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CORINTHIAN RELIGION
AND BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD
(1 CORINTHIANS 15:29): INSIGHTS FROM
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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"The phrase *baptizesthai hyper tōn nekrōn* of 1 Cor. 15:29 has always been obscure. It can justly be labeled as a 'crux interpretum.' An all around satisfactory explanation of the words has never ceased to tantalize exegetes."[1] With these words Bernard Foschini began his 1951 study of an exegetical puzzle he hoped to solve, but his attempt, like all attempts before and after, has failed to garner broad acceptance from NT scholars. To date no satisfactory explanation of the practice described in 1 Cor 15:29 has appeared, though not for lack of trying: "Despite dozens of proposed solutions, the reference itself is simply so obscure and our knowledge so limited that we cannot discern just what this rite actually involved or meant."[2]

There is, in fact, not much in the text to go on. Commentators have noted how little the context of the verse prepares us for it and tells us about it. The tone and style of 15:29 change abruptly from the preceding section of chap. 15, and while vv. 30–34 continue the rhetorical questions begun in v. 29, they introduce an entirely different subject matter.[3] The verse itself is straightforward,

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[1] B. M. Foschini, *"Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead" I Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: Heffernan Press, 1951) 1. Bernard Foschini's study originally appeared as a series of articles in *CBQ* 12 (1950) 260–76, 379–88; 13 (1951) 46–78, 172–98, 276–83.

[2] R. P. Carlson, "The Role of Baptism in Paul's Thought," *Int* 47 (1993) 261.

[3] C. Senft, *La première épitre de saint-Paul aux Corinthiens* (2d ed.; CNT 2/7; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1990) 201–2; H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 275–77; A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1914) 358; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (New Testament Message 10; Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1979) 144–45. To ease the discontinuity between v. 29 and its context, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor came to interpret baptism as a Corinthian allusion to Paul's missionary labors or suffering, thus connecting v. 29 with what follows ("'Baptized for the Dead' [I Cor., XV, 29] A Corinthian Slogan?" *RB* 88 [1981] 532–43).

but because Paul has based his argument on custom at this point, much goes unspoken between writer and audience: Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν; ("For 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 on their behalf?"). What does this verse reveal? The recipients of Paul's letter must have known the point of these questions, so presumably the Corinthian Christian community knew about baptism for the dead. More likely, in light of the rarity of the practice in ancient Christianity, the Corinthian Christians themselves baptized for the dead.[4] In addition to locating the practice in Corinth, most scholars have understood the Greek to describe a vicarious baptism undergone by the living for the benefit of the physically dead.[5] Beyond this common ground, however, lie two important questions whose answers are highly disputed: Why did baptism on behalf of the dead arise? What did it mean to the Corinthian Christians?

The Corinthians evidently married their high regard for baptism—to judge from Paul's warning about overconfidence in it (1 Cor 10:1–13)—with an intense concern for the dead to create a distinctively Corinthian practice. Why did their enthusiasm for baptism develop in this way? Understandably, scholars have turned to the religious environment of the Greco-Roman world to account for this unusual marriage, and I will argue that insight comes from looking at the beneficiaries of the rite—the dead—and the treatment of the dead in the Greco-Roman world. Further, given how distinctive the practice was, clarification of it will most likely come from the specific context out of which it arose: the religious climate of first-century CE Corinth. Such an approach does not intend to deny the creative energies working within early Christian communities or the influence that other Christian communities exercised on the Corinthian Christians, although the latter seems absent in this case. Nor do I take lightly the conclusions of scholars who see nothing in the Greco-Roman environment that would have given rise to or shaped Christian

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[4] Chrysostom (*Hom. in 1 Cor.* 40) attests to the Marcionite adoption of the practice, but generally ancient Christian writers rarely or never mention baptism for the dead. Mathis Rissi has collected the few ancient and medieval references (*Die Taufe für die Toten: Ein Beitrag zur paulinischen Tauflehre* [ATANT 42; Zurich: Zwingli, 1962] 6–22).

[5] A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (WUNT 44; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) 287–93, esp. 288; J. Downey, "1 Cor 15:29 and the Theology of Baptism," *Euntes Docete* 38 (1985) 23; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians,* 275–76; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 363; J. C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965) 136; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 185–87. Even those taking issue with this reading admit that it is the dominant interpretation, e.g., Foschini (*"Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead" I Cor. 15:29,* 31) and Murphy-O'Connor ("A Corinthian Slogan?" 532). Rissi, whose study (*Taufe für die Toten*) includes one of the latest and best surveys of the existing interpretations (pp. 6–51), concludes that vicarious baptism must be meant (p. 57).

baptism.[6] Yet, as Nancy Bookidis, the assistant director of the Corinth Excava-
tions, has observed, "an increasing awareness of regional variations in ancient
religion . . . [has] made the generalizations of the past somewhat suspect."[7] The
growing body of knowledge about religion in ancient Corinth provided by
archaeology may necessitate qualifying general claims made about Greco-
Roman religions, including ancient Christianity. Specific to this study, archaeo-
logical data from Corinth and its environs, the Corinthia, may help explain why
the Christians of early Roman Corinth extended the rite of baptism to their
dead.

I. The World of the Dead in Corinthian Religion

Both ancient Greek and Roman societies devoted considerable resources
to the dead, in part for fear of them but primarily because the living were
thought to be obligated to help the deceased become integrated into the realm
of the dead. Such help was crucial, for the moment of death was thought to
mark only the beginning of a long and sometimes difficult transition to the next
world.[8] In Greece this help began with proper mourning and burial rites and
continued for some time in the form of periodic commemorations of the
deceased, such as festivals. Remembering the dead also involved visiting the
grave, a visit that might include sacrifices and feasts held for them. A few Greek
graves even had feeding tubes so that blood offerings and libations could be
communicated directly to the deceased. Many of these practices appear to
reflect a belief that the dead could benefit directly from actions performed on
their behalf, particularly at the grave. Acting on this belief, some individuals set
up trusts to ensure that they would be adequately commemorated and pro-
vided for in death.[9]

Despite many differences in practice, Roman attitudes toward, and beliefs
about, death and the dead had much in common with the Greek perspective.

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[6] A. D. Nock, "Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments," in *Essays on Religion and
the Ancient World* (ed. Z. Stewart; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 2. 809;
idem, "Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background," in *Essays on Religion and the
Ancient World*, 1. 97–104; W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univer-
sity Press, 1987) 101–2. Innumerable NT scholars also argue against influence from other Greco-
Roman religions. The most recent thorough presentation of this position comes from A. J. M.
Wedderburn, who argues that the mystery cults did not influence early Christian baptismal theol-
ogy (*Baptism and Resurrection*, 5–6).

[7] N. Bookidis, "The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: An Archaeological Approach to Ancient
Religion," paper presented at the Archaeological Institute of America 1st Regional Symposium,
Columbia, MO, 1987; summarized in *AJA* 91 (1987) 480–81. The quotation comes from p. 480.

[8] D. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; Lon-
don: Thames & Hudson, 1971) 330; R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (London: Duckworth,
1985) 38–47; M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-
sity Press, 1974) 4–23.

[9] Garland, *Way of Death*, 39, 108–18.

Proper burial was so great a concern that clubs existed to ensure that members were adequately mourned and buried, and these were very popular in imperial Roman society.[10] Postburial commemoration of the dead focused, much as in Greece, on graveside feasts and annual festivals.[11] Providing for the dead could entail major financial outlays: wealthy Romans established elaborate tombs and even funerary gardens equipped with dining rooms, kitchens, wells, and cisterns.[12] Obviously, such expenditures reflected well on the living. At the same time, many Romans were convinced that the dead dwelt in the tomb and they needed adequate facilities.[13] In all this, the Romans exhibited the same sense of obligation to, and honor of, the dead as did the Greeks.

In broad terms this is how ancient Greeks and Romans related to their dead. Unfortunately, little of the information for this description comes from the Corinthia; the studies of ancient Greek burial customs by Donna Kurtz and John Broadman and by Robert Garland depended heavily on Attic evidence, the Roman study by Jocelyn Toynbee on Italian data.[14] Nevertheless, burials in the Corinthia provide data that support this general picture. At least the burials there seem to be fairly typical. Corinth's North Cemetery represents the largest excavated burial ground in the Corinthia and it has a broad chronological range of burials. Hazel Palmer's study of the classical and Hellenistic Greek graves documents a steady interest in supplying the dead with adequate goods, for even the least expensive graves had vases in and by them, sometimes a considerable number.[15]

Roman-era graves in the North Cemetery contained on average fewer pottery offerings than Greek-era graves, but this fact should not be read as a sign of lessening concern for the dead.[16] The continuing strength of this concern found clear expression in impressive Roman chamber tombs dating from the late first century CE, which excavators unearthed in a hillside near Corinth's North Cemetery. The most elaborate of these had niches for the remains of several individuals, wall paintings, numerous lamps and small finds, and even a well shaft.[17] The size and details of the tomb point to lavish expenditure typical of the Roman era and underscore how much attention the dead commanded. All

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[10] K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Sociological Studies in Roman History 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 212–16.

[11] J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; London: Thames & Hudson, 1971) 50–64.

[12] Ibid., 94–100.

[13] J. Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; London: Thames & Hudson, 1970) 134.

[14] For full citations, see nn. 8, 11.

[15] C. Blegen, H. Palmer, and R. Young, *Corinth:* Volume 13, *The North Cemetery* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1964) 79.

[16] Ibid., 82.

[17] T. L. Shear, "The Excavations of Roman Chamber Tombs at Corinth in 1931," *AJA* 35 (1931) 424–41.

in all, the data from Corinthian burials confirm the general picture I have drawn of the deep obligation ancient Greeks and Romans felt toward their dead.

Concern for the dead could find other channels of expression in both Greek and Roman religion, and early Roman Corinthia provides ample evidence of an emerging preoccupation with the dead and the world of the dead. The cultic focal point of Isthmia, the religious center of the Corinthia, was the temple of Poseidon, yet the Panhellenic games celebrated there were dedicated to the dead hero Palaimon or Melikertes and were funerary in nature.[18] How early the Palaimon cult emerged at the Poseidon site is uncertain. Walter Burkert sees this or like development occurring at all the Panhellenic game sites by the seventh century BCE, but the evidence for it at Isthmia does not exist.[19] Excavations at Isthmia have turned up no evidence for the Palaimon cult before Roman times, and literary evidence comes largely from writers of Roman imperial times.[20] As a result, some, such as John Hawthorne, argue that the cult of Palaimon began only after Roman settlement.[21] Others, including the excavators of Isthmia, posit some level of pre-Roman activity but can offer only tentative identification of its location.[22]

No matter when it began at Isthmia, the Palaimon cult did not become prominent until the Roman period.[23] Archaeological data—numismatic and architectural—provide evidence of a round temple by the middle of the second century, and predating this are several pits and a high wall enclosing the Palaimon precinct.[24] The pits were evidently used for burning sacrifices, for all

[18] Kurtz and Broadman, *Burial Customs*, 202.

[19] W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) 193.

[20] O. Broneer, *Isthmia: Volume 2, Topography and Architecture* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1973) 99. The situation is markedly different at nearby Nemea, another Panhellenic game site. There excavators have identified a site (*heroön*) dedicated to the dead hero Opheltes dating back to the sixth century BCE (S. G. Miller, ed., *Nemea: A Guide to the Site and Museum* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990] 26–29, 104–10).

[21] J. Hawthorne, "The Myth of Palaemon," *TAPA* 89 (1958) 92–98.

[22] E. Gebhard, "The Evolution of a Pan-Hellenic Sanctuary: From Archaeology towards History at Isthmia," in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches* (ed. N. Marinatos and R. Hägg; London/New York: Routledge, 1993) 171; idem, "The Early Sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia," paper presented at the Archaeological Institute of American 1st Regional Symposium, Columbia, MO, 1987; summarized in *AJA* 91 (1987) 476; Broneer, *Topography and Architecture*, 99.

[23] H. Koester, "Melikertes at Isthmia: A Roman Mystery Cult," in *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. Meeks; Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1990) 357, 363. Excavation in 1989 confirms the steady rise of the cult from the mid-first to the mid-second century (E. Gebhard, "The Isthmian Games and the Sanctuary of Poseidon in the Early Empire," in *The Corinthia in the Roman Period* [ed. T. Gregory; Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 8; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1993] 78–94).

[24] Or possibly two temples, one dating to Hadrian's reign, torn down and reused in a second temple built no later than 180 (Gebhard, "Isthmian Games and the Sanctuary of Poseidon," 89–93).

showed signs of intense heat and were filled with ash and burnt animal bones.[25] The earliest of these, pit A, contained pottery that would suggest it was in use from 50 to 80 CE.[26] This archaeological evidence accords well with the literary record: Philostratus says that the secret rites of Palaimon (Melikertes) included offerings (ἐναγίσματα) from a slaughtered black bull (*Imag.* 2.16). Excavators also recovered a large number of distinctive lamps from the site, which suggests nocturnal rites, a deduction confirmed by Plutarch's description of the Melikertes rites (*Thes.* 25).[27]

The literary and archaeological evidence not only indicates the importance of Palaimon in the Roman period; it makes clear the nature of the cult: worship focused on the dead or the chthonic.[28] All the features of the cult and the site—nocturnal rites, the burning of black animals in a sacrificial pit, a round sanctuary—conform to a chthonic rather than Olympic orientation.[29] And when Philostratus refers to the offerings that go to Palaimon, he calls them *enagismata*, which refers to offerings to the dead or the chthonic deities.[30] Thus, the rise of the Palaimon cult in Roman times indicates that the Corinthia's religious center, Isthmia, represented not only Poseidon but more and more that side of religion having to do with the dead and the gods of the dead.

Confirmation of a growing emphasis on the underworld in Roman Isthmia comes from the history of the Demeter cult there. As yet no temple or sanctuary has been found at Isthmia, so the center of cultic practices eludes interpreters. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence points to two places of cultic activity. The first is the ridge spur known as the Rachi, south of and overlooking the temple of Poseidon site, although the steepness of the slope would have prevented temple construction there. Votive pottery in the form of miniature water jugs (*hydriai*) and baskets (*kalathoi*) unearthed on the Rachi suggest Demeter worship because miniatures of precisely this type have been recovered in great numbers at the Demeter and Persephone sanctuary in Corinth.[31] Moreover, excavators also found many terra-cotta figurines, some of which reflect distinctively Demeter iconography. The dating of these objects indicates

[25] Broneer, *Topography and Architecture*, 100–112.

[26] D. Geagan, "The Isthmian Dossier of P. Licinius Priscus Juventianus," *Hesperia* 58 (1989) 359. Broneer opted for an earlier date (*Topography and Architecture*, 100), but the 1989 excavation confirms the 50 to 70 or 80 CE time frame for Pit A (Gebhard, "Isthmian Games and the Sanctuary of Poseidon," 79–85).

[27] Broneer, *Topography and Architecture*, 109; O. Broneer, *Isthmia:* Volume 3, *Terracotta Lamps* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1977) 35–52.

[28] Koester, "Melikertes at Isthmia," 365.

[29] Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 199–200.

[30] Garland, *Way of Death*, 110–13; W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983) 197.

[31] N. Bookidis and R. Stroud, *Demeter and Persephone in Ancient Corinth* (Corinth Notes 2; Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1987) 13.

that Demeter worship flourished on the Rachi from the sixth century down to the fourth and possibly the third century BCE.[32]

Two chance finds several hundred yards south and west of the Poseidon temple site suggest a second possible center for the Demeter cult. The two items, a statue of a young girl and a large vase (skyphoid krater) with reliefs, were inscribed to Demeter. They both date from some time in the fourth century BCE. Demeter devotion was evidently taking place somewhere in the area, yet excavations in the vicinity of these finds have produced no further evidence.[33]

There may have been no sanctuary or shrine to Demeter at Isthmia in the Greek period, but an inscription verifies the existence of a temple to her in Roman times.[34] Composed to acknowledge the lavish building program of the Isthmian high priest Juventianus, the inscription speaks of constructing the Palaimonion and its place of offering for the dead (ἐναγιστήριον) as well as an enclosure around the temples of the sacred glen, a place yet to be uncovered. In the glen stood temples dedicated to Demeter (Eueteria), Persephone, Dionysos, and Artemis. The first two Juventianus takes credit for having restored, as they had suffered from earthquakes and age. The date of the inscription is disputed; it may be late first, early second, or late second century.[35] Whatever the precise date, the inscription indicates that the Demeter temple had been standing for some time.

The Juventianus inscription not only provides evidence of Demeter devotion at Roman Isthmia and locates the center of cultic activity; it also indicates the orientation of that activity. The gods of the underworld were prominent at Isthmia, and Demeter was associated with them. Persephone or Kore, the queen of the dead, had her own temple in the sacred glen. Moreover, the inscription mentions a religious site dedicated to Hades, a Plutoneion, there.[36] Worship of Hades was virtually nonexistent in ancient Greece, for sacred sites dedicated to him are very rare.[37] That there was a Plutoneion at Isthmia underscores the chthonic disposition of the place. Furthermore, the grouping of

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[32] V. Anderson-Stojanović, "Cult and Industry of Isthmia: A Shrine on the Rachi," paper presented at the Archaeological Institute of America 89th General Meeting, New York, 1987; summarized in *AJA* 92 (1988) 268–69.

[33] J. Caskey, "Objects from a Well at Isthmia," *Hesperia* 29 (1960) 168–76; O. Broneer, "Excavations at Isthmia, Fourth Campaign, 1957–1958," *Hesperia* 28 (1959) 323, 326.

[34] *Inscriptiones Graecae* (ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin; 14 vols.; Berlin: G. Reimar, 1873–1923) vol. 4, no. 203.

[35] Late first: A. B. West, *Corinth: Volume 8.2, Latin Inscriptions 1896–1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931) 54–55; early second: Koester, "Melikertes at Isthmia," 361; late second: Geagan, "Isthmian Dossier," 358.

[36] *Inscriptiones Graecae*, vol. 4, no. 203, lines 20–21.

[37] Garland, *Way of Death*, 53, 153; A. D. Nock, "The Cult of Heroes," in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Z. Stewart; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 2. 592.

Demeter with Persephone and Hades suggests that Demeter devotion in the Roman period had a predominantly chthonic orientation.

Roman-era Demeter worship had the same cast in Corinth. The sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone on the slope of Acrocorinth saw new life in the first century CE after a period of abandonment triggered by Roman general Mummius's sacking of Corinth in 146 BCE. The Roman Corinthians reestablished the sanctuary farther uphill. The three small temples they built there in the latter half of the first century constituted the focal point of cultic activity.[38] Sometime after the temples were constructed, in the late second or early third century, a mosaic went down on the floor of the middle temple. It depicts two baskets and two large snakes wrapped around them.[39] Given the snake's funerary and underworld affinities, what we have in the mosaic is an iconographical indicator of the Roman sanctuary's chthonic focus, an emphasis that is further confirmed by the dedicatory inscription on the mosaic.[40] A certain Octavios Agathopous recorded the date of his benefaction as the year that Charis served as priestess of Neotera, an appellation the excavators of the Demeter sanctuary believe refers not to Demeter but to Kore or Persephone.[41] Thus, the central temple of the Roman-period sanctuary appears to have been dedicated to the queen of the underworld rather than Demeter.

Other finds at the site further confirm this underworld orientation and prove it went back to the beginning of renewed cultic activity. Curse tablets

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[38] N. Bookidis and J. Fisher, "The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on Acrocorinth, Preliminary Report IV: 1969–1970," *Hesperia* 41 (1972) 313; Bookidis and Stroud, *Demeter and Persephone,* 11, 22.

[39] N. Bookidis and J. Fisher, "Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on Acrocorinth, Preliminary Report V: 1971–1973," *Hesperia* 43 (1974) 280–81.

[40] Garland, *Way of Death,* 158–59. Attic funeral pottery (frequently amphorae) of the Late Geometric period (LGIIb, 720–700 BCE) commonly had plastic snakes on its rim, handles, and/or shoulders (J. Coldstream, *Greek Geometric Pottery* [London: Methuen, 1968] 60, 79, pls. 11,g [Athens St. 222] and 14,e [Athens 17519]). Snake figures were common on Roman sarcophagi (R. Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains a représentations dionysiaques* [Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 210; Paris: Boccard, 1966] 419, 485, 493, 526, 538, 548, 550, 628, pls. 31,b; 34,b; 36,a; 40,b; H. Sichtermann and G. Koch, *Griechische Mythen auf römischen Sarkophagen* [Bilderhefte des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Rom 5 & 6; Tübingen: E. Wasmuth, 1975] 57–58 [catalogue nos. 60, 61], pls. 148,1; 148,2; 154; A. M. McCann, *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978] 91 pl. 103, 94 pl. 109, 113 pl. 140).

[41] In conversation with Nancy Bookidis, Assistant Director, Corinth Excavations. Taking issue with this interpretation is K. Dunbabin ("'*Ipsa deae vestigia . . .*' Footprints Divine and Human on Graeco-Roman Monuments," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 [1990] 95). Ronald Stroud presents evidence for reading Neotera as Persephone and notes that a fuller argument will appear in a forthcoming volume (*Corinth,* vol. 18.3) on the Demeter and Kore sanctuary ("The Sanctuary of Demeter on Acrocorinth in the Roman Period," in *The Corinthia in the Roman Period* [ed. T. Gregory; Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 8; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1993] 73, esp. n. 7).

(*defixiones*) are not unusual finds at a Demeter sanctuary,[42] but in Corinth they appear for the first time in the Roman era, concentrated at levels dating to an early phase of Roman occupation, probably late first or early second century.[43] A full treatment of the Corinthian sanctuary curse tablets has yet to appear in print because their poor condition has made them difficult to decipher, but it is known that they invoked the underworld gods, in almost every case against women.[44]

The pottery record for the Demeter and Persephone sanctuary is also revealing. Compared with the Greek era, there is little Roman pottery that had an exclusively cultic function. Gone are the miniature vases—winnowing baskets, water jugs, and bowls for mixing wine—that clearly served as votives, gifts from worshiper to deity.[45] Of the Roman cultic pottery perhaps the most prominent are eighty-one large, coarse-ware vessels, seventy-three of which probably served as incense burners (*thymiatēria*). Several features of these vessels are noteworthy: all of these vessels have unusual impressed piecrust decoration; one has an incised wavy line on its upper wall.[46] What makes these features so noteworthy is this: piecrust decoration also appears on Roman cremation urns, three of which were found in first-century burials in the North Cemetery.[47] One can also see a wavy line on one of these urns, in this case painted on the fabric of the urn. The interpreter is faced at this point with relatively rare features shared by types of pottery with different functions, one cultic and the other funerary. But it may not be coincidental that two different types of pottery share this feature, *if* Roman Corinthian religion had a markedly underworld and thus funerary cast. In other words, this common feature may serve as verification that Demeter worship in the Roman era focused on the world of the dead.

Confirming this interpretation of the Demeter incense burners are lid fragments that evidently belonged to the burners.[48] The lids' fabric, color, and thickness match the incense burners', and the lids show traces of burning. All three lids have piecrust decoration and at least two, possibly three, have snake appliqué. Given the fact that snake imagery had strong funerary and chthonic

[42] D. Jordan, "A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora," *GRBS* 26 (1985) 175–76.

[43] Bookidis and Stroud, *Demeter and Persephone*, 30.

[44] Ibid.; Bookidis and Fisher, "Demeter and Kore, Report IV," 304; Stroud, "Demeter on Acrocorinth," 72.

[45] Bookidis and Stroud, *Demeter and Persephone*, 13; Stroud, "Demeter on Acrocorinth," 68–72; K. Slane, *Corinth*: Volume 18.2, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: The Roman Pottery and Lamps* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1990) 64.

[46] Slane's catalogue no. 145 (*Demeter and Kore: Roman Pottery*, 66–69); excavation inventory no. C-65-322.

[47] Slane, *Demeter and Kore: Roman Pottery*, 66, esp. n. 8; Blegen, Palmer, and Young, *North Cemetery*, 168, 298–99 (grave catalogue nos. 517-1, 518-1, 519-1), pls. 76, 99.

[48] Slane, *Demeter and Kore: Roman Pottery*, 68–71, catalogue nos. 156, 157, 152, 153, 154.

associations in Greco-Roman religion, the snake appliqué on the lids of the incense burners is a further indication of the chthonic orientation of Demeter worship in the Roman period.[49] Furthermore, the early date for these vessels (middle to late first century) relative to the curse tablets and central temple mosaic means that we can trace the chthonic cast of Demeter devotion back to the earliest Roman phase of Demeter devotion.

It would be an exaggeration to conclude from this archaeologically based reconstruction of Corinth's religious climate that Corinthian religion in the Roman period differed completely from that of the Greek period. Continuities did exist. The Romans reestablished or refurbished the temple of Asklepios and the sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone in Corinth and the temple of Poseidon at Isthmia. They built temples to the traditional gods of Greece—Apollo, Hermes, and others—at the west end of Corinth's new, impressive forum.[50] Poseidon and Aphrodite, traditionally popular gods of the Corinthia, maintained their status, if Roman Corinthian coinage is any indicator.[51] We can also assume that although Mummius depopulated Corinth, there remained a residual regional population that preserved the religion of the past.[52]

As we have seen, however, the material record also points to innovation; archaeological data verify the existence of a new and widespread religious perspective. The rise of the Palaimon cult at Isthmia and the orientation of Demeter devotion in the Roman period point unequivocally to a development transcending cult boundaries: the emergence during the middle of the first century CE of a religious outlook focused intensely on the dead and the world of the dead.

Determining why the religious culture of early Roman Corinth as a whole developed in this way goes beyond the scope of this paper, but at least with regard to the Corinthian Christians, their emphasis on the dead may have arisen in part from different, perhaps conflicting, burial practices in first-century Corinth.[53] If the burial data from Corinth's North Cemetery indicate a

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[49] See n. 40.

[50] Charles K. Williams II, "The Refounding of Corinth: Some Roman Religious Attitudes," in *Roman Architecture in the Greek World* (ed. S. Macready and F. H. Thompson; Occasional Papers [New Series] 10; London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1987) 26.

[51] D. Engels, *Roman Corinth: An Alternative Model for the Classical City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 93, 95–97.

[52] Cicero described a population living in the ruins of Greek Corinth (*Tusc.* 3.22 #53), and Charles K. Williams II observes that Greek graffiti on early Roman pottery is evidence for a Greek-speaking element in the early years of the Roman colony ("Refounding of Corinth," 35 n. 20). See also J. Wiseman, *The Land of the Ancient Corinthians* (Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology 50; Göteburg: Åström, 1978) 12 n. 25; C. K. Williams II, "Roman Corinth as a Commercial Center," in *The Corinthia in the Roman Period* (ed. T. Gregory; Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 8; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1993) 31, 33; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (GNS 6; Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983) 43–46.

[53] With regard to this development in Demeter devotion, see R. DeMaris, "Demeter in Roman Corinth: Local Development in a Mediterranean Religion," *Numen* 42 (1995) 105–17.

steady and strong sense of obligation to the dead in ancient Corinth, they also document varying burial practices in the first century CE. More to the point, in the early Roman period the Corinthians were carrying out very different burial practices *concurrently.* In that period—Hazel Palmer contends that the cemetery went out of use at the end of the first century[54]—we have evidence that Corinthians were practicing both cremation and inhumation. Palmer concludes that a residual Greek population inhuming its dead and Roman colonists cremating their dead were using the cemetery, and this conclusion makes sense given the typical burial practice of Romans and Greeks in the first century.[55] Did this difference in burial customs draw attention to the dead and the duty the living had to help them in their journey to the underworld? We cannot draw this conclusion for Corinthians in general because we do not know the level of integration between the local Greek population and the Roman colonists. But in the case of the Corinthian Christians, Gerd Theissen's compilation of those known by name indicates a mixed community of Romans and Greeks.[56] If differences in burial practices heightened concern about the disposition of the dead, such a preoccupation would have existed among the Christians of Corinth.

II. Baptism for the Dead in the Corinthian Religious Environment

New Testament scholars now have a more detailed picture of the religious environment in which the Christian communities of the Corinthia arose and with which they interacted. This study suggests that first-century Corinthians were preoccupied with the world of the dead, so they attached themselves to deities that would allow them to address that concern. Accordingly, the worship of the dead hero Palaimon blossomed at Isthmia, and attention to Persephone and other underworld powers overshadowed other elements within the local Demeter cult.

Corinthian Christianity, in order to survive and flourish, *had* to address this same orientation. As Christianity grew on Corinthian soil it became more and more a Gentile community, and many coming into the church brought with them a concern for the world of the dead. While it seems logical that baptism, a ritual of entry or boundary crossing, might have been used widely to aid the deceased as they made the transition from life to death, only the Corinthian Christians acted on this logic. What fostered this practice at Corinth was a local preoccupation with the underworld, such that Christians of first-century Corinth were pushed to innovate. Put simply, the Corinthian Christians would

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[54] Blegen, Palmer, and Young, *North Cemetery,* 65, 167.

[55] Ibid., 70–71; I. Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 52–53.

[56] G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 94–99.

not have instituted baptism on behalf of the dead if Corinthian religion of the Roman era had not been preoccupied with the realm of the dead.[57]

Concern for the dead certainly did come to expression in other Christian circles. For instance, Paul felt compelled to assure the Thessalonian Christians about the place of deceased community members in the events of the parousia (1 Thess 4:13–18). Concern for dead ancestors and the central importance of baptism may have prompted Hermas's interpretation of a vision, in which deceased apostles and teachers preached and baptized among those who had died before the advent of Christ (*Herm. Sim.* 9.16.5–6). As for aiding the dead or dying on their way from the world of the living to that of the dead and the role of a sacrament in this process, a story recorded by Eusebius is instructive: a certain Serapion, seeking a final release from his sins, put off death until the moment his grandson dropped a portion of the Eucharist in his mouth (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.44.2–6). All these examples indicate an early Christian concern for the dead, and in doing so they attest to how pervasive such a concern was in the Greco-Roman world.

Yet, other ancient Christians did not extend the practice of baptism to their dead. Why not? Because, according to my argument, local religious environments elsewhere did not elevate a general concern for the dead into a preoccupation with the dead and the world of the dead. At Corinth the practice arose alongside, and perhaps in competition with, the developing chthonic orientation of other Corinthian religions, all as responses to an intense local preoccupation with the dead. It seems unlikely that the configuration and details of the Corinthian situation could have occurred elsewhere, even though we have little evidence to say definitively they did not. Other Roman colonies in Greece, such as Philippi, might have developed a religious climate for the local Christian community similar to that of Corinth, but the material record currently available from that site does not allow for a valid comparison. Archaeological reports do exist on burial practices there, for example, but are preliminary and incomplete when set beside the record from Corinth's North Cemetery.[58] Excavation of Roman Thessalonica, impeded by the location and size of the modern city, has been so limited that comparison with Roman Corinth would be pointless.[59] Even without a means of verification, however, it seems reasonable to

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[57] Charles Kennedy has argued that the controversy over food offered to idols at Corinth (1 Corinthians 8–10) actually concerned Christian participation in memorial meals for the dead ("The Cult of the Dead in Corinth," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* [ed. J. Marks and R. Good; Guilford, CT: Four Quarters, 1987] 229–30). The religious climate I have described would have encouraged such participation.

[58] E. B. French, "Archaeology in Greece 1991–92," *Archaeological Reports* 38 (1992) 52; H. W. Catling, "Archaeology in Greece, 1985–86," *Archaeological Reports* 32 (1986) 69; idem, "Archaeology in Greece, 1984–85," *Archaeological Reports* 31 (1985) 49; idem, "Archaeology in Greece, 1983–84," *Archaeological Reports* 30 (1984) 50; idem, "Archaeology in Greece, 1981–82," *Archaeological Reports* 28 (1982) 42.

[59] J. McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 293–94.

conclude that the Corinthian environment was unparalleled, since in general local religious environments varied widely.

The conditions that fostered the emergence of baptism for the dead must have been unusual, for even at Corinth we have only Paul's reference to it. How long this Corinthian practice survived is uncertain, but the paucity of references to it by Christian writers suggests neither a widespread nor long-lived phenomenon. This argument from silence based on literary evidence (the lack thereof), would not be strong except that it fits well with the history of burial practices in the Roman Empire. Roman practices underwent a sudden and dramatic change in the second century, bringing them into conformity with the Hellenistic customs of the eastern Mediterranean. In other words, the Romans switched from cremation to inhumation, so that the entire empire had a common burial practice in the second and later centuries.[60] If, as I have suggested, baptism for the dead arose in part from a heightened concerned for the dead that originated from differences between Roman and Greek burial practices, then by the end of the second century this stimulus for the practice was gone. Presumably, baptism for the dead would have fallen into disuse, thus accounting for the silence about the practice at Corinth in Christian writings after Paul and the rarity of reference to it in general.

Connecting burial and baptism may press the evidence too far, however. Linking the emergence and disappearance of baptism for the dead at Corinth with the presence and absence of differences in burial practices in the Corinthia, as appealing as such logic may be, slights the larger phenomenon that baptism for the dead belonged to: the pronounced chthonic orientation of early Roman Corinthian religion. Since this emphasis did not slacken in Demeter or Palaimon devotion in the course of the second century, it seems unlikely that Corinthian burial practices *alone* shaped practices of the local Christians. We should not underestimate the importance of death and the treatment of the dead: differences in burial practice would have stood out in an ethnically mixed community like that of the Corinthian Christians; and death was central to, and definitive of, both Greek and Roman society, the opposite of many modern societies.[61] Still, it is probably best to reiterate the conclusion drawn above that baptism for the dead 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.

This pronounced chthonic emphasis may not only account for the emer-

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[60] Morris, *Death-Ritual in Classical Antiquity*, 42–69; Toynbee, *Death and Burial*, 33–34; I. A. Richmond, *Archaeology and the After-Life in Pagan and Christian Imagery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950) 19; J. Collis, "Owslebury (Hants) and the Problem of Burials on Rural Settlements," in *Burial in the Roman World* (ed. R. Reece; Research Report 22; London: Council for British Archaeology, 1977) 34.

[61] R. Huntington and P. Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 96.

gence of baptism for the dead but also aid in explaining what the practice meant to the Corinthian Christians. To begin with, the Corinthian preoccupation with the dead and the underworld, when added to the already considerable attention ancient Greeks and Romans gave to their dead in general, acts as confirmation of what most NT scholars understand the Greek of 1 Cor 15:29 to describe: baptism for the dead meant baptism undergone by the living to benefit the dead.[62] Emphasis falls on the dead and the duty of the living to act on their behalf in this reading of the verse's Greek, which accords well with this study's examination of Greek and Roman attitudes toward the dead and its reconstruction of first-century Corinth's religious climate.

Departures from this interpretation, even if they are textually possible, deserve criticism because they are unmindful of the religious orientation of first-century Corinth. For instance, some have proposed altering the accepted punctuation of 1 Cor 15:29 so that βαπτίζω and ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν belong to different clauses: "Else what will they achieve who are baptised—merely for the benefit of their dead bodies, if dead bodies never rise again? Why then be baptised just for them?"[63] This change allows the practice to be understood as baptism for one's *own* body. Other interpreters take ὑπέρ in a final sense— "because of," "for the sake of"—and argue that baptism for the dead was an act undergone by the living *for themselves,* presumably unbaptized family members or relatives, to ensure their reunion with dead Christian relatives or friends in the next world.[64] Both interpretations rid the practice of its vicarious action aimed at benefiting the dead and focus instead on the living. In doing so these alternatives distance the practice from its context, a culture in which aiding the dead was all important and which assumed that the world of the living could affect the world of the dead. The meager context provided by the letter of 1 Corinthians for 15:29 has encouraged interpreters to consider the dozens of possible readings that the grammar and vocabulary of the verse permit, and such speculation may have been justified in the past. Now, however, these possibilities can be tested against a specific context: the reconstruction of early Roman Corinthian religion based on archaeological data.

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[62] Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection,* 287–93, esp. 288; Downey, "1 Cor 15:29 and the Theology of Baptism," 23; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians,* 275–76; Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 363; Hurd, *Origin of I Corinthians,* 136; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament,* 185–87; Rissi, *Taufe für die Toten,* 57; et al.

[63] K. C. Thompson, "I Corinthians 15,29 and Baptism for the Dead," in *Studia Evangelica: Volume II, Papers Presented to the Second International Congress on New Testament Studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1961* (ed. F. Cross; TU 87; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964) 651, 659. Bernard Foschini took a very similar tack (*"Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead" I Cor. 15:29,* 92–98).

[64] This interpretation is best articulated by Maria Raeder ("Vikariatstaufe in I Cor 15:29?" *ZNW* 46 [1955] 258–60), who is followed by Joachim Jeremias ("'Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God' [I Cor. xv.50]," *NTS* 2 [1955–56] 155–56), J. K. Howard ("Baptism for the Dead: A Study of 1 Corinthians 15:29," *EvQ* 37 [1965] 140), and (with some reservation) Rudolf Schnackenburg (*Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1964] 102).

What more does this study suggest about the significance of baptism for the dead to the Corinthian Christians? We can probably specify with some accuracy who was baptized for whom. Primary obligation to the dead in Greek and Roman society typically fell to family members, so it is likely that those who had themselves baptized were kin of the dead.[65] Moreover, since the journey from the world of the living to that of the dead was a critical transition in the thinking of the Greeks and Romans, baptism was more likely undertaken for the recently deceased than for the long departed.[66] In thinking this way, Greco-Roman society reflects the perspective of many traditional societies in which dying is a relatively long process that only begins with physical death.[67] In that process, the deceased is thought to be precariously positioned between two worlds, the living and the dead. Living society must, therefore, exert itself to help the deceased pass through the transition, so that the uncertain status that dying imposes on the deceased can be resolved. Accordingly, survivors carry out elaborate and lengthy rituals to separate the deceased from the world of the living and integrate the newly departed into the world of the dead. By ensuring that the transition takes place, society overcomes the disruption that death introduces. Proper attention to the dead safely locates the deceased in the world of the dead and allows a social order fractured by death to regain its stability.[68]

Greco-Roman society's elaborate funerary and mourning rituals cohered around the metaphor of journey, used to express the belief that the newly deceased had to make a transition from the world of the living to that of the dead.[69] At the popular level, the journey was thought to be arduous enough to require divine assistance. Thus, the messenger of the gods and guide to travelers, Hermes or Mercury, was assigned the task of guiding the deceased to the underworld in his role as Psychopompus. The difficulties faced on the journey also came to expression in the figure of Charon, who charged the dead to ferry them across the river Styx at the boundary of the underworld. So powerful was this image that both Greeks and Romans typically placed a coin in the mouth of the deceased as payment to Charon.[70]

[65] S. C. Humphreys, *The Family, Women and Death: Comparative Studies* (International Library of Anthropology; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 83. Meyer Fortes notes that the religious duty of the son to his deceased father exemplifies the heavy obligation of son to father in Roman society ("Pietas in Ancestor Worship," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 91 [1961] 179).

[66] Kurtz and Broadman, *Burial Customs*, 330; Garland, *Way of Death*, 38–47.

[67] R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Aberdeen: Cohen & West, 1960) 28–37, 81–82; S. C. Humphreys, "Death and Time," in *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death* (ed. S. C. Humphreys and H. King; New York: Academic Press, 1981) 263–67. "Death and Time" also appears as chapter 7 in Humphreys, *Family, Women and Death.*

[68] M. C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 95–106.

[69] F. Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922) 148–69.

[70] This custom even entered Jewish burial practice (R. Hachlili and A. Killebrew, "Jewish

So pervasive was this popular belief that it eventually found its way into philosophical traditions and came to expression in Christian circles.[71] Plato puts a version of this story in the mouth of Socrates as anecdotal evidence for the soul's survival of the body's death. A guardian *daimon* escorts the soul through the various phases of its journey to the next world (*Phaed.* 107c–108c). In Christian literature we have Perpetua's striking vision of her martyrdom and journey to heaven as a climb up a tall, narrow ladder, on whose sides were attached all manner of dangerous weapons and at whose foot sat a dragon (*Pass. Perp. et Fel.* 4). In the *Acts of John*, John closes the prayer at his martyrdom with the petition that his passage to God not be hindered by demons, powers, Satan, or other impediments (*Act. Jn.* 114). The *Apocalypse of Paul* gives a full account of the confrontation between good and evil forces that threatened the journey of the righteous as their guardian angel led them to heaven (*Apoc. Paul* 13–14). Such accounts express quite vividly the belief that the newly deceased faced a difficult transition from this world to the next, so difficult that the deceased needed assistance to reach the other side.

This view of dying and death likely typified the Corinthian outlook, given how pervasive it was in the Greco-Roman world and given the correspondence I noted above between Corinthian burials and those elsewhere. Set against this background, vicarious baptism was one among several funerary rituals the Corinthian Christians used to help the deceased community member through the difficult transition between life and death. Along this line of interpretation, a nineteenth-century study by Georg Heinrici compared vicarious baptism to providing the dead with a coin for Charon and to Roman Catholic mass said for those in purgatory in order to shorten their torment.[72] More recently, James Downey has argued that the Corinthians used vicarious baptism to protect their dead from the cosmic powers that might impede them on the journey to their final resting place.[73] These positions merit attention.

Sociologically speaking, the primary significance of vicarious baptism for the Corinthians may have lain in its function as a rite of passage. Arnold van Gennep's study of this phenomenon found common features in the rituals that signal an individual's movement from one stage of life to another. He included baptism with marriage and funeral ceremonies as rituals having the three fea-

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Funerary Customs during the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis," *PEQ* 115 [1983] 118, 128).

[71] Alexiou, *Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition,* 5, 24–35, 189–93; A. C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity 1; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1941) 28–43, 50–71, 92–101.

[72] C. F. G. Heinrici, *Das erste Sendschreiben des Apostel Paulus an die Korinthier* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1880) 42–43.

[73] J. Downey, "1 Cor 15:29 and the Theology of Baptism," 23–25, 34–35. This interpretation corresponds to the understanding of baptism Irenaeus attributed to a Gnostic group (*Adv. Haer.* 1.21.5).

tures of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.[74] Gennep's classification of baptism rested largely on how the sacrament had developed in the ancient and medieval church, but Wayne Meeks has made the same case for baptism in the first century.[75] The baptismal language of Paul and the Pauline communities invariably conveys departure or separation from a previous status and incorporation or integration into a new condition: buried into death/raised to newness of life (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12); putting off the body of flesh or stripping off the old self/clothing yourself with the new self (Col 2:11; 3:9–10; cf. 2 Cor 5:17); uncircumcision of your flesh/circumcision of Christ (Col 2:11, 13); old status—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female/new status—oneness in Christ (1 Cor 12:12–13; Gal 3:27–28); and so forth. Whether the Corinthians expressed their understanding of baptism in precisely these terms or not, they evidently were aware of the new status baptism had given them, which Paul took great pains to define (1 Cor 6:9–20; 10:1–12; 12:13).[76]

Baptism normally functioned as a ritual of initiation into the Christian community, but it could have served equally well as a rite of passage between life and death. Understood as such, the Corinthians would have considered it ideally suited to assist the deceased community member to leave the world of the living and to enter the world of the dead. Baptism for the dead would have alleviated any apprehension the Corinthian Christians might have had about the destiny of the newly deceased, because the ritual allowed them to enact, and thus to be assured of, the departed one's transition to the next world. Moreover, by enabling the living to separate the dead from this world, the practice allowed the community to resume life, free of the disruption caused by death. In the context of early Roman Corinth, this development in baptismal theology was both an expression of the religious culture's preoccupation with the chthonic and a response to it. From the standpoint of the Christian community, baptism for the dead was an expression of confidence that death posed no threat to the Christian, deceased or living.

III. Wider Implications: 1 Corinthians 15 and Pauline Theology

Modern biblical scholarship has paid considerable attention to baptism for the dead not because of its own merits but because of how and where Paul made use of it. It is no overstatement to say that Paul's understanding of the

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[74] A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 10–11, 63, 79, 93–95.

[75] W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 88–89, 150–57. See also Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 363–92.

[76] A. C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 167–68; L. Hartmann, *"Auf den Namen des Herrn Jesus": Die Taufe in den neutestamentlichen Schriften* (SBS 148; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992) 82–93.

resurrection was central to his theology, that chap. 15 of 1 Corinthians is key to interpreting the entire letter, and that 1 Corinthians has been crucial for NT scholarship's reconstruction of what the earliest Christian communities were like. Consequently, Paul's inclusion of baptism for the dead among his arguments for the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 has elevated the practice to prominence.

In the unresolved debate about what Paul meant in 15:12—"How can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead?"—scholars have time after time used baptism for the dead to assess the interpretive options. If at first glance it seems that Paul launched his argument for the resurrection against a group among the Corinthian Christians that denied the raising of the dead or perhaps an afterlife of any kind, a consensus of NT scholars currently maintains that Paul countered an altogether different view. Some find a spiritual enthusiasm or realized eschatology dominating the Corinthian outlook (cf. 1 Cor 4:8), in which case denying the (future) resurrection was actually a claim that it had already taken place (cf. 1 Tim 2:18). Others find a dualistic orientation, of gnostic origin or otherwise, rife among the Corinthians, in which case denying resurrection (of the body from the dead) was actually a claim that the spiritual self, the soul or spirit, was immortal and it alone would enjoy an afterlife (cf. Justin, *Dial.* 80.4). What has made these and similar alternatives popular is, among other things, the deduction from baptism for the dead that the Corinthians believed that something survived the grave, which would presumably tell against identifying their denial of resurrection as a blanket rejection of an afterlife.[77]

Can the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead eliminate the possibility that Paul was responding in 1 Corinthians 15 to some at Corinth that rejected any kind of afterlife? Paul had no reason to mention baptism for the dead unless he thought it would be an effective argument with the Corinthians, so presumably he introduced what he thought was an inconsistency in the Corinthians' theology. In this case, some at Corinth might have rejected an afterlife but practiced baptism for the dead, not realizing what the rite implied. The practice hardly rules out skepticism about the afterlife in some circle at Corinth, since the Corinthian Christians came from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds, and Paul thought he was arguing effectively.

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[77] Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 6–37; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 261–63; Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 347–48; J. Becker, *Auferstehung der Toten im Urchristentum* (SBS 82; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1976) 71–76; L. E. Keck, "Death and Afterlife in the New Testament," in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (ed. H. Obayashi; Contributions to the Study of Religion 33; New York: Greenwood, 1992) 89–90; G. Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15* (FRLANT 138; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 17–37; M. C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (JSNTSup 22; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 96–97.

More likely, the Corinthians saw no connection and thus no contradiction between baptism for the dead and skepticism about resurrection. If, as this study suggests, the Corinthians undertook baptism for the dead in order to claim a place for them in the world of the dead, the practice had no bearing on questions of when, in what manner, or even whether the resurrection took place. In other words, a ritual marking the transition from life to death says little if anything about what lies beyond death and nothing at all about bringing the dead back to life. Hence, baptism for the dead may not be relevant for interpreting 1 Cor 15:12.

Paul's mention of the practice in chapter fifteen means that he saw the matter differently. For him a ritual concerning the dead necessarily involved the issue of resurrection because Christ's death and resurrection were paradigmatic for all Christians—this is the logic of 15:12–13—and because death was the enemy to be overcome by resurrection according to Paul's apocalyptically informed theology (15:24–28, 54–55).[78] The Corinthians would have claimed to overcome death, too, but they evidently understood the conquest differently. Through baptism for the dead they gained confidence that the disruption and uncertainty death produced in the community posed no ultimate threat. The practice confirmed the movement of the deceased from an uncertain, liminal status into the world of the dead and thereby signaled that life could begin anew for the surviving community with no anxiety about the departed.[79]

This understanding and application of baptism may have troubled Paul, but not for the reasons typically offered by interpreters of the practice. Because his mention of it could imply his toleration or approval of it, many have tried to distance Paul from baptism for the dead or remove features regarded as offensive from it. Some maintain that Paul was arguing *ad hominem* or *ex concessu* in 1 Cor 15:29, so that he neither approved nor disapproved of the practice by referring to it.[80] Yet it would have been unlike Paul to refrain from criticizing a practice he did not at least tolerate, especially since he readily corrected misapplication or misunderstanding of baptism elsewhere (1 Cor 1:10–17; 10:1–

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[78] Sellin, *Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten*, 226, 283–84, 292–93; Becker, *Auferstehung der Toten im Urchristentum*, 81–86, 105.

[79] Jonathan Z. Smith's distinction between utopian and locative aspects of religion might be useful for articulating this difference between Paul and the Corinthians (*Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* [SJLA 23; Leiden: Brill, 1978] 100–103, 130–42, 160–66, 169–71, 185–89, 308–9; idem, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* [Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990] 110, 121–42). As he notes (*Drudgery Divine*, 124), "In such locative traditions, what is soteriological is for the dead to remain dead. If beings from the realm of the dead walk among the living, they are the objects of rituals of relocation, not celebration." The Corinthian Christians evidently understood baptism for the dead as a means of maintaining or restoring boundaries.

[80] Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 191; Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 363; G. Barth, *Die Taufe in frühchristlicher Zeit* (Biblisch-Theologische Studien 4; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 91–92.

13).[81] Others acknowledge Paul's implicit approval of baptism for the dead but rid it of vicarious action, so that the "superstitious" or "magical" aspect of the ritual is gone.[82] Yet Paul maintained that family members could act vicariously for each other (1 Cor 7:14), and he recognized an efficacy in the Eucharist that could readily be understood as "magical" (11:29–30).[83] Both interpretations create a barrier between Paul and perceived ritualism or sacramentalism. In doing so they reflect an understanding of the early church with roots in a Protestant polemic against Roman Catholicism, one of whose goals was to pre-serve Paul from the pagan influences thought to have distorted apostolic faith into priestly religion.[84]

If baptism for the dead troubled Paul, it was for other reasons. Here is one possibility: His implied toleration or approval of it may have played into the hands of the women in the Corinthian churches.[85] While Paul acknowledged and in principle approved of women using their gifts and exercising leadership in Christian communities of the Corinthia, he also recognized that the goal of community order and decency might conflict with their assertion of authority and freedom.[86] Funerary rituals in Greco-Roman society were overwhelmingly in the hands of women, so Paul's toleration of baptism for the dead would have added to the prestige and influence of Corinthian women.[87] Hence, such toler-ation would have compromised Paul's efforts to qualify or curb their power. On

[81] Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, 95.

[82] Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in I Cor 15:29?" 258–59; Rissi, *Taufe für die Toten*, 89–92; K. Staab, "I Kor 15,29 in Lichte der Exegese der griechischen Kirche," in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961* (2 vols.; AnBib 17–18; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Bib-lico, 1963) 1. 449.

[83] Sellin, *Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten*, 278; M. Smith, "Pauline Worship as Seen by Pagans," *HTR* 73 (1980) 248. It may be best to abandon terms such as magical altogether. Mary Douglas sees no significant difference between the sacramental and the magical, as both are ritual (*Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1970] 9–11). She also notes that such language misrepresents ritual action and has historically served polemical purposes (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966] 19–28).

[84] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 34, 43–46, 65–71, 95. So well established is this originally Protes-tant historical model of "origins and corruptions," Jonathan Z. Smith argues, that even Roman Catholic scholars have assumed it (pp. 114–15).

[85] My conjecture here relies on Antoinette Clark Wire's contention that Paul had in mind the women prophets in much of what he wrote in 1 Corinthians (*Corinthian Women Prophets*, 3, 7, 8–9, 14, 15, 17, 32, 34, et al.). See Robin Scroggs's review of her book (*JBL* 111 [1992] 546–48).

[86] E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Chris-tian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 226–33; K. J. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 40–42, 144–45.

[87] Throughout Greek history, Sarah Pomeroy notes, care for bodies has fallen to women (*Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* [New York: Schocken, 1975] 44), a phenomenon that seems widespread (B. S. Anderson and J. P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* [2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1988] 1. 111).

the other hand, how could Paul have rejected a use of baptism that brought stability and unity to the community, a primary goal of his, particularly since baptism in its other uses at Corinth produced unwarranted self-confidence (1 Cor 10:1–13) and may have created divisions in the community (1:10–17)?[88] Moreover, Paul believed the practice supported his argument for the resurrection of the dead, an all-important issue for him. So Paul mentioned baptism for the dead without objecting to it. Here Paul's practical side shone: if he could gain ground on issues of the greatest consequence to him, why not give ground in his dealings with the Corinthian women, a matter about which he was ambivalent and perhaps even deeply conflicted.

Paul did not voice any dissatisfaction with vicarious baptism in the Corinthian correspondence, but did he let the matter go? It may have troubled him that the Corinthians made no connection between baptism for the dead and resurrection, but he may not have thought it wise to countermand his tacit approval of it and confront the Corinthians directly. Instead, Paul may have returned to the matter indirectly when he wrote about baptism in his letter to the Romans. Scholars agree that Paul relied on, and responded to, baptismal tradition in Rom 6:1–11, but they disagree about the amount and character of the tradition he included and how he modified it.[89] Some, for example, see Paul returning to Gal 3:27–28 and explaining baptism into Christ as a baptism into his death and resurrection.[90] Others find Paul countering a tradition similar to that expressed in Col 2:11–13. In this case he was correcting a realized eschatology by moving the full realization of the believer's new life with the resurrected Jesus from the present into the future.[91] The latter interpretation understands Rom 6:1–11 as a reaction to the Corinthian enthusiasts, a position strengthened by the fact that most scholars think Paul wrote Romans in Corinth.[92] This study of baptism for the dead cannot settle the scholarly debate

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[88] H. Halter, *Taufe und Ethos: Paulinische Kriterien für das Proprium christlicher Moral* (Freiburger theologische Studien 106; Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 133–41; Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, 110.

[89] A. J. M. Wedderburn lays out the interpretive issues in detail and with ample bibliographical citation (*Baptism and Resurrection*, 37–69; idem, "Hellenistic Christian Traditions in Romans 6?" *NTS* 29 [1983] 337–55).

[90] Most recently J. A. Fitzmyer (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993] 430) and S. Légasse ("Être baptisé dans la mort du Christ: Étude de Romains 6,1–14," *RB* 98 [1991] 549, 552–57).

[91] E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 132–33; idem, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 160–71; Becker, *Auferstehung der Toten im Urchristentum*, 61–65; N. Gäumann, *Taufe und Ethik: Studien zu Römer 6* (BEvT 47; Munich: Kaiser, 1967) 46–49; R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (BZNW 32; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967) 7–43; et al.

[92] E.g., Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 85; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 399; H. Frankemölle, *Das Taufverständnis des Paulus: Taufe, Tod und Auferstehung nach Röm 6* (SBS 47; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970) 18.

over Rom 6:1–11. On the contrary, it widens the debate by suggesting that Paul was responding to other baptismal tradition in those verses.

What likelier source is there for the burial imagery in Romans 6 than vicarious baptism, a funerary ritual of the Corinthian Christians?[93] Inspired by them to connect baptism and burial, Paul appears to explore in Rom 6:1–11 what he implied in 1 Cor 15:29. If baptism for the dead necessarily raises the issue of resurrection, as 15:29 suggests, in Rom 6:1–11 we learn from Paul why it does: baptism joins the believer to the death and resurrection of Christ. Perhaps Paul's christological anchoring of baptism was his way of hinting at a deficiency in the Corinthians' understanding of baptism for the dead, for language of dying and rising with Christ to new life represents a reversal of the journey from life to death. In a letter that went to Rome, we may catch Paul expressing his wish that the Corinthians would rethink their theology of vicarious baptism. Paul did not confront the Corinthians; he simply, deftly turned their theology on its head.[94]

[93] This interpretation agrees with that of Norman Peterson, who argues that Rom 6:3–4 may have been informed by funerary practices or ideas ("Pauline Baptism and 'Secondary Burial,'" *HTR* 79 [1986] 217–26). But I detect a response to Corinthian baptism for the dead, not the influence of secondary burial practices.