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Baptized for the Dead

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BAPTIZED FOR THE DEAD

Kevin L. Barney

Abstract: *This thorough treatment of the mention of baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29 gives a meticulous analysis of Paul's Greek argument, and lays out the dozens (or perhaps hundreds) of theories that have been put forth with respect to its interpretation. Barney concludes that "the most natural reading" and the "majority contemporary scholarly reading" is that of "vicarious baptism." Therefore, "the Prophet Joseph Smith's reading of the passage to refer to such a practice was indeed correct."*

[**Editor's Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.]

See Kevin L. Barney, "Baptized for the Dead," in *"To Seek the Law of the Lord": Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 9–58. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

I have long admired John W. Welch (Jack) as both a person and a scholar. I first encountered Jack only obliquely through his work in a Book of Mormon class my freshman year at Brigham Young University (BYU). Darwin L. Thomas, then a professor of sociology, devoted a class period to the phenomenon of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon (I would only later learn to associate that work with Jack).¹ As fate would have it,

1 John W. Welch, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: 40 Years Later," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 74–87, traces the history of

I would end up following a somewhat similar path to the educational trail Jack blazed: influenced by Hugh Nibley as a missionary, majoring in classics post-mission at BYU, followed by legal studies (albeit Jack became an actual academic and I went into private practice and became only a frustrated one). Shortly after Jack organized the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in 1979, I took the liberty of writing him a letter expressing my interest in and enthusiasm for the endeavor and suggesting a couple of projects I thought might fit under its umbrella.² He promptly wrote me back a very warm and encouraging letter, including some practical suggestions for approaching the topics I had identified. Eventually I would have the privilege of publishing reviews of some of his work.³ His talent for conceptualizing and organizing large scholarly projects is simply unmatched. I am very pleased to be able to contribute this small offering to the Festschrift in his honor.

Introduction

The Prophet Joseph Smith's first public affirmation of the practice of vicarious baptism for the dead was made during a funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson in August 1840 in response to a widow whose son had died without baptism. This led to an actual practice of such vicarious baptisms, initially in the Mississippi River near Nauvoo, Illinois, which was procedurally modified over time by subsequent revelations.⁴

The scriptural inspiration for this modern practice of vicarious baptism was undoubtedly 1 Corinthians 15:29. Early Christians who actually engaged in such a practice were deemed heretical, however, and

Jack's work with this phenomenon. I wrote a blog summary of this article, Kevin Barney, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the BoM," May 17, 2008, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2008/05/17/the-discovery-of-chiasmus-in-the-bom/>.

2 One of the projects I later reconceptualized and published as "The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 3 (1987): 85–102. The other project I eventually published as "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 15–81. For a report of my letter, see *Insights, FARMS Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (November 1981): 4.

3 Kevin L. Barney, "The Foundation of Our Religion," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 2 (2006): 179–87; reviewing John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), and Kevin L. Barney, "A Book of Mormon Casebook," *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 53–62, reviewing John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008).

4 H. David Burton, "Baptism for the Dead: LDS Practice," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 1:95.

there has been strenuous theological resistance to any such practice from that time to today. In this article I shall explore why the Prophet Joseph's reading of that passage as referring to a practice of vicarious baptism is indeed the contemporary majority scholarly view.⁵ I shall set the stage by analyzing the structure of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15; I shall then closely analyze the Greek text of verse 29 and follow with a lexical analysis of the three key words in the expression "baptized for the dead." After I shall examine why there is resistance to that reading, and then provide a summary (of at least some) of the many alternative theories that have been proposed, showing how none of them is superior to the vicarious baptism reading.⁶

The Structure of Paul's Argument

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives a sustained argument in response to reports he had heard that some in Corinth were denying the resurrection. In approaching verse 29, it is important to appreciate its placement within Paul's larger argument. Paul does not intend to make a particular point about baptism for the dead itself; rather, he means to laud those Corinthians engaging in the practice for the belief such a practice necessarily entails in the resurrection of the dead, and to highlight such belief as a model for the faction of the Corinthian church that had rejected the resurrection. This is part of a larger logical inconsistency attack on the position of those Corinthians who deny the resurrection. The focus of Paul's argument throughout the entire chapter is on the resurrection of the dead, both of Christ himself and of others more generally.

An outline of the argument might look something like this (all verse numbers are in 1 Corinthians 15):

- I. 1–11: Summary of Christ's resurrection and post-resurrection appearances.

5 "Once the theological pressures from later possible developments of practice and doctrine are felt less constricting, the text seems to speak plainly enough about a practice within the Church of vicarious baptism for the dead. This is the view of most contemporary critical exegetes." Krister Stendahl, "Baptism for the Dead: Ancient Sources," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:97. That the vicarious baptism view of the verse is the majority understanding is also demonstrated by the English translational tradition. See Appendix B — Survey of Translations.

6 My focus in this article will be strictly on the linguistics of the verse. For a Mormon perspective on the relevant theology and history, see David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 2 (2010): 22–49.

- II. 12–34: Logical Inconsistency of Denying the Resurrection.
 - A. 12–19: If Christ is not raised, our preaching and your faith are in vain.
 - B. 20–28: But in fact Christ has been raised; order of the resurrection given.
 - C. 29–34: Further Implications.
 - 1. 29: Baptism for the dead.
 - 2. 30–34: Why would Paul risk life and limb?
- III. 35–57: The Resurrection Body.
 - A. 35–44: The reasonableness of the resurrection body.
 - B. 45–49: Comparison and contrast of Christ with Adam.
 - C. 50–57: Necessity of the resurrection body and the destruction of death.
- IV. 58: Be unshaken by false teaching.

The Greek Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29

Epei ti poiēsousin hoi baptizomenoi huper tōn nekrōn; ei holōs nekroi ouk egeirontai, ti kai baptizontai huper autōn;

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead? (KJV)

In approaching the Greek text of the verse, I must begin with two technical issues. First, note that the end of the verse in the KJV presupposes the reading *tōn nekrōn* “the dead.” This is clearly a late form of text; the original reading should be the pronoun *autōn* “their, of them.”⁷ This variation does not in any way affect the meaning of the passage, as the antecedent to the pronoun is indeed *tōn nekrōn* “the dead” from earlier in the verse.

Second, there is some question as to how the verse should best be punctuated. Clearly there should be a question mark at the end (represented in Greek texts with the ; symbol). The KJV has a minor

⁷ See Eberhard and Erwin Nestle, Barbara and Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini and Bruce M. Metzger, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979), 468 at apparatus note for v. 29.

break, represented by a comma, after the first “baptized for the dead,” and a question mark after “if the dead rise not at all.” In this it is following Martin Luther. But virtually all other Greek editions and modern translations reverse that punctuation, putting the question mark after the first “baptized for the dead” and a minor break after “if the dead rise not at all.”⁸ Although the variant punctuation does not appreciably change the meaning of the text, I believe the question mark should indeed come first and the minor break second, with the vast majority of editions. If one were to revise the KJV text to reflect these two technical issues, it would look like this:

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

The verse begins with the conjunction *epei*, which in Greek can be construed either temporally or causally, much like *since* in English. When used causally and followed by a question, as here, as a matter of idiom the word needs to be rendered something like *otherwise*, *else*, or *for then*, as the KJV correctly takes it. Thus, the opening word of the verse connects this passage logically with the preceding argument in favor of a resurrection of the dead; one might paraphrase the impact of the word with something like this: “If it were the case that, contrary to my argument, there really were no resurrection, how would you explain the following?”⁹ This shows that the verse is very much a part of Paul’s argument based on some of the logical ramifications that would result if in fact there were no resurrection.

The next word, *ti*, is the neuter of the interrogative pronoun *tis*, used here to introduce an interrogative sentence in the form of a rhetorical question, and appropriately rendered in the KJV with English *what*.

Then follows the main verb of the question, *poiēsousin*, which is the third person plural future active indicative form of the verb *poieō*, the most basic meaning of which is *to do* or *to make*. The precise connotation of the verb here is somewhat obscure, and most translations simply render it with its most basic meaning, *to do*, much like the KJV. The Revised

8 Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 614 at punctuation apparatus note for v. 29. The punctuation apparatus is explained in the Introduction at pages xli–xlv.

9 The New International Version (NIV) makes this explicit by rendering the beginning of the verse “Now if there is no resurrection...”

Standard Version (RSV), the New Testament of which was published in 1946, renders “what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead?”; *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* paraphrases with “What must be thought of the conduct of those who receive baptism [for the dead]? Will they not seem to act foolishly?”¹⁰; and the New English Bible (NEB) begins the verse with “Again, there are those who receive baptism on behalf of the dead. Why should they do this?” It is perhaps only by such an extreme paraphrase that one can begin to approach the work the verb was meant to do here.

The subject of the verb is *hoi baptizomenoi*, which is the plural masculine present passive participle of the verb *baptizō* with the definite article, and literally means *the ones-being-baptized*, although this is typically smoothed out in English with something like “those who are baptized” or “those who receive baptism.” This is followed by the preposition *huper*, rendered “for” in the KJV, and which governs an articular plural noun (or, more accurately, an adjective being used substantively as a noun) in the genitive, *tōn nekron*, meaning “the dead.” (I shall discuss the meaning of the three key terms *baptized*, *for*, and *the dead* in more detail below.) This constitutes the initial question of the verse.

The next (rhetorical) question is introduced by the conditional particle *ei*, meaning *if*. This introduces a first class conditional sentence, in which the premise (the protasis) will be assumed to be true for the sake of argument. The verb of the protasis is *egeirontai*, which is the third person plural present indicative (the mood required of the protasis in a first class condition) passive of the verb *egeirō*, meaning *to rise*, preceded here by the negative *ouk*. The verb here has the connotation “to arouse from the sleep of death; to recall the dead to life.” The subject of the verb is *nekroi* “(the) dead,” this time without the definite article explicitly present (this noun in the plural without the article can have the connotation “all the dead”). The adverb *holōs* means “wholly, altogether,” but with a negative as here it means “at all.” The apodosis begins with the interrogative *ti* immediately followed by the conjunction *kai*, which here points to the significance of the question: “why then. . . ?” The verb is repeated here in the third person plural present passive indicative, *baptizontai* (with the subject of the verb still being *the ones-being-baptized*) followed by *huper autōn* “for them.” The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), widely regarded as the scholarly standard, thus renders the passage as follows:

10 *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* is embedded in the Blue Letter Bible. See <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongsg=G4160&t=KJV>

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?

The Three Key Words

Any attempt to read 1 Corinthians 15:29 in some way other than as a reference to vicarious baptism will likely do so by seeking to metaphorize or otherwise avoid the straightforward meaning of one or more of the three key words in the expression “baptized for the dead”: the verb *baptizō*, the preposition *huper* + genitive, and the substantive (adjective used as a noun) *nekros*. In this section I shall examine the lexis of each of these three words, first by reviewing the original usage of these words in classical Greek, and then by outlining the way these words were used in the Koine Greek in which the New Testament itself was written.¹¹

Lexis of the Verb *baptizō*

In classical Greek, the basic meaning of the verb *baptizō* was “to dip, plunge,” often used with respect to sinking or disabling ships. Used of persons, it conveyed the sense of becoming drenched. A number of metaphorical uses developed from this basic meaning, such as speaking of crowds flooding into a city, becoming “soaked” in wine, getting over one’s head and ears in debt, or one getting into “deep water.”¹²

Moving forward in time to the religious use of Hellenistic or Koine Greek (the “common” or simplified form of Greek that grew out of the conquests of Alexander the Great and in which the texts of the New Testament were written), this secular use of the word is no longer found. Rather, the word is only used in a religious or ceremonial sense, with the following uses attested:

11 In this article I shall use the expression “secure Pauline corpus” to refer to the books of 1 Thessalonians, Philipians, Philemon, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans. It is not my intention in doing this to make any implicit comment on the authenticity of the authorship of the other letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament. Rather, my intention is simply to avoid the complications of the authorship question when evaluating Paul’s own usage with respect to this vocabulary.

12 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) (hereafter Liddell and Scott), s.v. “baptize,” online as part of the Perseus classical library at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dbapti%2Fzw>

1. “Wash ceremonially for purpose of purification, wash, purify,” used of a broad range of repeated ritual washing rooted in Israelite tradition.
2. “To use water in a rite for purpose of renewing or establishing a relationship with God, plunge, dip, wash, baptize.”
 - a. of dedicatory cleansing associated with the ministry of John the Baptist
 - b. of cleansing performed by Jesus himself
 - c. of the Christian sacrament of initiation after Jesus’ death
3. “To cause someone to have an extraordinary experience akin to an initiatory water-rite, to plunge, baptize.”
 - a. typologically of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea
 - b. of the Holy Spirit, i.e., with fire
 - c. of martyrdom¹³

Lexis of the Preposition *huper* + Genitive

In classical Greek, the most basic meaning of the preposition *huper* + genitive was the locative one, “over.” In a state of rest the sense was “above,” and in a state of motion the sense was “across” or sometimes “beyond.” This gave rise to metaphorical uses, such as “in defense of, on behalf of,” “for the prosperity or safety of,” “in the interest of,” “instead of,” or “in the name of.” Other attested uses include “for the purpose of” and “concerning.”¹⁴

Moving forward in time to religious Hellenistic Greek, the basic locative use for “over, above” is no longer found; the word is rather used in metaphorical or nonliteral senses ultimately derived from that basic root meaning. The word appears about 450 times in the Septuagint, with a little over half governing the accusative case; in the New Testament the word appears about 160 times, with the vast majority (about 135 times) governing the genitive case, as in our passage. The preposition *huper* is sometimes used simply as a stylistic variation and thus with the same

13 Frederick William Danker, reviser and editor, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 164–65 (hereafter BDAG). This book is the most recent and most authoritative lexicon of New Testament Greek. The abbreviation BDAG refers to the authors and editors of the work over time: Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich.

14 See Liddell and Scott, s.v. “*huper*” at [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Du\(pe%2Fr](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Du(pe%2Fr)

meanings as the prepositions *peri* (about, concerning) or *anti* (in place of, instead of, in substitution for). Paul uses *huper* far more than any other New Testament author.

BDAG organizes the attested usage of *huper* governing the genitive in the New Testament into the following uses:

1. A marker indicating that an activity or event is in some entity's interest, *for, in behalf of, for the sake of someone/something*.
 - a. With a genitive of the person or a human collective: after words that express a request, prayer, etc.
 - i. after words and expressions that denote working, caring, concerning oneself about someone/something
 - ii. after expressions having to do with sacrifice
 - iii. generally *einai huper tinos* to be for someone, to be on someone's side
 - iv. after expressions of suffering, dying, devoting oneself, etc. So especially of the death of Christ: *for, in behalf of* humanity/the world
 - b. With a genitive of the thing, in which case it must be variously translated, such as "in order to atone for the sins of the world," "in order to show that God's promises are true," "for the strengthening of your faith."
 - c. *In place of, instead of, in the name of*. Papyri often have *huper autou* to explain that the writer is writing "as the representative of" an illiterate person. Sometimes the meaning *in place of* merges with *on behalf of, for the sake of* (BDAG places 1 Corinthians 15:29 here, although noting that the matter is debated).
2. Marker of the moving cause or reason, *because of, for the sake of, for*, such as with verbs of suffering, giving the reason for it.
3. Marker of general content, whether of a discourse or mental activity, *about, concerning* (about equivalent to *peri* [*tinis*]).¹⁵

Lexis of the Substantive *nekros*

In classical Greek, the root meaning of *nekros* (as a substantive derived from the adjective) is "a corpse," from which it came also to mean "a dying person." In the plural, it meant "the dead, dwellers in the nether

¹⁵ BDAG, 1030–31.

world,” as in the 10th book of Homer’s *Odyssey*. As an adjective the word means “dead, inanimate, inorganic.”¹⁶

BDAG suggests the following uses of the word in the New Testament and related literature:

A. As an adjective:

1. pertaining to being in a state of loss of life, *dead*, of persons
2. pertaining to being so morally or spiritually deficient as to be in effect dead, *dead* (as a figurative extension of A.1 above)
 - i. of persons
 - ii. of things
3. pertaining to having never been alive and lacking capacity for life, *dead*, *lifeless*

B. As a substantive:

1. one who is no longer physically alive, *dead person*, *a dead body*, *a corpse*
2. one who is so spiritually obtuse as to be in effect dead, *dead person* (a figurative extension of 1 above)¹⁷

Resistance to the Majority View

Paul uses the practice of vicarious baptism in neutral terms to make a point about the resurrection of the dead, which is his particular interest in this chapter. He neither explicitly recommends the practice nor condemns it; he simply *uses* it to make his point. Therefore, many scholars who also happen to be Christian believers have no problem reading this verse as an allusion to the practice of vicarious baptism; nor, in my view, should they. For instance, the New English Translation, a production of the Dallas Theological Seminary, gives the following note on the expression “baptized for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:29:

The most likely interpretation is that some Corinthians had undergone baptism to bear witness to the faith of fellow believers who had died without experiencing that rite themselves. Paul’s reference to the practice here is neither a

¹⁶ See Liddell and Scott, s.v. “*nekros*,” at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dnekro%2F68>

¹⁷ BDAG, 667–68.

recommendation nor a condemnation. He simply uses it as evidence from the lives of the Corinthians themselves to bolster his larger argument, begun in 15:12, that resurrection from the dead is a present reality in Christ and a future reality for them. Whatever they may have proclaimed, the Corinthians' actions demonstrated that they had hope for a bodily resurrection.¹⁸

This is, I believe, a proper approach to the passage. The vicarious baptism interpretation is the majority reading among critical scholars today.

There remains, however, a significant minority of Christian scholars who reject the straightforward reading of this passage. One of the rationales for this rejection is the sparse attestation of the practice in the New Testament — this one verse alone — and the lack of any contemporary historical evidence for the practice in New Testament times. (Query, however, what kind of historical evidence one might reasonably expect [beyond Paul's letters] if the practice were largely limited to Corinth in the mid-first century AD.) The more pressing concern seems to be a refusal to believe that Paul could have or would have written of such a practice without at the same time affirmatively condemning it.¹⁹

Consequently, numerous (sometimes very strained) attempts at reading the passage in some way, *any* way other than as a reference to vicarious baptism have been made over time. Below I shall survey the most common exegetical attempts at variant understandings of 1 Corinthians 15:29. My principal sources for these alternate attempts will be two books derived from dissertations concluded 55 years apart (1948 and 2003). First, the seminal treatment of Bernard M. Foschini, "*Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead*" *I Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation*,²⁰ and second the most recent extensive survey of the issue,

18 See note 17 to 1 Cor. 15:29 in the NET Bible at <https://bible.org/netbible/index.htm>

19 See, for instance, John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptized for the Dead,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October–December 1995): 457–75 at note 4. Of course, this is a dangerous view to press, because the implication of this point of view would seem to be that if the verse really means what it appears to say, then Paul of necessity was affirmatively endorsing the practice.

20 Bernard M. Foschini, "*Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead*" *I Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: The Heffernan Press, 1951) (hereafter Foschini); Foschini's work had previously appeared in two other forms: "'Those Who

Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*.²¹ I will also add some historical theories missed by Foschini from J. W. Horsley, “Baptism for the Dead,”²² and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*.²³

How Many Theories Are There?

Realistically, it is impossible to come up with a single, definitive number of how many different theories there are with respect to “baptism for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:29. There are several reasons for this. First, many of the theories were proposed hundreds of years ago in various parts of the world and in different languages in sources that are often difficult to recover today. Even Foschini often had to resort to secondary descriptions of a particular theory, being unable to locate the original source. Second, people may well take different views on what constitutes a theory worthy of inclusion in any such attempted catalog. For instance, I quote below two theories from Horsley’s catalog that struck me as so bereft of argument that they did not even deserve to be listed in the catalog I have assembled here:

(25) Baptism that Death May Be Abolished. “This is an interpretation mentioned by Heinsius, but how it can be extracted from the Greek neither he nor we can see.”

(37) Rather die than deny their hope by baptism received. “This is the view of P. Colomesius, but

Are Baptized for the Dead’ 1 Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation” (S.T.D. diss., Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 1948), and a series of five articles under the same title in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12 (1950): 260–76, 379–88 and 13 (1951): 46–78, 172–98, 276–83. Citations in this article are to the book form of this material. Foschini 55–58 gives a (negative) review of the Mormon concept of baptism for the dead, seeing it as a variant of vicarious baptism, but since his argument here is entirely theological as opposed to linguistic, responding to it is beyond the scope of this paper. Hull 2–3 takes a more modern and ecumenical approach to the Mormon practice.

21 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) (hereafter Hull).

22 *The Newbery House Magazine* II, No. 1 (January 1890): 15–21 and II, No. 4 (June 1890): 396–403 (hereafter Horsley). An online scan of this source from Princeton University is available at <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000053566> and clicking the first link.

23 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1242–49 (hereafter Thiselton).

how he makes it accord with the Greek, or the argument, *non liquet* [it is not clear].”²⁴

Third, different people will group or distinguish various theories in different ways. For instance, Horsley counts as four separate theories (1) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ, (2) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ and John the Baptist, (3) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ and the apostles, and (4) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ and all those who have died in him. Foschini for his part groups these into two theories only: (1) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ and (2) those who are baptized in the name of the dead Christ and others. Horsley, in his conclusion, wonders out loud whether perhaps these four theories shouldn’t all be grouped together as a single theory. So does this constitute four theories, two theories, or one theory? Many of the theories set forth by Foschini and others have within them variations on the same basic idea; if those variations were counted as separate, stand-alone theories, the number of theories could be greatly increased, with no substantive difference in the catalog of theories as a whole.

In older literature the number 40 was often used as an approximation for how many theories there were, without any citation or explanation of where that number comes from. More recent scholarly literature on the subject tends to recite the number 200, either in addition to 40 (something like “there are at least 40 theories, and perhaps as many as 200”) or more recently as the lone estimate for the number of theories.²⁵ Although this figure is most commonly recited without any citation, in a few cases a citation is given, and in these cases the citation is always to the same source, an article by K.C. Thompson published in 1964.²⁶ It turns out that the source for the widely repeated 200 number is a (problematic) footnote in that article (footnote 2 on p. 647):

Their number has been variously computed. The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh 1911) put it at 36, absurdly low, for I myself have

24 Horsley, 396 and 400–01.

25 For instance, Paulsen and Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” twice recite the 200 number: “Indeed, scholarly consideration of this verse has produced more than two hundred variant readings” (p. 26), and “Of the over two hundred interpretations, only a few remain as ‘legitimate possibilities’” (p. 30).

26 K. C. Thompson, “I Corinthians 15, 29 and Baptism for the Dead,” in *Studia Evangelica*, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), 2.1:647–59.

counted 39 types of solution, each with its sub-species. M. Raeder has recently added a 40th, espoused by J. Jeremias in his *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, London 1960, p. 36 footnote. Dr. Evans is nearer the mark in his recent edition of Tertullian's *De Resurrectione Carnis*, London 1960. He quotes 200.

First, it seems odd to characterize 36 as “absurdly low” when compared to 40, the number he himself had come up with. Second, since Thompson explicitly recites the number 40 as the number of theories at that time (39 he had counted plus the then recently articulated theory of Maria Raeder), this would appear to be the source for the widespread articulation that there are 40 theories. Most notably, Thompson states that Ernest Evans “quotes 200.” This statement represents the sole pillar on which rests the widespread scholarly repetition that there are 200 theories regarding the meaning of baptism for the dead.

In order to check Thompson's claim, I obtained Evans' edition of Tertullian's *De Resurrectione*. The passage to which Thompson clearly meant to refer is at line 48:41 of Tertullian's text which reads: *si autem et baptizantur quidam pro mortuis, videbimus an ratione* “And again, if some are baptized for the dead, we shall enquire whether this is with good reason.” Evans's comment on this passage is as follows:

There are said to be more than two hundred explanations of St. Paul's reference to baptism for the dead, most of them concerned to explain away the apparent superstition of the practice or to excuse the apostle's failure to rebuke it. Tertullian takes the passage to mean what it says, but by adding *hoc eos instituisse* [they had instituted that (custom)] hints that the Corinthians were doing this without apostolic authority.²⁷

Evans had also written a commentary on Paul's letters to the Corinthians, so I also checked that source in case he had more to say on the subject there. There he states simply that “the meaning here is no longer clear, and perhaps certainty is unattainable. The *many theories* in

27 Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection* (London: SPCK, 1960), 138–39 for the Latin text, and 312 for the quoted commentary.

respect of it can be reduced to three,” after which he comments on three of the theories.²⁸

So the notion that there are 200 theories derives from common repetition in the literature, the proximate source for which is Thompson’s article, which turns Evans’s loose, passive voice, hearsay aside that “there are said to be more than two hundred explanations” into the more definitive “Evans quotes 200.” (Perhaps Thompson intended to convey that Evans “quoted” *the number* 200, not 200 actual theories, but if so his language was unfortunately susceptible to a much more definitive interpretation than Evans likely intended.) I am not aware of anyone attempting to catalog even as many as 100 theories, much less 200. Therefore, the commonly repeated notion that there are 200 theories is utterly without any foundation whatsoever, and that number should no longer be repeated in the scholarly literature.

The catalog I present here sets forth 54 theories, derived from the following secondary sources. As the foundation for the list I used Foschini. Whereas Foschini listed a total of 36 theories, my list only includes 34 from that source, because (i) he listed vicarious baptism as a theory (which he did not accept), and I am taking the position that that is the correct reading and only cataloguing the alternative theories, and (ii) I similarly omitted Mormon baptism for the dead, as I see that as a practical application of vicarious baptism and not a separate theory. To Foschini’s list I added 11 historical theories he had missed from Horsley and another three from Thiselton, and to the whole I added six post-Foschini theories (from the mid-20th century on) from Hull, for a total of 54. Adding back in vicarious baptism, the total number of theories becomes 55. Yet even this number is certainly conservative, as I have no confidence whatsoever that this list is truly exhaustive. One could round this number up to 60, with the understanding that many of these theories have variations and that even that number would remain conservative, or better yet one could simply say there are “scores” of theories, which gives an accurate sense of both the scope and indeterminacy of the actual number.

28 Ernest Evans, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930), 144 (emphasis added).

Summary of Alternate Theories

Based on how the verb *baptizō* is used, I have separated the various alternate theories²⁹ for convenience into five categories as follows:

- I. Metaphorical uses;
- II. Ritual ablutions other than Christian baptism;
- III. Secular uses;
- IV. Regular baptism (i.e., baptism for the benefit of the one being baptized); and
- V. Variations on vicarious baptism (i.e., baptism for the benefit of others).

I have attempted to describe these theories in neutral terms. In the following section, “A General Linguistic Critique of the Alternate Theories,” I will explore in general terms why these theories are problematic.

Metaphorical Uses

1. *Baptism as the Works of Penance for Relief of the Dead.* This position was one commonly held by the Jesuits, and strongly rejected by Protestants. Its chief patron, Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), a Jesuit and a Cardinal who would eventually be canonized as a saint in 1930, explained it this way: “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?”³⁰
2. *Baptism as Sadness over the Dead.* This was the view of the early 18th century Danish bishop Caspar Erasmus Brochmann. The idea was that the Apostle wrote the same thought to the Corinthians that he wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:13):

29 The below are very succinct capsules of the basic idea underlying a given theory. For a more detailed explanation, including variants on the theory proposed by different scholars, see the sources cited in the notes.

30 Robertus Bellarminus, *De Purgatorio*, Chapter 6, in *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei, adversus huius temporis haereticos*, vol. 2 (Neapoli, 1857), 366, as cited in Foschini, 7. Paulsen and Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” 27, note that this too is a vicarious concept, just involving works of penance rather than baptism.

“We do not wish you to be sad as the others who have no hope.” He therefore paraphrases our verse as follows: “What shall we say to those who refuse all consolation over the death of dear ones, if the dead do not rise at all? How shall we give comfort to souls oppressed by sorrow if there is no happiness, if there is no resurrection after death?”³¹

3. *Baptism as Denoting the Labors and Dangers of the Apostolate.* Anna Maria Van Shurman, a 17th century German-born Dutch painter and scholar, took the verb “to be baptized” as referring to the labors and perils of the apostles, and the “dead” are the faithful themselves still living. So “to be baptized for the dead” meant to devote oneself to the apostolate “for the dead,” meaning the living faithful on earth, so that they may be saved.³² Others accepted her reading of the verb, but took the noun to refer to the unbelievers and persecutors themselves, who were still in need of conversion and so were in this sense as though they were “dead.”³³
4. *Baptism as Persecutions Endured in Order to Hasten the Parousia.* 1 Corinthians 15:30 reads “And [*kai*] why stand we in jeopardy [*kinduneuō*] every hour?” Because verse 30 begins with the conjunction *kai* “and,” Sytse Hoekstra, the 19th century Dutch theologian, argued that the verb *baptizō* had to be understood in a sense similar to *kinduneuō* “to be in danger, to be put in peril,” thus making the baptism of verse 29 the baptism of suffering. The suffering of the faithful was for the benefit of the dead, for, he claimed, it was believed that such sufferings hastened the Parousia.³⁴
5. *Baptism Identified with Martyrdom.* The 16th century Jesuit Joannes Maldonatus and others in a way similar to Hoekstra understood the verb of verse 29 as paralleling that of verse 30, but instead of understanding a baptism of suffering these exegetes understood a baptism of blood. Alexander Morus understood the verb the same way, but took “for the dead” as

31 As cited in Foschini, 8.

32 Anna Maria van Shurman, *Opuscula hebraica-graeca-latina-gallica. Epistola viro clarissimo Jac. Lydio* (Lugduni Batavorum, 1650), 101–02, as cited in Foschini, 9.

33 See Foschini, 9.

34 Sytse Hoekstra, “Proeve van verklaring van 1 Cor. XV: 29, 30,” *Theoloyisch Tydschrift*, 24 (1890): 135–42, as cited in Foschini, 9–10.

being equivalent to *huper tou nekrou Christou*, “for the dead Christ.”³⁵

6. *Baptism as To Be Overwhelmed with Miseries and Calamities*. Many 18th century commentators understood something like “of what avail is it to expose ourselves to so many dangers and calamities in the hope of the resurrection of the dead?”³⁶
7. *Baptism as To Be Immersed in Sufferings for Testifying of the Resurrection*. This was the view of the Westminster Assembly’s Annotations (Bible commentaries written in the 17th century). But instead of *huper tōn nekron* this theory would appear to require something like *huper tou dogmatos tēs anastaseōs* “for the teaching of the resurrection.”³⁷
8. *Baptism in Order to Convert those Dead in Sin*. This was the argument of Johannes Henricus Maius (18th century). The idea is that the passage refers to the metaphorical baptism of affliction and sufferings undergone for the value of the conversion of the unfaithful who are without the life of the soul.³⁸
9. *Baptism Identified as Those Who Are Being Destroyed*. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor takes the verse as a gibe by Paul against his opponents, with verse 29 being a general statement and the following verses on Paul’s apostolic labors a specific example. He concludes that one is forced to exclude a literal reading of the verb *baptizein*, even while quickly acknowledging that Paul nowhere else uses that verb in a metaphoric sense. He understands *baptizomenoi* as “those who are destroyed.” He understands the noun *nekros* in a spiritual sense, so when in the middle of the verse Paul means to speak of those who are actually physically dead, he construes the adverb *holōs* with the noun instead of the verb as most exegetes do. Paul is pointing out the incongruity of those Corinthians who deny the resurrection by means of a rhetorical question that has its origin in the spiritual elite’s (supposed) depreciation of his apostolic labors. To paraphrase: “Supposing that there

35 Joannes Maldonatus, *Opera varia theologica*, Vol. 1, *De baptismo*, qu. 6 pars 6, *An mortui baptizari possint* (Parisiis, 1677), 52–53, and Alexander Morus, *Ad quaedam loca Novi Testamenti notae* (Parisiis, 1668), 170–71, as cited in Foschini, 10–12.

36 Horsley, 16–17.

37 Ibid., 18.

38 Ibid., 20.

is no resurrection from the dead, will they continue to work, those who are being destroyed on account of an inferior class of believers who are dead to true Wisdom? If those who are really dead are not raised why indeed are they baptized on their account?"³⁹

Ritual Ablutions Other than Christian Baptism

10. *Baptism as Washing of the Dead.* Theodore Beza (1519–1605), a disciple of John Calvin, broke with his mentor on his understanding of this passage and rendered the key expression “baptized for the dead” into Latin as *ablutione utuntur super mortuis* “perform an ablution over the dead.”⁴⁰
11. *Baptism as Ritual Ablutions Made by the Jews before Their Sacrifices for the Dead.* Cornelius a Lapide (1567–1637), a Flemish Jesuit, wrote the following: “They are baptized (for the dead), that is, they are purified for the sacrifices they are about to offer for the dead. For among the Jews it was a custom to be baptized, that is, cleansed, before sacrifices, prayers and every religious service.”⁴¹ He seems to be thinking of the actions of Judas in sending 12,000 drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifices to be offered for the sins of the dead (see 2 Macc. 12:43–45).
12. *Baptism as Ritual Ablutions because of Contact with the Dead.* Gabrielis Vasquez wrote that “‘to be baptized for the dead’ is identical with ‘to be baptized by the dead,’ that is, by contact with the dead, or in order to wash away contact with the dead.”⁴² The argument is that, because of the ritual impurity it causes them, the Jews would not care for their dead but for their belief in a resurrection.
13. *Baptism as Vicarious Purification for Those Who Died in Impurity.* This is a vicarious concept, but rather than water

39 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, “‘Baptized for the Dead’ (I Cor., XV, 29): A Corinthian Slogan?” *Revue biblique* 88 (1981): 532–43, as discussed in Hull, 27–28.

40 Theodoro Beza, *D[omini] N[ostri] Jesu Christi Novum Testamentum cum interpretatione et adnotationibus* (1598), 173, as cited in Foschini, 21.

41 Cornelius a Lapide, *In omnes D[ivini] Pauli Epistolas* (Antuerpiae, 1692), 326, as cited in Foschini, 23.

42 Gabrielis Vasquez, *Commentarii ac disputationes in tertium partem Summae theologiae sancti Thomae Aquinatis Ad 1 Cor. 15:29; qu. 69, art. 10, dist. 156, c. 3* (Lugduni, 1631), 434, col. b, as cited in Foschini, 23.

baptism it reflects the legal ablution (Num. 19:11) required of one who touched a dead body. If someone touched a dead body and then died before the ablution was performed, the idea is that others would receive the ablution on their behalf.⁴³

14. *Ceremonies and Rites Analogous to Baptism*. Franciscus Cornelius Ceulemans wrote “perhaps...these Christians (*hoi baptizomenoi*)...received only the solemnities of Baptism and the ablution in the name of the dead catechumen, so that by this external symbol they might testify that the dead person had the desire of Baptism, and that he died in the faith of Christ, and that he had the hope of a blessed Resurrection.”⁴⁴ This theory is also grounded in a vicarious concept, but rather than one receiving water baptism vicariously for the dead, one receives only the ceremonies and rites of baptism.

Secular Uses

15. *Baptism as the Wetting of Those Who Washed the Dead*. Beza in theory number 6 above was aware of the weakness of taking the verb in an active rather than a passive voice. He therefore proposed as an attempt to save the basic idea: “*quid facient... qui abluuntur ablutione super mortuos?*” (“What will they do... who get wet from the ablution they perform over the dead?”) The idea would be that one performing such a rite would in the course thereof naturally get wet himself from the same water he was using in the ablution itself.⁴⁵
16. *Baptism as the Immersion of Divers after the Bodies of the Shipwrecked*. August Ludwig Christian Heydenreich, a 19th century pastor and advocate of a united Lutheran/Reformed church, quotes a certain Flaccius (perhaps the reformer Matthias Flaccius Illyricus [1520–1575]) as being of the opinion that those baptized for the dead referred to divers who went into the ocean to fish out the bodies of the shipwrecked who had been drowned in a storm at sea.⁴⁶

43 Franciscus Turrianus, *Adversus Magdeburgenses Centuriatores* (Florentiae, 1572), 416–17, cited in Foschini, 24.

44 Franciscus Cornelius Ceulemans, *Commentarius in 1 ad Cor.* (Mechliniae, 1926), 204, cited in Foschini, 24–25.

45 Foschini, 22.

46 August Ludwig Christian Heydenreich, *Commentarius in Priorem Divi Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolam*, vol. 2 (Marburgi, 1828), 537, cited in Foschini, 24.

Regular Baptism (i.e., baptism for the benefit of the one being baptized)

17. *Baptism for Dead Bodies.* Tertullian⁴⁷ and Chrysostom⁴⁸ somewhat similarly understood the “dead” as the initiate’s own dead body (because the body is mortal and will one day be dead). Thus baptism for the dead means baptism for the initiate’s own body, which is destined to die and rise again.⁴⁹ As the Greek and Latin Fathers rarely read each other, this confluence of opinion is unusual, and may point to influence of Tertullian on Chrysostom or perhaps influence upon both by a common, unknown source. Due to Chrysostom’s influence, this view has been widely held in the Greek Orthodox tradition.
18. *Baptism of Those Who Have Already Received the Holy Spirit.* Arias Montanus, a 16th century Spanish priest, understood the passage as referring to those who, as sometimes happened, were baptized *after* they had already received the Holy Spirit, such as Cornelius and his family. In such a circumstance the rite of baptism bore witness not to the resurrection in newness of life, but to the death of the body and the body’s future resurrection.⁵⁰
19. *Baptism as the Mortification of the Passions.* This view, which was first expressed by Julian, the fifth century bishop of Eclanum and a leader of the Pelagians, but subsequently was put forward by others as well, understands that those who are baptized for the dead are baptized for the purpose of mortifying themselves and beginning a new life, that to be baptized for the dead means to face mortification, tribulations and death itself as part of the Christian life.⁵¹
20. *Baptism of the Dying.* A number of important Christians, such as Bengel and Calvin, followed the opinion of Epiphanius, the fourth century bishop of Salamis, who proposed that our verse had reference to the baptism of those who were dying and on their death beds, those who “being near to death,...if they are

47 *Adversus Marcionem*, 5.10.

48 *Homiliae in 1 ad Corinthios*, 23.

49 Foschini, 64–65.

50 *Ibid.*, 67.

51 *Ibid.*, 67–68.

indeed catechumens relying on the hope (of the Resurrection), are purified by the sacred washing. And so they show both that the dead will rise again, and that consequently they need that pardon which is obtained through baptism.”⁵²

21. *Baptism Will be Useless after Death.* Philipp Bachmann, the early 20th century Lutheran theologian, was of the view that the statement was intended to express that baptism would be useless and could avail of nothing after death. For him, the meaning of the words was: “If there is no Resurrection of the dead, what will those who are now baptized do, what profit will they gain for the dead, that is, for the state and time when they shall be dead?” He reaches this interpretation by stressing the future *poiesousin* in contrast with the present *baptizontai* (taking that to mean that baptism received in the present time will be useless in the future) and also by partially cancelling the expression *huper autōn* at the end of the verse.⁵³ (His expression of his opinion is so convoluted that it is difficult to summarize it meaningfully.)
22. *Baptism by Which we Gain Nothing beyond What the Unbaptized Have.* Ernestus Richter in a booklet printed in 1803 interpreted *huper* as “beyond” and *tous nekrous* as those who died as godless and unbelievers in Judaism or in paganism. Further, the verb *poiein* expresses the notion of gaining profit or obtaining some utility. He would also delete the last two words of the verse. The result is: “what shall they who are baptized gain beyond the unbaptized unbeliever, if the dead do not rise at all?”
23. *Baptism by Which We Take the Place of the Christians Who Have Died.* The early 18th century scholar J. Cleric wrote that “If there is no Resurrection, what will they do, who every day, although they see Christians put to death for the sake of the Faith, eagerly come to receive Baptism in order to take the place of the dead in the Christian Church?”⁵⁴
24. *Baptism by Which the Names of Dead Christians are Received.* In contrast to Cleric in number 23 above, Daniel Heinsius, the 17th century Dutch Renaissance scholar, held that baptism for

52 Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 2.28.6.4–5, as cited in Foschini, 69.

53 Foschini, 70–71.

54 Ibid., 71–72.

the dead gave the baptized not the *place* of the dead, but the *name* of the dead. Baptism succeeds circumcision and retains certain of its rites, among which was the giving of a name. So Christians were accustomed to give the names of the dead “apostles, martyrs, holy fathers, deceased relatives...in order that these might seem still to live and exist; or to sleep for a short time now, but to rise soon after.”⁵⁵

25. *Baptism over the Sepulchers of the Martyrs.* This is the famous explanation of Luther, who took “the dead” as “the sepulchers of the martyrs” by metonymy, and also took the preposition in its original locative sense, “over,” thus rendering: “What do they otherwise do who have themselves baptized over the dead, if the dead do not rise again? Why do they have themselves baptized over the dead?”⁵⁶ To conform to this theory, in his revision of the Vulgate he substituted *super mortuis* [“over the dead”] in place of *pro mortuis* [“for the dead”].
26. *Baptism for Christ.* Others have also understood the dead as *martyrs* in the strict etymological sense of “witness.” So to be baptized for the dead refers to one who comes “to the font because of the dead one, namely Christ, or in view of that dead one whom death could not detain.” Since in one body the Church is many, it is fitting for Paul to use the plural form for “dead” with reference to Christ.⁵⁷
27. *Baptism for Christ and for the Other Dead.* Others thought it unlikely that the plural form of the word “dead” could refer to Christ alone, and so they posit that the dead refers to Christ and John the Baptist, or to Christ and the other apostles and doctors of the church, or to those who had been among the 500 witnesses of the resurrection of Christ, but were now dead.⁵⁸
28. *Baptism Received on Account of the Dead.* This theory supposes that a plague had raged through Corinth causing many deaths, and those who had delayed baptism, frightened by this specter of death, now hastened to receive it lest they die without baptism.⁵⁹

55 Daniel Heinsius, *Sacrarum exercitationum ad Novum Testamentum libri 20* (Cantabrigiae, 1640), 383, as cited in Foschini, 72.

56 As cited in Foschini, 72.

57 Foschini, 73–74.

58 Ibid., 74.

59 Ibid., 75.

29. *Baptism Received for Fanciful Reasons.* A certain Krausius construed the noun as a neuter rather than as a masculine, and thus took it as equivalent to *ta mē onta* “things which are not,” that is, “fancies, false opinions, a dead thing. What shall they do who receive Baptism because they are deceived and beguiled by idle dreams, thoughts of the dead?”⁶⁰
30. *Baptism Which Frees us from Fear of Death.* Johann Ernst Christian Schmidt, the early 19th century German scholar, also took the noun as a neuter and not a masculine, equating it conceptually to *ton thanaton*, or death itself. Thus the expression means to be “initiated into these sacred rites which put to flight the fear of death, to profess through Baptism a doctrine which fills the soul with contempt for death, or to be baptized for the purpose of being freed from the fear of death through that hope of immortality which the Christian religion instills into the soul.”⁶¹
31. *Baptism Received in Order to Obtain the Kingdom of the Blessed.* This interpretation construes the preposition *huper* in the final sense (“for the purpose of”) and sees the dead not as the state after death but as the Church triumphant. According to Bonnet, “It is known that in the most ancient times Baptism was often asked for only at death’s door....He who received Baptism in such circumstances was baptized not for the living, but for the dead, that is, he was admitted in the Church already glorified, rather than in the Church militant.”⁶²
32. *Baptism Merely to Be Numbered among the Dead?* Paul Dürselen, Bernard M. Foschini and K.C. Thompson, although differing in the particulars, all take a similar approach to the problem by emending the punctuation and creating a series of short, choppy, rhetorical questions. For Dürselen, “for the dead” modifies neither “what shall they do” nor “those who are baptized” but stands alone as a separate question. He then moves the final two words of the verse to become the beginning two words of verse 30: “Otherwise, what will they do who are being baptized? Do they do so for the dead? If the dead are not to rise, why are people baptized? For them we are in danger

60 As quoted in Foschini, 76.

61 Ibid.

62 L. Bonnet, *Epîtres de S. Paul* (Loussane, 1891), 241, as cited in Foschini, 76.

every hour.” Foschini similarly adds two question marks, although he keeps the last two words with verse 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 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)?” Foschini equates *huper* with *eis* “to/for” and keeps the last two words of the verse, but otherwise is scarcely different from Dürselen. Thompson too sees the key to the verse as a change in punctuation, and came to his view independently of Ernest Evans, who had published it 30 years earlier: “Else what will they achieve who are baptized — merely for the benefit of their dead bodies, if dead bodies never rise again? And why do people get baptized merely for them?”⁶³

33. *Baptism into the Faith which the Dead Held.* This was the view of Philip Nicholas Shuttleworth, a 19th century English churchman and Bishop of Chichester, who paraphrases “Why are we baptized into that faith of a crucified and dead Redeemer to which our already departed brethren have clung as their last hope in death, if the dead rise not?”⁶⁴
34. *Baptism as Washing away their Dead Works and Sins.* This was the view of Sedulius Scottus (9th century) and Petrus Lomardus, the 12th century Bishop of Paris. But if the genitive *nekrōn* refers to sins, so must the nominative *nekroi*, as the passage would read “What shall they do who are baptized for their sins, if their sins rise not?”⁶⁵
35. *Baptism in which they Profess themselves as Dead to the World.* This was the view of Philipp van Limborch (1633–1712), the Dutch Remonstrant theologian: “Baptized for the dead are they who, when they are baptized, declare that they are ready to die to the world, to be in it as dead men.”⁶⁶
36. *Baptism in the Hope of Blessings to be Received after they are Numbered with the Dead.* This theory was defended by Bishop

63 P. Dürselen, “‘Die Taufe für die Toten’: I Kor. 15, 29,” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* [no volume] (1903): 291–308; Foschini, 91–98, and Thompson, 647–59, as discussed in Hull, 21–25.

64 Horsley, 19.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 20.

George Berkeley, the 18th century Irish philosopher, in his *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (first published in 1732).⁶⁷

37. *Baptism in the Belief of a Resurrection from the Dead.* This view was favored by many early Christian writers, such as Theophylact and Pelagius, who saw *huper tōn nekrōn* as shorthand for *huper tēs anastaseōs tōn nekrōn* “for the resurrection of the dead.” The idea may be paraphrased as follows: “What will they be doing (i.e., what advantage will they gain) who are baptized in the confident expectation of a resurrection of the dead?”⁶⁸
38. *Baptism to Renew the Promises which God Makes to Quick and Dead.* This was the view of Christopher Wordsworth, the 19th century English bishop (and nephew to the poet William Wordsworth). Those who are baptized for the dead are not baptized to aid them or in their stead, but to confirm the promises of the covenant made to them and still to be fulfilled. Wordsworth wrote “Every baptized person is an apologist for the dead, declaring by his profession before baptism that Christ is risen and that the dead will rise.”⁶⁹
39. *Baptism so as to Belong to a Mere Kingdom of the Dead.* The idea here may be paraphrased “Why should a person suffer himself to be baptized on account of the dead — i.e., to belong to them so as to form a kingdom of the dead.” This was suggested by Jacob Elsner, the 18th century German theologian, who read *huper* as equivalent to Latin *propter* (i.e., in a causal sense).⁷⁰
40. *Baptism though so Many Martyrs Have Died.* The proponents of this theory take *huper* as equal to Latin *ultra* [beyond], *praeter* [beyond], or *post* [behind, after].⁷¹
41. *Baptism for the Sake of Mortal Sins.* Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas de Lyra (1270–1349) take the dead as a metaphor for mortal sins, for the sake of which people are baptized.⁷²

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 21.

69 Ibid., 39.

70 Ibid., 400.

71 Ibid.

72 Thiselton, 1242.

42. *Baptism after Witnessing the Deaths of Martyrs.* John Edwards, the late 17th–early 18th century Reformed theologian, takes the verse as referring to those who were baptized after witnessing the deaths of martyrs, especially the confidence and courage that they displayed.⁷³
43. *Baptism by One Who Believes and Expects the Resurrection of the Dead.* Theophylact, Photius and Erasmus think the passage refers to the creed and the belief in baptism which it represents. They understand “the dead” as an ellipsis reflecting the baptismal creed in faith: *tou nekrou sōmatos anastasin pisteuōn*, i.e., one who recites the creed “believes and expects the resurrection of the dead.” The dead refers to “soon to be” dead bodies.⁷⁴
44. *Baptism for Their Dying Bodies.* J.C. O’Neill reads the verse as talking about baptism of those near death “for their dying bodies.” First, he accepts the variant reading of the Leicester codex 69, which has *autōn tōn nekron* “their dead [bodies]” as the ending of the first sentence. Then he reads *nekros* in two different senses. The first and third appearances governed by *huper* mean “for their dead bodies,” with the noun *sōmatōn* “bodies” implicitly understood. In the second appearance he argues the adverb *holōs* ought to be taken with the noun *nekroi* and not the verb, reading the expression as “the completely dead,” meaning those who are about to die. To paraphrase, “Otherwise what do those hope to achieve who are baptized for their dying bodies? If the completely dead are not raised, why then are they baptized for them?”⁷⁵
45. *Baptism by Example (with huper in the final sense).* Maria Raeder, Joachim Jeremias and J.K. Howard each favors a “baptism by example” reading by focusing in particular on the preposition *huper* and taking it in the final sense, “for the purpose of, with a view towards.” According to Raeder, the baptism involved was ordinary baptism, and the dead were deceased Christians who had already been baptized in life. The *baptizomenoi* were living, previously unbaptized friends and relatives of those deceased Christians who were baptized in a

73 Ibid., 1243.

74 Ibid.

75 J.C. O’Neill, “1 Corinthians 15:29,” *Expository Times* 91 (1979): 310–11, as described in Hull, 25–27.

desire to be joined in the resurrection with their dead loved ones (as opposed to being joined with Christ). This notion was the result of an excessive missiology at Corinth. Jeremias expands Raeder's reading by focusing on the *nekroi* and its use with and without the article. He believes the anarthrous use refers to the dead in general, while the articular use refers to the Christian dead. Howard suggests that what might have originated as a less than noble motive may have indeed brought the initiated to a true faith in Christ. According to this theory, the *baptizomenoi* were those who received baptism "with a view towards the dead [in the resurrection]."⁷⁶

46. *Baptism by Example (with huper in the causal sense)*. John D. Reaume has a theory similar to Maria Raeder's baptism by example, except he rejects the final use of *huper* and instead takes that preposition in its causal sense: "on account of, because of." He reads *nekros* literally and rejects any metaphorical or figurative usage here. Like Jeremias, he distinguishes the *anarthrous nekroi* as the dead in general from the articular *hoi nekroi* as a particular set of the dead, whom he similarly takes as deceased Christians (who were already baptized in life). Reaume acknowledges that the dominant usage of the preposition is either "on behalf of" (representation) or "instead of" (substitution), but he finds four causal uses in Acts 9:16 and 21:13; Romans 15:9; and Philippians 1:29 (attributing the Acts passages to Paul instead of Luke). Thus, he takes the passage as talking about people being baptized on account of the sway of deceased Christians. Joel R. White proposes a theory that is also grounded in a causative usage of *huper* and otherwise is similar to Reaume's, although he unfortunately seems not to have known of Reaume's theory and so does not interact with it at all. Somewhat like Murphy-O'Connor, White reads Paul's concerns as being with his apostolic sufferings. Unlike Reaume, who rejected a metaphoric usage of *nekroi* and takes that word literally, White argues for a metaphoric reading of "the dead" as "the apostles."

76 Maria Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in 1 Cor 15:29," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 (1955): 258–60; Joachim Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," *New Testament Studies* 2 (1955–56): 151–59; and J.K. Howard, "Baptism for the Dead: A Study of 1 Corinthians 15:29," *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (1965): 137–41; as discussed in Hull, 29–31.

Similarly to O'Neill, White understands the word *nekroi* in two different senses in the same verse, and takes the adverb *holōs* as attributively modifying *nekroi* rather than *egeirontai*. His reading of the verse is as follows: "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)?"⁷⁷

47. *Baptism on Account of the Dead (with huper in the causal sense)*. At the end of his lengthy study, Hull gives his own proposed rendering as "Otherwise what are they to do, who have themselves baptized on account of the dead? If the dead are not really raised, why are they baptized on account of them?"⁷⁸ Hull takes both the verb and the noun literally, and does not posit any change in punctuation from the standard critical editions; the only change he posits is to understand *huper* in the causal sense. Thus baptism is an act of faith in which the Corinthians profess a conviction in what Paul preached to them; namely, the resurrection. In other words, "Otherwise what are they to do, who have themselves baptized on account [of their faith in the resurrection] of the dead?"

Variations on Vicarious Baptism (i.e., baptism for the benefit of others)

48. *Vicarious Eschatological Baptism*. Herbert Preisker accepted the vicarious baptism reading, but argued that the impetus for it was eschatological and not sacramental, that the just dead needed to be baptized lest the end of the world be delayed too long.⁷⁹
49. *Baptism of the Dead Sought Vicariously*. According to this view, the dead bodies (corpses) themselves were baptized, provided the deceased's relatives asked for this.⁸⁰ Foschini classifies this

77 Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:39," 457–75, and Joel R. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead": The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997): 487–99, as discussed in Hull, 31–36.

78 Hull, 230–31.

79 Herbert Preisker, "Die Vikariatstaufe I Cor 15:29 — ein eschatologischer, nicht sakramentaler Brauch," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 23 (1924): 298–304, as cited in Foschini, 39.

80 Foschini, 40.

as a form of vicarious baptism, since the deceased's relatives would have had to ask for it on the deceased's behalf, but since the deceased's own body was baptized, it could also be characterized as a form of regular baptism.

50. *Baptism as Suffrage for the Dead.* Fernand Prat, the 20th century theologian, accepted the vicarious baptism idea, but was careful to distinguish *huper* as used for the advantage of another from the sense of *anti*, a complete substitution in another's name, place and stead. Since Prat accepted the former but rejected the latter, Foschini denominates his view "baptism as suffrage for the dead."⁸¹
51. *Baptism as Hastening the Parousia and as an Aid for the Dead.* Hermann Olshausen, the early 19th century German theologian, much like Prat, sees *huper* in the sense of "in favor of, for the benefit of another" and not in the full substitutionist sense of *anti* "in the name and place of another." In his view, the dead had already been baptized, and the living now being baptized were acting in their interest so as to perfect that fullness (*pleroma*) of which Paul speaks in Romans 11:12–25, which must be achieved in order for the just to enjoy the glory and happiness of the resurrection.⁸²
52. *Baptism as the Defense of the Dead, and of Their Faith in the Resurrection.* Heinrich Müller proposed a view similar to that of Olshausen above, in which the dead have already been baptized in life. The preposition *huper* is then taken in a defensive sense: "Those persons are baptized for the dead, then, who by their Baptism defend the dead in their belief in a blessed resurrection, of which baptism is the seal." Those who are baptized for the dead are among the unfaithful who deny the resurrection. By being baptized they are defending a belief in the resurrection which they otherwise deny.⁸³
53. *Baptism as the Baptized Having Something to Do for the Dead.* Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann joins "for the dead" to the verb "what shall they (the ones being baptized) do" instead of the verb "baptized" and then joins *huper autōn* to

81 Ibid., 41–43.

82 Hermann Olshausen, *Die Briefe des Apostels Paulus an die Korinther* (Reutligen, 1836), 690–91, as cited in Foschini, 43.

83 Heinrich Müller, *Dissertatio de baptismo pro mortuis* (Rostocki, 1665), 48, as cited in Foschini, 44.

verse 30. He seems to focus on the present tense of the verb “baptized” and the future tense of the verb “do,” the idea being that those who are baptized (in the present) will at some later point do something for the dead (in the future). Thus, “If there is absolutely no Resurrection, what will the baptized do, that is, why will they act, in favor of the dead? For that matter, why are they themselves baptized? And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour for those who are baptized?”⁸⁴

54. *Baptism as Pagan Syncretism*. James Dewey takes the vicarious reading as a given, but attempts to explain it within the historical context of Greco-Roman Corinth, seeing especially the strong influence of cosmic powers and local pagan funerary rites in the practice. This view stresses the cosmic power of baptism as a victory over death. Similarly, Richard D. DeMaris focuses on the treatment of the dead in Greco-Roman Corinth, including funerary rites, burial customs (Greek inhumation vs. Roman cremation), passage to the next world and assuring one’s needs are met in the next life.⁸⁵

A General Linguistic Critique of the Alternate Theories

A detailed linguistic critique of each of the above theories would be tedious indeed. Instead, in this section I shall provide a “big picture” overview of the types of linguistic strategies employed in these theories and why they are problematic.

If one wished to avoid a vicarious baptism reading of the verse, the easiest way to do that would be to construe the verb *baptizein* in some sense other than having reference to the Christian sacrament of water baptism, for in that case no matter what else one does with the verse it could not have reference to vicarious *baptism*. This is the approach taken in our first three categories of alternate theories: metaphorical uses, ritual ablutions other than Christian baptism, and secular uses. The overwhelming problem with this type of approach is lexical. In

84 Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Nerdlingen, 1874), 364, as cited in Foschini, 45–46.

85 James Dewey, “Textuality in an Oral Culture: A Survey of the Pauline Traditions,” *Semeia* 65 (1994): 37–65, and 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, as discussed in Hull, 17–20. For a review of DeMaris, see John W. Welch in *FARMS Review* 8, no. 2 (1996): 43–45. I agree with Welch’s comments.

the secure Pauline corpus the verb appears in nine verses (outside of 1 Corinthians 15:29 itself): Romans 6:3, 1 Corinthians 1:13, 1:14, 1:15, 1:16 (*bis*), 1:17, 10:2, 12:13, and Galatians 3:27. Most of these uses are in the same letter as our passage, 1 Corinthians. There is a figurative usage in 1 Corinthians 10:2, “And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” but otherwise all of these occurrences are used in the literal sense of water baptism. Therefore, virtually all of the usage of this verb in the secure Pauline corpus falls under BDAG category 2.c, with the exception of the typological usage (BDAG category 3.a) of 1 Corinthians 10:2.

Our first category includes attempts to construe the verb metaphorically, where baptism is (i) penance, (ii) sadness, (iii) labors and dangers, (iv) persecutions, (v) martyrdom, (vi) being overwhelmed with miseries and calamities, (vii) being immersed in sufferings, (viii) a conversion of those dead in sin, or (ix) being destroyed. Even in the New Testament as a whole metaphoric uses of this verb are quite rare, and where they exist it is clear from the context that a metaphor was intended. One example is Mark 10:38: “But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” BDAG, 165 suggests rendering the stark metaphor of personal disaster as “are you prepared to be drowned the way I am going to be drowned?” Similarly is Luke 12:50, “But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!” These two passages are the rare exceptions in the straightforward usage of the verb in the New Testament as a whole. Accordingly, anyone positing a metaphorical use by Paul in our passage has the burden of establishing that such a use was intended, a burden that no one so far has managed to carry.

The second category construes the verb as relating to Jewish ritual ablutions other than Christian baptism. These include “baptism” as (i) washing the dead, (ii) ablutions preparatory to sacrifices for the dead, (iii) ablutions made on account of contact with the dead, (iv) vicarious purification for those who died in impurity, or (v) ceremonies and rites analogous to baptism (but not baptism itself). This approach is at least marginally stronger than the metaphoric approach and corresponds to BDAG category 1. The main illustration of this usage in the New Testament is Mark 7:1–8:

Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and
certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem.
And when they saw some of his disciples eat

bread with defiled [*koinais*], that is to say, with unwashen [*aniptoīs*], hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash [*nipsontai*] their hands oft, eat not, holding the traditions of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash [*baptisōntai*], they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing [*baptismous*] of cups, and pots, brazen vessels, and of tables. Then the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen [*koinais*] hands? He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of man. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing [*baptismous*] of pots and cups; and many other such things ye do.

The other New Testament example of this usage is at Luke 11:38: “And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed [*ebaptisthē*] before dinner.”

There are specific problems with some of these theories. For instance, in Theory 10 Beza has taken the passive Greek verb in an active sense in his Latin rendering. In general, this usage is unattested in the secure Pauline corpus, and it is specialized and distinctive enough that it is readily apparent from context in contradistinction to Christian water baptism.

Inasmuch as the secular use of the verb is completely unattested in Koine Greek, attempts to construe the verb in secular fashion as a simple getting wet are quite rare. Theory 15 actually derives from a ritual ablution context and is simply an attempt to salvage Theory 10. Theory 16, to the effect that the verse refers to divers seeking to recover dead bodies from shipwrecks in the sea, is perhaps the most bizarre suggestion in the entire catalog.

Thus one is left with construing the verb in its literal, sacramental sense of referring to actual baptism. There remain two ways to construe the verb: it could be referring to regular baptism, where the rite is for the

benefit of the one being baptized, or it could refer to vicarious baptism, where the rite is for the benefit of someone other than the one being baptized. Since the dominant sense of the preposition is to require that the benefit of the action of the verb be for someone else, this requires either a creative reading of the noun, a minority usage of the preposition, or both in order to avoid the obvious sense of the passage as a reference to vicarious baptism.

My fifth category, variations on vicarious baptism, involves theories where one has concluded that a vicarious concept is inevitable and then tries to blunt the force of the concept in some way. Since my focus here is linguistic only, detailed commentary on this category is beyond the scope of this article, as these exegetes have already conceded the principal point that the verse has reference to a vicarious concept. If there is a way to avoid a vicarious baptism reading, it will be by taking the verb as referring to regular baptism, and this is why the fourth category dealing with regular baptism theories is by far the largest of our five categories.

By my count, the noun *nekros* occurs some 40 times in the secure Pauline corpus. In the vast majority of these cases the word is used literally for deceased human beings (BDAG category B.1), but Paul does occasionally use this word in a metaphoric sense. For instance, Romans 8:10 reads “And if Christ be in you, the body [of flesh and sin] is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (BDAG category A.2b). But Paul’s metaphoric usage of the word is very limited: either a person is “dead” because of sin, or “dead” to the law because of Christ, or something similar. Many of the theories in category 4 seek to metaphorize the noun in various ways or otherwise understand it in a creative fashion. So Theory 17 treats live bodies as “potentially” dead; Theory 19 treats the dead as a metaphor for mortification and tribulations; Theory 20 understands the dead as those dying and near death; Theory 25 treats the dead as a metonymy for the sepulchers of the martyrs; Theories 26 and 27 treat the dead as specific dead persons (the dead Christ, John the Baptist, dead apostles, those of the 500 witness to the resurrection who had died, etc.); Theories 28 and 29 understand the word as a neuter and not a masculine, thus taking the dead as more conceptually referring to “death”; Theory 34 understands the dead as a metaphor for dead works and sins; Theory 41 takes the dead as a metaphor for mortal sins; and Theory 43 equates the dead with the baptismal creed.

Here is where reading the entire chapter in context becomes important. A quarter of Paul’s 40 uses of this word appear in 1

Corinthians 15 (ten occurrences outside of verse 29). And all ten of those occurrences use the word to refer to the dead generally in a resurrection context, which is not surprising given the focus of that chapter on the subject of the resurrection of the dead. Given that context, the burden is on anyone claiming a non-literal meaning for “the dead” in verse 29, and again, in my judgment, no one has so far succeeded in carrying that burden.

That leaves us with the preposition. The dominant usage of *huper* + genitive is to apply the action of the verb to the benefit of another in some sense. This dominant usage points to a vicarious baptism concept in verse 29. If one wants to avoid that dominant usage, there would appear to be only three possibilities. One would be to take *huper* as a synonym for *peri* “about, concerning” (BDAG category A.3). But I have seen no one try that, as to be “baptized about the dead” would not make any sense. So that limits our alternative options to two. First, one could take *huper* in the final sense, “for the purpose of.” One problem here is that this usage generally takes a genitive of the thing (see BDAG category A.1b) as opposed to a genitive of the person as required by our passage. Second one could take *huper* in the causal sense, “on account of, because of” (BDAG category A.2). This usage is the least common, but it is at least attested in the secure Pauline corpus.

In a sense, presenting an extensive catalog of 54 alternative theories can be somewhat misleading, because it might suggest that all of those theories are meaningfully in play today. They are not. It is important to see such an extensive catalog to appreciate the scope and even desperation of the various attempts to avoid a vicarious baptism reading. But by the standards of contemporary biblical scholarship most of the theories on that list would now be considered obsolete.

Hull in his 327-page book, which is an excellent overview of the subject in general, does not even bother to refute the historical theories, but concentrates instead on the half-dozen or so deriving from modern biblical scholarship and dating since the time of Foschini in the mid-20th century (all of which he rejects before preferring his own). I concur with Hull in rejecting these theories. The theory of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor from 1981 (no. 9 on our list) I reject out of hand due to its reliance on metaphorizing the verb. The pagan syncretism theory of James Dewey and Richard D. DeMaris (1994 and 1995; Theory 54 on our list) is beyond the scope of this article since it acknowledges a vicarious baptism reading and simply argues for some Greco-Roman influence on the practice.

I reject Foschini's own theory (no. 32 on our list), partly for his misuse of *hyper* as equivalent to *eis*, but mostly for the awkwardness of the choppy series of rhetorical questions he has created by emending the punctuation. Thompson, who independently came up with a very similar theory to Foschini's, tells the story of him as a young man fresh from Oxford in 1928 putting his theory to Henry Leighton Goudge, the then Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and author of the Westminster Commentary on I Corinthians. Goudge rejected it out of hand as demanding a novel and strained interpretation of the Greek. I agree with Professor Goudge.⁸⁶

The theory of O'Neill (no. 44 on our list) is untenable for several reasons: his acceptance of the variant reading from Leicester Codex 69, his reading of the noun in two different senses in the same verse, one of which is "dying bodies," and his insistence that the adverb modifies the noun and not the verb. White's version of Theory 46 is untenable for the way he attempts to metaphorize the noun as referring to the living apostles.

There are two baptism by example theories: that of Maria Raeder (no. 45 on our list), who takes *hyper* in the final sense, and that of Reaume (no. 46 on our list), who takes *hyper* in the causal sense. But in the absence of a persecution or martyrdom context, which seems historically unlikely for Corinth at the time the letter was written, it is not at all clear how or why such presumably natural deaths should have so motivated people to get baptized. Such a theory "demands the insertion of too much that is left unexpressed."⁸⁷

That leaves us with the most recently expressed alternative theory, that of Hull himself (no. 47 on our list). The strength of Hull's theory is that he takes both the verb and the noun in their literal senses, he does not try to emend the punctuation as Foschini did, and he posits a causal use of the preposition, which though rare is indeed attested. The ultimate problem with Hull's theory is one that applies similarly in varying degrees to all of the scholarly theories from the last half-century. I call this the "ellipsis problem." Hull's own words vis-à-vis Foschini could be applied to all of these theories, and to a certain extent even to his own: such theories "demand a number of, at least implied, ellipses, without which these same readings would scarcely be sensible and for which

⁸⁶ Thompson, 647.

⁸⁷ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 186, as cited in Hull, 45.

there is no basis other than creative, albeit educated, guesswork.”⁸⁸ If one were to read the reconstructions of these scholars of the text without their parenthetical explanations, they would not be comprehensible.

Although Hull’s theory requires a single ellipse, rather than several as in the case of Foschini, the same basic problem is present. Without parenthetical elaboration, Hull’s reading is “Otherwise, what are they to do, who have themselves baptized on account of the dead?” Try reading this to someone and asking her what it is supposed to mean, and I suspect she will not be able to tell you. (For instance, those same words could be construed in the way theory no. 28 takes them.) It only becomes sensible when the ellipsis is supplied; in this case, at a minimum adding back in “the resurrection of” before “the dead.”

Both Horsley and Foschini have, in effect, rejected Hull’s proposal, as it were from the grave. Horsley in his concluding comments writes the following:

With regard to the word *nekrōn* we need only remark that as the word *nekroi* in the second clause of the verse plainly refers to those who are absolutely and literally dead, there is no shadow of a reason for taking *nekrōn* in the first clause as being an adjective with the substantives *sōmatōn* [bodies] or *ergōn* [works] omitted, *nor for making it equivalent to the condensation of such phrases as the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, or the abolishment of death, nor for taking the word as meaning those who are about to die, or metaphorically dead.*⁸⁹

Foschini’s comments with respect to Theory 5 also have relevance here:

If Paul had wished to use an elliptical form, he should have omitted “for the dead” and not the other words, because he was speaking directly of the resurrection; again, when he says “resurrection,” “of the dead” is implied, while when he mentioned the “dead,” “the “resurrection” is not necessarily implied; finally, the style of the discourse would

⁸⁸ Hull, 43.

⁸⁹ Horsley, 401, emphasis added.

have called for the suppression of the word “dead” rather than of the word “resurrection,” since in 15:29 *nekros* is used twice, but the word *anastasis* [resurrection] is not found at all.⁹⁰

54 is a lot of alternate theories, deriving from many times and many places. Substantial erudite creativity has been applied in crafting them. But none of them makes better sense of the Greek of 1 Corinthians 15:29 than the majority contemporary scholarly reading of the passage as referring to a practice of vicarious baptism.

Conclusion

I began this investigation by reviewing the structure of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15. I then undertook a detailed analysis of the Greek text of verse 29, followed by a lexical analysis of its three key terms in the expression “baptized for the dead,” showing that the most natural reading is that of vicarious baptism, which is indeed the majority contemporary scholarly reading. Next I examined why there is resistance to that reading. In an excursus, I explored the question of how many alternate theories there are. I then presented a catalog of 54 alternative theories, and followed that with a broad linguistic analysis of the types of strategies employed over the centuries to avoid the natural reading of the verse. I conclude that none of the proffered alternative explanations is superior to the vicarious baptism reading, and therefore that the Prophet Joseph Smith’s reading of the passage to refer to such a practice was indeed correct.

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Appendix A — Synopsis of Theories

This paper takes the position that the correct reading of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is one of vicarious baptism, which may be synopsized as follows:

What shall they do who are baptized...

that the benefit may be conveyed to a dead unbaptized person.

90 Foschini, 18.

The 54 alternate theories summarized in this article are similarly synopsisized as a sort of index for the reader below, divided into the same five categories and with the same identifying numbers as given in the article proper:

Metaphorical Uses

What shall they do who...

1. perform the works of penance for relief of the dead.
2. experience sadness over the dead.
3. perform the labors and experience the dangers of the apostolate.
4. endure persecutions in order to hasten the parousia.
5. identify baptism with martyrdom.
6. are overwhelmed with miseries and calamities.
7. are immersed in sufferings for testifying of the resurrection.
8. in order to convert those dead in sin.
9. are being destroyed.

Ritual Ablutions Other than Baptism

What shall they do who...

10. wash the dead.
11. perform ritual ablutions before their sacrifices for the dead.
12. perform ritual ablutions because of contact with the dead.
13. perform vicarious purification for those who died in impurity.
14. perform ceremonies and rites analogous to baptism.

Secular Uses

What shall they do who...

15. get wet while washing the dead.
16. dive into the sea after the bodies of the shipwrecked.

Regular Baptism

(i.e., baptism for the benefit of the one being baptized)

What shall they do who are baptized...

17. for dead bodies.
18. having already received the Holy Spirit.
19. for the purpose of mortifying the passions.

20. on their deathbeds.
21. since baptism would otherwise be useless after death.
22. by which we gain nothing beyond what the unbaptized have.
23. by which we take the place of the Christians who have died.
24. by which the names of dead Christians are received.
25. over the sepulchers of the martyrs.
26. for Christ.
27. for Christ and the other dead.
28. on account of the dead.
29. for fanciful reasons.
30. to free us from the fear of death.
31. in order to obtain the kingdom of the blessed.
32. merely to be numbered among the dead?
33. into the faith which the dead held.
34. to wash away our dead works and sins.
35. to profess ourselves as dead to the world.
36. in the hope of blessings to be received after we are numbered with the dead.
37. in the belief of a resurrection of the dead.
38. to renew the promises which God makes to quick and dead.
39. so as to belong to a mere kingdom of the dead.
40. though so many martyrs have died.
41. for the sake of mortal sins.
42. after witnessing the deaths of the martyrs.
43. believing and expecting the resurrection of the dead.
44. for their dying bodies.
45. with a view to being joined to their dead loved ones.
46. on account of the sway of deceased Christians/living apostles.
47. on account of the [resurrection of the] dead.

Variations on Vicarious Baptism (i.e., baptism for the benefit of others)

What shall they do who are baptized...

48. for the dead for eschatological (and not sacramental) reasons.

49. for the dead sought vicariously (i.e., baptism of corpses sought by the deceased's relatives).
50. on behalf of but not in substitution for the dead.
51. to hasten the Parousia and as an aid for the dead.
52. as the defense of the dead, and of their faith in the resurrection.
53. as the baptized having something to do for the dead.
54. as a pagan syncretism.

Appendix B – Survey of Translations

It is one thing to propose a creative theory about baptism for the dead and publish it in a journal article, a book, or a commentary. Actual translations, however, tend to be more conservative, since in theory they are meant to satisfy the test of time. How has this verse been rendered in modern English translations? Set forth below is the rendering of this verse from the 46 English translations found at the Bible Gateway (biblegateway.com). Although this is not an exhaustive collection of modern translations, it is an extensive one.

Of all these translations, only two go out of their way to avoid a vicarious baptism wording. The Geneva Bible has “Else what shall they do which are baptized for dead? if the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for dead?” In the first and third occurrences of “dead,” the Geneva Bible does not translate the article “the,” which is clearly present in the Greek. From the accompanying notes it is apparent that this is somehow meant to avoid a vicarious baptism reading of the verse, although the precise import of what this translation is supposed to be saying is simply unclear. The notes to the Geneva Bible generally reflected the strong influence of Calvinism and the Protestant Reformation generally.

The second example where the translation has been skewed to avoid a vicarious baptism reading is the Names of God Bible: “However, people are baptized because the dead will come back to life. What will they do? If the dead can’t come back to life, why do people get baptized as if they can come back to life?”

Note that the Expanded Bible gives a straightforward rendering of the verse, but then in a note says “It is unclear what this practice was or whether Paul approves or disapproves.” The Orthodox Jewish Bible uses some unfamiliar Hebrew terms: *tevilah* is proselyte baptism, and *mesim* is the dead, deceased ones, so with that understanding the translation is consistent with a vicarious baptism reading. The Revised Standard

Version Catholic Edition has the following explanatory note: “Apparently a custom of vicarious baptism for those who had died without it. Paul mentions it without approving it.” This is similar to the NET note quoted at note 18 of the main article.

Accordingly, only two out of 46 modern English translations (about 4.3%) skew the wording of the verse in some way so as to avoid a vicarious baptism reading.

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
21st Century King James Version	Else, what shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?
American Standard Version	Else what shall they do that are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?
Amplified Bible	Otherwise, what do people mean by being [themselves] baptized in behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?
Common English Bible	Otherwise, what are those who are getting baptized for the dead doing? If the dead aren't raised, then why are they being baptized for them?
Complete Jewish Bible	Were it otherwise, what would the people accomplish who are immersed on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not actually raised, why are people immersed for them?
Contemporary English Version	If the dead are not going to be raised to life, what will people do who are being baptized for them? Why are they being baptized for those dead people?
Darby Translation	Since what shall the baptised for the dead do if [those that are] dead rise not at all? why also are they baptised for them?
Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition	Otherwise what shall they do that are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not again at all? why are they then baptized for them?

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
Easy-To-Read Version	If no one will ever be raised from death, then what will the people do who are baptized for those who have died? If the dead are never raised, then why are people baptized for them?
English Standard Version	Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?
English Standard Version Anglicised	Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?
Expanded Bible	If the dead are never raised, what will people do who are being baptized for the dead [^c it is unclear what this practice was or whether Paul approves or disapproves]? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people being baptized for them?
1599 Geneva Bible	<p>²⁹ [a]Else what shall they do which are baptized [^b]for dead? if the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for dead?</p> <p>Footnotes:</p> <p>1 Corinthians 15:29 The fifth argument taken of the end of Baptism, to wit, because that they which are baptized, are baptized for dead, that is to say, that they may have a remedy against death because that Baptism is a token of regeneration.</p> <p>1 Corinthians 15:29 They that are baptized, to this end and purpose, that death may be put out in them, or to rise again from the dead, whereof baptism is a seal.</p>
God's Word Translation	However, people are baptized because the dead will come back to life. What will they do? If the dead can't come back to life, why do people get baptized as if they can come back to life?
Good News Translation	Now, what about those people who are baptized for the dead? What do they hope to accomplish? If it is true, as some claim, that the dead are not raised to life, why are those people being baptized for the dead?

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
Holman Christian Standard Bible	Otherwise what will they do who are being baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, then why are people baptized for them?
J.B. Phillips New Testament	Further, you should consider this, that if there is to be no resurrection what is the point of some of you being baptised for the dead by proxy? Why should you be baptised for dead bodies?
Jubilee Bible 2000	Else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?
King James Version	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?
Authorized (King James) Version UK	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?
Lexham English Bible	Otherwise, why do they do <i>it</i> , those who are being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why indeed are they being baptized on behalf of them?
Living Bible	If the dead will not come back to life again, then what point is there in people being baptized for those who are gone? Why do it unless you believe that the dead will someday rise again?
The Message	Why do you think people offer themselves to be baptized for those already in the grave? If there's no chance of resurrection for a corpse, if God's power stops at the cemetery gates, why do we keep doing things that suggest he's going to clean the place out someday, pulling everyone up on their feet alive?
Mounce Reverse-Interlinear New Testament	Otherwise, what will they accomplish, those who are being baptized for the dead? If the dead are not actually raised, why then are they being baptized for them?

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
Names of God Bible	However, people are baptized because the dead will come back to life. What will they do? If the dead can't come back to life, why do people get baptized as if they can come back to life?
New American Standard Bible	Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?
New Century Version	If the dead are never raised, what will people do who are being baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people being baptized for them?
New English Translation	Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, then why are they baptized for them?
New International Reader's Version	Suppose no one rises from the dead. Then what will people do who are baptized for the dead? Suppose the dead are not raised at all. Then why are people baptized for them?
New International Version	Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?
New International Version – UK	Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?
New King James Version	Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?
New Life Version	What good will it do people if they are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised, why are people baptized for them?
New Living Translation	If the dead will not be raised, what point is there in people being baptized for those who are dead? Why do it unless the dead will someday rise again?

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
New Revised Standard Version	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?
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised	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?
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Catholic Edition	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?
New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition	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?
Orthodox Jewish Bible	Otherwise, what will they do, the ones being given tevilah on behalf of the dead? If the Mesim really are not raised, why indeed are they given tevilah on behalf of the Mesim?
Revised Standard Version	Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?
Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition	<p>Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?^[a]</p> <p>Footnotes:</p> <p>15.29 Apparently a custom of vicarious baptism for those who had died without it. Paul mentions it without approving it.</p>
The Voice	<p><i>You have probably heard that some people are undergoing ritual cleansings of baptism^[a] for the dead. Why are they doing that? If the dead are not going to be raised, then why are people being baptized for them?</i></p> <p>Footnotes:</p> <p>15:29 Literally, immersions, to show repentance</p>

Translation	Text of 1 Corinthians 15:29
World English Bible	Or else what will they do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead aren't raised at all, why then are they baptized for the dead?
Worldwide English New Testament	Another thing, what good is it for people to be baptized for dead people? If dead people are not raised, why are some people baptized for them?
Wycliffe Bible	Else what shall they do, that be baptized for dead men, if in no wise dead men rise again [if in all manner dead men rise not again]? whereto [also] be they baptized for them?
Young's Literal Translation	Seeing what shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? why also are they baptized for the dead?

