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BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD IN 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29: A CONTEXTUAL EVALUATION

GAMBO DAUDA DANIEL (PhD)
Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Nigeria
+2348061144033
danield@babcock.edu.ng

KINGSLEY C. ANONABA (PhD)
Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Nigeria)
+2348166807748
anonabak@babcock.edu.ng

OLUSEUN ABEL AKINPELU
Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Nigeria
+2348038463095
akinpeluo@babcock.edu.ng
&
ABIODUN FATAI ADEOTI
Religious Studies Department, Babcock University, Nigeria
+2348062175345
adeotif@babcock.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study explored the hapaxlegomenon and yet an enigmatic passage in the Holy Writ on Baptism for the dead. The various interpretative approaches employed in the debates (metaphorical, literal, word emendation, and interpolative), have further engendered confusion in relation to the place of the text and practice among some contemporary Christians. The work further interrogated 1 Corinthians 15:29 as it relates to 'baptism for the dead' and its interpretative approaches in scholarship with the view to identifying the contextual meaning of the lexical items: (ὑπέρ (huper), νεκρῶν (nekron), βαπτίζομενοι (baptizomenoi), Ποιήσουσιν (poiesousin), Επεὶ (epei) and βαπτιζονται (baptizontai) within their semantic range. The findings revealed that the most plausible translation of the wordὑπέρ (huper) in the passage should be "for" as against "above," since the wordνεκρῶν (nekron) that modifies it is in the genitive case and not the accusative case. The study established that the expression οἱβαπτίζομενοι (hoibaptizomenoi) in 1Corinthians 15:29 is used in the metaphorical sense to allude to the experiences of torment and hardship Paul and his associates underwent for the sake of saving the spiritually dead persons (unbelievers) who they daily labored for their salvation.

Keywords: Baptism for the Dead, 1 Corinthians 15:29, Unbelievers, Salvation.

Introduction

Myriads of unresolved scholarly views abound concerning the phrasal expression "baptized for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29. This is *hapaxlegomenon* (solo passage) in the scripture that made mention of this practice that appears to be so alien to the Christian practice and tenets.

Its enigmatic nature has posed a challenge of its misinterpretation and misapplication by some religious bodies that consequently incorporated in their doctrinal beliefs and practices the literal baptism for the dead.

Further, baptism is generally described in the words of Ajibade Onolapo as "a gospel ordinance symbolizing the death, burial and resurrection of Christ" (Ajibade, 1996; 37). However, the forms and rituals of the various churches with regards to baptism vary, but it almost invariably involves the use of water and the Trinitarian invocation, "I baptize you: in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit" (Ajibade, 1996; 37).This is accompanied by the person being plunged under the water. In some traditions, the water is poured or sprinkled over the head of the candidate. Worthy of note is the fact that the beneficiaries of this ordinance have always been persons who are living not dead as indicated in the baptism of John at Jordan and the baptism of Peter on the day of Pentecost and even the subsequent baptismal activities in the Apostolic era. Thus, throughout scripture it is clear that saving grace is granted to no one except the believer himself, on the basis of his personal faith. In a sense, faith can never be imputed from one person to another- no conversion by proxy. In this case, the practice of literal baptism for the dead appears to be so outlandish to the traditional tenets of the Church from its inception. While some scholars hold to the view of metaphorical baptism(Mare, 1977; 287)to decipher the enigma posed by the text another school of thought subscribe to the literal interpretation. Yet, a third view suggests a vicarious baptism (Fee, 1987; 764). Further, Bernard and O'neill suggest word emendation (Foschini, 1997: 310-311; Durselen, 1903: 291-308) while Walker maintains that the passage should be viewed as an interpolation (Walker, 2007:84-103). Some scholars on the other hand hinge their arguments on the lexical dimension by suggesting the possible interpretation of the lexical items within their semantic range. For instance, they postulate that the contextual usage of the preposition ὑπέρ(*huper)* is "for" as against "above" since it is modified by a word that takes a genitive case.

Notwithstanding the questions that comes to mind is: what type of baptism the author was referring to? Was he making a referential or affirmative statement to sanction the literal baptism for the dead as practiced by some Christian groups? The work therefore attempts to find a satisfactory answer to these questions by carefully investigating the meanings and usages of significant lexical items of 1 Corinthians 15:29; namely (ὑπέρ(*huper),* νεκρῶν(*nekron),* βαπτίζομενοι(*baptizomenoi), Ποιήσουσιν*(*poiesousin*), Επεὶ (*epei*) *and βαπτιζονται (baptizontai)* in their given contextual-grammatical construct. This research becomes significant for the reason that it will benefit those who radically disagree with some aspects of the doctrine of the benevolent acts for the dead (prayer for the dead, Purgatory and Penance etc). These practices are deemed to be on the same theological pedestal with the doctrine of literal baptism for the dead as upheld by some denominations namely; Mormon Church. Congruently, this work will review the literatures relevant to this subject. It will further discuss the city of Corinth in its first century historical and religious milieu. Also, it delved into the examination of the term "baptism" in the theology of Apostle Paul, the author as well as its usage in other portions of his corpus. The last section surveys the lexical items of the text and end with a conclusion.

Religious Climate of First Century Corinth

The ancient Greek and Roman worlds in which Corinth existed were known for their polytheistic religious practices as worship of many gods and goddesses formed the basis of their beliefs and practices (Barnes, 2002: 58).

Notable among their religious tenets was the belief on death and the state of the dead. In his efforts to describe the climate of the belief about the dead in Corinthian religion, DeMaris highlights the significant devotion of the Greek and Romans to the dead. There was a general belief that the living ones were obligated to render some kind of assistance to the dead so as to be fitly integrated into the world of the dead (DeMaris, 2015; 9-12). This was evidently witnessed by the regular visit to the graves and commemoration of the deceased by their loved ones. Also, there existed a common ground between the Greeks and the Roman as regards to the treatment and philosophy about the dead and death. Interestingly, Tad Brennan further buttresses this point by asserting that their post burial commemorations involved some benevolent acts for the dead as portrayed by making provisions of kitchen and dining rooms where the dead are said to be offered food at some given times in their dying state (Brennan, 2021).

Similarly, they believed the soul is immortal. This fact is demonstrated in the concept of the dead as held by Pythagorean school of thought that centers on the belief in transmigration of soul; that soul of the dead wanders and finds another body where it settles in after death (Brennan, 2021).This suggests that life continues in another form after death sets in. Remarkably among the proponents of the belief in the transition of soul (immortality of soul) in the Greek world was Plato who through series of polemics strained his nerves to justify the notion of immortality of the soul. In fact, it is said of him that he made "the first coherent statement about immortality (Roochnick, 2004:240-241).

Further, in his treatise, he closely drew a connection to the performance of duty (benevolent acts) on earth as an incentive accruable to the reward in afterlife. The elements of belief in the immortal state of man were further reflected in their funeral ceremonies. They had a common belief that "without a proper funeral, the soul of the dead person would wander forever by the river sytx, which separates this world with the underworld (Greco-Roman Religion and Philosophy, 2021). Correspondingly, at funeral, having washed the body of the dead, a coin was usually placed in the mouth of the deceased. This was believed to be a cost of passage across the river through a ferry that was operated by Charon (deity) in the realm of death. Also, they had the practice of placing the clothes of the dead ones in the coffin to prevent them from coming to constitute some nuisance to the family or living loved ones (Nardon, 2001:198). This was accompanied by some benevolent acts for the dead by placing food and offerings of assorted manner at yearly festival of *Parentalia* usually held in (Nardon, 2001:199). The foregone clearly indicates that engagement in some posthumous deeds was not weird to the cultural identities of the people in Corinth. Also, this atmosphere of posthumous benevolence in Greco-Roman milieu about the dead and the reality of their dying state are believed to have influenced the theological position of some members of the Corinthian Church as regards to death (DeMaris, 1995).

The Church in Corinth

The church in Corinth was established by Paul after painstaking efforts. On his arrival at Corinth, he first met with a couple, Priscilla and Aquila and established a good relationship with them. It is suggested by some scholars that this couple were already Christians since there is no record showing that they were converted to Christianity at this time (Soard, 1999: 2). Paul's work resulted in a huge success which consequently ignited opposition and antagonism and he eventually left for Ephesus to circumvent the fiendish climate. While in Ephesus, he exchanged letters with the Christians in Corinth, tackling the issues that were plaguing the Church at its embryonic stage. Marrion L. Soard observed: "the church had fallen into arguing, forming cliques within the larger congregation issues as sexual relations, marriage, divorce, the eating of foods associated with pagan gods, the use of spiritual gifts in the assembly of the church, orderly behavior in worship, resurrection of the dead and collection that Paul was assembling for the relief of the poor in Jerusalem" (Vielhauer, 1994:129-142). Thus, the letter was an attempt to address these issues that almost nipped the nascent congregation of its mission and existence off bud (Hull, 2005:139).

Baptism and Death in the Theology of Paul

Baptism actually played a vital role in the corpus of the apostles. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul describes it as a symbol of burial and resurrection with Christ Jesus (Rom 6: 3-11). This passage is often spoken of as the *locus classicus*, meaning "a passage that has become a standard for elucidation of a word or subject of Paul's understanding of the concept of baptism"(Hull, 2005:241). James D. G. Dunn buttresses the point further thus, "in view of the important role this passage has played in the discussions of baptism, it is important to note that baptism is not the subject of the passage. The theme is one of death to sin and life under grace which is documented by use of baptismal language" (Dunn, 1988:308). The major focus of death to sin and life in Christ spoken of in Romans 6:1-14 is not on the literal dying of the believer as such but his spiritual death and life in Christ (Hull, 2005:242).

In Galatians, he portrayed baptism as an act of putting on Christ: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, did put on Christ (Gal 3:27). However, there is a rare occurrence of the verb βαπτιζω in Paul's letter outside 1 Corinthians. Besides its ten occurrences in 1 Corinthians, Paul uses βαπτιζωin Romans 6:3 up to two times and in Galatians 3:27. Apart from the two appearances of the word βαπτιζό in 15:29, it also appears eight times in 1 Corinthians (1:13, 14, 15, 16 [2x], 17; 10:2; and 12:13). As regards to its usage in the literal sense Rheuame states that, "Paul consistently used this term with the literal sense of the Christian initiatory rite" (Reaume, 469). However, he further observes that, there are three instances in which Paul used the word in a nonstandard way with reference to a believer being identified with Christ in His death (Rom 6:3), the Israelites being identified with Moses and believers being immersed by the spirit of God (1 Cor 12:13).

More so, in some instances, the word "baptize" was used in the metaphorical (active) sense of "to suffer shipwreck," or "to perish" (Beasley-Murray, 1974: 144). In the Septuagint, the word occurs only four times and conveyed its usage both in the literal and figurative senses (cf. Lev 6:28; Isa 21:4). In the *Koine* Greek period, the usage of the word βαπτιζω continued with both the literal (active) and figurative (passive) meanings, with the active sense of "to immerse" becoming especially prevalent. In a few cases the literal meaning was applied to the sacred washings of the mystery religions. However, the figurative sense continued as βαπτιζω which

is used to refer to "going under" with respect to sleep or intoxication and "perishing" (Beasley-Murray, 1974: 144). Hull observed that the word baptism is always used in the literal sense (Hull, 2005:96) save for their occurrence in the figurative sense in Mark 10 and Luke 12:50: "I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished." Jesus in this passage was describing the turbulent experiences of torture and social rejection he was about to undergo.

Understanding the Passage

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians (vv 1- 55) which is the larger context deals with the discourse of Apostle Paul on establishing the reality of the resurrection. As noted by Michael Hull, the chapter is usually divided into five general units: verses 1-11, 12-28, 29-34, 35-49, and 50-58 (Hull, 2005:84). The reason for this division is clearly seen in the text. First, in verses 1-11, Paul makes a complete shift in subject matter from the preceding chapters that deal with spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 15:1 the author elaborates Christ's resurrection with a statement to provide reasons for that in order to highlight its authenticity as opposed to a certain philosophy possibly the Sadducees' and epicureans who do not subscribe to resurrection of the dead.

Second, in verses 12-18 an expansion upon the attestation to the resurrection of Christ is introduced with the use of a rhetorical question into the chapter: "Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" Third, in verses 29-34, Paul introduces another rhetorical question: "Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf?" Fourth, in v. 35, Paul introduces yet another rhetorical question: "But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised'?" This question is parallel to the first question in verse 12. Verses 12-28 have to do with the fact that Christ has been raised and therefore, Christians will be raised; vv. 35-49 explain how such resurrection is possible. And finally, verses 50-58 says, "I tell you this, brethren, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." These verses authenticate the reality of resurrection and how it will happen in terms of mystery. The structure below gives an insight to the passage at a glance.

i. A statement on the resurrection of Christ as determined by witnesses (verses 1-11)
ii. The resurrection of Christ reinforces the certainty of Christian resurrection (verses 12-28)
iii. Consistent life with the resurrection (vv. 29-34)
iv. A clarification of how bodily resurrection is feasible (vv. 35-49)
v. A description of bodily resurrection on the authority of "mystery" (vv. 50-58).

An examination of the structure of chapter 15 shows that the passage under study (vv. 29-34) which is the immediate context stands in the middle of the chapter. The authenticity of Jesus bodily resurrection (i) above (1-11) parallels the certainty of the resurrection of the believers in (v) above (vv. 50-58). In a sense the basis for the believers' resurrection is hinged on the resurrection of Christ. It is worthy of note that vv. 1-11 refers to a past event while (vv. 50-58) refers to a future event i.e. the final resurrection of the dead at Christ coming. Item (ii) above (vv. 12-28) has to do with proofs in support of both (i) and (ii), while (iv) above (vv. 35-49) is series of proofs to (ii) above. Looking at (iii) above (vv. 29-34), it appears to be aloof from the other items; it does not parallel (i) or (ii). It is neither a series of proof nor a reference to event situated in the past or future as seen in the other items, but a reference to an event that was

already taking place among the Corinthians and possibly in the life of Paul. Also, (ii) deals with "some of you" (τινες), verse 12; and iv deals with "someone" (τις) in verse 35; a reference is made to two distinct groups of individuals other than the one in item (iii) above. Therefore, the flow of the thought in this chapter indicates that the author was addressing the subject of resurrection while stressing its reality in elaborate terms.

Επεὶ (*Epei*) and τί

This item, Επεὶ is a conjunction subordinating with a causal sense 'because' or 'since.' The antecedence to this conjunction is in Paul's statement in the preceding verse, "and when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all." Hence, Επεὶ subordinately connects the next argument on baptism for the dead. This is followed byτί (*ti*) "what" an interrogative pronoun of an emphatic expression.

Ποιήσουσιν (*Poiesousin*)

The verb, *poiesousin* in the passage under discussion is key to grasping a clue on the type of baptism the passage underscores. The syntactical structure of the passage has revealed this verb to have the subject imbedded therein. Thus, it may not be inarguable to assert that, it is the subject-verb. The form of this verb is derived from the stem-verb *poieo*, meaning "to do," "to make." It qualifies an action that is directed on an object. Further, Thayer describes its function relevant to some specific activities carried out by people as they respond to a particular situation. Its appearance in the New Testament is usually accompanied by its usage in the demonstrative sense which informs whether or not the subject in a given sentence is acted upon (Ubi, 2021:4).

Further, it is a verb indicative future active, 3rd person plural with ποιέω as the root word. When combined with the interrogative pronoun τί, the appropriate rendering could be "what shall they do?" The word *Poiesousin* in this form appears about 40 times in the Septuagint (LXX), and five times in the New Testament. In the LXX, it occurred in the imperative mood stressing the reality of the subject being acted or acting upon an object(Ubi, 2021:9). In the books of Isaiah 39:7 and Daniel 11:32 the verb *Poiesousin* is used to underscore the moments of distress the Israelites would were to be subjected to by the Babylonians and the perilous times depicting the end of time respectively.

Likewise, the word appears five times in the New Testament and all in the indicative third person future plural form. It occurred three times in the book of John (15:21; 16:2; 16:3) and once each in 1 Corinthians 15:29 and Revelation 17:16. The fact that the verb appears in the indicative mood underscores the fact that the action was real. Parallel with this stance, some scholars observed that "In Greek there is only one mood which demonstrates the reality of the action – the indicative" whereas the other three are used to express potential action (Summers & Sawyer, 1995:12,116).Notably, the word "*poieo*" assume a different function in its contextual usage in the New Testament. It has a unique usage linking directly (except in 1 Cor 15:29 where it is a bit murky) to the persecution and suffering of the believers. Consequently, the view of metaphorical other than literal baptism seems to assume weight of application and acceptability in this sense of its contextual function in the passage.

οίΒαπτιζόμενοι (*Baptizomenoi*) and Βαπτίζονται (baptizontai)

The word Βαπτιζόμενοι in the passage is a verb, tracing its root to βαπτίζω. In context, it functions as a participle and carries the plural gender of masculine in a present passive nominative form. It appears in a simple participle form that is paired with an article οί (*hoi*) to express specifity of description of action. The participle form is a verbal adjectival construct that is in most cases used substantively alongside the aforementioned article οί (*hoi*) to describe a certain group. Zerwick collaborates with this stance in his description of the function of the article thus: "The function of the article is to point out (it was in origin demonstrative), to determine, to set apart from others, to identify this or that and not simply 'such" (Zerwick, 1963:166). Gleaning from the forgone assertion, οίΒαπτιζόμενοι may have such translation as "those or the ones who are baptized" (Zerwick, 1963:166).A second possible translation in its grammatical construct may render it as "those or the ones that get or have themselves baptized" (Blass & Debrunner, 1961:529). Worthy of note is the modifier role of the word Βαπτιζόμενοι (*Baptizomenoi)* to the subject of the verb *Ποιήσουσιν*(*Poiesousin*). Thus, the function of *Βαπτιζόμενοι* places emphasis on the unambiguous description as it delineates a certain group from the other.

οί βαπτίζονται is an indicative, third person plural, and present verb that functions as passive or middle voice in the masculine gender. It is usually paired with an article to denote the gender it represents.*οι' βαπτίζονται* (plural masculine gender article) can be translated as "those (the ones) who are baptized," or those (the ones) who have (get) themselves baptized" (Hull, 2005:103). The third person present tense form of the verb *βαπτίζονται* suggests that this activity was a current practice that was being carried out by a group of individuals and was probably known by the Corinthian believers (Mare, 1977:287).

Ὑπὲρ (Huper/Hyper)

The preposition ὑπὲρ is another key element in the proper understanding of the passage in question due to the controversy it has generated. As a preposition**,** ὑπὲρ can be viewed in both the genitive and the accusative forms. When it is modified by a word in genitive case, it could be translated for, in behalf of, for the sake of as evident in Matthew 5:44; Mark 9:40; John 11:50-52; Acts of the Apostles 21:26; Romans 5:6-8; 8:31; 16:4; Colossians 1:7, 9; Philippians 1:7; Hebrews 2:9. However, if the modifier-word is in the accusative, it is fittingly translated as "above" and "beyond" according to the grammatical fittingness. Thayer lends credence to this by postulating that the preposition can be translated as over, above, beyond, across when describing a position or a situation,[1] but however, he pointed out that But in this sense it does not occur in the New Testament.[2]

Ὑπὲρhas 430 occurrences in the Old Testament (LXX) and 150 times in the New Testament. However, out of these 150 appearances in New Testament its usage in Paul's letters is more frequent than any other New Testament author (Jeremias, 155). In 1 Corinthians 15:29, the word huper is modified by ton nekron which is in the genitive case. Given, it is appropriate to translate it as "for" based on the Greek grammatical rule. Hence, the translation of the

[1]Joseph Henry Thayer

[2]Ibid

passage is "Else what will they do those who are baptized for the dead…" as against "those who are baptized above the dead."

νεκροi (Dead) and τῶννεκρῶν (the dead)

The word νεκροὶ (dead) does not only appear in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians but also in some of his written works as contained in the book of Romans. Romans chapter 8 speaks of the death of sin apart from the law, and Romans 6:11, 13 and 8:10 talks about union in Christ's death in baptism. It appears ninety times in the LXX and 128 times in the New Testament. In the Pauline work it appears thirty-four times and, in most cases, it appears in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Its appearances are scattered throughout the book of Romans (1:4; 4:17, 24; 6:4, 9, 11, 13; 7:4, 8; 8:10, 11(2x); 10:7, 9;11:15; 14:9). In 1 Corinthians, we find νεκροὶ used only in chapter 15. Besides its two instances in 15:29, it's found in vv. 12 where it occurred twice. Elsewhere, Paul uses the word in 2 Corinthians 1:9; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 3:11; 1 Thessalonians. 1:10; and 4:1.

In the New Testament, νεκροὶ (dead) is used much more in its literal sense than figurative sense. And when it is used as a noun, νεκροὶ simply means "the dead" as distinct from the living (Daniel, 2022:114). The few instances that it is used in the figurative sense appear in Matt 8:22 and Luke 9:60 where Jesus speaks about "the dead burying their dead." And in John 5:25 Jesus speaks of the time when "the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live." In Ephesians 5:14 we find the quotation: "Awake O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." The death alluded to here is in the metaphorical sense. However, Paul consistently uses νεκροὶ in the literal sense rather than figurative throughout 1 Corinthians 15. In this vein, Gambo subscribed to the literal interpretation thus: "Since the literal sense is more preponderance in verse 29, it appears a literal understanding of the term νεκροὶas referring to dead individuals may be proper" (Daniel, 2022:114). Hence, its prominence of usage in the literal sense gives impetus to those who subscribed to the literal interpretation of the passage to substantiate their claims.

Conclusion

After a careful and close examination of the passage, 1Cor 15:29, this study is concluded thus: A plausible translation of the word ὑπὲρ in the passage which has received significant debate in scholarship should be "for" as against "above" as suggested by some scholars. This is viable since the word that follows it is in the genitive case and not accusative case. The expression "baptized for the dead" in the passage (1 Cor 15:29) was used in the metaphorical sense not the literal as evident in the context. It was employed to describe an inimical situation being faced by a certain group of individuals (Paul and his associates) who sacrificed their lives for the salvific benefits of those who were dying spiritually in their sins. Given, this position underscores the fact that the author was in no wise substantiating a literal baptism for the dead as doing so could be antithetical to the conventional trajectory of the acceptance of the rite of baptism which he was privy to and an advocate.

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