

THE MYSTERIES AND 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29:
COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXTUAL EXEGESIS

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Introduction

The Mysteries of the Graeco-Roman world have fascinated historians for generations, especially garnering attention from students of the New Testament and Christian origins.¹ Despite the high volume of work on the topic, the secondary literature shows significant variation in the understanding of afterlife in the Mysteries and in the application of such information to the tasks of New Testament studies. Although progress and clarification have been accomplished on many fronts, there is no final word on major issues: the nature of the Mysteries' beliefs about the afterlife; the specifics of the relationship, if any exists, between the Mysteries and Christianity on this point or any other; and which methodological principles should apply or take precedence in making such inquiries. Further, a pre-occupation with questions of derivation and a failure to account for local context has hindered the use of the Mysteries in the interpretation of specific NT texts.

The goal of this paper is to propose methodological principles and to summarize the results of applying these principles to Corinth—including a study of the afterlife beliefs connected to the Mysteries at Corinth and the use of that information in the interpretation and

¹ I count myself as one of the most recent students enraptured by the Mysteries. This paper is a brief summary of important topics from my dissertation, “The Mysteries, Resurrection, and First Corinthians 15: Comparative Methodology and Contextual Exegesis” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2014).

exegesis of First Corinthians 15. The first section, then, includes methodological principles for comparative studies involving the Mysteries and the NT. A brief second section summarizes the afterlife beliefs found in the myths, rituals, and other sources connected to the Mysteries of Demeter and of Isis. Third is a comparison of these Mysteries with the overall argument of First Corinthians 15 and the impact of that comparison on our understanding of the Corinthians' denial of the resurrection of the dead. The final section focuses on the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead found in 1 Cor 15:29 and how information from the Mysteries is helpful in evaluating interpretive options.

Methodological Principles

A scholar's approach to the Mysteries and their interaction with Christianity affects how the historical evidence is evaluated and prioritized. Because this task is fraught with difficulties due to the nature of the sources and the complexity of comparative studies in general, methodological considerations become all the more important.

Even a cursory review of the secondary literature on this topic shows that comparisons between the Mysteries and Christianity have often been used as weapons in the battle to either delegitimize or defend the claims of the NT and Christianity. The discovery of dependence or the lack thereof has been the ultimate goal with the former proving Christianity's derivative nature and the latter proving its originality and, for some, its supernatural origin. Observing how this overall purpose has led to methodological mishaps and the possibility of tainted conclusions on both sides of the argument suggests the adoption of more appropriate goals in comparative studies. In light of this, the methodological principles suggested below are based on the ultimate purpose of improved *interpretation* of the claims of Christianity rather than a defense of or attack against those claims. What this means is that a determination of

dependence or other relationships is not the primary question but rather is part of a bigger picture.² The purpose is not only to discover the precise nature of any connection between the NT and the Mysteries on a particular topic, but also to better interpret the message of each in its historical, cultural, and religious context. As a NT investigation, the interpretation of specific passages will be the final goal, but that goal can only be reached by first accurately describing the beliefs of the Mysteries, then determining similarities and differences, and finally evaluating the significance of those for interpretation.³

General Principles

Three principles should apply generally to a comparative study, whether looking at a source from the Mysteries or from Christianity. First, there is a need to focus on the time period of early Christianity. This means using sources no later than the second century CE, with preference given to those that pre-date the specific NT text in question. If a source is dated later than the text with which it is being compared, evidence should be provided which suggests it may point back to the time of early Christianity.⁴ Second, the point of view, genre, and purpose

² This follows Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil, *Studies of the New Testament and Its World*, ed. John Barclay, Joel Marcus, and John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 5-6.

³ Most of the individual principles here certainly do not originate with me, but have been gathered together after an analysis of the methodological principles of other works, especially: Bruce M. Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, *New Testament Tools and Studies*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1-24; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, JLCRS, vol. 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴ Wedderburn discusses the date of sources and the influence of the Mysteries at various points in his monograph: A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 99, 113, 138-9, 162. His main point is that inscriptional evidence shows the Mysteries flourishing in the first century with a growing degree of popularity that leads to their second century influence. An analysis of the interpretation of the Mysteries reveals little evidence for significant change in the understanding of the Mysteries from the first to second centuries such that there is nothing "which would justify us in fencing off the first century from the second" (p. 139). Neoplatonist interpretation in the third century brought new development as the Mysteries were used in these philosophical discussions, but even at this point there is some continuity with earlier interpretation of the Mysteries. Wedderburn's point is not that every

of each source should be evaluated in order to assess how these elements affect the meaning, interpretation, and reception of the source. Third, the discovery of broad themes and structural patterns in sources is more likely to be useful than the analysis of smaller units of language (specific words or lexical and grammatical units). A macro-level look allows for the analysis of arguments and ideas within their overall theological and historical context.⁵

Principles Related to the Mysteries

Several principles assist in addressing the numerous challenges in the study of the Mysteries.⁶ The most important step for a study such as this is to give the Mysteries a level of priority in that they are examined first, with a serious attempt to leave thoughts of comparison aside. This means there is an intention to understand the cults in their own words rather than in Christian terms or ideas.⁷ For an examination of afterlife beliefs specifically, when looking at a particular idea in the Mysteries, the question should not first be “Is this resurrection?” but rather simply “What is this?” It may seem a subtle difference, but it is an important one when the

second century source for the Mysteries accurately describes the situation in the first century, but that there is some continuity between the two such that second century sources should be considered and evaluated on a case by case basis. This continuity is less evident in the third century with changes in interpretation of the Mysteries, making those sources less helpful in comparisons. For example, though Apuleius’ descriptions of the Mysteries of Isis in *The Golden Ass/Metamorphoses* are from the second century, earlier sources show continuity with this description and attest the growing popularity of the cult before the source was penned (p. 99-102). Wedderburn’s entire chapter on the historical development of the interpretation of the Mysteries is helpful on this point (pp. 113-39).

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 2-4.

⁶ Challenges in studying the Mysteries include the relative dearth of written sources, the secrecy surrounding the private initiation ceremonies, and the variation that exists between different Mysteries. Also challenging is taking into account the fluctuation within a particular cult at different time periods and/or locations. One must not assume these religious expressions are monolithic or picture them as systemized and organized religions.

⁷ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Carl Newell Jackson Lectures (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 3; Klauck, *Religious Context*, 5; S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 9-19.

primary goal is to fully understand the intricacies of a particular teaching in the Mysteries in order to make better judgments about comparisons later.

Four additional principles help to meet this goal. First, it is necessary to investigate both literary and non-literary sources for the Mysteries and to search specifically for stories, practices, and illustrations related to death and afterlife. Second, there is a need to recognize diversity of practice and thought among the Mysteries. This will require a close look at each individual cult's view of afterlife and will avoid any assumption that the Mysteries can be understood as a monolithic group. Related to this is the need to recognize the possibility of variation *within* individual cults, especially in different locales and contexts.⁸ To address this, the current study is limited to Mysteries practiced in Corinth. A broad look at the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone and of Isis in the wider Graeco-Roman world provides a general overview of practices and beliefs, and then a closer look at these cults and their practices in Corinth gives a specific historical context. Third, both the myths and the rites of a particular cult should be studied in an attempt to understand the connection between the two.

Principles Related to Comparisons

Only once the Mysteries and their view of the afterlife are researched and described can comparisons with early Christian thought begin. Three main principles should guide this portion of the work.

First, similarities and differences in thought and structural pattern should be catalogued before investigating relationship. This requires careful identification of exactly which

⁸ R. E. DeMaris, "Demeter in Roman Corinth: Local Development in a Mediterranean Religion," *Numen* 42, no. 2 (1995): 105; Jorunn Økland, "Ceres, Koph, and Cultural Complexity: Divine Personality Definitions and Human Worshippers in Roman Corinth," in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*, ed. Steven J. Friesen, Daniel N. Schowalter, and James C. Walters, NovTSup, ed. M. M. Mitchell and D. P. Moessner, vol. 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 219.

events, teachings, or beliefs are similar or different as well as the true nature and extent of these similarities or differences.⁹ Such observations assume careful exegesis of relevant NT texts which takes into account the grammatical, historical, literary, and theological context of such passages.

Second, the significance and impact of similarities and differences needs careful evaluation. Where similarities exist, strict dependence or direct borrowing must not be automatically assumed, but the possibility of a relationship or connection should be investigated further.¹⁰ When differences are evident, it is necessary to take care in identifying a theme or event as absolutely unique or new, taking care to avoid the influence of personal bias and providing sufficient proof for such a claim by defining the phrase in exact terms.¹¹ An analysis of the significance of similarities and differences should then lead to conclusions about relationships and connections between the Mysteries and Christianity. This means distinguishing between a possible genealogical dependence, adaptive borrowing, analogical relationship, or any other possible connection;¹² providing adequate historical plausibility for any such relationship; and describing as accurately and thoroughly as possible the nature and impact of such a relationship.¹³ It is important at this stage to recognize varying levels of confidence which reflect

⁹ Arthur Darby Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 58-9; Hugo Rahner, "The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries," in *The Mysteries: Papers From the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. Ralph Manheim, vol. 2, Bollingen Series, vol. 30 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 355.

¹⁰ Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover, 1956), xviii.

¹¹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 38-42. Smith's treatment leaves much to be discussed, and though his arguments are not without fault, his discussion rightly highlights the concern for methodological caution on this point.

¹² Metzger, "Methodology," 9-11.

¹³ Klauck, *Religious Context*, 5-6. Wedderburn focuses on historical plausibility in his work: Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 158-62.

the reality of the historical task and the nature of the evidence. This is best accomplished by identifying conclusions as either possible, likely, or probable based on the strength of the evidence.

Third, the information gleaned from comparisons should be utilized in the contextual exegesis of NT passages. How do the afterlife beliefs of the Mysteries impact the development of Christianity in a particular location? Specifically in 1 Cor 15:29, how do they influence the Corinthians' practice of baptism for the dead, and how does this influence Paul's arguments concerning resurrection and eschatology?

Finally, it is important in any historical inquiry to be prepared to reframe questions as the evidence leads. For example, a study on the afterlife may begin with the question of whether or not the Mysteries include a concept of resurrection as found in early Christianity. As the work progresses, the answer might be found to be no, but other significant similarities concerning afterlife may be discovered that deserve our inquiries and study and that impact our understanding of the interpretation of both Christianity and the Mysteries. As was stated above, it is interpretation of texts and an understanding of context that takes priority, and our methodology should reflect this goal.

The Mysteries of Demeter and of Isis

The methodology outlined above calls for a thorough study of the Mysteries, but for our purposes here, the results must be summarized in brief. A close look at the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone and those of Isis gives insight into the afterlife expectations of initiates.¹⁴ Eleusinian initiation was widely understood to provide assurances for

¹⁴ The choice of these two Mysteries is governed by the popularity of their cults in the Corinthian region and the presence of a dying and returning god/goddess in their mythology.

death and beyond. Initiates expected a pleasant and enjoyable experience in Hades because Demeter's power and love extended into the afterlife.¹⁵ Isis also had power in Hades and initiates expected to live under her care, worshipping her in the afterlife.¹⁶ While a virtuous life may have been expected of initiates, participating in initiation rituals was the key to obtaining these benefits in the afterlife. The power of the Mystery deities over Hades and their love and protection for those connected to them through initiation was an important element of this expectation—bodily resurrection and identifying with or following the experiences of the “dying and returning” deity was not.

¹⁵ There are numerous sources for this which receive attention in the fourth chapter of my dissertation. Several themes in the *Hymn to Demeter* (approximately 600 BCE) suggest initiates receive some benefit in the afterlife: Hades' description of honors for Persephone (lines 367-9), the blessings listed for initiates (lines 480-83), and Demeter's newfound sympathy for the grief that humanity feels at the separation brought by death. Two reliefs found near Eleusis confirm the importance of Persephone's dual role in the Mysteries and in Hades. For discussion and pictures see C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series LXV: Archetypal Images in Greek Religion, vol. 4 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 151-3. Many ancient sources confirm this expectation of blessings and benefits in the afterlife for initiates into the Eleusinian Mysteries, suggesting this was a widespread and persistent understanding of the Mysteries. Here they are listed with approximate dates in parentheses: a fragment of Pindar (date for Pindar: 480 BCE) found in Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 3.3.17(2); Aristophanes *Frogs* 454-6 (400 BCE); a fragment of Sophocles (date for Sophocles: fifth century BCE) found in Plutarch *Mor.* 21F; Plato *Rep.* 362D–366B (fourth century BCE), Isocrates *Paneg.* 28–29 (380 BCE); Cicero *Leg.* 2.14.35-36 (first century BCE); Pausanias *Descr.* 10.31.9, 11 (170 CE, but describing paintings from 450 BCE); Diogenes Laertius *Vitae* 6.39 (third century CE, but quoting a philosopher from fourth century BCE); and *Pal. Anth.* 11.42 (tenth century CE, but the epigram is attributed to Crinagoras who lived and worked at the turn of the eras).

¹⁶ The evidence for Isis is less plentiful. Plutarch records the mythology connected to Isis in *Moralia* 355D–358E and includes a description of a burial rite that implies a connection between initiation and some benefit in the afterlife (352B-C; the dead are clothed in special garments that indicate they take with them the sacred writings imprinted on their souls at initiation). Apuleius includes several references to Isis' power over Hades (*Metam.* 11.5, 15, 21, 25), and Isis promises her followers will worship her in the Elysian Fields and see her reigning in Hades (11.6).

An analysis of the evidence at Corinth shows a long history of the Mysteries of Demeter in the region.¹⁷ For the first century CE, there is evidence of a focus on the afterlife.¹⁸ A gravestone at Corinth specifically links Persephone to benefits in the afterlife,¹⁹ and the discovery of curse tablets at the sanctuary of Demeter indicates a ritual intending to impact the afterlife experiences of the dead.²⁰ Archaeological evidence for Isis at Corinth gives no information about afterlife beliefs, but the second-century evidence from Apuleius describes a vibrant cult at a port in the Corinthian region, including a clear connection between initiation and hope for a pleasant afterlife in the Elysian Fields. The evidence from another local Mystery Cult

¹⁷ Pausanias mentions the sanctuary to Demeter on the slope leading up to the Acrocorinth (*Descr.* 2.4.7), and extensive archaeological work has been completed at the site under the supervision of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. A series of monographs published by the school presents the ongoing analysis of the evidence (see their series on Corinth, volumes 18.1–6). The sanctuary was a popular site by the sixth century BCE, was in use shortly after the re-colonization of the city in 44 BCE, and continued to be used until the fourth century CE. Elizabeth G. Pemberton, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: The Greek Pottery*, Corinth, vol. 18.1 (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1989), 1-2; Ronald S. Stroud, “The Sanctuary of Demeter on Acrocorinth in the Roman period,” in *The Corinthia in the Roman Period*, ed. Timothy E. Gregory, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, vol. 8 (Ann Arbor, MI: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 1993), 67; Nancy Bookidis and Ronald S. Stroud, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: Topography and Architecture*, Corinth, vol. 18.3 (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1997), 438-9.

¹⁸ Plutarch tells a story that connects the Mysteries at Corinth to the basic mythology of the abduction of Persephone (*Tim.* 7–8).

¹⁹ John Harvey Kent, *The Inscriptions: 1926–1950*, Corinth, vol. 8.3 (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1966), 117-18. The inscription is numbered 300 and is difficult to date because it was brought to the museum independently rather than excavated by archaeologists. Kent includes it with others dated in a range from 44 BCE to 267 CE. The inscription suggests that the deceased woman has obtained honors in Hades and as such is now living in the presence of Persephone: ... ἄδε τέτευχεν πρώτας εὐκόλποι καὶ παρὰ [Π]ερσεφόναι.

²⁰ The appearance of lead curse tablets in the Roman era suggests the practice of depositing these tablets became part of the ritual practices in this era. A large number of lamps were also found in the building, suggesting nighttime rituals. The tablets were folded or rolled, fixed with a nail, and all include inscriptions addressed to a deity connected to the underworld (Demeter, Hermes, Moirai). All but one of the tablets was written in Greek, and all include curses against women. The combination of the tablets, lamps, and libation vessels found together in this building, along with its location separate from the main temples of the sanctuary, suggest it may have been used for more chthonic aspects and rituals of the cult. Bookidis and Stroud, *Topography*, 435; Nancy Bookidis and Joan E. Fisher, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on Acrocorinth Preliminary Report IV: 1969–1970,” *Hesperia* 41, no. 3 (1972): 299-305.

at Corinth (Melikertes-Palaimon) also suggests an emphasis on the afterlife and the world of the dead.²¹

Comparing the Mysteries and First Corinthians 15

The following chart illustrates the comparison of First Corinthians 15 with the Mysteries celebrated at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 15	Mysteries of Demeter/Persephone and Isis
<u>Similarities:</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hope in and after death • the promise of existence beyond death • the promise of benefits after death 	
<u>Differences:</u>	
<p><u>Nature of the hope:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • victory over death through resurrection from the dead • bodily resurrection/transformation at a future time results in incorruptible bodies no longer subject to death • death personified as an enemy whose defeat is accomplished through the resurrection of the dead • resurrection steals power from and reverses the power of death 	<p><u>Nature of the hope:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hope in death because of benefits in Hades • death immediately followed by afterlife in Hades—the common destiny of all dead • a disembodied existence (though often described with embodied language) • initiates enjoy a pleasant experience and the protection of deity, thus there is comfort in death.
<p><u>Key to Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bodily resurrection as the key with Christ’s resurrection as pattern and promise • resurrection is key to inheriting the kingdom of God • emphasizes Christ’s power over death through resurrection 	<p><u>Key to Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing/participating in initiation ritual as the key • ritual brings one under power of goddess; her protection and love then continues in Hades²² • emphasizes deity’s power within the realm of the dead
<p><u>Connection to rising/returning deity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ’s resurrection is a pledge/promise of the future experience of believers • his experience is the same type that followers will experience • Christ’s resurrection deals with sin 	<p><u>Connection to rising/returning deity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mythology explains deities’ power and influence in Hades and their concern, care, and sympathy for initiates • protection of the deity/deities in that place provides benefit

²¹ The cult of Melikertes-Palaimon was connected to the Isthmian games near Corinth. The funerary nature of the rites, the use of a sacrificial pit, and an underground chamber all suggest an emphasis on the afterlife and the underworld. Elizabeth Gebhard, “Rites for Melikertes-Palaimon in the Early Roman Corinthia,” in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen, HTS, ed. Gene McGarry, vol. 53 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 165-203.

²² The ancient sources listed above support Wedderburn on this point (Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 331). The Mysteries of Demeter and of Isis emphasize initiates coming under the care and protection of the grieving goddess through ritual rather than identifying with the dying and returning deities of Persephone and Osiris. At Corinth especially, evidence for Osiris or references to his death and return is lacking.

The comparison suggests that while the Mysteries are not a source for Paul's teachings in First Corinthians 15, they *are* likely one source for the problems initiating the discussion about resurrection. When the Corinthians claimed "There is no resurrection of the dead," (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 29), they were denying a return to bodily life following death (vv. 35-49), and as such they did not expect to follow Jesus in his experience of death followed by resurrection (vv. 20-23). The Corinthians neither made the connection between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the dead (vv. 12-19) nor understood the incorruptible nature of the raised body and its necessity for entering the kingdom of God (vv. 42-44, 50, 53).

The Corinthians' denial involved several elements that Paul found erroneous, and their position was most likely the result of a complicated and unconscious process of combining the teachings they heard and/or misunderstood from Paul with their own previous notions of death and afterlife. They may have envisioned a disembodied existence beyond death that included a continued indwelling of the Spirit.²³ They simply did not believe a bodily resurrection was necessary to continue to receive benefits beyond death. This sketch of the Corinthian's view on resurrection shows them following ideas more familiar to the Mysteries—that benefits in the afterlife do not require bodily resurrection and that belief in Christ's resurrection does not necessarily lead to a similar experience for dead believers. In response to this, Paul argues bodily resurrection is necessary for any benefit or hope after death and is the only option for life after death—without it there simply is no afterlife (vv. 18-19, 32). The complexity of the issue means

²³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYBC, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 560.

the Mysteries were not the only influence on the Corinthians' position, but the evidence suggests their ideas on the afterlife were an important part of this local context.

First Corinthians 15:29

The struggle to identify the practice of the baptism for the dead mentioned in 1 Cor 15:29 is unavoidable due to the nature of the argument in vv. 29-34. Paul speaks here of specific situations and practices, and the section is thus by nature difficult to interpret for those of us removed from that context.²⁴ Paul resumes an earlier discussion on the consequences of denying resurrection and turns to those consequences related to consistency in practice and lifestyle.²⁵ The brief mention of baptism for the dead in v. 29 includes no further explanation, giving the impression that the audience readily recognized the custom and would have understood the point of the argument.²⁶

How this text functions in the chapter is not in question. Whatever the custom is, it is not compatible with a denial of the resurrection of the dead. If there is no resurrection, baptism for the dead is impossible to explain and has no benefit.²⁷ The interpretive questions involve the nature and meaning of the practice, whether Paul is affirming it or merely utilizing it in his argument here, and how such a custom fits in Paul's theology. In order to streamline the discussion of this complex issue, the text and issues will be reviewed, then the arguments of four commentators will be analyzed.

²⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 762.

²⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1240.

²⁶ R. E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *JBL* 114, no. 4 (1995): 662.

²⁷ Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 780; Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1240; Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 763.

The Text and the Issues

With no other mention of a similar practice in the New Testament, Paul's short description of baptism for the dead in 1 Cor 15:29 gives little help in deciphering its meaning.²⁸ As he has done elsewhere in First Corinthians 15, Paul asks rhetorical questions to communicate the consequences of denying the resurrection: if there is no resurrection what is the benefit of such a practice?²⁹ The text and translation of v. 29 follow: Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν [οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν]; εἰ ἄλλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, [τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν]; (Otherwise, what will those accomplish *who are baptized for the dead*? If the dead are not raised at all, *why then be baptized for them?*).

The major issue involves the meaning of the phrase οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, and the difficulty lies in interpreting this phrase in a way that understands the words and grammar accurately, fits the literary and historical context, and coheres with Paul's teachings on baptism.

- Βαπτίζω may be functioning in its normal NT usage as a reference to the Christian practice of washing related to conversion and entrance into the Christian community or to a different type of ritual altogether.
- The preposition ὑπὲρ may be used here with its most common definition, marking the practice as one done in the interest of or for the benefit of the dead (translated “for, in behalf of, for the sake of”).³⁰ Alternatively it may be functioning with a causal sense, marking the practice as one done because of the dead (translated “because of, for the sake of, for”).³¹ In this case, baptism is motivated by the dead rather than done for their benefit.
- Finally, the dead may refer to various groups: recently deceased loved ones or family members; influential Christians, apostles, or teachers; or believers who have died before experiencing baptism.

²⁸ Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians*, 578.

²⁹ The future tense of ποιέω in v. 29 parallels the question in v. 32 (τί μοι τὸ ὄφελος) and thus asks about the benefit of such a practice in light of the Corinthians' denial. Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 780

³⁰ This is the first definition in BDAG for ὑπὲρ with a genitive object. BDAG s.v. ὑπὲρ.

³¹ This is the second definition in BDAG for ὑπὲρ with a genitive object. BDAG s.v. ὑπὲρ.

Four Options

Four interpretations stand out as viable options. The first suggests a vicarious or proxy baptism that gives some benefit to the dead. The second and third options see ὑπέρ marking the motivation for or cause of the baptism. The final option is unique because of its focus on the archaeological evidence at Corinth and its interpretation of baptism as a funerary ritual.

1. Vicarious Baptism

the practice of baptism:	The baptism of living believers for others who have died. ³²
ὑπέρ	Vicarious, “on behalf of” and “for the benefit of”
identity of “the dead”	Possibly believers who died without being baptized, ³³ or deceased family members or friends. ³⁴ (most commentators admit the specifics of their identity is difficult to identify)
proponents	Fee, Fitzmyer, Horsley, Wedderburn
further explanation	Paul is neither promoting nor approving the custom but rather using it as part of his argument for the resurrection.

The advantages to this interpretation include the “normal” or “natural” sense with which it understands the individual terms—each functioning in the way that is most common in the NT and in Paul.³⁵ The idea of vicarious baptism also fits the wider and local cultural context. It coheres with Graeco-Roman ideas about the importance of ancestral spirits, the strong belief in

³² Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians*, 577-81.

³³ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 767; Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians*, 578; Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 288-9.

³⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, ANTC, ed. Victor Paul Furnish (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 206-7; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 305.

³⁵ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 766; Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians*, 578. Fee is correct to observe that without the historical and theological problems that arise, no other alternative would likely be suggested (p 764).

the power of ritual, and the offering of sacrifices for the dead.³⁶ More specifically it fits the Corinthian church's tendency toward syncretism and the general concern for the dead in Corinth.³⁷

Three main problems arise with this interpretation. The first is historical. There is no precedence in the NT, in the early church, or in the pagan world for this practice,³⁸ though this is true for each of the four interpretations mentioned here. The second is theological. In the context, Paul is presenting baptism for the dead alongside his own sufferings—both as appropriate actions in light of the resurrection of the dead.³⁹ It is difficult to imagine Paul condoning a view of baptism that envisions it accomplishing something for dead believers.⁴⁰ The third is contextual. This practice assumes there is some deficiency on the part of the dead, while all other references to dead in chap. 15 affirm their future resurrection and glory as certain.

³⁶ Witherington, *Conflict*, 293-4. Witherington mentions several of these practices: calling forth the spirits of one's ancestors at their tombs, gathering at the tomb on the anniversary of a loved one's death, making sacrifices on behalf of the dead, and having meals and feasts near tombs as if eating with the dead.

³⁷ Collins, *1 Corinthians*, 556-7.

³⁸ Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 781.

³⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 781.

⁴⁰ Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1246.

2. Baptism because of the Dead

the practice of baptism:	“Normal” baptism of conversion undertaken because of the influence of someone who has died. ⁴¹
ὑπέρ	Causal, “because of”
identity of “the dead”	A deceased person or persons with some influence on the one being baptized.
proponents	Thiselton
further explanation	The general idea is that the death of faithful Christians leads to the conversion of survivors. The main motivation for the baptism is a desire to be reunited with believing loved ones who have died and is thus accompanied by a belief in the resurrection of the dead.

The advantages to this view include its fit within the theological context of Paul’s view on baptism. It is Christian baptism in its normal sense, performed for the one participating in the ritual, but with a focus on the deceased’s influence on the conversion of the new believer. Thus, it is understandable as something Paul presents in a positive light. This view of baptism also fits the immediate literary context of vv. 29-34, as it is a practice clearly incompatible with a denial of the resurrection.

While this view eliminates the theological problems, it presents new ones. This interpretation of ὑπέρ and νέκρος fails to account for the literary and cultural contexts. While BDAG lists a causal nuance as an option for ὑπέρ, it is not the most common use in First Corinthians. Most other genitive uses in the epistle, including 15:3, mark interest or advantage.⁴² In the one case in the letter where ὑπέρ gives the cause or reason of the verb (10:30), the meaning is clearly indicated by the context.⁴³ In First Corinthians 15, νέκρος refers to all the

⁴¹ Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1248-9.

⁴² See 1 Cor 1:13; 4:6b; 11:24; 12:25; and 15:3.

⁴³ First Corinthians 10:30: εἰ ἐγὼ χάριτι μετέχω, τί βλασφημοῦμαι ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εὐχαριστῶ; (If I partake with thanks, why am I blasphemed *because of that* for which I give thanks?).

righteous who will be resurrected, and there is no evidence for this phrase referring to a specific person or group.⁴⁴

3. Baptism because of the Resurrection

the practice of baptism:	“Normal” baptism of conversion motivated by a desire to experience resurrection. ⁴⁵
ὕπερ	Causal/motivational, “on account of”
identity of “the dead”	Those who have died in Christ and expect resurrection after death.
proponents	Ciampa/Rosner
further explanation	Those who are being baptized are doing so because they have heard about the resurrection, they are concerned about the afterlife, and this provides their primary motivation for conversion and baptism. The promise of resurrection removes their fear of death.

The advantages of this view come from its careful attention to the context of chap. 15—especially in determining the identity of “the dead” in 15:29. Every use of νεκρός in chap. 15 connects this group to resurrection and identifies them as the righteous dead who are connected to Christ and who are certain to be raised in power and glory.⁴⁶

Many of the problems with Thiselton’s view also impact this option. While the causal use of ὑπερ is an option, it is not the usual sense in First Corinthians, and the vicarious or beneficiary use matches the cultural and religious context of Corinth. The problem of historical precedent or parallels remains an issue.

Both of the interpretations which take ὑπερ as causal are presented as readings that solve the theological problem created by a vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead. Neither,

⁴⁴ Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 784.

⁴⁵ Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 783-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 783-4. See the use of νεκρός in vv. 12, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29, 29, 32, 35, 42, and 52. The dead are connected to those who have fallen asleep in Christ (v. 21), are those for whom Christ’s resurrection is a firstfruit (v. 20), and are those who will be made alive in Christ (v. 22-3).

however, fits comfortably within Paul’s concept of baptism, and both would make more sense if 15:29 were a discussion of conversion or faith rather than the practice of baptism. Both interpretations connect the practice of baptism to receiving the promise of resurrection—a connection that is not present elsewhere in First Corinthians and is also foreign to Paul’s teachings on baptism.

4. Baptism as a Funerary Ritual

the practice of baptism:	A funerary ritual believed to help the deceased transition from life to death; a rite of passage. ⁴⁷
ὕπέρ	Vicarious
identity of “the dead”	Recently deceased members of the Christian community who were most in need of help with transition. ⁴⁸
proponents	DeMaris
further explanation	The church at Corinth joined their high view of baptism with a concern for the dead to create this “distinctively Corinthian practice.” ⁴⁹ This would have been a ritual to ensure a place for their deceased loved ones in the world of the dead and would give the community some closure on the loss, but would have no impact on the possibility of future resurrection. ⁵⁰ Paul’s point in 15:29 is to show them that such a practice should naturally include hope for the resurrection.

Advantages to this view come from its attention to both general Graeco-Roman beliefs and practices concerning the dead as well as specific evidence from Corinth.⁵¹ In general, death was understood as a journey from the world of the living to the realm of the dead—a journey that could be somewhat difficult and could be positively impacted by those still living.

⁴⁷ DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion,” 676.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 675.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 662.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 679.

⁵¹ Ibid., 662-76.

Several practices among both Greeks and Romans were believed to benefit the dead in some way and reflect a sense of obligation to honor the dead.⁵² Two sources mentioned above describe rituals for the dead in the context of the Mysteries: Plato's brief mention of rites for the dead possibly related to the Mysteries of Demeter and Plutarch's description of a burial practice connected to those of Isis.⁵³

In Corinth specifically, burial practices suggest consistency with these general ideas of obligation and practices on behalf of the dead. Also in Corinth was "an intense local preoccupation" with the dead and the world of the dead during the Roman period.⁵⁴ As evidence for this concern, DeMaris looks at archeological evidence from the worship of Melikertes and Demeter in and around Corinth.⁵⁵ The Corinthian church's practice of baptism as a funerary/transition rite then is natural part of a local phenomenon which placed significant emphasis on the dead and their world.

Three specific problems accompany this interpretation. As with the others, there is no historical precedence for this view in the NT or in the historical and cultural context. Despite all of DeMaris' archeological evidence (and mine!), there is nothing to suggest a baptismal funerary rite performed in order to assist the dead in their transition—either in Corinth or elsewhere, Christian or not. Second, this is not the way baptism functions elsewhere in First Corinthians,

⁵² Such practices include various funerary rituals, commemorations and festivals for the dead, and visiting graves and offering sacrifices or libations. *Ibid.*, 663-4.

⁵³ Plato *Rep.* 365A, Plutarch *Mor.* 352B-C.

⁵⁴ DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion," 672.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 666-70. See footnotes 21 and 22 above. For evidence of a focus on the dead in the worship of Melikertes, DeMaris points to the nocturnal rites, the sacrifice of black animals, and the round sanctuary. For evidence in the worship of Demeter, he points to the use of snakes in Roman-era pottery and buildings, the focus on Persephone, the curse tablets, and similarities between certain pottery found at the sanctuary and cremation urns.

where it marks entrance into the community as it does consistently in Pauline teaching.⁵⁶

DeMaris admits that his interpretation suggests a practice unique to Corinth and outside the normal function for baptism.⁵⁷ As was discussed above, there is some evidence of a focus on the underworld and the dead in the worship of Demeter and Persephone and of Melikertes at Corinth, but little can be known about the specifics of rituals at Corinth or their significance and meaning in the local cult.

Conclusions on 1 Cor 15:29

None of the four options for interpreting baptism for the dead in v. 29 are wholly satisfactory. The lack of details in the text and the absence of any precedence or parallel for the practice make this unavoidable. However, returning to the three issues related to this passage (the meaning of the baptism, the use of ὑπέρ, and the identity of the dead), the context of the Mysteries at Corinth can help in making some interpretive decisions.

With regards to the meaning and use of ὑπέρ, the causal interpretations presented by Thiselton and Ciampa/Rosner can be set aside as least likely. With the wider cultural concept of rituals done on behalf of the dead, a local focus on the world of the dead in the Mysteries, and the Corinthians' tendency toward syncretism, it seems unlikely that the preposition in this context would be used or understood without a vicarious notion.⁵⁸ That the baptism is one done by the living on behalf of, not because of, the dead is the best option.

⁵⁶ 1 Cor 1:12-17; 12:13. See also Gal 13:27 and Rom 6:3.

⁵⁷ He claims that baptism “*could have served equally well as a rite of passage*” in the Christian community and that death as a difficult journey “*likely typified the Corinthian outlook*” (emphasis mine) but gives no specific evidence. DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion,” 676-7.

⁵⁸ For example, the more general practice of making sacrifices on behalf of the dead, and the specific ritual of depositing curse tablets at the sanctuary of Demeter.

Uncovering the exact nature of the baptism and the identity of the dead is a more difficult issue. If the practice is best understood as vicarious and as providing some benefit to the deceased, one needs to account for Paul's presentation of this as an acceptable baptismal practice in 15:29. In light of this, it seems best to understand the ritual as incorporating a meaning and significance somewhat modified from that of "normal" Christian baptism at conversion. If the context of the Mysteries at Corinth indicates a concern for the fate of the dead, this might combine with Christian ideas and result in a ritual like this one that is connected to death and unique to the local community. If the Corinthian Christians continued to picture the afterlife much like they did before their conversion—as an existence in Hades—they would also continue to believe that the afterlife could be influenced by rituals performed by the living.

It thus seems likely that baptism for the dead was a funerary ritual meant to assist the recently deceased in continuing their life in the Spirit beyond death, or rather in beginning their afterlife in the Spirit. Thus if baptism marked one's entry into *life* in the Spirit, baptism for the dead marked the deceased's entry into *afterlife* in the Spirit. This is a modified form of DeMaris' interpretation, but includes more elements from the literary and theological context at Corinth.

Further specifics of such a ritual simply cannot be identified with certainty and the nature of the evidence leaves some ambiguity to our interpretation. What can be known with a level of certainty is that it was a practice tolerated by Paul, evidenced only at Corinth, and therefore likely influenced by the unique religious atmosphere at Corinth.

Conclusions

The Mysteries have long been compared to Christianity with varying conclusions, questions, and debate surrounding the process. The methodology applied here—especially the careful avoidance of overlaying Christian categories onto the Mysteries and the examination of

evidence from a specific locale—has clarified both the nature of the Mysteries in Corinth and the interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29. It is hoped that the methodology defined and applied in this investigation demonstrates how a study of the Mysteries can provide fruitful contextual information for the interpretation of specific NT texts.

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