Angels as arguments? The rhetorical function of references to angels in the Main Letters of Paul

The issue investigated in this article is the *rhetorical function* fulfilled by the references to angels in the Main Letters of Paul. For this purpose all the references to angels in Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans are investigated systematically and thoroughly. This study shows that Paul never uses any of the references to angels as a main argument in these letters. Furthermore, it is shown that Paul refers to quite a variety of (possible) roles that angels might fulfil, or characteristics that angels possess. From a rhetorical perspective, it is evident that Paul mostly mentions angels in contexts that can broadly be typified as hyperbolic – in the sense that the extent or broad scope of the issue under discussion is emphasised.

Introduction

The theme of angels and/or heavenly powers in the New Testament and in Pauline literature, in particular, has received a fair amount of attention from scholars thus far (cf. for example, Dibelius [1909], Bietenhard [1951], Caird [1956], Schlier [1958], Miranda [1961], Carr [1981], Benoit [1983] and Wink [1984]). In general, such investigations aim to present a broad overview of New Testament or Pauline views on these matters. In contrast to such an approach, the aim of this study is much more modest. The focus will merely fall on the references to angels in the four Main Letters of Paul; this subject will be approached from a particular angle, namely that of rhetorical function. The issue that is to be investigated may thus be formulated as follows: which rhetorical function is fulfilled by the references to angels in Paul’s Main Letters?

Angels in the Letter to the Galatians

In the Letter to the Galatians, angels are mentioned in three passages. The first instance is found near the very beginning of the letter, in Galatians 1:8 – part of a section that can be delimited as Galatians 1:6–10. In this section, Paul expresses his extreme disgust at the events in the Christian churches in Galatia, thereby attempting to persuade the Galatian Christians to reconsider what they are doing. He uses very forceful techniques to convey his intense feelings, namely:

- a rebuke in verse 6
- vilification of his opponents in verses 6c–7
- a twofold curse in verses 8–9
- rhetorical questions in verse 10.

Of these, the twofold curse in verses 8–9 is of special interest for this investigation, because Paul refers to ‘an angel’ when he invokes this curse:

> But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we or an angel from heaven declared to you... let that one also be accursed!

The careful way in which this curse is structured has often been noted. In verse 8, Paul uses references to angels in the Main Letters of Paul, HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies 67(1), Art. #825, 8 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v67i1.825

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1. In ancient rhetoric, the effectiveness of using a curse was often noted. Cf. for example, the discussion by Betz (1979:45–46).
2. All translations from New Revised Standard Version, except where indicated otherwise.
3. The reading in Nestle-Aland 27 has been followed here.
4. Cf. Blass-Debrunner-Rehkopf §373.2: ‘eiβον (if) mit Konj. ... vereinzelt statt Irrealis’. Cf. also §373.1.11: ‘Unbestimmte Beziehung auf die vorliegende Wirklichkeit: 1 Kor 4,15 eiβον gar marion pайдαγγελει eiβη (For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ) wenn ihr auch haben solltet’ (klass. potential oder irreal). This example is similar to the one that is encountered in Galatians 1:8. Cf. also 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.
5. The plural άγγελοι (we) may be interpreted either as an epistolary plural or as a reference to Paul’s co-workers. In my view, the first option is more plausible. Cf. Mußner (1977:59, n. 84).
As there is consensus amongst scholars on Paul’s rhetorical

The second reference to angels is found in Galatians 3:19, in a similar way, thus suggesting that, like the angel, he is thereby implies that he himself and such an angel would act an angel from heaven together, so to speak, in one breath. He that he has a good angel in mind, a heavenly messenger. To my mind, three aspects are important. Firstly, the reference to an angel creates a ‘hyperbolic’ effect in the sense that it forcefully conveys to the audience the wide scope covered by the curse – literally anyone is included; if even angels are included, then no one will be spared. This effect is heightened by Paul’s use of an angel as ‘an angel from heaven’, thereby indicating that his views are correct. Take note that he specifically refers to the angel as ‘an angel from heaven’, thereby indicating that he has a good angel in mind, a heavenly messenger. Lastly, the subtle way in which Paul places himself in ‘high’ company should not go unnoticed. He mentions himself and an angel from heaven together, so to speak, in one breath. He thereby implies that he himself and such an angel would act in a similar way, thus suggesting that, like the angel, he is obedient to God.

The second reference to angels is found in Galatians 3:19, a verse that forms part of the section comprised in 3:19–25. As there is consensus amongst scholars on Paul’s rhetorical strategy in this section, at least to a large extent, I will only provide a brief overview in this regard. Paul seemingly uses this section to explain the function of the law. Apparently, he realises that what he has said thus far in the letter about this section to explain the function of the law. Apparently, he realises that what he has said thus far in the letter about this section to explain the function of the law. Therefore, he now indicates that he intends to address the purpose of the law. However, he then proceeds to discuss this issue in such a way that the inferiority of the law, in comparison to the promises of God or faith, is emphasised. In verses 19–20, he begins by means of a rhetorical question (τίνως ἰδοὺνομεν; Why then the law? ), which is then followed by a series of concise statements:

V. 8: The clause, so far as ἔχεις ἐν τῷ θεῷ ἐν οἴνοι μετοίκισεν [we or an angel from heaven] is concerned, is concessive, being unfavourable to the fulfilment of the apodosis... It is, of course, only rhetorically a possibility.

V. 9: The form of the condition that suggests future possibility is displaced by that which expresses simple present supposition, and which is often used when the condition is known to be actually fulfilled. The result is to bring the supposition closer to the actual case ...

What is the rhetorical function of this reference to an angel? To my mind, three aspects are important. Firstly, the reference to an angel creates a ‘hyperbolic’ effect in the sense that it forcefully conveys to the audience the wide scope covered by the curse – literally anyone is included; if even angels are included, then no one will be spared. This effect is heightened by Paul’s use of an angel as ‘an angel from heaven’, thereby indicating that his views are correct. Take note that he specifically refers to the angel as ‘an angel from heaven’, thereby indicating that he has a good angel in mind, a heavenly messenger. Lastly, the subtle way in which Paul places himself in ‘high’ company should not go unnoticed. He mentions himself and an angel from heaven together, so to speak, in one breath. He thereby implies that he himself and such an angel would act in a similar way, thus suggesting that, like the angel, he is obedient to God.

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tων παραβασεων κατι προσετεθη, ατριν οι ουλοθεσμηναι απ' ὑψηλη του σουμαν συν εφηγγεσται, δι' αυτον ομοιοτατου [And the mediator is not of one, but God is one – author’s translation].

[It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator.]

For our purposes, two aspects should be noted. Firstly, from a rhetorical perspective, it is important to realise that Paul lumps together a number of characteristics of the law that, as such, do not automatically imply its inferiority. However, within this context, he deliberately contrasts some of these aspects with the oneness of God, thereby suggesting the notion of the inferiority of the law. In this regard, the notion that the law ‘was ordained by angels’ is a good example. In itself, this does not necessarily imply that the law is inferior; in fact, it could be viewed as being indicative of the importance of the law. However, within this context it is clear that Paul views the matter in a different light: from (the notoriously difficult) verse 20 (ος εστιν ουκ εστιν, ουκ εστιν [And the mediator is not of one, but God is one – author’s translation]), it can be inferred that the notion that the law was ordained through angels is not regarded by Paul as being indicative of its importance. Rather, in his view, it implies that the law was given by means of mediation, whereas the promise came directly from God. This he interprets as indicative of the inferiority of the law, because for him the way in which the promise was given corresponds to the nature of God and in particular, to his oneness, whereas the giving of the law does not. Rhetorically, the reference to the involvement of angels is thus used by Paul to emphasise the inferiority of the law.

Secondly, there is some debate on the nature of the angels whom Paul has in mind. Most scholars assume that he is referring to good angels, but this is disputed by Hübner (1980:28–30), who is of the opinion that, according to Galatians 3:19, the law did not come from God, but from evil angels who gave it to humankind in order to provoke them to violate the law. However, Hübner’s views cannot be accepted. The most important reason for rejecting his interpretation is that, if Paul had actually thought that evil angels were responsible for the giving of the law, this would have been such an excellent argument against what was going on in Galatia, that one would expect him to have exploited it to a much larger extent in his letter. However, this does not happen at all; the reference to the
role of angels is restricted to a mere three words. It thus seems logical to accept that Paul has good angels in mind. In fact, it is all but certain that if he were pursuing the idea that the law did not come from God, he would thereby be damaging his rhetorical strategy (as correctly pointed out by Thrëun 2000:28–30).

The last reference to angels is found in Galatians 4:14, part of the section comprised in 4:12–20, which is largely dominated by emotional arguments. The reference to an angel is found in what can be identified as the second segment of the section. In this segment (4:12c–16) Paul uses the Galatians’ former behaviour towards him, when he visited them for the first time, as a basis for rebuking them for their current attitude:

... oujw nhm kovxh wte: oijdte de:ot di diaggenevian th' sarkw', euqye li sahnh uswh to: prorhbev, kai: t on peirasmon uwhnh ep th' sarkivvw ouk eouquenvh wte: ejejytvate, ajla; wv aubgelon keuq'vegase me, wv Criston jhshou.

[... You have done me no wrong. You knew that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.]

For our purposes, two aspects should be noted: firstly, in this instance the reference to an angel (who, it must be pointed out, is specifically described as an angel ‘from God’) is used rhetorically to create a hyperbolic portrayal of the Galatians’ (former) positive attitude towards Paul. Instead of merely saying that they accepted him gladly during his visit, their behaviour is portrayed in terms of the way in which humans normally acted towards angels. In fact, the hyperbole is even taken one step further in the next phrase (‘like Christ Jesus’). Secondly, it is also important to keep the broader background in mind. Paul was ill when he visited the Galatians for the first time, and illness was frequently interpreted as a sign of demonic possession. Ill people were therefore often avoided. This ‘normal’ behaviour is contrasted with the way in which the Galatians acted towards him on that occasion. As Dunn (1995:234) puts it: ‘Instead of regarding Paul as a tool or victim of demonic possession, they had realized that he came with God’s message, that is, as one sent from God’. This hyperbole then serves as a basis for the rebuke that follows: how their attitude towards him has not changed in the meantime! In other words, the more their former behaviour towards him is amplified, the more appalling their current behaviour toward him appears.

Angels in the Letters to the Corinthians

The first reference to angels in the Letters to the Corinthians is found in 1 Corinthians 4:9. In this chapter, Paul admonishes the Corinthians by comparing their blameworthy behaviour with that of ‘the apostles’. After the ironical portrayal of the Corinthians in verse 8 (‘You are already satiated ... have become rich ... have become kings ...’), the suffering of the apostles is depicted in a vivid way and angels are mentioned for the first time in 1 Corinthians: 

14 I divide this section into four segments: 4:12a–b, dominated by Paul’s pleading; 4:12c–16, in which the Galatians’ former behaviour towards him is used as a basis for rebuking them; 4:17–18, dominated by vilification of his opponent and 4:19–20, in which he expresses his affection and concern for the Galatians.

5. This ‘normal’ behaviour is contrasted with the way in which the apostles normally acted towards angels. It thus serves as a basis for the rebuke that follows: how their former behaviour towards him is amplified, the more appalling their current behaviour toward him appears.

11. For more detailed discussions of the background of this metaphor, refer to, amongst others, Lindemann (2000:106) and Efstein (2000:359–360).


15. Cf. the overview that Edwards (2007:46–77) presents on ‘looking at death in the arena’. In the case of gladiators, the crowds sometimes displayed sympathy and even admiration; but in the case of doomed convicts (noxi), there was little sympathy. Cf. also Kyel (2001:91–95).

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forms the basis of an a maiore ad minus argument (judging the world and angels; judging biwt kha [ordinary matters]) which is used to reproach the Corinthians.

The nature of the angels that Paul has in mind is disputed. Many commentators\(^\text{16}\) assume that Paul is referring to evil angels, thus reflecting the theme of the judgement of evil angels which is also found elsewhere in the New Testament, for example, in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6. Meyer (1861:135), however, believes that Paul has only good angels in mind, because the word ‘angels’ is used without any closer specification (‘ohne andere Näherbestimmung’). However, this is not a good argument, because the term ‘angels’ is used in a similar way in Romans 9:38, where it is likely that Paul is referring to evil angels (cf. the discussion of Romans 9:38 further on in this article). Another possibility is that Paul has in mind both good and bad angels. This is accepted by Barrett (1971:136), who argues that both humans and angels will appear before God’s court at the last day and that this implies that both good and bad angels will be judged. Still another option is offered by Cullmann (1962:176), who interprets the passage as a reference to the judgement of the guardian angels (‘Völkerengel’) of the nations, who are the real powers behind the earthly governments. In deciding on this matter, I concur with Hoskins (2001:287–297), who investigated the Biblical and extra-Biblical parallels to 1 Corinthians 6:3 and argues that it is best to interpret this passage as a reference to the judgement of the fallen angels, because quite a number of parallels can be indicated for this notion, but not for the other options.\(^\text{17}\) He also correctly points out that the identity of the angels is not the central issue in 1 Corinthians 6:3. Rather, ‘what is central is that beings belonging to the class of angels will be judged by the saints’ (Hoskins 2001:296).

Determining the rhetorical function of the next reference to angels in 1 Corinthians, namely that in 1 Corinthians 11:10, is not too difficult. From a rhetorical perspective, it is evident that the allusion is used by Paul as (part of) the motivation for instructing Christian women ‘to keep control of their heads’:\(^\text{18}\) diai tou ojfeivlei hJ gunh; ejxousivan e[cein ejpi th; “ kefalh” diai tou” aggevou” [For this reason a woman ought to have authority on her head, because of the angels – own translation]. In other words, Paul uses it as a motivation in his attempt to control certain patterns of behaviour amongst (some of) the Christian women in Corinth. However, this is all that can be said with certainty. Unfortunately, the details of the argument remain obscure; firstly, because it is difficult to determine exactly what the problem was and secondly, because the cryptic expression diai tou’ aggevou’ [because of the angels] does not provide one with any clues as to the possible role that Paul ascribes to angels. With regard to the first issue, the control that Paul wishes women to exercise over their heads could refer either to the wearing of a veil, to the length of their hair (long hair – as was customary for women – instead of short hair), to hairstyles (keeping their long hair properly bound – as was customary – instead of having it free flowing and hanging down) or to a combination of these options.\(^\text{19}\) The fact that ‘an uncovered head’ and ‘hairstyle’ are discussed in close association in verses 13–15, seems to tilt the scale towards the notion of hairstyles (thus also Klauck 1984:78–79 and Lindemann 2000:241). If this is correct, it means that some of the women in Corinth (perhaps as a result of the newly achieved liberty in Christ?\(^\text{20}\)) participated in the worship services with free-flowing hair, instead of having the required hairstyle. Paul opposes this for two reasons: firstly, in his view, it is in conflict with the customary hierarchical gender-related roles that he links to creation (cf. diai tou’ [because of] at the beginning of verse 10). Paul’s views in this regard reflect notions that were widespread in antiquity in respect of women and, in particular, women and sexuality, as well as the role that hair played in this regard.\(^\text{21}\) Secondly,\(^\text{22}\) women should keep control of their heads diai tou’ aggevou’ [because of the angels]. Various suggestions have been made as to exactly what is meant by this. It has been proposed:

- that Paul refers to fallen angels, lustfully desiring earthly women (thus already Tertullian, Virg. Vel. 7.4–8)
- that he is referring to angels in terms of their role of guardian angels or watchers over the natural order (Foerster 1973:574) or their role as witnesses to creation (cf. Collins 1999:412)
- that angels were regarded as being present during worship meetings as in Qumran (Fitzmyer 1957:58; 46–58)
- that Paul is alluding to them in terms of their roles as representatives and mediators of prayer and prophecy (Schrage 1991:517).

The fact that Paul refers to the angels within a context in which worship is important, leads me to infer that his warning is in some way related to the notion that angels were present during worship services; believers thus worshipped God in the company of the heavenly host (cf. amongst others, 19 The literature on this matter is extensive. Cf. the overview in Thielson (2000:823–826). I cite only one example from the literature for each of the options outlined above: wearing a veil (Dale Martin 1995:229–249); long or short hair (Gielen 1999:220–249); hair properly bound (Klauck 1984:78–79); combination of long or short hair and wearing a veil (Cullmann 1981:224).
20. Thus, many scholars. However, some scholars link this practice amongst Christians to other influences, for example, to contemporary pagan traditions (Troy Martin 2005:264).
22. In concurrence with, for example, Lindemann (2000:244), I assume that biH tou’ isth; [because of the angels] indicates a second and thus an additional motivation and that it is not a further development of the notion introduced by biH tou; [because of] (which refers to the verses preceding verse 10). If this is not the case, the reference to angels should be linked to creation in some way, for example in terms of the fact that they were witnesses of creation (cf. Collins 1999:412); or otherwise, it could be assumed (to my mind, erroneously) that Paul attributes the creation of woman from man to angels (proposed by Bederah 1999:295–320).


\(^{17}\) Hoskins points out that there are no convincing parallels for the idea that good angels will be judged on the last day (contra Barrett) and that Cullmann overstates the evidence by claiming that a widespread Jewish belief existed that all peoples were ruled through angels. In spite of the parallels indicated by Hoskins for the notion of the judgement of the fallen angels, he also rightly stresses the uniqueness of the notion in 1 Corinthians 6:3. ‘In 1 Cor 6:2–3 Paul is not merely adapting a common Jewish eschatological belief; he is making, instead, a unique claim that is more closely tied to his Christology and ecclesiology than to his Jewish background’ (Hoskins 2001:297).

\(^{18}\) The expression is sometimes translated as ‘to have a sign/symbol of authority on their heads’, but I prefer to follow scholars who translate it as ‘to keep control of their heads’ – in the sense of having power over their own heads by wearing their ‘hair appropriately, that is, as is fitting in the context of worship’ (Collins 1999:411). For the relevant arguments, cf. Thielson (2000:838–839).
Thiselton 2000:841). If this is correct, Paul’s warning may be interpreted in two ways: firstly, he might have been of the opinion that the (good) angels who were present during worship services would be offended by the unbecoming hairstyles of some of the women, because these hairstyles did not reflect typical gender roles (including notions of sexuality). A second option (to my mind less likely) is that Paul was thinking of angels in general. Because angels were commonly understood in terms of male sexuality and always had ‘the capacity to violate the cosmic order’, becoming hairstyles functioned as a prophylactic measure against them (Stuckenbruck 2001:231).

The next reference to angels appears in 1 Corinthians 12:31b–14:1a, a section devoted to ‘the gift of love as the antidote to factionalism’ (Mitchell 1991:270). Angels are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:1: ἐὰν τινὶς ἀγγελος ἡμων ἡμῖν ἀφανὴς δεμοτικὸς ἡμῖν ἐφήγω ἔχων μοι σκούλο τὸ σατανα, ἡμῖν με κολαφίζων. In 1 Corinthians 11:14, ‘angel of light’ rhetorically serves as the direct opposite of ‘Satan’, thus indicating the total difference between appearance and reality. In verse 15 Paul then applies this notion to the ‘false apostles’ who, as ‘Satan’s servants’, do the same things as Satan does. This verse thus contains an example of extreme vilification.

In the next chapter, an angel is mentioned again. This angel is also linked to Satan, but whereas the angel of chapter 11 was a good angel, the one mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:7 is obviously an evil angel: διὸ ἡμῖν ὑπεραιβωμαι, ἐγὼ μοι σκούλο τὸ σατανα, ἡμῖν με κολαφίζων. There, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, an angel of Satan, to torment me, to keep me from being too elated – original translation. The expression αὐτοὶ ὁ σατανᾶς and ἡγεῖται σατανᾶς, ἀγγελὸς ὑπεραιβωμαι [angel of Satan] is in an appositional relation to σκούλο [thorn], thus identifying σκούλο [thorn] as αὐτοὶ ὁ σατανᾶς [angel of Satan] (Lambrecht 1999:203). Normally scholars focus on the identification of the ‘thorn’, but for our purposes the rhetorical function of the reference to ‘an angel of Satan’ is important. What is rhetorically achieved by this? To my mind, it primarily serves as a way to emphasise the intensity of the affliction caused by the ‘thorn’. If Paul had only mentioned a ‘thorn in the flesh’, one might perhaps have thought of something painful, but still relatively bearable. The expression ‘an angel of Satan to torment’ removes any doubt as to the intensity of the affliction.

Angels in the Letter to the Romans

In the Letter to the Romans, angels are mentioned only once, namely in Romans 8:38. This verse forms part of the section comprised in 8:31–39, which forms the climax of Romans 8–9. Towards the end of this ‘purple passage of praise’ (Dunn 1998:492), Paul expresses his confidence that nothing will ever be able to separate believers from God’s love. This confidence is based on the idea that angels play an important role in this section (Dunn 1998:498–499).

The expression αὐτοὶ ὁ σατανᾶς and ἡγεῖται σατανᾶς presupposes that angels have their own language (Thiselton 2000:1033; Martin 1995:267, n. 263). If Paul had only mentioned a ‘thorn in the flesh’, one might perhaps have thought of something painful, but still relatively bearable. The expression ‘an angel of Satan to torment’ removes any doubt as to the intensity of the affliction.

23. Here, I have slightly adapted Stuckenbruck’s views, in the sense that he interprets the passage as merely referring in general to a contrast between human and angelic languages (cf. Sigountos 1994:252–253), the context suggests that something more is on Paul’s mind, namely the fact that speaking in tongues might be regarded by some of the Corinthians as speaking the heavenly, angelic language (Thiselton 2000:1033; Martin 1995:267, n. 263). If this is indeed the case, he is not merely contrasting the gift of speaking human and angelic languages (cf. Stuckenbruck 2001:231), but rather, he is contrasting speaking in tongues with the gift of love.


25. As Harris (2005:774) points out, the Greek expression can be translated in different ways: A messenger from God; a messenger of (the world of) light; a shining angel; an angel of light. I prefer the last option, in the sense of an angel characterised by light.
is vividly illustrated by means of the rhetorical technique of enumeratio, which is employed to list ten items – eight of which are grouped in pairs:

- ou te qato
- ou te zw
- ou te aqel w ou te aqrai
- ou te epeste w ou te mel w ont a
- ou te dunamei
- ou te wama ou te bago
- ou te t’ kis’ egw a ...

[neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers,
nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation …]

The list is comprehensive: neither death nor life (usually interpreted as a reference to the dangers of this life33), nor angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come (i.e. ‘the present age with its instability and any future age with its uncertainty’ – Fitzmyer 1993:535), nor powers (usually interpreted as heavenly powers34), neither height nor depth (which could be interpreted either as astronomical terms35 or in a more metaphoric sense as referring to anything high or low in creation), nor any other creature will be able to separate believers from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. For the purposes of this investigation, the second pair, ou e aqel w ou e aqrai [nor angels nor rulers], is of interest. The term aqrai [rulers] is also used in 1 Corinthians 15:24 (cf. also Col. 1:16, 2:10, 15 and Eph. 1:21), where it refers to hostile heavenly powers; and this is the way in which it is usually interpreted in Romans 8:38, too.36 Together the two concepts in the pair thus refer to superhuman beings or powers who might attempt to separate believers from the love of God. With specific regard to Paul’s reference to ‘angels’, two further remarks should be made. Firstly, rhetorically speaking, the reference again occurs in a ‘hyperbolic’ context, in which the extent or broad scope of the dangers referred to in the list are extreme dangers in nature (cf. the peristasis catalogue in v. 35). In this instance, the rhetorical purpose of the reference to angels (together with the rest of the list and the peristasis catalogue) is to encourage the readers: whatever might threaten them, they will never be separated from the love of God. Secondly, the nature of the angels is not indicated. This leaves one with three options: Paul might have deliberately left the question open, because he has in mind any kind of angel, good or evil – in line with the hyperbolic nature of the passage (cf. e.g. Wink 1984:49). The other options are that he is referring to either good (cf. e.g. Schmithals 1988:316) or evil (cf. e.g. Jewett 2007:552) angels. A case could be made out for each of these options; but, to my mind, it is difficult to accept that Paul would assume that good angels would try to separate believers from God’s love. It is therefore probable that he has only evil angels in mind. Some scholars refer to Galatians 1:8 in this regard, according to which good angels might act against God’s will. However, as I indicated earlier on, in the case of Galatians 1:8, an e'av [if] -eventualis is employed, indicating the impossibility of such a situation, which means that this verse cannot be cited as a parallel to Romans 8:38.

**Conclusion**

What insights has this investigation yielded with regard to the rhetorical function of references to angels in the Main Pauline Letters? In general, it is evident that Paul believed in the existence of angels – good and evil. If my analysis is correct, most of the references are to good angels (Gl 1:8; 3:19; 4:14; 1 Cor 11:10; 13:1; 2 Cor 11:14), with evil angels only referred to or implied in four instances (1 Cor 4:9; 6:3; 2 Cor 12:7; Rm 8:38). Of all the instances included in this classification, the interpretations of the references to angels in 1 Corinthians 4:9 and 11:10 are the most uncertain.

If we turn our attention to the rhetorical function of angels in Paul’s arguments, it should be noted at the outset that the references to angels are never used as a main argument in any section of these letters. Rather, angels are mentioned relatively seldom and when they are, in fact, alluded to, one does not find any extensive discussion of them or any detailed argumentation based on them. Instead, they are merely mentioned briefly; in some instances, the references might even appear incidental. Closer investigation of the rhetorical function of the references to angels revealed quite a variety of (possible) roles that angels might fulfil, or characteristics that angels possess:

- they might proclaim a gospel (Gl 1:8)
- the law has been ordained through them (Gl 3:19)
- people respond positively to angels (Gl 4:17)
- angels are spectators watching the suffering of the apostles (1 Cor 4:6)
- angels will be judged by believers (1 Cor 6:3)
- when believers take part in worship services, they are in the presence of angels (1 Cor 11:10)
- angels have their own language (1 Cor 13:1)
- an ostensible angel of light might actually be Satan in disguise (2 Cor 11:14)
- one of Satan’s angels was sent to torment Paul (2 Cor 12:7).

From a rhetorical perspective, it seems as if Paul mostly mentions angels in contexts that can broadly be typified as hyperbolic, in the sense that the extent or broad scope of the issue is emphasised:

- in Galatians 1:8 the reference to an angel enables Paul to depict the broad scope of the curse that he uttered
- in Galatians 4:14 the reference is used to create a
hypercritical portrayal of the Galatians’ former behaviour towards him
• in 1 Corinthians 4:9 the allusion to angels helps to convey the notion that the apostles’ suffering is actually a cosmic spectacle
• in both 1 Corinthians 6:3 and 13:1 angels are referred to as part of a climactic argument (judging the world and even angels speaking the tongues of humans and even angels respectively)
• in 2 Corinthians 12:7 the intensity of Paul’s affliction is emphasised by the reference to an angel tormenting him
• in Romans 8:38 a reference to angels helps to convey the comprehensive nature of the forces that might attempt (unsuccessfully) to separate believers from God’s love.

Apart from their hypercritical usage, references to angels also function rhetorically in other ways:
• in Galatians 3:19 the role of the angels in the giving of the law is (surprisingly?) used by Paul as an indication of the inferiority of the law
• in 1 Corinthians 6:3 the fact that believers will judge angels is used in an a maioris ad minus fashion to reproach the Corinthian Christians for taking minor matters to Gentile courts
• in 1 Corinthians 11:10 the presence of angels during worship services is used as the motivation for a warning to women to ‘control their heads’
• in 2 Corinthians 11:14 a reference to an angel functions as part of the vilification of Paul’s opponents.

To return to the question in the title of this article: does Paul use angels as arguments? The answer? Only rarely, but when he does, he does so in a variety of ways, in which some cases, are very complex.

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