
Reviewed by Jennie Mathewson

*Your Sister in the Gospel* is the first scholarly biography of Jane Manning James, a nineteenth-century African-American Mormon woman who lived through the religion’s often mythologized founding years. As author and religious studies scholar Quincy Newell convincingly demonstrates, the story of Jane Manning James’ life—Jane, as Newell calls her because of the numerous surnames she held over her life—provides an alternative history of Mormonism: it both illustrates the attraction that Mormonism held for early black converts and complicates the LDS church’s narrative of an egalitarian racial structure within early Mormonism. Newell notes that Jane has recently become a symbol of the LDS church’s internal diversity and racial equality, but, during her lifetime, Jane was refused the full temple rites because of her race. *Your Sister in the Gospel* seeks to reconcile the idea that Jane was drawn to convert to Mormonism notwithstanding the fact that she was treated as a second-class member of the religion who would never fully ascend to the highest levels of glory in the Mormon afterlife.

Although her mother was formerly enslaved, Jane Manning James was born free in Connecticut during the height of the Second Great Awakening. Jane joined the Congregationalist church as a young woman but heard a Mormon missionary, Charles Wesley Wandell, speak in her area in 1842. She converted a week later and, with her family, walked most of the way to Nauvoo, Illinois, in the fall of 1843. Newell argues that this speedy conversion and exodus from the East Coast illustrates the hope Jane possibly had that Mormonism represented the future, a new religious world without the racism so entwined within the New England Protestantism she was leaving. Despite what may have been Jane’s initial hopes, the LDS church imposed restrictions on nonwhite Mormons over the course of the nineteenth century because, as historian Paul Reeve has shown, they wanted to preserve their whiteness that the outside world began to question in the mid-nineteenth century. While Newell does not fully explore Reeve’s point, Jane’s experiences with both Protestantism
and Mormonism raise the possibility that she could have been interested in Mormonism precisely because of the projection of “otherness” that Protestants put upon Mormonism.

In Nauvoo, Jane’s hopes of Mormonism were somewhat realized; she found work in the house of the church’s founder, Joseph Smith, whom she remembered later in life as an avuncular, egalitarian man. Jane also later recalled that Emma Smith, Joseph’s wife, offered to adopt her into their family, but Jane misunderstood Emma’s offer (likely an offer to seal Jane to the Smith family for eternity) and refused her request. At another point during Jane’s sojourn in the Smith home, Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith Jr.’s mother, allowed Jane to heft a covered bundle as Jane collected Lucy’s laundry. Lucy Mack revealed to Jane that the bundle contained the “Urim and Thummim” (the alleged interpreters for the Book of Mormon). Finally, Jane recalled having a spiritual experience while washing Joseph Smith’s temple garments, even though the full significance of the garments was not apparent to her at the time. Thus, Jane had direct experiences with some of the LDS church’s most sacred objects and most important founding figures.

Newell uses these memories not only as a source for understanding Jane’s life in Nauvoo, but to demonstrate how Jane understood her place as an African-American woman in Mormonism, an overwhelmingly white religion. Crucially, Jane recounted these stories of her time in Nauvoo with the Smiths when she was on a determined campaign to receive full temple rights from the church in the late nineteenth century. After Brigham Young became the leader of the LDS church following Joseph Smith’s death, Young imposed an overtly racial hierarchy in the church that excluded black Mormons from the endowment ritual and eternal marriage sealings. Consequently, Jane was excluded from rituals that were seen as essential for the fullness of eternal life. Although Newell believes that Jane was telling the truth as she believed it about her time in Nauvoo, Newell points out that Jane’s storytelling strategically positioned herself in relation to Joseph Smith and portrayed him as a strong, benevolent white man, the very image that late-nineteenth-century LDS leaders sought to cultivate for themselves. Furthermore, these stories demonstrated Jane’s Mormon bona fides, and may have been another tactic Jane used to request her temple rights, Newell asserts. However, in doing so, Jane was forced to play into the stereotypes that helped construct Mormon racism in order to secure her own eternal place in the Mormon afterlife. The probable motivation behind Jane’s stories complicates the objective accuracy of her words and could discredit her view of the events. But, in a biography of Jane Manning James, it is arguably just as important to understand Jane’s subjective experience of the “facts” of history as it is to speculate on what actually happened to her in Nauvoo. Furthermore, what Jane believed had happened was the truth to her and that matters in a biography.
Your Sister in the Gospel effectively balances Jane’s testimony with outside sources. Along with censuses, church records, tax records, and even railroad timetables, Newell uses notes taken during Relief Society meetings or oral histories from other Mormons in order to more fully flesh out Jane’s life. Sources like Relief Society minutes are particularly useful because they occasionally recorded Jane’s own words. However, Newell often has to do the work of constructing the context around these words and has to make assumptions about their underlying meanings. When doing this sort of work, Newell, like other historians, has had to make presumptions about her subject, presumptions that she can never fully corroborate due to lack of evidence. However, Newell is completely transparent about this in her text and often offers her readers a series of interpretative possibilities rather than one definitive reading of the evidence at hand. While this may annoy some readers, it clues readers into how historians work through evidence and does not artificially foreclose plausible alternative readings of evidence. In doing so, Newell manages to create as full of a picture of Jane’s life as is possible.

As a whole, Newell’s biography positions Jane as an independent person who both participated in Mormonism and pushed against its exclusionary policies, which complicates the modern-day sanitized narrative of Jane’s life that many LDS members would prefer to tell. In a larger context, Your Sister in the Gospel demonstrates the paradox of how people can exist both within and without a religion; they can question the beliefs of their religious authorities while still believing in the religion upheld by those authorities, just as Jane Manning James did.

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