

# THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the  
21st-Century Church

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## Go Deeper Excursus 3 Bodily Resurrection in the History of the Church

False teachers have gotten the bodily resurrection wrong for nearly 2000 years.

The second-century heresy known as “Gnosticism” strongly resisted the idea of a physical resurrection—the redemption of our physical bodies—because they tended to despise the physical creation in general and exalted immaterial, spiritual substance, believing the material world had a different origin than from the one true God.<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, the third-century so-called *Gospel of Philip* says, “Some are afraid lest they rise naked. Because of this they wish to rise in the flesh, and [they] do not know that it is those who wear the [flesh] who are naked.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the second-century Gnostic *Treatise on the Resurrection* teaches that the “resurrection” occurs for believers when they are taken to heaven, not raised bodily from the dead in the future.<sup>3</sup> On this text, Wright comments, “The writer is clearly working with the terminology which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians, but the likeness is superficial. Paul’s whole exposition is held in place by a sustained and positive exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2, but the *Treatise on Resurrection* shares with Valentinianism a deep skepticism about the value of the created world.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael J. Svigel, *The Center and the Source: Second Century Incarnational Christology and Early Catholic Christianity* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2016), 307–376.

<sup>2</sup> *Gospel of Philip* (Nag Hammadi Library II.3.56,26–30). Isenberg suggests *Gospel of Philip* was written as late as the second half of the third century in Syria (Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel According to Philip: Introduction,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7, together with XIII,2, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, ed. Bentley Layton, vol. 1, *Gospel According to Thomas, Gospel According to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes*, Nag Hammadi Studies, ed. Martin Krause, James M. Robinson, and Frederik Wisse, vol. 20 [Leiden: Brill, 1989], 131–35).

<sup>3</sup> See *Treatise on the Resurrection (Epistle to Rheginos)* (Nag Hammadi Library I.4.45,14–46.2). Though the Valentinian *Treatise on the Resurrection* has occasionally been regarded as having been drafted by Valentinus himself in the 140s, most scholars hold that the book was written by a member of the Valentinian school in the late second century. See Malcolm L. Peel, “The Treatise on the Resurrection: Introduction,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Nag Hammadi Studies, ed. Martin Krause, James M. Robinson, and Frederik Wisse, vol. 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 145–46.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 540. Cf. Jacques-É. Ménard, “La notion de ‘résurrection’ dans l’*Épître à Rhèginos*,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause, Nag Hammadi Studies, ed. Martin Krause, James M.

Despite the strong philosophical, theological, and practical opposition to future, bodily resurrection in the early centuries of the church, the earliest Christians held on to this foundational apostolic teaching with a solid grip. The first-century *Didache* states that when Jesus returns in the future, “the signs of the truth shall appear: first, a sign of an opening in heaven; then a sign of the sound of a trumpet; and the third *sign*, the resurrection of the dead” (*Did.* 16.6). Wright notes, “That [*Didache*] affirms the resurrection. . . . is another witness to the same theology that we find in Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp and of course the New Testament itself.”<sup>5</sup> In the late first-century letter from Corinth to Rome, called *1 Clement*, we see the same teaching on resurrection: “Let us consider, beloved, how the Master continually points out to us the resurrection that is coming, of which he made the first fruit by raising up the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead” (*1 Clem.* 24.1).

In the early second century, Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of John, writes, “If we please him in this present age, we will receive also that which is to come, just as he promised us, to raise us from the dead, and that if we conduct our lives in a manner worthy of him, we will also reign with him, if indeed we have faith” (*Pol. Phil.* 5.2). And Polycarp’s own disciple, Irenaeus, writes, “At the end, when the Lord utters His voice ‘by the last trumpet’ [1 Cor 15:52], the dead shall be raised, as He Himself declares: ‘The hour shall come, in which all the dead which are in the tombs shall hear the voice of the Son of man, and shall come forth; those that have done good to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil to the resurrection of judgment’ [John 5:28]” (*Haer.* 5.13.1).<sup>6</sup>

Toward the end of the second century, Theophilus of Antioch placed great emphasis on the future “beatific vision” of the invisible God as the ultimate experience of our eschatological salvation. This will not occur when we are in a disembodied state, having ascended into the spiritual realm, but when we “have put off the mortal, and put on incorruption,” then we will see God. He explains, “For God will raise thy flesh immortal with thy soul; and then, having become immortal, thou shalt see the Immortal, if now you believe on Him” (*To Autolyucus* 1.7 [ANF 2]). Of course, Theophilus knew that his reader, Autolyucus—a Greek who had no interest in the redemption of the flesh—would reject the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. So,

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Robinson, and Frederik Wisse, vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 112; Malcolm L. Peel, “The Treatise on the Resurrection: Notes,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex) Notes*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Nag Hammadi Studies, ed. Martin Krause, James M. Robinson, and Frederik Wisse, vol. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 489.

<sup>6</sup> By combining the reading of 1 Cor 15:52 and John 5:28, Irenaeus appears to conflate the resurrections of the righteous and the wicked into one event that takes place “by the last trumpet.” However, we know from elsewhere in his writings that Irenaeus most certainly believed the resurrection of the righteous dead would take place first, followed by the 1000-year Millennium, then the resurrection of the wicked. Wood notes, “Whilst Irenaeus looked for a general resurrection, when God through Christ will ‘raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race’, it does not appear that he envisaged a simultaneous resurrection. The righteous will be raised first amongst mankind, prior to the earthly reign of our Lord. The wicked will be raised, in their turn, at the close of the Millennium. The purpose of the Parousia is to separate the believing from the unbelieving, and this separation begins at the moment of the first resurrection” (A. Skevington Wood, “The Eschatology of Irenaeus,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 41.1 [1969]: 34). This passage should warn us about how Irenaeus reads these eschatological passages. Perhaps for Irenaeus “the last trumpet” was not so much a single event during which specific and discrete events occur in a strict chronology, but really the voice of Christ *by which* these events occur.

he says, “But you do not believe that the dead are raised. When the resurrection shall take place, then you will believe, whether you will or no; and your faith shall be reckoned for unbelief, unless you believe now” (1.8). This passage suggests the possibility that Theophilus expected the resurrection would be a noticeable (and notable) event.<sup>7</sup> Resurrection was so central to Theophilus’s thought that even in his retelling of the biblical creation narrative, he notes, “Consider, further, their variety, and diverse beauty, and multitude, and how through them resurrection is exhibited, for a pattern of the resurrection of all men which is to be” (2.14). Likewise, with reference to the typology of the moon, he writes, “The moon wanes monthly, and in a manner dies, being a type of man; then it is born again, and is crescent, for a pattern of the future resurrection” (2.15). As to the nature of the resurrection body, Theophilus describes it as “spotless, and righteous, and immortal” (2.26).

In the latter part of the second century, Athenagoras of Athens describes the resurrection as “a species of change” of the body, “and the last of all, and a change for the better of what still remains in existence at that time” (*Res.* 12 [ANF 2]). He readily admits that the doctrine causes much confusion: “For in regard to this subject also we find some utterly disbelieving, and some others doubting, and even among those who have accepted the first principles some who are as much at a loss what to believe as those who doubt” (*Res.* 1).<sup>8</sup>

Later in his *Embassy on behalf of Christians*, Athenagoras expounds upon and clarifies his position on the resurrection as it relates to judgment and reward. This discussion is specifically in connection with the false charge of cannibalism among Christians: “But if to anyone it appears sheer nonsense that the body which has moldered away, and been dissolved, and reduced to nothing, should be reconstructed, we certainly cannot with any reason be accused of wickedness with reference to those that believe not, but only of folly” (*Leg.* 33 [ANF 2]). Similarly, he notes in *Resurrection* that God will “unite and gather together again bodies that are dead, or even entirely dissolved into their elements, so as to constitute the same persons” (*Res.* 2; cf. 3, 7 [ANF 2]). At the conclusion of this same work, he writes, “That the same soul should obtain the same body is impossible in any other way, and possible only by the resurrection; for if this takes place, an end befitting the nature of men follows also” (*Res.* 25). Both the wicked and the righteous will give an account and be rewarded or punished in their resurrected bodies. Earlier he noted that the nature

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<sup>7</sup> It may be that Theophilus had in mind a distinct resurrection of the righteous followed by a period of judgment, during which the error of Autolyclus’s unbelief would be evident. Or he had in mind a general resurrection of the righteous and wicked, the former unto blessedness and the latter unto judgment. At that time Autolyclus’s belief in the reality of the resurrection would have no effect on him. This similar thought is expressed in 1.14, where he notes, “If now you continue unbelieving, you [will] be convinced hereafter, when you are tormented with eternal punishments.” Here is not only an affirmation of eternal conscious torment but an indication that Theophilus may have had in mind a resurrection of the wicked unto judgment in this earlier context.

<sup>8</sup> Those “utterly disbelieving” and “doubting” refers to outsiders. Yet Athenagoras acknowledges that even some initiates in the Christian faith are confused regarding the resurrection, despite the fact that they had apparently been taught the doctrine during initiation and have no real basis for disbelieving or doubting. It may be that the issue here is not so much a rejection of the general fact of a future resurrection but perplexity over the details related to the doctrine.

of the resurrection body would be “free from all change or suffering” and “not as flesh, even though we shall have” flesh, but as “heavenly spirit” (*Leg.* 31). Yet this language is clarified and balanced by the insistence on the general resurrection of the same bodies that died (*Leg.* 33). It is clear, though, that the “heavenly” quality free from suffering is reserved not for the wicked who will be punished, but for the redeemed who will be transformed and glorified in their bodies. In any case, there is no question that Athenagoras—in agreement with all the earliest Christians—affirmed belief that “when the dissolution of bodies takes place, they should, from the very same elements of which they were constructed at first, be constructed again” (*Leg.* 33). Yet the quality of these bodies will be incorruptible (*Res.* 3). Humans will “become immortal” and “free from want” and from “corruption and suffering” (*Res.* 10).

Athenagoras’s main argument for the reality of a future bodily resurrection rests on the purpose for which humans were created (*Res.* 12–13) and the nature of humans—that is, as integrated psychosomatic beings (*Res.* 15). He notes, “Man, therefore, who consists of the two parts, must continue forever. But it is impossible for him to continue unless he rise again. For if no resurrection were to take place, the nature of men as men would not continue” (*Res.* 15 [ANF 2]). Regarding resurrection unto judgment, he notes, “Although all human beings who die rise again, yet not all who rise again are to be judged” (*Res.* 14). Thus, Athenagoras asserts a universal resurrection of both righteous and wicked. He also asserts the resurrection even of infants and young children who have died (*Res.* 14).

At the turn of the second to third century, Tertullian offers a sharp rebuke against those who had swung the pendulum too far into a realized eschatology, that is, those who spiritualize the resurrection to make it a too-present reality while rejecting a literal, future, bodily resurrection. He expresses the absurdity of such a notion: “And is there now anybody who has risen again, except the heretic? He, of course, has already quitted the grave of his own corpse—although he is even now liable to fevers and ulcers; he, too, has already trodden down his enemies—although he has even now to struggle with the powers of the world. And as a matter of course, he is already a king—although he even now owes to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Tertullian, *Res. carn.* 22 [ANF 3]). He also writes, “The whole human race shall be raised again, to have its dues meted out according as it has merited in the period of good or evil, and thereafter to have these paid out through the immeasurable ages of eternity” (*Apol.* 48 [ANF 3]).

On the basis of the clear biblical teaching as well as the early, widespread, and foundational nature of the church’s confession on the future, bodily resurrection, the Council of Constantinople in 381 affirmed unambiguously: “We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”<sup>9</sup> This doctrine of bodily resurrection continued to occupy a central place in Christian theology, even when eschatological expectations and emphases turned from physical to spiritual and from earthly to heavenly. In the sixth century, philosopher and theologian, Boethius,

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<sup>9</sup> *The Constantinopolitan Creed* in John H. Leith, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3d ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 33.

wrote, “In the end of the age our bodies shall rise incorruptible to the kingdom of heaven, to the end that he who has lived well on earth by God’s gift should be altogether blessed in that resurrection, but he who has lived amiss should, with the gift of resurrection, enter upon misery. And this is a firm principle of our religion, to believe not only that men’s souls do not perish, but that their very bodies, which the coming of death had destroyed, recover their first state by this bliss that is to be.”<sup>10</sup>

Not only was the resurrection of the body articulated and defended in all catholic traditions from the patristic to medieval periods, but it has also been believed, confessed, and taught in all orthodox protestant traditions. In 1559, Calvin wrote concerning the resurrection of the body:

We must hold, as has already been observed, that the body in which we shall rise will be the same as at present in respect of substance, but that the quality will be different; just as the body of Christ which was raised up was the same as that which had been offered in sacrifice, and yet excelled in other qualities, as if it had been altogether different.... The corruptible body, therefore, in order that we may be raised, will not perish or vanish away, but, divested of corruption, will be clothed with incorruption.<sup>11</sup>

The Mennonite Dordrecht Confession of 1632 says, “Regarding the resurrection of the dead, we confess with the mouth, and believe with the heart, that according to the Scriptures all men who shall have died or ‘fallen asleep,’ will, through the incomprehensible power of God, at the day of judgment, be ‘raised up’ and made alive.”<sup>12</sup> The Reformed Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) states, “At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.”<sup>13</sup> And the 1833 New Hampshire Baptist Confession affirms that “at the last day, Christ will descend from heaven, and raise the dead from the grave to final retribution.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Boethius, *On the Catholic Faith*, in Boethius, *The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: Heinemann, 1918), 71.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1 vol. ed., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:271.

<sup>12</sup> *The Dordrecht Confession*, 18, in Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 307–308.

<sup>13</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 32.2 in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with A History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, 4th ed. rev. and enlarged, *Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 3:671.

<sup>14</sup> *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, 18, in Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 339.