

## GOD OF THE DEAD AND THE LIVING: UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 14:9 IN TERMS OF ITS INTERTEXTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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### Abstract

*In this article, Paul's reference to Christ being the Lord of both the dead and the living in Romans 14:9 is interpreted in terms of a well-established tradition in the early church that Christ descended into the realm of the dead to proclaim his victory and judgement over evil as well as to announce and accomplish the salvation of historical Israel. This tradition can be related to various NT texts, especially Jesus' reference to God being the God not of the dead but the living (Mt 22:23-33; Mk 12:18-27; Lk 20:27-50), the notion that God (1 Pt 4:3-6) or Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead (Ac 10:42; 2 Tm 4:1), texts alluding to the underworld (Lk 16:19-31) or Jesus' descent to the realm of the dead (Rm 10:7; 1 Pt 3:18-20:4:6; Eph 4:9), texts that point to the patriarchs being alive (Heb 11:13-16) as well as texts that point to the resurrection of OT saints (Jn 5:25-29; Mt 27:51-53). The interpretative tradition of Christ's descent to the underworld and his salvation of historical Israel is also clearly identified in the writings of the early church. These intertextual relationships that Romans 14:9 shares with many other texts in the early church paint the broader picture of an early Christian tradition about Christ's reign over the dead against which this text is to be interpreted, which in turn has profound implications for the significance of Christ's death and resurrection in Paul's theology.*

**Keywords:** Christology; Descent; Salvation; Realm of the dead; Hades; Sheol; Resurrection, Church fathers

### Introduction

In Romans 14, Paul reprimands the Roman congregation, urging them not to judge one another or become a stumbling block for their brothers and sisters who have a different conviction about consuming certain foods and observing certain days. Most scholars agree that the abstinence from certain foods concerns Judaeian dietary laws and that the observance of certain days involves Judaeian feasts and Sabbaths (e.g., Cranfield 1979:694-697; Dunn 1988:799-802; Moo 2018:847; Schreiner 2018:686). Although the Roman congregation was predominantly gentile, there are enough indications that there were Judaeian believers present in the congregation (e.g., Moo 2018:11) who probably retained much of their Judaeian identity with respect to their observation of food laws and Sabbaths. Paul does not want the congregants to judge one another on the basis of different convictions on these matters.

The main concern of this article is the way in which Paul motivates the Roman congregation's refraining from judging one another (Rm 14:7-12). He argues in Romans

14:6 that the one who is observing a certain day, the one who is eating (certain foods) and the one who is abstaining (from certain foods) both do so “for the Lord” or “in honour of the Lord” (κυρίῳ [X3]), giving thanks to God. In verse 7, Paul motivates this attitude by pointing out that believers do not live to themselves or die to themselves. According to verse 8, believers live to the Lord and die “for the Lord” (κυρίῳ [X2]). Whether believers live or die, they are “the Lord’s” (κυρίου ἐσμέν). Then in verse 9, Paul motivates further: “For to this Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἔζησεν, ἵνα καὶ νεκρῶν καὶ ζώντων κυριεύσῃ). In verse 11, Paul also quotes Isaiah 45:23, according to which God proclaims that every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess to God. In Philippians 2:10-11, Paul applies the same notions from Isaiah 45:23 to Jesus’ lordship. In Romans 14:9, Paul makes clear that Christ’s lordship involves his reign over both the dead and the living and that his lordship stems from his death and resurrection.

The specific questions around Romans 14:9 that this article intends to answer are the following: (1) How does Paul’s reference to Christ’s lordship over the dead (and the living) relate to similar ideas in other texts in the NT and other early texts? (2) How does Paul’s conception of Christ’s lordship over the dead relate to the rest of Paul’s gospel as put forth in the Letter to the Romans? (3) What does Christ’s lordship over the dead as put forth in Romans 14:9 entail? These questions will be dealt with in this order and discussed with respect to the methodological presupposition that the meaning behind texts is influenced by interpretative traditions that lie behind these texts (cf. Robbins 1996:52-53).

### **Christ’s lordship over the dead in the NT and the early church**

In this section, notions that relate to the notion that Christ is the Lord of the dead and the living will be probed in the New Testament as well as writings of the early church. Links to ideas from the OT will also be discussed here. The idea is to paint a picture of prevalent ideas or conceptions of Christ’s reign over the dead at the time.

### ***God as God not of the dead but of the living according to the Synoptic Gospels***

The account of the Sadducees confronting Jesus about the resurrection occurs in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27 and Luke 20:27-50. According to all three accounts, after Jesus said that people will not be given in marriage but be like angels in heaven, he refers to Exodus 3:6, according to which God declares to Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus then declares that “he [God] is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (οὐκ ἔστιν θεὸς νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων, Mk 12:27; cf. Mt 22:32; Lk 20:38).<sup>1</sup> In Luke 20:38, the words “for all live to him” (πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν) are added. At first glance, it seems that this saying in the Synoptic Gospels stands in contrast with Romans 14:9 in that it does not portray God as the God of the dead. But on closer inspection, the saying in the Synoptic Gospels works in the same direction as that of Romans 14:9, albeit from a different angle. Most commentators understand Jesus’ saying here as implying that God has an eternal

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<sup>1</sup> The wording is virtually the same in Mt 22:32 and Lk 20:38. Some manuscripts (K Γ Θ 0102 f<sup>13</sup> 565. 579. 700. 892. 1241. 1424 38 sy<sup>h</sup>) add ὁ before θεός in Mt 22:32. In Lk 20:38, the sentence starts with θεός and δέ is added.

covenant with the patriarchs (e.g., Carson 2010:754; Edwards 2015:581; France 2007:840; Luz 2005:72; Schnabel 2017:299; Stein 2008:555; Turner 2005:285) and that they are considered to be alive, even though they have already died (e.g., Carroll 2012:407; Green 1997:722; Hagner 1995:642; Keener 1999:785; Luz 2005:72; Osborne 2010:818; Schnabel 2017:299; Stein 2008:555; Witherington 2006b:416). Many commentators see here an allusion to 4 Maccabees 7:19, which refers to “our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob” that “do not die to God, but live to God” (e.g., Evans 2012:384; Keener 1999:785; Nolland 1993:967; Osborne 2010:818; Turner 2005:285). Hagner (1995:642) argues that the patriarchs are “by implication alive after their death . . . whether in Sheol . . . or otherwise”. Nolland (1993:967) adds that “we should probably go further and find here the view that God has taken the righteous dead [alive] to his own realm, where they await their resurrection future (cf. Wis 3:7-8), and perhaps conversely has deposited the unrighteous dead in Sheol in anticipatory suffering, awaiting the day of their final judgment”. It is thus not clear from Jesus’ saying exactly where the patriarchs are or what their state of being is, but in the context of Jesus’ discussion with the Sadducees about the resurrection, it seems that they are already viewed in resurrection terms even though they have physically died, which constitutes continuity between God’s people of the present and those who died in the past. Another instance of continuity between Christ’s earthly ministry and the patriarchs that could be mentioned here is his transfiguration on the mountain, in which he made contact with Moses and Elijah (Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; Lk 9:28-36).

### ***Jesus as judge of the living and the dead according to Acts 10:42 and 2 Timothy 4:1***

Another notion that occurs a few times in the NT (Ac 10:42; 2 Tm 4:1; 1 Pt 4:5-6; cf. also Mt 25:31-46; Jn 5:22-29; Rm 14:10; Rv 20:11-15) and is also found with the church fathers (Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 2.1; *Barnabas* 7.2; 2 *Clement* 1.1) is the notion that God or Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead (cf. also Dn 7:13-14), which can be considered as a stereotypical (Achtmeier & Epp 1996:286) or stock (Elliott 2000:730) expression. Acts 10:34-43 contains Peter’s speech about the good news that has come. In his speech, Peter indicates that the word of the good news of peace was sent “to the sons of Israel” (τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραήλ) through Jesus Christ who “is the Lord of all” (ἐστὶν πάντων κύριος, v. 36). At this point, it is noteworthy that in the post-exilic period, the term Ἰσραήλ was mainly used to denote historical Israel as God’s people and not so much his people living in the present (e.g., Elliott 2007; Gutbrod 1965; Tomson 1986),<sup>2</sup> although in this instance the reference in verse 36 to “the sons of Israel” certainly involves the descendants of historical Israel to whom the gospel was preached. According to verse 42, Jesus commanded the disciples to preach “to the people” (τῷ λαῷ) and testify that Jesus himself is appointed by God to be “judge of the living and the dead” (κριτὴς ζώντων καὶ νεκρῶν), which is presented as a direct result of his resurrection (vv. 40-41). Jesus’ lordship over both the living and the dead (v. 42) can in this context be understood as being universal (e.g., Keener 2013:1807; Pervo 2009:281) but specifically

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<sup>2</sup> This tendency is especially identified with Philo and Josephus’ *Antiquities*.

as pertaining to both God's people who died in the past (Israel) and those living in the present (Christ-believers).<sup>3</sup>

According to 2 Timothy 4:1, the addressees are reprimanded to preach the word in God's presence on the basis of Christ Jesus, "who is about to judge the living and the dead" (τοῦ μέλλοντος κρίνειν ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς), which is also related to his "appearing" (ἐπιφάνεια) and his "kingdom" (βασιλεία). The setting for Christ's judgement is thus eschatological (Johnson 2001:427; Witherington 2006a:364), but Christ's reign is pictured as being effective in both the present and the future (Yarbrough 2018:435). Witherington (2006a:364) argues that the notion of Christ being the judge of the living and the dead might be drawing on "a catechetical phrase" that would later be reflected in the church fathers (see above; cf. Köstenberger 2006:390; Mounce 2000:572). Seeberg (1903:96-97) specifically linked this notion with words used at baptism.

### ***God as judge of the living and the dead to whom the gospel was preached according to 1 Peter 4:3-6***

Another reference to God being the judge of the living and the dead is found in 1 Peter 4:3-6, but here the context is more specific. According to this text, the gentiles are set up for judgement because of their living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness and other immoral behaviour (v. 3). They need to give account "to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (τῷ ἐτοιμῶς ἔχοντι κρίναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς, v. 5). Verse 6 is connected to verse 5 and provides further motivation for God's judgement in a rather interesting way: "for this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but might live as/according to God in spirit" (εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη, ἵνα κριθῶσιν μὲν κατὰ ἀνθρώπους σαρκὶ ζῶσιν δὲ κατὰ θεὸν πνεύματι). The sense seems to be that although these people, to whom the gospel was preached, are to be judged in the same way as other living people, they will live like God (cf. NRSV; GNB). The question is, however, as follows: who are the "dead" to whom the gospel was preached? Many interpreters see the "dead" as Christians who were alive at the time of preaching but have since died (e.g., Osborne 2011:234; Jobes 2005:270; Schreiner 2003:208; Watson 2012:99). Yet this explanation is arguably not the most natural explanation and seems to avoid the theological implications of the possibility that the gospel was preached to people in the realm of the dead (cf. Horrell 2003:89), restricting the "dead" to just a certain group without specific exegetical indicators (Vinson 2010:198).

There are a notable number of interpreters who argue that the preaching was actually done in the realm of the dead, coinciding with Christ's death (Beare 1970:182; Best 1971:155; Cranfield 1950:90-91; Davids 1990:154; Feldmeier 2008:203-205, 216; Green 2007:122; Goppelt 1978:249; Horrell 2003; Reicke 1946:204; Scharlemann 1989; Schweizer 1952:152; Vinson 2010:201). According to Feldmeier (2008:2016), the abrupt mention of the preaching of the gospel to the dead in this passage is explained in the most unforced manner if 4:6 is linked to 3:18-20, which reports of Christ who was

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<sup>3</sup> Although Peter's reference to τῷ λαῷ probably refers to Israel (see e.g., 2:47; 3:12, 23), his reference to "everyone who believes" in the next verse (v. 43) secures the universal scope of Jesus' lordship (cf. Keener 2013:1807-1808).

put to death “in the flesh” (σαρκί) and made alive “in the spirit” (πνεύματι, v.18) in which he went to make a proclamation to the “spirits in prison” (ἐν φυλακῇ, v. 19) because they formerly did not obey when God’s patience waited in Noah’s days (v. 20). The idea that “prison” refers to the realm of the dead or the underworld (Sheol) is a well-known idea found in the OT (Pss 88:5-13; 107:10; 142:8; Job 3:18; 12:14; Lm 3:6-8; Zch 9:11; see Du Toit 2021:351-352). The contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” in 3:18 and the reference to men in the “flesh” in 4:6 also supports this connection (Feldmeier 2008:16; cf. also Davids 1990:153; Hillyer 1992:122; Perkins 1995:68).

However, the question remains: who exactly were the dead to whom the gospel was preached? Goppelt (1978:275-278) is probably right that all the dead, believing and unbelieving, heard the gospel (cf. Bigg 1901:171). This does not necessarily mean, however, that unbelievers received a second chance for salvation or even that the dead were given an opportunity to respond (Davids 1990:154; Horrell 2003:79). It rather points to the proclamation of the gospel to all who died before the Christ event. In such a scenario, Christ would also appear to the faithful people of the OT (Vinson 2010:197-201; Horrell 2003:83), which is an ancient interpretation that was held by Ignatius (*To the Magnesians* 8.1-9.3), Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 4.22), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 6.6), Tertullian (*The soul* 55), Augustine (*Letter to Evodius* 164), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (second edition) and Calvin (n.d.:77-78). According to Tertullian (*The soul* 55:2), Christ was in the heart of the earth for three days, during which he made the patriarchs and the prophets who awaited the resurrection partakers of himself. Christ preached to them not to convert them but to proclaim to them his successful gospel mission. Other references to the idea that Christ preached to those in the realm of the dead, albeit not specifically connecting it to 1 Peter 4:6, include the *Odes of Solomon* 17.10-12; 42:11-17 and *The Gospel of Peter* 38-42.<sup>4</sup>

While Michaels (1988:237) opts for the interpretation that the “dead” in 1 Peter 4:6 points to Christians who heard the gospel in their lifetime, he draws attention to the fact that “Christians” according to 1 Peter do not belong to any period in history. They rather belong to both the past and the present. Since in the letter, righteous Israel is used as prototype and illustration for Christians’ experience in Asia Minor, the faithful of the OT are regarded as “Christians” before the coming of Christ. Michaels thus understands the “dead” to include believers of the OT. In a similar way, in respect of 1 Peter 4:6, Johnson (1960:51) argues for Christ’s “comprehensive work”, “saving all who respond to the proclaimed word”, which includes “those who died under the old covenant” (cf. also Vogels 1976:88-141). Boer (1979:7) who comments on the same text, argues that the redemptive work of Christ “has a retroactive as well as a present and prospective effect” in which the “ancestors are not beyond the reach of Christ’s saving power”. For Boer (1979), the “saints of the Old Testament are *saved by the same Christ as the saints of the New*” (emphasis added).

### ***The underworld according to Ephesians 4:9 and Luke 16:19-31***

A text that is often associated with 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:3-6 in the early church is Ephesians 4:8-10, in which there is a reference to Jesus having “descended into the lower

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. also *The shepherd of Hermas*, *Similide* 9.16.5-7 in which the apostles and teachers, when they died, are considered to have preached to others in the realm of the dead.

parts of the earth” (κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη]<sup>5</sup> τῆς γῆς, v.9), which is presented as the inverse of Jesus having ascended to give gifts to people (Eph 4:8, alluding to Ps 68:19, MT; 67:19, LXX). Both Jesus’ ascent and descent are considered “to fill all things” (ἵνα πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα, v.10). Most interpreters now see the reference to the “lower parts of the earth” as pointing to Jesus’ grave and thus his death (e.g., Barth 1974:432-434; Baugh 2016:328; Bruce 1990b:343-345; Hoehner 2002:533-536), but it seems a little odd that the text would refer merely to Jesus’ death in this way. Bales (2010) points out that the idea that Christ descended into Hades in the realm of the dead was a well-known and widespread idea in NT times, the time of the church fathers, and the postapostolic and medieval times.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the fact that ancient cosmologies (e.g., Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Ugaritic) believed in an underworld, there are several texts in the OT that allude to this idea (e.g., 2 Sam 22:16; Job 7:9a-10c; 9:6; 10:20b-22; 14:10-12; 17:13; 18:18; 38:17; Pss 18:15; 88:7, 11-13; 115:17; Pr 2:18-19; Is 14:15; 24:18; 38:10-11, 18; 44:23; Mi 6:2; see also Jdt 16:15; Sir 10:16; 14:16). Bales (2010) especially points to the correspondence between the wording of Ephesians 4:9 and texts such as Psalm 62:10 (εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὰ κατώτατα τῆς γῆς), 138:15 (ἐν τοῖς κατωτάτοις τῆς γῆς) and Isaiah 14:15 (εἰς τὰ θεμέλια τῆς γῆς; cf. also the Prayer of Manasseh 13) in the LXX, arguing that Ephesians 4:9 alludes to a well-known tradition that between his death and resurrection, Christ made a descent to the underworld. Other contemporary interpreters that support this view include Odeberg (1934:17-19), Bratcher and Nida (1982:99-100), Dunn (1980:186-187), Kreitzer (1998:381-393), Bales (2010) and Arnold (2010:252-254), among others (see Bales 2010:84-85).<sup>7</sup> While some in this category of interpreters see Jesus’ descent as conquering hostile forces (e.g., Arnold 2010:254; Selwyn 1947:200), others see it as proclaiming to OT saints their salvation (e.g., Jerome, *Commentary on Ephesians*; Irenaeus, *Against heresies* 4.22.1; Tertullian, *The soul* 55.2). Both these notions are possible.

Luke 16:16-31 contains the unique account of Jesus’ parable of the unnamed rich man and the poor man named Lazarus. In this parable, both end up in Hades, in the underworld. Being in the furnace, the rich man saw Lazarus far off beyond a great chasm at Abraham’s side and cried out to Abraham to have mercy on him, but Abraham replied that everyone had received their reward on the basis of what they had done without the possibility of crossing the chasm. It is notable that the theme of God’s judgement is present here, which complements the idea that God is the judge of the dead and the living (see above). While most commentators insist that this parable cannot be taken as a literal description of heaven and hell (see Bock 1996:1362-1364, 1369), Witherington

<sup>5</sup> This reading is included in brackets in the UBS5/NA28 text, supported by the Alexandrian and Byzantine textual families (ⲛ A B C D<sup>2</sup> I K L P Ψ 33. 81. 104. 365. 630. 1175. 1241<sup>s</sup>. 1505. 1739. 1881. 2464 Ⲙ f vg) but missing from Ⲙ<sup>46</sup> and other Western texts (D<sup>\*</sup> F G it; Ir<sup>lat</sup> Cl<sup>exThd</sup> Ambst).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 9.3; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 1.2; Irenaeus, *Against heresies* 4.27.2; 5.31.1; 5.33.1; Tertullian *The soul* 55.2. Church fathers that specifically cite Ephesians 4:9 or allude to it in support of this view include the following: Irenaeus, *Against heresies* 4.22.1; Tertullian, *The soul* 55.2; Ambrosiaster, *Ephesians* 4; John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam ad Ephesios* 11 and Jerome, *Commentariorum in Epistulam ad Ephesios libri III* 2.4. Later interpreters that held this view include the following: Theodoret, *Ephesians* 4; Oecumenius, *Ephesians* 6; Theophylact, *Commentary on Ephesians* 4; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (see Bales 2010:84).

<sup>7</sup> Another view is that Christ’s descent refers to his coming to the church at Pentecost (e.g., Harris 1996; Lincoln 1990; Thielman 2010).

(2018:452) argues that seeing this parable as metaphoric deprives it of its punch, for as it stands, it fits the eschatological descriptions of its day (cf. Edwards 2015:467, 469; see e.g. Is 66:24; Sir 21:9; 4 Macc 13:15; 4 Ezra 7:31-44, 80-87, 93; 8:59; 2 Baruch 51:5-6; 1 Enoch 10:13; 18:11-12; 22; 63:10; *Ascension of Moses* 10:10). At least, the parable does seem to support the idea that people who die enter the realm of the dead in which the patriarchs are alive.

### ***The patriarchs that now desire a better land according to Hebrews 11:13-16***

Within the writer's discourse on faith and the examples of faith from the OT that he provides, Hebrews 11:13-16 states that "all of these" (πάντες), referring to the patriarchs in general (Allen 2010), did not receive the promises, especially the promised land, but greeted them from afar while acknowledging that they were strangers and exiles on earth (v. 13). According to verse 14, those saying such things make clear that "they seek a homeland" (πατρίδα ἐπιζητοῦσιν). In verse 15, the writer argues that if they had been thinking of the land from which they came out, they would have had an opportunity to return. But then verse 16 states that "now they desire a better [land], that is a heavenly [one]" (νῦν δὲ κρείττονος ὀρέγονται, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐπουρανίου). It is striking that the patriarchs' seeking for a homeland and their desiring of a better, heavenly one is presented in the present tense (ἐπιζητοῦσιν, v. 14; ὀρέγονται, v. 16) as if the patriarchs are alive. This theme is again taken up in 12:22-24 and 13:14. In 12:22-24, the readers are informed that they have come to "Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Σιών ὄρει καὶ πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος, Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἐπουρανίῳ) and to "God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (κριτῆ θεῷ πάντων καὶ πνεύμασιν δικαίων τετελειωμένων). In 13:14, the author states that "we" have no lasting city, but that "we" are looking forward to the city that is to come. The new heavenly land or city is therefore clearly eschatological. France (2006:224) argues that the patriarchs have become for the author models of the Christian pilgrim whose home is not this earth. Bruce (1990a:301) pointedly states that "[w]ords could hardly make it clearer that the patriarchs and the other men and women of God who lived before Christ have a share in the same inheritance of glory as is promised to believers in Christ of New Testament times". By using the present tense (11:14, 16) in reference to the patriarchs, the writer of Hebrews seems to place the patriarchs and Christ-believers on the same page with respect to time (cf. Lenski 1966:399-400) and their inheritance. The writer arguably considers the patriarchs alive and in some way identifies them with Christ-believers here and now.

### ***Dead saints that are raised at Jesus' crucifixion according to John 5:25-29 and Matthew 27:51-53***

According to John 5:25-29, Jesus said that "the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὅτε οἱ νεκροὶ ἀκούσουσιν τῆς φωνῆς τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀκούσαντες ζήσουσιν, v. 25). Verse 26 conveys the idea that Jesus was granted to have life in himself just like the Father, and according to verse 27, authority was given to the Son "to execute judgement" (κρίσιν ποιεῖν), a theme that is again displaying an interrelationship with the idea that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead (see above). Then, according to verses 28-29, Jesus said that "the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear

his voice and will come out, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgement” (ἔρχεται ὥρα ἐν ἧ πάντες οἱ ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις ἀκούσουσιν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐκπορεύονται οἱ τὰ ἀγαθὰ ποιήσαντες εἰς ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς, οἱ δὲ τὰ φαῦλα πράξαντες εἰς ἀνάστασιν κρίσεως). Most interpreters see this passage as pointing to an eschatological event (e.g., Keener 2003:653; Klink 2016:288-290; Michaels 2010:322-323; cf. Ezk 37; Dn 12:2). Yet Borchert (1996:240) argues that “the focus of 5:25 is definitely on the Johannine hour, which is primarily directed to Jesus’ hour of glorification (cf. John 17:1)”. This realised aspect of Jesus’ prophecy can especially be derived from the *vōn* in v. 25. Similarly, Beasley-Murray (1999:88) holds that the eschatological future “has come into the present . . . through the lifting up of the Christ” (cf. Carson 1991:256; Haenchen 1984:253). There is thus a connection between the present and the future (Ridderbos 1997:201). But in what way could this resurrection event also be present in Jesus’ time?

Matthew 27:51-53 might throw light on the subject. This text reports of tombs that were opened at Jesus’ crucifixion and many “bodies of saints who had fallen asleep” (σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἀγίων) that were raised coming out of their tombs and appearing to many in the city. Interpreters generally draw connections with Ezekiel 37:12, which speaks of God opening graves and bringing people up from the graves and Daniel 12:2 that speaks of many sleeping in the dust of the earth that would awake (e.g., Evans 2012:466; France 2007:1082; Mitch & Sri 2011:362; Nolland 2005:1214; Osborne 2010:1045-1046). It is noteworthy that interpreters like Albright and Mann (1974:351), Horrell (2003:88) and France (2007:1083) link this passage to Jesus’ prophecy in John 5:25-29 (see above) specifically. Some interpreters see this passage as symbolic (e.g., Albright & Mann 1974:352; Hagner 1995:851; Nolland 2005:1081). Many commentators, however, see this passage as inauthentic. The arguments advanced in this view are normally the general absence of references to this passage in early church fathers and its chronological awkwardness, seemingly implying that saints were raised before Jesus was raised (e.g., Davies & Allison 1997:634; Evans 2012:466-467). Yet the text specifically states that the saints came out of the tomb after the resurrection (μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν, Mt 27:53). Wenham (1981), followed by Carson (2010:941) and Osborne (2010:1046), argues that on the basis of the punctuation, a period of time must be presupposed between verse 52a and verses 52b-53, meaning that the earthquake and the opening of tombs would happen at the crucifixion whereas the raising and appearing of the saints coincided with Jesus’ resurrection. Mitch and Sri (2011:361) argue that this is not the kind of story that would have been invented since there is no first century evidence that OT prophecies were expected to be fulfilled in this manner. Others that see this account as authentic include scholars such as Carson (2010), Talbert (2010), Osborne (2010), Mitch and Sri (2011).

Yet if the account in Matthew 27:51-53 is authentic, the question remains: who were the saints that were raised? No details as to the persons resurrected or the nature of the resurrection are supplied. The question is, what happened to them after they appeared to people? Did they die again? Did they remain on earth? Nolland (2005:1217) probably has the most satisfactory explanation that after their resurrection they were taken up into heaven like Enoch and Elijah. Many interpreters hold that this resurrection could not include all the saints of the OT, probably because it would have been unrealistic that all would have appeared to people in the city. A reasonable deduction is therefore that the



people that appeared in the city are all heroes and martyrs from Israel's history (e.g., Carson 2010:942; Osborne 2010:1045; cf. Nolland 2005:1215). Other interpreters such as Luz (2005:567), Witherington (2006b:522), France (2007:1081), Mitch and Sri (2011:361) insist that since the saints are not specified, those resurrected are the righteous or faithful saints of the OT in general. If this is the case, it could be that Matthew has the resurrection of all the OT saints in mind but only reports of those appearing in Jerusalem. But Nolland (2005:1214) is probably correct that Matthew "is concerned here with proleptic manifestations of eschatological realities, not with the full substance of those realities". In other words, it might be that a few of the OT saints were raised as a sign that all will be raised as a result of Jesus' resurrection. With respect to the event's significance, it can be understood as an eschatological event that inaugurates the new age of salvation (Carson 2010:943; Osborne 2010:1045; Turner 2008:670), or in Talbert's (2010:307) words, "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of the general resurrection" (cf. Nolland 2005:1216). Bruner (2004:975) makes the interesting remark that "Jesus' death is as effective BC as it was AD; Jesus' death is as retroactive into the past as it is proactive into the future", being cosmic in respect of time and space. Understood in this way, the event of Matthew 27:51-53 can be interpreted as displaying the cosmic significance of Jesus' death and resurrection in which the gospel events also have a retrojective effect on all the OT saints (although only a few might have appeared in the city), establishing continuity between the OT and the NT people of God.

### ***Dead saints that will be raised at Jesus' second coming according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17***

According to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, Paul states that on the basis of Jesus' resurrection, he will bring with him those who have died. He argues that those who are alive at Jesus' second coming will not precede those who already died, for Jesus will descend from heaven and "the dead in Christ will rise first" (οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον, v. 16). Those who are alive at the time will then be caught up in the clouds together with the resurrected dead. Most commentators see "the dead in Christ" as deceased Christians, as Paul is specifically comforting grieving Christians in the letter (e.g., Shogren 2012:182; Wanamaker 1990:170-171; Weima 2014:380, 390-391). While this is certainly the case, it does not necessarily preclude the notion that Paul would have envisioned Christ also resurrecting the faithful OT people of God. In fact, Holmes (1998:151) draws attention to the fact that Paul in verse 17 uses the word ἀπάντησις ("meet"), which is the same word the LXX uses for God's meetings with Abraham (Gn 14:17), David (2 Sam 19:16) and the Israelites (Ex 19:17). According to Gaventa (1998:65), the descent of the trumpet (v. 16) recalls Daniel 7:13 (see also Num 10:7; Is 26:19; 27:13; Ezk 37; Dn 12:2). It could also be noted that in verses 13, 14 and 15, those that are "asleep" are not specified. While Paul is thus focusing on Christians who died in 1 Thessalonians, it does not preclude the idea that OT saints will also be resurrected at Christ's second coming.

### ***The idea of historical Israel's salvation in other texts***

Apart from references in the church fathers to God being the judge of both the living and the dead, and the idea that Christ would have appeared or preached to OT saints in the realm of the dead (see above), there are other references among the church fathers that

fall in the same category. The most notable is probably the so-called “Jeremiah logion”, which is referenced with small variations six times by Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.20.4; 4.22.1; 4.33.1; 4.33.12; 5.31.1; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 78) and once by Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 72). According to this saying, which Justin insists has been removed from the book of Jeremiah, the Lord has remembered his dead people Israel who lay in the graves, descending to them to preach to them salvation. In at least four of these references, this saying is referred to in the context of Jesus’ descent to Hades specifically (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 72; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.22.1; 5.31.1; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 78). It is noteworthy that in the Jeremiah logion, Christ’s preaching to the dead and their salvation are specifically associated with the salvation of historical Israel.

As indicated by Du Toit (2007:9-13), other, mostly later texts that refer to Christ’s descend to the underworld include the following: In *The Testament of Benjamin* 9.5, there is a reference to the Messiah that will ascend from Hades and pass from earth to heaven. According to *The Ascension of Isaiah* 9.16-17 (first century CE), the Messiah, who has plundered the angel of death, ascends on the third day and many righteous ascend with him. In 10.8-14, the following occurs: “Go forth and descend through all the heavens; and after that thou shalt descend to the firmament and the terrestrial world, even as far as to the angel in Sheol; nevertheless to Hael thou shalt not go. And thou shalt become like unto the likeness of all who are in the five heavens, and to the form of the angels of the firmament, and also of the angels who are in Sheol... Afterwards from the realms of death thou shalt ascend to Thy place, and thou shalt not be transformed in each heaven”. Further, there is a reference in *Epistle to the Apostles* 26-17 (second century CE) according to which Christ spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the fathers and the prophets, and proclaimed in Hell the rest in heaven to which they have come. Lastly, the following reference occurs in the *Sibylline Oracles* 8.310-312: “He shall go into Hades to proclaim hope to all saints, the end of the ages and eternal day; and He will fulfil the law of death by sleeping for three days”. These references confirm that the idea that the Messiah would descend to the underworld was an established tradition in the early church.

To summarise, a tradition of understanding can be identified in the early church in which the patriarchs and OT saints are seen as alive although being in “prison” (the realm of the dead), awaiting final resurrection. In continuation with such a view, God or Jesus is seen as ultimately judging both those in the realm of the dead and those in the realm of the living, thus demonstrating his lordship. In Christian texts, the judgement of Christ in his death involves proclaiming the good news of salvation to OT saints.

### **Indicators in the Letter to the Romans that might relate to Christ’s lordship over the dead**

At this point, if Romans 14:9 relates to the above-mentioned interpretative tradition(s), one could ask if there are traces in the letter to the Romans itself that Paul held such ideas. That is arguably the case. In Romans 10, which is in the centre of Paul’s discourse on Israel (Rm 9-11), he contrasts righteousness based on the Mosaic law with righteousness based on faith (vv. 5-6). When discussing righteousness based on faith, Paul alludes to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 but interprets it in light of the gospel (see Moo 2018:669-673). Probably more accurately, Paul refers to the same principles as put forth

in Deuteronomy 30:12-14 but applies it in a different situation. In Deuteronomy 30:12, the commandment of the law is portrayed as not being in heaven that one should say: “Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it for us so that we may hear it and do it?” In verse 13, it is said that the commandment is neither beyond the sea that one should say: “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and bring it for us so that we may hear it and do it?” Then, in verse 14, the word (of the commandment) is presented as being near to the people, in their mouth and heart for them to observe.

Yet Paul in Romans 10:6-8 seems to use the Deuteronomy text as a frame but fills it with different content. He argues that *righteousness based on faith* (not the commandments of the law) “says: Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’, that is to bring Christ down, or, ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’, that is to bring Christ up from the dead” (λέγει· μὴ εἴπῃς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου· τίς ἀναβήσεται εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; τοῦτ’ ἔστιν Χριστὸν καταγαγεῖν· ἢ· τίς καταβήσεται εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον; τοῦτ’ ἔστιν Χριστὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναγαγεῖν, vv. 6b-7). In verse 8, Paul alludes to Deuteronomy 30:14: “the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart”, but then adds: “that is, the word of faith that we proclaim” (τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὸ ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως ὃ κηρύσσομεν). As is seen here, Paul does not refer to the sea as in the Deuteronomy text but to the ἄβυσσος (“abyss”, cf. Ps 106:26, LXX), which is used in parallel with the underworld in which the dead abide. The ἄβυσσος can therefore be understood as a functional equivalent of Hades (Bales 2010:88) or the realm of the dead (Fitzmyer 1993:590; Murray 1965:54; Porter 2015:197; Schreiner 2018:545). It is interesting, however, that the sea and the abyss were interchangeable concepts in the OT. In fact, in some Aramaic paraphrases of Deuteronomy 30:13, language referring to the abyss is used (Moo 2018:673-674). A notable number of commentators understand Paul’s reference to the abyss as a reference to Jesus’ descent into Hades (e.g., Dunn 1988:606; Käsemann 1980:288; Sanday & Headlam 1907:288; Waetjen 2011:253). The sense would be that Christ can neither be brought down from heaven, where he is now, nor can he be brought back to earth from the realm of the dead, for he is no longer there and he no longer needs to return to the earth (Käsemann 1980:288). The reason why Paul casts his allusion to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in terms of faith is probably that he envisions the Christ event as completing and fulfilling the era under the Mosaic law (see esp. Rm 10:4). In other words, Christ accomplishes what the law was set out to accomplish but could not bring into effect, that is, the ability to do God’s will and be put right with God (cf. Rm 8:1-4).

Moving on to Romans 11:26, I have argued elsewhere (Du Toit 2019:295-305) that the salvation of Israel according to this text can be understood as pertaining to historical Israel, in accordance with how the term “Israel” was understood in the time of the second temple (see above). I argued that the future tense σωθήσεται can be understood as a logical future after οὕτως (“in this manner”), followed by καθὼς γέγραπται (“as is written”), similar to the way in which the future tense is used logically in Romans 5:19. In other words, the future does not necessarily point to the actual future, although a future aspect of salvation is not ruled out. The main point I argued for is that the salvation of historical Israel can be understood as being connected to the Christ event. In other words, the prophetic words quoted mainly from Isaiah 27:6-13 in Romans 11:26b-27 pertain to

Christ's first advent.<sup>8</sup> The notion would be that historical Israel's salvation, which is arguably an underlying question throughout the letter, would be effected through Christ's salvific work in his death and resurrection. Christ's salvific work can therefore be understood as having both a *retrojective* and *projective* effect, in other words, having an effect into the past under the old era (pertaining to historical Israel) and those believing in the new era in Christ. Stated differently, Christ did the same for historical Israel as he did for all believers in Him. This would mean that the gospel establishes profound continuity between historical Israel and Christ-believers. Such continuity can especially be recognised in the fact that Paul presents Abraham as the "father" of all believers (Rm 4:16) or that believers are considered as his "sons" (Gal 3:7). I further argued that Christ's salvation to historical Israel can be connected to the well-documented tradition in the early church and beyond (see above) that Christ proclaimed his salvation to the OT saints in the realm of the dead when he descended to Hades between his death and resurrection. In this, Christ did not provide a second chance for salvation to anybody but proclaimed his salvation and lordship to the faithful OT people as well as his victory and lordship over death and evil forces. This is probably the same idea to which Romans 10:7 alludes. The point in Romans 10:6-8 would then be that these cosmic and profound salvific accomplishments cannot be repeated in the act of faith. They have already been done by Christ in his death and resurrection.

### **Conclusion: Christ's lordship over the dead and the living according to Romans 14:9**

Turning back to Romans 14:9, it is peculiar that when Paul connects Christ's death and resurrection to him being Lord, he first mentions that he is Lord of the dead and then of the living. It seems clear that Christ's lordship is established by his death and resurrection itself (Moo 2018:860; Schreiner 2018:700). Interestingly, Ambrosiaster, the name given to an unknown fourth century writer of a commentary on Romans, in his commentary on Romans 14:9 (*Corpus Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* 81.1.439), writes the following: "For this reason he allowed himself to be killed by his enemies, so that by going down to hell he could condemn sin, because he was killed as an innocent man, and liberate those whom the devil held there. Therefore, since he showed the way of salvation to the living and offered himself for them and also delivered the dead from hell, he is Lord of both the living and the dead" (Bray 1998:344). There are a few more recent commentators (Käsemann 1980:372; Murray 1965:183) that also link Christ's lordship over the dead and the living to Ephesians 4:9-10, in which Christ's descent to the "lower parts of the earth" (the realm of the dead) is mentioned (see above).

When the intertextual relationships of Romans 14:9, of which there are probably more to explore, are considered, including Romans 10:7 and 11:26, the bigger picture of

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<sup>8</sup> Other arguments advanced in support of this reasoning include (1) the underlying concern in Romans of how historical Israel is saved in light of the eschatological inauguration of the new era, in which people are declared righteous on the basis of faith; (2) the connection of the mystery (Rm 11:25) to the gospel; (3) the hardening (Rm 11:25) of Israel that can be understood as being a historical reality (see Rm 10:19-21; 11:1-10; 2 Cor 3:14); (4) the "coming in of the fullness of the gentiles" (Rm 11:25) that can be understood as pertaining to the generic inclusion of the gentiles in God's salvific economy in the gospel; (5) the fact that the Deliverer (Christ) is the subject of all the prophetic actions (Rm 11:26b-27); (6) and the fact that the natural order of salvation (Israel first and then the gentiles), which was characteristic in the tradition of the nations' eschatological pilgrimage to Zion (see Hofius 1989:202), is not reversed in this interpretation.

Paul's reference to Christ being the Lord of both the dead and the living emerges. Although some of these texts that were discussed postdate Paul, they can arguably be understood as forming part of an early tradition in the church that linked Christ's death with his appearing to the saints of the Old Testament, a notion that can be understood as being in continuation with notions about the underworld in OT texts and seems to fit the ideas laid out in both Romans 10:7 and 11:26. If such an early tradition of understanding is acknowledged, Paul seems to argue in Romans 14:7-12 that one cannot escape Christ's cosmic lordship, which involves his reign over both those in the realm of the dead and those in the realm of the living. Paul's reference to believers that belong to the Lord in both life and death (Rm 14:8) also implies that their relationship with Christ as Lord continues after death.

If such is the backdrop against which Paul paints the picture of Christ's lordship, there also seems to be a deep diachronic sense in that Christ's lordship crosses not only the boundaries of death but also the boundaries of time. In other words, as a result of Christ's death and resurrection, his reign now involves reigning over his people of the past and the present, echoing the notion of God's mercy to both the people of the previous era and the new era as put forth in Romans 11:30-32 (see Du Toit 2019:319-324). The gospel events can therefore be understood as establishing a profound continuity between God's people of the past and the present, not to put believers of Christ "on speaking terms" with the patriarchs or to bring them into direct contact with them, but to bring both onto the same level before God in Christ, although currently being in different spheres or realms. The different realms in which deceased believers or OT saints and NT believers exist will finally be dissolved at Christ's return, when the dead will be raised first and all will be joined together with Christ (1 Thess 4:13-17).

It therefore seems probable that Paul's reference to Christ ascending to the abyss (Rm 10:7) and his reference to Christ being the Lord of both the dead and the living (Rm 14:9) can be understood as falling within an early tradition in which Christ's death is understood to have involved preaching to the people in the realm of the dead to both proclaim his judgement to the unfaithful and his salvation to the OT people of God. In such an understanding, Christ thus also "died and lived again" (Rm 14:9) for historical Israel. The reason why Paul first mentions Christ's lordship over the dead and then the living probably corresponds with the order of the salvation events: Christ first died and proclaimed salvation and victory in the realm of the dead, saving historical Israel, and then rose from the dead, bringing salvation to all believers. This order also corresponds to Christ's first resurrecting the dead and then gathering all the living according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

With respect to understanding the gospel in Paul, this understanding has a profound effect on appreciating the significance of Christ's death and resurrection. The gospel events can be understood as both (1) inaugurating a new, eschatological era in which all people are now saved and relate to God via faith in Christ and (2) as completing the old era under the law, effecting the salvation of the OT people of God, placing both OT and NT people of God on the same level. Through Christ's descent in death and his ascent in resurrection, his cosmic lordship can be understood as having been established on both a *synchronic* and *diachronic* level — synchronic in that he is the one Lord over all people regardless of ethnic or cultural background and diachronic in that he is Lord of both God's people of the present and God's people of the past. In this understanding, Christ's

lordship stands central and even transcends the entire history of salvation. This understanding arguably brings the content of the so-called disputed letters of Colossians and Ephesians closer to the so-called undisputed Pauline letters, especially with respect to Christ's cosmic reign.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, the bigger backdrop against which Paul's reference to Christ being the lord of both the dead and the living in Romans 14:9 can be understood might imply that Paul in Romans 14:1-12 not only levels the field for believers of different cultural backgrounds and convictions about certain (ritual) observations but also brings believers into the perspective of Christ's diachronic lordship. In other words, there were people in the past who also held to different convictions about ritual requirements under the old covenant, but now, in the new covenant, believers are brought under the same lordship of Christ. Different convictions about ritual requirements thus pale in comparison with Christ's cosmic lordship (both synchronic and diachronic) and thus cannot be a basis for judging others.

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<sup>9</sup> A cosmic understanding of Christ's lordship that is to be understood in both synchronic and diachronic terms (as argued) lies close to an understanding of Christ's preeminence that transcends time and space (see Col 1:15-23; Eph 1:20-23).

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