

Several people - on the blog and off of it - have asked me about the broader significance of my research on the Patristic citations of the NT, specifically the quotations of the Gospels in the writings of Didymus. Did this research contribute to my loss of faith? Did it lead me away from evangelical Christianity? Did it affect my understanding of any Christian doctrine - my view of God, my view of Christ, my view of salvation? Did it affect my understanding of Scripture as the inspired Word of God? Did it change anything that I thought about anything apart from the Patristic evidence for the text of the New Testament?

The answers are clear and straightforward: no, no, no, no, and no!

The follow-up question (when asked; you possibly have the same question) has always been: why did you do it then?

My answer to *that* is also straightforward. I did it because I'm a scholar who is committed to scholarship and who thinks scholarly research is important. And this kind of textual scholarship is the kind of thing really serious scholars do!

Let me be the first to say (well, OK, I'm not the first to say this) that I know and acknowledge that some kinds of scholarship are virtually pointless and of no broader significance. Some thirty years ago I was attending a textual criticism meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (the annual professional meeting for scholars who teach and research biblical studies), and a scholar - here left unnamed - was reading a paper about a variant reading that I *think* (all these years later) was on the manuscripts of Matthew 10:10 in some obscure ancient language that I didn't know at the time, and still don't know. The question had to do with what Jesus said when he indicated that his disciples should not take with them, on the mission that he was sending them out on, a "staff." In this other language, some manuscripts had one word for staff, but other manuscripts used a different word for staff. And this scholar was trying to establish definitively which of these two words was the word originally used in this ancient version for staff. His paper took twenty-five minutes.

Afterwards, during the question and answer period, I raised my hand - silly young graduate student that I was - and asked him what the difference in *meaning* was between the two words. He replied that there was no difference. They were synonyms.

I was completely dumbstruck. Why would you put *that* much work into deciding which word was originally used if at the end of the day, the meaning was not changed a bit because both words meant precisely the same thing? He thought I was an idiot not to see why it mattered.

But I didn't and I don't.

My work on Didymus the Blind was not like that. In fact, it was important because it helped establish what the text of the NT looked like in Alexandria Egypt around the year 390 CE. That matters because the Alexandrian text at that time was widely thought to represent the most faithful wording of the "original" text anywhere available. If other studies were done on the Alexandrian text at other times (for example in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and so on) then one could write a history of the Alexandrian text. And if someone could do *that* then we would be well on our way toward a unifying theory that explained what the original text was and how it came to be modified over time. And those things struck me at the time (and still strike me today) as significant.

But what does it have to do with my belief in God or in my understanding of the Christian faith or my views about the inspiration of the Bible? Nothing really. It has to do with \*other\* things, things that scholars are interested in because ultimately they matter for issues that \*do\* concern people more broadly (like knowing what the Gospels originally said).

Scholarship necessarily has to be built up from tiny little pieces into much larger wholes. Once I became an expert on the manuscript tradition of the New Testament, I could begin to reflect on that tradition, and once I did that - which was possible in great depth only when I had plumbed the depths of scholarship at one small point - I began to rethink things - first my view of Scripture, then my view of Christ, then my view of the existence of God.

But there was nothing about my research on Didymus per se that led me to change any views I had. Most of my friends who work in textual criticism (the manuscript tradition of the New Testament) have no problem agreeing with each and every point (and the evidence to support it) I make in my book on Didymus. But they were not moved to change their theological views and most of them continue to be very strong and committed evangelical Christians. Why shouldn't they be? Didymus's quotations of the Gospel of Luke have no bearing on whether God exists, or if Jesus was his son, or if his death brought salvation, or even if the original writings of the NT were inspired.

I myself came to rethink things. But I could have stayed exactly what I was, based on my study of Didymus. I changed because of other factors and other considerations. That does not invalidate the scholarship, though, or make it pointless or irrelevant. It is relevant and it is important. But not for matters of faith. Faith (or non-faith) is not the only thing that is important!!



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