

CHAPTER EIGHT

“SOMETHING BETTER” FOR THE SISTERS: JOSEPH SMITH AND THE FEMALE RELIEF SOCIETY OF NAUVOO

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¹One of the least-tapped sources in the ongoing effort to retrieve the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith is the minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society, or, more properly, “A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo.”² The six sermons the Prophet delivered to the women of the Church between March and August 1842 comprise the heart of this important and long-cherished document.³ In these foundational sermons, Joseph Smith instructed women regarding “the order of the priesthood,” including the keys, offices, ordinances, gifts, and blessings of the priesthood. He thereby prepared them to participate in the sacred ordinances to be administered in the Nauvoo Temple at its completion. He also encouraged the sisters in their important charitable work and expounded at length upon the broader meaning of charity.

Under Joseph Smith’s direction, the Relief Society was organized midway through the seven years, 1839–46, that the Church located its headquarters and many of its members on a bend of the upper Mississippi River at Nauvoo, Illinois. The Society provided a unique forum for the Prophet Joseph’s teachings, and his 1842 addresses to the women reflect both the sublime principles he taught his followers and the turmoil he experienced throughout that year. As

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disbelievers' unrelenting attempts to dismantle his work and impugn his claims conspired to draw the Prophet's focus to compelling legal and political matters during 1842, he remained undeterred from completing his commission to introduce the saving ordinances of the gospel to Church members, construct a temple wherein they could be administered, enlarge the Saints' understanding of vicarious work, deliver the keys of discernment between truth and error, and preach the nature of God, heaven, and earth. He organized the women of the Church "according to the law of heaven," as Elder John Taylor of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles explained,⁴ and "in the Order of the Priesthood after the pattern of the Church," as Relief Society charter member Sarah Kimball recalled.⁵

Joseph Smith greeted the year 1842 with much optimism. He was delighted with the progress on the temple, where "the fulness of the gospel" could be restored. This was the day, he recorded, "in which the God of heaven has begun to restore the ancient order of His kingdom unto His servants and His people,—a day in which all things are concurring to bring about the completion of the fulness of the Gospel." He rejoiced that the people looked to the completion of the temple "as an event of the greatest importance to the Church and the world" and that they were willing to sacrifice to bring that day to pass.⁶ Indeed, women's anticipated assistance in moving forward the work on the temple led to the establishment of the Relief Society.

Sarah M. Kimball's idea for a sewing society to provide clothing for construction workers on the Nauvoo Temple was probably informed by the benevolent societies that thrived throughout the United States during the early part of the nineteenth century. The writing of a constitution for the group by Sarah's friend Eliza R. Snow reflected practice well established in various associations in the new American republic. Upon seeing the women's constitution, however, Joseph Smith declared, "Tell the sisters their offering is accepted of the Lord, and He has something better for them."⁷ They thus abandoned their original plans in favor of the Prophet's inspired design of organization. On Thursday afternoon, March 17, 1842, twenty women met with him in the "Lodge Room" above his red brick store to be organized after the pattern of the Church, with a president and counselors set apart by the laying on of hands.⁸ Thirty-eight-year-old

Emma Hale Smith, Joseph's wife, was elected president.⁹ Within six months, the members of the newly organized Relief Society learned what Joseph meant by "something better." The new Society served effectively as a charitable institution for the welfare of Church members.¹⁰ But for society members themselves, it became a female "school of the prophets" wherein Joseph revealed important doctrine and instructions relating to their eternal welfare.

"The Society is not only to relieve the poor but to save souls," Joseph told the sisters when he addressed them on June 9, 1842.¹¹ With energy and clarity he taught them principles that would lead to salvation and the eternal duration of marriage and family relationships. Much as he had earlier instructed Church leaders and elders in the School of the Prophets preparatory to their receiving the endowment in the house of the Lord at Kirtland, Joseph instructed the sisters of the Relief Society preparatory to the completion of the Nauvoo Temple, where worthy women and men would receive the full endowment and sealing ordinances.¹²

Two of his sermons made explicit his plan to instruct the women in the blessings of the priesthood relating to the temple. At the first, delivered on March 30, he expressed concern over the rapid growth of the Relief Society, whose membership had increased by fifty-five. He had hoped, he said, that the Society would "grow up by degrees." It "should commence with a few individuals," he counseled, and "thus have a select Society of the virtuous and those who will walk circumspectly." He acceded to its rapid growth, but he advised: "Go into a close examination of every candidate." Subsequently each potential member was required to present a certificate attesting to her faithfulness and good character.¹³ He charged the sisters to "purge out iniquity" and affirmed the importance of unity, counseling that "all must act in concert or nothing can be done."¹⁴

He announced that "the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood." This, he declared, required "a select Society separate from all the evils of the world, choice, virtuous and holy."¹⁵ This was the beginning of the Society's understanding of his repeated references to the "ancient Priesthood."

The "ancient Priesthood" to which he alluded is the patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood and its ordinances, with the covenant of marriage and the family unit at its center. President Ezra

Taft Benson explained: "The order of the priesthood spoken of in the scriptures is sometimes referred to as the patriarchal order because it came down from father to son. But this order is otherwise described in modern revelation as an order of family government where a man and a woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God through their mortality."¹⁶ The ancient priesthood was governed by keys representing God's authority, which "open God's greatest blessings, including the 'privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, . . . [and] the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus'" (D&C 107:19).¹⁷ A revelation to Joseph Smith identified "the mysteries of the kingdom" as "the key to the knowledge of God," as manifest in the temple ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood (D&C 84:19–20). Thus, when the Prophet declared that Relief Society sisters "should move according to the ancient Priesthood," he invited them to prepare for the sacred ordinances to be administered in the temple. One by one through the holy endowment, these women would come to understand "the mysteries of the kingdom." As they were sealed with their husbands in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, they would enter the patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood.

In this same sermon, Joseph repeated what he had proclaimed three months earlier in January. Looking forward to the completion of the temple, Joseph had rejoiced that God was initiating the restoration of "the ancient order of His kingdom" and the preparation of "the earth for the return of His glory . . . and a kingdom of Priests and kings to God and the Lamb, forever, on Mount Zion."¹⁸ The organization of the Relief Society was instrumental in this restoration, for he intended, he said, "to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day—as in Paul's day."¹⁹ Women would be included in the anticipated temple blessings, which would distinguish Latter-day Saints as "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9). Their new organization was to be the vehicle by which the Prophet could nurture a society of holy women in God's kingdom. Eliza R. Snow, the secretary of the Nauvoo society, who became Relief Society president in Utah, made frequent references in her sermons to the connection between the Relief Society organization and the promises of the

temple. In 1905 Bathsheba W. Smith, fourth general president of the Relief Society, also recalled that the Prophet Joseph “wanted to make us, as the women were in Paul’s day, ‘A Kingdom of priestesses.’ We have that ceremony in our endowments as Joseph taught.”²⁰

At the Society’s April 28 meeting, Joseph expanded on his earlier allusions to the temple. No other sermon he delivered to the Relief Society was as instructive or as spiritually expansive. His diary entry for that day records that “at Two o’clock after-noon met the members of the ‘Female relief Society’ and after presiding at the admission of many new members,²¹ gave a lecture on the pries[t]hood shewing how the Sisters would come in possession of the privileges & blessings & gifts of the priesthood & that the signs should follow them. such as healing the sick casting out devils &c. & that they might attain unto these blessings, by a virtuous life & conversation & diligence in keeping all the commandments.”²²

Joseph Smith took as his text the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians, explicating Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts and the importance of all members of the body acting unitedly (see 1 Corinthians 12:14–31). Joseph emphasized how everyone, acting in his or her place, whatever the calling, was essential to building the kingdom. The words echoed his 1832 revelation on priesthood, which admonished “every man [to] stand in his own office, and labor in his own calling” (D&C 84:109).²³ Sensing his impending death, he explained to the sisters that “inasmuch as they would not long have him to instruct them,” he was going “to point out the way for them to conduct [themselves] that they might act according to the word of God.”²⁴ He urged them to be faithful and, especially, to be charitable, not only with their material means but also with their powers of forgiveness.²⁵ Joseph also counseled the women to take on the responsibility of their own salvation. “After this instruction,” he declared, “you will be responsible for your own sins. It is an honor to save yourself—all are responsible to save themselves.”²⁶ While this was not a new religious concept, there were, nonetheless, women who believed their salvation depended on the good works of their husbands. As late as 1878, for instance, Eliza R. Snow, meeting with members of the Spring City, Utah, ward Relief Society, felt constrained to clarify this misconception. “Joseph organized a female relief society according to the conmmagment [commandment] of

God," the minutes reported; "his wife Emma was pres and she [Eliza] was secretary some thought that the bretheren would save us and we had nothing to do but this was not the case we had just as much to do as they had and had as great labor to do and would receive just as much blessings."²⁷ An assertion of female moral agency and accountability, Joseph Smith's admonition led women to a path of spiritual maturity and independence in making choices for themselves and accepting responsibility for their own spiritual progression.

Joseph Smith then reflected on Paul's discourse on gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians and on the Savior's promise regarding such gifts as found in the Gospel of Mark. "The time had not been before," Joseph said, "that these things could be in their proper order," but now, he continued, "no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female."²⁸ A revelation Joseph received concerning spiritual gifts in March 1831 expanded upon the gifts listed by the Apostle Paul, emphasizing that "these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God" (D&C 46:26). Like the blessings of the priesthood, spiritual gifts accompanied and indeed testified of the return of the gospel of Christ to the earth. These gifts had been abundantly manifest in the house of the Lord in Kirtland, and Joseph surely anticipated the presence of such gifts in the temple at Nauvoo.²⁹

After sustaining the exercise of this kind of charismatic expression, Joseph returned to the topic with which he began and admonished Relief Society sisters to "stand and act in the place appointed, and thus sanctify the Society and get it pure." He reiterated, "Every one should aspire only to magnify his own office." He exhorted the women: "You need not be tearing [down] men for their deeds, but let the weight of innocence be felt; . . . Not war, not jangle, not contradiction, but meekness, love, purity, these are the things that should magnify us." To do like Jesus, he counseled, "you must enlarge your souls toward others" and "carry your fellow creatures to Abram's bosom."³⁰ Joseph's discussion of spiritual gifts, like that of the Apostle Paul, concluded with an emphasis on charity (see 1 Corinthians 13). It was a theme to which Joseph would repeatedly return.

In his April 28 sermon to the sisters, Joseph anticipated the completion of the temple and alluded to its blessings for women. "The

church is not now organized in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed," he declared. He was anxious to prepare the Saints for that great event. Exhorting the sisters to "concentrate their faith and prayers and confidence in those whom God has appointed to lead," Joseph explained that "the keys of the kingdom are about to be given them, that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders." These promised keys gave recipients the power of discernment, a gift of deep importance to Joseph.³¹ He explained that he was delivering the keys "to this Society and to the Church" because "the world would not be troubled with him a great while." The sense of foreboding in his words was long remembered by Bathsheba W. Smith, who recalled that the Prophet had offered the invocation at the meeting, his voice trembling as he spoke, and that later in the meeting he had said that according to his prayer, "God had appointed him elsewhere." He even repeated the prophecy, declaring, "According to my prayer I will not be with you long to teach and instruct you."³² This foreboding underscored his urgency to teach the culminating doctrines of priesthood.³³

At the end of this long and historic sermon, Joseph once again promised the sisters future blessings for their faithfulness. "I now turn the key to you in the name of God," he declared, "and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days to this Society." With those words Joseph metaphorically opened the door to spiritual knowledge and blessings for women.³⁴ He had employed nearly identical words in addressing the Kirtland elders quorum prior to the first missionary efforts in Europe: "This night the key is turned to the nations."³⁵ His brother Hyrum later invited Saints remaining in Kirtland to travel to Nauvoo to build the temple "wherein their dead may be redeemed, and the key of knowledge that unfolds the dispensation of the fulness of times may be turned, and the mysteries of God be unfolded."³⁶ The unfolding "mysteries of God" and "knowledge and intelligence" flowing down from heaven would teach the repentant and faithful how to attain eternal life, life in the presence of God. "If you live up to your privileges," Joseph promised the women that day, "the angels cannot be restrain'd from being your associates—females, if they are pure and innocent can come into the presence of God."³⁷

The effect of Joseph's words upon the women was stunning. Nancy Alexander Tracy testified that when Joseph spoke "he was so full of the spirit of the Holy Ghost that his frame shook and his face shone and looked almost transparent."³⁸ Mercy Thompson remembered that Joseph gave "directions and counsels to the sisters calculated to inspire them to efforts which would lead to celestial glory and exaltation."³⁹ Two priesthood leaders added their witness to Joseph Smith's instruction preparing the sisters to receive in the temple the priesthood ordinances and blessings that would in turn prepare them to "see the face of God" (D&C 84:22-23).

In the afternoon of May 27, the women convened in the "Grove" in Nauvoo because the upper room in Joseph's store had accommodated so few of them the day before. Bishop Newel K. Whitney attended the meeting with Joseph, explaining that he had come purposely to hear the Prophet speak. But it was Bishop Whitney who delivered the sermon that day, not the Prophet, who was unwell. The bishop exuberantly confirmed Joseph's promise in turning the key of knowledge and intelligence. "I rejoice that God has given us means whereby we may get intelligence and instruction," he declared, admonishing the sisters, "Rejoice in the prospect of what lays before."⁴⁰ Just three weeks earlier, on May 4, Whitney and eight other men had met with Joseph in the upper room of the red brick store to be instructed by the Prophet in "the principles and order of the Priesthood," the initiation of the ritual of the full endowment. On that occasion the Prophet revealed for the first time the saving ordinances of the gospel, which, he promised, would be administered to all the Saints when the temple was completed. To ensure that the ordinances of salvation and the keys of authority would be delivered to the Church, and that a corps of men and women would be ordained to administer these ordinances, the Prophet Joseph, aware of the precarious state of his own safety, taught and performed these vital temple rites before the temple was completed.⁴¹

Bishop Whitney affirmed the importance of the Relief Society as a vehicle for the sisters to "prepare for those blessings which God is soon to bestow upon us." "It becomes us to prepare," he advised, "by striving for union one with another." In the creation of man, both male and female, he continued, God bestowed "certain blessings

peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor'd to earth—it takes all to restore the Priesthood."⁴² This affirmation came from Whitney's new understanding of the temple-based patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, whose blessings are bestowed only on husbands and wives together. Only in union, Whitney had recently learned, could a man or woman attain the highest degree of the celestial kingdom (see D&C 132:19–20). Bishop Whitney echoed the Prophet's admonition to the women to bridle their tongues, for "it is impossible while finding fault with one another to be united." He counseled: "Throw the vail [*sic*] of charity over failings. . . . We may have different views of things," but "by bringing our minds and wills into subjection to the law of the Lord, [we] may come to unity." In closing his remarks, he again fervently assured the women, "There are great blessings before [you], that would astonish you if you could behold them." After again pleading for unity, he reiterated his promise that there were "blessings before [us] to be confer'd as soon as our hearts are prepar'd to receive them."

Reynolds Cahoon, a member of the temple building committee, confirmed the transcendent purpose of the Relief Society as taught by the Prophet in the spring of 1842. He expressed his sentiments during an August 13, 1843, visit to the Society: "You knew [no] doubt but this society is raisd by the Lord to prepare us for the great blessings which are for us in the House of the Lord in the Temple." Cahoon anticipated, as had Whitney, the blessings a united man and woman would receive through the sealing ordinances of the temple, and he bore witness of the distinctive and integral importance of Relief Society in relation to those blessings: "There are many Benevolent Societies abroad designd to do good but not as this ours is according to the order of God connected with the priesthood according to the same good principals & knowledge will grow out of it. . . . The Order of the Priesthood is not complete without it."⁴³

In September 1843, shortly after the visit of Reynolds Cahoon, Joseph Smith's promises of the previous year reached fruition when a number of Relief Society women were introduced to the temple ceremony, Emma Smith being the first. Eventually numbering about sixty-five, these men and women met regularly with the Prophet to learn and understand the significance of the temple ordinances and

to be prepared to administer the ordinances to others upon completion of the temple. Bathsheba W. Smith, an original member of the Relief Society, recalled that she “received her endowment in the upper room over the Prophet Joseph Smith’s store. The endowments,” she said, “were given under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who afterwards gave us a lecture or instructions in regard to the endowment ceremonies.” She frequently reflected on the unique opportunity of being “led and taught . . . by the Prophet himself who explained and enlarged wonderfully upon every point as they passed along the way.”⁴⁴

The Prophet’s spring 1842 sermons to the Relief Society prepared women to receive the sacred priesthood ordinances that bound men and women to God and to one another, the culminating act of unity so urgently stressed by Joseph in his visits to the Relief Society. Despite a year fraught with lawsuits, writs, and accusations, and against a backdrop of continual harassment and uncertainty, Joseph pressed on to complete his prophetic mission.⁴⁵

When Joseph met with the Relief Society again on June 9, 1842, he addressed a second theme of his counsel to the women, the meaning of charity as Paul had explained it to the Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 13). Joseph’s sermon expanded on Paul’s admonition and urged the women to exercise mercy and forgiveness as central to their charitable mission. His sermon was extraordinary when one considers the harassment and persecution he had undergone in the twelve years of his ministry. In his last sermons, particularly, the sisters came to know a tender and sensitive prophet as he revealed one of the driving forces of his nature. Having faced ridicule, hostility, spurious legal encounters, and outright persecution since he was fourteen, Joseph still emphasized mercy and forgiveness. He reminded the sisters of the counsel he had written to the Saints three years earlier while he was incarcerated in Missouri’s Liberty Jail. Men cannot be compelled into the kingdom of God, he told the sisters, “but must be dealt with in long suff’ring and at last we shall save them,”⁴⁶ a reiteration of his counsel that those exercising priesthood influence must work “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41).

It grieved him, he said, that the Society did not reflect a fuller fellowship and instructed the members to overlook “small things” with

eyes of mercy. "If one member suffer all feel it," he attested, and only "by union of feeling we obtain pow'r with God." Kindness, charity, love, and mercy were the virtues he invoked as characteristics of the godly. "Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand and watch over them with tenderness," he observed. "When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what pow'r it has over my mind." "If you would have God have mercy on you," he asserted, "have mercy on one another." While there should be no license for sin, he once again counseled, "mercy should go hand in hand with reproof." His words were a sharp deterrent to zealotry and an impassioned plea for empathy.⁴⁷

When Joseph met again with the Relief Society many weeks later, it was obvious that a summer filled with opposition, disloyalty, threats, and disaffection had taken its toll.⁴⁸ No one, however, expected it to be the last time he would speak to the members. As they gathered together in the grove on the last day of August 1842, they saw a solemn and introspective prophet. His first words at that late summer meeting were those of gratitude that despite the exertions made by his enemies, "God had enabled him to keep out of their hands." He said, "All the fuss and all the stir against me, is like the jack in the lantern, it cannot be found." He continued, "Altho' I do wrong, I do not the wrongs that I am charg'd with doing—the wrong that I do is thro' the frailty of human nature like other men. No man lives without fault." Opposition, he noted, merely increased as the work went forward. "When I do the best I can—when I am accomplishing the greatest good," he lamented, "then the most evils are got up against me."⁴⁹ Because of the disaffection of men he once trusted, both in Missouri and in Illinois, Joseph treasured those who remained faithful. He took comfort in the promise the Lord had made to him during the harsh months he spent in Liberty Jail: "Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands" (D&C 121:9). During this tense period of religious turmoil and legal distraction, he felt the spiritual buoyancy that love and loyalty could produce, and he chose to record the names of the faithful in his history. "These," he wrote, "I have met in prosperity, and they were my friends; and I now meet them in adversity, and they are still my warmer friends. These love the God that I serve; they love the truths that I promulgate; they love those

virtuous, and those holy doctrines that I cherish in my bosom with the warmest feelings of my heart, and with that zeal which cannot be denied. I love friendship and truth; I love virtue and law."⁵⁰

The members of the Relief Society, more than one thousand by the time of Joseph's martyrdom in 1844, provided an arsenal of female friends, ready to follow, honor, and defend him.⁵¹ "The Society has done well," he declared on August 31. "Their principles are to practice holiness." Though he would not attend another meeting, he was confident that the Relief Society was firmly established and that it would follow the course on which it had been launched. His last words to the Society bespoke the burden he shouldered in combating the forces so persistently marshaled against him and the Church. But he also prophetically proclaimed that the Church would survive and surmount all opposition. "It will be but a little season," he reassured the women on that warm August day, "and all these afflictions will be turn'd away from us inasmuch as we are faithful and are not overcome by these evils. By seeing the blessings of the endowment rolling on, and the kingdom increasing and spreading from sea to sea; we will rejoice that we were not overcome by these foolish things."⁵² These words would be remembered when the Church, once again, was forced to move by intolerant neighbors, this time a thousand miles to the west, where it would finally establish a permanent home.

During that one brief season in 1842, Joseph laid the foundation for women's responsibility in the mission of the Church. Moreover, for Joseph, the Relief Society had been not only a venue for religious instruction but also a respite from the barrage of disparagement that constantly plagued him. His message to the women was always one of inclusiveness; they were integral to the Church and its mission of salvation to humankind. In the twenty-three-year hiatus until 1867, when the Relief Society began to be reinstated Churchwide in Utah,⁵³ that conviction remained steady and became the kingpin on which the Relief Society functioned for decades thereafter. The symbiotic relationship between the Relief Society and the temple, which Joseph had established, was evident in the appointment of the next three Relief Society presidents—Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, and Bathsheba W. Smith—to serve simultaneously as both Relief Society president and head of female temple workers.⁵⁴

The Nauvoo minutes were sacred to the Relief Society and were read in women's conferences and repeatedly printed in the *Woman's Exponent*. A symbolic rendering of the "key" graced Relief Society halls at the fiftieth commemoration of its organization. And no one kept alive the spirit of Joseph's ennobling words more than Eliza R. Snow, the secretary who had carefully recorded his sermons to women and preserved the minutes on the trek to Utah: "The Relief Society is at the head of all womanhood upon the earth," she declared to the women of the Smithfield, Utah, Relief Society in 1878. "We are laying the foundation for the salvation of all women," she reminded them, "and if you are faithful you will be over all women. . . . Let us live up to the missions we took upon ourselves before we came here."⁵⁵

Joseph's teachings to the Relief Society during that summer of 1842 vitalized a whole generation of Latter-day Saint women and provided a pattern for religious expression that reached well into the future and far beyond the design of other religious and charitable societies. He did indeed have "something better" for them. Affording a text for the development of the organization and a record of Joseph's counsel, the Nauvoo minutes also provide valued insight into the character of the Prophet himself. During that year of stress and anxiety he was yet able to remain calm and continue in his mission to establish the kingdom. Nothing thwarted this commitment. He created a unified body of Latter-day Saints, who were firm in their own convictions but merciful to the wayward or uncommitted, underscoring all his teachings to the Relief Society. He not only taught the members principles that would lead to their exaltation in the life to come but also gave them a pattern of living in this one. Moreover, as one account asserts, "under his trials the Prophet seem[ed] to have grown more tender-hearted, more universal in his sympathies."⁵⁶ The challenges he faced, instead of agitating or dismaying him, seemed to transmit a calm and reflective mood in which he expressed deeply felt affection for the friends and family who had been loyal to him under all the trying circumstances. The minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo are a fruitful document, offering evidence of the extraordinary purpose of the Relief Society, additional understanding of Joseph's teachings and deeper

insight into his character. It is little wonder that this record was regarded with such reverence and preserved with such foresight.

NOTES

1. Portions of the text and notes for this article will be expanded in a forthcoming edition of "A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo" and other Relief Society documents, edited and annotated by the authors.
2. "A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," holograph (hereafter cited as Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes), Archives of the Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, hereafter cited as Church Archives.
3. Excerpts from Joseph Smith's sermons to the women were edited and published in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948–57), 4:570–71, 602–7. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980) reproduces the six sermons from the original record. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 23–58, includes a lengthy discussion of the sermons and much recent scholarship on Mormon women quotes from the sermons. For example, see Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Mormon Women and the Temple: Toward a New Understanding," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 80–110.
4. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 17, 1842.
5. Sarah M. Kimball, Reminiscence, March 17, 1882, National Women's Relief Society Record, 1880–1892, Church Archives.
6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:492.
7. Sarah M. Kimball, Reminiscence, March 17, 1882, National Women's Relief Society Record, 1880–1892. "Sarah M. Kimball," in Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret, A Book of Biographical Sketches* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham & Co., 1884): 27. See also Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 26–27.
8. Some official histories indicate that only eighteen women attended the initial meeting. However, as Maureen Ursenbach has shown, the names of two women have been crossed out in the original record: Athalia Rigdon Robinson and Nancy Rigdon, daughters of

Sidney Rigdon (Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 17, 1842). Apparently their names were “blotted out” when they followed their father out of the Church (Alma 5:57; 6:3; see Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and James L. Kimball Jr., “The First Relief Society: A Diversity of Women,” *Ensign*, March 1979, 25–29; also Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 27–28). News of the woman’s society traveled quickly through Nauvoo largely due to women who urged their neighbors and family members to join. See Beecher and James L. Kimball Jr., “The First Relief Society: A Diversity of Women,” and Maurine Carr Ward, “‘This Institution Is a Good One’: The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 17 March 1842 to 16 March 1844,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 86–203, which includes a list of members and describes family connections.

9. Joseph Smith explained that this was the office to which Emma had already been ordained twelve years earlier when she had received a blessing by revelation at his hands, later canonized as section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Joseph read the revelation to the assembled women and explained that Emma’s election to preside was a manifestation of her calling in the revelation as an “elect lady” (see D&C 25:3). Joseph Smith’s journal, written by his scribe Willard Richards, indicates: “[I] shewed that *Elect* meant to be *Elected to a certain work* && and that the revelation was then fulfilled by Sister Emma’s Election to the Presidency of the Soc[i]ety, having previously been ordained to expound the scriptures. her councillors were ordained by Elder J<ohn> Taylor & Emma <was> Blessed by the same” (Dean C. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol. 2, “Journal, 1832–1842” [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992], 371).
10. The women’s collectivized humanitarian efforts far exceeded unorganized individual aid in scope and regularity and became a primary conduit of social welfare during the two years the Relief Society functioned in Nauvoo. At the end of the first year Eliza R. Snow, elected secretary of the Society at its first meeting, compiled a report of the Society’s operations, which showed that \$507 had been collected in donations and \$306 spent in charitable work, leaving a balance of \$200, only \$29 of which was cash (“Female Relief Society,” Annual Report, from March 16 [sic], 1842, to March 16, 1843, *Times and Seasons*, August 1, 1843, 287).
11. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 30, 1842.
12. The endowment, bestowed only to the elders in the Kirtland Temple, was partial or preliminary; the full endowment, for all worthy members, was revealed and introduced in Nauvoo. See Alma P. Burton, “Endowment,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2: 454–56.
13. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 30, 1842. In a

sketch of the Relief Society organization, Eliza R. Snow wrote: "The Society soon became so popular that even those of doubtful character in several instances applied for admission, and to prevent imposition by extending membership to such ones inadvertently, stricter rules were adopted than seemed requisite at first. Each one wishing to join the Society was required to present a certificate of her good moral character, signed by two or more responsible persons" ("The Female Relief Society: A Brief Sketch of Its Organization and Workings in the City of Nauvoo, Hancock Co., Ill.," *Woman's Exponent*, June 15, 1872, 8). The need for such a "recommendation" prefigures the recommendation later required for temple admittance.

14. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 30, 1842. See also Doctrine and Covenants 38:37; 105:104–5.
15. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 30, 1842.
16. Ezra Taft Benson, "What I Hope You Will Teach Your Children about the Temple," *Ensign*, August 1985, 9.
17. Victor L. Ludlow, "Priesthood in Biblical Times," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1138–40.
18. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:492–93.
19. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, March 30, 1842.
20. "Relief Society Reports" [Pioneer Stake], *Woman's Exponent*, July and August 1905, 14. See also "Relief Society Conference," *Woman's Exponent*, October 1 and 15, 1902, 37. Bathsheba Smith was one of a number of men and women who received their temple endowments from Joseph Smith before the Nauvoo Temple was completed (Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" [MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1981], 107).
21. By this time the Society numbered more than two hundred members. All, however, following Joseph's injunction, had to be admitted by recommend attesting to their faithfulness and good character. As young Talitha Garlick explained, "There was no Society for the young people at that time, so I, as did all the other girls, who wanted and were *worthy*, joined the Relief Society" ("Talitha [Talitha Cumi Garlick Avery Cheney]," in "Eight Pioneer Autobiographies," *Our Pioneer Heritage*, ed. Kate B. Carter [Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1971], 15:118).
22. From the diary of Wilford Woodruff, as quoted in Jesse, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:378–79. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:602–8, wherein some modifications occur. Reaffirming Joseph Smith's intent, Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve declared in 1978 at the dedication of the Nauvoo

Monument to Women: “Where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord.” (“Our Sisters from the Beginning,” *Ensign* 9 [January 1979]:61.)

23. See Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 44; and Kathryn H. Shirts, “Priesthood and Salvation: Is D&C 84 a Revelation for Women Too?” *Sunstone* 15 (September 1991): 20–27.
24. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, April 28, 1842. Joseph Smith made frequent allusions, during this period, to his impending death (see Ronald K. Esplin, “Joseph Smith’s Mission and Timetable: ‘God Will Protect Me until My Work Is Done,’” in *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988], 280–319).
25. He was an experienced mentor. Even as he had languished in Missouri’s Liberty Jail, aching from the betrayal of so many of his “friends,” his charitable nature had not failed him. He wrote to the Church during those dark days in Missouri, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith” (D&C 121:45).
26. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, April 28, 1842. Joseph Smith had first enunciated this principle just a month earlier in two of the Articles of Faith he had written in answer to a request by newspaper editor John Wentworth. The second Article states that “men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression” and the third, that “through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (“Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 709).
27. Spring City [Utah] Ward, Sanpete North Stake, Relief Society Minutes, 1878–1901, vol. 2, June 23, 1878, Church Archives.
28. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, April 28, 1842.
29. Joseph Smith joyfully greeted the proliferation of spiritual gifts. “To witness and feel with our own natural senses, the like glorious manifestations of the power of the priesthood; the gifts and blessings of the Holy Ghost; and the good and condescension of a merciful God . . . combined to create within us sensations of rapturous gratitude, and inspire us with fresh zeal and energy, in the cause of truth,” he wrote of spiritual manifestations experienced at the first Church conference in June 1830. The next month he found his “faith

- much strengthened, concerning dreams and visions in the last days, foretold by the ancient Prophet Joel [2:28]" ("History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons*, December 1, 1842, 23, and February 1, 1843, 92). See Steven C. Harper, "'A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed': Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 327–71. For accounts of women exercising spiritual gifts, see Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 13, 45, 68, 90, and 219–22, 429–30.
30. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo Minutes, April 28, 1842.
 31. Three weeks earlier, Joseph had written a lengthy editorial for the *Times and Seasons* on the gift of discernment, and three days after this meeting Joseph Smith spoke to a public gathering in Nauvoo "on the keys of the kingdom," and stated, "The keys are certain signs and words by which false spirits and personages may be detected from true, which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed" (*History of the Church*, 4:608; see also *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 119).
 32. "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, June 1892, 345. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, April 28, 1842, read: "That according to his prayers God had appointed him elsewhere."
 33. Esplin discusses Joseph Smith's sense of urgency in "Joseph Smith's Mission and Timetable, 'God Will Protect Me until My Work Is Done.'"
 34. Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 46–50, discusses some interpretations of the statement. In later years many Latter-day Saints maintained that Joseph Smith's 1842 "turning the key" to women opened opportunities for secular knowledge and advancement and that the proximity between the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, and the organization of the Relief Society six years earlier was no coincidence.
 35. Quoted in Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo, UT: Grandin Books, 1985), 6–7.
 36. "Kirtland Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons*, November 15, 1841, 589. In a later effort toward clarification, the 1854 Church history compilation project, headed by Church Historian George A. Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, renders the phrase from the Relief Society minutes, "I now turn the key *in your behalf*" (*History of the Church*, 4:607; emphasis added; see Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 74).
 37. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, April 28, 1842.

38. "Incidents, Travel, and Life of Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy," 24–25, Church Archives.
39. Mercy Thompson, "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, July 1892, 399.
40. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, May 27, 1842. Newel K. Whitney (1795–1850) was a Presiding Bishop of the Church and the husband of Relief Society counselor Elizabeth Ann Whitney. Both had joined the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, and developed a close, loving friendship with Joseph and Emma Smith. Bishop Whitney had been a successful merchant in Kirtland, and managed Joseph Smith's store in Nauvoo.
41. Joseph instructed that group of men "in the principles and order of the Priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchisedek Priesthood. . . . In this council was instituted the ancient order of things for the first time in these last days." Bishop Whitney and others in the first group were aware that "there was nothing made known to these men but what will be made known to all the Saints of the last days, so soon as they are prepared to receive and a proper place is prepared to communicate them" (*History of the Church*, 5:2). The circle of those who received the ordinance through Joseph Smith gradually expanded and was known as the "Holy Order." Emma Smith received her endowment September 23, 1843, the first woman to enter the "Holy Order" (see Madsen, "Mormon Women and the Temple," 85–88, from Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question," Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1981, 107).
42. The ancient or patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood is "an order of family government" (Benson, "What I Hope You Will Teach Your Children about the Temple," 9). According to Elder James E. Talmage, through "the ordinances pertaining to the House of the Lord, woman shares with man the blessings of the Priesthood . . . seeing and understanding alike, and cooperating to the full in the government of their family kingdom" (*Young Woman's Journal*, October 1914, 602–3). The blessings of this order of the priesthood are given only to husbands and wives together, as explained by Lynn A. McKinlay, "Patriarchal Order of the Priesthood," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1067. In 1839 Joseph Smith admonished his apostles to "go to and finish the temple, and God will fill it with power, and you will then receive more knowledge concerning this priesthood" (*History of the Church*, 5:555; see D&C 107:18–20). As Bruce R. McConkie explained, men and women who are married in the temple "in the new and everlasting

- covenant of marriage . . . enter into the patriarchal order . . . [and] reap the full blessings of patriarchal heirship in eternity where the patriarchal order will be the order of government and rule" (*Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 559).
43. Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, August 13, 1843.
 44. Bathsheba W. Smith, Diary, typescript, Church Archives. She also made a number of other public statements about her involvement in this endowment group. Some can be found in *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage* (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing, n.d.), 87–88; N. B. Lundwall, comp., *Temples of the Most High* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1941), 246; "Latter-day Temples," *Relief Society Magazine*, April 1917, 185–86; Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham, 1884), 45; and Nauvoo Endowment Record, 1, Church Archives.
 45. Nauvoo, as noted by historians Lyndon Cook and Andrew Ehat, was the final setting for this expansive teaching, producing "a quantum increase of light" (*The Words of Joseph Smith*, 84).
 46. Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, June 9, 1842; see D&C 121, especially verses 37–46.
 47. Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, June 9, 1842.
 48. For details of the events plaguing Joseph during this time see Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:67–108. In response to the writs of extradition to Missouri on charges of complicity in the murder of former governor Lilburn Boggs, the City Council, the Relief Society, Joseph's wife Emma, and other individuals had all sent petitions to Illinois governor Thomas Carlin asking for his protection. Only dismissal of the case kept Joseph in Illinois.
 49. Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, August 31, 1842.
 50. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:108. Joseph writes specific words of tribute to several of his friends and lists the names of others, as recorded in *History of the Church*, 5:108–9.
 51. According to Maurine Ward's careful examination of the names recorded, membership numbered 1,331 (Ward, "The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," 88).
 52. Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes, August 31, 1842.
 53. The last meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo was on March 16, 1844. Activity resumed briefly in Utah from 1854 to 1858 but waned when ward organizations were disrupted by the coming of Johnston's Army to Utah. The Relief Society was permanently reestablished after Brigham Young's call to bishops to organize ward societies in December 1867, and Eliza R. Snow's work with local bishops to bring ward organizations to pass, beginning

in April 1868 (see Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 59–126).

54. The fifth general president, Emmeline B. Wells, was a veteran of Nauvoo but arrived in that city too late to join the Relief Society. She was, nonetheless, well versed in the minutes, which she copied into her own notebook, and its activities, as related by Elizabeth Ann Whitney, Emma Smith's counselor.
55. Smithfield Ward Relief Society, Minutes, "Minutes of a Special Meeting Held in the School House, 12 May 1878," Church Archives; see also Smithfield Ward Relief Society, Minutes, October 26, 1885, Church Archives. Snow recorded all of Joseph Smith's sermons to the women, though other women, such as Phebe M. Wheeler and Hannah Ells, penned minutes after the Relief Society began meeting in ward units in July 1843. Relief Society of Nauvoo, Minutes.
56. Some of these characteristics are enumerated in Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:xxviii.