

# Neither Proof Text nor Proverb: The Instrumental Sense of *διὰ* and the Soteriological Function of Fire in 1 Corinthians 3.15

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According to the prevailing interpretation of 1 Cor 3.15, the phrase *διὰ πυρός* must be taken in the local sense, and the fire of vv. 13 and 15 plays no soteriological function. This article contests this reading, arguing that Paul's probable allusion to Mal 3 and his reference to the testing function of fire may imply refining as well. More importantly, it demonstrates that whereas the phrase *διὰ πυρός* is indeterminate and may take either the local or the instrumental sense, nearly every other instance of the construction *σώζω + διὰ + genitive* in the relevant Greek literature has an instrumental sense.

**Keywords:** 1 Corinthians 3.10-15, Day of Judgment, *διὰ*, fire, intertextuality, soteriology

## 1. Introduction

First Corinthians 3.15, in which Paul writes that certain 'builders' of the Corinthian church 'will be saved, but only as through fire' (*σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός*), served for centuries in the West as a proof text for purgatory.<sup>1</sup> This verse became a lightning rod in Catholic–Protestant debates, and until recently the rhetoric of Protestant exegetes commenting on this verse was clearly fuelled by controversies over the doctrine of purgatory.<sup>2</sup> While this sort

1 On the history of the interpretation of this verse and the patristic origins of belief in purgatory, see Joachim Gnlika, *Ist 1 Kor. 3, 10-15 ein Schriftzeugnis für das Fegfeuer? Eine exegetisch-historische Untersuchung* (Düsseldorf: Michael Tritsch, 1955); Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 52-95; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NTGC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 331-2.

2 See for instance, Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (5 vols.; New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856) 5.345: 'On this passage of scripture the papists found their doctrine of purgatory, which is certainly hay and stubble: a doctrine never

of anti-papal rhetoric is thankfully absent from most modern commentaries, reticence regarding the potentially purifying function of fire persists. A few modern exegetes still maintain that this verse refers to post-mortem purification that leads to salvation;<sup>3</sup> however, the prevailing consensus insists that the fire of 1 Cor 3.13–15 plays no soteriological function in the purification of individuals whatsoever.

Three interrelated arguments typify the dominant position: (1) according to v. 13, the fire will test the *work* (τὸ ἔργον) of the builders, not the builders themselves; the fire therefore plays no role in the judgment of individuals;<sup>4</sup> (2) in the same verse, Paul states that the fire will *test* (δοκιμάσει), not that it will purify;<sup>5</sup> and (3) ‘saved, but only as through fire’ (σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός) in v. 15 is a proverbial statement, meaning something akin to the expression found in Amos 4.11 and Zech 3.2: ‘you were like a brand snatched from the fire’ (cf. Jude 23).<sup>6</sup> The expression is frequently paraphrased as ‘saved by the skin of one’s teeth’, indicating a narrow escape. A crucial assumption in this last argument is that the phrase διὰ πυρός must be taken in the local sense.<sup>7</sup>

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originally fetched from scripture, but invented in barbarous ages, to feed the avarice and ambition of the clergy’.

- 3 Johannes Michl, ‘Gerichtsfeuer und Purgatorium zu 1 Kor 3,12-15’, *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus* 1961 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963) 395-401; John T. Townsend, ‘1 Corinthians 3:15 and the School of Shammai’, *HTR* 61 (1968) 500-504.
- 4 David W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul’s use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:5* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 181: ‘The fire is not said to purify or punish the persons themselves’.
- 5 Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 66: ‘The fire is, of course, a fire of testing, not one of purifying’. So also C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) 89; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 77 n. 84; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 142; Kent Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment according to Deeds* (SNTSMS 105; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999) 217 n. 48.
- 6 Cf. Hans Bietenhard, ‘Kennt das Neue Testament die Vorstellung vom Fegefeuer?’, *TZ* 3 (1947) 101-22, 104; Fee, *Corinthians*, 144; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997) 56; Friedrich Lang, *Die Briefe an die Korinther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 55; Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I-II* (HNT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1949) 17; Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 315.
- 7 Barrett, *Corinthians*, 89; Matthias Konrad, *Gericht und Gemeinde: Eine Studie zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Gerichtsaussagen im Rahmen der paulinischen Ekklesiologie und Ethik im 1 Thess und 1 Kor* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 269; Kuck, *Judgment*, 184; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914) 65; Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 1,6-6,11)* (EKKNT 7/1; Zürich/Braunschweig: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991) 304.

According to this reading, which is adopted by the majority of commentators, the fire in no way contributes to the builder's salvation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the builder is delivered *despite* having to pass through the danger the fire presents. On the other hand, if διὰ πυρός is taken in the instrumental sense, the verse would mean 'the builder will be saved *by means of* fire', which would attribute a purifying—indeed, salvific—function to the fire itself.

In a recent contribution to *NTS*, Alexander N. Kirk effectively dismantles the first of the above three presuppositions, disputing the widely held view that the building materials of v. 12 and the 'work' (τὸ ἔργον) of vv. 14–15 refer to the *deeds* or *activities* of the builder. Kirk argues persuasively that the building materials and the work refer rather to human persons, the Christian believers who are joined to the church and who collectively comprise the temple of God.<sup>9</sup> Noting that immediately preceding and following the 'building' metaphor are two related metaphors—'you are God's field' (v. 9) and 'you are God's temple' (v. 16)—both of which refer to the Corinthian believers, he suggests that the building metaphor and the building materials likewise allude to the Corinthians.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Paul's use of the singular 'work' (τὸ ἔργον) in vv. 14–15 is similar to his use of the same noun in 9.11, where Paul inquires of the Corinthians 'are you not my work [τὸ ἔργον] in the Lord?', unambiguously equating τὸ ἔργον with those whom he has converted.<sup>11</sup> The temple imagery employed in this passage also recalls other NT texts that refer to Christians being built up as a temple (cf. Eph 2.20–22; 1 Pet 2.4–8), while the expectation that Paul would receive reward or loss as determined by the fate of his 'spiritual children' is consistent with his views regarding final rewards articulated elsewhere (cf. 1 Thess 3.5; Phil 2.16; 4.1; Gal 4.11; 2 Cor 1.14).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this identification of the building materials and the work of the builder with converted persons finds support in a number of patristic exegetes.<sup>13</sup> Kirk also questions the consensus position that v. 15 is a proverb connoting a narrow escape, rightly pointing out how distant the purported parallels to this supposed proverb are.<sup>14</sup> However, he sidesteps the key argument in its favor, namely the assertion that the prepositional

8 Karl Paul Donfried ('Justification and Last Judgment in Paul', *ZNW* 67 [1976] 90–110, 105) contends that 'the verb σῶζω in v. 15 has nothing to do with Christology and is used here in an entirely secular sense of "to rescue, to deliver from danger or harm"'.  
 9 Alexander N. Kirk, 'Building with the Corinthians: Human Persons as the Building Materials of 1 Corinthians 3.12 and the "Work" of 3.13–15', *NTS* 58 (2012) 549–70. Kirk is elaborating on a view introduced to modern scholarship by Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu: eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934) 133.

10 Kirk, 'Building', 554.

11 Kirk, 'Building', 557.

12 Kirk, 'Building', 558–9.

13 Kirk, 'Building', 560–2.

14 Kirk, 'Building', 565–6.

phrase διὰ πυρός must be taken in the local and not in the instrumental sense. Further, while he disputes the adequacy of reading v. 15 as a proverb, he offers no comment on how the fire functions if the saying is not taken proverbially. Thus, while Kirk's article presents a forceful and well-reasoned challenge to one of the basic assumptions of the dominant interpretation of this pericope, the prevailing consensus requires further criticism.

The present article, which dovetails with and expands upon Kirk's critique of the proverbial reading of 1 Cor 3.15, makes a case for the instrumental sense of διὰ in v. 15 and for the purifying and soteriological function of fire in vv. 13-15. After demonstrating Paul's use of temple imagery in this pericope's wider context, I shall argue that Paul is alluding to a specific temple text, LXX Malachi 3, where fire plays an explicitly refining function, and that Paul's allusion assumes this purificatory function of fire. I shall then proceed to a linguistic analysis of the Greek phrases διὰ πυρός and σώζω + διὰ + genitive, contending that Paul employs the preposition διὰ instrumentally and thus assigns a soteriological function to the fire of eschatological judgment. While I have no wish to defend the view that this passage should be read as a proof text for purgatory, I do wish to argue that v. 15 is more than simply a proverb connoting a narrow escape.

## 2. A Refining Fire in God's Temple

First Corinthians 3.15 comes near the conclusion of a passage in which Paul has been urging upon his readers the necessity of church unity. Divisions have sprung up in Corinth, with some claiming allegiance to Apollos, others to Paul. In his appeal to unity, Paul employs two extended metaphors: one of planting (3.6-9) and one of building (3.10-15). The former analogy stresses that Paul and Apollos are 'God's servants working together' (v. 9). Paul planted, Apollos watered, but both are working towards a common purpose. In continuity with the planting metaphor, the Corinthians are compared to 'God's field' (v. 9). From here Paul transitions to another metaphor in which the Corinthians are compared to 'God's building' (v. 9). It is in this context that he introduces the motif of fire:

Κατὰ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι ὡς σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων θεμέλιον ἔθηκα, ἄλλος δὲ ἐποικοδομεῖ. ἕκαστος δὲ βλέπετω πῶς ἐποικοδομεῖ. θεμέλιον γὰρ ἄλλον οὐδεὶς δύναται θεῖναι παρὰ τὸν κεῖμενον, ὅς ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. εἰ δέ τις ἐποικοδομεῖ ἐπὶ τὸν θεμέλιον χρυσόν, ἄργυρον, λίθους τιμίους, ξύλα, χόρτον, καλάμην, ἑκάστου τὸ ἔργον φανερόν γενήσεται, ἢ γὰρ ἡμέρα δηλώσει, ὅτι ἐν πυρὶ ἀποκαλύπτεται· καὶ ἑκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὅποιόν ἐστιν τὸ πῦρ [αὐτὸ] δοκιμάσει. εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον μενεῖ ὁ ἐποικοδόμησεν, μισθὸν λήμψεται· εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον κατακαήσεται, ζημιωθήσεται, αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός. (1 Cor 3.10-15)

In this pericope, Paul has in mind the construction of a specific building—the temple. However, even those who detect this temple imagery rarely grasp its significance, particularly the importance of fire imagery in the temple. A fuller appreciation of this metaphor and its implications will contribute to our understanding of 1 Cor 3.15.

### 2.1. *The Temple Metaphor*

In vv. 16-17 Paul explicitly identifies the Corinthian church as the temple of God. Where he has previously stated, ‘you are God’s field, God’s building’ (v. 9), he now affirms, ‘you are God’s temple’ (ναὸς θεοῦ) (v. 16). While scholars occasionally suggest that Paul is mixing his metaphors here with no discernible unity between them, he is in fact employing a coherent and consistent cluster of metaphors that extend from v. 5 to v. 16. While less obvious than the explicit statement ‘you are God’s temple’, the building metaphor likewise points to the temple. Paul describes the builders as making use of diverse materials: ‘gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw’ (χρυσόν, ἄργυρον, λίθους τιμίους, ξύλα, χόρτον, καλάμην). Part of Paul’s purpose is to indicate that just as the first three of these materials can endure fire and the latter three are combustible, the work of some will withstand the fire of judgment while the work of others will be burned up. Additionally, however, Paul has chosen these particular materials to evoke an identifiable image. As G. K. Beale observes, ‘The only other place in Scripture where a “foundation” of a building is laid and “gold”, “silver”, and “precious stones” are “built” upon the foundation is Solomon’s temple’.<sup>15</sup> Several texts attest to the use of individual elements, such as stones (1 Kgs 5.17), gold (1 Kgs 6.20-21, 28, 30, 35), or silver (1 Chron 22.14, 16) in the construction of the temple; however, it is to 1 Chron 29.2 in particular that Paul most clearly alludes. In this text David announces that he has provided the following materials for ‘the house of my God’ (οἶκον θεοῦ μου): gold (χρυσίον), silver (ἀργύριον), wood (ξύλα), and precious stones (λίθον τίμιον). This allusion is reinforced by Paul’s description of himself as a wise or skilled master builder (σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων) in 1 Cor 3.10, which recalls the description of the builder of the tabernacle in LXX Exod 35.31-33, who is filled with the spirit in ‘skill’ or ‘wisdom’ (σοφίας) and is said ‘to be a master builder (ἀρχιτεκτονεῖν) according to all the works of a master builder (ἀρχιτεκτονίας)’. Significantly, this ‘master builder’ also works with ‘gold’ (χρυσίον), ‘silver’ (ἀργύριον), ‘stone’ (λίθος) and ‘wood’ (ξύλα).<sup>16</sup> These intertextual links indicate that when Paul described

15 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos-InterVarsity, 2004) 247. Cf. Kuck, *Judgment*, 177-8; Christian Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (THNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996) 71-2.

16 Beale, *Temple*, 247.

the materials used by the builders and referred to himself as a ‘wise master builder’, he was intentionally alluding to the construction of the temple.<sup>17</sup>

This temple metaphor, which is not made explicit until vv. 16 and 17, may extend all the way back to v. 5, where Paul compares the Corinthians to a field, for in the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish literature the temple is closely associated with garden imagery; indeed, the temple was filled with agricultural images (cf. 1 Kgs 6.18, 29, 32; 7.18-20, 22, 24-26; 7.42, 49-50).<sup>18</sup> Significantly, in certain texts from Qumran the community is described alternatively as a plantation and as a building in the context of referring to the community in terms of a temple.<sup>19</sup> 1QS VIII.5-8, for instance, states that the Community will be ‘an everlasting plantation, a holy house for Israel and the foundation of the holy of holies for Aaron’.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the juxtaposition of a planted vine and the temple occurs in Pseudo-Philo *L.A.B.* 12.8-9: after the Israelites commit idolatry through their worship of the Golden Calf, Moses prays to the LORD, saying that God has ‘planted this vine’ but that the vine ‘has not recognized its cultivator’ and so the vine has been ‘burned up’. Moses immediately shifts to a description of the temple: ‘you have adorned your house with precious stones and gold; and you have sprinkled your house with perfumes and spices and balsam wood’ before he returns to the image of the vine.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2. *Malachi 3 and the Refiner’s Fire*

In light of these various texts that similarly juxtapose the plantation metaphor with the temple metaphor, it is apparent that in vv. 6–17, Paul is not shifting haphazardly between disconnected metaphors, but very intentionally and consistently

17 H. H. Drake Williams (*The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture within 1 Cor. 1:18-3:23* [Leiden: Brill, 2001] 259) believes that the allusion is to Isa 3.3, where the phrase σοφὸν ἄρχιτέκτονα is used. However, the additional presence of gold, silver, stones, and wood in Exod 35.31–33 and the lack of any other shared vocabulary in Isa 3.3, indicate a greater resonance with the Exodus allusion, further suggesting a link to temple (or tabernacle) imagery. The LXX of Isa 3.3 diverges significantly from the MT, which, instead of ‘skilled builders’, has והכם הרשיים ‘skilled magicians’.

18 Beale, *Temple*, 248. Beale is followed by Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010) 151. See also William Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-Critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-Tree Pericope in Mark’s Gospel and its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* (JSOTSS; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 208–12.

19 Cf. Bertil E. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament* (SNTSMS 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965) 58.

20 Cf. Albert L. A. Hogeterp, *Paul and God’s Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Leuven and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006) 281.

21 On *L.A.B.*’s depiction of Israel as a vineyard and the interpretation of God’s *domus* as the temple, see Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 1.497–500.

focusing on the image of the temple.<sup>22</sup> Paul's deliberate use of this metaphor significantly locates the testing fire of God's judgment in the context of the temple, not simply in some 'fantastic, possibly apocalyptic buildings'.<sup>23</sup> And this identification of the building as the temple is far from 'inconsequential', as Joseph Fitzmyer suggests it is.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the allusion to the 'temple' (ναός) alongside the image of 'fire' (πῦρ) that tests 'silver' (χρυσόν) and 'gold' (ἄργυρον) and which 'will burn' (κατακαήσεται) the work that is like 'stubble' (καλάμην) on 'the day' (ἡμέρα) suggests an allusion to LXX Malachi 3, according to which the LORD, who is described as a 'refiner's fire' (πῦρ χωνευτηρίου), comes into his 'temple' (τὸν ναόν) on 'the day' (ἡμέρα) of judgment and sits 'as a refiner and purifier of silver and gold' (ὡς τὸ ἄργύριον καὶ ὡς τὸ χρυσίον) to 'purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver (ὡς τὸ ἄργύριον καὶ ὡς τὸ χρυσίον)' (vv. 2-3).<sup>25</sup> A few verses later, Malachi describes 'the day' (ἡμέρα) as 'burning (καιομένη) like an oven' and prophesies that 'all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble (καλάμη)' and that the fire will 'leave them neither root nor branch' (v. 19).<sup>26</sup> The verbal similarities between these two texts are strong and suggest an intertextual link.<sup>27</sup>

LXX Mal 3	1 Cor 3
ναόν (v. 1)	ναός (v. 16)
ἡμέραν (v. 2); ἡμέρα (v. 19)	ἡμέρα (v. 13)
πῦρ (v. 2)	πυρί, πῦρ (v. 13); πυρός (v. 15)
ἄργύριον (v. 3)	ἄργυρον (v. 12)
χρυσίον (v. 3)	χρυσόν (v. 12)
καιομένη (v. 19)	κατακαήσεται (v. 15)
καλάμη (v. 19)	καλάμην (v. 12)

22 Erik Peterson, 'ἔργον in der Bedeutung "Bau" bei Paulus', *Biblica* 22 (1941) 439-41, 440.

23 Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 76.

24 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB; New Haven and London: Yale University, 2008) 197.

25 It may also be significant that both 1 Cor 3.13 and Mal 3.19 (MT) use 'the day' (דַּיּ= הַ... ἡμέρα) absolutely to refer to 'the Day of the LORD'; cf. Gerhard Dellling, 'ἡμέρα', *TDNT* 2 (1964) 943-53, 952. The LXX has ἡμέρα κυρίου.

26 The καλάμη ('stubble') of LXX Mal 3.19 explains its presence in 1 Cor 3.13 more adequately than does the thesis of J. Massyngberde Ford, 'You are God's Sikkah (I Cor. III. 10-17)', *NTS* 21 (1974) 139-42. Ford argues that Paul's imagery derives from the construction of Sukkoth, for which hay and straw were used. She suggests they were adorned with tapestries embroidered with gold and silver thread and precious stones; however, such slender filaments of gold and silver thread fail to convey the sense of enduring strength that Paul seeks to communicate.

27 Cf. Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 153; J. Proctor, 'Fire in God's House: Influence of Malachi 3 in the NT', *JETS* 36 (1993) 9-14, esp. 11-14; Williams, *Wisdom*, 264-5, 269-72.

More broadly, if we accept Kirk's thesis that the building materials and work of 1 Cor 3.12-15 represent not deeds but human persons, both LXX Mal 3.3, 19 and 1 Cor 3.12 contain two categories of materials that represent two sorts of people: in both texts the righteous are likened to precious metals while the wicked are compared to highly flammable substances.

The recognition that intertextual allusions and echoes influence readers' interpretations of texts has become a commonplace of contemporary scholarship. The influential work of Richard Hays on this subject has drawn the attention of NT scholars to the literary trope of *metalepsis* or *transumption*, which suggests that when one text alludes to another, 'the figurative effect of the echo can lie in the unstated or suppressed (transumed) points of resonance between the two texts'.<sup>28</sup> In light of the intertextual relationship between 1 Cor 3.10-15 and LXX Malachi 3, we may thus suggest that the purificatory function of fire explicit in Malachi 3 is implicitly present in 1 Cor 3.10-15. In speaking of the testing of the work of the builders of the temple on 'the day', Paul intended to recall Malachi's reference to the refining and purifying of the sons of Levi in the temple on 'the day'. Thus the testing of the work in 1 Cor 3.13 may carry connotations of purification and refinement.

### 2.3. *Testing and Refining the Work of the Builders*

The suggestion that 1 Cor 3.10-15 transumes the purifying function of fire of Malachi 3 is strengthened—not weakened, as is often assumed—by the testing function attributed to the fire in v. 12. As noted above, two qualities of materials are tested, those that will endure the fire and those that will not. According to v. 15, the flammable substances will be burned up (κατακαήσεται). This burning is the end result of the testing process for the inferior substances. We may assume a different result for those that endure the testing process. Significantly, in the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint, testing and refining are frequently mentioned in tandem (cf. Isa 48.10; Jer 9.6; Zech 13.9; Ps 66.10). Of particular relevance is the parallelism between the refining of silver and the testing of gold in Zech 13.9: 'And I will put this third into the fire, and refine (πυρώσω) them as one refines silver, and test (δοκιμῶ) them as gold is tested'. While technically speaking testing and refining were two distinct stages in the smelting process, the phrases are here placed in synonymous parallelism, and in the poetry of prophetic

28 Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1989) 20. Cf. Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000) 21: 'An allusion is no end in itself but a suggestive element, a clue, an implied link to another text; it is a piece whose purpose is to summon what it has been subtracted from (cf. synecdoche). And it is up to readers to do the summoning.'



speech the two procedures are collapsed into a single metaphor.<sup>29</sup> Also noteworthy is Theodotion's translation of Dan 11.35. Where the MT states that in the tribulation, the wise ולברר וללבן ... לצרוף 'may be refined, purified, and cleansed', Theodotion makes explicit that this period is meant πυρῶσαι αὐτούς 'to try them with fire'. Notably, it was no great leap for the translator to equate this fiery test with the refining, purifying, and cleansing of human beings. Given other contextual clues, most notably the allusions to LXX Malachi 3, where the fire serves to refine and purify the sons of Levi as silver, it is very probable that Paul thought not only of the testing, but also of the refining, of the precious metals he mentions.<sup>30</sup> And as Kirk has demonstrated, these precious metals represent human persons. As fire purifies the sons of Levi in Malachi 3, the fire that attends 'the day' in 1 Corinthians 3 will test the converts like silver and gold; what is imperfect will be burned away, and they will be refined and purified. Thus, arguments that emphasize the function of testing over against refining and the identity of the work as deeds over against individual believers are not as convincing as they may at first appear. We have seen that testing and refining were frequently linked together conceptually, and we have noted the plausibility of Kirk's argument that when Paul wrote of the work and materials of the builder, he had in mind not their teaching or their deeds, but those whom they had converted. The testing of the builder's work may therefore refer to the testing, refining, and purifying of individual believers by means of fire. This leads to the question of whether Paul assigns this fire any soteriological function, as may be indicated by his use of the verb σῶζω in v. 15.

### 3. Saved as through Fire

The crux of this passage, v. 15, which states that the builder 'will be saved, but only as through fire' (σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός), has been identified as a proof text for purgatory by some, while the majority of interpreters support the assertion that 'Paul is obviously borrowing from a common phrase, "barely escaped from the fire"'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is now an axiom of Pauline scholarship that we are dealing with a proverbial or quasi-proverbial saying. However, no exact parallel to the construction σῶζω + διὰ πυρός is known, and most of

29 See the excursus on 'The Cupellation of Silver', in William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986) 1.230–2.

30 Kuck, *Judgment*, 181.

31 Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 77. Johannes Weiss (*Der erste Korintherbrief* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910] 83 n. 81) lists a number of texts that allegedly parallel v. 15: Strabo *Geog.* 3.5.11; Eur. *Androm.* 487; *Elect.* 1182; Liv. 20.35; LXX Amos 4.11; Zech 3.2; Ps 65.12; Jude 23. Kirk ('Building', 565–9) rightly notes how very distant these and other supposed parallels are.

the purported parallels to this supposedly ‘common phrase’ are quite distant. Certainly, none is sufficiently close to demonstrate the proverbial nature of our saying. It is my contention that we are dealing with neither proverb nor proof text, but with Paul’s belief that on the day of the parousia—not in some post-mortem state of purgation—fire would play an instrumental role in the purification and salvation of some, just as it would play a destructive role in the judgment of others.

### 3.1. *On the Ambiguity of διὰ πυρός*

The lynchpin of the argument that 1 Cor 3.15 is a proverb alluding to a narrow escape achieved by passing through fire is the assertion that Paul employs the prepositional phrase διὰ πυρός in the local sense. To support this position, Walter Bauer cites a handful of Greco-Roman and Jewish texts that employ διὰ πυρός or διὰ φλογός in a local sense, where the image is of an individual rushing through a wall of fire to safety.<sup>32</sup> While Bauer’s few examples do demonstrate the possibility of the local sense of this phrase, they do not exhaust the variety of meanings it could elicit, nor do they determine Paul’s usage. Admittedly, the Septuagint does provide further examples of the local use (Num 31.23; 2 Chron 28.3; Isa 43.2; Zech 13.9; Ps 65.12 [66.12 MT]; 4 *Macc.* 18.14 [quoting Isa 43.2]). However, even in some texts that employ διὰ πυρός in the local sense, the phrase carries with it connotations of purification—particularly in texts that refer to precious metals. For instance, LXX Num 31.23, which follows a list of metals of various qualities, states, ‘everything that can withstand fire shall be clean...but whatever cannot go through fire (διὰ πυρός), shall be passed through the water’. The purifying function of the fire intensifies the cleansing function of water. Further, while I have already cited Zech 13.9 to demonstrate the parallelism between testing and refining, here I note the use of the phrase διὰ πυρός: ‘And I will put this third into the fire (διὰ πυρός), and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested’. Psalm 65.10–12 similarly states, ‘For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried...we went through fire (διὰ πυρός) and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place’. Thus, even when διὰ πυρός is used in the local sense, it may connote the purifying function of fire.

However, in addition to these examples of the local sense of διὰ πυρός, one could just as easily adduce several examples from the relevant literature where the phrase is used in the instrumental sense.<sup>33</sup> Philo, for instance, uses the instrumental sense in three of the four occurrences of διὰ πυρός in his corpus.<sup>34</sup> In *De*

<sup>32</sup> BDAG, s.v. πῦρ. Cf. *Jos. Ant.* 17.264; Diodorus Siculus 1.57.7–8; Cynic Epistles *Crates* 6.

<sup>33</sup> Kuck (*Judgment*, 184 n. 179) gives the impression that the instrumental use of this phrase is much rarer than it actually is: ‘The only instrumental use of διὰ πυρός I could find is in 4 *Macc* 9:9 (eternal punishment by means of fire)’.

<sup>34</sup> The only exception is *Spec. Laws* 4.28.

*Abrahamo* 1 he writes of ‘terrible destructions which have taken place on earth by the agency of fire and water (διὰ πυρὸς καὶ ὕδατος)’ while in *Mos.* 2.219 he refers to businesses ‘carried on by means of fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’ and ‘instruments made by fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’. *Letter of Aristeas* 87 likewise describes the burnt offering being consumed by fire (διὰ πυρὸς). Perhaps more significantly, we also encounter the instrumental usage in the Septuagint, the NT, and the Apostolic Fathers. The phrase frequently occurs in the instrumental sense in the Maccabean literature. *Third Maccabees* 2.29 reports that Jews who were registered were to be ‘branded on their bodies with fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’; *4 Macc* 7.12 describes Eleazar’s resolve in spite of being ‘consumed by the fire (διὰ τοῦ πυρὸς)’; *4 Macc* 9.9 alludes to ‘eternal torment by fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’. Further, in the NT, 1 Pet 1.7 speaks of faith being ‘tested by fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’. And the only two occurrences in the Apostolic Fathers are instrumental: *1 Clem.* 11.1 describes how Sodom was ‘judged by fire (διὰ πυρὸς)’ while *Herm. Vis.* 4. 3.4 explains that gold is ‘tested by the fire (διὰ τοῦ πυρὸς)’.

*Testament of Abraham* 13 (Rec A) is often brought into discussions of 1 Cor 3.10–15 due to the verbal and thematic links between the two texts. While some have proposed that Paul was influenced by the *Testament of Abraham*,<sup>35</sup> and others have suggested that they were both drawing on a shared tradition,<sup>36</sup> the most plausible explanation for their strong similarities is that the *Testament of Abraham* was originally a Jewish document that Christian scribes have substantially redacted in light of 1 Cor 3.10–15.<sup>37</sup> One point of significant overlap is *T. Ab.* 13.11’s echo of the διὰ πυρὸς from 1 Cor 3.15.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, in *T. Ab.* 13.11, the phrase is used instrumentally—δοκιμάζει τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἔργα διὰ πυρὸς—allowing us to conclude that whoever made use of Paul’s saying here apparently also interpreted his phrase in the instrumental sense.

While all this evidence is highly suggestive, it does not point decisively in favor of the instrumental reading, for as I have demonstrated, the phrase could be used in either the local or the instrumental sense. I have thus far merely sought to redress a lopsided emphasis on the local sense of this phrase in contemporary scholarship.

### 3.2. The Sense of σῶζω + διὰ + Genitive

In light of the flexible nature of the phrase διὰ πυρὸς, it is therefore instructive to consider the sense of the construction σῶζω + διὰ + genitive ‘to save by/through...’ elsewhere in the Pauline corpus and more broadly in the

35 Charles W. Fishburne, ‘1 Corinthians 3.10–15 and the Testament of Abraham’, *NTS* 17 (1970) 109–15.

36 Harm W. Hollander, ‘The Testing by Fire of the Builders’ Works: 1 Corinthians 3.10–15’, *NTS* 40 (1994) 89–104.

37 Dale C. Allison, *Testament of Abraham* (CJL; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003) 291; Kuck, *Judgment*, 184.

38 Cf. Allison, *Testament of Abraham*, 291.

contemporary literature. The construction occurs twice in the Septuagint, in eight other instances in the Greek NT (not counting 1 Cor 3.15), frequently in the Apostolic Fathers, and sparingly in Philo and Josephus. In the vast majority of these cases, the preposition takes the instrumental sense.

The sense of eight of the ten additional biblical occurrences of the phrase σῶζω + διὰ + genitive is uncontroversial:

1. '...so he [the LORD] saved them [Israel] by the hand (ἔσωσε ν...διὰ χειρός) of Jeroboam son of Joash' (LXX 2 Kgs 14.27).
2. 'The Lord has founded Zion, and the humble among the people will be saved through him' (δι' αὐτοῦ σωθήσονται) (LXX Isa 14.32b).
3. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (σωθῆ...δι' αὐτοῦ) (John 3.17).
4. 'But we believe that we are saved through the grace (διὰ τῆς χάριτος...σωθῆναι) of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 15.11).
5. 'Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him (σωθησόμεθα δι' αὐτοῦ) from the wrath of God' (Rom 5.9).
6. 'Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you...through which also you are being saved' (δι' οὗ...σώζεσθε) (1 Cor 15.1-2).
7. 'For by grace you have been saved through faith' (σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως) (Eph 2.8).
8. 'He saved us through the water (ἔσωσε ν...διὰ λουτροῦ) of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3.5).

In each of the above passages—two of which are from undisputed Pauline epistles, and two of which are from Deutero-Pauline epistles—the phrase σῶζω + διὰ + genitive unambiguously takes the instrumental sense, and detailed discussion of each text need not detain us here. It is noteworthy that, with the obvious exception of the Septuagint texts, in each case the object of the preposition belongs to a cluster of theological themes related to the gospel: faith, grace, Jesus, the good news, or the waters of rebirth and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, one gathers the impression that resistance to the instrumental sense of 'saved through fire' in 1 Cor 3.15 stems from the apparent inconsistency between being saved by means of fire, on the one hand, and being saved by grace, the gospel, Jesus, or faith in Christ, on the other hand. For this reason, the remaining two biblical occurrences of the phrase σῶζω + διὰ + genitive are of particular significance, despite the difficulties implicit in their own meanings.

According to the Deutero-Pauline 1 Tim 2.15, 'she [woman] will be saved through childbearing' (σωθήσεται...διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας). The instrumental

sense of this phrase is frequently contested, presumably due to the tension it creates with the conviction that one is justified by faith, not works. The local reading of the verse would suggest that the woman's life will be *preserved through* the dangerous process of giving birth.<sup>39</sup> Attractive as this reading may be to modern exegetes who find this verse overtly patriarchal, it does not adequately fit the context of 1 Tim 2.15, for in the Pastoral Epistles σώζω is always used soteriologically, and given this context, the instrumental sense of the preposition διὰ is most plausible.<sup>40</sup> The instrumental reading, moreover, coheres with the Jewish view that the travails of childbirth in some way overcome the curse of Eve (cf. Gen 3.16) and that women attain merit by fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers.<sup>41</sup>

We also have a rough parallel to this construction in 1 Pet 3.20, where we read that in the days of Noah, 'eight persons were saved through water' (διεσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος). At first glance, this verse appears to support the local reading, and some have taken it in this sense, for Noah and his family were preserved as they physically passed through the waters of the flood.<sup>42</sup> However, as v. 21 explains, 'baptism, which this [the flood] prefigured, now saves (σώζει) you'. According to the allegorical logic of these verses, the water of the deluge typologically signifies the water of baptism and the verb διεσώθησαν stands parallel to σώζει.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, reading the *destructive* waters of the flood as a type signifying the *saving* waters of baptism is, as R. T. France puts it, 'a little whimsical'. However, as France himself goes on to observe, it is 'certainly not beyond the imagination of a keen typologist'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, if we follow the logic of 1 Peter 3 itself, the sense of the verse seems to be that the flood waters were instrumental in saving Noah and his family by buoying them up in the ark while cleansing the world of wickedness, just as the waters of baptism are instrumental in the salvation and cleansing of the believer.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in our consideration of the construction

39 Elizabeth A. McCabe, *An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008) 77.

40 Stanley E. Porter, 'What Does it Mean to Be "Saved by Childbirth" (1 Timothy 2:15)', *JSNT* (1993) 87-102, esp. 95-7.

41 Cf. *Tg. Neof.* 1 on Gen 3.16; *b. Ber.* 17a; *b. Sotah* 21a.

42 While the verb διασώζω may indicate the local reading, meaning 'to bring safely through', it may also mean 'rescue without special feeling for the meaning of διὰ' (BDAG, s.v., διασώζω). Cf. *1 Clem.* 9.4: 'through him [Noah] the Master saved (διέσωσεν) the living creatures that entered into the ark in harmony'.

43 A cogent defense of the instrumental sense of διὰ in this passage is presented by Ronald F. Satta, "'Baptism Doth Now Save Us": An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Peter 3:20-21', *EvJ* 25 (2007) 65-72, esp. 66-7.

44 R. T. France, 'Exegesis in Practice: Two Examples', *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977) 252-81, 273.

45 Cf. *Herm. Vis.* 3.3.5.

σώζω + διὰ + genitive in 1 Cor 3.15, it is significant that in every other biblical instance it is used in the instrumental sense.

This grammatical construction is also quite common in the Apostolic Fathers, and there too the instrumental sense dominates (cf. *1 Clem.* 9.4; 12.1; 58.2; *2 Clem.* 3.3; *Pol. Phil.* 1.3; *Herm. Vis.* 3.3.5; 3.8.3; 4.2.4; *Sim.* 9.12.3). One possible exception that may permit a local reading is *Herm. Sim.* 9.12.3. A dominant allegorical motif in the *Shepherd of Hermas* is the construction of a tower, and the stones used to build this tower are said to pass through a certain gate. In the explanation of the allegory in 9.12.3 the Shepherd explains that some ‘will be saved through it [the gate]’ (σώξεσθαι δι’ αὐτῆς). The very mention of a gate in conjunction with the preposition διὰ would appear to suggest a local reading, particularly since earlier in the text we read of individuals physically passing through this gate (cf. 9.3.4; 9.4.1). However, the Shepherd further explains that the gate is Christ, and since according to *Hermas’s* soteriology Christ is the *means* of salvation, the instrumental sense is also possible. It may even be that the text is intentionally ambiguous, holding together the two possible readings with the local sense prevailing at the allegorical level and the instrumental sense coming into focus in its interpretation.

The evidence from Philo further buttresses our case, for he too uses the construction σώζω + διὰ + genitive exclusively in the instrumental sense (*Leg.* 3.189; *Cherub.* 130; *Agr.* 1.13; *Abr.* 145). The most significant of these is in his discussion of the judgment of Sodom:

... of the five finest cities in it four were about to be destroyed by fire, and one was destined to be left unhurt and safe from every evil. For it was necessary that the calamities should be inflicted by the chastising power, and that the one which was to be saved should be saved by the beneficent power (σώξεσθαι δὲ διὰ τῆς εὐεργετίδος). (*Abr.* 145)

While the ‘beneficent power’ that saved the one city is distinguished from the ‘chastising power’ (i.e. the fire) that destroyed the four other cities, it is striking that the phrase σώξεσθαι δὲ διὰ is used in the context of πῦρ where διὰ is used in the instrumental sense.

Finally, Josephus’s use of the phrase σώζω + διὰ + genitive admittedly presents something of an aberration, for he uses the construction on three occasions, and in each instance he employs διὰ in the local, not the instrumental, sense (*Ant.* 14.362; 17.275; *Life* 304). While this evidence indicates that one could in fact use the construction in the local sense, Josephus is the outlier. Further, Josephus’s context must be taken into account: in each instance he refers not to eschatological salvation, but to physical preservation from danger in battle. This is quite different from Paul’s use of the phrase, for which the biblical and early Christian evidence offers a far closer parallel. These three passages from

Josephus notwithstanding, every other instance of the phrase σὸζω + διὰ + genitive that I have been able to find in the Greek literature most relevant to our study can or must assume the instrumental sense. This observation, alongside the number of examples of διὰ πυρός that allow that usage, points strongly in the direction of the instrumental sense of the phrase in 1 Cor 3.15.

We must, however, briefly pause to address the significance of the construction οὕτως...ὡς to consider what, if any, impact it has upon our conclusion. C. K. Barrett cites two other occurrences of this construction in 1 Corinthians, one of which indicates the metaphorical nature of the subject (9.26), and the other of which indicates a statement of fact (4.1).<sup>46</sup> With no further explanation, he asserts that this phrase signals the metaphorical nature of our verse, rather than the factual one. This metaphorical reading is assumed by the common translation 'but only as' and would seem to support the proverbial reading of v. 15. However, as Barrett himself concedes, the phrase may also be used to make a factual statement.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the precise phrase οὕτως δὲ ὡς occurs also in Aristotle (*GA* 734b 17-19) and Pseudo-Clement (*Hom.* 17.18), and in neither instance does it convey a metaphor or proverb.<sup>48</sup> Appeals to Paul's use of the construction οὕτως δὲ ὡς cannot therefore overturn the weight of the substantial evidence surveyed above.

### 3.3. *The Soteriological Function of Fire*

If the above linguistic evidence suggests that the διὰ in 1 Cor 3.15 is instrumental, in what sense is the fire of eschatological judgment instrumental in salvation, and more broadly speaking, how does this interpretation cohere with the soteriology Paul articulates elsewhere?

With Malachi 3 clearly in the background, the fire appears to save insofar as it purifies. Just as God refines inept priests in Mal 3.3, fire purifies incompetent builders in 1 Cor 3.15. The testing and refining function of fire in this text may be further illumined by similar motifs elsewhere in early Christian literature. For instance, according to *Did.* 16.5, 'all humankind will come to the fiery test' (πύρωσιν τῆς δοκιμασίας) and 'those who endure (ὑπομείναντες) in their faith will be saved by the curse itself' (σωθήσονται ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τοῦ

<sup>46</sup> Barrett, *Corinthians*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Dieter Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010) 164. 'Wahrscheinlich führt jedoch das ὡς nicht einen Vergleich ein ("gleichsam"), sondern präzisiert nach dem οὕτως die reale Art und Weise (vgl. 9,26; 2Kor 9,5; Eph 5,33; Jak 2,12; Herm sim IX 9,7)'.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle *GA* 734b 17-19: 'It is clear by now that there is something which fashions the parts of the embryo, but that this agent is not by way of being (οὕτως δὲ ὡς) a definite individual thing'; Pseudo-Clement *Hom.* 17.18 (quoting Num 12.6-7): 'If a prophet arise from amongst you, I shall make myself known to him through visions and dreams, but not so as (οὕτως δὲ ὡς) to my servant Moses'.

καταθέματος). While the traditional reading of this text identifies ‘the curse’ as Christ (cf. Gal 3.13), some recent interpreters have identified ‘the curse’ that saves with ‘the fiery test’.<sup>49</sup> If this reading is correct, *Did.* 16.5 closely parallels our reading of 1 Cor 3.15. A more certain parallel is *Herm. Vis.* 4.3.4: ‘just as gold is tested by fire (δοκιμάζεται διὰ τοῦ πυρός) and made useful, so also you who live in them are being tested (δοκιμάζεσθε). Therefore those who endure (μείναντες) and pass through the flames will be purified by them’ (ὑπ’ αὐτῶν καθαρισθήσεσθε).<sup>50</sup> Here the fire that tests clearly has a purifying function. When Paul suggests that fire is instrumental to salvation, he appears to be thinking in similar terms.

This is not to question Paul’s insistence that believers are justified by faith (cf. Gal 2–3 and Rom 3–4) and are ultimately saved through Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15.1–2; Rom 5.9). Indeed, in his building metaphor Paul assumes that the foundation is Christ (v. 12). Yet in Paul’s soteriology the believer’s justification and future salvation do not preclude the possibility of punishment for sins either in this life or at the last judgment (cf. Rom 14.10; 1 Cor 4.4–5; 5.5; 11.29–32; 2 Cor 5.10). The verb ζημιωθήσεται in v. 15a may suggest that some of the saved will be ‘lightly punished at the judgment, depending on their deeds’,<sup>51</sup> and in this instance, the builder’s punishment may be the painful purification process of being saved διὰ πυρός.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most relevant Pauline parallel is 1 Cor 5.5: ‘hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (εἰς ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός), so that (ἵνα) his spirit may be saved (σωθῆ) in the day (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ) of the Lord’.<sup>53</sup> Here the circumstances of exclusion, suffering, and possible death

49 The argument is presented most persuasively by Aaron Milavec, ‘The Saving Efficacy of the Burning Process in *Didache* 16:5’, *The Didache in Context: Essays on its Text, History and Transmission* (ed. C. Jefford; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 131–55; cf. Jonathan Draper, ‘The Jesus Tradition in the *Didache*’, *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, vol. 5 (ed. D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 282.

50 Note the striking similarities between 1 Cor 3.13–15, *Did.* 16.5, and *Herm. Vis.* 4.3.4: there is a fiery test (πῦρ [αὐτὸ] δοκιμάσει//πύρωσιν τῆς δοκιμασίας//δοκιμάζεται διὰ τοῦ πυρός); some endure (μενεῖ//ὑπομείναντες//μείναντες); and they will be saved/purified by the fire (σωθήσεται...διὰ πυρός//σωθήσονται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ τοῦ καταθέματος//ὑπ’ αὐτῶν καθαρισθήσεσθε).

51 E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992) 275; cf. BDAG, s.v., ζημιόω. Jay Shanor (‘Paul as Master Builder: Construction Terms in First Corinthians’, *NTS* 34 [1988] 461–71, esp. 469) notes that in some Greek temple inscriptions this term refers to the imposition of fines on incompetent builders. Some sort of penalty is in view beyond ‘the potential “dis-honor” (i.e. shame) of lost reward on the Day of Judgment’ (Ronald Herms, “Being Saved without Honor”: A Conceptual Link between 1 Corinthians 3 and 1 *Enoch* 50?’, *JSNT* 29 [2006] 187–210, 205).

52 So also Lietzmann, *Korinther*, 17: ‘Gemeint ist wohl, daß er nach einiger Strafe (ζημιωθήσεται = ὡς διὰ πυρός) gerettet wird’.

53 Contra Konradt (*Gericht*, 268), the significance of this parallel is not diminished by the fact that ‘sowohl die Züchtigung (11,32) wie das “Verderben des Fleisches” (5,5) sind auf das irdische



contribute (ἵνα) to the individual's salvation on 'the day'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in 1 Cor 3.15, the fire of divine judgment on 'the day' appears to be the circumstance through which the builder is purified of his sins and through which Christ saves.

#### 4. Conclusion

The dominant reading of 1 Cor 3.10–15 rests upon the following three assertions: (1) Paul's statement in v. 13 that fire will test the work of the builder indicates that only *deeds* and not individuals will be subjected to the fire; (2) the reference to *testing* precludes us from attributing any purifying function to the fire; and (3) his assertion that the builder 'will be saved, but only as through fire' (v. 15), is nothing more than a proverb connoting a narrow escape. Since Kirk has already called into serious question the first of the above premises, I have focused my attention on the remaining two.

In light of the probable allusion to Malachi 3, where fire plays a purifying and refining function, and given the frequent pairing of testing and refining in the Hebrew Bible, there is no obvious reason to exclude the potentially purificatory function of fire from Paul's statement that the fire will test the work of the builder. More substantially, since 1 Cor 3.15 has no precise parallel, it is difficult to accept the scholarly axiom that we are dealing with a common proverbial statement. Rather than accepting the consensus opinion, which is based on only very inexact parallels, I have considered this verse in its individual grammatical parts, for which there are ample parallels in the relevant Greek literature. The phrase διὰ πυρός can just as easily take the instrumental sense as the local sense, though scholars frequently draw attention only to the latter use. More significantly, in every other biblical occurrence of the construction σὺζω + διὰ + genitive it takes the instrumental sense. That this is the dominant usage is supported by its use in the related Greek literature. Further, since the phrase οὕτως δὲ ὡς may indicate either metaphor or fact, it presents no serious challenge to our reading.

Taken together with the recent contribution of Alexander Kirk, the arguments presented here require a significant paradigm shift in the interpretation of 1 Cor 3.10–15. The confidence with which so many modern commentators assert that διὰ πυρός must be taken in the local sense and that the fire cannot serve a purifying or soteriological function is unwarranted. It seems that those who have

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Leben bezogen und nicht endgerichtliche Akte'. As Sanders (*Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983] 108 suggests, 'faults unpunished in this world will be punished at the judgment. Further, punishment at the judgment brings atonement, just as do punishment and death in this world.'

54 Cf. Barrett, *Corinthians*, 126–7.

revolted against the use of 1 Cor 3.15 as a proof text for purgatory have overshoot the mark in being overly skeptical regarding the possibility that fire may play a purifying function.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the balance appears to be tipped in favor of the instrumental sense of *διού* and thus in favor of the soteriological function of fire in v. 15. The dominant reading, which has gone too long without critical scrutiny, cannot stand without further justification. Those wishing to defend it must give further consideration to Kirk's arguments and to the above intertextual and linguistic evidence.

55 Cf. Jean Héring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1962) 23: 'Yet it is not a question of purifying fire (no purgatory!), but of one which destroys worthless material'.