The Angels are among us. A Study of the Writings of Paulinus of Nola

Anioły są wśród nas. Studium pism św. Paulina z Noli

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Abstract: Paulinus of Nola (c. 355-431) is undoubtedly one of the most interesting yet least known figures of early Christianity. Born into a wealthy senatorial family from Bordeaux, Paulinus gave up wealth, a career as a civil servant and the practice of secular poetry to follow St. Felix on the path of Christian faith. One of its elements was the belief in the existence of angels. In the case of Paulinus of Nola, this belief took on a very concrete expression. The aim of this article is to show, on the basis of an analysis of the surviving letters and songs, the angelology of St. Paulinus, which took on above all a pastoral aspect and showed very concrete manifestations of the action of angels for the benefit of the human beings.

Keywords: Paulinus of Nola; angel; letter; poem; care

Jean Daniélou, in his book on patristic angelology, a fundamental work in this field, points out that concerning the Fathers “in angelology, their attention was focused less upon the nature of the angels and their function as adoring spirits than upon their missions to humanity at different moments in the history of salvation”3. They were first and foremost interpreters of the Scriptures4, in which angels were sent with a mission to announce God’s truths and plans5. Paulinus of Nola also

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belongs to this tradition. He was not a great theologian and dogmatist, but rather a pastor and spiritual guide for many people seeking the way to God. In his letters, but also in his poems, he made numerous references to various passages of Scripture, including those that speak of angels. He was aware of his own incompetence and ignorance, and he himself asked his more theologically knowledgeable colleagues about questions concerning angels. He is thus an example of the contemporary angelology in search of its expression, and at the same time an author who brings to it a lively perspective on this fundamental function of the angels, known from the historical scriptural testimonies that were the subject of analysis by the writers of the time. Since the angelological themes in the work of Paulinus of Nola have never been studied, and above all because of the above-mentioned new approach to the contemporary mission of the angels, it is worth studying the angelology of the Nolian as it appears in his letters and poetic works.

Angelology of the Old Testament. A Study in Biblical Theology, Washington 1949; Angeli e demoni nella Bibbia, ed. P.G. Bortone, L’Aquila 1998. This way of thinking we can find as well in Tertullianus, De carne Christi 14, 3; Eusebius Caesariensis, Praeparatio evangelica VII 16; Eusebius Caesariensis, Demonstratio evangelica III; Athanasius, Contra arianos oratio III 12; Gregorius Nyssenus, Contra Eunomium I; Ambrosius, De Spiritu Sancto I 10; Hieronymus, Commentarii in Isaiam VI 6; Gregorius Magnus, Homiliae XL in Evangelia 34, 8, 12.

1. Nature of the angels

In his writings, Paulinus, using primarily Scripture, reveals the nature of angels. Emphasising that they are “created as pure spirit”, that they are “created without bodies”, that they feed on the heavenly bread – the bread of angels – and are clothed in the garments of God’s glory, Paulinus argues for the incorporeality of angels. They are immortal creatures who live forever with God in heaven. And it is with their dwelling place that Paulinus links the very essence of their present mission and nature. Angels play an essential role in the thought of Paulinus of Nola at the moment of human death. The spirit that leaves the buried body is lifted into the arms of an angel. It is the angel’s hands that lift the deceased through the clouds up to heaven. The miracles that happened around St. Felix’s tomb (e.g. the snow that covered the ground) are signs that he is already enjoying the light and peace of the angels who dwell in heaven. Paulinus used poetic images of the transition from earthly to heavenly life in describing...
Felix’s passage to God: “Then bands of angels, their columns representing
the seven tiers of heaven, met him as he sped in heavenly triumph to the
presence of the King, the person of the highest Father”\(^{17}\), or Baebianus’
life and death: “See how the gate of sunny heaven lies open to the merits
[…] the angel who flies before [him]”\(^{18}\). Paulinus, on the other hand, em-
phasised the role of the angel in describing the visions of his own death in
a poem of consolation after the death of Celsus: “[…] then an angel may
be kind to my coming, and bear me off to set me triumphant in the arms
of the patriarchs, far from the hell that rages in yawning anarchy”\(^{19}\). Finally,
in accordance with the Scripture, angels will play an important role on the
Day of Judgment, when the presiding angel will give the sign of the Lord’s
coming from the lofty throne of the Father with the sound of the trumpet\(^{20}\),
and when a separation will be made among all mankind, through whom
the avenging angel (\textit{ultor angelus}) will pass, leaving those who are marked
with the sign of the cross\(^{21}\).

In discussing the nature of angels in the writings of Paulinus of Nola,
it is worth noting a problem that preoccupies the Nolian’s mind and
which he addresses in a letter to Augustine\(^{22}\) asking for clarification\(^{23}\).

\(^{17}\) Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Carm.} 18, 141-144, ACW 40, 119.
\(^{18}\) Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Carm.} 33, 123-126, ACW 40, 344.
\(^{19}\) Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Carm.} 31, 472-474, ACW 40, 324.
\(^{21}\) See Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Carm.} 24, 141-142.
\(^{22}\) On the exchange of the letters between Augustine and Paulinus see J. Desmul-
liez, \textit{Les lacunes de la correspondance entre Saint Augustin et Paulin de Nole}, “Revue
des Études Anciennes” 53/3-4 (1951) p. 253-300; P.M. Courcelle, \textit{Correspondance entre
saint Augustin et saint Paulin de Nole}, “Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires
de France” 1950-1951 (1954) p. 204-205; Y.-M. Duval, \textit{L’entrée en relations épistolaires
Colloque international “L’épistolaire antique et ses prolongements européens Université
Paris – Dudley 2004, p. 397-419; C. McCann, ‘You know better than I do’. The dynamics
of transformative knowledge in the relationship of Augustine of Hippo and Paulinus of Nola,
conocimiento transformador, en la relación de Agustín con Paulino de Nola, “Augustinus.
\(^{23}\) Augustine’s answer to Paulinus’ questions in his \textit{Ep.} 45 is \textit{Ep.} 95 in the August-
phinian epistolarium. However, Augustine does not give Paulinus an exhaustive and com-
prehensive answer. He points out that one can speak of angels as wholly spiritual entities
in the same way that humans are said to be souls (in the collective sense), and does not
resolve whether angels have a body, although he tends to do so in his answer. Regarding


by God the duty of speech, that He has termed the words and utterance of angels created without bodies their ‘tongues’"\(^{28}\). Discussing angelic tongues, Paulinus presents one possible interpretation of the Apostle’s words: “[…] Paul may have used the phrase ‘tongues of angels’ in distinguishing between voices and ways of speaking, just as when discoursing on the diversity of charism he counts diverse kind of tongues amongst graces bestowed”\(^{29}\). Paulinus also suggests that this might be a tongue available only to those in heaven and not yet available to the people of the world, and they would speak it as immortals according to their state of grace in heaven, united with the choruses of Angels, Powers, Dominions and Thrones, when people will be clothed in spiritual bodies and speak in words that are not human but angelic and heavenly\(^{30}\).

It is clear from the above that Paulinus is part of this current of biblical exegesis in the early Church’s teaching on angels, but at the same time he goes further, attempting to probe more deeply into the nature of these heavenly creatures.

2. Activities of angels

As can be seen from the above reflections on the nature of angels, their primary nature, defined by their very name – messengers – is their activity, which is revealed in being God’s messengers to human beings. Paulinus of Nola recognises and understands this aspect of the nature of angels and often refers to biblical examples of their activity, but he does not stop there and shows how angels in his time act in carrying out their tasks. It is a most interesting perspective and awareness of the presence of these heavenly creatures in the life of humans.

In his writings, Paulinus many times recalls the mission and works of angels and their direct involvement in the lives of the people. It was through the hand of an angel that God restrained Abraham’s right hand raised to strike a blow against Isaac\(^{31}\); it was the hand of an angel that assisted Habakkuk who was to provide food for the prophet Daniel\(^{32}\); it


\(^{32}\) See Paulinus Nolanus, *Carm. 16*, 187-189.
was through an angel that Elizabeth gave birth to her son; and finally, it was an angel who announced to Mary the conceiving of the Saviour, and it was the angels who on the night of the Nativity greeted with the shepherds the born Saviour and sang in heavenly joy where later “a mixed crowd of harlots and eunuchs lamented for Venus’ lover”, showing the destruction of Christ’s birthplace by the pagans. Such mission and tasks of angels described in the Bible find continuity in later centuries. For Paulinus, the action of angels towards his spiritual father and patron, St Felix, was of particular importance. In describing his life, the Nolian referred directly to the miraculous interventions of angels in the New Testament, such as the release of St. Peter from prison (cf. Acts 12:7n). In the same way, St. Felix was freed from prison. The care and actions of the angels, based on biblical stories, were also to be applied

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35 Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 31, 3, ACW 36, 128.


37 See Paulinus Nolanus, Carm. 15, 238-257.
to Paulinus’ dear ones, such as his visitor Nicetas of Remesiana\textsuperscript{38}, for whom he expressed such a wish:

May Raphael be sent to fly near you; as once the angel attended Tobias to the Medes, so may he accompany Nicetas as far as the Dacians. May the Guide who once led the fleeing Jacob to safety from the presence of his arrogant brother, likewise guide Nicetas His servant, for he similarly is a fugitive. What the patriarch did once, Nicetas does continually, fleeing from the world towards the walls of high heaven. The ladder which Jacob saw the angels alternately ascending and descending Nicetas strives to mount as his life overtops the clouds\textsuperscript{39}.

Of course, these are biblical topoi and images widely used by early Christian writers, but Paulinus, compared to his fellow theologians, refers remarkably often in his works to the care and action of angels in the lives of various people\textsuperscript{40}.

There is, moreover, an extraordinary testimony in his writings which seems very interesting with regard to the role and presence of angels in the life of Paulinus’ contemporaries. It is contained in Letter 49, addressed to Macarius\textsuperscript{41}, a high imperial official and consul of Campania\textsuperscript{42}. This letter concerns the property of a friend of Paulinus, a ship full of goods that had


\textsuperscript{39} Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Carm.} 17, 141-154, ACW 40, 109.


been wrecked in a storm on its sailing from Sardinia and had landed on the Campanian coast. Paulinus tells the story of the accident and the ship’s journey. In the end, during this strange adventure, only one old man remained on board the ship, who was a helper under deck, in the bilge. And it is with this old man, Valgius, that God performs extraordinary things through angels, and he directly experiences the presence of angels in his life. For he was not a sailor, as an old man he was not of full vigour, he remained alone on board, and yet, with the help of God, through the action of angels, he managed to save himself and the ship. As Paulinus writes, recounting the whole incident to Macarius,

As soon as Valgius made the slightest effort, he saw the work performed by the hand of angels just as he was beginning his attempt. He had scarcely laid hands on a rope to pull it when the foresail was already billowing out on its beams, or the ship was under sail. When water poured through the holed timbers and tried to sink the ship, the use of a small scoop a couple of times emptied the water and made the ship dry, so that he had nothing to do, and he stood astonished that his work had been performed for him without any effort on his part.\footnote{Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Ep.} 49, 3, ACW 36, 261.}

Moreover, Paulinus points out that

Even the workers were not withdrawn from the ingenuous sight of that most innocent old man, for on numerous occasions he saw armed soldiers from the army of heaven on watch on the ship, and performing all the sailors’ duties. Indeed, none but angels were suitable sailors for that ship, for its rudder was the Helmsman of the universe.\footnote{Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Ep.} 49, 3, ACW 36, 261.}

Christ also changed the name of the old man to Victor, the name by which he would henceforth be called by men and angels.\footnote{See Paulinus Nolanus, \textit{Ep.} 49, 2.} The Lord placed the angels around Victor to show, as Paulinus wrote, that

\[\text{[...]}\] the divine Saviour shows Himself to us by different proofs, and works on our behalf on land and sea. By the acts He performs in individuals, He tends

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the faith and salvation of many. Observe how remarkable and praiseworthy a work the Lord Jesus and His holy angels performed in one man⁴⁷.

Paulinus emphasises that through such actions God saves the individual as well as many people. The awareness of such a presence of angels is very common in the writings of Paulinus. For example, those who give alms do so in the presence of angels and bring them joy⁴⁸; and alms are „[…] immediately deposited in the bosom of rejoicing Lord by angels who intercepted it in flight” as merits⁴⁹; angels accompany the couriers so that they would not dash their feet against a stone⁵⁰; they dwell joyfully with the monks in hermitages⁵¹; angels are present among the faithful who gather in the churches built by the correspondents of Paulinus⁵² and „in company with the holy angels, they are charmed by the unceasing praise, day and night, of Christ the Lord”⁵³, and we ourselves are constantly fighting in the theatre of this world, in the sight of men and angels⁵⁴.

Paulinus, despite his clichéd and often naïve statements, is thus a representative of what I would call a practical angelology, which can be defined by the statement in the title of this paper: Angels are among us!

Bibliography

Sources


⁴⁷ Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 49, 1, ACW 36, 258.
⁵⁰ See Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 28, 1.
⁵² See Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 18, 4.
⁵³ Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 18, 5, ACW 35, 171.
⁵⁴ See Paulinus Nolanus, Ep. 24, 9; 40, 10.
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