

## *The Work of Many Choirs:*

Angelic Ministry in the Book of Mormon

by

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Throughout the world, and over many hundreds of years, there is affirmation of magnificent creatures who convey messages between heaven above and earth below. These supernatural travelers have many names from dozens of cultures. But whether known as malakim, angeloi, thunderbirds, dakinis or yazatas, these beings called angels make the world a better place.

A study of angels and their work would need to clarify what a messenger or spiritual being needs to be, in order to qualify as one of the “holy angels,” as Alma the Second and others use the term. Here is a definition that may serve to clarify.

An angel is a spiritual being who serves God,  
and who is entrusted to deliver divine information.

Definitions worth their salt, more than one scholar has said, should rule some things in and some things out. The definition supplied here would rule in a) the created order of angels (Heb 2:7 and Ps 8:5), b) good persons and prophets who have left the earth to serve above an angels (Rev 22: 8,9), c) messengers who identify as women (Zech 5:6-11) as well as d) those appearing to be masculine. On the other side of the coin, this definition rules out “angels to a devil,” as Lehi’s son Jacob likes to express matters (2N 6:21, LDS 9:9).

On the latter point, why sully the good name of angels by using their name to identify Satan and his cohorts? This article acknowledges the devil’s evil assistants as demons, subdemons, furies and stalkers, but they are never termed angels here.

The spirit world is complex, and not fully known to humans. Are all who reside there utterly evil or undeniably good? Paul speaks in Galatians (Gal 4: 3 and 9) of “elements” (King James) or more accurately “elemental spirits” (Revised Standard and New Revised Standard), language found also at Colossians 2: 8 and 20. These “elemental spirits” are “weak and beggarly” yet not devilishly evil. Obviously many people are not comfortable with admitting that neutral spirits exist. However, the existence of elementals would help to explain how a modern-day person claiming a prophetic gift can be so right about a few things and so wrong about many others.

There are (a very few) places where the Book of Mormon hints at the existence of beings who are not devils, yet they are far from angelic. One example is the term “unclean spirits,” used with “devils.” In the name of Jesus they are cast out, both at 1N 3:83 (LDS 1N 11:31) and at 3N 3:60 (LDS 3N 7: 19). If the unclean spirits are simply devils or demons, why does the text have more than one term?

Beyond demons (who are evil) and elemental spirits (who are troublingly neutral, if they exist), one comes to angels – true angels, who work for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In reading the Hebrew Bible, it would seem that the angel par excellence is the Angel of the Lord, who appears in some fifty verses. This figure is more directly a divine being, and therefore not considered in this article.

Some 1600 years ago, Pseudo-Dionysius (reinforced later by Saint Thomas Aquinas) asserted the existence of nine choirs of angels. The logic is fairly basic. There appear to be seven terms used in the New Testament that refer to angels (or readily could). Adding to that the cherubim and seraphim of the Old Testament, one has an assembly of nine choirs.

#### ANGEL TERMINOLOGY

NOUN singular	NOUN plural	ADJECTIVE
angel	angels	angelic
archangel	archangels	archangelic
archon	archons	archonic
power	powers	powerful; thunderous
virtue	virtues	virtuan
dominion	dominions	dominional
throne	thrones	thronic
cherub	cherubim	cherubic
seraph	seraphim	seraphic

There seems to be some variety in the names used. The group third from the top, identifying an archon, is often translated as principality. However, that is a very long translation for a Greek term of five letters, *arche*. Since the similar term archon exists in English and means a ruler, there is little justification for the lengthier term. The term for "power" is sometimes translated as "authority."

While Christian tradition has done a fine job of naming the nine groups or choirs, it has failed to produce a unity of thought as to what each group does. How does a virtue differ from a throne? There is no consensus on this. However, careful study of Mormon's sermon in Moroni's seventh chapter reveals a fascinating insight. In that sermon, Mormon lists nine things that angels do, pauses, then reviews the list of nine. This equates to nine named choirs (the Bible) and nine sets of duties (Book of Mormon). Should these be put together? If that is done, the result is quite intriguing. The reader should rest assured that no effort is being made to *prove* something here. The associations offered below may or may not appeal, but there is no assertion that the associations have to be meaningful.

The first mention of angels who do good is found in Mormon's sermon at Moroni 7:21

(LDS 7:22). All of the relevant material for both numbering systems is within this one sermon in the seventh chapter of Moroni. "Angels," one learns in Verse 21 (LDS Verse 22), have been sent by the Lord to minister to humans, "to make manifest the coming of Christ." More information on this revelatory ministry is in the parallel passage at Verse 31 (LDS Verse 30), explaining that angels are subject to Christ, ready "to minister according to the word of His command." One learns that angels can show or reveal themselves to those "of strong faith and firm mind" who evidence a godly nature. "The office of their ministry" is to call human beings "to repentance." If one stops there, one has a rather full plate for regular angels, the first choir.

Verse 22 (LDS Verse 23) speaks of *prophets*, and the parallel passage at Moroni 7: 32 (LDS Verse 31) mentions *chosen vessels of the Lord*. Are these terms synonyms? If so, then the first three choirs could shape up in this manner. Certainly a) angels of ordinary rank declare Christ (and through Him every good thing), reveal themselves to the faithful and preach repentance. These are widespread and fundamental tasks. Then, b) archangels can be assigned to fulfilling the work of the Father's covenants. If c) the *prophets* are the *chosen vessels of the Lord*, then the archons declare "the word of Christ" to the chosen vessels/prophets, bringing about prophetic testimony and scripture.

Moving on to Verse 24 (LDS Verse 25), a power would then be an angel who helps humans to exercise "*faith in Christ*." The parallel passage is Verse 33 (LDS Verse 32), which speaks of preparing "the way for the residue" of men and women to have "*faith in Christ*." This thought is echoed in Verse 35 (LDS Verse 33), which even mentions the term "power": "If you will have faith in Me, you will have *power* to do" those things that are expedient in Christ. Thus, an angel of power is clearly associated with faithbuilding. The choir of the powers also seems to match the Native-American concept of the thunderbeings.

The virtues as an angelic order seem to be associated with the good gifts or "every good thing" springing up from belief in Christ (Verse 24, LDS Verse 25). Surely such gifts will be even greater in the Millennial period, as Verse 37 (LDS Verse 35) seems to reflect in mentioning "great *glory* at the last day" when the words of Christ are proven true.

Moving on to Verse 25 (LDS Verse 26), the angels of dominion can be associated both with "faith in His name" and becoming "the sons" and daughters "of God." The dominion here would seem to be the believer's allowing Christ to have full dominion over one's earthly life, and in the parallel passage (Verse 37, LDS Verse 35) allowing the "true" words of Mormon to have a spiritual dominion within the believer's heart.

Verse 27 (same in both) calls the reader's attention to miracles. The parallel in Verse 37 (LDS Verse 35) mentions the day of miracles, and Verse 41 (LDS Verse 37) associates faith with miracles and those angels (from their thrones above?) coming to appear and minister to humans. Thus, the order of thrones would seem to have an association with great miracles.

There is a key word in Verse 27 that has a historical association with the cherubim. One should recall that the ark of the covenant had two carved angels or cherubim that were placed atop the ark (Exodus 25: 16-22) along with the *mercy* seat. This created a sacred testimony of mercy related to the cherubim. Those thoughts should resonate with Verse 27 and the Son's right "of mercy" which He has on the human race. Thus, the wording of Verse 27 suggests the connection of mercy with the cherubim.

The ninth and final choir is the highest, the seraphim or flaming princes of the heavens. Verse 28 (LDS Verse 28 also) speaks of Christ advocating the cause of humans. It would appear that the seraphim, as special assistants to Christ and to the Holy Spirit,

help in this regard by sharing the fruit of the Spirit with the repentant – sharing faith, meekness (Verse 49, LDS Verse 44) and especially charity (Verse 50, LDS Verse 44) which Mormon defines as the pure love of Christ. The goal beyond faith and love is purity (last verse of the seventh chapter), which the image of the seraphim would seem to suggest (by the purifying hot coal from Isaiah's meeting with the seraphim (Isaiah 6: 1-7).

Here is a chart on the possible relationships covered so far.

ANGELIC CHOIR	REFERENCE Community of Christ Moroni 7	REFERENCE LDS verses Moroni 7	WORK PERFORMED
angels	21, 31	22, 30	reveal themselves and the coming of Christ; they minister; preach repentance
archangels	32	31	assist the Father with the fulfillment of covenants
archons	22, 32	23, 31	work with prophets ( Hlm 5: 63; LDS 14:9)
powers	24, 33, 35	25, 32, 33	faithbuilders; Nat-Am thunderbeings
virtues	24, 37	25, 35	sharing gifts that glorify Christ
dominions	25, 37	26, 35	building relationships (God with humans); testifying of truth
thrones	27, 37, 41	27, 35, 37	working (greater) miracles
cherubim	27	27	sharing divine mercy
seraphim	28, 49-50	28, 44, 48	giving and promoting spiritual fruit; aiding humans with purification

Regarding the seraphim (mentioned in the Book of Mormon in a quotation from Isaiah Chapter 6), there is no clear understanding as to how many seraphim there are. Third Enoch suggests that there are four, corresponding to the four winds. That writing may be behind the wording of Revelation 7: 1, which reads in part “And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth ...” The King James term of “corner” is based on the Greek word *gonia*, referring to an edge or a fourth of a square building. In the Book of Mormon, Jacob's “four parts of the earth” (2N 7: 13, LDS 10: 8) would be the equivalent. Legend does associate the four seraphim with the four winds or four directions. The north is associated with Gabriel, the east with Michael, the south with Ariel (appearing in the Old Testament as a name for Jerusalem) and the west with Raphael, who appears in the Apocryphal book of Tobit.

Angels are mentioned 131 times in the Book of Mormon, excluding the cherubim and seraphim. The divine messengers do many dynamic things in the Book of Mormon, and it is beyond the scope of this article to consider each appearance by an angel. However, three interventions or works by angels deserve attention.

First one should consider the conversation between Nephi and the Holy Spirit, which

begins at 1N 3: 38 (LDS 1N 11: 1). This amazing theophany, known to many as the *Presencia Santa*, ends all too soon, with Nephi still wanting to see more in the way of a vision. His experience continues, but – significantly – an angel takes over for the Spirit, revealing and explaining many wonderful things. It is important to see the holy angels standing at the ready, prepared to step in and aid the Holy Spirit, or Jesus, or the Father.

A second angelic intervention of true impressiveness is the angelic visit to King Benjamin, whose speech or sermon gets underway at Mos 1: 38 (LDS 2: 9). What is often missed here is the content, and who is contributing what. This sermon is actually in three parts. At the beginning the king delivers an Israelite New Year's address, rich in social content and quite firm in calling on his people to remember sacred traditions. Then, the king tells his audience that he needs to share more, in particular things “made known to me by an angel from God” (Mos 1: 93, LDS 3: 1). It is worth one's time to compare carefully what the king has said to this point, and what the angel adds. The king's words are profound, and true to the highest ideals of Israel, but *they do not say much about Christ*, if anything at all. It is the *angel* who brings the Christological address. It is the *angel* who speaks of “the Lord Omnipotent who reigns, who was and is from all eternity to all eternity” who will come down from heaven and “dwell in a tabernacle of clay.” It is the *angel* who gives four names for Christ, speaks of His crucifixion, and glorifies the “atonement of His blood.” The king's message is social, the *angel's* message is Christocentric. Then the third part of the address blends these two elements. One must pause to contemplate how much less the reader would have, if the courier from on high had neglected to visit King Benjamin.

Third, amid a sermon of greatness, Alma the Second makes a profound observation at Alma 16: 145 (LDS 32: 23). There the prophet says that God “imparts His word by angels, to men” – of course – “but women also.” The divine word is often *imparted* by angels. If this is true in this world, how much more will it be true in the hereafter, when millions who have not heard, and have not considered, will experience the word *imparted* by angels, who will call their listeners to repentance as well.

Human beings belong on the side of the angels. Men and women should have nothing to do with demons, subdemons, furies and stalkers, nor be seen in their company. The Testament of Asher speaks of the end of human life, and the angels awaiting those who leave. At TestAsher 1: 36 one reads of “the angel of peace,” waiting to lead those in grace to the beauty of eternal life. It is fitting to conclude with this blessing: “May the Holy Spirit and His angels of peace bring comfort and enlightenment to all who read and take to heart the sacred scriptures so generously given to the human family.”