

## Disarming Death: Theomachy and Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15

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### *Abstract:*

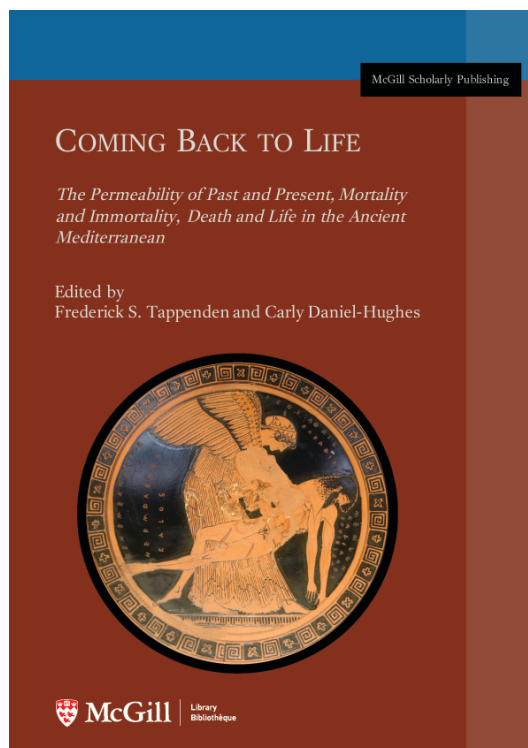
This essay reads Paul's apostrophe to Death in 1 Corinthians 15:54–55 in relation to the wider literary topos of theomachy, or god-fighting. The god-fighter is typically a human or a demigod who, by challenging the gods, threatens to subvert the natural order of the cosmos. A close reading of 1 Corinthians 15 in comparison to other examples of the theomachy topos in Greek, Roman, and Jewish writings shows that Paul presents Christ as a god-fighter throughout this chapter. Paul concludes this presentation with a set of strategically reworked scripture quotations, which he uses to taunt the personified figure of Death for failing to defeat Christ. Far from providing a mere rhetorical flourish, as commentators have suggested, these quotations illustrate the mythological significance of Christ's coming back to life. As a complement to Paul's exegetical and philosophical defense of bodily resurrection, they show that the old gods and *daimones* no longer hold sway over the power of life and death.

### *Bibliography:*

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# Disarming Death: Theomachy and Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Without First Corinthians 15, our understanding of the apostle Paul's views on the prospect of coming back to life would be radically impoverished. Nevertheless, [1 Cor 15:54–57](#) have yielded few riches in the forty or so years since Rodolphe Morissette (1972, 11) observed that they are very little studied. This is surprising because, to use Paul's own metaphor, these verses celebrate nothing less than the crowning gift of God: Christ's victory over Death, "the last enemy" ([1 Cor 15:26](#)):

### [1 Cor 15:54c–57](#)

- 54c Κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος.  
55a ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ νίκος;  
55b ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον;  
56 τὸ δὲ κέντρον τοῦ θανάτου ἢ ἁμαρτία, ἢ δὲ δύναμις τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ νόμος.  
57 τῷ δὲ θεῷ χάρις τῷ διδόντι ἡμῖν τὸ νίκος διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.
- 54c Death has been swallowed up in victory.  
55a Where, Death, is your victory?  
55b Where, Death, is your κέντρον?  
56 The κέντρον of Death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;  
57 but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

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[Verses 54–55](#) have attracted special attention because Paul appears to quote variants of [Isa 25:8](#) and [Hos 13:14](#). The text of this combined quotation matches neither the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text nor the Greek of the Septuagint, although [1 Cor 15:54c](#) may reflect a preexisting translation of [Isa 25:8](#) that conformed more closely to the Hebrew than does the Septuagint (Wilk 2005, 146):

**Isa 25:8 (MT and LXX)**

בלע המות לנצח

He will swallow up death forever

κατέπιεν ὁ θάνατος ἰσχύσας

Death in his strength has devoured

**[1 Cor 15:54c](#)**

Κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος

Death has been swallowed up in victory

In the case of [Hos 13:14](#), the key differences probably reflect Paul's own modifications to the passage (Fee 1987, 804). These modifications include Paul's use of "victory" in [1 Cor 15:55a](#) rather than the Hebrew Bible's "plagues" or the Septuagint's "penalty," and his use of "Death" in [1 Cor 15:55b](#) rather than the Septuagint's "Hades" (Stanley 1992, 212–13):

**Hos 13:14a (MT and LXX)**

איהי דבריך מות

Where are your plagues, Death?

ποῦ ἡ δίχη σου, θάνατε;

Where is your penalty, Death?

**[1 Cor 15:55a](#)**

ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ νίκος;

Where, Death, is your victory?

**Hos 13:14b (MT and LXX)**

איהי קטבך שאול

Where is your destruction, Sheol?

ποῦ τὸ κέντρον σου, ἄδη;

Where is your κέντρον, Hades?

**[1 Cor 15:55b](#)**

ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον;

Where, Death, is your κέντρον?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The appearance of Hades instead of Death in the Byzantine text and a number of manuscripts reflects scribal assimilation of [1 Cor 15:55b](#) to the Septuagint text of [Hos 13:14b](#).

Clearly Paul has sewn together oracles from Isaiah and Hosea and woven them into their new context in the letter by means of *Stichwörter* like “death” and “victory.” The secondary literature is so dominated by questions about his sources, methods, and backgrounds, however, that the interpretation of the quotation in its present form and its present context has received virtually no consideration. In this respect, scholarship has taken one step forward and two steps back from Morissette’s (1972, 162) boldest claim:

[Les versets 50 à 58](#) ne proposent en rien une description de la résurrection ou de la fin des temps; ils s’appliquent au contraire à définir le contenu proprement théologique de l’événement et ils forment le complément naturel, nécessaire même, de l’anthropologie exposée en [xv, 35 à 49](#). De celle-ci en effet, [les versets 50 à 58](#) dégagent la signification théologique ainsi qu’ils expriment la dimension invisible ou cosmique de la résurrection des fidèles.

The present essay picks up where Morissette left off, with a revised version of his claim that [1 Cor 15:50–58](#) defines the invisible or cosmic dimension of the resurrection. I will argue more broadly that this passage defines the *mythological* significance of the resurrection. I use the term “mythology” in a twofold sense. First, it refers to popular representations of gods, *daimones*, heroes, and the regions they inhabit. In this sense, it does not exclude Morissette’s cosmic dimension. Second, it refers to Paul’s strategic use of narrative to underwrite and authorize his beliefs about coming back to life. In this sense, mythology is “ideology in narrative form” (Lincoln 1999, xii). The fact that the particular narrative in question has perforce to do with gods, *daimones*, and heroes has more to do with the distinctive confluence of cultures in which Paul lived than with the putative essence of myth. Following Russell McCutcheon (2000, 200), then, I regard mythology in this second sense as “an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance” and not as a literary genre with a fixed set of formal characteristics.

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This puts me happily at odds with two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, I disagree with Hans Conzelmann's (1975, 273–74; see also Carr 1981, 91) suggestion that Paul *reduces* the mythological element in his presentation by making Death, rather than Satan, the last enemy. On the other hand, I am skeptical of Martinus de Boer's (1988, 121) rejoinder that Paul *enhances* the mythological element by placing Death among the principalities and powers “already known to the Corinthians” ([1 Cor 15:24–27](#)). Paul had no need “to hypostatize death as a quasi-angelic, cosmological power,” nor is this characterization likely to have been “a new idea for the Corinthians” (Boer 1988, 124 and 139). Its foundations had long since been laid by poets, playwrights, artisans, and theologians. This essay asks how their legacies may have helped the Corinthians not just to visualize Christ's victory over Death but also, and especially, to celebrate it.

The complexities of the task can be fruitfully organized around the interpretation of a single word, so I shall begin with a provocation. *Κέντρον* does not mean what we think it means, at least not in the context in which Paul has placed it. This has escaped the notice of commentators for two reasons. First, dedicated scholarship on this passage has focused on everything *but* its context in Paul's letter (Lüdemann 1980; Gillman 1988; Perriman 1989; Stanley 1992, 209–15; Healey 1999; Harrelson 2004; Wilk 2005, 145–47). Second, when careful attention is given to this context, the standard lexica are less helpful than one might hope. Lothar Schmid (1966, 3:667–68) conceded as much in his entry on *κέντρον* for the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

What does Paul mean when he speaks of the *κέντρον θανάτου*? Is he thinking of the goad, so that we have a personification of death with the goad in his hand to rule and torture man? Or is he thinking of the poisonous tip, so that death is a dangerous beast which gives man a mortal prick? Both metaphors may play some part, but it is difficult to carry either of them through with logical consistency.

Schmid duly pressed *both* metaphors into service—the goad *and* the poisonous tip—as if the problem of consistency could be solved simply by positing an excess of meaning (cf. Conzelmann 1975, 292–93). Other commentators wisely shun this hobgoblin only to embrace another, seemingly preferring whatever image finds support in more or less random comparanda. The poison-filled stingers of the scorpions in [Rev 9:10](#) are popular, as are those of the bees in [4 Macc 14:19](#), and the sharp goads of an animal drover in [Acts 26:14](#) (Robertson and Plummer 1911, 378; Conzelmann 1975, 292–93; Fee 1987, 804–05; Boer 1988, 132–38; Thiselton 2000, 1300; Schrage 2001, 380–81; Fitzmyer 2008, 607).

What we need here is neither a foolish consistency nor a foolish inconsistency. Theriomorphic representations of death as a weaponized animal may comprehend the high stakes of the contest, but they are inconsistent with Paul’s personification of death all the same. As defined in a recent volume of essays on the subject: “personification is the *anthropomorphic* representation of any non-human thing” (Stafford and Herrin 2005, xix, my italics). When such representations have a definite theriomorphic quality, this quality is usually conveyed by more than one or two words, as in the depiction of the ravenous Canaanite god, Mot (“Death”), in Ugaritic literature, the Kēr of Greek mythology, “with teeth as cruel as those of a beast and fingernails bent like talons” ([Pausanias, Descr. 5.19.6](#)), and the Latin figure of Pale Death (Mors pallida), with greedy jaws spread wide to swallow the funereal crush of souls crossing the Stygian stream ([Seneca, Herc. fur. 554–559](#); [Oed. 164–169](#)). To imagine the κέντρον as a poisonous stinger in the present case, by comparison, is to place more weight on one word than its context can bear.

Conversely, it is not immediately clear how an anthropomorphic representation of death as a goad-wielding animal drover fits into Paul’s thematization of victory. The familiar saying about kicking against the goad(s) is not a true parallel because it usually refers to the *futility* of a mortal human being resisting the gods or their agents ([Pindar, Pyth. 2.88–96](#); [Aeschylus, Ag. 1617–1624](#); [Euripides, Bacch. 794–795](#); [Acts 26:14](#)). If Paul’s victory taunt celebrates the

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powerful disruption of this hierarchy by Jesus, as arguably it does, then it implicitly casts Jesus in the role of a θεομάχος, or god-fighter. While this line of reasoning has prima facie support both in 1 Cor 15 and in the proverbial usage of κέντρον as a metaphor for oppressive forces in the purview of gods or *daimones*, it also brings a new set of problems in its train.

### II. TRAMPLING DOWN DEATH BY DEATH

The myth of “the battle of the Gods” has an impressive pedigree both in the ancient Near East and in Greco-Roman culture (Litwa 2012, 172–76). Successful *human* god-fighters can be counted on one hand, however, even including ἡμίθεοι or demigods. This distinction between gods battling gods and humans/demigods battling gods is pertinent to our interpretation of 1 Cor 15 for two reasons. First, the point in question concerns Jesus’s ability—as a mortal human being who died and rose from the dead—to rescue other human beings from the power of death. Second, framing the issue in this way narrows our search for parallels. It excludes, for example, the oft-cited but historically distant cycle of stories in which the Canaanite god Mot (“Death”) swallows his fellow god Baal in his massive maw, with “jaws reaching the earth, lips to heaven, and a tongue to the stars” (*UT* 67 II:1–5, trans. Tromp 1969, 104; cf. Hays 2015, 122–24). This myth influences a number of Hebrew Bible texts depicting the underworld and its deities, including Isaiah’s image of Yahweh swallowing up death ([Isa 25:8 MT](#); Gulde 2009; Day 2000, 185–88); but only traces remain in Paul’s quotation of this text in [1 Cor 15:54c](#). Neither Isaiah nor Paul (*pace* Healey 1999, 211) mention the sizeable jaws and voracious appetite of Death, and Paul comments instead on the power of Death’s κέντρον ([1 Cor 15:55b–56](#)). Importantly, for Paul, Jesus has despoiled Death of this power over human beings by becoming human and by defeating Death on his own territory. How he accomplished this Herculean task is the question that Paul must answer in the face of a longstanding Greco-Roman tradition of *failed* theomachies.

Pramit Chaudhuri (2014) has recently surveyed the theomachy topos in Greco-Roman literature from its origins in Greek epic and tragedy through its deployment in Latin literature of the Flavian period. Chaudhuri observes that the success of the god-fighter in the Homeric epics is strictly constrained by the will of the gods and threatens the hero with doom regardless. Athena authorizes Diomedes to strike Aphrodite, for example, but prohibits him from engaging the other deathless gods in battle ([II. 5.129–132](#)). Later, Dione comments disdainfully on his fate: “The son of Tydaeus is a fool and does not know in his mind | that whoever fights the deathless gods (ὁς ἀθανάτοισι μάχεται) is not long for this life” ([II. 5.406–407](#); Chaudhuri 2014, 18–20). The tragedians place θεομάχοι in even more dire circumstances. Isolated and lacking divine sponsors, “the tragic *theomachoi* act on their own initiative and ‘fight,’ alone and in vain, against their divine opponents” (Mikalson 1991, 176). Finally, in Roman culture the perdurance of this hierarchy is tested, but not broken, by the scientific theomachy of Epicurus in Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, by the political theomachies of Julius Caesar and others in Lucan’s *Bellum civile*, and by the imperial cult with its prospect of divinization. These developments contribute to “tenser and grander” theomachies in Roman writings than in their Greek antecedents, yet the ultimate concession of the god-fighter to his fate retains its place in the topos (Chaudhuri 2014, 29).

This is especially true of Seneca’s Hercules, whose stunning defeat of Dis (Hades) prompts Juno to worry about the security of the gods’ supernal abode:

It is heaven we must fear for, lest he seize the highest kingdoms, / who conquered the lowest; he will snatch his father’s sceptre. . . . / He is seeking a path to the gods. ([Herc. fur. 64–65, 74](#); trans. Chaudhuri 2014, 124)

In order to block this path, Juno devises a plan to turn Hercules’s ambitions against him by unleashing a coterie of psychological terrors: Crime (*scelus*), Impiety (*impietas*), Error (*error*), and especially Frenzy (*furor*) ([Herc. fur. 96–99](#)). Indeed, Seneca boldly



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highlights the connection between theomachy and madness by placing the hero's terraforming climb to heaven within the context of a hallucination:

I shall carry rocks and forests / and seize ridges full of Centaurs  
in my right hand. / Now with twin mountains I will drive a  
path to the gods; / let Chiron see his Pelion under Ossa, / and,  
placed third, Olympus will reach heaven / or be hurled there.  
([Herc. fur. 968–973](#); trans. Chaudhuri 2014, 139–40)

When Hercules finally takes his place among the gods in the imagination of Greeks and Romans alike, he does so not by storming the gates of heaven but by immolation and apotheosis (see Litwa 2014, 158–63 for a synoptic account of Heracles's death and deification). Thereafter, coming back to life as he formerly was is not an option, even for the one individual to have defeated the god of the underworld in single combat.

This is not to say that Greeks and Romans denied the possibility of coming back to life tout court. On the contrary, Heracles, Theseus, and Orpheus are prime examples of heroes who faced death by travelling to the underworld and returning from it (although Heracles has to rescue Theseus in some versions of the myth; Bauckham 1992, 150; Graf and Brändle 2006). These heroes do not physically die and return to life in the course of their travels, but even belief in resurrection of this sort was not entirely beyond the pale. The Thessalian hero Protesilaos experienced two such resurrections, according to Philostratus (*Her.* 2.9–11 [= §§662–663 in older editions]; Maclean and Aitken 2001, liii–liv), and Asclepius reportedly performed multiple resurrections (Edelstein and Edelstein 1945, 1:66–86). The issue is not *whether* resurrection was conceivable (*pace* Wright 2003, 60), but *how* it was conceivable, under what conditions it might occur, and what manner of postmortem existence it entailed.

If the Corinthians misunderstood Paul's view of resurrection to involve the resuscitation of a corpse to the same kind of bodily life it had previously experienced (Litwa 2014, 150; Martin 1995, 108),

then it is a small wonder that only some of them were denying the resurrection of the dead ([1 Cor 15:12](#)). That Paul thought it necessary to address this contingent directly only underscores the question of precedents for his audacious declaration of victory over death. On the one hand, Paul's Jesus resembles a Homeric hero fighting under the aegis of a divine sponsor. After reigning "until he has put every enemy under his feet," this Jesus will hand over his kingdom to the one God and Father who "put all things in subjection under his feet" ([1 Cor 15:25](#), [27](#)). On the other hand, Paul's recombinant interpretation of passages from [Ps 8:6](#) (= [8:7 LXX](#)) and [110:1](#) resonates powerfully with Epicurus's superstition-shattering ascent to the outer reaches of heaven in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, as described by Chaudhuri (2014, 58–59):

Epicurus moves from looking up at *religio* in the sky (*tollere . . . oculos*, [Lucret. 1.66–67](#)) to standing above his enemy: *religio pedibus subiecta uicissim / obteritur* [*nos exaequat victoria caelo*] ("superstition was in turn cast underfoot and trampled [and victory exalts us to heaven]" [Lucret. 1.78–79](#)). Lucretius employs strikingly violent and martial language to describe Epicurus' success: *obsistere*, "to make a stand," [1.67](#); *effringere*, "to break open," [1.70](#); *uictor*, "victor," [1.75](#). This victory, however, consists in a mastery of scientific fact.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's answer to the question, "with what kind of bodies will they come?" ([1 Cor 15:35](#)) is of more than passing interest here. More a Stoic (or a Platonist) than an Epicurean, Paul nevertheless bases his distinction between the earthly *σῶμα ψυχικόν* and the heavenly *σῶμα πνευματικόν* on observation and hypothesis. He observes that different kinds of bodies are differently composed, and then he hypothesizes that psychic bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies at the resurrection ([1 Cor 15:39–44](#)). The goal of this strategy

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<sup>2</sup> The bracketed text and translation includes Lucretius's reference to human beings sharing in the reward of Epicurus's victory. This parallels the sharing of Jesus's followers in the reward for his victory over death ([1 Cor 15:55–56](#)).

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is to counter the Corinthians' skeptical *denial* of bodily resurrection with a distinctive *theory* of bodily resurrection. Vigdis Songe-Møller (2009, 114) argues that Paul formulates this theory with traditional Greek mythology in view:

The Greeks were familiar with the conception that eternal existence includes bodily existence. Or perhaps rather: that there are bodies which live forever and which are not a part of nature's cycle of birth, growth, decay and death, namely the bodies belonging to gods and to very special humans.

Others have detected philosophical influences in Paul's astral and pneumatic language (Litwa 2012, 129–51; Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 27–38; Martin 1995, 117–29). The specific nature of his theory is less important for our purposes, however, than the fact that he frames this theory in precisely the same way that Lucretius frames Epicurus's triumph over *religio*; that is, within the mythological context of a violent ascent to heaven in which a precipitously rising hero victoriously tramples the traditional gods and *daimones* underfoot.

These considerations help us to pinpoint 1 Cor 15 within the broader topos of theomachy and its evolution in the early principate. What unites Lucretius and Paul is their shared desire to undermine the culturally postulated gods of the day whilst elevating their respective heroes above the fray. Presenting these heroes as god-fighters is an ideal way to achieve this goal because it simultaneously entertains and provokes:

Theomachy provides a congenial, effective, and, above all, sublime idiom with which to shock and inspire the audience, bringing before their eyes an ostentatiously philosophical vision of the world, and in the process turning an epic topos into a moment of extraordinary intellectual power (Chaudhuri 2014, 63).

Even the collapse into madness of Seneca's Hercules prompts reflection on alternative paths to deification, whether political, as in

the imperial cult, or philosophical, through the cultivation of wisdom (Chaudhuri 2014, 150–56). In 1 Corinthians, by comparison, Paul introduces the folly of the cross as a pretext to extol the wisdom and power of God in Christ to rescue human beings even from the grave ([1 Cor 1:17](#)).

Comparison of Heracles and Jesus is not new (Malherbe 1988, 574–75; Aune 1990; Hershbell 2004, 172–73), but it is apropos in this context, not least because the mutual threat they pose to the traditional pantheon catalyzes theological reflection. Within the wider context of ancient Greek culture, such reflection should take into account both the nature of heroes and of hero worship, commonly known as “hero cult.” Gregory Nagy (2006, §69) defines the heroes of epic poetry as “mortals of the remote past, male or female, who are endowed with superhuman powers because they are descended from the immortal gods themselves.” This definition ought to apply equally as well to Jesus as it does to Heracles, both of whom were believed to descend from a god and a mortal woman ([Homer, \*Il.\* 14.323–324](#); [Gal 4:4](#)). Nevertheless, the suggestion that Paul represents Jesus as a demigod requires certain qualifications. Nagy (2006, §70) goes on to observe that “the literal meaning of the word *hēmītheos* as ‘half-god’ does not imply an exact half-and-half distribution of immortals and mortals in a hero’s genealogy.” It implies, rather, the balancing of mortality and immortality in the hero’s self. The difficulty of this balancing act derives from the innate limitations that mortality imposes on the hero’s otherwise limitless potential. Theomachy highlights this difficulty by displaying the shocking spectacle of a hero striving violently—and failing—to transcend these limitations. This antagonism which the hero displays toward a god or goddess in myth is often reversed in cult, where the immortalized hero receives worship together with this same god or goddess (Nagy 2006, §105). Heracles becomes reconciled with Hera through his death. Achilles becomes reconciled with Apollo through the death of Patroklos as a ritual substitute (Nagy 2006, §§108–09). No such reversal occurs in the case of Jesus, however, because he displays no such antagonism toward God.

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What differentiates Jesus from Heracles and other such heroes is his acquiescence to the condition of mortality—the human condition—with all its limitations. Unlike Heracles madly storming the gates of heaven or Achilles rushing in “like a god” (δαίμονι ἴσος) to slay Hector against Apollo’s will ([Homer, \*Il.\* 20.447](#); Chaudhuri 2014, 26), Jesus refuses to regard “equality with God (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ) as something that can be seized by force (ἀρπαγμόν)”; instead, he voluntarily submits himself to a humiliating death on a Roman cross ([Phil 2:6–8](#)). This absence of hubris in Jesus not only helps us to understand why Paul suggests that Jesus succeeded where others failed, it also encourages reflection on an alternative path to deification—the way of humility.

In addition to the fact that Jesus’s defeat of death takes on truly heroic proportions in Paul’s hands, several features of 1 Cor 15 stand out for their connections to the mythology of Heracles, especially as this mythology is presented in Euripides’s *Alcestis*. Given the popularity of this tragedy well into the Roman period ([Juvenal, \*Sat.\* 6.652–654](#); [Lucian, \*Salt.\* 51–52](#); [P.Oxy 4546](#), with Marshall 2004 and Slater 2013, 69–70), it is likely that at least some of the Corinthians will have noticed a few of these connections. Whether Paul himself anticipated this result is difficult to determine in the absence of more definitive evidence for his acquaintance with the tragedy. What can be argued with greater certainty is that his theology and exegesis show affinities with the hellenized Jewish tradition represented, *inter alia*, by the Wisdom of Solomon. This text overlaps with the *Alcestis* in its iconography of death, and so it may have served as a cross-cultural bridge linking Paul to his earliest readers.

### III. WRESTLING WITH DEATH

The *Alcestis* opens with Apollo explaining how he tricked the Fates into granting a reprieve to the king of Pherae, Admetus, on the condition that someone else willingly die in his place. The only person to volunteer is Admetus’s wife, Alcestis, who awaits her impending death. Death himself appears on the scene as the black-robed lord of the dead who wields a sacred sword (ξίφος; ἔγχος ἱερός)

and drinks the blood of sacrifices at tombs ([Alc. 74–75](#); [845](#)). When he arrives to abduct Alcestis, she perceives him as a dark-browed, “winged Hades” (πτερωτός Ἅιδας, [Alc. 262](#)). Upon hearing of her abduction, Heracles descends to the underworld in order to rescue her from the clutches of Death and return her to Admetus to live out her natural life. For this reason, her story has long been cited as a Greek antecedent to the Christian doctrine of resurrection. My claim is different; namely, that her story offers insight into the ideological grounds on which a doctrine like bodily resurrection could be defended, even though her return to natural life does not constitute a direct antecedent to this doctrine. Mythology, in this sense, truly is ideology in narrative form. The following four features of 1 Cor 15 have parallels in the *Alcestis*.

First, Paul personifies Death as “the last enemy” (ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς, [1 Cor 15:26](#)). Biblical inspiration for this epithet could derive from any number of psalms (Tromp 1969, 114–19), but the most relevant text is [Ps 8:6](#) (= [8:7 LXX](#)), which concerns the trampling underfoot of “every enemy” (πάντας τοὺς ἐχθρούς, [1 Cor 15:25](#)). A statement by Philo of Alexandria suggests a related context but lacks a fully realized personification of death: “incorruption is akin to eternity, but death is hateful to it” (συγγενὲς μὲν αἰδιότητος ἀφθαρσία, ἐχθρὸν δὲ θάνατος, [Abr. 55–56](#)). In the earliest use of the epithet in the Greek tradition, by comparison, Hesiod personifies the twin sons of Nyx as “fearsome gods” (δεινοὶ θεοί). One of these gods, Hypnos, is “gentle to human beings,” while the other, Death, is “inimical even to the deathless gods” (ἐχθρὸς δὲ καὶ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν, [Hesiod, Theog. 758–765](#)). Euripides echoes Hesiod in the *Alcestis*, where Apollo describes the ways of Death as “inimical to mortals and detestable to gods” (ἐχθρούς γε θνητοῖς καὶ θεοῖς στυγουμενούς, [Alc. 62](#)). Here, as in 1 Cor 15, death is personified as an adversary even to deathless gods. Heracles later fulfills Apollo’s prediction that someone would rescue Alcestis from Death by force ([Alc. 64–71](#), [843–857](#)). Upon his return from the underworld, he likens his success to victory in athletic contests (ἀγῶνα), slyly presenting Alcestis to her grieving husband as though she were a trophy (νικητήρια) from a boxing match or a

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wrestling match ([Alc. 1025–1033](#)). This dissimulation builds dramatic tension before the joyful moment of recognition whilst calling to mind Heracles’s legendary reputation as a god-fighter. Euripides attenuates the hero’s equally legendary impiety by giving him an altruistic motive, a detestable opponent, and Apollo’s tacit approval.

Second, the adversarial relationship between God and Death in 1 Cor 15 echoes the tense exchange between Apollo and Death in the opening scene of the *Alcestis*. Like Heracles, Paul’s Jesus is divinely favoured to defeat Death and to share with others the prize for his victory: namely, coming back to life. That Euripides and Paul differ widely in their understanding of the nature and scope of this prize is both self-evident and irrelevant to the larger set of relationships in view. These relationships show how Paul could justify and even celebrate what could otherwise be considered an act of impiety on the part of Jesus. As Diana Burton (2005, 52) observes: “it is precisely when death personified acts as his own agent that the normal order of things appears to be overturned. He is, paradoxically, an unsuccessful personification, who does not effectively embody the concept that is his *raison d’être*.”

Third, Paul introduces his taunting apostrophe to Death with sartorial imagery: “When what is perishable dons imperishability and what is mortal dons immortality, then the saying that is written will come to pass” ([1 Cor 15:53–54](#)). This imagery can be compared to the concept of the heavenly garment found elsewhere in early Jewish texts ([Apoc. Ab. 13](#); [Odes Sol. 15.8](#); [Mart. Ascen. Isa. 4.17](#); [1 En. 62.15–16](#); [2 En. 22.8–10](#)). What these texts lack, however, is an overt connection between the garment topos and the topos of theomachy. [1 Cor 15:53–57](#) is distinctive in this respect, but not sui generis. Greco-Roman writers and artists often depict Heracles cloaked in the hide of the Nemean lion, an invulnerable garment which he is said to have used as armor ([Hesiod, Theog. 327ff.](#); [Pindar, Isthm. 6.46ff.](#); [Euripides, Herc. fur. 359–363](#); [Theocritus, Id. 25.132ff.](#); [Diodorus of Sicily, 4.11.3](#); [Seneca, Herc. fur. 83ff.](#)). A tradition that this lion is the offspring of the moon points to its

heavenly origin.<sup>3</sup> Although Euripides does not mention the lion's skin in the *Alcestis*, it may have been part of Heracles's costume in productions of the tragedy (Luschnig and Roisman 2003, 64). As a common feature of his iconography, regardless, it serves as a reminder both of his god-like power and of his near oneness with the beast (Papadopoulou 2005, 48). This duality is a trait that Heracles shares with Jesus, whose imperishable and immortal garment likewise covers his mortal body and protects him from the deadly κέντρον of Death.

Lastly, Paul substitutes Death for Hades in his quotation of [Hos 13:14](#). C. K. Barrett (1968, 383) suggested that Paul drops the Septuagint's reference to Hades because the name evokes a pagan god, but this is equally true of Death in the tradition under consideration. The substitution is better explained as a means of integrating [Isa 25:8](#) and [Hos 13:14](#) into their shared context in the letter. If so, Paul then treats Hades and Death as rhetorical synonyms (Thiselton 2000, 1300). This treatment is consonant with the parallelism of [Hos 13:14](#), but it is only truly *paralleled* in the *Alcestis*, where Euripides borrows from the iconography of Death as a winged *daimon* but blurs the distinction between the winged Death and the usually wingless Hades ([Alc. 262](#)).<sup>4</sup> To quote Burton (2005, 51) once more: "Alcestis' death here is not a precursor to her descent to Hades, but identical with it." This is so because, for all intents and purposes, Death *is* Hades.

#### IV. TAKING THE STING OUT OF DEATH

Death has a similar agency and a similar iconography in the Wisdom of Solomon. In its sapiential rewriting of the Exodus story, Wisdom of Solomon reorganizes disparate stories from the canonical

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<sup>3</sup> Aelian ([Nat. an. 12.7.49–53](#)) cites Epimenides as the source of this tradition, but it also appears contemporaneously with Paul's letters in Seneca ([Herc. fur. 83ff.](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *EG* 89.4 (= [IG II<sup>2</sup> 8494.7](#), = *SEG* 37.167), cited by Burton (2005, 52). Hades wraps dark wings around the deceased in this grave epigram for Nikias of Eretria (ca. 300 BCE).



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scriptures into a series of seven diptychs designed to contrast God's judgment of the Egyptians with God's mercy toward the Israelites (Wis 10:5–19:22; Linebaugh 2013, 69–78). The sixth diptych is especially relevant to 1 Cor 15 both for its overlapping deployment of the theomachy topos and the garment topos, and for its personification of death (Wis 18:5–25). This diptych contrasts the plague that strikes down Egypt's firstborn children with the death of 14,700 Israelites following the Korahite revolt (Exod 12:1–32; Num 16:41–50 [= 17:6–15 MT and older editions of the LXX]).

The first half of the diptych ascribes the horrific death of Egypt's firstborn to the omnipotent logos of God, a relentless warrior who wields the command of God as a sharp sword, walks on earth whilst touching heaven, and fills all things with death (ὁ παντοδύναμός σου λόγος . . . ἀπότομος πολεμιστής . . . ξίφος ὄξυ τὴν ἀνυπόκριτον ἐπιταγὴν σου φέρων καὶ στάς ἐπλήρωσεν τὰ πάντα θανάτου καὶ οὐρανοῦ μὲν ἤπτετο, βεβήκει δ' ἐπὶ γῆς, Wis 18:15–16). By design, this elaborate description associates the divine logos with the destroyer of Exod 12:23 (τὸν ὀλεθρεύοντα) and the destroying angel of 1 Chr 21:15–16 (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῷ ἐξολεθερεύοντι). The second half of the diptych introduces the disastrous aftermath of the Korahite revolt as a “test of death” (πεῖρα θανάτου, Wis 18:20). In isolation, the genitive use of θάνατος in this phrase leaves open the question of whether the emphasis is on the lethal nature of the test (objective genitive) or whether a personified Death is in view as the agent who carries out the test (subjective genitive). What follows, however, depicts an unmistakably theomachic confrontation in the wilderness.

Wisdom of Solomon refers to the antagonist in this confrontation with various names that recall the same sword-wielding angel of death responsible for the tenth plague, including the punisher (ὁ κολάζων, Wis 18:22) and the destroyer (ὁ ὀλεθρεύων, Wis 18:25). The human opponent of this destroying angel is described as a blameless man who champions the Israelites by “bringing the weapon of his own liturgies” (προεμάχησεν τὸ τῆς ἰδίας λειτουργίας ὄπλον . . . κομίσας, Wis 18:21). This priest defeats the wrath (ἐνίκησεν δὲ τὸν κόλον) and subjugates the punisher (τὸν

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κολάζοντα ὑπέταξεν)—not by bodily strength or by force of arms but by the *logos* (ἀλλὰ λόγῳ, [Wis 18:22](#)). Not only does the *logos* seem to be on his side, therefore, he also suffers no physical harm because his priestly vestments protect him:

For on his full-length robe the whole cosmos was depicted and the glories of the fathers were engraved on the four rows of stones, and your majesty was represented on the diadem on his head. From these the Destroyer (ὁ ὀλεθρεύων) withdrew; these he feared . . . . ([Wis 18:24–25](#) NETS, slightly modified)

This shockingly militarized account of intercessory combat strongly favours the subjective genitive reading of the phrase “test of death” (πειρα θανάτου, [Wis 18:20](#)). On this reading, Wisdom of Solomon personifies death in the angelomorphic guise of the destroyer and reassigns to it the task of testing the Israelites that is otherwise ascribed to the Lord God in [Deut 8:14–16](#). In a clever reversal of the canonical text, the Lord now *defends* the Israelites through the richly adorned liturgical panoply of the blameless high priest. This transposition has the double advantage of attenuating what could be understood as divine capriciousness whilst recalling Wisdom of Solomon’s earlier warning that it is the impious who by their actions summon death:

Do not zealously seek death by the error of your life or bring on destruction (ὄλεθρον) by the works of your hands. For God did not create death, nor does he delight in the destruction (ἀπωλεία) of the living. For he created all things that they might exist, and the lifegiving forces of the cosmos are healing. There is no destructive poison (φάρμακον ὀλέθρου) in them, nor is the kingdom of Hades on earth. For righteousness is immortal. But the impious summoned him [i.e., Death], and considering him a friend they wasted away; they made a covenant with him because they are fit to belong to his party. ([Wis 1:12–16](#))

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The phrase “destructive poison” likely alludes to the “biting snake and scorpion” which [Deut 8:15](#) mentions, along with “thirst,” as means of testing the Israelites in the wilderness. Twin warnings also frame this passage in Deuteronomy: “take heed for yourself, lest you forget the Lord your God,” and, “remember the Lord your God” ([Deut 8:11; 18](#)). This is significant because Wisdom of Solomon later retells the episode of the serpent invasion from [Num 21:5–9](#) in light of these admonishments:

Not even the fangs of venomous serpents conquered your children, for your mercy defended them and healed them. They were stricken (ἐνεκεντριζόντο) as a reminder (υπόμνησιν) of your oracles, and were quickly delivered, lest they fall into a deep forgetfulness (εἰς βαθεῖαν ἐμπεσόντες λήθην) and become distracted from your benefactions. For neither plant nor poultice healed them, but your logos, Lord (ἀλλὰ ὁ σός, κύριε, λόγος), the healer of all. ([Wis 16:10–11](#))

Ignoring the canonical claim that “many children of Israel died” ([Num 21:6](#)), Wisdom of Solomon eclipses the punitive character of the serpent invasion by transforming it instead into a mnemonic event. The snakebites figuratively ‘goad’ the Israelites into remembering the Lord but fail to kill them because the logos intervenes through a “symbol of salvation” (σύμβολον . . . σωτηρίας); namely, the brazen serpent affixed to what the canonical account calls an ensign (σημεῖον, [Num 21:9](#)). Wisdom of Solomon insists, however, that it is not this symbol that heals the Israelites but the Lord himself ([Wis 16:6–7](#)).

In retelling these episodes, Wisdom of Solomon deftly exploits a peculiar feature of the Exodus story: “Exodus’s subtle differentiation of the agency of ‘the destroyer’ and the person of the Lord” (Linebaugh 2013, 75, referring to [Exod 12:23](#)). This differentiation allows Wisdom of Solomon to identify the logos of God with the destroyer on missions involving judgment of the Egyptians but also to position the logos *against* the destroyer on missions involving the preservation of the Israelites in the wilderness. Just as the high priest’s vestments visibly depict the cosmos-spanning righteousness

of the logos, therefore, so too does the brazen serpent represent the visible dimension of a cosmic and invisible battle.

Not coincidentally, this same combination of themes reappears in 1 Corinthians with similar distinctive language and in reference to the same events:

Let us not test Christ (μηδὲ ἐκπειράζωμεν τὸν Χριστόν) as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents (ὑπὸ τῶν ὄφεων ἀπόλλυντο). Do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer (ἀπόλωντο ὑπὸ τοῦ ὀλοθρευτοῦ). These things happened to them to serve as an example (τυπικῶς), and they were written down to admonish us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ([1 Cor 10:9–10](#))

The figure of the destroyer appears both in Wisdom of Solomon and in 1 Corinthians, but not in Deuteronomy. This makes Wisdom of Solomon the most likely source of Paul's usage. The theory that Paul understands *Christ* as the destroyer, however, is quite mistaken. Although Paul mentions Christ and the destroyer in virtually the same breath, this does not mean that the two are one and the same in his mind. Advocates of this theory must ignore or attenuate the explicitly typological character and eschatological orientation of his exegesis in order to extract an alleged angelomorphic Christology from this passage (Gieschen 1998, 325–29).<sup>5</sup> Paul explicitly states, for example, that the rock which followed the Israelites in the wilderness was Christ (ἡ πέτρα δὲ ἦν ὁ Χριστός, [1 Cor 10:4](#)). It would be absurd to suggest on the basis of this remark that Paul views Christ as a preexistent *petramorph*, but not that Paul views the rock as a visible manifestation of the invisible power of the logos to nourish, to heal, and to defend the Israelites. This interpretation accords better both with Wisdom of Solomon's theology of mercy and with Paul's manner of exegesis. Paul's innovations flow mainly from his perspective at what he perceives to be the ends of the ages and from his theology of the cross.

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<sup>5</sup> Gieschen's theory has recently been popularized by Bart Ehrman (2014, 252).

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First, Paul twice states that Israel's travails in the wilderness have a protreptic character; they are "for us," where "us" now includes both himself and the Corinthians to whom he writes: "These things happened as examples *for us*" (τύποι ἡμῶν) and "to admonish *us*" (πρὸς νουθεσίαν ἡμῶν, [1 Cor 10:6, 11](#)). Paul concedes that some of the Israelites were destroyed, but he frames their loss as an object lesson for those in Christ who would live at the ends of the ages. Elsewhere he expresses his conviction that "all Israel will be saved" (πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται, [Rom 11:26](#)). Although the meaning of this remark is contested (e.g., Scott 2001), Paul may believe that even those Israelites who fell in the wilderness will ultimately be restored to life and counted among the blessed.

Second, Paul suggests that the logos who nourished, healed, and defended Israel in the wilderness is the logos of the cross:

For the *logos* of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed (ἀπολλυμένοις), but for those of us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . for Jews ask for signs (σημεῖα) and Greeks seek wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jew and Greek, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ([1 Cor 1:18, 22-24](#))

Here, too, Paul's language echoes Wisdom of Solomon's distinctive praise for the powerful protection of the logos from the venomous bite of the invading serpents and the indiscriminate carnage of the destroyer. In this context, Paul's allegation that Jews ask for signs alludes to Wisdom of Solomon's claim that it is not the symbol of the serpent that heals the Israelites but the power behind the symbol—the logos of God. Because Paul believes that this same logos has been crucified in the last days, the cross punctuates his understanding of the wilderness tradition.

In fact, the only reading of 1 Cor 10 that is consistent both with Wisdom of Solomon's theology of mercy and with Paul's theology of the cross is one in which Christ is present with the Israelites *as the*

*logos of the cross.* As John M. G. Barclay argues in dialogue with David Horrell (2002, 167 n. 18): “the Christ event *gives* meaning to the temporal narrative in which Paul places it, as much, or more, than it gains meaning from it.” From this perspective, it is the crucified Christ who waters the Israelites through the aquiferous rock; it is the crucified Christ who heals the Israelites through the sign of the brazen serpent; it is the crucified Christ whom the impious test by summoning Death himself in the guise of the destroying angel; and it is the crucified Christ who defends the remnant through the intercessory combat of the blameless high priest with his cosmic vestments and the weapon of his liturgies. This weapon, in turn, can be nothing other than the cross.

Together with Paul’s deployment of the theomachy topos, these connections to Wisdom of Solomon and parallels to the *Alcestis* furnish the broader context for Paul’s quotation from Hosea in [1 Cor 15:55](#). Indeed, [Hos 13:14](#) is itself open to interpretation as a theomachy (Healey 1999, 209; Tromp 1969, 107). This is especially clear in the Septuagint, where the first bicolon ([13:14a](#)) of the verse appears as a divine promise and not as a pair of rhetorical questions: “I shall rescue the children of Ephraim from the hand of Hades and redeem them from Death.” The rendering of the Hebrew כּוּס as κέντρον in the next bicolon ([13:14b](#)) reveals the logic behind this interpretation: “Where is your penalty, Death? Where is your κέντρον, Hades?” Although כּוּס is traditionally translated as “sting” in this context, Judith Blair’s (2009) recent survey of its usage here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible shows that there is no one-word equivalent in English. Blair (2009, 192) concludes, rather, that “the contexts suggest some kind of destructive force that comes from Yahweh as punishment.” Much the same can be said of κέντρον. Although it is often translated as “goad,” its proverbial use as a metaphor for the oppressive powers of gods or *daimones* makes it a near-perfect rendering of כּוּס, where it designates the power over the dead that Yahweh will ultimately strip from Hades. The translator’s interpretation of this bicolon as a taunting apostrophe to Death and Hades further amplifies the overall theomachic character

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of the passage.<sup>6</sup>

Paul continues this trend toward amplification by focalizing the topos around the victory of Christ and developing it further in the direction of a human-divine theomachy. He accomplishes this task in two ways. Explicitly, he thematizes humanity in scriptural terms by contrasting “the first human” (ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος)—Adam—to “the second human” (ὁ δεύτερος ἄνθρωπος)—Christ ([1 Cor 15:47](#)). Implicitly, he associates Christ with the blameless high priest of Wisdom of Solomon or with Heracles. While it is more likely that he is directly influenced by the priestly figure, I would argue that we need not choose between these traditions because the humanity of the god-fighter is equally important to both. This emphasis is both a critical component of Paul’s rhetorical strategy and, in Chaudhuri’s (2014, 5) analysis, a key feature of the topos: “the theomach speaks the language of humanity and is thus capable both of offering a richer context for his radical aspirations and of inviting the audience to adopt an alternative view on the theological status quo.” The radical view that Paul invites the Corinthians to adopt is one in which “all things are possible” ([1 Cor 10:23](#))—even bodily resurrection—because the old gods and *daimones* no longer hold sway over human life and death.

### V. DISARMING DEATH

Given the evidence that both Paul and the Septuagint translator of Hosea exploit the theomachy topos, and that Paul, for his part, echoes Wisdom of Solomon’s cosmos-spanning battle in the wilderness and the *descensus ad inferna* of Heracles, the intersection of these stories is a logical place to look for a solution to the problem of inconsistency in the interpretation of κέντρον. This presses us to go beyond a strictly philological approach to consider how the iconographies generated by these stories inflect Paul’s usage. The question at this point is not whether Paul uses κέντρον in its proverbial sense (he does), but how he and the Corinthians are likely

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<sup>6</sup> Compare this emphasis to the nine different ways of interpreting the Hebrew text presented by Ehud Ben Zvi (2005, 274–75).



to have imagined this implement in the broader context of Christ's intercessory combat with Death.

The first point to note is that both Euripides and Wisdom of Solomon depict Death as a sword-wielding adversary of humanity. This is true of Wisdom of Solomon despite the fact that it is initially the omnipotent warrior-logos of God who seems to wield the sword. As I have argued above, Wisdom of Solomon's identification of the divine logos with the destroying angel occurs only in the context of God's judgment on the Egyptians through the final plague. When the destroyer targets Israel the logos appears on the side of the blameless high priest, who by standing between the remnant of Israel and the destroying angel meets with the deadly rapier-thrust that otherwise would have felled the remnant. This thrust ultimately fails to defeat him because he is clothed with righteousness—and "righteousness is immortal" ([Wis 1:15](#); cf. [1 Cor 15:53–54](#)). "These things happened as examples for us," Paul insists in [1 Cor 10:6](#), so that "we" who live in the last days may know the true meaning of the cross and act accordingly.

What Wisdom of Solomon poetically calls the sword of God's commandment is, for Paul, the cross ([Wis 18:15](#)). This is the implement that Death wields against Christ, just as Hades himself wields his staff against Heracles according to a scholion on Pindar's ninth Olympian ([9.35](#)):

[Hades] uses the staff as though it were a kind of weapon (*ὄπλῳ*), not one enabled by any bodily strength, as a trident or a sword or a spear, but he exploits the capacity of the soul to be enthralled and weakened; indeed, it is said that he leads souls down with it. Against Heracles, however, Hades was able to accomplish nothing by the work of this staff because its power was blunted by Zeus. (*Schol. in Pind. Ol. 9.50a*)

Although this scholion does not refer to Hades's staff as a *κέντρον*, it does show that this staff could be imagined as a kind of weapon with oppressive, *κέντρον*-like power. The same can be said of the respective swords wielded by Death in the *Alcestis* and by the



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Destroyer in Wisdom of Solomon. The form of the implement varies from staff to sword, but its function remains the same in each case: it symbolizes the power to send humans into the depths of the earth and there to hold them in thrall. This, too, is the power of the cross—the κέντρον of Death—and yet, for Paul, the resurrection of Christ shows that Death has been despoiled of this power.

Paul's representation of the cross as a weapon and the resurrection as a precipitous climb from the deepest recesses of the earth to the outer reaches of heaven are more obvious to the eyes of his early interpreters than to our own eyes. Among the greatest such interpreters is the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, whose comments on a variant text of [1 Cor 15:55](#) provide a fitting conclusion:

The very things by which the Devil was victorious, by these things the Christ overcame him, and having despoiled him of his own weapons (ὄπλα), with these he prevailed against him. . . . The contest (ἄγων) was the Lord's, and the crown is ours. Since the victory is also ours, therefore, let us all raise the victory chant today, just as soldiers do: "Where, Death, is your victory? Where, Hades, is your κέντρον?" The cross has accomplished these things for us! The cross is the trophy of victory over demons! The cross is the dagger against sin (ἡ κατὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας μάχαιρα)! The cross is the sword with which Christ pierced the serpent (τὸ ξίφος, ᾧ τὸν ὄφιν ἐκέντησεν ὁ Χριστός)! (*Coemet.* [[PG 49.396](#)])

However unsettling this image of a warrior-Christ wielding the cross as a blade may be in comparison to warmly-lit and softly-focused portraits of a gentle and loving Jesus, it is worth asking whether this warrior-Christ is not what Jesus himself had in mind when he warned his followers that he came not to cast peace but a dagger (οὐκ ἦλθον βαλεῖν εἰρήνην ἀλλὰ μάχαιραν, [Matt 10:34](#); cf. [Matt 11:12](#)). Ironically, modern efforts to demythologize the Gospels leave him with nothing but flesh-and-blood opponents, and those who would follow him with few options but to take up arms against their own all-too-human oppressors. A revolutionary Jesus of this sort cannot

inspire love even for one's own family, much less for one's enemies ([Matt 5:44](#); [10:35–38](#)).<sup>7</sup>

What the mythology of the cross shows us, in contrast, is a revolutionary Jesus of the sort who gives up his own life in order to turn enemies into friends, and friends into sisters and brothers ([Rom 5:10](#)). Without this mythology, it is difficult to sublimate real persecution and sometimes horrific violence into the message of hope that beats at the very heart of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Without this mythology, the walls that divide us will continue to stand firm. Without this mythology, the gospel of peace can too easily yield to the fog of war. Paradoxically, then, the shocking language of theomachy and violence with which Paul celebrates Christ's defeat of Death invites those who would take up the cross and follow him to cultivate both strength and humility in the face of adversity, and fearlessly to love even their enemies, knowing that the last enemy has already suffered a crushing defeat.

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<sup>7</sup> For the most recent effort to revive the hypothesis that Jesus sought to provoke a revolution against the Roman occupiers of Judea and their clients, see Dale B. Martin (2014), along with the response by Gerald F. Downing (2015). Downing concedes that Matt 10:34 offers "marginal support for Martin" (327), but even marginal support requires a crassly literal interpretation of the *μάχαιρα* in question.

<sup>8</sup> The reverse is also true; namely, that in some circumstances this mythology can and does encourage a false perception of persecution fuelled by a binary view of the world. See esp. Candida Moss (2013, 199): "The problem is what happens when this vision of the world is translated into settings in which Christians are not the underdogs. In situations where Christians have the military, political, and financial power to take steps against their 'demonically inspired' enemies, this worldview can legitimize all kinds of violence." The solution, in my view, is not to abandon the mythology but to underscore the solidarity of *all* human beings in the face of death that it entails.

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