

In Praise of Eve's Faithful Daughters: The Legacy of Relief Society through the Life of a Great Grandmother

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It's an honor to be here today and to add a male witness to the glorious legacy of Relief Society that my wife has just testified to. I want you to know that I believe that many if not most of the most noble spirits to have ever lived on the earth have been women. Let me say that again: most of the most noble spirits that have ever lived on the earth have been women.

I find scriptural warrant for this in President Joseph F. Smith's great vision of "the hosts of the dead," in which he saw "an innumerable company of the spirits of the just."¹ He wrote that "Among the great and mighty ones who were assembled in this vast congregation of the righteous were Father Adam . . . And our glorious Mother Eve, *with many of her faithful daughters* who had lived through the ages and worshiped the true and living God" (italics added).²

I love this verse and long have. It confirms the presence of many faithful women "among the great and mighty ones" who have walked the earth. Although it mentions none of the names after that, I imagine that President Smith beheld at least as many women as men in that "vast congregation of the righteous"—and likely more. For women have played a disproportionate role, even if often unrecorded, in promoting righteousness upon the earth. I am confident that when Heaven writes the history of this world out of the Lord's Book of Life, it will be replete with stories of Eve's faithful daughters. It will tell of women whose lives have seemed unremarkable in the grand sweep of things to some, but who will be remembered and celebrated long after more famous figures pass into oblivion or infamy. The praises of Eve's faithful daughters will be sung by the hosts of Heaven, their fame will echo across the eternities, and they will be crowned with unspeakable glory.

So today I raise my voice in praise of Eve's faithful daughters who have "worshiped the true and living God," especially those faithful sisters who first burnished Relief Society's glorious legacy. To do this I shall focus on the life of one such woman, a faithful foremother of mine who joined Relief Society in Nauvoo and who lived to celebrate its jubilee 50 years later. Her name is Elizabeth Haven Barlow. She is my mother's, mother's, mother's, mother's mother—the first of

seven generations of Relief Society presidents (and counting) in my mother's matrilineal line.³ I focus on Elizabeth in order to put a name and a face on the many relatively unknown rank-and-file women who first established Relief Society. In doing so, however, let me stress that Elizabeth Haven Barlow stands for thousands upon thousands of Eve's faithful daughters in these latter days. These women are to be found in every era and every nation. They are new converts and multi-generation Mormons. They are married and single, they are rich and poor, tall and short, educated and unlearned. And sisters, they are legion. I am confident that Eve's faithful daughters are well represented in this congregation today. We are indeed "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses"⁴—women witnesses, including women like Elizabeth Haven Barlow who formed that first Relief Society.

These faithful daughters of Eve came in all shapes and sizes, just then as they do now. According to her daughter, Elizabeth Haven (like her mother before her) had dark eyes and hair, a large frame, a fine figure, and intensely rosy cheeks that turned pink during periods of merriment—so pink that some accused her of painting them. Her daughter goes on to say that mother had a "natural queenly appearance," was "charmingly proportioned," and "weighed over 200 pounds."⁵ Alas, how ideas of beauty have changed!

The first women to join the Relief Society also came with a variety of gifts and abilities, just as they do today. Elizabeth's included nimble fingers that could braid bonnets and hats of straw "fifteen strands at a time,"⁶ and a bright mind, an independent spirit, a college education, and a deeply religious nature. She describes herself as "a great lover of Scriptures" even as a girl.⁷ She used her practical skills as a milliner to earn enough money to attend Amherst and Bradford Colleges, where she obtained a teacher's diploma and she often led her friends in lively, lengthy discussions about religion.⁸

Like all members of the early Relief Society, Elizabeth was a convert and she had a conversion story to tell. Elizabeth's occurred when she was 26 years old, still single, living at home—at her home in Holliston, Massachusetts. Her second cousins Brigham Young and Willard Richards visited her in her home in Holliston with a message about angels, revelation, and the Book of Mormon, which she says, "I read very attentively. The Spirit of God rested upon me and I felt convinced to say in my heart 'This is the way I long have sought' . . ."⁹ Conversion came at a cost for Elizabeth, as it often has for Eve's faithful daughters. Against the strenuous objections of her father,¹⁰ a deacon in the Congregational Church, Elizabeth was baptized by Parley P. Pratt. She soon emigrated to Far West, Missouri. Happily, with great effort, she convinced her parents to join the Church and to migrate to Nauvoo later. Elizabeth taught school in Far West and in Nauvoo. Her students included the children of Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Brigham Young. When the mob came for the Prophet in Far West, Helen Mar Whitney says of Elizabeth Haven, that she was "a very sweet lady, beloved of her scholars who became acquai—who was loved by all of her scholars . . . and she allowed the children to go to the window and look out"¹¹ when Joseph Smith was taken by the mob.

We often think of the Nauvoo Relief Society sisters as genteel, and certainly many were. But they were not fragile. These women were made of stern stuff. Their resilient faith was forged in the fires of persecution, as was Elizabeth's. We can get a sense of Elizabeth's tenacious testimony from the long letters she wrote in 1839 in Quincy, Illinois, to a friend named—and a

cousin named Elizabeth Howe Bullard who was back—lived back in Holliston. Here are a few snippets from these marvelous letters that speak of her testimony amid trial. Testimony amid trial, my dear sisters, is one of the most priceless legacies left by the faithful women who formed the first Female Relief Society of Nauvoo.

Having been driven out of Missouri in the bitter winter of 1838-39, Elizabeth Haven writes to her cousin on February 24, 1839:

“O! how Zion mourns, her sons have fallen in the streets by the cruel hand of the enemies and her daughters weep in silence. It is impossible for my pen to tell you of our situation, *only those who feel it, know.*”

“About 12 families cross the river into Quincy every day and about 30 are constantly at the other side waiting to cross; it is slow and grimy; there is only a ferry boat to cross in.”

“By the Rivers of Babylon we can sit down, yes, dear E[lizabeth], *we weep when we remember Zion.*”¹²

Yet despite her tears, Elizabeth’s faith in the cause of Zion remained unshakable. Her letter continues: “To look at our situation at this present time it would seem that Zion is all destroyed, but it is not so, the work of the Lord is on the march.”¹³ Where others saw failure, Elizabeth saw the fulfillment of prophecy; she saw the gospel being spread at a quickening pace because of persecution. Although she recognized that things would get much worse for the—for her and the other sisters, having been warned by Heber C. Kimball that she would need to be prepared for trials that were 10 times worse,¹⁴ she faced this prospect with courage and she expected others to do so. She wrote back to her cousin in their comfortable home in Holliston: “let all who desire to live with the Saints, count the cost, before they set out on their pilgrimage to Zion. Come prepared to suffer with the Church in all their afflictions, not to flee as many have. . . . [T]his church ‘Wants no more cowards,’”¹⁵ she said. As I said, these women were made of stern stuff.

By the time Elizabeth wrote again to her cousin six months later, the situation had become even more desperate. Fevers had broken out among the Saints and among Elizabeth’s family in Quincy and the other Saints in swampy Commerce. In a letter that was composed, she said, while “sitting by the herb tea close to the fire,” Elizabeth admitted to being “wore out with fatigued [body] and a loss of sleep” from tending the suffering from burning fevers and those shaking with ague. Yet when she saw the suffering, she saw in that not purposeless pain but purposeful sanctification. She wrote to her cousin in these exalted terms, these inspiring terms:

“Sister, we will rejoice for these trials are for our sanctification and will purify us to receive a bright crown of glory in the Celestial kingdom with our crucified Christ. . . . The Spirit of the Lord has rested upon me within a few months as it never did before and although I have laboured hard, over the sick, night and day, yet communion with my Heavenly Father has sweetened many hours of toil. . . .”¹⁶

The women then and now have found communion with God in the extremities of sickness, storm, sorrow, and suffering. Such robust faith is among the most priceless legacies that we receive from Eve's faithful daughters.

So is the legacy of loyalty to the leaders of the Church. Elizabeth Haven concludes her letter by telling about a wealthy non-LDS neighbor in Quincy named Mr. Wells who "asked me one day if I would give up Mormonism if he would pay my passage back to Holliston." Mr. Wells and his family expected this educated, genteel young lady from the East to accept their invitation. "But in this," Elizabeth writes, "they were mistaken. I know in whom I have trusted and believed." Rebuffed, Mr. Wells told the others that this Elizabeth Haven would be sorry she had followed "old Joe Smith," but she remained (in her own words) "undaunted." Her letter concludes: "Pray for our Prophet, for it is a great blessing for us to hear the Prophet's voice and have a prophet's voice again in the land. . . . Your sister in the gospel. Elizabeth Haven."¹⁷

These letters from Quincy give a sense of the character of the women who would sit at Joseph's feet in the early meetings of Relief Society. These meetings functioned as sort of the School for the Prophets for the sisters who were there. I can hardly emphasize how important they were for those sisters. Joseph's teachings inspired and guided Elizabeth and the other Latter-day Saint women for generations. Thankfully, these minutes were carefully recorded and were preserved by Eliza R. Snow. And Eliza brought them west, where they were used to re-establish Relief Society. These minutes constitute an inestimable treasure for LDS women and for the entire Church.¹⁸

One of the most remarkable of these meetings was held on April 28, 1842, the very day that Elizabeth Haven Barlow was admitted to the Society. At this meeting, the Prophet gave great instruction as he told the sisters about the great spiritual gifts they could enjoy, and he promised them that "if you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrain'd from being your associates." He said, "females, if they are pure and innocent can come into the presence of God." And he told them that if they would purge out iniquity "then the vail [sic] would be rent and the blessings of heaven would flow down—and would roll down like the Mississippi river. This Society shall have the power to command Queens in their midst."¹⁹

Joseph then instructed the sisters in the principles of charity from 1 Corinthians 13, in the very chapter that the sisters would later use for their motto. He told them:

"let your hearts expand—let them be enlarged towards others—you must be longsuff'ring and bear with the faults and errors of mankind. How precious are the souls of men! . . . You must not be contracted, but you must be liberal in your feelings."²⁰

And then he said:

". . . I now turn the key to you in the name of God 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."²¹

They were thrilled with these messages. After recording Joseph's teachings in the minutes of April 28th 1842, Eliza R. Snow said: "The spirit of the Lord was pour'd out in a very powerful manner, never to be forgotten by those present on that interesting occasion."²²

Elizabeth Haven Barlow certainly never forgot the lessons she learned in the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. She understood that Relief Society was organized "under the priesthood and after the pattern of the priesthood,"²³ with a duly called and set-apart president, and two counselors. She knew that it was much more than a class and much more than a benevolent society, for she heard the Prophet Joseph teach that "this Society is not only to relieve the poor but to save souls."²⁴ As Susan likes to say, it's to save, to serve and to sanctify. She realized, with anticipation, that the Relief Society was preparing the sisters to be sanctified through temple ordinances. And before she left Nauvoo, Elizabeth Haven was endowed with power and sealed to her husband Israel Barlow, whom she had married in 1840. She and Israel had the great privilege of serving as ordinance workers in the Nauvoo Temple²⁵ and helping others receive their endowments.

Elizabeth cherished her experiences in the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo all her days. She carried a deep love for Relief Society across the plains to Utah. Her daughter Pamela wrote that:

"Mother had the privilege of associating with many noble women including Eliza R. Snow, Emma Smith, Zina D. Young, Mary Richards, Mary Fielding, Alvira Holmes, and many others who managed the affairs of the women in Nauvoo and gave such wonderful instruction. Many and many a time have I heard mother bear testimony of their greatness."²⁶

Elizabeth enjoyed a special sisterhood with the women of that Relief Society in Nauvoo. Pamela describes her mother and the other sisters in Nauvoo as taking crackers, cookies, and babies and gathering "to some home to discuss conditions" and to seek safety together when the mobs threatened and "no person knew or could guess what was going to happen next."²⁷ Such sisterhood was precious to Elizabeth. It provided refuge for her, just as it has for other LDS women in these latter days. Relief Society has been a sisterhood.

By the time Elizabeth left Nauvoo she had given birth to four children. Her first child had died at birth in 1841. Her fourth was born in May 1846, just after the main body of the Saints had left Nauvoo. She bore another baby while crossing the plains in 1848 and three more when she arrived—after she arrived in Utah. Her last two children were twins, born three months after her husband had arrived in England on a mission. The twin named Willard died as a toddler. His father never saw him. The death of little Willard broke Elizabeth's heart. She wrote to Israel, her husband, in England that people had often remarked, "'What a beautiful baby little boy Willard is!' Beautiful as he was the cruel hand of death marked him for his prey and snatched him from our sight. His lovely face and playful tricks are fondly intertwined [sic] around my heart."²⁸ How did these pioneer women stand such losses.

Many years later, the pain of Willard's loss—death was still fresh. When Elizabeth received news from her daughter Pamela in faraway Panaca, Nevada, that she had "lost your lovely babe, sweet boy. . . . I felt for a while I could hardly believe what I read." The news brought back

memories of the death of “my little Willard” still “so fresh in my memory . . . I never could forget it.” We do these pioneer women a great injustice to suppose that because infant mortality was common, it was not as trying for them as it is for us. Elizabeth wrote Pamela: “There are but few mothers but are called to part with their little ones. But O! how keen is the anguish of a fond mother’s heart.”²⁹

Yet, in true Relief Society fashion, her own sharp sorrows engendered in Elizabeth’s heart a readiness to reach out in compassionate service to others, just as so many women have done. Elizabeth’s letter to Pamela continues: “Tuesday went to the Relief Society. . . . That night Sister Ashby gave birth to a pair of twin boys. The oldest lived only two days, the other’s alive yet. I have been down there several times.”³⁰ Eve’s faithful daughters have always gone down to the Sister Ashbys. Such is the glorious legacy of Relief Society.

Eventually, the Barlows moved to Bountiful. There, Elizabeth served twice as president of the Relief Society of the Bountiful ward. Faithful service in Relief Society has also—and in the callings of the church is also part of the Relief Society’s glorious legacy. Elizabeth first served as Relief Society president in 1857. Her daughter records that the Bountiful society “soon had seventy-five active members holding meetings and doing wonderful work for the needy. The records show that during the summer they gave sixty dollars in cash to help a poor widow in South Bountiful who had a sick son.”³¹ Sixty dollars in cash out of pioneer poverty, when money was so scarce, they were bartering so often, these Relief Society sisters somehow scraped together \$60.00 in cash for a needy widow. It’s amazing to me, yet it’s typical. It’s one of the great—organized charity is one of the hallmarks of Relief Society from its inception.

With the coming of Johnston’s Army, the Bountiful Relief Society was disbanded less than a year after it was organized. It was not re-established again until 1868. Once again Elizabeth was called to serve as president—or in the language of the time, as “presidentess”—with her counselors.³² Elizabeth served in this capacity for over 15 years.

The local minutes of the Society’s meetings provide a detailed record of her activities. Her most conspicuous accomplishment was to raise money for a Relief Society hall. The fund-raising took many forms. In June of 1875, she “moved that the ladies save their Sunday eggs and donate them for the building of the hall.”³³ She also organized what were called “Fancy Fairs,” at which were sold homemade rugs, mats, quilts, hats, bonnets, stockings, artificial flowers, fine specimens of needlework, and “a thousand and one other things.”³⁴ Eventually, the sisters in Bountiful raised \$3,332.54. I just love the exactness of that figure. It bespeaks hardworking, honest, frugal women on the frontier for whom every penny counted.

Elizabeth often hosted distinguished visitors to Relief Society, like Eliza R. Snow, Emmeline B. Wells, Brigham Young, and many others, whom she delighted with her famous peach pies. She also herself instructed her sisters in their duties. On January 12, 1875, for example, she encouraged them to share more freely with the Spirit “which often burns in our bosoms.” She admonished the visiting teachers to be “more alive to their duties.” And finally, she addressed the “young sisters who are present.” After complimenting them for being there and encouraging them to “love virtue,” she expressed concern that she often sees many of them on the Sabbath

whispering and chewing gum while the Elders are preaching. “My young sisters,” she goes on, “refrain from such. . . .”³⁵ The more things change, the more they stay the same.

At age 77 years old, Elizabeth was released as Bountiful’s first Relief Society president, but she continued to champion the Relief Society until the end of her days. In 1892, the year Bountiful celebrated the 50-year anniversary (or jubilee) of the Relief Society, Elizabeth was invited to speak. The *Davis County Clipper* reported that this aging matriarch, “Notwithstanding her feeble condition . . . spoke at some length. Aided, one would think, by some power higher than that of man.”³⁶ She bore powerful testimony. And Elizabeth was known for her ardent testimonies. Her grandson observed that “Grandmother Barlow always had a deep burning testimony of the Gospel. . . . the kind that came from her very soul, that is, borne by one having the Holy Ghost.”³⁷ That day at the jubilee, the testimony was even more remarkable. Those who heard her speak reported, and I love this, they “saw a halo of light . . . surrounding Sister Elizabeth H. Barlow, and [saw] the Prophet Joseph Smith come and stand by her side while she was talking.”³⁸

I hope that that witness is true, that the Prophet Joseph came to that jubilee to provide his benediction upon the life and testimony of Grandma Barlow, for she, like so many of her sisters, had been true to the teachings and testimony she absorbed at his feet and to the society for women that he organized in Nauvoo. She had lived the life of one of Eve’s faithful daughters, she had burnished the bright, beautiful Relief Society legacy.

These faithful daughters of Eve are now, like Elizabeth Haven Barlow, often little remembered, except, perhaps, by their posterity. Yet the good they did is incalculable. They are like Dorothea, the heroine of George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, of whom Eliot writes in the famous, wonderful conclusion of that novel that I just love:

Her full nature, like that river . . . spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.³⁹

Eve’s faithful daughters have often lived “a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs,” but I am persuaded that in eternity their lives will not be hidden. They will be well-known to Heaven. They will be queens and priestesses, goddesses among the mighty and great whom God loves.

This same possibility holds for all of those who are found possessed of charity at the last day. If charity never faileth in us—indeed if it flourishes in us—then it will be well with us. And we, too, shall take our place among the great ones. And maybe some in our posterity may write what Elizabeth Haven Barlow’s daughter Pamela wrote of her in what I find to be an extremely moving conclusion of the biography, with which I will conclude this talk and this tribute to not only Elizabeth but to all Eve’s faithful daughters. She writes:

To mother the gospel meant everything. No sacrifice was too great. . . . She dug sego roots and thistles and went to the canyon for wood while her husband was on his mission

and she would have done it again had it been necessary. Nothing stirred her soul more than repeating the events she had passed through in Missouri and Nauvoo. The Gospel, coupled with seeing her family live righteously, was the joy of her life.

She bore eight children, six sons and two daughters. . . . Let me close this biography by quoting from Revelation, 7th Chapter, “. . . What are these which are arrayed in white robes? . . . And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. . . . They shall hunger no more, neither (shall they) thirst. . . . and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”⁴⁰

May we, too, be numbered among the faithful sons of Adam and daughters of Eve who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ D&C 138: 11-12.

² D&C 138:38-39 (emphasis added).

³ “Our Five-Generation Love Affair with Relief Society,” Athelia T. Woolley with Athelia S. Tanner; *Ensign* June 1978.

⁴ Heb. 12:1.

⁵ “Biography of Elizabeth Haven Barlow: As Told by Pamela E. Barlow Thompson.” Prepared by Pamela Emeline Smith Grant. Published by Israel Barlow Family Association. 1958. Typescript, pp. 1 & 2. (Hereafter, “Biography.”)

⁶ “Biography” 2.

⁷ Quoted in *The Israel Barlow Story and Mormon Mores*, Ora H. Barlow, The Israel Barlow Family Association, Publishers Press, 1968, 139. (Hereafter, Story.)

⁸ “Biography” 2.

⁹ *Story* 141.

¹⁰ See letter from John Haven to Elizabeth in Church History Library, MS 16271 in Elizabeth Haven Barlow Collection.

¹¹ *Story* 153.

¹² *Story* 142-43. This letter is also reprinted, in part, in *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900*, Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982): 106-15. The original letter of 24 February 1839 is held by the Church History Library: Barlow Family Collection, MS 941.

¹³ *Story* 143.

¹⁴ *Story* 145.

¹⁵ *Story* 146-47.

¹⁶ *Story* 159-61.

¹⁷ *Story* 163-64.

¹⁸ The Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book has recently been made available online by the Church History Office as part of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. All citations from the Minutes are from this source. See <http://beta.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book>.

¹⁹ Minutes 38-39.

²⁰ Minutes 39-40.

²¹ Minutes 40.

²² Minutes 41.

²³ Sarah M. Kimball, “Autobiography,” *Women’s Exponent*, Sept 1. 1883, 51.

²⁴ Minutes 63.

²⁵ *Story* 222.

²⁶ Biography 5.

²⁷ Biography 5.

²⁸ *Story* 369.

²⁹ *Story* 488.

³⁰ *Story* 489.

³¹ "Biography" 9. Also in *Story* 420.

³² *Story* 451.

³³ *Story* 478.

³⁴ *Story* 484-85.

³⁵ *Story* 495.

³⁶ *Story* 532.

³⁷ *Story* 532.

³⁸ *Story* 533.

³⁹ *Middlemarch*, ed. Gordon S. Haight. Riverside Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968, 613.

⁴⁰ "Biography" 10.