

Vickie Cleverley Speek. *“God Has Made Us a Kingdom”:
James Strang and the Midwest Mormons.*
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006.

Reviewed by Roger Terry

Award-winning journalist Vickie Cleverley Speek was not looking for the Mormons during the summer of 1991. She was looking for basket-making materials, and the nearest shop was in Burlington, Wisconsin, at the corner of Highway 36 and Mormon Road. Surprised to find evidence of Mormons in Wisconsin, she took Mormon Road that day. It led to the community of Voree and to the beginning of a fifteen-year odyssey that would result in yet another book about James Jesse Strang, self-proclaimed successor to Joseph Smith.

Several biographies about Strang were already in print in 1991, including Milo M. Quaife’s seminal history *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); O. W. Riegel’s *Crown of Glory: The Life of James J. Strang, Moses of the Mormons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935); Doyle C. Fitzpatrick’s partisan *The King Strang Story: A Vindication of James J. Strang, the Beaver Island Mormon King* (Lansing, Mich.: National Heritage, 1970); and Roger Van Noord’s *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

The existence of such works raises the valid question, why does the world need yet another biography of the enigmatic Strang? Speek offers several reasons for writing her book. First, she relied extensively on primary sources, some of which were unavailable to earlier biographers. “New facts and resources are still being discovered,” and “old records are ready for re-examination and reinterpretation” (x). Second, Speek claims her book is not a biography but “an attempt to tell the fuller story of the Strangites—their trials and tribulations and efforts to maintain the Strangite Church during their founder’s ministry and after his death” (xi). Third, the story of the Strangites is “a compelling and intriguing one. Many writers, including Strang’s own descendants, have struggled with the logistics of how to relate the tale without sensationalizing it, and,”

Speek confesses, “so have I” (xi). The difficulty in writing about Strang is similar to the complex task of writing about Joseph Smith. As Van Noord pointed out in his book’s preface, bias and misinformation abound. The original sources, in particular, are often inclined for or against Strang. Many of them come from Strang himself—his autobiography, diary, letters, and publications—or from his followers. Others come from his enemies. Sorting out fact from misrepresentation is no easy task. In spite of these difficulties, Speek’s book is an engaging, insightful, and well-researched exploration of a complicated man, his family, and his followers.

“*God Has Made Us a Kingdom*” divides unevenly into two separate sections: the first (and longer) part details Strang’s life and death; the second part explores what happened to his family and followers after his murder. Speek cannot avoid the almost eerie parallels between James Strang and Joseph Smith: self-proclaimed divine appointment, claims of finding and translating engraved metal plates, persecution resulting from unconventional doctrines and a concentrated gathering of followers, public denial and private practice of polygamy, coronation as “King on earth,” dissension within the ranks, John C. Bennett’s ruinous role in both men’s lives, and, finally, untimely assassination. Although neither Strang nor Smith explicitly named a successor, the circumstances of their deaths were different enough that while Strang’s flock remained shepherdless, numerous would-be successors to Joseph Smith stepped forward, one (Joseph III) as late as 1860.

Speek is sympathetic toward Strang and his followers, but she is also careful to explore Strang’s duplicities (as when his first plural wife, Elvira Field, accompanied him to New York masquerading as a nephew and personal secretary named Charley Douglass); his questionable doctrines (for instance, the practice of “consecration”—stealing gentiles’ property for the kingdom of God); and his aspirations to nobility. “*God Has Made Us a Kingdom*” is well documented, but the author’s preference for allowing biased eyewitnesses to speak for themselves obscures at times the objectivity of her history. She also fails to explore the validity of the appointment letter Strang claimed he received from Joseph Smith or the authenticity of the metal plates he reportedly found and translated.

By all accounts, the story of James Jesse Strang and his disciples is both bizarre and tragic; and it has not yet ended, as about one hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) persist. Where Speek’s book sets itself apart from other histories, however, is in her research of the lives of his five wives, their children, and many of Strang’s followers. The second and shorter part of the book focuses on

what happened after Strang's death to the people whose lives were bound together with his.

Using the controversial letter purportedly sent to him by Joseph Smith and also the claim that an angel anointed him Smith's successor, Strang gathered as many as believed him, first to Voree, Wisconsin, then to Beaver Island, the largest island in Lake Michigan. It was on Beaver Island that he instituted polygamy and was crowned king; it was also there that two disaffected followers shot and mortally wounded him on June 16, 1856. He died twenty-three days later in Voree.

During those twenty-three days, Strang steadfastly refused to name a successor, even though he knew his demise was imminent. Consequently, when his followers were driven from Beaver Island, they gathered either in small groups or went their separate ways, often in search of work, having lost all their possessions in the forced exodus. Many of Strang's followers gave up on Mormonism altogether and simply settled into new lives, never revealing their past to their neighbors.

When James Strang died, he left five wives, four of whom were pregnant. Their stories, interestingly, are quite characteristic of what happened to Strang's followers in general. Strang had his first wife, Mary Abigail Perce, banished from Beaver Island five years prior to his death, perhaps because she had tried to kill the baby of his first plural wife, Elvira. Mary and her three surviving children lived for a time with her brother in Illinois, but they later returned to their home in Voree, where they ran a farm. Ironically, they were not at home on July 1, 1856, when James was brought, mortally wounded, from Beaver Island, nor did they return before he died. Mary lived in Voree for several years before moving to Terre Haute, Indiana. She lived there with her daughters, her son, and his family until her own death on April 30, 1880. She never remarried. Her son, William, was so bitter about his father's polygamous involvement that he discouraged his sister Myraette from even writing her half brothers and sisters.

When a dying Strang left Beaver Island, wives Betsy McNutt and Phoebe Wright traveled with him. The two other wives, Elvira Field and Phoebe's sister Sarah, left the island a few days later. Sarah visited her husband briefly on his deathbed but left with her father's family. Phoebe stayed until James died, then also joined her parents. Elvira did not arrive in Voree until two days after Strang's death. She and Betsy lived together in Voree for a time, and both women gave birth in January 1857. Eventually, Elvira returned to her parents' home in Michigan. After her father's death, Elvira fell desperately ill and placed her four children with other families. After three years she finally recovered and was able to retrieve the older three children, but the couple who had adopted the youngest, James J. Strang, considered him

their own and even renamed him Charles J. Grier. In 1865, Elvira married John Baker, a widower with five children. Although he was a good man, he was not religious. Elvira did not join another church but was involved in "Christian work" the rest of her life (266). She died of bronchitis on June 13, 1910. While James Strang was living, Elvira obviously believed his claim to be a prophet and Joseph Smith's successor, but later in life she apparently harbored doubts that she shared with her children. Two of her sons, Charles Strang (named after his mother, "Charley Douglass") and Clement Strang, took an interest in their father's life, and the documents Speek references in her book include their letters and other writings.

After Elvira departed for Michigan, Betsy and her brother John, also a Strangite, moved their families to Indiana, then back again to Wisconsin. Betsy's daughter Evangeline married John Denio, a Strangite widower who, at forty, was closer to his mother-in-law's age (forty-seven) than his wife's (thirteen or fourteen). In 1883 the Denios moved to Davis City, Iowa, where they joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. They eventually moved to Lamoni, Iowa, headquarters of the RLDS Church. Betsy McNutt accompanied the Denios to Iowa, where she passed away in 1897, but it is not clear whether she ever joined the RLDS Church. James Strang had told Betsy before his death that she would be one of the last to deny him. And this indeed appears to have been the case. Of note is the report that Betsy carried with her a chest containing manuscripts, letters, and other articles of interest, including the controversial plates Strang claimed to have found near Voree. According to Heman H. Smith of the RLDS Church, Betsy still had the plates with her when she moved to Lamoni but loaned them to Charles Hall, a Hedrickite. Hall's wife then purportedly loaned the plates to two elders from the LDS Church in Utah, and they were never returned.

Phoebe Wright lived for many years with her father, Phineas, in Wisconsin. She dropped the name Strang, however, and instead used her husband's middle name. Phoebe Jesse seldom talked about Strang, but she genuinely loved him. When her daughter, Eugenia, married Thomas Phillips, a local businessman, Phoebe moved in with them. Phillips became manager of a bank in Duluth, Minnesota, and spent two years in Salt Lake City before being assigned to Tacoma, Washington. Phoebe accompanied them on these moves, eventually dying in Tacoma, on November 9, 1914, at the age of seventy-eight. She never remarried, and Eugenia was her only child.

Of Strang's five wives, Sarah Wright's story is the most remarkable. After leaving her dying husband, Sarah eventually married a self-taught doctor named Joseph Smith Wing who, ironically, was not a Mormon.

When “Brighamite” missionaries came to the area, Joseph joined the Utah church and set out for the Rocky Mountains with his family. While passing through Illinois, Sarah had a disconcerting experience. They stopped to visit a family Joseph said he knew. The only person at home was the twelve-year-old daughter. After asking her if she would like to go riding with them, Wing put her on the horse with him and rode off. He never took her back home. When Sarah questioned her husband, Joseph disclosed that the girl was his daughter from a previous marriage. This was not Sarah’s only surprise. Wing had also married and abandoned two other women. So Sarah was not his first wife; she was the fourth. And she would not be the last: in Utah, Church leaders asked Joseph to participate in polygamy. Although Sarah had renounced the practice after Strang’s death, she watched Joseph marry six additional wives. Eventually, as she grew increasingly dissatisfied with both her marriage and polygamy, she left Wing and established her own medical practice in Springville, having learned the profession from her much-married husband. Sarah served her Mormon neighbors for many years, but she eventually became disenchanted with the LDS Church and left it. She died at age eighty-seven at the home of her daughter Amanda in Boise, Idaho. Even though Sarah admitted to Milo Quaipe in 1920 that she no longer believed God spoke to prophets, her grandson Mark claimed she “remained faithful to Strang’s underlying religious convictions and high moral standards,” (294) and she always spoke highly of him.

“*God Has Made Us a Kingdom*” does not answer all the questions surrounding James Jesse Strang and the people who followed him, but anyone interested in this branch of Mormon history will surely want to read Vickie Cleverley Speek’s book.

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