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**Abstract** To help mitigate the soteriological problem of evil, that one having had no chance to hear the gospel would be sent to hell, many early Christians practiced baptism for the dead. The only reference to this in the New Testament comes in 1 Corinthians 15:29, a scripture that some scholars attempt to reinterpret or repunctuate to dismiss baptism for the dead but that most scholars defend as a legitimate reference. Further strengthening the historicity of the practice are references by early writers such as Tertullian and Ambrosiaster. The quest for authenticating the practice of baptism for the dead should rest on these and other historical references, not on retroactively applied standards of orthodoxy.



St. Paul, Altman / Art Resource, NY.

# Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity

DAVID L. PAULSEN AND BROCK M. MASON

**I**N THE FIRST PART OF THIS SERIES,<sup>1</sup> we established that apocalyptic Christian writers were deeply concerned about the fate of those who had no chance to receive the gospel in this life. They felt that an eternal condemnation meted out to these souls—simply because they had not accepted the inaccessible—was not in keeping with their understanding of a merciful God.

This concern is the crux of the soteriological problem of evil, which is best stated as a logically inconsistent triad: (1) God is perfectly loving and just, desiring that all his children be saved; (2) salva-

tion comes only through an individual's acceptance of Christ's salvific gifts in this life; and (3) countless numbers of God's children have died without having a chance to hear about, much less accept, Christ's salvific gifts.<sup>2</sup> Surely, the God of mercy would offer salvation to all; according to some early apocalyptic Jewish and Christian writers, he has. Apocalyptic Jews taught that eternal damnation was a punishment reserved for fallen archangels and wicked men,<sup>3</sup> while righteous Gentiles would be spared such tortures.<sup>4</sup> However, this solution did not fully mitigate the soteriological problem of evil;



righteous Gentiles, although escaping endless punishment, would not share in the exaltation of the covenant people.

Some early Christians, on the other hand, provided a more thorough solution than the said Jewish predecessors. They taught that righteous individuals could receive the gospel in the next life through postmortem evangelization, a work initiated by Jesus's descent into hell "to save those who had not known him on earth."<sup>5</sup> However, some did not believe that postmortem acceptance of the gospel was sufficient to ensure the salvation of the deceased but that it must also be accompanied by vicarious ordinance work, a belief implicit in their involvement in baptisms for the dead.

In this paper we will provide evidence that the practice of baptism for the dead existed in some early Christian<sup>6</sup> communities. We do not attempt to prove that baptism for the dead is a true teaching. This cannot be demonstrated by historical research. We intend only to trace the history of proxy baptism in early Christianity and the theological rationale for its practice. To support our thesis, we will show that early Christians, including New Testament writers, taught that baptism is essential to salvation. Because of this belief, vicarious baptisms were performed to ensure that the unbaptized dead would not be denied access to salvation. Next, we examine 1 Corinthians 15:29, arguing that metaphorical interpretations of this passage are ultimately unconvincing. Instead, we support what some modern scholars refer to as the "majority reading,"<sup>7</sup> which understands 15:29 as a reference to vicarious baptism. Third, we explore the possible origins of the practice by examining the texts that teach doctrines closely related to baptism for the dead. And, finally, we detail the historical practice of proxy baptisms by early Christian communities *now* labeled "heretical." We argue, however, that retroactively measuring ancient Christian practices by later standards of orthodoxy is misguided and that we must, therefore, independently reexamine practices traditionally considered heretical.

Before setting out and assessing historical evidence for early Christian practice of proxy baptisms for the dead, an important caveat is in order: though Joseph Smith believed that first-century Christians performed proxy baptisms,<sup>8</sup> the modern Latter-day Saint practice is *not* grounded on histori-

cal precedent. Rather, as we will detail in the last part of this series, it is based on modern revelation.

## Baptismal Theology of the New Testament and Patristic Literature

Proxy baptisms are based on the conviction that the sacrament of baptism is necessary for salvation. Accordingly, we will look at the teachings of New Testament and patristic writers regarding the necessity of this sacred ordinance. These writers taught that baptism was essential for forgiveness of sins and for entrance into the church and into heaven. Indeed, according to Everett Ferguson in his highly respected study of early Christian liturgy, Christians through the first five centuries believed that baptism "effects salvation, forgiveness of sins, freedom from the rule of sin and death, purification, and washing."<sup>9</sup>

Three main arguments from the New Testament support the essential nature of baptism. First, Christ himself is baptized, signifying the necessity for Christians to receive the same. Second, there are pivotal verses of scripture, such as John 3:5, Mark 16:14–16, and Matthew 28:19, which, according to some scholars, affirm the necessity of baptism for salvation. Third, throughout the book of Acts, baptism is without question the rite of initiation that all converts must undergo. According to Acts, this rite assures the convert a remission of sins and links them to Christ.

The synoptic Gospels all attest to the fact that Christ was baptized by John in order to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:13–17; cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21). W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann explain Christ's baptism in relation to Matthew's goal of showing Christ's fulfillment of ancient scriptural prophecies. These scholars explain the term *fulfill all righteousness* as a reference to the "fulfillment of those Scriptures in which those demands are set out—law, prophets, writings. In any event, the baptism administered by John was a direct response to the will of God, and so the Messiah must submit to it."<sup>10</sup> Thus Christ's baptism, for Matthew, fulfilled both divine commands and ancient scripture (notably Isaiah 43:2 and Psalm 2:7). The *Oxford Bible Commentary* suggests that Matthew's account demonstrates this fulfillment of both commands and scripture by focusing on the apocalyptic vision that Christ receives upon baptism, in which God affirms

Jesus as his Son and the Holy Ghost descends as a dove.<sup>11</sup> A few Christian authors such as Hilary, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chromatius, and Cyril of Alexandria declare Christ's baptism as the example for Christians to follow, that they may receive salvation and remission of sins.<sup>12</sup> Although no New Testament text explicitly confirms the point, Jesus's baptism likely became the foundation for later Christian baptism.<sup>13</sup>

Christ's example of baptism is not alone in signaling the necessity of the ordinance. Mark 16:15–16 declares a similar sentiment: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." It is quite certain that this passage was added to the text by a later author.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, it still corroborates the doctrine of baptism, as it was added by a Christian who obviously believed baptism was salvifically requisite. This addition was added before AD 185, as it is quoted by Irenaeus<sup>15</sup> and perhaps may be referenced earlier by Justin.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, a Christian of the first

or second century inserted these verses, and they were taken as canon by many Christians following thereafter.

Matthew's Gospel records that the risen Christ instructs the apostles: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matthew 28:19). According to Matthew, then, one of the duties of the apostles was to teach and baptize all nations.

Professor Ulrich Luz notes in his commentary on these verses that "the task of 'making disciples' of the nations involves first of all the command to baptize. Since baptism is the sign that all Christians have in common, the command to baptize is a confession of the whole church."<sup>17</sup> He further explains, "It is certain that with their baptism the newly won disciples of Jesus follow the example of Jesus who also submitted to baptism (3:13–17). Just as in so doing he 'fulfilled all righteousness,' they too follow him onto the way of righteousness."<sup>18</sup> Matthew's account of Christ's ministry thus begins and ends<sup>19</sup> with a call to baptism—first with the example of Christ's own baptism in the third chapter of the work and finally with the risen Lord's dramatic commission to go to "all nations" and baptize those who will believe and follow. Ferguson notes that "early Christians commonly based their practice of baptism on the dominical command of Matthew 28:19 and on the Lord's example."<sup>20</sup>

John 3:5, when read straightforwardly, explicitly indicates that baptism by water is essential for "entrance into the kingdom of heaven." Many Christian authors and writings from the early centuries—including Tertullian,<sup>21</sup> Justin Martyr,<sup>22</sup> Ambrose,<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>24</sup> Cyprian,<sup>25</sup> and the Seventh Council of Carthage<sup>26</sup>—cite John 3:5 as evidence for the necessity of baptism for salvation. Tertullian, for example, boldly declares: "The prescript is laid down that 'without baptism, salvation is attainable by none' (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, 'Unless one be born of water, he hath not life')."<sup>27</sup> Modern scholars may disagree about the proper interpretation of John 3:5,<sup>28</sup> but many prominent early church writers unequivocally read 3:5 as affirming that baptism is necessary for salvation.



*John the Baptist Baptizing Jesus.* © Greg Olsen—Do Not Copy.



*Go Ye Therefore.* Harry Anderson. © IRI.

Finally, Christian history lends support to our claim that baptism was considered necessary. Throughout the book of Acts and the writings of the church fathers, baptism is viewed as the mandatory initiation rite for converts into Christendom. Acts 2:38; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:14–15, 30–34; 18:8; and 22:16 all present historical evidence that whenever a group of people were converted to Christianity baptism was the ordinance that initiated them into the faith. Lars Hartman, in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, notes, “It [Baptism] is treated as the undisputed initiation rite of the Church . . . baptism is mentioned as a natural step in connection with people’s acceptance of the message about Christ, i.e., becoming believers; . . . baptism was practised from the very beginning in the early church.”<sup>29</sup> It further explains that, in Acts, “entering the Christian community through faith and baptism means to be ‘saved’ (2:40; 11:14; 16:30–31).”<sup>30</sup> Acts 2:38 is quite explicit in tying baptism with forgiveness of sins: “then Peter said unto them, repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” This verse illustrates the Lukan understanding of what it means to convert to Christianity: “Those who receive the apostolic message, recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah, repent, and are baptized in his name receive forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation.”<sup>31</sup>

The *Shepherd of Hermas* reiterates that baptism is essential for a Christian. It says, “some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the

water and received remission of our former sins. . . . that [is] sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case.”<sup>32</sup> In addition to the patristic fathers mentioned above in relation with John 3:5, Clement of Alexandria,<sup>33</sup> Firmilian,<sup>34</sup> Victorinus,<sup>35</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem,<sup>36</sup> John Chrysostom,<sup>37</sup> Augustine,<sup>38</sup> and Barnabas<sup>39</sup> affirm the necessity of baptism for salvation, repentance, remission of sins, begetting sons of God, or some other purpose which Christians *must* receive.

Other writings by Christian gnostics show a similar viewpoint. The *Tripartite Tractate* indicates that “there is no other baptism apart from this one alone, which is the redemption into God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>40</sup> The *Gospel of Philip* teaches that “when speaking of baptism they say, ‘Baptism is a great thing,’ because if people receive it, they will live.”<sup>41</sup> Marcion and his followers, who were not properly gnostics, seem to have viewed baptism similarly and did not deviate much from what became the orthodox view on this issue.<sup>42</sup>

The New Testament, early Christian literature, and Christian history all affirm that many early Christians viewed baptism as essential for entrance into the kingdom of God. Everett Ferguson concludes, “Although in developing the doctrine of baptism different authors had their particular favorite descriptions, there is a remarkable agreement on the benefits received in baptism. And these are present already in the New Testament texts. Two fundamental blessings are often repeated: the person baptized received forgiveness of sins and the gift of





Corinth with the citadel in the background. Courtesy Kent Jackson.

the Holy Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> From such belief, the doctrine of vicarious baptism was a natural corollary. Apparently, the earliest group mentioned to perform this sacrament for the dead is the Christian community at Corinth.

### Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:29

Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν.<sup>44</sup>

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead? If the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for the dead?<sup>45</sup>

Paul’s mention of the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead has long troubled many Christians. A plain, matter-of-fact reading of 15:29 clearly speaks of vicarious baptism, but many scholars are unconvinced that such a reading is best. Indeed,

scholarly consideration of this verse has produced more than two hundred variant readings. However, if the simplest reading were not so much at variance with modern baptismal theology, we would not expect the abundance of interpretations that attempt to remove this teaching from the New Testament or to portray it as an anomaly. We will review those interpretations of 15:29 which scholarly consensus judges most credible. Significantly, of this subset, vicarious baptism is the reading supported by the majority of scholars.<sup>46</sup>

We will focus on three main words in the verse while interpreting its meaning: βαπτίζω (*baptizō* / baptized),<sup>47</sup> ὑπὲρ (*hyper* / for),<sup>48</sup> and νεκρῶν (*nekrōn* / dead).<sup>49</sup> Those who do not view the baptism of 15:29 as referring to a vicarious ordinance provide alternative readings for each of the aforementioned words. Following the analysis of these words, we will turn our attention to variant punctuations that seek to make 15:29 read as ordi-

nary, as opposed to vicarious, baptism. This task is especially pertinent in that there is no punctuation in extant copies of New Testament documents.

*Baptizō spoken metaphorically.* Scholars who treat the baptism spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15:29 as figurative have largely based their interpretation on the meaning of *baptizō*. For example, St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) writes:

It is therefore the true and genuine explanation that the Apostle speaks concerning the baptism of tears and penance which one receives by praying, fasting, and giving alms, etc. And the sense is “What will those who are baptized for the dead do if the dead do not rise?” That is, what will they do who pray, fast, grieve, and afflict themselves for the dead if the dead do not rise? In this way Ephraem in his book “*Testamentum*,” Peter the Venerable in his “*Contra Petrobrusianos*,” Dionysius, and others explain this passage.<sup>50</sup>

Bellarmino understands *baptizō* not as a reference to the Christian baptismal sacrament, but as other works done for the dead. This is a significant inter-



Orpheus descended to the underworld in an attempt to rescue his beloved Eurydice from death. *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

pretation for adherents of Catholicism since this understanding lends scriptural support to their concept of purgatory and the works of penance that release the souls bound there. Interestingly, though, such a reading does not discredit the ideas upon which baptism for the dead rest. Even if the verse is taken metaphorically, the works of penance and the release of souls from purgatory are literal. There is common ground between the LDS and Catholic views of vicarious works. Both imply that the living can perform acts to help the deceased in their post-mortual advancement.<sup>51</sup>

However, any metaphorical interpretation of *baptizō* seems inconsistent with the body of Pauline literature and with the New Testament as a whole. T. J. Conant, after conducting a thorough analysis of the use of the word *baptism* in biblical and patristic literature, concludes that baptism almost always refers to the Christian sacrament of immersion, the only exceptions being Mark 10:38–39 and Luke 12:50.<sup>52</sup> Conant also notes that many commentators have viewed 1 Corinthians 15:29 in reference to the baptismal rite, which reading he neither condones nor condemns.<sup>53</sup> So, while a figurative reading has some precedence, the literal reading is much more common.

When viewed in the context of Pauline literature as a whole, *baptizō* is consistently used in a literal sense (that is, to refer to sacramental immersion). Paul makes reference to baptism in Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 6:2; Romans 6:3, 4; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 1:13, 14, 15, 16 (twice), 17; 10:2; 12:13; and 15:29 (twice), for a total of fifteen times. In each of the other thirteen usages (excluding 15:29) *baptizō* is used literally. Michael F. Hull points out that “in all, each and every one of these eight instances of βαπτίζω in 1 Corinthians is to be read literally.”<sup>54</sup> Hull concludes, “What of the two instances of *baptizō* in 15:29? Given Paul’s other uses of the term, and especially his use thereof in 1 Corinthians, we can read them only in like manner. There is no compelling reason to do otherwise.”<sup>55</sup>

It seems difficult to interpret *baptizō* in any way other than literally in 15:29.<sup>56</sup> If taken literally, the Corinthian community was practicing actual baptism. However, this alone is not sufficient evidence to conclude that these baptisms were being performed vicariously for the dead.<sup>57</sup> Instead, we must

view the meaning of ὑπὲρ in context with νεκρῶν to fully comprehend the meaning of the verse.

*1 Corinthians 15:29 as ordinary baptism, an alternative reading of ὑπὲρ and νεκρῶν.* A frequent interpretation of 15:29 among scholars is that of baptism in its literal sense but not performed on behalf of the dead. To maintain such a reading, the standard usage of the Greek preposition ὑπὲρ (*hyper*) or of the adjective νεκρῶν (*nekrōn*) must be altered.

John D. Reaume, who championed an alternative reading of *hyper*, stated that “the understanding of the preposition ὑπὲρ and the resulting theological implications are the decisive issues in this *crux interpretum*.”<sup>58</sup> The way the preposition is read determines whether vicarious or ordinary baptism is meant. Most scholars who subscribe to such an

concept as “pure conjecture; there is no historical or biblical evidence for any such practice anywhere in the ancient world.”<sup>61</sup> Second, he regards her reading as “unrelated to the context” of Paul’s letter as a whole.<sup>62</sup>

White, in opposition to Raeder, feels that *hyper* should be read in its causal sense.<sup>63</sup> He interprets *nekrōn* as a figurative reference to the apostles and their persecution unto death. Consequently, he translates 1 Corinthians 15:29 in the following manner: “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 all are people being baptized on account of them (that is, the apostles)?”<sup>64</sup> White suggests that Paul considers himself as one of the “dead,” due to the persecutions that accompany apostleship.

However, such a reading seems arbitrary. In order to understand why, it is important to spell out the entire Greek of 15:29:

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

According to Hull, “White . . . propounds a metaphorical reading for τῶν νεκρῶν in 15:29a and claims that ὅλως functions attributively to modify νεκροὶ in 15:29b. The former ‘dead’ he equates with the apostles; the latter ‘dead’ are the actually dead”—in other words, “White contends that the same word is used in the same sentence to mean entirely different things.”<sup>65</sup>

So, without further criterion as to why White uses this modifier in distinct and varied ways within the same context, his usage certainly appears arbitrary, and we cannot be persuaded to accept his translation.

Furthermore, as with *baptizō*, *hyper* and *nekrōn* are used in a consistent manner in Pauline literature; *hyper* is almost always used by Paul in its genitive sense—that is, “on behalf of.”<sup>66</sup> The final and causal senses previously discussed seldom occur in Pauline literature.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, “In Paul’s letters, νεκρός [*nekros*] is always used as a noun in the literal sense.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, a straightforward reading of the three words in question appears to be the most

## Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead? If the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for the dead?

### 1 Corinthians 15:29

approach feel that 15:29 is a reference to “baptism by example.”

Maria Raeder believes that in 15:29 Paul refers to Corinthians who desired to undergo ordinary baptism for themselves so they could join with their deceased loved ones in the hereafter. She believed that such a practice was motivated not by faith in Christ, but by a hope to inherit heaven, a less than fully honorable observance of the Christian sacrament.<sup>59</sup> Central to Raeder’s position is to render *hyper* in a final sense,<sup>60</sup> giving the verse a sense of finality or, rather, for what goal or for what purpose some action is being performed. In this light, the verse now refers to a “baptism by example” in which the catechumen is compelled to baptism by the example of the dead.

In reference to Raeder’s translation of ὑπὲρ in its final sense, Joel R. White characterizes Raeder’s



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sound interpretation and consistent with Paul's writings as a whole.

*1 Corinthians 15:29 with variant punctuation.* Some biblical scholars have taken still another approach toward reading 15:29 as ordinary baptism. This approach does not try to give alternative translations to any of the words in question, but instead punctuates 15:29 in a way that makes the verse read like a reference to ordinary baptism, something proponents of this reading find more in line with Pauline theology. Since the original Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contain no punctuation at all, we must consider the methods of punctuation used by translators of the KJV and comparable versions of the Bible.

In explaining why he opted for a variation in the punctuation of the text, Bernard M. Foschini states that he considers the approach "more simple and more probable than any other, because it seems most consonant with manuscript, with Pauline style, with the nature of Baptism, with the signification of the preposition *hyper* and with the words *tōn nekrōn*."<sup>69</sup> Foschini further claims that the word "*baptizesthai* has nothing to do with the phrase, *hyper tōn nekrōn*, and is to be separated from it by a question mark,"<sup>70</sup> rendering the following translation of 15:29: "Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? For the dead? (that is, are they baptized to belong to, to be numbered among the dead, who are never to rise again)? Indeed, if the dead do not rise again at all, why are people baptized? For them? (that is, are they baptized to be numbered among the dead who are never to rise again?)."<sup>71</sup>

Foschini takes his analysis from Dürselen, a German scholar, and his punctuation is therefore very similar to Dürselen's. Yet, Foschini diverges from Dürselen's approach by positing that while Dürselen was right to separate "to be baptized" and "for the dead," Dürselen breaks the rhetorical parallel Paul was building between verses 29 and 30 by punctuating them in such a way as to improperly link "on behalf of" with verse 30.<sup>72</sup>

However, as Reaume points out, there is an "insurmountable difficulty"<sup>73</sup> with such an interpretation. Foschini's reading, which preserves the parallel between verses 29 and 30, leans heavily

on a skewed interpretation of *hyper*. According to Reaume, Foschini seeks to give an interpretation to *hyper* that makes it synonymous with εἰς "into." Reaume asserts that such a reading is doubtful, as the nuance upon which it depends is evident only in classical Greek,<sup>74</sup> whereas the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which flourished between 300 BC and AD 300. Consequently, Foschini has to appeal to extrabiblical texts of a different time period to establish his case. Due to these considerations, Hull concludes that "such a desperate attempt to read ὑπὲρ [*hyper*] as εἰς diminishes Foschini's argument to the point of facile refutation."<sup>75</sup>

Hull also presented an interpretation of 15:29 that appeals to variant punctuation. Hull's undertaking is no small enterprise. He examines 15:29 not only from a historical standpoint but from a literary

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*First Corinthians 15:29 is a crux interpretum. Of the over two hundred interpretations, only a few remain as "legitimate possibilities."*

John D Reaume

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standpoint, giving a lengthy treatment of Paul's theology and his manner of writing as a guide toward a greater understanding of how the apostle intended the difficult passage in question. In the opening pages of his work, Hull states his case: "In our rereading, we see that 1 Cor 15:29 is a reference to ordinary baptism. . . . Baptism 'on account of the dead' is baptism into eternal life; it is a rite for the living, and undergoing it expresses faith in the resurrection of Christ and of Christians."<sup>76</sup>

Hull's coverage of the literary issues regarding 15:29 is, in our opinion, one of the best treatments on the subject. However, we are not compelled to accept his interpretation for two reasons. First, Hull recognizes that 15:29 is a *crux interpretum*. Not only does he express this outright, but he also acknowledges that "while it is true that the literary context does not necessitate such a reading of

ordinary baptism any more than it necessitates the majority reading of vicarious baptism, the literary context does not, in fact, demand a reading one way or the other.”<sup>77</sup> So, even with all textual information considered, there is no objective way of deciding between ordinary and vicarious baptism. Secondly, in agreement with David Kuck, we conclude that while “Hull’s causal reading of the preposition is possible,” its viability is not strong, since “on account of the dead” must be read as “on account of faith in the resurrection of the dead,”<sup>78</sup> a reading which the text itself does not need in order to function in the larger literary context. Once again, it appears to us that a straightforward reading of 15:29 avoids the most difficulties.

*1 Corinthians 15:29 as vicarious baptism.* As has been shown, 1 Corinthians 15:29 is a *crux interpretum*. Of the over two hundred interpretations, only a few remain as “legitimate possibilities.”<sup>79</sup> The aforementioned analysis was not meant to resolve these interpretive issues; instead, it was intended to familiarize the reader with some of the textual difficulties and interpretations associated with this verse.

Latter-day Saints affirm without reservation that a straightforward, literal reading is best. And we are not alone in this approach. It has previously been shown that the reading of 15:29 as a reference to vicarious baptism is in fact the majority reading among modern biblical scholars. These scholars have recognized that a literal reading is best, as it avoids many of the aforementioned difficulties. Any alteration, either in semantics or in syntax, generally creates more problems than it solves. William F. Orr and James A. Walther conclude that:

The allusion to the idea and/or practice of *baptism on behalf of the dead* is unique in the New Testament in this passage. . . . Close inspection of the language of the reference makes all attempts to soften or eliminate its literal meaning unsuccessful. An endeavor to understand *the dead* as persons who are “dead in sin” does not really help; for the condition offered, *if the dead are not being raised at all*, makes it clear that the apostle is writing about persons who are physically dead. It appears that under the pressure of concern for the eternal destiny of dead relatives or friends some people in the church were undergoing baptism on their behalf in the belief that this would enable the dead to

receive the benefits of Christ’s salvation. Paul remarks about the practice without specifying who or how many are involved and without identifying himself with them. He attaches neither praise nor blame to the custom. He does take it as an illustration of faith in a future destiny of the dead.<sup>80</sup>

New Testament scholar Leon L. Morris, in the Tyn-dale New Testament Commentaries, expresses a similar sentiment:

This reference to baptism *for (hyper) the dead* is a notorious difficulty. The most natural meaning of the expression is that some early believers got themselves baptized on behalf of friends of theirs who had died without receiving that sacrament. Thus Parry says: “The plain and necessary sense of the words implies the existence of a practice of vicarious baptism at Corinth, presumably on behalf of believers who died before they were baptized.” He stigmatizes all other interpretations as “evasions . . . wholly due to the unwillingness to admit such a practice, and still more to a reference to it by S. Paul without condemnation.”<sup>81</sup>

Yet, there are those who affirm this reading, qualified with the explanation that the Corinthian Saints were engaging in a heretical practice. Those who hold such a position often assert that Paul was merely referencing vicarious baptism to demonstrate the inconsistencies of denying the resurrection and yet baptizing the deceased: “Else what shall they do which are baptized by the dead, if the dead rise not at all?” Arthur Carr asserts that ordinarily Paul would have strongly discouraged such a disreputable practice; however, he did not want to offend the tender new converts of Corinth. Consequently, Paul neither condemns nor approves such a practice; he merely points out the inconsistency.<sup>82</sup>

Readings such as Carr’s seem fairly common among biblical scholars. Richard E. DeMaris is one such scholar who attempts to justify his position with modern archaeological findings in connection with first-century Corinthian culture. He points out that archaeological excavations show that Corinthian citizens of the time were vested in cults of the dead. DeMaris asserts that what was happening in Corinth was simply a “phenomenon” that was catalyzed by the aforementioned cultic practices. He

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insists, however, that vicarious baptism was “neither widespread nor long-lived.”<sup>83</sup>

DeMaris’s claim cannot be reasonably maintained. After all, Christian communities that were very widespread and endured for a significant amount of time engaged in this practice. DeMaris seems to take for granted that there is no connection between these groups and Corinth, but lack of textual evidence establishing such a connection is not sufficient to conclude that there was none. That would be an argument from silence.

Additionally, many sects within the Judeo-Christian tradition have espoused some form of vicarious work for the deceased, from the Catholics and their ancient doctrine of penitence for souls bound in purgatory, to the ancient Israelites’ concern with proper burial. Religions unrelated to the Judeo-Christian tradition also have variations of vicarious work for the dead.<sup>84</sup>

Granted, none of these examples compare exactly with vicarious baptisms for the dead. However, the general principle is the same: the living can perform some rite or act whereby the deceased may progress in a postmortal sphere. Without these vicarious efforts, the dead do not advance. So DeMaris’s claims that the Christian practice of baptisms for the dead was a “phenomenon” that was not “widespread” gives us reason to pause.

Yet, even given DeMaris’s critique, we still contend that Paul’s failure to openly condemn the practice was in effect an endorsement of the same. It has been asserted that Paul’s lack of condemnation on the subject has a parallel to Paul’s initial unwillingness to condemn the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:10). But the parallel is weak, since Paul does state explicitly later in the same epistle that such a practice is inherently wrong (1 Corinthians 10:21). We do not find that in respect to baptisms for the dead.

An additional point also needs to be made on this topic. As previously pointed out, Carr believes that Paul did not openly condemn the practice of vicarious baptism because he did not want to offend new converts. But reflecting on the greater part of Pauline writings, including his epistle to the Corinthians, leaves one to wonder if there can be an example found of Paul holding back condemnation

for fear of offense. Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul unabashedly condemns instances when the Corinthian community has strayed; one hardly gets the sense that Paul is ever concerned about wounding the tender Corinthian heart. Carr’s statement seems to be out of harmony with the whole tenor of 1 Corinthians and based on pure speculation. H. V. Martin reads the verse in question just as Carr does. He feels that Paul is pointing out the inconsistency of the Corinthian practice, with their skewed belief on the resurrection. Yet, Martin disagrees with Carr. He feels that by abstaining from condemnation Paul is actually giving his approval to such a practice.<sup>85</sup>

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## Paul’s failure to openly condemn the practice was in effect an endorsement of the same.

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The theologian Fernard Prat does not take the case quite as far as Martin, but he does lend considerable support to the concept of work for the deceased. Prat feels that Paul neither condemns or approves of the practice. Instead, he insists that Paul sees in it

a profession of faith in the resurrection of the dead. . . . [the] practice was . . . a solemn protestation that the deceased belonged to Jesus Christ and that he had lacked the requisite time, but not the desire, to become an effective member of the visible Church. Nor were they mistaken in thinking that through the communion of saints an act of faith and piety on their part could be profitable to the deceased.<sup>86</sup>

As can clearly be discerned, many scholars see vicarious baptism as the most plausible interpretation of 15:29, simply due to its immunity from the perplexities generated by all other readings.

*Ancient support for 1 Corinthians 15:29 as vicarious baptism.* Two early Christian theologians also affirm that first century Corinthian saints practiced vicarious baptisms, the first being Tertullian. Writing sometime in the late second to early third century, Tertullian took it upon himself to define the Christian faith (in effect, delineating a standard



for determining heresy). In one of his earliest works, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Tertullian discusses baptism for the dead and the community at Corinth. After quoting 1 Corinthians 15:29 he states: “Now it is certain that they adopted this (practice) with such a presumption as made them suppose that the vicarious baptism (in question) would be beneficial to the flesh of another in anticipation of the resurrection.”<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, using the phrases *vicarious baptism* and *flesh of another* frankly acknowledges that the Corinthians engaged in the practice under the belief that it would benefit their dead.

However, in a later work, *Against Marcion*,<sup>88</sup> he reinterprets the verse, explaining that to be baptized “for the dead” was really only to be “baptized for the body” because “it is the body which becomes *dead*.”<sup>89</sup> It seems that he is attempting to recant his earlier statements about Corinth and deny that “vicarious baptism . . . for the flesh of another” ever occurred. Jeffrey Trumbower argues persuasively that Tertullian, while combating Marcion in *Against Marcion*, goes at length to ensure that 15:29 is not construed to legitimize baptism for the dead presumably because Marcion himself has endorsed the practice. Trumbower concludes, “It is significant that Tertullian only makes these moves when combating the Marcionites, leading me to conclude that between the writing of *De Resurrectione* and *Adversus Marcionem* he had learned of their (Marcionites) practice based on 1 Corinthians, some 200 years before it received a full reporting in John Chrysostom.”<sup>90</sup> Tertullian’s remarks thus provide good evidence that the



Front view of the baptismal font at the Church of Saint Simeon, Syria, which dates to the first half of the 5th century AD. Courtesy Paul Y. Hoskisson.

Marcionites were practicing baptism for the dead as early as the late second or early third century AD—a rite that continued until at least the early fifth century.



View from the steps of the baptismal font at the Church of Saint Simeon. Courtesy Paul Y. Hoskisson.

Apart from Tertullian's change in language with regard to baptism for the dead, he also mentions while attacking Marcion, the "*Februarian* lustrations"<sup>91</sup> and prayer for the dead as a parallel to the rite. Although ambiguous, Tertullian seems to connect baptism (either the Marcionite practice of baptism for the dead or the Corinthian one) with these Roman forms of vicarious offerings and prayers for the deceased. It seems that the baptismal rite was in existence at the time and was not simply baptism "for the body" for every Christian of the time.

Further, the writer now known as Ambrosiaster,<sup>92</sup> writing in the latter half of the fourth century, substantiates Tertullian's initial confirmation of Corinthian proxy baptisms. In his famous commentaries on the Epistles of Paul, he notes "that some people were at that time (of 1st Corinthians construction) being baptized for the dead because

they were afraid that someone who was not baptized would either not rise at all or else rise merely in order to be condemned."<sup>93</sup> He clearly affirms the practice and argues that Paul refers to such work in his epistle. Although scholars have difficulties ascertaining the identity of "Ambrosiaster," his remarks provide further evidence that some Christians in the early centuries continued to read 15:29 as reference to vicarious ordinance work.

## Origins of the Lost Practice

The New Testament and other early Christian literature give some important insights as to how the earliest Saints viewed posthumous salvation and vicarious ordinance work for the dead. Many apocryphal, gnostic, and even New Testament writings present themes that are reasonably connected with baptism for the dead. Perhaps these texts are merely echoes of the true origin of the work, or they mirrored an existing practice. We will look at a number of different texts, some from the New Testament, others apocryphal,<sup>94</sup> some purporting to be forty-day literature,<sup>95</sup> others from the gnostics, to examine the teachings that seem to provide a way for accepting baptism for the dead under Christian theology, searching for their origin in Christian thought.

In the case of Paul, it is not far removed from his general theology to assume that vicarious ordinance work, particularly proxy baptisms for the dead, was plausibly a part of his own beliefs and teachings. Unquestionably, vicarious work—in the figure of Jesus Christ—was the central theme of Christian belief in Pauline theology; Christianity, for Paul, hinges on the salvific gifts of Christ. Christ is a "propitiation . . . for the remission of sins" (Romans 3:25). Paul even recounts his own "sufferings for you," where, by his own exertion, he fills up "that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). In this context Paul is performing vicarious work to make up for the shortcomings of the church as a whole. With the emphasis Paul places on baptism elsewhere in his writings (Romans 6:1–5; Galatians 3:26–27),<sup>96</sup> "it is not a stretch to imagine a Pauline community practicing vicarious baptism for those who had died 'in the faith,' but without baptism."<sup>97</sup>

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Another interesting New Testament writing is the epistle of Peter, specifically 1 Peter 3:19–22 and 4:6, which speaks of Christ’s evangelization of the dead, a belief that relates directly to the doctrine of vicarious ordinance work, where Christ is preaching to the “spirits” or to the “dead” (3:19; 4:6). Verse 4:6 is more direct in its wording that those being taught are the “dead” (*nekrois*), meaning those who are physically dead rather than the vague term *spirits* (*pneumasin*), and states that the gospel is being preached to the deceased so that “they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” Scholars are divided over the relation of these two passages of scripture and whether or not they refer to the same event in which “spirits” and “dead” are equivalent, with Christ being the subject of both verbs (*ekēryxen* and *euaggelisthē*, both usually translated as “preached”).<sup>98</sup> Regardless of what stance is taken, some form of postmortem evangelism is clearly reported in the verses in question, particularly 4:6.<sup>99</sup>

that the “dead” referred to are those who did not have the opportunity to receive Christ while in mortality. None of the verses of 1 Peter that they cite explicitly state that there is no “second chance” for the dead. Peter’s warnings appear more precisely to discourage procrastination of repentance.

If the dead were indeed given an opportunity to accept the gospel of Christ, then certainly this would open room for the idea of proxy baptisms on their behalf. First Peter suggests baptism as requisite for salvation (3:21),<sup>103</sup> thus providing a basis for a theology that includes vicarious work for those who cannot perform rites for themselves.

The *Apocalypse of Peter*<sup>104</sup> shows a different theme, in which the righteous can affect the salvation of the condemned dead. It presents scenes from the final judgment of the world, with the wicked receiving their eternal punishment. In chapter 14, some of the damned are saved at the behest of those who are with God. The Greek text, purported by Dennis D. Buchholz and Montague R. James to

be closest to the original writings, explains, “I will give to my called and my elect whomever they request of me from out of punishment. And I will give them a beautiful baptism in salvation from the Acherousian Lake which is said to be in the Elysian Field, a share in righteousness with my saints.”<sup>105</sup>

Apparently, the righteous are able to choose certain damned souls, who are then released from eternal punishment and receive baptism (literal or figurative) that they might be saved

with their counterparts. Buchholz concludes that this scene “teaches a form of universal salvation, that is, if any who are saved request pardon for any wicked, . . . the latter will be released from punishment.”<sup>106</sup> These same lines are paraphrased in the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the doctrine therein is the same, whereby some of the damned souls are given salvation at the hands of God through intervention by righteous people. Interestingly, the later Ethiopic translation of the *Apocalypse of Peter* changes the wording of these lines so that no second chance could be interpreted from the text. This was likely done because “someone had theological objections to it.”<sup>107</sup> Further, the *Sibylline Oracles*, when paraphrasing this scene from the *Apocalypse of Peter*,

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For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. —1 Peter 4:6

Referring to 1 Peter 4:6, Ernest Best notes that “the Gospel is now offered to those who never had the opportunity of hearing it when alive.”<sup>100</sup> However, he observes that a likely objection to this assertion is the implication that a “second chance” remains for the dead. This, he states, is incompatible with other verses within 1 Peter that affirm that death is the final judgment for men.<sup>101</sup> Later scholars have concurred with his objection, arguing that the dead referred to must be those who have died among the group addressed in the epistle, who accepted the gospel while in mortality.<sup>102</sup> But these scholars fail to explain why those who have already received the gospel need it preached to them again upon death. It is far more reasonable



contains a small interjectory note written by a later author declaring that the doctrine taught concerning damned souls was “plainly false: for the fire will never cease to torment the damned. I indeed could pray that it might be so, who am branded with the deepest scars of transgressions which stand in need of utmost mercy. But let Origen be ashamed of his lying words, who saith that there is a term set to the torments.”<sup>108</sup> The idea that righteous people could intervene on behalf of the condemned and that their punishment would see an end was apparently held by the authors of these two texts and by Origen. According to such beliefs, which are related to other teachings of the era about affecting the salvation of the dead, baptism on their behalf certainly seems plausible. Another important area of research in relation to the doctrine of salvation for the dead is Christ’s three-day descent into Sheol or Hades. Early Christians believed that after Christ died on the cross, he descended into hell to evangelize the dead. To those who accepted him, he placed his “name upon their head(s)” and made them “free.”<sup>109</sup> This rite was called Chrismation, which would almost always be linked with baptism in later church practice.<sup>110</sup> After preaching to the unevangelized dead, Christ returned to the earth for his Forty-Day ministry, in which he was continually “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

A common form of symbolism to express Christ’s descent is breaking the gates of hell or unlocking them with his key,<sup>111</sup> as discussed in the “Harrowing of Hell,” the first article in this series.<sup>112</sup> Christ’s mention of his *descensus* to Sheol to preach the gospel and free the captives there is certainly linked with the idea that the dead therefore need baptism.<sup>113</sup> If they need the gospel preached to them, why not the saving rite of baptism? The *Epistula Apostolorum*, a composition dating roughly to AD 140–150, describes the purpose for Christ’s descent. In the text, the Savior speaks of the resurrection and the ultimate redemption and judgment of the souls on earth, in which all men will be judged “in regard of that that they have done, whether it be good or evil.” He then continues with this important statement:

For to that end went I down unto the place of Lazarus, and preached unto the righteous and the prophets, that they might come out of the rest which is below and come up into that which

is above; and I poured out upon them with my right hand the water (baptism, *Eth.*) of life and forgiveness and salvation from all evil, as I have done unto you and unto them that believe on me.<sup>114</sup>

The Savior indicates that his descent and preaching to the righteous dead and the former prophets are tied to the resurrection. Further, the righteous dead, the former prophets, and those who are unevangelized, receive the “water of life,” or baptism—the very thing that brings “salvation from all evil.” Apparently, this was a central reason for his descent into the underworld—to provide baptism for the righteous souls there that they might be judged correctly and “come up into that which is above.”

The gnostic writing the *Apocryphon of John* (which is a conversation between the risen Lord and the apostle John written around AD 150)<sup>115</sup> discusses further the purpose of Christ’s descent. Within the text the divine Forethought<sup>116</sup> reveals to John:

I entered the midst of darkness and the bowels of the underworld,<sup>117</sup> turning to my task. The foundations of chaos shook as though to fall upon those who dwell in chaos and destroy them. . . . I hurried back to the root of my light so they might not be destroyed before their time. . . . I brightened my face with light from the consummation of their realm and entered the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body. I said, Let whoever hears arise from deep sleep.<sup>118</sup>

The text concludes with Christ meeting a certain person in the depths, someone who is repentant and ready to be released. Christ then notes, “I raised and sealed the person in luminous water with Five Seals that death might not prevail over the person from that moment on.”<sup>119</sup> In a number of separate Sethian writings (the gnostic Christian community or classification to which the *Apocryphon of John* is attributed), the Five Seals referred to are thought to be the “final act of deliverance” or “a baptismal rite.”<sup>120</sup> Thus the final saving ordinance that instills life and awakens those who are dead from their “deep sleep” is the rite of baptism.

The theme of the Five Seals is discussed further in a number of other texts. The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII) uses the symbolism in a way that confirms the interpretation of the Five Seals as some form of baptismal rite or liturgy.<sup>121</sup> Composed

sometime in the early to middle second century AD—and possibly even included “in a codex that originally contained the long version of the *Apocryphon of John*” and *On the Origin of the World*<sup>122</sup>—it recounts the three descents of the gnostic savior called Protенnoia (interpreted to be Christ by the gnostic Christians using the work). During one of the descents, Protенnoia describes cleansing a person and providing him with certain salvific initiations. The text recounts:

[I gave to him] from the Water [of Life, which strips] him of the Chaos [that is in the] uttermost [darkness] that exists [inside] the entire [abyss], that is, the thought of [the corporeal] and the psychic. All these I put on. And I stripped him of it and I put upon him a shining Light, that is, the knowledge of the Thought of the Fatherhood. And I delivered him to those who give robes—Yammon, Elasso, Amenai—and they [covered] him with a robe from the robes of the Light; and I delivered him to the Baptists and they baptized him—Micheus, Michar, Mn[e]s[i]nous—and they immersed him in the spring of the [Water] of Life. . . . And I delivered him to those who glorify—Ariom, Elien, Phariel—and they glorified him with the glory of the Fatherhood. And those who snatch away [snatched away]—Kamaliel [ ] anen, Samblo, the servants of <the> great holy Luminaries—and they took him into the light—[place] of his Fatherhood. And [he received] the Five Seals from [the Light] of the Mother, Protенnoia, and it was [granted] him [to] partake of [the mystery] of knowledge, and [he became a Light] in Light.<sup>123</sup>

In the text, the Five Seals are taken in conjunction with other ceremonial practices that together provide the culminating salvation for the recipient. Salvation is hence described through “stripping, investing in a garment of light, robing, spring baptism, enthroning, glorifying and rapture, followed by reception of the five seals from the Light of the Mother so that (the recipient) partakes of the mystery of knowledge and becomes a light in light.”<sup>124</sup> Baptism and the Five Seals intertwine with other saving rituals to provide salvation for those who are recipients; one is incomplete without the other. The ordinances mentioned in the text are reminiscent of temple themes encountered in apocalyptic Jew-

ish texts centered on themes of ascent and ethereal ritual, where the recipient of such blessings is normally taken to heaven.<sup>125</sup>

While introducing the *Trimorphic Protенnoia*, the translator/commentator declares that “the baptismal rite of the Five Seals is a mystery of celestial ascent which strips off the psychic and somatic garments of ignorance, transforming and purifying Protенnoia’s members and clothing them with radiant light.”<sup>126</sup> Further, “the author’s [of the gnostic texts in question] reference to the recipients of this rite in the first-person plural and as ‘brethren’ suggests a [Sethian] community with a well-established tradition of water baptism which has been spiritualized into a mystery of ascent.”<sup>127</sup>

These Sethian gnostics appear to elicit an elaborate liturgy and doctrine by viewing baptism and celestial ascent as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, their writings indicate a near obsession with receiving the saving *gnosis* and ultimately removing themselves from this world through liturgical rites. In these texts, then, the celestial ascent appears inseparable from baptism and the Five Seals.<sup>128</sup> Each provides a connecting link and an escape from the shackles of mortality, allowing the recipient to be reborn. Interestingly, they extend this doctrine to cover the dead as well, as already noted in the *Apocryphon of John*. Thus, the dead who receive the gnostic salvation will be baptized and receive the accompanying rites and all things surrounding the Five Seals.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, immediately prior to the scene that speaks of the Five Seals and saving the dead, John poses a question that elicits a curious response from the risen Lord. John asks, “Lord, how can the soul become younger and return into its mother’s womb, or into the human?”<sup>129</sup> The commentator notes, “Returning to the mother’s womb is also a theme encountered in John 3:4,” in which a similar inquiry is made by Nicodemus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” In responding to the query of Nicodemus, Christ teaches him, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In his response to John in the gnostic text, the Savior recounts, “You are truly blessed, for you have understood. This soul will be made to follow another soul in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one.”<sup>130</sup>



Baptistry of the Orthodox, Ravenna, Italy. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

The Lord’s phrasing appears to suggest vicarious or proxy salvation in which the living provide those who are “dead” in some sense with access to saving grace. The soul, when being reborn, must follow one who is already living, in whom “life” dwells. To save those souls who need the opportunity to be reborn, the act must become operative through a living agent. What could the living do to assist the dead to gain salvation—taking into account the close parallel between the question asked by Nicodemus and the question posed in the gnostic text? Given the Lord’s answer to Nicodemus (to be born of water

and of the spirit), it seems the answer would be baptism for the dead.

Another gnostic text, the *Pistis Sophia*,<sup>131</sup> a discursive writing purporting to contain the instructions of the risen Lord to his apostles, hints at vicarious baptism for those who die without the ordinance. In one particularly notable scene, Maria (Mary) poses the question to Jesus:

My Lord, if a good man has fulfilled all the mysteries, and he has a relative, in a word, he has a man and that man is an impious one who has committed all the sins which are worthy of the outer darkness; and he has not repented; or he has completed his number of cycles in the changes of the body, and that man has done nothing profitable and has come forth from the body; and we have known of him certainly that he has sinned and is worthy of the outer darkness; what should we do to him so that we save him from the punishments of the dragon of the outer darkness, so that he is returned to a righteous body which will find the mysteries of the Kingdom of the Light, and become good and go to the height, and inherit the Kingdom of the Light?<sup>132</sup>

Maria is wondering about the status of condemned souls, or those who have sinned and also lacked the “mysteries” that are given to the elect. The condemned souls are deceased, for to reach the Kingdom of Light they must be “returned to a righteous body.” The “mysteries” to which Maria refers are of great importance in understanding the Lord’s response. Upon hearing the question, Christ responds:

If you want to return them from the punishments of the outer darkness and all the judgments, and return them to a righteous body which will find the mysteries of the light, and go to the height and inherit the Kingdom of Light—perform the one mystery of the Ineffable which forgives sins at all times. And when you



have finished performing the mystery, say: “The soul of such and such a man on whom I think in my heart, when it comes to the place of the punishments of the chambers of the outer darkness; or when it is in the rest of the punishments of the chambers of the outer darkness and the rest of the punishments of the dragon: may it be returned from them all. And when it finishes its number of cycles in the changes, may it be taken to the presence of the Virgin of Light; and may the Virgin of the Light seal it with the seal of the Ineffable, and cast it in that very month into a righteous body which will find the mys-

teries of the light in it, and become good, and go to the height and inherit the Kingdom of the Light. And furthermore, when it has completed the cycles of the changes, may that soul be taken to the presence of the seven virgins of the light which are in charge of (lit. over) the baptism. And may they place it (the baptism) upon that soul, and seal it with the sign of the Kingdom of the Ineffable, and may they take it to the ranks of the light.” . . . Truly, I say to you: the soul for which you shall pray, if indeed it is in the dragon of the outer darkness, it will withdraw its tail out of its mouth, and release that soul.<sup>133</sup>



Ceiling of the baptistery of the Arians, Ravenna, Italy. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

The gnostic Christ tells Maria that the soul of an unrepentant man may reach the Kingdom of Light and be released from the place of punishments if certain procedures are undertaken in his name, mainly the “mystery of the Ineffable which forgives sins at all times.” A person on earth is to perform this mystery as a proxy for the deceased relative or friend; the living proxy merely thinks of that person while performing the rite and it will serve to release the person from outer darkness. The significance of this passage is that a living soul undergoes a certain rite, the mystery of the Ineffable (perhaps baptism as this rite is connected with forgiveness of sins), combined with prayer, which directly influences the salvation of a deceased soul; it is a proxy rite of the clearest nature.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* teaches that the dead will receive baptism and hints at proxy work in a manner similar to the *Pistis Sophia*. In the apocalyptic visions, Hermas sees the apostles preaching to the spirits in the underworld. The text states, “They had to rise through water. . . in order to be made alive. In no other way could they enter the reign of God, unless they put off the deadliness of their [first] life. So too, those who had fallen asleep received the seal and [entered the reign of God]. Before

bearing the name of [the Son of] God . . . a person is dead. But upon receiving the seal, the person puts aside deadliness and takes on life. So the seal is the water. Into the water they go down dead and come up alive. The seal was proclaimed to them, and they profited from it to enter into the reign of God.”<sup>134</sup>

In her commentary on this specific verse, Professor Carolyn Osiek declares that “the association of passing through water with entering the kingdom of God (v. 2) and receiving the seal is unmistakably a reference to baptism; . . . the absolute necessity of baptism is implicit here [the dead included].”<sup>135</sup>

However the Shepherd of Hermas is not finished. Having learned this, he then asks, “Why, sir . . . did the forty stones rise with them from the depth already having the seal?” He is answered thus,

These are the apostles and teachers who proclaimed the name of the Son of God, who, having fallen asleep in power and faith of the Son of God, even proclaimed to those who had previously fallen asleep and gave them the seal of the proclamation. They descended with them into the water and came up again, except that these descended alive and came up alive. Because of them, these others were enlivened and came to know the name of the Son of God. . . . They [those being baptized] fell asleep in justice and great purity, except they did not have this seal.<sup>136</sup>

The dead are given baptism at the hands of the apostles and teachers. Yet for some reason, the dead who are baptized and receive life have some forty people rise with them who already have the seal, or baptism. The wording “descended alive and came up alive” appears to indicate that these are souls who are already baptized. Could this be a reference to proxy baptisms? Osiek concludes: “These verses, without saying so, present a good argument in favor of baptism in the name of the dead, apparently already an act of piety in first-century Corinth. . . . here with the pre-Christian dead, the problem is . . . they practiced virtue in their lives, but had not received baptism. Through the apostles and teachers, this problem is solved.”<sup>137</sup> The text is certainly vague enough to allow for the interpretation, and it seems interesting that the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a widely used text for early Christians, would contain such language. This is

not conclusive evidence for vicarious baptisms, yet the texts reviewed indicate that some form of proxy work is possible and that it is related to the “rebirth” provided through baptism.

One thing is quite certain, however—nearly all the texts purporting to contain teachings of Christ concerning salvation for the dead emphasize that his teachings were closely guarded, reserved only for those whom the Lord deemed worthy to hear them.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, of all the major themes presented in the texts, this one is quite pervasive. Because of this discretion, much remains unknown regarding the circulation and general understanding of these doctrines. Likely, few people had access to the texts that claim to contain the “hidden” teachings of the resurrected Lord. Hugh Nibley pointed out that much of Christ’s recorded teachings on important doctrinal topics—though only a fraction of what he taught<sup>139</sup>—remain shrouded in mystery,<sup>140</sup> particularly Christ’s teachings concerning salvation for the dead.<sup>141</sup> Given this point, we should be appreciative of what evidence still exists.

From the texts mentioned it seems clear that a belief among some early Christian communities was that the dead could be saved, perhaps through vicarious work, and that many of them would receive baptism. The ultimate question regards form: Were the baptisms to be performed vicariously by the living on behalf of the dead, as was done historically by the groups previously mentioned (and as hinted at in some texts)? Or do these texts purport that baptism is received by the dead only in the afterlife, with no proxy or living agent involved?

It appears, ultimately, that the Corinthians, or at least the reference to them in 1 Corinthians 15:29, inspired following generations of Christians to engage in vicarious ordinance work. In the remaining section we will set forth evidence showing that such a practice was performed in ancient Christianity and was more common than one might suppose.

## Marcionite and Gnostic Baptisms for the Dead

A favorite tactic of proxy nihilists is to associate the practice of vicarious baptism with later heretical groups and by so doing infer that the Corinthian practice was likewise heretical. One of the most oft-cited heretical groups is the Marcionites. Born

around AD 100, Marcion was raised as a proto-orthodox Christian by his father. Around AD 140, he entered Rome and converted many people to his own Christian theology, now quite distinct from other teachers of the time. It anticipated the teachings of Gnosticism, with ideas of strict dualism within the universe and that Yahweh from the Old Testament was a demiurge. Because of Marcion's success, he became a marked target for heresiologists (i.e., heretic hunters) of the orthodox faith,<sup>142</sup> both contemporary and those far removed (such as Epiphanius).

The Marcionite sect was completely estranged from proto-orthodox believers and met in their own communities rather than worship alongside other believers (as did the gnostics). According to Epiphanius (late fourth century), Marcion and his followers had stretched into the vast majority of the Christian world: "the sect is still to be found even now, in Rome and Italy, Egypt and Palestine, Arabia and Syria, Cyprus and the Thebaid—in Persia too moreover, and in other places."<sup>143</sup> Because of the widespread presence of the Marcionites, far more information about Marcion's own teachings and practices has survived than that of relatively minor heretics.

One practice that sources attribute to Marcion and his followers is proxy baptism for the dead. John Chrysostom, in a homily concerning 1 Corinthians 15:29, states with amusement that the Marcionites had perverted the expression "baptized for the dead":

Will ye that I should first mention how they who are infected with the Marcionite heresy pervert this expression? And I know indeed that I shall excite much laughter; nevertheless, even on this account most of all I will mention it that you may the more completely avoid this disease: viz., when any Catechumen departs among them, having concealed the living man under the couch of the dead, they approach the corpse and talk with him, and ask him if he wishes to receive baptism; then when he makes no answer, he that is concealed underneath saith in his stead that of course he should wish to be baptized; and so they baptize him instead of the departed, like men jesting upon the stage. So great power hath the devil over the souls of careless sinners.<sup>144</sup>



Twelfth-century baptismery in St. Barthélemy, Liège, Belgium. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

It appears that as late as the time of Chrysostom (hence the present tense in his explanation of the Marcionite heresy), perhaps even in the early fifth century, followers of Marcion were practicing a form of proxy baptism for the dead. Chrysostom suggests that they would only do baptisms for deceased catechumens, or those who were interested in baptism but died before receiving that ordinance. It was thus reserved only for those who were intent on becoming baptized within the Marcionite community.

Didymus the Blind (writing in the mid-fourth century) further substantiates this fact but with a slight difference in his description of the practice, saying, "The Marcionites baptized the living on behalf of dead unbelievers, not knowing that baptism saves only the person who receives it."<sup>145</sup> Didymus writes that Marcionites baptized for the souls of all unbelievers who had died without baptism, not just for those who were catechumens while yet alive. These textual discrepancies leave room for interpretation as to the exact nature of the practice,



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yet *clearly* the Marcionites were practicing such an act as late as the fourth century AD.

If the practice of proxy baptism was fairly widespread in the Marcionite communities throughout their history, then it would extend throughout the Near East and into nearly every area where Christian communities stretched during the first four centuries. Unlike other Christian sects that would normally worship right along with more “orthodox” believers, the Marcionites had such a large following that they began to meet outside the confines of the “proto-orthodox” church, establishing their own religious communities or congregations. Marcion had so much success with his teachings<sup>146</sup> that in many areas of Asia Minor they were the “original form of Christianity and continued for many years to comprise the greatest number of persons claiming to be Christian (in those areas).”<sup>147</sup>

In his work *Panarion*, Epiphanius of Salamis, bishop of Cyprus in the late fourth century, mentions baptism for the dead performed vicariously in parts of Asia and Galatia. In a section entitled *Against Cerinthians*, he diverts from his main writing to provide information about proxy baptisms:

For their school (Cerinthians) reached its height in this country, I mean Asia, and in Galatia as well. And in these countries I also heard of a tradition which said that when some of their people died too soon, without baptism, others would be baptized for them in their names, so that they would not be punished for rising unbaptized at the resurrection and become the subjects of the authority that made the world. And the tradition I heard of says that this is why the same holy apostle said, “if the dead rise not at all, why are they baptized for them?”<sup>148</sup>

It is unclear whether Epiphanius meant the Cerinthian practice when speaking of baptisms for the dead, though one would assume that the Cerinthians were practicing the ordinance. Perhaps he was referring to the Marcionite practice that existed in that area during the time in which he was writing. Either way, his remarks provide further evidence that throughout Asia, or what would better be termed Asia Minor, and Galatia, proxy baptisms were being

performed. His inclusion of the phrase *subjects of the authority that made the world* points to the fact that whether it was Marcionites, Cerinthians, or others who were performing this work, they were likely gnostics.<sup>149</sup>

Another interesting doctrine is that of proxy baptism by angels, a doctrine taught by Theodotus, a gnostic teacher who wrote in the later second to early third centuries AD. He is quoted by Clement of Alexandria as teaching that angels would be baptized for the souls of dead men. Apparently for Theodotus and the Valentinian tradition of Gnosticism, “Baptism (played) a key role in the salvation of the elect.”<sup>150</sup> Clement quotes Theodotus as saying, “And, they say, those who are baptized for the dead, these are the Angels who are baptized for us, so that, as we also possess the NAME, we are not bound by the Limit and the Cross, and prevented from entering Pleroma.”<sup>151</sup> Theodotus seems to express that salvation for the elect souls of the dead, whereby they may enter into Pleroma (fulness, light above this world), is achieved via proxy baptisms performed by angels of heaven. Although a variation on the current theme, it is important to note the similarity implicit in this teaching: proxy baptisms are necessary for the salvation of the dead, and they must be performed by someone who is living (such as an angel).

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Too often Christian commentaries will dismiss baptism for the dead, specifically 1 Corinthians 15:29, because those who practiced the work were judged long after the fact to be “heretics.”

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Most commentators, though recognizing the fact that the Marcionites, as well as gnostic Christians,<sup>152</sup> performed the rite of baptism for the dead, dismiss the practice because such groups are considered heretical sects of Christianity. However, the term *heretical* is used by the enemies of these early branches of Christianity: in scholarly work the term

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should hold no bearing on the legitimacy of the beliefs of the group nor upon the historical relevance of their practices. The Marcionite, Cerinthian, and gnostic beliefs have just as much of a claim on Christian doctrine as do orthodox views; the only difference between the two is that one lasted far longer than the other. Simply because later church fathers rejected the practice in no way indicates that the primitive church or Christ himself rejected the beliefs concerning proxy ordinances. Too often Christian commentaries will dismiss baptism for the dead, specifically 1 Corinthians 15:29, because those who practiced the work were judged long after the fact to be “heretics.” This, according to their reasoning, is sound evidence that the early Christian church rejected the doctrine. By this same logic one could surmise that because the Marcionites, and all other “heretical” sects, practiced faith in Christ, then certainly the primitive church did not practice such foolish things.

To understand early Christian doctrines, one must analyze the teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and early Christian literature. Early Christians didn’t always agree on doctrine. Orthodoxy is the Christian interpretation that eventually won out. On this basis, orthodoxy cannot claim to possess Christ’s original teachings:

It is widely thought today that proto-orthodoxy was simply one of many competing interpretations of Christianity in the early church. It was neither a self-evident interpretation nor an original apostolic view. The apostles, for example, did not teach the Nicene Creed or anything like it. Indeed, as far back as we can trace it, Christianity was remarkably varied in its theological expressions.<sup>153</sup>

Whether groups are gnostic, orthodox, Marcionite, or whatever, one cannot use the term *heretical* to infer that all their teachings are incorrect. Rather, to judge whether a doctrine is plausibly connected with the teachings of Christ, the apostles, and early Christian theology, it must be based on historical evidence without reference to antagonistic terms. Such callous proclamations do nothing to help us understand why certain groups accepted proxy ordinances, or whether it was reasonable for them to do so under Christian theology of the time.

If, for instance, the Marcionite sect, or some other gnostic heresy, had outlasted the proto-

orthodox religion, then the current view of Christianity would be quite different. Our view of history, particularly of Christianity, is tainted by the categories of orthodoxy and heresy. On what basis do scholars or theologians judge which sects reflect the earliest teachings of Christ and his apostles concerning posthumous salvation and proxy ordinances? If it is based solely on the view of the sect that has outlasted the others, the so-called orthodox view, then methodologically their views are no more reputable than those of an untrained layperson. Instead, if modern methodology is to be observed, then it can be quite plausibly asserted that (1) Corinthian Saints practiced proxy baptisms on behalf of the dead, as did the Marcionites, and perhaps the Cerinthians and other gnostics, all of whom belong to Christian groups with claims of Christian doctrines; and that (2) given the historical nature of the practice,<sup>154</sup> especially its early appearance, proxy baptisms originated in the first century alongside the Christian faith. Whether the practice was widespread across the Christian world, or even among the apostles, is in no way clear. Mormons and non-Mormons alike must affirm that the scant amount of evidence and writings concerning the practice leaves a gap of information concerning its origin. Perhaps it did originate in Corinth, and later with Marcion. Yet perhaps the origin of the practice stems from Christ himself and the teachings of his apostles. If this were true, then proxy baptism may hold more weight than ever assumed in determining Christian doctrine of the earliest form.

## Conclusions

As has been shown, vicarious work for the deceased was a relatively common practice across a broad swath of the ancient Roman Empire. Diverse religious groups practiced various forms of proxy rites intended to improve the eternal condition of their deceased loved ones in their postmortal advancement. Given this background, it was quite natural for some first-century Christians to practice baptisms for the dead, as they faced the quandary of reconciling the infinite mercy of a loving God with the clearly stated and universally accepted Christian requirement of baptism for entrance into heaven, in light of the fact that many of their loved ones had not met this requirement.

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As historical evidence of the practice of baptism for the dead in the early Christian church, we submit the following, presented in detail throughout this article:

1. Both the New Testament and patristic literature apparently identify baptism as an absolute requisite of any soul desiring entrance into heaven. The Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles all demonstrate that the Lord and his apostles actively extended baptism to every repentant soul and called upon every soul to repent and be baptized.
2. The most common reading of 1 Corinthians 15:29 among modern biblical scholars is that it, in fact, refers to vicarious baptism for the dead among the Corinthian saints circa AD 56/57.
3. Early Christian writers, including Tertullian and Ambrosiaster, acknowledge that 1 Corinthians 15:29 described vicarious baptism for the dead. Various Christian writers of the next few centuries thereafter also recognized this as fact, even though some of them denounced it as heresy.
4. Several New Testament passages and a plethora of apocryphal and gnostic writings support various themes related to vicarious baptism for the dead, including Christ's descent into Sheol to preach to the dead, the need for baptism for the souls in Sheol, the efficacy of proxy work for the dead, and various forms of vicarious baptism for the dead, both by the living and by angels.
5. The Marcionites, a Christian sect that had a large following throughout much of the Roman Empire, practiced baptism for the dead from the late second or early third to the fourth century and possibly into the early fifth century AD. Some gnostic groups likewise practiced vicarious baptisms for the dead during the same period (but of shorter duration). They believed their practice continued a rite original to Christian belief.
6. These groups are labeled heretical today. While the victor writes the history book, which is true of both Christian and secular history, the victor is only the strongest combatant, not necessarily the most deserving. The modern methodology of historical research requires us to examine the

historicity of the practices without the prejudice inherent in labels from one's enemies.

Granted, the evidence is not watertight, just as there is a lack of incontrovertible evidence regarding the origins of many Christian doctrines. The simple fact is that few Christian documents survive from the first century, and so we should be appreciative and perhaps even surprised at the amount of attention given to vicarious baptism and related themes by the ancient writers.

But just as the lack of historical evidence is used by proxy nihilists to question the validity of the doctrine of baptism for the dead, the lack of historical records could just as well hide the fact that Christ himself taught this doctrine during his Forty-Day mission, or that baptisms for the dead were performed in numerous Christian communities, not just Corinth, under the auspices of the apostles. The fact is that we simply lack the historical evidence to determine these matters definitively.

Ultimately, every reader must ask: How can I reconcile the infinite mercy of a loving Heavenly Father with the Lord's declaration that one cannot enter heaven without baptism, in light of the fact that millions upon millions of good, honest individuals have lived their entire lives in various regions of the world without the opportunity to hear the good news of the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Latter-day Saints practice baptism for the dead out of love for the deceased as they seek to extend to them the salvific gifts of Christ's atonement. We recognize that vicarious ordinances can only be efficacious if the spirit on the other side of the veil accepts the ordinance performed on his or her behalf. This approach to the salvation of the dead, though not acceptable to many, demonstrates a selfless dedication of time and effort to perform potentially saving acts on behalf of the deceased.

In the last part of this series, we will trace and explore the revelations that restored the doctrine of the redemption of the dead, including the resumption of vicarious ordinances for deceased loved ones. ■

#### Notes

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1. David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, "The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010): 56–77. The final part will cover the restoration of the doctrine of the redemption of the dead.
2. Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 57–58.
3. *1 Enoch* 90:20–27, where the fallen angels, along with the "seventy shepherds" (likely wicked kings) are thrown into the "fiery abyss . . . in the middle of the earth." Taken from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 134–35.
4. *1 Enoch* 90:28–32; the Gentiles are subservient to the exalted Jews, "worshiping [them] and making petition to them and obeying them in everything." However, unlike the fallen angels and the "seventy shepherds," they are not cast into the abyss. See further Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 60.
5. Gardiner M. Day, *The Apostles' Creed: An Interpretation for Today* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1963), 81. The Apostles Creed, "next to the Constantinopolitan Creed, [is] the most important confessional formulary in Christendom." The specific phrase included in the creed concerning Christ's descent into hell "was a commonplace of Christian teaching from the earliest times. . . . Two broad, often intermingling streams of interpretation [about the descent] can be distinguished. According to one, Christ was active during the mysterious three days preaching salvation, or *else administering baptism*, to the righteous of the old Covenant, according to the other, He performed a triumphant act of liberation on their behalf." J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: McKay, 1972), 368, 379, 380, emphasis added. The descent of Christ was an early teaching of Christianity, and it was viewed, by some, as bringing salvation and baptism to those unable to achieve it in their own lifetime.
6. By "early Christians" we mean Christians from the first through the fifth centuries.
7. "Majority reading," as these scholars use it, does not mean more than half of scholars support it but that more scholars support it than any single alternative reading.
8. *History of the Church*, 4:231.
9. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 197.
10. W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 31–32.
11. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 851.
12. For Hilary, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Chromatius, see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1–13* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 50–53. For Cyril of Alexandria, see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 66–67.
13. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 115.
14. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1088–89. "Most scholars agree that 16:9–20 is non-Markan. . . . These verses are found in the overwhelming majority of manuscripts and in all major manuscript families and are attested already by Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.10.5) in 185 c.e. and perhaps, even earlier, by Justin (*1 Apology* 45, around 155 c.e.). But they were almost certainly not penned by Mark, nor were they the original ending of the Gospel. Matthew and Luke follow Mark's narrative closely up to 16:8, whereas beyond it they diverge radically, suggesting that their version of Mark did not contain anything subsequent to 16:8. Verses 9–20, moreover, do not exist in our earliest and best Greek manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, both of which terminate at 16:8, as do the Sinaitic Syriac, about a hundred Armenian manuscripts, the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (from 897 and 913 c.e.), and all but one manuscript of the Sahidic Coptic."
15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.10.5.
16. Justin, *First Apology* 45.
17. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 631.
18. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 632.
19. "Matthew is the only gospel which has anything that can properly be called an ending. . . . This final paragraph of Matthew's gospel looks forward to the continuing work of the Messianic community, making explicit what has already been hinted elsewhere about a mission to those outside the Old Covenant community of Israel." Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 361.
20. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 276–77.
21. "For the law of baptizing has been imposed, and the formula prescribed: 'Go, He saith, 'teach the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' The comparison with this law of that definition, 'Unless a man have been reborn of water and Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of the heavens,' has tied faith to the necessity of baptism. Accordingly, all thereafter who became believers used to be baptized." Tertullian, *On Baptism* 13, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:676, emphasis deleted. It is further reiterated: "When, however, the prescript is laid down that 'without baptism, salvation is attainable by none' (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, 'Unless one be born of water, he hath not life.'" Tertullian, *On Baptism* 12, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:674–75.
22. "As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, . . . [these] are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, 'Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Now, that it is impossible for those who have once been born to enter into their mothers' wombs, is manifest to all. And how those who have sinned and repent shall escape their sins, is declared by Esaias the prophet, . . . 'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from your souls; learn to do well; judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow: and come and let us reason together, saith the Lord. And though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white like wool; and though they be as crimson, I will make them white as snow.'" Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:183.
23. "Who is he who is born of the Spirit, and is made Spirit, but he who is renewed in the Spirit of his mind? This certainly is he who is regenerated by water and the Holy Spirit, since we receive the hope of eternal life through the laver of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. And elsewhere the Apostle Peter says: 'Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' For who is he that is baptized with the Holy Spirit but he who is born again through water and the Holy Spirit? Therefore the Lord said of the Holy Spirit, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again by water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. And therefore He declared that we are born of Him in the latter case, through Whom He said that we were born in the former. This is the sentence of the Lord; I rest on what is written, not on argument." Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit* 3.10.64, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 10:144.
24. "And dipped himself," says [the Scripture], 'seven times in

- Jordan.' It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but [it served] as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions; being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: 'Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'" *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus* 34, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:574, brackets in original.
25. "That unless a man have been baptized and born again, he cannot attain unto the kingdom of God. In the Gospel according to John: 'Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. For that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' Also in the same place: 'Unless ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye shall not have life in you.'" *Treatises of Cyprian: Testimonies* 25, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:542.
  26. "And in the Gospel our Lord Jesus Christ spoke with His divine voice, saying, 'Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' This is the Spirit which from the beginning was borne over the waters; for neither can the Spirit operate without the water, nor the water without the Spirit. Certain people therefore interpret for themselves ill, when they say that by imposition of the hand they receive the Holy Ghost, and are thus received, when it is manifest that they ought to be born again in the Catholic Church by both sacraments. Then indeed they will be able to be sons of God, as says the apostle: 'Taking care to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, as ye have been called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.' All these things speaks the Catholic Church." The Seventh Council of Carthage under Cyprian, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:566. This is an interesting variation on the theme that baptism is essential for salvation. Here, instead of mentioning the remission of sins, regeneration, or salvation, as the other authors do, the council refers to the saints becoming "sons of God" through baptism.
  27. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 12, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:674–75.
  28. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 142–45. Ferguson here surveys the arguments about the meaning and legitimacy of John 3:5, ultimately concluding that "John 3:5 provides a combination of the ideas of baptism, sonship (new birth), and the presence of the Holy Spirit" (p. 145).
  29. Lars Hartman, "Baptism," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:590, 585.
  30. Hartman, "Baptism," 590.
  31. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 170.
  32. *Shepherd of Hermas*, commandment 4.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:22.
  33. "Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons. . . . This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing; washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly." Further, "we who are baptized, having wiped off the sins that obscure the light of the Divine Spirit, have the eye of the spirit free, unimpeded, and full of light, by which alone we contemplate the Divine, the Holy Spirit flowing down to us from above." Clement of Alexandria, *The Pegagogue* 1.6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:215, 216.
  34. "The second birth, which occurs in baptism, begets sons of God." *Epistle to Cyprian* 74.14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:393.
  35. "They ask that their reproach may be taken away—that is, that they may be cleansed from their sins: for the reproach is the original sin which is taken away in baptism, and they begin to be called Christian men." Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John* 1.16, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:346.
  36. "If any man receive not Baptism, he hath not salvation; except only Martyrs, who even without the water receive the kingdom." *Catechetical Lectures* 3.10, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, 7:16.
  37. Referencing John 3:5 and baptism: "What he declares is this: 'Thou sayest that it is impossible, I say that it is so absolutely possible as to be necessary, and that it is not even possible otherwise to be saved.'" *Homilies on St. John* 25, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 14:87.
  38. "In three ways then sins are remitted in the Church; by Baptism, by prayer, by the greater humility of penance; yet God doth not remit sins but to the baptized." Augustine, *Sermons to Catechumens on the Creed* 7:16, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 3:375. Further, "[According to] apostolic tradition, . . . the Churches of Christ hold inherently that without Baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal[.] This is the witness of Scripture too." Augustine, *Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1.24.34, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3, trans. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 91.
  39. Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water. . . . We indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement, but come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and trust in Jesus in our spirit." *Epistle of Barnabas* 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:144, brackets in original.
  40. *Tripartite Tractate* I,5, 127, 28–32, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Harold W. Attridge and Dieter Mueller (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 99.
  41. *Gospel of Philip* II,3, 73, 5–8, trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 153.
  42. See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 276–77.
  43. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 854.
  44. The Textus Receptus, which stems from Erasmus's 1516 Greek version of the New Testament (and ultimately from Theodore Beza's 1598 Greek New Testament), is considered by many to be an inferior text and underlies the King James Version quoted below.
  45. This is roughly the translation given by the King James Version of the text. As noted above, many scholars consider the text underlying the KJV to be inferior. However, owing to the fact that our general readership is most acquainted with the King James translation we felt it appropriate to use this translation. Translations which scholars hold to be more authoritative vary in the way in which they refer to "the dead" in its final occurrence in the verse. For example, The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which uses a standard scholarly Greek text and not the Textus Receptus of the King James Version, translates the passage thus: "Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?"
  46. Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 8 and 11 n. 14. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 766; and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "'Baptized for the Dead' (1 Cor 15:29): A Corinthian Slogan?" *Revue biblique* 88 (1981): 532.
  47. "The intens. βαπτίζω occurs in the sense of 'to immerse' (trans.) from the time of Hippocrates, in Plato and esp. in later writers. a. strictly, act." Albrecht Oepke, "βαπτίζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:530.

48. "1. Over, Beyond; . . . 2. on behalf of; . . . 3. In the Place of; . . . 4. With Reference to; . . . 5. On Account of. . . In all probability the word has the representative sense in Paul's saying about baptism for the dead. . . . None of the attempts to escape the theory of a vicarious baptism in primitive Christianity seems to be wholly successful. If one thus presupposes that there may be baptism 'for the dead,' this implies that the dead, probably relatives, were un-baptised at death. We thus have a kind of substitution even if, as one may suppose, the candidate was baptised for himself as well as with respect to someone who had died unbaptised." Harald Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 8:507–14, last quotation on 512–13.
49. "In the NT νεκρός is used as both noun and adj. As adj., in the sense 'dead,' it is used of men, as of Jesus Christ. . . . νεκρός (mostly as adj.) is also used fig." Rudolf Bultmann, "νεκρός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:893. Both νεκρῶν and νεκροί appear in 15:29. νεκρῶν is used in a genitive sense while νεκροί "are often the dead in the underworld of whom Christ is the πρωτότοκος" (4:893).
50. St. Bellarmine, *De Purgatorio*, c. 6, in *Disputationes*, vol. 2 (Naples, 1857), 366. Quoted by Bernard M. Foschini in "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," *1 Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: Hefferman, 1951), 7. Bellarmine cites authors who translate 15:29 in a similar way. Peter the Venerable (1092–1156) was born in France and was the abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Clunney. Bellarmine's remaining two references are not as clear. However, it seems that in speaking of Dionysius he is referring to Pope Dionysius, who presided over the church from 259 to 268. Additionally, in referring to Ephrem, it is most likely that he is speaking of Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), the venerated theologian of the Syriac Orthodox Church.
51. However, it is important to note that the commonality is not convincing for Catholic theologians. They see a precedent in praying for other living individuals, while they see no precedent in being baptized for another living individual. To them, this is a common-sense extension of a practical and condoned practice, while baptism finds no such precedence.
52. See Thomas J. Conant, *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein: Philologically and Historically Investigated for the American Bible Union* (New York: American Bible Union, 1868), 101.
53. Conant, *Meaning and Use of Baptizein*, 99–100.
54. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 97. Importantly, 1 Corinthians 10:2 and 12:13 appear to have a metaphorical meaning. However, Michael Hull and John D. Reaume affirm that the only way that these uses can be read is in a literal sense.
55. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 97.
56. While this analysis essentially refutes any reading which rests upon a metaphorical reading of *baptizō*, it will be beneficial to include another interpretation. We do this merely to portray the ingenuity which has gone into avoiding a vicarious baptism reading. According to the interpretation of this verse, βαπτίζω may refer to the martyrdom of the faithful Christians of Corinth under persecutions. In this way an appeal is made to a metaphorical reading to indicate a baptism of blood. Importantly though, our refutation of Bellarmine's thesis is sufficient to address all variant readings that rely on a metaphorical reading of βαπτίζω, for any such readings cannot come into proper conformity with Pauline literature as a whole.
57. As we will demonstrate, many scholars give an analysis to 15:29 which causes it to read as ordinary baptism.
58. John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptized for the Dead,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 467. The term *crux interpretum* is Latin for "crossroads of the interpreters." The term is used in biblical scholarship for a passage which is high unto impossible to arrive at a consensus as to its proper translation and meaning.
59. Maria Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in I Kor. 15:29?" *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 (1956): 256–60, as quoted by Reaume, in "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 462.
60. In regards to the final sense Riesenfeld has said that "with various verbs and expressions ὑπὲρ is used with the gen. of an abstract noun in a final sense: 'with reference to,' 'as concerns,' . . . 'for the sake of,' 'for.'" Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:513.
61. White gives this additional remark in his footnotes: "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." Joel R. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead: The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116/3 (1997): 492 n. 29.
62. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead," 492.
63. According to Riesenfeld, "Causally ὑπὲρ is used to denote the cause or reason: 'on account of,' 'because of.' In the NT it occurs with verbs and expressions of suffering, the reference being to Christians who endure hardships because of their faith." Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:514. The causal reading gives the reason why individuals initially entered into the practice.
64. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead," 494.
65. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 47.
66. Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:508.
67. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 31.
68. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 98–101.
69. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 93.
70. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 93.
71. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 93.
72. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 98.
73. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 466.
74. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 466 n. 46.
75. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 44. Furthermore, Foschini's translation also assumed that the sole purpose of baptism has to do with the afterlife. But Paul also understands baptism as producing great benefits during one's mortal life. We live for Christ, whether it is in this mortal life or in the hereafter. We do not have to wait for death to become new through baptism.
76. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 5.
77. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 230. Importantly, Hull goes on to claim that when the historical context is taken into consideration, 15:29 becomes a "reference to ordinary baptism, albeit an extraordinary one" (p. 230).
78. David W. Kuck, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*, by Michael F. Hull, *Religious Studies Review* 33/1 (2007): 69.
79. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 457.
80. William F. Orr and James A. Walther, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 337.
81. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 218.
82. Arthur Carr, "Baptism for the Dead" (1 Corinthians XV. 19 [sic]), *Expositor* 9 (1901): 371–78.
83. Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 661–82, 673. However, it is important to point out, that if DeMaris is referring to the fact that the practice at Corinth was an anomaly, and so was not widespread during that time period, then we agree with him. There is nothing that resembles such a practice in the mid-first century.
84. See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004), 146–65. In Gennep's chapter on funeral



- rites, he sets forth many rites which the living must perform on behalf of the dead in order to aid them in their postmortal journey. He cites from a host of non-Judeo-Christian sources.
85. H. V. Martin, "Baptism for the Dead," *Expository Times* 54 (1942–43): 192–93.
  86. Fernard Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul*, vol. 1, trans. John L. Stoddard (Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1927), 137. Prat explains that "there was danger of believing that in having themselves baptized for the dead—that is to say, for their advantage—they had had themselves baptized in the place of the dead, so as to procure for them the effects of baptism; as if death were not the terminus of the test, and as if the dead could be aided otherwise than by means of prayer" (p. 137). Prat in this passage gives voice to an important point, that in the "orthodox" tradition, there is no precedence of baptisms being performed on behalf of the dead. Furthermore, the concept of baptisms for the dead is not as easily translatable as prayers for the dead (since we are capable of praying for another who is living, and we are not able to be baptized for another that is living). However, such a defense is based upon the precedence of the "orthodox" tradition. Those who have rightly or wrongly been branded as heretics in later centuries, do indeed have a precedence of such a practice, and in light of the full viability of reading 15:29 as vicarious baptism, their practice does have possible scriptural support.
  87. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 48, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:581.
  88. *Against Marcion* has been tentatively dated to AD 207–208, and certainly after *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, due to the fact that the latter work is referenced by Tertullian in *Against Marcion*. See further Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55.
  89. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.10, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:449–50.
  90. Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37–38.
  91. The Februarian lustrations was a Roman celebration where the dead would be provided and prayed for, to benefit them beyond the grave.
  92. Ambrosiaster is the name given to an unknown author of a commentary on the epistles of Paul. For many years scholars supposed that this author was the Orthodox theologian St. Ambrose. After extensive textual studies, modern studies conclude that this writer is likely someone else. However, given the history of referring to the author of these commentaries as "Ambrose," scholars now prefer to term the Christian writer as "Ambrosiaster" to distinguish him as the once supposed "Ambrose" and author of the Pauline commentaries.
  93. Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 81.175; see Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 166.
  94. The term *apocryphal* generally refers to the early Christian writings that are of questionable authorship or were left out of the New Testament canon for one reason or another. The term itself means "hidden" or "secret" writings, though modern scholarship generally uses the term for noncanonical Christian writings.
  95. Forty-day literature here is meant to include all writings where the resurrected Lord appears after his crucifixion and provides instruction to certain select people.
  96. Hartman, "Baptism," while commenting on Galatians 3:26–27, mentions that for Paul, "there is no tension or contradiction to be seen between the two (faith and baptism). . . . One may say that faith is the subjective side of the receiving of the gift of salvation, baptism the objective side" (p. 587).
  97. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 37.
  98. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 654–68, 730–34.
  99. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 56–77.
  100. Ernest Best, *1 Peter* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 156.
  101. Best, *1 Peter*, 156–57, references 1 Peter 1:3; 3:10; 4:5, 18; and 5:8 as evidence.
  102. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 733–34.
  103. Hartman, "Baptism," 591, explains: "Although baptism is mentioned only once in 1 Peter, it plays an important role as a basic presupposition for the presentation in the epistle. In fact, it is so important that scholars have suggested that it represents (parts of) a baptismal liturgy or a baptismal homily. Even though such a supposition may go somewhat too far, there is a wide consensus that 1 Peter makes substantial use of ideas associated with baptism."
  104. Not to be confused with the gnostic work of the same name. This text dates roughly between AD 100–150; it is first mentioned by Clement of Alexandria in AD 180. This apocryphal work was considered scripture by Clement but was likely composed in Egypt by an unknown author.
  105. *Apocalypse of Peter* 14, translation from the Greek Rainer Fragment, by Dennis D. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 344–45.
  106. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, 348.
  107. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, 348.
  108. Montague R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament: Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 524.
  109. *Odes of Solomon* 42:20; see further Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 62–65.
  110. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Continuum, 2008), 207. Kelly remarks how the rites of Chrismation became increasingly important and were used more and more in conjunction with baptism at the beginning of the third century—although the rite itself existed much earlier. In Chrismation, the initiate is anointed with sacred oil, known as chrism, while a priest speaks certain words and performs the sign of the cross. The words repeated indicate that the initiate will have sealed upon him the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is often, though not always, performed with the rite of baptism. It is still practiced today in orthodox churches, particularly of the East.
  111. See Revelation 1:18; Christ has the "keys of hell and of death."
  112. Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 62–66.
  113. Note *Odes of Solomon* 42:11, 14, 17–20, in which Christ descends to Sheol and creates a "congregation of living (people) . . . and (I, Christ) placed My name upon their head. Because they are free, and they are mine." Though the odes are mainly hymns and poetic in nature, they purport to be the revelations and teachings of the risen Lord to the odist, hence the conversational nature.
  114. Taken from *Epistle of the Apostles*, in Montague R. James, trans., *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 494, parenthetical explanations provided by the translator.
  115. John D. Turner notes, "The *Secret Book of John* contains what purport to be secret teachings revealed by Christ in a postresurrection appearance to the apostle John the son of Zebedee." Turner, introduction to the text, in *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 104.
  116. The divine Forethought that descends into darkness in the

- extended ending of the *Apocryphon of John* is generally understood to refer to Jesus. The corresponding footnote by Meyer in *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 131 n. 138, reads that the “hymn of heavenly Forethought, the divine Mother,” depicts her “as Savior.” However, “in the present Christianized version of the *Secret Book of John* readers may understand the Savior to be Jesus.”
117. Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, I; III, I; and IV, 1 With BG 8502, 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 171. The translation appears thus: “I entered into the midst of darkness and the inside of Hades. . . . And I entered into the midst of their prison which is the prison <of> the body. And I said, ‘He who hears, let him get up from the deep sleep.’” Note the translators rendering the Coptic word for “underworld” as “Hades,” signifying this is indeed the resting place of the dead.
  118. Selections from *Apocryphon of John—Hymn of the Savior* 30,11–31,25, in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 131–32. Further, Meyer explains that the phrase to “arise from deep sleep” is in fact, “the call to awaken” that “addresses a prototypical sleeper—any person who may awaken to knowledge and salvation.” In other words, Christ’s descent is a call to those who are residing in the underworld to receive knowledge (*gnosis*) and ultimately salvation—posthumous salvation.
  119. Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 132: In some sense, the person, after receiving the Savior and the “Five Seals,” receives new life and awakens from “deep sleep,” or receives salvation.
  120. Turner, introduction to the text, in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 106. He notes, “Several Sethian treatises present this final act of deliverance as a baptismal rite (the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, *Three Forms of First Thought*, *Melchizedek*, the *Revelation of Adam*, *Zostrianos*, and perhaps *Marsanes*), usually called the Five Seals (*Three Forms of First Thought*; the longer versions of the *Secret Book of John*; the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*; and the untitled text of the Bruce Codex).”
  121. Alastair H. B. Logan, “The Mystery of the Five Seals: Gnostic Initiation Reconsidered,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51/2 (1997): 188. This article investigates the Five Seals in numerous texts.
  122. This is the contention of Yvonne Janssens in the translation/commentary of the text, contained in *La Prōtennoia Trimorphe* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1978), 2–5.
  123. Charles W. Hedrick, ed., *Trimorphic Protēnoia* 48,5–35, in *Nag Hammadi Codices* XI, XII, XIII (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 429.
  124. Logan, “Mystery of the Five Seals,” 188.
  125. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9–46; this chapter examines the mythic ascent of Enoch in Enochic literature, his investment with priestly garments, and his ultimate transfiguration. The entire book focuses on such ascents, where ritualistic notions are accompanied by transcendent visions into heaven.
  126. *Nag Hammadi Codices* XI, XII, XIII, 379.
  127. *Nag Hammadi Codices* XI, XII, XIII, 379.
  128. *Nag Hammadi Codices* XI, XII, XIII, 379.
  129. “The Secret Book of John—On Human Destiny,” 25,16–30,11, in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 129.
  130. Some scholars have interpreted this verse as an indication that the souls of these men will have some form of reincarnation. Although this is true in one sense, those who are “saved” through “another soul in whom life dwells” will no longer receive this reincarnation. Trumbower, in his work *Rescue for the Dead*, 111–12, mentions that these verses (and some preceding it) speak of a “reincarnation for some souls.” He cites as a source Michael A. Williams, who likewise claims this verse is speaking of reincarnation. Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 197. Once John poses the question concerning reentering the womb, a new group (of saved-souls) is meant. The Lord responds: “This soul will be made to follow another soul in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one. Then *she will not be thrust into flesh again*.” Thus, reincarnation may only apply to those spirits who are not saved, according to the gnostic text.
  131. The text is roughly dated to AD 250–300 and penned by a gnostic Christian. It is also likely that each of the four books that comprise the *Pistis Sophia* were composed by different people, given the textual variance found in the different texts.
  132. Carl Schmidt, ed., Violet Macdermot, trans., *Pistis Sophia—Book III*, 128 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 322–23.
  133. Schmidt and Macdermot, *Pistis Sophia—Book III*, 128, 323–24.
  134. *Similitude* 9:16, 2–4, in Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 232, brackets in original.
  135. Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 238.
  136. *Similitude* 9:16, 5–7, in Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 232–33.
  137. Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 238.
  138. The *Gospel of Thomas* records in the prologue, “These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded.” Likewise, the *Apocryphon of John* expresses a similar sentiment in its opening lines: “the teaching of the Savior, and [the revelation] of the mysteries [and the things] *hidden in silence*, things he taught his disciple John.” Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 139, 107. These sayings were considered highly sacred, and as such were likely not widely circulated in the ancient world. The teachings contained therein would have been known only by a select few.
  139. See John 21:25: “There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.” It is interesting that the apostle John, in composing his own Gospel, notes the scant amount of information provided concerning the historical Jesus.
  140. Hugh Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 103–5. Nibley points out the peculiar dearth of information provided by the apostles for some of the most important of teachings, such as the “keys of the kingdom,” which, as he explains, likely refers to salvation for the dead.
  141. Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead,” 103–9. On page 102, Nibley points to an important discussion allegedly between Clement and Peter as initial evidence. Clement poses the question, “If the righteous ones whom he finds will participate and delight in the kingdom of Christ, then those who have died beforehand have missed out on his kingdom (referring to those who die before the advent of Christ).” In response, Peter assures him that such a scandal could not occur and that salvation has been made available to them. He also reminds Clement: these are “hidden matters, Clement. It is not irksome for me to tell you, as far as I am permitted to reveal.” *Clementine Recognitions* 1.52, in F. Stanley Jones, *An Ancient Jewish Christian Source on the History of Christianity: Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.27–71* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 84. It is not clear why these doctrines would require such secrecy. A number of authors such as Nibley include this teaching as an esoteric doctrine of Christianity, one that was principally carried on by word rather than through scripture and one that was preserved only for the most righteous of Saints. It seems quite clear that traditions like this did exist in the early church, and the possibility that proxy

- baptism was included among this category is quite plausible.
142. Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 2005), 45–46. Hall lists Valentinus and Basilides as other leaders of heretical sects that spread widely and were the targets of both Eastern and Western criticism of their doctrines.
  143. Epiphanius, *Panarion: Against Marcionites* 22, in Frank Williams, trans., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamaia* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 294.
  144. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* 40, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 12:244.
  145. Didymus, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*; see Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 166.
  146. Justin of Rome, an apologist for the proto-orthodox church, would recount of Marcion in the second century that he, “by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies.” *First Apology* 1.26, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:171.
  147. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.
  148. Epiphanius, *Panarion: Against Cerinthians* 6,4–5, in Williams, *Panarion of Epiphanius*, 120 n. 137.
  149. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 12–13.
  150. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 166.
  151. Authors’ translation based on François Sagnard, trans., *Clément D’Alexandrie: Extraits de Théodote* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1970), 103.
  152. It must be kept in mind that in the earliest centuries, there was no great division between gnostic Christians and so-called orthodox believers. Ehrman relates, “One of the striking features of Christian Gnosticism is that it appears to have operated principally from *within* existing Christian churches, that Gnostics considered themselves to be the spiritually elite of these churches, who could confess the creeds of other Christians, read the Scriptures of other Christians, partake of baptism and Eucharist with other Christians, but who believed that they had a deeper, more spiritual, secret understanding of these creeds, Scriptures, and sacraments. . . . Gnostics were not ‘out there’ forming their own communities. The Gnostics were ‘in here,’ with us, in our midst. And you couldn’t tell one simply by looking.” Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 126.
  153. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 176.
  154. The Mandaean, a non-Christian group, also practiced baptisms for the dead. The Mandaeans trace their religious history back to the followers of John the Baptist and are strict proponents of religious ritualism and ceremonial cleanliness. They practice not only baptism for the dead, but other saving rites for the deceased. Once a year, at *Panja*, these saving rites, “called the *hava d̄ mani*, . . . are performed upon a proxy, who in status, sex, personality, and age closely resembles the dead person.” Ethel S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2002), 214. In the ritual, “the proxy descends into the water, and repeats voicelessly, ‘I, N. son of N. (the name of the dead person) am baptized with the baptism of Bahram the Great, son of the mighty [ones]. My baptism shall protect me and cause me to ascend to the summit.’ He submerges thrice, and on emerging puts on a completely new *rasta*” (pp. 215–16). It should be noted that their concepts of the effect of such rituals is different than Christians would normally infer. Rather than admitting them solely into the heaven, these rituals are aids in the cosmic venture of the dead across the universe.