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Abstract Review of “Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology” (1995), by Richard E. DeMaris.

Richard E. DeMaris. "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114/4 (1995): 661–82.

Reviewed by John W. Welch

The thesis of this interesting article is that in ancient religions "the living were thought to be obligated to help the deceased become integrated into the realm of the dead" (p. 663), and hence the early Christians in Corinth "had themselves baptized . . . to help the deceased pass through the transition" into the next life (p. 675). Latter-day Saints will find some useful information in this article, and it is good to find scholarly attention given to the important subject of baptism for the dead; but DeMaris overemphasizes the influence of Greco-Roman ideas on this early Christian ordinance and is not persuasive in casting Paul as a veiled critic of this practice.

DeMaris begins his article with a helpful summary of previous scholarly attempts to explain the crucial but puzzling passage in 1 Corinthians 15:29. Rejecting "dozens of proposed solutions" that offer imaginative readings of this text, DeMaris finds that the most viable interpretation of the Greek is the obvious one, that the Corinthian Christians performed "a vicarious baptism undergone by the living for the benefit of the physically dead" (p. 662).

DeMaris presents considerable evidence for the existence of Greco-Roman temples or cultic facilities in the area around Corinth, including a rare sacred site dedicated to Hades, the god of the underworld, that were especially concerned with making offerings for the dead (p. 667). Accordingly, DeMaris believes that the "first-century Corinthians were preoccupied with the world of the dead" (p. 671), and because of this they were drawn to the practice of baptizing themselves for their dead as a funerary ritual. He argues further that the "primary obligation to the dead in Greco-Roman society typically fell to family members, so it is likely that those who had themselves baptized were kin of the dead"

(p. 675). Thus, it would appear that this Christian ordinance was grounded in concerns for the eternal welfare of one's kindred dead. So in certain respects, DeMaris comes close to the Latter-day Saint understanding of baptism for the dead.

DeMaris, however, places too much emphasis on Greco-Roman evidence. What he says about ancient Greek and Roman societies devoting considerable family resources to help the deceased become integrated into the realm of the dead can also be said about most ancient cultures, including Egyptian, Etruscan, and to some extent Jewish societies. Thus, DeMaris goes too far in seeing baptism for the dead as a direct and exclusive response of a few early Christians to the local Greco-Roman religious environment that may have been prominent in and around Corinth.

He is also too limiting in his conclusion that "only the Corinthian Christians" ever performed baptisms for the dead (p. 671). Indeed, DeMaris himself mentions but gives little weight to the concern of the Thessalonian Christians about the place of deceased church members in the coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18), and he acknowledges Hermas's interpretation of a vision "in which deceased apostles and teachers preached and baptized among those who had died before the advent of Christ (*Herm. Sim.* 9.16.5–6)" (p. 672). Further evidence marshaled by Hugh Nibley also suggests that the practice may have been more widespread than the single reference in 1 Corinthians 15:29 explicitly demonstrates.¹

DeMaris concludes his article with a discussion of the implications of baptism for the dead in connection with Pauline theology. Seeking, but unable to find, any evidence that Paul voiced "any dissatisfaction with vicarious baptism" (pp. 679–81), DeMaris still oddly suggests that Paul wrote Romans 6:1–11 with this ordinance in mind and as an implied criticism of the Corinthians' theology of vicarious baptism. By seeing baptism as a journey from life to death, he argues, Paul allegedly rejected the idea that baptism for the dead was a transition in the other direction from death to life. While DeMaris may be right when he asks, "What likelier source is there for the burial imagery in Romans 6 than vicarious

¹ Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 100–167.

baptism, a funerary ritual" (p. 682), he overlooks the logical force of verse 5, which reads: "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Romans 6:5). The logic of this verse moves from death to life: because one has been planted in the likeness of Christ's death, one shall rise in the likeness of his resurrection. But then, if resurrection is to have universal effect, as Paul clearly believed (1 Corinthians 15:22), Romans 6:5 would seem to imply that all who will be resurrected in the likeness of Christ must be baptized—even those who have died. Thus, instead of reflecting some latent discomfort on the part of Paul with the practice of baptism for the dead, Romans 6:5 more likely reflects an expectation that all people will somehow be afforded the blessings of baptism. To provide for those who have not received baptism directly, a theology of vicarious performance offers a natural and obvious substitute.

DeMaris's article is one piece of a substantial body of scholarship on 1 Corinthians 15:29. He and other scholars over the years have brought valuable tools to bear on this text, and some of their conclusions are consistent with the Latter-day Saint understanding of baptism for the dead. But in the end, the full meaning of this passage becomes clearer and more coherent through revealed knowledge. For example, prophetic vision sees baptism for the dead as a necessary link between ancestors and posterity, for "we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect" (D&C 128:18). Thus, it is not merely a matter of the living helping the dead, as DeMaris's model proposes. "Else what shall *they* do which are baptized for the dead," Paul rhetorically asks. In other words, if the dead were not to rise, Paul foresees some problem befalling those who perform the baptisms. I would suggest that only by reading this statement in light of the teachings of Joseph Smith does it become clear why those who perform these ordinances need their kindred dead as much as the dead have need of them.

DeMaris may be on the right track in certain respects, but there is more at work in Corinth than nocturnal chthonic rites or syncretistic commemorations of the dead.