PUTTING ON THE GOD MAN: THE ECCLESIASTICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIDYMUS “THE BLIND” AND ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

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Introduction

Didymus “the Blind” was a popular urban ascetic and educator who resided in Alexandria, Egypt during the fourth century A.D. Many students came to him in Alexandria and sought him out for instruction. Among his students, which were mostly monks or other ascetics, were Jerome (ca. 347-420), Palladius (ca. 364-425), Rufinus of Aquileia (345-411) and Evagrius of Pontus (345-399).  

Ironically, despite Didymus’ popularity, we know very little about this famous ascetic. Didymus was born around 310 or 313 A.D., lost his eyesight at the age of either four or five, and died in 398 AD. The fact of his blindness at such an early age is remarkable and humbling for anyone who styles himself or herself as knowledgeable, since the constant reference in his works to various biblical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and classical works show that he memorized the contents that he heard while others read to him. His student Rufinus says that, while those who read to him would sleep at night, Didymus would stay up and repeat what others had read to him in his mind, “like an animal chewing its cud.” In addition to this, Didymus was also well versed in classical philosophy, dialectics, geometry, and astronomy. While proof is lacking, the church historian Sozomen claims that he reportedly taught himself to read by feeling letters carved on a tablet. If this report

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1 Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its*

2 Jerome *De vir ill.* 109; Palladius *Hist. laus.* 1.1, IV.1. According to Jerome, Didymus was still alive in 393 AD and was eighty-three years old. He also states in his *Chronicle* that Didymus lost his eyesight when he was five years old. In contrast, Palladius states that he visited Didymus four times in ten years. This visit to Alexandria happened in 388 AD, thus putting Didymus’ death in 398 AD. Palladius also states that Didymus lost his eyesight when he was four years old.

3 Rufinus *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.7.
were true, then Didymus would have developed something similar to a rudimentary form of Braille.4

Didymus lived during the first Nicene Council in 325 A.D, the subsequent Arian controversy that followed, and the time of the first Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. Along with and likely in direct support of Athanasius, Didymus defended the Nicene doctrine against an array of opponents, which included Arians, Apollinarians, and Manicheans.5 Rufinus claims that Didymus was “the teacher of the ecclesiastical school of Alexandria approved by Athanasius.”6 If this claim holds merit, then this places Didymus as a teacher in the same school as other eminent Christian teachers such as Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) and Origen (184-254). Palladius also speaks of Didymus’ “cell,” which suggests that he was an urban ascetic who taught those who came to him.7

Like his predecessor Origen, Didymus spent a large amount of time compiling lectures and commentaries on the exegesis of Scripture. Unfortunately, by his association with Origen, Didymus was swept up into the “Origenist controversy” following his death during the reign of Justinian in the sixth century and accused of following Origen too closely in his allegorical exegesis and in the heretical teaching of the pre-existence of

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4 Sozomen Historia Ecclesiastica iii.15.
6 Ibid; Rufinus H.E. 11.7.
7 Palladius, Hist. laus IV.3.
souls. As a result, some zealous for orthodoxy found and destroyed the vast majority of Didymus’ works after the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 533 A.D.\textsuperscript{8}

Even though the majority of his works were destroyed, Didymus’ extant works include findings such as his \textit{Against the Manichees}, a contested work entitled \textit{De Trinitate} in three books, and his work \textit{De Spiritu Sancto}, translated into Latin from the Greek original by Jerome.\textsuperscript{9} In addition to these, thanks to the discovery of papyri at Tura near Cairo in 1941, there is now a more robust collection of Didymus’ works. Among the findings at Tura are Didymus’ \textit{Commentary on Genesis}, the \textit{Commentary on Zechariah}, and his classroom lectures contained in his \textit{Commentary on Job}, the \textit{Commentary on Ecclesiastes}, and in the \textit{Commentary on Psalms}.\textsuperscript{10}

While the contours of history seemingly swept Didymus out of the fourth-century Alexandrian picture, it is apparent that many of his contemporaries saw him as a prominent theologian and bastion of pro-Nicene orthodoxy. An unfortunate by-product of Didymus’ condemnation as an Origenist is that there is not an exhaustive answer to the question of his relationship to Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria. If more of Didymus’ work were available, then a more accurate picture of the exact relationship between the famous bishop of Alexandria and the blind urban ascetic possibly would emerge. Such


\textsuperscript{10} The only study available in English on the Didymus’ commentaries found at Tura is the work of Richard Layton in his \textit{Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria: Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). This study is a wonderful introduction to the thought of Didymus in relation to his role and self-understanding as an educator.
information, now lost, could have possibly revealed precisely what Didymus’ alleged role within the ecclesiastical school of Alexandria was and how it related, if at all, to Athanasius’ ecclesial, political, and theological agenda. Yet, thanks to the archaeological discoveries at Tura, one can discern some semblance of the relationship between these two men.

Didymus aided Athanasius’ ecclesial, political, and theological agenda by championing a particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian theology in fourth-century Alexandria. Didymus did so as the head of the Alexandrian catechetical school, a position that had evolved over the preceding two centuries because of the encroaching power of the bishops of Alexandria that brought the school under direct ecclesial control. In this position, he both supported the pro-Nicene theology of Athanasius and upheld the bishop’s command to combat certain heretical ascetic groups living within Egypt.

The first area of investigation will entail an overview of the connection between Didymus and Athanasius of Alexandria. Evidence will be garnered to display the relation between Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria and Didymus’ alleged position held within the Alexandrian catechetical school. A second theme examined will be references to a local bishop by Didymus in a couple of his extant works, thought to be Athanasius, to whom he seems to be in close relation. A final consideration examines the similar theological polemics of both Athanasius and Didymus against the ascetic Hierakite movement in fourth century Egypt.

The second part of this essay considers Didymus’ theology of deification from the vantage point of his Commentary on Zechariah. Didymus’ Commentary on Zechariah is
intriguing, since it contains an articulation of Christian deification that mirrors the particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian orthodoxy taught by Athanasius in his *Letter to Marcellinus* and *Life of Antony*. Didymus, through the means of a spiritual exegesis of Zechariah, expounds a Christian theology of deification that transforms the reader or student into the image of Christ, thus fulfilling the will of God in creating humanity in his image. Didymus and Athanasius’ shared strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy does not view this life of Christian virtue as the result of human effort alone, but as an appropriation of the work of Jesus Christ in his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. In this act, the Christian in reality puts on Christ and thus cooperates with the living Word in order that he or she becomes the image and likeness of God, fulfilling the intention of humanity’s creation.\(^\text{11}\) In sharing this particular strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy with Athanasius, Didymus aided the Alexandrian bishop with his desired ecclesial, political, and theological agenda both in Alexandria and throughout Egypt.

**The Connection between Didymus and Athanasius**

*Didymus’ Role in the Alexandrian Catechetical School*

Didymus’ alleged position as the director of the catechetical school of Alexandria rests upon the testimony of a couple of ancient sources. The testimonies that connect Didymus with Athanasius, who was bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373 A.D., and speak of him as the director of the catechetical school are Didymus’ student Rufinus (ca. 340-410) and the church historian Sozomen (ca. 400-450). Rufinus wanted to connect his master with the bishop Athanasius. He says:

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\(^{11}\) It is to be noted that, outside of the translations of Didymus’ commentaries on Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes (since there are no English translations), the translations in this essay have consulted, and in places use, the translations made by the scholars on the works mentioned and cited in the bibliography. I make translation changes in certain texts as the result of personal preference and style.
In short, being taught by God, he obtained such learning and knowledge in both divine and secular matters, that he became a teacher in the church school (*ut scholae ecclesiasticae doctor exsisteret*), having been fully approved by Bishop Athanasius and the other learned men in the church of God. In other subjects as well, whether logic or geometry, or even astronomy or mathematics, he was so well versed that no philosopher ever was able to prevail or hem him in, by a proposition from any of these sciences. He immediately accepted his answers, and admitted him to be a master (*magistrum*) of the discipline, from which he had drawn the question.\(^{12}\)

Rufinus directly connects Didymus with the famed bishop Athanasius, who he says fully approved him to become a teacher in the catechetical school. The expression *scholae ecclesiasticae doctor* often is interpreted to mean that Athanasius appointed Didymus to be the actual director of Alexandria’s catechetical school.\(^{13}\) However, the basis for this does not come directly from Rufinus, but from the church historian Sozomen. He claims explicitly that Didymus was the president of the catechetical school in Alexandria. It is likely that Sozomen based his claim on evidence derived from Philip of Side’s *Universal History*, a work that exists only in fragmentary form, which listed the directors of the Alexandrian catechetical school.\(^{14}\) The fragment of Philip’s work that survives says that Didymus was the last president of the catechetical school, with the one exception of a certain Rhodes, who was Philip’s teacher. Richard Layton, however,

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\(^{12}\) Rufinus *H.E.* 11.7; Richard A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria: Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship*, 15.


\(^{14}\) Sozomen *H.E.* iii.15; The fragment of Philip of Side’s *Universal History* concerning Didymus still survives. See J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. 39 (Turnholti, Belgium: Brepols, 1966), 229. For a discussion on this fragment, see Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria*, 16.
claims that Philip’s list is “replete with anachronisms” and that it “transparently boosts the credentials of Philip’s own teacher.”

There are also questions concerning Rufinus’ testimony. Is one able to accept his portrayal of Didymus as the director of the Alexandrian catechetical school as a reliable testimony? The two books on church history written by Rufinus, his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, were a supplement to his translation of the nine books of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*. Layton makes two astute points in regard to Rufinus’ translation of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and to his own *Historia Ecclesiastica*. He explains that Rufinus consistently translates Eusebius’ references to the catechetical school of Alexandria as *scholae ecclesiasticae*. This seems to indicate that, by using the same phrase in relation to Didymus, Rufinus is associating him with the famous institution. This also assumes that the school was active during Rufinus’ own lifetime. Next Layton shows that Rufinus carefully avoids assigning Didymus director of the school in his description of the blind scholar. Rufinus does this by rendering Eusebius’ mentioning of the school’s director as *magisterium*. In contrast, his designation of Didymus as *doctor scholae ecclesiasticae* seems to indicate that Rufinus may be distinguishing the activities of Didymus from previous school directors, who were described as *magisterium*. This, of course, is only true if one takes Rufinus’ words at face value and holds an assumption of the consistent usage of *magisterium*. Yet Layton does not mention the possibility that the role of director could have possibly been termed differently in Rufinus’ lifetime than in

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15 Richard A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria*, 16.
the time of Clement or Origen. However, this is solely conjecture based on possible scenarios and not on any known historical evidence.\textsuperscript{16}

Layton also points out that Rufinus designated another Alexandrian intellectual, Pierius, as \textit{doctor ecclesiae} for his ability in public and private instruction, and that Eusebius did not assign him an official position within the catechetical school. Thus, the designation of Didymus as \textit{doctor} by Rufinus allows for a wide range of relationships between Athanasius as bishop and Didymus as scholar. This spectrum could range from approval of the teaching activities of Didymus to his supervising the education of lay Christians. However, it is not possible to reach firm conclusions on Didymus’ activity in the catechetical school based solely on the passage from Rufinus’ \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica}.\textsuperscript{17}

In spite of this uncertainty, a few points are plausible and even likely. It seems unlikely that Rufinus conjured up the testimony of his teacher Didymus out of thin air. To do so would have likely been easily discerned and quickly criticized by his opponents. The fact that others, such as Sozomen, make similar claims also supports Rufinus not conjuring this account out of nothing. While he likely is attempting to legitimize his teacher by explicitly connecting him with the approval of Athanasius, this does not invalidate the claim that Didymus did have some type of relationship with the famed Alexandrian bishop. The clear connection that Rufinus makes between Didymus and the same catechetical school mentioned by Eusebius lends itself to the high plausibility that Didymus’ teaching activities, whatever they officially or unofficially were, did not occur

\textsuperscript{16} Rufinus \textit{H.E.} 7.32.30.

\textsuperscript{17} Richard A. Layton, \textit{Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria}, 15-6.
without the knowledge or approval of Athanasius. This, together with the interpretive
testimony of Sozomen regarding Didymus as the president of the school, points towards
the fact that this narrative did not originate from mere political rhetoric or fanciful
history.  

*Didymus’ References to an Anonymous Alexandrian Bishop*

The next connections to consider are the references to a local bishop by Didymus,
thought to be Athanasius, in a couple of his extant works. In these references, this bishop
and Didymus seem to be in close relation. The first text considered is from Didymus’
*Commentary on Zechariah*, where he comments on chapter four verses one through three.
Didymus, after interpreting the vision of the prophet in several senses, says that he once
knew a teacher presiding over the whole Church (προϊσταμένου τῆς καθολικῆς
Ἐκκλησίας διδασκάλου) who taught on this text. He explains that this teacher claimed
that the vision of the golden lampstand in this passage is the light shed on the Father,
while the olive tree on the right and left refers to the considerations concerning the Son
and the Holy Spirit.  

At first, one might think that Didymus here only refers to a teacher and not to a
clerical figure. Yet this seems unlikely, since he clarifies the role of this teacher
(διδάσκαλος) by describing him as one presiding over the whole Church of Alexandria.
Doutreleau postulates that this presiding teacher over the whole Church was most likely

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18 Ibid., 16. This statement stills stands, even though Layton sees Sozomen’s testimony concerning
Didymus as an amplification of Rufinus’ biographical information possibly derived from dubious
testimonial.

tῆς καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας διδασκάλου σαφηνέως τὴν προκειμένην λέξιν ὅτι τὸ ἐπάνω τῆς λυχνίας ὁ
περὶ τοῦ Πατρὸς φωτισμὸς ἐστὶν, αἱ δὲ ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ ἐξ εὐφορίας αὐτοῦ ἔλαβαν οἱ περὶ Υἱοῦ καὶ ἀγίου
Πνεύματος εἰσὶν λόγοι.
Athanasius, who was bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373. Although this claim is not certain, considering that Didymus wrote his *Commentary on Zechariah* around 386 and Athanasius died in 373, it is plausible. Since Didymus says that he heard this taught in the past (Ἠκουσα ἐγὼ ποτε), this makes the case for Athanasius being this teacher rather strong. It is not likely that Didymus would make mention of a teacher in a positive manner, as he does here, who was of a different theologian persuasion than himself. This situation arose many times during Athanasius’ bishopric, since he spent seventeen years in exile away from Alexandria. The association between the two made by Didymus’ student Rufinus and the church historian Sozomen discussed previously supports that Athanasius is this teacher.

A second passage where Didymus mentions the local clergy is in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. This passage from Didymus describes an ordinance from an Alexandrian clergyman who prohibits the reading of apocryphal books in the church. Didymus describes this clergyman as an ancient bishop of the church (ἀρχιος ἐπίσκοπος ἐκκλησιαστικός) and approves of his ordinance. If this were the only piece of evidence to go on, then any attempt to identify this ἀρχιος ἐπίσκοπος ἐκκλησιαστικός would...
likely be unsuccessful. Luckily, there is evidence supporting the interpretation of this passage from Didymus as a reference to Athanasius.

A piece of evidence that helps identify this ancient bishop mentioned in Didymus’ comment in the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* is found in Athanasius’ thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*, which he wrote on Easter in 367 A.D. Athanasius makes his pronouncement saying:

> But since we have made mention of heretics as dead, and of ourselves as possessing the divine Scriptures for salvation…I fear lest, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, some of the simple should be beguiled from their simplicity and purity by the craftiness of certain men, and should read other books, those that are called apocryphal, and be led astray by the similarity of their names with the true books. I ask you to bear patiently, if I also write, by way of remembrance, of matters with which you are acquainted, influenced by the need and advantage of the Church.  

In this letter from Athanasius, the bishop of the Alexandrian church speaks ill of crafty men deceiving the simple members of the Christian flock by means of so-called apocryphal books. While no one explicitly identifies the bishop mentioned by Didymus in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* as Athanasius, it seems unlikely that a connection between Didymus’ reference to a bishop prohibiting the reading of apocryphal books and Athanasius’ thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* decrying such works is a coincidence. The fact that these condemned apocryphal works are called by the same term in Didymus’ passage from the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and in Athanasius’ thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* supports the likelihood that Didymus refers to Athanasius in this passage from his commentary. If this is a reference to Athanasius, then it fits in well with his desire to unify the orthodox church in Egypt after 366. Since he was exiled three times from 356-366, it was only in his last seven years of life that he was able to “enjoy the freedom to

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24 Athanasius *Letter XXXIX*. 
bring the monastic movement into greater doctrinal unity with the Church.”25 Within this context, the desire for a uniform canon of Scripture by Athanasius would definitely be a necessity. This desire to unify the monastic movement in Egypt directly relates to the next point in the argument concerning the Hierakite movement in Egypt.26

While it does not necessarily prove that this passage refers to Athanasius, the evidence presented here indicates that he is the most likely candidate.27 It is possible that Didymus here refers to a bishop who ruled before Athanasius, perhaps someone such as Athanasius’ mentor Alexander. This could be plausible since Athanasius speaks of “matters with which you are acquainted,” thus possibly referring to a past ruling from a previous bishop.28 Another manner of reading this phrase from Athanasius is to realize that he sees this issue as a recurring problem, which would seem to indicate that it was of a more recent origin. Yet, this hypothetical theory that Didymus’ referent refers to a bishop before Athanasius is based upon no historical evidence. In contrast, the view that this passage refers to Athanasius has strong textual evidence, thus making it more plausible.

Didymus’ Polemical Attack Against the Egyptian Hierakites

A final theme is Athanasius’ theological polemics against a certain ascetic group in Egypt known as the Hierakite movement and the parallel to Didymus’ polemic against the same group. After his last exile in 366, Athanasius desired to bring the monastic

27 Richard A. Layton, Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria, 18. Layton, while he assumes Athanasius to be the teacher in Didymus’ passage from the Commentary on Zechariah mentioned above, passes over the opportunity to identify this reference from the Commentary on Ecclesiastes as Athanasius. I am indebted to a private conversation with James R. Adams on this very issue, which helped me work through this line of reasoning.
28 Athanasius Letter XXXIX.
movement within Egypt into greater doctrinal unity with the Church. However, this desire to do so did not arise late in the bishop’s career. He planted the seeds of such desire much earlier in his reign as Alexandria’s bishop. One finds an example of this in Athanasius’ *First Letter to Virgins*.

The end of imperial persecution of Christians at the hand of Rome in 311, affected by Galerius’ Edict of Toleration in the same year, allowed the number of Christian virgins to increase, to organize into ascetic communities, and to develop a more public form of piety. In the years following his election as Alexandria’s bishop in 328, Athanasius took it upon himself to bring some order to this new situation. He endorsed ways of life that would minimize contact between male and female virgins and the public life of the city. He also fostered and supported a more private life for Christian virgins in order that they could live with an “undivided attention to Christ, and yet maintain a close connection to the official cult of the Church.”29

However, Athanasius encountered opposition to this ascetic program since there were many alternative ascetic ideals readily available to the Egyptian virgins. One alternative ascetic ideal’s nucleus formed around the ascetic Hieracas of Leontopolis (ca. late 3rd-early 4th century). Hieracas offered his own vision of the virginal life, which he saw as “the only legitimate response to the teaching of example of Christ.”30 He excluded married people both from his worship services and from the kingdom of heaven that only the celibate could inherit. Hieracas understood history as leaving marriage behind in the period prior to Christ’s incarnation. As a result, Hieracas believed that the arrival of


30 Ibid., 21-2.
Christ ushered in a new period of self-control and continence.\textsuperscript{31} It is in opposition to this that Athanasius writes his \textit{First Letter to Virgins}.\textsuperscript{32}

Unfortunately, none of Hieracas’ work survives except within the polemical rhetoric of his opponents, especially Athanasius. Athanasius is not kind to Hieracas in his \textit{First Letter to Virgins}, and he exhorts the recipients of his letter to oppose Hieracas and his heretical doctrine. Athanasius says:

Especially take courage and condemn Hieracas, who says that marriage is evil inasmuch as virginity is good. In this manner, it should be said that the sun is evil because the angel is more excellent and that the human is evil because the sun is more excellent. Listen, and learn that it is absurd to say this, that is, to despise what is lesser because it is not like what is greater than it…Likewise, the virgin is better, for no one will deny it, although marriage is allowed by everyone.\textsuperscript{33}

Athenasius uses strong language here, calling the orthodox ascetics of Egypt to condemn the teachings of Hieracas and to oppose him, since he postulates that married is evil and that only virginity is good. Later in the letter, Athanasius escalates this polemic against his opponent, comparing Hieracas to Judas the betrayer of Christ. He says:

Now let Hieracas be cast out, with all the other heretics as well, and let him be cast out before everyone as a defiled enemy, but especially from you, holy virgins. For this man does not disparage honorable marriage on account of your elevated and true way of life, but on account of flattery, because he desires to trap the souls of the simple-minded so that, on account of flattery, he might make enemies of those whom it is inappropriate to suspect, so that he might become like one who does what he wants surreptitiously, just like the brother of these people, Judas the traitor.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. While not exact in every detail, a similar strain of thought was combated by Clement of Alexandria. See Clement of Alexandria \textit{Strom.} 3.6.

\textsuperscript{32} This work only survives in Coptic. Brakke translates this work for the first time into English in his \textit{Athanasius and Asceticism}, 274-91.

\textsuperscript{33} Athanasius \textit{First Letter to Virgins} 24. Note that this citation is from Brakke’s \textit{Athanasius and Asceticism}, and, as he states, the division of his translation is of his own invention. It does not follow the textual divisions found in the Coptic text edited by Lefort.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 28.
Here Athanasius offers a stark contrast to the position of Hieracas, who seemingly views the virgin as having a higher ontological nature than the non-virgin. Athanasius sees virgins as having a transcendent form of marriage to Christ, and says that they are not superior to married couples by their nature. Rather, Christian virgins choose to pursue a higher virtue and thus demonstrate the “full use of freedom made possible by the Word’s incarnation.”35 For Athanasius, these various legitimate uses of humanity’s freedom create the multilayered Church that he sought. This vision of the Church was one that was inclusive of both married members and virgins.36

In a similar manner to Athanasius, Didymus also launched his own theological polemic against the Hierakite movement and its leader Hieracas. There are several references to Hieracas and his followers scattered throughout Didymus’ works found at Tura. One finds these references in Didymus’ Commentary on Ecclesiastes, his Commentary on Job, and the Commentary on Psalms. In the Ecclesiastes passage, Didymus criticizes the Hierakites, along with the Simonians, for their teachings on the doctrine of the soul. Didymus explains that the Hierakites believe that the soul is conceived and perishes together (συνσπείρεται καὶ συναπόλλυται) with the body. Hieracas understood that the souls of the wicked (i.e. the non-celibate) alone would perish along with the body. He taught that all physical bodies would perish, but that only the pure souls would be able to enjoy the riches of heaven.37

35 Ibid.
36 David Brakke, Athanasius and Asceticism, 22. The same theological underpinnings are also found in Athanasius’ Life of Antony.
37 Didymus Kommentar Zum Ecclesiastes 102.23-103.1; See Epiphanius Haer. 67; Elm offers a good and succinct overview of Hieracas and his ascetic followers in Virgins of God, 339-42.
One finds the exact same sentiment in a passage from Didymus’ *Commentary on Job*. Within the context of discussing the orthodox understanding of the soul not deriving from matter, Didymus states that the Hierakites and those similar to them teach that the soul comes into existence together with the body (προσχρήσονται οἱ συσπειρωμένην εἰσάγοντες τὴν ψυχήν, ὅν εἰσιν Ἱερακάιται καὶ ὅμοιοι).\(^{38}\) In saying this, Didymus explains that the Hierakites understand the soul to be composed from simple material along with the physical body. As a result, Didymus rejects this teaching since it would result in a material soul that was also capable of dissolving along with the body at death. While the Hierakite doctrine of the wicked soul alone perishing with bodily death does not make it into this passage as in the text from *Ecclesiastes*, it is clear that Didymus refers to the same doctrine of the soul and decries it as a betrayal of the orthodox Christian confession that says the human soul is a spiritual reality created by God.

The theological polemic comes full circle with a much shorter passage found in Didymus’ *Commentary on Psalms*. Similar to the passage from his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Didymus maintains that his students must not listen to the doctrine that says souls go into nothingness, since this denies the immortality of created souls. He says:

> And the sinner, having an immortal soul, never perishes (ὁ ἀμαρτωλός δὲ ἀθάνατον ἐχων ψυχὴν οὐδέποτε ἀπόλλυται); for you cannot take into consideration (προσεκτέον) those who say that wicked souls are overturned into nothingness (:bg: ὃτι αἱ τῶν φαύλων φυχαί εἰς οὐ μὴ ὃν καταστρέφουσιν), as the Stoics among the Greek wish to say, and alongside with those supposed Christians, the Hierakites (παρὰ δὲ ἰδῆν Χριστιανοίς ὁι Ἱερακάιται).\(^{39}\)

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Didymus attacks the view that the soul perishes with the death of the physical body. Associating the Hierakites with the Greek Stoics, Didymus instructs his students that they should not take into consideration (προσεκτέον) those who teach about the wicked soul’s descent into non-being along with the body. An interesting note here is that Didymus, for the first time in these three passages, speaks on the self-understanding of the Hierakites themselves. These ascetics are not antithetical to Christianity in their own minds, but they view themselves as the only true Christians. Yet Didymus, in response, says that Hierakites are only supposedly Christian (δῆθεν Χριστιανοῖς), since they deny both the worth and resurrection of the physical body.

Didymus’ polemic against the Hierakites fits in well with Athanasius’ teaching against the same group. In his polemic against the ascetic community, Athanasius seems to understand them as teaching that they are the true Christians who belong to the kingdom of God. This corresponds well with Didymus’ assumption that the group proclaims themselves as the only true Christians. While Athanasius’ First Letter to Virgins focuses on the heretical Hierakites view on celibacy and marriage, Didymus chooses to focus on the group’s supposed heretical anthropology concerning the origin and destiny of the human body and soul. The strategies employed by these two Alexandrian theologians, while one focused on Christian practice and the other on anthropology, share similar presuppositions concerning the Hierakites. Athanasius and

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40 Hieracas thus denies the resurrection of the body. Also, it is precisely because of the Hierakites’ doctrine of the material soul that Didymus couples them with the Stoics in the following passage from the Commentary on the Psalms, since they taught that the soul was material and capable of perishing. One sees this teaching of the soul in Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations 4.21, 40. Also see Cicero De Natura Deorum 1.39.

41 David Brakke, Athanasius and Asceticism, 21.

42 Athanasius, First Letter to Virgins, 24, 28.
Didymus both view the group as heretics who have separated themselves from the orthodox church and who propagate themselves as the true representatives of Christianity.

In addition, Didymus, like Athanasius in his First Letter to Virgins, not only upholds virginity as the best option for Christians but thinks that Christian marriage should be permitted and celebrated. In his Commentary on Zechariah, Didymus comments on the prophet’s vision found in verses six through seven in chapter three. After giving an initial sense to the phrase, “I will also give you those living in the midst of these attendants,” Didymus proceeds to give a second sense (δεύτερον λόγον) to this passage. He says that one could view those standing in the vision as being the holy angels. He then turns to identify those who are “living in the midst” of the attending angels. These are none other than those Christians who have become like the angels after the resurrection, no longer marrying or giving in marriage, since their corruption has put on incorruption and their mortality immortality (ἐπείπερ τὸ φθαρτὸν αὐτῶν ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν ἀθανασίαν ἐνδόσατο). These alone, in the resurrected state, are now able to devote themselves fully to the things of the Lord. Didymus then says that, in comparison to these resurrected saints, the one who is currently a virgin is holy in both spirit and body (Ὡμοίως καὶ ἡ παρθένος, πνεύματι καὶ σώματι ἄγια), and is devoted to the bridegroom, not even desiring to leave him for a moment.43

For Didymus, the virgin living as a celibate consecrated to Christ participates, in a limited sense, in the resurrected state already. This high view of Christian virginity runs parallel to Athanasius’ understanding of the same practice. Yet, in saying this, Didymus

does not say that Christian marriage should be looked down upon or shunned. While this is an argument from silence, it is clear that Didymus upholds the positive view of marriage advocated by Athanasius in opposition to the Hierakites.

Following Athanasius, Didymus agrees with the Alexandrian bishop and views Christian marriage as a praiseworthy and permissible state within the church. In contrast to Hieracas, who saw only virgins as worthy of honor, Didymus celebrates the life of Anna the prophetess, who proclaimed the birth of Christ in the temple as she lived a life of celibate prayer and fasting. Commenting on 1 Timothy 5:3, 9-10, Didymus praises Anna as conforming to this picture of mature womanhood crowned with virtue. In doing this, Didymus undercuts a core belief found within the Hierakite community, namely that someone who was not a virgin could achieve the status of spiritual maturity and virtue that the Hierakites reserved only for the celibate.

There is ample evidence to connect Didymus with Athanasius. Even though Sozomen may have overplayed the biographical details of Rufinus in casting Didymus as the director of the Alexandrian catechetical school, one should not dismiss Rufinus’ words concerning Athanasius’ official approval of the blind scholar. While there is little evidence to go on, this little evidence indicates that something similar to what Rufinus reported likely occurred. When one takes Rufinus’ biographical remarks concerning Didymus in his Historia ecclesiastica, the mention of Didymus in the list of scholars present at the catechetical school made by Philip of Side, and the mentioning of Didymus

44 Ibid., 84.154.264.18-25. Didymus states: Ὑπὲρ βεβαιώσεως δὲ τῶν μνημονευθεισῶν ἀρετῶν χρεία καὶ τελείας ἡλικίας συνεπικοσμοῦσις τάς κεντράς ἀρετάς, τελείων ἐτῶν ἁριθμόν ἐσχηκώσιν οὐκ ἐλαττομένην ἐξήκοντατέοις χρόνου. Τοιώδεις κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν ἔπρεπον Ἀννά ἢ προφήτης, ζήσας μετὰ ἀνδρός ἐπὶ ἐπί τῆς παρθενίας αὐτῆς, διαμείνας ἐπὶ πολὺ χίρα ἐως ἐτῶν ὑγόδοικον τεσσάρων. Οἰκεῖος δὲ καὶ οὕτως ὁ ἁριθμός τῆς ἐν χειρείᾳ ἁγνείας, περὶ οὗ ἐν ἄλλοις εἰρηται; Didymus, Commentary on Zechariah, 164.

45 Richard A. Layton, Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria, 18.
by Sozomen, the collective evidence seems to favor the acceptance that Didymus held some position within the same school where Clement and Origen taught.\textsuperscript{46} This fits well with a conclusion, based on Rufinus and Sozomen, that sees Didymus as both knowing and receiving approval from Athanasius in his position within the catechetical school. While Layton’s criticism of viewing Didymus as the director of the catechetical school has merit, it does not go against the testimony of Rufinus, who may well have distinguished Didymus by the title \textit{doctor} instead of the title \textit{magisterium} in order to show that Didymus functioned within the catechetical school but not as the director. It does not preclude the possibility of Didymus to have been the director of the catechetical school, albeit in a modified form under the leadership of the Alexandrian bishops.\textsuperscript{47}

The testimony of Didymus, who places himself in a relationship with a bishop in Alexandria, supports this position as well. While he does not name this bishop or bishops, the most plausible identity of this bishop is Athanasius. This position strengthens when one considers Rufinus’ testimony and Didymus’ support of an ancient bishop of the church (\textit{ἀρχιεπίσκοπος ἐκκλησιαστικός}) banning the reading of apocryphal books.\textsuperscript{48} This comment by Didymus fits seamlessly with the thirty-ninth \textit{Festal Letter}, where Athanasius decries those who deceive the simple using apocryphal books.

In addition, Didymus’ polemic against the Hierakites follows lockstep with Athanasius’ call in his \textit{First Letter to Virgins} to take courage and confront the heretical

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\textsuperscript{46} Even with the questions with Philips’ report and Sozomen’s possible use of it as a source, the cumulative evidence along with Rufinus fits best with the conclusion above.

\textsuperscript{47} Rufinus \textit{H.E.} 11.7; Richard A. Layton, \textit{Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria}, 15-6.

\textsuperscript{48} Didymus, \textit{Kommentar Zum Ecclesiastes}, 8.5-12; Palladius, \textit{Hist. laus IV.4}. The connection between Didymus and Athanasius is made even less suspect with the report of Didymus hearing of the death of Emperor Julian in a divine vision, where angels are sent both to Didymus and to the bishop Athanasius.
group. Even though Didymus and Athanasius approach their respective polemics against the Hierakites differently, they both assume the same presuppositions concerning them and perceived their threat to the orthodox church in Alexandria and Egypt. Against this background, Athanasius saw the Hierakite movement as a danger both to his strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy and his desired ascetical reform program in Egypt. Both the call in his *First Letter to Virgins* and Didymus’ various answers throughout his commentaries fit nicely within the gradual consolidation of power that took place in Egypt from the second century to the fourth century. This consolidation included the catechetical school increasingly coming under the direct supervision, if not control, of the Alexandrian bishops. While Didymus’ classroom instruction was not necessarily in direct service to the ecclesial office of Athanasius, it certainly was supportive of it. It is likely that Athanasius would have officially approved of such an ascetic community as Didymus’, since they were supporting his theological vision. This supportive role of Didymus’ classroom in fact upholds the strain of pro-Nicene ascetic theology of Athanasius. It is within this context that Didymus embarks in his exegetical practices in his *Commentary on Zechariah*.

**Deification in Didymus’ *Commentary on Zechariah***

Didymus wrote his Commentary on Zechariah around the year 386 A.D., shortly after Jerome left Alexandria where he visited the blind monk. In fact, Didymus wrote this work in response to Jerome’s request for his thoughts on the prophet. The latest that Didymus could have possibly written the commentary is in 393 A.D., since Jerome

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50 Ibid., 247.
51 Richard A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria*, 17-8.
makes mention of it in that same year. Doutreleau’s dating of the work around 387 A.D. is a good and reasonable estimate to hold, since it falls within the time of Jerome’s visit to Alexandria and his mention of the commentary in his On Illustrious Men in 393 A.D.  

*Didymus’ Presuppositions to Scriptural Exegesis*

Didymus’ fundamental hermeneutical approach in reading Zechariah, along with the entire Bible, begins with the reading Scripture in its plain sense. For Didymus, the plain sense serves as the foundation upon which the Holy Spirit, who is the final author of all Scripture, leads and guides the Church from the literal understanding of the Bible to the spiritual meaning. Led by the Spirit, one comes to understand that the spiritual sense of the Bible is centered upon the mystery of Christ, who is the final cause of cosmic history. The writings of the Old Testament, which contain the promises of new covenant in its plain sense, reveal the new covenant to the Church through the Spirit’s coming after the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Since the incarnation of the Logos, Didymus not only grasps the coming of the Spirit in past history as he reads the plain meaning of the biblical text in the Old Testament, but, by the Spirit, he also understands the work of the Spirit in the church in his present era and future historical time. Didymus achieves this as he interprets his present historical era and all future historical time

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53 Didymus the Blind, *Sur Zacharie*, 83.23.

54 Origen *On First Principles* 4.2-3; Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 295-6. Didymus was a disciple of Origen and therefore used this particular articulation of the Church’s reading of the Bible that Origen birthed. Origen did not invent this approach to reading the Church’s holy texts, yet he nuanced his presentation of it and, thus, it contains things that other thinkers did not articulate. As Young notes, Didymus, inheriting Origen’s mantle, gave a little more systematization to his teacher’s exegetical approach.
through the Christological lens of Scripture. In doing this, Didymus presupposes and places great importance on the historical happenings recorded in Scripture.\(^55\)

Led by the Spirit in his exegetical activity, Didymus moves from the letter of the plain meaning to the spirit of the allegorical meaning mysteriously found in the text, just as the Christian life moves from the elementary need for metaphorical milk to more solid food found in the deep meaning of the text.\(^56\) Thus Jesus Christ, the final cause that everything in Scriptures leads to and had promised in advance, gives history its proper value. For Didymus, and other Christian exegetes, it is only after the resurrection of Christ and the arrival of the Spirit that the new covenant prophetically proclaimed by Old Testament had come to pass. As a result, the referent of all Christian Scripture is Christ, who serves as the key to interpreting it.\(^57\)

Didymus saw the allegorical or spiritual reading of the Scriptures as a fulfillment of the old covenant, where the reality of Christ’s advent realizes and fulfills the promises and hints given in the Scriptures. For Didymus, this spiritual reading results in a giving way of the old and transitory to a realization of the new and eternal. It is not seen as a moving away from the history described in the Old Testament, but as a movement into history oriented around the advent of Christ. It attempts to understand the mystery of Christ, since, when guided by the Spirit in spiritual reading, the facts of the literal sense


disclose to the reader the mystery of Christ. It attempts to understand the sacred events, namely the advent and resurrection of Christ, that are the object of the Christian faith. Like Origen before him, Didymus bases his spiritual reading on nothing else but the center of the Christian gospel, namely Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. This center reaches its pinnacle in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Some modern scholarship views this spiritual or allegorical exegesis as a hermeneutical method that has a purely arbitrary essence, resulting in a form of interpretation that has no basis in the plain meaning of the biblical text. A standard view to hold is that the allegorical tradition does not concern itself with the plain meaning of Scripture, but only deals with abstract spiritual truth deduced through the means of allegorical interpretation. This fundamental misunderstanding results from modern scholarship’s interpretation of the early Christian phrase κατά τὴν ἱστορίαν (‘according to history’) as referring to modern notions of “History.” This understanding is problematic, since the Church fathers often used this phrase to simply refer to the plain narration found in the text and not to a theoretical or reconstructed history. Thus, the criticism from some modern interpreters rests upon anachronistic assumptions and definitions of history.

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60 R. C. P. Hanson, Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen’s Interpretation of Scripture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 241-42. Although Hanson’s work is a classic in English when it comes to Origen studies, his presupposition of seeing the historical-critical method as the only means to properly read the Bible inhibits him from properly understanding the early church fathers’ exegesis. He can only see ‘real history’ as being ‘History.’ Also see David Dawson, Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 207-9. Dawson comments on this presupposition in his treatment of Daniel Boyarin’s position on Paul and his understanding of “binary opposition.”

61 Tzamalikos, Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology, 368-70.
which hinder their ability to understand those they criticize. One finds an example of this anachronistic presupposition in R. C. P. Hanson’s work on Origen’s exegesis of Scripture. While his detailed work deserves respect, it suffers from a presupposition of seeing the historical-critical method as the only means to properly read the Bible. This inhibits him from seeing the fundamental exegetical approach found in Origen, Didymus, and other early Christians. Didymus often will begin a commentary on any given passage with an examination of the plain sense of the verse before moving on to a spiritual reading of the same verse. However, there are times where he will also skip any discussion of the passage’s plain meaning and move straight into a spiritual or allegorical interpretation of the text.

Didymus, along with Origen, saw Christ as the key to understanding Scripture, and understood him to become the true subject matter of all Scripture through the pedagogical guidance of the Holy Spirit. Commenting on ancient interpreters in general, James Kugel claims that there are four assumptions shared by all ancient readers of Scripture. These four assumptions include that Scripture was understood to be a cryptic document that contained more than what simply met the eye, that it was of contemporary importance and relevant to the readers’ milieu, seeing it as perfect and

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62 Ibid., 369; Also James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 195.
63 R. C. P. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*, 241-42.
64 John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 26-9. While my understanding of ancient biblical interpretation and the difference between it and modern hermeneutical methods are still immature, I am greatly indebted to Fr. Behr’s correspondence through an email on this very subject.
impeccably harmonious, and, consequently, that is was divinely inspired. Didymus
definitely shares these four assumptions in his reading of Scripture. That Didymus
presupposes a variation of these hermeneutical norms should not be terribly surprising. In
fact, these assumptions serve as a means through which he articulates his understanding
of Christian deification. For Didymus, they supply the edifice upon which his
understanding of deification informs his exegetical practices in his *Commentary on
Zechariah*.

**Didymus’ Reading of Zechariah 3:3-5**

Didymus begins his thoughts on Zechariah 3:3-5 by commenting on the plain
meaning of the passage (πρὸς ῥητόν). Didymus often uses πρὸς ῥητόν to introduce the
plain meaning of a text, yet he also uses the phrase κατὰ ἱστορίαν to do this as well. In
using both of these phrases in his works, Didymus usually lacks the introductory formula
that would be necessary to understand a distinction between the terms. Yet, as Bienert
notes, in Didymus’ *Commentary on Job*, he often places importance on the word ἱστορία
when he comments on the happenings or history found in the plain sense of the text. He
also notes that Didymus uses the term ῥητόν in his *Commentary on Job* and that it
typically refers to the meaning which one verse, saying, or phrase means in a given

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York: Free Press, 2007), 14-5. Here Kugel explains these assumptions in more detail.

66 Didymus, *Commentary on Zechariah*, 71, n.17. Hill says that Didymus here
“reluctantly…concedes that the text is susceptible of a literal interpretation.” This betrays the
presupposition of modern scholarship concerning Origen and his followers. It is also vulnerable to the
critiques mentioned. As such, Hill’s comment is of little help for the reader. In addition, Hill’s comment on
Cyril of Alexandria’s commentary on Zechariah, where he denies that Didymus allows for a historical basis
for the text in contrast to Cyril, tends to display Hill’s misunderstanding of Didymus’ purpose in his
commentary. The irony is that Didymus and Cyril usually agree upon the plain meaning of the grammar.
See Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary On the Twelve Prophets*, trans. Robert C. Hill, Fathers of the Church,
context of a passage.\textsuperscript{67} However, using \(\pi\rho\varsigma \rho\eta\tau\omicron\), Didymus begins his comments on this passage from his \textit{Commentary on Zechariah} with the plain meaning of the passage before moving forward to a spiritual reading of text.\textsuperscript{68}

After briefly commenting on the plain meaning (\(\pi\rho\varsigma \rho\eta\tau\omicron\)) of Zechariah 3:3-5, Didymus moves on to a spiritual interpretation and explains that Joshua the high priest’s filthy garments represent the sins and unlawful deeds committed by the nation of Israel. He continues by saying that the removal of Joshua’s garments represents the removal of his sins, which the angel replaces with a long tunic that serves as a priestly robe.

Didymus explains that Joshua figuratively points towards the true and faithful high priest (\(\tau\omicron\ \delta\varepsilon\iota\kappa\nu\nu\omicron\nu\tau\omicron\) \(\varepsilon\iota\kappa\omicron\nu\kappa\iota\delta\zeta\) \(\tau\omicron\ \alpha\nu\lambda\iota\theta\omicron\delta\zeta \pi\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\ \alpha\rho\chi\epsilon\iota\rho\omicron\alpha\)) Jesus Christ, who has a lasting priesthood.\textsuperscript{69} Didymus continues:

In addition to regarding what the historical narrative says, there is something to be said regarding that which is derived from discernment (\(\pi\rho\varsigma \tau\iota\nu \rho\eta\tau\iota\nu \delta\iota\gamma\gamma\eta\gamma\eta\iota\nu\nu\iota\nu, \kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\iota\nu \pi\rho\varsigma \delta\iota\alpha\nu\omicron\alpha\nu\theta\omicron\varphi\omicron\tau\omicron\theta\omicron\nu\). Jesus the great high priest, who Joshua represents as a type figuratively (ο\(\omicron\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\omicron\nu\ \phi\omicron\epsilon\omicron\iota\ \o\(\epsilon\iota\kappa\omicron\nu\kappa\iota\delta\zeta\) \(\iota\eta\zeta\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\zeta\ς\)), living in Babylon as he did along with the captives, put on as filthy clothes the sins of all human beings without sinning himself or experiencing sin (ο\(\omicron\chi\ \alpha\mu\mu\alpha\rho\omicron\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\ ι\omicron\nu\omicron\zeta\ \mu\epsilon\delta\ \pi\iota\omicron\alpha\beta\omicron\omicron\omicron\ι\omicron\omicron\upsilon\omicron\omicron\omicron\ς \alpha\omicron\mu\alpha\omicron\tau\omicron\omicron\upsilon\omicron\omicron\iota\). To put off and remove the weave of sin that he put on for our sake, he went up upon the cross…so that rid of sin, we might live by his righteousness.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{67} Wolfgang A Bienert, “\textit{Allegoria” und “Anagoge” bei Didymos dem Blinden von Alexandria}, 112-3.

\textsuperscript{68} Jo Tigcheler, \textit{Didyme L’Aveugle Et L’exégèse Allégorique: Étude Sémantique de Quelques Termes Exégétiques Importants de Son Commentaire Sur Zacharie}, Græcitas Christianorum Primaeva, vol. 6, (Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1977), 55. Tigcheler says that Didymus signifies a certain kind of textual explanation when he uses \(\rho\eta\tau\omicron\) with the preposition. He observes that this often appears when Didymus associates it with an interpretation of a text where he uses the phrase \(\pi\rho\varsigma \delta\iota\alpha\nu\omicron\alpha\nu\theta\omicron\varphi\omicron\tau\omicron\theta\omicron\nu\) or \(\nu\omicron\eta\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\). However, it most often appears with the term \(\alpha\nu\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\omicron\gamma\omicron\).\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} Didymus, \textit{Sur Zacharie}, 83.47.208.29-31; Didymus, \textit{Commentary on Zechariah}, 71-2; Heb. 2:17.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 83.49.213.1-214.11.
Building upon what he said earlier concerning Joshua the high priest, Didymus juxtaposes the plain sense of the text to the sense derived from discernment (τὰ πρὸς διάνοιαν θεωρητέον). Without discarding the plain sense of the passage, Didymus builds upon it a spiritual reading that views Joshua the high priest as representing Christ in a type figuratively (οὗ τύπον φέρει ὁ εἰκονικὸς Ἰησοῦς). He explains that the filthy garments, worn by Joshua as a type, are the sins of humanity that Christ has put on in his incarnation. While this point is clear, Didymus is adamant that Christ has done so without himself sinning or experiencing sin (οὐχ ἁρματῶν αὐτος μηδὲ παιραθεὶς ἁμαρτίας). He describes the garments of humanity’s transgression as the weave of sin (ὑφασμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας), woven by humanity’s sin to wear themselves, which Christ put on as filthy garments for the sake of humankind. To put off and remove this weave of sin, Christ goes up upon the cross and disarms the demonic rulers who encumber humanity. Didymus sees Christ’s work as resulting in humanity’s elevation to a new life where they might live by Christ’s righteousness.⁷¹

For Didymus, Christ has completely conquered sin by his death on the cross and his resurrection. If this were not the case, then the alternative condition would result in the demonic rulers responsible for humanity’s original bondage simply subjugating them again in even a worse state.⁷² Loosely citing Paul in Colossians 2:14-15, Didymus sees the devil and his demons as the spiritual powers that are responsible for humanity’s subjugation to sin and corruption. The key for Didymus is that Christ conquers these wicked spiritual powers in his humanity that he took up from Mary. By his going up upon

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⁷¹ 1 Pet. 2.22, 24; Col. 2.14-15. Didymus’ text of 1 Peter 2:22-23 seems to include “his” in qualifying righteousness.

⁷² Didymus, Sur Zacharie, 83.49.215.15-18.
the cross, Christ puts off and removes the weave of sin (ὑφασμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας) that he put on, without sinning or experiencing sin, for humanity’s sake. By putting this state off by means of the cross and resurrection, the victory of human nature over these powers derives solely from the victory of Christ’s work in his human flesh. Didymus teaches that humans are again able to live in righteousness, since they live by Jesus’ righteousness. This new life of righteousness results from one putting on Christ, leading to human life becoming wedded to God’s divine life through Christ and by the power of the Spirit. Here, the first evidence appears that shows Didymus advocating a doctrine of Christian deification using the hermeneutical methodology that informs his exegetical activity.

Next, Didymus situates this cosmic warfare between Christ and the devil within the context of the Christian’s life. He says that the spiritual interpretation that he offers is established by considering the opposition (κατασκευαστέον ἐκ τοῦ ἑναντίου τῆς θεωρησίας) between two different human states. Didymus explains:

The person whose actions and attitudes are those taught by the savior puts him on, that is Christ (Ὁ πράττων καὶ φρονῶν ἅ διδάσκει ὁ Σωτήρ αὐτῶν ὑπερ Χριστόν ἐνδύεται), in keeping with the statement, “Put on the Lord Jesus (Ἐνδύσασθε τὸν Κύριον Ἰησοῦν)” and, “All you who have put on Christ.” The person whose actions and thoughts are from the evil rulers and authorities, against whom people contesting for salvation direct their struggle, puts them on, accepting identification with them. These are what our Lord and savior put off by taking on our sins, Scripture saying of him, “He bears our sins and suffers for us,” and after other statements in the prophecy of Isaiah, “He will take on the sins of many.”

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73 Didymus’ use of θεωρία here and in others places is an inconvenient occurrence for those who wish to cast him as an “Alexandrian allegorist” in contrast to the Antiochene interpreters who, ironically, are styled as using θεωρία in lieu of ἀλληγορία. For an example of this see Hill in Commentary on Zechariah, 15-20.

74 Didymus, Sur Zacharie, 83.49.216.19-217.29; Didymus, Commentary on Zechariah, 72.
Didymus, with his previous reference to 1 Peter 2:22-24 in mind, claims that Christians are able to live by Christ’s righteousness when their actions and attitudes (πράττων καὶ φρονῶν) are those that Christ exemplified and taught.\(^\text{75}\) When a person’s life constitutes his or her actions and attitudes in this manner, Didymus explains that they have really put on Christ himself, in accordance with the Scripture that says “All you who have put on Christ.”\(^\text{76}\) Next, Didymus compares the Christian with the one whose actions and thoughts derive from the evil rulers and authorities (πράττων καὶ διανοούμενος τὰ τὸν πονηρὸν ἄρχον καὶ ἐξουσιῶν). They are identified by Didymus with the evil rulers, namely, the devil and his demons, and are said to put them on (ἐνδιδύσκεται αὐτάς).\(^\text{77}\)

Didymus also advocates such a position in his treatise On the Holy Spirit, preserved only in the Latin translation by Jerome. Here, deification results from putting on Christ and is given to those who have forsaken their vices (qui, uitiis derelictis) and live by faith in Christ (in Christi fide uictitant). Didymus says that these are the only ones to whom the Holy Spirit is introduced (Spiritus Sanctus inseritur).\(^\text{78}\)

Christ, in taking on humanity’s sin, puts off these evil rulers and authorities. Didymus emphatically explains that these filthy garments (ἵµάτια ῥυπαρά) do not belong to Christ according to nature. He did not construct or tailor them. Didymus says that it was in behalf of those who made them and wore them (προηγοµένως αὐτά) that Christ put them on by the good God’s grace (χάριτοι τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ Θεοῦ). This way, by tasting

\(^{75}\) 1 Pet. 2:22, 24.

\(^{76}\) Didymus, Sur Zacharie, 83.49.217.20-22; Gal. 3:27. Didymus in saying Ὅσοι Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε most likely has Gal. 3:27 in mind, which says, “ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε.” If this is so, then the connection between putting on Christ and Christian baptism is striking.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 83.49.217.22-24; On the Holy Spirit 222.1-8.
death for all human beings, Christ might deliver from death those for whom he tasted it 
(ἐξω ποιήσῃ θανάτον τούς ὑπέρ ὧν ἐγεύσατο αὐτοῦ). Didymus explains that Christ, by
only approaching and touching human nature in his incarnation (μόνον θηγόν καὶ 
πλησιάσας αὐτω), accomplished this. 79 Thus, it is clear that Didymus views the
Christian’s deification as existing only within the context of Christ’s healing of human
nature in his incarnation, death, and resurrection. This once again shows that Didymus’
comments on Zechariah 3:3-5 result from his understanding of deification, which informs
his exegetical procedure and action.

Didymus’ articulation of deification demonstrates several key features that need
closer consideration. The first is that he connects the life of the Christian, who lives by
Christ’s righteousness, to the very work of Christ on the cross and in his resurrection.
Didymus teaches that Christ, by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, heals humanity’s
nature that is subject to fluctuation and decay. In this work, Christ took humanity’s sins
and put them off through his death and resurrection. Christ also, without sinning or
experiencing sin, renders powerless the devil and his evil demons that were responsible
for humanity’s subjection to death. Didymus, following Origen, highlights that Christ
willingly took upon himself humanity’s sin. As a result, Christ is able to defeat death and
free those who are under its dominion. 80 Didymus can say that Christ became a curse for
humanity’s sake so that they could gain a blessing and that they could live according to
God (ζῶντες κατὰ θεόν). Thus, the Christian is able to live a divine life and contemplate

79 Ibid., 83.49.218.30-50.218.2.
80 Origen Commentary on Canticles 3.14, 32; Ilaria Ramelli, The Christian Doctrine of
Apokatastasis: a Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena, Supplements to Vigiliae
the truth (πολιτείαν θείαν καὶ θεωρίαν τῆς ἀληθείας) precisely because of Christ’s work on the cross and in his resurrection.  

A second aspect that Didymus speaks of is that the divine Christian life lived by Christ’s righteousness is an actual existence; he does not speak of this divine Christian life in a metaphorical manner that has little bearing on humanity’s existential reality. In fact, he says the exact opposite and claims that the person who by faith in Christ puts off the works of sin is given life through participating in the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit. The sanctifying life that the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian is the means through which the Holy Spirit deifies him or her and, in consequence, transforms her or him into the image of Christ. The Christian is able, through the work of Christ, to literally put on Christ (αὐτὸν ὄντα Χριστὸν ἐνδύεται) and thus, by mimicking his action and attitudes, live by faith in accordance with and through virtue. It is key to understand that Didymus is not speaking of mere human effort in attaining deification, but that the Christian, through recovering all that is good through the Holy Spirit, is able to partake in Christ’s divine life since Christ is truly in him or her. When the Christian puts on Christ through faith in baptism, he or she identifies with him and the Holy Spirit transforms him or her into his image.

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This leads to a third characteristic of Didymus’ theology of deification, which sees the believer, transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ, as fulfilling the goal of creation. Didymus understands God’s goal for creation to be the desire to shape humans into his own image and likeness. Didymus illustrates this feature when he compares the Christian undergoing deification in order to live according to God (ὑνα ζῶντες κατά θεον) to a more detailed description of the divine life in his comments on Zechariah 3:6-7. Didymus elaborates:

Among those standing in this way are those who, given to Christ from God, are living according to a divine way of life and contemplation of the truth (πολιτείαν θείαν καὶ θεωρίαν τῆς ἀληθείας). Among the people who are faithful according to the image and likeness of God (ἀληθῶς τυχάνουσι κατ’ έικόνα καὶ ὁμοίωσιν Θεού) there lived Jesus, who received them from the Father, “who appeared on earth in order to live among human beings,” providing a type and model for those choosing to imitate him (τύπον καὶ ύπογραμμόν παρέχων τοῖς προηρημένοις μιμεῖσθαι αὐτὸν).

Here the believer, who has put on Christ and lives according to God, is designated as one given to Christ by God and thus lives according to a divine manner of life and contemplation of the truth (πολιτείαν θείαν καὶ θεωρίαν τῆς ἀληθείας). Didymus elucidates that these men and women are faithful to the very image and likeness of God. It is for these humans newly created in the image and likeness of God that Christ, receiving them from the Father, appeared on earth in order to live among humanity (ἐπὶ τῆς ὡφθείς ἵνα συναναστραφῇ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις). Didymus explains that the divine Son

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84 Ibid., 83.50.221.21-22.
85 Ibid., 83.53.233.12-18; Didymus, Commentary on Zechariah, 75.
86 Ibid., 83.53.233.16-17; Bar. 3:38. Baruch, which Didymus likely alludes to here, has the following: μετὰ τοῦτο ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ὡφθη καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις συναναστράφη.
of God comes to cohabitate with humanity in order to provide a type and model (τύπον καὶ ὑπογραμμόν) for those choosing to mimic Christ.\textsuperscript{87}

The Christian, newly created by putting on Christ in baptism, lives by faith in Christ and chooses to imitate him in all things.\textsuperscript{88} Didymus says that, after removing every evil that plagues humanity, the Spirit leaves the believer in the state according to the image and likeness as God created them (ὑπολείπεται τὸ κατ’ εἰκόνα καὶ ὑμοίωσιν καθ’ ὃ ἐκ Θεοῦ) in the beginning, and that they live by faith in Christ in accordance with and through virtue. Through the removal of every evil, which came about by many difficult arguments, the Spirit places the Christian in an existential state that accords to the image and likeness of God, in which they were created. Consequently, he or she is capable of participating in the Holy Spirit and in putting on Christ, thus sharing in his victory over sin through his death and resurrection.\textsuperscript{89}

For Didymus, this participation occurs for the Christian only after clothing themselves in Christ through baptism. As a result, Didymus sees this putting on of Christ and transformation through the Spirit into the image and likeness of God as the goal of humanity’s creation, which is only realized in the body of Christ, the Church. It is not surprising that Didymus follows this vein of thought. While direct evidence of reliance is not certain, it is strongly plausible that Didymus follows similar thoughts articulated by his predecessor Clement of Alexandria in the Alexandrian catechetical school Clement of Alexandria. Clement’s teaching on deification results in humanity’s

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 83.53.233.17-18.
\textsuperscript{88} Gal. 3.27. See note 102.
\textsuperscript{89} Didymus, \textit{Sur Zacharie}, 84.215.122.5-7; \textit{On the Holy Spirit} 222.1-3. Didymus says, “His enim tantummodo Spiritus Sanctus inseritur, qui, uitiis derelictis, uirtutum sectantur chorum et iuxta eas et per eas in Christi fide uictitant.”
transformation into the image of God through Christ’s advent. Clement understands the creation of humanity as encompassing his entire existence, including his creation from the dust, his rebirth through baptism (ἀναγεννήσας ὁ ὄστι), and his participation through the Spirit. Like Didymus, Clement’s understanding of deification resulted from the finished work of Christ on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and the subsequent coming of the Spirit.  

Clement also understood the process of Christian deification not to be an instantaneous occurrence, but a pedagogical progression that would culminate in the eschaton. Likewise, it is essential to understand that Didymus sees the finalization of deification as happening only at the eschaton. For him, deification (θεοποιεῖ) also expresses an inaugurated eschatology. As such, the soul is enabled to participation in divine glory even in this life as it partakes in the Word (Christ), but its consummation is only experienced in the next. When speaking of the blessed final condition, Didymus uses the term κατάστασις and understands it as a condition of calmness and peace due to the grace of God. He understands humanity’s end to be Christ himself and, as a result, views this κατάστασις as a θέωσις. Thus, for Didymus it is only in the eschaton when the finalization of humanity’s deification reaches its ultimate goal. The final κατάστασις as θέωσις will be the result of a humanity completely conformed to the

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90 Didymus Sur la Genèse For Clement of Alexandria’s thought, see his Paedagogus 1.12.98.2.
91 Norman Russell, The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition, 162. Cf. Didymus Sur la Genèse 244.248.7, 8, 15. Also see footnote 83 for Didymus’ use of both θεοποιώ and θεοποιήσις.
image of Christ, who is the true image of God, thus resulting in humanity becoming an image of the image.  

Didymus gives ample evidence in his reading of Zechariah 3:3-5 and 3:6-7 of how his understanding of Christian deification informs his exegetical work. While using four common hermeneutical assumptions shared by many ancient readers of Scripture, he tailored these presuppositions to display his particular articulation of the Christian’s pedagogical development as she undergoes the process of deification. When one considers Didymus’ position within the Alexandrian catechetical school, it is not surprising that Didymus produces similar thoughts to Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In Didymus’ service as the teacher within this Alexandrian church school, he labored to promote a particular strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy in line with the ecclesiastical rule of Athanasius who, despite his seventeen years in exile, he served under for most of his life. Yet the next question to consider is how does Didymus’ teaching on deification in the Commentary on Zechariah compare to Athanasius’ understanding of deification. If Didymus truly supported Athanasius’ ecclesial and theological agenda in promoting a particular strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy, then it would not be surprising to see a similar theology of deification from the Alexandrian bishop as one finds in Didymus’ Commentary on Zechariah. Such a similar theology is precisely what one finds in Athanasius’ Letter to Marcellinus and Life of Antony.

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93 Didymus Sur Zacharie 83.14.65.28-15.65.5. Also see Clement of Alexandria Paedagogus 1.12.98.3.

94 Rufinus H.E. 11.7.
Athanasius’ *Theology of Deification*

*Deification in Athanasius’ Letter to Marcellinus*

Athanasius thoroughly exhibits the theological metanarrative found in his *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation* in his anti-Arian writings. John Behr astutely points out that this vision embodies the “fundamental Christian practice of meditating on the Scriptures.” The *Letter to Marcellinus* describes this key practice as one applies it to the book of the Psalms.\(^95\)

In the *Letter to Marcellinus*, Athanasius begins speaking on what the reader of Scripture receives upon reading its various interconnected parts. He explains that the Pentateuch relates the beginning of the world, the deeds of the patriarchs, the exodus, and the law of Sinai. He continues by stating that the Triteuch describes the possession of the Promised Land, the deeds of the Judges, and the life of David.\(^96\) After this, the books of Kings and Chronicles recount the stories of the rulers, while Esdras narrates the return from exile and the construction of the temple and the city. Finally, he says that the Prophets foretell the sojourn of the Savior, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and instructions regarding the Lord’s commands.\(^97\)

Athanasius then proceeds to speak on the book of Psalms. He says that the Psalms are like a garden containing all of the various things mentioned throughout Scripture. Yet the Psalms contain things that are their own, which they give in song along with the other


\(^{96}\) The Triteuch contains the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

\(^{97}\) Athanasius *Marcell. 2*. 
Concerning the Psalter, Athanasius stresses that the marvel of its own is that it contains even the soul’s emotions (ὅτι καὶ τὰ ἑκάστης ψυχῆς κινήματα). He continues by saying that the one who hears the Psalms also learns the things found in the other portions of Scripture. However, in addition to these things, he explains that the one hearing the Psalms also comprehends and understands it in the emotions of his or her soul. This comprehension and teachings enables the hearer to possess the image deriving from the words (δύναται πάλιν ἐκ ταύτης ἔχεισθαι τὴν εἰκόνα τῶν λόγων). This correlates with the Christian who not only disregards passion, but one who must heal passion through speaking and acting. Thus, as Behr points out, when the Christian appropriates the words found in the Psalter to himself or herself, the Psalms transforms the person whose words they are along with the emotions of the soul. As a result, the Psalms teaches Christians through regulating their souls and empowering them to possess the image that the Psalms present.

In this sense, as the Christian reflects on Scripture, Athanasius’ portrayal of the Psalter can be viewed as the pinnacle of Christian deification, encompassing body and spirit, knowledge and emotion. One also finds this language that depicts humanity’s transformation into the image of God through the knowledge of the Son by means of Scripture in Clement of Alexandria’s Protrepticus. Clement says that the divine Logos himself transforms, or deifies, believers as they learn from him. Thus, they become an image of the Word, who is the image of God. In a similar manner, Athanasius’ emphasis upon the transformation of the soul in the Letter to Marcellinus seems to share Clement’s

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98 Athanasius Marcell. 10; Behr, The Nicene Faith, 250.
99 Ibid.
100 Behr, The Nicene Faith, 250-1.
emphasis upon the image of God in humanity as the mind that is in humankind (ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ) undergoing transformation along with the body.\textsuperscript{101}

For Athanasius, the Psalms accomplish this divine pedagogy of humanity since Christ himself speaks through them.\textsuperscript{102} This is the same grace of the Savior, who became human so that he could free humanity from death, since he offered his own body in dying for them. Since he desired to show the world his own heavenly and well pleasing life, the Word, in his incarnation, typified this divine pedagogy in himself (ἐν έαυτῷ ταύτῃ ἑτύπωσεν) so that the enemy may not easily deceive some, since his victory over him was already complete.\textsuperscript{103} The desired goal for the reader of the Psalms is “the efficacious therapy for the soul provided by the Psalms,” which result in him or her not only knowing the appropriate model of acting, but also “knowing the power of acting.” Through the acquisition of the mind of Christ by means of a harmonious reading of the Psalms, the reader, enabled by the grace of the God, can live a truly virtuous life and become the instrument of the Holy Spirit, becoming obedient to the Word. Athanasius exemplifies this virtuous life in his \textit{Life of Antony}.\textsuperscript{104}

\textit{Deification in Athanasius’ Life of Antony}

In his \textit{Life of Antony}, Athanasius provides the ideal human example of a virtuous life, as portrayed in his \textit{Letter to Marcellinus}, in his depiction of the desert ascetic Antony. This work brought much influence in favor of the emergence of monasticism in

\textsuperscript{101} Clement of Alexandria \textit{Prot.} 10.98.4. Clement says: Εἰκών μὲν γάρ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ (καὶ νεὼς τοῦ νοῦ γνήσιος ο θείος λόγος, φωτὸς ἀρχέτυπον φῶς), εἰκών δὲ τοῦ λόγου ὁ ἀνθρωπὸς ἄληθινός, ὁ νοῦς ο ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ.

\textsuperscript{102} Behr, \textit{The Nicene Faith}, 252.

\textsuperscript{103} Athanasius \textit{Marcell.} 13; Behr, \textit{The Nicene Faith}, 251-2.

\textsuperscript{104} Behr, \textit{The Nicene Faith}, 252-3.
Athanasius most likely wrote this famous work shortly after the death of the famous monk around the year 356. In this work, Athanasius takes a contemporary figure and placed him in the desert, albeit in biblical dress. Spanning only ninety-four paragraphs, Athanasius makes some four hundred or so references and allusions to the Bible. This leads some to describe Athanasius’ portrayal of Antony as a *homo biblicus*. Athanasius portrays the Egyptian monk as the prototype of the theological vision that he cast in his *On the Incarnation*, where he speaks of the Word coming into the world by means of his own human body to ensure victory over death for those in the body. One sees this theology in Athanasius’ portrayal of Antony in terms of the monk’s appropriation of Christ’s victory.

Athanasius explains that Satan, who hates and envies what is good, first attacked Antony because of his inability to bear seeing such progress in the young man (Ὁ δὲ μισόκαλος καὶ φθονερὸς διάβολος οὐκ ἤνεγκεν ὅτι ἐν νεωτέρῳ τοιαύτῃ πρόθεσιν). Satan then proceeds to attempt to dismantle the young ascetic. Athanasius says:

First, he (Satan) attempted to lead him away from his ascetic discipline, filling him with memories of his possessions… the intimacy of his family, the love of money, love of honor…and the other indulgences of life, and finally the difficulty of living virtuously.

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105 This is the case, although ascetical and monastic practices were already established in Egypt. The *Life of Antony* helped tremendously in spreading the popularity of the monastic movement throughout Egypt and beyond.


109 Ibid.
In spite of this onslaught, the devil was not able to gain mastery over Antony. After other failed attacks against Antony, Satan then hurls evil thoughts toward him. Yet Antony rebuffs the devil’s attack through his prayers and fortifies his body through his faith and fasting. At the end of this first assault, Athanasius narrates:

All these things occurred to the shame of the enemy. He, who thought he would become like God, was now mocked by a youth; a flesh and blood human being was rebuffing him who had boasted about himself concerning flesh and blood. For working through Antony was the Lord, who for us bore flesh and gave the body victory over the Devil (Συνήργει γὰρ ὁ Κύριος ἀυτῷ, ὁ σάρκα δὴ ἡμᾶς φορέσας, καὶ τῷ σώματι δὸς τῇ κατὰ τοῦ διαβόλου νίκην), so that each one of those who struggles like Antony can say ‘It is not I but the grace of God that is in me’. 110

Because of the Lord’s accomplished work in and by means of his own flesh, the devil is defeated since the Lord himself fights him with Antony. Antony won the first encounter with the devil not just by his will and effort. Along with Antony, the Savior who was in him won the contest. 111 Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh argue that a particularly fierce battle with the devil, found later in the Life of Antony, depicts the young monk fighting alone without divine assistance, impressing the divine spectator, and thus winning his favor through his merits. They also argue that this was the original story and that it “once described the perseverance of a hero who fought without the benefit of heavenly assistance” and who maintained “tranquility of soul in the midst of physical distress.” They hypothesize that Athanasius redacted this original telling to suit his own theological agenda. 112

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110 Ibid.; See 1 Cor. 15.10.
111 Behr, The Nicene Faith, 255.
However, this viewpoint rests on a couple of shaky assumptions. First they juxtapose an artificially constructed Arian view of salvation that emphasizes human violation and striving, and a so-called Athanasian understanding of salvation that places emphases upon human participation in the divine. The problem, as Khaled Anatolios aptly points out, is that there is no evidence pointing to any so-called Arian theologian who held such a soteriology. In lieu of this, the existence of such an Arian soteriology is highly suspect. The second assumption is that there are “redactional seams” within Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, thus implying that Athanasius takes liberty in portraying Antony in light of his own subjective theological vision. Yet Anatolios says that, even if one supposed this artificially reconstructed Arian soteriology, the theory of “redactional seams” in the *Life of Antony* does not have any sufficient evidence to warrant its acceptance.  

If one read this one episode as an isolated narrative outside the context of the rest of the *Life of Antony*, then the reading espoused by Gregg and Groh is at least plausible. However, right before this, one sees that Antony is victorious as the result of keeping the profession of his faith and through prayer. The test in this earlier episode is not to see what Antony is capable of doing without divine assistance, but whether he can control the thoughts of his mind and stand firm in his faith “in the one who has already worked the victory in the midst of the demonic cacophony.” This view gains support when one considers that this episode occurs after an initial encounter between Antony

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114 Athanasius *Life of Antony* 10.
115 Ibid., 9; Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 255.
and the devil, where the cooperation between Antony and Christ within him is emphasized.\textsuperscript{117}

Athanasius depicts what some see as the most notable and powerful depiction of Antony later in the work.\textsuperscript{118} Athanasius narrates how Antony barricades and isolates himself within a wilderness fortress for twenty years in order to battle the demons. After twenty years, some other monks, in their desire to follow Antony in his asceticism, forced him to emerge from the fortress by breaking down the door. Athanasius says:

Antony emerged as though from some shrine, having been initiated into divine mysteries and inspired by God (προήλθεν ὁ Ἀντώνιος ὀσπερ ἐκ τινος ἄδοτου μεμυσταγωγημένος καὶ θεοφορούμενος). This was the first time that he came out of the barracks and appeared to those who came to see him. When they saw his body they marveled...for he had not exercised yet was not weak as though he came out from fasting and fighting with demons...They saw that the thought of his soul was pure, and he was not sorrowful or suffering...Moreover, when he saw the crowd, he was not disturbed, nor was he delighted at so many people greeting him. Instead, as one guided by the Word, he maintained complete equilibrium in that which accords with nature (ὅλος ἰν ἱσός ὡς ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου κυβερνῶμενος καὶ ἐν τῷ κατὰ φύσιν ἑστῶς).\textsuperscript{119}

Athanasius uses language reminiscent of pagan mystery religions to display Antony’s fortress as an image of a sacred shrine (ἐκ τινος ἄδοτου).\textsuperscript{120} Antony’s intense

\textsuperscript{117} Athanasius Life of Antony 9.
\textsuperscript{118} Behr, The Nicene Faith, 254-5.
\textsuperscript{119} Athanasius Life of Antony 14; Behr, The Nicene Faith, 255-6.
\textsuperscript{120} Behr, The Nicene Faith, 256; Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Knopf, 1987), 258-9, 675-81. Fox’s explanation of the carryover of language and even certain practices from pagan religions in the Christian Roman Empire is informative. He does not say that the Christian Church borrowed and baptized paganism or pagan practices, but that Christian thinkers, in their theological or other types of literature and pious practice, kept certain manners of articulation and praxis that had their origin in paganism. He explains this based on said articulations and practices being “neutral technology,” which entails that these practices are not inherently pagan or Christians, and that both pagans and Christians use them to express their distinctive viewpoints. He says that some Christians even went so far as to perform certain practices derived from paganism, in this case divination, sanctioned against by their Church leaders. In light of this, the fact that Athanasius uses language borrowed from pagan mystery religions here in the Life of Antony should not surprise or alarm anyone.
asceticism and prolonged war with demonic forces led him to a state of detachment, where he was no longer moved by the emotions of pleasure and grief. Thus, Athanasius’ ideal Christian is one who is “detached, interiorly and exteriorly, from the things of the world,” not subject to the whims of human emotions. In his portrayal of Antony, Athanasius illustrates that the goal of Christian asceticism is not solely bodily mortification, but “to reestablish the body in its proper subjection to the soul.” That Athanasius does not use the term ἀπάθεια in his narration of Antony, unlike Clement who uses ἀπάθεια in reference to Christ and to those partaking of him, supports the conclusion that Athanasius views the goal of Christian deification and asceticism as being not solely bodily mortification, but the reestablish of the body in its proper subjection to the soul.¹²¹

This interpretation of Athanasius’ Life of Antony runs parallel with the description of the human soul in his Against the Pagans. There he speaks of the soul decaying from its initial sinless condition to a state where, considering itself and holding to the body and other senses, it falls into desire for itself and prefers this desire to the contemplation of divine things.¹²² Christ rights this state of corruption by the work of his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. This work, while done and accomplished in his body, is most evident in the lives of weak humans who, as Christ’s disciples, triumph over death.¹²³

¹²¹ Ibid.; Clement of Alexandria Paedagogus 1.2.4.1. Clement speaks of Christ of as being ἀπαθῆς τὴν ψυχήν. However, one should not necessarily read Clement as simply portraying Christ as a Stoic philosopher here.

¹²² Athanasius Against the Pagans 3.

Athanasius portrays Antony, having emerged from the fortress and not subject to the whims of humanity’s natural impulses, in a state according to nature (ἐν τῷ κατὰ φύσιν ἐστῶ). This state is a direct portrayal of Athanasius’ description of humankind’s state in the beginning, united with the person of the Word of God, in contrast to the inherit corruptibility of created beings.\(^\text{124}\) Having achieved the victory through the presence of the Word in him, Antony returns to the world and has overcome it through Christ’s victory. God now enables Antony to aid others in guiding them to the same divine life. As a result, Antony inspires many to join in an ascetical life, making the desert a city (ἡ ἡρημὸς ἐπολίσθη).\(^\text{125}\) The desert, once a wilderness uninhabited by God and opposed to his control, now is conquered and populated by monks glorifying God, fulfilling the goal of creation. The sense of equilibrium achieved through Athanasius depiction of asceticism is “shown to be the incarnation in Antony of the Lord and Word, Jesus Christ,” and the subsequent transformation of all creation.\(^\text{126}\)

For Athanasius, the result of creation reaching its culmination in the work of the Savior is a direct result of the deification of humankind wrought by Christ in humanity’s physical body. He portrays this belief through Antony, the archetypal Christian for Athanasius, who is deified as he is united to the body of the victorious Christ.\(^\text{127}\) In union with the risen Christ, who conquered Satan and death in his own body, Antony is now able to defeat Satan and his demons by means of the grace of God in him as he dwells in

\(^{124}\) Athanasius Against the Pagans 2-4; On the Incarnation 5; Behr, The Nicene Faith, 257; Anatolios, Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought, 181-2.

\(^{125}\) Athanasius Life of Antony 14; Behr, The Nicene Faith, 257-8.


\(^{127}\) Athanasius On the Incarnation 54. Antony displays Athanasius’ theology of deification clearly as one who has been made god (θεοποιῆμα) by Christ’s incarnation. Here in On the Incarnation, Athanasius also uses the same term used by Didymus, θεοποιῷ, in reference to deification. This adds another layer of connection between the famed bishop and the blind ascetic scholar.
the power of the risen Christ. In portraying Antony as the ideal life of virtuous Christian deification in the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius articulates his particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian orthodoxy. It is within this pro-Nicene agenda that Athanasius depicts Antony, in union with the risen Christ who can be none other than the co-eternal Son of God became flesh, as conquering Satan and his wicked angels through the appropriation of the work of Jesus Christ in his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. In union with the living Son, Antony in reality puts on Christ and cooperates with the living Word so that he may become the image and likeness of God, fulfilling the intention of humanity’s creation.

*Comparing Didymus and Athanasius’ Theologies of Deification*

*The Deified Christian and the Risen Christ’s Union of Body and Soul*

In lieu of Athanasius’ theology of deification in his *Letter to Marcellinus* and *Life of Antony*, similar motifs are also found in examining Didymus’ work. Recalling his teaching in his *Commentary on Zechariah*, Didymus’ theology of deification articulated the connection between the life of the Christian and the work of Christ on the cross and in his resurrection. Didymus sees Christ, by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, as the healer of human nature that is subject to fluctuation and decay. Christ took humanity’s sins and put them off through his death and resurrection. Christ also, without sinning or experiencing sin, renders the devil and his evil demons powerless, since they were responsible for humanity’s subjection to death. In doing this, Christ became a curse for humanity’s sake so that they could gain a blessing and live according to God (ζωντες

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128 Athanasius *Life of Antony* 5.
κατὰ θεόν). As a result, the Christian is able to live a divine life and contemplate the truth (πολιτείαν θείαν καὶ θεωρίαν τῆς ἀληθείας) precisely because of Christ’s work on the cross and in his resurrection.¹²⁹

This same theology is found in Athanasius’ Life of Antony. Athanasius teaches that it was through Christ that Antony was able to defeat the assaults of the devil. In fact, the Lord abided in and aided Antony precisely because the Lord himself defeated Satan through his bodily resurrection from the dead. Didymus’ theology of the Christian putting on Christ, through participation in the Holy Spirit in baptism, and living a virtuous life by Christ’s righteousness parallels the theology of Christian deification found in Athanasius portrayal of Antony.¹³⁰ Antony’s intense asceticism and prolonged war with demonic forces led him to a state of detachment, where he was no longer moved by the emotions of pleasure and grief. Athanasius thus portrays Antony as the ideal Christian who is “detached, interiorly and exteriorly, from the things of the world” and not subject to the whims of human emotions. In his portrayal of Antony, Athanasius illustrates that the goal of Christian asceticism is not solely bodily mortification, but “to reestablish the body in its proper subjection to the soul.”¹³¹ Both Didymus and Athanasius articulate a particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian orthodoxy, which sees the result of Christ’s victory over death and Satan in his own human nature appropriated by the Christian who experiences deification. This process of deification begins the Christians’ identification with Christ through the Holy Spirit in baptism.

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¹²⁹ Didymus, Sur Zacharie, 83.50.221.19-22; 83.53.232.13.
¹³⁰ Athanasius Life of Antony 5.
¹³¹ Behr, The Nicene Faith, 256.
The Divine Christian Life as a Present Existential Reality

Didymus’ theology of deification also does not speak of the divine Christian life lived by Christ’s righteousness metaphorically. He explains that the person who by faith in Christ puts off the works of sin is given life through participating in the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit.\(^{132}\) The sanctifying life that the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian is the means through which the Holy Spirit deifies him or her and, in consequence, transforms him or her into the image of Christ. Through the work of Christ the Christian puts on Christ himself (αὐτὸν ὅντα Χριστὸν ἐνδίεται) and, by mimicking his action and attitudes, lives by faith in accordance with and through virtue.\(^{133}\) The sanctifying life that the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian is the means by which the Holy Spirit deifies him or her and transforms her or him into the image of Christ. The Christian is able, through the work of Christ, to literally put on Christ (αὐτὸν ὅντα Χριστὸν ἐνδίεται).\(^{134}\) Didymus does not speak of mere human effort in attaining deification. He explains that that Christian, through recovering all that is good through the Holy Spirit, is able to partake in the divine life of Christ since Christ is in him or her. When the believer puts on Christ through faith in baptism, they identify with him and the Holy Spirit transforms them into his image.

Didymus’ teaching corresponds with Athanasius’ depiction of the monk Antony when he emerges from the desert fortress after twenty years of seclusion battling the demons. Athanasius depicts Antony as inspired by God (θεοφορούμενος), not moved

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\(^{132}\) Didymus On the Holy Spirit 231.1-6.

\(^{133}\) Didymus, Sur Zacharie, 83.49.217.20-22; On the Holy Spirit 222.1-3.

\(^{134}\) Ibid.
about by the passions of the flesh or human emotion, and as one directed by the Word (ὡς ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου κυβερνώμενος) who was in him. Just as Didymus’ view of deification says that the Christian is transformed into the image of Christ by means of putting on Christ and participating in the Holy Spirit, Athanasius renders Antony’s transformation into the image of Christ as the accomplishment of the work of the Word in him.  

Deification as the Goal of the Humanity’s Creation in the Image of God

Didymus’ theology of deification in the Commentary on Zechariah also teaches that the Holy Spirit’s transformation of the Christian into the image of Christ fulfills the ultimate goal of creation by making humanity into the image and likeness of God. For Didymus, this finished work of God’s creative activity results from the completed work of Christ in his own body and is administered by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer as he or she freely participates in the Spirit. When the Christian has put on Christ in baptism and subsequently follows him in discipleship, he or she is indwelled by the Spirit and is thus able to emulate Christ. As Russell notes, for Didymus this notion of deification (θεοποίησις) is fundamentally a product of Christian discipleship. Illustrating this in his commentary on Zechariah 3:6-7, Didymus explains that Christ provided a type and model for those choosing to imitate his human life (τύπον καὶ ύπογραμμὸν παρέχων τοῖς προηρημένοις μιμεῖσθαι αὐτὸν) in his taking up of human nature. Didymus describes those who choose to mimic him as given to Christ by God the Father and as those who are faithful to the image and likeness of God (ἀληθὸς

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135 Athanasius Life of Antony 14.
τυγχάνουσι κατ’ εἰκόνα καὶ ὀμοίωσιν Θεοῦ). As a result, the Christian is able to live a
divine way of life (πολιτείαν θείαν).138

This view of human deification as the final goal of God’s creation of humanity is
also detected in Athanasius’ articulation of Antony’s work as he exits from the desert
fortress to aid those seeking after God. As Behr points out, Antony returns to the world
having achieved the victory through the work of Christ who abides in him. Now God
enables Antony to aid others in guiding them to the divine life that he enjoys. As a result,
Antony inspires many to join in an ascetical life and makes the desert into a city (ἡ
ερημός ἐπολίσθη).139 The desert, once a wilderness uninhabited by God and opposed to
his control, is both conquered and populated by monks glorifying God, registering for
citizenship in heaven and fulfilling the goal of creation.

As Antony emerges from the fortress directed by the Word in him, he then leads
others to join and live the divine life as an ascetic. In this way, Antony leads others to put
on Christ and live the life of Christian virtue, no longer moved by the whims of human
emotions or the flesh. In doing so these men and women become faithful to the image
and likeness of God as they are transformed into the image of God by the ministry of the
Holy Spirit. Thus, through the work of the risen Christ, Christian deification
accomplishes the goal of God making human beings into the image of God. For
Athenasius and Didymus, the Lord accomplished this definitive goal of the created order
through the deification of Christ’s human nature by means of his death and resurrection.

138 Ibid., 83.53.233.12-18, 84.215.102.5-7; On the Holy Spirit 222.1-3.
139 Athanasius Life of Antony 14, 92-3; Behr, The Nicene Faith, 257-8.
It then follows that this life of Christ applies to all believers who put Christ on, mimicking his divine life through participation in the Spirit.  

**Conclusion**

While the contours of history seemingly swept Didymus out of the fourth-century Alexandrian picture, it is apparent that many of his contemporaries saw him as a prominent theologian and bastion of pro-Nicene orthodoxy. However, there has not been an exhaustive answer to the question of the relationship between the famous bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, and the blind urban ascetic. Such an answer would explain Didymus’ alleged role within the ecclesiastical school of Alexandria and how this role related to Athanasius’ ecclesial, political, and theological agenda.

In light of the cumulative evidence, it is likely that Didymus the Blind aided Athanasius’ ecclesial, political, and theological agenda through his championing of a particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian theology in fourth century Alexandria. He likely did so as the head of the Alexandrian catechetical school. This position as the head of the school evolved over the preceding two centuries because of the encroaching power of the bishops of Alexandria bringing the school under a more direct ecclesiastical control.  

While Didymus likely did not enjoy the same type of relationship with the ecclesiastical powers in Alexandria as his predecessors, it is improbable that he did not serve in the same capacity in the catechetical school as Origen and Clement of Alexandria did, albeit in an altered fashion.

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In this capacity within the Church’s catechetical school, Didymus both knew and submitted himself to the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius. That Didymus submitted himself to the Alexandrian bishop, almost certainly Athanasius, is supported by his teaching in his *Commentary on Zechariah* commenting on Zechariah 4:1-3. Didymus’ description of the teacher presiding over the whole Church (προϊσταμένου τῆς καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας διδασκάλου) who taught on this text from Zechariah likely refers to Athanasius who ruled in Alexandria from 328 to 373 A.D. Didymus’ allegiance to Athanasius is also supported by a second passage in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, where he describes an ordinance from an Alexandrian clergyman concerning a prohibition against the reading of apocryphal books in the church. Didymus describes this clergyman as an ancient bishop of the church (ἀρχαῖος ἐπίσκοπος ἐκκλησιαστικός) and approves of his ordinance. That this text refers to Athanasius is firmly supported by the same theme found in Athanasius’ thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*, where he decries the reading of apocryphal books in the Egyptian church.

The alliance between Didymus and Athanasius in their attempt to herald a particular strain of pro-Nicene Christian theology is also witnessed to by Didymus and Athanasius’ joint attack, or Athanasius’ command to attack and Didymus following the order, against the ascetic Hierakites in Egypt. Following Athanasius call to withstand the Hierakites, Didymus attacks them by condemning their doctrine of the human soul,

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142 Didymus the Blind *Sur Zacharie* 83.64.286.28-65.286.2. Didymus explains: Ἡκουσα ἐγὼ ποτε προϊσταμένου τῆς καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας διδασκάλου σαφηνίζοντος την προκειμένην λέξιν ὧν τὸ ἐπάνω τῆς λυχνίας ὁ περὶ τῆς Πατρὸς φωτισμὸς ἐστίν, αἱ δὲ ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ ἐξ εὐνομίαν αὐτῶν ἔλημεν οἱ περὶ Υἱοῦ καὶ ἀγίου Πνεύματος εἰσὶν λόγοι. In regards to this teacher as Athanasius, Doutreleau says, “Il est sur que, pour Didyme, il ne peut s'agir que de l'Eglise d'Alexandrie. Le maître place autrefois à la tête de l'Eglise est donc très probablement S. Athanase.”

143 Didymus *Kommentar Zum Ecclesiastes* 8.5-12.

144 Athanasius *Letter XXXIX*. 
categorizing them along with the Stoics.\textsuperscript{145} In light of the cumulative evidence, it is likely that Athanasius would have officially approved of such an ascetic community like Didymus’, since they were supporting his theological vision.\textsuperscript{146} Based upon this argument connecting Didymus and Athanasius, it is reasonable to see how Didymus would either follow or join in a theological vision akin to that of Athanasius.

It is not surprising within this ecclesiastical and political context to discover that Didymus shared a similar theology of deification with the bishop with whom he had a close relationship. In his \textit{Commentary on Zechariah}, Didymus articulates a theology of Christian deification that teaches that the deified Christian is united to the body and soul of the risen Christ. In this union, Didymus says that the divine Christian life is a present existential reality wherein the believer, through the work of Christ, puts on Christ himself ($\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\omicron\nu\tau\alpha\chi\rho\sigma\tau\omicron\omicron\varepsilon\nu\delta\iota\epsilon\tau\omicron\alpha\iota$) and lives by faith in accordance with virtue.\textsuperscript{147} The sanctifying life that the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian is the means through which the Spirit deifies him or her and transforms her or him into the image of Christ. Didymus also claims that this deification consists of the Holy Spirit’s transformation of the Christian into the image of Christ and that this transformative deification fulfills the ultimate goal of creation by making humanity into the image and likeness of God.

The characteristics of Christian deification taught by Didymus run parallel to and mirror the theological themes found in Athanasius’s \textit{Letter to Marcellinus} and his \textit{Life of Antony}. While it is possible that Didymus was both aware and borrowed from this work,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{145} Athanasius \textit{First Letter to Virgins} 24, 28; Didymus \textit{Kommentar Zum Ecclesiastes} 102.23-103.1; \textit{Hiobkommentar} 387.13-388.1.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Rufinus \textit{H.E.} 11.7; Richard A. Layton, \textit{Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria}, 15-6.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Didymus, \textit{Sur Zacharie}, 83.49.217.20-22; \textit{On the Holy Spirit} 222.1-3.
\end{itemize}
this is not necessary to understand why he articulated a similar theology of Christian deification. Convinced of the orthodoxy of the Nicene cause and supportive of his Alexandrian bishop who upheld this emerging Nicene orthodoxy, Didymus sought to articulate a theology of deification in his Commentary on Zechariah that was similar to Athanasius’ theology of deification.

If Didymus’s relationship with Athanasius is close to the argument found in this essay, then it is reasonable to conclude that Didymus’ theology of deification would be within the same trajectory of pro-Nicene theology found in Athanasius’ Letter to Marcellinus and Life of Antony. While Didymus and Athanasius’ theologies of deification run parallel in several areas, this alone does not necessarily prove that Didymus relied upon any textual work of the Alexandrian bishop. However, when Didymus and Athanasius’ similar themes are viewed in light of the cumulative evidence presented in other texts, the possibility or plausibility that Didymus was aware of and used Athanasius’ work is heightened. Ultimately, the cumulative textual evidence from Didymus’ extant work surrounding Athanasius’ ascetical reform movement in fourth-century Egypt makes the connection between the two highly plausible, even if a direct connection between their theologies can not be firmly established. In sharing this particular strain of pro-Nicene orthodoxy with Athanasius, Didymus not only shared a close relationship with the Alexandrian bishop, he also aided his ecclesial, political, and theological agenda. This explanation is sufficient to comprehend why these respective theologies run parallel in several key areas.
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