CROSSING THE CHASM: POSTMORTEM SALVATION IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION

by

VICTORIA ISABEL BOND

(Under the Direction of Wayne M. Coppins)

ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the concept of postmortem salvation – i.e., that one can be "saved" after death – as developed in a selection of New Testament and early Christian texts, including 1 Peter 4:6, 1 Corinthians 15:29, and the Apocalypse of Peter. Based on these texts and their reception among early Christians, this thesis will argue that belief in the possibility of postmortem salvation was considered acceptable by some early Christians prior to the rejection of this teaching by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and other Western theologians.

INDEX WORDS: early Christianity, New Testament, postmortem salvation, Hell

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DEDICATION

To my Lord, Jesus Christ

"For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:22)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Postmortem Salvation in Contemporary Christian Thought

Can someone be saved after death? Many Christians have answered this question with a resounding "no." As the so-called "traditional" Christian view of the afterlife goes, the only opportunities for salvation are during this life, not after. Death is the point at which one's eternal fate is fixed: postmortem bliss for the righteous, postmortem suffering for the wicked. This view is perhaps best summarized in Jesus' parable of Lazarus and Dives, found in Luke 16:19-31. While Dives, the rich man, is tormented by fire in Hades, Abraham informs him that "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."[1] Those who do not choose to follow Christ now will find themselves unable to choose to do so in the afterlife. There are no "second chances" after death.

The extent to which this belief is held today is challenging to discern. For decades, conservative theologians have complained of the decline of the doctrines of Hell and eternal punishment, both of which are inextricably bound to the rejection of postmortem salvation. The 2004 book *Hell Under Fire* epitomizes many of these complaints well. In the introduction, theologians Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson assert that the "historic doctrine of hell," including the belief in unending postmortem torment for sinners, has been under attack

[1] Luke 16:26, *New Revised Standard Version*. Unless otherwise specified, all Scriptural quotations are taken from the *NRSV*.

"since the Enlightenment," and that these attacks "are now coming from within" Christianity.[2] In the following chapter, R. Albert Mohler Jr. similarly claims that the "traditional doctrine of hell" was developed early in Christian history and, with the exception of Origen, largely unchallenged until the seventeenth century.[3] There may be a degree of truth to some of these claims: alternative views of Hell and postmortem punishment, including universalism and annihilationism, have grown in popularity among Evangelicals in recent years, though measuring how widespread these views are is difficult.[4] On the other hand, explicit affirmation of the traditional view of eternal postmortem punishment can still be found in official doctrinal statements from various Christian denominations. For instance, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell after death, where they are punished with eternal separation from God.[5] On the Protestant side, the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is still used by many Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, affirms that "the wicked… shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the

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[2] Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, "Introduction," in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

[3] R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell," in *Hell Under Fire*, 16-17, 20.

[4] See, for instance, Stanley N. Gundry and Preston Sprinkle, eds., *Four Views on Hell*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), which features defenses of both universalism and annihilationism by two Evangelical contributors, Robin Parry and John G. Stackhouse.

[5] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2019), sec. 1035, accessed February 26, 2025, https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church.

Lord."[6] More recently, in 2011, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution titled "On the Reality of Hell," which explicitly rejects the possibility of postmortem salvation and upholds the "conscious, eternal suffering" of the "unconverted."[7] Though it may be true that some contemporary Western Christians are open to alternative views of Hell and the afterlife, belief in eternal postmortem punishment is alive and well among Christians today.

Postmortem Salvation in the New Testament and Early Christian Thought

As seen above, those who reject the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned do so on the basis of either Scripture or church tradition. To be sure, there are New Testament passages that, *prima facie,* indicate a view of unending postmortem torment for sinners. The two texts that best support this view come from the Gospels. Matthew 25:41 and 46, for example, are quite clear that the "goats" – those who failed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit the prisoner – will be condemned to "eternal fire" and go away into "eternal punishment," directly contrasted with the "eternal life" granted to the righteous. Similarly, the parable of Lazarus and Dives in Luke 16:19-31 envisions a state of postmortem fiery torment for Dives from which he cannot escape. Looking beyond the New Testament, it is also true that, from the patristic period onwards, many Christian theologians have denied the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned. In the West, one of the most vehement opponents of this idea was Augustine of Hippo. In *City of God,* Augustine directly addresses and condemns "those tender-hearted Christians" for denying the doctrine of eternal punishment for human beings,

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[6] The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 33.2, accessed February 26, 2025, https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession.

[7] SBC.net, *On the Reality of Hell* (2011), accessed February 26, 2025, https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-reality-of-hell/.

arguing that, based on passages like Matthew 25:46, eternal punishment and eternal life are "correlative," and that one cannot hold that eternal punishment has an end without also accepting that eternal life will end.[8] He similarly rejects the idea that human beings can be saved after death through the intercessory prayers of the righteous on the basis of passages from Scripture which suggest eternal punishment.[9] Though not the first Christian theologian to argue against the possibility of postmortem salvation, especially in the Western tradition, Augustine would prove to be one of the most influential figures in this debate.[10]

What is *not* true, however, is the claim that the idea of postmortem salvation for the damned – i.e., that sinners, after death, will have an opportunity to turn towards God and escape postmortem torment – is a recent development, largely absent from the New Testament or early Christian tradition. In fact, there are a number of texts in New Testament, as well as other early Christian works, that indicate that this possibility was more widely accepted among early Christians than is often assumed. Accordingly, this thesis will focus on three of these texts and their reception by early Christians and modern scholars. Chapter two, "Proclaiming to the Dead," will highlight 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6, two passages which have been traditionally interpreted as referring to Christ's descent into Hades. Both texts describe a message being conveyed to non-living beings – in the former, to the "spirits in prison," and in the latter, to "the dead." Chapter

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[8] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 2000), XXI.17, 23.

[9] Augustine, *City of God*, XII.18, 24.

[10] Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 126-130. Trumbower notes that "Latin Christianity had a long tradition of writers who claimed that this life was the realm in which one must act to set things right with God," including Hippolytus of Rome, Cyprian of Carthage, and Tertullian, but that "[n]o earlier figure… had expounded on the subject so broadly and clearly as Augustine" (126-127).

three, “Baptized on Behalf of the Dead,” analyzes 1 Corinthians 15:29, where Paul mentions, in passing, the Corinthian practice of vicarious baptism. Chapter four, “Praying for the Dead,” will focus primarily on the Apocalypse of Peter, an early Christian apocalypse and tour of Hell, as well as the Testament of Abraham and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, all of which explore the motif of a righteous individual praying for the salvation of deceased human beings. These three texts are especially relevant to the discussion at hand because of their popularity among early Christians. To fully flesh out the reception history of these texts in the early church, a range of primary and secondary peer-reviewed sources will be utilized, including biblical and literary texts, commentaries from ancient writers, and modern commentaries on New Testament and early Christian texts. When relevant, early Jewish and Greco-Roman parallels to the concept of postmortem salvation in Christianity will also be discussed, with the goal of illustrating the continuity between early Christian traditions and the cultures from which they emerged.

CHAPTER 2

PROCLAIMING TO THE DEAD: 1 PETER 3:19 AND 4:6

Introduction

1 Peter contains two of the most difficult-to-interpret passages in the New Testament: 3:19, which discusses Christ going to make a "proclamation to the spirits in prison;" and 4:6, which describes proclaiming the gospel to "the dead." The meaning of these two passages is opaque, as is the relationship between the events they describe, and their reception history is long and contentious. An additional complicating factor is how these texts have been used in the development of the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades, also known as the *descensus ad inferos* or the Harrowing of Hell, which has further shaped their interpretation. This chapter will explore how these texts were taken up in the early Christian Church, particularly in relation to the *descensus*, as well as how modern scholarship has attempted to deal with these texts.

1 Peter is categorized as one of the General Epistles. Traditionally attributed to the Apostle Peter, who is identified as the letter's author in 1:1, its authorship is now disputed by modern critical scholars, most of whom consider the letter to be pseudepigraphical.[11] Working

[11] Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, volume 1 (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 116-117; Eugene Boring, "1 Peter in Recent Study," *Word & World* 24, no. 4 (2004): 359-60. An especially important argument against Petrine scholarship is that the quality of the author's Greek far exceeds what someone of the apostle Peter's background (a Galilean fisherman) would have known. Some go further, arguing that Peter was likely illiterate – see also Bart Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Ehrman, citing studies conducted by Meir Bar Ilan and Catherine Heszer on literacy in ancient Israel and Roman, asks: "Was Peter, a lower-class fisherman from rural Galilee, among that minuscule fraction of the Palestinian population who could compose books in elegant Greek?" (446-47). The answer, according to Ehrman: no. Other arguments advanced against Petrine authorship

under the assumption that the letter is pseudepigraphical, many scholars date 1 Peter to the late first century CE, placing the date of its composition squarely outside of Peter's lifetime.[12] In terms of the letter's intended audience, the author of 1 Peter addresses the letter to "to the exiles of the Dispersion" in several provinces in Asia Minor: "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia."[13] Thematically, 1 Peter focuses on suffering, whether the suffering experienced by Christ on the cross (e.g., 2:21, 3:18, 4:1) or by the letter's readers as victims of persecution (e.g., 1:6, 3:14, 4:12-13).[14] This emphasis on suffering can be seen in the verse directly preceding 3:19, which connects Christ's proclamation to the spirits in prison to Christ suffering "for sins once for all" through his death on the cross.

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focus on the historical background of the letter: 1 Peter lacks any direct reference to Jesus' life and ministry, which would be strange if the letter had been in fact penned by Simon Peter (though some, such as Paul J. Achtemeier, note that the evidence for or against this argument is quite ambiguous). Additionally, there is a lack of historical evidence that, during the lifetime of the apostle Peter, Christians faced the level of hostility or persecution from the Roman Empire suggested by 1 Peter by virtue of being Christians (or, even more specifically, by virtue of calling themselves by the name "Christian") which is a central theme of 1 Peter (see Ehrman, *Forgery*, 440). That said, some scholars still argue for Petrine authorship based on the testimonies of early Christian writers, who regarded 1 Peter as authentic, as well as the stylistic, scriptural, and theological correspondences between 1 Peter and the speeches of Peter found in Acts (Williams and Horrell, 117-120).

[12] Williams and Horrell, volume 1, 100-101, though they note that "there are still a number of scholars who extend the *terminus ad quem* into the early to mid-second century (110-140 CE)."

[13] 1 Peter 1:1; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 50 - "at least the entire northern half of Asia Minor." Returning briefly to the question of authorship, Ehrman argues that "there is almost nothing to suggest that Christianity had spread in Peter's day throughout the provinces of Asia Minor named in 1:1," which would also point to 1 Peter being pseudepigraphical (Ehrman, *Forgery*, 439).

[14] See Martin Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 190. Williams notes that the verb πάσχω (suffer) appears "12x in this letter – more than the other books of the NT."

Though verses 3:19 and 4:6 will be the primary focus of this chapter, some of the surrounding passages will also be provided for context. 3:18-20, which is essentially one long, winding sentence, reads:

> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit [πνεύματι], **in which also he went and made a proclamation [ἐκήρυξεν] to the spirits [πνεύμασιν] in prison [ἐν φυλακῇ]**, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. [emphasis added]

The implications of the specific terminology used here will be explored in more depth momentarily. For now, it is worth noting that the author uses the verb κηρύσσω, here in the aorist form, to describe Christ's message, not εὐαγγελίζω, which would be more closely associated with preaching the gospel ("good news"); though κηρύσσω is also used in this sense elsewhere in the New Testament, it may be meant in the more neutral sense of "proclaim" and "announce" here.[15] Additionally, while 3:19 is often cited in support of the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hell or Hades, it is notable that the author uses a term not typically associated with either place, φυλακή. Though this term appears elsewhere in the New Testament, it is used to denote "prison" in the literal sense, not as an allusion to the abode of the dead.[16]

Next, 1 Peter 4:5-6 reads:

> But they will have to give an account to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead [νεκρούς]. **For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed [εὐηγγελίσθη] even to the dead [νεκροῖς], so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit [πνεύματι] as God does.**

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[15] Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation*, 205.

[16] Williams, 201; William Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6* (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Instituto Biblico, 1989), 160.

If one reads 3:19 and 4:6 together, a few key differences emerge: no location is specified in 4:6; the proclamation is described with the verb εὐαγγελίζω; and rather than to spirits (πνεῦμα), the audience of the proclamation is said to have been the dead (νεκρός). Additionally, νεκρός is used to denote both the recipients of judgment as well as the group that the gospel was preached to. If 4:5 is interpreted as describing the Last Judgment, where those who are still living will be judged as well as those who have died, the possibility that 4:6 also refers to those who are physically dead is high. It is not clear from this text, however, if the proclamation of the gospel was restricted to a specific subset of the dead, or if it was a proclamation made to all those who are physically dead; similarly, the timeframe during which the gospel was proclaimed is not immediately obvious.

There are, then, several questions that one must ask when interpreting these texts. First: who are the "spirits in prison" in 3:19, who, according to 3:20 "in former times did not obey?" Second: what were the contents of Christ's proclamation to these disobedient spirits? Third: when did Christ's proclamation to the spirits in prison take place? Fourth: what is the relationship between the events described in 3:19 and 4:6 – are these passages describing the same event, or different events? Finally: who are "the dead" in 4:6, and when did they die? All five questions have been raised at one point or another in the history of interpretation surrounding 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6, each with a range of different answers.

Early Reception of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6

Beginning in the patristic era, 1 Peter 3:19 was commonly interpreted as scriptural evidence of Christ's descent into Hades – i.e., the view that Christ, in the period between his death and resurrection, descended to the underworld (or Hell) and preached to the souls of the dead. The earliest evidence for this view comes from second-century Alexandria, with Clement

of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) being one of the first commentators to make a direct connection between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* near the end of the second century CE.[17] In fact, though the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades had existed in some form very early on, there is little extant evidence that the church fathers commented on 1 Peter 3:19 or 4:6 prior to Clement.[18] Clement viewed 1 Peter 3:18-22 as describing Christ's descent into Hades to preach the gospel to those who had perished in the Flood, offering the opportunity of salvation to the imprisoned spirits.[19] Clement's contemporary, Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 253), interpreted this passage in a similar manner, as did the other Greek Fathers, who held that 1 Peter 3:19 referenced Christ

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[17] Williams and Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* volume 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 216-217, n. 4.

[18] D.N. Campbell and Fika J. van Rensburg, "A History of the Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19, no. 1 (2008): 74; Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Essays* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 340; Dalton, *Proclamation*, 28, 32, who notes that "despite the knowledge of 1 Peter and its popularity in citation and use, 1 Pet 3:19 [sic] is never cited in connection with the descent" (32). See also Catherine Ella Laufer, *Hell's Destruction: An Exploration of Christ's Descent to the Dead* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11; Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Peter 3:19 and its Context* (New York: AMS Press, 1946), 14, though it should be noted here that Reicke later suggests that there are "some pieces of evidence which can indirectly indicate that at least 1 Pet. iv. 6 [sic] had already earlier been conceived as having Christ's descent in view" (17). Reicke goes on to argue that there was an apocryphal text known as the "Jeremiah-*logion*" which was also connected to the development of the *descensus ad inferos,* and that this text either a.) influenced 1 Peter 4:6, if the Jeremiah-logion was pre-Christian in origin (as Justin Martyr supposedly argues); or, b.) was influenced by 1 Peter 4:6 (17-18). Reicke concludes that "even if the relation is not so primary, we must in any case point out they who in this way quoted the Jeremiah-*logion*, Justin and Iraeneus, as possibly Hermas and later the authors of the *Gospels of Peter* and *Nicodemus*, must have conceived iv. 6 [sic] as an expression of the Descent" (19). Dalton, decades later, would criticize Reicke's argument as "very indirect and not convincing" (*Proclamation*, 36, footnote 50) and that any similarity between 1 Peter 4:6 and the Jeremiah logion is "probably verbal and external only" (51-52).

[19] Campbell and Rensburg, 74; Trumbower, 46; Paul J.J. van Geest, "Augustine's Certainty in Speaking about Hell and His Reserve in Explaining Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The Apostles' Creed: 'He Descended into Hell*,' Marcel Sarot and Archibald L.H.M., eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 45, who notes that for Clement, "the result of Christ's descent was that the devil was the only one left there [in Hades]."

preaching to the souls of the dead in Hades, potentially converting and liberating some or all of them from their imprisonment in the abode of the dead.[20] For instance, Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444), the Patriarch of Alexandria, argued that, based on 3:19, Christ "proclaimed the liberation… of the dead," and that during his descent Christ "threw open the gates of hell… and emptied it completely," leaving only the devil in Hades.[21] This optimistic interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 was also held by many writers in the early Syriac tradition, who often went beyond the Greek Fathers by extending the scope of Christ's preaching in Hades to "all souls," liberating them from both Sheol and Satan.[22] In the West, there were also a handful of early writers that viewed 1 Peter 3:19 as pointing towards Christ offering salvation to at least some of the dead, including the early church bishop Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310-c. 367), who saw 1 Peter 3:19 as evidence that "the wicked received a preaching in hell."[23] Even Philaster of Brescia (d. 387), who was one of the earliest Western theologians to reject the idea that Christ's descent into Hades led to the posthumous salvation of those who had not been able to convert while alive, still conceded that, based on 1 Peter 3:19, some of those who had died in Noah's day were saved during Christ's descent to Hell. Philaster qualified this, however, by stating that these individuals

[20] Campbell and Rensburg, 74-75; Dalton, 29-30. Origen, according to Dalton, even held out hope for "the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah" as well as those who had sinned prior to Christ's coming, perhaps in line with Origen's belief in a general ἀποκατάστασις – the restoration of all things to God.

[21] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 30; van Geest, 45.

[22] Campbell and Rensburg, 75.

[23] Trumbower, 103.

were saved based on their actions while they were alive, not because they repented after death – in other words, only the "saints" were saved during Christ's descent.[24]

While 1 Peter 3:19 was generally thought to refer to the *descensus* by most writers during the patristic era, how the church fathers dealt with 1 Peter 4:6 is less certain. It isn't clear, for example, whether the Alexandrian school (e.g., Clement, Origen, and Cyril of Alexandria), who explicitly linked 1 Peter 3:19 to the *descensus* and a postmortem offer of salvation, read 1 Peter 4:6 in the same way.[25] Clement of Alexandria seems to have viewed "the dead" in 4:6 as being the "spiritually dead" who had the opportunity to hear the gospel while they were alive, a view apparently shared by Cyril of Alexandria.[26] But, in the words of one recent commentator, Clement is "hardly clear or exegetically consistent" in his treatment of 4:6, and as we saw earlier, Clement was not averse to the concept of Christ preaching to the dead in Hades.[27] Other writers, such as the anonymous fourth-century Latin author Ambrosiaster, seem to have read 1 Peter 4:6 as depicting Christ making a general offer of mercy to the dead in Hades during the *descensus,* in line with many patristic-era interpretations of 1 Peter 3:19. In the East, the Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662) also seems to have connected 1 Peter 4:6 to the *descensus*, arguing that, based on this passage, Christ descended into hell to save the dead, who were punished while "in the flesh" for their actions, but who ultimately accepted Christ's preaching

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[24] Trumbower, 105; 128.

[25] Dalton, 52.

[26] J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: A. & C. Black Publishers, 1969), 173.

[27] Kelly, *A Commentary*, 173; David G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 96.

during the *descensus*.[28] It is not clear, however, how widely this view was shared among the church fathers.[29]

Though many early theologians in both the East and West interpreted 1 Peter 3:19 as an account of Christ preaching in Hell and offering salvation to the dead, a certain fifth-century North African bishop firmly rejected this view: Augustine of Hippo (354-430). As we have already seen, Augustine was broadly opposed to the concept of posthumous salvation. [30] Though Augustine affirmed the doctrine of the *descensus,* he denied that these texts could be read as supporting this doctrine and instead argued that they should be interpreted allegorically.[31] Writing in response to a question posed by fellow bishop Euodius, Augustine argued that 1 Peter 3:19 was not an account of Christ's descent but rather a reference to Christ preaching through Noah prior to the flood, specifically to individuals who were alive on earth at the time they were preached to but are now "spirits in prison," with "prison" being a metaphor for a state of ignorance.[32] Additionally, regarding 1 Peter 4:6, Augustine states that "there is nothing compelling us to understand the immediately succeeding words of Peter… as describing what has been done in hell," arguing instead that the author is referring to those who are "spiritually

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[28] Hilarion Alfeyen, *Christ the Conquerer of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 79.

[29] Trumbower, 103.

[30] Trumbower, 140; Dalton, 38, who writes that "[t]his principle of 'no conversion after death' came to be generally admitted by all theologians after Augustine."

[31] It is worth noting here that Augustine's interpretation of the descensus is similar to Philaster's, in that Christ's descent only freed "the saints of the first covenant" – see Laufer, 15.

[32] Williams and Horrell, volume 2, 218-219; Laufer, 12; van Geest, 52; Kelly, 153; Michel Sarot, "The Scope of Redemption on Finding Meaning in Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The Apostles' Creed*, 195.

dead" (i.e., unbelievers), presenting an interpretation not dissimilar to Clement's earlier reading of 4:6.[33] For Augustine, then, these verses are not relevant to the *descensus* at all. Furthermore, Augustine's view of the *descensus* is decidedly less optimistic than the Greek Fathers: Christ may have descended into Hades between his death and resurrection, and it is possible (albeit undesirable, to Augustine; he permits this possibility only begrudgingly) that some were given an opportunity for salvation at Christ's descent, but Christ did not empty Hades, nor did any memory of Christ's preaching remain there.[34]

In summary, during the patristic era, 1 Peter 3:19 was frequently linked to Christ's descent into Hades. It is possible that Clement of Alexandria was the first to make this connection, and his optimistic interpretation of 3:19 and the *descensus* as constituting a postmortem offer of salvation was shared and even expanded upon by the other theologians in the East, including Origen and Cyril of Alexandria as well as writers in the Syriac Christian tradition. Patristic-era writers in the West similarly linked 1 Peter 3:19 to the *descensus*, though many qualified or even rejected the idea that Christ converted any (or all) unbelievers while preaching the gospel in Hades. 1 Peter 4:6, by contrast, was rarely linked to Christ's descent, and may have been more commonly interpreted as referring to the "spiritually dead," per Clement and others. Augustine broke with the earlier, dominant interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 by asserting that this verse did not refer to the *descensus* at all, proposing an allegorical interpretation in which Christ, prior to the incarnation, preached through Noah. Similarly, he denied that 4:6

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[33] Augustine, *Letter CLXIV*, 7.21, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Co., 1886).

[34] Trumbower, 132.

referenced the *descensus*, though this may have been more in line with the dominant view of 4:6 in Augustine's day.

Modern Reception of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6

Both 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 have attracted considerable attention in twentieth-century scholarship as modern interpreters have struggled with how to best interpret these verses. Turning first to 1 Peter 3:19, a widely held view among scholars today is that the "spirits in prison [τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν]" are not human souls but rather evil supernatural beings (e.g., the Nephilim; fallen angels), to whom Christ either proclaimed judgment, or a message of victory.[35] This view appears to have originated in the last decade of the nineteenth century in the writings of Friedrich Spitta and was further developed by Edward Selwyn and Bo Reicke in the mid-1940s.[36] Selwyn notes that πνεύματα, "spirits," is "used absolutely of supernatural beings" in Jewish apocryphal literature such as 1 Enoch and the *Book of Jubilees*, and that much of this literature details these beings disobeying God in the period immediately before the Flood and being punished for their disobedience by imprisonment.[37] Additionally, he asserts that "[l]inguistically, there is far more authority for τὰ πνεύματα without a qualifying genitive connoting supernatural beings than departed human beings," which would further detract from the likelihood that this term is being used in 1 Peter 3:19 to refer to the souls of dead human

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[35] Wayne A. Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7, no. 2 (1986): 4; Campbell and Rensburg, 82; Williams and Horrell, 219-220, who note that "[a]fter 1 Enoch was 'rediscovered' in Europe during the late eighteenth century […] it was natural that some biblical scholars around this time would draw connections with this text" (220).

[36] Campbell, 83-84; Williams and Horrell, 220. Campbell and Rensburg note that Spitta ultimately sided with the Augustinian interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19.

[37] Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 198; 315; 323.

beings.[38] From this, Selwyn posits that this passage refers to Christ proclaiming judgment to fallen angels.[39] Similarly, Reicke believed that 1 Peter 3:19 referred to Christ making a proclamation to fallen angels, though he thought it was possible that πνεύματα could refer to both fallen angels *and* the souls of human beings at the same time without the author needing to distinguish between the two.[40] Connecting 1 Peter 3:19 to 4:6, which Reicke reads as describing the same event, he concludes that both verses refer to "a universal evangelization."[41]

In the latter half of the twentieth century, William Dalton presented another variation of the view developed by Selwyn and Reicke. Noting several parallels between 1 Peter 3:19-20 and select passages of 1 Enoch (e.g., Christ and Enoch are both portrayed as going and making a proclamation to disobedient spirits who are either imprisoned or about to be imprisoned), Dalton asserts that 1 Peter 3:19-20 describes Christ proclaiming to "the angels who disobeyed… in the days of Noah."[42] Unlike earlier interpreters who shared this view, though, he argues that Christ's proclamation to these spirits did not take place during the *descensus*, but rather during Christ's post-resurrection ascent.[43] This is because, according to Dalton, the cosmology at the time of the New Testament had shifted towards a belief in the "abode of the spirits" being located above the

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[38] Selwyn, 199; see also Williams and Horrell, volume 2, 223, who argue that this claim is "demonstrably false […] context plays an equally (if not more) important role in establishing the referent of the term."

[39] Ibid., 200.

[40] Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 59.

[41] Reicke, 209.

[42] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 176.

[43] Campbell, 85; Dalton, 181-182.

earth rather than in the nether world.[44] Regarding the contents of Christ's proclamation, Dalton differs from both Selwyn and Reicke in his interpretation of Christ's message to the fallen angels: he did not proclaim judgment, nor was there a "universal evangelization," but rather he brought to them the message of the liberation of humanity from the powers of evil as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ.[45]

Though the view that 1 Peter 3:19 describes Christ making a proclamation to imprisoned, disobedient angels (à la 1 Enoch and other apocryphal Jewish literature) is the most popular reading of this passage today, some other alternative readings are worth noting here as well. For instance, the Augustinian interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 is still held by some evangelical scholars, most notably Wayne Grudem. Grudem rejects the assertion of previous scholars that the word πνεύματα in 1 Peter 3:19 necessarily refers to disobedient angels, arguing instead that "'he preached to the spirits in prison' means, 'he preached to those who are now spirits in hell but who at the time of the preaching were human beings living on earth.'"[46] Grudem is also critical of the assumption by most scholars that the audience of 1 Peter would have known 1 Enoch well enough to understand that "the spirits in prison" was an allusion to the punishment of angels in 1 Enoch, writing that "no one has ever demonstrated that 1 Enoch was that widely known or even familiar to the great majority of churches to which Peter was writing."[47] Grudem ultimately sides with Augustine's reading of 1 Peter 3:19, that Christ preached through Noah to human beings

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[44] Dalton, 179-180.

[45] Ibid., 186.

[46] Grudem, 9.

[47] Ibid., 17.

who are now spirits in prison – i.e., Hell.[48] The interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 favored by Clement of Alexandria and other theologians in the East also continues to find support, even enjoying a resurgence among liberal Protestant scholars in the nineteenth century, though its popularity has waned since then.[49] More recently, A.T. Hanson has argued for an interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 in which Christ is depicted as having "visited the place… in which the fallen angels and the generations of men before his coming on earth were to be found," proclaiming a message of salvation.[50] However, both this interpretation as well as the Augustinian interpretation favored by Grudem and other evangelical scholars are minority views in current scholarship.

Like 1 Peter 3:19, 1 Peter 4:6 has continued to divide modern interpreters. As David Horrell has helpfully suggested, the major strands of interpretation concerning this passage in modern scholarship can be divided into two broad categories: the "already dead" view, that 4:6 refers to Christ proclaiming the gospel to those who were already physically dead when they heard it; and the "since died" view, that 4:6 refers to those that heard the gospel while alive on earth, but have since died.[51] The most influential proponent of the "since died" view is Dalton, who argues that the verb εὐηγγελίσθη "necessarily requires a *live* audience" based on how it is

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[48] Grudem, 30.

[49] Campbell and Rensburg, 76; Dalton, 33.

[50] A.T. Hanson, "Salvation Proclaimed: I. 1 Peter 3:18-22," *The Expository Times* 93, no. 4 (1982): 102.

[51] Horrell, *Becoming Christian*, 75-77. Additionally, Williams and Horrell note a third major strand of interpretation which enjoyed limited support among earlier commentators, namely that 4:6 "refers to the proclamation of the gospel by early Christian apostles and missionaries to those who were dead in trespasses and sins," i.e., the "spiritually dead" (337-338), as seen in the previous section with Clement of Alexandria's reading of 4:6. This view, however, appears to have fallen out of favor in modern scholarship.

used elsewhere in the New Testament; in other words, the idea of preaching the gospel to the physically dead *while they are physically dead* is absent from the New Testament.[52] He then asserts that the "context of thought" behind 1 Peter 4:6 is similar to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, a passage which addresses concerns about Christians who have died before Christ's return, before concluding that the purpose of 4:6 "is to vindicate the faithful Christians against the abuse of their pagan adversaries," who supposedly ridiculed Christians because their followers were dying without the *parousia* having occurred.[53] Dalton goes on to suggest that the reason differing interpretations of 4:6 have "presented a picture of confusion and contradiction" is because later generations of Christians were no longer concerned about the fate of Christians who died before Christ's return, therefore making the "precise point" of 1 Peter 4:6 difficult to discern.[54] A variation of this argument has been proposed by J. Ramsey Michaels, who, while agreeing with Dalton's argument as a whole, argues that "the dead" need not be restricted to Christians who had died prior to the *parousia*, but should be expanded to include the "righteous of Israel's past."[55] Michaels also criticizes Dalton's attempt to demonstrate a connection between this passage and 1 Thessalonians, noting that "there is no hint in 1 Peter of any particular anxiety about the fate of loved ones who had died, as there is in 1 Thessalonians."[56] But, like Dalton, Michaels explicitly rejects the idea that Christ preached to the dead, instead interpreting the

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[52] Dalton, 58; 234.

[53] Dalton, 58-59; see also Selwyn, 338, who also proposes that 1 Peter 4:6 is addressing the same problem as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

[54] Dalton, 64.

[55] J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 237.

[56] Michaels, 237.

reference to "the dead" in 1 Peter 4:6 as Christians (and righteous Israelites) who heard the gospel while they were alive and have since died.

While the "since died" view has enjoyed considerable popularity in recent scholarship, the "already dead" view has struggled to gain the same level of widespread acceptance, at least in English-language scholarship.[57] However, David Horrell has raised several objections to the "since died" view, a few of which will be examined here. First, there is no evidence that 1 Peter is concerned with the fate of Christians who have died before the *parousia*, a reality of which Dalton himself seems to be at least somewhat cognizant.[58] Furthermore, there is no indication that the audience of 1 Peter would have been concerned about the salvation of those who had died while being negatively judged by their peers.[59] Though the reassurance of suffering believers is undoubtedly a major theme in 1 Peter, nothing in the letter's literary context would point towards 4:6 functioning solely as a promise of vindication for Christians who had died prior to the return of Christ. Horrell also addresses several theological objections raised against the "already dead" view: first, the implication that there are disembodied souls in Hades, which is (allegedly) absent from the rest of the New Testament; second, the fate of those who died after Christ without hearing the gospel, which is uncertain; third, the absence of a "final

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[57] Horrell, 78, where he notes that "German commentators… have taken somewhat less account of his [Dalton's] arguments and generally follow the 'already dead' interpretation of 4.6."

[58] Horrell, 79, 81; see also Dalton, 228, where he admits that "[t]he problem of the Thessalonians about Christians does not arise explicitly in 1 Peter." As Horrell notes later, Dalton's attempt to connect 1 Peter to 1 Thessalonians is further complicated by the dating of 1 Peter: the concern expressed by the Thessalonians regarding the delay of the parousia would have only been a concern very early on, when Christ's return was thought to be imminent. By the time of 1 Peter's composition (likely near the end of the first century CE), this would not have been an acute concern.

[59] Horrell, 82.

condemnation" in 1 Peter 4:6; and fourth, the possibility of postmortem conversion.[60] Regarding the first objection, Horrell states first that "the author of 1 Peter does not actually specify the form or the place in which 'the dead' are located," before going on to cite at least two passages that seemingly contradict the claim that the concept of disembodied souls in Hades is completely absent from the New Testament: Luke 16:23, as well as Revelation 20:13.[61] In response to the second objection, Horrell writes that "[i]t is quite conceivable that the author of 1 Peter has in mind some proclamation of the gospel to the dead… without considering the question concerning those who came afterwards" – in other words, the author of 1 Peter is not necessarily concerned with the fate of those who died after the gospel had been announced on earth.[62] Concerning the third objection, Horrell notes that the author of 1 Peter generally avoids specifying "the fate of unbelievers;" in 1 Peter 4:6 specifically, it is left unclear how "the dead" will respond to Christ's proclamation.[63] The final objection – whether or not 1 Peter 4:6, in the "already dead" view, implies the possibility of postmortem conversion, and whether or not this possibility is ruled out by the greater theology of the New Testament – will be addressed in greater detail later. For now, it is notable that Horrell cites 1 Corinthians 15:29 as a possible point of comparison to 1 Peter 4:6. Though both passages are "enigmatic," and 1 Corinthians 15:29 does not refer directly to postmortem conversion but rather a practice presumably performed to affect the fate of the dead in some way, the existence of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is nonetheless

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[60] Horrell, 89; see also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 289, who directly raises the first three points.

[61] Horrell, 89-90.

[62] Ibid., 89.

[63] Ibid., 89.

sufficient to at least qualify the argument posed by Dalton that postmortem conversion is entirely outside of the realm of New Testament theology.[64]

Conclusion

As we have seen, both 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 have attracted a wide range of interpretations throughout the history of their reception. Turning first to 1 Peter 3:19, the dominant scholarly view of the passage today as a reference to Christ going and making a proclamation to fallen angels is plausible, but not without issues. On the one hand, it is notable that the word πνεῦμα is used for the recipients of Christ's proclamation, especially as the author of 1 Peter uses ψυχή when referring to human souls.[65] Additionally, the use of the word φυλακή to describe the location of the spirits potentially complicates the traditional interpretation of 3:19 as a reference to Christ's activities in Hades, as this word is not used anywhere else in the New Testament to refer to a "holding place" for human souls.[66] In 1 Enoch, however, there are references to a "prison" for angels.[67] Lastly, from the verb used in 3:19 to describe Christ's journey, πορεύομαι, it is unclear whether Christ descended or merely went; no direction is specified, which may lend some credibility to Dalton's claim that this passage refers to an action that Christ carried out

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[64] Horrell, 91. On the following page (92), Horrell cites John 5:24-25 as a possible parallel to 1 Peter 4:6, if "the dead" are viewed as the physically dead rather than the spiritually dead. This view finds at least some support in the works of Selwyn and Heinz-Jürgen Vogels. But Horrell is also careful to add the caveat that "[m]ost commentators… regard vv. 24-25 as referring to the spiritually dead who respond to Jesus; in John's realized eschatological perspective, these have already passed from death to life."

[65] Williams and Horrell, 222, citing 1 Peter 1:9, 22; 2:11, 25; 4:19.

[66] Williams and Horrell, 225.

[67] 1 Enoch 18:14; 21:10; Dalton, 160-161; see also Williams and Horrell, 225, n. 138, who note that a different word is used in these passages for "prison" (δεσμωτήριον).

during his post-resurrection ascent. On the other hand, the proponents of this reading may be overstating their case. Williams and Horrell argue that πνεῦμα is a more flexible term than the "fallen angel" reading suggests, writing that "[e]ven in the NT, there are references to individuals as spirits."[68] Furthermore, Williams and Horrell posit that angels *and* humans experience the same fate of postmortem imprisonment in 1 Enoch, though this is somewhat ambiguous from the text of 1 Enoch itself.[69] Finally, regarding the timing and location of Christ's proclamation, the text of 3:19 is quite vague, to the point where the traditional interpretation of 3:19 as a reference to Christ's descent into Hades cannot be entirely ruled out. While the "fallen angel" reading remains possible, it is difficult to say with total certainty which reading of 3:19 is most likely.

Regardless of how one reads 3:19, the most popular interpretation of 1 Peter 4:6 in current scholarship – the "since died" view – leaves much to be desired. As Horrell has already highlighted, there is little to no indication within the text of 1 Peter that the letter's intended audience would have been worried about the fate of fellow Christians who died before Christ's return, a "major and decisive difficulty" for Dalton's argument in support of the "since died"

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[68] Williams and Horrell, 224; see also n. 135, where they point out that Jesus is described as a spirit (πνεῦμα) in Luke's account of his post-resurrection appearances to the disciples (Luke 24:27, 39).

[69] Williams and Horrell, 225, citing 1 Enoch 22:1-14 and 10:13-14. In 1 Enoch 22:1-14, Enoch goes to "four hollow places," where the "souls of the children of men" will reside until the day of judgment (22:2-4), though it is unclear from the surrounding context of the passage whether this is the same as the prison for the angels mentioned in 21:10, as chapter 22 begins with Enoch going to "another place" (22:1). In 10:13-14, God orders "Semjaza and his associates" (10:11), who are fallen angels (or "Watchers"), to be cast into the "abyss of fire […] to the torment and the prison in which they shall be confined for ever" (10:13-14). It is again unclear if the imprisonment is restricted only to the Watchers, or if it also applies to some human beings, as this is immediately followed by the statement "whosoever shall be condemned and destroyed will from thenceforth be bound together with them to the end of all" (10:14), which seems to imply that non-Watchers will be imprisoned as well.

view.[70] In fact, it would appear that most obvious reading of the text would be that the gospel was proclaimed to the physically dead. This reading is first suggested by the preceding verse, 4:5, which mentions "him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead [νεκρούς]," in what appears to be a reference to the Last Judgment. Presumably, "the dead" here would mean "physically dead." Furthermore, seeing as 4:6 uses the same word for "dead" [νεκρός] and is seemingly linked to the preceding statement by the usage of γάρ, it is difficult to conceive how "dead" is meant in a more general sense in 4:5, before suddenly taking on a more restrictive meaning in 4:6 without any additional qualifiers. Nowhere in 4:6 or its surrounding context does the author of 1 Peter state that "the dead" refers specifically to dead Christians, and the usage of νεκρός in 4:5, to which 4:6 is closely linked, would further strengthen the likelihood that 4:6 refers to a general proclamation of the gospel to the physically dead. It is worth noting that whether this proclamation was made by Christ himself is admittedly less clear from the text of 1 Peter 4:6. If one reads 4:6 in light of 3:19, it could be argued that Christ being the one to proclaim the gospel to the dead is implied here. But, as we have seen, many interpreters in both the patristic and modern eras have avoided connecting 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. For the sake of the "already dead" view, however, the concern is not necessarily who did the proclaiming, but rather who was proclaimed to. Though Christ *could* be inferred as the agent of the proclaiming – and this move may be desirable if one wishes to use this passage to support the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades – this has little bearing on the question of whether the gospel was proclaimed to once-alive Christians or presently-dead human beings.

But what would the effects of such a proclamation be? Seeing as the verb εὐαγγελίζω is used, it seems likely that the intent of this proclamation is conversion: the gospel is preached to

[70] Horrell, 79.

the dead, so that they might be able to live in the spirit as God does. The author of 1 Peter does not specify how many of the dead respond to this proclamation, nor does he specify whether this proclamation was made only to those who had died prior to the time of Christ. Nonetheless, if one adopts the "already dead" view of 1 Peter 4:6, the implication that at least some individuals were offered salvation after death is present here, even if the response to this offer is left ambiguous. The concept of postmortem conversion is controversial, especially within the Western Christian tradition, and is often cited as a reason for rejecting overly optimistic interpretations of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. But, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the idea that one's fate can change after death is not foreign to the broader theological context of the New Testament, nor to early Christian tradition. Regarding the latter, we have already noted that the Greek Fathers, as well as writers within the early Syriac tradition, thought that Christ emptied Hades during the *descensus*. Within the context of the New Testament specifically, 1 Corinthians 15:29's reference to "baptism on behalf of the dead" comes to mind as the strongest example of a text that implies the possibility of change after death. Though not a proof-text for postmortem salvation by any stretch of the imagination, the potential implication of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is that one's eschatological fate is not completely unchangeable after death. This is significant, as it further strengthens the argument that 1 Peter 4:6 can be read as referring to a proclamation of the gospel to those who are physically dead; at the very least, it blunts the common objection that such an idea would be completely unthinkable within the greater context of the New Testament.

From this, we can tentatively conclude that the "since died" reading of 1 Peter 4:6 is unlikely. The language of 1 Peter 4:6, as well as its literary context, both favor the "already dead" view as the most straightforward reading of the text. If the "already dead" view is a viable reading of the text, then 1 Peter 4:6 alludes to the possibility of postmortem salvation for the

damned. While we are not told how the dead responded to the proclamation of the gospel, or how long the gospel was proclaimed to the dead, the text nonetheless affirms that, at some point in time, the dead had the opportunity to hear the gospel and, presumably, respond.

CHAPTER 3

BAPTIZED ON BEHALF OF THE DEAD: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29

Introduction

1 Corinthians 15 is centered upon Paul's argument for the bodily resurrection of believers, a belief that some of the Corinthians had apparently rejected. Beginning with the premise of Christ's resurrection from the dead, Paul, quite forcefully, makes a case for the resurrection of believers by showing the incoherence of the Corinthians' position. If there is no resurrection of the dead, the argument goes, then there was no resurrection of Christ, either, rendering the faith of the Corinthians futile.[71] But, because Christ was resurrected, the dead must be resurrected as well; Christ was the "first fruits of those who have died."[72]

Paul then moves, briefly, to address some of the practices engaged in by either the Corinthians or himself, showing the absurdity of engaging in these practices if there is no resurrection of the dead. It is here where Paul states,

> Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;
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> Otherwise, what will they do, the ones being baptized on behalf of the dead? If [the] dead are not raised at all, why are they baptized also on behalf of them?

1 Corinthians 15:29 has perplexed commentators for centuries. Much of the debate surrounding this passage concerns the phrase οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, "the ones being

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[71] 1 Corinthians 15:17.

[72] 1 Corinthians 15:20.

baptized on behalf of the dead." Scholars have struggled to make sense of what, exactly, Paul is referring to when he uses this phrase, and consequently anywhere from "at least forty" to "more than two hundred" readings have emerged over the course of the history of interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:29.[73] The greatest difficulty that this phrase presents is the impression that, *prima facie*, Paul is alluding to the practice of vicarious baptism or baptism by proxy: some of the Corinthians are undergoing baptism for those who have died, presumably to benefit them in some way in the afterlife. This practice is undoubtedly obscure, and it is found nowhere else in Paul or the rest of the New Testament. Furthermore, if Paul *is* referring to vicarious baptism, it is potentially telling that he does not clearly condemn it. He mentions the practice; he questions why the Corinthians engage in this practice if they do not believe in the resurrection; he moves on.

"Solutions" to the Vicarious Baptism Problem

In light of the difficulties presented by the vicarious baptism reading, a seemingly endless stream of solutions have been proposed, though none have gone on to become the majority view. Many of these solutions involve either taking βαπτίζω (baptize) or οἱ νεκροί (the dead) in a non-literal or otherwise uncommon sense. Others have explored the range of meanings associated with the preposition ὑπὲρ, which I have chosen to render as "on behalf of" in the translation provided above. Others still have proposed re-punctuating 1 Cor. 15:29 to better reflect the intended meaning of the text, though these interpreters seldom agree how, exactly, to re-punctuate.[74] At least one recent scholar, William O. Walker, Jr., has suggested that 1 Corinthians

[73] Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 762; David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 26.

[74] See Fee, 766 (see also n. 30, n. 31).

15:29 is part of a "non-Pauline interpolation."[75] Another, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, has suggested that Paul was quoting a derogatory Corinthian slogan directed towards him.[76] While a comprehensive summary of the various interpretations that have emerged for 1 Cor. 15:29 is outside of the scope of this chapter, it is worth examining at least a few of these proposed solutions. We shall focus specifically on different meanings suggested for βαπτίζω as well as the phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, before moving to address the reading of 1 Cor. 15:29 proposed by Murphy-O'Connor.

The verb βαπτίζω has attracted a plethora of different interpretations. Typically, in the New Testament, βαπτίζω refers specifically to the ritual of water baptism. This appears to hold true for 1 Corinthians as well. For example, in 1 Cor. 1:12-17, at the opening of the letter, Paul uses βαπτίζω several times as he begins to address the behavior of the Corinthians and the divisions within the church at Corinth. Here, it is more obvious that Paul is referring specifically to water baptism, particularly in verses 14 through 16: "I thank God that I baptized [ἐβάπτισα] none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized [ἐβαπτίσθητε] in my name. (I did baptize [ἐβάπτισα] also the household of Stephanas; beyond

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[75] William O. Walker, Jr., "1 Corinthians 15:29-34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (January 2007), 84-103. Walker argues that this section was inserted by a later interpolator, probably no later than the "middle of the second century" (103). He also suggests that, based on certain features of the text (including the reference to "baptism on behalf of the dead" in v. 29), someone other than Paul authored this section of 1 Cor. 15 (99). Walker concludes with the possibility that the "entire unit" of 1 Cor. 15:29-34 originated in "Marcionite or proto-Marcionite circles," as some of Marcion's followers may have engaged in the practice of vicarious baptism (103). But, as Walker himself acknowledges, there is no "direct text-critical evidence" that the passage was a later interpolation (102), and it seems more likely that the Marcionites derived the practice of baptism for the dead *from* Paul's reference to it in 1 Cor. 15:29.

[76] Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242-256.

that, I do not know whether I baptized [ἐβάπτισα] anyone else.)" Similarly, in 1 Cor. 12:13, Paul probably appeals to the ritual of water baptism in his argument for the unity of the church at Corinth: "[f]or in the one Spirit we were all baptized [ἐβαπτίσθημεν] into one body." In these passages, it is reasonably clear from context as well as content that Paul has the ritual of water baptism in view.

That said, βαπτίζω is occasionally used in a non-ritual or figurative sense elsewhere in the New Testament, and there is at least one example of the term being used in a non-literal sense in 1 Corinthians. Two notable examples of a figurative usage of βαπτίζω come from the Synoptic Gospels: Mark 10:38-39 and the shorter parallel in Luke 12:50. In both instances, βαπτίζω is thought to refer to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Mark also uses βαπτίζω when describing some of the rituals of the Pharisees: the Pharisees do not eat without first washing themselves [βαπτίσωνται].[77] Here, βαπτίζω is referring to a ritual washing, but not in the sense of the ritual of water baptism. Returning to 1 Corinthians, Paul seems to use βαπτίζω figuratively in 10:1-2: "our ancestors [the Israelites]… were baptized [ἐβαπτίσθησαν] into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." As noted by Everett Ferguson, Paul saw the Israelites' "experience of deliverance" and their "being surrounded by the sea… and the cloud overhead" as comparable to the Christian ritual of baptism, but the Israelites did not experience a literal water baptism.[78]

What of the use of βαπτίζω in 1 Cor. 15:29? Some have proposed that βαπτίζω is being used in a non-literal sense - e.g., baptism as "martyrdom," or as denoting the "labors and dangers

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[77] Mark 7:4.

[78] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 349.

of the apostolate," or as persecutions endured by the faithful.[79] Others, while avoiding a non-literal interpretation of βαπτίζω, have argued that a practice other than the Christian rite of baptism is in view. One notable example comes from Theodore Beza, a sixteenth-century theologian and follower of John Calvin, who suggested that Paul was referring to the washing of dead bodies prior to their burial.[80] But, especially within the context of 1 Corinthians, these readings are unconvincing. Though βαπτίζω is sometimes used metaphorically in the New Testament, and it is occasionally used to refer a practice other than water baptism, it is usually clear from the surrounding context that it is being used in this manner. This is not the case for 1 Cor. 15:29. There is no clear indication in the text that Paul has something other than the ritual of water baptism in view, and such a usage of βαπτίζω would be unusual within the context of 1 Corinthians, where nearly every use of βαπτίζω points towards water baptism.

Various interpretations of the phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν have also been proposed. One view, which was especially popular in the patristic era, was that τῶν νεκρῶν referred to the "soon to be" dead (i.e., mortal) bodies of the ones being baptized.[81] This interpretation was supported by John Chrysostom, who also connected this passage to the creed recited by those being baptized: "[…] Paul […] said, 'if there is no resurrection, why are you baptized for the dead?' i.e., the dead bodies. For in fact with a view to this are you baptized, the resurrection of your

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[79] Bernard M. Foschini, "'Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead': An Exegetical Historical Dissertation," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (July 1950), 266-69.

[80] Foschini, "'Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead,' 1 Cor. 15:29," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (October 1950), 379-80.

[81] Foschini, "'Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead,' 1 Cor. 15:29 (Fourth Article)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (April 1951), 173; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 1243.

dead body, believing that it no longer remains dead."[82] Notably, Tertullian also held this view, though it is not clear if Chrysostom borrowed it from Tertullian or came to the same conclusion independently.[83] Alternatively, as suggested by Epiphanius in the early church and later picked up in the Reformation era by John Calvin, this phrase was interpreted as referring to catechumens who were baptized "when death was imminent."[84] Lastly, another Reformer, Martin Luther, interpreted ὑπέρ in the "local" sense, arguing that 1 Cor. 15:29 was a reference to some of the Corinthians being baptized over the graves of the dead.[85] While these interpretations of ὑπέρ τῶν νεκρῶν are theoretically possible, they are not particularly convincing as natural readings of the text. The view supported by Chrysostom, Tertullian, and many of the other church fathers has been criticized more recently in part because it does not account for the use of the third person – as Fee notes, Paul "would in fact be addressing the congregation itself if this view is correct."[86] The suggestion made by Epiphanius and Calvin has similarly been criticized as "forc[ing] the Greek of v. 29."[87] And Luther's proposal, while not entirely impossible from a

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[82] Chris L. de Wet, "John Chrysostom's Exegesis on the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15," *Neotestamentica* 45, no. 1 (2011), 104.

[83] Foschini, "Fourth Article," 172, n. 227, where he notes that "[s]ince the Greek Fathers hardly ever read the Latin Fathers, it is not easy to see how Chrysostom arrived at this explanation which agrees almost to the word with the explanation offered by Tertullian."

[84] Foschini, "Fourth Article," 177.

[85] Thiselton, 1242.

[86] Fee, 766, n. 28.

[87] Thiselton, 1243.

grammatical standpoint, is unlikely, as the "local" use of ὑπέρ is uncommon in Koine Greek and "apparently foreign" to the New Testament.[88]

We shall consider one final attempt at avoiding a "vicarious baptism" reading of 1 Cor. 15:29. Murphy-O'Connor has advanced an interpretation of v. 29 that is notable in that it features both a metaphorical reading of βαπτίζω, a lá Mark 10:38-39 and Luke 12:50, as well as a non-literal use of οἱ νεκροί. Murphy-O'Connor argues that, based on the surrounding literary context, v. 29 "concerns apostolic labors," which would require a metaphorical understanding of βαπτίζω – specifically, as meaning "to destroy" or "to perish."[89] From this, he proposes that οἱ νεκροί refers not to those who are physically dead, but "those who were 'dead' in an existential sense."[90] This, of course, presents a major difficulty for the second half of v. 29, where οἱ νεκροί is clearly being used in a literal sense as it refers to the resurrection of the dead. Murphy-O'Connor's solution to this difficulty is to read the first half of v. 29 as a quote: Paul is responding to a "contemptuous gibe" lobbed at him and his colleagues by the Corinthians.[91] Citing the work of Richard Horsley, Murphy-O'Connor points to the influence of "a type of philosophico-theological speculation on Wisdom," as articulated by Philo of Alexandria, which contributed to the Corinthians' denial of the resurrection and an elitist attitude towards those who emphasized the importance of the body, which the "spiritual elite" at Corinth considered to be completely irrelevant.[92] From this, Murphy-O'Connor suggests that the first half of v. 29 can be paraphrased

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[88] Thiselton, 1242.

[89] Murphy-O'Connor, 243-44.

[90] Murphy-O'Connor, 244.

[91] Murphy-O'Connor, 245.

[92] Murphy-O'Connor, 245-47.

as follows: “Supposing that there 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?”[93] The second half of v. 29 functions as Paul’s response to his critics: why, indeed, would they be destroyed on the account of the dead, if those who are “really” dead are not raised?[94]

Murphy-O’Connor’s proposal is intriguing, but its central premise – that Paul is quoting and responding to a Corinthian “slogan” – seems unlikely. In addition to the usual difficulties associated a non-literal reading of βαπτίζω within the context of 1 Corinthians, nowhere does the text indicate that Paul is quoting someone else. This makes the proposed interpretation even more problematic, as it assumes that Paul is using οἱ νεκροί figuratively in the first half of v. 29 (those considered “existentially” dead) and literally in the second half of v. 29 (the physically dead). If it could be shown, grammatically or otherwise, that Paul was quoting someone in the first half of v. 29, then such a switch might be plausible. But in the absence of any clear textual evidence, Murphy-O’Connor’s argument is unsuccessful at providing a compelling non-vicarious baptism reading of 1 Cor. 15:29.

Having surveyed several alternative readings of 1 Cor. 15:29, we return to what appears to be the most obvious, albeit still difficult, reading of the text: vicarious baptism. As Richard Hays aptly states, the “numerous attempts to explain away the obvious sense of this verse are strained and unpersuasive.”[95] Hans Conzelmann similarly affirms, “[t]he wording is in favor of

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[93] Murphy-O’Connor, 250.

[94] Murphy-O’Connor, 250.

[95] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 267.

the 'normal' exposition in terms of 'vicarious baptism.'"[96] But the exact details of this practice are challenging to draw out. It is clear that Paul is referencing vicarious baptism; it is less clear from the text of v. 29 how this practice may have originated, who it was performed for, and the effect it was thought to have.

Vicarious Baptism in the Context of Jewish and Greco-Roman Religion

Turning first to historical precedent, vicarious baptism seems to align with other practices performed for the benefit of the dead in Jewish and Greco-Roman religion, despite claims by some scholars to the contrary.[97] Regarding the former, 2 Maccabees 12:43-45 offers a parallel to both the practice of vicarious baptism as well as the line of argumentation found in 1 Cor. 15:29. Here we are told that Judas Maccabeus "took up a collection… to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver… to provide for a sin-offering." We are then told by the narrator – either Jason of Cyrene, whose five-volume historical account of the Maccabean revolt was later condensed into 2 Maccabees, or the editor – that Judas, in doing so, "acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection."[98] Furthermore, the narrator continues, "if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish the pray for the dead," but "if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought." There is a striking similarity

[96] Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 275.

[97]See, for instance, Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 256, where he asserts that vicarious baptism is "without any historical foundation whatsoever," and that in his historical analysis "something like vicarious baptism was nowhere to be found." It is probably true that 1 Cor. 15:29 is the earliest reference we have to the practice of vicarious baptism, but this section (hopefully) demonstrates that similar practices can be found in early Jewish and Greco-Roman religion which predate 1 Cor. 15:29.

[98] Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 27.

here to the argument Paul presents in 1 Cor. 15:29: performing this practice, presumably for the benefit of the dead, would be foolish if one does not also believe in the resurrection of the dead. Considering that 2 Maccabees would have been compiled around the "late second or early first century B.C.E.," one wonders if Paul was aware of this passage.[99]

Performing rituals for the benefit of the dead was also a prominent feature of Greco-Roman religion. There is ample evidence from both ancient inscriptions as well as literary sources that Greeks and Romans prayed for and made offerings to the dead. The practice of providing food, wine, and other gifts to the dead has its origins in the culture of preclassical Greece.[100] For instance, in Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles offers a funeral libation for his deceased friend, Patroklos.[101] In a similar vein, Ovid describes the annual festival of the Feralia in *Fasti*, during which gifts are offered to "appease the shades."[102] Additionally, the Corinthians may have been particularly interested in the world of the dead; Richard DeMaris points to archaeological evidence that, during the Roman period, a "religious outlook focused intensely on the dead and the world of the dead" emerged in Corinth, as indicated by "[t]he rise of the Palaimon cult at Isthmia" as well as the "chthonic orientation of Demeter worship in the Roman period."[103] DeMaris goes on to argue that the Corinthians' heightened interest in the underworld

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[99] Trumbower, 27.

[100] Trumbower, 16-17

[101] Homer, *Iliad*, 23.218-20.

[102] Ovid, *Fasti*, 2.535-42.

[103] Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 4 (Winter 1995), 670.

during this period played a fundamental role in the development of the practice of vicarious baptism.[104] While there is no evidence of the existence of vicarious baptism prior to 1 Cor. 15:29, there *is* evidence that Jews, Greeks, and Romans engaged in other practices thought to benefit the dead in some way; and, furthermore, it is possible that the Corinthians exhibited an unusually strong interest in the world of the dead that may have further contributed to the development of vicarious baptism.

Conclusion

While establishing a general historical background for the practice of vicarious baptism is not terribly difficult, it *is* difficult to ascertain what, exactly, this practice entailed. There is first the question of scope: who were these baptisms performed for? Two likely options emerge. Some have suggested that these baptisms were performed on behalf of deceased friends or relatives, specifically those who had died without being baptized.[105] Others have suggested that the Corinthians were baptized on behalf of catechumens who died before they were able to be baptized.[106] The Marcionites, an early heterodox group that allegedly practiced vicarious baptism, were reported to have limited it to unbaptized catechumens.[107] Notably, the only Christian group that practices vicarious baptism today, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day

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[104] DeMaris, 671-72.

[105] Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 206-07; N.H. Taylor, "Baptism for the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29)?" *Neotestamentica* 36, no. ½ (2002), 118.

[106] Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 128; Trumbower, 36.

[107] J. David Stark, "Traditional Conflict Management: How Early Interpreters Address Paul's Reference to Those Baptized for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29)," *Religions* 14, no. 722, 5.

Saints, has extended the scope of this practice beyond dead friends and relatives or those who expressed interest in joining the church while alive; in theory, any dead person named during the baptismal ceremony can be saved, though the dead themselves must accept the offer of salvation before the general resurrection.[108] But, at least for the Corinthians, the practice was probably not as widely used. Of the two likely options, the restriction of vicarious baptism to dead, unbaptized catechumens seems slightly more plausible, if only because the Marcionites supposedly adopted the same practice. But these options are not mutually exclusive, and some commentators, such as N.H. Taylor, appear to accept both.[109] The more important point is that this ritual, as practiced by the Corinthians, may have been limited in scope.

Then there is the second, related question: what did the Corinthians hope to achieve for those they were being baptized on behalf of? Many scholars have characterized the Corinthians as having a "high view" of baptism and the role it played in salvation.[110] In light of this, as well as the historical and cultural context in which they lived, the practice of vicarious baptism is perhaps more understandable. The Corinthians were baptized on the behalf of the unbaptized, faithful dead in order to ensure their salvation.

If the "vicarious baptism" reading of 1 Cor. 15:29 is correct, then this passage serves as another example of the tradition of postmortem salvation in early Christianity, though it is unclear from this text if Paul endorsed this tradition or merely made use of one instance of the tradition to argue for the bodily resurrection of believers. On the one hand, Paul is silent; on the

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[108] Trumbower, 4-6.

[109] Taylor, 118-19.

[110] Hays, 267.

other hand, Paul is silent. It could be argued that Paul does not condemn the practice because he sees nothing wrong with it, at least in principle. Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that "the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband," perhaps suggesting that Paul would not have been completely uncomfortable with the idea of someone performing an action on the behalf of someone else to ensure their salvation.[111] Conversely, it could also be argued that Paul mentioning the practice does not mean he endorses it; he is merely using it to show the incoherence of the Corinthians' beliefs regarding the resurrection. Nonetheless, the practice of vicarious baptism itself points towards the belief of some early Christians that one's fate is not fixed after death.

[111] 1 Corinthians 7:14.

CHAPTER 4

PRAYING FOR THE DEAD: THE APOCALYPSE OF PETER AND OTHER TEXTS

Introducing the Apocalypse of Peter

While we have now seen that the New Testament contains passages that support the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned, this idea also appears elsewhere in early Jewish and Christian literature. The most relevant of these texts is the Apocalypse of Peter, which punctuates a lengthy and graphic tour of the eternal torments awaiting sinners in Hell with an explicit affirmation of postmortem salvation. Accordingly, the Apocalypse of Peter will be the starting point of our investigation and the primary focus of this chapter. Though ultimately not included in the New Testament canon, this text was widely read by early Christians and occasionally quoted as authoritative scripture by early Christian writers. Its detailed depictions of the afterlife and eschatological judgment, topics which are addressed in the New Testament but seldom fleshed out, undoubtedly played a role in shaping early Christian thought on these matters.

Scholars generally agree that the Apocalypse of Peter was written during the second century CE, but the precise date and geographical provenance of the text remain elusive. At the very least, one can be reasonably confident that the Apocalypse of Peter was composed at some point during the first half of the second century based on other second-century and early third-century texts that directly or indirectly cite it.[112] The emphasis placed upon the themes of false

[112] Eric J. Beck, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter: A New Translation and Analysis of the Purpose of the Text* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 6-7.

messiahs and martyrdom further suggest that the Apocalypse of Peter was written during a time of persecution for Christians. For instance, the first two chapters of the Apocalypse of Peter feature Jesus warning his disciples about following false Christs, before concluding with a warning about a singular false messiah who will kill those who reject him.[113] Additionally, the ninth chapter of the text details punishments for the "persecutors and refuters of my righteous ones," the "blasphemers and renouncers of my [Jesus'] righteousness," and those who "killed the martyrs (with) a lie."[114] From this, some scholars, most prominently Richard Bauckham and Dennis Bucholz, have argued that the text was written in Palestine during the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135 CE, and that the "false messiah" in question was the revolt's leader, Simeon bar Kosiba.[115] Justin Martyr's account of the revolt in his *First Apology* seems to support this possibility; writing about two decades after the revolt, he alleges that "Barchochebas… gave orders that Christians alone should be led to cruel punishments, unless they would deny Jesus Christ and utter blasphemy."[116] Bauckham also suggests that 2:10, "this liar is not the Christ," is a pun on bar Kosiba's nickname: while his followers called him Bar Kokhba, "son of the star," others called him "bar Koziva," meaning "son of the lie" or "liar."[117] In more recent scholarship,

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[113] Apocalypse of Peter 1:4-5; 2:7-13. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations of the Apocalypse of Peter are taken from Eric J. Beck, "Translation of the Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter including the Pseudo-Clementine Framework," in *The Apocalypse of Peter in Context*, eds. Daniel C. Maier, Jörg Frey, and Thomas J. Kraus (Leuven: Peeters, 2024), 377-400.

[114] Apoc. Pet. 9:2-4.

[115] Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 176-194; Dennis C. Bucholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 408-412.

[116] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in Phillip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 266-267.

[117] Bauckham, 189-190.

however, this theory has been contested as lacking strong textual support.[118] An alternate possibility is that the Apocalypse of Peter was written in Egypt, potentially during the revolt under Trajan (115-117 CE). This theory was acknowledged by Bauckham himself as "a possibility which perhaps cannot be entirely excluded," though the few sources we have that deal with the revolt under Trajan "tell us nothing of any persecution of Christians during this revolt."[119] Nonetheless, Tobias Nicklas has recently argued for an Egyptian origin of the Apocalypse of Peter based, in part, on its early reception history.[120] Additionally, the reference to idols which resemble "the image of cats and lions" in 10:5 may also suggest that the Apocalypse of Peter originated in Egypt rather than Palestine.

Today, there are five extant manuscripts of the Apocalypse of Peter: three Greek manuscripts (Akhmīm, Bodleian, and Rainer), Egyptian in origin, which are fragmentary; and two Ethiopic manuscripts, both of which are embedded within a larger work known as *The Second Coming of Christ and the Resurrection of the Dead*.[121] The Ethiopic manuscripts are

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[118] See, for instance, Eibert Tigchelaar, "Is the Liar Bar Kokhba? Considering the Date and Provenance of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter," in *The Apocalypse of Peter*, eds. Jan N. Bremmer and István Czachesz (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 63-77. Tigchelaar criticizes the Bar Kokhba theory on the points referenced above, noting that the descriptions of persecution in chapter two are "general to such a degree" that they may refer to another historical event, such as the Jewish revolt against Trajan (115-117 CE). He concludes that "the identification of the liar with Bar Kokhba is possible and tempting, but the arguments are not conclusive," and that "the Bar Kokhba hypothesis should not serve as a hermeneutical key that veils other possible explanations of sections of the composition" (74; 77).

[119] Bauckham, 185-187.

[120] Tobias Nicklas, "Jewish, Christianeek? The Apocalypse of Peter as a Witness of Early 2nd-Cent. Christianity in Alexandria," in *Beyond Conflicts: Cultural and Religious Cohabitations in Alexandria and Egypt between the 1st and the 6th Century CE*, ed. Luca Arcari (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 35-40.

[121] Beck, *Justice and Mercy*, 3-4; Bucholz, 17, 34.

thought to better preserve the original Apocalypse of Peter overall than the Greek Akhmīm fragment, which probably represents a shortened and edited form of the original text.[122] The other two Greek fragments largely correspond with the Ethiopic manuscripts. The Bodleian fragment contains 10:6-7 of the Ethiopic text, which details the punishment of those who made idols.[123] The Rainer fragment, on the other hand, preserves 14:1-3, a passage which is largely unintelligible in the Ethiopic text.[124] It is in the Rainer fragment that the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned is most clearly articulated.

Turning first to the text as a whole, the Ethiopic text of the Apocalypse of Peter may be outlined, roughly, as follows:

1. Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Olives (1:1-2:13)
    a. Disciples ask Jesus about the "signs of your coming and the end of the world… [so] we may instruct those who come after us[.]" (1:2-3)
        i. Description of the Parousia and a warning about false Christs (1:4-8)
    b. Parable of the fig tree (2:1-13)
        i. Fig tree is "the house of Israel" (2:7)
        ii. Transition from "false messiahs" (2:7) to singular false messiah (2:8)
        iii. Martyrdom of those who reject the false Christ (2:10-13)
    c. fig tree is "house of Israel;" reference to a singular "deceiver" who martyrs those who do not accept him as Christ
2. Revelation, from Jesus to Peter (3:1-14:6)
    a. Peter questions Jesus (3:4-3:7)
    b. Day of judgment (4:1-6:9)
    c. Tour of Hell (7:1-12:7)
        i. Parents who killed their children (8:1-10)
        ii. Persecutors of Jesus' followers (9:1-2; 4)
        iii. Blasphemers, idol-worshipers, followers of demons (9:3; 10:5-6; 7)
    d. Righteous, elect, and sinners (13:1-14:3)

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[122] Beck, 11.

[123] Bucholz, 146.

[124] M.R. James, "The Rainer Fragment of the Apocalypse of Peter," *The Journal of Theological Studies 32*, no. 127 (April 1931), 270.

i. Sinners request mercy, but ultimately affirm that God's judgment is righteous, good, and proportional (13:4-6)
ii. Elect and righteous given "the baptism and salvation they have asked of me" (14:1-3a)

e. Peter sent to "the city in the west" to proclaim Jesus' message (14:3b-6)

3. Transfiguration (15-17)

Postmortem punishment of the damned is one of the most prominent themes of the Apocalypse of Peter. As seen above, the tour of Hell is the longest section of the text, spanning a total of five chapters and featuring twenty-one different punishments for different groups of sinners, including murderers, sorcerers, and disobedient slaves.[125] Two of the most frequently mentioned categories of sins in the tour of Hell are sexual sins (e.g., adultery) and sins against God (e.g., blasphemy) or his followers.[126] The author also devotes considerable attention to the punishment of men and women who killed their children.[127] As Bauckham notes, the model of punishment found in the Apocalypse of Peter is that of "pure retribution:" there is no indication that the sinners facing postmortem punishment are purified or reformed through the suffering they experience in Hell.[128] Furthermore, in the Ethiopic text, these punishments are consistently described as being "eternal" or otherwise unending in duration, though it seems possible that some of these references do not go back to the original Greek text of the Apocalypse of Peter.[129]

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[125] Bauckham, 166-167.

[126] For sexual sins, see Apoc. Pet. 7:5-9 (fornication), 10:2-4 (male and female homosexuality), and 11:6-7 (premarital sex). For sins against God and/or his followers, see 9:1-2, 4 (persecution of Christians), 9:3 (blasphemy); 10:2-3, 5-6 (idolatry), and 10:7 (demon worship).

[127] Apoc. Pet. 8:1-10.

[128] Bauckham, 209.

[129] See, for instance, Apoc. Pet. 10:3, 7; 11:3, 9. As Bauckham notes (209-210), the Akhmīm fragment, when it parallels the Ethiopic text, does not reference eternal punishment. Additionally, when comparing the parallels of 10:6-7 of the Ethiopic text contained in the Akhmīm and Bodleian fragments, the Ethiopic text features an additional reference to eternal

Nonetheless, it is reiterated several times in the text that this punishment is just and proportional to the sins committed by those being tormented. When Peter questions the punishment of the sinners, suggesting that "it was better for them when they had not been created," Jesus quickly rebuffs him, telling him that "[it is] you who opposes God."[130] The phrase "each one according to their deeds," in reference to the postmortem punishment faced by sinners, is repeated throughout the text, with the sinners themselves affirming this statement at the conclusion of the tour of Hell after their request for mercy is rejected.[131] This punishment is justified in spite of the sinners' ignorance of the consequences of their actions while they were alive.[132] The judgment of God and subsequent punishment of sinners is brutal and unending, but ultimately justified on the basis that the postmortem suffering of the damned is proportional to the sins they committed before they died.

The Rainer Fragment of the Apocalypse of Peter

This picture of unending postmortem torment is complicated by 14:1-3, verses which are best preserved by the Greek Rainer fragment. The most relevant portion of the Rainer fragment, translated into English based on the Greek text provided by M.R. James, reads:

> (παρ)έξομαι τοῖς κλητοῖς μου καὶ ἐκλέκτοις μου ὃν ἐὰν αἰτήσωνταί με ἐκ τῆς κολάσεως, καὶ δώσω αὐτοῖς καλὸν βάπτισμα ἐν σωτηρίᾳ Ἀχερουσίας λίμνης ἣν

punishment not found in either Greek fragment. While all three texts agree that the duration of the punishment of idol-makers is in some way unending (ἀναναπαυστως in the Bodelian fragment; μηδεποτε παυομενοι in the Akhmīm fragment), the Ethiopic text also states that the punishment of those who "abandon the commandment of God" will be eternal in duration, as well. For a more in-depth discussion of 10:6-7 in the Akhmīm, Bodleian, and Ethiopic texts, see Bucholz, 145-152.

[130] Apoc. Pet. 3:4-5; 6:3; 13:6.

[131] Apoc. Pet. 13:6; see also 6:3.

[132] Apoc. Pet. 13:4.

> καλοῦσιν ἐν τῳ Ἡλυσιῳ πεδίῳ, μέρος δικαιοσύνης μετὰ τῶν ἁγίων μου. καὶ ἀπελεύσομαι ἐγὼ καὶ οἱ ἔκλεκτοί μου ἀγαλλιῶντες μετὰ τῶν πατριαρχῶν εἰς τὴν αἰωνίαν μου βασιλείαν, καὶ ποιήσω μετ᾽αὐτῶν τὰς ἐπαγγελίας μου ἃς ἐπηγγειλάμην αὐτοῖς ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.[133]
>
> I will grant, to my called and my elect, whomever they may ask me, out of punishment, and I will give them a good baptism in salvation from the Acherusian lake, which they call, in the Elysian plain, a portion of righteousness with my holy ones. And I will go away, I and my elect, rejoicing, with the patriarchs, into my eternal kingdom, and I will do with them my promises which I promised them, I and my Father, who is in the heavens.

Prima facie, the text of the Rainer fragment affirms the postmortem salvation of the damned quite explicitly: Jesus tells Peter that he will take whomever his "called" and "elect" ask for out of torment and baptize them in salvation. Two qualifications emerge, however, upon a

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[133] M.R. James, "The Rainer Fragment," 271. See also Beck, 85-88; Tamás Adamik, "The Description of Paradise in the Apocalypse of Peter," in *The Apocalypse of Peter,* eds. Bremmer and Czachesz, 87; Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, *Das Petrusevangelium und die Petrusapokalypse: Die griechischen Fragment emit Deutscher und englischer Übersetzung* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 126-128. Scholars disagree on the best way to read the beginning portion of the Rainer Fragment. As noted by Beck, two possible readings have been suggested: James' reading, reproduced and translated above, which has been followed more recently by Kraus, Nicklas, and Beck; and Tamás Adamik's reading, following Charles Wessely and Karl Prümm, which instead reads ἔξομαι τοῖς κλητοῖς μου καὶ ἐκλέκτοις μου θ(εὸ)ν ἐαν στήσωντα᾽με ἐκ τῆς κολάσεως (Adamik, 87; Beck, 86; James, 271). These readings differ on two key points that are of the utmost significance for the translation and interpretation of the Rainer fragment. First, Prümm and Wessely thought that the text contained the *nomen sacrum* $\overline{\theta\nu}$, rendering the text θ(εὸ)ν (Beck, 87). Kraus and Nicklas, however, have pointed out that "[u]nter dem Mikroskop" the horizontal line that would be used to indicate the use of the *nomen sacrum* is, in fact, a breathing mark (Kraus and Nicklas, 126). Additionally, "no horizontal line exists within the o to make it a θ," making the reading of ὅν more likely than θ(εὸ)ν (Beck, 87). Second, there is debate over how to read the first letter of the word στεσωνται, which James emends to αἰτήσωνταί (James, 271). More specifically, it is difficult to tell from the manuscript of the Rainer fragment whether the first letter of this verb is a lunate sigma (c, which James printed as σ) or an epsilon (ε). Kraus and Nicklas argue again that, "unter dem Mikroskop," the first letter contains a horizontal line indicating that it is ε, not c (Kraus and Nicklas, 126). From this, one can read the verb in question as αἰτήσωνταί, as James does, because ε could be used in place of αι during the Greco-Roman period (Kraus and Nicklas, 126). The difference in meaning is significant: if one follows the reading of Adamik, Prümm, and Wessely, then the Rainer fragment no longer contains the suggestion of postmortem salvation for the damned through the intercession of the righteous. "Whomever" [ὅν] becomes "God" [θ(εὸ)ν], and the meaning of στήσωντα is unclear.

closer examination of the text. Most importantly, the phrase ὃν ἐὰν αἰτήσωνταί με, "whomever they may ask me," is a conditional statement, and the verb αἰτήσωνταί ("they may ask") is in the subjunctive mood. This grammatical feature lends a degree of uncertainty to the passage regarding what the called and elect will do. While it is *probable* that the called and elect will ask for sinners to be baptized, it is not *guaranteed* that this will happen. There is also some ambiguity as to what happens to the sinners after they are baptized. Jesus only states that he will go away with his *elect* (οἱ ἔκλεκτοί μου) into his eternal kingdom. While the sinners have been delivered from torment and baptized in salvation, it is unclear if they, too, will enter into the eternal kingdom with Jesus and the elect. Nonetheless, the overarching point of the text is clear, even if some of the individual details remain elusive. At the request of the called and the elect, *if* they choose to make this request, Jesus *will* deliver the damned out of torment and grant them a salvific baptism.

It seems strange that a text so focused on the postmortem torment of sinners would also feature one of the least ambiguous instances of postmortem salvation in early Christian tradition. The fact that this idea is present in the Apocalypse of Peter, however, is less surprising when one considers another distinctive feature of the text: the sorrow of the righteous upon seeing the torment of sinners. At the beginning of the vision, we are told that Peter and Jesus see that "the sinners […] weep in great affliction and sorrow to the extent that everyone who has seen it with their eyes will weep, whether the righteous or angels, or even he himself."[134] Additionally, as noted before, Peter himself questions the punishment of the damned. That the righteous are able to see the punishment of the damned is reiterated in 8:3, where the children whose parents

[134] Apoc. Pet. 3:3.

"prevented [them from] living" are seated "opposite" to them, and again in 13:1-2, where the "elect and […] righteous" are brought to view the punishment of "those who cursed [them]." Granted, in these instances, the reader is not told how the righteous respond to the punishment of the damned. But the only response that *is* depicted is that of sorrow and weeping for the damned.

Taken together, the response of the righteous to the punishment of the wicked and the contents of the Rainer fragment have important implications for the purpose of the Apocalypse of Peter as a whole. The Apocalypse of Peter has commonly been interpreted as serving a "monitory" purpose, functioning as a warning against engaging in the actions that the text depicts the punishment of. This interpretation, at least in part, stems from an understanding that the Apocalypse of Peter was written with a "wicked" audience in mind: the punishment of the damned is depicted in a graphic manner to discourage its audience from engaging in these specific actions. However, as Eric J. Beck has suggested, this is an inaccurate understanding of the text's intended audience. Beck instead argues that the intended audience of the Apocalypse of Peter is "the righteous who will not receive punishment in Hell," encouraging its readers to identify with the righteous rather than the wicked.[135] Beck supports his interpretation by noting that the text sharply distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked to a hyperbolic extent: the righteous are Christians who have never sinned and will not "see death by the devouring fire," (6:4) and the groups of the wicked have only committed a single sin that they face eternal torment for.[136] Because the intended audience of the Apocalypse of Peter are righteous

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[135] Beck, 114.

[136] Beck, 114. Beck notes that the text contains "ambiguous" references to apostasy (5:1, 7:3-4), but that these references likely "imply a more general rejection of righteousness by those outside of the faith rather than apostasy by those within."

Christians, they are ultimately meant to identify with the sorrow and weeping of the righteous in 3:3.[137] From this, the reference to postmortem salvation in the Rainer fragment becomes more comprehensible. Though the text does not explicitly state that the righteous will intercede for the damned, the response of the righteous to the suffering of the damned in 3:3 establishes that the righteous feel compassion towards those being tormented in Hell. The possibility that no righteous individual will intercede on behalf of the damned remains open, but the fact that the righteous are moved by their plight makes this possibility unlikely. In this way, 3:3 and the version of 14:1-3 preserved by the Rainer fragment serve as compassionate bookends for the tour of Hell. The damned deserve the punishment that they receive; at the same time, the mercy and compassion of the righteous may move them to intercede on the behalf of the damned.

Greco-Roman Parallels: Plato's *Phaedo* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Parallels to the concepts of Hell and postmortem salvation as developed in the Apocalypse of Peter can be found in earlier Greco-Roman literature. One detail in particular, the postmortem baptism of the damned in the Acherusian Lake, brings to mind the depiction of the afterlife in Plato's *Phaedo.* In the *Phaedo*, Socrates describes the different places of punishment for the dead: the Acheron, where those who have lived moderate lives immediately go to be "purified" and "absolved of their wrongdoings by paying penalties" at the Acherusian Lake; and Tartarus, a place of suffering, where those who have committed irredeemable wrongs are cast forever and those who have committed "redeemable" wrongs stay until they have "won over" the ones they have wronged.[138] The depiction of the Acherusian Lake as a place of purification is of

[137] Beck, 123. Beck argues that a common alternate reading of the Apocalypse of Peter, that the text encourages *Schadenfreude* because the wicked receive the suffering that they deserve, is also discounted by this.

[138] Plato, *Phaedo*, 113c-114b.

particular interest for the Rainer Fragment, as the Rainer Fragment describes sinners being baptized in the Acherusian Lake at the request of the called and the elect. This parallel, however, is only partial: while the Rainer Fragment explicitly refers to this baptism as a baptism in salvation [βάπτισμα ἐν σωτηρίᾳ], the *Phaedo* refers to the process undergone by those in the Acherusian Lake as purification [καθαίρω]. That said, the Acherusian Lake seems to function *similarly* in the Rainer Fragment as it does in the *Phaedo*, even if the processes described in each text are not identical. The Acherusian Lake is the place where those who have done wrong are able to correct those wrongs, whether they do so through purification or through salvific baptism.

The theme of *katabasis,* descent into the underworld, is also found throughout Greco-Roman literature and is of relevance to both the Apocalypse of Peter as a whole as well as the Rainer Fragment in particular. In katabatic literature, the hero goes to the underworld with the assistance of a divine being, where he "performs an important task, has significant encounters with ghosts, and comes back alive to proceed successfully with the rest of his endeavors."[139] An especially striking example of katabasis is found in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*[140] After his wife, Eurydice, is bitten by a serpent and dies, Orpheus goes to the underworld to bring her back to life. He is initially successful in his rescue attempt: after playing his lyre, he persuades the "bloodless spirits" residing in the underworld to grant his request. But as they are making the journey out of the underworld, Orpheus looks back, and Eurydice slips into the underworld again. Conceptually, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is not

[139] Stamatia Dova, *Greek Heroes in and out of Hades* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 1.

[140] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book X, 1-85.

dissimilar from the process of saving sinners from torment described in the Rainer Fragment. In both instances, someone petitions for someone else to be saved, and the petition is granted.

Jewish Parallels: Testament of Abraham

Some early Jewish literature also attests to the postmortem salvation of the damned through the intercession of the righteous. We have already seen one expression of this idea in 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, where Judas Maccabeus takes up a collection to make atonement for the dead "so that they might be delivered from their sin." An example that more closely parallels the depiction of postmortem salvation in the Apocalypse of Peter, however, can be found in the Testament of Abraham. This early Jewish apocalyptic text was most likely written in Egypt.[141] Establishing a date of origin is more difficult for several reasons: the text exists in two recensions (a longer "A" recension and a shorter "B" recension), both of which were edited by Christian scribes as they were copied down; the text makes no discernible reference to any particular historical event; the doctrines presented in the text "are not datable to any narrow historical period;" and even the original language of the text is not entirely certain, though Greek seems most likely and is the language that both recensions have been preserved in.[142] That said, many scholars, including E.P. Sanders, date the original text Testament of Abraham to 100 CE, "plus or minus twenty-five years."[143] Assuming that the text is Egyptian in origin and originally written in Greek, it is unlikely that the text was written after the Jewish revolt under Trajan, as "it is doubtful if Egyptian, especially Alexandrian, Judaism was sufficiently intact after A.D. 117 to

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[141] Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 32-33.

[142] E.P. Sanders, "Testament of Abraham: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. I, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1983), 874-875; Allison, 40.

[143] Sanders, 875.

allow the production of such literature."[144] The dates of the text's two recensions are similarly difficult to determine. While the language used in A is probably more recent, the tradition history behind this recension is thought to be longer, whereas some aspects of B are thought to be closer to the original text.[145]

Each recension of the Testament of Abraham depicts the judgment of souls differently. In A, Michael brings Abraham to the "first gate" of heaven, where he will be able to see "the judgment and the recompenses" so that he may learn mercy for sinners.[146] Abraham and Michael go to the place of judgment, where a "wondrous man, bright as the sun, like unto a son of God" sits on a crystalline throne, judging and sentencing souls.[147] Two angels are present: one who weighs souls with a scale, another who tests sinners with fire.[148] There is also a book that contains a record of sins committed by the souls being judged. Abraham and Michael witness a soul brought forth to be judged. The soul is determined to have committed and equal number of good deeds and sins, and, consequently, is not sent away to be punished or saved; they are instead "set… in the middle."[149] Later, Abraham is told that this soul will remain in this intermediate state until "the judge of all should come;" in response, Abraham prays for the soul,

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[144] Sanders, 874.

[145] Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in its Jewish* Context (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 123.

[146] Test. Abr. A 10:14-15.

[147] Test. Abr. A 12:4-6.

[148] Test. Abr. A 12:12-15; 13:9-14.

[149] Test. Abr. A 12:18.

which leads to the soul being "carried… up to Paradise."[150] B, on the other hand, lacks much of this material. Three possibilities for the fate of souls are given: a soul with more good deeds than sins will enter into Paradise; a soul with more sins than good deeds will be condemned to destruction; and a soul with a balance of sins and good deeds will be left in an intermediate state.[151] Unlike A, however, B does not address what happens to souls in an intermediate state.

Two similarities between the Apocalypse of Peter and the Testament of Abraham are worth noting here. First, Abraham is taken on an otherworldly journey so that he will learn to have mercy on sinners.[152] The surrounding context of the otherworldly journey in the Testament of Abraham is, admittedly, quite different: the catalyst for Abraham's journey is him requesting the destruction of "robbers," a couple "engaging in sexual immorality with each other," and house burglars.[153] Nonetheless, if the assessment of the audience and purpose of the Apocalypse of Peter given above is correct, both texts show an interest in promoting a merciful and compassionate attitude towards sinners. A more striking similarity is A's account of Abraham's intercessory prayer for the soul in an intermediate state. Though the Apocalypse of Peter lacks the three-fold classification of souls developed in both recensions of the Testament of Abraham, the motif of the righteous interceding on behalf of the non-righteous dead is nonetheless shared by both texts.[154] Considering the possibility that the Apocalypse of Peter is also Egyptian in

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[150] Test. Abr. A 14:1-9.

[151] Test. Abr. B 9:5-10.

[152] Test. Abr. A 10:14-15.

[153] Test. Abr. A 10:3-12.

[154] It should be noted here that, in contrast to other Jewish and Christian texts that allude to the intercession of the righteous on behalf of the dead – e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:29, 2 Maccabees 12:43-45; Acts of Paul and Thecla 4.3 (see below) – both the Apocalypse of Peter and

origin and written shortly after the Testament of Abraham, one wonders if the authors of these texts drew upon some sort of shared tradition of intercession for the damned.

Christian Parallels: Acts of Paul and Thecla

Lastly, another early Christian text is relevant to the discussion of postmortem salvation in the early Christian tradition: the Acts of Paul and Thecla. The Acts of Paul and Thecla is part of the apocryphal Acts of Paul, though some elements of Thecla's story probably predate the rest of the Acts of Paul.[155] Additionally, the Acts of Paul and Thecla appears to have circulated independently of the Acts of Paul and, owing to its popularity, was better preserved than the rest of the Acts of Paul.[156] Like the other texts examined in this chapter, ascertaining a date of composition for the Acts of Paul and Thecla is challenging. Because Tertullian references (and condemns) the text in *De Baptismo,* a tractate penned sometime between 196 and 206 CE, the Acts of Paul and Thecla could not have been written or compiled later than the latter half of the second century CE.[157] Jeremy W. Barrier has suggested that "the final compilation would have come toward the last 30-40 years of the second century," meaning that the Acts of Paul and Thecla was compiled sometime after the Apocalypse of Peter.[158] Notably, like the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul appears to have been regarded as authoritative scripture in some early Christian circles; while certain early Christian writers rejected the text, including Tertullian as

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the Testament of Abraham envision the righteous interceding while in the place of the dead, rather than the *living* righteous praying or otherwise acting for the benefit of the dead.

[155] Trumbower, 56.

[156] Trumbower, 56.

[157] Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 21-24.

[158] Barrier, 24.

well as Eusebius, it was included in other lists of canonical scripture as late as the sixth century.[159]

The passages of the Acts of Paul and Thecla that are relevant to the discussion of postmortem salvation include 4.3-4.4 and 4.14, where Thecla prays for the postmortem salvation of Queen Tryphaena's daughter, Falconilla. After Thecla has been condemned to fight with wild beasts, Tryphaena takes Thecla aside, the narrator notes, because Falconilla appeared to her in a dream and told her, "Mother, the deserted stranger, named Thecla, you will take in my place, in order that she might pray on my behalf and I might be translated into the place of righteousness."[160] In the following section, Thecla prays for Falconilla, asking God to "give to her [Tryphaena] according to her wish, in order that her daughter Falconilla might live forever."[161] Later, after Thecla miraculously survives this ordeal, Tryphaena says to her, "'Now I believe that the dead are raised. Now I believe that my child lives.'"[162] Though not explicitly confirmed by the text, the implication seems to be that Thecla's intercessory prayer was effective.

The Early Reception of the Apocalypse of Peter and its Decline in Popularity

From this exploration of early Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts dealing with the afterlife, it becomes clear that the Apocalypse of Peter is not alone in affirming the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned. What makes the Apocalypse of Peter especially significant for establishing the existence of such a tradition in early Christianity, however, is its near-

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[159] Barrier, 25-26.

[160] Acts of Paul and Thecla 4.3; from Barrier's translation, 146.

[161] Acts of Paul and Thecla, 4.4.

[162] Acts of Paul and Thecla, 4.14.

scriptural status and popularity within certain early Christian circles. Though ultimately excluded from the New Testament canon, a few ancient sources indicate that the text was accepted by some as authoritative. Most importantly, the Muratorian Fragment (ca. 190) reads: "We also still receive the Apocalypses of John and Peter, although some of us do not want [them] to be read in church."[163] A later catalogue of New Testament writings featured in the *Codex Claromontanus*, dating to either the 4th or 6th century CE, includes the "Revelation of Peter" alongside other canonical texts.[164] Additionally, the second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria references the Apocalypse of Peter several times in *Eclogae propheticae,* at one point favorably citing the text as "γραφή [scripture]."[165] Methodius of Olympus, another early Christian writer, similarly alludes to the Apocalypse of Peter as an "inspired" text in his *Symposium*.[166] Lastly, the Latin Homily on the Ten Virgins, a fourth-century text with an unknown author, cites the Apocalypse of Peter as a reliable source of information for the afterlife alongside the Book of Daniel.[167]

That said, there is indication elsewhere that the Apocalypse of Peter had begun to fall out of favor with church authorities beginning in the fourth century CE. For example, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea disputes the authenticity

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[163] Muratorian Fragment, lines 71-73; translation taken from Claire K. Rothschild, *The Muratorian Fragment: Text, Translation, Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 40.

[164] Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 37.

[165] Bucholz 22-29, citing Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae propheticae*, 41a, 48-49.

[166] Dennis D. Bucholz, 34-36.

[167] J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 600. The relevant quotation from the Latin Homily reads: "The closed door is the river of fire by which the ungodly will be kept out of the kingdom of God, as it is written in Daniel and by Peter in his Apocalypse."

of the Apocalypse of Peter and claims, erroneously, that "no orthodox writer of the ancient time or of our own" used this text.[168] Later canon catalogues, including the seventh-century *List of the Sixty Books* and the ninth-century *Stichometry of Nicephorus,* further point towards a shift in the text's reputation as authoritative scripture, as both affirm that the Apocalypse of Peter was considered "apocryphal" or otherwise non-canonical.[169] It is not clear from these texts, however, why the Apocalypse of Peter eventually lost its status as authoritative scripture: Eusebius does not articulate a reason for classifying the Apocalypse of Peter as "non-genuine," beyond the incorrect assertion that no "orthodox" writer had cited the text, nor does the author of the Muratorian Fragment elaborate on why only some churches chose to read the Apocalypse of Peter publicly.

There are clues, however, elsewhere in the reception history of the text. First, it should be reiterated here that both extant Ethiopic manuscripts of the Apocalypse of Peter are attached to another work: *The Second Coming of Christ and the Resurrection of the Dead.* This work is considerably more challenging to date than the Apocalypse of Peter, though Daniel C. Maier has persuasively argued for a date of composition sometime during the first millennium.[170] Though

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[168] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3.2, 3.25.4-6. Curiously, in 6.14.1, Eusebius notes that Clement "has given concise explanations of all the Canonical Scriptures, not passing over even the disputed writings," including "the Apocalypse known as Peter's."

[169] Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha,* vol. I, 41-43.

[170] For a succinct summary of his argument, see Daniel C. Maier, "The Ethiopic Pseudo-Clementine Framework of the Apocalypse of Peter: Chances and Challenges in the African Transmission Context," in *The Apocalypse of Peter in Context*, 209-210, where he also argues for an Egyptian origin of the *Second Coming* rather than an Ethiopic origin. Notably, Maier suggests in an earlier passage that the *Second Coming* may have been composed around the time of the second Origenist crisis in the sixth century, as the topic of postmortem salvation (or, specifically, Origen's idea of *apokatastasis*) was central to this crisis and played a role in the condemnation and destruction of Origen's writings (208-209).

the transition between the text of the Apocalypse of Peter and the *Second Coming* is abrupt and awkward, the two texts are undoubtedly related: the latter comments on and expands upon the former. In the *Second Coming,* Peter recounts his vision to Clement, as well as a subsequent interaction with Jesus concerning the postmortem fate of sinners. Throughout this conversation, Jesus affirms that sinners will be shown mercy, while repeatedly admonishing Peter not to tell anyone because "[w]hen the sinners hear (this), their conduct will be sinful so that they might be shown mercy."[171] Peter, in turn, tells Clement to "[g]uard this mystery" and to "[p]ut (it) into a box so that foolish people might not see it."[172] The *Second Coming* is significant, then, as it provides another reason for the rejection of postmortem salvation in mainstream Christianity. As Maier writes, postmortem salvation for the damned "was not condemned but was simultaneously perceived as a dangerous and destabilizing truth for any community."[173] Even if the teaching of postmortem salvation was true, it was a truth best kept hidden from most human beings.

Another early Christian text, the Apocalypse of Paul, also provides some interesting insights into the waning popularity of postmortem salvation for the damned among early Christians. Likely written around the time of the first Origenist controversy in late fourth-century Egypt, the Apocalypse of Paul also devotes considerable time to the punishment of the damned and shares several elements in common with the Apocalypse of Peter.[174] For instance, some of the punishments detailed in the Apocalypse of Paul resemble those found in the Apocalypse of

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[171] *Second Coming*, 32:3.

[172] *Second Coming*, 38:4.

[173] Maier, "Ethiopic Pseudo-Clementine Framework," 213.

[174] Emiliano B. Fiori, "'Close and Yet so Far Away:' The *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*," in *The Apocalypse of Peter in Context*, 235.

Peter: those who committed infanticide are attacked by devouring beasts, and those who failed to care for widows and orphans wear rags and dark clothing.[175] A more striking similarity is the appearance of the Acherusian Lake in both texts as a place of baptism.[176] It is here, however, where the texts diverge in a notable way. While the Rainer Fragment depicts the Acherusian Lake as a place of salvific baptism for the damned, the Apocalypse of Paul envisions the Acherusian Lake as a place of purification for those who repented of their sins while alive. Similarly, both texts explore the relationship between divine justice and mercy for the damned: both Peter and Paul weep upon seeing the torments experienced by sinners in Hell; both question whether it would have been better for the sinners to have never been born in the first place; and both are rebuked for questioning God's judgment.[177] However, while the tour of Hell in the Apocalypse of Peter culminates in the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned through the intercessory prayers of the called and elect, no such possibility is articulated in the Apocalypse of Paul. Instead, through Paul's intercession, the damned are granted respite from torment "on the very day on which I [Jesus] rose from the dead" – either every Easter, or every Sunday.[178] In short, mercy for the damned is more limited in scope in the Apocalypse of Paul than it is in the Rainer Fragment of the Apocalypse of Peter.

Emiliano B. Fiori has suggested that the Apocalypse of Paul is, in fact, a "post-Origenist form of the Apocalypse of Peter."[179] In the wake of Origenism, which championed the ultimate

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[175] Apoc. Paul 40; Apoc. Pet. 9:6-7, Apoc. Paul 35.

[176] Apoc. Pet. 14:1-3; Apoc. Paul 22.

[177] Apoc. Pet. 3:4-5, Apoc. Paul 42; Apoc. Paul 43.

[178] Apoc. Paul 44; Fiori, 248, who suggests that the former is more likely than the latter.

[179] Fiori, 252.

salvation of all, the Apocalypse of Peter's "slight […] preponderance of mercy over justice" the for the damned was no longer tenable.[180] With the controversy of Origen's teaching of *apokatastasis* in mind, as well as other concerns about the teaching of postmortem salvation for the damned becoming widespread knowledge expressed in the *Second Coming,* the decline of the Apocalypse of Peter's popularity among early Christians becomes easier to understand. Over time, the Apocalypse of Peter was supplanted by texts like the Apocalypse of Paul, which similarly depict the torments of Hell as well as some form of mercy for the damned, without going as far as to indicate that the damned will eventually be saved from torment.[181]

[180] Fiori, 250.

[181] In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the fifth-century church historian Sozomen alludes to this shift: while the Apocalypse of Peter was still being read in "some of the churches in Palestine" despite being considered "altogether spurious by the ancients," the Apocalypse of Paul was "esteemed by most of the monks," indicating that the Apocalypse of Paul had begun to surpass the Apocalypse of Peter in popularity (VII.19). See also Fiori, 249, n. 58.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The previous three chapters of this thesis have explored several New Testament and early Christian texts that strongly suggest the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned. Though these texts do not present a single, unified model of postmortem salvation, a few general observations are worth making here. First, most of these texts suggest that the damned will be saved because of the intercession of the righteous, rather than the actions of the damned themselves. This appears to be the case in 1 Corinthians 15:29, as well as the Apocalypse of Peter and the Testament of Abraham. In all three texts, the righteous perform an action (e.g., vicarious baptism; prayer) that saves the damned without an active response from the damned. 1 Peter 4:6 and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, however, present possible exceptions to this rule: in the former, the dead will presumably have to respond positively to the proclamation of the gospel to be saved, though the text does not indicate clearly whether this will happen; and in the latter, Falconilla explicitly requests an intercessory prayer from Thecla in her mother's dream. Second, these texts alternately depict the righteous dead and the living righteous as agents of salvation for the damned. On the one hand, 1 Corinthians 15:29 and the Acts of Paul and Thecla both model living Christians performing an action for the benefit of the dead; on the other hand, the Apocalypse of Peter focuses specifically on the actions of the righteous dead. 1 Peter 4:6 is harder to classify, as it is unclear if the one proclaiming the gospel to the dead is alive or dead. Lastly, the intercession of the righteous is portrayed in these texts as either taking place in the

realm of the living or the realm of the dead (e.g., Hell). 1 Corinthians 15:29 and the Acts of Paul and Thecla both highlight instances of living Christians acting in the realm of the living to save the dead; all other texts discussed in this thesis envision the intercession of the righteous taking place in the abode of the dead.

Another area that merits further discussion is the scope of postmortem salvation for the damned as depicted in these texts. While many Christians in antiquity came to associate belief in postmortem salvation with the Origenist teaching of *apokatastasis,* it is notable that these texts do not appear to go so far as to endorse universal salvation. Two of the texts addressed in this study, the Testament of Abraham and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, only depict the postmortem salvation of a single individual. It also seems plausible that the Corinthians' practice of vicarious baptism was limited to specific groups of individuals (e.g., deceased loved ones), though admittedly it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from Paul's terse reference to the practice. The Apocalypse of Peter comes closest to presenting a model of postmortem salvation that *could* be universal, though the text also leaves open the possibility that the called and elect will not ask for anyone out of torment. The overarching point, however, remains the same regardless of scope: one's fate is not sealed after death.

This study has attempted to demonstrate that belief in the possibility of postmortem salvation for the damned is not a modern development, but rather an ancient Christian tradition that largely died out in Western Christianity. This was at least in part due to the influence of Augustine, as well as the rejection of Origenist teachings that came to be associated with the concept of postmortem salvation more broadly. To further illustrate this point, it bears mentioning that the rejection of postmortem salvation was not nearly as widespread in Eastern Christianity. This can be seen in Eastern Christian interpretations of Christ's descent into Hades.

A number of Eastern Christian writers held that Christ's descent into Hades extended the offer of salvation to all of the dead captive there, rather than limiting the scope of salvation to the "Old Testament righteous" or those who lead faithful lives while on earth.[182] This view is considered part of the general church doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church today and is affirmed by many of the liturgical texts which discuss the descent into Hades.[183]

While not always a mainstream Christian teaching, postmortem salvation for the damned was a well-established tradition in the early Christian church, and it lives on today to an extent in the liturgical and theological traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is a tradition that further illustrates the continuity between Christianity, early Judaism, and Greco-Roman culture, all of which were concerned with the fate of the dead and the afterlife, and all of which were open to the possibility one's fate could be altered after death. For some early Christians, a glimmer of hope remained for those who died apart from Christ. Death would not have the final word.

[182] Alfeyen, *Christ the Conqueror*, 204-205.

[183] Alfeyen, 208.

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