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Choirs Above

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Chapter 19

CHOIRS ABOVE

I say unto you that I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together that I might rid my garments of your blood, at this period of time when I am about to go down to my grave, that I might go down in peace, and my immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God. (Mosiah 2:28)

During his address to the Nephites assembled at the temple in Zarahemla, King Benjamin expressed the hope that he might “join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God.” The heavenly choir is noted in three other places in the Book of Mormon. Lehi declared that he “saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8). Alma₂ told his sons, “Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22). Mormon declared that the heirs of the celestial kingdom will “dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above” (Mormon 7:7).

In his prayer dedicating the Kirtland Temple, Joseph Smith expressed a desire similar to that of King Benjamin: “And help us by the power of thy Spirit, that we may mingle our voices with those bright, shining

CHOIRS ABOVE

seraphs around thy throne, with acclamations of praise, singing Hosanna to God and the Lamb!” (D&C 109:79).

The heavenly choir of angels is noted in the Bible (Job 38:7; Luke 2:13–14) and throughout the pseudepigraphic literature. According to *4 Maccabees* 18:23, the righteous dead join the (heavenly) choir of the fathers. Ezra saw the innumerable company of righteous souls in the last days praising the Lord with songs (*4 Ezra* 2:42). According to *3 Baruch* 10:5, the souls of the righteous in the third heaven are organized into choirs. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, likewise declares that humans will sing in the angelic chorus (1QH 3.22–24).

Especially relevant to King Benjamin’s wish are those stories that have a mortal being taken to heaven and singing with the host of angels. Thus, in *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17:4–18:1, we read that Abraham, during his heavenly vision, sang a song of praise to God, taught him by angels. Similarly, *Testament of Isaac* 6:6 informs us that Abraham’s son Isaac was taken to heaven, where he worshiped before the divine throne with a host of saints.

The prophet Zephaniah is said to have been taken to the fifth heaven, where he joined the thousands of angels praising and praying (*Apocalypse of Zephaniah* [Akhmimic] 8:2–3). Similarly, Isaiah is said to have joined with the heavenly throng in the sixth heaven to sing praises to God (*Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 8:16–17), then joined with his righteous ancestors in the seventh heaven in singing praises to God (*Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 9:29–32). Rabbi Ishmael the high priest also reported being taken to heaven, where he sang praises with the heavenly creatures below the throne of God (*3 Enoch* 1:10–12).

A medieval Jewish text, *Zohar* Exodus 19a, has Rabbi Judah saying, “Why are the singers here below called Levites? Because they are joined closely to (*lava*, “to be

TESTAMENTS

joined to”) and united with (the singers) above in absolute unison.”¹

When King Benjamin expressed the desire to “join the choirs above,” he may have been playing on the Hebrew word “join” that lies behind the name Levi, ancestor of the Israelite tribe that performed priesthood functions in Old Testament times. Of his birth, we read, “And she [Leah] conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be *joined* unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi” (Genesis 29:34, emphasis added).

One of the functions of the Levites was to sing in the tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 6:33; 9:33; 15:27; 2 Chronicles; 5:12–13; 29:30; 35:15; Ezra 2:40–41; Nehemiah 7:1, 73; 10:28, 39; 11:22). Chief among the singing Levites in David’s day were Heman, Asaph, and Ethan (1 Chronicles 15:16–19), who wrote some of the psalms found in the Bible (see Psalms 50, 73–83, 88–89).

Significantly, King Benjamin was at the temple at the time he spoke of the heavenly choir (Mosiah 2:1). It is likely that his discourse and the designation of his son Mosiah as the new king occurred at the Israelite feast of tabernacles, when a choir of Levites sang in imitation of the choir of angels.²

¹ Harry Sperling et al., *The Zohar* (New York: The Rebecca Bennet Publications, 1958), 3:60.

² See John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 147–223.