

The Dead in Christ: Recovering Paul's understanding of the after-life

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Abstract

The study of the so-called "intermediate state" of the dead is conducted under the technical designation necrology. The evidence suggests that Paul's necrology did not remain constant and its development was influenced by personal circumstances. Paul's necrology consisted of two phases. Phase one: The dead were considered as "the others". They were the ones to be raised. Phase two: Paul realised that he could be one of "the others" and the theological content of his necrology demanded further clarification. Drawing on his being-in-Christ mysticism, Paul stated that the dead would experience fellowship "with Christ". It is also explicitly stated that Christians would retain their resurrection status in death and objectively experience the resurrection body that is under construction. This transformation process will be completed at the parousia.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is the New Testament's teaching, but especially Paul's teaching with regard to the state of the "dead"? Very often, the "intermediate state" of the dead as it is generally known is investigated under the broader rubric of eschatology. However, as an aspect of New Testament theology it needs to be clearly *differentiated* from other aspects of New Testament studies. I therefore propose that the study concerning the status of the dead should be given the technical term, necrology.² I tentatively make this suggestion, since I

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² That is, "the doctrine or teaching about the dead", derived from two Greek words: νεκρός ([the] dead) and λόγος (word/doctrine/teaching).

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have as yet not encountered it as a technical term to denote research done on the so-called "intermediate state."

If this can be accepted, I shall pay special attention to the "necrology" of Paul, which focused on the "here and now" of the departed. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, it did not develop in a vacuum, and neither did it remain constant. Paul's immediate environment was his Jewish faith, rich in ideas and religious heritage. It was also dynamic, as is evidenced by developments in eschatology and religious expression through writing. Judaism was, however, surrounded by Roman power and Hellenistic culture. Religious ideas were exchanged, modified or rejected, therefore an overview of Paul's Jewish world and the Greco-Roman world at large is necessary.

What dominated Paul's theology was not so much the Jewish and Greco-Roman world at large, but the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its implications for the Messianic community. Certain developments within Judaism before the Christian era opened Paul, the Pharisee, to the *Christian* message of the resurrection. How life after death was conceived of varied, and different views made their claim heard. Early Judaism was creative, if not chaotically so, but as far as Paul and the early Christians were concerned, views on the afterlife stabilised, rather, it (the afterlife) was explained by God's saving action in Jesus Christ. The conviction held, although acceptable to those Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah, would have appeared at first as folly to most non-Jews, being exposed to some religious traditions of their own.

2. NECROLOGY: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The necrology of the Greco-Roman world

The necrology of the Greco-Roman is quite instructive, and it is probable that elements of Greek necrology stimulated and influenced Jewish thought on the matter (Glasson 1961:1-7, 23, 81-85). The Hellenistic world, however, regarded death in various ways (Bolt 1998:51-79). Viewed negatively, death was a hopeless inevitability or a mysterious unknown. Viewed positively, it was something heroic or a welcome relief from human suffering. Alternatively, death was a natural and complete end to human life or the sought after release and relocation of the soul. Relevant to our study, death was sometimes seen as an introduction to a conscious interval between several earthly lives. Only the latter scheme can qualify as involving a necrological state, or rather, states.

The Underworld (Hades) or heaven was conceived as a place of judgement that could hold reward and blessedness. Alternatively, Hades

could be a place of purgation or punishment for the soul, especially for those who were not initiated into the Mystery cults or on the other hand, those who had philosophical training in virtue. The Greco-Roman world lacked that Jewish (and Christian) theological element, however, understood human death as the consequence of human sin, and went against a holy God's divine purposes. In other words, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, death was not something "natural" (Bultmann 1967:11-15). In this it stood apart from the Greco-Roman world that had no need for the doctrine of the resurrection, or a belief that salvation was to be achieved through the reversal of human death.

In addition, in the Jewish, Pauline and general Christian context, physical death was something that would happen only once, and to the faithful was promised eternal life through the resurrection of the dead. As a result, Paul's necrology in theological content and purpose cannot be explained by the necrological speculation one encounter in the Greco-Roman world.

2.2 The necrology of Early Judaism

In the period of Early Judaism (200 BC-AD 200), from obscure origins, a belief in life after death emerged dramatically in Judaism (Bauckham 1998:80-95). It found its expression through a belief in the resurrection of the dead, and thereto related speculation about the current state of the departed emerged as well. Necrology was the inevitable child of eschatology.

In contrast to the older view, it was now seen that personality could be expressed in terms of discarnate soul (Russell 1980:359). The souls or spirits of the departed are therefore represented as fully conscious, possessing form and recognizable appearance as well. Generally, this intermediate state was enjoyed in Sheol, Gehenna, or possibly the heavens, or some obscure place like the mountain to the "west" described in 1 Enoch 1-36. As far as the location of the departed was concerned, various possibilities were offered, and the Jews shared the same dilemma as the Greeks as to whether the departed found themselves in some place "below", or in some place "above". To a degree the authors of the New Testament inherited this dilemma.

Although a more Hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul also emerged (4 Macc 16:24-17:5; WisSol 3:1-4; Jub 23:31), the predominant scheme entailed that at the moment of death, the individual would enter a state of proleptic blessedness or punishment, in anticipation of the future resurrection and/or judgement. This doctrine of the necrological state was most fully developed in the apocalyptic literature (e g 1 En 22:1-13; 4 Ezr 7:78-101), but even where a belief in the immortality of the soul was expressed, one find at least once that the future of the righteous were placed within the context of a cosmic and collective eschatology (WisSol 3:7-8).

These developments are also evident in the rabbinic traditions that plausibly can be dated to before or around AD 100. (Cavallin 1974:171). In this instance too death was seen as the entry into a proleptic participation in the Age to Come, since the belief in the resurrection formed one fundamental aspect of rabbinic dogma (m.Sanh 10:1). It was only when the dead would be resurrected to a life on earth, that the necrological state would be exchanged for the final state.

3. THE NECROLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (EXCLUDING PAUL)

When one investigates the New Testament, a few passages that posit a necrological state, whether in application to the saints of the Old Testament, or to those who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, come to notice. Admittedly, there are some passages in which the idea of a necrological state is not really present. Particularly most references to Hades are simple references to the realm of the dead or the fact of death (Ac 2:27; Mt 11:23; 16:18; Rv 1:18; 6:8) also used in a metaphorical sense.

In two instances however, Hades clearly refers to a necrological state (Hoekema 1994:100). In Revelation 20:13 Hades is said to give up its dead at the time of the resurrection and judgement. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), Hades specifically refers to the intermediate realm of torments, implying a form of post-mortem discrimination, since Lazarus is in "Abraham's bosom" (Lk 16:22), a place of blessed existence.

2 Peter 2:9, similar to Luke 16:19-31, describes the unrighteous as being constantly punished in the period between death and the Day of Judgement, and even though 2 Peter 2:9 primarily has a necrological application (Hoekema 1994:101-102), the location of the unrighteous dead is not given. On the other hand, the departed righteous is also described in the New Testament as being in Paradise (Lk 23:42-43), and in the case of Christian martyrs, they are described as being under the altar in heaven (Rv 6:9-11).

The New Testament also recalls traditions of Jesus' "descent" into Hades and his preaching to the "spirits in prison" (1 Pt 3:19-20; 4:6 cf Jn 5:25; Ac 2:31; Mt 12:40; Rm 10:7; Eph 4:9), likewise indicating a necrological state of some sort (Turner 1965:171). In relation to this is the claim in Hebrews 11:39-40 that the Old Testament saints could not be made perfect without the Church's current participation in God's saving action in Christ. This also refers to a necrological state for the Old Testament saints, but the exact conditions again are not specified.

I would further suggest, that the New Testament implicitly distinguishes between the intermediate state for the righteous departed before (and even during!) the ministry of Christ, and the intermediate state for Christians. This ontological distinction in a necrological sense is explicit in the writings of Paul. Based on Christ's death and resurrection, the necrological state of Christians after death came to promise things far better. This is especially evident in the later writings of Paul.

4. THE NECROLOGY OF PAUL

4.1 Introduction

Paul would have had much in common with his Jewish contemporaries about views on the afterlife, but nothing in Judaism had foreseen the Christian situation. The Messiah had already been on earth, had died and was resurrected and ascended to heaven, without the Kingdom of God being fully established yet. Paul, the missionary and great Christian theologian had to interpret and explain this new situation. The belief in the resurrection would not have offended most of his fellow Jews, but the claim that a crucified Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, and now is the resurrected Lord who reigns from heaven, would have.

Based on the expectation that the heavenly Lord's return was imminent, the death of Christians initially seems to have come as a bit of a surprise, because these Christians were considered to already participate in the Messianic Kingdom. Why then should they be dying? For this reason Paul also had to explain the fate of those who died before the parousia. Paul comforted the bereaved at Thessalonica that the departed would not miss out on eschatological fulfilment (1 Th 4:16), but with time, their ontological status required further attention in the thought of the apostle. Paul's necrology in this respect was mainly influenced by personal circumstances.

For this reason I propose that Paul's necrology consisted broadly of two phases. Phase One: Paul at first thought of the departed as the "others" who will be raised at the parousia (1 Th 4; 1 Cor 15). Phase two: Later on in his ministry, Paul began to identify himself with those who could possibly die before the parousia (2 Cor 5; Phlp 1).

I shall now summarise how Paul's necrology developed in language and theological content, as his personal experiences forced upon him a change in his necrological outlook. Subsequently, a more developed necrology began to emerge as Paul exploited his being-in-Christ mysticism for use in an unforeseen theological direction.

4.2 Phase 1: The dead in Christ

Paul was of the conviction that with the resurrection of Jesus, the Age to come was inaugurated. For now, the Ages were mingled, and through baptism believers as persons “in Christ” already existed in the resurrection mode of existence and enjoyed a proleptic participation in the Age to Come (Schoeps 1961:88-110; Schweitzer 1931:98 ff).³ A believer enters a state of being-in-Christ through baptism. If one is baptised (or immersed), you have “put on Christ” (Gl 3:26-28; Rm 13:14 cf Col 3:9; Eph 4:22). To be “in Christ” is the equivalent of to “put on Christ”. As Wikenhauser explains:

The expression “to put on Christ” is a metaphor in which Christ is compared to a heavenly robe which is ready for all men; by putting on this robe men enter into a new world and are enveloped in this new world. The new relationship to Christ is not merely ethical, it is ontological. It is not simply a fresh rule of conduct. The man who “puts on Christ” gains a share in Christ's being, and this participation produces “Christ in us”, the “new man”.

(Wikenhauser 1960:32)

Related to baptism and what makes this eschatological tension possible is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, believers already exist in an “intermediate state”, and that is why in our opinion, making the “intermediate state” only applicable to the departed, is misleading, especially within the context of Pauline theology. Nevertheless, the full implications of this eschatological tension for Paul's necrological perspective were realised only later. At this stage, there was no necrological development to speak of.

The reason for this lack of necrological development was due to the conviction that the interim period would be of very short duration: the parousia of Christ would happen at any moment (contra Harris 1985:142). More importantly, Paul *himself* it would seem, was as yet not concerned about the reality of death – based on his personal perspective the dead are seen as “the others” (Hanhart 1969:450). Furthermore, the death of believers at this stage was the exception, and not the rule. As a result, the focus of Paul's writings at this stage – from the vantage point of the living – was on the change at the

³ We differ with Schoeps and Schweitzer's analysis of Pauline eschatology on several points though. Schweitzer (followed by Schoeps) reckoned since believers share in the death and resurrection of Christ, for those who had died, Paul had to postulate a special resurrection (1 Th 4) at the Parousia. Schweitzer also reckoned that Paul believed in a millennial kingdom (cf Rv 20) that would be inaugurated at the Parousia, and that the general resurrection would occur after the end of the millennial kingdom. It is questionable that Paul believed in such a kingdom that would endure for a period after the Parousia, and most scholars reject Schweitzer's idea that Paul postulated two resurrections. We do, however, agree with Schweitzer and Schoeps that Paul believed the members of the kingdom live like their Messiah in the resurrection mode of existence.

Parousia (eschatology), not the status of the dead (necrology). Paul was convinced that he (and most Christians) would participate in the Parousia while still alive.

When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians some fifteen to twenty years had passed since Christ's death and resurrection. By that time some Christians in Thessalonica had come to grief as some of their fellow believers had died (1 Th 4:13-18). This grief was not because they did not believe in the resurrection, but they feared the dead would not experience the same advantages as the living when the Lord returned. Questions about why they had died, arose: they were already risen to life with Christ, but was their death an indication that they would not share in the resurrection life due to some sin they committed? (Davies 1970:291). Paul then gave them the assurance that at the Parousia οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον (1 Th 4:16).

Because the Parousia was so imminent, their situation after death did not really demand theological clarification, and certainly, no such information presented itself here in Paul. Paul does not comfort the bereaved by stating that the departed ones are somewhere in heaven or with Christ. At this stage, all that was necessary it seems, was the assurance that the deceased would rise from the dead. In 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, as mentioned, the dead are "the others", since they are the ones that will be raised. The "dead in Christ" (1 Th 4:16) had already been Christians before they died, but it is significant that at this stage already it is thought that they remain under the control of the indwelling Christ (cf Gl 2:19-20; Rm 8:10; 14:9), enjoying spiritual union with him, but exactly how, is not stated.

At this stage, Paul possibly thought the departed saints are in Sheol (Hades) or in one of the heavens (cf Paradise), but their location is not specified. Although they enjoy spiritual fellowship with Christ, it would seem that Paul did not as yet think they were experiencing active and personal fellowship with the Lord in death as is the case in his later epistles (2 Cor 5:1-10; Phlp 1:21-23). At this stage, the exact nature of the fellowship between departed believers and their Lord is rather obscure.

Since they are the "dead in Christ", ontologically their process of Christification is not seen as complete. How can it be? They are "the dead", or "the sleepers" (1 Th 4:13, 16; 1 Cor 15:15 ff), "the others", described by using prejudicial language. They exist somewhere in a necrological state waiting for the Parousia (i.e. their eschatological resurrection). They will be *raised* imperishable, and like the living, they will undergo the final and complete ontological clothing process (1 Th 4:16; 1 Cor 15:51-53). Furthermore, if Paul

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shares the view of the Thessalonian Christians, the dead in Christ, compared to the living, is seen as being in a state of “disadvantage”. They will however rise first at the Parousia, to place them on an equal status with the living.

As a result, they are not conceived as experiencing the full vision of God. Only after Christ will hand his kingdom to the Father some time after the Parousia, will their being-in-Christ be exchanged for their being-in-God (Schweitzer 1931:13), and only then would God finally be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:26-28). Their ontological status can therefore be aptly described as a Christ-mysticism, something inherited from earthly life.

The departed clearly had in this life undergone the sacramental act of baptism as a result of their faith in Christ (Gl 3:26-28; Rm 6:3; 13:14; 1 Cor 1:13 cf Col 3:9; Eph 4:22). Through this, they had put on Christ, a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45), and gained a share in Christ's being (see also Gl 2:19; 5:24; 6:14; Rm 6:1 ff; 7:7; 2 Cor 5:14; Phlp 2:10 cf Col 2:20; 3:3; Eph 2:5 f). This means that ironically the “dead in Christ” remain to exist in a resurrection mode of existence since they had already been a new creation before death (cf 2 Cor 5:17; Gl 6:15). But at this stage, nothing is explicitly stated with regard to the resurrection status of the dead, for as yet, the historical situation did not demand it. Nevertheless, the departed had and continue to have the gift of the Holy Spirit (2 Th 2:12; Gl 3:2; 3:26; 4:6; 1 Cor 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Rm 5:5; 8:9 ff, 23 cf Eph 1:13), and they continue to form part of the Body of Christ (Gl 3:28; 1 Cor 11:3; 12:13, 27; Rm 12:5 cf Col 1:18), the One Person (1 Cor 12:13). They retain their full individuality, however, even in death (Wikenhauser 1960:102).

4.3 Paul's eschatological anthropology

Before investigating the second phase of Paul's necrological outlook, the nature of his eschatological anthropology first needs to be established.

It should be stated at the outset that in my search for what constitutes the ego or element of continuity, in other words, that part of a person that will continue to exist after death and will experience the successive modes of embodiment, we unfortunately cannot offer any clear answers. When one turns to Paul's anthropological usage as it occurs throughout his letters (e.g. references to “mind”, “spirit”, “soul” et al), one also cannot clearly determine the relevance to the necrological state. The fact is, Paul provides us with no consistent anthropology, and often adopts anthropological terms of his opponents for his own purposes (Jewett 1971:447). Paul's most consistent

usage in his doctrine of man is typically Jewish, where he uses the term “heart” (used 27 times). According to Jewett (1971:447) it denotes “a view of man as an integral, intentional self who stands in relationship before God ... It depicts man as a whole viewed from his intentionality; the heart as the center of man is thought of as a source of will, emotion, thoughts and affections.”

Paul’s reference to the “spirit, soul and body” in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 should also not be interpreted as man leading a trichotomous existence. Paul was employing these terms to encapsulate the entire being of a person, and not to indicate that a human being consists of three parts (Sanders 1977:454).

Paul’s most consistent anthropology in our opinion is present in his being-in-Christ mysticism, where the believer as a person “in Christ” is seen as subject to moral and ontological transformation. This is explicit in Paul’s “in Adam” vs “in Christ” antithesis expressed in its different forms (1 Cor 15:21-22, 37; Rm 5:1 ff; 2 Cor 5:3), something that indicates that his anthropology is mainly understandable and is most consistent in an eschatological context (cf Paul’s use of the “first man Adam” vs “last Adam” in 1 Cor 15:45, and “first man” vs “second man” in v 47).

The γυμνὸν κόκκον, the “naked seed” that is sown in death (1 Cor 15:37 cf 2 Cor 5:3) refers to a person that is “in Adam”, who has a σῶμα ψυχικόν, having inherited Adam’s fallen anthropological state. It refers to a person without a resurrection body (Harris 1985:139).⁴ This ontological solidarity with Adam is further characterised by human sin. This can only be countered by a person being “clothed” (1 Cor 15:53; 2 Cor 5:2-4), that is, being “in Christ”, where the believer has a share in Christ’s resurrected being, combined with a personal commitment to moral regeneration. Being “in Adam”, therefore “naked”, leads to sin, condemnation and death, while being “in Christ” leads to grace, justification and eternal life (1 Cor 15:21-22, 37-49) through resurrection.

⁴ It must be borne in mind though that for Paul, Adam was a ψυχὴν ζῶσαν (1 Cor 15:45 cf Gn 2:7-LXX) from the start (cf v 46): “the spiritual did not come first, but the psychological” the psychological man in v 48 is χοϊκός, “earthy”). The Genesis narrative however, explains that Adam discovered his nakedness *after* he had sinned (Gn 3:10-11). Jewish speculation had it that Adam possessed a glory derived from God (Sir 49:16), and whatever special qualities he had, his fall was correspondingly disastrous. So although Adam became a σῶμα ψυχικόν from the start, we may conclude that his eventual anthropological state of “nakedness” for Paul constituted a removal of his previous glory brought about by his sin. The only way of rectifying this is to be “in Christ.” It moves beyond rectifying the situation, however, since by being-in-Christ, the believer possesses a better ontological state than that which Adam had from the beginning.

The “naked seed” therefore does not refer to a “naked soul” of a person in the necrological state. The part of man (the ego) that survives death is a mystery. What this element of continuity consists of, how it is animated, and whether it is expressed in some bodily form apart from the spiritual body (only applicable to those who are “in Christ”) Paul does not tell us. Paul’s main concern generally is eschatological anthropology – the “*identity with a difference*” (Harris 1985:126) – not necrological anthropology as such.

I argue, however, that the aspects of a believer that is already subject to the process of transformation must continue to exist in death, and in itself become the elements of continuity. This is true in both an ethical (i.e. the ego) and ontological sense, but Paul leaves one with explicit information only as far as the ontological (i.e. the bodily) aspect is concerned (1 Cor 15:51 ff; 2 Cor 5:1 ff).

One can be confident that Paul envisages it to be genuine human beings that exist in the necrological state, and it will be these individuals (cf “God will raise up *us*” – 1 Cor 6:14) that will be raised at the resurrection, not impersonal corpses (Harris 1998:148), who refers to Paul speaking about the resurrection “from [i.e. out from among] the dead” – ἐκ νεκρῶν, Phlp 3:11; and the phrase “of the dead” – τῶν νεκρῶν, 1 Cor 15:42, 52). It must be remembered that through baptism the departed were already clothed with a proleptic spiritual body (see also 1 Cor 15:49),⁵ but they, like the living, will have to undergo the final clothing process at the consummation (1 Cor 15:51 f; 2 Cor 5:2-4).

4.4 Phase two: Paul realising his own mortality

4.4.1 Fellowship with Christ in death

Paul’s eschatological anthropology seems to have remained constant throughout his ministry, since his being-in-Christ mysticism is found throughout his epistles. One also finds a consistency in Paul’s view with regard to the nearness of the parousia (Phlp 3:10-11, 20-21; 4:5), even though his later language is metaphorical (2 Cor 4:14-5:10; Phlp 1:21-23; 3:20-21; Rm 8:19-25) compared with his initial style that was literal and highly apocalyptic (1 Th 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:12-58).

This change in language is also present in a necrological context, as Paul realised his own mortality based on his near death experiences in Asia (2

⁵ See Paul’s use of the subjunctive φορέσωμεν (p⁴⁶ ✠ A C D G K P Ψ et al) in 1 Cor 15:49: “*let us bear the likeness of the man from heaven*”. It points to a present reality, since the believer is already “clothed” through baptism. This status must continue to exist in death. Paul’s use of φορέσωμεν gives further evidence of the “already – not yet” tension in his eschatology.

Cor 1-7), and the prospect of his possible martyrdom (Phlp). Where he initially associated himself with those who would be alive at the Parousia (1 Th 4:15-17; 1 Cor 15; but cf 1 Cor 6:14), at a later stage in his ministry, he identified himself with those who could possibly die before the Parousia (2 Cor 4:14-5:10; Phlp 1:21-23). Paul realised he could also be among “the others”, and his focus shifted, but not exclusively, to an individual perspective of one’s own death *alongside* that of the Parousia. Paul’s thought now became increasingly personal and more realistic with respect to his own death, and one might add, that of other Christians as well. The misleading or crass expressions for the departed or references to the act of dying (i.e. “the dead”, “the sleepers” – 1 Th 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:12-58; “destruction of the flesh” – 1 Cor 5:5) are generally softened whenever Paul speaks from a personal perspective (i.e. “get home with the Lord”, “to depart”; 2 Cor 4:14-5:10; Phlp 1:21-23).⁶ Therefore, Paul’s expectation of how he would fit into the eschatological drama clearly changed and he was pressured to give a personal and therefore a more humane perspective on death. The departed are no longer thought of as “the others”, and the expression the “dead in Christ” no longer suffices, especially if one starts to realise that you could possibly be one of them.

More importantly, this personal perspective on death made the theological content of Paul’s necrology richer, since the departed are now seen as those who experience active and personal fellowship “with Christ” (2 Cor 5:6-8; Phlp 1:23 cf Rm 14:7-9) in the heavenly realm. This is a clear development since the dead in Christ are no longer portrayed as being in a position of “disadvantage” – if Paul initially had such a view himself. What is explicit though, is that now it is seen that to die and to be “with Christ” held many advantages for the Christian. In fact, compared to earthly life, Paul conceives it as being “by far the best” (Phlp 1:23 cf 2 Cor 5:8), because subjective faith would be exchanged for objective sight (2 Cor 5:7) and personal fellowship with the resurrected Lord will be enjoyed.

The fact that even here Paul continues to speak of a necrological state has general support, since in 2 Corinthians 1:9; 4:14 and Philippians 3:11 he speaks of his own hope to experience the resurrection. In addition, even though Paul speaks of being at home “with the Lord” and of being “with Christ” (2 Cor 5:8; Phlp 1:23) immediately after death, Christ himself, however, is yet to be made subject to God (1 Cor 15:24-28). This is critically important to illustrate that this context does not have the final state in view. It was comforting to know he would be with Christ in death, but this could not have been Paul’s *ultimate* hope. Paul had no concept of the Trinity as it was developed by the later church (Barrett 1962:102). Christ is at the right hand of

⁶ Paul however maintains the reference to “(of) the dead” when in Romans and Philippians he refers to the resurrection of Christ, that of believers or his own resurrection.

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the Father; he shares in God's divine being. He is the human figure on the throne or the principal mediator figure already recognised by Jewish apocalyptic and mystical tradition. But in keeping with that tradition, for Paul, Christ as this intermediary figure, remained subordinate to God (1 Cor 11:3). Therefore, this necrological state for believers of being "with the Lord" will come to an end after the resurrection at the parousia, when Christ will hand over his kingdom to the Father, and when Christ himself will also be made subject to God (1 Cor 15:24-28). It is only after this handover of the kingdom that God will be "all in all", and the current Christ-mysticism will be replaced by an eternal God-mysticism. How this ontological separation between believers and God in the necrological state is possible, is however not explained.

In support of the above, it is worth mentioning that Paul often speaks about the kingdom of God, and mostly it has a *future* reference (1 Cor 6:9 f; 15:50; Gl 5:21 cf 1 Th 2:12; 2 Th 1:5). In other passages again, the time reference is not clear (Rm 4:17; 1 Cor 4:20 cf Col 4:11). When Paul speaks of the kingdom of Christ (twice) it is *present* (1 Cor 15:23-28 cf Col 1:13). Christ exercises kingship for a limited period of time. It is through the Holy Spirit that the eschatological conditions of the future kingdom of God can be experienced in the present kingdom of Christ (Barrett 1962:100).

4.4.2 The process of Christification after death

As mentioned here above, Paul's necrology became richer in theological content as a personal perspective on death made Paul realise that death initiated a more intimate and objective fellowship with Christ. How is this change to be explained? Was it driven only by personal preferences or a theological hope? Hanhart (1966:43 ff; 78, 239) argues that Paul and the New Testament do not speculate about an intermediate state, and that Paul's words "with Christ", "with the Lord" apply to the Age to Come which always *is* in heaven, entered into at the moment of death. In short, a state similar to our necrology (the traditional "intermediate state") does not really exist in the New Testament; it is an unwarranted "metaphysical box". Hanhart (1969:445-457; 1997:77-86) with specific reference to Paul, claims that he was a "reverent agnostic" as far as the exact nature of life after death was concerned, but that he expressed a strong hope of an eternal life "with Christ."

One however does not accept Hanhart's position, since Paul's writings do support a necrological state for the dead. Combined with the fact that Christ exercises kingship for a limited period of time, one should also take note of Paul's usage of the noun οἰκοδομή 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul writes:

Οἶδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι ἐὰν ἡ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία τοῦ σκήνους καταλυθῆ, οἰκοδομὴν ἐκ θεοῦ ἔχομεν, οἰκίαν ἀχειροποίητον αἰώνιον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Let us first turn our attention to 1 Corinthians 3:9 specifically where οἰκοδομή is the building process resulting in an edifice, a building which is in the process of construction. It refers to the Christian community. Paul writes: “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s *building* (οἰκοδομή).” Paul continues in verse 10: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, *and someone else is building on it* (ἐποικοδομεῖ). But each one should be mindful of *how he builds*” (ἐποικοδομεῖ).

Verse 9 could very well be translated as “you are God’s field, God’s *building under construction*”. In this instance the building up (ἐποικοδομέω, “to build on something”, “to build further”) is a continuation of the apostolic work of laying the foundation (cf 3:14; Eph 2:20; 1 Pt 2:5; Col 2:7). Wherever οἰκοδομή appears in Paul’s writings it refers to a spiritual process, a progression of some sort. In 2 Corinthians 5:1 it becomes a figure of speech for man’s corporeality (Michel 1967:146). Plummer, commenting on Paul’s use of οἰκοδομή in 2 Corinthians 5:1 is therefore correct when he states: “Here we seem to be half-way between the process and the result, ‘a building in course of erection,’ the result being οἰκίαν, a word in which there is no intimation of a process” (Plummer 1956:143).

The implications of this are clear. The process of Christification continues even after death (cf Turner 1965:131), and in this regard I argue that it specifically relates to the production of the spiritual body. Contrary to what scholars such as Osei-Bonsu (1986:81-101), Gundry (1976:151) and Lincoln (1981:64) say, the οἰκοδομή does not refer to the resurrection body which is only acquired at the Parousia. I propose that 2 Corinthians 5:1 must be understood as combining both the resurrection body and the necrological state (Hoekema 1994:106).

The verb καταλυθῆ in 2 Corinthians 5:1 therefore forms the “midpoint” of what can be called a “somatic symmetry”, where the regression of the physical body (2 Cor 4:16-17) resulting in death (καταλυθῆ, 2 Cor 5:1a) is exchanged for the progression of the spiritual body after death (v 1b, and the future resurrection in vv 2, 4). It is important to realise that this is aimed at that which the believer can (or will) objectively experience by sight. Currently, the “outward man” is wasting away (2 Cor 4:16). 2 Corinthians 5:1 then tells us

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what will happen immediately after death. When our earthly tent-dwelling is “dissolved” or “destroyed” (aorist tense of καταλυθῆ suggests the moment when death occurs), there immediately is a building from God (Hoekema 1994:106). The phrase οἰκία τοῦ σκήνους καταλυθῆ (v 1a) stands in antithetical parallelism to οἰκοδομην ἐκ θεοῦ. In the case of buildings καταλυθῆ commonly implies destruction (Mt 24:2; Mk 14:58; Lk 21:26), being the opposite of οἰκοδομειν (Gl 2:18). What Paul is saying is that we will enter a glorious heavenly existence, not a temporary one such as our present existence, clothed with a spiritual body which for the moment, will be *under construction*.

2 Corinthians 5:1 therefore describes the objective possession of the spiritual body after death, in contrast to a passage such as 1 Corinthians 15:49 in terms of which the spiritual body can only be subjectively experienced through the eyes of faith. Both passages therefore make perfect sense seen in the broader context of Paul's being-in-Christ mysticism that involves the transformation of the believer. This process of transformation finds its climax when mortality is “swallowed up” by divine life (2 Cor 5:4) through the acquisition of the completed resurrection body (5:1b, 2).

Paul's desire to be “with Christ” was therefore not merely the result of an agnostic theological hope without really knowing what to expect after death, but I argue that it was influenced and given its content by his personal experience of ascension and transformation made possible by being “in Christ” (Segal 1992:302-328). Theological dimensions were now put to their full use that previously were only explicitly applied to the living and which therefore were “dormant” as far as the fate of the dead was concerned: these are namely that the Ages have now become mingled, and through baptism believers already exist in the resurrection mode of existence. For Paul this meant that believers were subject to a process of moral and ontological transformation. As Christ exists as the εἰκὼν (2 Cor 4:4 cf Col 1:15) or μορφῆ (Phlp 2:6) of God, so the body of the believer will be transformed into the body of Christ, the “man from heaven” (1 Cor 15:48-49). Christians will *become as Christ is now*. For Paul the new creation is present either proleptically or at least in an incomplete state. Paul uses transformation terminology both in the indicative and the imperative, or in a conditional clause that has the effect of an imperative (Sanders 1977:468). It is logical to suppose that when Paul, the mystic, developed his necrology, these significant factors played a big part in the process of development.

In other words, the change in Paul's necrological perspective to the effect that the departed would enjoy fellowship with Christ, could be attributed

to the conviction that since believers were subject to the process of Christification and for this reason already shared in Christ's being, it would seem reasonable that in death they will experience fellowship with him. Believers whether alive or dead, proleptically have the same ontological status as their resurrected Lord, but death specifically will mark the entry into the spiritual realm.

Therefore in death, based on Paul's use of οἰκοδομή, it is now explicitly stated that Christians will retain their resurrection status, they will remain to be transformed, but they will objectively experience it (2 Cor 5:7), since the hindrances of the physical body will be removed. Paul's transformation theology, first applied to the living, now became appropriated to life after death, as Paul himself faced the reality of death. The historical situation, that is, Paul's developed personal perspective on death, not only demanded this clarification, but also enabled it. Paul must have thought that there was no reason to suppose that the process of Christification, which begun at conversion and baptism, would end at the moment of death (Harris 1985:100).⁷

Before 2 Corinthians 5:1, Paul explicitly states that Christians are now being transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18 cf 4:16); immediately thereafter he says that those in Christ already are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Similarly, this ontological transformation is described in 2 Corinthians 5:1 (οἰκοδομήν ἐκ θεοῦ), but for the first time in a necrological context. The οἰκοδομή therefore refers to the proleptic spiritual body that will be inherited from earthly life. In an indirect manner Longenecker (1998:194-195) also brings support for our argument as he translates 2 Corinthians 5:1 as "we have [proleptically] a building from God" in application to the necrological state. However Longenecker correctly also maintains that Paul's focus remains constant with regard to the future resurrection of believers at the Parousia (1998:197).

That believers have a spiritual body under construction (whether in life or in death) also makes theological sense, since they are thought to have τὸν ἀρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος, the "down payment" of the Spirit (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5 cf Rm 8:23), and the resurrection body is animated by Spirit. This process of ontological transformation, which will be inherited from earthly life, clearly points to a necrological state and an existence in time.

⁷ We disagree with Harris, however, that the "acceleration" (i.e. the completion) of the transformation process occurs at the moment of death (1985:100, 129). See also Davies (1970:317-318).

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When Paul refers to the possibility of being found “naked” (2 Cor 5:3), he is therefore not expressing a fear of dying, potentially ending up as a disembodied soul. If interpreted in this way, then the nature of Paul's eschatological anthropology is ignored. Christians are already clothed through baptism (the aorist ἐνδύειν⁸ in 2 Corinthians 5:3 indicates it is applicable to this life) and that is why the departed will objectively acquire the οἰκοδομή after death and Christians, both living and deceased, will not be found naked at the Advent of Christ. One should follow the lead from Paul's “first Adam” vs “last Adam”, and “in Adam” vs “in Christ” antithesis. To be “naked”, is to be ἐν Ἀδάμ, that is, not participating in the corporeity of the risen Christ and therefore to stand under condemnation (cf Rm 8:1). To be naked is to be in Adam's fallen ontological (and ethical) state, in the polluted garment of sin and shame. Its application here is primarily anthropological, but the ethical requirements thereto related are also in the background (2 Cor 5:10).

It is for this reason that Paul, when speaking from the perspective of the living (2 Cor 5:2-4), he instructs believers not to “unclothe”, but encourages them to rather be “clothed further” or *in addition* with the spiritual body (ἐπενδύειν – 2 Cor 5:2, 4), because they only have the “down payment” of the Spirit (2 Cor 5:5). By implication, this super-investiture with the spiritual body is also applicable to the departed; those who are explicitly said to have the οἰκοδομή (cf Paul's use of ἐνδύειν in application to both the living and the dead in 1 Cor 15:53 f).

There is also a sobering aspect to Paul's necrology insofar as he states that the departed saints will have to appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), to be made manifest for who, in an ethical sense, they truly are. They will be rewarded for overall conduct in this life, thereby illustrating that they still possess ethical self-responsibility. They are not necessarily perfect though, for like the living, they too have to make it their aim to please the Lord. But the exact nature of *moral* transformation after death – if there is such a transformation – Paul does not inform us about.

5. CONCLUSION

Cullmann insists that the dead still exist in time, and that they are waiting for eschatological consummation at the return of Christ. The New Testament does not support the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul, nor the position that the resurrection of the body occurs at death. In his own words

⁸ Thus going against the preference of the GNT (3rd and 4th editions) and Nestle-Aland (26th ed) that favours the minority reading ἐκδυσάμενοι (“being unclothed”: D* a f(c) Tert Spec).

Cullmann (1951:233) argues that “those who have died in Christ, even as dead, do not yet belong in the future stage of redemptive history, but in the present stage; but they belong in the present stage of *redemptive history*, whose characteristic is the Holy Spirit as ‘earnest’ [2 Cor 1:22; 5:5] and as ‘firstfruits’ [Rm 8:23].”

By reviewing New Testament necrology, with special emphasis on the necrology of Paul, one can conclude that Cullmann’s position, as outlined here above, can generally be maintained with confidence. However, in certain respects one moves beyond Cullmann’s position. I propose that Cullmann’s understanding of “redemptive history” be modified to make allowance for the Ages now being mingled through the Holy Spirit. It should also be mentioned that in Early Judaism, necrology hardly posited the archaic shadowy, lifeless existence Cullmann attributes to it. Neither did Paul believe that man becomes a naked soul in death, without a body (1958:52). It should also be mentioned that in the Pauline context, the dead in Christ were eventually seen as being “with Christ”, which was not the same as being in “Abraham’s bosom” or in “Paradise” – which Cullmann wrongly equates to Paul’s concept of being “with Christ” (1958:51). Cullmann therefore did not recognise the full extent of the profound meaning the Holy Spirit had for Paul, especially with regard to the overlap of the Ages and the Spirit’s transformation of the body, both in life and in death.

Based on my interpretation of Paul’s necrology, it is clear that it was not the product of a pre-conceived systematic theology as such, nor was it speculation in the sense of “what will happen *if*”. It proved to be a response based theological extension as a result of historical developments, similar to how Paul had to respond to and interpret the new and unforeseen post-Messianic situation. It can indeed be said that what was forced upon him, was a “systematic development” of his Resurrection-mysticism already in place. Paul *had* to come to terms with the possibility of his own pre-parousia death, instead of exclusively focussing on the Lord’s return. As a natural development and related to the fact that the resurrection of Jesus had already inaugurated the Age to Come and the resurrection-transformation in general, the reality of Christians dying had to fit within Paul’s broader “being-in-Christ” mysticism.

As a whole, the necrology of Paul is similar to the necrology of Early Judaism and that of the rest of the New Testament, in that death for the righteous is seen as an entry into a state where the blessings of the future age will be proleptically enjoyed. Paul, however, does not inform one about the necrological state of the wicked. But it must be mentioned that Paul’s being-in-Christ mysticism in reality made any contemporary Jewish notions of

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participation in the Age to Come – mostly applicable in a necrological context – obsolete. A (proleptic) participation in the Age to Come, for Paul, was the sole prerogative of those who had τὸν ἄρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος. This was already true in the case of the living, and ultimately even more so in the case of believers who had passed out of this life.

In sum, Paul's necrology has the departed Christian as still forming part of and participating in redemptive history. They still exist in time and form part of the "already – not yet" tension and like the living, they proleptically enjoy the blessings of the Age to Come. In the final scheme, however, their situation is understood as being far better than that of the living. Having inherited their ontological solidarity with Christ, the departed could experience personal and objective fellowship with the Lord in the heavenly realm, but to ward of any misguided enthusiasm, they are told that Christ would also be their Judge. Furthermore, they would also objectively experience their ontological transformation, with a spiritual body being under construction. Moreover, they can look forward to a blessed consummation when finally, they would be revealed with Christ on earth at the parousia (Rm 8:19), and thereafter, experience an eternal God-mysticism with him.

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