strang grew frustrated with “vain babbling and endless disputations” that threaten to split his movement. “Put away vain babblers,” he warned the church, taking specific aim at one of his own apostles, John E. Page.

Page, who had joined Strang by February 1846, left the Twelve after concluding that the council had no right to act in place of the First Presidency.²⁷¹ He also accused his fellow (former) apostles of misusing tithing money for personal benefit.²⁷² And, although he practiced polygamy, having taken additional wives in Nauvoo, Page renounced the practice by 1846, presumably at Strang’s insistence, and denounced the Twelve for promoting “spiritual wifery.”²⁷³ When allegations arose that Strang had grown favorable to polygamy, Page defended his prophet. In August 1847, Page published a defense of Strang’s opposition to plural marriage, reassuring members that their prophet

²⁶⁷ Williams, *Child*, 65.

²⁶⁸ Williams, *Child*, 68.

²⁶⁹ Williams, *Child*, 68.

²⁷⁰ “Discussion in the Church,” *GH* 4, no. 16 (July 5, 1849): 75.

²⁷¹ John Quist, “John E. Page: An Apostle of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Mormon History* 12, (1985), 58.

²⁷² “The Twelve Charged With Torture and Other Crimes,” John E. Page et al, April 6, 1846, JJSP.

²⁷³ “The Twelve Charged With Torture and Other Crimes,” John E. Page et al, April 6, 1846, JJSP; Shepard, “Shadows on the Sun Dial,” 40, 48.

did not “believe in or cherish the doctrine of polygamy in any manner, shape or form imaginable whatever.”²⁷⁴ The following year, Page’s opinion had not changed. He warned against the “spiritual wife system,” imploring members to disfellowship with anyone who held the doctrine.²⁷⁵ Such a hard stance may have caused friction with Mormons who kept their wives after converting to Strang. According to a gentile resident of Beaver Island, Strang preached against polygamy but allowed those who had entered plural marriage under Smith to keep their wives.²⁷⁶ As their prophet, however, Strang himself would lead by example. He persistently and publicly affirmed his opposition to polygamy.

By summer 1849, however, Page experienced similar concerns in Strang that caused him to leave the Twelve. Page became disillusioned with Strang over what he believed was financial mismanagement of the Order. Page aired his grievances publicly, which invited the ire of Strang. On July 4th, Strang “suspended” Page’s priesthood authority and, just three days later, excommunicated him.²⁷⁷ Lacking means to move, Page remained in Voree and sowed discord among the “pseudos”. By winter, Page added to his argument against Strang with another familiar accusation—adultery.

Strang, however, was not in Voree to defend himself. He was on a missionary tour of the eastern cities to solidify existing branches and recruit more members for settlement in both the Voree and Beaver Island settlements. *En route* to the east, Strang stopped in Buffalo to pick up his 16-year-old nephew, Charles Douglass, who served as his secretary on the eastern mission. Douglass remained very close to Strang, lodging with him, and assisting with administrative duties.

²⁷⁴ John E. Page, “To the Saints—Greeting,” *ZR* 2, no. 20 (August 5, 1847): 83.

²⁷⁵ John E. Page, “Spiritual Wifery,” *GH* 3, no. 25 (September 7, 1848): 115.

²⁷⁶ Williams, *Child*, 77.

²⁷⁷ “Discussion in the Church,” *GH* 4, no. 16 (July 5, 1849): 75.

Troubles in Voree soon caught up with the prophet. Two Strangite missionaries, Increase Van Dusen and apostle Lorenzo Dow Hickey, well-known for their opposition to polygamy, were spreading rumors about the prophet among the eastern branches. At a meeting in New York City—for which Douglass kept minutes—Van Dusen and Hickey laid out their case against Strang, who, in turn, offered his defense by denying the allegations. According to Douglass’s dramatic account, Strang’s defense “roused to fury” the “smiling demon in them” as Hickey, “trembling with rage,” attempted to refute Strang.²⁷⁸ He was overruled as Strang promised them a hearing later that day.²⁷⁹ When the meeting concluded, however, Hickey stood and further denounced Strang as “a liar, an imposter, a false prophet and dangerously wicked man.”²⁸⁰ Hickey said he had received letters from his wife, then on Beaver Island, that accused Strang of being “guilty of all the abominations which ever existed in Nauvoo.”²⁸¹ Specifically, Hickey charged Strang with “adultery, fornication, [and] spiritual wifery,” and a physical altercation broke out between the men.²⁸² The next day, on October 18, 1849, Strang denied the charges, demanding the letters from Hickey’s wife, which Hickey claimed were no longer in his possession.²⁸³ Hickey was suspended that same day and Van Dusen was excommunicated.²⁸⁴ Hickey suffered a mental break as a result, but, with the

²⁷⁸ Charles J. Douglass, letter to “Bro. Cooper” on October 22, 1849, *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 188.

²⁷⁹ Charles J. Douglass, letter to “Bro. Cooper” on October 22, 1849, *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 188.

²⁸⁰ Charles J. Douglass to “Bro. Cooper,” October 22, 1849, *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 189.

²⁸¹ Charles J. Douglass to “Bro. Cooper,” October 22, 1849, *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 189.

²⁸² “Proceedings of a Meeting in New York City on the Case of Hickey and Van Dusen,” *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 191.

²⁸³ “Proceedings of a Meeting in New York City on the Case of Hickey and Van Dusen,” *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 191.

²⁸⁴ “Suspension,” *GH* 4, no. 36 (November 22, 1849): 168.

assistance of a sympathetic George Adams, was restored to the Strangite fold by December.²⁸⁵ Hickey would go on to become one of Strang's most loyal defenders and an uneasy ally of Wingfield Watson.

Aside from record-keeping at turbulent meetings, Douglass also penned several articles for the *Gospel Herald*.²⁸⁶ One essay, titled "Slander," chastised Mormons for being "too ready and willing to hear and cherish an evil report of a brother or sister," warning that no one would "inherit the kingdom of God, until they quit slandering one another."²⁸⁷ Douglass had a vested interest in tamping gossip among the Strangites. As early as November 1849, private murmurings about Douglass's "Physiological peculiarities" raised suspicion that *he* was, in reality, a *she*. According to one member, such rumors "circulated [from] Brother to Sister untill it [had] become . . . an Established fact."²⁸⁸ The rumors were true. Charles Douglass was not Strang's nephew, but was, in fact, his first plural wife, Elvira Field.

The couple, who had secretly married earlier that summer, doubled down on the ruse, but were unable to fend off suspicion for long.²⁸⁹ By February 1850, after receiving a letter from a concerned member in Philadelphia, Page informed Voree residents that Strang's secretary "was in the habit of wearing petticoats until very recently."²⁹⁰ Unable to quell the rumors, the prophet and his second wife, arrived to Beaver Island on April 12th in open contradiction to his previous opposition to

²⁸⁵ Speck, *Kingdom*, 86.

²⁸⁶ C. J. D., "What Must a Man Do to be Saved?" *GH* 4, no. 33 (November 1, 1849): 161–2; "The Kingdom of God," *GH* 4, no. 35 (November 15, 1849): 178–9; Charles J. Douglass, "Secret Societies," *GH* 4, no. 39 (December 13, 1849): 212–5; "Slander," 4, no. 41 (December 27, 1849): 231.

²⁸⁷ Charles Douglass, "Slander," 4, no. 41 (December 27, 1849): 231.

²⁸⁸ John Ursbruck to James Strang, November 17, 1849, JJSP.

²⁸⁹ Speck, *Kingdom*, 68. There is no official record of the marriage; however, Speck estimates July 13, 1849.

²⁹⁰ Gilbert Watson to James Strang, February 11, 1850, JJSP.

polygamy.²⁹¹

Field eventually lived with the Strang family on the island and plural marriage was made official in 1851 with the publication of new scripture, *The Book of the Law of the Lord* (BLL). The BLL permitted men to marry multiple women provided they were single and could be cared for along with the rest of his household.²⁹² Strang no longer opposed plural marriage, caused families—some headed by prominent leaders—to leave the island disillusioned. Mary Perce, Strang’s first wife, left with her children sometime in the spring of 1851.²⁹³ Her departure coincided with the birth of Strang’s first child with Field, who they impudently named Charles. The following year, Strang privately married a third wife, Elizabeth “Betsy” McNutt, and would go on to marry publicly two more women, cousins Sarah and Phoebe Wright.²⁹⁴

Breaking Away to Reorganize the Church

Leadership failures and his reversed position on plural marriage led some of Strang’s followers to lose faith in their new prophet. Two men, Jason W. Briggs and Zenos G. Gurley, would become instrumental in breaking away from Strang to form a new organization of Mormons that would eventually become the second-largest LDS restorationist branch.

Jason W. Briggs, a convert to the LDS Church in 1841, led a branch in Beloit, Wisconsin, a position he held at the time of Smith’s death in 1844.²⁹⁵ Briggs joined Strang, having been convinced by the LofA. However, like many other Strangites, he

²⁹¹ *GH* 5, no. 6 (April 25, 1850): 47.

²⁹² BLL 44:5, 7. The publication date for the BLL is A. R. I., an odd date that presumably means *Anno Regio Primo*, i.e., the first year of the reign of King James. The coronation ceremony was held July 8, 1850; however, as Dale L. Morgan pointed out, the BLL contains revelation from Strang that was not given until February 1851. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 68.

²⁹³ Speek, *Kingdom*, 158.

²⁹⁴ Speek, *Kingdom*, 194–6.

²⁹⁵ Russell, “The Last Smith Presidents,” 48.

grew disaffected when it became clear that their prophet had, like Smith before him, adopted polygamy. Briggs briefly associated with William Smith, but left him for the same reason as he had left Strang.²⁹⁶ On November 18, 1851, Briggs was prompted by a spiritual experience to reassemble disenfranchised Mormons into what he called the “New Organization.”²⁹⁷ Briggs argued, as Rigdon had before him, that Smith “still holds [the] keys of receiving revelations, and therefore the church and the world are left without a prophet, seer and revelator in the flesh” until the second coming of Christ or the resurrection of Smith.²⁹⁸ He set out on a mission to teach wayward Saints true Mormonism, with one trip taking him to Voree.²⁹⁹

Briggs was not alone in his conviction. He was eventually joined by Zenos G. Gurley, who converted to Mormonism in the late 1830s and, after Smith’s death, also affiliated with Strang. Gurley was an enthusiastic Strangite missionary. After a mission to Canada, he was dispatched in June 1850 to the “north-eastern parts of Wisconsin, on the presentation of Pres. Strang.”³⁰⁰ By late 1850, Gurley began preaching in Yellowstone, Wisconsin, and, by 1851, there were enough converts to establish a branch over which Gurley presided.³⁰¹ When rumors of Strang’s polygamy reached Yellowstone, the branch withdrew their fellowship, further denouncing all other successors to Smith’s office. Gurley’s branch would, in the meantime, hold to the “original doctrine of the church, in its purity.”³⁰² In addition to rejecting polygamy, members of the New Organization also

²⁹⁶ Russell, “The Last Smith Presidents,” 50.

²⁹⁷ Russell, “The Last Smith Presidents,” 50.

²⁹⁸ Samuel P. Bacon to Jason W. Briggs, July 18, 1851, *NI* 1, no. 11 (July 31, 1851).

²⁹⁹ Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 4th ed. (Lamoni, IA: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1911), 3:203.

³⁰⁰ *GH* 5, no. 12 (June 6, 1850): 90, 91.

³⁰¹ “Gurley, Zenos Hovey, Sr.,” in Black, *Early Members*, 3:215–6; *Hist. Reorg.* 3:744–5.

³⁰² *Hist. Reorg.*, 3:198.

dismissed other theological innovations from the Nauvoo era, including the plurality of gods, proxy baptism, and temple ceremonies.

These newly organized Mormons envisioned themselves as a *re-organization* of LDS restorationism, of which, notably, plural marriage was absent. In June 1852, Briggs and Gurley called a special conference of Mormons in northeastern Illinois and southern Wisconsin who, like them, renounced every claimant to Smith's office.³⁰³ The conference, held in Beloit, publicly rejected the "pretensions" of the various prophets and declared their belief that the only true candidate to replace Smith would come by lineal succession.³⁰⁴ This pronouncement set into motion the eventual leadership of Joseph Smith III, then only nineteen years old, over the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Josephites).

The Coronation of King Strang

Despite growing discontent, settlements on Beaver Island were flourishing when Strang returned from New York in spring 1850, a season that brought with it a renewed sense of optimism. Strang republished his 1846 revelatory vision of Beaver Island to remind the Mormons why they were settling the paradise.³⁰⁵ Mormons arriving to the island were greeted by booming business and rapidly cultivated lands. They "were a very busy people," recalled one island resident.³⁰⁶ Fisheries and the timber industry boomed, farming was well underway, and new stores were opening in St. James, a budding city in the north of the island. By the year's end, St. James would become the new headquarters of the church. Strang built a home large enough to accommodate his wives, relocated his printing press from Voree, and oversaw the construction on a

³⁰³ Speck, *Kingdom*, 282.

³⁰⁴ *Hist. Reorg.*, 3:209.

³⁰⁵ *GH* 5, no. 9 (May 16, 1850): 64–67.

³⁰⁶ Williams, *Child*, 77.

tabernacle in anticipation of building a temple.³⁰⁷ By many indications, Beaver Island seemed to be accomplishing what Smith had dreamed of for the Saints in Missouri and Illinois—a prosperous community free from harassment by outsiders. Strang had seemingly survived the volatility of the previous years.

However, all was not well in paradise. Mormons were subject to harassment, intimidation, robbery, and even assault by gentile islanders who refused to join Strang's fold. Some gentile fishermen from the Whiskey Point on the northern tip of the island threatened to invade St. James and run the Mormons off the island. Strang was determined not to revisit the violence in Mormonism's past. Like Smith before him, Strang feared he would likely not receive assistance should persecution arise. Strang called for pacifism, but not without a warning shot toward the would-be assailants at Whiskey Point. On July 4th, Strang fired a canon at the very moment when men had gathered to assault St. James. The gentiles received Strang's message and called off the attack. According to one historian, were it not for Strang's "energetic measures . . . there would have been a bloody conflict."³⁰⁸ To solidify his victory, Strang secured control over the local government by filling township positions with Mormon officers, tipping the balance of power to St. James.³⁰⁹ Gentile antagonism was muted for the time being.

As Strang built up the Island, dissidents in Voree began spreading a new rumor about the Mormons. As before in Nauvoo, concerns over precisely how the Mormons viewed their relationship to the government led some to accuse them of treason.³¹⁰ And, just like Nauvoo, their concern was not unwarranted. On June 6th, Strang announced a

³⁰⁷ By summer 1852, Mormons had completed the temple foundation, 100' by 60' wide, but, due to opposition, lack of resourcing, and eventually eviction, the project barely moved beyond this point. "Beaver Island, July 5, 1852," *Erie Chronicle* reprinted in *NI* 2, no. 17 (August 12, 1852).

³⁰⁸ Henry E. Legler, *A Moses of the Mormons: Strang's City of Refuge and Island Kingdom* (Milwaukee, WI: Parkman Club Publications, 1897), 134–35.

³⁰⁹ Van Noord, *King*, 93.

³¹⁰ "Treason," *GH* 5, no. 7 (May 2, 1850): 52–53.

special general assembly at St. James. The event would be held in the unfinished tabernacle. Attendance was highly encouraged, and it was “especially necessary that all the Apostles and the High Priests and Elders generally attend on this occasion.”³¹¹ The announcement was signed by the First Presidency: James Strang, George Adams, and Williams Marks. It is fitting that this announcement was made on the last page of the last edition of the *Gospel Herald*, which, by the end of the year, would evolve into the *Northern Islander*. Change was in the air as something exceptionally significant loomed above the island.

On the morning of July 8th, around seventy Mormons packed themselves into the unfinished tabernacle at St. James.³¹² Most of those in attendance did not know the occasion for gathering. Only a select few, like George Adams, were privy to the significance of what was about to occur. Adams, a stage actor by trade, had transformed the tabernacle, then a half-completed structure of hewn timber, into a makeshift theatre, complete with a stage curtain. One witness, Cecilia Hill, recalled how the ceremony began with a “procession of elders and other quorums, escorting [Strang],” who was “dressed in a robe of bright red.”³¹³ He then slipped out of view, taking his place behind the curtain to sit “in a large chair with a crown on his head and scepter in his hand,” remembered another witness, Chauncey Loomis.³¹⁴ With his booming voice and the dramatic pull of the curtain, George Adams introduced the packed audience to their new king.

Adams had waited for this moment for six years. On April 5, 1844, he was

³¹¹ *GH* 5, no. 12 (June 6, 1850): 96.

³¹² “Saw a King Crowned,” *Green Bay Advocate*, February 6, 1905.

³¹³ Quoted in Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, 138.

³¹⁴ Chauncey Loomis, “Experience on Beaver Island with James J. Strang,” *SH* 35, no. 45 (November 10, 1888): 718. Precise details of this event by eyewitness conflict as to when Strang was presented.

inducted to his first meeting of the Council of Fifty. There, Smith explained to him “the order and object of the organization,” the birth of a new kingdom born from the adversity of persecution and absence of redress from the federal government.³¹⁵ Adams could hardly suppress his excitement at the prospect of a Mormon kingdom. Midway through the meeting, Adams rose to express how “[this] was the happiest hour of his life.” There was no “government under heaven that would suffer so much persecution to the saints as this government and not redress their grievances,” he claimed.³¹⁶ To learn that he would soon become citizen of a new nation filled him with joy as he “closed his remarks by shouting hosanna to God &c.”³¹⁷ Adam’s citizenship into the kingdom of God was delayed, but the day had finally come, and it was he who crowned his long-anticipated king.³¹⁸

“The crown was a plain circlet,” Hill described, “with a cluster of stars projecting in front.”³¹⁹ After Adams adorned his king, he launched into an eloquent monologue, hailing the crowned “king of earth and heaven” and prophesying a terribly glorious future for the Mormons.³²⁰ “I see the ships coming up to battle against the Saints on the island. I see them dashed to shivers upon the shores.”³²¹ All the while, Strang sat regal and silent. His youthful appetite, “filled with dreams of royalty and power,” was finally being satisfied.³²²

Reaction from the crowd drew mixed feelings. One witness recalled how all

³¹⁵ *JSP C50:80.*

³¹⁶ *JSP C50:82.*

³¹⁷ *JSP C50:82.*

³¹⁸ “Saw a King Crowned,” *Green Bay Advocate*, February 6, 1905.

³¹⁹ Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, 138.

³²⁰ “Saw a King Crowned,” *Green Bay Advocate*, February 6, 1905.

³²¹ Loomis, “Experience on Beaver Island,” 718.

³²² Strang, *Diary*, 17, 19.

attendees were filled with “great astonishment,” but not for the same reasons.³²³ Stephen Post wrote in his journal of that day’s events: “This day is one long to be remembered. . . . King James was hailed as king in Zion by one unanimous voice of the whole congregation.”³²⁴ The event cemented in the Strangite identity a “kindred feeling,” said Lorenzo Hickey, celebrated annually on what would come to be known as King’s Day.³²⁵ Others, however, felt the scene was blasphemous and traitorous. “[It] was the most disgusting sight that I ever saw,” said Elisha C. Brown; other witnesses said it was “one of the most spectacular impositions ever practiced before deluded American citizens.”³²⁶

The strangeness of Strang crowning himself king over an isolated theocracy dissolves when the episode is situated in the wider narrative of Mormonism. Strang’s coronation met the trajectory set earlier by Smith in Nauvoo. The Council of Fifty planned to “establish a Theocracy,” according to William Clayton, isolated from both the government and anti-Mormon antagonists, with Smith as its head.³²⁷ Smith was declared the “Prophet, Priest & King” of an “independant government” who would rule the “Kingdom of God.”³²⁸ For Strang, a man who won his position by emulating Smith’s prophetic experiences, it was a natural progress to move from prophet to king as Smith had before him and not, as one historian suggested, to leapfrog Smith’s presidential aspirations out of jealousy.³²⁹ Like Smith, Strang too desired to lead a kingdom free from

³²³ Loomis, “Experience on Beaver Island,” 718.

³²⁴ “Excerpts from Stephen Post Journal,” typeset facsimile, WWP.

³²⁵ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, letter to Charles J. Strang on April 1880, WWP; “Saw a King Crowned,” *Green Bay Advocate*, February 6, 1905.

³²⁶ Elisha C. Brown, “In Evidence,” *SH* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1882): 6; Quoted in Speck, *Kingdom*, 121.

³²⁷ *JSP* C50:40.

³²⁸ *JSP* C50:20, 36, 48, 127.

³²⁹ Faber, *Michigan’s Mormon King*, 98.

foreign influence. Unlike Smith, however, Strang would not draft a new constitution by clandestine council, nor would he enshrine governing principles received through contemporary revelation. Instead, the laws of his kingdom would come from the miraculous delivery and translation of Israel’s governing laws.

The Book of the Law of the Lord

Months before his coronation, during the winter of 1849–1850, Strang began working on a secret project he cryptically dubbed the “Swedish work.” The project was one of translation, but not from Swedish, as the code name suggested. Adams, one of the few privy to the project, gleefully looked forward to the finished product: “[I] am rejoiced that you are getting along so well with the translation of the plates,” he wrote in February.³³⁰ The “plates,” Strang claimed, were ancient records from the OT titled the Book of the Law of the Lord, a governing document used by Israel and lost to history until then.³³¹ A copy of the document was among the collection of works removed from Jerusalem by Nephi in the Book of Mormon, the fabled “plates of Laban,” and remained part of the same volume as the Book of Mormon source material (1 Nephi 3–4). Strang claimed the majority of his translation came from this copy with the exception of the some material given to Strang directly by revelation.³³² As with the Book of Mormon, the BLL was “restored by divine authority” in the latter days, a fulfillment of his earlier

³³⁰ George J. Adams to James J. Strang, February 18, 1850, JJSP.

³³¹ The title apparently derives from references in 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah to the “book of the law of the LORD” (2 Ch. 17:9; 34:14; Neh. 9:3). The title does not appear to be influenced by a work of Smith under the same name, which included journal entries and donation records during the Nauvoo period. (*JSP* J2:xiii–xxxii). This document, said Strang, was stored in the ark of the covenant and used as the basic governing document of ancient Israel. The book was lost, however, when the temple was destroyed, and neither had it been translated into the LXX. BLL, 6. Fortunately, the BLL was copied to other plates prior to the Babylonian captivity and added to the mormonic plates collection inherited by the Lehites and subsequently passed down from generation to generation until its burial with the BofM source material by Moroni in the fifth century AD.

³³² BLL, 6, 8.

revelatory promise in 1845.³³³ Strang finally recovered the plates—although it is not known how he received them—after years of delay, and then privately translated the majority of the text by Urim and Thummim during the winter of 1851 aboard the steamer *Lexington*, which wintered at the harbor of St. James.³³⁴ Like Smith, Strang was assisted by a scribe, Samuel Graham, who, for “much of the time had [the plates] in his possession.”³³⁵ And, just as the golden plates were attested to by witnesses, so Strang gathering testimony of the BLL plates, chief among them was Graham.³³⁶ Later testimony, however, accused Strang of fraud. According to Chauncy Loomis, one of the witnesses to the plates, Samuel P. Bacon, discovered fragments of the counterfeit hidden in the ceiling while working on repairs.³³⁷ Bacon left the Strangite church and was eventually excommunicated for failing “to bear a faithful testimony to the end.”³³⁸ Loomis also claimed that Graham confessed to crafting the plates with Strang. Graham lost faith in Strang and fled the island with his family.³³⁹

Strangites received their first glimpse of the BLL on February 6, 1851 after Strang printed a sample in the *Northern Islander*.³⁴⁰ It was fully published later that year. The BLL represents the apex of Strang’s literary work, both for the impressive scope of

³³³ BLL, 9. CV, 21; *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

³³⁴ Van Noord, *King*, 126–27; Speek, *Kingdom*, 149.

³³⁵ “Samuel Graham,” *NI* 4, no. 4 (April 13, 1854).

³³⁶ BLL, 2.

³³⁷ Loomis, “Experience on Beaver Island,” 719.

³³⁸ “Minutes of the Conference, held at Enoch Grove, Saint James, Beaver Island, July 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th, 1855,” *NI* 5, no. 7 (August 9, 1855).

³³⁹ Loomis, “Experience on Beaver Island,” 719.

³⁴⁰ “The Decalogue,” *NI* 1, no. 3 (February 6, 1851). The first edition of the book was published, according to the title page, in St. James during “A. R. I.” (July 1850 to July 1851), apparently a reference to the first year of King James’s reign, i.e., Anno Regio I. Because the first edition contains revelation given in February 1851 (cc. 35, 40), the BLL was published sometime between February and July 1851. The second edition, scheduled for publication in 1856, includes extensive commentary by Strang, expanding the work to 336 pages.

the project and the power of its influence over Strangite doctrine and practice. If Smith is best known for the BofM, then Strang must be best known for the BLL. It provided the scriptural bedrock for Strangite theocracy. In it, citizens could find laws and decrees that regulated civil, ceremonial, and ethical life. Everything from the duties of kings and courts to the construction and maintenance of highways is outlined in precise commands reminiscent of OT Levitical law. Readers are told how God's installed kings "execute judgement among the people," ruling in absolute sovereignty over his kingdom.³⁴¹ The BLL gives clear commands on prayer, sacraments, marriage, adoption, ecclesiastical positions, feasts, inheritances, social order, household relations, and tithing. Moreover, it solidified Strang's position atop the kingdom of heaven: "[God] hath chosen his servant James to be King . . . above the Kings of the earth; and appointed him King in Zion," read the text.³⁴² Notably, the BLL permitted the practice of polygamy under certain conditions, e.g., the man may wed only unmarried women, he must provide for all his wives and their children, he must not marry a women to spite his other wives, etc.³⁴³ The BLL also divinely deeded the "Islands of the Great Lakes" for the Saints, giving the land in totality for Mormon "inheritance," to be distributed by Strang.³⁴⁴ In the case of opposition, "if strangers or enemies" impeded their possession, the Mormons were coldly instructed: "[Y]e shall destroy them."³⁴⁵

Trouble with Gentile Neighbors

With the publication of the BLL, a new government was taking shape on Beaver Island. Strang, once a boy who dreamt of "revolutionizeing governments and

³⁴¹ BLL, 177.

³⁴² BLL, 169.

³⁴³ BLL, 310–28.

³⁴⁴ BLL, 298.

³⁴⁵ BLL, 299.

countrie[s],” was achieving his goal.³⁴⁶ Gentiles on the island, however, resisted their self-appointed king. Not only did monarchy fly in the face as despotically anti-American, but rumors spread that the king had sanctioned his citizens to consecrate territory according to their inheritance, i.e., steal federal land. During spring 1851, accusations against the Strangites reached President Millard Fillmore, who heard testimony by George J. Adams and others that Beaver Island was, essentially, a piracy enclave. Strang was accused of treason, counterfeiting, stripping public lands of timber, and disrupting the mail.³⁴⁷ Fillmore responded by dispatching the U.S.S. *Michigan*, an iron-hulled warship, to arrest Strang for trial in Detroit. In Strang’s absence, Mormons were subject to aggressive gentiles who robbed—perhaps, in some instances, reclaimed—property. The federal government also reversed consecration, seizing lumber from Mormons allegedly cut from public land.³⁴⁸ For the Mormons, gentile and federal opposition to their growth stirred troubling memories of the previous decade.

By summer 1851, tension between gentiles and Mormons had boiled into violence. In May, a Mormon leader, Samuel Graham, was severely beaten by gentiles, “fracturing his skull.”³⁴⁹ Another gentile, Thomas Bennett, was killed in a scuffle between Mormons and gentiles. Bennett’s death proved to be the moment with the gentile-Mormon relationship was irreparably shattered. “Until the killing of Bennett,” wrote a gentile islander, “we could not believe the Mormons meant to do us bodily harm. Now all was changed. There was no more open friendship between Mormons and Gentiles as before.”³⁵⁰ In December, *The Detroit Tribune* described the rapidly

³⁴⁶ Strang, *Diary*, 15.

³⁴⁷ Speck, *Kingdom*, 137.

³⁴⁸ Speck, *Kingdom*, 139.

³⁴⁹ “Affair with the Bennetts,” *NI* 4, no. 4 (April 13, 1854).

³⁵⁰ Williams, *Child*, 95.

deteriorating relationship in terms of mutual aggression. “It is doubtless true that the Mormons, as a sect, have suffered wrongs and persecution at the hands of individuals and whole communities, through the influence to some extent, of prejudice, and, to a certain degree, through their own misconduct.”³⁵¹ Later, the *Erie Chronicle* echoed this sentiment: “The Mormons say they have been persecuted, and no doubt they have. A good deal of prejudice exists against them among the surrounding people. Some of this prejudice had probably a foundation, and some of it none.”³⁵²

Strang was eventually acquitted on July 9th, which he interpreted as a victory and divine permission to secure safety and prosperity for the Mormons. “The day of mobbing the Mormons here has gone by,” he declared boldly upon his return.³⁵³ The island would be a place for Mormon flourishing with or without gentile cooperation. All those within his fiefdom would either leave, convert, or submit to his power.

Still, over the course of the next few years, Strang and other Mormon leaders would endure a relentless plague of arrests and indictments on criminal charges from state and local authorities. For some Mormon families, the situation was too difficult to continue. For others, however, their identify as a persecuted people of a just cause was compelling enough to endure the opposition. Families that left the island were quickly replaced by new families arriving for the first time. In July 1852, one of those families was headed by a new convert, Wingfield Watson.

³⁵¹ “The Mormons on Beaver Island,” *The Detroit Tribune*, December 11, 1851, reprinted *NI* 1, no. 6 (May 1, 1851).

³⁵² “Beaver Island, July 5, 1852” *Erie Chronicle* reprinted in *NI* 2, no. 17 (August 12, 1852).

³⁵³ “The Gathering,” *NI* 1, no. 12 (August 14, 1851).

CHAPTER 4
THE LIFE OF WINGFIELD SCOTT WATSON

Wingfield Scott Watson was born on April 22, 1828 in the fertile dales of Wicklow County, Ireland.¹ His father, Thomas, supported the family as a schoolmaster and parish clerk of a local Anglican church.² Watson remarked that his Protestant family was “not of the original Irish race. Their names and faith, if nothing else, show it.”³ The Watsons reared a large family, eleven children in all.⁴ Watson reminisced how his childhood was spent in

[a] quiet and industrious neighborhood. Innocent people, neighborly and kind. No back biting, no opposition, nor envy, nor hatred, nor malice, nor pride. In all our wanderings and all our travels our thoughts fondly turn to that neighborhood, as the dearest spot in our memory.⁵

Watson would later yearn for this idyllic condition in which to raise his family and found his sylvan utopia on Beaver Island.

Watson was intelligent and mild-mannered but stubborn. He worked hard

¹ Two birthdates have been suggested for Watson, April 22nd and April 28th, both of 1828. For April 22nd, see John Cumming, “Wingfield Watson: The Loyal Disciple of James J. Strang,” *Michigan History* (December 1963), 4; William Shepard, “Wingfield Watson’s Sixty-Five-Year Adversarial Relationship with the Reorganized Church,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 30 (2010), 3. For April 28th, see William Shepard, “Wingfield Watson: A Midwest Visit, 1908,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 234–48, 234. Watson was born on April 22nd according to his autobiography and headstone at Hudson Cemetery in Lyons, Wisconsin.

² Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 3, typeset copy, WWP.

³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on January 14, 1897, WWP. A few of Elizabeth’s relatives are buried in the cemetery of Old Castlemacadam, further indicating that the Watsons were Protestant. Old Castlemacadam (Avoca, Wicklow County, Ireland), FindAGrave.com, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2500883/old-castlemacadam>.

⁴ The children were Joseph (1822), John (1824), Thomas (1826), Wingfield (1828), William (1830), Elizabeth (1832), Ellen (1834), Charles (1836), Robert (1838), Hannah (1841), Mary Ann (1843). Watson, *Autobiography*, 3.

⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on September 18, 1896, WWP.

during the day and spent his evenings reading. He especially loved to read “a little work on natural philosophy” gifted to him by his father.⁶ Watson was also a stranger to impatience and anger. “I am not inclined to be short tempered,” he wrote, “and it takes quite a little to arouse my temper.”⁷ His natural inclination bent toward altruism; he fostered in himself and others an affection for “all things that are lovely,” and his heart inclined to the oppressed and justice.⁸ But persuading him away from his settled opinions was a tall order for anyone, enough to arouse his dormant temper, as this chapter will demonstrate.

Sadly, Watson’s bucolic childhood was interrupted after his father was beset by alcoholism. “At that time,” Watson recalled, “drinking was the rule and a sober man the exception.”⁹ His father forfeited employment because of insobriety, thrusting his family into poverty. The timing only exacerbated the family’s woes; Thomas lost his job at a time when Ireland’s economy began to stagnate. Watson recalled that “Great Britain’s steam engines about that time began to break down Ireland’s home industry, and a dark and forbitten cloud . . . covered that land ever since, without any hope that it will ever be better.”¹⁰ Watson’s elder brothers found employment wherever they could, mainly at the nearby copper mines.¹¹ In 1844, his two oldest brothers, Joseph and John, were recruited from the mines to work in England, replacing higher-paid British workers in Yorkshire on

⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife on November 3, 1921, WWP.

⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on September 18, 1896, WWP.

⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on September 18, 1896, WWP.

⁹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 2.

¹⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on September 18, 1896, WWP.

¹¹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 3; Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry, 1801–1922* (London: Routledge, 2009), 110.

strike during the Chartist movement.¹² Still, the family struggled to make ends meet. Watson resented the frustrating exchange of hard work for meagre pay and the persistent “sharpened appetites and our gaunt stomachs” that accompanied poverty. The memory of starvation, “a thing not easily forgotten,” lingered with Watson even toward the end of his life.¹³

The following year marked the beginning of the Great Famine (1845–52), pushing the Watsons further into poverty. Watson’s third-oldest brother, Thomas, looked westward across the Atlantic for a better life. In January 1848, he booked passage for New Orleans, which was a cheaper destination than others as cotton shipments from Louisiana were deposited in Britain and exchanged for human cargo on the return trip.¹⁴ By the end of the year, Thomas invited Watson to join him.¹⁵ Watson’s family helped him scrounge together enough money for the passage. He bade his family farewell and began his long and arduous journey on February 16, 1848.¹⁶ On March 3rd, he departed Liverpool on the steamer *Albania* for his new life in America.¹⁷ The voyage was an unpleasant experience; Watson fell ill the first full week and anytime the ship encountered rough seas.¹⁸ After fifty-two days at sea, on April 24th, Watson landed in New Orleans.¹⁹

¹² Watson, *Autobiography*, 3. Chartism was a populace movement of working-class laborers who sought political reform. See John K. Walton, *Chartism* (London: Routledge, 1999) and David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on December 29, 1918, WWP.

¹⁴ David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815–1877* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 27.

¹⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁶ Watson, *Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁷ Watson, *Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁸ Watson, *Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁹ Wingfield claims in his autobiography that the date was April 21st; however, immigration documentation dates his arrival on April 24th. “Louisiana, New Orleans, Quarterly Abstracts of Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, 1820–1875,” FamilySearch, accessed October 8, 2018, <https://>

Watson's Emigration to the United States

The twenty-year-old Irishman stepped onto the dock during a period of substantial immigration. Ships from Liverpool, Bremen, Hanover, and Antwerp weekly deposited thousands of Europeans looking for opportunity in the expanding American frontier. Nationalistic prejudice toward immigrants—especially Irish immigrants—would have tainted Watson's welcome to his new country. The destitute condition of the Irish agitated nativist American sentiment, whose Hibernophobia was loudest among Know-Nothings populism.²⁰ Watson's religious identity as a Protestant may have aided him in the east, but it was of little use in New Orleans. The nativism embodied by the Know-Nothings was infamously anti-Catholic, but among Gulf Coast cities, founded by and populated with French Catholics, anti-Catholicism failed to gain any lasting traction.²¹ Watson's nationality and destitute condition would have overshadowed any advantage his Protestant identity might have offered in Boston or New York. His experience as a marginalized person, both ethnic and religious (which was to come), shaped his view of social issues, especially regarding religious freedom and the treatment of women, Blacks, and indigenous peoples.²² "I am very apt to feel indignant generally when I see the stronger party oppress the weak," he wrote years later, "and I sincerely hope that I shall always so feel against oppression and oppressors."²³

As an Irish pauper, Watson found it difficult to secure work. The only

www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C9TK-BSGH-3S?i=195&cat=67761.

²⁰ See John R. Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990); Maureen Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); and Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States & the 19th-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²¹ Gleeson, *Irish in the South*, 113.

²² Watson was an advocate of women's suffrage, equality for Blacks, and respect for indigenous people. Wingfield Watson, "Rights for all Men," *SH* 6, no. 13 (March 16, 1868): 81-87; Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols on July 29, 1874; Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols on June 19, 1876, WWP.

²³ Wingfield Watson, letter to James Pierce on February 17, 1869, WWP.

employment offered to him was extenuating. A stevedore hired the Watson brothers to unload hay bales, but the extreme heat in the belly of ships forced the brothers to find work elsewhere at a cotton rolling plant.²⁴ Still, they could not escape the heat. Soon, Watson suffered from frequent illness, so the brothers determined to travel upriver where the weather was thought to be cooler. In July 1848, they traveled up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, but, to their horror, the summer heat in Missouri was just as oppressive as Louisiana and employment every bit as difficult to find. “I was so broken down in spirits,” he recalled, “that I thought that I was prepared to die. Indeed, I could have heartily wished to die.”²⁵ At one point, Watson was stricken with ague, a malarial fever that ravaged settlers in the Mississippi Valley wetlands.²⁶ The brothers spent the next few months traveling up and down the Mississippi looking for work until, finally by the winter of 1848–49, he found steady income by mining near St. Louis.²⁷ Around this time, while working the Russell Coal Mines south of St. Louis, Watson met Jane Chisholm Thompson, a widowed Englishwoman with a son, Robert.²⁸ The two fell in love and were engaged.²⁹

²⁴ Watson, *Autobiography*, 4; Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis on August 13, 1916, WWP.

²⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 4.

²⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis and Sarah Jane Watson Willis on April 12, 1900, WWP.

²⁷ Watson, *Autobiography*, 4; Wingfield Watson, “A Letter to John Zahnd,” *The Latter Day Precept* (June 1920).

²⁸ Wingfield states that he met his wife, Jane, in Gravois, Missouri. At the time, there was a small frontier town named Gravois off the Osage River, over 140 miles west of St. Louis. However, it is more likely that Wingfield meant the area near the “Gravois coal digging,” due south of St. Louis. See Andrew Wanko, “1875 St. Louis: The Russell Coal Mines,” Missouri Historical Society, July 17, 2015, <http://mohistory.org/blog/1875-st-louis-the-russell-coal-mines/>. Jane Barbara Chisholm was previously married twice, first to Thomas Burns (d. 1907) and second to Robert “Josh” Thomas (d. 1848). Wingfield Watson Trust, *Livingston-Watson Genealogical Information*, Church Library and Archive, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite), Burlington, WI, 295. Wingfield mentions that Jane had three children by Robert. Wingfield Watson, letter to Adell Tubbs Watson on December 23, 1892, WWP.

²⁹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 8.

Watson's Conversion to Mormonism

Watson's introduction to Mormonism was slow and informal. He first heard of the religion from an Irish Catholic who was "burlesquing some of its principles" to him.³⁰ Watson recalled that, despite his mocking tone, the man "created a desire in me to hear something more of them [Mormons]."³¹ Watson learned about the religion periodically through isolated events—reading about the Mormons in a magazine, overhearing a Mormon preacher, meeting a Mormon boat passenger, and conversing with a Mormon deckhand.³² In spring 1850, Watson encountered a man reading *Voice of Warning*, LDS apostle Parley P. Pratt's apologetic for LDS restorationism.³³ Watson initially balked at what he read, saying that he "fought it at first."³⁴ However, after a careful reading, he became enthralled with the idea of LDS restorationism. He lost himself in the pages, as he recalled, reading it "over and over again . . . [the] more I read of it the more I loved it."³⁵ For him, *Voice of Warning* was "just what I had been wanting all along but which I knew the sectarian world could not give me."³⁶ Watson so favored Pratt's book that he

³⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on January 21, 1896, WWP.

³¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis on January 21, 1896, WWP.

³² Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 6.

³³ Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 7. It is probable that Watson read the third American edition, (i.e., fourth edition) printed in 1844, which was published regionally in Nauvoo. Pratt, nicknamed the "Archer of Paradise," argued strictly from biblical sources that God always leads his chosen people out of exile and apostasy by fulfilled prophecy, and that in the latter days Christianity would enter into a time of apostatized exile from which it would need a new exodus. Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, 121, fn. 12. True to Smith's thought, Pratt argued that, shortly after the NT apostolic era, Christianity had become "an apostate Church, full of all manner of abominations, and even despising those who are good . . . setting aside the direct inspiration, and supernatural gifts of the Spirit, which ever constitute the Church of Christ." Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 52. Yet, as before, God would once more deliver his people from apostasy under fulfilled prophecy. In the latter days, fulfilled prophesy centered on the discovery and translation of the Book of Mormon, with its subsequent restoration of the gospel. Interestingly, Pratt did not ground his argument in the work of Joseph Smith, but in fulfilled biblical prophecies and the Book of Mormon, a much more accessible witness to the Mormon movement with thousands of copies in public circulation. Pratt ended with a comparison of primitive Christianity as presented through Mormonism, which he called "doctrines of Christ," with nineteenth century Protestantism, which he called "doctrines of men." Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 186–99. Pratt gave no invitation or call for conversion in his conclusion; his was an appeal to reason.

³⁴ Watson, "A Letter to John Zahnd."

³⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 7.

³⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 16, 1902, WWP.

recommended it to family and neighbors for the rest of his life.³⁷

Prior to his conversion to Mormonism, Watson wrestled with his Anglican faith. As a Protestant raised in Catholic Ireland, he had little tolerance toward Rome. Yet, even within the Protestant faith of his “sectarian days,” denominationalism did not sit well in his soul, especially churches he deemed proud and opulent.³⁸ Christianity seemed like a fractured mess; congregations held “different creeds, different confession of faith, different churches [under] different names . . . no two of them agreeing one with another.”³⁹ With the fracturing came confusion over individual religious convictions. He was frequently “puzzled” during prayers, which felt vague and objectless, not knowing to “what kind of a being to fix my thoughts on.”⁴⁰ Watson’s was a “God of confusion, a God of contradictory creeds, a God of division, strife, contention.”⁴¹ In *Voice of Warning*, however, Watson found answers to questions that had long vexed him. For him, Mormonism represented the only alternative to sectarianism. After studying and accepting Pratt’s teaching, he was a “changed man from that onward.”⁴² Unlike so many of his peers, Watson was being converted to Mormonism not by the work of missionaries or preaching but by reading its doctrine.

Plans to Migrate to Utah

That same spring, Watson moved from St. Louis to Clifton, Grant County, Wisconsin to join extended family mining for lead.⁴³ All this time, Wingfield and Jane

³⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 5, 1910, WWP.

³⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Bradford Corless, December 25, 1873, WWP.

³⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Jacob Greensky, November 27, 1884, WWP.

⁴⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 4, 1910, WWP.

⁴¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 1, 1922, WWP.

⁴² Watson, “A Letter to John Zahnd.”

⁴³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 7.

spent their engagement apart. He wrote his fiancé to join him in Wisconsin. By July 29th, the couple was reunited and married two weeks later in Mifflin, Grant County, Wisconsin.⁴⁴ Soon after, the newlyweds had trouble making a living. Watson spent the next few months searching for work, fighting illness, and staving off depression. “I was a stranger in a strange land,” he recalled. “How necessary and how good it is to that thot for and give a little encouragement to strangers and to the poor and needy and afflicted.”⁴⁵ In all his affliction, Winfield found comfort in his new, budding faith—Mormonism.⁴⁶ He yearned to join Latter-day Saints in Utah, perhaps to be among a people where he would no longer be a stranger. “I wished at the time to have at least the company of one Latter Day Saint, but seemingly no one cared for the faith,” he lamented.⁴⁷

While working in the Wisconsin mines, Watson happened upon a Book of Mormon.⁴⁸ Having been primed by *Voice of Warning*, Watson’s first read through the Book of Mormon was riveting. He immediately concluded that “no wicked man ever wrote that book,” to the contrary of anti-Mormons.⁴⁹ His positive experience with the Book of Mormon made him long for such experiences with Mormons. His affection for his new religion grew deeper as the “spirit of gathering with the saints” grew stronger.⁵⁰ The Watsons resolved to move west but were met with skepticism and resistance from

⁴⁴ Watson, *Autobiography*, 8; *Livingston-Watson Genealogical Information*, 295, WWP); “Death Claims an Aged Resident,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 43, no. 52 (November 2, 1922).

⁴⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 9.

⁴⁶ Watson, *Autobiography*, 9.

⁴⁷ Watson, *Autobiography*, 9.

⁴⁸ Watson, *Autobiography*, 11; Milo Quaife, “Notes from an Interview with Wingfield Watson, Burlington, Wis.” December 10–11, 1918, WWP. Watson, “A Letter to John Zahnd.”

⁴⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, February 3, 1912, WWP; Watson, *Autobiography*, 11.

⁵⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, February 3, 1912, WWP; Watson, *Autobiography*, 11.

family who begged them to stay. They issued warnings against “Joe Smith” and the “terrible stories of Brigham Young and his many wives.”⁵¹ Watson’s family could not understand the bewildering power that would motivate him to leave family and homestead for “the society of a strange people.”⁵² Watson was cast into a season of spiritual depression; “I had everyone against me in my undertaking and no one to speak a cheering word.”⁵³ Reflecting on his conversion, he lamented that his family never understood him; “[they] never knew my sufferings, and consequently they never knew what induced me to leave them, and prefer the society of a strange people.”⁵⁴

The Watsons, though, were undeterred. In early June 1852, they sold their property, collecting \$190 in all, and traveled to St. Louis with hopes of joining a caravan headed to the Salt Lake Valley.⁵⁵ Still, Watson’s mood never lifted. Shortly after arriving in St. Louis, Jane happened upon two Mormon men while visiting some friends.⁵⁶ She invited the strangers to meet with Watson, hoping they would lift his spirits. Watson was so well encouraged by them that he “talked and acted so cheerful,” according to his wife.⁵⁷ It seemed that happiness would elude Watson until he lived among his new people.

So, it pained Watson when the men reported that a company of Saints had already departed for Utah and the next caravan would not leave until the following spring.⁵⁸ However, the men introduced them to “a little Mormon society,” of which

⁵¹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 11.

⁵² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 16, 1902.

⁵³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 12.

⁵⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 16, 1902.

⁵⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 12; Quaipe, “Notes”

⁵⁶ Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, “My Father–Wingfield Watson,” n.d., WWP.

⁵⁷ Lewis, “My Father.”

⁵⁸ Watson, *Autobiography*, 12; Lewis, “My Father.”

William Gibson was a member.⁵⁹ Gibson baptized Wingfield and Jane, and, the next day, they participated in their first sacrament meeting.⁶⁰ With no job prospects in Missouri, the Watsons were advised to return to Wisconsin and wait for word on the departure of the next wagon train.⁶¹ Somewhat reluctantly, they booked passage up the Mississippi to return home, doubtlessly anxious about how their family would receive them.

Redirection to Beaver Island

Watson passed the time by studying Mormon literature.⁶² During the voyage, as their riverboat neared Nauvoo, Jane once more happened upon some Mormon men who were discussing religion.⁶³ She prompted Watson to join the conversation led by Moses Smith and Samuel Shaw, the same pair of men that Strang sent in winter 1845–1846 to proselytize in Nauvoo.⁶⁴ They immediately contended for Strang as the true successor to Smith.⁶⁵ Watson was convinced immediately, reasoning that “if there were no truth in that, then there is not in Joseph Smith’s call.”⁶⁶ Shaw further convinced

⁵⁹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 13. Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 4, 1918.

⁶⁰ Watson, *Autobiography*, 14. Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 4, 1918.

⁶¹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁶² Watson recalled these works to be “A Series of Pamphlets” by Orson Pratt in *T&S* 5, and a collection of tracts. Watson, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁶³ Lewis, “My Father.”

⁶⁴ Lewis, “My Father.”

⁶⁵ Shaw would have been a very capable and convincing apologist for Strang. Shaw previously served Smith as an elder and was likely in Chicago at the time of his death in June 1844; the *Times & Seasons* places Shaw in Chicago on May 24–25th, 1844 at a conference, just one month before Smith’s assassination on June 27th. *T&S* 5, no. 14 (August 1, 1844). On December 12, 1845, Shaw joined Strang’s organization and was ordained a high priest two days later. *Chronicles of Voree*, 34. He was immediately given a mission to proselytize in Nauvoo where he spent the winter of 1845–1846 arguing for the authenticity of the LofA to mixed reaction. CV 35, 49, 58–59. Shaw was later elected to serve as a high counselor in Voree, gaining administrative responsibilities for the Church as an “agent of temporal affairs” on Beaver Island. CV 59, 123; *Gospel Herald* 3, no. 13 (June 14, 1848). In the turbulent spring of 1852, Shaw was accused of murder in an attempt by the gentiles to subvert Mormon power in the Great Lakes. That summer, after his release from jail, Shaw accompanied his wife to visit her family in Nauvoo for when they coincidentally meet the Watsons.

⁶⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 5, 1897, WWP.

Watson to abandon their journey westward and, instead, to join the Strangites on Beaver Island.⁶⁷

On their way to Lake Michigan, the Shaws and Watsons disembarked at Nauvoo. There, Watson surveyed the temple, which, by then had fallen into a “solemn, ruined grandeur” after being destroyed by a mob years earlier and, piece by piece, was salvaged by Icarians, a neighboring utopian community.⁶⁸ The experience was powerful for Watson. He remembered standing on

shattered steps, broken to pieces by the falling of masses of stone from above, when the incendiary applied the torch to this grand and sacred piece of architecture. I felt to mourn at the desolation of the whole place . . . However, its appearance inspired a deep, awful, solemn, mournful and melancholy feeling which long years cannot obliterate.⁶⁹

Years later, Watson invoked Danielic language to summarize the temple scene as one of “desolation and desecration.”⁷⁰ For him, the ruins were terrible but revelatory, evidence of Mormonism’s divine mission scorned by the world, and yet another prophecy fulfilled. The opposition he experienced from his family now fit within the broader Mormon experience—their rejection matched that of his new religious community. After a week in Nauvoo, the Watsons made their way to Chicago where they boarded the *Scotia* and set out for Beaver Island.⁷¹ “I could not think that it was surely the hand of the Almighty that led me to that island,” Watson later reminisced.⁷²

⁶⁷ Quaife, “Notes.”

⁶⁸ Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 15.

⁶⁹ Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 15.

⁷⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis and Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 5, 1903.

⁷¹ Wingfield Watson, *Autobiography*, 16.

⁷² Watson, “A Letter to John Zahnd.”

Beaver Island and the Strangite Diaspora

The Watsons arrived late afternoon on June 23, 1852, nearly eight years after the death of Smith. They brought with them little more than clothes and bedding.⁷³ The *Scotia* docked on the south end of St. James Harbor as newcomers were welcomed to the island personally by the prophet.⁷⁴ Watson escorted his wife, then pregnant with their first child, off the ship and into their new kingdom. That summer, the island was bustling with industry. In St. James, two additional docks received ships daily—and sometimes twice a day—from Chicago, Buffalo, Green Bay, Cleveland, and Mackinac, bringing supplies and people.⁷⁵ Stevedores unloaded goods from the mainland and reloaded the ships with exports of fine timber.⁷⁶ A few houses and businesses were under construction as blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, and millers traded their goods.⁷⁷ Some storefronts in St. James were vacant, ready to be let by mercantile entrepreneurs.⁷⁸ Newcomers cleared and cultivated lands for hopes of an even larger harvest the following year.⁷⁹ “There were no idlers there [among] the Mormons,” said Watson.⁸⁰

Beaver Island was a community on the rise. Yet, Watson’s first impression did not match the economic opportunity before him. “I can’t say the looks of things pleased

⁷³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 17. Elsewhere, Watson offers the date June 16th as their arrival (Quaife, “Notes”). Either dates, the 16th or 23rd, are plausible since the *Northern Islander* recorded the *Scotia* arriving from Chicago on those dates in June 1852. *NI* 2, no. 10 (June 24, 1852); no. 15 (July 29, 1852).

⁷⁴ Watson, *Autobiography*, 17. Watson states that Aldrich’s dock was on the west end of the harbor; however, a map produced by James Oscar McNutt, a resident of the island, places Aldrich’s dock on the south end with two additional docks, McCullough’s and Waite’s docks, on the northwest end. Strangites referred to Beaver Island as “Holy Island.” Mary Nichols to Phebe Burnham Hobart, April 1872.

⁷⁵ *NI* 2, no. 10 (June 24, 1852); no. 15 (June 29, 1852).

⁷⁶ *NI* 2, no. 13 (July 15, 1852).

⁷⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo M. Quaife, January 21, 1921.

⁷⁸ *NI* 2, no. 13 (July 15, 1852).

⁷⁹ *NI* 2, no. 9 (June 17, 1852).

⁸⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, January 21, 1919, WWP.

me at first,” he recalled.⁸¹ Surrounding St. James was the daunting unsettled frontier his family now called home. Sandy shorelines forced the Saints inland where they met thick forests and swampy lowlands. As a miner with little timbering and farming experience, Watson was overwhelmed with anxiety; he had traded the tamable western prairies for “very trying and forbidding” land.⁸² The Watsons lodged with the Aldrichs for the evening before moving in with two other families in the log hewn home of Samuel Shaw.⁸³

Eventually, the Watsons were issued their inheritance; their land was “about midway on the Island.”⁸⁴ The Watson’s settled near three other families who all immediately set out to clear the land and setup their cabins together.⁸⁵ “When we were getting short on provisions,” he recalled, “[we] would have to go six miles and chop wood to get more, and at the end of the week bring home sixty and seventy pounds of flour on our backs and a chunk of pork for the families.”⁸⁶ The road was less a paved highway as it was a mere trail, meandering through “cedar swamps and highland, and anything but pleasant walking.”⁸⁷ Yet, for all its difficulties, Watson grew fond of his inheritance, which, after being tamed, offered “pure water, splendid grass, potatoes,

⁸¹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 18.

⁸² Watson, *Autobiography*, 18.

⁸³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 17.

⁸⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo M. Quaife, January 21, 1921, WWP. A map of the island published in July 1852 shows the property of “W. Watson” near the midpoint of the island to the west of Enoch Road, later renamed the King’s Highway, which acted as the main thoroughfare connecting the northern and southern settlements of the island. James McGuig, *Beaver Island, Michigan* [map] July 24, 1852. Scale not given. “Township of Peaine, Emmet Co, attached to Michillimacinac Co for judicial purposes,” Published by the Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University from the original in the Michigan State Historical Commission Archives.

⁸⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo M. Quaife, January 21, 1921, WWP.

⁸⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo M. Quaife, January 21, 1921, WWP.

⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo M. Quaife, January 21, 1921, WWP.

grain, and root land.”⁸⁸ More than its economic advantages, he loved the island as a religious safe haven, the kingdom of God on earth, where the Saints were relatively “free from the contamination of Gentile vices such as drunkenness, swearing, fashions, and foul language.”⁸⁹

Watson Receives His Baptism and Blessing

Between July 8–10th, on the second anniversary of Strang’s coronation, the Strangites held a general conference on Beaver Island.⁹⁰ Families customarily brought animal sacrifices, which were ceremonially slain and prepared as part of a large feast. Following a trajectory set by Smith, Strang reinstated a form of OT feasts as part of his LDS restoration religious practices, setting his movement apart from other Mormon groups.⁹¹ The Watsons were too new to the community and did not participate in the feast.⁹² They did, however, attend the conference. In a show of the island’s growth, the assembly lasted one day longer than expected as the people happily enjoyed “faith and a most exemplary union.”⁹³ The conference saw a “large number” of people baptized and confirmed, likely at Font Lake, with the Watsons among them.⁹⁴

Watson reported being baptized by Phineas Wright, one of Strang’s apostles, “soon after” they arrived at the island.⁹⁵ Following his baptism, as was customary,

⁸⁸ Watson, *Autobiography*, 17.

⁸⁹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 17.

⁹⁰ *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 5, 1852).

⁹¹ See the subsequent chapter for discussion on Strangite animal sacrifices.

⁹² The Watsons are missing from the list of attendees publishing in the *Northern Islander*. “Conference,” *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852).

⁹³ *NI* 2, no. 13 (July 15, 1852).

⁹⁴ *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852); 4, no. 4 (April 13, 1854).

⁹⁵ Wingfield Watson, journal entries, “Four journal pages found in the files of Sister Billie Ulland in March 1991 probably copied at one time by Sister Grace Willis.” n.d., WWP.

Wingfield received a patriarchal blessing, a prophetic message from God that accompanied a convert's entry into the kingdom. Qualified authorities, likely Wright and others, placed their hands upon Wingfield and spoke:

My son thou art destined for the army of the Lord God of Israel and with a torch shall thou light up the firmament . . . Thou shalt assist thy Brethren in collecting and leading forth a host of the poor oppressed, distressed, trodden down sons of men to form the Army of the Lord, and with them shall thou make a rush upon the enemies of our God.⁹⁶

The conference offered the Watsons their first opportunity to hear a sermon from the prophet. The topic, a discourse on the fate of apostates, was timely. Watson had a brief encounter with “a grossly blind apostate” who enticed him to doubt Strang’s calling.⁹⁷ He remembered “being well nigh tempted to believe I had made a wrong move in going to Beaver Island,” but was delivered from apostasy after reading *The Diamond*.⁹⁸ When it came to religious investigation, Watson preferred the company of the written word as his guide.

At an unknown date, Watson was ordained to a position in the Aaronic priesthood but was never called to a higher position while living on the island.⁹⁹ He was, however, privileged to participate in the School of the Prophets, penning essays for fellow students on the topics of spiritual blindness, baptism, and spiritual gifts.¹⁰⁰

By all measures, the Watson’s arrived on the island during a season of prosperity for the Mormons at the expense of apostate and gentile neighbors. After the tumult of the previous year, Strang had determined to bring peace to his kingdom with

⁹⁶ Watson, “Four journal pages found.”

⁹⁷ Watson, “Four journal pages found.”

⁹⁸ Watson, “A Letter to John Zahnd.”

⁹⁹ Quaife, “Notes.”

¹⁰⁰ Wingfield Watson, “When Were the Gifts of the Holy Spirit First Ministered to Mankind?” box 1, folder 25; “For What was Christ Baptized?” box 1, folder 27; “What is the Blindness?” box 1, folder 29, series 6: School of the Prophets Essays, 1850–1871, James J. Strang Collection, De Golyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

force. By late fall, gentiles reported that the king decreed they be baptized within ten days or face expulsion.¹⁰¹ Armed Mormon men purportedly patrolled beaches and docks to ensure compliance.¹⁰² By then, however, most pseudos and gentiles had already left willingly; according to one account, only a handful of gentile families remained by November.¹⁰³ In the exodus, gentile families left behind boats, fishing equipment, tools, and property, objects of ‘consecration’ for Mormon use. For Watson, the advancement of the Mormons was a sign of God’s blessing and fulfillment of scripture.¹⁰⁴ “[Truly] were they blessed,” he wrote of the Mormons on the island, “and truly did they possess a peace, a rest, a freedom, and an enjoyment unknown among men: unknown to those who serve not God.”¹⁰⁵ Beaver Island had become for Watson a revival of his idyllic childhood.

The Battle of Pine River

Over the next four years, Watson grew fonder of Strang and dove deeper into Strangite doctrine, although he never ascended to a position of leadership.¹⁰⁶ He was content to live a quiet, modest life on his inheritance with his growing family. The Watsons welcomed two daughters on the island: their first, Sarah Jane (“Janey” or “Janie”) was born of October 9, 1852, shortly after the Watson’s arrival, and a second daughter, Elizabeth (“Lizzie”) was born on June 30, 1856.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Whitney Williams, *A Child of the Sea; And Life Among the Mormons* (Harbor Springs, MI: Elizabeth Whitney Williams, 1905), 142.

¹⁰² Williams, *Child*, 142.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Child*, 123, 142. According to Williams, only eight gentile families lived on the island by summer 1852.

¹⁰⁴ Watson, *Autobiography*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 18.

¹⁰⁶ Watson is frustratingly silent about his time on Beaver Island and later confessed that it was “a not small error” for not keeping a diary during the four-year period during which he lived there. (Watson, *Autobiography*, 17). Reconstruction of Watson’s experience is only possible by small glimpses into his experience through his papers in combination Strangite writings that survived their expulsion from the island in 1856.

Displaced gentiles, however, grew increasingly frustrated with Strang and his followers. A few days after the July 1852 festival, a Green Bay newspaper reported how several gentile families were “driven from Beaver Island, in a state of destitution and misery . . . because they refused to affiliate with Mormondom.”¹⁰⁷ Newspapers all along the Great Lakes accused the Mormons of theft, coercion, arson, larceny, and various other felonies. “The pirating in Lake Michigan, Huron and Green Bay,” claimed one newspaper, “[is] generally attributed to desperadoes from the Beaver Islands.”¹⁰⁸

With the island firmly under his control, Strang sought the upper hand for influence in the region. Backed by a solid voting bloc, he ran for state legislature in fall 1852, winning his seat in November, and then set his sight on the state Supreme Court.¹⁰⁹ Several Mormons were appointed to various local governmental positions. The economy of Beaver Island also began to outpace that of its gentile rival, Mackinac Island. Having once been the center of booming fishing and timber industries, Mackinac’s citizens watched helplessly as traders shifted their business to Beaver Island.¹¹⁰ Trade between the Mormon and gentile islands trickled to a stop, creating economic competition between them. The balance of power in the northern Great Lakes was tipping away from Mackinac toward St. James.

Tension between the rival communities continued to build until violence erupted in spring of 1853. On May 12th, Strang prohibited the sale of liquor, threatening

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 174.

¹⁰⁸ “More Pirating,” *NI* 2, no. 16 (August 5, 1852).

¹⁰⁹ Van Noord, *King*, 180. By many accounts, Strang served his public office well. He was described by non-Mormon newspapers as “the most talented and ready debater in the House,” “a talented man, equal to any other man in debate and general information,” displayed “industry, sagacity, good temper, apparent regard for the true interests of the people,” and had his political career described as “an eloquent and an honorable one.” All quoted in “Letter from W. Watson,” *SH* 29, no. 11 (June 1, 1882): 170.

¹¹⁰ Vickie Cleverley Speek, *“God Has Made Us a Kingdom”*: *James Strang and the Midwest Mormons* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2006), 182.

to arrest anyone who defied his decree.¹¹¹ The gentiles, however, saw the ban as a convenient excuse to board vessels and raid property to confiscate ‘consecrations.’ That same month, anti-Mormon citizens on Mackinac Island gathered to plot ways to rid the region of “the felonious depredations of the Mormons.”¹¹² They released a public statement soon after. “*Resolved,*” they declared, “That recent outrages perpetrated on our fishing grounds . . . must eventually lead to the most determined resistance, and possibly terminate in bloodshed.”¹¹³ The following month, the *Northern Islander* responded in kind: “We prefer peace; but if war must come, let it be upon us and not upon our children. We shall not yield a step to the threats, and are ready today for the blow.”¹¹⁴ Battle lines were being drawn. The saber-rattling soon evolved into a skirmish at the Mormon settlement of Pine River, resulting with six wounded Mormons, all of whom escaped by the fortunate assistance of a passing gentile ship.¹¹⁵

From spring 1853 to summer 1855, the Mormons and gentiles repeated a pattern of harassment, accusations, and retaliation. Strangites criticized gentiles of immorality and persecution, and the gentiles were quick to volley back stories and rumors of Mormon theft and villainy. All along the Great Lakes, gentile description of events spread faster and farther through regional newspapers. Mormons bore the brunt of blame for piracy despite known cases of non-Mormon pirates in the lakes. Worse, the Mormons were accused of murdering the crew of a large schooner that disappeared during a fierce gale in winter 1853. For his part, Watson insisted that Strang always upheld the law. “Mr. Strang never violated nor encouraged others to violate the law of the land,” he

¹¹¹ *NI* 3, no. 3 (June 30, 1853).

¹¹² *NI* 3, no. 3 (June 30, 1853).

¹¹³ *NI* 3, no. 3 (June 30, 1853).

¹¹⁴ *NI* 3, no. 3 (June 30, 1853).

¹¹⁵ Van Noord, *King*, 206.

maintained, adding that “[his] claim and office as a king was exercised in a church or ecclesiastical capacity, and not in opposition to the laws of the land.”¹¹⁶

The Mormons, moreover, were determined not to bow to intimidation while simultaneously expanding their kingdom through questionable means. In a sure sign of defiance, in late July 1855, Mormons commemorated the 1853 assault by returning to Pine River, constructing a gallows, and “hung in effigy the men who made the murderous attack on two boat loads of unarmed Mormons.”¹¹⁷ The gentiles, however, were not satisfied merely to wound a few of Strang’s men; they wanted him gone. And, like Smith before him, Strang was not only endangered by external forces but also internal threats.

The Death of Another Mormon Prophet

In 1855, Strang married his fourth and fifth wives, cousins Sarah and Phoebe Wright. By then, polygamy was no longer an open secret on the island, yet, despite its availability to Strangite men, few took their prophet up on the offer. Watson claimed that less than twenty families practiced plural marriage in total and that only a handful of men married more than two women.¹¹⁸ “So polygamy had not been practiced to such a very great degree as some suppose it had,” he explained.¹¹⁹ Watson apparently wanted to engage in plural marriage.¹²⁰ “Now as to that everlasting wife,” he wrote in 1869, “that I wished to get but don’t. I hardly know what to say. I have left myself now in a pretty

¹¹⁶ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 3 . . . Wanting* (Bay Springs, MI: Wingfield Watson, 1889), 34.

¹¹⁷ “Conference at Lake Mormon, *NI* 5, no. 72 (July 19, 1855).

¹¹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP; Quaife, “Notes.” Gabriel Strang listed just fifteen men whom he claimed to know had plural wives, but erroneously listed Watson, so his memory was not clear. Still, his short list approximates Watson’s estimate and testifies to the rarity of polygamy among Strangites. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, May 8, 1929, WWP.

¹¹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹²⁰ Gabriel Strang claimed that Watson practiced polygamy, which is untrue. It is perhaps a testimony of Watson’s open willingness to take a second wife that led to Gabriel misremembering. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, May 8, 1929, WWP.

pickle by letting it be known that I really wanted one!”¹²¹ Such an arrangement, however, never materialized as it had with other Mormon men, such as Lorenzo D. Hickey and Reuben Thomas Nichols, who would become close associates of Watson.

Still, Strang’s most recent marriages—to women aged seventeen and nineteen, whom he married at forty-two—raised concerns even among his closest followers and incited scandal among his critics. Many on the island felt the king had indulged too much in his position while gentiles in the area expressed fear that women were being abused in the isolated community.¹²² Signs that Strang was losing grip on his power began to show. Watson recalled how, despite Mormon “increase in riches,” nevertheless “many violated the Word of Wisdom,” a set of precepts given by revelation to Smith in 1833, which forbade alcohol, tobacco, and “hot drinks,” i.e., tea and coffee.¹²³ Many of Watson’s peers returned to “their old heathen practices . . . intoxicating drinks in some cases, and the use of tobacco.”¹²⁴ Watson recalled how in 1855 at “a private party whiskey had been used among them,” which prompted the prophet to chastise offenders publicly in a “sad and discouraged” tone.¹²⁵ “[It was] the worst discouraged I ever saw James,” said Watson.¹²⁶

Additionally, some women refused to wear “bloomers,” loose trousers that the king prescribed earlier in 1855 to promote uniformity. According to Watson, Mormon women preferred the bloomers for convenience but “were compelled to throw them by in

¹²¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to James Pierce, 17 February 1869, WWP. In 1929, one of Strang’s sons, Gabriel, claimed that Watson participated in polygamy; however, based on extant evidence, Gabriel was mistaken. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, May 8, 1929, WWP.

¹²² Speek, *Kingdom*, 200–201.

¹²³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 19; D&C 89.

¹²⁴ Watson, *Autobiography*, 19.

¹²⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 25, 1916, WWP.

¹²⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 25, 1916, WWP.

order to avoid impertinent observations among Gentiles.”¹²⁷ Not all women were represented by Watson’s analysis. Two in specific, Ruth Ann Bedford and Sarah McCulloch, were particularly vocal in their opposition to the Turkish-style pantaloons.¹²⁸ Strang attempted to reinforce his dictate by withholding funds from disobedient families, the Bedfords being one of them, along with the McCullochs.

Bedford was a gentile fisherman who lived on Beaver Island before the Mormon migration.¹²⁹ Wishing to remain on the island, he reluctantly converted after marrying a Mormon, Ruth Ann. His was never a true faith in Strang, and by early 1856, what little tolerance he harbored for the prophet dissipated completely. Strang had no patience for Bedford’s insolence and, after consultation with some of his men, decided to have Bedford flogged. Watson was apparently one of the men present at the meeting; he said Strang issued the order reluctantly.¹³⁰ Humiliated by the flogging, Bedford vowed revenge. That evening, he stalked Strang’s home armed with a revolver, but resolved to postpone a hasty assassination.¹³¹ Bedford found an ally in Hezekiah McCulloch, a former apostle whom Strang had deposed out of jealousy of his rising influence. A third ally joined them, Alexander Wentworth, whose wife caught the affectionate eye of the prophet.¹³² The three men secretly hatched their assassination plot.

On June 16th, U.S.S. *Michigan*, the only iron-hull warship in the Great Lakes, docked in front of McCulloch’s store and an adjacent hotel.¹³³ It was her second port call

¹²⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹²⁸ Speek, *Kingdom*, 209.

¹²⁹ “King Strang’s Murder,” *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882.

¹³⁰ Quaiife, “Notes.”

¹³¹ “King Strang’s Murder,” *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882.

¹³² Speek, *Kingdom*, 214.

¹³³ Following the War of 1812, the U.S. and Great Britain agreed to demilitarize the Great Lakes to secure freedom of navigation in shared waters. The Rush–Bagot Treaty (ratified 1818) permitted each nation only one warship in the lakes, which, according to Gabriel Strang, made an annual port call to

that month, unusual behavior for a ship that typically visited the port only once annually.¹³⁴ The ship's suspicious conduct had its reason; Strang's would-be assassins enlisted the aid of the U.S. Navy in their plot against Strang. The captain, Charles H. McBlair, dispatched a pilot to request an audience with Strang. Such requests had been a normal part of Strang's life. It was the *Michigan* that President Fillmore dispatched in 1851 to arrest Strang.¹³⁵ So, the sight of the warship and the captain's subsequent invitation to board her did not arouse enough suspicion of Strang to decline the call. "They are not coming back for any good purpose," he reportedly said, but nonetheless started for the dock with the pilot.¹³⁶ Indeed, there was nothing suspicious about that day to the many people working in the area surrounding the dock. Among them was Watson who, at the time, was with other men hewing timber for the tabernacle.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, Strang and the pilot, after passing the tabernacle where Watson was working, continued to make their way toward the ship. As soon as Strang neared the dock, however, the pilot stopped in his tracks, stepping away from Strang.¹³⁸ Just then, Bedford and Wentworth emerged from a crowd of about forty and stalked Strang until they were clear of the gaggle.¹³⁹ A young boy, watching his prophet stroll toward the ship, caught a glimpse of the unthinkable—Bedford and Wentworth were readying their arms. "[Brother] Strang," the boy cried out, "they are going to shoot you!"¹⁴⁰

Beaver Island. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, April 10, 1929, WWP.

¹³⁴ Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, April 10, 1929, WWP.

¹³⁵ Speck, *Kingdom*, 137.

¹³⁶ Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, April 10, 1929, WWP.

¹³⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 24, 1919, WWP; "The Tabernacle," *NI* 4, no. 6 (June 5, 1856).

¹³⁸ James Hutchinson to George Smith, September 19, 1870, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹³⁹ "King Strang's Murder," *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882. Other accounts have the men hiding between stacks of fuel wood on the docks.

¹⁴⁰ James Hutchinson to George Smith, September 19, 1870, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

Strang barely had time to react. Immediately after the boy's warning, and as the prophet turned to see his assailants, both Bedford and Wentworth fired on him.¹⁴¹ Bedford's shot grazed his ear and head, puncturing his plug hat.¹⁴² Wentworth's shot severed Strang's spine, paralyzing him from the lower back down.¹⁴³ The prophet collapsed immediately on the dock as Bedford then battered the king's head with the butt of his pistol "until it was so broken that he could do nothing more," and raced with Wentworth to the ship.¹⁴⁴ Despite the crowd of bystanders, both Mormons and Naval personnel, no one intervened.¹⁴⁵ The assassins were taken aboard the ship and transported to Mackinac for trial.¹⁴⁶ After a brief imprisonment, and having been showered with gifts from thankful gentiles, the men were acquitted and set free, a hearing that Watson rightly described as a "mock trial."¹⁴⁷

When Watson heard the shots, he rushed to his wounded prophet, standing guard over him "lest the enemy, thinking he was still living, might rush in upon him to finish him."¹⁴⁸ Miraculously, Strang survived the attack and was transported to Voree

¹⁴¹ James Hutchinson to George Smith, September 19, 1870, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹⁴² "Murderous Assault," *Daily Northern Islander* 1, no. 33 (June 20, 1856); "King Strang's Murder," *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882.

¹⁴³ Watson, *Autobiography*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ "King Strang's Murder," *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882.

¹⁴⁵ "Murderous Assault," *Daily Northern Islander* 1, no. 33 (June 20, 1856).

¹⁴⁶ "Murderous Assault," *Daily Northern Islander* 1, no. 33 (June 20, 1856).

¹⁴⁷ Van Noord, *King*, 252; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 17, 1914, WWP. According to Gabriel Strang, a legal dispute between where exactly the assassination took place ultimately set the men free. In Mackinac, the court determined that because the assault took place over water, the crime was in federal jurisdiction. The case was then taken to a federal court in Pennsylvania where authorities opined that because the murder occurred on a dock attached to land, it was in state jurisdiction. Due to double jeopardy, the charges were dropped. "So that was the end of the Farce," said Gabriel. There, stranded in legal limbo, the charges evaporated. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, April 10, 1929, WWP.

¹⁴⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 24, 1919, WWP; Watson, *Autobiography*, 19.

with hope of recovery.¹⁴⁹ Several families fled the island out of fear of being arrested or assaulted, but others, like Watson, “were unwilling to believe that Mr. Strang had been fatally wounded.”¹⁵⁰ Their hopes would ultimately prove to be misplaced.

The Strangite Exile from Beaver Island

“[It] would seem that all hell was let loose against us,” wrote Watson of the immediate aftermath of Strang’s departure.¹⁵¹ The gentiles wasted no time reclaiming the island for themselves. Assailants positioned themselves in isolated places across the island as soon as the *Michigan* pulled out of harbor, awaiting reinforcements.¹⁵² After his ‘trial,’ Bedford returned to Beaver to organize the men into armed squads that scoured the island for Mormons.¹⁵³ Four schooners filled with more invaders took possession of key facilities at St. James.¹⁵⁴ One of these men, Edward Albert Bouchard, recalled how the native gentiles welcomed his party. Having anticipated the raid, they hoisted over the *Northern Islander* office a flag inscribed with the phrase: “Free from the Mormons, Glory to the Gentiles.”¹⁵⁵ The liberators carried on their assault, whipping Mormons as they were ransacked of property, storehouses, businesses, and homes. The tabernacle, which Watson labored to construct, was burnt to the ground.¹⁵⁶ Gentile efforts were made easy

¹⁴⁹ Speek, *Kingdom*, 222. Watson states that Strang was taken one week after he was shot (Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP).

¹⁵⁰ Watson, *Autobiography*, 19.

¹⁵¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

¹⁵² Speek, *Kingdom*, 227.

¹⁵³ “King Strang’s Murder,” *Detroit Evening News*, July 1, 1882; “Attempted Assassination of Strang, the Mormon Leader,” June 27, 1856.

¹⁵⁴ “Cheboygan Man Relates Fall of Strang’s Empire,” *Detroit Free Press* 79, no. 106 (January 11, 1914).

¹⁵⁵ “Cheboygan Man Relates Fall of Strang’s Empire,” *Detroit Free Press* 79, no. 106 (January 11, 1914).

¹⁵⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

by pacifist orders from Strang.¹⁵⁷ Watson lamented:

[It] was galling to the last degree to see mobocracy and lawlessness triumph seemingly over the Saints who had so faithfully clung to the hope that the poor would be redeemed from deceit and violence . . . through Mr. Strang's ministry and faithfulness

Gentiles ordered the Mormons to gather their belongings and report to the docks for expulsion. Resistance would be met by death.¹⁵⁸ Watson received the order when two drunk fishermen, armed with guns and knives, confronted him just one day after his wife had given birth to their second daughter. Watson pleaded in vain for relief. He returned to his inheritance to gather as many possessions as the family could carry, and led them on the six-mile, swampy trek to the harbor "with the babe in my arms," arriving to the docks on July 4th.¹⁵⁹ The Watsons, along with many other families, were shoved onto the steamer *Buckeye State*.¹⁶⁰ "Where is your kingdom now?" the gentiles taunted their prisoners as they corralled them aboard. "Where is your prophet now?"¹⁶¹ Jane, still recovering from giving birth, was the last to board, but not quickly enough for the vigilantes. "[God damn] you; why don't you go faster?" they barked.¹⁶² Once on board, the Mormons discovered that the gentiles had no plans of sending them off with their possession; gentiles kept the property for themselves.¹⁶³ Everything the Watsons owned dwindled to what they carried with them. The ship disembarked the island. Watson would not see his beloved island again for nearly five decades.

Meanwhile, in Voree, Strang's health deteriorated terminally. Edward

¹⁵⁷ Speck, *Kingdom*, 228–29.

¹⁵⁸ Watson, *Autobiography*, 20.

¹⁵⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877; Speck, *Kingdom*, 229.

¹⁶⁰ Speck, *Kingdom*, 230.

¹⁶¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

¹⁶² Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877.

¹⁶³ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877.

Chidester was among those who tended to their dying prophet. On the day before his death, Chidester asked Strang if he “was a going to leave us.” Strang confirmed, so Chidester asked if he planned “to have a successor appointed through him.” With a tear welling up in his eye, Strang replied, “I do not want to talk about it.”¹⁶⁴ The following morning, Strang’s life held on by thread. Chidester asked once more if he wished to communicate any last wishes or decrees. “Yes,” the dying prophet replied, but it was his last word.¹⁶⁵ The Mormon king died on July 9th, a mere day following the third anniversary of his coronation. Chidester interpreted Strang’s response as an indication that “there is a head somewhere, & that he will come in the Lord’s own due time to the faithful.”¹⁶⁶ This hope would sustain faithful Strangites in the years to come.

That same day, the *Buckeye State* unloaded 150 Mormons in Racine, Wisconsin, where the Mormons received word that Strang had died that morning.¹⁶⁷ The news shocked Watson. “I could scarcely believe the story,” he said.¹⁶⁸ He did not want to believe it was true. “[We] had looked for much to be accomplished by him and were not at all prepared to believe in his being taken from us.”¹⁶⁹ “Never perhaps since the days that Jesus was taken from the disciples were any people more disappointed by the death of a leading man,” he added.¹⁷⁰ The reason was eschatological. Watson believed

that Mr. Strang was a great prophet raised up to finish the great work of the dispensation left unfinished by Joseph Smith, that by him [Strang] . . . the House of

¹⁶⁴ Edward Chidester to Warren Post, August 30, 1856, WWP.

¹⁶⁵ Edward Chidester to Warren Post, August 30, 1856, WWP. Strang’s body was buried near his home in Voree. Years later, after the land fell into gentile hands, Strang’s body was unceremoniously exhumed and relocated to unremarkable burial site: “no head stone, nor footstone, no monument of any kind, no mound—nothing, all flat as prairie,” Watson described in 1919 after visiting the site that year. Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife, February 14, 1919, WWP.

¹⁶⁶ Edward Chidester to Warren Post, August 30, 1856, WWP.

¹⁶⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁶⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁶⁹ Watson, *Autobiography*, 19.

¹⁷⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

Israel would be gathered and established for ever upon their own lands from out of every nation under heaven, oppressors and restored to their own lands.¹⁷¹

“So,” he concluded, “when the news of his death came to hand, many of us were so thunderstruck that we became dumb and opened not our mouths, not knowing what to say.”¹⁷² The Watsons were deposited further down the lake, deprived and penniless, both through lack of means and by spiritual depression. “[Most] of us were as a lot of little children; suddenly on the wharf at Chicago we knew not what to do.”¹⁷³

In the wake of Strang’s death, Watson was faced with a difficult decision: to abandon his faith or dig deeper into his convictions, to abandon the LDS restoration as he imagined it or to contend for Strangite authority in the absence of Strang. Over the next decades, he would watch as countless co-religionists chose the former. “For many,” he wrote, “we remained in that state of mingled doubt, disappointment and darkness. One by one, many, many departed from their former faith in James.”¹⁷⁴ Watson, however, chose the latter, to reinforce and broadcast his faith in Strang, becoming one of the Mormon prophet’s foremost apologists after his death. It is telling of how significant the death of Strang was in Watson’s life that his unfinished autobiography begins with his own birth yet ends with Strang’s death.¹⁷⁵

The Strangite Church in Exile: July 1856 to April 1877

Watson estimated the total population of the church was about seventy families at the time of their dispersion.¹⁷⁶ Details of his life immediately after the exile are scarce; a common theme for many Strangites who spent the decade in hiding and rebuilding their

¹⁷¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁷² Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁷³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

¹⁷⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁷⁵ Watson, *Autobiography*, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Quaife, “Notes.”

lives in the wake of Strang's death and their forced exile. Some Strangites went so far as to conceal or deny their involvement with Mormonism altogether.¹⁷⁷ Poor and with nowhere to go, most Strangites returned to the communities from which they came, which was true of the Watsons. Although he did not appoint his successor, Strang did give his followers final guidance, commanding every man "to take care of his family and do the best he could till he found out what to do."¹⁷⁸ According to Strang's son, Gabriel, the dying prophet also advised church members "to scatter over the country in small bodies: [to] not attract too much attention."¹⁷⁹

The Watsons followed this advice. From Chicago, the family returned to Wisconsin to reside with relatives, isolated from other Strangites.¹⁸⁰ The Watsons welcomed two additional children, the last of five; Grace "Gracie" Barbara was born on February 3, 1860, and Thomas "Tommy" Gershwin on June 7, 1862. Far removed from the broader Strangite community, Watson continued practicing his Strangite faith, advocating for it among his neighbors.¹⁸¹

Watson's persistence in the faith invited opposition. Some in his family, having warned him against conversion to Mormonism years earlier, could not understand why he remained a part of the movement. One of his sisters-in-law quipped to Watson

¹⁷⁷ One woman, Eunice Kinney, even changed her name to hide her association with Strang. Kinney, who likely served Strang as a concubine on Beaver Island, lived with her son, William Franklin, along with her children Sylvia, Henry, and Sylvester. An 1860 census suggests that Kinney changed her name to Josepha Franklin, as well as Sylvia to Selma and Sylvester to Auguste. Grafton, Ozaukee County, "Wisconsin. 1860 U. S. Census, population schedule." FamilySearch, accessed July 20, 2018, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MW94-L2P>. See also Susan Easton Black, *Early Members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1993), 2:832. Another woman reported to Watson that some Strangites in western Wisconsin "did not want anyone to know they every were Mormons." M. J. Whitman, letter to Wingfield Watson on February 28, 1891, WWP.

¹⁷⁸ Edward Chidester to Warren Post, July 14, 1856, reprinted in Cumming, *Last of the Twelve*, 11.

¹⁷⁹ Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, May 8, 1929, WWP.

¹⁸⁰ Warranty Deed to Wingfield and Jane Watson, November 7, 1860, WWP.

¹⁸¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to J. W. Smelker, December 29, 1861; Wingfield Watson, letter to J. W. Smelker, January 7, 1862, WWP.

that had one of Strang's murders visited her home, she would reward him with her "best cup of tea she ever had," a jab with added sting (perhaps unknown to her) because Strang forbade the consumption of tea.¹⁸² Wingfield's brother, John Watson, joined her and "resisted and abused me because of my faith," Watson said.¹⁸³ He attempted to convert his family numerous times, but they "looked upon [his] efforts only as haluciation."¹⁸⁴ "They have fought me for my faith in the Book of Mormon," he later wrote, "and I have lived to see them ridicule the scriptures and say that they were all hatched up by men for gain."¹⁸⁵ Eventually, he "concluded that it was only a waste of time to bother with them any more, and so quit."¹⁸⁶ Toward the end of his life, after his last surviving brother passed away, Watson lamented their lifelong unbelief. "I can't hope very much for those who reject the Gospel message. They not only reject the life to come, but make the present life short and uncertain," he wrote.¹⁸⁷ Still, as strained as his familial relationships were and would be, Watson's closest siblings, especially Thomas, refused to let religion dissolve the connection to their beloved "Wint," the nickname they gave him and used in correspondence over years to come.

Despite opposition, Watson was resolved to stay true to his faith, but the task would be difficult. His fellowship with other members was severed by the diaspora; returning to the island came at great risk, and by 1858, only a handful of Mormon families remained in Voree, which had reverted to its old name, Spring Prairie.¹⁸⁸ Strangites eventually lost control of the land to gentiles, who demolished their buildings

¹⁸² Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, March 24, 1903, WWP.

¹⁸³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, August 8, 1920, WWP.

¹⁸⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, November 11, 1899, WWP.

¹⁸⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, March 20, 1909, WWP.

¹⁸⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, November 11, 1899, WWP.

¹⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 14, 1915, WWP.

¹⁸⁸ Speck, *Kingdom*, 249

and repurposed the materials (even gravestones) for projects in neighboring Burlington.¹⁸⁹ According to Strangite James McNutt, a gentile farmer, whose was fiercely prejudiced toward Mormons, acquired the Strangite cemetery and repurposed the land as a pig yard.¹⁹⁰

Polygamy, too, was abandoned—the practice was unsustainable outside a Mormon enclave—and consummated plural marriages were hidden from public.¹⁹¹ Polygamous families moved from home to home and instructed the children of their additional wives to call their father ‘uncle.’¹⁹² Some Strangite families moved to Utah, folding into the Brighamite church, while others left the faith altogether. The Strangite movement was quickly unraveling. Watson desired to shield his family from such a fate, wishing to “associate with, and talk of the principles of God’s kingdom” with like-minded believers.¹⁹³

Sometime in 1858, Watson was ordained an Elder in the Melchizedek priesthood.¹⁹⁴ Watson believed that his ordination as an Elder gifted him “the right to preach the gospel and administer its ordinances.”¹⁹⁵ Had he not been ordained to this position, it is possible that Watson could have faded from public service to his church out of fear of undermining its ecclesiastical processes.

¹⁸⁹ Quaiife, “Notes.”

¹⁹⁰ James McNutt, letter to Wingfield Watson on October 30, 1921, WWP. When James McNutt was a young boy, he lived about two miles from Watson on Beaver Island. James McNutt to Elizabeth White, March 6, 1924, WWP.

¹⁹¹ Quaiife, “Notes.”

¹⁹² Quaiife, “Notes.”

¹⁹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Brother,” November 23, 1866, WWP.

¹⁹⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 4, 1918, WWP; BLL, 224–25.

¹⁹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

Strangites in Diaspora Encounter the Reorganization

By summer 1865, the Watsons relocated to Burnside, Wisconsin away from his unbelieving family to be closer to other Strangites in neighboring Black River Falls. Western Wisconsin in the early 1860s was a rally point for Strangites, who found themselves leaderless and set adrift into uncertainty. All they could do was gather their battered and impoverished community to await divine direction. But without a clear successor to Strang and silence from the heavens, the Strangite identity was vulnerable to atrophy, due to lack of religious activity, or dissipation as former members converted to larger and more organized Mormon sects. Once more, the question of authority and authenticity in the LDS restoration took centerstage.

In spring 1862, apostle William Bickle wrote to Watson that the Wisconsin Strangites had begun correspondence with one such sect, the “new organization,” a coalition of disenfranchised Mormons who began to reorganize under Gurley and Briggs nearly ten years earlier.¹⁹⁶ Throughout the past decade, anticipation grew among the New Organization that a new prophet would soon be appointed, and it was obvious to many who that man would be.¹⁹⁷ On April 6, 1860, Joseph Smith III, the oldest son of Smith, stepped forward from among them to assume the mantle of the First Presidency of the newly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. His principal claim for appointment were quiet, spiritual “manifestations” that pointed him to the position.¹⁹⁸ In stark contrast to Strang, who heralded his calling of direct prophetic succession and angelic visitations, Joseph Smith III’s call was in the quiet, private recesses of his soul.

Watson was scandalized by Smith III’s appointment. According to him, the Reorganization, which firmly rejected Strang, had bypassed Mormon ecclesiastical norms

¹⁹⁶ William Bickle, letter to Wingfield Watson on April 19, 1862, WWP.

¹⁹⁷ Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 268.

¹⁹⁸ *Hist. Reorg.*, 3:247; Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 270.

to illegitimately establish Smith III as a prophet in a manner no different than the sectarian priesthood. He called the maneuver “Gurleyism,” the rejection of divine ordination and ecclesiastical norms in favor of more earthly means of establishing priesthood authority.¹⁹⁹ Worse yet, they did so by appointing a higher authority by lesser authorities. Gurleyism was preposterous to Watson.

To Watson’s disappointment, many of his fellow Strangites were cautiously intrigued by Smith III. “If there is anything in Young Joseph’s Claims,” Bickle told Watson, “we are going to know it.”²⁰⁰ Watson, however, did not share Bickle’s optimism, and as fellow Strangites began to trade a king for a prophet’s son, Watson refused to budge. Over the next few years, he grew unsatisfied merely to maintain his household’s loyal to Strang. He felt the burden of responsibility to salvage what remained of his entire faith community. By winter 1862–1863, Watson began a public crusade to advocate for Strangite doctrine and fidelity to the late prophet. His campaign earned him the reputation as a “champion” of the “Latterday Saints” among locals, who described him as a “firm believer in the doctrines and practices of Mormonism,” and who “actually proposes to come to the rescue of that ‘institution,’ and defend it upon the group of the Bible, *reason*, and *good sense*.”²⁰¹

Watson hoped that isolated and personal interaction and instruction would be sufficient to rekindle allegiance among the Strangites, but his early efforts to keep them tethered to Strang and away from Smith III proved unsuccessful. In January 1863, he bemoaned to a friend how many “Strangites are pretty much all gone over to Gurleyism.”²⁰² He was so distraught at their faithlessness to Strang that he wondered if he

¹⁹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Friend Stephens,” January 20, 1863, WWP.

²⁰⁰ William Bickle, letter to Wingfield Watson on April 19, 1862, WWP.

²⁰¹ “A Champion of ‘The Latterday Saints,’” *Grant County Witness*, January 15, 1863. Emphasis original.

²⁰² Wingfield Watson, letter to “Friend Stephens,” January 20, 1863, WWP.

had moved his family from one unbelieving community to another.²⁰³ Despite Watson's best efforts, little by little, the Strangites were fracturing into three camps: those who embraced Smith III, those who rejected him, and those who desired some middle ground.

Josephite converts reasoned that Strang had been appointed by Joseph Smith to lead the Saints, but, according to the LofA, his calling was limited only to those Saints in Wisconsin. After Smith's death, however, Strang abused his appointment to secure more power than Smith ever meant for him to hold. In Watson's words, they acknowledged that Strang was appointed by Smith, but "only to establish a stake of Zion at Voree, and that in claiming the successorship he went beyond the mark."²⁰⁴ Strang's death, then, could be interpreted as divine punishment for his transgression. Moreover, for them, Strang's notoriety had become so mired that it was in their best interest to renounce him completely, and to trade Strang for Young, who had also earned a reputation as a despotic polygamist, was to exchange one bad reputation for another. If they would not leave Mormonism, then Joseph Smith III represented their best option.

Opposite this group were Strangites who rejected Josephism wholesale. Chief among them was Watson, who described Smith III's ordination as "contemptible heresy."²⁰⁵ Still, many Strangites found themselves caught between the two extremes. They desired fellowship with the Josephites—perhaps in lieu of their broken and scattered community—but were at a loss to reconcile their beliefs about prophetic appointment with Smith III's ascension to his position. They needed a satisfactory reason to accept young Joseph as their leader. One of these men, apostle Lorenzo D. Hickey, shocked the Strangite community with news that made it theoretically possible for Strangites to join the Josephite fold and accept Smith III as their leader without

²⁰³ Wingfield Watson, letter to "Dear Brother," November 23, 1866, WWP.

²⁰⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to "Friend Stephens," January 20, 1863, WWP.

²⁰⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to "Dear Brother," November 23, 1866, WWP.

disobeying Strangite law nor dishonoring the legacy of Strang.

The “Young Joseph” Question and Hickey’s Hypothesis

In late 1863, a large gathering of Strangites met in Hixton, Wisconsin for a conference over which Hickey presided.²⁰⁶ Among other business, members agreed to reprint the BLL, but most were anxious to discuss Smith III’s ascension in the Reorganization, especially as a growing number of Strangites were inclining themselves to recognize Smith as prophet.²⁰⁷ Others, however, felt that he was not qualified without evidence of divine appointment and ordination, echoing the same argument made by Strang in contrast to Brigham Young. Hickey offered his fellow Strangites a solution: Smith III had, in fact, been appointed to the First Presidency by Strang, although Smith III was not ordained at prophet. Thus, Strangites need not accept Smith III as a prophet, but they ought to accept him as their leader as a member of the First Presidency. Hickey’s hope was that Strangites would find a home in the Reorganization, and, perhaps, Strangite influence would shape the Reorganization toward a more Strangite form.

According to Hickey, in 1846, Strang secretly ordained Smith III while he slept at a home in Fulton City, Illinois, then the residence of his mother, Emma.²⁰⁸ The story was bizarre but not implausible. The Strangite church was no stranger to secret appointments in 1846. That summer, Strang’s Order of Illuminati met for the first time, during which the prophet was secretly appointed Imperial Primate over his budding kingdom. Moreover, Hickey pointed to a revelation from Strang given around the time of the supposed ordination that predicted a day when Smith III would become a member of

²⁰⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Brother Richard,” December 1882, WWP; Cumming, *Last of the Twelve*, 13.

²⁰⁷ Quaife, *Kingdom*, 189.

²⁰⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, September 15, 1881, WWP; Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 237, 244. According to Newell and Avery, Emma moved to Fulton in September 1846 and remained there for six months.

the church's First Presidency, in specific, its patriarch.²⁰⁹ The revelations called on the Strangite church to "take my servant Joseph Smith the son of the Prophet Joseph . . . [and] set him in the President as one of the First Presidents of my church."²¹⁰ Strang apparently hoped that Smith III, then 14 years old, would eventually ascend the Strangite ranks, giving Strang a distinct advantage over Young for having a member of Joseph Smith's family in the highest echelon of Strangite leadership.

Hickey read this prophecy as permitting Joseph Smith III's membership in First Presidency without establishing him as the prophet. Hickey reasoned that despite being appointed by both his father and Strang to the First Presidency, Smith III was not ordained as prophet. Instead, Smith III held the same position as Patriarch and First Counselor in the First Presidency just as it was held by his uncle, Hyrum Smith.²¹¹ Thus, Hickey argued, the Strangites ought to sustain Smith III as the highest-ranking member of the church, although not its prophet. Even though the Moses of the Strangites had been taken away, they nevertheless had a Joseph, a second-in-command.²¹² Hickey's goal was simple: retain a lineage of authority through Strang to Smith III without undermining Strang's role in the LDS restoration.

Members of the conference were open to Hickey's proposal. They unanimously resolved to honor the revelation and communicated warmly that they were "deeply interested in the welfare and prosperity of Young Joseph and his family," and

²⁰⁹ CV, 49–50, 120.

²¹⁰ CV, 120.

²¹¹ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, *Who Was the Successor of Joseph Smith*, 5; Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 4 . . . Honorable Man* (Spring Prairie, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1897), 17. Hereafter cited as PC 4.

²¹² Lorenzo Hickey would later explain to Charles Strang, "I sustain Joseph [Smith III] in what God bestowed and no farther. He is not satisfied with that but claims that he cannot by law prove up. He stood to your father as did Joshua to Moses - held a lesser priesthood." Lorenzo Dow Hickey to Charles Strang, November 25, 1874, WWP.

sustained them by “our prayers and faith.”²¹³ However, they clarified that their support was limited to divine calling: “[we] sustain Young Joseph in the office whereunto God” called him, i.e., patriarch.²¹⁴ Smith III could also ascend to the office of prophet, but he would need to produce evidence in line with their tradition. Like Young and unlike Strang, Smith III did not claim to be appointed by a proper priesthood authority, nor was he ordained by an angel, and neither did he ever claim to receive plates to translate.

Watson, however, was not convinced and called Hickey’s story “a strange and unparalleled thing.”²¹⁵ Moreover, Smith III was unwilling to share the spotlight with Strang. He never viewed Strang as a legitimate successor to his father, vehemently denied the secret appointment, and viewed plural marriage as a sign of apostasy.²¹⁶ “Young Joseph,” as Watson called him, never budged from this position, thus undermining Hickey’s maneuver.

The Dwindling Saints in Exile

The solidarity Watson sought in Wisconsin faded as his fellow Strangites soften toward the Reorganization. By mid-1866, the Watsons had left Wisconsin to resettle closer to Beaver Island with Hickey.²¹⁷ Although the men differed on their stance

²¹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Brother Richard,” December 1882, WWP.

²¹⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Brother Richard,” December 1882, WWP.

²¹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Brother Richard,” December 1882, WWP.

²¹⁶ In spring 1865, Watson wrote to Smith III attempting to persuade him to accept polygamy. Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, n.d., WWP. (This letter was likely written in late spring or early summer of 1865 because it references a newspaper article “Letter from T. Thoughtful.” *SH* 10, no. 7 (May 15, 1865): 151–52.) Perhaps Watson thought that if he could convince Smith III that polygamy was a sanctioned practice, it would open the possibility of Strang’s legitimacy as a prophet. Watson ribbed Smith for denying polygamy, wondering “how much more inconsistent some Mormons make the Almighty than even the most ignorant gentiles,” adding that virtuous Strangites are right “to keep an eye after those pious declaimers against the doctrine of polygamy. Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, June 6, 1865, WWP. Although Watson would try numerous times to persuade Joseph Smith III, all attempts were made in vain.

²¹⁷ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 11. Although Watson would go on to resettle in Charlevoix County, approximately 30 miles from Beaver Island, Hickey lagged in Coldwater, Michigan, some 260 miles from the island. He resided there until his death in 1897.

toward Smith III, Watson was content to remain under the authority of his apostle. Still, Watson yearned to return to appointed gathering spaces. By spring 1872, anticipation built among some Strangites for a potential regathering near Beaver Island. Mary Nichols wrote to Watson explaining how she felt that “at least some of the higher quorums will eventually come and harbour some where near this place [Torch Lake, Antrim County, Michigan] or Pine Lake [Charlevoix County, Michigan].”²¹⁸ Watson felt the same urge to return to the island. By April 1872, he relocated to Bay Springs, near Boyne City, Charlevoix County, roughly 45 miles from Beaver Island. Although he was closer to the island, paradoxically, he was now more isolated from the Strangite diaspora.

Watson kept busy “to keep a little bread and gravy on hand,” but not too busy to encourage Strangites.²¹⁹ He described the plight of fellow believers in terms of a temporary diaspora until a future time when “all that have been scattered shall be gathered.”²²⁰ When, exactly, that gathering would occur was a mystery, and there was no good in forcing the matter. Watson demonstrated great respect for priesthood hierarchy, hesitant to proselytize without commission from those in authority over him even when apostasy was being preached in his region. “[Should] we undertake to preach without being sent by anyone,” he asked a fellow Strangite, “can we do any good?”²²¹

Eventually, he received his commission. In the early 1870s, Watson converted a few gentile families, among them Irish brothers William and Edward T. Couch²²² and

²¹⁸ Mary Nichols to Phebe Burnham Hobart, April 1872, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT. Pine Lake was later renamed Lake Charlevoix.

²¹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, May 25, 1872, WWP.

²²⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, May 25, 1872, WWP.

²²¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, May 25, 1872, WWP.

²²² Shepard, “Adversarial,” 12. Little is known about William and Edward T. Couch. Correspondence show that Watson had a closer relationship with Edward than William. Edward was born January 28, 1852 in Canada and died July 26, 1917 in Emmet County, Michigan. He wrote that he was “brought up by sectarian parents,” and was married to Hattie E. Griffin in Charlevoix County by Reuben T. Nichols in Torch Lake on November 13, 1880. Edward T. Couch, *The Prophetic Office* (Boyne City, MI: Edward T. Couch, 1908), 39. It is very likely that Edward was a converted to the Strangite church by the

two Indigenous men.²²³ The conversions were precious victories for the diminishing church. But Watson had little success of conversion beyond these handful of examples, which he owed to the many “unpleasant things” associated with Mormonism.²²⁴ Still, the horizon of Watson’s mission was broader than preaching to neighbors and defending the Saints against slander, whether warranted or unfounded. He also felt compelled to provide apologetic arguments in support of his belief in public spaces.

During a later visit to his family in Wisconsin, he took time to write an article defending the Book of Mormon in a Chicago newspaper, which was picked up by newspapers in Indiana and Kansas.²²⁵ It was not the first time he used the press to defend his beliefs, nor would it be his last. As a homesteader, however, his means to write and publish were severely limited. On June 12, 1874, Watson wrote Smith III, an unlikely ally, to ask for support in printing and distributing his tract on the “first principles of the

proselytism efforts of William, who Watson baptized on August 5, 1877. Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, August 15, 1877, WWP. Watson said of William that he was “a pretty good sort of man and is advocating the faith wherever he goes.” Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 11, 1878, WWP. Watson baptized Edward the following year, and, by spring 1879, spoke affectionately of the “two Couch Brothers” as dedicated members of the church. Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 26, 1879; Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, February 1895; Edward Couch, letter to Wingfield Watson on June 22, 1895, WWP. The Couches were children of first-generation immigrants from Ireland, which likely played a role in fostering the friendship between them and Watson. In August 1880, Watson wrote to his family from Wisconsin that he wished Edward was with him to help convert “young persons.” Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, August 29, 1880, WWP. Despite having never met Strang, Edward was nevertheless a fierce defender of his movement, even his practice of polygamy. Edward, who lived near the Watsons, was clearly Wingfield’s disciple; much of his argumentation for Strang echoes in tracts that Edward later published, e.g., *The Sabbath and the Restitution* (1891), *The Everlasting Covenant* (1906), *The Two Bibles* (1907), *The Prophetic Office* (1908), and *The Teachings of Jesus* (1913). Watson wished that his daughter, Grace, would have married Edward. Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 3, 1916, WWP.

²²³ Watson kept a decade-long correspondence with one of these men, Andrew Jackson Blackbird, an Ottawa man who lived in northern Michigan.

²²⁴ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 85. Reflecting on his proselytizing years later, Watson explained: “When I was first studying Mormonism, it gave me much cheer and caused me much rejoicing, as I thought it would now be an easy matter to win souls for Christ by presenting to them doctrines taught and believed by Latter Day Saints. But, in this I found myself very much mistaken, and felt much disappointment; for them I have presented the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints, and it could not be met by sectarian divines, immediately it would seem as though the whole atmosphere was filled with accounts of ‘Mormon depredations,’ and crimes of all kinds were being charged against them.” Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 85–86.

²²⁵ “The Book of Mormon,” *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, September 23, 1876; *The Jasper Weekly Courier* 18, no. 44 (November 10, 1876); *Cowley County Telegram* 4, no. 27 (November 10, 1876).

Gospel,” i.e., common doctrine between all Mormons.²²⁶ He was not looking for fame or affirmation, Watson clarified, so the tract could be published anonymously, “for I am only anxious to bring a few souls into the faith.”²²⁷ Smith III eventually arranged for his press staff to support Watson’s efforts. Over the course of a few decades, he wrote a handful of publications for the Reorganized newspaper *Saints’ Herald*.²²⁸

Watson, however, was mainly interested in buttressing the faith of those who remained in his church. It was painful for him to continually hear reports of fellow Strangites abandoning the faith. It seemed to Watson that Strangite Mormonism was evaporating at an alarming rate. “I am alone in the earth,” he lamented, “[but] I will dwell in dens or caves . . . before I yield up my faith.”²²⁹ Watson was troubled by Mormons who gave themselves over to competing religious movements, so he began decades-long correspondence with any Strangite who responded to his exhortation, especially those who found themselves in frequent conflict with Josephites. For Watson, little was more important than maintaining a distinctive Strangite identity even members who chose to join the Reorganization. “Be careful how you handle, associate with, or adopt Josephism,” he warned fellow Strangites.²³⁰ “It is, in its very essence, an absolute denial of James’ claims from A to Z.”²³¹

Watson’s desire to see members retain their Strangite distinctives set him on a

²²⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, June 21, 1874, WWP.

²²⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, June 21, 1874, WWP.

²²⁸ Later correspondence between Watson and Henry A. Stebbins, an employee of the *Saints’ Herald* printing office, demonstrate that he was able to negotiate and place orders for printed tracts (Henry A. Stebbins, letter to Wingfield Watson on May 25, 1877; Henry A. Stebbins, letter to Wingfield Watson, June 15, 1877, WWP). Watson also had published in the *Herald* a few articles: Wingfield Watson, “Baptism,” *SH* 23, no. 19 (October 1, 1876); “The Problem of Pauperism,” 23, no. 14 (July 15, 1876): 427–31; “Authority in the Name of God,” *SH* 24, no. 14 (July 10, 1877).

²²⁹ Quoted in William Shepard, “Wingfield Watson: A Midwest Visit, 1908,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 23–39.

²³⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 26, 1876, WWP.

²³¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 26, 1876, WWP.

quest to gather Strang's teachings and reprint the prophet's most valuable works. Two of them, in particular, caught Watson's attention: "I am very anxious to see the diamond and Prophetic Controversy in print," he told Reuben Nichols, "and it is actually a shame to us as Saints that there is scarcely a copy of either of those works to be had," he added. "It is no wonder that we are under the feet of our enemies...."²³² Watson believed that if Strang could speak for himself, if he could present his own case as he had in *The Diamond* and *Prophetic Controversy*, then perhaps the Strangites who left or considered leaving would heed the words of their late prophet. But Watson was at a loss to how he might go about collecting the works for reprinting.

Sometime in the fall of 1875, Watson learned of the death of Gilbert Watson (no relation to Wingfield). Gilbert served as Strang's clerk, eventually joined the Reorganization, and died at Binghampton, Wisconsin on September 22, 1875.²³³ To Watson, Gilbert was the most likely candidate for having collected and archive important documents.²³⁴ After hearing the news Gilbert's death, Wingfield immediately traversed Lake Michigan and trekked many miles on foot to visit Gilbert's widow, Cynthia, with the hope that she retained some of Strang's works and would be willing to hand them over to him.²³⁵ When he arrived, he was glad to learn that many of Strang's newspapers were in Cynthia's possession but shocked to find that she had begun to use them for "common place matters."²³⁶ One edition draped listlessly over freshly-kneaded dough. Watson secured the Gilbert collection, including a first edition of the BLL.²³⁷ Had it not

²³² Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, n.d., 1875, WWP.

²³³ Black, *Early Members* 6:128; "Died," *SH* 23, no. 3 (February 1, 1876): 96.

²³⁴ Watson he recalled how Gilbert had "kept a regular file of the *Voree Herald* and the *Northern Islander*." Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, June 2, 1914, WWP.

²³⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 25, 1916, WWP.

²³⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 25, 1916, WWP.

²³⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, November 3, 1921, WWP.

been for this chance encounter, it is possible that they would have been lost to history forever.²³⁸ “I was mighty glad to get [the collection],” he wrote.²³⁹ Absent from Gilbert’s papers was the official Strangite history written by church historian, Warren Post, whose wife, after his death, joined the Reorganization and delivered it over to that church.²⁴⁰

Josephites in the Watson Family

Watson’s struggle to maintain the Strangite identity entered his own family when his daughter, Janie, became engaged to John Willis, a non-Mormon. On August 22, 1876, he wrote John “with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain” to offer only one objection to the arrangement: “you do not belong to our faith.”²⁴¹ To Watson’s disappointment, John continued to resist conversion. The marriage was “no cause for joy to me but sadness,” he confessed to Nichols on October 31st.²⁴² Janie and John were married the very next day.²⁴³ Not wanting to see the same happen to his other daughters, he invited Reuben Nichols’ son, James, to visit and “see the girls,” that, perhaps the next wedding might be more equally yoked, but no such union blossomed.²⁴⁴

By summer 1877, after years of feeling as if the movement he loved was fraying, Watson was beset by discouragement. He wrote Nichols to recommend that they

²³⁸ Historian John Cummings agreed: “Without Watson’s devotion to the cause of his church and his belief in James J. Strang, most of the literature and the records of the church would have probably been lost. He guarded with great care the files of the *Voree Herald*, the *Northern Islander*, other publications and the church records. His republishing of significant items from the files of the church newspapers and from pamphlets was the performance of a valuable service to the records of history.” Cumming, “Wingfield Watson,” 320.

²³⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 25, 1916, WWP.

²⁴⁰ Quaiife, “Notes.”

²⁴¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to John Willis, August 22, 1876, WWP.

²⁴² Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, October 31, 1876, WWP.

²⁴³ “Michigan Marriages, 1868–1925,” FamilySearch, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6LZQ-SXB?i=89&cc=1452395&personaUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AN3DJ-SZX>.

²⁴⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 11, 1878, WWP. By then, Watson’s other two daughters, Elizabeth (b. June 1856) and Grace (b. 1860), were 21 and 18 or 19, respectively.

meet in conference, but not for reasons Nichols might have suspected. “I feel we ought to make it a day of Mourning and not rejoicing,” Watson explained, point to OT references of Israel weeping in captivity far from their Zion. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in strange lands?” asked Watson, referencing Psalm 137:4. To Watson, the Strangites were not in diaspora but captivity, and their exile was taking its toll on the community. “[We] are few in numbers scattered among our enemies,” he lamented, “and scarcely a dozen remaining true to the faith.”²⁴⁵ If only God would send the Strangites their third prophet. “Where, O where is our leader?” asked Watson. “Without question he is somewhere on the earth and I think he is in the exercise of his ministry some where . . . Where is the prophet of God?”²⁴⁶ Watson’s prayers went unanswered; there would never be a second Strangite prophet in his lifetime, nor has there been to this day.

Still, Watson felt compelled to persevere. At an unknown date, Watson was ordained from elder to high priest by Nichols, emboldening his resolve to persevere.²⁴⁷ “I feel still that God has not altogether cast us off but we have not much to spare.”²⁴⁸ Watson’s sentiment was shared by James Hutchins, who, though he was “alone save God my Heavenly Father,” plead with Strangites to pray that God would “send one mighty and strong” to deliver them “from present Babylonian bondage.”²⁴⁹ While Watson never envisioned himself as the ‘mighty and strong’ one, it is clear he felt drawn to a Danielic role of maintaining Strangite distinction in the midst of exile while also representing truth (as he saw it) to power. If Watson was to strengthen what remained and grow in his prophetic role, he would need to step forward from beneath the shadow of priesthood

²⁴⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, June 7, 1877, WWP.

²⁴⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, February 20, 1878, WWP.

²⁴⁷ William Shepard, “Adversarial,” 19. The ordination likely occurred sometime between 1872 and 1886, after Watson’s move to northern Michigan and before Nichols’s death.

²⁴⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, June 7, 1877.

²⁴⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to James Hutchins, September 1, 1877, WWP.

hierarchy to defend and promote the faith with or without his fellow authorities.

**Wingfield Watson, the Strangite Apologist:
May 1877 to July 1910**

By winter 1877–1878, Watson was growing in his role as one of Strang’s most ardent apologists. In addition to gathered fellowship, Watson believed that a resurrected Strangite press could advance their cause, an unsurprising conclusion for a man who was converted by Mormon literature and whose prophet made much use of the press. In 1877, Watson commissioned the *Saints’ Herald* publishers to print a pamphlet for him even as Smith III rejected one of his articles for publication.²⁵⁰ Watson secured the reprinting of two influential pamphlets written by Strang, *The Diamond* (1848) and *Prophetic Controversy* (1854). He mailed a copy of *The Diamond* to Smith III, who expressed his gratitude in return. In a rather candid response, Smith III wrote: “So far as the future, and the fate that awaits me for following my own convictions, instead of what others may hold, I am prepared for the risks.”²⁵¹ Watson may have read this confession as a harboring potential for Smith III later acceptance of Strang’s claims, or, at the very least, a willingness to hear out the Strangite argument.

Still, the focus of his mission always returned to strengthening what remained. Watson realized the difficulty of his task increased the longer Hickey supported Smith III. In January 1880, Watson trained his sights on Hickey. By then, their relationship had deteriorated substantially. Watson complained to Hickey how he had weathered his “slang, and abuse, and scurrelous inuendos” in years past but was willing to place personal insult aside to settle their debate. He proposed they co-author a written debate, each defending his own position.²⁵² It would be printed and distributed among the

²⁵⁰ Henry A. Stebbins, letter to Wingfield Watson on May 25, 1877; Henry A. Stebbins, letter to Wingfield Watson on June 15, 1877, WWP.

²⁵¹ Joseph Smith III, letter to Wingfield Watson on April 4, 1878, WWP.

²⁵² Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, January 5, 1880, WWP.

Strangites “so that all may see both sides of this question, aye this most important question.”²⁵³ Watson was confident that his position would win. Hickey, however, rejected Watson’s invitation. In anger, Hickey reiterated his position that Strang had ordained Smith III, whether he knew it or not, and that the Strangites had to accept him, whether they liked it or not.²⁵⁴

Having thrown the gauntlet down to Hickey, and armed with some of Strang’s pamphlets, Watson turned again to Smith III. On July 22, 1880, he sent Smith III a copy of Strang’s *Prophetic Controversy* with some commentary of his own. Watson was confident he would breach his opponent’s confidence. Brashly, he wrote: “You certainly must know by this time of the day that young Joseph is neither prophet, seer, revelator nor translator.”²⁵⁵ But his confidence was misplaced and frayed the men’s relationship. Smith III fired back a response, arguing that both Strang and Watson misread key Mormon scriptures. From his hunkered position, Smith III declared: “I will die before I will change my views; &c which has been heretofore the position held by you, Hickey, &c.”²⁵⁶ The following month, he wrote again, lambasting Watson for “slashing away at me.” He wondered why Watson, if he could not reconsider Strangism, would not simply let others move on. Smith III further pressed Watson by asking the Strangites to identify

²⁵³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, January 5, 1880, WWP.

²⁵⁴ Cumming, *Last of the Twelve*, 19. While Hickey continued to sustain Smith III in the First Presidency, he also maintained contact with Strang’s sons, especially Gabriel and Charles, perhaps in anticipation of his potential succession to his father’s position. In April, Hickey wrote to Charles, cryptically hoping for the day when Charles would “teach what your father taught.” “Such has been our prayer and shall be in all coming time,” said Hickey, who maintained God’s prerogative in appointing prophets, but apparently wondered if it might be one of Strang’s sons. Lorenzo Dow Hickey to Charles J. Strang, April 1880, WWP. Charles, however, vehemently rejected what he perceived to be an invitation to assume his father’s mantle. Rumors of Strang’s prince ascending to the throne became so credible that, in 1882, Charles wrote Smith III to set the record straight. He assured members of the Reorganization that, despite being “urged many years to undertake a revival of the ‘kingdom,’ [I] can not do it.” Joseph Smith III, *SH* 29, no. 15 (August 1, 1882): 236. Gabriel, too, was pressured by Hickey to take a leadership role without success. Gabriel Strang, letter to John Wake, January 9, 1928, WWP.

²⁵⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, July 22, 1880, WWP.

²⁵⁶ Joseph Smith III, letter to Wingfield Watson on July 27, 1880, WWP.

Strang's successor, an impossible question to answer.²⁵⁷ "I don't know!" Watson snapped back; "Now let me ask you a question. . . . Does our ignorance of this <fact> authorize usurpation on your part?"²⁵⁸ The men entered a bitter stalemate.

By August 1880, Watson traveled to Clifton, Wisconsin, offering him the opportunity to visit and encourage the Strangites in the region.²⁵⁹ Possibly it was around this time that Watson received more important Strangite church records spanning the Voree and Beaver Island years.²⁶⁰ These documents offered Watson "precious truths" and detailed insight into church history.²⁶¹ "I have often wondered what would have become of it had I not requested it just when I did," he said, and with good reason.²⁶² Had Watson not received and stewarded the collection, the *Chronicles of Voree* might have been lost to history forever and, with it, the possibility of reconstructing Strangite history.²⁶³

In July 1881, after all his efforts over the past few years, Watson could muster only a small contingency of Strangites to hold a conference in northern Michigan. He reported that the meeting was "not very numerously attended; as in fact there are but few of that faith in the region."²⁶⁴ Most of the meeting was spent listening to Hickey and Watson debate their positions, by then a familiar exercise. Such debates were never pleasant affairs. Watson later complained that, over the course of decades, "L. D. Hickey has abused me much because I could not agree with him" on Smith III's role in the

²⁵⁷ Joseph Smith III, letter to Wingfield Watson on July 27, 1880, WWP.

²⁵⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, December 2, 1880, WWP.

²⁵⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Jane Watson, August 29, 1880, WWP.

²⁶⁰ In 1892, Watson informed Hickey that he received the documents from James Hutchins "about 11 years ago." Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, March 2, 1892, WWP.

²⁶¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, March 2, 1892, WWP.

²⁶² Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, March 2, 1892, WWP.

²⁶³ CV indicates that the manuscript was given to Watson by Hutchins who charged him to keep the records safe "to the uttermost of your circumstances and ability." CV, ii.

²⁶⁴ *SH* 28, no. 18 (September 15, 1881): 289.

church.²⁶⁵ In the end, “the matter was left with the Saints to consider, deliberate upon, and decide for themselves.”²⁶⁶

Weathering Deteriorated Relationships and Schism

Watson would spend the next decade in a rhythm of combating criticism, attempting to persuade Smith III and Hickey of his position, encouraging faithful Strangites, and distributing proselytizing material. Watson, however, was careful to pick his battles. National interest in Strang was revived in 1882 when *Harper's Magazine* ran a critical six-page biography of the Mormon prophet.²⁶⁷ Compared to previous biographic works, the article represented the first gentle sketch free of sensationalist prejudice. It was also the first major publication on Strang since his death. Watson was aware of the article but did not address it publicly.²⁶⁸ Instead, he reserved his energy for rhetoric against Josephite influence within the Strangite community.

Watson's dialogue with Elisha C. Brown is a typical example of his engagement with Reorganized members. In a *Saints' Herald* piece, Brown, formerly a Strangite, criticized the “handful of Strangites” left for their shrinking and minute status within Mormonism.²⁶⁹ It was patently obvious to Brown why Strang was a fallen prophet; plural marriage caused his downfall. Watson fired back immediately the month after with a lengthy defense of polygamy and ending with the obvious rebuttal: “[If] the true church is determined by numbers . . . why should I not join the Brighamites in preference to the

²⁶⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP. This letter was written sometime during 1892 or after because it was postmarked Burlington, Wisconsin, where Watson lived from 1892 until his death in 1922.

²⁶⁶ *SH* 28, no. 18 (September 15, 1881): 289.

²⁶⁷ Charles K. Backus, “An American King,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 64, no. 382. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1882: 555.

²⁶⁸ “Letter from Wingfield Watson,” *SH* 29, no. 11 (June 1, 1882): 170–71.

²⁶⁹ Elisha C. Brown, “In Evidence,” *SH* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1882): 6.

Reorganization? Aye why not join the Catholics?”²⁷⁰ Brown was quick to mend the fence. On March 9th, he wrote to Watson apologizing for any offense, but remained firm in his convictions. “As for Strang,” he explained, “I rather liked the man, but think he jumped pasture when he went into plurality. . . . If you wish any further controversy, please write me.”²⁷¹

Brown’s word choice of ‘controversy’ is an apt description of Watson’s mission. The succession of Joseph Smith to Brigham Young was a prophetic controversy only to be repeated with Strang to Joseph Smith III. For Watson, controversy over the legal priesthood rights of the prophetic office had plagued the church since the death of Joseph Smith in summer of 1844 and was continuing through his own son. Having republished Strang’s *Prophetic Controversy* in 1878, he would go on to publish twelve of his own pamphlets under the same title, most during his twilight years.

On January 30, 1886, Mary Nichols died, leaving Reuben a widower.²⁷² Later that fall, Reuben Nichols followed his wife in death. Watson presided over both funerals.²⁷³ In one year, Watson lost two of his closest companions in the faith, both relationally and by proximity. Watson also discovered shortly after Mary’s death that Reuben’s priesthood had been temporarily revoked at the time Nichols ordained Watson, thus invalidating his position as high priest and reverting him back to an elder.²⁷⁴ Watson called into question his entire quest for rallying his church. It was a particularly debilitating season to endure.

In frustration, Watson lashed out at his greatest sources of trouble—Hickey and

²⁷⁰ Wingfield Watson, “In Defense,” *SH* 29, no. 4 (February 15, 1882): 53.

²⁷¹ Elisha C. Brown, letter to Wingfield Watson on March 9, 1882, WWP.

²⁷² “Died,” *SH* 33, no. 8 (February 20, 1886): 127.

²⁷³ “Died,” *SH* 33, no. 42 (October 23, 1886): 655.

²⁷⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 9, 1887, WWP.

Joseph Smith III. Watson claimed that he would rather be “chopped into mince meat before I will receive Young Josephism or have any connection with his Reorganization,” adding that he regarded “each and every man who denied the claims of James J. Strang ‘as a Heathen man’” and could not “uphold any man who upholds such as the ministers of God,” i.e., Hickey.²⁷⁵ Watson also declared that he regarded the Reorganization “as five times worse than Brighamism, and only another form of apostasy.”²⁷⁶ It frustrated him to fight this battle alone. “What I want,” he wished, “is some one to take part with me for though I can do considerable alone, two are better than one.”²⁷⁷ One wonders whether Hickey and Watson could have accomplished more for Strangism in concord than as rivals.

The following year, on May 24, 1888, Watson received a letter from Smith III that infuriated him. In a long, nineteen-page letter, Watson railed against Smith III and his First Counselor, William W. Blair, for corrupting scripture and opposing God’s will.²⁷⁸ The Reorganization was, in fact, far worse than Brigham Young’s church. Gurley and Briggs, the movement’s chief architects, peddled “drunken, driveling, staggering and reeling contradictions and nonsense” whose “gross perversions of holy writ remind one of a drunken man reeling and staggering in his vomit.”²⁷⁹ As a result of Smith III’s compliance with them, he too was guilty of “grossly perverting scripture and opposing the prophets of God.”²⁸⁰ Consequently, the Josephites have opposed the priesthood “in

²⁷⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 9, 1887, WWP.

²⁷⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to John Comstock, March 26, 1887, WWP.

²⁷⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Reuben Nichols, March 11, 1887, WWP.

²⁷⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, draft, n.d., WWP. William Wallace Blair (1828–1896) was converted to Mormonism, in part, by the missionary efforts of William Smith, following him and other schismatic leaders until meeting Zenos Gurley. Blair joined the Reorganization in 1857 and rose through priesthood ranks until Joseph Smith III called him to be his First Counselor, the position formerly held by Smith’s uncle, Hyrum, to his father. Black, *Early Members*, 1:478–479.

²⁷⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, draft, n.d., WWP.

²⁸⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, n.d., WWP.

order to establish themselves in usurpation and fraud, over their fellow man.”²⁸¹

Exasperated, Watson set down his pen, filed away the draft letter, and never sent it. He had a change of heart, not in his position but in the mode of its defense. Besides, it was time, once more, to reinforce the other front under assault from Hickey.

By fall 1888, the Strangite remnant in Kansas had dwindled to less than forty.²⁸² The small contingency met for conference in Horton on October 4, 1889, where, once more, their relationship to the Reorganization was raised by Hickey, who attempted to pass a resolution to recognize Smith III as president.²⁸³ Ultimately, the resolution failed to pass and backfired on Hickey. In December, a majority of members resolved to disassociate from anyone who acknowledged Smith III’s presidency.²⁸⁴

Watson was thrilled by their decision. Although he did not attend the meeting, he visited them the following spring of April 1889. He affirmed their resolve, encouraging them to disfellowship completely from anyone who entertained partnership with or membership in the Reorganization.²⁸⁵ But Watson’s visit was risky. As an ordained elder from a distant jurisdiction, visiting the Kansas Strangites and taking such a hard stance against an apostle was dicey. Other members could have interpreted Watson’s visit as jockeying against his leadership and undermining the priesthood. Still, Watson thought it was worth the risk and resources to reinforce true commitment to Strang.

By spring 1890, Watson’s household was, once more, threatened by Josephite influence. Charles Lewis, his son-in-law of four years, lost interest in the Strangite church after becoming persuaded by Josephites to reject Strang.²⁸⁶ Lewis’s opposition to plural

²⁸¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, n.d., WWP.

²⁸² Shepard, “Adversarial,” 20.

²⁸³ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 20.

²⁸⁴ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 20.

²⁸⁵ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 20.

²⁸⁶ On March 9, 1886, Watson’s third daughter, Grace, married Charles Lewis, who expressed

marriage played a large role in rejecting Strang's teachings.²⁸⁷ Watson's position on the matter was not merely settled but also very public. Earlier, in 1885, Watson wrote an article for the Brighamite *Deseret Evening News* in solidarity with Mormon men arrested for 'unlawful cohabitation.'²⁸⁸ By the mid-1880s, with the passage of the Edmunds Acts (1882), polygamists were in the throes of federal authorities prosecuting them with felonies and imprisonment.²⁸⁹ Though he never practiced polygamy, Watson defended it, arguing that God had ordained plural marriage and, moreover, contrary to popular opposition with concern for women's safety and flourishing, it worked for the common good of humanity by pairing women with men who are of godly character. In a strange twist, Watson argued that polygamy was a sort of proto-feminist right; a woman ought to have the power to choose any man she desires, even if he is already married. Moreover, in a world ravaged by warfare and a tremendous loss of men's lives, whom were the women left to marry? Watson's answer was, of course, no one. In a strictly monogamous society, then, young widows were consigned to prostitution or crime to make ends meet. Watson wrote of the gentiles sarcastically, "This is our motto, and these are our terms. Whoredom or the prison house is your choice."²⁹⁰

Watson's persistent defense of polygamy was a perpetual source of ire to the Josephites who, despite evidence to the contrary, maintained that Joseph Smith never taught nor practiced plural marriage. Yet, Watson rightly contended, Smith had instituted and practice polygamy, and, after an initial opposition to plural marriage, so did Strang.

interest in joining the Strangite church at the time of their engagement.

²⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

²⁸⁸ Wingfield Watson, "The Crusade as Viewed by a Michigan Man," *Deseret Evening News* 21, no. 34 (June 10, 1885): 333.

²⁸⁹ W. Paul Reeve, "Conflict: 1869–1890," *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall (Santa Barbra, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 41–43.

²⁹⁰ Wingfield Watson, "The Crusade as Viewed by a Michigan Man," *Deseret Evening News* 21, no. 34 (June 10, 1885): 333.

For Watson, polygamy was an element of Mormonism—though not a major one—that could not be denied. To deny its efficacy and divine permission was to deny God’s prophets.

Apparently, Watson called upon this and other lines of reasoning to defend Strang against the skepticism of his son-in-law. Tension between Watson and Lewis boiled over at a meeting in East Jordan, Michigan and erupted in sharp disagreement.²⁹¹ Watson followed up with Lewis in a letter to argue in support of polygamy, firmly contending that the practice was without adulterous intentions. In the end, though, Watson argued that polygamy was not the continental divide between Strangite and Josephite—it was priesthood authority. In fact, Watson said, were the Josephites ever to adopt polygamy he would remain outside its body. “I would be as far from joining that institution than as I ever was,” he said, wanting “nothing to do with false leaders.”²⁹² But, like his unsent invective to Smith III, Watson never mailed the letter. He later explained to Grace that he saw no point in “sending prejudiced men letters to convince them of the errors of their ways.”²⁹³ Meanwhile, Josephites continued to persuade Lewis to forsake Strang and join their cause, and, consequently, Watson was losing his grip on his daughter’s religious beliefs.

On July 5th, Watson wrote her to explain that he would not have discussed polygamy with Lewis but was compelled because he was using it as “a mere excuse for rejecting the claims and ministry” of Strang.²⁹⁴ Anyone who does so is “striking and kicking against some pretty sharp pricks,” he said.²⁹⁵ Attached to the letter was a copy of

²⁹¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

²⁹² Wingfield Watson, letter to Charles Lewis, March 18, 1890, WWP.

²⁹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

²⁹⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

²⁹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

Watson's unsent message to Lewis. "You can do as you please whether you shew it to Charley or not," Watson instructed.²⁹⁶ Whether Lewis read it is not known; regardless, Watson sent the letter too late. The day after Watson mailed Grace, Lewis was baptized into the Reorganization in East Jordan.²⁹⁷ Josephites convinced Watson's son-in-law to reject the prophet he loved for one he viewed as a usurper, and, worse, his daughter's own salvation was now in peril. To keep her in the faith, he would need to do something drastic.

Little did Watson know, but plans were hatching in East Jordan that would present the perfect opportunity, one in which he would play a central role.

The 1891 Debate at East Jordan

After returning to Michigan in August, Watson wrote Phebe Thompson to invite her for a visit in Bay Springs.²⁹⁸ Along with his invitation, he encouraged her to remain true to her faith, ramping up his rhetoric against the Reorganization. "Brighamism is based upon a bundle of lies and falsehoods of the most mean and blasphemous [disaster?]," he warned her, "and Young Josephism is actually three times meaner and more wicked if possible."²⁹⁹ Employing a military metaphor, Watson asserted "we are still trying to do battle for the right, and find that we must do it or sink."³⁰⁰ Clearly, the fear of losing his daughter to Josephism haunted him, and he yearned for an opportunity to be sent into the field of battle against his enemies.

²⁹⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 5, 1890, WWP.

²⁹⁷ Shepard, "Adversarial," 22; Wingfield Watson, "Holy Island and Mormon Sacrifices There," July 15, 1875, WWP.

²⁹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, Thompson family correspondence, 1854–1907, 2013; Phebe and Medad Thompson miscellaneous documents, 1854–1892; Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

²⁹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

³⁰⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

That winter, Lewis was busy setting up such a skirmish between his father-in-law and the Reorganization's second-in-command, William Blair.³⁰¹ Although it is impossible to ascribe motive for why Lewis mediated a meeting, based on the men's fiery exchange the year prior, it is reasonable to suppose that Lewis wanted to soften his father-in-law's support of Strang to alleviate religious tensions in his family.³⁰² And, if Lewis read the letter Watson wrote Grace, then it is possible that Lewis took seriously his father-in-law's argument that the core division between Strangite and Josephite was not religious practice (e.g., polygamy) but religious authority; prophetic authority would become the theme of the meeting Lewis organized between Watson and Blair.

Blair wrote to Watson in November 1890 to recommend a public platform on which the men could "discuss the merits of Strangism compared with the claims of the Reorganized Church."³⁰³ This was the opportunity Watson had been waiting for. A victory over the Josephites would reward Watson with his daughter's continued residency in his faith, a strengthened Strangite church, and a public wounding of the Reorganization.

Watson immediately agreed to debate; however, he was uninterested in comparing Strangite and Josephite doctrine to one another. Instead, he suggested that both doctrines be compared to Mormonism "as set forth and laid down by Joseph the Seer [and other] seers and prophets in former dispensations."³⁰⁴ Watson recommended holding the debate in East Jordan because the discussion "was first set on foot" there and,

³⁰¹ Watson, too, played a role in the meeting after repeatedly challenging Reorganized leadership to "public discussion of the relative merits of the claims made" by both James Strang and Joseph Smith III. (Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 5).

³⁰² Lewis also wrestled with his new Josephite faith and even questioned some aspects of it publicly. In early 1891, Watson wrote to the First Presidency concerning a New York newspaper that claimed Joseph Smith had prophesied the Saints would eventually emigrate to Mexico. "To this," retorted Joseph Smith III, "we reply that nothing of the kind was ever heard of till of late. Nothing of the kind appears of record in any of the authentic writings of Joseph Smith." "Joe Smith's Prophecy," *SH* 38, no. 7 (February 14, 1891).

³⁰³ Wingfield Watson, letter to William W. Blair, December 22, 1890, WWP.

³⁰⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to William W. Blair, December 22, 1890, WWP.

moreover, Lewis promised Watson to provide a venue on the condition that he agree to the debate.³⁰⁵ Moreover, Watson did not envision the debate as between Blair and Watson alone, but between the Reorganized First Presidency and “we the followers of Mr. Strang.”³⁰⁶ It would not be a debate between two men but between two institutions, despite the Strangite church being split over Hickey’s young Joseph question.

Blair agreed to the terms and, with the blessing of Joseph Smith III, began his preparation. Evidently, Smith III believed the debate would produce favorable results for the Reorganization. It is unlikely he would permit a member of his First Presidency to debate someone if he thought they could undermine the church. Perhaps, Smith III thought, a win for Blair could result in more converts from the Strangites at best or, at worse, a rebuked and subdued Wingfield Watson.

East Jordan received a foretaste of the debate in August when “Reverend Collins,” a Methodist Episcopal minister, met with Josephite “Elder Phelps” to debate doctrine. Instead of debating, however, Collins bogarted the event by turning it into a tent meeting. His strategy backfired; after the Methodist finished preaching, Phelps converted four people.³⁰⁷ Such a misstep played into Phelps’s hands, and Watson was determined not to repeat such a debacle. His debate with Blair would orbit priesthood authority, and neither would it transform into proselytizing.

On October 15th, Blair set out from Lamoni, Iowa for East Jordan.³⁰⁸ The debate occurred in the townhall from October 22–26, 1891. Watson defended Strang’s prophetic position and doctrine on the evenings of 22nd, 23rd, and 24th while Blair

³⁰⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to William W. Blair, December 22, 1890, WWP.

³⁰⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to William W. Blair, December 22, 1890, WWP. Emphasis added.

³⁰⁷ *SH* 38, no. 34 (August 22, 1891): 538–39.

³⁰⁸ *SH* 38, no. 43 (October 24, 1891): 681.

defended his prophet on the evening of the 25th and 26th.³⁰⁹ The exchange focused on the differing interpretations of Mormon ecclesiastical law to argue for the right of Strang and Smith III to their respective positions. The debaters were dynamic and vehement in rhetoric but, according to Willard J. Smith, who recorded the event, the men maintained “a courteous and gentlemanly manner” toward one another.³¹⁰ A transcript of the event confirms Smith’s commentary.³¹¹

The debate was framed within the topic of ‘lawful succession’ within an LDS ecclesiology. In reality, it was a contest of authority. Between James Strang and Joseph Smith III, who inherited the proper authority over the LDS Church? Blair was clearly a captivating and persuasive orator, though he was a less skilled as a debater. He paired his long, expressive arguments with common-sense rationalism, and he habitually employed biting wit and merciless *ad hominem* attacks against Strang. Watson was Blair’s inverse; his arguments were logically sound but lacked the same substance and organization as his opponent. His rebuttals were shorter and precise but repetitive and scattered as he bounced from topic to topic, responding to one issue, moving to another, and then returning to the first. A flustered Watson confessed at the end of the debate that at times he was “somewhat confused, not knowing hardly what to present first.”³¹²

³⁰⁹ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 3–4.

³¹⁰ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 4.

³¹¹ In essence, Blair argued that Strang was not a prophet for two primary reasons. First, his claims to the office contradicted and undermined Mormon ecclesiastical law and, second, his teachings and practices were contradictory to Mormonism, subversive of federal law, and immoral because Strang engaged in disqualifying practices, namely polygamy and ‘king-craft.’ Watson countered that Strang was a prophet because he received appointment by Joseph Smith, he was ordained by an angel, and he brought forth true revelation that led to holiness and flourishing. Watson repeatedly accused Smith III of violating priesthood law, noting that lesser priesthood officers could not appoint or ordain those above them, as they had done for him in 1860. Notably absent from Watson’s defense is any attempt to refute charges that the LofA was fraudulent, which Blair habitually cast aside as forgery. Of course, Watson called on the LofA as evidence, but did not defend it against accusations of fraud. Watson, who accepted the letter’s authenticity *a priori*, once referred to it as being delivered to Strang “through the proper source,” but spent no energy defending it beyond this comment. Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 189. Watson would later explain in detail why he believed the letter was authentic. Wingfield Watson, letter to Edward Couch, December 15, 1892, WWP.

³¹² Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 233.

This debate was the first and most significant public argument for the succession and authority of Strang to date. It demonstrated clearly that Watson held to unique Strangite principles, which will be explored in detail in the following chapter. A record of the debate was finalized by Willard Smith and was later “examined and corrected” by Watson, who endorsed the final draft.³¹³ *The Watson-Blair Debate* was printed the following spring.³¹⁴

The results of the debate were not what Watson hoped for. He admitted that he was not “accustomed to debate,” a confession that proved true as the evenings wore on.³¹⁵ Watson’s precision and clarity waned as each evening passed by. Although the event drew a massive crowd of four hundred, Blair confidently boasted of a “good outlook” for the Josephites.³¹⁶ Smith III welcomed letters from attendees that prompted him to “report a victory for the Reorganization.”³¹⁷ Non-Mormon reports even claimed the debate was lopsided, “and that not favorable to the claims of Strang.”³¹⁸ The Reorganization was so confident of a victory that by January the *Saints’ Herald* advertised the sale of the debate proceedings and ran an ad for the book over the next decade. Conspicuously absent from the *Saints’ Herald* after 1891 are any writings from Watson despite his efforts at getting articles into print.

Even members of Watson’s church were frustrated with the results. Although Willard Smith heralded Watson as “the leading light of the Strangites,” Hickey conceded

³¹³ *SH* 39, no. 3 (January 16, 1892): 37; Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 244. Evidently, the final edition included alterations that Watson disapproved. Shepard, “Adversarial,” 24.

³¹⁴ “Editorial Items,” *SH* 39, no. 12 (March 19, 1892): 180.

³¹⁵ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 233.

³¹⁶ *SH* 38, no. 45 (November 7, 1891): 714.

³¹⁷ *SH* 38, no. 45 (November 7, 1891): 714.

³¹⁸ *The East Jordan Enterprise*, 12 November 1891, reprinted in *SH* 38, no. 48 (November 28, 1891): 758.

defeat and expressed his disappointment with Watson.³¹⁹ “You [got] brow beaten by Blair,” he scolded Watson.³²⁰ Hickey added that “I think no more of Blair than Tom Bedford,” i.e., in essence, that a defeat from Smith III’s right-hand-man was as insulting as a defeat from Strang’s assassin.³²¹ Hickey distanced himself from Watson after the debate and tried to persuade Josephites in East Jordan that Watson was not an official representative of the Strangites.³²² The debate, once bursting with potential, deflated into one of the most demoralizing experiences of Watson’s life.

To make matters worse, in the following year, the Reorganization gleefully reported that their “work was gaining ground” in the region as “people were more willing to hear and talk of the faith.”³²³ If Watson had any hopes of winning over his son-in-law, they were in vain. Lewis remained an active member of the Reorganization, which continued to gain ground even in Watson’s own town.³²⁴ In just a few years, Lewis would lead the East Jordan branch.³²⁵ The only consolation to comfort Watson was his daughter’s (Lewis’s wife) refusal to budge from her Strangite convictions.

Even more miserable experiences plagued the Watsons as they suffered from a poor harvest that summer. Then, the Watson’s home burned and, with it, many important Strangite documents he had collected earlier.³²⁶ Relocating was nearly inevitable. A final

³¹⁹ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 4.

³²⁰ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, letter to Wingfield Watson, n.d., WWP.

³²¹ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, letter to Wingfield Watson, n.d., WWP.

³²² Wingfield Watson, letter to “the High Priests,” May 18, 1892, WWP.

³²³ *SH* 39, no. 53 (December 31, 1892): 842.

³²⁴ In January 1893, the *SH* reported that Lewis left East Jordan for a missionary journey, which resulted in “reaching a large number with the truth.” *SH* 40, no. 3 (January 21, 1893): 38; 40, no. 5 (February 4, 1893): 69. Throughout the year, Lewis happily reported to Joseph Smith III of a new convert baptisms in Boyne City. *SH* 40, no. 14 (April 8, 1893): 212; 40, no. 42 (October 21, 1893): 663.

³²⁵ *SH* 41, no. 9 (February 28, 1894): 130.

³²⁶ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 23; Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, February 1895, WWP. Uncannily, Strang’s home on Beaver Island, one of the last standing Mormon structures, was also destroyed by fire around the same time. Marie Latta “The Unusual Story of Michigan’s Only King,”

blow to Watson's morale came in spring 1892 when he learned that his priesthood had been silenced in retaliation for his appearance in Horton, Kansas by a group of high priests loyal to Hickey.³²⁷ Having lost his own office of high priest years earlier, Watson was not even an elder any longer. He could no longer, in any official capacity, act as a representative of the Strangite community.

Watson was defeated in debate, failed as a farmer, homeless, and without his priesthood. Still, his resolve for Strang sustained him. Watson pled with the high priests to restore his station in the church, arguing that the time to tolerate internal bickering and strife had long passed. He bemoaned that the Strangite population had shrunk to "perhaps not more than thirty persons" (a serious underestimate) and, given a few more years, the movement would be altogether "'swallowed up' by the grave and the apostates till there will scarcely be one left."³²⁸ But if the leaders of his own community would not support his crusade to see the Strangite identity endure, then he would go about doing it on his own. One way to do so, he thought, was to regain the lost property of Voree, the original Strangite gathering place, in anticipation of Christ's return.

Securing the Future of the Strangite Tradition

By spring of 1892, the Watsons moved from Michigan to Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, six miles west of Burlington near the old Voree settlement. The devastation wrought by failed crops, housefire, and social turmoil in the aftermath of the debate were motivation enough for the Watsons to seek sabbath near the Garden of Peace. Watson found employment with Jacob Nephi Richtman, a Strangite, who owned farmland near

Enquirer and News (Battle Creek, MI), August 10, 1974, 17.

³²⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to "the High Priests," May 18, 1892.

³²⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to "the High Priests," May 18, 1892.

Burlington.³²⁹ In June, Watson’s son, Thomas, married Richtman’s daughter, Sophia, who converted to the Strangite church and moved with her husband near the Watsons.³³⁰

The comfort of settling near to Voree was attended by sorrow. Watson described the abandoned and derelict Zion to his daughter, Grace:

When I look over this beautiful land and pass by the gathering place once apointed and to a great extent filled with Saints, and see it now dessloate—with the walls only of the schoolhouse, and one or two other houses where Saints used to reside and congregate still standing, I cannot feel otherwise at least than a little sad.³³¹

Still, Watson yearned for a future day when the Saints would gather there again. In 1896, Watson and Richtman purchased property from a gentile owner that included prized Strangite sites featuring the Hill of Promise and the nearby cemetery.³³² Watson clearly desired to secure the property so that Strangites, and not gentiles, might control its destiny. He paid a tidy sum of \$2,000 toward its purchase as Richtman contributed an additional \$8,350.³³³ Watson believed that by regaining the land he was correcting the error that Strangites made in letting it go. “[The] Saints have always been required to be a gathered people,” he explained, a feature that would become especially important during the apocalypse.³³⁴ “Joseph Smith has put it on record that the time is approach when there will be no safety, only at the gathering places of the Saints,” he wrote.³³⁵ Watson’s financial sacrifice was a down payment for the safety of his fellow Strangites at a future date. In fact, Watson did not consider the land his own, and neither was it Richtman’s

³²⁹ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 24.

³³⁰ “Wisconsin Marriages, 1836–1930”, FamilySearch, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XR2R-PGV>.

³³¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 9, 1892, WWP.

³³² Shepard, Adversarial, 25–26; Speek, *Kingdom*, 226; “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 14 (February 14, 1906).

³³³ Richtman v. Watson, 150 Wis. 385, in Frederic K. Conover, ed., *Wisconsin Reports 150: Cases Determined in the Supreme Court of Wisconsin, May 14–October 29, 1912* (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1912), 388.

³³⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

³³⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

property. The men agreed to a verbal trust, and Watson was named on the land's title.³³⁶ The land could be used only for members in need of free residency. The Watsons settled there in a wood-frame house near the White River, adjacent from the possible home where Strang died.³³⁷ In addition to farming, in his spare time, Watson returned to publishing tracts and pamphlets in lieu of penning articles for the *Saints' Herald*.³³⁸

In 1894, renowned Brighamite historian Brigham Henry Roberts published *Succession in the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* in which he took aim at the Reorganization's installation of Smith III as presidency based on revelation, lineal descent, and priesthood ordination.³³⁹ Four years later, the Reorganization's church historian, Heman C. Smith, responded to Robert's work serially in the *Saints' Herald*.³⁴⁰ Watson, in the meantime, had already interjected his Strangite perspective in November 1894.³⁴¹ In *An Open Letter to B. H. Roberts*, Watson warmly

³³⁶ "Richtman v. Watson," 400.

³³⁷ "Richtman v. Watson," 389.

³³⁸ Dale Morgan lists *The Diamond* and *The Prophetic Controversy* among the works Watson reprinted in 1893. Morgan, "Bibliography," 87–88.

³³⁹ B. H. Roberts (1857–1933) was an influential leader in late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Mormonism. Roberts worked as editor of multiple Mormon periodicals, was Assistant Church Historian, and served as president in the First Council of Seventy for most of his life (1888–1933). In 1898, he was elected to the House of Representatives but denied entry for practicing polygamy. Roberts was also a prolific author. Among his most significant works were the six-volume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, both of which set a standard for study and scholarship in their respective topics. Andrew Jenson, "Brigham Henry Roberts," *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Andrew Jenson History, 1901), 205–6. Roberts, *Succession*, 50.

³⁴⁰ The *SH* indicates that the Reorganization was made aware of Robert's work in early 1894. *SH* 41, no. 9 (February 28, 1894): 132. That summer, the book began to sow confusion in the Reorganization, especially among new converts, which prompted an official response from Josephite leadership. *SH* 41, no. 30 (July 25, 1894): 476; 41, no. 31 (August 1, 1894): 487; "B. H. Roberts' Book Authoritative," 42, no. 47 (November 20, 1895): 744. In 1898, Heman Smith published his lengthy rebuttal. See Herman C. Smith, "True Succession in Church Presidency," *SH* 45, no. 43 (October 26, 1898): 685–87; 45, no. 44 (November 2, 1898): 701–4; 45, no. 45 (November 9, 1898): 717–20; 45, no. 46 (November 16, 1898): 732–36; 45, no. 47 (November 23, 1898): 749–54; 45, no. 48 (November 30, 1898): 765–69; 45, no. 49 (December 7, 1898): 781–86; 45, no. 50 (December 14, 1898): 798–802; 45, no. 51 (December 21, 1898): 815–19; 45, no. 52 (December 28, 1898): 829–32.

³⁴¹ Historian Dale Morgan commented that Watson's work appeared amid the exchange between Roberts and Smith. Morgan, "Bibliography," 89. However, Watson wrote *Open Letter* in November 1894, almost four years before Smith published *True Succession* in the *Saints' Herald*. Even Watson's second edition of *Open Letter* predates Smith's serial release of *True Succession*. October to

congratulated Roberts for dismantling the Josephite argument but, naturally, wished to demonstrate shortcomings in related Brighamite positions.³⁴² Two years later, Watson printed a second edition of *Open Letter*, which included the original letter with additional material. Watson believed the letter contained a “simple and plain” argument against Brigham Young’s succession claim, one that was met with “favor from all our people” and requested by Strangites living in Brighamite territory for distribution.³⁴³

Roberts’s book sparked Watson’s interest in the Brighamites. Up until the mid-1890s, Watson’s attention was primarily focused on the Reorganization. Perhaps, Watson thought, the Brighamites would be more open to hearing out the Strangite position than were the Josephites. Sometime after publishing the first edition of *Open Letter*, Watson embarked on a missionary trip to Utah. His goal was to proselytize and presumably seek out Roberts and any other Brighamite leadership with whom he could meet. He managed to receive an audience with Wilford Woodruff, then president of the LdS Church, and George Q. Cannon, Woodruff’s First Counselor. To Watson’s disappointment, the meeting was unpleasant, filled with “hot and ugly words” as he found himself defending Strang, yet again, against accusations of immorality.³⁴⁴ His request for a public space to preach was denied, but he was directed to Sarah Wright, Strang’s second plural wife, who, by then, had remarried and was practicing medicine.³⁴⁵

Watson fellowshipped with Sarah’s only son with Strang, James Phineas Strang, who, Watson reported, was “glad to see a friend of his worthy father.”³⁴⁶ Watson

December 1898. See previous footnote.

³⁴² Wingfield Watson, *An Open Letter to B. H. Roberts, Salt Lake City, Utah*. Spring Prairie, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1894.

³⁴³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 4, 1896, WWP.

³⁴⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Brother,” January 12, 1895, WWP.

³⁴⁵ Speek, *Kingdom*, 287–95.

³⁴⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Brother,” January 12, 1895, WWP.

then traveled up and down the Salt Lake Valley on foot, passing out tracts and speaking with anyone who would give him an audience. But the work was arduous and fruitless. After listening to his message, Brighamites would then “bear their testimony, and this elder and that and the other elder testifies that he knows that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and that Brigham Young and his successors were all prophets of God,” testimonies that Watson found difficult to undermine.³⁴⁷ At one point, Watson fell ill and was welcomed into a Brighamite home until he recovered. Despite tremendous effort and trials, Watson won just a single convert. His experiment in converting Brighamites ended as quickly as it began.

On his return home, Watson settled into a predictable rhythm of fending off Josephite influence from the Strangite remnant by maintaining copious correspondence and publishing polemic material. Aside from farming, Watson wrote how his “spare hours are occupied in writing to somebody.”³⁴⁸ This rhythm would continue uninterrupted for the remainder of his life. Watson was especially concerned for his own children. With few exceptions, nearly every extant letter of Watson to his immediate family contains religious instruction, typically in contrast to the Josephite doctrine. He earnestly desired his children to raise their families in the Strangite faith even if they were members of the Reorganization. “You can’t be too watchful of your children,” he cautioned.³⁴⁹

Watson struggled with bouts of disappointment at the state of the church he loved. “I feed bad some times, almost as though God had cast me off,” he confessed.³⁵⁰ It frustrated him to watch the remaining few Strangites leave the faith, and, moreover, the difficulty of converting new members. Watson reflected on his years of proselytizing,

³⁴⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, January 1907, WWP.

³⁴⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 16, 1896, WWP.

³⁴⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, August 10, 1895, WWP.

³⁵⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 1, 1894, WWP.

admitted that he hadn't

made any great number of converts to be sure; but I have made and converted a good many more than Noah did in a much longer period. . . . Jesus himself though followed by great crowds in his life, had scarcely a man to stand by him in his last and most trying hour.³⁵¹

Watson was convinced the problem did not lay with Strang or his doctrine but rather misunderstandings of both. The bulk of his publication efforts involved setting the record straight, from his perspective, and defending his beloved prophet.

In 1894, Watson jubilantly informed his daughter that he was nearing completion of *Prophetic Controversy, No. 4*, which he believed would “[knock] the last brick of underpinning from under Mr. Blairs or the Reorganized theory that the Prophet Office goes by lineage.”³⁵² The Reorganized doctrine of lineal descent especially bothered Watson. “A more rotten thing never was advanced among men,” he said.³⁵³ By the time it was printed in 1897, however, very few people were interested in reading *from* the Strangites; their interest was in reading *about* them. Even in the wider culture, the story of Strang was far more interesting than his doctrine and religious claims.

The 1882 *Harper's Magazine* biography of Strang opened the way to periodic articles in major national newspapers along its same vein.³⁵⁴ The American public consumed fascinating tales of a religious monarch in the heart of the republic, but it cared little, if anything at all, for the king's dictates and decrees. For Josephites, the merits of Strangite doctrine were largely settled at East Jordan debate, a moment that proved to be

³⁵¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Charles Lewis, March 18, 1890, WWP.

³⁵² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 1, 1894, WWP. As its title suggests, PC 4 is an apologetic for Strang's character and succession. It was published on March 15, 1897. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 91.

³⁵³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 16, 1896, WWP.

³⁵⁴ “The King of the Saints,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1882; “The King of Beaver Island,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, December 11, 1886; “King Strang's Death,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 2 October 1892; “Strange Career of King Strang,” *The Times* (Philadelphia), October 13, 1895; “The Story of a Fraud,” *The Sacramento Bee*, April 24, 1897.

a watershed. Failing to convince anyone, interest from the Reorganization to engage with Strangites waned. Watson was printing for an audience that was not reading; he was preaching into the void.

Still, the Strangite apologist persisted. In an undated letter to a Strangite brother, Watson wrote: “[Let] us fight it out to the end. Don’t get discouraged. Let us be brave unto death.”³⁵⁵

Presiding High Priest Wingfield Watson

By summer of 1896, Watson broke a long season of silence between him and Smith III. In his response, the Reorganized president reaffirmed his commitment to the movement while confessing, “I do not hate Mr. Strang.”³⁵⁶ His distaste for the “continued hostility” between the two men led him to write frankly that any continued discussion “would be useless.”³⁵⁷ Smith III closed his letter to Watson with “sympathy and respect,” ending the last known correspondence between the two adversaries. To Watson, Smith III was a lost cause.

Still, Watson achieved a small victory that summer after baptizing Richtman’s son, Jacob and James, along with three of his daughters.³⁵⁸ An even greater victory came when Hickey repudiated his position on Smith III after decades of courting the Reorganization. Hickey, then the last surviving apostle, finally thrust all his weight behind repudiating the Josephites.³⁵⁹ The following spring, however, Watson received a troubling letter from Hickey, who was critically ill and felt as though his “work is about

³⁵⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP.

³⁵⁶ Joseph Smith III, letter to Wingfield Watson on August 11, 1896, WWP.

³⁵⁷ Joseph Smith III, letter to Wingfield Watson on August 11, 1896, WWP.

³⁵⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 18, 1896, WWP.

³⁵⁹ Cumming, *Last of the Twelve*, 23.

done.”³⁶⁰ With their past differences behind them, Hickey desired to pass the baton of leadership to Watson. “I would like to see you before I go hence,” wrote Hickey, adding that, “I feel a head should be set up . . . I think you are the man.”³⁶¹ He asked Watson to “think it over,” and, shortly thereafter, Watson visited Hickey in Coldwater, Michigan. Hickey ordained him to the office of presiding high priest and died the following month on April 25, 1897.³⁶² With Hickey’s passing, Watson became the highest-ranking member of the Strangite priesthood.³⁶³ Watson was reinvigorated by his commission.

From his new position atop the Strangite church hierarchy, Watson focused on warning members of the apocalypse. His anticipation of Christ’s return grew sharper as he warned his family of imminent danger. Watson reasoned that the United States would bear the brunt of God’s wrath having rejected the ‘restored gospel.’ The nation “has had the gospel contained in the book of Mormon preached to her first, and having well nigh rejected it . . . she is therefore visited with a greater degree of [judgement].”³⁶⁴ Yet God promised his faithful redemption from the calamity, and only those few who “keep the society” would survive.³⁶⁵ “We are living in a peculiar age,” Watson wrote to a Strangite, “an age of wickedness and enmity to God” in which repentance was extended to all but, he prophesied, “I imagine and am pretty sure they will not except a few.”³⁶⁶ For Watson, as he grew older and his beloved movement grew smaller, it seemed that rejection of

³⁶⁰ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, letter Wingfield Watson on March 1897, WWP; Cummings, *Last of the Twelve*, 23.

³⁶¹ Lorenzo Dow Hickey, letter Wingfield Watson on March 1897, WWP.

³⁶² Cummings, *Last of the Twelve*, 23.

³⁶³ Strang explained in *The Diamond* that the man who holds the highest office of the Strangite priesthood is “the presiding high priest over the high priesthood of the church,” and that this office is ideally held by the president of the church, i.e., the prophet. Strang, *Diamond*, 1. However, in the absence of a prophet, the office of presiding high priest defaults to the highest-ranking member of the Melchizedek priesthood.

³⁶⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, October 5, 1897, WWP.

³⁶⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Saidie Wake, July 11, 1898, WWP.

³⁶⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Saidie Wake, July 11, 1898, WWP.

Strang was, paradoxically, a sign that his doctrine was true.

More determined than ever, at age 76, Watson set out on another missionary journey west, this time to Kansas and the San Luis Valley of Colorado in spring 1898.³⁶⁷ Watson followed the familiar pattern of encouraging what remained of the Strangites, preaching against Josephite and Brighamite doctrine, and distributing tracts.³⁶⁸ Watson calculated only a handful of Strangite families, between them thirty women of marriageable age but only six men to marry. Naturally, were they to practice plural marriage, the lopsided ratio would become less of an obstacle to overcome. “Under God’s law,” Watson said, “these girls could all easily find an acceptable husband,” but, in their present state of law and religious practice, “they shall have no such privilege.”³⁶⁹ Like his earlier experience in Utah, Watson’s Colorado trip yielded little fruit. While in Monte Vista, he wrote home to confess:

When I think of the hard work we have to do, and the labor necessary to accomplish the conversion of a few families or even a few individuals and look on the other going out of the Church to build up to be greater than the number brought in, it is so small source sadness to be so to all.³⁷⁰

Converts to the Strangite movement were increasingly rare as the years progressed.

Watson visited a few Brighamite settlements and was offered an invitation to preach, but, according to him, they were stuck in their ways, enchanted under the spells of their “vile leaders,” whom they were taught to revere above all.³⁷¹ Watson claimed they esteemed their leaders higher than God himself. “So,” Watson explained, “unless it is here and there a very strange exception, they cannot be converted from what they

³⁶⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Saidie Wake, July 11, 1898, WWP; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 23, 1898, WWP.

³⁶⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 23, 1898, WWP.

³⁶⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 2, 1898, WWP.

³⁷⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, April 11, 1898, WWP.

³⁷¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 23, 1898; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 2, 1898, WWP.

are.”³⁷² Watson appreciated their hospitality but mourned their helplessly entrenched state. He lamented that in Joseph Smith’s day “there were hundreds of converted then for the tens now,” citing “wickedness” as the cause.³⁷³ In total, Watson preached six times and baptized only five new members.

Watson also met with Hendrickites, small Mormon sect led by apostles, that controlled the Missouri temple lot, sacred property to all Mormons. He remarked how “curious too [like] the sectarians they are” in terms of misplaced authority and subjective testimony of their own beliefs.³⁷⁴ The very heart of LDS restorationism—unification of the Christian faith—ceased to beat among the various and contradictory beliefs within the Mormon sects. According to Watson, their problem laid in “following the precepts of men in regard to the leadership” and, consequently, rejecting divine guidance.³⁷⁵ The same problem Joseph Smith encountered at the dawn of the nineteenth century was present in LDS restorationism at its dusk; a newer and perhaps greater apostasy plagued Mormonism. “[The] Mormons to a great extent are ‘in harmony’ with many other abominations,” Watson wrote, echoing God’s warning to Smith in the First Visions against all the creedal abominations of the ‘pre-restored’ Christianity.³⁷⁶ Watson did not recognize the irony and, instead, interpreted the schisms as yet another sign of Christ’s imminent return and judgment.

On his return to Wisconsin, a Strangite from Colorado wrote him to inform them of their status: “[We] have not held meetings very regularly but are holding them

³⁷² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 23, 1898, WWP.

³⁷³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, November 11, 1899, WWP.

³⁷⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 2, 1898, WWP.

³⁷⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 2, 1898, WWP.

³⁷⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 2, 1898, WWP.

occasionally . . . I have baptized Mister Everett and his wife and blessed the child. Thus you see there is four of us now in Pueblo instead of one as at first.”³⁷⁷ The man offered Watson some final advice. “Let those who have apostatized go.”³⁷⁸

By the late 1890s into the early 1900s, Watson followed this counsel. He grew less interested in opposing Josephite succession than preparing his religious community for the end of the world. He frequently exhorted Strangites to keep the faith and maintain the Word of Wisdom, thereby keeping themselves from the world and for the returning Christ. If the world, pseudos, and apostates wanted nothing of Strang’s doctrine, then so be it. Watson, however, harbored a deep desire to ensure that his family, the remnant, and any future converts might have the same opportunity to adopt Strangite Mormonism as he had, which explains why he went to such incredible lengths in writing, traveling, and securing sacred property. Watson was building a Strangite inheritance for the future even as he held the conviction of Christ’s imminent return. And to do so, he once again turned to the printing press.

At the turn of the century, Watson’s writing graduated from impressive to prolific. Sometime after his move to Voree, Watson purchased a printing press.³⁷⁹ On April 18, 1903, Watson published his fifth *Prophetic Controversy*, in which he expounded on his typical defenses of the succession, doctrines, and practices of Strang.³⁸⁰

In January 1905, he managed to get into print a lengthy letter in the Hendrickite *The Evening and Morning Star*, which rehearsed the usual line of Watson’s

³⁷⁷ S. H. Martin, letter to Wingfield Watson on August 9, 1898, WWP.

³⁷⁸ S. H. Martin, letter to Wingfield Watson on August 9, 1898, WWP.

³⁷⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Robert Willis, February 25, 1921, WWP.

³⁸⁰ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 5* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1903). Hereafter cited as PC 5. This pamphlet, published on April 18, 1903, is an open letter to Heman C. Smith, then serving as the church history of the Reorganization. It is based on a letter dated November 20, 1901 that, among other topics, defends Strang’s practice of polygamy from Josephite criticism.

argumentation.³⁸¹ The paper's editor called Watson "probably the ablest exponent of the claims of [James] J Strang," yet some of Watson's own thought he could be doing more.³⁸² After a visitor from the Colorado Strangites reproved Watson for slacking, he wrote his family: "I hardly know how I could do any more than I am doing."³⁸³ In April, he published another article in the Hendrickite newspaper.³⁸⁴ Two months later, Watson crafted a letter to anti-Mormons in Kentucky that would become *Prophetic Controversy, No. 6*.³⁸⁵

By mid-1905, Watson began to interpret his lack of numeric success to a new apostasy. Framed within a remnant eschatology, Watson lamented the deafness of fellow Mormons and chastised the religion's schismatic leaders.

Oh, those stiff-necked Mormons! Those usurping Mormons, those blind and blinding Mormons! When I think of all these matters, and to see how completely they have corrupted and deceived the whole body of the people, "save a few" which have become strangers and pilgrims on the earth in consequence of this almost complete apostasy, it is no wonder that God commanded James to curse, curse, curse their leaders.³⁸⁶

He conceded that "Utah Mormons are much nearer the truth than Reorganized

³⁸¹ "Wingfield Watson Again," *The Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, MO) 5, no. 9 (January 15, 1905). The Hendrickites, founded by Granville Hendrick, viewed the BofM and early D&C revelations as scripture but Smith as a fallen prophet, thereby rejecting Mormon doctrinal innovations toward the end of his life, e.g., proxy baptism, polygamy, plurality of god, etc. As in his recently published pamphlet, Watson rehearsed common arguments for the veracity of the Strangite movement.

³⁸² "Wingfield Watson Again," *The Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, MO) 5, no. 9 (January 15, 1905). For the Hendrickites, an apostolic body filled the position at the highest echelon of ecclesiastical authority, not, as other Mormon bodies assumed, a prophet.

³⁸³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 28, 1905, WWP.

³⁸⁴ *The Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, MO), May 1905.

³⁸⁵ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 6 . . . Inquiry* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1905). Hereafter cited PC 6. This pamphlet is a letter written to Robert Burns Neal (1847–1925) on June 9, 1905, which was published that same month. Neal was a leader in the National Anti-Mormon Association of the Churches of Christ, whose mission was to combat the "Mormon delusion" with membership open to "all persons interested in the overthrow of Mormonism." "Constitution," *The Hepler* 1, no. 4, December 1902. Another leader in the association, James William Lusby, would go on to become the founding president of Christian Normal Institute, now Kentucky Christian University, in 1919.

³⁸⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis and Sarah Jane Watson Willis, August 28, 1905, WWP.

Mormonism,” but criticized both for scattering the Mormons in confusion and disarray.³⁸⁷

In December, Watson’s children received ominous news. “We are all well but your mother is not very strong now,” he lamented.³⁸⁸ At 82 years old, he praised his wife for enduring “many trials, and tribulations,” but feared the spiritual loss of his children more than the physical death of his wife. “Abominations are becoming wider and wider every day,” he warned.³⁸⁹

Even as abominations were spreading, so was Watson’s renown. In February 1906, the *Burlington Free Press* ran an article on Watson, mistakenly claiming that he was the “sole survivor of the Voree Mormon Church.”³⁹⁰ The author generously described Watson as possessing “one of the kindest hearts and is always ready to offer a helping hand to those in need,” a man whose neighbors spoke of him “in most laudable terms.”³⁹¹ Watson was also recognized as having always been a faithful and consistent defender of the Mormon faith and its dead leader [James Strang]. All the records, books, papers and church property, including its most sacred emblems are still in his keeping. His home is a complete museum of Mormon literature.³⁹² His publications, too, were recognized. “[Watson] is a writer of more than ordinary ability, and his treatise, in the form of tracts, several of which are in print, testify to his qualities.”³⁹³ Watson was tickled by the article. He responded to the author, noting how copies had been sent to him from around the

³⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 29, 1905, WWP.

³⁸⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, December 7, 1905, WWP.

³⁸⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, December 7, 1905, WWP.

³⁹⁰ “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 14 (February 14, 1906).

³⁹¹ “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 14 (February 14, 1906).

³⁹² “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 14 (February 14, 1906).

³⁹³ “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 14 (February 14, 1906).

country. He confirmed his status as a master collector of Strangite material. “They are my chief pleasure,” confessed, adding that they were more important than “any other source in seventeen centuries.”³⁹⁴ Naturally, Watson also took the opportunity to advance the Strangite message.

By fall 1906, Watson began to feel the pressures of time and mortality. “Your mother is now in her 83rd year,” he wrote to his daughter, also reporting on his wife’s failing health.³⁹⁵ “I am getting up there way myself,” said the seventy-eight-year-old.³⁹⁶ He wished to live to one hundred “so that I could see many more of the prophecies fulfilled. I would like to see the redemption of Zion.”³⁹⁷ In January 1907, Watson reported on his wife’s worsening condition, which continued to decline until her death on April 1st.³⁹⁸ Jane was buried in Lyons, Wisconsin, and two of Watson’s children, Tommy and Elizabeth, remained in neighboring Spring Prairie to aid and tend to their widower father.³⁹⁹

Watson’s Final Missionary Trip

While his advanced age and the death of his wife might have prompted retirement from his religious work, Watson was nevertheless resolved to press forward. Mere days after Jane’s death, Watson hosted a pair of Brighamite elders who attempted to convert him. “[That] can never be,” he said defiantly, “either in this world or the world to

³⁹⁴ Wingfield Watson, “A Reply from Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 27, no. 19 (March 21, 1906).

³⁹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 24, 1906, WWP.

³⁹⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 24, 1906, WWP.

³⁹⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 24, 1906, WWP.

³⁹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis and Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, January 1907, WWP. Jane’s headstone at Hudson Cemetery in Lyons, Wisconsin reads April 1, 1907. I also discovered in the Strangite archive a receipt to Thomas Watson for funerary expenses dated April 4, 1907, which was mistakenly identified as referring to his wife, Sophia Richtman, who did not die until 1946. Apparently, Thomas arranged and paid for the funeral of his mother in 1907.

³⁹⁹ Shepard, “Adversarial,” 29.

come.”⁴⁰⁰ The elders invited him to a conference in Illinois, to which he accepted conditionally. “I think I will go, if I can get to be heard an hour or so, on or in behalf of James.”⁴⁰¹ That May, just a month after Jane’s death, Watson wrote his grandson, Fred Willis, to encourage him in the faith despite the dwindled state of their shared movement. “I know our numbers are small,” wrote Watson, adding that the “two great bodies, Brighamites and Josephites look upon us as going under.”⁴⁰² But in the end, it would be Strang’s followers, and not the others, who would receive glory. “[Poor] fools,” he wrote of the other Mormons, “they don’t know what they are talking about, and they will find out someday that some madman has deceived them.”⁴⁰³ Just three months after Jane’s death, on July 20th, Watson published *Prophetic Controversy, No. 8*, having published the seventh in the series earlier that year.⁴⁰⁴ The ninth *Prophetic Controversy* was published in fall 1907.⁴⁰⁵ Clearly, the death of his wife and decline of his church had no effect on Watson’s religious commitment to his fallen prophet.

In summer 1908, at 80 years old, Watson took his final major missionary journey to Nauvoo, Kansas City and Independence, Missouri, and the San Luis Valley of Colorado to visit Strangite congregations.⁴⁰⁶ While visiting Independence, Watson met with Josephite leaders and, on June 5th, made a “pleasant call” with the editors of the

⁴⁰⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, April 4, 1907, WWP.

⁴⁰¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, April 4, 1907, WWP.

⁴⁰² Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, May 23, 1907, WWP.

⁴⁰³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, July 29, 1907, WWP.

⁴⁰⁴ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 7* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1906), *Prophetic Controversy, No. 8* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1907). Hereafter cited as PC 7. This pamphlet is another letter to R. B. Neal dated December 22, 1906. The pamphlet was published in early 1907. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 96. Hereafter cited as PC 8. This pamphlet is a defense of Strang written on July 16, 1907, in response to an article published by the Brighamite paper *Liahona*. The pamphlet was published on July 20, 1907. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 96.

⁴⁰⁵ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 9* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1907). PC 9 is yet another letter to R. B. Neal dated July 26, 1907. Hereafter cited as PC 9. The pamphlet was published on September 25, 1907. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 97.

⁴⁰⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, July 29, 1907, WWP.

Liahona: the Elders' Journal, a new Brighamite periodical.⁴⁰⁷ Watson updated them on the status of the Strangite church, noting that “only a few hundred members” remained and, moreover, that they “make little effort at proselytizing or increasing their numerical strength,” unlike the efforts of their presiding high priest.⁴⁰⁸ Watson noted how “Regular Sabbath services are maintained near Burlington, but not elsewhere.”⁴⁰⁹

Watson also visited Jacob Richtman in Nauvoo for a little over two weeks.⁴¹⁰ The men’s relationship had been strained in the years leading up to his visit due to their financial entanglement with the Voree property. Richtman’s sons added to the stress by demanding access to the land for profiting, which violated the purpose of the trust. This visit, however, aided in resolving the men’s differences, which was a great relief for Watson.⁴¹¹ Outside his own family, and of all the Strangites under Watson’s care, the Richtmans were especially cherished. Their restoration warranted further celebration as Watson baptized three new members of Richtman’s family, but lament over the state of Nauvoo muted his cheer.

Smith’s prairie Zion was a mere shadow of its former self decades after the Mormon exodus. Watson described the city as “dead for more than half of it.”⁴¹² The temple, once a beacon on a hill, was reduced to rubble; “not one stone stands upon another,” Watson observed.⁴¹³ Most of the houses were in condemnable status, “now

⁴⁰⁷ “Follower of James J. Strang,” *Liahona: The Elders' Journal*, June 20, 1908, 28. The *Liahona* was founded just one year prior on April 6, 1907.

⁴⁰⁸ “Follower of James J. Strang,” *Liahona: The Elders' Journal*, June 20, 1908, 28.

⁴⁰⁹ “Follower of James J. Strang,” *Liahona: The Elders' Journal*, June 20, 1908, 28.

⁴¹⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹¹ “Richtman v. Watson,” 397. On May 22, 1908, Watson and Richtman officially settled their claims.

⁴¹² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

dangerous to live in,” and “silence reigns over the greater part of Nauvoo.”⁴¹⁴ Watson could not help but personify the city as weeping at its past: “Yes the trees mourn, and the streets mourn, and the desolate houses rotting down mourn, and the large vacant lots mourn, and the old cellars where the houses once stood mourn.”⁴¹⁵ Worse, the old Mormon structures mourned beneath the shadow of “the Catholic Churches and the mighty buildings . . . occupying the lots round about where the temple stood.”⁴¹⁶

From Nauvoo, Watson continued his journey to Colorado. While visiting with Strangites, he found himself, once more, defending Strang’s polygamy against Josephite elders.⁴¹⁷ In a letter to Janie, he briefly mentioned the controversy, offering very little details of the confrontation. By then, Watson had grown tired of trying to reason with Josephite arguments against Strang. Whether or not they accepted Strang’s authority was no longer any of his concern. “Strangism will stand when they are all forgotten,” he wrote, looking forward to a future day when his religion would “be found to be true and faithful in all things.”⁴¹⁸ The days had passed when the Josephites and Brighamites would “open their papers for a square and manly and fair discussion of Mr Strang’s claims.”⁴¹⁹ Watson was only concerned with strengthening what remained, especially members of his own household.

The burden of keeping his family in the faith—by then, growing with in-laws and grandchildren—weighed on his mind so much that it manifested in nightmares. On August 19th, Watson shared with his family a dream he had of Charles Lewis with a paper containing “a lot of stuff about the Mormons . . . for the purpose of suffering to

⁴¹⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 23, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 23, 1908, WWP.

⁴¹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 28, 1908, WWP.

it.”⁴²⁰ Watson interpreted the dream as an omen and, in response, wrote two lengthy letters to his family reinforcing the succession of Strang and denouncing his rivals. “Take heed that these reorganized accusers of the Saints of God do not rob you of your faith in the claims of God’s prophets,” he pleaded.⁴²¹ Watson returned from his journey by mid-September; it was the last major missionary trip he would ever take.⁴²² He concluded the year writing letters to his family, defending (but never encouraging) polygamy, and populous membership as a sign of God’s favor for the Josephite and Brighamite churches.⁴²³ The Strangite congregation in Burlington, the largest in the movement, was tiny compared to the major Mormon groups. Watson reported less than twenty members who attend their Sunday gathering.⁴²⁴ Those who attended, though few, were fortunate to learn from the Strangite’s most prolific author and thinker. On September 3rd, amid farming, teaching, and corresponding, Watson managed to publish his tenth *Prophetic Controversy*.⁴²⁵

The Struggle to Keep Hold of Voree

Around this time, Richtman’s sons sued Watson to reclaim the Voree property, land for which Watson sacrificed money and worked tirelessly to wrest from gentile hands. The lawsuit carried on for years and was a source of great anxiety for Watson. “My heart is sad and pierced,” he wrote to his daughter, and complained to a Strangite

⁴²⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, August 19, 1908, WWP.

⁴²¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 23, 1908, WWP.

⁴²² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 30, 1908, WWP.

⁴²³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 20, 1908; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 23, 1908, WWP.

⁴²⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, December 9, 1908, WWP. The primary gathering for Strangites occurs on Saturday; therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the Burlington congregation was larger than twenty, but not significantly greater as to meet the population of competing churches.

⁴²⁵ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 10*, September 3, 1908. (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1908). Hereafter cited as PC 10. Like other pamphlets before it, PC 10 is letter to E. W. Nunley, a Josephite who published an anti-Strangite article in the *Saints’ Herald* earlier in the year. *SH* 55, no. 14 (April 1, 1908): 329. The pamphlet was published in September 1908. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 98.

that his “mind is in unrest” on account of his legal troubles.⁴²⁶ Richtman and his sons demanded that Watson return to them years of tithe money, even though Richtman remained a member of the Strangite church.⁴²⁷ Watson obliged, likely to support the Richtman’s family after their shipping company became “financially embarrassed,” according to court records.⁴²⁸ Perhaps Watson also hoped the returned tithes would alleviate their financial stress enough to withdraw the lawsuit. But the money was insufficient for Richtman’s sons. They accused Watson of hypnotizing their father to trick him into purchasing Voree, so they pressed forward with their litigation.⁴²⁹ Watson thought the accusation was absurd, calling their case “low-down trickery fraud and lies.”⁴³⁰ The Richtmans’ lawyer apparently felt the same because the lawsuit was a more measured argument absent of superstitious accusations. The plaintiffs argued that because they were partners with their father’s business, and their father used business funds to secure the land, they thereby contributed to the acquisition and were entitled to compensation.⁴³¹

Watson was concerned that gentile authorities would neither understand nor appreciate the significance of Strangite ownership of the sacred gathering place, one of the few pieces of real-estate to offer Mormons safety and shelter in the coming apocalypse.⁴³² “I entreated and begged and felt to do anything within the bounds of

⁴²⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 21, 1910; Wingfield Watson, letter to E. J. Mead, June 23, 1910, WWP.

⁴²⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to William Henning, January 4, 1910, WWP.

⁴²⁸ “Richtman v. Watson,” 389.

⁴²⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to William Henning, January 4, 1910, WWP. In a humorous bit of the letter, Watson was so unfamiliar with hypnotism that he had to look up its definition in a dictionary. “[I] am surprised that you should apply such a term to me,” he wrote to the Richtmans’ attorney. Unsurprisingly, Watson included in this letter some reading material concerning Mormonism.

⁴³⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis., December 21, 1912, WWP.

⁴³¹ “Richtman v. Watson,” 388.

⁴³² Wingfield Watson, letter to Jane Willis, May 21, 1910; Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 8, 1910, WWP.

reason and justice,” Watson said, “if only they [Richtmans’ sons] would not go to the law. But they seemed bent on not leaving me a place to put my head in.”⁴³³ Watson trusted the lawsuit to fate. To his surprise, the Court was favorable to Watson’s defense. It recognized that the title bore Watson’s name and that, irrespective of the Richtman sons’ contributions, they were not interested parties when the trust was formed. In fact, the Court discovered that the trust was not legally formed at all—its formation came from a non-binding oral agreement, not a certified written agreement.⁴³⁴ Regardless, the Court determined that because the title bore Watson’s name, the land belonged to him.⁴³⁵ Watson interpreted the favorable ruling as divine favor, a sign that “God will fight for us, and will not let our efforts be in vain.”⁴³⁶ The Richtmans’ lawyer filed for a rehearing, which the Court denied, settling the matter once and for all.⁴³⁷ “I am so thankful to God,” he said after learning of the denial, “for I am satisfied that He has worked in our favor.”⁴³⁸ Losing the land would have been a terrible defeat for Watson. His daughter summarized the reason well:

I have thought more of that place [Voree] for a quite gathering place for a few of the Saints than any other and you know in one of the revelations given to Bro Strang the Lord told them to retain a strong hold at Voree. . . . that command is the reason Father is staying there, but if a few more could gather there it would be so much better.⁴³⁹

The property presently remains in Strangite possession to this day.

⁴³³ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Grandsons,” October 13, 1912, WWP.

⁴³⁴ This discovery prompted Watson to create the trust legally, apparently at the suggestion of the Court. On December 7, 1917, Watson named his three daughters—Grace, Sarah Jane, and Elizabeth—as trustees. A copy of the trust is presently kept in the Strangite Church archives.

⁴³⁵ I am indebted to Ryan Barnaby, Scott Tindle, and John Hajicek for helping me to interpret this court case ruling.

⁴³⁶ “Richtman v. Watson,” 400; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 8, 1910, WWP.

⁴³⁷ “Richtman v. Watson,” 400.

⁴³⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Grandsons,” October 13, 1912, WWP.

⁴³⁹ Grace Barbara Watson Lewis to “Dear Sister,” January 28, 1921, WWP.

Watson's Twilight Years: August 1910 to October 1922

Watson spent his twilight years following a familiar pattern of farming, publishing, and maintaining correspondence. "I do scarcely anything but answer letters," he wrote.⁴⁴⁰ Many of Watson's first-generation Strangite peers had long passed away, so the audience of his writings were overwhelmingly second-generation Mormons. He is typically caring, always instructive, and, as he aged, his interest in the end times grew more intense. Watson's eschatology will be explored in the subsequent chapter, particularly to its relationship with Strang's eschatology. As always, Watson's primary concern was for his children, whom he wrote often to provide spiritual guidance, encouraging them to persevere in their religion. Watson also faithfully discharged his duties as Strangite clergy by overseeing meetings and celebrating holy days, even as membership continued to dwindle, and the diaspora seemed to widen.

Interestingly, although his disdain for the Josephites never waned, Watson softened toward the Brighamites in his old age, even empathizing with them over the nuisance caused by evangelical missionaries in Mormon territory.⁴⁴¹ Having read accounts of Protestant missionary efforts among the Brighamites, Watson scoffed. Despite their best funding and efforts, Protestant missionaries in Utah was met with "a very broad laugh, as the whole body of them would not convert one Mormon in twenty years."⁴⁴² The irony of Watson's paralleled experience among the Brighamites was, apparently, lost on him.

Watson's own proselytism and apologetic efforts never waned until his hand was forced to quit writing by lack of means and old age. On August 1, 1910, he published

⁴⁴⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, March 20, 1909, WWP.

⁴⁴¹ Christian missionary efforts to Utah began in the mid-1860s with the arrival of Norman McLeod, a Congregationalist chaplain stationed at Fort Douglas. His efforts trailblazed the arrival of more missionaries from an array of denominational backgrounds in the decades that followed.

⁴⁴² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 1, 1911, WWP.

Prophetic Controversy, No. 11, a supplement to the tenth volume.⁴⁴³ He released his twelfth, and penultimate, pamphlet two years later.⁴⁴⁴ After its publication, Watson sold his printing press, which effectively ended his self-publishing career at 83 years old, leaving an idle collection of drafts and manuscripts, including other controversies, unpublished.⁴⁴⁵

Watson's Hope in the Latter Days

National interest in Strang grew in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. In 1897, historian Henry Legler published the first popular biography of James Strang, *A Moses of the Mormons*.⁴⁴⁶ In 1905, Elizabeth Williams released her autobiography, *A Child of the Sea, and Life Among the Mormons*, much of which took place on Beaver Island.⁴⁴⁷ In 1908, James Oliver Curwood penned *The Courage of Captain Plum*, a fictional romance thriller that follows a protagonist hero who rescues one of Strang's plural wives from the clutches of the villainous Mormons.⁴⁴⁸ In 1912, a short biographic from the *Philadelphia Record*, "King of American Island," was

⁴⁴³ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 11*, August 1, 1910 (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1910). Hereafter referred to as PC 11. This pamphlet is a companion volume to *Prophetic Controversy, No. 10*, which continues Watson's dialogue with E. W. Nunley. The pamphlet was published in August 1910. Morgan, "Bibliography," 98–99. Hereafter cited as PC 10.

⁴⁴⁴ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 12*, March 12, 1912 (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1912). Hereafter cited as PC 12. This pamphlet is a letter to the editor of the *Evening and Morning Star*, a Hedrickite newspaper, arguing against that church's belief in a dissolution of the First Presidency in favor of apostolic leadership. The pamphlet was published in March 1912. Morgan, "Bibliography," 99.

⁴⁴⁵ As he aged, and his eyesight deteriorated, Watson grew frustrated with the printing process. His publications became riddled with mistakes. "I was never sicker of anything, nothing went right," Watson explained. "I was glad to get rid of it at one fourth of what I gave for it! Oh you don't catch me there again!" Wingfield Watson, letter to Robert Willis, February 25, 1921, WWP.

⁴⁴⁶ Henry E. Legler, *A Moses of the Mormons: Strang's City of Refuge and Island Kingdom* (Milwaukee, WI: Parkman Club Publications, 1897).

⁴⁴⁷ Williams, *Child*. Watson was unaware of this book. In an April 1919 letter, he asked to borrow it from Milo Quaiife. Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁴⁸ James Oliver Curwood, *The Courage of Captain Plum* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1908).

reprinted and ran across the nation for three straight years.⁴⁴⁹ Most of the press was negative, painting Strang as a tyrant and his followers as zealots. On March 4, 1914, Watson responded to an anti-Mormon article, a “blood curdling story of Mormon atrocities,” printed in the *Detroit Free Press* and reprinted in the *Evening Journal* and *Boyne Citizen* (Boyne City, Michigan).⁴⁵⁰ The article was sensationalist, and Watson could not sit idly by as it circulated. In January 1914, he offered his version of the story, but, naturally, setting the record straight was not nearly as interesting to the public as tales of theocratic despotism, Mormon polygamy, and dastard piracy.⁴⁵¹

Renewed national interest in Strang’s story led to the first attempt at an unbiased work on the Strangites. The flurry of writings on Strang captured the attention of a young historian, Milo M. Quaife, who, in 1913, was elected to lead the Wisconsin State Historical Society.⁴⁵² Quaife would go on to author a benchmark biography on Strang in large part with the aid of Watson. Published in 1930, *The Kingdom of St. James* was lauded by critics for its depth and scholarly voice and, nearly a century later, is foundational to understanding Strang and his movement. Without the benefit of Watson’s collection and insight, however, Quaife could not have accomplished the feat.

The year 1912 proved to be one of optimism for Watson. Despite entering his mid-80s, he was enjoying “fairly good health.”⁴⁵³ In June, Watson happily reported to

⁴⁴⁹ I was unable to locate the publication date of the original article from the *Philadelphia Record*; however, I discovered reprints of the article between October 1912 and November 1915 from newspapers across the United States. “King of American Island,” *The Evening Republican* (Columbus, IN), October 24, 1912, 3; “King of American Island,” *The Morning Call* (Paterson, NJ) 67, no. 112 (November 8, 1918): 7.

⁴⁵⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Editor Evening Journal, Boyne City,” March 4, 1914, WWP; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 17, 1914, WWP.

⁴⁵¹ “Cheboygan Man Relates Fall of Strang’s Empire,” *Detroit Free Press* 79, no. 106 (January 11, 1914).

⁴⁵² “Successor to Dr. R. G. Thwaites,” *The Marshfield News* (Wisconsin), 25, no. 18 (January 1, 1914): 3.

⁴⁵³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Thomas Willis, March 28, 1912, WWP.

family that “we have won our case in the supreme court of the State of Wis. for which I am thankful unto God and to all those who have offered their prayers and sympathy in our behalf.”⁴⁵⁴ Later in October, the court declined an appeal by the Richtmans.⁴⁵⁵ The property would remain with the Strangites, but land was not the only thing Watson hoped would remain in the Strangite community. On June 25, 1912, he asked his family to fast and pray for his grandson-in-law, Carl, to “know for himself which is right before God. The Reorganized Leaders or James J. Strang.”⁴⁵⁶ Thanks to Watson’s influence, Carl eventually remained true to Strang. The year ended with a revival of Strangite missionary activity in Michigan was enough to capture the attention of local newspapers.⁴⁵⁷

Still, it seemed that no matter what gains the Strangites made, the church continued to diminish in number. Persistent decline, along with the spirit of the times, worried Watson of the coming troubles ahead. As the church shrank his interest in the eschaton grew. Watson became convinced that Christ’s return was imminent. In October 1914, with the July Crisis in rearview, the fire of the first world war was rapidly spreading across multiple theatres. The magnitude and swiftness of the conflicts, the “distress of nations,” he called them, borrowing Lukan language, were positive proof to Watson that the apocalypse was just over the horizon.⁴⁵⁸ “[The] time of his coming draws near,” Watson warned his family, “There is no denying that. It is too plain now to be doubted by any reasonable man.”⁴⁵⁹ Throughout the duration of the global conflict,

⁴⁵⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 11, 1912, WWP.

⁴⁵⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to “Dear Grandsons,” October 13, 1912, WWP; “Richtman v. Watson,” 400.

⁴⁵⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 25, 1912, WWP. Carl married Watson’s granddaughter, Jennie Lewis, the oldest daughter of Grace. Carl’s father, Charles Lewis, was a staunch Josephite and a key instrument in arranging Watson’s debate with William Blair.

⁴⁵⁷ “Mormon Revival Recalls King Strang’s Principality of Polygamy in Michigan,” *St. Joseph Evening Herald* 11, no. 259 (October 16, 1912): 3.

⁴⁵⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 26, 1914, WWP.

⁴⁵⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 26, 1914, WWP.

Watson interpreted WWI in apocalyptic language when he wrote about it. For him, the war *per se* was less important than what global warfare indicated. Yet, when the Treaty of Versailles was signed without Christ's return, intense apocalypticism quietly evaporated from Watson's letters.

He nevertheless held out hope that the church, with its divinely appointed gathering, would remain until Christ returned, and that all Mormons would repent from their dismissal of Strang. "I live in strong hope that those who have rejected James will see, and be ashamed of their folly by and by," he wrote.⁴⁶⁰ Watson habitually rehearsed his predictions for the end times, which included the construction of a temple in Missouri, Nauvoo, and Beaver Island,⁴⁶¹ the conversion of northern Lamanites (i.e., indigenous people from Canada),⁴⁶² violence of a universal nature, and safety for Mormons in various gathering spaces appointed by revelation (e.g., Independence, Voree, and Beaver Island).⁴⁶³ All these predictions were based on prophecies by Smith and Strang. Watson looked forward to these predictions with the same certainty he had in the movement of celestial bodies. "These things we look for as we look for an eclipse on the sun or moon—sure and certain to be fulfilled," he wrote.⁴⁶⁴

Tragic Losses and Joyful Gains

On December 9th, the *Saints' Herald* reported on the declining health of Smith

⁴⁶⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, February 13, 1914, WWP.

⁴⁶¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 22, 1909; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 6, 1921; Wingfield Watson, letter to James McNutt, October 26, 1921; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP.

⁴⁶² Wingfield Watson, letter to Gabriel Strang, November 16, 1914; Wingfield Watson, letter to James McNutt, October 26, 1921; Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, November 3, 1921; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 6, 1922, WWP.

⁴⁶³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 25, 1912; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 25, 1913; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, February 27, 1918; Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, December 13, 1918; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 6, 1922, WWP.

⁴⁶⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, November 3, 1921, WWP.

III.⁴⁶⁵ He died the following day.⁴⁶⁶ Watson’s reaction to the news was a mixture of respect and concern. “Yes Joseph the III is gone,” he Watson wrote his family. “It seems strange he should be blind for so long. He was true and faithful to his convictions, whether his convictions were true and faithful to him or not.”⁴⁶⁷ Predictably, Watson expressed frustration as he watched the Josephites—many of whom were former Strangites—continued down a path that he considered error. Frederick M. Smith, son of Smith III, became the third prophet of the Reorganization later that spring.⁴⁶⁸

Once again, Watson found it impossible to remain idle as Mormonism continued to persist in its rejection of Strang. In March, he published a pamphlet, *The One Mighty and Strong*, to argue that an 1832 prophecy by Joseph Smith was fulfilled in Strang and not in various other candidates as competing Mormonisms claimed.⁴⁶⁹ The prophecy spoke about the future coming of a man, “one mighty and strong,” who would hold “the scepter of power,” “set in order the house of God,” and “arrange by lot the inheritances of the saints” (D&C 85:7). For Watson, each of these elements were plainly fulfilled by the actions of King James on Beaver Island. His concern for readers was clear—should they persist in their rejection of Strang, they would be swept away during the imminent judgment. The global scale of conflict then raging was positive proof that the apocalypse drew near. The invitation to repent and accept Strang as the ‘one mighty and strong’ always remained open.

Yet, as Watson’s experience continued to show him, his carillon rang out to

⁴⁶⁵ *SH* 61, no. 49 (December 9, 1914).

⁴⁶⁶ Elbert A. Smith, “Death of President Joseph Smith,” *SH* 61, no. 50 (December 16, 1914).

⁴⁶⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 19, 1915, WWP.

⁴⁶⁸ Paul M. Edwards, *Our Legacy of Faith: A Brief History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1991), 313.

⁴⁶⁹ Wingfield Watson, *The One Mighty and Strong* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1915). This pamphlet was written primarily as a response to a Hendrickite article that argued the prophecy spoke of Jesus Christ. It was published in March 1915. Morgan, “Bibliography,” 100.

deaf and indifferent ears. On October 11, 1915, Watson wrote to encourage a fellow Strangite who lamented the conversion of a fellow member to another sect of Mormonism. “Our numbers are small to be sure but it is simply a question of the great truths of the Almighty against big numbers and no truth. Which will you have? It is a false prophet against a true one. Which will you have?”⁴⁷⁰ Worse yet, a member of Watson’s own family defected. In November 1915, his grandson, John Amos Willis, son of Sarah and John Willis, converted to the Reorganization.⁴⁷¹ “I did not imagine that,” Watson said of his grandson’s conversion, pleading with him to abstain from helping them to make converts, “for helping apostates in their labors to convert people would make you a partaker of their evil deeds.”⁴⁷² That same month, despite his advanced age and the severe winter weather, Watson traveled to Lamoni, IA—the Josephite capital—to visit his daughter.⁴⁷³ Perhaps he weighed the risks against the bitter loss of his grandson to the Reorganization and wanted to encourage other family members not to follow suit. Despite the loss, in the spring of 1916, Watson managed to gain one convert from Louisiana with whom he had been corresponding.⁴⁷⁴

In September, Watson traveled to East Jordan to visit another daughter and encourage the dwindling Strangite congregation.⁴⁷⁵ He was pleased to learn that Charles Lewis, his son-in-law instrumental in organizing the 1891 debate, was waffling in his Josephite convictions. Watson wrote: “Charley Lewis is now well satisfied that there is

⁴⁷⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to John Wake, October 11, 1915, WWP.

⁴⁷¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to John Willis, November 9, 1915, WWP.

⁴⁷² Wingfield Watson, letter to John Willis, November 9, 1915, WWP.

⁴⁷³ Wingfield Watson, letter to John Willis, November 9, 1915; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 28, 1915, WWP.

⁴⁷⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, April 28, 1916, WWP. The man’s name was possibly S. F. Maloch. In a later letter, Watson mentions a man from Louisiana who hoped to sell his land and relocate closer to Strangites. Wingfield Watson, letter to December 16, 1916, WWP.

⁴⁷⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 12, 1916, WWP.

something wrong about the Reorganized claims and well, he may yet be an enemy to our faith, and a mean one too. They are all a lot of crazy fools.”⁴⁷⁶ Watson could only hope that Charles would return to the Strangite flock. In the meantime, he was content to prevent any future departures. “[Be] patient Janey and dont be ruffled,” he wrote his daughter, “you have done well, although standing alone with many influences against you.”⁴⁷⁷ Watson add that he was proud of her for the way she carried herself and raised her family.

But as Watson labored to keep his children in the faith, natural causes took his only biological son out of the world. Thomas, Watson’s youngest, died at fifty-five years old on Friday, November 16, 1917.⁴⁷⁸ The following Monday, the family gathered for his funeral. Watson was wrecked. Of all his children, Watson seemed most fond of “Tommy,” whom he named after his father and favorite older brother who first persuaded him to emigrate to the United States. Tommy remained near his father most of his life, aiding him in tending to the farm and religious work. Watson’s lament for his son’s passing surpassed even the death of his wife. “My son,” he wailed, “when I look round over places where he used to trod and see him no more, oh my son Tommy, my son, my son!”⁴⁷⁹ Watson spent the winter mourning. “[We] cannot control our fate,” he wrote, “we can only mourn at its decisions, many times.”⁴⁸⁰

Yet, once more, Watson pulled himself from personal despair to attend his religious mission. On September 12, 1918, Watson wrote his daughter concerned about an extensive article from Reorganized leader Richard S. Solyard, in the *Saints’ Herald*

⁴⁷⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 3, 1916, WWP.

⁴⁷⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, December 16, 1916, WWP.

⁴⁷⁸ “Obituary,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 39, no. 1 (November 22, 1917).

⁴⁷⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 27, 1917, WWP.

⁴⁸⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Thomas Willis, January 18, 1917, WWP.

that lambasted the Strangites.⁴⁸¹ Although he was apprehensive to publish it because he had written so much on the topic already, Watson responded to the article in his last *Prophetic Controversy*.⁴⁸² The following month, Watson wrote his grandson, Carl Lewis, begging him to remain in the Strangite faith.⁴⁸³

Watson had returned to his predictable mission of publicly defending Strang and privately buttressing his flock, and his efforts paid off. On February 25, 1919, Watson wrote his grandson, John Amos Willis, who had left the Reorganization at some point in the past and, moreover, that his other grandson, Carl, had also left the Josephites, both to return to the Strangite faith.

Watson's Correspondence with Milo Quaife

In early December 1918, Watson was visited by historian Milo Quaife for an interview about his experiences as a Strangite. Quaife was researching the movement for his work, *The Kingdom of St. James*, and Watson seemed like a valuable source to pull from. It is no wonder why Quaife chose him. By then, Watson had earned a reputation as one of the last of Strang's original followers. Watson's local newspaper took a bit of pride in their resident Strangite, identifying him as "the last survivor of the original Strang Mormon colony known as Voree," and reporting that he supplied the Wisconsin Historical Society (i.e., Quaife) with "many valuable papers connected with the founding of the colony at Voree and later with their removal to Beaver Island."⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 12, 1918, WWP; Richard S. Solyard, "Strangism," *GH* 65, no. 23 (June 5, 1918): 551–54.

⁴⁸² Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, December 13, 1918, WWP; Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy*, No. 13, June 27, 1918 (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1918). Hereafter cited as PC 13. Published in June 1918, this pamphlet is a response to the article "Strangism" written by Richard S. Solyard and published in the *Saints' Herald*. Morgan, "Bibliography," 102. Solyard wrote his article in direct response to Strangite pamphlets, including Watson's works. Richard S. Solyard, "Strangism," *GH* 65, no. 23 (June 5, 1918): 551–54.

⁴⁸³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Carl Lewis, October 9, 1918, WWP.

⁴⁸⁴ "Last Survivor of Mormon Colony," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI) 40, no. 45

Quaife was impressed by Watson, journaling in his notes that although he was ninety years old, his “Mind [is] clear as ever, and face is that of a man of 70 or 75. One of the best preserved men, age considered, I have ever seen.”⁴⁸⁵ Between January 1919 and 1921, Watson and Quaife kept incredibly important correspondences revealing Watson’s precise summary of his religious convictions and details of Strangite history, both before and after Strang.⁴⁸⁶ It is clear in their letters that Watson hoped for Quaife to tell Strang’s story from a Strangite perspective. After decades of weathering criticism and prejudice, Watson saw in Quaife an opportunity to set a positive and, from his perspective, truthful rendition of a story the nation thought it knew. Watson was most concerned with relaying his opinion on the Beaver Island years, explaining why other Mormons apostatized from the faith, and sharing his struggle to preserve Strangism. Watson described the present state of the church:

[It] is hard to make converts now, to what it used to be, and we can hardly hope to hold more than our own. . . . As to our present numbers, they are scattered and small and perhaps were we all assembled together there would scarcely be enough to make a good sized congregation, but we know our course is not quite dead and buried.⁴⁸⁷

Watson respected Quaife, calling him “a very nice man, and a gentleman,” so it was a delight when the men finally met. In May 1919, the historian invited Watson on a trip to Beaver Island.⁴⁸⁸ They made their voyage later that August. It was the first time Watson had visited the island since his abrupt exile in 1856. It would also be his last visit.

After sixty-three years, Watson was unsure how the island would welcome

(September 25, 1919). Of course, Watson was not the last survivor. Two of his own daughters were residents of Beaver Island.

⁴⁸⁵ Quaife, “Notes.”

⁴⁸⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, January 2, 1919; Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, January 21, 1919; Wingfield Watson, letter to John Willis, February 25, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, April 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁸⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 10, 1919, WWP.

him, and he left very little description of the experience. By the time of Watson's visit, the island's new inhabitants had long resolved to keep some relics from its Mormon history. The island's largest lake was still called Galilee and fed by the Jordan River. Its main village still bore the name St. James and the central throughway of the island, which led to Watson's inheritance, was still the King's Highway. But nearly everything else had changed. The printing office had been converted into a hotel and, more significantly, the tabernacle, which Watson labored on, had long been reduced to a pile of rubble. Instead of a Mormon temple, the steeple of a Roman Catholic chapel dominated the landscape, owing to an influx of Irish fishermen after the Strangite exodus.

Watson was pleasantly surprised to find the locals quite unlike the gentiles he knew before. "There did not seem to be any thing like the depth of prejudice there when we were over there that there was years ago," he wrote.⁴⁸⁹ But the presence of Catholics was a sign that the Strangites had abandoned their religious obligation to gather there. The scene caused Watson to reflect on the diminished state of his church. Could the Saints regather on the island even if they desired to do so? Watson found it difficult to believe, especially without the guidance of a prophet. "There are so few of us to go any where now that one can hardly talk what is best for us unless we have the word of the Lord through a prophet of God."⁴⁹⁰ If Watson was ever to inspire members to regather on the island, it would need to come by common consent.

A year later, Quaife sent Watson a draft of his manuscript for review, which Watson returned with comments.⁴⁹¹ Quaife appears to have taken Watson's input into consideration and sent him a revised draft in November along with good news. Quaife informed Watson that Clement Strang, Strang's second son with Elvira Field, was in

⁴⁸⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁹⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁹¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaife, May 10, 1920, WWP.

possession of the LofA.⁴⁹² Although the manuscript would not be published until after Watson's death, *The Kingdom of St. James* offered readers the first critical narrative of Strangism devoid of the tired sensationalism and overt prejudice that had attended similar works in decades past. Were it not for Watson, our understanding of Strang may have permanently been read through the lens of distant observers and his fiercest adversaries.

Passing the Baton

By late 1919, at the age of 91, Watson knew his life was ending. He took every opportunity to advocate for his religion and ensure the security of future generations. Principle among his actions were, by then, very predictable: publicly defending Strang, attempting to keep and foster what little membership remained, and encourage his family in the religion.

Watson was especially proud of his publications and believed that his "*Controversies and Diamond* [had] broken down the faith of a great many of their leading men."⁴⁹³ Yet, with the sale of his printing press in 1912, Watson lacked the ability to publish on his own, so he was glad when John Flanders established *The Latter Day Precept* in August 1919. The *Precept* was the first Strangite periodical since the *Northern Islander*. Watson happily contributed defenses of Strang and Strangite doctrine to the *Precept* during its short run, which featured his known publication in December 1920.⁴⁹⁴ Flanders was forced to sell the press in late 1921 due to poor circulation.⁴⁹⁵

In October 1919, Watson presided over a conference in Kansas City inviting

⁴⁹² Wingfield Watson, letter to Milo Quaiife, November 5, 1920, WWP.

⁴⁹³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, June 3, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁹⁴ Wingfield Watson, "Will Christ Again Come to do a Mighty Work Among the Wicked?" *The Latter Day Precept* 2, no. 5 (December 1920).

⁴⁹⁵ Walter W. Smith, "The Periodical Literature of the Latter Day Saints," *Journal of History* 14, no. 3 (July 1921): 289; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP. It is possible that Watson authored other articles for the *Precept* or in other outlets; however, they are non-extant or presently unknown to me.

“all those who have remained true to the faith, all those who have not gone over to the revilers of God’s prophets, come.”⁴⁹⁶ During the conference, attendees spent “five days talking over matters pertaining to our welfare and what was best to do under the circumstances,” specifically focusing on “which of the gathering places was best to gather to,” e.g., Independence, Voree, or Beaver Island.⁴⁹⁷ Members agreed to prioritize gathering in Missouri, yet “no hurry [was] urged.”⁴⁹⁸ Watson, however, hesitated. “My inheritance is on the island,” he wrote his family, fearing that a move to heartland would forfeit his appointed plot.⁴⁹⁹ “I am only living in Voree,” he added, hoping that he might one day return to the island, even in his advanced age.⁵⁰⁰ Watson enjoyed the conference but lamented that his people gathered so infrequently. Still, he held out hope. ““In time ye shall possess this goodly land,”” Watson quoted D&C 103:20, adding that “[it] will be with a glorious redemption of Zion.”⁵⁰¹

Worse yet, those Strangites who did gather met in turmoil. On October 28, 1921, Watson lamented the condition of the Kansas City branch and the relational strife that stifled it. Division became so severe that Watson uncharacteristically washed his hands of them. “[The] branch of the church there is all torn up, and few got to meeting. I care but mighty little to have anything more to do with them except a few,” he said, exasperated.⁵⁰² Disagreement among members rose when a leading authority’s priesthood was called into question, causing some to seek rebaptism and ordination. Watson was called upon numerous times to settle the matter, but the branch could not reconcile and

⁴⁹⁶ Wingfield Watson, “Notice,” *The Latter Day Precept 2*, no. 5 (December 1920).

⁴⁹⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁴⁹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁵⁰⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 14, 1919, WWP.

⁵⁰¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 13, 1920, WWP.

⁵⁰² Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP.

split.⁵⁰³ In one of his last commands to the church, Watson wrote: “My advice to all is to receive their baptism and ordination where the least shadow of doubt exists.”⁵⁰⁴

On May 1, 1922, Watson reported to his daughter, Janey; “My health is not as good as I would like it.”⁵⁰⁵ Later that month, Watson continued to complain of his deteriorating state and yearned for the promises made by Strangite eschatology. “[They] must be close at hand now . . . wont all this be joyful?”⁵⁰⁶ In October, Watson wrote to Strangite leaders, “I am drawing near the time of my dissolution.”⁵⁰⁷ That month, Joseph Flanders and Samuel Martin visited an ailing Watson in Voree. Watson appointed Samuel Martin “in case of my death to take the oversight and watchcare over the whole church known as the Strangites.”⁵⁰⁸

In Watson’s last extant letter, he rehearsed the story of Strang’s appointment and ordination, going into specific detail about Strang’s vision of Voree as a bustling and vibrant community. “There is no use in talking much on this matter. It has never been fulfilled. In James’s ministry there wasnt a single brick house in the land of Voree! . . . All the gathering places in Missouri are failures, Nauvoo is a failure, Kirtland is a failure, Independence is a failure. So what shall we do?”⁵⁰⁹ Watson’s answer was unwavering faith that God, through Smith and Strang, had made promises that were sure to come about eventually. “[God] has sworn it and that should end all controversy.”⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Lloyd Flanders, October 18, 1922, WWP.

⁵⁰⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP.

⁵⁰⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 1, 1922, WWP.

⁵⁰⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 29, 1922, WWP.

⁵⁰⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Chester Flanders, October 16, 1922, WWP.

⁵⁰⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Chester Flanders, October 16, 1922, WWP.

⁵⁰⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., 1922, WWP. Likely written to Jane because Watson asks the recipient to pass a message along to Grace; Jane and Grace were the primary recipients of most of Watson’s family correspondence at this time.

⁵¹⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., 1922, WWP.

He ended with his last written words to his daughters: “Good Bye and God be with you all.”⁵¹¹ According to family lore, in late October, Watson walked a mile into town to collect his mail, doubtlessly with the intention to continue guiding his beloved church through correspondence.⁵¹² Upon his return, however, he rested in his chair never to stand again.

Wingfield Watson died on October 29, 1922, at 94 years of age, nearly a century after the dawn of the religion he spent his life trying to preserve.

⁵¹¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., 1922, WWP.

⁵¹² Shepard, “Adversarial,” 36.

CHAPTER 5
WINGFIELD WATSON'S APOLOGETIC FOR
JAMES J. STRANG

In the previous four chapters, I surveyed the foundations of LDS restorationism, the construction of Strangite beliefs, and the historical role Wingfield Watson played in maintaining Strangite distinctives after the death of Strang. I will now answer the thesis question, namely, whether Wingfield Watson's apologetic was in continuity with the teachings of James Strang, and, if so, whether Watson's leadership was a contributing factor in preserving Strangite distinctives after the death of James Strang. In the fifth chapter, I will examine the first part of this question (i.e., the continuity between the teachings of Strang and Watson) by surveying his apologetic for Strang from the key sources introduced in the previous chapter (e.g., Strangite scripture, Strang's publications, and Watson's correspondence and publications). In the concluding chapter, I will answer the second part of the question (i.e., Watson's role in preserving Strangite distinctives).

In surveying Watson's apologetic for Strang to determine continuity, I will consider select elements of Watson's doctrine and religious practices in relationship to that of Strang. Doctrinally, I will divide Watson's apologetic into two sections: primary and tertiary issues. For Watson, all Strang's claims are directly linked to his prophetic controversy, (i.e., Strang's argument for succeeding Smith); therefore, the question of succession is the primary issue for Watson in relation to his second prophet. Common tertiary issues will also be examined (e.g., priesthood theology, scripture, and Zionism). Then, I will survey any continuity between Watson and Strang with three Strangite practices: Seventh-day Sabbatarianism, polygamy, and animal sacrifices. While these

doctrines and practices do not represent the whole of Strangism, they are nevertheless unique to Strangism (in contrast to the Reorganization) and represent commonly referenced elements in Watson's literature and correspondence, thus providing researchers a sample of how closely or distant Watson stood in proximity to Strang.

The Core of Watson's Apologetic

Was Wingfield Watson's apologetic for Strang in continuity with his teachings? The natural place to begin answering this question is with *the* question Strangism proposes to Mormonism—was Strang the true successor to Joseph Smith? Any deviation from Strang's prophetic controversy here would set Watson on a trajectory away from the genesis of Strangite distinctives.

In short, the core of Watson's apologetic for James Strang is summarized by four elements in chronological sequence: 1) Joseph Smith's successor must be called and appointed by direct revelation; 2) this direct revelation must come through Smith as prophet and seer, and through no one else; 3) the successor must be ordained under the hands of angels, or heavenly messengers, from God for that purpose; and 4) the successor must also be the custodian of the Urim and Thummim and the same ancient plates from which the BofM was translated.

The Calling and Appointment of a Prophet

As rehearsed in chapter 3, according to Strang, God called him to the office of prophet mere days before the death of Smith in June 1844. This divine calling was manifested through three events: a revelation by God to Smith, the record of that revelation in the LofA, and Strang's angelic ordination at the hour of Smith's death. In the LofA, God called Strang through Smith, then the prophet and seer of the LDS Church, and not through another person or mechanism, e.g., common consent (Brigham Young) or lineal descent (Joseph Smith III). The following year, in September 1845,

Strang claimed to recover ancient plates and translated them *via* Urim and Thummim, a prelude to Strang’s later reception and translation of the same plates from which the BofM was sourced.

Elements of this narrative feature prominently in all Strang’s most influential works. The LofA and an account of the angelic ordination are displayed prominently on the front page of Strang’s earliest public work, the *Voree Herald*.¹ They are, in effect, the first two messages that Strang wished to share with the wider public. In his 1848 pamphlet *The Diamond*, Strang couched the LofA and his ordination within his interpretation of LDS priesthood law and early Mormon narratives of Smith’s ordination to argue for the veracity and authenticity of his own appointment. Strang again repeated the core elements of his ordination in *Prophetic Controversy*, juxtaposing his argument against curated Brighamite sources that undermine the claims of his chief competitor. Specific ecclesiastical regulations and instructions for the appointment of prophets are also outlined in his BLL, which fit the mold of Strang’s claims.

According to Strang, prophets of God are always made in the same manner, so “what authority and ceremonies it took to make him [Smith] a prophet . . . the same authority and ceremonies it would also take to confer the same office and priesthood on anyone to stand in his place.”² Because Smith was first called by God *via* revelation, so must his successor be called in like manner. No prophet could ascend to his office without first being “called by revelation of God,” or, more specifically, “called by the voice of God.”³ Strang appealed to a verse in the D&C that explained how “the president of the church [is] appointed by revelation, and acknowledged, in his administration, by

¹ *Voree Herald* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

² James J. Strang, *The Diamond . . . Kept Up* (Voree, WI: Gospel Herald Print, 1848), 12.

³ James Strang, *The Prophetic Controversy: A Letter from James J. Strang to Mrs. Corey* (Saint James, MI: Cooper & Chidester, 1856), 3.

the voice of the church.”⁴

Watson’s argument for Strang’s appointment fell exactly in line with Strang’s thought:

Common sense, and revelation perfectly agree in this rule:—Whatever amount and kind of authority it took to make the First President and prophet, the same it takes to make his successors in all time. As the predecessor was called by revelation, so the successors must be.⁵

Watson believed that LDS restorationism presented a “uniform rule” that regulates how all prophets are called and appointed to their station, and, consequently, that all “true Prophets of God have never but *one story* to tell about their calling.”⁶ Atop the priesthood sat a man whose duty it was to operate in the office as a prophet, seer, revelator, and translator, the “greatest of all others in the kingdom of God.”⁷ For a man to occupy this office required him to be “called and set apart by direct revelation, and in no other way.”⁸ No potential occupant is exempt from the prerequisite calling; he could not “lawfully enter upon their duties” without first receiving this call.⁹

While Strang used this line of argument against Brigham Young, Watson used it to take aim at Joseph Smith III. Watson further argued (following in Strang’s footsteps) that not even Jesus Christ was exempt from this rule; he was “called of God and was appointed and ordained under his Heavenly Father’s own right hand.”¹⁰ Watson

⁴ D&C (1835), 96; cf. D&C 102:9.

⁵ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 2 . . . Transcriber* (Boyne City, MI: Wingfield Watson, 1887), 10.

⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 29, 1912, WWP; PC 10:7. Emphasis original.

⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP.

⁸ PC 2:8.

⁹ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 6 . . . Inquiry* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1905), 9.

¹⁰ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 10* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1908), 7.

summarized: “It is not any man’s duty to do this [i.e., occupy the office], until he is called by the voice of God to do it.”¹¹ Additionally, Strang taught that from Adam to the latter days, God elected to call men to the prophetic office from out of ethnic Israel.¹² Strang claimed to descend from the lineage of David and, therefore, was a prophet from the tribe of Judah.¹³ Watson repeated this subtle detail.¹⁴

Thus, the foundation of Watson’s apologetic for Strang’s prophethood aligns perfectly with Strang: Smith’s successor must be called by direct revelation. Watson further argued that a prophet must not only be called, but that their calling must be affirmed and confirmed by appointment. For Watson, this revelation cannot come through any other sources than either God himself, as was the case with Smith, or a living prophet and seer, as was the case for Strang.

Strang originated this position. According to him, his calling came by revelation that was manifested in the LofA. Strang claimed that sometime in the early summer of 1844, Smith received a revelation from God appointing Strang as his successor, thereby offering prophetic affirmation and confirmation of God’s calling of Strang. Smith subsequently recorded his visionary experience in the letter appointing Strang his successor, which Strang received shortly after Smith’s death. Strang built his succession atop this document. In his first public maneuver for the presidency, he presented the letter at a conference of Mormon elders in Michigan, and, subsequently, ordered that a copy be sent to church leadership in Nauvoo. The LofA was publicly exhibited by Strang, thus subjecting it to scrutiny and prompting Strang to fend off

¹¹ Wingfield Watson, *The One Mighty and Strong* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1915), 8.

¹² James J. Strang, *The Book of the Law of the Lord . . . Notes and References* (St. James, MI: Royal Press, 1851), 175–76. Hereafter cited as BLL.

¹³ BLL, 219.

¹⁴ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 3 . . . Wanting* (Bay Springs, MI: Wingfield Watson, 1889), 34.

skepticism and criticism of the letter's legitimacy. Both of his most popular proselytizing pamphlets, *The Diamond* and *Prophetic Controversy*, rehearse detailed arguments for its authenticity. A typeset copy of LofA was curated as the first article on the first page of Strang's first newspaper, and Strang continually appealed to it throughout his religious career.¹⁵ Without the LofA, Strang would have no tangible evidence of an intangible, divine appointment by supernatural revelation.

As with Strang's calling, Watson carried forward an identical reproduction of his prophet's teachings on appointment. Watson firmly believed in the letter's authenticity and rightly recognized its significance as the keystone to Strang's authority, claiming that, concerning the LofA, "there is absolutely nothing written that is more certain, or of any more importance to us [Strangites] or more necessary to the truth and faithfulness of the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints, or that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God."¹⁶ That people criticized the letter as fraudulent was unsurprising to Watson. "It is certain no one would ever have questioned the genuineness of that letter if it had not contained the appointment of a prophet of God," wrote Watson, further noting that Smith himself was subject to ridicule and slander because of his prophetic status.¹⁷

In his writings, Watson parroted Strang's narrative of the LofA's genesis. The LofA featured prominently in Watson's 1891 debate with William Blair; he commented that it represented "a fulfilment of the revelations given through Joseph the Martyr governing this matter [succession]" and that it further "proves that he [James Strang] was Joseph's lawfully appointed successor in the prophetic office and presidency of the church."¹⁸ Elsewhere, Watson argued for the letter's authenticity by interpreting its

¹⁵ "Letter from Joseph Smith to James J. Strang," *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

¹⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 29, 1905, WWP.

¹⁷ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 13* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1918), 2.

¹⁸ Willard J. Smith, *The Watson-Blair Debate . . . 1891* (Galien, MI: Willard J. Smith, 1892),

content in terms of fulfilled prophecy, e.g., death of Smith, scattering of the Mormons, and gathering of ‘true’ Saints under the second latter-day prophet.¹⁹ Watson also contrasted the LofA with the lack of such appointments in the claims of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith III. In short, according to Watson, the LofA fit perfectly within the scheme of prophetic succession, as he believed it should occur.

Strang taught that for a man to become a prophet, God must first call him by direct revelation, and a subsequent appointment by the sitting prophet must follow. Watson carried this teaching forward by faithfully replicating Strang’s argument and defending Strang’s appointment from critics.

The Source of Direct Revelation

Strang taught that because a prophet’s calling is sourced in heaven, it must be manifested by revelation, and because the prophet is the fountainhead of LDS revelation, any call concerning his successor must come directly to him. Strang further argued that in the OT God had not only instituted the entire priesthood by direct revelation but also its chief heads.²⁰ Apostasy interrupted this pattern, of course, so, in the case of Joseph Smith, because there was no prophet on earth by whom God could send revelation for Smith’s calling, “there was a necessity that he be called by the direct revelation of the word of God to himself.”²¹ The First Vision narrative fulfilled this scenario. However, according to Strang, because Smith occupied his office when God called Strang to succeed him, that revelation could only come from Smith, acting as prophet and seer, and no one else. For Strang, the “keys” of authority, including the right to name his successor, were held by

14.

¹⁹ PC 3:5–6.

²⁰ BLL, 165.

²¹ BLL, 166.

Smith alone, “and to his successors regularly appointed by revelation through him.”²² Thus, no other priesthood authority, not even the Twelve, held power to name a successor because they “not only are under the direction of the First Presidency, but the high council is above them, and they are amenable to it.”²³ Even then, the two attendant members of the First Presidency (i.e., the first and second counselor) were likewise unable to name a successor because, like the Twelve, their station was lower than the prophet, thereby disqualifying Rigdon’s claims. Thus, Strang criticized Brighamite elders for “bringing Brigham Young into the Prophetick office by a revelation of the will of man, and no ordination at all.”²⁴ To Strang, the Twelve appointed Brigham Young in Smith’s stead “by the votes of Conferences instead of the voice of God,” and, consequently, “put a bishop [where] God placed a President.”²⁵

Watson followed Strang’s logic very closely. All revelation is sourced in God and distributed to his church *via* the prophet. In the case of prophetic succession, the only proper recipient of direct revelation concerning their replacement is the man who occupies the prophetic office. Watson argued: “[We] are told in that law [D&C] *several times* that the revelation appointing Joseph’s successor *must come through Joseph*, and forbids us to receive law or revelation from any other.”²⁶ The reason, for Watson, is simple:

[The] highest officer in the church, the prophet, seer, revelator and translator to the church is appointed by revelation, or the direct word of God . . . this revelation must come through the prophet Joseph and if any one comes along with any revelation through any one else for that purpose, God’s law requires us to reject all such

²² Strang, *Diamond*, 8.

²³ Strang, *Diamond*, 8.

²⁴ BLL, 223.

²⁵ Strang, *Diamond*, 9.

²⁶ PC 2:19. Emphasis original.

revelations forthwith.²⁷

Consequently, Watson rejected Brigham Young's claims in line with Strang for lacking direct revelation through Smith naming him the second prophet. Instead, Young merely "worked himself up to the position of office of the presidency" by virtue of his position as head of the Twelve.²⁸ Watson likewise rejected Joseph Smith III on the same grounds because "Joseph the Martyr has not left us a single line regarding Young Joseph's call."²⁹

Not only did Watson follow Strang's teaching, but he also practiced it. He sincerely believed Strang's revelations, finding "no unrighteousness in them."³⁰ Watson was also uninterested in revelatory knowledge from any source other than those acknowledged or produced by men he recognized as prophets. Watson was not a theological innovator; he instead moored himself to the writings of Smith and Strang. Only in the area of eschatology did Watson ever venture beyond Strang's teachings, but he constantly conditioned his ideas on a future verification or correction by the third latter day prophet.

Strang taught that a man's calling to become a prophet must originate in direct revelation, whether it comes from God himself or through his prophet. Watson not only championed this position in his apologetic for Strang's prophethood but he also practiced it in his personal life.

The Angelic Ordination of Successors

After divine calling and prophetic appointment comes an anointing ordination by angels, and Strang was persistently adamant in arguing this belief. He reasoned that ordination must come from a representative occupying a higher station than the prophet

²⁷ PC 3:12.

²⁸ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 14.

²⁹ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 182.

³⁰ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 5* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1903), 1.

because the priesthood only permits one prophet at a time and, should an active prophet ordain another to his office, then “that very moment he would lose his own station.”³¹ Therefore, Strang argued, “it is not the President’s duty to ordain his successor; it is not the duty of his counsellors in the Presidency, nor of the Twelve, for they are all below him, and the less cannot bless the greater.”³² Only an authority above the priesthood could ordain a candidate for its chief post, which, based on Smith’s ordination account, was performed by angels, whom Strang taught (as did Smith) were select glorified men, e.g., biblical authorities like John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John. For clarification, and in relation to Smith’s ordination to the priesthood, in his *Prophetic Controversy*, Strang quoted a passage from D&C describing those four men as heavenly messengers by adding “(angel)” and “(angels)” after their names.³³ Consequently, for the sake of legal consistency, Smith’s successor would need ordination in the same manner as him.³⁴

As did Smith, Strang claimed that he was ordained by angels. Strang’s testimony specified that, during the hour of Smith’s death, the angel of the Lord appeared to Strang and “stretched forth his hand unto him and touched his head and put oil upon him.”³⁵ Strang ensured this testimony featured prominently in his church’s official record and in his first widely distributed epistle to the Latter Day Saints, written in December 1845.³⁶ Strang repeatedly argued that he was “ordained as he [Smith] was, by the hand of

³¹ James Strang, “Ordination,” *VH* 1, no. 4 (April 1846).

³² James Strang, “Ordination,” *VH* 1, no. 4 (April 1846).

³³ PC 1:2; cf. D&C (1835), 180.

³⁴ BLL, 166.

³⁵ “Chronicles of Voree: A Record of the establishment and doings of the Stake of Zion called Voree in Wisconsin, made by the Scribes appointed to that office,” 23, typeset facsimile copy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) archives, original in private hands. Hereafter cited as CV. This edition is a transcription compiled by John J. Hajicek (Burlington, WI: J. J. Hajicek, 1992). Hereafter cited as CV.

³⁶ CV, 10, 35–47; Strang, “An Epistle,” *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

angels.”³⁷ Strang rested much of his argument on this ordination, in combination with the LofA. In fact, Strang took a step further tying the legitimacy of Smith’s prophetic career—and, therefore, the entirety of Mormonism—to his angelic ordination.

[There] is no escaping the conclusion that I am a true prophet, and his [Joseph Smith] lawful successor, or Joseph is a false prophet, and Mormonism an imposture. . . . Called by the voice of God, and ordained by the hand of Angels, since the day of his death I have known my calling, as he did his in the days of his ministry.³⁸

Strang’s unflinching assertion of his subjective experience brings to mind his predecessor’s incessant claim that he had truly seen God in his First Vision, and, despite his skeptical neighbors, he resolved to declare, “[I] had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it.”³⁹ For both Smith and Strang, the onus of belief was not on them but on those who heard their stories.

Strang further solidified his position in the BLL: “Whoever is called by the voice of God to the royal authority [i.e., priesthood] shall be anointed and ordained by the hands of those who stand in royal authority above him, but he that is first [i.e., prophet] by the angels of God.”⁴⁰

Watson’s belief in Strang’s angelic ordination features prominently in his apologetic for his prophet. It appears in all but one of his *Prophetic Controversies*, is frequently addressed in private letters of religious instruction, and peppers Watson’s arguments and rebuttals at the 1891 debate. For Watson, Strang’s ordination by an angel is the key link between Smith and Strang, connecting the two together in experience and, to Watson, verifying both men’s callings and appointments. Without the angelic ordination, Strang’s calling by Smith would collapse, for “the appointment would not

³⁷ PC 1:2.

³⁸ PC 1:3.

³⁹ “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11 (April 1, 1842): 749.

⁴⁰ BLL, 163.

amount to anything *without an ordination*.”⁴¹ And without the angel’s ordaining hands, Strang would be an unqualified custodian of the ancient plates. After all, Watson asked, within the framework of LDS restorationism, “who ever heard of any office in the holy priesthood, being conferred upon anyone in any age of the world only by the laying on of the hands of those who lawfully hold it?”⁴² His answer, of course, is no one. And, like Strang, Watson argued that the angels who ordained prophets were once prophets themselves.⁴³

Moreover, in the aftermath of Smith’s death, many contenders to his office claimed revelatory appointments, but none framed them within angelic ordination, which was compelling evidence to Watson that Strang was the legitimate heir to Smith’s office. In line with Strang’s reasoning, just as “Joseph himself was first called by revelation and anointed under the hands of angels,” wrote Watson, “so must his successor be.”⁴⁴ Prophets are not made by “vote or franchise,” he argued, but instead, “God calls and ordains them by angels.”⁴⁵ Neither of Strang’s chief competitors, Brigham Young and Joseph Smith III, claimed to be ordained by angels; therefore, to Watson, they were *ipso facto* disqualified. Young was ordained not by the hands of angels but by the raised hands of church members voting to make him a prophet. Joseph Smith III was also not ordained by the hands of angels but under the hands of men who occupied lower priesthood offices, i.e., William Marks, Zenos H. Gurley, and others present at the 1860 conference.

Watson further advanced Strang’s argument by denying lineal descent, a challenge that Strang had not faced in his lifetime because Smith III was too young.

⁴¹ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 14. Emphasis original.

⁴² Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 4 . . . Honorable Man* (Spring Prairie, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1897), 23–24. Hereafter cited as PC 4.

⁴³ PC 13:1.

⁴⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Joseph Smith III, draft, n.d., WWP.

⁴⁵ PC 2:5.

Watson followed the trajectory of his prophet's argument to conclude that, lacking warrant from Mormon scripture and revelations, prophethood by lineal descent was a "gross and unfounded heresy" that welds unmerited privilege to a bloodline and tolerates godlessness in prophetic candidates. Watson reasoned that if a man comes to his office perforce, then what motivation would they have for moral character?⁴⁶ Instead, prophets are chosen by God not based on their faith and righteousness, not lineage, as both Smith and Strang ostensibly had been chosen.⁴⁷

Strang taught unyieldingly and consistently that a man's ordination as prophet must come by the hands of a being higher in authority and, because no higher authority exists on earth above the prophet, the angels, who occupy higher authorities, are the only proper authorities. Watson adopted this position as the core of his argument for the legitimacy of Strang's claims and, moreover, evolved Strang's argument to meet the challenge of lineal descent presented by the Reorganization.

The Possession of the Plates and Seer Tools

To the outsider, Strang's ascension to the prophetic office was subjective and opaque. Only he could verify his own angelic ordination because it occurred in private without witnesses, and the LofA, although tangible evidence of his appointment, immediately fell under severe criticism and scrutiny. Perhaps for these reasons, Strang felt a fourth element—a more tangible and familiar artifact—was required to convince Mormon seekers that his claim to Smith's office was more compelling than his competitors, especially Young. Strang chose the possession of ancient plates and seer tools to meet this requirement.

In September 1845, he unearthed and translated the Voree Record by Urim and

⁴⁶ PC 4:20.

⁴⁷ PC 4:18.

Thummim, his first physical evidence of his role as seer, which served as a promissory note of more material evidence in the future. Strang claimed to have returned the Urim and Thummim to an angel shortly after translation. By summer 1851, Strang published the BLL, the capstone of his revelatory practices, said to have been translated from the same source material of the BofM “by the gift and power of God,” yet without mention of the Urim and Thummim.⁴⁸ That he was the custodian of these records is as significant as his brief custodianship of the Urim and Thummim. Strang argued that the BofM records were to be passed down from prophet to prophet; rightful possession is a sign for prophetic legitimacy. Thus, for Strang, that a prophet obtained seer abilities and accompanying tools was primarily a confirmatory token of their legitimacy rather than a gift to be exercised at will. Ultimately, Strang positioned the LofA and his testimony of angelic appointment ahead of material evidence like the Voree Record and BLL plates.⁴⁹

As with the previous three points, Watson incorporated Strang’s possession of seer tools into his apologetic, and, like Strang, viewed possession of the tools as an attendant (albeit important) facet of prophetic claims. “The possession of the Urim and Thummim constitutes a Seer,” argued Watson, and neither Brigham Young nor Joseph Smith III ever claimed to possess them.⁵⁰ Thus, Watson asked of the Reorganization:

Why is it that, while the Almighty has decreed that the sealed records are to go down from one prophet to another, from generation to generation, that young Joseph has never either seen or hefted these records and knows nothing as to whose hands they are in?⁵¹

Unlike Young and Smith III, Strang claimed to act as seer by “bringing forth and [translating] ancient and sacred records, by the gift and power of God, by Urim and

⁴⁸ BLL, 43.

⁴⁹ The Urim and Thummim are altogether absent from *Prophetic Controversy* and *The Diamond*, are briefly mentioned in the BLL, and make sporadic appearances in his other public works, i.e., *Voree Herald*, *Gospel Herald*, and *Northern Islander*.

⁵⁰ PC 2:23.

⁵¹ PC 5:2.

Thummim,” thereby setting himself above and beyond the other claimants.⁵² Watson boasted of the Strangites:

We have shown that the Reorganized prophet never had in possession any of the prophetic gifts, any more than the Utah leaders have. Never saw the Urim and Thummim. Never saw the plates of Laban . . . or any other sacred record spoken of by any of the Holy Prophets.⁵³

There is, however, a rare discrepancy between Strang’s and Watson’s claims concerning the method of the translation of the BLL. Watson clearly believed that Strang accomplished the feat by the Urim and Thummim; however, I was unable to uncover evidence to suggest that Strang made a similar claim.⁵⁴ Strang only claimed to have received and returned the Urim and Thummim in 1845, and he did not make a similar claim of the BLL translation in the early 1850s. Given that Watson remained so close to Strang’s argument, and that Watson lived on Beaver Island beginning a year after the BLL’s publication (1851), it is entirely possible that Strang told his followers that the Urim and Thummim played a role in this work but neglected to publish such a statement.

In sum, at the core of Watson’s apologetic for Strang is a faithful recreation of Strang’s argument for his own succession: “[What] it takes to put one in the office, it takes the same to put another in the same office.”⁵⁵ If it took divine calling, direct revelation, angelic ordination, and custody of seer tools and ancient plates to make Joseph Smith the latter day prophet, seer, translator, and revelator, then any prophet who follows him must have the same experiences. Because Strang was the only man to make

⁵² PC 3:6.

⁵³ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 9* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1907), 4. Hereafter cited as PC 9.

⁵⁴ Watson expresses this belief in a number of places: “Now in the law translated by Mr. Strang, by Urim and Thummim...” (PC 5:19); “Nothing in his [Strang’s] translating THE BOOK OF THE LAW OF THE LORD by means of the Urim and Thummim...” (PC 8:6); “...[God] gave [Strang] the Urim and Thummim, and the ancient records to translate from them...” (PC 13:12); “...neither have they [Joseph Smith III and Brigham Young] ever seen the Urim and Thummim, which goes down with the Ancient Records.” Watson, *One Mighty and Strong*, 8.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 26.

these claims—and because neither Sidney Rigdon, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith III, nor any other contender followed suit—Strang alone could claim to be the lawfully appointed successor to Joseph Smith. Watson reasoned:

Mr. Strang was either what he claimed to be; that is, Joseph Smith’s lawfully appointed successor, appointed by revelation from God through Joseph, and ordained by angels as Joseph was, or else he was about as great a criminal as has stood on the earth in one thousand years at least.⁵⁶

That Strang was no criminal seemed patently obvious to Watson. Consequently, for him, Strangism is the truest form of LDS restorationism after the death of Smith. In Watson’s words, “the foundation upon which we stand, is, Joseph Smith and all the revelations and translations which he has given us as the word of God, including the revelation appointing James J. Strang to succeed him.”⁵⁷

Doctrinal Continuity of Wingfield Watson with James Strang

As a primary doctrinal issue for Strangism, Watson demonstrated keen understanding of Strang’s argument for his prophethood and, moreover, he faithfully replicated the argument and tailored it to the new challenge of the Reorganization. However, arguing for the legitimacy and authority of Strang does not necessarily equate to fidelity to Strang’s system of belief. In this section, I will examine unique Strangite doctrine and practices as taught by Strang to contrast them with the teachings and practices of Watson to determine how closely he remained to Strang’s religious system, which, in turn, will help to determine whether Watson successfully defended and passed on authentic Strangite distinctives to his church. Unique doctrines to examine are delimited to Strangite priesthood theology and organization, scripture, Zionism and eschatology, and practices to examine are Seventh-day Sabbatarianism, polygamy, and

⁵⁶ PC 3:2.

⁵⁷ PC 13:14.

animal sacrifices. These doctrines were chosen over others because they represent truly unique theological positions and practices that are distinct from Josephite and Brighamite Mormonism.

Strangite Priesthood Theology and Organization

Like all expressions of Mormonism, the Strangite church was organized in a priesthood hierarchy said to have been restored by Joseph Smith. Strang, however, amended the priesthood to conform it to an ancient order that he believed had been recovered through personal revelation and the retrieval of sacred records he translated as the Book of the Law of the Lord.

Strang developed his theology of priesthood over time, as did his predecessor, from whom Strang sourced many of his ideas, relying heavily on D&C. Like Smith, Strang taught that the priesthood was a divine and ancient order, a power and authority held by God and delivered to humanity first through Adam and subsequently through priesthood heads with various episodes of disruption, most notable the Great Apostasy. Like Smith, Strang's described the priesthood as both a power and an authority. Yet, Strang emphasized the legality of the priesthood while also upholding Smith's teaching that the priesthood is also a manifestation of God's salvific power.⁵⁸ Indeed, Strang echoed Smith's salvific restrictivism when he wrote, "If a book containing the whole doctrine of the gospel were placed in the possession of a Pagan people, and they should read and believe it, they could not be said to possess the gospel" unless they also possessed the priesthood.⁵⁹ Strang saw little distinction between the authority and power vested in the priesthood. To him, the priesthood was the "*power [to] take dominion* and

⁵⁸ BLL, 36.

⁵⁹ BLL, 243.

administer justice and judgment.”⁶⁰

Moreover, like Smith, Strang organized the priesthood into two orders but renamed the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods to the “Priesthood of life” and the “Priesthood of an endless life” (cf. Heb 7:15–16, KJV), respectively.⁶¹ Like Smith, the Melchizedek priesthood was stationed above the Aaronic priesthood, because it “holds the keys [i.e., authority] of ordinances and Spiritual blessings” and the prerogative and power “to administer certain ordinances and sacraments,” such as baptism.⁶²

Unlike Smith, however, Strang also imbued the priesthood with the authority to offer animal sacrifices and participate in thanksgiving feasts, resurrecting elements of the ancient Levitical order.⁶³ Another distinction between Smith and Strang is the monarchical language with which Strang described the priesthood. Smith’s kingly office was concealed within the Council of Fifty and never publicly revealed. While Strang was never privy to the theocratic plans of the Council of Fifty, he was nevertheless influenced by former members who were likely aware of Smith’s royal ambitions.⁶⁴ Absent in Smith’s priesthood but present in Strang’s are positions of ecclesiastical royalty, e.g., king, “Viceroy,” “Embassadors,” etc.

Still, more similarities exist between the priesthood of Smith and Strang’s than differences. Temples were required to exercise the priesthood keys in their fullness; therefore, although a Strangite temple has never been completed, two temple projects in Voree and Beaver Island demonstrate continuity of Strang’s thought with Smith’s ideas.

Much of what Watson wrote about on the priesthood related to the succession

⁶⁰ BLL, 242, emphasis added.

⁶¹ BLL, 214.

⁶² *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846); BLL, 108, 122.

⁶³ BLL, 108.

⁶⁴ The following Council of Fifty members affiliated with Strang’s movement: George Miller, William Marks, George J. Adams, William Smith, John E. Page, Lucian R. Foster, and Cyrus Daniels.

crisis and not priesthood theology; however, it is possible to piece together his priesthood theology in relation to that of Strang's teachings. Watson remained close to both Smith's and Strang's teachings on the priesthood primarily through D&C and BLL, his two favorite sources on the subject. Like Strang, Watson believed that the priesthood was both a power and authority to act on God's behalf, and that it has existed from "the days of Adam down to the present time," though subject to interruptions of apostasy.⁶⁵ The one ordained to the priesthood holds "all the gifts, keys, prerogatives and privileges" as those who came before them.⁶⁶ Watson followed Smith and Strang in conceptualizing the priesthood in two echelons, but he preferred the common terms "Aaronic priesthood" and "Melchizedek priesthood" over Strang's "Priesthood of life" and the "Priesthood of an endless life," perhaps for clarity purposes.⁶⁷

Watson also taught, like Strang, that a royal element existed in the priesthood. Despite denial and criticism for his position, Watson rightly believed (without evidence beyond the anecdotal) that Smith was secretly appointed king in his final days at Nauvoo.⁶⁸ Naturally, Watson also recognized Strang as king, and, like Strang, Watson linked religious kingship directly to the priesthood. Yet, Watson was careful to clarify his belief that Strang's title of 'king' was not meant to communicate earthly government; rather, for Watson, the king of the priesthood was "a protector, a defender, a guardian of people's rights."⁶⁹ Whether or not people agreed with his assessment was of no consequence to Watson. "One thing is certain," he wrote, "that where the Priesthood after the order of the son of God (i.e., Melchizedek priesthood) is, there is the kingly office."⁷⁰

⁶⁵ PC 2:20.

⁶⁶ PC 5:2.

⁶⁷ Strang himself alternates between the two sets of terms in the BLL.

⁶⁸ PC 4:35.

⁶⁹ PC 4:34.

⁷⁰ PC 13:13.

The “office of king as all other offices in the Priesthood is an appendage, or belongs to the Priesthood after the order of the son of God,” he clarified.⁷¹ For Watson, the office of king within the Mormon priesthood was only ever an ecclesiastical position and “not in opposition to the laws of the land,” as evidenced by Strang’s public service as a state representative and his obedience to local laws (although historians hotly contest this second point).⁷² In effect, Strang was the king of the kingdom of God on earth, not of any earthly kingdom:

Mr. Strang found himself set apart to the kingly office, in the midst of another nation, presided over by another sovereign, the president of the United States, very much as Jesus found himself under the Roman empire.⁷³

For Watson, denial of the kingly office within the Melchizedek priesthood was a sign of ignorance.⁷⁴ He blamed American prejudice against monarchy as the primary reason for their rejection of the kingly office.⁷⁵ Yet, despite the slander his prophet endured, Watson was convinced that “[in] light of God’s eternal truth and justice, no king that ever wore a crown was ever more worthy of one than [Strang].”⁷⁶ Lastly, Watson also believed in temples, having personally worked on the construction of the Beaver Island tabernacle and held to an eschatological hope that a Strangite temple would be built sometime in the his future.

Priesthood Organization. Strang mimicked Smith by blending the LDS priesthood hierarchy and practices with elements of nineteenth-century Freemasonry, e.g., dividing the hierarchy into orders and degrees, secret initiatory rites, etc. (see

⁷¹ PC 13:14.

⁷² PC 3:34.

⁷³ PC 4:34.

⁷⁴ PC 3:24.

⁷⁵ PC 3:24.

⁷⁶ PC 3:25.

appendix 3). Invitation to and ascension in this priesthood are the result of divine calling, “the revelation of God’s will,” the archetype of which is seen in the calling and ordination of its chief position, the “Lawgiver,” i.e., prophet, seerer, revelator, and translator.⁷⁷ All men—and, in the case of the Strangites, all women—who are called by revelation to the priesthood enter their positions by the laying on of hands by members in authority over them.⁷⁸

Watson’s priesthood hierarchy matched nearly identically to that of Strang (see appendix 4). For Watson, the prophet is the earthly fountainhead from which all priesthood power and authority flows, for “the keys of the kingdom belong always unto the presidency of the High Priesthood.”⁷⁹ Consequently, “all the offices in the whole priesthood is contained and carried within the prophetic office,” so that he may exercise all ordinances required for salvation.⁸⁰ As previously mentioned, Watson bifurcated the priesthood into a greater and lesser order, but deviated from Strang’s description of them as priesthoods of life and reverted select offices back to traditional terms. In the Melchizedek priesthood, Watson renamed the two orders—Order of the Apostles and Order of the Priests—to “Grade of the Apostles” and “Grade of the Priests.” In the Grade of the Apostles, Watson called the Lawgiver “First President,” the Counsellors “Second (or Vice) Presidents,” the Embassadors “Twelve Judges” or the “High Council,” and the Evangelists “Twelve Apostles.” In the Grade of the Priests, Watson retained the titles “High Priests” and “Elders” but added “The Seventies.” In the Aaronic priesthood, Watson renamed the Order of the Priests to “The Priests of the Aaronic Priesthood” and retained the subsequent positions (e.g., Rabbi, Ruler, Teacher, Stewards, Ministers, etc.)

⁷⁷ BLL, 163.

⁷⁸ BLL, 163.

⁷⁹ PC 10:1.

⁸⁰ PC 3:24.

under the renamed “Grade of the Teachers” and “Grade of the Deacons.” In my research, I could not find an explanation for why Watson deviated in terminology from Strang. It is likely, however, that Watson chose terminology more familiar to wider Mormonism for accommodation purposes, yet he also used these terms in private correspondence with Strangite members. Still, the basic structure and specific offices remained intact and only the titles changed.

Strangite Scripture

Strang’s canon consisted of the Bible, Doctrine & Covenants, Book of Mormon—a triad of “binding forces” on his church—and Book of the Law of the Lord.⁸¹

Strang held that the Bible was an authoritative source for retrieving revelation and referenced it liberally in his writings, especially the BLL. However, he was skeptical of the Bible’s manuscript provenance and translation history. He echoed popular arguments of the early-nineteenth-century skepticism to which he subscribed as a young intellectual.⁸² “So poorly has the Bible been kept,” wrote Strang, “that it is in dispute among the learned, whether numerous Books in it ought not to be expunged; and equally in dispute whether numerous Books, not contained in it, ought not to be inserted.”⁸³ In this way, Strang refracted Smith’s position in the *Articles of Faith*: “We believe the bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly,” and, because of a questionable manuscript tradition, the Bible was prone to improper translation.⁸⁴ Smith further taught that additional material was necessary to complement the shortcomings of the Bible. Strang republished an article from *Times & Seasons* that taught how the gospel “is not

⁸¹ CV, 74.

⁸² For example, Strang, who held anti-paedobaptist views, complained that the “English version of the Bible was made by sprinklers; not baptizers,” and so transliterated *baptizo* to avoid translating it “immersion” and, thus, offering concession to the Baptists. BLL, 124.

⁸³ BLL, 228.

⁸⁴ Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 709.

told in the scripture plainly” and, so, “the bible is not a safe guide, neither could any thinking man trust his salvation on its teaching.”⁸⁵

For Smith and Strang, a chief complementary source was their own revelations. Strang utilized the 1844 Nauvoo edition of the Doctrine & Covenants, printed shortly after Smith’s death.⁸⁶ Strang also published his own revelations in church records and periodicals. Another primary complementary source for Strang was the BofM. Strang advanced Smith’s interpretation of Ezekiel 36:15–17 as prophesying the conjunction of the Bible, the “stick of Judah,” and the Book of Mormon, the “stick of Ephraim,” in the latter days.⁸⁷ Strang called the publication of the BofM as “the first epoch in the publick attention to the fulness of times,” and took strides to defend its historicity and authenticity against criticism.⁸⁸ The BofM is frequently called upon to defend Mormon doctrine broadly and Strangite interpretations of LDS restorationism, specifically.

Like Smith, Strang also claimed to translate ancient records as evidence of both his divinely appointed mandate as prophet and the restoration of the priesthood. The BLL was Strang’s *magnum opus* and the pinnacle of his contribution to his church’s sacred texts. Unlike the BofM, a religio-historical narrative, the BLL is a collection of divine commandments said to have been translated from records kept in the ark of the covenant.⁸⁹ The BLL contains the legal blueprint for an ecclesiastical government and provided Strang with the framework for establishing his priesthood hierarchy, religious

⁸⁵ “Gospel,” *Northern Islander* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852); “The Gospel, No. III,” *T&S* 2, no. 3 (December 1, 1840): 226.

⁸⁶ Strang quotes material present in the 1844 edition that is not found in the 1835 edition. For example, in one of Strang’s last printed references to D&C, he references an 1841 revelation present in “*Doc. & Cov.*,” which appears in the 1844 edition and, obviously, not the 1835 edition. *NI* 5, no. 74 (August 9, 1855); D&C 1844, 397; cf. D&C 124.

⁸⁷ BLL, 173. The context in which this prophecy was given speaks of the reunion of two divergent ‘sticks,’ the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and not of scriptural books.

⁸⁸ BLL, 246.

⁸⁹ BLL, viii.

practices, and governmental laws, offering his church an “end of controversy” concerning domestic affairs.⁹⁰

Watson listed the Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and BLL as “the three standard works upon Mormonism, and which we hold of equal authority with the Bible, but not as many say, in place of it.”⁹¹ Watson described how all four formed a “common code” of scriptural canon, further reiterating that they were of “equal authority.”⁹² Further, Watson persistently contended that no contradictions of dogma existed across the Strangite canon; all four works sung in doctrinal harmony.

Perhaps owing to his Anglican upbringing, Watson seemed more comfortable deferring to the Bible for doctrinal matters (especially eschatology) than did Strang. Throughout his entire life as a Mormon, Watson cited and referenced it more frequently than his prophet. Watson described the Bible in terms of inspiration but also held to Strang’s argument that supplemental revelation was required to modify corrupted portions of the text. More than this, Watson parroted Smith’s belief that the Bible “is the word of God so far as it is correctly translated,” and called this position “one of the principles of our [Strangite] faith.”⁹³ Thus, Watson reasoned: “If the Bible told, or gave us all necessary knowledge, what was the necessity of giving us the Book of Mormon?”⁹⁴

For Watson, the primary value of the Bible was its revelatory nature, for “the whole spirit and glory of the Bible is revelation.”⁹⁵ Yet, the revelation of the Bible ought always to be subjected to latter revelations, i.e., those of the prophets, BofM, D&C, and

⁹⁰ *NI* 4, no. 51 (September 7, 1854).

⁹¹ Wingfield Watson, “Holy Island and Mormon Sacrifices There,” *Charlevoix Sentinel*, July 15, 1875, WWP.

⁹² Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

⁹³ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 7* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1906), 1. Hereafter cited as PC 7.

⁹⁴ PC 10:3.

⁹⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Jacob Greensky, November 27, 1884, WWP.

BLL. The problem with Protestants was neither zeal nor sincerity of belief but scriptural authority. “We have a Bible and dont want any more Bible,” Watson characterized *sola scriptura*, lamenting that such a position causes the sincere religious seeker to “simply die to investigation.”⁹⁶ “Oh fools,” Watson howled, adding that “[every] true believer in the faith of the Latter Day Saints, is impelled to cry out the same thing.”⁹⁷ And while Strang lacked access to Smith’s “Inspired Translation” of the Bible, Watson maintained a positive view of it.⁹⁸ His favorite topics of interest from the Bible were the priesthood, polygamy, wisdom literature, and eschatology. Thus, core and critical elements of belief about the Bible resonated between Watson and Strang, but, unlike Strang, Watson cited it with more frequency and utilized Smith’s translation.

Watson used the D&C mainly as supporting evidence for his arguments on the priesthood, prophetic succession, and eschatology. To Watson, the D&C acted toward revelations in a similar way than the BofM did for the Bible. Carrying on a similar argument for the necessity of additional revelation from the Bible, Watson asked, “[If] the Book of Mormon was enough, what need have we of the Doctrine and Covenants?”⁹⁹ Like Strang, Watson appeared to have utilized the 1844 Nauvoo edition.

As was his view of the Bible, Watson primarily approached the BofM for its revelatory value. In its pages, Watson found evidence of Mormonism’s genuineness and Strangite conceptions of the priesthood, the two topics Watson called upon the BofM for defense most often. The BofM and its translation was proof-positive that Smith was a

⁹⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, April 11, 1898, WWP.

⁹⁷ Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy, No. 12* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1912), 9. Hereafter cited as PC 12.

⁹⁸ PC 7:1. The “Inspired Translation” of the Bible was a major revision of the AV that Smith produced sporadically throughout his career but never brought it to publication. After Smith’s death in 1844, the manuscript fell to his wife, Emma, who subsequently transferred it to the Reorganization in 1866, a full decade after Strang’s death. Strang would only have had access to select portions published in Mormon newspapers. See Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2004), 3–13.

⁹⁹ PC 10:3.

prophet, paving the way for Strang's translation of the BLL in like matter. So important was the BofM to Watson that he crafted an eighteen-page pamphlet outlining its content, defending its authenticity, and persuading the reader to view its coming forth as fulfillment of biblical prophecy.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Watson followed Strang in teaching that the BofM and Bible were in perfect accord, as both were in concert with D&C and BLL. For Watson, there is no "line in the Book of Mormon that opposes in any way the divine teachings of the Bible."¹⁰¹ Yet, the BofM elucidates, clarifies, and offers more doctrinal value than the Bible.

In his public works, Watson rarely references the BLL, and, when he did, it was framed more as evidence of Strang's seership rather than a source of revelation. However, Watson clearly admired the work in his personal life. In correspondence with fellow Strangites, he quotes it with greater frequency than in any other of his writings. Watson called the BLL "unique both as regards its general construction, or plan, and the nature of its contents," i.e., how it came to be and what it has to say.¹⁰² For Watson, doctrinal clarity was the greatest benefit the BLL provided, for "it opens many mysteries, and gives the why and the wherefore for many of its sayings and doings which cannot be learned from any other book existing."¹⁰³ Specifically, Watson believed it to be the primary and clearest source of information on divine regulations for prophet-making. The Bible, BofM, and D&C spoke "a great deal about prophets of God," said Watson, "but none of these Books tell us clearly or gives us a uniform rule as to how all prophets of God are made. But the Book of the Law of the Lord makes that clear and plain. And it is

¹⁰⁰ Wingfield Watson, *The Book of Mormon: An Essay on Its Claims and Prophecies* (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1899).

¹⁰¹ Watson, *The Book of Mormon*, 2.

¹⁰² Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

¹⁰³ Wingfield Watson, letter to A. Chaney, August 15, 1877, WWP.

in perfect harmony with all other Books.”¹⁰⁴ Naturally, Watson reasoned that the BLL uncontrovertibly backed Strang’s prophethood, and, because Strang brought forth the BLL as a seer, to deny the BLL was tantamount to denying Strang. The BLL to Watson was a litmus test of one’s fidelity to true Mormonism. To reject it was to reject Mormonism, but to embrace it was to be counted among a faithful remnant. To this end, Watson pled with Strangites to grasp to the work tightly in the face of opposition from Josephite criticism.

In short, despite minor differences in emphasis (e.g., Watson favored the Bible more than Strang), Watson nevertheless remained very close to the scriptural convention set by his prophet, viewing an attack against the Strangite canon as an attack on Strang himself. In this way, Watson faithfully transmitted Strang’s teachings on scripture.

Zionism and Eschatology

Strang, like Smith, promoted the physical gathering of the Saints ahead of Christ’s second coming. In one of his earliest revelations, Smith broadcasted a warning for those who “be of Judah flee unto Jerusalem,” the future capital of the earth.¹⁰⁵ The city was accompanied by a new “Zion [that] will be built upon this continent,” a gathering place of spiritual and physical refuge, and both would be populated by Latter-day Saints and Jews, a “pure people” who would live in a community of righteousness in anticipation of Christ’s earthly reign, or what one scholar called a separatist apocalypticism.¹⁰⁶ Looming just over the latter-day horizon was violent persecution, natural disasters, wars, and divine judgment. So, Smith counseled his leaders frankly:

¹⁰⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, July 29, 1912, WWP.

¹⁰⁵ D&C 133:13. See also Christopher James Blythe, *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 710; D&C 100:13.

“We ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object.”¹⁰⁷ “The time is soon coming when no man will have any peace but in Zion & her Stakes,” Smith added.¹⁰⁸ Part of building this righteous Zion would manifest in temple ritual, necessitating the construction of temples, like those built in Kirtland and Nauvoo. Chief among the structures was the proposed temple of the New Jerusalem in Jackson County. Smith prophesied in 1832 that the “temple shall be reared in this generation,” constructed atop the temple lot of Independence. The prophecy reiterated: “verily this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord.”¹⁰⁹ However, with the expulsion of the Saints from Missouri, the temple was never built, the land eventually fell to the Hendrickites, and its lot presently remains empty.

Smith also anticipated “the literal gathering of Israel”—whom he called both members of his movement and descendants of Jews—“and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes,” i.e., the lost tribes of Israel from the “north countries” of the Western hemisphere.¹¹⁰ Only sanctioned and holy spaces could provide the protection needed to survive the catastrophe that would attend Christ’s imminent return.

Strang adopted this separatist apocalypticism, especially regarding gathering and communal righteous living. His first reported visionary experience featured a happy community of Saints gathered together in Voree, which, according to Strang’s first published revelation (LofA), was to be “a gathering of my people, and there shall the oppressed flee for safety.”¹¹¹ In the LofA, the Saints were given divine warning that “great calamities are coming on the church such as have not been” and that if the Saints

¹⁰⁷ Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Brenden W. Rensink, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 6, *February 1838–August 1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 546.

¹⁰⁸ *JSP* D6:547.

¹⁰⁹ D&C 84:4–5.

¹¹⁰ Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *T&S* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 710; *JSP* J1:222.

¹¹¹ *VH* 1, no. 1 (January 1846).

“scatter the ungodly of the world shall swallow them up” but “if they gather to my city of Voree there will I keep them under the shadow of my wing.”¹¹²

As his movement gained momentum, Strang exhilarated migration to Voree:

The gathering must continue, and it is necessary that it so continue that the stakes of Zion shall be strengthened—Voree must be built up. The gathering from the east [United States] and the Exodus of the oppressed from Nauvoo must be unto Voree. . . . [Let] the oppressed flee to Voree for safety, and let the gathering of the people be there.¹¹³

Strang taught that the combination of persecution against the Saints, cultural and moral degradation, inevitable apostasy within the LDS Church, and looming global violence were harbingers of the parousia. Sacred spaces in Zion offered Saints the chance to weather the apocalyptic storm. For Strang, these “places appointed of God” were Voree and Beaver Island, both of which would feature temples.¹¹⁴ While construction of temples began at both sites, neither were ever completed due to lack of funding and, after Strang’s death, the diaspora.

Like Smith, Strang also taught that the Saints would be joined by indigenous descendants of Jews, so fulfilling the biblical prophecy of the gathering of Israel. For Strang, Lamanite conversion and migration from the “north country” to Strangite gathering places was a sign of the end times; indeed, according to an 1847 revelation, the very reason for settling Beaver Island was to provide such a gathering place in the north country for Mormon and Lamanite alike.¹¹⁵

Watson did not stray very far from his two prophets’ teachings. Textually, Watson relied heavily on the D&C to construct his eschatology, perhaps because Smith recorded his eschatology in more elaborate detail and at greater lengths than did

¹¹² LofA. See appendix 1.

¹¹³ James Strang, “The Future,” *VH* 1, no. 3 (March 1846).

¹¹⁴ James Strang, “To the Saints Scattered Abroad,” *Zion’s Reveille* 2, no. 8 (March 4, 1847): 30–31; cf. CV 3, 179–80.

¹¹⁵ James Strang, “Revelation,” *ZR* 2, no. 1 (January 14, 1847).

Strang.¹¹⁶ He affirmed the imminency of Christ's coming and for all Saints (Mormon, Lamanite, and Jew) to gather in divinely appointed places for safety during the apocalypse. Notably, Watson maintained the bifurcation of gathering places, i.e., that the Old World Jews would gather in Jerusalem as New World Jews with the Saints would gather in appointed places in North America. Watson explained: "This house of Israel would gather in the very end times, the Jews to Israel and the Indians and LDS in America. Many Indians, ten tribes, will come from the north to their land inheritances."¹¹⁷ Watson recognized Nauvoo, Independence, Kirtland, Beaver Island, and Voree as sanctioned gathering places. In fact, so important was the gathering place at Voree that Watson spent substantial effort and resources to recover the land from gentile ownership and retain it through legal battles.

Watson further believed that both Brighamite and Josephite Mormonism would dissolve, leaving only a remnant of those movements who gather with Strangites in the appointed places.¹¹⁸ That time would be marked by

the building of a house on the isles and at Nauvoo, the coming of the ten tribes from the north, building of a mighty temple in Missouri, the preaching and converting of the Lamanites, and the pouring out of the wrath of God without measure.¹¹⁹

Watson held to these convictions to the end of his life. Just one year before his death, clinging tightly to Smith's 1832 temple prophecy, Watson was adamant that "the temple in Missouri must be built. A prophet of God must come with a plan of it, and it is to be finished before all who were on the earth in 1830 will pass away."¹²⁰ "Don't be

¹¹⁶ Watson himself recognized his dependence on the D&C. "It has taken a good deal of study and pains to get at this matter [eschatology] and bring it out clearly. But it is the Doc. and Cov. that has been my chief guide in this matter, for the Bible alone is a poor guide, but with the revelations of Joseph Smith to guide, the Bible is a great book!" Wingfield Watson, letter to John Wake, August 31, 1922, WWP.

¹¹⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, September 25, 1913, WWP.

¹¹⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, April 24, 1919, WWP.

¹¹⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, March 22, 1909, WWP.

¹²⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP.

deceived,” he warned his family, “90 years are gone by since 1830, and few men live over 100.”¹²¹

Watson formed his eschatological views in the wake of two martyred prophets who died before seeing their apocalyptic prophecies fulfilled, necessitating an advancement of their views considering their deaths. One puzzle for Watson was the unexpected death of Strang, which, he candidly confessed, appeared “the whole ministry of James, in Voree and on Beaver Island, is a failure.”¹²² Watson quickly regained composure: “[Is] it a failure in fact? God forbid the thought.”¹²³ He reasoned that all throughout history, it seems prophets fail, but God always works through them, regardless of whether their work appears like failure.

Tangible evidence for Watson was the disfiguring wound that Strang received at his assassination. He interpreted Isaiah’s suffering servant to be Strang, in part because the wound from his assassins’ gunshots and pistol-whipping deformed his face and, as Isaiah wrote, “his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men” (Isa. 52:14, KJV). Watson argued that Strang was the suffering servant and, therefore, Isaiah’s prophecies apply to him with all its attending sorrow and tragedy.¹²⁴ So, Watson reasoned, it should not surprise Strangites that their movement shrank so drastically because Smith predicted a time when “the church must go into bondage for there is a mighty one like unto Moses to be raised up to lead them out.”¹²⁵ This future prophet, Watson believed, was Smith’s predicted “one mighty and strong to set in order

¹²¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, October 28, 1921, WWP.

¹²² Wingfield Watson, letter to Gabriel Strang, November 16, 1914, WWP.

¹²³ Wingfield Watson, letter to Gabriel Strang, November 16, 1914, WWP.

¹²⁴ Interestingly, the LofA appears to apply the suffering servant motif to Smith, who ostensibly wrote of himself, predicting his death, “though my visage be more marred than that of any it will be unscared and fair when archangels shall place on my brow the double crown of martyr and king in a heavenly world.” See appendix I.

¹²⁵ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

the house of God, &c. which implies that it would get out of order.”¹²⁶ Until that mighty one came, Strangites could only hope for the “glorious promises which God has given us of deliverance.”¹²⁷

That Watson taught converts of a coming prophet is clear. In 1895, convert Edward Couch wrote to Watson expressing disappointment that the third prophet had yet to come. “It is now about 17 years since I was baptized,” he wrote.¹²⁸ “We thought then it would not be long till another prophet arose. Well it cannot be much longer. We must stick to the true faith.”¹²⁹ That future prophet would begin where Strang left off, even bringing forth new scripture. According to Watson, the BLL alone was not the only information to be gleaned from the Plates of Laban. Watson explained: “not only the Book of the Law, as it now stands, but much more of the same thing that is hidden on the plates of Laban.”¹³⁰ After quoting Micah 4:10—which promises that even though Israel was in Babylon, “there shalt thou be delivered”—Watson admitted that God’s people were in a latter-day Babylon “without a prophet to lead them,” an ironic echo of Brigham Young’s declaration of the same in August 1844, which Strang leveraged to declare himself prophet.¹³¹

Eventually, Watson came to believe that the future prophet would be Strang himself, that Strang would resurrect to complete his end times work, and that his return

¹²⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹²⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹²⁸ Edward Couch, letter to Wingfield Watson on June 22, 1895, WWP.

¹²⁹ Edward Couch, letter to Wingfield Watson on June 22, 1895, WWP.

¹³⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

¹³¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT.

would be heralded by the appearance of an indigenous prophet.¹³² Watson was not shy about this belief, telling a local newspaper editor in early 1922 of this hope that the Strangite church “will shortly be restored to power and glory,” a hope that he wished would come before his death.¹³³ Yet, Watson never witnessed the gathering in Zion, a violent apocalypse, nor the second coming of Christ. In his twilight years, as Watson’s hope for seeing end times signs in his lifetime dimmed, he lamented: “All the gathering places in Missouri are failures. Nauvoo is a failure. Kirtland is a failure. Independence is a failure. So what shall we do?” Watson summoned faith in his prophets: “One thing is true or there is God; for he has sworn it and that should end all controversy.”¹³⁴

In sum, Watson held to core, unique Mormon eschatological views taught by both Smith and Strang, especially regarding early LDS Zionism. In fact, Watson’s eschatology remained so close to Strang that the deceased prophet featured prominently in his prediction of end time events, i.e., Strang’s resurrection prior to Christ’s return.

Conclusion for Tertiary Doctrine

Watson was a careful student of his prophets’ writings. He viewed his role as a teacher in terms of transmission rather than innovation. In Watson’s teachings, one finds near unaltered facsimiles of Strang’s teachings on priesthood theology and organization, scripture, Zionism and eschatology. Watson taught the same origin, purpose, and function of the priesthood, differing from Strang only in titles and, even then, the differences dressed the Strangite priesthood with more common terms within wider Mormonism. Watson upheld and studied Strang’s scriptural canon—the Bible, BofM, D&C, and

¹³² Wingfield Watson, letter to Phebe Burnham Hobart [Thompson], August 13, 1890, CHL, Salt Lake City, UT; Wingfield Watson, letter to Gabriel Strang, November 16, 1914, WWP.

¹³³ Fred L. Holmes, “Ninety-Four Year Old Prophet Sole Survivor of Wisconsin Mormon Kingdom Near Burlington,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 15, 1922.

¹³⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., 1924(?), WWP. Watson mentions in the letter that he is ninety-four years old.

BLL—and used these sources to carry on the latter-day call for retreat to Zion for safety from the impending apocalypse. Even when constructing his own eschatology, Watson was careful not to veer from the trajectory set by either Smith or Strang. In sum, Watson followed Strang at every significant theological junction and only moved beyond his prophet’s footsteps when, considering unfulfilled prophecies, there were no longer any to follow.

Practical Continuity of Wingfield Watson with James Strang

Watson practiced Seventh-day Sabbatarianism, a tradition rooted in Strang’s teaching that is still practiced among Strangites today, making them unique from Brighamite and Josephite traditions. And although polygamy was practiced among Brighamites, it was vehemently rejected among Josephites, Watson’s primary adversaries. Neither Brighamite or Josephite—or, for that matter, any other known Mormonism during Watson’s lifetime—practiced animal sacrifice.

Seventh-day Sabbatarianism

Strang instituted a Seventh-day Sabbatarianism, i.e., the religious observance of rest from secular labor on the last day of the week. Rooted in OT law, Protestant Christianity has generally interpreted the Sabbath commandment to rest (Exod 20:8–11) as being ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Christ (Heb 4:9) rather than a moral imperative meant to be obeyed literally, i.e., to cease all activities one day a week. Instead, the Sabbath day was set apart for religious activity (e.g., worship, catechism, fellowship, rest) as church members abstains from secular endeavors. Arguments arose during the seventeenth century, especially among Baptist congregations, as to whether the Sabbath ought to be celebrated on Sunday (First-day Sabbatarianism) or Saturday (Seventh-day Sabbatarianism). The Seventh-day Sabbatarian position, which interprets the “seventh day” (Exod 20:10) as Saturday, grew in popularity during the nineteenth

century with the birth of movements like Seventh-day Millerites and Seventh-day Adventism.

Strang was doubtlessly aware of Sabbatarianism in general having been raised a Baptist and converted to a Sabbatarian religion. Mormonism continued the Christian tradition of ceasing secular labor to gather and worship on Sunday, a practice that endures to this day (D&C 59:9–10). Successive splits between Baptist churches in Strang’s childhood home hints at the possibility that an issue like Seventh-day Sabbatarianism may have played a role. While his exact church membership is unknown, Strang claimed to have been raised Baptist. By the time Strang turned nine years old, his small town of Scipio had weathered the birth, schism, union, and death of at least seven Baptist churches.¹³⁵ With so many congregations in such a small community, it is possible that Seventh-day Sabbatarianism was at least one theological boundary that prevented greater Baptist unity.

As previously noted, Strang’s vision of the LDS restoration included the retrieval of artifacts that he considered part of an ancient order. One such artifact was the Seventh-day Sabbath. Like many Christian commentators before him, Strang grounded the Sabbath in the biblical creation narrative and pointed to Mt. Sinai as the formalization of God’s command to rest as he had from his creative work.¹³⁶ Yet, Strang parted ways from tradition by accusing the ancient church of rescheduling Sabbath from the seventh to first day of the week for pragmatic reasons, to align the day of Christian worship with “the regular day of heathen festivals.”¹³⁷ Strang blamed Emperor Constantine for formalizing this modification in an attempt to “make the change of national religion less

¹³⁵ Elliot G. Storke, *History of Cayuga County, New York, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1879), 426.

¹³⁶ BLL, 22.

¹³⁷ BLL, 23.

difficult” for his formerly pagan kingdom.¹³⁸ The change, however, was warrantless to Strang, who instituted a Seventh-day Sabbath in his church.¹³⁹

Watson followed suit. He believed that certain laws, statutes, and sabbaths (i.e., weekly days and periodical holidays) were eternally binding, which, in combination with Strang’s teachings, compelled him to practice Seventh-day Sabbatarianism. Watson also rooted the Sabbath in the Torah and further blamed Rome for “giving us the first day of the week for the sabbath of the Lord our God, instead of the seventh.”¹⁴⁰ In so doing, Christians who meet on Sunday are worshipping during “the day set apart for the worship of the sun,” thus proving the “heathen authorship” of the apostate faith.¹⁴¹ Watson further defended Sabbatarianism against his opponents and continued to meet on Saturdays for religious fellowship and instruction. One of Watson’s closest disciples, Edward Couch, produced a pamphlet titled *The Sabbath and the Restitution* that taught a Seventh-day Sabbath.¹⁴² Due in part to Watson’s efforts, Seventh-day Sabbatarianism persists in the Strangite church today.

Polygamy

The origins of polygamy in Mormonism are opaque owing to the secrecy of the practice by early Latter Day Saints. Likely, plural marriage began as early as the mid-1830s after Smith entered a furtive relationship with Fanny Alger.¹⁴³ By summer 1843,

¹³⁸ BLL, 23.

¹³⁹ “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is the Sabbath day: ye shall do no work therein: it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings: ye shall take care that nothing perish, but ye shall not labour for hire nor increase; ye shall have a holy convocation in all your Temples and Synagogues.” BLL, 291.

¹⁴⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, November 4, 1910, WWP.

¹⁴¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, September 14, 1915, WWP.

¹⁴² Edward T. Couch, *The Sabbath and the Restitution* (Bay Springs, MI: Edward T. Couch, 1891).

¹⁴³ Brian C. and Laura H. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 1:85–106.

Smith had married around twenty-five women in secret, and trusted men were invited to follow suit.¹⁴⁴ Smith ratified the practice in a July 1843 revelation that tied eternal principles for marriage, both monogamous and polygamous, to celestial glory (D&C 132). By the time of Smith's death, the prophet married between thirty-five and forty women, according to one scholarly tally.¹⁴⁵ Brigham Young adopted the practice and was maritally sealed to over fifty women.

Strang initially opposed polygamy to provide an alternative for Mormons uncomfortable with the practice. He put great distance between himself and the “spiritual wife system,” which he denounced as an “abomination,” and the “spiritual wife doctrine” was a common accusation for excommunication of early converts.¹⁴⁶ Strang was nevertheless influenced by Nauvoo-era polygamists like John C. Bennett and William Smith, and gradually reversed his opposition. By spring 1850, Strang was no longer hiding his clandestine relationship with his first plural wife. The following year, he formally introduced the practice with the publication of the BLL. Strang would go on to pen or reprint nearly a dozen articles in support of polygamy in *Northern Islander*, but his most detailed teachings on plural marriage are found in the BLL.

Like Smith, Strang taught that marriage was an eternal covenant and promised that a man's wife is “[his] in the resurrection, and [his] in life everlasting,” so long as the marriage was performed by a proper priesthood authority.¹⁴⁷ The BLL permitted men to marry multiple wives provided they were eligible virgins, i.e., unmarried women who were not “strange” or foreign to the community, unrelated to the man, post-pubescent, not

¹⁴⁴ Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:323–36.

¹⁴⁵ Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:272–73. This estimate was cited by the LDS Church in its essay “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

¹⁴⁶ ZR 2, no. 21 (August 12, 1847): 88; CV, 107, 130, 149, 151, 153, 157.

¹⁴⁷ BLL, 159.

physically deformed, free from demonic possession, and not coerced into marriage.¹⁴⁸ Men were also forbidden from marrying wives “disproportioned to [their] inheritance, and [their] substance” to prevent poverty and neglect.¹⁴⁹

The BLL offered Strang firmer footing to defend polygamy, which, he claimed, “was not only allowed, but required and enforced by the law of God.”¹⁵⁰ Strang argued publicly in favor of polygamous western Mormons who were the targets of cultural and legal confrontation during the 1850s. Strang’s argument in favor of polygamy was two-fold, both theological and practical. First, polygamy was a divinely sanctioned practice by God as evidenced by the OT patriarchs and kings, and, because God was restoring the ancient order of things, polygamy, too, would be restored in the latter days.¹⁵¹ Second, polygamy benefitted society by empowering women to choose a desirable man over undesirable men (even if they had already been chosen by another woman) and preventing them from slipping into poverty. In a monogamous culture, especially ones where the gender ratio is lopsided in favor of females, it is difficult for women to find a man of character, competence, and industry. Consequently, with all the good men taken, some women resorted to less than desirable husbands or were forced into prostitution.¹⁵² Strang argued that where polygamy is practiced rates of prostitution and adultery are lower.¹⁵³ Moreover, widows and barren women are left on their own if they are unable to find another husband or to bear sons who would grow to become their caretakers. Strang further believed that polygamy, when practiced according to the BLL, was a gracious

¹⁴⁸ BLL, 311–12.

¹⁴⁹ BLL, 314.

¹⁵⁰ *NI* 4, no. 7 (June 8, 1854).

¹⁵¹ “My Dear Brother,” *NI* 5, no. 14 (October 18, 1855).

¹⁵² *NI* 4, no. 3 (March 2, 1854).

¹⁵³ BLL, 328.

relief to the embarrassment of singleness and barrenness.¹⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, Watson affirmed and defended plural marriage in line with Strang. Watson never practiced plural marriage but defended those who did even at the cost of his relationship with family members. Like Strang, Watson was fond of pointing to OT biblical figures for affirmation of the practice. And, in keeping with his prophet, Watson further contended that polygamous societies generally enjoyed greater social order and justice. Watson also argued that the presence of polygamy correlates to the absence of prostitution.¹⁵⁵ In 1906, Watson produced a pamphlet, “Non-Mormon Lectures on Polygamy From Non-Mormon Viewpoint,” a republication of an article from the *Deseret Evening News*, which a non-Latter-day Saint argued for the biblical sanction of the practice and criticized Protestants who, on the one hand, allow polygamous units to remain in missionary contexts but, on the other hand, break up domestic polygamous families to bring them into monogamous conformity.¹⁵⁶ Watson highlighted the argument by adding his attack against anyone, non-Mormon and Josephite alike, who would “ruthlessly separate the innocent wives of the plurally married men of Utah,” calling them “the most unfeeling and brutish of all inhuman brutes, and the most savage and fanatic of all human savages.”¹⁵⁷

Watson further lambasted the Josephite portrayal of Strangite polygamy as “divine free lovism” and grew weary of the “considerable merriment” that Josephites received in bringing up the topic.¹⁵⁸ He complained:

To hear them [Josephites] talk one would think that the Strangite Mormons were

¹⁵⁴ BLL, 313–14.

¹⁵⁵ PC 5:22.

¹⁵⁶ Wingfield Watson, “Non-Mormon Lectures on Polygamy From Non-Mormon Viewpoint” (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1906).

¹⁵⁷ Wingfield Watson, “Non-Mormon Lectures on Polygamy From Non-Mormon Viewpoint” (Burlington, WI: Wingfield Watson, 1906), 10.

¹⁵⁸ PC 5:24; Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 39.

every day marrying wives . . . Where as the truth of the matter is, that inside of 65 or 70 years I have not known a single case of polygamy taking place among the Strangites; not one.¹⁵⁹

It was less important to Watson that polygamy was practiced—in fact, he did not believe plural marriage could be practiced without the supervision of a prophet—than it was to be affirmed. Indeed, Watson’s resolute support of plural marriage, both outside and within his movement, irked the Josephites who, despite evidence, refused to believe that Joseph Smith taught and practiced polygamy. For Watson, to reject polygamy was not merely tantamount to a denial of Strangism but also of Mormonism. “In their [Josephite] abuse of plural marriage,” opined Watson, “I am satisfied that they are doing more to make infidels and turn men against the scriptures, than any other people.”¹⁶⁰

Watson further believed that in the millennium, the patriarchs, Jesus Christ, “and Joseph Smith and James J. Strang, and all their wives and children will be here,” living in a utopia free from violence.¹⁶¹ “But the Reorganized wont be there,” Watson continued, “because they never could stand [polygamy]. For Poly will be there and she will be there to stay, for sure. And there will be a notice up over all the doors to the R. O. ‘keep out’.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 21, 1918, WWP. Reconciling Watson’s statement in the letter about an absence of polygamy in the Strangite community is difficult. To write that no other Strangites besides Strang practiced plural marriage “inside of 65 or 70 years” (i.e., from 1848 or 1853 to 1918) is untrue. Watson either miscalculated the years, lied, or was genuinely unaware of Strangites who practiced polygamy aside from Strang. However, in an interview he gave that same year to Milo Quaife, Watson surmised that as few as 17 or 18 men practiced polygamy on the island. Watson’s motivation to conceal Strangite plural marriage is not readily apparent. To non-Mormons, it appears he chose to conceal or even deny his support of polygamy. In a 1906 biography of Watson in his hometown newspaper, the author reassures his readers that Watson “never believed in nor practices polygamy.” “Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, Wisconsin), February 14, 1906. Yet, he was an outspoken proponent of polygamy, even in correspondence with his children, and had little reason to downplay it in his religious community. Perhaps, then, Watson mistakenly wrote “65 or 70 years” or did not know fellow members who practiced polygamy (although the Nichols were a polygamous family), which communicates its taboo on Beaver Island, its dissipation in the diaspora, and Watson’s outsider status until the late-nineteenth century. It also communicates how secretive Strangites were about their involvement in polygamy after Strang’s death.

¹⁶⁰ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP.

¹⁶¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, December 20, 1913, WWP.

¹⁶² Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, December 20, 1913, WWP.

Animal Sacrifice

In Smith's revision of Genesis, Adam and Eve are given their first divine command to sacrifice an animal after their expulsion from Eden. In it, they are told to "offer the firstlings of their flocks" as an offering to God, an order they dutifully obeyed.¹⁶³ Smith thus affixed Adam to the later animal sacrificial experiences of major figures such as Noah, Abraham, and Aaron. Animal sacrifice was no longer an implied imperative from God, with the first episode involving Abel's sacrifice of the "firstlings of his flock" (Gen 4:3, KJV), but a direct demand from his father, the head of all mankind. According to LDS scripture, the Hebrews practiced animal sacrifice throughout the OT and, in the new Promised Land, Lehi's descendants continued the practice as they "took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses" (Mosiah 2:3).

Overall, Mormonism has adopted the prominent Christian view of sacrificial fulfillment in Christ's crucifixion to explain the cessation of animal sacrifice (4 Nephi 1:12). Still, Smith left open the possibility of a future restoration of animal sacrifice in the latter days. The earliest days of the LDS Church harbored the anticipation "that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness."¹⁶⁴ In an 1839 sermon delivered to church leaders, Smith explained that near the finale of the latter days "God would gather together all things in one," ushering in an event during which Adam and other OT figures prelude the coming of Christ.¹⁶⁵ Smith later clarified that a notable feature of this reunification would be the reinstatement of animal sacrifice.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Strang was apparently unaware of this revision. In his BLL, Strang explained that "the first institution of sacrifices the Divine Oracles make no record" and that the earliest recorded sacrifices were those "the sons of Adam." BLL, 106. Still, Strang held the Smithian belief that "[sacrifices] continued in all ages, from Adam till Christ." BLL, 107.

¹⁶⁴ Oliver Cowdery, "Dear Brother," *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 16.

¹⁶⁵ *JSP* D6:545.

¹⁶⁶ So Smith: "...the offering of sacrifice shall be continued at the last time. for all the ordinances and duties that ever have been required by the priesthood under the directions and

An 1841 further calls the Saints to prepare for the renewal of such offerings by readying temples for, among other ordinances, “your sacrifices by the sons of Levi.”¹⁶⁷

Anecdotal evidence supports animal sacrifice as an element of the returning old offering sacrifices. Oliver B. Huntington recalled a time in Smith’s office when, huddled together with other disciples, the group inquired about sacrifices and burnt offerings. “Will there ever be any more offering of sheep and heifers and bullocks upon altars, as used to be required of Israel?” they asked. Smith replied affirmatively, explaining that “there was never any rites, ordinances or laws in the Priesthood of any gospel dispensation upon this earth but what will have to be finished and perfected in this the last dispensation of time.”¹⁶⁸ Likewise, Wandle Mace remembered how Smith instructed the Twelve to prepare for Willard Richard’s appointment to the Quorum by purifying a room in the Kirtland temple and “that they must kill a lamb and offer a sacrifice unto the Lord.”¹⁶⁹ Yet, like other Smithian doctrinal innovations, the return of animal sacrifices never developed in mainstream Mormon thought and practice and is today relegated to eschatological mystery.

Strang showed no interest in animal sacrifice in the early years of his movement. Instead, he adopted the common Christian view that such practiced ceased in the early church and any language involving sacrifice was meant to communicate spiritual offerings of repentance and prayer or perseverance through the losses of

commandments of the Almighty in any of the dispensations, shall all be had in the last dispensations—Therefore all things had under the Authority of the Priesthood At any former period shall be had again—bringing to pass the restoration spoken of by the mouth of all the Holy prophets. . . . The offering of sacrifice has ever been connected, and forms a part of the duties of the priesthood. It began which with the priesthood and will be continued untill after the coming of christ from generation to generation “Instruction on Priesthood, circa 5 October 1840,” JSP, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/instruction-on-priesthood-circa-5-october-1840/16>.

¹⁶⁷ D&C 124:39.

¹⁶⁸ Oliver B. Huntington, “Sayings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *The Young Woman’s Journal* 4, no. 6 (March 1893): 275.

¹⁶⁹ Wandle Mace, *Autobiography*, 37, Book of Abraham Project, accessed April 13, 2021, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/WMace.html>.

persecution. Despite the desire to restore some of the OT ancient order, the concept of sacrifice was nevertheless thought of in a traditional Christian framework. A stanza from an early Strangite hymn captures this well: “We’ll rear a Temple to our God, and here be taught his holy word, and incense from our hearts shall rise, a humble, broken sacrifice.”¹⁷⁰ The sacrifice is figurative, not literal. In 1847, Strang published an article from John E. Page instructing readers how God, in the progression of his salvific scheme, redeemed his people “from a law demanding *carnal sacrifices* to the offering of *spiritual sacrifices* of a broken heart and a contrite spirit.”¹⁷¹ Two years later, Strang reprinted a *T&S* article described the inefficacy of the OT atonement sacrifices, describing sacrifices as “types and shadows” that “could never make the comers thereunto perfect,” necessitating a “more ‘excellent sacrifice’” in the Son of God.¹⁷²

By the publication of the BLL in 1851, however, Strang’s view of sacrifices had evolved. The BLL requires altar sacrifices for a variety of reasons, e.g., “sinofferings, and for trespassofferings, and for memorials, and for peaceofferings, and for thankofferings.”¹⁷³ Proper objects of altar sacrifice are “firstlings of thy flocks” that meet the same purity requirements of the Torah, and harvest offerings were to be selected from “the choice of thy fields.”¹⁷⁴ The proper officiants to offer sacrifices are Melchizedek priests.¹⁷⁵ Some of these sacrifices had an atoning power to satisfy God’s wrath against sin. For Strang, however, “Christ himself is the one sacrifice, great above all others,” or

¹⁷⁰ *Gospel Herald* 4, no. 5 (April 19, 1849).

¹⁷¹ John E. Page, “Treatise on the Spiritual Covenant Made with Abraham,” *ZR* 2, no. 26 (September 16, 1847), 106. Emphasis original.

¹⁷² “Sons of God,” *T&S* 4, no. 5, January 16, 1843: 73, reprinted in *GH* 4, no. 32 (October 25, 1849).

¹⁷³ BLL, 106.

¹⁷⁴ BLL, 106.

¹⁷⁵ BLL, 106.

what he called the greatest “natural” sacrifice.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin is no longer required. Yet, Strang contended for the continuation of “sacerdotal” sacrifices, i.e., offerings (both animal and harvest) devoid of redemptive power but are nonetheless symbolic of the “natural” sacrifice of Christ. Strang reasoned that because “the rites peculiar to the Melchisedek Priesthood continue,” thanksgiving (i.e., non-atonement) sacrifices ought to also continue.¹⁷⁷ “Wherever that Priesthood is found, there those sacrifices, ordinances and sacraments may be looked for,” he explained.¹⁷⁸ For Strang, the logical path of the restoration of the ancient order led back to sacrifices. Although Christ’s “natural” sacrifice satisfied the requirement for sin offerings, the priesthood nevertheless still required “sacerdotal” sacrifices of thanksgiving as a sanctifying power in the religious community, and because the priesthood was being restored, so ought the practice of sacrifices.

The first instance of Strangite animal sacrifices occurred on July 8, 1852, the second anniversary of Strang’s coronation. The BLL sanctified that day for Strangites, commanding them to “kept [it] in remembrance forever” to honor the ascension of Strang to his throne.¹⁷⁹ The *Northern Islander* reported that nearly ninety men with their families brought “victims,” animals for a “most solemn sacrifice” and “splendid feast.”¹⁸⁰ In turning over their animal sacrifices, members confessed that “God has made us a kingdom; and the fear of us is upon those who hate us.”¹⁸¹ At the feast, presiding priests blessed the meal and led the people in prayer, confessing their membership “into covenant with thee to keep they commandments, and I have eaten of the sacrifice before

¹⁷⁶ BLL, 109.

¹⁷⁷ BLL, 109.

¹⁷⁸ BLL, 108.

¹⁷⁹ BLL, 293.

¹⁸⁰ “Conference,” *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852).

¹⁸¹ “Conference,” *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852).

thee as a witness forever.”¹⁸² The Strangites gathered in 1854, when “[n]umerous sacrifices and offerings were made,” and again in 1855, when “[u]pwards of 200 victims were slain.”¹⁸³ The July 1856 sacrifice was not one of animals but a prophet; Strang succumbed to his assassination on July 9th of that year.

Watson wrote relatively little about animal sacrifices when compared to other Strangite distinctives. Like Strang, Watson taught that Melchizedek priesthood holders, “from the days of Adam . . . all offered sacrifices,” but that Christ’s crucifixion satisfied the salvific power of animal sacrifice.¹⁸⁴ Still, Watson believed that Smith and “other prophets,” i.e., biblical and Strang, prophesied that “sacrifices were to be restored” in the latter days.¹⁸⁵ Watson kept the practice well toward the end of his life, yet apparently also felt that the practice was best saved for a time when a prophet could supervise the worship.¹⁸⁶

The Continuity of Wingfield Watson’s Apologetic

As it was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Watson worked to preserve the Strangite distinctive, but if he deviated from the doctrines and practices that made Strangism distinct, how could he have succeeded in his mission? This chapter has demonstrated how Watson’s apologetic for James Strang was in continuity with his prophet. Watson painstakingly and unwaveringly contended for the prophethood of Strang by employing a near carbon-copy of Strang’s own argument. Strang issued a four-fold argument for his right to succeed Joseph Smith—1) calling *via* direct revelation, 2)

¹⁸² “Conference,” *NI* 2, no. 12 (July 8, 1852).

¹⁸³ “Conference,” *NI* 5, no. 5 (July 19, 1855).

¹⁸⁴ PC 6:10. See also PC 7:6.

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *Watson-Blair Debate*, 63.

¹⁸⁶ Watson wrote his daughter, Grace on July 8, 1910, to report: “We have sacrificed according to the law of our God and we could sincerely wish that all could be together at least on this day.” Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, July 8, 1910, WWP.

Smith's appointment, 3) angelic ordination, and 4) custodianship of Urim and Thummim), and Watson echoed those four core elements exactly. Strang taught unique doctrine that distinguished his movement from that of his chief competitor, Brigham Young. Watson not only taught these doctrines in fidelity with Strang's teachings, but he juxtaposed and defended them against a new rival to Strangism, the Reorganization. Strang also instituted unique Strangite practices, polygamy and animal sacrifice, which, although Watson never engaged in the former, he nevertheless upheld as non-negotiable elements of the Strangite faith.

Watson labored to remain within the doctrinal boundaries set by his prophet, an endeavor with which he was very self-aware. "I have rejected no prophet of God," wrote Watson, "nor any revelation of God by the mouth of his authorized prophets."¹⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson prided himself not on doctrinal innovation but doctrinal continuity, not evolution but resilience. Success for him was not measured by membership population but by quality of belief. Indeed, he would have considered his mission a failure had the Strangite church grown larger while diverging from its founding prophet. It was better to Watson that a small orthodox remnant remains in anticipation of a third prophet than to build a large, unorthodox organization that would inevitably face judgement for their infidelity.

¹⁸⁷ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter, I argued that Watson's apologetic for Strang was in continuity with his teachings, leaving open the possibility that Watson could preserve Strangite distinctives as a reliable and authentic inheritance from its founder. The question remains to be asked; did he do it? Was his leadership a contributing factor in preserving Strangite distinctives after the death of James Strang?

This question may be approached from two avenues, from both the quantitative and qualitative perspectives. If Watson is to be measured by the number of members his apologetic labors kept within the movement, then he failed spectacularly. The population of the Strangites is difficult to ascertain due, in part, to lost documents, a lack of baptismal records (Strang did not require rebaptism of Mormon converts), a turbulent history, poor record-keeping at Strangite-affiliated congregations outside Voree and Beaver Island, and the movement's transient nature. Membership constantly fluctuated as disaffected members left in exchange for incoming converts. Researchers have estimated that upwards of approximately 2,500 people associated with Strang between 1846 to 1856.¹ By the time of Strang's death in 1856, the number dwindled significantly—around a thousand members were exiled from Beaver Island.² Over the course of the next few decades, at least half of all known Strangites became Josephites.³ It did not help the

¹ Vickie Cleverley Speck, "From Strangites to Reorganized Latter Day Saints: Transformations in Midwestern Mormonism, 1856–79," in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 142–43.

² Speck, "From Strangites to Reorganized Latter Day Saints," 142.

³ Speck, "From Strangites to Reorganized Latter Day Saints," 145.

Strangite cause that Lorenzo Dow Hickey encouraged migration into the Reorganization, something Watson resisted pugnaciously.

By the end of Watson's life, the total population of the church could have been no more than a couple hundred, and this, in my research, is a generous estimation. While the exact population of the post-Strang church may never be known, Strangites clearly suffered persistent decline from 1856 to the end of Watson's life in 1922. Writing in 1907, Watson commented how "our numbers are small," a fact that both Brighamites and Josephites alike interpreted as a sure sign of the movement's demise.⁴ Later, in 1920, Watson's daughter, Grace Lewis, echoed her father's observation, noting how after the exile, the Strangites were "left few in number."⁵ The Strangites were so few and far between that they struggled to hold conferences. Besides the small contingency that continued to gather in Wisconsin—Sunday School attendance in 1908 was a little over a dozen—Watson wrote about "quite a little branch" in Pueblo, Colorado, along with "one or two others" in the West, as well as a few members in Kansas City.⁶ Watson also kept correspondence with Strangites living in Michigan, Illinois, Louisiana, and New Mexico. Despite his lifelong commitment of shoring up the church, it dwindled to near extinction.

However, it is not necessarily true that Watson failed to preserve the Strangite identity. As chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated, Watson toiled incessantly at great personal cost to preserve a religious identity that was faithful to Strang's thought and practice. In other words, while Watson *quantitatively* failed to maintain the Strangite population, he nevertheless *qualitatively* succeeded at maintaining an authentic Strangite identity among remnant members.

At his baptism in 1852, Watson was told by church authorities that he was

⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, May 23, 1907, WWP.

⁵ Grace Lewis, "Correspondence," *The Latter Day Precept* (June 1920).

⁶ Wingfield Watson, letter to Fred Willis, December 9, 1908; Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, January 12, 1920, WWP.

destined to assist his religious community “in collecting and leading forth a host of the poor, oppressed, distressed, trodden down sons of men” and “to make a rush upon the enemies of our God.”⁷ Watson took seriously his two-fold commission of aiding his community and defending his faith. From his conversion to the end of his life, he held an unwavering belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet, seer, and revelator called by God to restore the Christian faith to its primitive and pure organization, empowered by the priesthood on an inevitable latter-day march toward the second coming of Christ. Watson further believed that Smith’s lone successor was James Strang, having been called by God through revelation, appointed by Smith, ordained to the chief office of the LDS priesthood by the hands of angels, and proved the validity of his calling by translating ancient records. After Strang’s death, Watson unflinchingly maintained the position that no prophet could arise outside his interpretation of strict ecclesiastical regulations set forth by Smith and Strang, even despite Lorenzo Dow Hickey, a prominent and more authoritative member of his own movement, teaching otherwise. For Watson, Brighamite and Josephite priesthoods were birthed from apostasy and led by counterfeit prophets of empty authorities who ascended to their post *via* earthly means, whether by common consent (Brigham Young) or, worse in Watson’s mind, lineal descent (Joseph Smith III). Only those Saints who acknowledged Strang and gathered with like-minded believers would survive the imminent danger of apocalyptic destruction.

For over half a century, Watson watched as “Gurleyism” evolved into the “Young Josephism” and pillaged his beloved church of its members. He displayed intense antipathy for the Reorganization and its representatives, despite maintaining a relatively amicable relationship with its leader, Joseph Smith III, and having Josephite members in his family. Unlike the Strangite remnant, the Reorganization was populous, well-funded,

⁷ “Four journal pages found in the files of Sister Billie Ulland in March 1991 probably copied at one time by Sister Grace Willis.” n.d., WWP.

and efficient at proselytizing, owing, in part, to the many Strangites who joined the church. They enjoyed the influence of a large network of churches, which collectively mobilized missionaries and supported newspapers and other publishing efforts. By contrast, the Strangite church was impoverished, fractured, scattered, and diminished. Still, Watson resolved to do anything within his power to curb the influence of the Reorganization, which manifested in a lifetime devoted to public and private devotion to Strang.

In public, Watson defended Strang's legitimacy, character, doctrines, and practice in public debate, Reorganized meetings, missionary efforts, and an impressive publishing career. He spent countless hours carefully combing through Mormon and non-Mormon periodicals for any mention of his prophets, then stepped forward in defense against criticism. When newspapers would not publish his articles, Watson took up the printing press, which came at a considerable financial expense. He pondered this sacrifice: "While I have been counting up those works, and the labor, thought and time, they have cost men, the question came into my mind have I shown my faith in the Latter Day work by my work?"⁸ The answer to his question is, of course, a resounding yes. While other Strangites wrote and published, none came close to the quantity that Watson achieved. Even non-Mormons took notice of his prolific authorship. A newspaper commented how his writings showcased "a close reasoner, and in matters pertaining to the church, a thorough master of the Mormon creed and Mormon history," adding that Watson had "met and vanquished in debate the ablest men of the Utah sect."⁹ Even one Strang's Protestant son, Clement, "counted [Watson] as perhaps the sanest and most sensibly devoted to the cause he held uppermost of any of those associated with my

⁸ Wingfield Watson, letter to Sarah Jane Watson Willis, May 1, 1922, WWP.

⁹ "Wingfield Watson," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI), February 14, 1906.

father in his great venture.”¹⁰

In private, Watson maintained voluminous correspondence with his immediate family, Strangites, and seekers—rarely were his letters devoid of religious instruction. His faith in Strang and LDS restorationism occupied most of his attention in correspondence. It is telling that Watson allowed both the American Civil War and the First World War to pass him by without opining much about those conflicts outside of apocalyptic terms, and even then, barely at all. The only kingdom Watson concerned himself with was the divine kingdom under Strang. To watch the Strangite community dwindle and fracture, then, was chief among Watson’s disappointments; he constantly pled for unity and abhorred assimilation into any Mormon body that diminished or dismissed Strang’s authority. For those who listened, Watson’s leadership and writings were crucial. In the early twentieth century, Strangites in Colorado proselytized with Watson’s pamphlets, and, in 1948 when members in Voree reinvigorated the printing press there, Watson’s *The True Gospel* was printed 2,000 times.¹¹

Watson also dedicated himself to the collection and preservation of Strangite materials. He once confessed, “if I have been covetous of anything in this life, it has been that I was covetous of Mormon documents, Mormon history and to possess all that Joseph Smith and James J. Strang have given to us” by way of revelatory documentation.¹² His serendipitous meeting with Gilbert Watson’s widow led to his retrieval of the former Strangite clerk’s collection, which, along with other Strangite donations (like that of James Hutchins’s collection) proved to be Watson’s “chief pleasure” in life, precious material to modern Strangites, and invaluable sources to

¹⁰ Clement James Strang, letter to Elizabeth White, February 6, 1928, WWP.

¹¹ H. C. Anderson, *Facts for Thinkers: In Defense of James J. Strang as the Legally Appointed and Ordained Successor of Joseph the Martyr* (Pueblo, CO: H. C. Anderson, 1915); Morgan, “Strangite Bibliography,” 109.

¹² “A Reply from Wingfield Watson,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI), March 21, 1906.

present-day historians.¹³ One contemporary witness to Watson's collection called his home "a complete museum of Mormon literature."¹⁴ No one outside Strang's family in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries contributed more to the preservation of historical Strangite material than Watson. Were it not for his efforts, much of what we could know of Strang and Strangite history would have been lost, rendering the reconstruction of this fascinating chapter of Mormon history nearly impossible. The sources that Watson preserved were critical to existing scholarly works on Strang.¹⁵

But Watson's work was not merely one of material preservation. If his chief pleasure was the conservancy of Strangite historical sources, then his chief joy was the preservation of his Strangite children. He toiled in the spiritual field of his own family for decades to secure the transfer of his religion from one generation to the next. Nearly all his extant letters to his children contain spiritual advice, exhortation, and doctrinal instruction. Watson was, in fact, survived by children who carried on his faith, an especially impressive circumstance given their wide geographic separation and opposition from the Reorganization.¹⁶ Still, they retained the distinct faith given to them by their father, a sharp contrast to Strang's own children, many of whom refused their

¹³ "A Reply from Wingfield Watson," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI), March 21, 1906.

¹⁴ "Wingfield Watson," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI), February 14, 1906.

¹⁵ Quaife, *Kingdom of St. James*; Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island*; Speck, *Kingdom*; Faber, *James Jesse Strang*.

¹⁶ Robert (1847–1937) married Adell Tubbs, daughter of Strangite apostle Lorenzo Dow Tubbs, and later settled in the San Luis Valley of Colorado where they enjoyed the fellowship of a small Strangite community. Sarah (1852–1938) married John Willis and remained in northwestern Michigan for most of her life. John, who waffled in his commitment to the Reorganization, ultimately joined with the Strangites, as did members of his own family. Watson was able to baptize his granddaughter, Grace Willis, in the late 1880s. Wingfield Watson, letter to Lorenzo Dow Hickey, February 1895, WWP. Joseph Hickey, son of Lorenzo Dow Hickey, wrote to John Willis to discuss church matters into the 1920s. Joseph Hickey, letter to John Willis, February 14, 1923, WWP. Watson also kept correspondence with his grandson, Fred Willis, instructing him in the ways of their shared religious convictions. Elizabeth (1856–1947) married Adelbert White, and they remained near to Watson and his faith their entire life. Grace (1860–1959), who married Charles Lewis, weathered years of persistent opposition from her Josephite husband and immediate community of Lamoni, Iowa. Still, Grace retained her Strangite identity even while associating with the Reorganization. Thomas (1862–1917), married to Sophia Richtman, remained a part of the church until his unexpected death in 1917.

father's religious inheritance.¹⁷ Today, no known descendants of Strang affiliate with his church.¹⁸

Non-Mormons took notice of Watson's devotion, too. In 1906, his hometown newspaper called him (erroneously) the "only known living person still loyal to the Strang dynasty," further describing him as "a devout believer in the divine appointment of Strang" and "a faithful and consistent defender of the Mormon faith and its dead leader."¹⁹ In his obituary, the *Grant County Herald* marveled at the fact that "after 60 years of exile and tribulation [Watson] was still as firm a believer as ever of Strang's divine calling."²⁰

Watson could have conceivably abandoned the exhausting work of defending Strang to grasp for power over those under his influence. In the early-twentieth century, with no remaining apostles, Watson was the highest-ranking figure in the Strangite church and, arguably, its most influential. With Strang's sons resisting the call to take up their father's mantle, Watson was a prime candidate for apex Strangite leadership. Yet, while other men in the history of LDS restorationism seized power at critical moments in their respective movements, Watson refused. Milo Quaife thought it an "obvious deduction" that Watson believed he would be the third prophet, but this was not at all

¹⁷ Watson kept correspondence with some of Strang's children, two of whom, Gabriel and Clement, stand in stark contrast of the religious destinies of Strang's progeny. Gabriel (1855–1935), son of Betsy McNutt, remained in Mormonism, was pro-polygamy, and was particularly interested in the history of central America, even wishing to colonize the area with fellow believers. According to Gabriel, Hickey wished he would have stepped forward to become the Presiding High Priest; however, after declining, Gabriel recommended Watson. Gabriel J. Strang, letter to John Wake, January 9, 1828, WWP. But Clement James, (1854–1944), son of Elvira Field, abandoned his father's faith for Protestantism, even becoming a member of its clergy. Clement maintained that his father was a crypto-atheist and had "counted his [Smiths'] claims and teachings as strictly artificial." Clement J. Strang, "Why I Am Not a Strangite," *Michigan History* 26 (1942), 463, 465. Still, Clement maintained a warm and friendly relationship with Watson calling him "one of the finest men I ever met." Clement J. Strang, letter to Elizabeth White, July 8, 1828, WWP.

¹⁸ Speek, "From Strangites to Reorganized Latter Day Saints," 153.

¹⁹ "Wingfield Watson," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, WI), February 14, 1906.

²⁰ "Last Survivor Mormon Band Dies, Aged 95," *Grant County Herald* (Lancaster, WI), December 13, 1922.

obvious from any of his extant writings.²¹ If he ever harbored aspiration of becoming a prophet, then he concealed the matter from friends and family better than he did his desire to practice polygamy. Moreover, given the consistency and fervor with which he held to his beliefs on prophetic succession, only an angel from heaven could have convinced Watson to take the reins of leadership. In an angel's absence, he remained loyal to Strang and the priesthood hierarchy he established, even if that meant decades of waiting and wondering what would become of his beloved church. Watson believed that "the works of James J. Strang before they are finished will be greater than any accomplished by any man since the world began with one exception,— the works of Jesus," and Watson was of no mind to undermine nor outshine his prophet.²² Watson loved Strang, admiring him as "a more patient man, a more temperate man, a man of more soundness and sagacity in judgment, a quicker and readier to discern the right in deeply complicated matters and questions, never wore a crown anywhere."²³

That Watson chose not to subvert his two prophets' teachings corroborates other evidence of his devotion and testifies to his unpretentious character. Watson's writings reveal a gently austere man, kind in his interactions but stiff in his opinions. He reserved his harshest words for Mormon leaders he deemed apostates and practiced gentle patience towards their followers even amid slander and bruising. In one of his few self-descriptions, Watson wrote:

I know my own weakness and faults and feel a good deal worse about them than any body else. The man who tries to serve God, and to work out his salvation, knows his own weakness, and the weakness of human nature better than any body else. Since James was taken I have had the whole world to fight against and a very large body of the Mormons also; and they being led by false leaders who ought to be the easiest won have been the hardest hearted, and uncircumsized in heart and ears, of any others. Yet there is a goodness about them and in time the great mass of them will be

²¹ Quaife, "Notes."

²² Wingfield Watson, letter to Gabriel Strang, November 16, 1914, WWP.

²³ PC 3:25.

redeemed and become a righteous people.²⁴

Watson was a compassionate father and steadfast leader but pledged his life to a vain quest. He witnessed none of what he hoped for in his lifetime, e.g., the building of a Strangite temple, the return of Christ, the retrieval of Mormonism from Josephite and Brighamite influence, etc.

In sum, Watson dedicated most of his life to tireless engagement in teaching, preaching, public debate, corresponding, publishing, and familial instruction to uphold Strang's authority as a means of safeguarding the fidelity of the Strangite identity, which he believed was the most authentic form of Mormonism. Indeed, for Watson, "Strangism has proved the truth of Mormonism, as nothing else has proved it," and it was his role as a Strangite apologist to secure and transmit an authentic Strangism so that Mormonism could, according to Watson, continue to be proven true.²⁵ To do so required unflinching loyalty to the authority of Strang. In what are arguably the three most significant challenges of Watson's apologetic career—his drawn-out confrontation with Hickey's secret appointment theory, the 1891 East Jordan debate, and *Richtman v. Watson*—he remained true to what he believed would perpetuate a true form of Strang's doctrines and revelations, both of which were tied to issues of authority.

Indeed, authority in LDS restorationism is rarely absent from Watson's thought and apologetic. Who is God, and who says so? For Watson, these questions were inextricably linked because to deny Strang was tantamount to denying God's authority and *vice versa*. If the First Vision wrested authority away from existing churches into the LDS restoration movement, then, for Watson, the only way to keep it there was to promote and maintain a coherent narrative lineage of appointment from Smith to Strang, even to Watson himself. Without this reinforced (Strangite) authority, Mormonism was

²⁴ Wingfield Watson, letter to unknown, n.d., WWP.

²⁵ PC 13:12.

destined to suffer from the same fractured state as Protestantism, a fate it has indeed met. Today, the Strangites, Community of Christ, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints join hundreds of other expressions, both extinct and extant, who trace their spiritual lineage back to the movement sparked by Joseph Smith.²⁶ Within LDS restorationism broadly, the issue of authority is still contested and far from settled.

For the Strangites, without Watson's efforts, it is reasonable to conclude that, in the decades following Strang's death, the entirety of the Strangite movement would have evaporated through abandonment, primarily by assimilation into the Reorganization. I agree with historian John Cummings: "That the church was not permitted to disintegrate entirely was due in a large measure to the untiring, ceaseless efforts of Wingfield Watson."²⁷ Cummings called Watson the "loyal disciple" of Strang, and that he was.

In 1898, a pair of Josephite elders met with Watson in a foolish attempt to persuade him away from his beloved prophet. It was a spectacular failure. "[The] old Strangite fire still burns within the old man," they complained, "and he would try to ignite everything he would come in contact with." The elders took solace in the fact that, despite the formidability of Watson's convictions, "his fire is not very combustible far or wide, so the fire is not very disastrous, only the fumes seem to trouble some in this locality."²⁸ Few other testimonies so accurately capture the legacy of Wingfield Watson. His immense, immovable, and fiery convictions were perpetually couched in a tiny movement that suffered from an inability to withstand defection, desertion, and division. While his struggle to maintain the Strangite population may have failed, Wingfield Watson nevertheless succeeded at maintaining the Strangite identity after the death of its founder.

²⁶ See Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: An Encyclopedia of the Smith-Rigdon Movement*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2021).

²⁷ Cumming, "Wingfield Watson," 1.

²⁸ Letter from W. A. McDowell to the Editors, *SH* 45, no. 52 (December 28, 1898): 828.

APPENDIX 1
LETTER OF APPOINTMENT

Nauvoo June 18th 1844

My dear son Your epistle of may 24th proposing the planting a stake of zion in Wisconsin and the gathering the saints there was duly received & I with most of the brethren whose advise I called in were of opinion that you was deceived by a spirit not of this world great but not good. brother Hyrum however thought otherwise and favored the project not doubting it was of God I however determined to return you an unfavourable answer for the present but oh the littleness of man in his best earthly state not so the will of the Almighty. God hath ruled it otherwise and a message from the throne of grace directed me as it hath inspired you and the faith which thou hast in the shepherd the stone of Israel hath been repaid to thee a thousand fold and thou shalt be like unto him but the flock shall find rest with thee and God shall reveal to thee his will concerning them. I have long felt that my present work was almost done and that I should soon be called to rule a mighty host but something whispers me it will be in the land of spirits where the wicked cease from troubling and the bands of the prisoner fall off my heart yearns for my little ones but I know God will be a father to them and I can claim face to face the fulfilment of promises from him who is a covenant keeping God and who sweareth and performeth and faileth not to the uttermost the wolves are upon the scent and I am waiting to be offered up if such be the will of God knowing that though my visage be more mared than that of any it will be unscared and fair when archangels shall place on my brow the double crown of martyr and king in a heavenly world in the midst of darkness and boding danger the spirit of Elijah came upon me and I went away to inquire of God how the church should be saved I was upon the hill of the temple the calm father of waters rolled below

changeless & eternal I beheld a light in the heavens above & streams of bright light illuminated the firmament varied & beautiful as the rainbow, gentle, yet rapid as the fierce lightning. the Almighty came from his throne of rest. He clothed himself with light as with a garment. He appeared & moon & stars went out. the earth dissolved in space. I trod on air & was borne on wings of cherubims, the sweetest strains of heavenly musick thrilled in my ear but the notes were low & sad as though they sounded the requiem of martyred prophets I bowed my head to the earth & asked only wisdom & strength for the church the voice of God answered my servant joseph thou hast been faithful over many things & thy reward is glorious the crown and sceptre are thine and they wait thee but thou hast sinned in some things & thy punishment is very bitter the whirlwind goeth before & its clouds are dark but rest followeth & to its days there shall be no end study the words of the vision for it tarrieth not & now behold my servant james j Strang hath come to thee from far for truth when he knew it not & hath not rejected it but had faith in thee the shepherd and stone of Israel & to him shall the gathering of the people be for he shall plant a stake of Zion in Wisconsin & I will establish it & there shall be established on the prairie on white river in the lands of Racine & Walworth & behold my servants james & Aaron shall plant it for I have given them wisdom & Daniel shall stand in his lot on the hill beside the river looking down on the prairie & shall instruct my people & plead with them face to face behold my servant james shall lengthen the cords & strengthen the stakes of Zion & my servant Aaron shall be his counsellor for he hath wisdom in the gospel & understandeth the doctrines & erreth not therein & I will have a house built unto me there of stone & there will I show myself to my people by many mighty works & the name of the city shall be called Voree which is being interpreted garden of peace for there shall my people have peace & rest & wax fat & pleasant in the presence of their enemies but I will again stretch out my arm over the river of water & on the banks thereof shall the House of my choice be but now the city of Voree shall be a strong hold of safety to my people & they that are faithful and obey me I will there give

them great prosperity & such as they have not had before and unto Voree shall be the gathering of my people & there shall the oppressed flee for safety & none shall hurt or molest them & by this shall they know that I have spoken it the people there and the owners of the land shall show kindness to them for great calamities are coming on the church such as have not been & if they scatter the ungodly of the world shall swallow them up but if they gather to my city of Voree there will I keep them under the shadow of my wing & the cities from whence my people have been driven shall be purged with a high hand for I will do it & my people shall be again restored to their possessions but dark clouds are gathering for the church is not yet wholly purged & now I command my servants the apostles & priests & elders of the church of the saints that they communicate & proclaim this my word to all the saints of God in all the world that they may be gathered unto and round about the city of Voree & be saved from their enemies for I will have a people to serve me & I command my servant Moses Smith that he go unto the saints with whom he is acquainted and unto many people & command them in my name to go unto my city of Voree and gain inheritants there & he shall have an inheritants therein for he hath left all for my sake & I will add to him many fold if he is faithful for he knows the land and can testify to them that it is very good

so spake the Almighty God of heaven thy duty is made plain and if thou lackest wisdom ask of God in whose hands I trust thee & he will give thee unsparingly for it evil befall me thou shalt lead the flock to pleasant pastures

God sustain thee

Joseph Smith.

james j strang

ps Write me soon & keep me advised of your progress from time to time

APPENDIX 2

AN EPISTLE OF THE TWELVE

To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in Nauvoo and all the world: ...GREETING.

BELOVED BRETHREN:—Forasmuch as the Saints have been called to suffer deep affliction and persecution, and also to mourn the loss of our beloved Prophet and also our Patriarch, who have suffered a cruel martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus, having voluntarily yielded themselves to cruel murderers who had sworn to take their lives, and thus like good shepherds have laid down their lives for the sheep, therefore it becomes necessary for us to address you at this time on several important subjects.

You are not without a prophet present with you in the flesh to guide you; but you are not without apostles, who hold the keys of power to seal on earth that which shall be sealed in heaven, and to preside over all the affairs of the church in all the world; being still under the direction of the same God, and being dictated by the same spirit, having the same manifestations of the Holy Ghost to dictate all the affairs of the church in all the world, to build up the kingdom upon the foundation that the prophet Joseph has laid, who still holds the keys of this last dispensation, and will hold them to all eternity, as a king and priest unto the most high God, ministering in heaven, on earth, or among the spirits of the departed dead, as seemeth good to him who sent him.

Let no man presume for a moment that his place will be filled by another; for, *remember he stands in his own place*, and always will; and the Twelve Apostles of this dispensation stand in their own place and always will, both in time and in eternity, to minister, preside and regulate the affairs of the whole church.

How vain are the imaginations of the children of men, to presume for a moment

that the slaughter of one, two or a hundred of the leaders of this church could destroy an organization, so perfect in itself and so harmoniously arranged that it will stand while one member of it is left alive upon the earth. Brethren be not alarmed, for if the Twelve should be taken away still there are powers and offices in existence which will bear the kingdom of God triumphantly victorious in all the world. This church may have prophets many, and apostles many, but they are all to stand in due time in their proper organization, under the direction of those who hold the keys.

On the subject of the gathering, let it be distinctly understood that the City of Nauvoo and the Temple of our Lord are to continue to be built up according to the pattern which has been commenced, and which has progressed with such rapidity this far.

The city must be built up and supported by the gathering of those who have capital, and are willing to lay it out for the erection of every branch of industry and manufacture, which is necessary for the employment and support of the poor, or of those who depend wholly on their labor; while farmers who have capital must come on and purchase farms in the adjoining country, and improve and cultivate the same.—In this way all may enjoy plenty, and our infant city may grow and flourish, and be strengthened an hundred fold; and unless this is done, it is impossible for the gathering to progress, because those who have no other dependence cannot live together without industry and employment.

Therefore, let capitalists hasten here; and they may be assured we have nerves, sinews, fingers, skill and ingenuity sufficient in our midst to carry on all the necessary branches of industry.

The Temple must be completed by a regular system of tithing, according to the commandments of the Lord, which he has given as a law unto this church, by the mouth of his servant Joseph.

Therefore, as soon as the Twelve have proceeded to a full and complete organization of the branches abroad, let every member proceed immediately to tithe

himself or herself, a tenth of all their property and money, and pay it into the hands of the Twelve; or into the hands of such Bishops as have been, or shall be appointed by them to receive the same, for the building of the Temple or the support of the priesthood, according to the scriptures, and the revelations of God; and then let them continue to pay in a tenth of their income from that time forth, for this is a law unto this church as much binding on their conscience as any other law or ordinance. And let this law or ordinance be henceforth taught to all who present themselves for admission into this church, that they may know the sacrifice and tithing which the Lord requires, and perform it; or else not curse the church with a mock membership as many have done heretofore. This will furnish a steady public fund for all sacred purposes, and save the leaders from constant debt and embarrassment, and the members can then employ the remained of their capital in every branch of enterprise, industry, and charity, as seemeth them good; only holding themselves in readiness to be advised in such manner as shall be for the good of themselves and the whole society; and thus all things can move in harmony, and for the general benefit and satisfaction of all concerned.

The United States and adjoining provinces will be immediately organized by the Twelve into proper districts, in a similar manner as they have already done in England and Scotland, and high priests will be appointed over each district, to preside over the same, and to call quarterly conferences for the regulation and representation of the branches included in the same, and for the furtherance of the gospel; and also to take measures for a yearly representation in a general conference. This will save the trouble and confusion of the running to and fro of elders; detect false doctrine and false teachers, and make every elder abroad accountable to the conference in which he may happen to labor.—Bishops will also be appointed in the larger branches, to attend to the management of the temporal funds, such as tythings, and funds for the poor, according to the revelations of God, and to be judges of Israel.

The gospel in its fulness and purity, must now roll forth through every

neighborhood of this wide-spread country, and to all the world; and millions will awake to its truths and obey its precepts; and the kingdoms of this world will becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

As rulers and people have taken counsel together against the Lord; and against his anointed, and have murdered him who would have reformed and saved the nation, it is not wisdom for the Saints to have any thing to do with politics, voting, or president-making, at present.—None of the candidates who are now before the public of that high office, have manifested any disposition or intention to redress wrong or restore right, liberty or law; and therefore, wo unto him who gives countenance to corruption, or partakes of murder, robbery or other crueldeeds. Let us then stand aloof from all their corrupt men and measures, and wait, at least, till a man is found, who, if elected, will carry out the enlarged principles, universal freedom, and equal rights and protection, expressed in the views of our beloved prophet and martyr, General JOSEPH SMITH.

We do not, however, offer this political advise as binding on the consciences of others; we are perfectly willng that every member of this church should use their own freedom in all political matters; but we give it as our own rule of action, and for the benefit of those who may choose to profit by it.

Now, dear brethren, to conclude our present communication, we would exhort you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be humble and faithful before God, and before all the people, and give no occasion for any man to speak evil of you; but preach the gospel in its simplicity and purity, and practice righteousness, and seek to establish the influence of truth, peace and love among mankind, and in so doing the Lord will bless you, and make you a blessing to all people.

You may expect to hear from us again.

BRIGHAM YOUNG,

President of the Twelve.

Nauvoo, August 15th, 1844.

APPENDIX 3
STRANGITE PRIESTHOOD HEIRARCHY

Priesthood of an Endless Life

(Melchizedek Priesthood)

Order of the Apostles

1st Degree: The Lawgiver

(Apostle, Prophet, Seer, Revelator, and Translator)

2nd Degree: The Counsellors

(First Counselors, i.e., “Viceroys”)

3rd Degree: Embassadors

(12 Apostles)

4th Degree: Evangelists

(Quorum of 7 Apostles per representative nation)

Order of the Priests (Melchizedek)

1st Degree: High Priests

2nd Degree: Elders

Priesthood of Life

(Aaronic Priesthood)

Order of the Priests (Aaronic)

1st Degree: The Chief Priest

2nd Degree: The First and Second High Priests

3rd Degree: The Course of Priests

(One course per temple; one leader per Course.)

Order of the Teachers

1st Degree: Rabboni

2nd Degree: Rabbi

3rd Degree: Doctor

4th Degree: Ruler

5th Degree: Teacher

Order of the Deacons

1st Degree: Marshals

2nd Degree: Stewards

3rd Degree: Ministers

APPENDIX 4

WATSON'S STRANGITE PRIESTHOOD HEIRARCHY

Melchizedek (Greater) Priesthood

Grade of the Apostles

1st Degree: First President

2nd Degree: Second (or Vice) Presidents

3rd Degree: 12 Judges, or the High Council

4th Degree: The 12 Apostles

Grade of the Priests

High Priests

The Seventies

Elders

Aaronic (Lesser) Priesthood

The Priests of the Aaronic Priesthood

Grade of the Teachers

Grade of the Deacons

Watson outlined his conception of the priesthood in an 1889 letter to Mrs. John Robinson.¹ He describes orders and degrees as “grades and degrees,”² and does not list

¹ Wingfield Watson, letter to Mrs. John Robinson, September 4, 1889, WWP.

² Wingfield Watson, letter to Grace Barbara Watson Lewis, February 18, 1902, WWP.

the degrees of the Aaronic orders of teachers and deacons. The office of judge is present in the BLL, a function of the king's court, but not the priesthood. Strang required judges to hold the degree of High Priest, thereby creating an ancillary function in the Melchizedek priesthood.³ It is possible that Watson mistook the function of a judge for a degreed position in the hierarchy, which is evidenced by Watson's misplacement of the judges over the Embassadors (i.e., Twelve Apostles). If judges are, at a minimum, High Priests, then their position within the priesthood hierarchy should be below, and not above, the Embassadors.

³ BLL, 185.

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ABSTRACT

WINGFIELD SCOTT WATSON AND HIS STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS (STRANGITE) AFTER THE DEATH OF ITS FOUNDER

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Wingfield S. Watson (1828–1922) was a fiercely loyal apologist for the Mormon prophet James J. Strang, a successor to Joseph Smith. In the aftermath of the succession crisis that followed Smith's unexpected death, Strang attracted hundreds of converts to his theocratic commune on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan, Watson being one of them. After Strang's own untimely death, Watson stepped forward from among his religious community as a Strangite apologist to ensure that Strangite distinctives of Latter Day Saint restorationism would survive the unstoppable decline of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangites) due to internal dissension and external opposition. From primary documents, this dissertation demonstrates that Watson succeeded at maintaining the Strangite identity among its remnant after the death of its founder.

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