

“BAPTIZED ON ACCOUNT OF THE DEAD”: THE MEANING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29 IN ITS CONTEXT

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Paul's words in 1 Cor 15:29, "Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized for the dead? If truly¹ the dead are not raised, why then are they being baptized for them?" (Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;) have been the subject of much debate since the patristic era. The reason is immediately apparent: the phrase οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, standing alone, would seem to imply some sort of vicarious baptism for the dead.² Students of the passage have struggled to make sense of this curious reference, offering an astonishing number of diverse interpretations.³ In the past thirty years, however, interest in the subject has fallen off as scholars reached an impasse concerning its meaning. There has been only a trickle of new ideas, and certainly nothing close to a consensus on the proper interpretation has emerged. This has led to an exegetical agnosticism on the part of many scholars.⁴

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¹ The precise syntactical function of the adverb ὅλως will be discussed below.

² Both Hans Conzelmann (*1 Corinthians* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 273) and Gordon D. Fee (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 763) call this the "normal" rendering of the text, by which they mean simply that the phrase οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, considered in isolation, would most naturally have that meaning. The same is true for Bernard Spörlein (*Die Leugnung der Auferstehung* [Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1971] 79), for whom this reading is "offenlegend," and Mathis Rissi (*Die Taufe für die Toten: Ein Beitrag zur Paulinischen Tauflehre* [ATANT 42; Zurich: Zwingli, 1962] 57), for whom it is "selbstverständlich."

³ Fee speaks of "at least forty different solutions" (*Corinthians*, 762), while Conzelmann knows of some two hundred (*Corinthians*, 276 n. 120)!

⁴ Fee: "no one knows in fact what was going on. The best one can do in terms of particulars is point out what appear to be the more viable options, but finally admit to ignorance" (*Corinthians*, 763). F. W. Grosheide: "Vs. 29 is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Interpretations abound but no one has succeeded in giving an interpretation which is generally

Defeat has been perhaps too easily conceded, however, for an investigation of the various attempts at interpretation⁵ reveals an almost universal inadequacy: failure to consider seriously the context of the verse.⁶ No doubt due to its perceived obscurity, 1 Cor 15:29 has generally been analyzed in complete isolation from its context.⁷ Yet, as will become clear below, the immediate and the larger epistolary context, far from being irrelevant, offers the key to establishing the meaning of v. 29. Before we present our own argument from the context, however, it will be helpful to lay out the issues at hand by outlining the basic solutions that have been proposed.

I. An Overview of the Major Interpretive Approaches

Past attempts at interpreting 1 Cor 15:29 have been tremendously creative. We may categorize them as follows: (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 alternate meaning for the preposition ὑπέρ; and (4) those that postulate some nonliteral sense for βαπτίζόμενοι. We shall briefly review these basic approaches.⁸

We have seen above that 1 Cor 15:29, taken in isolation, appears to refer to vicarious baptisms for the dead. This is the view taken by the majority of modern scholars.⁹ There are, nevertheless, at least four serious difficulties with this

accepted" (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953] 371). W. G. H. Simon: "We have no clue to the meaning of this obscure and difficult verse" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: SCM, 1959] 147). Simon J. Kistemaker: "Verse 29 remains a mystery" (*1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 560).

⁵ For an overview of the history of the interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29, see B. M. Foschini, "Those Being Baptized for the Dead": 1 Cor 15.29, *An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: Heffernan, 1951).

⁶ The notable exception is Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "'Baptized for the Dead' (1 Cor., XV, 29): A Corinthian Slogan?" *RB* 88 (1981) 532–43. For his view, see below.

⁷ This has left commentators at a loss to explain Paul's reasoning when they move from v. 29 to vv. 30 and 31. Conzelmann simply posits that "the new argument has nothing to do with the one advanced so far. Paul is stringing different thoughts together, though not of course in a disorderly manner" (*Corinthians*, 277). For Fee, "[w]hat follows comes as something of a surprise" (*Corinthians*, 769).

⁸ We should also mention those attempts at deciphering the verse by means of repunctuation. The problem with all these attempts, however, is that they divide the text into even smaller syntactical units than we have with the present punctuation, making for a very bumpy ride across one relatively short verse. For an example of this approach, see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 43–44.

⁹ According to Fee (*Corinthians*, 766) and Murphy-O'Connor ("Baptized," 532).

view. We have already alluded to the first of these: the lack of any immediate contextual mooring. As Murphy-O'Connor has perceptively pointed out:

If we accept that 1 Cor 15:29 refers to vicarious baptism, we are obliged to postulate a complete break between vv. 28 and 29, and another between vv. 29 and 30–34. In other words, while verse 29 reflects the general theme of the chapter, it has no relation to its immediate context. . . . By this criterion vicarious baptism is the least likely of the various possibilities of meaning implicit in verse 29.¹⁰

A second problem emerges when we consider Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15:29 within the context of the chapter as a whole: in order for Paul's argument to make any sense at all, the group at Corinth that was practicing vicarious baptism of the dead must be roughly coextensive with the group that denied the resurrection of the dead,¹¹ for it was precisely the fact that some in Corinth denied the resurrection that prompts Paul's discourse in the first place.¹² But it is difficult to conceive how anyone who denied the resurrection of the dead would wish to engage in any rituals on their behalf.¹³ Belief and custom in Corinth

¹⁰ Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized," 532–33.

¹¹ Rissi, *Taufe*, 91. A. J. M. Wedderburn allows that Paul's argument does not demand that anyone in Corinth actually practiced the rite of vicarious baptism, but he admits that it has a great deal more force if that were actually the case (*Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* [WUNT 44; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987] 288 n. 4). Indeed, he raises disturbing questions for those who deny that the two groups overlap (*ibid.*, 7–8).

¹² Paul's entire argument in 1 Corinthians 15 is directed at "some among you who are saying that there is no resurrection of the dead" (v. 12). While the precise nature of Corinthian eschatology represents a knotty problem that would take us beyond the scope of this analysis (for a thorough discussion, see Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 6–37), the Corinthians' denial of the resurrection is doubtless closely connected to their understanding of what it meant to be πνευματικός (1 Cor 3:1; 14:37; for a thorough discussion, see E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 23–44), a state of existence that the group Paul is addressing seems to have believed they had attained. It involved a disdain for suffering (1 Cor 4:6–13) and a disparagement of the body, certainly with regard to sexuality in general (1 Cor 6:12–20) and marriage in particular (1 Cor 7:1–7) and apparently with regard to bodily resurrection, as well. The Corinthians' position seems to have been that they had "already been raised, that such 'resurrection' pertains to their present spiritual existence, and what they will be at the end is nothing other than what they are now, minus their physical body" (D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 281). On this view, see Fee, *Corinthians*, 713–17; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 347–48; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 260–61. For an overview of this and other positions, see Spörlein, *Leugnung*, 1–19.

¹³ It might be argued in response that the dualistic anthropology of the Corinthians allowed for a spiritual resurrection that a physical baptism could have been held to influence in some way. It should be noted, however, that Hellenistic dualism tended in the opposite direction: toward an antimaterialism which led to the denial that anything done in the physical realm could have any effect whatsoever in the spiritual realm. Barrett captures Corinthian attitudes quite succinctly: "nothing done in the body really matters" (*Corinthians*, 145).

would in that case have become so diametrically opposed to each other that one must postulate absolute cognitive dissonance between the two in order to sustain the argument.

The third problem with the majority interpretation is historical. One searches in vain for any independent historical or biblical parallel to the practice of baptism for the dead.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ If such a practice is behind our text, it would be "a genuinely idiosyncratic historical phenomenon"¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Lastly, the majority argument raises theological questions of no small import. Why would Paul muster as an argument a custom that seems so at odds with his entire theology? If it is an *ad hominem* argument, as most who hold this position claim, why does he not distance himself from it immediately? In light of Paul's stern warning against a false evaluation of the significance of baptism in 1 Cor 10:1–22, it is difficult to conceive of any satisfactory answers to these

¹⁴ Similarities to Hellenistic mystery rituals or even to 2 Macc 12:39–46, where an offering is made for the dead, are ultimately unconvincing as corroborating evidence. Later references to baptisms for the dead in Marcionite or Gnostic circles are irrelevant; they are all influenced by our text. For a summary of the problem and response, see Spörlein, *Leugnung*, 83–87.

¹⁵ Richard E. DeMaris offers an impressive amount of archaeological evidence from in and around Corinth to substantiate his contention that "first-century Corinthians were preoccupied with the world of the dead" ("Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead [1 Corinthians 15:29]: Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *JBL* 114 [1995] 661–82, esp. 671). Unfortunately, he goes on to assume what we would hope might now, as a result of such thorough research, be readily demonstrable: that the Christians in Corinth actually practiced vicarious baptisms for the dead. The enormous wealth of information that DeMaris and others, especially Wedderburn in *Baptism*, have amassed urges caution here: a great deal is known about Greco-Roman funerary practices, in Corinth and elsewhere, but there is no evidence anywhere in the ancient world for anything like baptism for the dead. Further, it should be noted that DeMaris's argument as a whole is problematic. Aside from his *a priori* acceptance of the traditional interpretation, his rationale for assuming the practice of vicarious baptism for the dead is that it was an indispensable adaptation to prevailing Corinthian culture without which Christianity could not have flourished there (see esp. pp. 671–72). It is, however, certainly fair to ask how a custom so necessary to the survival of the church in Corinth could vanish, excepting one reference in Paul whose obscurity even DeMaris is forced to concede (p. 661), without the merest trace.

¹⁶ Fee, *Corinthians*, 764.

¹⁷ The controversy in 1 Corinthians 8 concerning meat offered to idols, for instance, would seem to indicate that the Corinthians were overly concerned with the dangers of syncretism precisely when it came to matters of form rather than substance. For similar reasons, Wedderburn refuses to charge the Corinthians with syncretism (*Baptism*, 7).

questions.¹⁸ There is simply no precedent for this sort of argumentation anywhere in Paul.¹⁹

In order to avoid these theological difficulties, some exegetes have sought a nonsubstantial sense for τῶν νεκρῶν, a second interpretive approach which has recently been revived by J. C. O'Neill.²⁰ He seeks to explain τῶν νεκρῶν as an adjective followed by the elided substantive σαρμάτων, offering the following translation of v. 29: "Otherwise what do those hope to achieve who are baptized for their dying bodies? If the completely dead are not raised, why then are they baptized for themselves as corpses?"²¹ O'Neill's argument is problematic for several reasons. First, this sort of ellipsis would be highly irregular, giving the impression that Paul went out of his way to express himself in a tortuous and extraordinarily vague manner.²² Second, in what sense the Corinthians viewed baptism as being "for their dying bodies" or "for themselves as corpses" is by no means immediately apparent, nor is it apparent how this notion could be construed within the context of Paul's argument as a denial of the resurrection. Third, the argument is based on a single, extremely late textual variant,²³ and lastly, it is wholly unrelated to the context.²⁴ In the end, O'Neill's proposed solution must be deemed unsatisfactory.

The third interpretive approach involves an alternate understanding of the preposition ὑπέρ. Of these, Martin Luther's was certainly the most creative. He wished to understand ὑπέρ in a local sense, postulating that baptisms in Corinth were performed over the graves of the dead. Unfortunately, ὑπέρ had lost this classical meaning well before Paul took up his pen.²⁵ More intriguing is M. Raeder's interpretation.²⁶ She interprets this as an instance of "das ὑπέρ der Abzweckung" and renders the phrase, "die sich um der Toten willen taufen lassen."²⁷ Raeder turns the problem, as it were, upside down: it was not, in her view, the Christians in Corinth who were being baptized on behalf of unbeliev-

¹⁸ Rudolf Schnackenburg is even more emphatic: That Paul would make use of such an *ad hominem* argument in a letter in which "he warns against a false estimate of the sacraments" is, for him, simply "not possible" (*Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1964] 95).

¹⁹ Rissi, *Taufe*, 59 n. 7.

²⁰ J. C. O'Neill, "1 Corinthians 15.29," *ExpTim* 91 (1980) 310–11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

²² Rissi agrees: "Ganz allgemein muss festgehalten werden, dass sich Paulus unter dieser Voraussetzung einer ausserordentlich dunklen, ja unglücklichen und äusserst schwer verständlichen Ausdrucksweise bedient hätte" (*Taufe*, 53).

²³ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν τῶν νεκρῶν, found only in minuscule 69 from the fifteenth century.

²⁴ Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized," 543 n. 23.

²⁵ Rissi, *Taufe*, 53.

²⁶ Maria Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in 1 Cor 15.29," *ZNW* 46 (1955) 258–60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 260. Some commentators are skeptical of Raeder's understanding of ὑπέρ here. See, e.g., Conzelmann, *Corinthians*, 279 n. 121; Barrett, *Corinthians*, 364.

ers; rather unbelievers were submitting to Christian baptism for the purpose of being united with their deceased baptized relatives in the resurrection. Although this solution has attracted support among some scholars,²⁸ it suffers from two of the same problems as the majority opinion: (1) It is pure conjecture; there is no historical or biblical evidence for any such practice anywhere in the ancient world.²⁹ (2) It is unrelated to the context.

Lastly, we must consider those interpretations which take οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι in a nonliteral sense, especially Murphy-O'Connor's recent analysis. As we have noted, the strength of Murphy-O'Connor's analysis lies in his effort to consider the immediate context of the argument. He points out that "there is, in Paul's mind, some intrinsic relationship between verses 29 and 31–32," and he also sees "a relationship between verse 29 and the antecedent context."³⁰ Murphy-O'Connor interprets both οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι and τῶν νεκρῶν metaphorically. The baptized are "those being destroyed," which reflects classical usage³¹ and refers to the apostles,³² and "the dead" are to be understood as those "who for the spirituals [i.e., the πνευματικοί in Corinth] were not worth bothering about."³³ Thus, Murphy-O'Connor offers the following translation of v. 29: "What will they do who are being destroyed [i.e., the apostles] on account of (the resurrection of) the dead?"³⁴ In the last analysis, though, Murphy-O'Connor's argument simply cannot bear up under the weight of at least three unfounded assumptions: (1) that Paul has elided τῆς ἀναστάσεως after ὑπέρ,³⁵ (2) that βαπτιζόμενοι is being used here in its classical sense,³⁶ and (3) that the whole phrase is a derogatory slogan coined by the Corinthians to refer to Paul.³⁷

²⁸ See, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," *NTS* 2 (1955–56) 155–56; Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 95; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1971) 149.

²⁹ This lack of empirical confirmation is particularly detrimental to Raeder's hypothesis since it involves a phenomenon that, on the face of it, seems intuitively unlikely. Neither she nor those who share her view provide adequate sociological or theological justification as to why unbelievers would seek baptism or why the Corinthian church would allow them to receive it.

³⁰ Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized," 533.

³¹ According to which βαπτίζω can metaphorically bear the sense of "destroy" or "perish." See A. Oepke, "βάπτω," *TDNT*, 1.530.

³² Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized," 534.

³³ *Ibid.*, 539.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.

³⁵ Murphy-O'Connor himself explains how crucial this is for his interpretation and is aware of the fact that his approach is problematic, but he is convinced that his argument overcomes this difficulty ("Baptized," 535–36).

³⁶ Barrett: "Baptized without further explanation can hardly have any other than its normal Pauline meaning" (*Corinthians*, 362). Even Murphy-O'Connor admits that Paul "never uses βαπτίζειν in a metaphorical sense" except, presumably, here ("Baptized," 536).

³⁷ This is Murphy-O'Connor's conclusion as well as his major presupposition. Although he understands that his unusual rendering of the verse can be supported only if we presume that it was a Corinthian slogan, he fails to appreciate how severely this weakens his overall argument: If an

II. A New Attempt at Interpretation

Murphy-O'Connor's new appreciation³⁸ for the context of 1 Cor 15:29 does, however, lay the groundwork for a fresh approach to this passage. Although his solution must finally be rejected, he correctly identifies Paul's apostolic sufferings as the point of Paul's concern in v. 29. On the one hand, Paul had just argued for the crucial importance of the resurrection for the mission of the Son of God in the passage ending with v. 28. On the other hand, Paul's point in vv. 30–32 is the importance of the resurrection for his own apostolic mission. As Murphy-O'Connor notes, "it is only reasonable to suppose that verse 29 fits into this line of thought."³⁹

But precisely how does v. 29 fit into this context? This becomes clear when, in terms of the categories outlined above, οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι is taken literally, ὑπέρ is understood in its causal sense,⁴⁰ and a metaphorical interpretation is posited for τῶν νεκρῶν (meaning "the apostles"), while νεκροί is construed as a reference to the literal dead. The adverb ὅλως is then understood to function attributively⁴¹ in its clause, modifying νεκροί rather than ἐγείρονται, precisely in order to distinguish it from and set it against the metaphorical usage immediately preceding it; hence, in translation, "truly dead persons."⁴²

inherently unlikely rendering rests on an unlikely presupposition, neither for that reason suddenly becomes likely.

³⁸ Murphy-O'Connor's argument from context is, in fact, a complete about-face. Only two years prior to "Baptized," he argued that the section beginning with v. 29 "has no connection with the preceding one" and calls it "one of the most abrupt shifts in the letter" (1 Corinthians [NT Message 10; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979] 144). Only subsequently, it seems, did he consider the context to his, and our, profit.

³⁹ Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized," 534.

⁴⁰ That is, "to denote the moving cause . . ." (BAGD, 838–39).

⁴¹ BDF §434

⁴² Here we agree with both O'Neill ("1 Cor 15:29," 310) and Murphy-O'Connor ("Baptized," 540), who gives a cogent argument in favor of this rendering. The adverb ὅλως occurs sparsely in both biblical and extrabiblical literature. Of the five biblical occurrences, three are found in 1 Corinthians (5:1; 6:7; 15:29; the other two are found in Matt 5:34, and a variant LXX reading of Job 34:8). In all three instances, the connotation "actually" or "truly" seems likely. In 1 Cor 5:1, Paul is incredulous that "sexual immorality is actually reported among you" ("Ὅλως ἀκούεται ἐν ὑμῖν πορνεία"). For this view, see Barrett, *Corinthians*, 12; LSJ, 1218; Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (4th ed., Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993) 505. In 1 Cor 6:7, the context suggests that Paul uses ὅλως to denote by means of contrast (in a manner similar to 1 Cor 15:29) what he views as a true defeat (ὅλως ἥττημα), namely, the very fact that the Corinthians are suing each other in courts of law, as opposed to that which the Corinthians construe as defeat, namely, that they are being wronged and defrauded (see Zerwick and Grosvenor, *Analysis*, 507). According to our rendering in 1 Cor 15:29, then, Paul's usage of ὅλως is uniform throughout 1 Corinthians, not only semantically but also syntactically, coming immediately before the word it modifies. For an extrabiblical example of ὅλως with the unequivocal sense of "actually" or "truly," see *P.Oxy.* 1676.29–31: καλῶς οὖν ποιήσεις ἐλ[θούσ]α τῷ Μεσορῇ πρὸς [ἡμᾶς] ἵνα ὅλως ἰδωμέν σε.

Thus, we offer as the correct interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29: "Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized on account of the dead (that is, the dead, figuratively speaking; that is, the apostles)? For if truly dead persons are not raised, why at all⁴³ are people being baptized on account of them⁴⁴ (that is, the apostles)?"

Initial support for this interpretation is found in vv. 30 and 31. Two things are striking about this text. The first is Paul's use of the plural in conjunction with the personal pronoun ἡμεῖς. The plural is epistolary, referring specifically to Paul.⁴⁵ At the same time, it serves to focus attention not on Paul per se but rather on his apostolic ministry; what he here asserts, in other words, is true of himself as an apostle.⁴⁶ The personal pronoun renders Paul's statement emphatic, delineating Paul's own apostolic experience over against that of the Corinthians.⁴⁷ Also striking is use of the particle νή, an oath formula with which one normally invokes a god or goddess. It is found nowhere else in the NT and in the LXX only in Gen 42:15.

These preliminary observations lead to the obvious question that commentators simply have not asked because they have neglected the immediate context in interpreting v. 29: Why is Paul so eager to emphasize that he is continually in danger—so eager, in fact, that he takes an oath to the fact that he daily "dies"? The only adequate answer and the clear implication of these verses seem to be that Paul wants the Corinthians to understand him, in his role as an apostle, as being one of "the dead"⁴⁸ in v. 29.

⁴³ A confirmation of our rendering of ὅλως in the protasis may be found in the fact that this allows τί καί to retain the nuance "at all" in the apodosis (see "καί," BAGD 393, §II.5; and BDF §442.14). Translators who assign ὅλως the sense of "at all" generally ignore this nuance for the obvious reason that τί καί thereby becomes virtually redundant (see, e.g., various English translations, esp. NRSV and NIV).

⁴⁴ A comparison of οἱ βαπτίζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν with the structurally similar βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν verifies that αὐτῶν refers back to τῶν νεκρῶν in v. 29a (i.e., to the figuratively dead apostles) since νεκρῶν and αὐτῶν clearly occupy the same syntagmatic slot. The variant found in the Majority text et al., which replace αὐτῶν with τῶν νεκρῶν, provides further confirmation for our reading. While probably not original, it testifies to the fact that early scribes felt the need to clarify the ambiguity concerning the referent of αὐτῶν (an ambiguity, incidentally, which does not exist in the traditional reading of v. 29, since according to that reading νεκρῶν and νεκροί have the same referent!) and wanted to remove all doubt that αὐτῶν and νεκρῶν refer to the same group.

⁴⁵ Fee, *Corinthians*, 768 n. 36.

⁴⁶ Scott J. Hafemann: "the use of the literary plural is best attributed to the fact that Paul was conscious that he represented the apostolic 'office.' . . . In fact, the man Paul becomes inseparable from his office, and indeed, is even swallowed up by it" (*Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 15).

⁴⁷ Fee, *Corinthians*, 768 n. 36.

⁴⁸ Agreement is semantic, not lexical (νεκροί vs. ἀποθνήσκω), but that is to be expected since lexical agreement is not possible given the fact that the cognate verb of νέκρος is the transitive νεκρῶν, "to put to death" (BAGD, 535). This would require, if Paul had wished to use it, a reflexive construction meaning "I put myself to death." But since, as will become evident below, Paul is here

That Paul should refer to himself in this way is not at all surprising when we consider that his experience of being given over to death, understood as a metonymy⁴⁹ for suffering, is a recurring theme in the Corinthian correspondence whenever Paul seeks to define his role as an apostle.⁵⁰ Specifically, Hafemann shows that the Corinthian letters contain "four thesis-like summaries of Paul's understanding of the significance of his suffering as an apostle."⁵¹ These four texts, as the following analysis will reveal, either invoke as a controlling metaphor the image of the Roman triumphal procession, which ended in the execution of the prisoners at the end of the procession (1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 2:14) or are found within or in direct proximity to "peristasis catalogues" or "tribulation lists" (1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 4:10–11; 6:9).⁵² This would seem to confirm that Paul's metaphorical use of death is closely linked to his understanding of apostolic ministry. In 1 Cor 4:9 Paul states: "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles last, as men under the sentence of death." As the tribulation list that follows makes clear, Paul's death sentence "refers specifically to the suffering which he is called to endure as an apostle to the crucified Christ."⁵³

The second reference is 2 Cor 2:14, where Paul's use of the technical term *θριαμβεύειν* leaves no doubt that he is invoking the Roman triumphal procession as a metaphor to convey his sense that he was "being led by God to death in order that he might display or reveal the majesty, power, and glory of his conqueror."⁵⁴

referring to his sufferings, it would be completely foreign to his thought to imply that he caused, chose, or even wished for his sufferings.

⁴⁹ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 136.

⁵⁰ Hafemann, *Suffering*, 52–79.

⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

⁵² For a description of the Roman triumphal procession, see Josephus, *J.W.* 7 §§123–57. For the Roman triumphal procession as the background for 1 Cor 4:9, see Fee, *Corinthians*, 174–75; Barrett, *Corinthians*, 110. For recent discussions of the significance of *θριαμβεύειν* in 1 Cor 2:14, see, in addition to Hafemann, J. M. Scott, "The Triumph of God in 2 Cor 2:14: Additional Evidence of Merkabah Mysticism in Paul," *NTS* 42 (1996) 260–81; Cilliers Breytenbach, "Paul's Proclamation and God's 'ΘΡΙΑΜΒΟΣ': Notes on 2 Corinthians 2:14–16b," *Neot* 24 (1990) 257–71. For a discussion of the Roman triumphal procession as the possible background of the Markan passion narrative, see T. E. Schmidt, "Mark 15.16–32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession," *NTS* 41 (1995) 1–18. For a thorough examination of the peristasis catalogues in the Corinthian letters and an analysis of their literary function, see John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in Earthen Vessels: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁵³ Hafemann, *Suffering*, 59.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 32–33. See, however, Jens Schröter, who argues that Hafemann's understanding of *θριαμβεύειν* is an "Überstrapazierung der Metapher" (*Der versöhnte Versöhner: Paulus als unentbehrlicher Mittler zwischen Gott und Gemeinde nach 2 Kor 2,14–7,4* [Tübingen: Franke, 1993] 13–33, esp. 32). Schröter contends that not all nuances of *θριαμβεύειν* are operative in the use of

The third instance is found in 2 Cor 4:7–12, especially vv. 10 and 11, where we have once again a tribulation list and a reference to death: “Always carrying about the dying of Jesus in the body, so that the life of Jesus might also be made manifest in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death because of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might also be made manifest in our mortal flesh.”

In the fourth passage, 2 Cor 6:1–10, we have yet another tribulation list and a reference to dying in v. 9: “As dying, yet behold, we live.” Hafemann shows clear structural parallels between these passages, especially the first three,⁵⁵ and, we think, correctly concludes, “Paul’s role as an apostle or minister of the new covenant . . . is fulfilled in his suffering . . . [It] becomes an essential aspect of his apostolic ministry.”⁵⁶

To these four thesis-like statements we can now add a fifth: 1 Cor 15:29–32, for v. 29 fits seamlessly into the rich tapestry of apostolic suffering portrayed metaphorically in terms of Paul’s “death” throughout the Corinthian correspondence.⁵⁷ Against this background, the enigma surrounding v. 29 evaporates, and it becomes clear that Paul is referring to his sufferings in a manner quite recognizable to those familiar with his teachings.

That Paul would refer to his own sufferings in arguing for the resurrection makes sense when we consider his argument in 1 Cor 15:12–28. He has just shown how the resurrection validates the redemptive ministry of Christ, whose final achievement was the vanquishing of the ultimate enemy, namely, death (1 Cor 15:25–26).⁵⁸ But if there is no resurrection, then death has not been vanquished, and Christ’s whole mission becomes a failure since he would thereby have been shown to have suffered and died for his own sins (Gal 3:10–14; 1 Cor 15:17–18) rather than for ours, as Paul elsewhere maintains (see 1 Cor 15:2; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:4). Given Paul’s propensity for identifying his sufferings with Christ’s (see 2 Cor 4:7–12), it is not surprising that he seeks a common denominator between them. Thus, in Paul’s view, both Christ’s sufferings as a part of his redemptive mission and Paul’s own sufferings as a part of his apostolic mis-

the metaphor here, but rather that Paul wishes merely to indicate that, having been conquered by God, he was being led around (in his role as apostle) in God’s triumphal procession throughout the world. But since, as both Hafemann’s study and the present analysis confirm, death is used throughout the Corinthian correspondence as metonymy for suffering to characterize Paul’s self-understanding as an apostle, there seems to be no reason why the metaphor should not be taken over in its entirety here.

⁵⁵ Hafemann, *Suffering*, 68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

⁵⁷ Hafemann is aware of the fact that 1 Cor 15:30–32 belongs to the complex of Corinthian texts in which death serves as a metonymy for suffering (*Suffering*, 59). What he does not recognize is its link to 1 Cor 15:29, which, of course, magnifies its importance not only for chapter 15 but also for any analysis of Paul’s understanding of his apostolic ministry as a whole.

⁵⁸ Fee, *Corinthians*, 756–57.

sion are validated by the fact of the resurrection.⁵⁹ By rejecting the resurrection, then, the Corinthians were rejecting not only the very redemptive work of Christ which they professed to believe but also the compelling testimony to the resurrection which Paul had lived out before them through his own willingness to suffer on their behalf just as Christ, before him, had done.

This explains Paul's peculiar use of the oath formula in v. 31. It is highly unusual not only because it is so rare but also because the witness he invokes to enforce his oath is not, as the convention would normally lead one to expect, some divinity or potentate (see Gen 42:15; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1 §255).⁶⁰ Instead Paul enforces his oath by curiously invoking his "boasting in you" (νή τήν ὑμετέραν καύχησιν). The object of Paul's boasting is nothing other than the very existence of the church in Corinth.⁶¹ The Corinthians themselves are Paul's work and the seal of his apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor 9:1–2). Ronald F. Hock has shown that Paul's description of his sufferings in 1 Corinthians refers to those hardships he voluntarily endured on their behalf by refusing the support to which he, as an apostle, had a right and instead supporting himself as an artisan/laborer (see 1 Cor 9:1–17).⁶² Thus, in 1 Cor 15:31, Paul calls upon the Corinthians themselves to confirm that, in his steadfast willingness to endure hardship on their behalf, he "dies" daily. Their very existence as a church testifies to that fact (see 2 Cor 2:2–3).

As for the preposition ὑπέρ, it is to be understood in its causal sense and is best translated "because of" or, more precisely, "on account of." Standard grammars and lexicons give ample evidence for this usage in the NT.⁶³ In what way

⁵⁹ The fact that Paul uses the plural τῶν νεκρῶν in v. 29 makes it unlikely that he has only Christ in view; one would have expected the singular in that case. On our understanding of the text, however, Paul implicitly includes Christ as the first of those who have suffered and died and in whose train the apostles now follow. Indeed, this is what the flow of the argument seems to presume.

⁶⁰ Fee, *Corinthians*, 769 n. 42.

⁶¹ Hafemann: "[Paul's] boast is the simple fact that he was the one through whom the Gospel came to Corinth and by whom the church was founded. . . . Paul's arrival in Corinth and the ensuing birth of the church are thus the divinely appointed indication and objective evidence that Paul's claim to authority in Corinth is valid" ("Self-Commendation' and Apostolic Legitimacy in 2 Corinthians: A Pauline Dialectic?," *NTS* 36 [1990] 79).

⁶² Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 59–62.

⁶³ See, in addition to BAGD, H. Riesenfeld, "ὑπέρ," *TDNT*, 8:514; J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1963) 270–71; H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927) 111. ὑπέρ has an unambiguously causal sense when it describes the grounds for giving thanks or offering praise (Rom 15:9; 1 Cor 10:30; Eph 1:16; 5:20). It also seems to have a causal sense in many of the instances in which it is linked to suffering (Acts 5:41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13; 2 Cor 12:10; Eph 3:13; 2 Thess 1:5). In Phil 1:29 this is undoubtedly so, for there we have two instances of ὑπέρ, the first, ὑπέρ Χριστοῦ, giving the cause or ground of the Philippians' suffering; the second, ὑπέρ αὐτοῦ, stating its purpose. Additionally, a causal sense is possible, if not likely, in Rom 1:5; 15:8; 2 Cor 12:8;

were the Corinthians being baptized “on account of” the apostles, especially Paul? According to 1 Cor 3:5 and 4:15, Paul is their father in the faith, the one through whom they heard the gospel and believed. Paul’s ministry moved them to receive baptism. This association, however, became the cause of much distress, for in 1 Cor 1:13–17 a definite link between the competing factions in Corinth and those responsible for their baptism is established. Often this passage is understood to imply that in proclaiming their allegiance to this or that apostle, the various parties in Corinth wanted others to know which of the apostles actually baptized them.⁶⁴ But if our interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29 sheds any light on the subject, the Corinthians’ concern was broader; they wished to emphasize “on account of” whom they were baptized, or in other words, under whose ministry they were converted.⁶⁵ Paul is not pleased by these false allegiances and their warped baptismal application. After expounding upon the issue at length, he explains in 1 Cor 4:6 that he wants “no one to become arrogant on the account of one (ὕπερ τοῦ ἐνός, i.e., Paul) against the other (κατὰ τοῦ ἐτέρου, i.e., Apollos).”

The connection with 1 Cor 15:29 thus becomes clear. Certain groups in Corinth were brought to faith and baptized “on account of” some of the apostles, especially Paul and Apollos, to whom they subsequently and quite naturally felt an affinity, but their preferences resulted in the development of competitive allegiances to one or the other of the apostles. In our text, Paul points out the inconsistency of this fact with their denial of the resurrection. If “truly dead” persons are not raised, what sense does it make for the Corinthians to be baptized on account of those who are “dying all the time,” namely, the apostles? In other words, if there is no resurrection from the dead, then the Corinthians’ allegiances to the apostles under whose ministries, respectively, they were converted is all the more ludicrous since the apostles, figuratively speaking, are already dead. Apart from the resurrection, both the willingness of the apostles to suffer on behalf of the gospel and the gospel itself would be futile and pitiful mistakes, and the Corinthians would be fools to accept their message and be baptized because of it. Thus, in our text Paul’s willingness to suffer becomes a powerful confirmation of the validity of the resurrection and is, in turn, confirmed by the Corinthians’ baptism on the basis of Paul’s life and message.

Eph 5:20. Liddell and Scott offer several examples of causal usage in extrabiblical sources roughly contemporary with Paul (*LSJ*, 1857–58). Causal ὑπέρ is also well established in classical Greek. See, e.g., Isocrates: ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ ὧν τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐπεβούλευσαν μισοῦντες αὐτούς (*Panathenaicus* 102).

⁶⁴ Fee, *Corinthians*, 61.

⁶⁵ In many cases, the evangelist and the baptizer would, of course, be the same individual, but not always. That the “Paul” party, for instance, consisted only of the handful he personally baptized (1 Cor 1:14–16) seems highly unlikely.

III. Conclusions

In contrast to other interpretations of 1 Cor 15:29, the present analysis offers satisfactory solutions for all the major interpretive problems associated with this text. It does justice both to the language and the immediate context and explains certain elements that are otherwise inexplicable. Further, it fits neatly into the overall context of 1 Corinthians.

Other benefits accrue from this interpretation as well. First of all, the passage regains its logical force by making those who deny the resurrection roughly coextensive with at least some of the various groups involved in the baptismal controversy mentioned in 1 Cor 1:13–17 (see p. 487 above).

Second, it provides insight into the meaning of 1 Cor 15:32. While it does not resolve the historical issue surrounding “fighting wild beasts,” it does illuminate the meaning of the phrase *κατὰ ἄνθρωπον*. It means: in the same way as the Corinthians are approaching baptism—shortsightedly, having lost sight of its eschatological purpose (see 1 Cor 3:3). In other words, if Paul were to approach his apostolic sufferings in the same manner as they approach baptism, it would be better for him and them together to adopt the attitude “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” because it is the hope of the resurrection that both legitimates his sufferings and gives him strength to bear up under them.

Third, far from being “the weakest link in the argument of chapter 15,”⁶⁶ v. 29 becomes an important pivot upon which the argument of the chapter turns. Our interpretation helps to elucidate the crucial link that Paul makes between his own apostolic sufferings and the sufferings of Christ and sheds light on their relevance for the problems in Corinth as well as Pauline theology as a whole.

Finally, our interpretation provides further insight into many of the important themes of the letter as a whole, including, as we have seen above, the nature of the divisions mentioned in 1 Cor 1:13–17. Discussion of these larger issues lies, unfortunately, beyond the bounds of this article, but it is hoped that this fresh look at a seemingly obscure verse will provide new impetus to the ongoing task of interpreting Paul.

⁶⁶ Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 57.

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