



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 19 | Number 2

Article 18

2007

The Quick and the Dead

John A. Tvedtnes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Tvedtnes, John A. (2007) "The Quick and the Dead," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol19/iss2/18>

This New Testament is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Quick and the Dead

Author(s) John A. Tvedtnes

Reference *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 215-37.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (2005), by Michael F. Hull.

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

John A. Tvedtnes

Review of Michael F. Hull. *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. xvi + 327 pp., with bibliography and indexes. \$42.95.

Monsignor Michael F. Hull is a senior fellow of the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology and professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie, in Yonkers, New York. Although his view of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is to some extent new, he has tried to approach the text in light of earlier studies (beginning in the second century AD) while concentrating on modern exegesis. The first part of Hull's book reviews some of the major articles and books that deal with explanations given by various Bible scholars. This is followed by a lengthy discussion of Paul's writing style and the topics he discusses in his first epistle to the Corinthians. The last part of the book introduces Hull's view of what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 15:29.

The Majority View

Hull maintains that although some exegetes claim 1 Corinthians 15:29 has spawned two hundred or more readings over the centuries, there are actually about forty "general hypotheses" that have been put forward, reflecting "enormous variation in exegetical opinion" (p. 8). Though he acknowledges that most scholars who have dealt with the verse see it as evidence that at least some early Christians in Corinth

performed proxy baptisms for the dead, Hull parts company with them in an effort to make sense (in his religious worldview) of the passage. “At first glance, one could read [15:29] to mean that vicarious baptism had been practiced, at least at some point in time, by Corinthian Christians,” Hull notes. “But, also at first glance, one could read it as a reference, albeit an extraordinary one, to ordinary baptism, even if Paul’s point in mentioning it is unclear” (p. 1). If one can read “ordinary baptism” into the verse, it certainly would not be “at first glance.” Otherwise, there would be no need for books like Hull’s to explain how it can refer to regular baptism. He adds:

It is evident that the majority of contemporary scholars read 15:29 as a reference to one form or another of vicarious baptism. However, given the gravity of baptism in Christian theology, the atypical character of vicarious baptism, and the lack of any parallel to 15:29, any reading of the verse in terms of vicarious baptism is bound to evoke serious challenges. This is especially so when we find a scholar such as [Richard E.] DeMaris¹ holding for vicarious baptism while at the same time implying that the text of 15:29 itself might admit of other interpretations. The most obvious of these other interpretations is that 15:29 refers to some form of ordinary baptism, and many challenges are offered against vicarious baptism on

1. 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. See John W. Welch, review of “Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114/4 (1995), by Richard E. DeMaris, *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 43–45. At my invitation, DeMaris came to Brigham Young University’s Provo campus to discuss the topic of baptism for the dead. DeMaris, to whom Hull also refers in notes 9–10 on page 9, holds that the practice of vicarious baptism in Corinth resulted from cultural views held by the Corinthians before the introduction of Christianity. In my 1981 article “Baptism for the Dead: The Coptic Rationale,” I had already noted that pre-Christian practices made it easier for Egyptian Christians to accept baptism for the dead. This article was presented at a 5 June 1981 symposium in Jerusalem sponsored by the L. A. Mayer Memorial Museum of Islamic Art and the Israel Ministry of Education and Culture; it was published in *Special Papers of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, September 1989, and subsequently posted online at www.fairlds.org/Misc/Baptism_for_the_Dead_the_Coptic_Rationale.html (accessed 2 October 2007).

behalf of ordinary baptism. Generally speaking, such challenges maintain that, whatever Paul is speaking of in 15:29, he is not speaking of any form of vicarious baptism: either Paul is speaking about something else in the verse (heretofore misunderstood) or the verse is a reference to some (albeit extraordinary) form of ordinary, traditional baptism. It is not surprising that such a difficult verse as 15:29 should elicit suggestions of textual inaccuracy or mistranslation. It is less surprising to find that many read 15:29 to be an example of ordinary baptism. (p. 21)

Hull's rejection of the plain sense of the verse is based on the fact that scholars who understand it to refer to vicarious baptism do not account for this "seemingly aberrant practice" (p. 12). Most of those Bible scholars agree that the rite was indeed an aberrant practice, as the views cited by Hull demonstrate.

Hull's Proposal

Unwilling to accept the concept of vicarious baptism, Hull posits:

1 Cor 15:29 is a reference to ordinary baptism, extraordinary circumstances notwithstanding. Baptism "on account of the dead" is baptism into eternal life; it is a rite for the living, and undergoing it expresses faith in the resurrection of Christ and of Christians. . . . Paul believed that submission to the baptismal rite was *the* act of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and of his dead by which one secured the opportunity for eternal life. Therefore, in an atmosphere of denial of resurrection, to accept baptism "on account of the dead," that is, with a faith in the resurrection of once baptized and now dead Christians, is, to say the least, laudable in Paul's estimation. Without the resurrection, his and their faith is in vain (1 Cor 15:12–14) and his struggles useless (1 Cor 15:30–34). (p. 5)

Hull's explanation for his reading of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is as follows:

The βαπτιζόμενοι [*baptizomenoi*, “ones being baptized”] are those who are undergoing the rite of baptism. Their motivation for so doing is their steadfast faith in the resurrection of Christ and, concomitantly, of Christians. They believe that the νεκροί [*nekroi*, “dead ones”] are to be raised as Christ has been raised. They undergo the rite of baptism “on account of the dead”—on account of the fact that the dead are destined for life, having died hoping in the Lord’s promise of salvation—on account of their faith in the fact that “if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (1 Cor 15:13). By committing themselves to baptism, the βαπτιζόμενοι shame the arrogance and ignorance of those among the Corinthians who deny the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). The example of the βαπτιζόμενοι, along with that of Paul himself (1 Cor 15:30–32), serves as a source of edification for the entire community. 1 Cor 15:29–32 is the crown of chapter 15 in terms of the personal examples given by Paul. After his long theoretical defense of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15:1–28, Paul is able to turn to two practical examples: the βαπτιζόμενοι and himself. Therewith, he is able to warn the Corinthians that they should not be deceived, to tell them that he defends the resurrection to their shame (1 Cor 15:33–34), and to continue his defensive discourse by explaining how, in fact, the dead are raised (1 Cor 15:35–58). (p. 3)

Paul describes the resurrection in terms of the difference between various types of resurrected bodies, comparing them to the sun, moon, and stars in glory. Some early Christian fathers read this portion of 1 Corinthians 15 in the same way Latter-day Saints do.² The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 rests on the meaning of three Greek words: *baptizomenoi*, “ones being baptized”; *hyper*, usually “above, over”; and *nekroi*, “dead ones.” The preposition *hyper* has usually been rendered “for,” but Hull translates it “on account of.” In doing so, he

2. For a detailed discussion, see John Tvedtnes, “Three Degrees of Glory,” posted on the *Meridian Magazine* Web site at <http://www.meridianmagazine.com/gospeldoctrine/nt/070823nt34sf.html> (accessed 28 September 2007).

inadvertently supports the view of vicarious baptism, for the English idiom “on account of” can also mean “for” or “in behalf of,” though Hull seemingly thinks of it in the narrower sense of “because of.”

In a moment of candor, Hull writes, “While it is true that the literary context does not necessitate such a reading of ordinary baptism any more than it necessitates the majority reading of vicarious baptism, the literary context does not, in fact, demand a reading one way or the other” (p. 230). This is the reason Hull goes on to investigate the historical context, maintaining that there are no examples that support the idea of vicarious baptism. He also writes that “one cannot be baptized without hearing and accepting” (p. 233). I agree with this assessment but am surprised that Hull, a Roman Catholic priest, should make such a declaration, given that his church christens infants and that godparents, not the newborn, are the ones who hear and accept Christ on behalf of the infant.³ While he rejects vicarious baptism for the dead, his church allows the godparents to act vicariously for the infant, who is too young to hear and accept the message of salvation. Moreover, Jesus vicariously suffered and died in our behalf.⁴

Paul’s Teachings about Baptism

Hull maintains (and I agree) that one must take into account what Paul has written elsewhere on the subject of baptism. Two challenges in doing this, Hull notes, are that Paul’s baptismal theology is but a

3. While Roman Catholic priests place water on the head of a newborn, priests in the eastern Orthodox churches still immerse them completely in water, reflecting the fact the Greek term from which the word *baptize* derives means “to immerse or sink.” In the Roman Catholic Church, extreme unction is administered to a dying person, and even to a person who dies before the priest can perform the rite. If the dying individual is unbaptized, baptism must be performed before extreme unction. But early councils (AD 393 Synod of Hippo, Third Council of Carthage, Council of Sardica) forbade the baptizing of a corpse. St. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily 1* on Acts 1:1–2, notes that baptismal water had been occasionally poured on the dead—a practice he opposed. Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 11:10.

4. The Book of Mormon declares that the atonement of Jesus Christ had to be infinite in its nature, necessitating the suffering and death of God (see 2 Nephi 9:6–7; 25:16; Mosiah 13:28; 15:1; Alma 34:9–14).

part of his larger “theological enterprise” and that nowhere in his writings is the subject of baptism discussed per se—that is, Paul’s comments on baptism are oblique, passing references in his treatment of larger issues (p. 240). Given these difficulties, Hull’s study is “intended as a contribution to Paul’s baptismal theology, not [as] a restatement thereof,” and involves four steps: “First, we look to Rom 6:1–14, which is spoken of by many as the *locus classicus* of baptism in Paul [though Hull readily acknowledges that this text is ‘mostly not about baptism’]. Second, we look to Gal 3:26–29. Third, we look to other references to baptism in the Pauline literature and review our findings. Finally, we seek to integrate our reading of 15:29 within the larger context of Paul’s baptismal theology” (p. 241).

In two of his epistles, Paul likened baptism in water to being buried and then resurrected in Christ (Romans 6:3–11; Colossians 2:12–13). This works only if there is an immersion, which is the only way baptism (the Greek word means “immersion”) was performed in the days of Christ and his apostles. As a Roman Catholic priest, Hull has most likely never performed such an immersion.

In regard to 1 Corinthians 15:29, Hull argues that “Paul could have placed an affirmation of baptism anywhere in the letter—baptism is certainly relevant to each and every aspect of the Christian life—but he chose to place it in reference to the resurrection” (p. 235). This leads him to the conclusion that, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul had reference to ordinary baptism. It is certain that Paul’s view of baptism as symbolic of death and resurrection is reflected in the passage, but this does not exclude vicarious baptism as his referent.

Purpose of 1 Corinthians 15:29

Most commentators read 1 Corinthians 15:29 as an aside thrown in by Paul to bolster his argument for the resurrection. They insist that Paul neither approved nor disapproved of the actions of those being baptized for the dead, and some anti-Mormon writers go so far as to say that Paul would not have approved of the practice. Hull disagrees. Though at one point he terms the verse an “oblique reference to baptism [that] has piqued Christian curiosity for centuries” (p. 7),

he later concludes it is far more, describing the verse as “a dual rhetorical question in which Paul holds up one group within the Corinthian community as a *laudable example* for the entire community” (p. 3, emphasis added; see p. 5). He argues that Paul was “*praising*” those who are baptized “because they are affirming the resurrection of the dead in accepting baptism; theirs is an act of faith that opposes the lack of faith Paul perceives among so many Corinthians.” He adds that “baptism is *the* ultimate act of faith in the gospel, in Christ’s resurrection, and in his promise of eternal life to believers. Thus, Paul *applauds* the βαπτιζόμενοι for what they are doing, for accepting baptism and all that goes with it, for affirming the resurrection of the dead” (p. 233, emphasis added except for *the*).

We said that Paul holds up the βαπτιζόμενοι as a *laudable example* for the Corinthians because the βαπτιζόμενοι’s motivation for undergoing the rite of baptism is their steadfast faith in the resurrection of Christ and of Christians. They believe that Christ has been raised and that the νεκροί are destined for life. Therefore, they undergo the rite of baptism “on account of the dead”—on account of the fact that “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (1 Cor 15:13). (pp. 250–51, emphasis added)

One can almost hear Paul *bellowing*: “Look at those *eager* baptismal candidates. Look at their faith. It was once yours. They believe all that I preached about Jesus. They do not doubt that many persons including myself have seen him alive after death. They do not doubt that those among us who have fallen asleep will rise on the last day. As a matter of fact, it is their firm faith in the resurrection of Christ and of his dead that moves them to baptism. That is what they believe. That is what you once believed. Come back to your senses!” (p. 235, emphasis added)

But rather than being a major theme in Paul’s epistle, as Hull implies, 1 Corinthians 15:29 is more likely something added to support Paul’s argument about resurrection, though it is clearly some-

thing with which his readers were already acquainted. Similarly, Peter's discussion of salvation for the dead (1 Peter 3:18–20) is also interjected in a casual and offhand manner.

Dead Christians?

Hull assumes that the “dead” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29 are “those among us who have fallen asleep.” They “are destined for life, having died hoping in the Lord’s promise of salvation” (p. 3). Those who “accept baptism ‘on account of the dead’” do so “with a faith in the resurrection of once baptized and now dead Christians” (p. 5). Hull writes: “Given the relatively small size of the Christian community in Corinth at the time of 1 Corinthians, the dead are the saints and the sinners with whom the βαπτιζόμενοι were associated. The acceptance of baptism in 15:29 expresses the βαπτιζόμενοι’s trust in Paul’s gospel: not only is Christ raised, but departed brothers and sisters are truly destined to share in resurrected glory” (p. 254). However, this makes more sense if the passage refers to deceased ancestors. After all, given the small size of the Corinthian church, how many of them could have died before Paul wrote his epistle to the Corinthians?

As some Corinthian Christians die and are buried, the community’s faith in the resurrection is tested because the resurrection of their bodies is a future event. But not just *a* future event; it is *the* future event—the parousia. Baptism is the act of faith that incorporates one into Christ and, therefore, into his resurrection. Baptism simultaneously incorporates one into Christ here and hereafter. If the baptized do not believe that their departed Christian brothers and sisters are destined for life eternal, they have *de facto* renounced Christ and the baptism that incorporated them into him. (p. 236)

If Hull’s reasoning is correct, then only baptized Christians can be resurrected. This is at odds with Paul’s declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 that, because of Christ’s resurrection, *all* mankind would be resurrected, just as all had inherited death from Adam. Paul also declared that “there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just

and unjust” (Acts 24:15). Revelation 20:5–6 speaks of a “first resurrection,” thus implying that there would be a second. Jesus declared that there would be both a “resurrection of life” and a “resurrection of damnation” (John 5:29).⁵ Moreover, we learn from Matthew 27:53 that some of the dead saints—presumably the prophets who foretold his advent—rose from their graves shortly after the Savior’s resurrection.

Hull believes that Paul’s epistle is addressed to Corinthian Saints who do not believe in resurrection and that Paul (in 1 Corinthians 15:29) draws their attention to new converts who are being baptized for themselves. He writes: “The ones ‘who have themselves baptized on account of the dead’ are obviously not part of the larger group Paul is addressing in chapter 15. In fact, ‘if the dead are not really raised,’ it would seem that they should stop doing whatever it is they are doing—accepting baptism on account of the dead, i.e., on account of dead Christians—because it would be futile.” Hull notes that Paul was not correcting the ones being baptized but, rather, “the Corinthians who deny the resurrection of the dead,” and then he adds, “Apparently, ‘they’ (the third person, βαπτίζόμενοι) are being offered as an example to the ‘you’ (the second person, τίνας and τίς)” (p. 231).

Some anti-Mormon writers also point out the use of the third-person pronoun *they*, though they argue that the ones performing vicarious baptism for the dead are heretics and hence not part of the body of Christians in Corinth. The Greek original of 1 Corinthians 15:29 does *not* use the pronoun *they*. It says, “Otherwise, what will do *the ones being baptized* for the dead?” The text uses a passive participle form, *baptizomenoi* (“the being baptized [ones]”), as a substantive (where it is usually accompanied by the definite article). Participles reflect gender, number, and case but not person. Hence, there is no third-person plural (*they*) in the Greek original, implied or otherwise.

Baptism and Resurrection

“If 15:29 is interpreted as we read it,” Hull notes, “there is now a vital and vibrant link between baptism and the resurrection, which

5. See Luke 14:14, where the Savior mentions “the resurrection of the just.”

is exemplified by the βαπτίζόμενοι in their acceptance of baptism ‘on account of the (resurrection of the) dead’” (p. 253). While disagreeing with Hull in regard to the nature of the baptism Paul mentions, I concur that there is a symbolic tie between baptism and the resurrection, as Paul explained elsewhere (Romans 6:3–11; Colossians 2:12–13).⁶ But Paul is not alone in this regard; the apostle Peter wrote:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:18–21)

In this passage, the apostle speaks of both death and resurrection, along with Christ’s visit to the spirit world, and adds the flood as a symbol of baptism. Similarly, in an epistle to the Corinthian saints, Paul wrote, “Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the [Red] sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). Peter mentions Christ as the one who will “judge the quick [living] and the dead,” noting “for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Peter 4:5–6). Peter’s words have parallels to Jesus’s explanation found in John 5:25–29:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when *the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God*: and

6. As noted earlier in this review, Paul saw baptism in water as symbolic of burial, while rising from the water symbolizes resurrection.

they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to *execute judgment* also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which *all that are in the graves shall hear his voice*, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the *resurrection of life*; and they that have done evil, unto the *resurrection of damnation*. (emphasis added)

Some might argue, on the basis of the verse preceding this one, that the “dead” of verse 25 are living persons who are dead because they have not yet accepted the gift of salvation brought by Christ. But verse 28 makes it clear that Christ was referring to those who “are in the graves,” hence literally dead.

Several early Christian creeds declare that Christ “descended into hell” after his crucifixion. The idea of descending draws on Paul’s declaration “Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” (Ephesians 4:9). The notion that Christ descended into hell is found in the fifth article of the so-called Apostles’ Creed and in part 2 of the Faith of Saint Athanasius (also known as the Athanasian Creed). The Greek word rendered “hell” in English (*inferna* in Latin) is *hades*, the same word used elsewhere by Peter to denote the location where Christ went before his resurrection (see Acts 2:29–32). The passage cited by Peter is Psalm 16:10, in which the Hebrew word *sheol* denotes the abode of the dead. The concept of the Messiah liberating captives from Hades is also found in a Jewish text in which “R[abbi] Joshua, son of Levi, tells further: ‘I asked the Messiah to allow me to look into Hell, but he did not allow me, as the righteous should never behold Hell.’ So I sent to the angel called *Komm* that he might describe Hell for me. But it was impossible, for at that moment R. Ishmael, the high priest, and R. Simeon, son of Gamaliel, and ten just men were killed, and the news reached us, so I could not go with the angel. I went afterwards with the angel *Kipod* and the light went with me up to *the gates of Hell*, and the Messiah came with me, and they were open. The sinners who were there saw the light of the Messiah, and rejoiced, and said to one another: ‘This will bring us out

from here.”⁷ A number of early church fathers (Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius) taught that Christ rescued some spirits from Hades.⁸

The “Harrowing of Hell” was a common theme in medieval Europe, teaching that Christ visited the spirits of the dead in Hades.⁹ Early Christian stories of the descent of Christ into hell are virtually unanimous in noting the joy felt by the righteous dead when they learned of Jesus’s baptism. Of this connection, J. Rendel Harris wrote, “In the earliest times the Baptism of Christ was the occasion of His triumph over Hades.”¹⁰ Harris saw Ode 24 of the *Odes of Solomon* as connecting baptism (note the mention of the dove over Jesus’s head) with anointing and the deliverance of the dead (i.e., resurrection). In Ode 6, too, we have a stream bringing water to the temple and bringing back from the dead those who were dying.

A Letter or a Homily?

The goal of chapter 2 is “to read 1 Cor 15:29 as closely as possible in its literary context. In view of the fact that previous readings have proven unsatisfactory, we seek a reading of the verse which flows out of its locus within 1 Corinthians” (p. 51). Hull’s intent is laudable, but he treats 1 Corinthians more like a doctrinal thesis than a letter.

Hull considers “baptism on account of the dead” to be the central point in the apostle’s discussion of the resurrection. Why, then, did Paul not elaborate on this aspect? As noted earlier, most Bible commentators see 1 Corinthians 15:29 as an aside thrown into the mix to strengthen the argument about resurrection. Paul is known for asides

7. “The Revelation of R. Joshua ben Levi” (paragraph 20), English translation by Moses Gaster, “Hebrew Visions of Hell and Paradise,” in *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha, and Samaritan Archaeology* (1928; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1971), 1:148, emphasis added except for the names of the angels.

8. See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, “The Dead Shall Hear the Voice,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 184–99.

9. A number of books on the subject have been written. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Skin Deep,” review of *Die Mormonen: Sekte oder neue Kirche Jesu Christi?* by Rüdiger Hauth, *FARMS Review of Books* 9/2 (1997): 99–146.

10. J. Rendel Harris, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 123.

in this epistle and others. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:14–16, we read, “I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other.” Initially, he failed to mention Stephanas’s family, but realizing his error, he added the verbiage in verse 16. One would expect this in a letter, but not in a well-crafted homily.

In two of his letters, Paul mentions the office of bishop (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9).¹¹ Though he gives the qualifications for one to be called to the bishopric, he does not list the bishop’s duties. Again, this is what one might expect in a letter, but it implies that the duties of a bishop were already known to both Timothy and Titus. Similarly, it is reasonable to conclude that baptism for the dead was already understood by the early Christians and that in 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul was merely drawing on the previously established practice as evidence for the resurrection that some Corinthians had come to doubt.

Hull refers to language in 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1 (compare 4:6) as evidence that, in 1 Corinthians 15:30–32, Paul is admonishing the Corinthians to take him as an example (p. 233). It is more likely that the apostle was saying that the trials he had suffered would have had no value if there were no resurrection of the dead. Again, this is something one might expect in a letter, but not in a theological treatise.

The Historical Context

Hull explains that “anyone who holds to the majority reading [vicarious baptism] is led to address the naturally ensuing questions: What of the paucity of historical attestation in Corinth and the early Church to vicarious baptism?” (pp. 11–12). In chapter 3 (“Reading 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Historical Context”), he explains:

The importance of the historical context within which we find 15:29 cannot be overemphasized. . . . In Chapter II of our study,

11. Had these two epistles not survived (they were, after all, mere letters, not doctrinal expositions), there would be no biblical proof that there were Christian bishops in the days of the apostles.

we concluded that an examination of the literary context alone was insufficient to yield a definitive reading of the verse. Because 15:29, when we consider its morphology, syntax, and literary context, may be read either as a reference to ordinary baptism or vicarious baptism, the importance of its historical context is promptly seen as the *sine qua non* for the interpretation of the verse. If we were to read 15:29 as an instance of ordinary baptism, parallels for comparison in Pauline literature and the NT would be readily forthcoming. But if we were to read 15:29 as an instance of vicarious baptism, we have no parallel for comparison in the NT, the early Church, or the first century. On the one hand, this presents no problem, for as we have seen, those who hold for a reading of vicarious baptism among the Corinthians also hold that it was an anomaly. (p. 113)

He then notes that proponents of vicarious baptism seek to find its source in Paul, in the Corinthian milieu, or in a combination of the two (p. 113). Having found no such support, Hull contends that “vicarious baptism, without precedent in the NT or the early Church, cannot be claimed as a workable reading of 1 Cor 15:29 on the basis of the literary context alone; there must be some historical underpinning. . . . In vain we search for ‘a needle in the haystack,’ i.e., for the vicarious baptism that so many commentators claim to find—even as an anomaly or aberration—in 1 Corinthians” (p. 4). Further: “We conclude that vicarious baptism is *not* a viable option for interpreting 1 Cor 15:29. Without any semblance of precedence in Paul, Greco-Roman Corinth, or Corinthian Christianity, reading 1 Cor 15:29 as a reference to vicarious baptism is unfeasible” (p. 5).

This approach on the part of a Catholic scholar is strange because it seems to be based on the *sola scriptura* concept, which relies on the Bible as the sole source for the teachings and practices of the earliest Christians and also suggests that the Bible discusses everything important about them.¹² This is contradicted by the Bible itself. In

12. The *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) approach to the Bible is more readily identified with Protestants. The Roman Catholic Church relies on much more, including the decisions of ecumenical councils, the writings of the early church fathers, and *ex cathedra*

John 20:30 we find that “many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book [John, not the Bible],” while John 21:25 hyperbolically says, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”

Early Christian Views

Hull points out that Joel R. White¹³ “declines to accept a reading of vicarious baptism on four grounds: (1) the lack of a ‘contextual mooring’ at the end of chapter 15 for such a practice; (2) the ‘cognitive dissonance’ we would have to assume among Paul’s interlocutors in Corinth who would deny the resurrection of the dead while performing such a rite on their behalf; (3) the dearth of ‘any independent historical or biblical parallel’ of vicarious baptism; and (4) vicarious baptism’s obvious incongruity ‘with [Paul’s] entire theology’” (p. 34). The validity of the first argument disappears if one believes that Paul’s mention of vicarious baptism was an aside. White’s second argument assumes that those who deny the resurrection were practicing vicarious baptism, which seems unlikely. The fourth argument rests on the assumption that we know everything that Paul taught and that all of his teachings are in the few letters ascribed to him.¹⁴ As noted earlier, Paul’s epistles are not treatises.

White’s third claim is the one most commonly mentioned in connection with vicarious baptism. With regard to this “dearth of an exterior or interior historical parallel,” Hull writes, “Except for the

declarations from the pope. In its extreme, the sola scriptura approach suggests that God himself wrote or literally dictated the Bible and that each and every word is placed precisely where it needs to be.

13. Joel R. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead’: The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116/3 (1997): 487–99.

14. Many Bible scholars, especially those who are Protestant, believe that Paul taught that one is saved by grace alone (or by faith alone or by public confession of a belief in Christ alone, etc.) and that baptism and obedience to God’s commandments are not necessary for salvation. I have discussed such false ideas in my article “Salvation by Grace Alone?” posted on the FAIR Web site at http://www.fairlds.org/Misc/Is_There_Salvation_by_Grace_Alone.html (accessed 28 September 2007).

rare patristic secondary references we consider below, nowhere in the history of early Christianity do we find anyone baptizing in such fashion or writing thereof. Nowhere in intertestamental Judaism or the pagan religions of late antiquity is there anything comparable to vicarious baptism” (p. 37).

Elsewhere, Hull notes that “an attempt to find more source material outside the Pauline literature is, obviously, out of the question” (p. 241). He does not explain why this is so. He draws attention to a passage in the Apocrypha where we read that, following the battle of Marisa in 163 BC, it was discovered that the Jewish soldiers killed in the fight had been guilty of concealing pagan idols beneath their clothing. In order to atone for their wrong, Judas Maccabaeus collected money from the survivors in order to purchase sacrificial animals for their comrades.

And when he had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of two thousand drachmas of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection: for if he had not hoped that they that were slain should have risen again, it had been superfluous and vain to pray for the dead. And also in that he perceived that there was great favour laid up for those that died godly, it was an holy and good thought. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin. (2 Maccabees 12:43–46, KJV)

This passage does not mention baptism, but it is significant that it uses the same argument as Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:29, that is, that unless the dead rise from the dead, any rite performed for them is without value.

Hull calls attention to the writings of two early church fathers, one of whom, John Chrysostom (ca. AD 347–407), notes the practice of vicarious baptism among the Marcionites in Homily 40 on 1 Corinthians 15:29. The other is Tertullian (ca. AD 160–225), whose views seem to have changed over time. In one place he acknowledges that the Corinthian Christians practiced vicarious baptism (*On the*

Resurrection of the Flesh 48), while elsewhere he suggests that Paul was referring to baptism of the body, which is subject to death (*Against Marcion* 5.10). Hull likes Tertullian's approach because it is close to his own beliefs: "Tertullian believes that 15:29 referred to baptism on behalf of our 'dying bodies'" (p. 41). Chrysostom similarly rejected Marcion's interpretation of Paul and concluded that his real referent was the profession of faith in baptism, part of which was, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead" (Homily 40 on 1 Corinthians 15:29). These words, recited before baptism, indicated to Chrysostom that baptism is performed in hope of this resurrection.

Tertullian, in *Against Marcion* 5.10, and Epiphanius (AD 315–403), in *Against Heresies* 8.7, noted that the Marcionites, an early Christian group founded in AD 144, baptized others in the name of the dead. Chrysostom told how, when one of their catechumens died without baptism, they would place a living person under the dead man's bed and ask whether he desired to be baptized. The living person would respond in the affirmative and was then baptized as a proxy for the deceased (Homily 40 on 1 Corinthians 15:29). Some dismiss this evidence on the grounds that the Marcionites were heretics. Latter-day Saints, believing that an apostasy was already well under way by Marcion's time, see this practice as a remnant of an earlier rite going back to the apostles.

In the *Pastor of Hermas*, widely read in the early Christian church,¹⁵ Hermas's angelic guide tells him that the apostles and teachers who fall asleep (die) faithful in Christ preach to others who have died, then go down into the water with them to give them the seal, which is a term usually referring to baptism (*Similitude* 9:16). The passage is cited by Clement of Alexandria (in *Stromata* 2.9 and again in *Stromata* 6.6), where he notes that not only Jesus but also his apostles taught the dead in Hades. This same point is made in *Doctrine and Covenants* 138:29–32.

A number of early noncanonical Christian texts mention the baptism provided for the dead prior to being taken to heaven but seem to

15. The earliest mention of the *Pastor of Hermas* (also known as the *Shepherd of Hermas*) is from the mid-second century AD. Some early Christian fathers placed it on a par with other New Testament books.

suggest that it was their spirits who were baptized. One such text is the widely read *Epistle of the Apostles*, which has the resurrected Lord telling his apostles: “For to that end went I down unto the place of Lazarus, and preached unto the righteous and the prophets, that they might come out of the rest which is below and come up into that which is above; and I poured out upon them with my right hand the water [*baptism*, Ethiopic text] of life and forgiveness and salvation from all evil, as I have done unto you and unto them that believe on me.”¹⁶

In an ancient Christian text generally called the *Epistle of the Apostles* (27–28), preserved in both Coptic and Ethiopic languages, the resurrected Jesus tells his apostles, “And on that account I have descended and have spoken with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to your fathers the prophets, and have brought to them news that they may come from the rest which is below into heaven, and have given them the right hand of baptism of life and forgiveness.” He then adds, “To those who believe in me through you I will do the same, and as I have said and promised to you, that he should go out of prison and should be rescued.”¹⁷

The *Acts of Pilate*, in its present form from the fifth century, has a later appendage (Part II, The Descent of Christ into Hell, also published as *Gospel of Nicodemus*) that some scholars think predates the earlier portions of the book. It tells how, when Christ descended into hell, he removed therefrom the spirits of the righteous and of the repentant. The latter were then baptized in the Jordan River. The *Gospel of Bartholomew* informs us that when Siôphanes, son of the apostle Thomas, died, his soul was taken by Michael, who washed him three times in the Akherusian lake.¹⁸ The *Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan* notes that people will be baptized in this lake after being raised from the dead (1:2–4). The *Apocalypse of Peter* (14) and the *Apocalypse*

16. *Epistle of the Apostles* 27, quoted from Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), 494.

17. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 1:265.

18. E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1913), 207–8.

of Paul (22–23)¹⁹ both speak of the judgment day, when men will be brought before God and receive a baptism in the sacred lake.

In *Pistis Sophia* 146 we read that the disembodied spirits of certain types of sinners, such as robbers, thieves, and arrogant persons, are saved by being chastised, then led to a water that becomes a seething fire that purifies them. In the following chapter (*Pistis Sophia* 147), we find that the soul of an unbaptized righteous person is brought by angels to God, chastised, then brought to the same water that becomes a seething, purifying fire, after which he inherits the light. In an earlier passage (*Pistis Sophia* 128–30), Mary Magdalene asks the risen Christ about the fate of deceased relatives who had not been baptized. The Savior tells her that living family members are to pray for that person, whereupon his or her soul is handed over to the seven virgins of the light, who baptize it and lead it into the treasury of the light, opening the veils to allow passage. A Christian Ethiopic text (*Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth*)²⁰ also describes the baptism of the spirits of the dead before they are allowed to enter heaven.

A Mandaean text has Adam, apparently after his death, ascending “to the House of Life; they (the uthras [angels]) washed him in the Jordan and protected him. They washed him and protected him in the Jordan; they placed their right hand on him. They baptized him with their baptism.”²¹ In *Apocalypse of Moses* 37:3–6, we read that when Adam died, a seraph carried him off to the Lake of Acheron and washed him three times in the presence of God, then conducted him to the third heaven. Equally significant is the fact that the Coptic Christians of Egypt and the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran (who claim descent from the disciples of John the Baptist) continue to practice vicarious baptism for the dead. Hull does not seem to be aware of

19. These two texts are found in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:633 and 2:726–27, respectively.

20. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth and Other Works of Bakhayla Mikâ'êl (Zôsîmâs)*, 24.

21. Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 2:259.

most of these texts, though I have described them in essays on the topic of vicarious baptism.²²

Latter-day Saints

Hull mentions the practice of vicarious baptism for the dead among Latter-day Saints: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day [sic] Saints (Mormons) practice ordinary baptism and vicarious (or proxy) baptism. In the practice of vicarious baptism, Mormons stand alone. [footnote 2] As we shall see, the (non-Mormon) biblical scholars, [footnote 3] who concede that some form of vicarious baptism was practiced in first-century Corinth, believe that such a practice was at best an anomaly and at worst an aberration. Hence, what 1 Cor 15:29 has to say about vicarious baptism, if anything at all, is of momentous importance to Christians and Mormons in their common deliberations” (pp. 1–2).

Hull’s footnote 2 reads as follows: “It is beyond the pale of this study to consider the Mormon rationale for vicarious baptism. Suffice it to say that Mormons extend God’s scriptural revelation beyond the Bible to include *The Book of Mormon* (1830) and *The Book of Doctrine and Covenants* (1935).²³ Proxy baptism (for the dead) is not mentioned in the former, but it is found in the latter (sections 107:10–12; 109:57; and 110:1, 12, 16, 17, 18), wherein 1 Cor 15:29 is specifically invoked as a biblical example.” His footnote 3 reads: “It is also beyond the pale of

22. See especially John A. Tvedtnes, “Baptism for the Dead: The Coptic Rationale”; Tvedtnes, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 55–78, also posted on the Maxwell Institute Web site at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/bookschapter.php?chapid=104>; Tvedtnes, “The Dead Shall Hear the Voice,” review of “Does the Bible Teach Salvation for the Dead? A Survey of the Evidence, Part I,” *Heart and Mind* and “Did Jesus Establish Baptism for the Dead?” *Heart and Mind*, by Luke P. Wilson, *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 184–99. See also Tvedtnes, “Proxy Baptism,” *Ensign*, February 1977, 88; Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, “The Messiah Opens the Gates of Sheol,” posted on the *Meridian Magazine* Web site at <http://www.meridianmagazine.com/farms/021201gates.html> (accessed 28 September 2007); and Tvedtnes, “Question 26, Baptism for the Dead,” posted on the SHIELDS Web site at http://www.shields-research.org/42_Questions/ques26_Tvedtnes.htm (accessed 28 September 2007).

23. The Doctrine and Covenants was originally published in 1835.

this study to consider the Mormon biblical scholarship, since Mormons profess belief in revealed texts other than the Bible.” Ironically, the quotation from the Doctrine and Covenants is from an edition published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (now termed the Community of Christ), which has never practiced baptisms for the dead. However, his footnote 5 on page 3 correctly identifies Doctrine and Covenants 138.²⁴

For the Latter-day Saint view, Hull recommends the writings of Sterling M. McMurrin and Jan Shippo (a liberal Methodist), the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, and chapter 4 (“The Mormon Response to Higher Criticism”) of Philip L. Barlow’s *Mormons and the Bible*.²⁵ He also mentions Hugh Nibley’s “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times”²⁶ but neglects some of the more recent Latter-day Saint studies of the subject. He provides an accurate explanation of the Mormon rationale for the practice:

In addition, it is hoped that our study will serve in some small way as an aid to ecumenical dialogue among Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. The Mormon theology of baptism is one of the more exacerbating of contemporary concerns between Mormons and other Christians. On the one hand, Catholics question the validity of the nature of the Trinity. Catholics have rejected vicarious baptism as an heretical practice since the second century A.D. On the other hand, Protestants are vehemently opposed to vicarious baptism because of the radical efficaciousness it betokens for baptism

24. Being a vision experienced by LDS Church president Joseph F. Smith, D&C 138 would not have been incorporated into the RLDS edition.

25. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103–47.

26. Hugh Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” first published in the *Improvement Era* 51 (December 1948): 786–88, 836–38; 52 (January 1949): 24–26, 60; 52 (February 1949): 90–91, 109–10, 112; 52 (March 1949): 146–48, 180–83; 52 (April 1949): 212–14; and later included in his book *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 100–67. It has also been posted on the Maxwell Institute Web site at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/display.php?table=transcripts&id=67> (accessed 28 September 2007). Nibley’s work is not included in the bibliography at the end of the book.

in general.²⁷ Yet for Mormons, vicarious baptism is a revealed and charitable practice. According to the revelations given to Joseph Smith, Mormons hold that Christ continues to offer salvation to the dead. And, although they believe that the practice of vicarious baptism is warranted by the latter-day revelations to Smith, they look to the Bible for support. If baptism is necessary for salvation (John 3:3–5), God desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4), and Christ preaches to the dead (1 Pet 3:18–30; 4:6), then there must be some means by which the dead, who no longer have bodies to be baptized, can receive the necessary baptism, i.e., vicarious baptism. Pious Mormons have themselves baptized again and again as proxies for those dead in need of baptismal unction, to help those who cannot help themselves, as they claim the Corinthian Christians once did. To be sure, the confessional differences of Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons extend well beyond baptism (ordinary or vicarious) and 1 Cor 15:29. Thus, should our interpretation of the verse fail to gain acceptance, we hope that our efforts will at least demonstrate an intention to explore honestly and openly the common conundrum of 1 Cor 15:29 and, thereby, to succor our mutual understanding. (pp. 2–3)

One final point regarding Hull's views and those of Latter-day Saints: Hull believes that the resurrection of Christ is the center of Christian belief (see esp. pp. 237–38). Believing this as well, following the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints would have to add that Christ's atonement involves not only his resurrection but also his ascension. Christ suffered both spiritually (in Gethsemane) and physically (in Gethsemane and on the cross). He overcame physical death by being resurrected and overcame spiritual death by ascending to heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father.²⁸ Thus we read that the redemption of mankind "was to be brought to pass through the power, and suf-

27. That is, many modern Protestants do not consider baptism to be essential for salvation.

28. For physical and spiritual death, see 2 Nephi 2:5–6; Mosiah 2:41; Alma 42:7–9; Helaman 14:15–27; D&C 29:40–42.

ferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven” (Mosiah 18:2).²⁹

Summary

Hull recognizes that “[r]arely in the history of biblical interpretation has a single verse elicited so much attention and so little concert” (p. 9). His descriptions of previous studies of the passage confirm the truth of this statement. Hull’s work adds to this literature. I do not believe that he has put an end to the speculation.

One wonders how any of the Saints at Corinth, to whom Paul addressed his epistle, could have understood what he meant if they had not previously read Hull’s explanation. To be sure, later Christians might have held one of Tertullian’s opinions regarding vicarious baptism, for they are similar to those of Hull but would not have helped those to whom the apostle was writing. Second Peter 3:15–16 sums up the situation: “Even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

As a Latter-day Saint, I consider that Hull’s book, and others like it, demonstrate the necessity of living prophets and additional scripture to help clarify the meaning of obscure passages of scripture. Scholars of other faiths should compare and contrast their views with those of Joseph Smith and not merely dismiss the Latter-day Saint view.

29. See Alma 16:19; 21:9; 22:14; 3 Nephi 6:20; Moroni 9:25; D&C 45:4.

