

Play within a play

By [Margaret Blair Young](#)

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Jane Elizabeth Manning James, a black Mormon pioneer, was known to some Latter-day Saints historians in the later 20th century but was hardly a household name. Linda King Newell and Valerie Tippetts Avery wrote the first well-researched article about Jane in LDS Church publication [The Ensign](#). Subsequent Mormon authors focused on the early years of Jane's life, particularly on founder Joseph Smith accepting her and her family into his home.

The church-produced film *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* changes an important episode in Jane's story, as she dictated it to Elizabeth J.D. Roundy around 1890. She describes her family's trek from Buffalo, New York, to Nauvoo, Illinois (where the Latter-day Saints were gathered):

We walked until our shoes were worn out, and our feet became sore and cracked open and bled until you could see the whole print of our feet with blood on the ground. We stopped and united in prayer to the Lord; we asked God the Eternal Father to heal our feet. Our prayers were answered and our feet were healed forthwith.

In the film, Jane arrives in Nauvoo with bloody feet, which Smith tenderly wraps in long bandages. When [my co-author, Darius Gray](#), saw it, he said, "That's not accurate. Jane's feet had already been healed by her faith."

In 2001, I wrote the play *I Am Jane*, which tells Jane's full story, using as many of her own words as possible. A group of us produced it in various places, including at Brigham Young University in 2002, where it met some controversy. Though the restriction forbidding anyone of African lineage to be ordained to the priesthood or to enter the LDS temple ended in 1978, many were protective of the past. Some continued to preach ideas that had undergirded the restriction, including the Curse of Cain or Canaan.

In the play, Jane quotes the letters we have on record, in which she petitioned various church leaders for permission to enter the temple. These leaders allowed her

to perform proxy baptisms for her “kindred dead,” but they did not allow her to receive the temple endowment or sealing—the most significant ordinance for Mormons. Church president Wilford Woodruff blessed her, but wrote in his journal that he could not grant her petition “because of Cain” (October 18, 1894). In the play Jane proclaims that she has never felt cursed by God, only loved.

One critic complained that the play implied that Brigham Young was a racist, which could cause cognitive dissonance in a loyal Mormon audience. He advised that I change the following line describing Brigham Young:

Don't think I'm going to be surprised by what Brigham Young say. That's a man with a strong will and a strong tongue. He say whatever come to mind even if someone's takin' notes!

This is the change he suggested:

He say whatever the Spirit gives him. He's not afraid of man. But if he say it, there must be a purpose—even if only to give us more cause to trust in the Lord.

I ignored his suggestion.

On December 6, 2013, I decided to produce the play at BYU again. That day, the [LDS Church, in an effort for greater transparency](#), released a [statement about race and priesthood](#), and named Jane Manning James. It strikes down prior justifications for withholding temple privileges from Jane and others of African lineage:

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse . . . or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else.

We produced the play this February. It sold out and was even attended by a high church official.

I am 58 years old. I remember the priesthood restriction and my discomfort with it from my teen years, before I knew any black people. I remember June 8, 1978, when the LDS church lifted the restriction. These memories are from my white world in Utah. It wasn't until later that I started appreciating the pain that the restriction had caused black people. As I partnered with Darius on many projects, I heard him counsel and comfort many who were still hearing about curses.

Our healing as a church and as a people is incomplete. Yet the December 6 statement, which contextualizes the restriction to Brigham Young's worldview and the 19th century cultural concept of race, is one of the most important documents to have come from the church I love.

I shared it with [Cecil "Chip" Murray](#), an African Methodist Episcopal pastor and ethics professor in Los Angeles, who said:

Yes, I have tracked the history of the "curse of Cain," and having been exposed to the Mormon Church at its best, looked anxiously to that day when the word would become flesh. That day has come. . . . Now the Church will surge to the top, as its hindrance is removed and its positive programs are sweeping the planet.

The history of my play points to a larger tale and suggests that we Latter-day Saints are preparing to move towards greater truth, transparency, and even reconciliation.

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