THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON OF DIDYMUS THE BLIND

BY

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Historical investigations into the formation of the New Testament canon have paid inadequate attention to the status of the canon in Alexandria during the fourth century. In large part this inadequacy is due to the presumed stature of Athanasius's thirty-ninth Paschal letter (A.D. 367). In this famous correspondence, the bishop lists as canonical the twenty-seven books that later became universally accepted by the Christian church. Not infrequently, scholars have assumed that this letter depicts a fixation of the NT canon in Alexandria during Athanasius's lifetime. The position taken by C. R. Gregory can be cited as representative:

We find in the list [of Athanasius] our whole New Testament. The notable advance upon Eusebius is, that now not a single one of these books remains as a disputed book. They are all on one level. Now that may be merely the Alexandrian view of the case. In Caesarea doubts may still prevail, or in other churches. But for Alexandria the case is clear ... The process for choosing books has come to an end.

Those who concur with Gregory's position sometimes observe a limited disagreement in Alexandria over the precise contours of the canon; occasionally a Latin commentary, presumed to be a translation of Didymus's work on the Catholic epistles, is quoted to show that he, at least, rejected 2 Peter. But even this noteworthy case is dismissed as an exception to what is otherwise assumed—that the Alexandrian church of the latter part of the fourth century had struck a general agreement concerning the extent of the NT canon.

It is precisely this historical judgment that requires further attention. Was the letter of Athanasius descriptive or prescriptive of the status of the canon in fourth-century Alexandria? If descriptive, it was probably the academic and ecclesiastical prestige of the Alexandrian church that influenced the ultimate acceptance of the current twenty-seven book canon. If prescriptive, the bishop's personal influence would have led to the final fixation of the New Testament.
One way to determine the status of the canon in Alexandria is to ascertain the view of the canon held by a contemporary of Athanasius. This the following study sets out to do by examining the writings of Didymus (d. 398), the blind monk appointed by Athanasius as head of the famed Alexandrian catechetical school. Such an endeavor has become possible only within recent years, since the publication of over 2000 pages of papyrus mss. of Didymus’s commentaries on the Old Testament, discovered in 1941 in a grotto near Toura, Egypt. These commentaries on Genesis, Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Zechariah can be studied profitably to determine the concept, function, and extent of Didymus’s NT canon. The purpose of this article is to undertake such a study so as to ascertain whether one can still speak of a fixed NT canon in the Alexandrian church of the late fourth century.

Limitations and Method

Any attempt to ascertain Didymus’s NT canon on the basis of these newly discovered commentaries encounters serious limitations. In them, Didymus refers to the canonical status of early Christian writings only on occasion; never does he follow Athanasius in listing the books he considered canonical. This circumstance renders the discernment of his canon difficult, though not impossible. That Didymus viewed any given book as canonical can be determined in one of three ways. The first is the most obvious: sometimes Didymus classifies a book as divinely authored (D. Job 18:9; 41:5), or as part of the divine Scriptures (D. Gen. 70:14) of either the Old or New Testament (D. Gen. 156:1-11). Any book so classified clearly belongs to his canon.

The second way of determining Didymus’s view of a book’s canonical status is considerably more complex, requiring a detailed explanation and justification. The method here suggested concerns Didymus’s “canonical use” of the Biblical writings. This exegetical use of the Bible depends, in turn, on his understanding of the nature of Scripture. With regard to his understanding of the Bible, Didymus was very much the disciple of Origen. In simplified terms, Didymus believed that the Bible was to be interpreted both literally and spiritually. The literal interpretation, which Didymus calls a word for word (πρὸς τὴν λέξαν) or historical (φυσικά) interpretation, is necessary in view of the occasional obscurity of the Biblical text. Didymus removed such obscurities by making simple paraphrases of the text. As he states in his commentary on Zechariah: