ABSTRACT

"BAPTISM ON BEHALF OF THE DEAD": 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29 IN ITS HELLENISTIC CONTEXT

by Matthew Michael Connor

This thesis analyzes 1 Corinthians 15:29 – a reference to "Baptism on behalf of the dead" – as an ancient Mediterranean ritual conducted on behalf of the dead. Scholars have been unable to reach a consensus regarding what Paul was referring to in this passage, with many commentators rejecting the most simple and obvious reading of the text. This paper analyzes the text and translation of 15:29, as well as the history of its interpretation before turning to the category of rituals on behalf of the dead in the ancient world. With a cultural predisposition toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead established in the ancient Mediterranean world, vicarious baptism in Corinth is approached using hybridity theory, which acknowledges the religious creativity of the Corinthians, standing in the contact zone between Paul's Jesus cult and this longstanding Greek tradition of ritual actions performed on behalf of the dead.

“BAPTISM ON BEHALF OF THE DEAD”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:29 IN ITS HELLENISTIC CONTEXT

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Introduction

The writings of the Apostle Paul, like the rest of the New Testament, are not without their mysteries. Paul's letters have been in circulation for almost two thousand years, and have provided much of the theological grounding for Christianity (in all its myriad forms), yet there are still passages about which we know surprisingly little. 1 Corinthians 15:29, which appears to be a reference to some form of vicarious baptismal practice among the Corinthians, is one of these passages, and the meaning of the verse has been hotly disputed since the early Church fathers. The verse has been responsible for a surprisingly large body of interpretations – one of the few things commentators can agree on is that there is no scholarly consensus regarding the meaning and significance of the verse.

Acknowledging the obscurity of this verse and the confusion surrounding it as an introduction to its exegesis is a necessary cliché that provides a sense of how problematic the verse has been historically. 1 Cor. 15:29 has been labeled an "obscure…crux interpretum", "one of the most hotly disputed passages of the epistle", and "one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament."[1] The verse reads:

> What then will they do, those baptizing on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised up at all, why then do they baptize on their behalf?

The verse seems disconnected from the verses that precede and succeed it, and, as commentators are quick to point out, vicarious baptismal practice, if it occurred, did not survive in Christian practice. Also, the implications vicarious baptism might hold for Christian baptismal theology are troubling at the least. These factors all lead to the confusion surrounding the verse. Even after analyzing the verse, commentators often conclude that "finally we must admit that we simply do not know" its meaning.[2]

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[1] Bernard M. Foschini, *"Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead": I Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation.* (Worcester, MA: The Heffernan Press, 1951), 1; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) Trans. Leitch, James W., 275; F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953). The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 371.

[2] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 767.

While it is impossible to establish the original meaning of the verse, its analysis still proves fruitful. One of the primary tasks of the scholar of the history of religions is to provide a cultural and historical context for the object of study, and while 1 Cor. 15:29 may be mysterious on its own, analyzing the verse in the context of the Hellenistic world helps us solve, or at the very least take a step towards solving, this mystery.

I will be examining the verse and its Hellenistic context in three chapters – each one addressing one type of argument regarding the inscrutability of 1 Cor 15:29. The first chapter begins with the immediate literary surroundings of the verse: 1 Corinthians as a Pauline epistle and the structure of Paul's argumentation leading up to and through chapter 15. From there, I analyze the actual contents of verse 29, including the history of interpretations concerning the verse, and conclude with a detailed word study of the translations that create the most problems. This study leads me to conclude that there is no reason, based on anything contained within the verse, letter, or chapter, to argue against the hypothesis that a group in Corinth was practicing a form of vicarious baptism – one which Paul neither promotes nor condemns.

The second chapter addresses one of the major critiques leveled against the vicarious baptism hypothesis – the perceived lack of historical parallels for such a practice. Again, like the translation/interpretation of the verse, this is a hotly disputed area. There are a few practices that are mentioned as potentially relevant, but these are generally disregarded entirely, or cast as too far afield to be particularly useful. I analyze these practices, and suggest that, rather than categorizing related practices as too distant, we should in fact be widening the net, and examining Hellenistic cultural predilections toward the dead in general. This requires a consideration of material evidence from gravesites as well as interactions between the living and the dead in "magical" sources, in addition to the sources previously considered.[3] All of this evidence combines to give us a picture of the way ritual interactions between the living and the dead may have been conceptualized by Paul's Corinthian congregation, and I will argue, suggests a cultural predisposition toward the type of interaction allowed by vicarious baptism. This cultural predisposition is deeply embedded in Greek culture from at least the Bronze Age on, and

[3] I also address the theoretical issues surrounding the use of the term "magical."

connections between the living and the dead were part of the lived reality of Greek society – graveyards, for example, were often situated on the main road out of town.

The third chapter addresses a critique which is rarely discussed explicitly, but which often underlies the entire approach to the verse in question, and has greater implications for the study of early Christianity as a whole. In the search for parallel and antecedent practices, some commentators look for exact precursors that can be identified as constituent elements of vicarious baptism. This is a flawed methodology, one that fails to account for the realities of cultural contact and religious creativity, as addressed by postcolonial critiques. I propose we continue in the footsteps of scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Karen King, and Richard Horsley, and address early Christianity (and all the Mediterranean religions of that time) as examples of hybridity and religious creativity in action. This theoretical shift is supported by dozens of test cases that make it impossible to defend the notion of fixed, discrete cultural boundaries. Viewing all of early Christianity as a hybrid religious tradition removes all of the obstacles raised in the second chapter – all of the potential parallels scholars raise and dismiss are constituent elements of this hybrid, rather than direct antecedents that cannot be proven to lead to vicarious baptism. This chapter also addresses the problems caused when baptism is introduced into a new population, among them concerns about the severance of kinship ties in the afterlife. This, combined with a cultural predisposition toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead could very easily lead to a form of vicarious baptism being practiced in Corinth.

The Text and Its Reception

"What then will they do, those baptizing on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised up at all, why then do they baptize on their behalf?"

1 Corinthians 15:29 is one of the more enigmatic verses found in the Pauline corpus, and the pericope has caused commentators no small difficulty as they try to explain the verse's meaning. Are we to take the verse at face value, arguing that Paul is referring to some form of vicarious ritual where the actions of the living can effect the status of the dead? To answer this question, we should first establish certain scholarly principles and historical critical methods. I shall, for the most part, be following the methodological strategy laid out by Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann in *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of N.T. Exegesis* regarding a critical approach to New Testament scholarship.[1]

First, I shall assume that of the thirteen letters commonly attributed to Paul, only seven are authentically Pauline.[2] I Corinthians is one of these seven, addressed by Paul to the church (ἐκκλησία) in Corinth. According to Acts 18: 1 – 17, Paul founded the church in Corinth, and though he never explicitly claims this in his letters, he does refer to himself as their "father through the gospel" in 1 Cor. 4:15 and certainly presumes some form of authority over them throughout.[3] The letter appears to have been written sometime in the early 50's from Ephesus, though Pauline chronology remains notoriously

[1] Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of N.T. Exegesis*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988) Trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann

[2] These are Roman, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Phillipians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The rest of the letters commonly attributed to Paul (the deutero-Pauline letters: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians; and the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) were most likely written by Paul's students in his name to lend authority to their letters. For a more detailed analysis, see: Helmut Koester. *Introduction to the New Testament*. 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

[3] Acts 18: 1-11; 1 Cor. 1: 14 – 16. The problem of agreement between Acts and Paul is a significant one. While they seem to agree in most cases, there are a number of instances where they do not agree, or directly contradict each other. For instance, when Acts recounts Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus, the author has him stay in Damascus for a short time with Ananias, who cures his blindness, before going to Jerusalem to join the disciples (Acts 9: 8 – 27). When Paul relates his conversion experience in Galatians he says that "neither did I go up into Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went into Arabia and again returned to Damascus" pushing off his visit to Jerusalem by three years and downplaying its importance (Galatians 1: 17 – 18). This problem of agreement is not likely to be solved anytime soon, so for the purposes of this examination, I shall stick to the Pauline letters.

difficult to establish.[4] Establishing an exact year is not essential for our task, so we shall bypass the controversy and assume the letter to be authentically Pauline and a product of the early 50's.

Second, I shall assume that the letter is a coherent, unified, whole. This is an issue that has caused some difficulty for exegetes in the past, with many arguing that the text as we have it today is a composite formed from fragments of a few of Paul's letters (the current consensus position on 2 Corinthians today, for example). These divisions typically varied from exegete to exegete based on perceived differences in subject matter and tone. This desire for division seems to have abated in recent years, and I will be following in the footsteps of substantial scholarship by J.C. Hurd, Hans Conzelmann, Gordon Fee, and Margaret M. Mitchell (among others) in arguing for the compositional unity of the letter as we have it.[5]

Third, I shall assume (following Hurd) that 1 Corinthians represents one stage of an ongoing conversation between Paul and the Corinthians.[6] According to Hurd, the first stage of this conversation was Paul's founding visit to Corinth, the second stage was a letter from Paul to Corinth ("the Previous Letter"), possibly with some revisions of Paul's original preaching.[7] The third stage was a letter the Corinthians wrote to Paul asking him to address the discrepancies between his earlier preaching and the Previous Letter, as well as some issues that would have naturally arisen through the day-to-day life of the congregation. 1 Corinthians appears to be the fourth step in this conversation, and seems

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[4] Koester places it in the winter of 53-54 (Koester, vol. II, p. 121) and Gordon D. Fee places it sometime in the spring of either 53, 54, or 55 (Fee, 15). For more information on Pauline chronology, see: Rainer Reisner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*. Trans., Doug Scott. (Grand Rapids, MI:. Eerdmans, 1998.); Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology*. Trans. F. Stanley Jones (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and John Knox, *Chapters in the Life of Paul* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950).

[5] For a more detailed discussion of the various views on the division of 1 Cor., see Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991)

[6] J.C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (New York: Seabury Press, 1965)

[7] Hurd has attempted to reconstruct the contents of the Corinthian's letter to Paul, the Previous Letter, and Paul's original preaching, based on such statements as "Concerning the things having been written…" (1 Cor. 7:1; Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε …). Based on the questions Hurd claims the Corinthians were asking, he posits a discontinuity between Paul's original preaching and the Previous Letter, which Hurd claims stems from the Apostolic council mentioned in Acts 15:20. His theory is that Paul was influenced by the Apostolic Decree and agreed to change the content of his preaching (mainly on issues of immorality and idolatry), perhaps in exchange for formal recognition by the council of Paul's status as "Apostle to the Gentiles." Unlike Hurd's claims regarding the compositional unity of 1 Cor., and the stages of the conversation, the Apostolic Decree aspect of this is pure speculation on Hurd's part.

to be based on the Corinthians' letter as well as information Paul received from some other informant(s).[8]

One additional assumption not directly related to the composition of the letter should be noted: I shall assume the congregation in Corinth was primarily, though not entirely Greek. Here, I am following the work of Wayne A. Meeks and James Constantine Hanges, among others. As Hanges claims, "One of the most self-evident facts of his [Paul's] mission, according to his own letters, is that his converts were largely Greek."[9] The evidence that exists for a Jewish contingent in the Corinthian congregation comes from two main sources: the canonical Acts of the Apostles and a list of Jewish congregations found in Philo. Acts is, at best, unreliable with regard to Paul, and correlation between Acts and the undoubted Pauline letters is difficult. Crispus, for example, is mentioned as "the leader of the synagogue" (ἀρχισυνάγωγος) in Acts 18:8, but all that Paul tells us is that Crispus is one of the few he baptized in Corinth, saying nothing about his former religious belief. Similarly, Aquila is referred to as a Jew (τινα Ἰουδαῖ ον ὀνόματι Ἀκύλαν) in Acts 18:2, but Paul calls him "one who works with me in Christ" (συνεργούς μου ἐν Χπιστῷ) – Paul's other references to Aquila have nothing more beyond his name. Additionally, Crispus and Aquila both have solidly Latin, not Jewish names, though this alone should not be taken to speak for their religious or ethnic background.[10]

Meeks continues:

> Besides the New Testament evidence, Philo singles out only the cities Corinth and Argos in his list of regions of the Diaspora. Other literary fragments are lacking, and archaeological evidence is disappointing: a single fragment of a terracotta lamp from the fifth or sixth century A.D., decorated with what is *probably* a menorah, and a broken piece of what was perhaps the lintel over a doorway, inscribed [Syna]gôgê Hebr[aiôn].[11]

[8] For instance, when Paul claims that "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you…" (1 Cor. 5:1; Ὅλως ἀκούεται ἐν ὑμῖ ν πορνεία.), it is assumed this is information that the Corinthians neither included in their letter nor wished Paul to know. Thus, he has some source of knowledge about the happenings in Corinth *other* than the on-going conversation.
[9] James Constantine Hanges, *Christ, The Image of the Church.* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2006.), 87.
[10] Wayne A Meeks. *First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983) 57- 59
[11] Ibid., 48.

After this summary, Meeks is forced to conclude that though it "seems" there were Jews in Corinth, "we are left with only tantalizing hints of the Jewish community here."[12] Addressing Philo, Hanges points out that:

> Philo appropriates the technical language of Greek foundation-legends to gratuitously portray Jerusalem as a *mētropolis* ("mother-city") purposefully dispatching colonies of Jews worldwide, and producing a ubiquitous population of Jews the potential political benefit of which he now reminds the emperor (281). That Philo lists Corinth as one of Jerusalem's colonies (a list in which Philo seems to include for effect every Greek city and territory he can recall) in the midst of such self-indulgent apologetic should provoke extreme caution in addressing his claims."[13]

These claims come into conflict with the concept of θεοσεβὴς("god-fearers") as a fairly common class in the Greco-Roman world. These are supposed to have been non-Jewish synagogue-goers whose numbers helped pave the way for the rapid spread of Christianity. A primarily Greek congregation in Corinth does not explicitly exclude god-fearers, but I find insufficient evidence for their existence, and shall be treating the congregation as typical Greeks.[14]

The overall theme of the letter appears to be Paul's chastisement of the Corinthian congregation for their poor judgment in a number of matters. Paul criticizes the Corinthians for being "people of the flesh" (σαρκικοί) rather than "people of the spirit" (πνευματικοί) in 3: 1 – 3, and proceeds to give examples of how exactly the Corinthians have erred in their judgment. Chapter 5 targets some sort of "sexual immorality" (πορνεία) among the congregation, concerning a man living with his father's wife. Chapter 6 addresses those in the community who have apparently taken internal disputes to the public court system, rather than resolving the issues within the community. The entire letter comes to a head in chapter 15, as Paul reaches the crux of his arguments. The Corinthians have been using "fleshly" judgment rather than "spiritual" judgment, and nowhere is this more significant than in their treatment of the resurrection.

Hans Conzelmann, citing Karl Barth, agrees that "the position of chap. 15 at the end of the epistle is no accident. It is in harmony with the general scheme that was widely

[12] Ibid., 49.
[13] Hanges, 20.
[14] I am again following Hanges and others on this path. For more discussion, see Hanges, 16 – 21.

employed for the presenting of Christian teaching."[15] Paul's entire critique of the judgment of the Corinthian congregation culminates with the error they have made in their view of the resurrection. Apparently, there is a group within the congregation that is denying the future resurrection of the dead, most likely because of the prevalent Greek philosophical view that the body was a "meat-prison" for the containment of the soul, and that after, death, there was no reason for the soul to end up trapped back in physical form.

> Εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς κηρύσσεται ὅτι ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγήγερται, πῶς λέγουσιν ἐν ὑμιν τινες ὅτι ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν;
>
> And if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Cor. 15:12)[16]

W.L. Knox thinks that Paul "failed to allow for the extent to which the Jewish element in the Church [at Corinth] had declined; at any rate a considerable section of it was sufficiently acquainted with the outlook of popular philosophy to refuse to believe in the resurrection of the dead in the form in which he had presented it."[17] I can not accept Knox's claims about the Jewish origins of the Corinthian congregation, but it seems reasonable that popular Greek philosophy was a part of their rejection of the resurrection.[18]

Paul begins his critique of the Corinthians' judgment by restating the proclamation of faith that Christ died, was buried, and rose again on the third day (15:1-11), and using this profession as the basis of his argument. Paul provides a number of reasons why resurrection is essential to Christian salvation before moving on to a detailed description of the resurrection body – he says a "psychic" body is sown and a "spiritual" body is raised (σπείρεται σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν).[19] He also promises them that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομῆσαι οὐ δύναται).[20] Thus, Paul creates some distance

[15] Conzelmann, 11.
[16] All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
[17] W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939) cited in Hurd, 196.
[18] While metempsychosis is not unknown in Greek philosophy, it generally refers to a concept more along the lines of reincarnation, rather than resurrection.
[19] 1 Cor. 15: 44. Paul here is using ψυκιός and σαρκικός (psychic and fleshy) somewhat interchangably with πνευματικός (spiritual) as the oppositional term.
[20] 1 Cor. 15:50

between the popular Greek views of the body and the particularly Christian view of the resurrection.[21]

Verse 29 appears in the middle of this chapter as one of Paul's minor arguments against the Corinthians, along with verses 31 – 34. This short excursus from the larger context of the argument is particularly puzzling to commentators, as it stands apart from the rhetoric of the chapter, and does not appear to have any other obvious references in the Pauline corpus.[22] Verse 29 stands on its own as well; it is composed of two short questions consisting of a total eighteen words, with no other immediate references in the works of Paul or the remainder of the canonical New Testament.[23]

It reads:

> Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;[24]
>
> What then will they do, those baptizing on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised up at all, why then do they baptize on their behalf?

This is the simplest reading of the text on a purely grammatical level, taking all the words with their most common literal meaning, although this reading is not without its difficulties. Almost all of the commentators examining the verse admit that, at first glance, the text reads as above, in favor of some sort of vicarious baptism. Conzelmann calls this the "normal" reading of the text.[25] Scholars are very well aware of the difficulty

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[21] For more detail see Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995)

[22] 1 Cor. 15: 32 is Paul's discussion of "fighting beasts in Ephesus" which, if the account of Paul's career and Roman citizenship in Acts is valid, would not be possible. As a result, this passage proves problematic to commentators, just as verse 29.

[23] A potential connection does exist with 1 Cor. 7:14 – ἡγίσται γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἄπιστος ἐν τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἡγίσται ἡ γυνὴ ἡ ἄπιστος ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ ἐπεὶ ἄρα τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀκάθαρτά ἐστιν, νῦν δὲ ἅγιά ἐστιν (For the unbelieving man has been made holy by his wife and the unbelieving wife has been made by the brother (husband); otherwise their children would be unclean, but now they are holy.) – insofar as both verses seem to deal with benefits being applied to one person through the agency of another. As Conzelmann states, "it looks as if holiness is crassly regarded as a thing; it is transferable, without faith (and even baptism) being necessary." Conzelmann, 121. In this passage Paul is not dealing explicitly with baptism, but with questions of marriage, and the relationship between the believing community and the world.

[24] The Nestle-Aland preferred reading ends with the word αὐτων, however there are two other main manuscript traditions: one which ends with τῶν νεκρῶν, paralleling the ending of the first question, and another which ends with αὐτῶν τῶν νεκρῶν, which is the reading found in the Chester Beatty Papyrus (p^{46}), the earliest copy we have of the letter.

[25] Conzelmann, 275. This reading of the text is far and away the most common. Some translations: "But what shall they do who have themselves baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then do they have themselves baptized for them?" Conzelmann, 263.

that 15:29, taken at face value, admits a practice rejected by the historic church, namely, vicarious (or substitutionary) baptism for the dead.

However, despite the fact that almost all commentators begin with the same reading, they often head off in very diverse directions. Conzelmann, writing in 1975, counted over two hundred different interpretations of the verse, tracing back from the modern to the patristic era, though Michael Hull suggests that "minor variations notwithstanding, there are really about forty general hypotheses."[26] While the interpreters come from various religious traditions, the impulse behind their readings of the text has often been an apologetic one. It seems that there have been three main phases we can establish in which the apologetic impulse has overridden the exegetical process: 1) the patristic era, as the church fathers and early church councils attempted to define both baptism and the relationship between the living and the dead in early Christianity[27]; 2) the Reformation, when Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others tried to reform the principles and practices of Christianity over against Roman Catholicism[28]; and 3) the modern era, as a reaction to the usage of the pericope as a proof-text for the actual practice of vicarious baptism by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Adam C. English has also divided the history of interpretation regarding this verse into three distinct eras, which correspond with the ones I have suggested. He labels his divisions "mediated," "mediation," and "unmediated."[29] English's first era, the

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" Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?" Fee, 760.
"If there is no resurrection, what will those people do who are baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are never raised, why are they baptized on their behalf?" C.K. Barrett. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 361.
"Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?" NRSV.
"Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?" NIV.
"Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" KJV.

[26] Conzelmann., 276 and Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 8.

[27] A topic Jeffrey A. Trumbower has discussed in detail in *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians is Early Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[28] This attempt to purge Catholic influence initiated an enduring Protestant resentment toward and resistance to anything smacking of ritual – a resentment they have consistently attempted to find in the New Testament itself.

[29] Adam C. English. "Mediated, mediation, unmediated: 1 Corinthians 15:29: the history of intrepretation, and the current state of biblical studies." *Review & Expositor,* Vol. 99, no. 3, Summer 2002, pgs 419 – 428.

"mediated" era, consists of the patristic/early medieval period, when, he says, "the text [15:29] was mediated to them through doctrinal lenses. The Scriptures were used and legitimated insofar as they defended orthodoxy."[30] The second era he suggests is the Reformation, where "the interpreters themselves mediate between orthodoxy and scripture."[31] In this way, he claims, Luther's doctrines of *sola gratia*, *sola fide,* and *sola scriptura* serve as the basis for approaching the text, which is forced by the interpreter, after a long process of internal debate, to conform to these doctrines.[32] The final era is the "unmediated" era, and our modern attempts to approach the text free of doctrinal biases and preconceptions. Interpreters of this era, he claims, even if they reject vicarious baptism, do so not "on the basis of theological consistency…Rather, they are based upon the unmediated text and are supported by syntax, grammar, or ancient parallels which may illuminate the text."[33] While English claims that theological concerns are no longer the primary motivating factor, it seems that one can still detect the theological concerns which lie behind scholarship even in this era of "unmediated" scholarship.[34]

For example, Fee, after affirming that the reading seems to indicate vicarious baptism, points out two problems he finds with this interpretation:

> 1) There is no historical or biblical precedent for such baptism. The NT is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that immediately follow; nor are there parallels or precedents in pagan religion. This is a genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon. …

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[30] Ibid., 421.
[31] Ibid.
[32] English's division between these periods seems somewhat contrived and unconvincing. Essentially, he is arguing that the patristic commentators had no choice but to follow orthodox views of baptism, as they operated under the strictures of the greater church. For him, the reformers, although they embraced orthodoxy in the same way, and refused to espouse unorthodox interpretations (vicarious baptism), exist in a different situation. They *chose* orthodoxy, thus "assuming the role of mediators between dissident viewpoints." Again, this distinction seems to fall flat, particularly when contrasted with English's third category. His point here regards the methodology operating in the various eras of biblical scholarship, but it seems that one could make the same arguments about the mediation process for the patristic commentators as he does for the reformers.
[33] Ibid., 424.
[34] English cites Karl Barth's interpretation of the pericope: "I should be the first to rejoice if a more satisfactory explanation of this passage in a credible manner be forthcoming; for the present I see no alternative but to leave the historically insoluble in its mysteriousness." This is not the voice of a scholar content with the obvious reading of vicarious baptism. In fact, English refers to Barth's "angst over accepting this theologically problematic explanation" and claims he was "coerced into a position that is theologically uncomfortable yet exegetically solid."

> 2) The second problem is theological and has to do with how Paul can appeal, without apparent disapproval, to a practice that stands in such contradiction to his own understanding both of justification by grace *through faith*, which always implies response on the part of the believer, and of baptism as personal response to grace received. It smacks of a "magical" view of sacramentalism of the worst kind, where a religious rite, performed for someone else, can have saving efficacy.[35]

Fee's interpretation poses a number of problems and reveals the apologetic impulse behind his interpretive stance. His first point, if true, does complicate our understanding of the pericope. However, I find ample evidence proving the existence of rituals on behalf of the dead, if not baptism, in early Christianity, late Judaism, and the larger Greco-Roman world to dispute this claim (a topic I shall address later).

Continuing Fee's objection, Joel R. White states that "if such a practice is behind our text … that would necessitate viewing the Corinthians as innovative syncretists who combined the theology of certain mysteries with the phenomena of primitive Christian religion."[36] Both of these critiques fail to appreciate how genuinely innovative baptism itself was, to say nothing of Christianity itself. Modern culture theory (particulary postcolonial critiques of the "contact zone" between cultures) would argue that any cultural encounter is "innovative" – an argument which renders the objections of Fee, White, and others somewhat moot.[37]

Fee's second point is perhaps more important for this stage of the discussion. Setting aside the issue of whether Paul approved of the rite or not, Fee claims that vicarious baptism would not fit in with Paul's sacramental theology, which he claims is based on "justification by grace *through faith*."[38] Fee himself has called attention to the Reformation-era biases he is enmeshed in. For Fee, baptism cannot function for the dead, as they would be unable to profess their faith, and therefore, in the tradition of Luther, would be unable to become members of the elect community.

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[35] Fee, 764. Emphasis original.
[36] Joel R. White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context" *Journal of Biblical Literature*: Vol. 116, No. 3. (Autumn, 1997) 487 – 499., 490.
[37] I shall return to this topic in more detail in Chapter 3.
[38] Many commentators have been able to accept that Paul could write about vicarious baptism while disapproving of the practice. In this view, the whole verse is an argument *ad hominem*, which Paul included to exemplify how illogical it would be to baptize the dead while arguing against their future resurrection. This is an easy way of side-stepping the issue, yet Fee and many others still seem compelled to tackle the pericope head on.

The doctrine of faith, not works is still an influential part of the scholarly tradition, despite English's claims to the contrary. As John Ashton pointed out in his discussion of Albert Schweitzer's *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, Schweitzer's work has received less than its due because "in taking on the whole of the Protestant establishment by denying outright that the doctrine of faith lies at the heart of Paul's theology, Schweitzer was entering a fight that he could not win."[39] *Mysticism* was published in America in 1931, and over 50 years later, Fee was still claiming that "faith" was the central element of Pauline theology.[40]

Fee's use of the term "magical" also proves telling, and serves to further reveal the biases active in his understanding. "Magic" is a highly disputed category, and Stanley J. Tambiah (among others) has rightly pointed out that much of the scholarly discussion of "magic" is informed by the Protestant tradition. "It is my submission" he states, "that this emphasis on religion as a system of beliefs and the distinction between prayer and spell, the former being associated with 'religious' behavior and the latter with 'magical' acts, was a Protestant legacy which was automatically taken over by later Victorian theorists like Tylor and Frazer…"[41] Here, Fee's terminology reflects this distinction. "Magic" exists as a polemical term, and if vicarious baptism "smacks of a 'magical' view of sacramentalism of the worst kind" the "magical" is obviously not a positive category.[42]

John D. Reaume approaches 15:29 in a similar manner, citing Fee and arguing against vicarious baptism because of "the theological problem of Paul appealing, without qualification, to a practice that implies that baptism has saving efficacy."[43] Reaume

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[39] John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 143.
[40] I realize that this view of Pauline theology is not one that is going to vanish, nor is it necessarily a minority position. However, there is a significant amount of explicitly apologetic scholarship in the field, and any attempts to perform objective scholarship must acknowledge how traditions produced by the Reformation continue to try and excise ritual and Roman Catholic practice not only from their own practice, but from the history of Christianity as well.
[41] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19. Others, most prominently J. Z. Smith, have also addressed the legacy of the Protestant Reformation in the academy. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) for more detail, as well as analysis of how 'pagan' often stands in for 'Roman Catholic' for some theorists.
[42] Fee, 764.
[43] John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, "Baptized for the Dead." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October – December 1995)., 457. Reaume raises the same objection, with slight variations in phrasing, multiple times throughout the article. His two objections to vicarious baptism are based on a lack of

claims that "vicarious baptism implies a mystical view of baptism" in which the rite itself has some effect on the practitioner.[44] The word "mystical" functions as a cipher for Fee's "magical", but Tambiah's point regarding the Protestant legacy of religious terminology still holds.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this argument is C.K. Barrett's analysis:

> The idea of vicarious baptism (which is that most naturally suggested by the words used) is usually supposed to be bound up with what some would call a high sacramental, others a magical, view of baptism. Immersion in water is supposed to operate so effectively that it matters little (it seems) what body is immersed. The immersion of a living body can secure benefits to a dead man (at any rate, a dead catechumen).[45]

Barrett claims 15:29 is an *ad hominem* argument, and concludes this discussion by claiming that the "magical" view of baptism "was not Paul's view".[46]

One further example should illustrate the apologetic motives that lie behind certain scholars' rejection of the vicarious baptism hypothesis. Bernard M. Foschini, a Franciscan priest, introduces his dissertation on 1 Cor. 15:29 in this way:

> The purpose of this volume is to attempt a solution to the very obscure passage of I Cor. 15:29 which speaks of "Baptism for the Dead." This question is of special interest in the United States since the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) is still *abusing* that text and practicing a vicarious baptism for the dead.[47]

Foschini's conclusion, after analyzing all of the variant interpretations, is that "no such 'Baptism for the dead' existed, and that it was a complete absurdity which he [Paul] fabricated," thus separating the Mormon practice from the historic church in Foschini's view.[48]

Despite his admitted anti-Mormon sentiment, Foschini has done an excellent job of listing the variant interpretations, breaking them down into four major categories: (1)

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historical parallels, and a percieved theological problem. Lest there be any doubt, Reaume defines Pauline baptism as "simply an act of faith symbolizing a believer's identifation and union with Christ in His death and resurrection" (459).

[44] Ibid., 457.

[45] Barrett, 364.

[46] Ibid. It seems that one could help flesh out some of the studies of the history of magic in the academy (e.g. Tambiah or Randall Styers) by examining 1 Cor. 15:29 as an exemplar of how offensive ritual can be to Protestant sensibilities – many scholars attempt to address 15:29 as some sort of "magical" or "mystical" practice, and something no early Christian would have done.

[47] Foschini, i. Italics mine.

[48] Foschini, 96. I will return to the Latter-Day Saints practice in the third chapter.

Baptism in the Metaphorical Sense, (2) Baptism in the Proper Sense, but not as a Sacrament, (3) Baptism Received for the Benefit of Others, and (4) Baptism for the Benefit of Those who are Baptized. He also provides a list of the specific interpretations within each category, which is far too lengthy to list here, although some of the specific interpretations will be covered shortly.

Foschini's categories are dependent both upon the way in which the verb βαπτίζω is read – as a literal baptism, as a metaphorical baptism (i.e., the washing of one's hands after coming in contact with the dead), - as well as Foschini's judgment of how well the type of baptism proposed by that interpretation falls in line with his own theological stance on what a "Proper" baptism is. As such, while his history of interpretations is quite detailed, the categories he provides are unsuited for historical-critical work.

White also breaks the interpretations into four categories, but bases his division on grammar, rather than on explicitly theological grounds. White's conclusions regarding prior interpretations may be informed by apologetic impulses, but his categorization is sound. The categories he provides are:

> (1) Those that take the verse at face value and try to offer some historical explanation for the practice of vicarious baptisms for the dead; (2) those that postulate some nonsubstantial sense for τῶν νεκρῶν; (3) those that offer some alternative meaning for the preposition ὑπέρ; and (4) those that postulate some nonliteral sense for βαπτιζόμενοι.[49]

White's first category is self-explanatory and needs no grammatical analysis. It should be noted, however, that some variation of vicarious baptism is currently the majority position, even if many of these commentators propose very specific limitations on who was counted among "the dead."[50] White's first action is to reject vicarious baptism (re-stating Fee's objections to such a practice) along with the variant interpretations.

The second category White provides deals with interpretations that take the noun τῶν νεκρῶν (commonly translated as "the dead") and attempt to argue for some other translation, often based on some creative metaphoric structure. Paul uses some form of

[49] White, 488.
[50] Fee, 766 and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "'Baptized for the Dead' (I Cor. XV, 29): A Corinthian Slogan?" *Revue Biblique* Vol. 88, no. 4 (1981) 532 – 43., 532 both identify vicarious baptism as the "majority position, and White follows suit.

the noun ὁ νεκρός thirty-four times throughout the seven undoubted letters, and thirteen of those occur in 1 Cor. 15.[51] Of these, the majority are included in direct arguments for the resurrection of the dead, such as 1 Cor. 15:13:

> εἰ δὲ ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν, οὐδὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται
> And if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither was Christ raised.

Commentators do not disagree with this use of νεκρῶν, as it is a completely obvious reading. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* entry for νεκρός claims "as a subst.[antive] νεκρός means the dead as distinct from the living."[52] νεκρός can be used adjectivally, but Paul's use of the definite article precludes this usage. Also, reading νεκρός as "the dead" does not conflict with commonly held Christian theology regarding the afterlife or the soul, and as such, poses no problems to the apologetic interpreter. However, some commentators, faced with the problem of 15:29, will attempt to read in some other meaning for νεκρῶν, or to posit that Paul originally wrote some other phrase, which has since disappeared from every manuscript, or which only appears in one or two late manuscripts and is more likely a product of deliberate scribal insertion. One of these attempts is John O'Neill's rendering of the text as ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν [σωμάτων] or, "on behalf of their dying bodies" with σομάτων as the inferred/ellided object of ὑπὲρ.[53]

Foschini provides additional creative interpretations, two of which I shall highlight. The first is H. Müller's 1665 hypothesis that "by *tous nekrous*…we must certainly understand in this place *tous koimethentas en Christo* of v. 18…The preposition *hyper* is to be understood in a defensive sense…*Those persons are baptized for the dead, then, who by their baptism defend the dead* in their belief in a blessed resurrection."[54] This substition has no apparent basis in the manuscipt tradition, and Foschini rightly rejects it. The second proposal Foschini terms "The Mortification of the Passions" citing J. Alber that "those are baptized for the dead who put on the likeness of a man who has died to self and in whom the old man is crucified so that henceforth he may no longer live

[51] There are sixteen occurances of ὁ νεκρός in Romans, thirteen in 1 Corinthians, one in 2 Corinthians, one in Galatians, two in 1 Thessalonians, one in Phillipians, and none in Philemon.
[52] Rudolph Bultmann, "νεκρός" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Freidrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). Vol. VII, 893.
[53] J.C. O'Neill. "1 Corinthians 15:29" *Expository Times*, XCI, 1980, pp. 310-311.
[54] Foschini, 44. First ellipsis mine, second and third ellipses Foschini's.

to himself but to God." Again this is an incredible leap from νεκρός meaning "dead" to νεκρός being a metaphor for the believer's mental state.

Paul's use of ὁ νεκρός is consistent throughout his letters, and there is no reason, based solely on the text, to posit some other meaning for the noun in this occurrence, and nowhere else, unless one is operating from a theological presupposition that Paul cannot possibly mean vicarious baptism of dead people. In the end, therefore, we must assume that when Paul refers to "the dead" that is all he means, and that the reference is neither to the living Corinthian congregation, to Paul himself, or to any of the other proposed variant readings.[55]

White's third category includes those interpretations that suggest some alternate meaning for the preposition ὑπέρ. One of the more famous interpretations in this category is Martin Luther's – he proposed that ὑπέρ be viewed in a locative and not an attributive sense, and thus the Corinthians were being baptized literally "over the dead" in graveyards. John Chrysostom's interpretation/translation – "baptized for the dead" – also relies on an inaccurate rendering of ὑπέρ and as Foschini notes, Chrysostom's reputation lent this rendering a disproportionate amount of influence.[56]

According to the Liddell and Scott lexicon, ὑπέρ has three possible meanings when it is followed by the genitive: I. of Place; *over, above* II. Metaphorically, from the notion of standing over to protect; *for, for defence of, in behalf of,* and III. Like περι; *on, of, concerning*.[57] White asserts that ὑπέρ has lost its locative sense long before Paul wrote, citing Mathias Rissi's *Der Taufe für die Toten: Ein Beitrag für Paulinsichen Tauflehre*. Foschini also reject's Luther's interpretation, claiming that, as there is no historical evidence to support baptism over graves in Pauline Christianity, we cannot claim that to be the practice. This rejection does not work for our purposes, as we are arguing for vicarious baptism despite a similar dearth of historical evidence. More

[55] White's rendering of the verse claims that τῶν νεκρῶν is a reference to the apostles; he ties Paul's claim to "die every day" in 1 Cor. 15:31 to 15:29, making the whole section from verse 29 to verse 34 into one unit, rather than a series of disconnected arguments. White does not account for the fact that "the apostles" has not been mentioned as a prior referent anywhere near verse 29, and that, as the letter was read aloud to the Corinthians, they would have had no reason to assume that τῶν νεκρῶν was anything other than what it immediately sounds like.
[56] Foschini, 65.
[57] H. G. Liddell and R. Scott. *Greek – English Lexicon: With A Revised Supplement.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996*).*

convincingly, Foschini provides an additional grammatical rejection of this interpretation, claiming that "neither St. Paul nor any other New Testament writer ever uses the preposition *hyper* governing the genitive to indicate the place 'above, over which,'" which is in line with Rissi's claim.[58]

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament also lists a number of possible translations for ὑπέρ, but ultimately claims that, "in all probability, the word has the representative sense in Paul's saying about baptism for the dead," following this with the note that "none of the attempts to escape the theory of a vicarious baptism in primitive Christianity seems to be wholly successful."[59]

Ὑπέρappears in the undoubted Pauline epistles approximately seventy-five times, ten of which are in 1 Corinthians, three of these in chapter 15, and two of which occur in verse 29.[60] Both Rissi and the *Theological Dictionary* appear to be on target, and I see no compelling reason to argue for any reading other than the obvious for ὑπέρ, apart from an apologetic desire to separate Paul from some sort of vicarious baptism.

White's fourth category consists of those interpretations which posit some other meaning for βαπτιζόμενοι. Many of Foschini's categorizations would fall within this one category of White's, as Foschini concerns himself with how well the proposed interpretation fits within the orthodox Catholic understanding of baptism. Analyzing this category is also more difficult than the previous three from a grammatical standpoint, as the word βαπτίζω (or some variant thereof) appears only thirteen times in the Pauline corpus, with the overwhelming majority of these occurring in 1 Corinthians.[61] With this smaller sample size, it becomes much more difficult to establish a consistent usage of the word.

C.K. Barrett, however, is willing to take such a step. He claims: "*Baptized*, without further explanation, can hardly have any other than its normal Pauline

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[58] Foschini, 86.
[59] Harald Reisenfeld, "ὑπέρ" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Freidrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). Vol. VIII, 512.
[60] Seventeen times in Romans, ten in 1 Corinthians, thrity-four in 2 Corinthians, four in Galatians, seven in Phillipians, twice in 1 Thessalonians, and five times in Philemon.
[61] Twice in Romans, ten times in 1 Corinthians, and once in Galatians. The other four epistles do no use the word.

meaning."[62] White quotes this passage approvingly, and although his interpretation relies on reading τῶν νεκρῶν metaphorically, he posits baptism in the traditional sense. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* concurs: "The NT…uses βαπτίζω only in the cultic sense, infrequently of Jewish washings…and otherwise in the technical sense 'to baptize.' This usage shows that baptism is felt to be something new and strange."[63]

At least two additional categories of interpretation exist: the first are those that attempt to avoid vicarious baptism through creative re-punctuation.[64] Perhaps the most famous of these is Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's proposal that 15:29 is actual a Corinthian slogan denigrating Paul's work which Paul used to further his own argument. Murphy-O'Connor suggests that the verse can be paraphrased as: "Supposing that there is no resurrection from the dead, will they continue to work, those who are being destroyed on account of an inferior class of believers who are dead to true wisdom? …If those who are really dead are not raised, why indeed are they being destroyed on their account?"[65] White, inspired by Murphy-O'Connor (though not convinced by his analysis), suggests that the pericope only makes sense in the context of vv. 29 – 34 taken as a whole. He ties Paul's claim to "die every day" in 1 Cor. 15: 31 to 15:29, and claims τῶν νεκρῶν is actually a reference to "the apostles." White's ultimate rendering of the verse is: "Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized on account on the dead (that is, the dead, figuratively speaking; that is, the apostles)? For if truly dead persons are not raised, why at all are people being baptized on account of them (that is, the apostles)?"[66] Both White and Murphy-O'Connor attempt to make more sense out of the verse by combining verses 29 and 31, and the reading of τῶν νεκρῶν as related to "the apostles" makes some sense in this context. However, this reading has the effect of isolating the passage even

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[62] Barrett, 362.

[63] Albrecht Oepke, "βάπτω" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Freidrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). Vol. I, 530. Note again that vicarious baptism would have been no newer and stranger than 'normal' baptism.

[64] A category also identified by Patrick E. James, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: 'Baptized for the Dead' in 1 Corinthians 15.29." *New Testament Studies* (2006).

[65] Murphy-O'Connor, 542. Murphy-O'Connor relies on a metaphoric translation of βαπτιζόμενοι (those being destroyed) and of νεκρῶν (the apostles), but the crux of his argument is the assumption that the first part of the phrase is not the words of Paul, but rather a slogan of his opponents. By separating the two parts of the verse into two distinct phrases, Murphy-O'Connor believes he has solved the grammatical difficulties of his creative translation. As White argues: "If an inherently unlikely rendering rests on an unlikely presupposition, neither for that reason suddenly becomes likely." White, 493.

[66] White, 494.

further from the rest of the letter. "The apostles" has not appeared as a referent since verse 9, and "the dead" (with the normal meaning) has appeared a number of times between the two. There would be no reason for those reading the letter, to assume that Paul has suddenly shifted meaning, and this reading is overly complex, given the simplicity of the words being used.

Foschini also relies on re-punctuation; he suggests (following Dürselen) that there should be a question mark after οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι and then places another after βαπτίζονται. Thus, for Foschini, the verse would read as:

> Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι; ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται; ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;

He translates this as: "Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? for the dead? (that is, are they baptized to belong to, to be numbered among the dead, who are never to rise again)? Indeed, if the dead do not rise again at all, why are people baptized? For them? that is, are they baptized to be numbered among the dead who are never to rise again?"[67] None of these proposals have been successful in avoiding the vicarious baptism hypothesis, as they all introduce unnecessary complications and may increase the gulf between the pericope and the rest of the letter.

The second additional category is what might be termed the "nuclear option" – removing the offending passage (and the following verses) from the letter entirely. William O. Walker has proposed that 1 Corinthians 15: 29 – 34 is an "interpolation, neither composed by Paul, nor included by him in his Corinthian letter."[68] Walker bases his argument on the lack of context for these verses, as well as the vocabulary used and the "content" of the verses.[69] Walker concludes that:

> (1) The text speaks, without disapproval, of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead. (2) It is highly unlikely, however, that Paul would have approved of such a practice. Therefore, (3) the text is most likely non-Pauline in origin. In short, it is

[67] Foschini, 93. Foschini claims that this rendering of the passage is "more simple and more probable than any other" (*ibid.*), even though he is opting to translate ὑπὲρ as "for", a reading that has already been addressed.

[68] William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29 – 34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation." *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 69, no. 1, January 2007, pgs 84 – 103., 84. Walker's arguments concerning verses 30 – 34 are beyond the scope of this analysis, and will not be addressed in great detail.

[69] "Content" serves Walker as a cipher for "theology" at this point. Walker's concerns with vocabulary are based on the number of NT *hapax legomena* and otherwise uncommon phrases that occur in this section. None of these occur in verse 29, however.

> my judgment that the reference to baptism on behalf of the dead constitutes a very strong argument against Pauline authorship of 1 Cor. 15:29.[70]

Because of a later Marcionite practice of vicarious baptism (which shall be addressed in the following chapter) and the fact that Marcion included 15:29 – 34 in his version of 1 Corinthians, Walker suggests that perhaps "1 Cor. 15:29 may have been inserted into Paul's Corinthian letter by a Marcionite or proto-Marcionite interpolator in order to provide apostolic warrant for the practice [of vicarious baptism]."[71] Removing the troublesome passage from the Pauline corpus, and suggesting it was inserted by Marcionites is a tactic that both solves a theological problem, and eliminates one of the potential parallels that would illuminate such a practice in Corinth. For Walker, Marcionite vicarious baptism is not a parallel to that in Corinth, but in fact, the practice which actually lies behind the text. To the best of my knowledge, Walker is alone in this claim, and as I have stated above, I am following majority opinion in arguing for the compositional unity of 1 Corinthians 15 as we have it.

Analyzing the verse grammatically only reinforces the first impulse one has upon viewing the text. Paul is referring to a practice of vicarious baptism, though he doesn't say much about it – other than to point out the inherent inconsistencies between the Corinthians' practices and their attitude toward the resurrection. Grammatical and punctuational issues however, are only the first objections to the verse. While some are willing to concede that the verse may appear to be talking about vicarious baptism, the lack of evidence for the practice historically serves as an argument against any such practice.

I admit there is a lack of information regarding the practice, which is why the interpretation of the verse has been so difficult. However, this does not mean we must argue against the vicarious baptism hypothesis, only that we cannot be certain of it. One possible solution, which I shall examine in the next section, is to draw on evidence available from the Hellenistic world regarding rituals performed "on behalf of the dead." It is my contention that, in fact, a wealth of historical evidence relevant to vicarious baptismal practice does exist.

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[70] Ibid., 95.
[71] Ibid., 103.

The Hellenistic Context

As we have seen, 1 Corinthians 15:29 has inspired controversy and confusion for centuries. The simplest (and most obvious) reading of the verse is as a reference to some form of vicarious baptism. Despite this, exegetical creativity has run rampant. I have addressed the various interpretations of the passage that have been proposed, both in general categories that encompass multiple interpretations as well as a few of the more interesting interpretations on their own. None of the various interpretations based on exegesis of the verse has been proven. The burden of proof lies on those who reject the natural reading of the verse – theological presuppositions about what Paul can or cannot mean are insufficient justifications to reject the possibility that vicarious baptism was practiced in Corinth. There is no reason, based on the text or our knowledge of early Christian practice, to doubt that Paul is referring to some form of vicarious baptism, though he only mentions it to point out inconsistencies in the Corinthians' theology (denying the reality of the resurrection while simultaneously baptizing on behalf of the dead).

However, scholars continue to privilege the verse. For example, Gordon Fee, despite acknowledging that "it would be fair to add that this reading is such a plain understanding of the Greek text that no one would ever have imagined the various alternatives were it not for the difficulties involved…" lists two reasons he cannot support the vicarious baptism hypothesis:

> 1) There is no historical or biblical precedent for such baptism. The NT is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that immediately follow; nor are there parallels or precedents in pagan religion. This is a genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon. …
> 2) The second problem is theological and has to do with how Paul can appeal, without apparent disapproval, to a practice that stands in such contradiction to his own understanding both of justification by grace *through faith*, which always implies response on the part of the believer, and of baptism as personal response to grace received. It smacks of a "magical" view of sacramentalism of the worst kind, where a religious rite, performed for someone else, can have saving efficacy.[1]

[1] Fee, 764. Emphasis original. This passage is worth re-stating in its entirety, as it is one of the most concise arguments against vicarious baptism. Note that for Fee, the "difficulties involved" are primarily theological, and have little or no basis in the text.

I have already addressed Fee's second claim; his first will require a more in-depth analysis.

Many commentaries assume that in the absence of a clear parallel, a practice must be dismissed as inconceivable, and that, even if one grants that vicarious baptism was taking place in Corinth, it must have been some entirely alien and unfathomable practice. In his analysis of the passage, Joel R. White claims:

> One searches in vain for any independent historical or biblical parallel to the practice of baptism for the dead. While we have evidence of many customs and rituals that were designed to influence the fate of the deceased, none of them involved baptism; they differ, in other words precisely at the crucial point. If such a practice is behind our text, it would be "a genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon" [citing Fee] that would necessitate viewing the Corinthians as innovative syncretists who combined the theology of certain mysteries with the phenomena of primitive Christian religion, a view that seems difficult to square with other evidence.[2]

Again, note that approaching early Christianity as a hybrid religious tradition (addressed in the following chapter) removes entirely this sort of obstacle to understanding 15:29. White has defined "parallel" in a narrow manner – he acknowledges the existence of "customs and rituals…to influence the fate of the deceased" but rules them out instantly as being too different to serve as points of comparison. What White and many others fail to mention is that baptism itself was an innovation: the practice had very little historical precedent, at least in the form and function we find in Christian circles.[3] Thus, baptism for the dead would have been no stranger than baptism itself. I contend that the practice is not as "idiosyncratic" as Fee claims, and that there is, in fact, a wealth of information from around the Hellenistic world that, while not providing an *exact* parallel of the type White wishes, establishes a long-standing cultural predisposition toward ritual contact between the living and the dead, in which (among other things) rituals conducted by the living can affect the status of the dead.

There is enough evidence for this cultural predisposition from throughout the Hellenic and Hellenistic worlds, to warrant a more detailed examination of the various

[2] White, 490. I will return to White's claims of "syncretism" in the third chapter
[3] For more on baptism as innovation, see Meeks, 152 – 3.

parallels produced (and often dismissed) by commentators. The first (and most commonly cited) is a passage from Plato's *Republic* (c. 380 BCE), discussed by Erwin Rohde, Albert Schweitzer, and others:

> βίβλων δὲ ὅμαδον παρέχονται Μουσαίου καὶ Ὀρφέως, Σελήνης τε καὶ Μουσῶν ἐγγόνων, ὥς φασι, καθ' ἃς θυηπολοῦσιν, πείθοντες οὐ μόνον ἰδιώτας ἀλλὰ καὶ πόλεις, ὡς ἄρα λύσεις τε καὶ καθαρμοὶ ἀδικημάτων διὰ θυσιῶν καὶ παιδιᾶς ἡδονῶν εἰ σὶ μὲν ἔτι ζῶσιν, εἰ σὶ δὲ καὶ τελευτήσασιν, ἃς δὴ τελετὰς καλοῦσιν, αἳ τῶν ἐκεῖ κακῶν ἀπολύουσιν ἡμᾶς, μὴ θύσαντας δὲ δειν ὰ περιμένει.[4]
>
> And they produce a throng(?) of books of Musaeus and Orpheus, the descendant of the Moon and the Muses, as they say, and they hold sacrificial liturgies according to the books, persuading not only the private man, but also the states, that there are modes of absolution and purification of wrongs through sacrifices and the pleasure of play while yet living, and there are also [rites for] those having died, which they call rites [initiations?], which will release us from evil things there, and terrible things await those not sacrificing.

The passage is part of a discussion on the nature of justice, and is given as an example of unjust behavior, for rather than living justly, one may live an unjust life and have these rites performed after death in order to atone for it. Plato tends to criticize the actions and beliefs of the masses, which may hint that these vicarious "initiations" were common enough to draw Plato's ire.

Schweitzer also mentions an excerpt from an Orphic fragment, roughly contemporaneous with Plato, which he cites as a possible ritual for the dead.

> ὄργια τ' ἐκτελέσουσι, λύσιν προγόνων ἀθεμίστων μαιόμενοι.[5]
>
> And they perform these rites seeking the release of lawless ancestors.

Erwin Rohde claims that this vicarious purification is "a conception that is quite unique in ancient religion."[6] Presumably the rites are being performed by the living with the

[4] Plato, *Republic*. James Adam, Editor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) Book II 364 E – 365 A.

[5] Albertus Bernabé (ed.), *Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia et fragmenta Poetae Epici Graeci. Pars II. Fasc I. Biblioteca Teubneriana.* (München/Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2004). 350 F (232 K) Damascius in Plato, *Phaedra* 1.11. Cited in Schweitzer, 284.

[6] Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1925)., 344. Rohde does admit further evidence (358 n. 66) in the form of the *Republic* citation above and a selection from the *Rig Veda* before claming that "religious pietism seems to produce the same effects everywhere." I would argue that this conception is hardly unique – there are a

intent of altering the status of the dead in the afterlife, as posthumous justice in the afterlife was a standard part of Orphic doctrine.

One possible parallel that no commentator provides is that of the Bacchic gold tablets found at Pelinna (c. 4th century BCE.). Most of these are short passages buried with initiates into the Bacchic mysteries, containing advice and passphrases for the proper path to the afterlife.[7] Sarah Iles Johnston cites a claim by Fritz Graf that some of these tablets may have been "placed in the mouths of the deceased, as if to make them "speak" the words of an initiation ceremony after death that they failed to speak while alive."[8] While the Pelinna tablet was placed on the breast of the deceased, Graf brings some of the Cretan tablets to our attention, noting that they "have an ellipsoid shape, and Yannis Tzifopoulos has made a convincing case that they were put on the lips of the buried bodies: the inscribed tablet, as a proxy in the true sense of the word, graphically preserves the ability to talk that the lifeless body has lost."[9] Whether this hypothesis is true or not, the Pelinna tablets, provide an example of information, along with milk and wine, being ritually transferred to the deceased.[10]

A fourth parallel is provided by Schweitzer and others, from the Second Book of Maccabees, discussing Judas Maccabaeus [2 Mac. 12:39-45]:

> On the next day, as had now become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to take them back to lie with their kindred in the sepulchers of their ancestors. Then under the tunic of each one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to

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number of myths involving a sacrifice by the living to release the dead from the underworld in one way or another (see Tammuz or Persephone) – though they are too far off-topic for the present inquiry.

[7] There have been two recent surveys of the Bacchic gold tablets published in English. See: Alberto Bernabé and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Intructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets.* (Boston: Brill, 2008). Trans. Michael Chase.; and Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. (New York: Routledge, 2007.)

[8] Sarah Iles Johnston. *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999) 55 n. 53. The Graf citation comes from a paper that was unpublished in 1999 that I have been unable to track down – it may still be unpublished.

[9] Graf and Johnston, 162. Graf notes that "this seems a local variation, due to an innovative initiator, and it never left the one corner of Greece where these texts were produced." For more information on these epistomatic tablets, see Yannis Z. Tzifopoulos. *"Paradise Earned": The "Bacchic-Orphic" Gold Lamellae from Crete*. (Forthcoming.) Thanks to Sarah Iles Johnston for this suggestion.

[10] Bernabé and Cristóbal, 62.

> keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.[11]

This selection provides a significant parallel not only to 1 Cor. 15:29, but also to 1 Cor. 15 as a whole. The major point of both is the importance of the resurrection, and just as 15:29 argues that baptism on behalf of the dead is absurd if one does not believe in the resurrection, so too, according to the author, does Judas Maccabeus prove the importance of the resurrection by praying for the dead, and providing a sin offering for their deliverance. The Septuagint uses ὑπὲρ νεκρῶν εὔχεσθαι for "to pray for the dead" which could comfortably be translated "to pray on behalf of the dead", providing yet another potential parallel to 1 Cor. 15:29. The Maccabean passage is admittedly not a baptism, so in that sense White is correct, but again, baptism was itself an innovation. We should not expect exact historical attestations, but rather, similar practices, which this certainly seems to be. Significantly, this passage also provides evidence of a cultural predisposition toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead occurring in a Jewish, rather than a Greek, cultic context.

Another example of a parallel ritual "on behalf of" the dead, comes from an inscription recorded by Josef Zingerle:

> Μεγάλε Μήτηρ Ἀνεῖτις. Ἀπολλώνιος Μηνοδώρου ὑπὲρ Διονυσίου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, ἐπεὶ κατελούσετο καὶ οὐκ ἐτήρησε τὴν προθεσμίαν τῆς θεοῦ, ἀπετελέσατο αὐτόν.[12]
>
> "Great Mother Aneitis! Apollonious of Menodorus on behalf of his brother Dionysius, when he washed himself and did not keep the appointment of the goddess, paid his dues himself."

The inscription comes from a set of Lydian-Phrygian reconciliation inscriptions, dating from 57 – 263 CE. In this case, Dionysius was seen to have been killed by the goddess

[11] 2 Maccabees 12:39 – 45. NRSV.
[12] Conzelmann, 276, n. 116.

Aneitis, and his brother Apollonius completed the purification ritual on his behalf.[13] This inscription is also noteworthy for its parallel use of ὑπὲρ, though we should take care not to read too much into the use of a common preposition. Here again we see a reference to "washing" which was one of the variant translations often proposed for βαπτιζόμενοι in 1 Cor. 15:29 (discussed in Chapter 1).

Jeffrey A. Trumbower provides further evidence of a cultural predisposition toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead in *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Chrisitanity*. Trumbower analyzes the fictional tale of Thecla and Falconilla from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the historical martyr Perpetua's posthumous salvation of her brother Dinocrates as recounted in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas.*[14] The first text is an apocryphal work which was most likely compiled in the middle of the second century.[15] In the relevant portion of the tale, Thecla has been sentenced to death in the arena for 'sacrilege' (ἱερόσυλος) and is given into the temporary care of a rich pagan woman named Trypheana. That night, Trypheana's dead daughter Falconilla appeared to her in a dream, and said: "Mother, you shall have the abandoned stranger Thecla in my stead, in order that she might pray on my behalf and I might be transferred to the place of the righteous (μεταθετῶ εἰς τῶν δικαίων τόπον)."[16] This section of the tale concludes with Thecla saved by the beasts and set free, Tryphaena and her slaves converted to Christianity, and Falconilla saved (she now gets to "live forever").[17]

The tale of Thecla and Falconilla provides an example of prayer for the pagan dead apparently being successful in transferring them to the realm of the Christian dead –

[13] For more detail on these inscriptions, see most recently Aslak Rostad, "Human Trangression – Divine Retribution: A Study of Religious Transgressions and Punishments in Greek Cultic Regulations and Lydian-Phrygian Reconciliation Inscriptions" (Ph.D. diss., University of Bergen, 2006). For the inscription discussed, see Rostad, 195. Rostad provides a thorough bibliography in his dissertation.
[14] Trumbower's main concern is with the salvation of the non-Christian deceased, and he follows Rissi's argument that 1 Cor. 15:29 concerns the vicarious baptism of catechumens who died before they were baptized – and as such, he dismisses 15:29 as not directly relevant to his thesis (Trumbower, 36). I am not persuaded by Rissi's argument; however, this does not matter for my argument. I believe all of Trumbower's evidence for the posthumous salvation of non-Christians only reinforces my argument for a cultural predisposition toward interaction between the living and the dead.
[15] Trumbower, 58. Though the story of Theclas may have had an independent origin, the version we currently have was excerpted from the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* and circulated on its own.
[16] Ibid., 61. Translation by Trumbower.
[17] Ibid., 67. Quoted from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 29

Falconilla is now (presumably) able to participate in the resurrection. This is, admittedly, a fictional example that certainly was written after 1 Corinthians, and does not provide a direct parallel for vicarious baptism of the dead. It does, however, help establish that this cultural belief in the possibility of interaction between the living and the dead helped shape the literature of early Christianity.

The second example is that of the historical martyr Perpetua. Vibia Perpetua was a young, wealthy Roman citizen of Carthage (possibly widowed) with an infant son who was arrested as a catechumen, along with two slaves, two other catechumens, and their teacher, Saturus. The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* was compiled shortly after her death, possibly by Tertullian, and contains first-person excerpts supposedly by Perpetua and Saturus.[18] She was baptized in prison, and shortly after, began to have "prophetic" dreams. The two dreams relevant to this study concern her dead pagan brother, Dinocrates:

> I saw Dinocrates coming out of a dark hole, where there were many others with him, very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face was the wound he had when he died… There was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other. Where Dinocrates stood there was a pool full of water; and its rim was higher than the child's height, so that Dinocrates had to stretch himself up to drink. I was very sorry that, though the pool had water in it, Dinocrates could not drink because of the height of the rim. Then I woke up, realizing that my brother was suffering.[19]

Both Trumbower and Joyce Salisbury point out how much Perpetua's vision was shaped by her religious and cultural background (specifically by texts such as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the Gospel of Luke, among others).[20] After this first vision, Perpetua devotes her time in prison to praying for her brother, leading to her second dream:

> I saw the same spot that I had seen before, but there was Dinocrates all clean, well dressed, and refreshed. I saw a scar where the wound had been; and the pool that I had seen before now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist. And Dinocrates kept drinking water from it, and there above the rim was a golden bowl full of water. And Dinocrates drew close and began to drink from it, and yet

[18] Ibid., 76.
[19] Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman.* (New York: Routledge, 1997.), 105. Both Trumbower and Salisbury use Musurillo's translation: H. Musurillo, trans. *The Acts of the Chriistian Martyrs.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.)
[20] Salisbury, 105; Trumbower, 81.

> the bowl remained full. And when he had drunk enough of the water, he began to play as children do. Then I awoke, and I realized that he had been delivered from his suffering.[21]

While Perpeuta does not explicitly say that Dinocrates has been baptized (the water in the dream quenches thirst, and does not appear to have been a baptismal reference), and it is not entirely clear what "delivered from his suffering" entails (after all, he is still in the same place, presumably not with the Christian dead in heaven), Perpetua seems to have believed her brother would now be able to participate in the resurrection.

Again, this story postdates Paul; Perpetua was probably martyred on March 7, 203 (possibly 202 or 204) as part of games celebrating the emporer Geta's birthday, and again, this is not the exact parallel which Fee is searching for. This story was, however, quite popular. Tertullian and Augustine both made use of Perpetua in their arguments about the status of the dead. By the time of Constantine, there was an official feast of Perpetua, and as Trumbower claims: "Perpetua and her companion Saturus turn up on a fourth-century Christian sarcophagus from Spain, and Perpetua is featured in sixth-century mosaics from San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna and the basilica of Perenzo, further indications of the importance of her story in late antiquity."[22] Again, I would argue that this helps establish the existence of a belief in the efficacy of actions of the living affecting the status of the dead.

In addition to the prior parallels, Conzelmann provides a final point of reference – a quotation from Chrysostom (c. 380 CE) regarding an earlier custom of the Marcionites:

> ἐπειδὰν γάρ κατεχούμενος ἀπέλθῃ παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς, τὸν ζῶντα ὑπὸ τὴν κλίνην τοῦ τελευτητόκος κρύψαντες, προσίασι τῷ νεκρῷ καὶ διαλέγονται καὶ πυνθάνονται, εἰ βούλοιτο λαβεῖν τὸ βάπτισμα. εἶτα ἐκείνου μηδὲν ἀποκριωομένου ὁ κεκρυμμένος κάτωθεν ἀντ᾽ ἐκείνου φησὶν ὅτι δὴ βούλοιτο βαπτισθῆναι. καὶ οὕτω βαπτίζουσιν αὐτὸν ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀπελθόντος.[23]
>
> "For when one of the Catechumens departs from among them, having concealed one of the living under the couch of the deceased, they approach the corpse, and talk and ask if he wishes to receive baptism. And when he does not answer, the

[21] Murusillo, 117. Trumbower translates the final *poena* as 'penalty' rather than 'suffering'.
[22] Trumbower, 77.
[23] Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistula I ad Corinthios*. 40.1. Note that this is the practice Walker believes was the inspiration for 1 Cor. 15:29.

> one concealed below says in his place, that he wishes to be baptized. And in this way, they will baptize him in place of the one having departed."

This is, of course, a later practice, and cannot be conclusively tied to the events in Corinth. It does, however, problematize Fee's claim that there are no attestations to the practice of vicarious baptism in the Greek world or in the early Church. Fee has sidestepped this issue by limiting his claim to "orthodox Christian communities" which excludes the Marcionites. However the question of which came first, the orthodox belief or the heretical belief, is not as simple as Fee would have it.[24] Note as well that the Marcionites could be considered "hyper-Paulinists", intensely concerned with Paul and his thought, as they were, in many ways, the early Christian group most closely related to Paul's legacy.

Trumbower provides a number of other examples from early Christianity and the rest of the ancient Mediterranean world which provide evidence for a concern with the salvation (or at least, improving the status) of the dead. The Jewish and Early Christian sources include: 2 Maccabees 12: 39 – 45 (discussed above); 1 Cor. 5:5 (in which Paul responds to rumors of a man who "has his father's wife" by ordering the Corinthians to "hand him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord")[25]; Romans 11:32 (Paul's claim that God will show mercy to all – Trumbower cites this as one example of promises of "universal salvation" in the NT); I Peter 3: 19 – 20 and 4: 6 (which relate the story of Jesus proclaiming the gospel to the dead); *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Similitude* 9.16 1 – 7 (in which 40 "apostles and teachers" died and then baptized the dead in the afterlife); the *Epistula Apostolorum* 27 (in which Christ baptizes the righteous dead); and finally, the *Apocalypse of Peter* 14: 1 – 4 and *Sibylline Oracles* 2: 330 – 38 (in which God promises to give unto the chosen "whomsoever they shall ask me for" (ὅν ἐάν αἰ τήσωνται), out of torment").[26]

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[24] For a discussion of the nature of 'orthodoxy' as opposed to 'heresy', see Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1996)

[25] This passage is, along with 15:29, one of the most disputed and unclear references in 1 Corinthians, and one which also causes discomfort for many apologetic commentators.

[26] These are found in Trumbower, 27, 35, 39, 44, 48, 48, and 50, respectively. The *Sibylline Oracles* pericope is a paraphrase of the *Apocalypse*. Trumbower notes that this text was revised at some point between the older Greek fragment and the translation into Ethiopic: "This much is certain: the earlier version of the text, originating in the second century, envisioned the posthumous salvation of at least some…a subsequent copyist or translator found this idea objectionable and expunged it as best he could."

From the rest of the Mediterranean world, Trumbower cites: *Republic* Book II: 364 E – 365 A (discussed above) as well as two re-statements of the same argument later in the *Republic*); the gold tablets from Pelinna (also mentioned above); epitaphs which call the living to give to the dead in some way; and evidence of feeding tubes from grave sites.[27] Both the epitaphs and feeding tubes are connected to a long Greek (and Roman) tradition of maintaining communion with the dead. According to Walter Burkert, among the Greeks:

> the honouring of the deceased is incorporated into the general celebrations with which the city honours its dead every year: days of the dead, *nekysia*, or days of the forefathers, *genasia*. On such days the graves are adorned, offerings are made, special food is eaten, and it is said that the dead come up and go about in the city. The offerings for the dead are pourings, *choai*: barley, broth, milk, honey, frequently wine, and especially oil, as well as the blood of sacrificed animals; there are also simple libations of water, which is why there is talk of the bath of the dead…As the libations seep in to the earth, so, it is believed, contact with the dead is established and prayers can reach them. The sinking of tubes into the earth in order to feed the buried corpse quite literally, is a rare offshoot of the funerary ritual.[28]

Burkert also discusses the hero cult in Greece, which shares many features of the tendance of the familial dead. Heroes, much like the dead, are perceived as being spatially tied to the gravesite, and hero cult is "conceived as the chthonic counterpart to the worship of the gods, and is attended by blood sacrifices, food offerings, and libations."[29]

> J. M. Toynbee provides evidence of a similar custom among the Romans:
>
> Throughout the year there were occasions on which the dead were commemorated by funerary meals eaten at the tomb by their relatives and friends – on their birthdays and when the annual festivals for the dead were celebrated…At all of these banquets, as at those held at the time of a death, the departed had their share set apart from them. Their disembodies spirits, it was thought, could somehow partake of the fare with which they were provided and, indeed, be nourished through the medium of their bones or ashes…Hence the fact that graves, whether for inhumation or for cremation, with holes or pipes through which food and drink could be poured directly on to the burial (*profusio*), so as to reach the remains, are a not uncommon feature of cemeteries in very diverse areas of the Roman world.[30]

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[27] Ibid, 23, 25, 14, and 16.
[28] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 194.
[29] Ibid., 205.
[30] J.M. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 51.

These are very old customs – Toynbee mentions graveside feasts at pre-Roman Etruscan graves, and funereal feasts and offerings to the dead are a staple of Homeric literature, at the latest.

Trumbower also provides two much later examples –St. Gregory's prayer for the emperor Trajan, and St. Patrick's resurrection and baptism of a dead pagan.[31] Taken together, these examples, as well as those previously listed, provide evidence of a cultural concern with the welfare of the dead, one deeply embedded in Greek thought prior to Paul, shared by the early Christian community, and still a matter of concern long after Paul's death. These concerns are hardly limited to the Greeks, Hellenistic or otherwise, and exist not only with Paul and the Corinthians, but since prehistoric times.

While very few of the potential parallels are roughly contemporaneous with 1 Corinthians, there does seem to have been a climate of concern for the status of the dead in the Hellenistic world. A short examination of what actually *was* done with the dead in Corinth reinforces this original impression. As Sarah Iles Johnston tells us, "every detail in which a culture cloaks its ideas about the dead has the potential to reveal something about the living."[32] In the case of the Corinthians, the manner in which they treat the bodies of the dead may reveal their level of concern for the well-being of the spirits of the dead.

Perhaps the simplest approach to this problem is to begin with the Roman-era cemeteries in Corinth, as those will get us to within a hundred years or so of Paul, and provide evidence contemporaneous with the beginnings of the church in Corinth. Both Mary Hoskins Walbank and Christine Thomas have analyzed burials in Roman Corinth. Thomas claims that cremations appear in Corinth only in the Roman period, though not in any large numbers, and that, while "the coming of Rome to Corinth is accompanied by the introduction of a completely different mode of disposing of the body…this is

[31]Trumbower, 144, 149. In the Gregory story, Gregory's prayers are powerful enough to save Trajan (in the Greek version, Trajan's soul was baptized by Gregory's tears) but Gregory is warned by God not to attempt this sort of action again.
[32] Johnston, ix.

unremarkable."[33] Cremation, she claims, was the normal practice for all but the poorest of Romans, those who could not afford the fuel with which to burn the corpse.[34] However, in Corinth the majority of the burials are inhumations, which is more in line with Greek practice.[35]

Walbank provides a detailed examination of seven chamber tombs and about sixty- five single graves from the area just north of the old city (an excerpt from a much larger archaeological survey). The area in question, she surmises, was outside the *pomerium*, the ritual boundary of the Roman city, but probably inside the walls of the original Greek city.[36] Thus, the tombs she is looking at are easily dated to the Roman period by virtue of being outside the Roman city but not the Greek. The single graves do not provide much information, but the chamber tombs show a concern for the welfare of the dead. The chamber tomb she labels "Tomb X" was built in the early first century C.E. (Placing it within the same rough timeframe as 1 Corinthians). Walbank states:

> Two narrow graves had been let into the floor, and the interior of both graves had been built up to form a pillow at the south end. The east grave contained two skeletons and the west grave the lower part of one skeleton; neither grave appeared to have been disturbed though there were no offerings clearly associated with them. In the cover slab on the west grave, directly over the place where the skull would have been placed on the pillow, there was a hole for libations. Pouring food and drink onto the bones of the dead in the expectation of nourishing the spirit was a common, albeit illogical, practice in the ancient world.[37]

Leaving aside the "illogical" nature of the practice for the moment, we find clear evidence of concern for the welfare of the dead in Corinth. This concern, I argue, is entirely logical, given Greek presuppositions about the interaction between the living and

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[33] Christine M Thomas. "Placing the Dead: Funerary Practice and Social Stratification in the Early Roman Period at Corinth and Ephesos" in *Urban Religion in Roman Coriinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches.* Daniel N. Showalter and Steven J. Friesen, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Part of the Harvard Theological Studies Series. 286.

[34] Ibid., 287. This is not a new claim. For more discussion, see Toynbee, 33 – 42.

[35] The issue is not as simple as 'the Greeks inhume, the Romans cremate' however. In both Greece and Rome, both types of burial practice co-exist (alongside the occasional mummification); the most we can say for certain is that the Greeks tended toward inhumation, while the Romans tended toward cremation. See Burkert, 190 – 194, and Toynbee, 39 – 42. See also, Ian Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[36] Mary E. Hoskins Walbank. "Unquiet Graves: Burial Practices of the Roman Corinthians" in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches.* Daniel N. Showalter and Steven J. Friesen, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Harvard Theological Studies Series, 250.

[37] Ibid., 257.

the dead. Walbank's "illogical" commentary is entirely out of place, and echoes apologetic dismissals of vicarious baptism as a "magical" practice.

The Painted Tomb, built slightly later (first half of the second century C.E.) was elaborately decorated and contained a number of vessels for food and drink, as well as a "layer of burnt matter, spread over the floor with a heavier concentration in the center, for which sacrificial meals are the obvious explanation."[38] Both these tombs are fairly elaborate in design, with the Painted Tomb incredibly intricate in terms of ornamentation. Many burial practices are concerned with the prestige of the living (ornamentation, for example, as well as the number and quality of grave goods), but if the burnt matter is a byproduct of sacrificial meals, it implies a continued series of devotions at the gravesite of one (or more) of the burials in the tomb.

Additionally, Walbank points out that while "conventional wisdom is that in the Greco-Roman world they [infants and newborns] were not normally accorded full burial" rites, evidence from the Tomb with Sarcophagi leads her to speculate that "it seems that the occupants of this particular tomb, as well as their neighbors, felt that even tiny babies should be accorded the same burial rights as other members of the community."[39] She may be making too broad a generalization about the burial status of infants and newborns in the Greek world, but this does provide us with further evidence of a concern for maintaining familial ties between the living and the dead in Corinth.

Richard E. DeMaris claims that the data from the North Cemetery reveals a "steady and strong sense of obligation to the dead in ancient Corinth" as well as noting that "in the early Roman period the Corinthians were carrying out very different burial practices [inhumation and cremation] *concurrently*."[40] He posits that the Greek concern for the dead, already a strong influence on both burial practice in particular and religion in general, may have been heightened by the discontinuity between two completely opposed means of burial. If the Corinthians were concerned with the state of the corpse after burial – and Thomas claims that "early Corinthian sarcophagus burials…witness the care taken to protect the corpse from decay" – then it is possible that the Roman practice

[38] Ibid., 263.
[39] Ibid., 270.
[40] Richard E DeMaris. "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology". *Journal of Biblical Literature*: Vol. 114, no. 4 (Winter, 1995). 661 – 682. 671. Emphasis original.

of cremation would have created a conflict for some of the Corinthians.[41] I am not certain this argument is entirely convincing – as we have seen, both the Greeks and the Romans practiced cremation and inhumation simultaneously for centuries, though each culture tended to favor a different method of burial. DeMaris addresses 1 Cor. 15:29 directly, and claims that vicarious baptism occurred in Corinth, and "was one of several responses to a local preoccupation with the dead and the underworld, triggered *in part* by an anxiety arising from the difference between local Greek and colonial Roman burial practices."[42]

DeMaris also provides a few examples of vicarious funeral rituals from the Roman world, one for the emperor Pertinax, and one from a burial club in Lanavium dealing with deceased slaves whose bodies were not handed over to the club.[43] He also lists some mock funerals held for the living, before returning to the topic of vicarious baptism:

> Two extraodinary types of funeral are noteworthy for how they elucidate baptism on behalf of the dead: (1) a replacement or substitute rite performed vicariously for the dead; and (2) funerals for the living. Both applications are imaginary rites, whose context indicates whether we further qualify them as honorary or mock. This, then, is the language for baptism on behalf of the dead that is both contextually and ritually sensitive: it was an imaginary rite of the honorary type.[44]

DeMaris would classify both vicarious funerals and vicarious baptism as related; both are imaginary rites (i.e. traditional, common-place, or "regular" rituals performed in an imaginative manner or context) with the intent to honor, rather than to mock, the recipients of the rites. While I think there is merit to this comparison, we must remember that the baptismal rite, unlike the funeral, was itself a new (perhaps "imaginary" for DeMaris) ritual; for a culture steeped in rituals performed on behalf of the dead, it may

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[41] Thomas, 289. DeMaris also claims that the cult of Palaimon at Isthmia was a post-Roman phenomenon which was funerary in nature and that the cult of Demeter in the Corinthia was exceptionally strong in the Roman period. He uses this, along with a few other points, to argue that the Corinthians were a people focused on the underworld. Suffice it to say, if his claims are true, it lends even more credence to the argument that the Corinthian worldview lends itself quite easily to performing rituals on behalf of the dead. For more information on Isthmian archaeology, see Elizabeth Gebhard, "The Evolution of a Panhellenic Sanctuary: From Archaeology towards History at Isthmia." *Greek Sanctuaries, New Approaches,* ed. Nanno Marinatos and Robin H Sìgg, 154-177. (London: Routledge, 1993) 154 – 177, as well as the University of Chicago Excavations at Isthmia Annual Reports (available online at http://humanities.uchicago.edu/orgs/isthmia/isthmia.html).

[42] DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion", 673.

[43] Richard E. DeMaris, *The New Testament in its Ritual World.* (New York: Routledge, 2008). 61.

[44] Ibid., 63.

not have been a large jump from the introduction of baptism for the living to the use of baptism to benefit the dead.

One final category from the Hellenistic world that deserves to be mentioned is necromancy, or oracular communication with the dead. As Daniel Ogden points out, there is a long tradition of literary references to the practice, though he does note that "there is little in any of our fields of evidence – arguably even none of it – that, when pressed, can be taken to document directly any one specific historical performance of necromancy in antiquity."[45] The literary references he mentioned, including the *Odyssey*, the tragedies of Aeschylus (namely the *Psychagogoi* and the *Persians*), and a number of "major necromantic sequences" from the Augustan period on, are sufficient to support the idea of a cultural predisposition towards interactions between the living and the dead.[46] When looking at the full body of literary evidence for this type of interaction, we can see a shift over time in popular conceptions of the extent to which the two groups (the living and the dead) were able to interact with each other.

Any such survey must begin with Homer. In Homer, we see a particular view of the dead and their interactions with the living. Perhaps the best example of this is the νέκυια (a rite calling up the dead) in *Odyssey* 11. Odysseus must seek out the spirit of Tiresias, the deceased blind prophet, in order to discover what he must do to return home to Ithaca. Sarah Iles Johnston addresses the interaction between Odysseus and the spirits he contacts:

> The Homeric Underworld, then, is filled with ghosts who must be specially nourished before they can interact with even those members of the living world who arrive at their own doorstep. There is no indication that these ghosts can return to the land of the living. Indeed, Anticleia expressly claims that the opposite is true: she tells her son that terrible rivers form an uncrossable barrier between the two worlds. Odysseus has traveled to the bitter edge of the upper world in order to make his sacrifice and speak with the dead. It is only at this special place, carefully designated by the goddess Circe, that any interaction between those who inhabit the upper and lower world is possible.[47]

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[45] Daniel Ogden. *Greek and Roman Necromancy*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001) xxii.

[46] Ibid., xxix. These "major necromantic sequences" are found "in the work of Horace (*Satires* 1.8, ca. 30 B.C.), Virgil (*Aenied* 6, 19 B.C.), Seneca (*Oedipus*, before A.D. 65), Lucan (*Pharsalia* 6, ca. A.D. 65), Silius Italicus (*Punica* 13, late 80s A.D.), Statius (*Thebaid* 4, ca. A.D. 91/92…), and Valerius Flaccus (*Argonautica* 1, ca. A.D. 79 – 95.)".

[47] Johnston, 8. The notion of place is an impotant factor in Hormeric views of communication with the dead. Ogden lists the four main νεκυομαντεῖα (places of necromancy), as "Acheron in Thresprotia, Avernus in Campania, Heracleia Pontica on the south coast of the Black Sea, or Tainaron at the tip of the

One of the first spirits to appear when Odysseus begins his rite is that of Elpenor, a companion of his left unburied on Circe's island. Elpenor makes Odysseus promise to perform the proper burial rites, which will affect his status in the underworld.[48] Additionally, in the *Iliad*, Patroclus returns after his death to speak with Achilles in a dream, asking him to perform his burial rites quickly so that his soul may enter Hades.[49] As early as the works of Homer, we see a conception that rites performed by the living (in this case, on the body of the deceased) can have an effect on the dead in the afterlife.

Later texts extend this conception. Pindar, in his Fourth Pythian Ode, relates the story of how Jason is persuaded to retrieve the Golden Fleece from Colchis by his relative Pelias. Pelias has been convinced to undertake this task by the spirit of their shared ancestor Phrixus, who appears to Pelias in a dream and asks to have his soul transferred from Colchis to Thessaly by the retrieval of the Fleece. Johnston comments that "this scene echoes the much earlier encounter between Achilles and Patroclus in *Iliad* 23, for in both cases, the dead appear to the living in order to ask them to perform rituals that will allow them to rest more easily in death."[50]

In the Classical period, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides often relied on death and the dead as major plot devices. And, unlike in the Homeric epics, the living could enter the land of the dead and the dead could also return to the land of the living. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, Heracles enters the underworld while still alive and wrestles death, at which point Alcestis is allowed to return to the world of the living. There is no "uncrossable barrier" between the worlds.

Herodotus tells the story of the Corinthian tyrant Periander, who summons the ghost of his dead wife Melissa to discover where a lost item has gone. Melissa refuses to help at first because she is "cold and naked – she said the clothes buried with her were useless because they had not been burnt properly."[51] Periander then collects the women of Corinth at the temple of Hera, has them stripped and burns their clothes while praying

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Mani peninsula." (Ogden, 17) Odysseus's rite to summon and speak with Tiresias has been tied by a number of scholars (in Classical Greece and more recently) with the Acheron νεκυομαντεῖον. See Ogden for a more detailed examination of these locations.

[48] *Odyssey*, Book 11. 79 – 85.

[49] *Iliad*, Book 23. 83 – 90.

[50] Johnston, 21.

[51] Ibid., vii.

to Melissa. Her need for suitable clothing in the underworld satisfied, Melissa tells Periander where the missing object is.[52] Again, the ritual performed by one of the living, Periander, is able to produce an effect in the world of the dead. What we do in the world of the living can affect the situation in the underworld.

Not only can we contact the dead, but the dead can actually be used by the living – to carry curses to the Underworld, for example.[53] Johnston describes it well:

> Thus, from the time of the Homeric poems to the early Classical age, we pass from a situation in which the dead were believed to interact with the living only under very specific circumstances – when their bodies were unburied, for example – and then usually at their own discretion, to a situation in which the living believed that they could invoke the dead at their pleasure for almost any reason, and particularly to harm others; the dead were now a significant source of potential problems.[54]

The problems brought about by these "restless dead" could be solved by turning to the ψυχαγωγός ("evocator") or γόης ("sorcerer"). The ψυχαγωγός was involved in laying ghosts, or traveling to their gravesite to placate them and bind them in one spot. Our first attestation of the ψυχαγωγός is Aeschylus's fragment of the same name.[55] The term shows up in a number of literary sources from then on, often with the same basic task of locating and placating the dead. The γόης, in contrast, was one described as being able to control the dead in one form or another. Often this control was exercised by bringing the deceased back into the world of the living, typically with some supplication to a god or goddess such as Hecate.[56]

Apparently the Greeks saw a connection between γοητεία (the practice of a γόης) and the mysteries. Orpheus, for example, was seen as introducing the Dactylic mysteries and initiations into Greece, and Lucian and Strabo both referred to Orpheus as a γόης.[57] Johnston cites the above-mentioned passage from Plato's *Republic* regarding rites performed for the dead as further evidence that Orpheus (or, more appropriately, his name) was tied to γοητεία. This connection, she says, make perfect sense:

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[52] Herodotus, 5.92
[53] For more, see John Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[54] Johnston, 86.
[55] Ogden, 96.
[56] Johnston, 103.
[57] Ibid., 105.

> The expert who knows enough about how the afterlife works to invoke and control the souls of the dead should also know how to ensure that a soul would get a good deal once it was down there, and especially how to protect a soul against the sort of postmortem intrusion it would otherwise suffer at the hands of the goêtes themselves. In particular, both undertakings would require the practitioner to have a special relationship with the gods of the Underworld, who could support his invocations by forcing souls to obey his call and support his initiations by promising his clients a better deal in the afterlife.[58]

The popularity of the mysteries, coupled with the shift in popular views of the dead gives rise to a conception that "the dead would be punished for what they did while alive unless they had prepared beforehand by being initiated into mystery rites that released them from paying for their transgressions after death."[59] This is the context for the passage from Plato. Johnston brings up one belief that may have arisen from this situation:

> The living are able to ameliorate the situation in which their dead ancestors find themselves by performing rituals on their behalf. Perhaps the living can even hire ritual experts to perform postmortem variations of initiation ceremonies that were otherwise performed for the living…we really should not be surprised by this idea – after all, if the dead suffer hunger, thirst, and other physical needs that the living can address, why would they not suffer religious needs that the living can address as well, including a need for purificatory rituals?[60]

This, I think, perfectly summarizes the situation in Corinth Paul is attempting to address. As Schweitzer puts it, the situation is Corinth was such that "the undergoing of baptism for the dead [might] appear possible and rational."[61] Those in Corinth were heir to a long-standing tradition in which the living were concerned for the state of the dead and lived at a time when the ritual actions of the living were thought capable of affecting the dead, even to the point of moving them from one state of being to another. There was a general concern in Corinth with burial practice (regardless of whether it was motivated by the incongruity of cremation or not) that further enhanced the concern for the dead. And, finally, the Corinthians were in possession of a new revelation with substantive benefits for those who receive and participate in the cult. These benefits extend (and possibly apply most) after death. In light of this evidence, the most likely explanation for Paul's

[58] Ibid., 106.
[59] Johnston, 54. Note that Christianity has often been paired with the mysteries – both are salvific, initiatory traditions – and the claim that the mysteries helped pave the way for the rapid spread of Christianity is certainly not a new one.
[60] Ibid., 55.
[61] Ibid., 285.

reference to baptism on behalf of the dead in Corinth is that some of the Corinthians are practicing vicarious baptism on behalf of their dead. This practice is a hybrid, a creative negotiation of contact between the introduction of water baptism in Paul's Jesus cult and the long-standing Corinthian, in fact, Greek, assumption that ritual can be effective in changing conditions of the dead in Hades.

The Importance of Hybridity

Two arguments against the vicarious baptism hypothesis for 1 Corinthians 15:29 have already been addressed. The first (and primary) argument against this interpretation begins with the translation of the verse – even though almost all commentators agree that the simplest and most obvious reading of the passage is as a reference to vicarious baptism, numerous variant translations have been proposed to avoid the vicarious baptism "problem". The second argument brought against vicarious baptism concerns the supposed lack of historical precedents and precise parallels for the practice. However, as I have shown, there is a wealth of evidence for related practices for and on behalf of the dead. Furthermore, a cultural predisposition toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead existed throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, in particular among the Greeks, and would certainly have been part of the religious milieu of early Christian Corinth. Vicarious baptism is still the most probable explanation for 1 Cor. 15:29 – there is a wealth of related practices for and on behalf of the dead, and none of the arguments for translating the phrase "βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν" as anything other than "those baptizing on behalf of the dead" are persuasive.

There are however, a few other arguments mustered against the vicarious baptism hypothesis. One of these is closely connected to the notion of historical parallels – an often unspoken or unacknowledged rejection of innovation in early Christianity. Once again, Gordon Fee's remarks about vicarious baptism provide an excellent example:

> There is no historical or biblical precedent for such baptism. The NT is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that immediately follow; nor are there parallels or precedents in pagan religion. *This is a genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon*. …[1]

Fee does not dismiss such a practice as impossible – he merely notes how unique he thinks such a practice would have been. White, using Fee, extends this line of reasoning:

> If such a practice is behind our text, it would be a "genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon" that would necessitate viewing the Corinthians as innovative syncretists who combined the theology of certain mysteries with the

[1] Fee, 764. Emphasis mine.

> phenomena of primitive Christian religion, a view that seems difficult to square with other evidence.[2]

For White, the act of innovation itself proves problematic. He sees no evidence of "syncretism" in the congregation at Corinth (he points to the controversy over meat offered to idols in 1 Cor. 8 as evidence that the Corinthians were "overly concerned with the dangers of syncretism") and thus, any such innovation (as he claims vicarious baptism would be) would be entirely out of character for the congregation.[3]

An additional example of this type of argument comes from Michael F. Hull, who, while providing a history of interpretation for the verse, argues:

> Neither Downey nor DeMaris employs the word "syncretism," and each may loathe to find his work under such a heading. Yet, given their respective emphases on the strong influences of cosmic powers and local pagan funerary rites, it seems that their interpretations lend themselves, at the very least, to a mild form of syncretism within the Corinthian community.[4]

Hull continually returns to the topic of "syncretism" in Corinth, dismissing it every time as an improbably and insufficient answer to the questions raised by 1 Cor. 15:29. One question none of these scholars address is the exact nature of the syncretism they are rejecting. Carsten Colpe defines syncretism for the *Encyclopedia of Religion* as, at its basic level, "connections of a special kind between languages, cultures, or religions."[5] In this case, exchanges and adaptations to a religion are produced by contact between that religion and another religion or religions. Colpe continues to propose that

> Religious entities that were originally separate can come together in such a way that a syncretism results. The first possible result is that what is superimposed predominates, while what is older survives… A second possibility is that the substratum continues to exercise dominance … A third possibility is that a balance may be established between the various components… In addition to a syncretism of what was originally separate, there is a syncretism of elements from related sources.[6]

For Colpe, religious syncretism is a direct equivalent to the Greek 'syncratos' ("mixed together" or "held together") and involves two (or more) distinct religious traditions

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[2] White, 490.
[3] Ibid., 490, n. 17.
[4] Hull, 17.
[5] Carsten Colpe, "Syncretism [First Edition]." *Encyclopedia of Religions*. Lindsay Jones, ed. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005)., 8926.
[6] Ibid., 8927.

mixing together in one of the above ways. Note that these "connections" do not really result in the emergence of anything new. The result of this contact is a dominance of one religious tradition over another to some degree, with the product reflecting some aspect of both component systems. This is a very dated definition (Colpe's article was written in 1987), and the Encyclopedia acknowledges this with Fritz Graf's addendum to the article in 2005, but the definition he uses is worth considering. This is the basis for the argument both White and Hull make – vicarious baptism in Corinth would be the direct result of mixing "certain mysteries with the phenomena of primitive Christian religion." One of the presuppositions of syncretism is that the scholar is able to approach a syncretist tradition, and identify the exact origins of the constituent elements. In the case of vicarious baptism, as we have already seen, this is a difficult, if not outright impossible task. This difficulty is one of the reasons both White and Hull reject the vicarious baptism hypothesis.

"Syncretism" much like "Magic" is a contested term in contemporary academic debate. Fritz Graf, in a continuation of Colpe's *Encyclopedia of Religion* entry, reminds us that:

> Recently, scholars [have] rejected the term altogether. Following the lead of recent cultural studies, especially Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) who in turn followed the pioneering work of the colonial historian Edward Said, these scholars reject the assumption that religions are autonomous entities or systems that can at some point react with each other; they rather focus on the constant interaction of single elements in a continuum where interaction takes place both at the zones of contact and at every possible other place as well.[7]

This approach rejects any claim that there is some form of "pure" religion which existed at some point before contact (Colpe's "connections") between religious groups. This is particularly problematic for White's rejection of vicarious baptism – White sees "the phenomena of primitive Christian religion" and "certain mysteries" as two distinct categories, which "syncretism" puts into contact. However, as Bhabha argues: "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity."[8] This

[7] Fritz Graf, "Syncretism [Further Considerations]." *Encyclopedia of Religions*. Lindsay Jones, ed. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005)., 8936.
[8] Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004) 2nd edition., 55.

approach is not new – since Martin Hengel's work on the Hellenization of Judaism, claims to the "purity" of Judaism prior to Jesus are entirely untenable.[9] White and others who take this line of argumentation are defending an untenable methodology.

It is my contention that cultural studies, particularly the insights of those studying the impact of colonialism like Homi Bhabha and David Carrasco, provide us with a theoretical path to a better insight into the situation in Corinth. Corinth at the time provides an example of what Mary Louise Pratt terms the "contact zone." For Pratt, a "contact zone" is

> The space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict…the term "contact" foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader's perspective.[10]

The city of Corinth itself serves as a contact zone between Hellenic culture and imperial Roman power, although the same can be said for almost any city in the Roman east. Additionally, we can speak of the congregation in Corinth as a contact zone where the varied Greek and Roman religious traditions come into contact with Judaism and Paul's Christ-preaching. As Bhabha argues, "we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture."[11] The contact zone is the "inbetween space" in question, the cutting edge of the varied religious traditions and practices being brought into contact. Paul himself bridges these religious traditions, and lives in this inbetween space. Chris Forbes makes the claim that Paul:

> Is working creatively between the angelology and demonology of his Jewish heritage, and the world-view of the thoughtful Graeco-Roman philosophical amateur. Neither do I think that he does this simply for the sake of communication, searching for toeholds in the world-view of his audience. Rather I would suggest that Paul, himself in part a product of decades of intelligent

[9] See, for example, Martin Hengel, *Jews, Greeks, and Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period*. (London: SCM Press, 1980) Trans. John Bowden.
[10] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.
[11] Bhabha, 56.

> engagement with Hellenistic Judaism and Graeco Roman culture, is here working towards his own synthesis.[12]

I wish to focus on creativity as one of the key factors for religious hybridity. Pratt highlights the "improvisational" aspects of the contact zone – a theme that has been taken up by David Carrasco in his discussion of what he calls the "Jaguar Christians" (Maya forcibly Christianized by the Spanish). Carrasco says that improvisation "takes place as an expression of "transculturation" when dominated peoples *select and invent* from materials transmitted to them from both the dominant culture and their own indigenous traditions… I am impressed with the theme of creative work, of translation and transculturation that takes place in the contact zone."[13] This improvisation, this creativity, allows us to view vicarious baptismal practice in a different light. Rather than requiring exact precursors and parallels for such a practice, we can now assume a certain creativity being exercised by the Corinthian congregation and, as Forbes points out, by Paul himself.

We find many examples of religious innovation in early Christianity – baptism itself was an innovation, an adaptation of extant purificatory rites which allowed them to serve an additional initiatory function. Jesus is portrayed as exercising religious creativity by the gospel authors (the institution of the Lord's supper, the investiture of the twelve apostles, etc.). Why then, should it be surprising that the Corinthians, practicing a new religion in a cultural and religious contact zone, also exercised religious creativity? Given what we now know about cultural encounters, the burden of proof should lie with those who would deny such creativity in Corinth.

We have many historical examples of this type of creativity in the Hellenistic world – the cults of Sarapis and Isis, Men Tyrannus, Mithras, Sabazius, et. al. all speak to

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[12] Chris Forbes. "Pauline Demonology and/or Cosmology? Principalities, Powers and the Elements of the World in their Hellenistic Context," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 85 (2002), 73. Hull uses this passage to argue against any form of "syncretism" in Paul – "Intelligent engagement of that nature precludes the primitive spiritualism that Downey sees in Paul and his nascent Christian communities." Hull, 149. I would note that Paul is not always intentionally 'acting' in this space – he is shaped by the cultural interactions around him, regardless of what he may be trying to accomplish.

[13] David Carrasco, "Jaguar Christians in the contact zone: Concealed narratives in the histories of religions in the Americas." *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Traditions and Modernity*. (New York: Routledge, 2004) Ed. Jacob K. Olupona., 130. Italics original. One of Carrasco's primary points in this article is "to encourage historians of religions to give *greater value to the creative possibilities of incomplete, open-ended contact zones.*", 132.

the creative work being done across the Mediterranean at this time. Sarapis, for instance, may have been a creation of the Ptolemies, combining some of the mythology of Osiris and the Apis bull with more traditional Greek ritual practices.[14] The cult of Isis, once relegated as the consort of Sarapis, spread throughout the Hellenistic world, and according to Helmut Koester "if ever any deity of that time was on the way to becoming the central figure of a world religion, it was Isis. Not, however, the Isis who was the goddess of the throne and the Pharoah and wife of Osiris."[15] The Isis who caught the attention of the Greeks and Romans was a thoroughly Hellenized Isis, one who emerged from the contact zone in a very different form. The cult of Mithras, often cited as being one of the closest analogues to early Christianity, also underwent significant changes during its transmission. Koester discusses the origins of Mithraism:

> Nothing indicates that the Mithraic cult of the Hellenistic period was a mystery religion, nor that its Iranian ingredients were instrumental in the development of the mysteries. It is quite possible that the Mithraic religion assumed the features of a mystery religion only during its migration to the west at the beginning of the Roman imperial period.[16]

Later imperial Mithraism was certainly a mystery cult, and the same type of development (cultic change, often but not always the incorporation of mystery aspects) happened to the cults of Isis and others. Koester, in his discussion of "the syncretistic process" in the Hellenistic world, claims "no single religion of the Hellenistic and Roman period was spared."[17] Religious creativity, as a result of both cultural transmission and the passage of time, was the norm, rather than the exception, and vicarious baptism in Corinth can best be viewed as one of many examples of this phenomenon.

Jonathan Z. Smith draws our attention to the potential connections between the events in Corinth and instances of the so-called "cargo cults" in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s and 70s.[18] For Smith, there are substantial similarities between the concerns of the

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[14] Koester, 187.
[15] Ibid., 188.
[16] Ibid., 372.
[17] Ibid., 166. *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* was published in 1982, so Koester's use of the term "syncretism" should not be surprising, and his analysis does rely somewhat on the notion of an unadulterated, original form of the religions he discusses. Nonetheless, there is value in his insights into the cultural transmission of religions.
[18] The "cargo cult" refers to any new religious movement which arose in Polynesia as a result of contact between indigenous groups and Europeans, usually focused on the return of the ancestors to address the

Atbalmin people of West Papua and those of the Corinthians. Both, Smith claims, are concerned with maintaining links with the dead:

> Analogous notions of oracular relations to the ancestors and the more proximate dead, within the context of a set of cultic relations and responsibilities to the dead, are thus found in Papua New Guinea, Israel, and the ancient Near East and are likewise present in each of the culture areas from which the resettled population of Corinth was derived. While such relations are often seen as problematic from the perspective of temple-based religion, they are an essential component of domestic religion. Drawing on my previous work on this theme and influenced by the Papua New Guinea materials, we might imagine two different sorts of essentially familial practices obtaining for some groups in Corinth (I separate here what may, in fact, be joined in practice). One would focus on cultic relations with the spirit(s) of the now dislocated ancestors left behind, in the homeland. Such relations would include attempts to obtain oracular esoteric wisdom. Another would focus on cultic relations with the more immediate dead, now buried in Corinth, and would include a range of activities from memorial meals with the dead to oracles guiding present behavior, including moral guidance.[19]

For Smith, much of the confusion in 1 Corinthians may have arisen from miscommunication between Paul and the ἐκκλησία in Corinth over whether the term spirit (πνεῦμα) should be understood as a reference to the Holy Spirit or to the spirits of the dead, as well as a concern that the resurrection threatens the chthonic status of the dead as dead. In this context, Smith explains 1 Cor. 15:29 as a "ritual experimentation on new modes of relation to the dead."[20] While I am not ready to embrace Smith's argument in its entirety, one of his central theses – that we can look to later situations of colonial contact in "pluralistic urban settings, especially those coastal cities engaged in translocal commerce" to reveal more about the situation in the Corinth of Paul's time – is an important one.[21]

One additional component of hybridity stands out in Bhabha – the element of resistance to colonizing power that hybridity reveals. This element may not stand out as noticeably in early Christianity, but I believe it is present. Other scholars are making these claims as well. Daniel Boyarin approaches Christianity and Judaism in the first few

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imbalance in material wealth between the groups. For more, see: Lamont Lindstrom, *Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of Desire from Melanesia and Beyond.*(Honolula: University of Hawaii Press, 1993).

[19] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Re:Corinthians", *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 349.

[20] Ibid., 351.

[21] Ibid., 348.

centuries of the Common Era as examples of hybridity and resistance as heresiologists from both sides attempted to define "orthodoxy" in opposition to "heresy" via the inscription of boundaries.[22] Karen King advances a similar argument with regard to gnosticism.[23] For Boyarin, "Rabbinic Judaism can be seen as a nativist reaction, a movement that imagines itself to be a community free of Hellenism, and therefore it is itself no less Hellenistic precisely because of its reaction."[24] Richard Horsley attempts "to set popular Judean and Galilean resistance movements and the historical Jesus in the context of the Roman empire, indeed as resistance to it."[25] One of his primary emphases is the effect of Roman imperial power on first-century Judea, and the ways in which people resisted this power through religion when they were unable to do so through politics. For Hosley, the gospels are "complete stories with the dramatic political-economic-religious conflicts (between Jesus and the Roman and Jerusalem rulers) that constitute their dominant plots."[26]

Resistance to imperial power, for Bhabha, is perhaps best expressed via "*mimicry* as the effect of hybridity – at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring."[27] The concept of mimicry as resistance to colonial authority provides an additional means of approaching 1 Cor. 15:29. Mimicry re-produces the colonial authority, producing an "Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference."[28] Bhabha considers the product of mimicry to be unsettling, as it is "almost the same, *but not quite.*"[29] This, it seems, is an apt descriptor of vicarious

[22] For more on this topic, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity.* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Daniel Boyarin and Virginia Burrus, "Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity." *Social Compass* 52 (4), 2005.
[23] See Karen L..King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
[24] Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 18.
[25] Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and Empire", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review 59*, no. 3 – 4, 2005., pp 44 – 74., 44. For more information, see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Jewish Palestine* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987) and *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
[26] Ibid., 46.
[27] Bhabha, 172. Emphasis original.
[28] Ibid., 122. Emphasis original.
[29] Ibid., 123. Emphasis original.

baptism, and explains some of the discomfort the passage creates for exegetes. Vicarious baptism is recognizably related to "ordinary" baptism, but there is a slippage, a difference, between the common expectations for baptism, and the expectations for vicarious baptism.

The introduction of baptism and its attending theology into new populations illustrates this problem, especially if we are willing to view baptism as a type of dominant discourse. Baptism serves an immediate initiatory function (the subject is now a member of the Christian community) as well as a more esoteric salvific function (the subject is now one of the elect, entitled to participation in the future resurrection and kingdom of God). This second function rewrites existing cultural expectations for the afterlife, and can cause problems for populations concerned with maintaining kinship relations after death. This is the most probable explanation for the situation in Corinth and we have other examples that illustrate resistance to baptism based on concern for maintaining kinship ties.

This concern for maintaining kinship ties was apparently present to some degree in Thessalonica as well, and Paul was forced to assuage the congregation's concerns about the status of the dead in his letter to them. 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 – 18 (the foundational text for the contemporary evangelical doctrine of 'the Rapture') is Paul's attempt to reassure the Thessalonians, who "were evidently grieving because they were uncertain about what their relationship would be with those of their number who would have died by the time the Lord came."[30] The passage in question reads:

> Οὐ θέλομεν δε ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, περὶ τῶν κοιμωμένων, ἵνα μὲ λυπῆσθε καθὼς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες ἐλπίδα. εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰεσοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ. Τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάωμεν τοὺς κοιμηθέντας· ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον, ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἁρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα· καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα. ῞Ωστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις.

[30] Abraham Malherbe, *The Letter to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New York: The Anchor Bible, 2000.), 261.

> We do not wish you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who are asleep, in order that you may not grieve, as the rest who do not have hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, thus, through Jesus, God will bring with him those having fallen asleep. For this we say to you by the word of the lord, that we living, who remain into the second coming of the lord, will not come before those having fallen asleep; for the lord himself, with a command, with the sound of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will be raised first, then we living who remain who will be seized along with them into the clouds to meet the lord in the air; and thus we will be with the lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words.

Malherbe argues that "the succinctness of Paul's treatment of the problem suggests that he was replying to a specific matter of concern about which they had inquired" which would fit with the pattern of Paul's communication with his congregations.[31] The opening and closing of this section provide us with the exact nature of the Thessalonians' concern – they are grieving because some have "fallen asleep" (Paul tends to use κοιμωμένοι in place of νεκροὶ when referring to the Christian, i.e. baptized, dead). Paul suggests that the Thessalonians not grieve, rather "encourage each other" because both the dead in Christ and the living will be taken *at the same time* to meet the lord. There will not be a discrepancy between dead Christians and living Christians at the second coming, and the dead will not miss out on the benefits of the kingdom. While this is not the same scenario as I am positing in Corinth, it does point to a general level of concern in the early church for the status of the dead and the exact function of the baptismal ritual. It is not hard to see how Paul's assurance that "the dead in Christ" and "we living who remain" will be together for eternity could lead to a group attempting to extend these benefits to deceased kin.

John Lothrop Motley provides a related example from early 8th century Dutch history – Radbod, Chief of the Frisians was defeated by Charles the Hammer, and was on the verge of converting to Christianity (bringing his people with him). The story is narrated in the following quotation:

> The pagan Radbod had already immersed one of his royal legs in the baptismal font, when a thought struck him. "Where are my dead forefathers at present?" he said, turning suddenly upon Bishop Wolfran. "In Hell, with all other unbelievers," was the imprudent answer. "Mighty well," replied Radbod, removing his leg, "then will I rather feast with my ancestors in the halls of Woden, then dwell with

[31] Ibid., 264.

> your little starveling band of Christians in Heaven." Entreaties and threats were unavailing. The Frisian declined positively a rite which was to cause an eternal separation from his buried kindred, and he died as he had lived, a heathen."[32]

Much of Motley's language is normative, but the story stands as an excellent introduction to the problems baptism can cause when it is introduced to a new population. In this case, there is no creative mimicry taking place, simply a rejection of the practice. However, the reasons expressed for this rejection are not unique to eighth-century Europe.

A few connected examples can be found in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* – the compiled reports sent back from missionaries in New France to their superiors. Lisa Poirier analyzes resistance and mimicry in the Native American responses to Jesuit baptismal practice, and finds that "rituals of baptism were understood by the Innu people as manifestations of sacred power that could produce either positive or negative results."[33] Many of these results were supposed to affect the living, but the concern caused by the introduction of baptism did not end with death. Poirier tells us that one Father Brébeuf "made it clear to the Wendat that if a member of their kinship group had been baptized, that person was going to heaven. Because of this doctrine, a new concern arose among the Wendat: how to remain within their kinship groups in the afterlife."[34]

This concern parallels that expressed by Radbod and, I believe, may help explain the situation in Corinth. The dominant Christian baptismal discourse is causing discontinuity with traditional views of the afterlife, prompting resistance and mimicry (as well as acceptance) as possible solutions to help mend this slippage. Poirier provides a number of examples:

> Some adults did choose baptism … [from a] concern for joining family members in the afterlife. The Jesuits recorded several instances of this rationalization of baptism. One woman was quoted as seeking baptism so that she might "go to find [her] brother… who was baptized and died two years ago" (Thwaites 13:29).

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[32] John Lothrop Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic: A History*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855) 20.

[33] Lisa J. M. Poirier, *New Religions in New France: Religious Creativity and Gender in Colonial Contexts*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, Forthcoming). Poirier notes that the Jesuits primarily baptized the dying, leading to "an entirely logical association between the sacrament of baptism and the hastening of death." Also, for many natives, baptism was seen as a "ritual performance in which a Native person was made a member of the French community." Given both of these views of baptism, it should not be surprising that baptism began to cause concerns among Native peoples.

[34] Ibid.

> Conversely, others rejected baptism because they feared that if sent to heaven, they would be separated from their deceased kinspeople. On one occasion recorded by Father LeMercier, a woman dissuaded her husband from baptism, by "representing to him that it would not be proper for him to go to heaven, since none of his relatives were there" (Thwaites 13:127). Yet another man was quoted as stating unequivocally that "for my part, I have no desire to go to heaven; I have no acquaintances there, and the French who are there would not care to give me anything to eat" (Thwaites 13:127).[35]

Curative rituals also developed in response to epidemics, in which "water was sprinkled on the sick; this ritual action reasserted Wendat sacred power, and reclaimed the power of medicine men to cure, but deployed this power in a form extremely similar to the Christian baptismal ritual."[36]

Finally, the actual practice of vicarious baptism by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, commonly referred to as the "Mormon Church") provides a more recent example.[37] The Latter-Day Saints, a Christian community, hold that in addition to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament, there is an additional testament, The Book of Mormon – as well as two additional divinely inspired works – the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C), which claims to contain revelations from God to Joseph Smith, and the Pearl of Great Price, which provides additional church history, doctrine, and Joseph Smith's "translations" of the otherwise unknown Book of Moses and Book of Abraham. Of these, Doctrine and Covenants is the only text to mention vicarious baptism in any form. LDS views differ from those of most other Christian sects, and the current LDS practice of vicarious baptism is often a factor (acknowledged or not) in some apologists' rejection of the vicarious baptism hypothesis. John D. Reaume does not mention LDS practice explicitly in his analysis; nonetheless, he ends his article with this statement:

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[35] Ibid. The Thwaites citations are references to *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Bros. Company, 1896 – 1901).
[36] Ibid.
[37] On a related note, but one outside the scope of this project, the LDS itself can in many ways be viewed as an entirely hybrid tradition, which modifies traditional Christian cosmology to account for the presence of Native Americans, while addressing the lack of sacred space in the "New World" for European colonists. And the Church is definitely a product of the contact zone, arising in the "Burned-Over" District of upstate New York, which at the time was still the frontier, and the jumping off point for most voyages westward into "unclaimed" territory.

> In addition there is no biblical warrant given in this passage for instituting the practice of baptism for the dead. Both the ancient and modern practices of baptism for the dead are apparently founded on misinterpretations of this verse.[38]

Bernard M. Foschini is more straightforward about his motivation. The first line of the preface to his dissertation states:

> The purpose of this volume is to attempt a solution to the very obscure passage of I Cor.15:29 which speaks of "Baptism for the Dead." This question is of special interest in the United States since the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) is still abusing that text and practicing a vicarious baptism for the dead.[39]

Foschini also devotes an entire section to LDS practice, distinguishing between scholars who propose 15:29 to be a reference to vicarious baptism and LDS practice, "especially in view of the fact that Mormons actually practice Baptism for the dead and attempt to defend it."[40] Few scholars are as transparent about their motives as Foschini, but given contemporary LDS practice, no work on 1 Cor. 15:29 is entirely objective.[41]

Vicarious baptismal practice by the LDS can be dated very specifically to 15 August 1840. On this day, during the funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson, Joseph Smith read much of 1 Corinthians 15, and "announced to the congregation that the Lord would permit the Saints to be baptized in behalf of their friends and relatives who had departed this life."[42] This may have been motivated in part by the efforts of the widow Jane Neyman to have her deceased son, Cyrus, baptized. The Church of Latter-Day Saints uses 1 Cor. 15:29 as one of the proof-texts for this practice, adding Doctrines and Covenants 124:29 – 36, which reads:

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[38] Reaume, 475.
[39] Foschini, iii.
[40] Ibid., 36.
[41] Foschini claims that it is "difficult" to argue against LDS interpretations of the passage, as "they are not on common ground with us. We must depend on research and reason; they depend on the light of their 'revelations.'" (55). He then goes on to refute Mormon theology using Catholic theology, concluding that "we find Mormon Baptism for the dead entirely erroneous and arbitrary." (58) While Foschini's work is certainly dated, he has much more in common with LDS scholars than he cares to admit – both cite scripture to prove their point, they are merely disagreeing about what counts as scripture.
[42] Church Educational System, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. *Church History in the Fullness of Times: The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*. (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1992)., 251. Admittedly, this date comes from an LDS source, but there is no compelling reason to doubt this claim.

> For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for those who are dead…I command you…to build a house unto me; and during this time your baptisms shall be acceptable to me.[43]

Joseph Smith added to this revelation soon after in D&C 127 : 5 – 12, which elaborates on how vicarious baptism should be practiced:

> And again, I give to you a word in relation to the baptism for your dead. Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you concerning your dead: When any of you are baptized for your dead, let there be a recorder, and let him be eye-witness of your baptisms…that in all your recordings it may be recorded in heaven; whatsoever you bind on earth, may be bound in heaven.

Finally, Smith writes an entire letter concerned with vicarious baptism. D&C 128 lays out the theology behind vicarious baptism, as well as expanding and codifying the baptismal ritual, providing (mostly unrelated) additional scriptural citations that Smith claims support his interpretation.[44] For our purposes, the most relevant portion of this chapter is verse 15:

> Let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining for our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers – that they without us cannot be made perfect – neither can we without our dead be made perfect.

It is clear from this that there is a duty in LDS theology to practice vicarious baptism, for the benefit of both the dead and the living.

Here, I think, may be one of the closest analogues to the situation in Corinth. A new revelation from God has been proclaimed, one with a very specific view of how the afterlife (the kingdom of God) operates. LDS theology claims that there are three "Degrees of Glory" after death, three separate "kingdoms" awaiting the dead – the "Celestial," "Terrestrial," and "Telestial" kingdoms. Only those who are baptized into the community and obey the laws and commandments of the community are eligible for the Celestial Kingdom. In order to preserve kinship ties in the afterlife, it became necessary to practice vicarious baptism. This is the same problem that was faced by the Corinthian congregation. The Thessalonians' concern regarding their dead proves that this problem

[43] Chapter dated Jan. 19, 1841. This chapter of D&C also concerns a large number of unrelated organizational revelations.
[44] D&C 128 is far too long to quote in full; Smith cites Matthew 16:18 - 19, I Cor. 15:46 – 48, 1 Cor. 15:29, and Malachi 4: 5 – 6.

was not unique to Corinth – the resurrection and the community of the elect was wreaking havoc with existing kinship ties, and the possibility of those being severed was a very real concern. In both early Corinthian Christianity and the developmental stages of the LDS, this new revelation rewrote existing expectations for the afterlife, and, in both cases, the community exercised religious creativity in order to address this problem and restore kinship ties. Given that the early LDS community seems to have had a similar problem to the one in Corinth, it is not surprising that the LDS would have turned to this same text, just as the congregation in Corinth turned to the example of rituals on behalf of the dead from the Hellenistic world.

Conclusion

In the end, we, like those who precede us, must admit that we simply do not know what was happening in Corinth; there is simply not enough evidence available to reconstruct the events of two thousand years ago. However, I believe that by analyzing the verse in the context of the greater Greco-Roman religious world and approaching early Christianity as an example of hybridity, the interpretive haze surrounding 1 Cor. 15:29 begins to clear – it seems most likely to be a reference to some form of vicarious baptismal practice in Corinth. These are not ground-breaking insights – the field of New Testament studies has been moving toward a greater contextualization of biblical phenomena, and Boyarin, King, Horsley, and others are part of a wave of scholars who acknowledge the importance of postcolonial critiques for the study of early Christianity. However, these insights had not yet been applied to 1 Corinthians 15:29, and, when they are, the arguments against vicarious baptism lose much of their force.

The primary arguments against a form of vicarious baptismal practice in Corinth are: "the lack of any immediate contextual mooring" for the verse; the existence in Corinth of a group denying the resurrection at the same time as a group practicing vicarious baptism; the lack of an "independent historical or biblical parallel to the practice of baptism for the dead"; and "theological questions of no small import."[1] The variant translations and re-punctuations generally stem from these issues, though this is not always acknowledged.[2] While these objections may have compelled White to find a new interpolation (assuming νεκρός as an understood referent to "the apostles"), they are not convincing. White's first two objections are easy to address – sometimes Paul uses this argumentative style, and the entire letter is an attempt to address this type of factionalism in Corinth – which leaves his third and fourth objections. These two are the most common reasons given for arguing against vicarious baptism.[3] I have not addressed the theological argument, as it is beyond the scope of this paper, and there is no consensus on Paul's baptismal theology to begin with.

[1] White, 489 – 490. White's list has been selected because it is laid out concisely and summarizes the most common concerns.
[2] When almost all commentators agree that the original Greek text has a simple and obvious meaning, one needs a significant reason to propose an alteration – in this case, for reasons unrelated to the source text.
[3] Fee, 764.

The objection based on a lack of parallels to vicarious baptism is also untenable, especially given the insights of postcolonial critique into situations of hybridity. There are parallel practices (acknowledged as potentially relevant), that are rejected as inexact – as White claims, "none of them involved baptism; they differ, in other words, precisely at the crucial point."[4] This same logic could be applied to baptism itself, if we did not have a continuing baptismal tradition. What White and others are looking for is an exact precursor to vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead, one that most likely will never be found. However, this hypothetical exact precursor does not need to exist – to require its existence is a methodological error.

I have established a 'cultural predisposition' toward ritual interaction between the living and the dead, which would have informed the Corinthians' understanding of their relationship with the dead. There is evidence that the spread of baptism into a new population can create concern for kinship ties in the afterlife, both within early Christianity (1 Thess 4:13, 1 Cor. 15:29) and in later contact situations. Additionally, postcolonial theories both disprove the notion of fixed, impermeable cultural boundaries, and highlight the creativity that is an integral part of negotiating colonial encounters. It should not be surprising, given this background and with this understanding of cultural encounters, if the congregation in Corinth did, at least for a time, practice vicarious baptism.

This is only one very specific example where the interpretation of early Christianity as a hybrid religious tradition is beneficial. While others have taken this approach (Boyarin, Horsley, King, et. al.), it has not yet become the dominant view in the study of early Christianity (nor, for that matter, a significant minority view). However, analyzing early Christianity as one of the many hybrid religious traditions that arose in the late antique Mediterranean world has the potential to shed new light on more than simply vicarious baptismal practice – 1 Corinthians alone contains instances of glossolalia, prophecy, and other ecstatic practices, which continue to trouble interpreters. Many of the supposed "magical" and ecstatic events in the New Testament and early Christian practice can be understood in greater detail by appealing to the social context of

[4] White, 490.

the ancient Mediterranean world and recognizing the influence of colonial contact and imperial power on this nascent tradition.

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