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A Witness in England: Martin Harris and the Strangite Mission

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FIG. 1. Martin Harris (1783–1875). Harris was one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon.

A Witness in England

Martin Harris and the Strangite Mission

Robin Scott Jensen

Throughout his long life, Martin Harris (fig. 1) consistently testified that he knew Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates. At first affiliated with Joseph Smith and the main body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for a time Harris associated with a schism led by James J. Strang. He served a mission in England in 1846 for the Strangites,¹ but he claimed to the end of his life that he had never preached against Mormonism or against the Book of Mormon.² Indeed, he was a powerful witness of the Book of Mormon during his mission.

Martin Harris was closely associated with Joseph Smith at the time of the founding of the LDS Church. He contributed significant funds for the costs of printing the Book of Mormon. Soon thereafter, Harris, along with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, became the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. The three declared that an angel of God had shown them the golden plates.³ After years of selfless service, Harris distanced himself from the LDS Church, although he still believed in a majority of its teachings.

Harris's detachment was in part due to the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society in 1837.⁴ Harris began to doubt the continued inspiration of Joseph Smith, and when the Church moved from Ohio, Harris remained behind, residing in Kirtland until 1870. He then moved to Utah and was rebaptized into the LDS Church, remaining a member until his death in 1875. However, even during his time away from the LDS Church, he remained adamant about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

During his years in Kirtland, Harris was involved with many different churches: the main body of the LDS Church, schismatic groups (including

the Strangites), and other churches not at all affiliated with the doctrines of Joseph Smith. Before becoming involved with the Strangites, Harris was a member of the Church of Christ along with Warren Parrish, Luke Johnson, and other former Saints.⁵ By 1844, Harris was affiliated with the Shakers in Kirtland. It was rumored that Harris was “a firm believer in Shakerism,” so much so that “his testimony is greater [in Shakerism] than it was of the Book of Mormon.”⁶ In contrast, William Capener, a Latter-day Saint who knew Harris and later went to England with Harris, said, “Harris visited their home often and . . . where ever [Capener] saw Martin Harris he always had a book of Mormon under his arm.”⁷

Robin Scott Jensen

My interest in the history of James J. Strang and the people who followed him began when I discovered that my great-great-grandfather, William Capener, then a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for only a few years, joined Strangism. Having heard very little of Strang and being naive concerning the environment of the LDS Church at the time of Joseph Smith, I did not understand how my ancestor could have left the Church. Now, after three years of studying Strangism, I not only understand why he made that choice, but I am impressed that he showed his faith in the Mormonism he knew by following Strang.

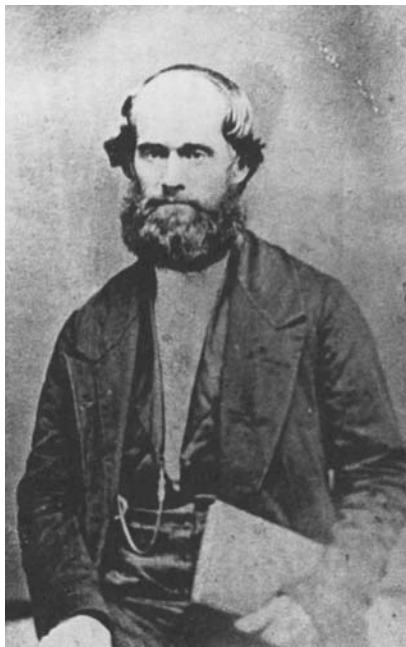


I also found Martin Harris’s involvement with Strangism to be a fascinating story of a man with strong religious convictions who was not sure how to express them. Harris’s and Capener’s religious searchings represent many people who believed in Mormon tenets during the succession crisis but chose different religious paths. To label these two men and the many other women and men like them as “apostates” is to do injustice to their genuine faith in Mormonism.

James Strang and the Strangite Church

After the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in June 1844, confusion and aggression over the question of succession spread within the Church. Among those attempting to establish themselves as the leader was James J. Strang (fig. 2). Strang's claim to succession was founded upon a letter said to have come from Joseph Smith, dated just days prior to Smith's death, in which Smith appointed Strang to be the next leader of the Church. The main body of the LDS Church, as well as other schismatic groups, denied the letter's existence and rejected Strang's succession,⁸ but Strang quickly gained a following large enough to continue, in his and many of his followers' view, leading the church set up by Joseph Smith.⁹

Strang's claim was not based on lengthy membership in the Church, since he had been baptized only months before Smith died. Strang was born in Scipio, New York.¹⁰ He was sickly as a child and developed into a short and frail man, but his strong mental capacity compensated for any physical weakness he may have had. Strang was an intelligent man, at times described as a genius, being "a man of unusual talents in many respects."¹¹ Strang read extensively, skillfully retained his knowledge, and was a charismatic speaker and debater. He practiced law, but soon moved to other tasks, becoming the local postmaster and the editor of the Randolph, New York, *Herald*. His uncle-in-law, Moses Smith, an early convert to the LDS Church in Wisconsin, enticed Strang to the territory of Wisconsin. While there, Strang learned more about the LDS Church and traveled to Nauvoo, where, in February 1844, he was baptized by Joseph Smith. After the martyrdom, Strang made his claim for leadership based on the letter and also claimed that at the moment Joseph and Hyrum Smith lay dead at Carthage, Strang was anointed by an angel to be the successor of the



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FIG. 2. James J. Strang (1813–1856).

church. This and other claims of miraculous visions and events proved to many that Strang could rightfully assume the appointment of prophet of the church.¹²

To distance his group from the main body of the Church, Strang excommunicated Brigham Young and other members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.¹³ As evidence that he was divinely appointed, Strang expressed approval of Joseph Smith as a prophet of God and never rejected the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. He further displayed his prophetic prowess by claiming to receive a revelation of the location of ancient plates buried under a tree. Four witnesses dug up the plates, and Strang translated them, unveiling a sacred prophecy that a prophet would be raised up after the forerunner was killed.¹⁴

Many frustrated Latter-day Saints who were unable to conscientiously follow the Twelve nor ignore the rumors of polygamy looked to Strang for leadership. Martin Harris was one such devotee. The degree to which Harris believed in Strang as Joseph Smith's rightful successor cannot be unearthed easily, but he certainly was affiliated with Strang. It is most likely that Harris was not baptized into the Strangite Church; most of Strang's followers formerly affiliated with the LDS Church were not. Strang, in speaking about baptism, said, "When you have a new presiding Elder in your branch do you all go and be baptized again? No. . . . It is never necessary to be baptized again because some other person has been appointed to a particular priesthood."¹⁵ Harris attended a Strangite meeting and was put in the high council, presumably in connection with the office of high priest that he had held since 1831. Had Harris not been a believer of the position that Strang put forth, he would have rejected the offer to be a member of the Strangite high council.¹⁶

Strang Calls His Missionaries

In August 1846, the newly organized Strangite Church held a conference in the Kirtland Temple, at which they established a stake and set apart missionaries for the spreading of the religion beyond American boundaries, namely in England.¹⁷ Strang saw an expedition to England, a source of many Latter-day Saint converts, as critical to his success. In writing of the LDS branches in England, he said that they were "in great confusion in consequence of the . . . oppressions of the Brighamites," and continued by saying that it "is necessary to preach the true order to them now before a general apostacy shall take place."¹⁸ The missionaries called were Martin Harris, Lester Brooks (who, at the same conference, was ordained an Apostle), Moses Smith (already a Strangite Apostle),¹⁹ Hazen

Aldrich,²⁰ and unnamed “Highpriests with several Elders.”²¹ Of the four who were named, only Harris and Brooks actually went to England; of the unnamed high priests and elders, only one elder, William Capener, is known to have gone to England.²²

Brooks, before joining the Strangites, had been a local leader in the LDS Church at Kirtland. When Joseph Smith called for the Kirtland Stake to be reorganized in 1840, the leader of the stake, Almon Babbitt, chose Brooks as one of his counselors.²³ Besides serving in the presidency of the stake, Brooks, a member as early as 1837, did much in Ohio to further the causes of the LDS Church, including acting as clerk for many meetings and also later being the presiding elder in Kirtland.²⁴ Precisely when he joined Strang is not entirely clear. In late 1844, Brigham Young appointed many high priests, including Brooks, to “preside over the branches . . . to go and settle down, where they can take their families.”²⁵ However, by May 1846, Brooks is mentioned as working for the Strangite cause, and by the August conference that same year, Brooks was ordained an Apostle in the Strangite Church.²⁶

In 1846, William Capener had been a member of the LDS Church for only two years. Capener moved to America from England in 1834, and six years later was working as a carpenter in the shipyards of Cleveland, Ohio. While in Ohio, Capener became acquainted with Thomas Wilson, a leader of the Cleveland LDS Branch. Capener was soon baptized and thereafter ordained an elder in the Kirtland Temple in January 1845.²⁷ By October 1845, he was still a member of the LDS Church, being mentioned in LDS conference minutes.²⁸ Like Brooks, the date Capener joined Strang is unknown; however, by October 1846, all three Strangite missionaries were on their way to England.

LDS Leaders and Missionaries in England in 1846

Strang was not wrong when he wrote that Mormons in England were in “confusion.”²⁹ Not only was the Church in England shaken by the news of the murder of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, but Reuben Hedlock, the presiding leader of the LDS Church in England, was accused of embezzling from the LDS Church–sponsored Joint Stock Company.³⁰ Leaders of the LDS Church, perhaps spurred by news of the financial difficulty in England, sent an increased number of missionaries over to England in 1846.

Many of the LDS missionaries had contact with Strangism before leaving America and were prepared to encounter the Strangite trio in England. For example, in February 1846, Samuel W. Richards, an LDS missionary

called to England, “attended meeting at the [Nauvoo] temple [and heard] Preaching by Orson Pratt, followed by Moses Smith, who presented the claims of ‘Strang,’ as President of the Church. He was followed by Brigham Young and Orson Hyde, who used him up, by tearing down the Principles of his foundation. When by vote of church, Moses Smith . . . was disfellowshipped by the Church and J. J. Strang, given over to the Devil.”³¹ Other LDS missionaries had experiences similar to Richards’s, and many went to England prepared to combat the new schism.

After hearing of the difficulties transpiring in the LDS Church in England, Brigham Young sent three of the Twelve Apostles to England: Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, and John Taylor. Orson Hyde already had experience combating the growth of Strangism in Nauvoo.³² The three Apostles were instructed to ask the British government to give the LDS Church Vancouver Island as a colony. Along with talking with government officials, the three were to investigate English LDS leaders Reuben Hedlock and Thomas Ward for their involvement in the fiscal difficulties relating to the Joint Stock Company.³³ Many English Latter-day Saints had invested considerable sums, much of which was now lost, leading to distrust and dissension. In due course, Hedlock was excommunicated, but not before damaging the trust of many English LDS Church members.

The three LDS Apostles, on arriving in England, set about immediately to disband the Joint Stock Company. Anticipating the arrival of the Strangites in England, they also began to prepare the LDS Saints in England to reject the “apostates.” The *Millennial Star* spoke out strongly against Strang, Brooks, and Harris before they even set foot on English shores, and the printed attacks intensified after they arrived. LDS leaders in England preached against them in meetings as well. In one of the first meetings that the LDS Apostles attended, Orson Hyde made several remarks against Strang: “When Jesus left the earth, who stepped in between him and the Twelve Apostles to preside over the church? No one! But if Strang had lived at that period, he would have attempted it. . . . To talk of appointing another in Joseph Smith’s place . . . exhibits a specimen of the most consummate ignorance, stupidity, and willful blindness.”³⁴ LDS missionary Lucius Scovil spoke in a meeting against the “course and conduct of Martin Harris, Strang and company and others.”³⁵

The Three Strangite Missionaries in England

Upon arrival in England, Martin Harris and the other two Strangite missionaries began to work. On October 25, 1846, the LDS Birmingham Branch was assembled in a conference to discuss the gospel and review

business. Martin Harris, perhaps with the other Strangites, came to the meeting as an “advocate for Strang.”³⁶ Of Harris’s efforts, Cyrus Wheelock recorded the following:

This day we held our quarterly Conference and had Large Congregation the forenoon was Occupied by the Business of the Conference in the afternoon our Conference was hounered by the August presence of Martin Harris who had Came all the way from America to tell of the wonderful things performed by the wicked Twelve apostles and also that he was a wittnys of the Book of Morman and Brotherinlaw to Presdt B Yong I felt it my Duty to give a short history of the Character of said H[arris] which seemed to be anything but Edifying to him he was verry Desirous of speaking but the Conference with united voice informed him that they did not need his instructions he Reluctantly withdrew

he however he was not to be put of[f] so he must and would preach and Accordingly Decampt to the Street and Cammenced holding forth to the annoyance of the people while thus [engaged] t[w]o policemen Verry politely wa[i]ted upon him Each affectionately taking an arm and thus the Curtain fell and the Drama Closed to the great Amusement of the Spectators.³⁷

Harris, though led away by the policemen, was probably not convicted, as he was soon after found at another meeting.³⁸

This encounter had a lasting impression upon the Saints’ view of Harris. Years later in Utah, Harris’s son Martin Harris Jr. reported that Wheelock had told the congregation in that 1846 meeting that Harris “was cut off from the church and that the curse of God was resting upon him.”³⁹ Such talk pained the Harris family, as Martin had never denied his Book of Mormon testimony.

Charles Derry, later a member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, provides another record of the Birmingham meeting:

My first wife . . . told me that she saw him [Martin Harris] in Birmingham, in the Saint’s Meeting House. He had gone there from this land to oppose the pretentions of Brigham Young and the Twelve apostles, who were then laying the foundations for polygamy and the Brighamite rule. A young man of her acquaintance, in the presence of the assembly, presented to him his testimony with his name in connection with the other two witnesses’ names, and asked him if that was his name. Martin replied, “It is.” “Did you put your name to that testimony?” Martin answered, “I did; and that Book of Mormon is the Book of God. I know more about that book than any man living.”⁴⁰

Another member at the conference later recalls that

an elderly man [at the conference] asked permission to speak a few words to us. . . . [Cyrus Wheelock] told us that it was Martin Harris, an

apostate from the faith; that he had abused him and his brethren coming across the sea, and he would not allow him to speak. . . . When we came out of the meeting Martin Harris was beset with a crowd in the street, expecting that he would furnish them with material to war against Mormonism; but when he was asked if Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, he answered yes; and when asked if the Book of Mormon was true, this was his answer: "Do you know that is the sun shining on us? Because as sure as you know that, I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, and that he translated that book by the power of God."⁴¹

These recollections show that Harris, though choosing a different path from the majority of the audience at Birmingham, stayed true to his testimony of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—a common foundation of belief that he held with the English Saints.

Lester Brooks, after his mission, wrote several letters to members of the Strangite leadership explaining what transpired in England. He complained of the presence of so many "Brighamites" in England. "All [the Brighamites'] bullies . . . [are] over evry Conference and over evry large branch of the Church. [T]hey are determined to maintain the ground in that Country at all hazards."⁴² The Birmingham conference, with its unwelcoming attitude, foreshadowed what was to come of the Strangite cause in England.

Already distanced from the English LDS Church members as a result of the statements printed in the *Millennial Star*, Harris attended another meeting, where clues hint that he was beginning to separate from the Strangites as well. At Birkenhead, close to Liverpool, apparently near to the time of the Birmingham conference, Harris again encountered LDS opposition:

Elder [James] Marsdon, of this town [Liverpool], handled them [Harris and presumably Brooks] so effectually in Birkenhead, and made Strangism look so contemptibly mean, that Martin [Harris] publicly denied being sent by Strang, or being in any way, connected with him. This he did in presence of many witnesses, and not in some remote region where nobody could ascertain the fact, but here in Birkenhead, where we all know it.⁴³

Many members, both LDS and Strangite, began to see the folly of taking Harris to England on a Strangite mission. Orson Hyde, in his notice of the arrival of Harris, said Harris was "afraid or ashamed of his profession as a Strangite . . . [and] he tells some of our brethren on whom he called, that he was of the same profession with themselves. . . . [but the] very countenance of Harris will show to every spiritual-minded person who sees him, that the wrath of God is upon him."⁴⁴ Harris became the target of both the

LDS leaders in England as well as the Strangite missionaries, who felt that it was time for Harris to end his mission.

Despite Harris's apparent change of heart, LDS Apostles Hyde, Pratt, and Taylor did not relent in attacking Harris and his companions. By means of the *Millennial Star*, the LDS Apostles provided the English Latter-day Saints with "Sketches of Notorious Characters,"⁴⁵ in which they presented short descriptions of three individuals: James Strang, Lester Brooks, and Martin Harris. The description of Strang began, "Successor of Sidney Rigdon, Judas Iscariot, Cain . . . & Co. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of His Most Gracious Majesty, Lucifer."⁴⁶ The other sketches were similar in nature. The LDS Apostles accused Brooks of teaming up with one Nelson Millet, who swindled the Saints in Ohio out of money in a bogus speculation scheme.⁴⁷ The longest of the three sketches featured Harris having "yielded to the spirit and temptation of the Devil a number of years ago . . . [being] filled with the rage and madness of a demon. One day he would be one thing, and another day another thing."⁴⁸ Despite that rhetoric, the Apostles stated, "We do not feel to warn the Saints against Harris, for his own unbridled tongue will soon show out specimens of folly enough to give any person a true index to the character of the man."⁴⁹ It seems Harris could not satisfy anyone in England.

As the leaders of the LDS Church in England censured the Strangite envoy, the Strangite mission found yet more difficulty while in England. This event involved the LDS Apostles indirectly with all three Strangite missionaries. The *Millennial Star*, with Hyde and Taylor as editors, convey the story:

We thought proper to send them [Harris, Brooks, and Capener] an invitation to meet with us, as their operations had been mostly limited to one or two persons who had been excommunicated from our church for some time. We thought that if the Lord had sent them, they might accept our invitation and come, but if the devil had sent them, we were confident they would not come to the light.⁵⁰

Accordingly, they sent the invitation by Elder Thomas Brown, who left it with the Styles family—new Strangite converts recently excommunicated from the LDS Church who were housing the Strangite missionaries.⁵¹ The Strangite missionaries were not there at the time, but the LDS Apostles sent Elder Isaac Brockbank, well before the meeting was to start, to see that Harris and his companions had received the letter. The *Millennial Star* continues, "[Brockbank] found that they had received [the letter] in due time, but declined improving the admirable opportunity which we offered them on this occasion."⁵² The LDS Apostles, who in America had

refused a public meeting with Strang, in turn offered the same to Strang's missionaries, only to be refused themselves.⁵³

Sometime during their sojourn in England, Lester Brooks wrote back to James Strang the news of the progress of the Strangite Church's foreign mission. Though the letter is not extant, a summary of it was printed in *Zion's Reveille*:

L. Brooks (the apostle) writes from Liverpool the most cheering intelligence. Although the . . . *Brighamatic clique* had forestalled public opinion, and placed every possible obstacle in the way, many of the brethren stood ready to receive the truth. . . . The apostate[s] . . . could not so pervert the right ways of the Lord as to turn the saints from the true faith. The brethren in the Isle of Man have written Brother Brooks to visit them, the *interdiction* of . . . John Taylor . . . to the contrary notwithstanding. The church may soon expect interesting and highly important information from that quarter. Martin Harris and William Capner, from Ohio, are the travelling companions of Brother Brooks. May Prosperity crown their efforts.⁵⁴

Even before this announcement in the Strangite newspaper, Strang had written that the work in England was "progressing."⁵⁵ The LDS Apostles in England were quick to counter this report, and the Strangite missionaries would eventually find that prosperity would not crown their efforts.⁵⁶

There is another probable appearance of Harris that is important to discuss but impossible to place. The difficulty of relying on this event is that only one person is known to have recorded the incident. Though the event may be the same as that reported from Birkenhead, it appears more likely that this occurrence is distinct. Joseph Tuttle, writing to a Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints newspaper, relates that Martin Harris stopped at his house in America both before and after traveling to England. Harris related to Tuttle that he was going to England to "destroy the work [of Mormonism] as far as everything pertaining to it except the connection [Harris] had with the Book of Mormon."⁵⁷ Tuttle tried to convince Harris otherwise, but Harris said his "mind was fully made up that he would deliver a course of lectures against Mormonism."⁵⁸ Tuttle continues that when Harris arrived in England, he

rented a hall; had large circulars posted, announcing that Martin Harris, one of the three special witnesses to the Book of Mormon, would . . . lecture to the people, exposing Mormonism; and all were invited to come and hear. . . . 'I remember,' said Martin Harris [to Tuttle upon returning from England], 'of announcing my subject to the people, and of feeling a pain at my heart when I saw that little handful of Saints sitting before me, and realized that what I had to say would be as death to them; but I know of nothing more, I can tell you of nothing which occurred until [after speaking] I found myself surrounded by those Saints, who, with

streaming eyes and broken utterances, were thanking me for the glorious manner in which I had defended the faith, and the powerful testimony I had borne to the truth of the work.⁵⁹

In attempting to “destroy the work” of Mormonism, Harris found that his testimony of the Book of Mormon confirmed the faith of the LDS Saints.

A Mission Cut Short

Martin Harris, when he left America, had planned “to go to Europe and remain there one year or more.”⁶⁰ His “one year” would actually turn into less than two months. With Harris failing to testify of Strangism, Lester Brooks decided to end Harris’s mission. Brooks wrote to a fellow Strangite that if “Martin Harris ever knew any thing about the principles of the gospel he has lost that knowledge.”⁶¹ Harris’s departure from Strangism never stopped him from proclaiming the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Preaching Strangism, however, was what Brooks needed Harris to accomplish. Brooks, seeing Harris fail in his mission, began to do all he could to stop Harris.

With the probable help of Capener, Brooks “saw fit to persuade Martin [Harris] to return to America, which [Harris] did by way of Liverpool.”⁶² Because Martin Harris had the potential of being such a great asset to the Strangites, one can safely conclude that though Harris bore a powerful testimony of the Book of Mormon, there was a rift between what Harris taught and the Strangite doctrine. The distance between Brooks and Harris was finalized, and Brooks claimed later that he did not “want to go to the heaven that . . . Harris will lead men to.”⁶³

The LDS Saints in England, however, were not as negatively affected as Brooks. Less than half a year after Harris had left England, the *Millennial Star*, in considering Harris’s standing in the church, wrote this of Martin Harris:

now that [Harris] is *not* numbered among us, and has since been in this country, has any one ever heard him say that Joseph Smith—a prophet of God—was a bad man, or addicted to visionary habits? or that the Book of Mormon was not true? or that this work was not of God? No! and he is miserable until he again be numbered with us. I pray my Father that he may do what is right, and again be numbered and saved in the Kingdom of God.⁶⁴

On December 8, 1846, less than one and a half months after their first documented meeting in England, Harris and Brooks arrived in New York.⁶⁵ Brooks reported to James M. Adams, a leader in the Strangite Church, and told of his difficulties in England.⁶⁶ Brooks said he suffered from ill health the entire time in England, but he did not come back

because of his health. “I thought it very necessary that Martin Harris leave that country and there was no other way only for me to come with him.”⁶⁷ Brooks continued to Adams, “The Brighamites have as many as fifty [missionaries] . . . in England . . . they teach that Brigham Young was appointed President of the Church by revelation.”⁶⁸ Brooks also told Adams that “the work is well begun in that Country[.] Brother William Capner from Cleveland I left in Charge.”⁶⁹

With Harris and Brooks home from their mission, Strang naturally was concerned with continuing his movement in England. Brooks, in two letters written shortly after his return home, expressed a desire to return himself, but certainly not with Harris. Brooks expressed a desire to have “Br Strang if possible Brother Greenhow Br. Page [and] William Smith”⁷⁰ sent over to England. And several months later, at the annual conference, it was proposed that “John Greenhow, W[illiam] Smith, (patriarch,) and John E. Page (if his circumstances will admit) [will] go on a mission to England.”⁷¹ However, in the same newspaper announcing these appointments, Greenhow’s suspension of duties was also published, and he and William Smith shortly thereafter were excommunicated.⁷² Strang also excommunicated John E. Page before Page could get to England.

Robin Jensen’s article on Martin Harris in England as a conflicted Strangite missionary is a laudable extension of this budding scholar’s MA thesis on James J. Strang and his missionary endeavors of the late 1840s and early 1850s. Strang, a contender for Church leadership after the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, for a period of time posed a far more formidable challenge to Brigham Young’s leadership than any other claimant—Sidney Rigdon included. Jensen’s extensive research into primary sources sheds much new information not only on the complex personality of Martin Harris but also on how serious a problem Strang and his enthusiastic force of missionaries posed to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it struggled to find a new refuge in the West.

—Richard Bennett, Brigham Young University

Aftermath

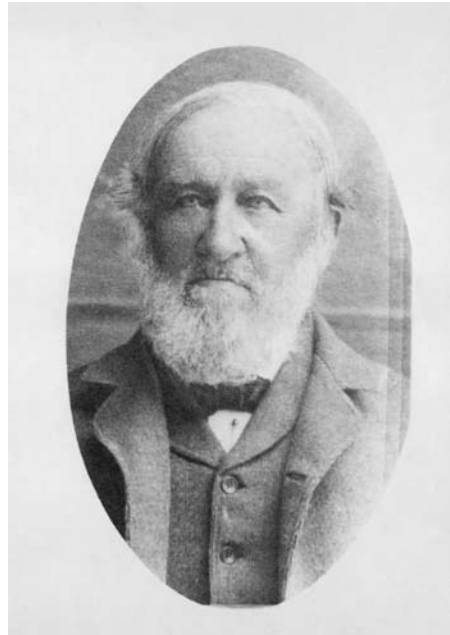
Strang, although leading his church for some time, would never again see the day when Strangite missionaries would return to England. James Strang continued leading the Strangite Church as its prophet, and later as self-proclaimed King of Beaver Island in Michigan, until a disaffected Strangite Church member killed him in 1856.

Lester Brooks, after his mission to England, stayed with the Strangites for several years. His faithfulness came into question on several occasions to the point of a possible excommunication, yet Brooks wrote several letters to Strang reaffirming his loyalty.⁷³ Having moved to New

York by 1850, he did not “perform his duty as an apostle” and eventually, on July 6, 1850, it was moved and seconded in a conference that “the Priesthood be taken from Lester Brooks and given to some one that will fill the calling.”⁷⁴ In 1878, Lester Brooks died in New York.⁷⁵

For some unknown reason, when William Capener (fig. 3) returned from England, he had completely forsaken the Strangite movement and told Brigham Young he was prepared to go to Utah. Young instructed him instead to stay in Ohio and provide lodging for the traveling Mormon elders going on missions, which he did with much enthusiasm.⁷⁶ Back home in Cleveland among LDS Church members described as “warm hearted saints,”⁷⁷ he became the clerk for the branch. On one occasion he even helped the presiding LDS elder conduct Church business at Martin Harris’s home.⁷⁸ Capener migrated to Utah in 1852 and died in Centerville, Utah, in 1894.⁷⁹

After his mission to England, Martin Harris continued to testify of the Book of Mormon. Shortly after his return to America, Harris preached to a Strangite congregation. One witness praised him: “We also had Martin Harris, here about two weeks since, and was very glad to see him. We had often heard of him, but until then we never had the pleasure of seeing him.



Courtesy Robin Jensen

FIG. 3. William Capener (?–1894).

This man, although he has been buffeted and scoffed at by the world made our hearts glad in consequence of the unwavering testimony which he bore with regard to the origin of Mormonism.”⁸⁰ The majority of the Strangite Church, however, including Strang himself, agreed with Brooks when Brooks said that “the greatest blunder that ever I committed was in taking Harris to England.”⁸¹ Harris was perhaps excommunicated by Strang, or, just as likely, they simply went their separate ways, but by early 1847, Lester Brooks had heard that Harris was “at Kirtland Doing all he can against [James Strang].”⁸² Harris did not cease from exploring other churches. He joined William McLellin’s church for a time, and then several other organizations, yet he continued to preach the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.⁸³ Harris dreamed of going to England again⁸⁴ but would remain in Kirtland until his move to Utah, where he died in 1875.

The Strangite mission with Harris, Brooks, and Capener exemplifies how Harris acted throughout his life. Though vacillating in his religious affiliation, Harris stayed firm to his testimony of the Book of Mormon. He turned for a time from Joseph Smith and the LDS Church but never from the Book of Mormon. When he died in Utah, his son wrote a letter to George A. Smith and, analyzing not only his last moments, but much of his life, Martin Harris Jr. wrote, “He [Martin Harris] has continued to talk about and testify to the truth of the Book of Mormon and was in his happiest mood when he could get somebody to listen to his testimony.”⁸⁵ True to the Book of Mormon and constantly seeking opportunities to preach of its truthfulness, no better statement can summarize the life of Martin Harris.

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1. As this paper will deal with two different churches both based on the teachings and leadership of Joseph Smith, it will be necessary to differentiate between the two and stay uniform with that separation. The main body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which followed Brigham Young, will be referred to as the LDS Church. Those who followed James Strang, also being called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, will be called the Strangite Church, Strangites, or Strangism.

2. See, for example, Martin Harris to H. Emerson, January 1871, *Saints' Herald* (Plano, Ill.), October 15, 1875, 630. A reprint of this letter is found in *Millennial Star* 39 (January 1, 1877): 5.

3. "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," which is found in the introduction of the Book of Mormon.

4. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 110.

5. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 164–66; and H. Michael Marquardt, "Martin Harris: The Kirtland Years, 1831–1870," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (2002): 1–40.

6. Phineas Young, J. Knight, Hiram Winters, and Ira Tuft to Brigham Young, December 31, 1844, transcribed into the Journal History of the Church, December 31, 1844, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives). For an explanation of Harris's alleged connection with the Shakers, see Anderson, *Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 165.

7. Louisa Rebeckah Taylor and Margaret Wicks Taylor Cluff, "Sketch of the Life of William Capener," n.d., 4, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City.

8. Both John Taylor of the LDS Church and Joseph M. Cole of Sidney Rigdon's group claimed that they were with Joseph Smith the whole day the letter was supposed to have been written. Both said Smith did not write to Strang. Handwriting and postmarks were also compared with other letters sent out the same day. The argument against Strang was that Joseph Smith would have notified the leading councils if he had appointed a successor. Both contemporary and modern claims of the originality of the letter are mixed, but most today agree that it was a forgery. John Taylor, *Millennial Star* 8 (October 15, 1846): 94; Joseph M. Cole, "Communications," *Messenger and Advocate*, 1846, 480; Charles Eberstadt, "A Letter That Founded a Kingdom," *Autograph Collectors' Journal* (October 1950): 3–8; Richard E. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 17–18; and Robin Scott Jensen, "Gleaning the Harvest: Strangite Missionary Work, 1846–1850" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2005), 6.

According to a later report, Caleb Barnes reportedly stated that he, Strang, and two others "got up the letter of appointment, and that Joseph Smith was dead when they got it up, also that Strang dictated every word of it." The letter was supposedly a succession plan "for speculation, to sell lands which they owned where they intended to build Voree [Wisconsin]," and that Strang's "aim, in the first place, was to have Joseph Smith appoint a gathering place, or Stake, on their lands, but as Smith was killed about this time they changed their plans and concluded to make Strang Smith's successor and that would make a sure thing of building up Voree." Isaac F. Scott, "James J. Strang in Voree," *Saints' Herald*, December 29, 1888, 832.

9. For a good study on Strang's vie for power, see Milo M. Quaife, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1930), 14–30; Bennett, *We'll Find the Place*, 12–18; and Jensen, "Gleaning the Harvest."

10. Much of the information of this paragraph comes from Quaife, *Kingdom of Saint James*, 1–13. Strang was given the name Jesse James Strang, but he later changed his name to James Jesse Strang for unknown reasons.

11. "Narrative of Ludlow P. Hill," in Henry E. Legler, "A Moses of the Mormons," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society* 32 (1903): 213.

12. For more information about Strang's early career in Mormonism, see Jensen, "Gleaning the Harvest," 3–12, and "A Record of the Establishment and Doings of the Stake of Zion Called Voree in Wisconsin, Made by the Scribes Appointed to That Office," 6–12, microfilm copy, Brigham Young University, original in private hands, hereafter cited as "Chronicles of Voree." The "Chronicles of Voree" is apparently a contemporary, dated journal of the Strangite Church of unknown authorship. A transcription of this manuscript has been compiled by John J. Hajicek (Burlington, Wisc.: J. J. Hajicek, 1992).

13. "Chronicles of Voree," 72–76.

14. "Chronicles of Voree," 26–31; Jensen, "Gleaning the Harvest," 8–9.

15. "Re-Baptisms," *Voree Herald* March 1846: 1.

16. Martin Harris was "ordained to the High Priesthood" on June 3, 1831. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 7. For information on Martin Harris as a member of the Strangite High Council in Kirtland, see "Kirtland," *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 2. When called to England at the Kirtland council, Martin Harris is named a high priest. Strang to Brethren and Sisters, in "Chronicles of Voree," 102.

17. "Kirtland," *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 1.

18. "English Churches," *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 3.

19. Moses Smith was a member of the LDS Church as early as 1839. Failing to go to England because of internal division in the Strangite Church, Smith later moved away from Voree and died in 1849. For more information on Moses Smith, see David L. Clark, "Moses Smith: Wisconsin's First Mormon," *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 2 (1995): 155–70.

20. Hazen Aldrich had been a president of the LDS Church's original First Quorum of the Seventy in 1835–37. He was affiliated with the Strangites until 1848. Later, Aldrich is found in Ohio printing *The Olive Branch*, a paper sustaining another faction group led by James C. Brewster. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1994), 535.

21. "Kirtland," *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 1; Strang to Brethren and Sisters, "Chronicles of Voree," 102.

22. It is likely that it was only these three that went to England. *Zion's Rev-elle*, a Strangite newspaper in Voree, Wisconsin, printed news from England and mentioned that "Martin Harris and William Capner [sic], from Ohio, are the travelling companions of Brother [Lester] Brooks." "News from England," *Zion's Rev-elle*, December 1846, 3.

23. See "Minutes of the General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, held in Nauvoo, Hancock County, Ill. October 3rd 1840," *Times and Seasons* 1 (October 1840): 185–86, for the reestablishment of the stake of Kirtland. For the choosing of Brooks as a counselor, see "Minutes of a Conference, Held in Kirtland, Ohio, May 22nd 1841," *Times and Seasons* 2 (July 1, 1841): 458.

24. See *Times and Seasons* for the various conference minutes in Kirtland. For example: "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2 (July 1, 1841): 458–60; "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 3 (November 5, 1841): 587–89; and "Conference Proceedings," *Times and Seasons* 4 (August 1, 1843): 282–86. See

also Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1985), 74.

25. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 7:305–6.

26. *Voree Herald*, May 1846, 3; “Kirtland,” *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 1.

27. Very little is known of Capener's life in the LDS Church at this time. What little information there is comes from life sketches by Capener's daughter, Elizabeth Ann Capener Hardy, and others. However, the difficulty in relying on the life sketches of William Capener for his history is that, for whatever reason, the fact that Capener was a Strangite is ignored, and it is said that Capener went over to England simply to settle to some personal business.

28. “Minutes of a Conference Held in This, the Cleveland Branch, Ohio, October 30, 1845,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (November 15, 1845): 1030–31.

29. “English Churches,” *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 3.

30. The Joint Stock Company was a way in which British Saints could immigrate to America less expensively. Richard Bennett, “‘We Might Have Gone to Vancouver's Island’: The Mormon Exodus, British Emigration, and the Pacific Northwest,” *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Western Canada*, ed. Dennis A. Wright and others (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000): 13–33. Strang jumped at the chance to publicly display this debacle. “Fruits of Wickedness,” *Voree Herald*, August 1846, 2.

31. Samuel W. Richards, Diary, February 1, 1846, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Perry Special Collections).

32. While in Nauvoo, Hyde preached and wrote against Strangism, including receiving a revelation against Strang and his followers. Jensen, “Gleaning the Harvest,” 96–97.

33. On the attempt at settling on Vancouver Island, see Bennett, “‘We Might Have Gone to Vancouver's Island;’” Richard Bennett and Arran Jewsbury, “The Lion and the Emperor: The Mormons, the Hudson's Bay Company and Vancouver Island, 1846–1858,” *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, 128 (Winter 2000/2001): 37–62; and Lewis Clark Christian, “A Study of the Mormon Westward Migration between February 1846 and July 1847 with Emphasis on and Evaluation of the Factors That Led to the Mormons' Choice of Salt Lake Valley as the Site of Their Initial Colony” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1976), 124–36.

34. “General Conference at Manchester,” *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 120.

35. James Ure, Diary, November 2, 1846, Church Archives.

36. John Freeman, Diary, October 25, 1846, Church Archives. Because Harris was by far the most famous of the three missionaries, perhaps the eyewitnesses do not bother to mention any companions of Harris. Cyrus Wheelock's notice of Harris's activities at the Birmingham conference states that “Martin Harris and his escort have paid them a visit.” “Notices,” *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 128. Brooks mentions hearing Wheelock testify against Strang, placing Brooks in the company of Wheelock. Lester Brooks to James M. Adams, January 12, 1847, holograph, Strang Collection. The three Strangite missionaries could have stayed together, but, perhaps more likely, the three separated into their

several directions with perhaps two of them (probably Harris and Brooks) staying together, as hinted by the life sketch of William Capener: "When they [Harris and Capener—no mention of Brooks] reached England they separated, each going about his own business." Taylor and Cluff, "Sketch of the Life of William Capener," 4.

37. Cyrus Wheelock, Diary, October 25, 1846, Church Archives. The letter written by Wheelock to the *Millennial Star* puts the incident in another way: Martin Harris and his escort have paid them a visit. He introduced himself to their conference meeting and wished to speak, but on being politely informed by Elder Banks that the season of the year had come when Martins sought a more genial climate than England, he had better follow. On being rejected by the united voice of the conference, he went out into the street, and began to proclaim the corruption of the Twelve; but here the officers of government honoured him with their presence—two policemen came and very gently took hold of each arm and led Martin away to the Lock-up. "Notices," *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 128.

38. A search of the "Warwickshire Quarter Sessions Calendars of Prisoners, 1801–1850," for reference to Harris, Brooks, or Capener in Birmingham during October and November 1846 resulted in nothing. Microfilm copy, Family History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

39. Martin Harris Jr. to George A. Smith, July 13, 1875, Church Archives.

40. W. W. B., "'Mormonism' Reviewed," *Saints' Herald*, April 1, 1876, 198.

41. George Mantle, "Martin Harris in England," *Autumn Leaves* (Lamoni, Iowa) 2 (March 1889): 141.

42. Lester Brooks to James M. Adams, January 12, 1847, Strang Collection, punctuation added.

43. "Strangism.—Invitation to Imposters," *Millennial Star* 8 (November 20, 1846): 137.

44. "Notices," *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 128.

45. "Sketches of Notorious Characters," *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 123–26.

46. "Sketches of Notorious Characters," 123.

47. "Sketches of Notorious Characters," 124. See also Simeon Carter to Brigham Young, October 1, 1844, incoming correspondence of Brigham Young, Church Archives.

48. "Sketches of Notorious Characters," 124.

49. "Sketches of Notorious Characters," 124. There is no indication why Capener escaped from the full force of the *Millennial Star* editors' ridicule. One possibility is that Strang, Brooks, and Harris were known to one degree or another in the LDS Church, whereas Capener, newly baptized in Ohio away from the main body, was unknown to the Twelve Apostles or many of the American missionaries or British members.

50. "Strangism.—Invitation to Imposters," 137–38.

51. Liverpool Branch Minutes, Church Archives. "Deacon George Styles and wife Margaret" were excommunicated for following the "Imposter James J. Strang."

52. "Strangism.—Invitation to Imposters," 138.

53. "Copy of a Letter from James J. Strang, to Orson Hyde and John Taylor: Answer to the Above," *Millennial Star* 8 (October 15, 1846): 94. The letters were also printed in "Discussion," *Voree Herald*, August 1846, 4.

54. "News from England," *Zion's Reveille*, December 1846, 3.

55. "Progress of the Work," *Voree Herald*, September 1846, 4.

56. "That imposter publishes in his paper, in America, that his cause is very prosperous in England. All the Saints here know that he lies; and if he will lie about things that we do perfectly know and understand, can we trust his word in things that we do not know?" "To the Presiding Elders Abroad: Greeting," *Millennial Star* 8 (November 15, 1846): 122.

57. "Ye Are My Witnesses," *Autumn Leaves* 1 (April 1888): 182.

58. "Ye Are My Witnesses," 183.

59. "Ye Are My Witnesses," 183.

60. Martin Harris, "Martin Harris Affidavits," Manuscript A, September 4, 1846, Perry Special Collections.

61. "Letter from Brother Brooks to Brother Adams," *Zion's Reveille*, March 11, 1847, 36.

62. Gates and Hardy, "Sketch of William Capener," 5. Another sketch of William Capener stated Harris's return thus: "Later on one of [Capener's] trips to London he was attracted by a crowd gathered on the street and went to see what it was all about and to his astonishment, there was Martin Harris standing preaching Mormonism. He looked very unkept and ragged and like he was hungry. Grandfather took him, fed him and bought him a new suit of clothes that he might look more respectable but grandfather chided him for going there without an appointment by the proper authority." (Taylor and Cluff, "Sketch of the Life of William Capener," 4. As noted above, life sketches of William Capener ignore the fact that Capener was a Strangite missionary.)

63. "Letter from Brother Brooks to Brother Adams," *Zion's Reveille*, February 10, 1847, 36.

64. "Religious Impostors," *Millennial Star* 9 (March 15, 1847): 86.

65. For the notice of the arrival of their ship *Sea*, see "Arrived," *New York Herald*, Maritime Herald, December 8, 1846, 2. For a list of passengers, including Brooks and Harris, see Passenger List of Vessels Arriving at New York 1820–1897, List for Ship *Sea* of New York #1043, Family History Library.

66. Brooks to Adams, January 12, 1847.

67. Brooks to Adams, January 12, 1847.

68. Brooks to Adams, January 12, 1847.

69. Brooks to Adams, January 12, 1847. Quaiife, *Kingdom of Saint James*, 244, transcribes "Capner" as "Cosmer." A close inspection of the original, however, proves that it is indeed "Capner."

70. Brooks to Adams, January 12, 1847.

71. "The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Held at Voree April the 6th, 1847," *Zion's Reveille* 2 (July 8, 1847): 68.

72. "Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, at Voree," *Zion's Reveille*, October 14, 1847, 122.

73. In one letter, Brooks writes to Strang, "Let me remain a member in the church[,] I <am> not a rebellious man." Lester Brooks to James Strang, March 14, 1847, Strang Collection. Brooks wrote to Adams, stating, "You can assure Brother Strang of my friendship towards him, and that I shall do all that I have power to do to build up the church." "Letter from Brother Brooks to Brother Adams," *Zion's Reveille*, March 11, 1947, 36.

74. *A History of the Church at the City of James, Beaver Island, State of Michigan, U.S.A. 1847-1855; Commonly called the "Beaver Island Record,"* reproduced by John J. Hajicek (Burlington, Wisc., 1992), [69].

75. Dean C. Jesee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989-92), 2:530.

76. Taylor and Cluff, "Sketch of the Life of William Capener," 2; Gates and Hardy, "Sketch of William Capener," 5. LDS missionary James Willard Bay mentions staying with Capener on many different occasions. See James Willard Bay Journal, 1850-52, Church Archives.

77. James W. Bay to Brigham Young, March 24, 1851, Church Archives.

78. The Church business was confronting Gladden Bishop, a man who claimed to receive revelation for the Church. Bishop was asked about "his character of . . . faith" and "also about going west." Gladden Bishop to Brigham Young, July 30, 1851, Church Archives. James W. Bay stated the following: "I and Br Capener went [to] Br Harises saw gladden Bishop talked with him som[e] on the gathering of the s[a]ints." James W. Bay, Journal, July 17, 1851, Church Archives.

79. Gates and Hardy, "Sketches of William Capener," 7. The Daughters of Utah Pioneers Memorial Museum in Salt Lake City contains several life sketches of William Capener written by various people. According to the histories, Capener kept a diary "in which is recorded in very detail of a trip to various cities of England in 1846." Gates and Hardy, "Sketch of William Capener," 5. Despite a thorough search, the author has yet to locate this diary.

80. James Smith to James Strang, [ca. January 1847,] *Zion's Reveille*, February 11, 1847, 19.

81. Brooks to Strang, March 14, 1847. In a later reference to the Strangite British mission, the *Gospel Herald* said, "Lester Brooks and Martin Harris . . . [went on the mission together], the folly of the latter defeated their work." "Obituary," *Gospel Herald*, June 14, 1849, 55.

82. Brooks to Strang, March 14, 1847.

83. *Gospel Herald*, July 5, 1849, 74; Anderson, *Book of Mormon Witnesses*; Marquardt, "Martin Harris: The Kirtland Years," 1-40.

84. David B. Dille, on his way to a mission to England in 1853, writes of meeting Martin Harris: "[Harris] said to me, 'Just let me go with you to England, I see you can preach . . . You do the preaching and I will bear testimony to the Book of Mormon and we will convert all England.[]'" David Buel Dille, *Reminiscence*, Church Archives.

85. Martin Harris Jr. to George A. Smith, July 9, 1875, Church Archives.