

# THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

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

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## Go Deeper Excursus 6 The Eschatology of Didache 16

After its introductory “Two Ways” catechetical section (Did. 1–6), the Didache presents instructions concerning baptism and the eucharist, fasting and prayers, and discerning between true and false teachers (Did. 7–13). Then, after a brief discussion of gathering under proper leadership (Did. 14–15), the text ends with what many call a “Mini-Apocalypse” (Did. 16). That section begins with an exhortation to “watch,” reminiscent of Matthew 24:42 and 1 Thessalonians 5:6 (Did. 16.1). The image of the foolish virgins whose lamps went out (Matt 25:1–8) appears briefly as well: “Do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming.”<sup>1</sup>

The church is to “gather together frequently” to ensure perseverance in the faith until the end (Did. 16.2; cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Heb 10:23–25; Ign. *Eph.* 13.1). The warning strongly urges perseverance, suggesting that only those who are faithful to the end will receive their reward. What follows is a brief but dense description of the end times. False prophets, corrupters, deceivers, and haters will abound; lawlessness will increase, and persecution will ensue (Did. 16.3–4).<sup>2</sup> In the midst of this general deterioration of society, “the deceiver of the world will appear as a son of God and will perform signs and wonders” (Did. 16.4). The similarities with 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12, Paul’s “man of lawlessness,” and Revelation 13’s two beasts should be obvious. The notion of a final “antichrist” figure empowered by Satan and claiming to be the savior of the world abounds in early Christian literature; it was a universal expectation. During the reign of this figure, “the earth will be delivered into his hands” (cf. Rev 12:9; 13:3, 7) and his abominations will be unparalleled in history (Did. 16.4; cf. Dan 12:1; Matt 24:15). At that time, “all humankind will come to the fiery test” (Did. 16.5; cf. Rev 3:10). Many will “fall away and perish” (Did. 16.4; cf. Matt 24:10).

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<sup>1</sup> These themes are so common in the early church that one does not need to presume a written source. In fact, the language and imagery of the Didache’s portrayal of the end of the world is so unique that one ought to regard it as an independent testimony to the early church’s unified eschatological expectations.

<sup>2</sup> This general characterization of the end times is pervasive in the New Testament, See Matt 7:15; 24:11, 12, 24; 2 Tim 3:1–7; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:3, etc.

However, “those who endure in their faith” (Did. 16.4; cf. Matt 24:13) will be “saved by the accursed one himself.” The phrase “saved by (σωθήσονται ὑπό)” refers simply to being rescued or delivered by a savior (Deut 33:29; Isa 45:17). In this case, “the accursed one (τοῦ καταθέματος)” must be a reference to Christ, who will save those who await him from heaven (Phil 3:20; 1 Thess 1:10).<sup>3</sup> It is possible that “the accursed one” refers to Galatians 3:13, where Christ is said to have become “a curse for us” by dying on the cross. It is a title of Christ never embraced by subsequent church fathers.

Finally, and relevant to our question, the Didachist presents a series of “signs of the truth”: that is, the vindication of the “accursed one” for who he really is—the Lord and Judge of the world (Did. 16.6). The three “signs” are (1) an opening in heaven (cf. Rev 4:1; 19:11); (2) the sound of a trumpet (cf. 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 4:1); and (3) the resurrection of the dead (cf. 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16); 4), at which time the Lord will come upon the clouds of heaven (Did. 16.8; cf. Dan 7:13; Matt 24:30; 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7).

An interesting parenthetical statement is found in Didache 16.7. Clarifying the “resurrection of the dead,” the Didachist says, “but not of all (οὐ πάντων δέ); rather, as it has been said, ‘The Lord will come, and all his saints with him’ (ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐρρέθη Ἡξει ὁ κύριος καὶ πάντες οἱ ἅγιοι μετ’ αὐτοῦ).” The quotation comes almost certainly from the Septuagint of Zechariah 14:5 (καὶ ἦξει κύριος ὁ θεός μου, καὶ πάντες οἱ ἅγιοι μετ’ αὐτοῦ). Note that in Zechariah, the subject is “the Lord God,” whereas in Didache 16.7, the subject is the Lord Jesus Christ, reflecting not only a high Christology but also Christ’s assumption of Yahweh’s role in a theophanic visitation in judgment—executer of the Day of the Lord (see chapters 15 and 16 of *The Fathers on the Future*). However, the peculiar part of this text is the limitation of the resurrection at the Lord’s return to only “the saints.” This apparent limitation at the coming of Christ is similar to 1 Thessalonians 4:16 where the “dead in Christ” are raised at the second coming; we also find it in 1 Corinthians 15, especially verse 23, where at Christ’s coming, “those who are of Christ” are resurrected.

The fact that “not all” are raised at Christ’s coming, according to the Didache, is rather puzzling because the overwhelming Jewish and Christian expectation was that both the righteous and the wicked would be raised for judgment at the end of the age (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:46; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; Rev 20:12–13). It seems most implausible that the Didache would modify such a pervasive doctrine of the general resurrection without any explanation. However, the puzzle can be easily solved if one considers that the Didachist’s language represents an early millennialism, in which the resurrection of the righteous saints (those “in Christ”) occurs at the return of Christ, followed by an earthly reign, which then ends with the resurrection of the wicked to judgment. Though it is not entirely clear that the original eschatology of the Didache was a form of early premillennialism, it seems more historically responsible to opt for an explanation that was known in the early church (resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked separated by a millennial

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<sup>3</sup> Shawn J. Wilhite, *The Didache: A Commentary*, Apostolic Fathers Commentary Series, vol. 1, ed. Paul A. Hartog and Shawn J. Wilhite (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 229.

kingdom),<sup>4</sup> rather than point to this as an instance of unique teaching regarding the resurrection of the righteous only.<sup>5</sup>

The challenge for the interpreter of *Didache* 16 is that the ending of the text as we have it today appears to be missing. Aldridge notes that whereas the other six writings contained in the same codex as the *Didache* begin on the next line of the page following the previous writing, this is not the case with the *Didache*, “which ends in the middle of fol. 80b, with the entire remaining half-page being left blank—an extraordinary omission! The *Didache*’s ending in chapter 16 is also abrupt and unresolved. The chapter recounts the eschaton inclusively up until the point at which it breaks off (the beginning of Christ’s return) and is obviously only half-complete.”<sup>6</sup> The scribe who copied the *Didache* from its exemplar also punctuated the end in such a way that suggested he was aware that the copy from which he was making his own copy was missing the original ending, which he probably hoped to locate. Thus, he left space in the manuscript to complete the book at a future time. That time obviously never came.<sup>7</sup> In a 1999 article, Aldridge attempts to patch up the missing eschatological content of the first-century *Didache* by drawing from a fourth-century writing known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which itself incorporated much material from the *Didache* in its own manual of church order. It is this reconstructed text upon which Charles Hill depends to dismiss the testimony of *Didache* as a potential witness of a premillennial eschatology.<sup>8</sup>

However, Aldridge himself acknowledges that “*Constitutions*’ most notable differences from the Bryennian *Didache* (other than its interpolations) are its great reduction of the rules for hosting itinerants (chs. 11–12) and significant alterations in the sections on baptism and liturgy (chs. 7, 9 and 10).”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the compilers and redactors of the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* did not hesitate to amend the material of the first-century *Didache* in order to transform its primitive content to the theology and practice of the fourth century. If they edited it to conform to later ecclesiological and sacramental theology and practice, why would they have

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Barn. 15.4–9; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 80–81; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.25.2–4; 5.30.4; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.12. Cf. William C. Varner, “The *Didache* ‘Apocalypse’ and Matthew 24,” *BSac* 165 (2008): 318.

<sup>5</sup> I disagree with Draper’s suggestion (Jonathan A. Draper, “The *Didache*,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, edited by Wilhelm Pratscher [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010], 20) that this notion of the resurrection of the righteous only originated in the Maccabean martyr cult. This appears to be a misunderstanding of the teaching in the Maccabean writings. Second Macc 7:14 reads, “So when he was ready to die he said thus, It is good, being put to death by men, to look for hope from God to be raised up again by him: as for thee, thou shalt have no resurrection to life (ἀνάστασις εἰς ζωὴν)” (cf. 2 Macc 7:9). The “resurrection to life” is already distinguished from the “resurrection” to death or punishment, described in Dan 12:2—“And many of those who asleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life (εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον), and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Claiming to be numbered among the resurrection to life does not mean others will be excluded from the resurrection to judgment.

<sup>6</sup> Aldridge, “Lost Ending,” 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> Whether the exemplar of the Jerusalem Manuscript of the *Didache* had itself left the space blank or perhaps suffered from a physical defect of the page cannot be known. Nor can we speculate whether the omission of the longer ending of *Didache* was intentional or accidental.

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 77–78.

<sup>9</sup> Aldridge, “Lost Ending,” 5n11.

any qualms about amending its eschatology to fit the views of fourth-century amillennialism? In fact, we see evidence that this is precisely the case. While Didache 16.6–7 preserves the statement that implies a partial resurrection at the return of Christ—“and the third [sign] of a resurrection of the dead, but not of all (οὐ πάντων δέ), but as has been said, the Lord shall come and all the holy ones with him”—*Apostolic Constitutions* 7.32.3–4 drops out the language implying a partial resurrection (see comparison below, my translation). Clearly, the redactor(s) had no problem modifying this aspect of the apocalypse of Didache. Therefore, any dependence on Aldridge’s reconstructed ending of Didache based on the expanded ending found in *Apostolic Constitutions* must be rejected.

### Comparison of Didache and *Apostolic Constitutions*<sup>10</sup>

Didache 16:6–9	<i>Apostolic Constitutions</i> 7.32.3–5
<p><sup>6</sup>And then the signs of the truth will appear: first a sign of an opening in heaven, then a sign of a sound of a trumpet, and the third <b>of a resurrection of the dead</b> (ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν), <b>but not of all</b> (οὐ πάντων δέ), <b>but as has been said, the Lord shall come and all the holy ones with him.</b> <sup>8</sup>Then the world will see the Lord coming upon the clous of heaven. . .</p>	<p><sup>3</sup>And then the sign of the Son of Man shall appear in heaven, then there will be a sound of a trumpet from an archangel and at that <b>time a revival to life of those who are sleeping</b> (ἀναβίωσις τῶν κεκοιμημένων). <sup>4</sup><b>And then the Lord will come and all the holy ones with him</b> with a quaking upon the clouds with the angels of his power on the throne of his kingdom to condemn the world-deceiving devil and to give to each one according to his deed. <sup>5</sup>Then the wicked ones will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life, inheriting those things which eye has not seen and hear has not heard and has not entered upon the heart of people, which things God has prepared for those who love him, and they shall rejoice in the kingdom of God which is in Christ Jesus.</p>

<sup>10</sup> The translations in this chart are my own.