

“BLESSINGS DEFERRED”

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“So how does the priesthood ban make you feel?” At the time I didn’t have the right tools to answer my freshman year religious studies professor at Brigham Young University, so I muttered something about how it didn’t really affect me because my family joined a couple years after the ban was lifted. I still have a clear memory of the nerves running through me knowing the professor would call on the only brown face in the class. As uncomfortable as those feelings were, I was glad for them, because in those moments I began to consider and eventually learn about the implications of the priesthood ban on men, women, and children of African descent.

BYU provided me with many more occasions to think about this history. In college, I was privileged to learn about beloved LDS pioneer Jane Manning James while participating in a theater adaptation of her life.¹ The script recounts her and her family’s journey from New York to Nauvoo and finally Salt Lake City. In Nauvoo, Jane becomes employed in the Smith mansion as a laundress where she became well acquainted with Joseph and Emma Smith. After some time, they offered her to be sealed to them as their daughter—which she declined. Jane recalls that at the time she did not understand temple ordinances.

After Joseph’s assassination Jane and her family moved west. In Salt Lake City, Jane was a devoted member of the faith until her death. During her time in Utah, she repeatedly contacted Church leadership pleading for her temple blessings, as had been offered by Joseph Smith. In a letter to President John Taylor, she wrote, “I called at your house

1. Margaret Blair Young, *I Am Jane*.

last Thursday to have conversation with you concerning my future salvation. I did not explain my feelings or wishes to you. I realize my race & color & can't expect my Endowments as others who are white. My race was handed down through the flood; God promised Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blest; as this is the fullness of all dispensations is there no blessing for me?"² Eventually Jane was granted a "special" ceremony and was sealed to Joseph and Emma as a servant. Additionally, she was not allowed to enter the temple to perform this sealing, someone else was used as proxy. Displeased, and again invoking the Smiths' earlier offer, Jane continued to petition for her blessings.³

Like many members of African descent from 1852 to 1978, Jane died without the promises of temple blessings. Jane preceded her husband and several children in death. I cannot begin to imagine her dismay and agony thinking about the dissolution of her family. Because of the color of their skin, there was no promise of an eternal life together. And not only that—the God she loved supposedly wanted her to be sealed as a servant for all eternity. This was a woman who had not only escaped the horrors of slavery, but then lived to see this most evil institution instated in Utah by Brigham Young. I often wonder how in her quiet moments of contemplation she reconciled that God, who she may have believed delivered her from slavery, would reinstitute those same conditions through his prophet and his Church.

How does the Church move forward from its racist history if it will not be clear about its past? There are some members of the

2. Quincy D. Newell, "Is There No Blessing for Me? (ca. 1880–1894)," in *Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James, a Nineteenth-Century Black Mormon*, online ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199338665.003.0008>.

3. Quincy D. Newell, "Jane Elizabeth Manning James," *Century of Black Mormons*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/james-jane-elizabeth-manning>.

Church—most often those outside of the United States—who are not even aware of this history. Others have a surface-level understanding of the significance of these decisions and ramifications to members that were victimized by it. Many do not understand the full extent of its effects. For example, many members are not aware that this was a priesthood and temple ban. Most understand that men of African descent could not pass the sacrament, baptize their children, or bless their families with authority from their God. Many don't know or forget that all members, men and women, of African descent were not allowed into the temple buildings to participate in the ordinances therein. Husbands could not be sealed to their wives, and children were not sealed to their parents. In effect, the eternal progress of members of African descent was halted. This meant that in a church that performed baptisms for the dead and provided them the ordinances of the temple by proxy—members of African descent would still have to stand aside, permanent second-class citizens in God's kingdom.

These issues, however, are not in the distant past. A few years ago, the Church released a new Sunday School manual with racist justifications for the priesthood and temple ban.⁴ This was even more curious because the Church had just previously released the Gospel Topics essays where they had disavowed these racist teachings.⁵ In my opinion, the Church had been forced to acknowledge that the justifications for the priesthood and temple ban were racist but could not disavow the ban itself because of the far-reaching implications to undermining prophetic authority. Yet somehow, this Sunday School manual made its way through the hands of those same Church officials and into every church building. Yes, they fixed their mistake for the online version,

4. Peggy F. Stack, "Error in Printed LDS Church Manual Could Revive Racial Criticisms," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 18, 2020.

5. "Race and the Priesthood," *Gospel Topics Essays*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

but those printed versions are still in the family room of every Church member who took their complimentary copy home and saved it.

This recent past is antithetical to President Russel M. Nelson's admonition "to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice."⁶ Moreover, it is damaging for those of us who are left to feel invisible to our religion because of ongoing failures.

Should the Church apologize for its history of racism? Sure. However, to me, an apology matters much less than the unlearning and reteaching they must embark on. If I were to go back to my freshman BYU religion class and answer the question "so how does the priesthood ban make you feel?" I would have a different answer. I would talk about the hard work of shedding feelings of inferiority and alienation that comes from internalizing racist teachings. I would also point to inspirations of hope and action from pioneers such as Jane Manning James, and I join with her in continuing to speak up and call for change. Let us all follow her example.

6. Russel M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," Oct. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/46nelson>.

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