

BREVIA.

Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν (1 Cor. xv. 29).—The expression, οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, has always formed one of the most insurmountable difficulties in the path of the exponent of St. Paul's epistles; and the generally accepted possible interpretations are not only fraught with considerable difficulties, but admitted by most commentators of importance to be at least unsatisfactory, while the greatest of our modern theologians speak with evident embarrassment and uncertainty on the passage.

There is however one interpretation which, though possibly suggested before, has not been brought into any prominence, but yet deserves consideration and attention; for if not the true solution of the difficulty, it at least throws a flood of light upon the whole subject, and helps to clear away many of the apparently insuperable difficulties involved in any consideration of the text.

It is noticeable that, throughout the story of the progress of the gospel as given in the Acts and the epistles of St. Paul, the baptism of whole households is more frequently spoken of than that of individuals. Thus in the epistle in which this passage occurs, St. Paul says he baptized τὸν Στεφανᾶ οἶκον; and in other cases, such as that of the gaoler at Philippi, and, earlier, of Cornelius of Cæsarea, baptism was given to the whole house (*i.e.* family and servants) of the newly made convert.

This points to the fact, that it was evidently a custom in the earlier days of Christianity, a custom of necessity confined to the first introduction of that religion into a country or community, for the baptism of the *head* of a household to entail that of the family (οἶκος), in a manner somewhat similar in later years to that in which the conversion of a king or chieftain often led immediately to the conversion of his subjects or clan. Thus it may not be wrong to assume that a household was baptized whenever the head of a household was converted.

Now it is more than likely that in every family there were vacant gaps made by the deaths of loved ones who had passed away, whose memory would be fondly cherished. We know well

how strong was family feeling and regard for ancestors in early times, and it is on record that during the evangelization of north-west Europe, centuries later than the date of the Pauline epistles, a certain monarch refused baptism when on the very point of entering the font, because, in reply to a question put to the bishop administering the rite, he was told that his ancestors who had died in the old faith could not be with him in the paradise Christianity would provide. It is quite conceivable from such considerations as these that the νεκροί, in behalf of whom St. Paul speaks of certain being baptized, were none other than the *departed members of the family newly received into the Christian faith.*

The thought of baptism separating finally and for ever the living from the beloved dead would doubtless exercise a deterrent influence upon many otherwise willing to enter the laver of regeneration and become fully initiated Christians; but the idea of "one family in Him" could be greatly emphasised and made doubly real to the minds of converts by the apostle who baptized, not merely the family on earth εἰς τὸ ὄνομα, but those also (vicariously) who were in the invisible world, and who would, as a matter of course, have shared the newly acquired privileges with the households of which they had been cherished members, had they been alive.

By such a baptism ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν many an uneasy mind would be set at rest, and many a scruple and prejudice against accepting Christianity be overcome; nor could it be regarded as a mere artifice on the part of evangelists, for there would be nothing in it repugnant to the spirit of the Church, any more than the custom of sponsors at baptism, while it would be eminently suited to the exigencies of the times.

But such a practice would of necessity, as the number of converts increased and Christianity spread, fall into disuse, and as early as the 4th or 5th century be so far forgotten, because unrecorded, as to be unknown even as a precedent for later conversions in the West. There is however nothing to show that, in countries such as our own, the earliest evangelists may not have used this interpretation of βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν to precipitate the entrance into the baptismal font of kings, nations, and families. It is moreover worthy of notice that this expression occurs in an epistle wherein St. Paul speaks of baptizing a household, καὶ τὸν Στεφανᾶ οἶκον (i. 16), followed immediately by the

words, *λοιπὸν οὐκ οἶδα εἴ τινα ἄλλον ἐβάπτισα*, where the words *τίνα ἄλλον* may be taken to refer as well to the *οἶκον* as the individual baptism implied in the mention of *Κρίσπον καὶ Γάϊον* in ver. 14.

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Psalm xlv. 7.—A standing puzzle to interpreters is the phrase in Psalm xlv. 7, rendered after the LXX. in Hebrews i. 8, 9, as “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever.” This is unobjectionable in point of grammar, but has against it material considerations of a formidable character. The alternative translation, “Thy God’s throne is for ever and ever,” defies the principle of Hebrew syntax, that no suffix may intrude between a construct noun and its following genitive. Passages cited as examples to the contrary are dubious, and the set of grammatical opinion is steadily against admitting the exceptional construction. Starting with the probability, that in the Elohim Psalms, the original sacred name *יהוה* has been displaced by a reviser, Giesebrecht points out the possibility that in this passage a *יהי*=3 sing. imperf. of the substantive verb, hastily read as the Divine name, was replaced by Elohim. If that were so, every difficulty vanishes, and we should read, “Thy throne is (or shall be) for ever and ever,” a phrase that has a close parallel in 2 Samuel vii. 16, and that leads naturally on to the thought of the following verse. The conjecture is ingenious.

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