

# The Angel of Satan: 2 Corinthians 12:7 Within a Social-Scientific Framework

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## INTRODUCTION

The question regarding the angel of Satan in 2 Cor 12:7 has puzzled many interpreters.<sup>1</sup> The verse says, “And, for the sake of these great revelations, therefore, in order that I may not be conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, an angel of Satan, in order to keep beating me, in order that I may not be conceited.”<sup>2</sup> In the present article, I will argue that the “angel of Satan” is a reference to Paul’s opponents, either in Corinth or in general.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation is not a novel idea, but was in fact presented as early as the fourth century by John Chrysostom.<sup>4</sup> Over the last hundred years different suggestions have been proposed, ranging

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<sup>1</sup> I will not seek to address the unity of 2 Corinthians in the present study, since my analysis will not be affected by any of the major partition theories. For a discussion on the subject, see Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 8–51; Cf. Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), xlv; Victor Furnish, *Second Corinthians*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 30–48; Margaret Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994–2000), 1:5–13; George Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 23–32.

<sup>2</sup> This translation is my own. Henceforth I use NIV if nothing else is stated.

<sup>3</sup> It is not necessary for the present article to decide who Paul’s opponents are. For a discussion see Furnish, *Second Corinthians*, 54; Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:667–670, 926–945; Harris, *Second Epistle*, 67–87; Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> See “Homilies on the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 15 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 12:400.

from interpreting it as Paul's migraine,<sup>5</sup> that he had problems with his eyes,<sup>6</sup> or that the angel refers to his opponents<sup>7</sup>. Although most interpreters have chosen between either opponents or an ailment, disease is overrepresented historically.<sup>8</sup>

By analysing the verse in the larger context of chapters 10–13 within a social-scientific framework, I will attempt to show that Paul uses particular words and phrases in order to label his opponents as deviant from the norms that should govern the Corinthian Christ-following group. In an article from 1999, Lee Johnson states something similar, namely that Paul uses "Satan-language" in order to warn his readers from associating themselves with Paul's opponents.<sup>9</sup> However, Johnson

<sup>5</sup> So John Thomas, "An angel from Satan: Paul's Thorn in the Flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7–10)," *JPT* 9 (1996): 39–52; Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:818; Ulrich Heckel, "Der Dorn im Fleisch: Die Krankheit des Paulus in 2 Kor 12,7 und Gal 4,13f," *ZNW* 84/1–2 (1993): 65–92.

<sup>6</sup> So Patricia Nisbet, "The Thorn in the Flesh," *ExpT* 80/4 (1969): 126; T. J. Leary, "A Thorn in the Flesh," *JTS* 43/2 (1992): 520–522.

<sup>7</sup> So Terrance Mullins, "Paul's Thorn in the Flesh," *JBL* 76/4 (1957): 299–303; C. K. Barré, "Qumran and the Weakness of Paul," *CBQ* 42/2 (1980): 216–227; Jerry McCant, "Paul's Thorn of Rejected Apostleship," *NTS* 34/4 (1988): 550–572; Laurie Woods, "Opposition to a Man and His Message: Paul's Torn in the Flesh (2 Cor 12:7)," *Australian Biblical Review* 39 (1991): 44–53; Derek Brown, *The God of This Age: Satan in the Churches and Letters of the Apostle Paul*, WUNT 2/409 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 192; Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 592.

<sup>8</sup> Between these, most lean toward a disease without specifying it, or chooses not to identify the ailment. For disease, see n. 5 and 6, but also Furnish, *Second Corinthians*, 549–550; Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:818; Harris, *Second Epistle*, 859; Sydney H. T. Page, "Satan: God's Servant," *JETS* 50/3 (2007): 449–465. For those who choose not to identify the ailment, see, for example, Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 225; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 416; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 570; David Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 521; Hans Johansson, *Andra Korintherbrevet 8–13*, KNT 8b (Stockholm: EFS-förlaget, 2003), 346. For a thorough review, see Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:809–818; Harris, *Second Epistle*, 851–859.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Johnson, "Satan Talk in Corinth: The Rhetoric of Conflict," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 29/4 (1999): 145–155 (154).

comes to the conclusion that when Paul is talking about a “thorn..., an angel of Satan,” the phrase refers not to the opponents but to a disease.<sup>10</sup> The result is that every case of “Satan” (or cognates) in the Corinthian correspondence is used to defame Paul’s opponents, except for in 2 Cor 12:7. I believe Johnson is mistaken and that 2 Cor 12:7 too is used to slander Paul’s opponents.<sup>11</sup>

Paul’s struggle is not mainly with some kind of disease, as I will show below, but with something else. Lisa Bowens has suggested that the whole passage of 12:1–10 should be placed within the framework of Paul’s cosmic battle with Satan, where Satan’s main objective is to keep Paul and his fellow Christ-followers from “divine insight.”<sup>12</sup> Had Paul reached the highest of heavens in his ascent, he might have received the “divine insight,” but he was stopped on his way.<sup>13</sup> In lieu of Bowen’s suggestion of a cosmic battle, I propose that Paul’s battle with Satan regards the right teaching of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Earlier scholars who have proposed to interpret the phrase as referring to opponents have mainly discussed the phrase’s linguistic and lexicographical difficul-

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson, “Satan Talk,” 152.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson’s argument is rather inconsistent. She stresses that Paul’s “Satan talk” does not reflect his cosmic worldview, and that it tells nothing of the figure “Satan.” She also argues that the main reason why Paul refers to Satan when he speaks about the thorn in his flesh is to scare the Corinthians. Presumably, they were aware of Paul’s disease, and when he ascribed the responsibility to Satan, they would surely know that being associated with Satan is very bad (cf. Johnson, “Satan Talk in Corinth,” 152–153).

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle*, WUNT 2/433 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 190–191.

<sup>13</sup> A similar interpretation is found in Robert Price “Punished in Paradise,” *JSNT* 7 (1980): 33–40, and David Litwa, “Paul’s Mosaic Ascent: An Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12.7–9,” *NTS* 57 (2011): 238–257. See also David Abernathy, “Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh: A Messenger or Satan?,” *Neotestamentica* 35/1–2 (2001): 69–79 and Dale B. Martin, “When Did Angels Become Demons,” *JBL* 129/4 (2010): 657–677 (674). Abernathy and Martin interpret the angel as an actual demon that buffets Paul, although not in relation to any travels through the heavens. Also, Frank E. Hain, *The Battle is Real: Spiritual Warfare, Discipleship, and the Christian “Soldier,”* (Liberty University: Ann Arbor, 2016), interprets the phrase as conveying a demonic reality.

ties. My contribution to this position is a focus on the sociological implications of Paul's rhetoric. I will argue that by associating his opponents with Satan, Paul tries to convince the Christ-followers in Corinth that the former are not to be trusted, and if they wish to know how a true Christ-follower properly acts, they should follow Paul's example. Since most interpreters in the last two decades have refrained from interpreting the phrase as referring to the opponents, the present study will hopefully provide fresh approach that my result in a further substantiation for the proposed hypothesis.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 CORINTHIANS 10–13 WITHIN A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK<sup>15</sup>

In 2 Cor 10–13, Paul argues for his legitimacy as an apostle and as a consequence also his authority. His defence would not have been neces-

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<sup>14</sup> Since Johnson's article "Satan Talk in Corinth," as far as I can tell, only Derek Brown, *The God of This Age*, and Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, choose to identify the angel as Paul's opponents (cf. n. 7). Cody Gibson, "A Study of the Apostle Paul's "Thorn in the Flesh,"" (MA diss: State University of New York, 2015), has recently suggested that the "thorn" refers to the Corinthian congregation.

<sup>15</sup> The social-scientific theories and methods I use are Harold Garfinkel's status degradation ceremony (see Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," *American Journal of Sociology* 61/5 [1956]: 420–424), Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner's self-categorization theory (see Turner, John C., et. al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987]), and Howard Becker's sociology of deviance theory (see Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* [New York: The Free Press, 1991]). These methods are well known in New Testament studies and will not be introduced further here. For an overview, see John Barclay, "Deviance and Apostasy: Some Applications of Deviance Theory to First-Century Judaism and Christianity," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 1995), 114–127; other New Testament scholars who have used them include Lloyd Pietersen, "Despicable Deviants: Labelling Theory and the Polemic of the Pastorals," *Sociology of Religion* 58/4 (1997): 343–352; Mikael Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus*, WUNT 242 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Paul Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

sary if his apostleship and authority was not in question by the Christ-followers in Corinth. Furthermore, it seems as if Paul is being labelled as untrustworthy and deviant by his opponents. Considering these things, it is important to note that Paul is not arguing with his *opponents*, but with the *Christ-followers* in Corinth. He is therefore not trying to convince his opponents that he is right, but the people who are the main body of the social group and who possess the power to include or exclude people.

### Prototypes and Antitypes

Throughout 2 Cor 10–13, Paul is trying to establish a prototype of himself by claiming his legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> At the same time Paul is creating a kind of “antitype” of his opponents. What this means is that if Paul is successful with his argument, a member of the social group in Corinth who lives and behaves as an antitype will be labelled deviant and no longer considered a member of the group.<sup>17</sup> The one behaving as a prototype will, on the contrary, be a good example for the rest of the Christ-followers. Paul creates the prototype and antitype by emphasising five different pairs of opposing qualities in order to argue for his legitimacy and authority. The goal is to gain authority so that he can remove his opponents, but more importantly so that the Corinthians’ adherence to the right lord is safeguarded.

The first quality Paul emphasises is on whose recommendation one should be considered as an apostle. The antitypes are those who “commend themselves” (10:12), and the prototype is the one “whom the Lord commends” (10:18). Paul does not want to be commended by standards set by himself, but by the Lord (10:12–13).<sup>18</sup> He says that he

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<sup>16</sup> According to Turner’s self-categorization theory, a person who wants others to follow their example within a social group has to become a sort of “proto-type” (John Turner et. al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987], 51, 53).

<sup>17</sup> Becker, *Outsiders*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London:

was appointed as an apostle of the gospel to the Corinthians, and since he has done what the Lord commanded, he can boast about himself because of this (10:13–14). However, the one who boasts should “boast in the Lord” (10:17), that is, one should not measure ones right to boast based on their own standards but by the standards set by the Lord, namely listening to the Lord and following his commandments. Paul concludes that “it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” (10:18). In this way, Paul becomes himself the prototype, and his opponents, who “commend themselves” become the antitypes.<sup>19</sup>

The second quality Paul emphasises is that it is not success and strength that qualifies one as an apostle, but being in Christ’s service (11:16–33). Paul puts it like the following:

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this). I am more. (11:21b–23a)

Paul then goes on to list the many failures and misfortunes that happened to him because he is a servant of Christ. The “list” functions as evidence that Paul differs from his opponents in a significant way, since they seem to boast about their success and strength in serving Christ. Paul, on the other hand, much rather boasts about his weaknesses and his misfortunes. The antitype is therefore someone who boasts about their success, strength, and even heritage. Paul becomes the prototype

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Adam & Charles Black, 1979), 262, 269; Johansson, *Andra Korintherbrevet*, 269; Harris, *Second Epistle*, 704, 727–728; Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 498–499.

<sup>19</sup> See also 2 Cor 3:1: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” Cf. Matthew Pawlak “Consistency Isn’t Everything: Self-Commendation in 2 Corinthians,” *JSNT* 40/3 (2018). Although Pawlak shows that Paul is both consistent and inconsistent in his self-commendation throughout 2 Cor, I contend that Paul is trying to refocus the origin of the (self-)commendation (cf. Harris, *Second Epistle*, 414–415).

who, even if he has to endure much suffering, lets his suffering prove that he remains in the service of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

The third quality Paul emphasises is not to be a burden for the Christ-followers. Paul repeats several times that he does not wish to be a burden for the Corinthians (e.g. 11:7–11; 12:13–18). He seems to repeatedly defend himself against accusations that he has not accepted financial and material support from the Corinthians.<sup>21</sup> His opponents, on the other hand, seem to have done this:

In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! (11:20–21a).

Paul ironically admits his shame for being too weak to exploit the Corinthians.<sup>22</sup> It seems as if the Corinthians have not realised that Paul's opponents have in fact exploited them, and they even accuse Paul for not being as willing as his opponents to accept their offerings. Further on, Paul says:

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. (12:14–16a)

Paul shows the Corinthians that the one who truly serves Christ sacrifices everything for this sake—Paul even sacrifices the Corinthians' love for him. The antitype is therefore the one who exploits the Christ-followers and charges them for the service. The prototype is the opposite,

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Furnish, *Second Corinthians*, 439; Johansson, *Andra Korinthierbrevet*, 320.

<sup>21</sup> On the support from the Corinthians, see Ryan S. Schellenberg "Did Paul Refuse an Offer of Support from the Corinthians?" *JSNT* 40/3 (2018), 329, who argues that Paul's defence in 2 Cor 10–13 is not that he refused the offer, but that he has the right to demand it, but does not.

<sup>22</sup> See Barnett, *Second Epistle*, 532–536; Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:718–721; Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 538–542.

the one who, like Paul, is an apostle without charge and without being a burden for the Corinthians. The prototype gives everything and expects nothing in return.

The fourth quality Paul emphasises is that it is not one's visions and revelations that gives authority, but what a person says and does (12:1–6). It appears as if Paul's opponents were boasting about receiving visions and revelations from the Lord, and that this would be something that grants them authority. Paul claims that he too received visions and revelations, but that they are reckoned void since he was not permitted to speak about what he heard and saw (12:2–4). He even says that he refrains from boasting regarding these visions, "so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say" (12:6b). Ironically, Paul in fact just boasted about the vision (12:2–4), but nevertheless refuses to use this as his main reason for boasting. The antitypes are therefore the ones who boast about their visions and revelations to gain authority. The prototype, on the other hand, is the one who gains his or her authority by what "is warranted by what [one] does or says" (12:6).<sup>23</sup>

The fifth and final quality Paul emphasises can be seen as a summary and expansion of the fourth one above. In 12:7–10, Paul says that he would rather boast about his weakness, since he has learned that it is by being weak that the power of Christ can remain in him (12:10). Paul claims that he has been given a "thorn in the flesh," and that "an angel of Satan"<sup>24</sup> has been tormenting him "in order to keep me from becoming conceited" (12:7). Paul pleaded thrice that he may be relieved of this torment but the suffering taught him what it meant to be a prototypical Christ-believer, that is, imitating Jesus, who also suffered because of the gospel.<sup>25</sup> According to Paul, it is only by enduring the suffering that

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<sup>23</sup> Paul explains that he indeed fulfilled the criteria for this when he says "I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, *including* signs, wonders and miracles" (12:12, italics mine).

<sup>24</sup> The NIV has "messenger of Satan."

<sup>25</sup> Although Jesus' suffering may be considered a lot greater than Paul's, Jesus is still a



the power of Christ can be made perfect in him, and the same goes for anyone who aspires to be a true Christ-follower.<sup>26</sup> The antitype is, then, someone who condescends to weakness and believes that the right way to live is to demonstrate one's own strength. The prototype is, accordingly, the one who realises that Christ's power is made perfect through his or her weakness (12:9), which is where true joy of life is found (12:10). Paul confirms this at the end of the letter when he claims that "[Jesus] was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you" (13:4). Paul is ultimately saying that Jesus is the original prototype—he is Paul's example, and should therefore be the Corinthians' example as well (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

### Deviants and Labels

When Paul creates a prototype for the Christ-followers in Corinth he cannot be certain that they will listen to him. Paul's opponents have probably tried to create a prototype of their own, which Paul attempts to dismantle in his defence speech. Since Paul lacks the authority to exclude people from the group of Christ-followers, he has to argue in a way that the Corinthians themselves exclude Paul's opponents. To this end, Paul uses certain expressions to label his opponents as "deviants."<sup>27</sup> According to Paul, his opponents deviate from the group in that they do not follow the correct teaching, but maybe even more so because they try to undermine Paul's authority. It is to be assumed that Paul expects the Christ-followers to understand the values (good or bad) that he attaches to the words and phrases used to label the opponents.<sup>28</sup>

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prototype that one can attempt to imitate in order to be a true Christ-follower.

<sup>26</sup> See especially Susan Garrett, "Paul's Thorn and Cultural Models of Affliction," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 82–99. Garrett argues that by employing several models of affliction, Paul shows the Corinthians what it means to be a true Christ-follower.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Garfinkel, "Degradation Ceremonies," 420–424.

The first time Paul mentions his opponents is in 10:11, where he calls them “such people” (ὁ τοιοῦτος).<sup>29</sup> Such a title, as well as “some of those” (τινές) in 10:12, is not very specific. Further on, in 11:5, Paul identifies them as “super-apostles” (τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων). In the verses that precede this identification, Paul expresses his worry for the Corinthians and hopes that they are not going to be deceived as Eve was deceived by the serpent in paradise. Paul then claims that he is not at all inferior to these “super-apostles” (11:5). The label “super-apostles” is not necessarily a degrading label, but in the present context Paul appears to be labelling his opponents ironically, implying that they are actually inferior to him.

The next occurrence where Paul mentions his opponents is in 11:12–15. Here, Paul says that they are trying to boast about being equal to Paul. What then follows is a kind of progression from claiming that his opponents are “masquerading as apostles of Christ” to them being “Satan’s servants.” A simple structure analysis will make this point clear:

<sup>13</sup> γὰρ  
οἱ τοιοῦτοι ψευδαπόστολοι,  
ἐργάται δόλιοι,  
μετασχηματιζόμενοι<sup>30</sup>  
εἰς ἀποστόλους Χριστοῦ.  
<sup>14</sup> καὶ οὐ θαῦμα·

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Becker, *Outsiders*, 9: “Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infractions constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders” (italics original).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:633–634; Johansson, *Andra Korinthiebrevet*, 269.

<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that the verb μετασχηματίζω occurs in the T.Job when Satan transforms himself in order to deceive pious humans. 2 Cor 13–15 however most likely includes a reference to LAE, in which Satan transforms himself in to the “brightness of angels” in order to deceive Eve. For a discussion regarding the present tense of the verb and the verses’ relation to LAE, see Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:695–696; cf. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 351; Harris, *Second Epistle*, 773; Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 528–529.

γὰρ

αὐτὸς ὁ σατανᾶς  
 μετασχηματίζεται  
 εἰς ἄγγελον φωτός.  
<sup>15</sup> οὐ μέγα οὖν εἰ καὶ  
 οἱ διάκονοι αὐτοῦ  
 μετασχηματίζονται  
 ὡς διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης·

<sup>13</sup> For

such people are false apostles,  
 deceitful workers,  
 masquerading  
 as apostles of Christ.  
<sup>14</sup> And no wonder,

for

Satan himself  
 masquerades  
 as an angel of light.  
<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then,  
 if his servants also  
 masquerade  
 as servants of righteousness

Paul calls his opponents “false apostles” and “deceitful workers,” which are serious accusations. He then enforces his name-calling by saying that these people are actually the servants of Satan.<sup>31</sup> Paul introduces the idea that his opponents, according to him, no longer adhere to Christ, but to Satan. By doing so, Paul has labelled his opponents as completely deviant from the social group that is the Christ-followers in Corinth.

After claiming that his opponents are the servants of Satan, Paul argues for his legitimacy as an apostle in an extraordinary way. He lists all his weaknesses and misfortunes and says that in order to not become

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<sup>31</sup> That Satan is someone whom the Christ-followers consider to be a bad figure is not hard to argue for. For an in depth analysis of Satan’s role in the letters of Paul, see Brown, *God of this Age*. Cf. Mark 1:13; T. Ash. 1:3–9; T. Dan 4:7; T. Jud. 25:3; T. Levi 18:12; T. Naph. 2:6; 3:1; T. Reu. 4:7–8; T. Sim. 5:3.

conceited, he was given a “thorn in his flesh,” “an angel of Satan” to buffet and torment him (12:7). I am convinced that this should be interpreted as another reference to his opponents.

### Boasting and Conceit

Another theme in 2 Cor 10–13 significant for the present article is Paul’s complicated relationship to boasting.<sup>32</sup> Paul states that he could indeed boast (10:8), but refrains from boasting about himself, since he wants people to think highly of him based on what they see him do and hear him say (12:6). He does indeed boast, but reluctantly, and “as a fool,” probably because his opponents boast about being like Paul (11:12, 16, 30; 12:4; cf. 1 Cor 9:27–28). Boasting seems to be a problem for Paul, and his opponents seem to be great at boasting. In contrast to boasting, Paul says in 12:7 that he wishes not to be conceited. The verb he uses is *ὑπεραίρωμαι*, which in this wider context seems to be what may result if one boasts for the wrong reasons. David Litwa argues that the verb *ὑπεραίρωμαι* should in fact to be translated as “being lifted higher.”<sup>33</sup> In his interpretation of 12:7, the verse refers to Paul’s unsuccessful ascent to the heavens, which he was unable to boast about because he was beaten by an “angel of Satan” while ascending (12:2–7).<sup>34</sup> However, the passage claims that the reason Paul was unable to boast about it was that he was forbidden to speak about what he saw and heard, not because he did not reach the highest point in the heavens. In LAE, the highest of the heavens is the third heaven, and this is identified with the paradise in Apoc. Mos. 37:5. According to Paul, he did indeed travel to paradise, so that the failure is only in the eyes of Paul’s opponents, since they wanted him to boast about everything he heard and saw while being there (12:2–6). It is therefore more reason-

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<sup>32</sup> *καυχάομαι* occurs 16 times in 2 Cor 10–13 (cf. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 309).

<sup>33</sup> Litwa, “Paul’s Mosaic Ascent,” 242.

<sup>34</sup> Litwa, “Paul’s Mosaic Ascent,” 254–257.

able to interpret ὑπεραίρωμαι as “to become conceited,” which would be the result of boasting for the wrong reasons.<sup>35</sup>

What Paul tells the Corinthians in 12:7 is that his opponents, who are the “angel of Satan,” are the means by which God taught Paul the lesson he recounts in 12:9–10:

But [Christ] said to me: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Although the preceding verses could be, and have been, interpreted as a bodily ailment, it does seem odd that Paul would complain about a bodily ailment after the long list of sufferings in chapter 11.<sup>36</sup> It makes more sense if the opponents are in view here. This does not mean, however, that it does not include anything physical. For Paul, opposition is neither merely physical nor merely spiritual since it relates to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is both physical and spiritual. The only thing that matters for Paul is that Jesus Christ is preached as Lord and Messiah to the whole world (cf. Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 4:5; 11:4; Gal 2:19–20; 1 Thess 2:9). As a consequence, he will regard anyone who opposes the gospel as a “servant of Satan”; an “angel of Satan.” Bowens argues that the heavenly angel beats Paul on his journey through the heavens to keep him from receiving “divine insight,” which he was given

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<sup>35</sup> This is the common translation of the only other occurrence of ὑπεραίρωμαι in 2 Thess 2:4.

<sup>36</sup> The phrase σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί continues to puzzle interpreters. For an overview of different suggestions, see Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 2:809–818. I concur with McCant, who claims that the phrase should be interpreted as opponents who disturb Paul. The “angel of Satan” is an appositive genitive in relation to the σκόλοψ. Therefore, the “angel” should serve to explain the “thorn,” not the other way around. Furthermore, the word σκόλοψ is used in the Septuagint regarding Israel’s opponents in Num 33:55 and Ezek 28:24 (see McCant, “Paul’s Thorn of Rejected Apostleship,” 550–551, where he argues against the common assumption of a connection between this phrase and Paul’s words in Gal 4:13).

through suffering instead.<sup>37</sup> But even if one were to take the verb ὑπεαίρωμαι as “being lifted higher” (which is unlikely, see above), Paul’s main concern is not whether or not he has “divine insight.” Knowledge seems unimportant if it is not knowledge regarding the risen Messiah (Phil 3:10), which Paul seems to have plenty of. Rather, his issues with being beaten and his opponents is that they are a threat towards the Christ-followers in Corinth (2 Cor 11:28).

### Summary

Paul shows the Corinthians that to be “weak” is not something to be considered of less worth, but rather as more valuable, as he says in 13:4. Thus, when Paul tells the Corinthians that he has an “angel of Satan” who beats him so that he might not be conceited, he informs the Corinthians that his opponents have served and continue to serve a greater good, regardless of how evil they may seem. In fact, they help Paul to stay on course and not to become conceited, so that he remembers that it is by Jesus’ power that he lives and not through his own strengths and features.<sup>38</sup> Understanding the phrase “angel of Satan” as another reference to Paul’s opponents, it is the most severe one. He brings together the idea of his opponents as servants of Satan and the idea of such servants as angels. Paul hereby labels his opponents as the worst kind of servants, namely Satan’s angels.

In 12:11, Paul once again labels his opponents “super-apostles,” although the process of labelling could be seen as reaching a climax when Paul called them “an angel of Satan.” He has shown that his opponents are not servants of Christ. By demonising his opponents, he shows the Corinthians that they should exclude these people. Ultimately, it is only the Christ-followers in Corinth that can exclude Paul’s opponents, and so, in order to win their confidence, he argues that he is a representative

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<sup>37</sup> Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle*, 112–117.

<sup>38</sup> See Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 522, who notes that it is in this “paradoxical” way that God defeats Satan, by turning a weakened Paul in to an even stronger apostle.

of the group's core values as he proves to be a true prototypical Christ-follower. Although Jesus tells Paul that it is not required for him to have the opponents removed from his life (12:8–9), he nevertheless sees them as a threat to the Christ-followers in Corinth and deems it necessary for them to be removed from their group. Paul realises that opposition will always be present in his life as an apostle, but that it is not required for those in Corinth to suffer from these deviant Satan-followers. Since he himself lacks the authority to remove them, he attempts to convince the Corinthians that they should remove them and argues that it is because these opponents are really prime examples of an antitype of what a Christ-follower should be: Satan's angels.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown that the social implications of Paul's rhetoric are greater than is commonly argued. When using language such as "super-apostles," "Satan's servants," an "angel of Satan," and "false apostles," Paul labels his opponents and puts them in a relationship with the Christ-followers' greatest enemy: Satan. The main objective for Paul is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord, and whoever or whatever sabotages this goal should be appropriately identified with Satan's associates and work. Paul argues for this while at the same time labelling his opponents as Satan's servants and angels. They are thorns in his side, but they serve a greater good. Paul has learned that it is only by enduring the sufferings caused by being a prototypical Christ-follower that Christ might reside in him. It is only in this way that Christ's power might be revealed more fully in Paul. Thus, when Paul uses the name "Satan" in reference to his opponents, the Corinthians are forced to evaluate both Paul's and his opponents' teachings. The Corinthians are forced to choose between two options: either they listen to Paul and strive to become Christ-followers in the same way as him, or they discard his attempt to demonise and transfer his opponents from "insiders" to "outsiders," and in the end exclude Paul instead.