

*Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James,  
a Nineteenth-Century Black Mormon*  
By Quincy D. Newell

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019

*Reviewed by Carter Charles*

Biographer Quincy D. Newell admits that she approaches the story of Jane Manning James (1820–1908), one of the first black members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “for what it tells us about religion and race in nineteenth-century America” (4–5) and because it is a “history of Mormonism from below” (135). Such a story, she argues, “demonstrates how a focus on temple rituals and priesthood,” though always central to Latter-day Saints, “blinds us to the everyday lived religion of thousands of nineteenth-century Mormons” (135). Beyond participating in the project of recovering the ethnically diverse past of the Church, Newell’s overall goal seems to be to position James’s story where it belongs: in the “books on African American history, American women’s history, and the history of the American West” (1).

*Your Sister in the Gospel* is a must-read, with eight chapters and just over 138 pages. About three pages of acknowledgements give insight into her multiple research venues and the experts who provided intellectual and material support (W. Paul Reeve, Patrick Q. Mason, J. Spencer Fluhman, Kate Holbrook, and Brittany Chapman Nash, to name just a few). Two notably welcome sections of the book are the “Who’s Who in Jane’s story” (three pages), in which Newell meticulously identifies everyone known to have been associated with Jane Manning James,<sup>1</sup> and the primary-source appendices (fourteen pages), which include her patriarchal blessings.

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1. Newell makes a case as to why she mostly refers to Jane Manning James by her first name (3). I heartily welcome the sense of closeness of doing so, but here, I will adhere to the convention of using her full name or her most common last names.

The book is organized chronologically, allowing readers to follow James from childhood to her death (1908). The book also covers present-day interest in her life: Newell mentions the 2018 “Mormon Prayer Candles” (138) and a 2017 general conference sermon in which senior Church leader M. Russell Ballard enjoined Latter-day Saints to “eliminate any prejudice, including racism, sexism, and nationalism” (137).<sup>2</sup> Ballard’s call becomes even more meaningful to readers who know that he is also a great-great-grandson of Hyrum Smith—who blessed Jane Manning James in 1844—and a great-grandson of Joseph F. Smith, the last ecclesiastical leader she petitioned for her temple rituals, during the early phases of the Church’s temple and priesthood restriction for members with African heritage. James signed her last petition to Joseph F. Smith, “Your sister in the gospel” (130), which became the title of Newell’s book.

The book is free of jargon, which makes it accessible to a wide readership, without sacrificing quality or buying into easy conclusions. Newell thus rises to the challenge, for all good historians, to survey possible options—to “flesh out the possibilities and follow the suggestions of the evidence” while leaving room for other options “where the sources are inconclusive” (5). Because of that, she warns from the outset that “much of this story . . . is conjectural” (5). This translates into a non-negligible use of the past conditional tense (*would, may, might have* + past-tense verb) and adverbs of probability (*likely, perhaps, probably, certainly*). Their accumulation has the potential to trigger uneasiness.<sup>3</sup> They can also be seen as a sign of professionalism and of humility in light of the scarcity of documents: as Newell’s extensive research shows, Jane Manning James did leave a paper trail “to be remembered” (1), but it was not as consistent and rich as that of other Saints who were more educated and wholly dedicated to record keeping.

Newell’s use of modals and conditionals will always be preferred to authoritative statements that are not warranted by either direct evidence or the larger context of a story. Readers who see them for their benefit will appreciate the possibility they provide to come up with hypotheses other than what Newell presents. For instance, to Newell’s possible reasons as to why plural marriage “might . . . have sounded more ordinary—less scandalous to Jane than to the white people around

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2. M. Russell Ballard, “The Trek Continues,” *Ensign* 47 (November 2017): 106.

3. There are sixteen occurrences on pages 8 through 9.

her” (46), one may add that while James’s sense of marriage may indeed have been informed by circumstances imposed by slavery, she probably had no idea of what was going on, as evidenced in her insistence that she did not understand what “adoption”—in the sense of being sealed as an “adopted” member—into Joseph and Emma’s family meant (113).

Likewise, to the postulate that “Jane’s editorial comment in her Retrenchment Society remarks [about self-unction and healing] suggested a certain skepticism about the importance of the ecclesiastical priesthood to the practice of healing” (121), one might argue that her belief in charisma did not seem to make her feel superior to ecclesiastical authorities, whom she respectfully petitioned for rituals she believed were vital to her salvation. Newell shows that James forcefully disputed the racial basis of the denial of her temple rituals (105), but she does not come across as a radical or like William McCary, the black coreligionist who came up with his own prophetic claims and sealing ritual (63–64).

It will also take a little more for Newell to convince that the derogatory term *aunt*, used even when there was no filial connection, “erases” Jane Manning James’s sexuality (129). One may question how her sexuality was “a problematic part of her identity as a Mormon” and what part of her “sexual activity did not follow LDS norms” (129). If polygamy and temple marriage were the determining characteristics of that norm, then obviously she was outside of it. But since she was not the only woman who was not sealed in a polygamous union, that norm was not binding. And if it was not binding, it was hardly a norm. Newell convincingly demonstrates that Jane Manning James never lived with a man she was not married to. The only alternative left for a sexuality outside of the norm would be divorce. But even that, the author shows, was not uncommon (90), meaning that it was not dishonorable or “markers of failure” for her to have had the labels of “single” or “divorced” in nineteenth-century Utah (105).

Of course, the above discussions reveal more of my inability to fully grasp one or two arguments in a work whose quality is beyond question. Whenever possible, the book lays bare the whereabouts of Jane Manning James and of anyone who ever lived under the same roof as her. In the 2017 conference sermon Newell refers to, Ballard describes Jane Manning James as “a most remarkable disciple who faced difficult challenges,”<sup>4</sup> without elaborating. Newell’s book is not intended

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4. Ballard, “Trek Continues,” 104.

to “promote the faith of Latter-day Saints” (4),<sup>5</sup> but Latter-day Saint readers might find their faith strengthened when they discover that “difficult challenges” meant difficulty for Jane Manning James to belong in America, difficulty to belong in the religion she had embraced, divorce, disappointments with children, death, denial when she basically asked if there was no balm in Gilead for her (105) and, through it all, the ability to still see the hand of God in her life.

Ultimately, beyond the praises of Newell’s peers in academia, those who claim a connection to the restoration initiated through Joseph Smith are indebted to her, a sister in humanity and in God, for bringing greater attention to Jane Manning James’s lifelong struggle to be fully recognized as a sister. The title of the book, *Your Sister in the Gospel*, is fitting for an observer like Newell. The challenge for all Latter-day Saints is to find ways to further own her as *our* sister.

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5. Nor is it intended to provide fodder to those who want to “tear down the church” (4).