Teaching the Psalms:
Didymus the Blind and the Pedagogy of Christian Knowledge[1]

Lincoln H. Blumell
Brigham Young University

Didymus the Blind's *Lectures on Psalms* (Pss 20–44), delivered in Alexandria around 370 CE, constitute an important witness to the social production and transmission of Christian knowledge in late antiquity. These lectures, which are preserved among the Tura papyri, are the earliest extant Christian lecture series. Thus, they provide direct access to the exegetical content of late-ancient Christianity, as well as to the pedagogical strategies through which Christian knowledge was conveyed, authorized, negotiated, and contested within a fourth-century educational setting.

Drawing on insights developed by Harold Remus's adaptation of Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's work on the "sociology of knowledge," this paper argues that Didymus's lectures reveal Christianity functioning as an epistemic community that formed students into a distinct symbolic group through pedagogy, scriptural exegesis, philosophical reasoning, and moral formation. Throughout the lectures, Didymus repeatedly appeals to what is "known," "self-evident," "obvious," or accepted through "common conception." Such appeals, however, are never epistemologically neutral. Rather, they function rhetorically and pedagogically to establish communal norms of interpretation while simultaneously redefining the framework and limits of authoritative knowledge through Scripture.

[1] My interest in the Tura papyri, Didymus the Blind, and his lectures text stems from my work editing a lost quire of Didymus's *Lectures on Psalms* that ended up at Brigham Young University in 1983 and was published in 2019: L. H. Blumell, with T. W. Mackay and G. Schwendner, *Didymus the Blind's Commentary on Psalms 26:10–29:2 and 36:1–3* (Turnhout, 2019). Later this year I will be submitting a complete translation of Didymus's Lectures on Psalms to the SBL Series, *Writings from the Graeco-Roman World*.

I. The Psalms Lectures as Classroom Transcripts

The methodological importance of Didymus's *Lectures on Psalms* for the present investigation lies partly in the fact that they preserve oral pedagogical discourse. The Tura Papyri, therefore, provide unique access to the practical negotiation and transmission of knowledge within a late-antique Christian classroom. Questions from students are explicitly marked in the text, and the material's oral nature is evident in its repetitious style, short clauses, abrupt digressions, and frequent explanatory clarifications. The lectures differ markedly from Didymus's more polished commentaries intended for "publication."[2]

The oral and repetitive character of the lectures is especially significant from the perspective of the "sociology of knowledge." In the classroom, repetition, clarification, recapitulation, and pedagogical restatement functioned not merely as stylistic features of oral discourse but as mechanisms for reinforcing authoritative interpretation and embedding Christian modes of reasoning within communal memory. In fact, the classroom itself functioned as a kind of "plausibility structure" in Remus's sense: a socially bounded environment in which authoritative interpretation, moral formation, and Christian modes of reasoning were repeatedly reinforced through pedagogical practice.

Recent scholarship has significantly reshaped the understanding of Didymus's educational identity. Earlier studies often treated him primarily as an allegorical exegete or as a theological heir of Origen. Blossom Stefaniw, however, has persuasively argued that Didymus should primarily be understood as a practicing grammarian operating within the structures of late-antique *paideia*.[3] This argument is supported strongly by the Tura Papyri. The lectures

[2] I.e., Commentaries on Genesis, Job, and Zechariah.
[3] B. Stefaniw, *Christian Reading: Language, Ethics and the Order of Things* (Berkeley, 2019).

preserve precisely the sort of pedagogical activity associated with grammatical instruction in late antiquity.[4] Stefaniw's formulation is especially noteworthy: "Didymus was doing the same cultural work that every other grammarian was doing."[5] This observation is important because grammatical instruction in late antiquity was never solely about technical literacy. Rather, it inducted students into a relationship with a revered literary patrimony that shaped moral identity, social belonging, and civic formation. In Didymus's classroom, however, the literary patrimony being transmitted was no longer Homeric but Christian.

The lessons of Didymus preserve epistemic negotiation in real time: adaptation to audience knowledge, explanatory improvisation, appeals to shared assumptions, repetition for emphasis, and the social mechanics of intellectual formation. The classroom setting is also evident from the educational level presupposed by the lectures. The students appear to be familiar with grammatical, philosophical, and rhetorical traditions. Didymus often introduces Aristotelian distinctions with minimal explanation, suggesting that both teacher and students shared a background in elite *paideia*. Aristotelian categories thus functioned as part of the shared intellectual grammar of late-antique educational culture rather than as isolated philosophical abstractions.

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[4] I.e., explanation of parts of speech, identification of speakers, analysis of literary devices, etymology, discussion of textual variants, logical reasoning, ethical application, and broad disciplinary excursions into philosophy, zoology, mathematics, and rhetoric. See, Dionysius Thrax, *Gramm. Graeci* 1.1: "*Grammatike* is an *empeiria* (acquired expertise) of the general usage of poets and prose writers. It has six parts: first, accurate reading with due regard for prosody; second, explanation of the literary devices contained; third, the provision of notes on phraseology and subject matter; fourth, the discovery of etymology; fifth, the working out of analogical regularities; sixth, the critical study of literature, which is the finest part of the *techne* (art)." Cf. Quintilian, *Inst*. 1.4.2: "Grammar is the science specifically concerned with reading .... There are two parts of grammar, one that is called exegetic and one that is called horistic. The exegetic is explanatory, and has to do with the matter of reading; the horistic is delimiting, and demonstrates principles such as the parts of speech, and the virtues and vices of speech. The whole art of grammar consists above all in the understanding of the poets, writers, and historians, in ready exposition, and in the logic of speaking and writing correctly."

[5] B. Stefaniw, "The School of Didymus the Blind in Light of the Tura Find," in L. I. Larsen and S. Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2018), 154.

The educational nature of the lectures is repeatedly visible in Didymus's pedagogical analogies. He regularly elucidates "spiritual progress" through educational processes familiar to his audience. The acquisition of grammar becomes a model for the acquisition of virtue and perfect knowledge. Likewise, Didymus repeatedly distinguishes beginners from the mature, elementary instruction from perfect teaching, and introductory understanding from perfected wisdom. This pedagogical structure is especially evident in his description of "sober intoxication" that appears multiple times in the lectures.[6] Here, Didymus distinguishes between "destructive intoxication"[7] and a spiritual intoxication arising from participation in divine teaching. He explains that those who become intoxicated "from the abundance of your house" partake of "the perfect teaching" and "the perfect knowledge of truth." This distinction reflects the graduated structure of elite education. Beginners receive milk, while the mature receive solid food and wisdom. Therefore, Didymus presents Christian pedagogy as progressive intellectual and spiritual ascent.

II. Sociology of Knowledge and the Christian Classroom

Remus's framework is particularly illuminating for interpreting the social and pedagogical dynamics preserved within Didymus's lectures. In Remus's study, he defines the sociology of knowledge as the investigation of "the relation of thought to its social settings."[8] Remus argues that knowledge includes not only formal intellectual systems but also the assumptions, conventions, and common understandings through which communities construct

[6] E.g. *Comm. Ps.* 64.19–65.3, 238.8–19.

[7] I.e., actual intoxication.

[8] H. Remus, "Sociology of Knowledge and the Study of Early Christianity," in B. Hargrove (ed.), *Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Modernization and Pluralism in Christian Thought and Structure* (New York and Toronto, 1984), 99

reality. Therefore, knowledge is sustained through "plausibility structures," social environments that reinforce a shared symbolic universe.[9]

This framework can elucidate Didymus's lectures in some important ways. The classroom itself functions as a sort of "plausibility structure" in which students are socialized into Christian modes of interpretation, reasoning, and perception. Didymus does not simply communicate biblical information. He inducts students into an ordered intellectual world in which Scripture, philosophy, language, ethics, and cosmology are integrated into a coherent Christian vision of reality. This is readily evident in the opening section of the lecture series that begins with Psalm 20 (LXX):

> Based on scripture and common conception, we understand God to be immutable and unalterable; for the one who is not at all subject to quality is not mutable or alterable. Alteration is nothing other than a change according to quality. Not every change is an alteration, but only the one according to quality. There are other types of change since there are other movements. That which comes into being changes, but this movement is not an alteration. That which grows changes, but this is not an alteration, for such movement is an addition and an increase of quantity. Whenever one becomes good from being bad, or vice versa, they are changed according to quality in the same way as one goes from sickness to health and vice versa.[10]

This passage is particularly revealing for understanding how Didymus negotiates authoritative knowledge in the late-antique classroom. He begins not simply from Scripture alone, but from "Scripture and common conception" (κοινὴ ἔννοια), thereby grounding his argument simultaneously in revelation and in assumptions shared within broader Greco-Roman intellectual culture. The argument then proceeds through distinctly Aristotelian categories, especially the classification of kinds of change. Didymus carefully distinguishes "alteration" (ἀλλοίωσις), which concerns change in quality, from other forms of motion, such as coming-to-be and quantitative increase. The conceptual framework derives directly from Aristotelian physics and

[9] Remus, "Sociology of Knowledge and the Study of Early Christianity," 101.
[10] *Comm. Ps.* 1.1–8.

metaphysics, in which motion is divided into categories of substance, quantity, quality, and place. Yet Didymus does not introduce these distinctions as abstract philosophical exercises. Rather, they function pedagogically and exegetically to serve theological instruction on divine immutability. God cannot be altered because alteration belongs only to beings subject to qualitative change. Particularly significant is the way Didymus moves seamlessly from philosophical taxonomy to moral and spiritual formation: the movement from vice to virtue, or from sickness to health, constitutes a qualitative alteration. Aristotelian categories thus become instruments for Christian epistemology and ascetic anthropology. The passage exemplifies the larger pedagogical method of the lectures themselves: Didymus begins from shared intellectual assumptions recognizable within elite *paideia*, organizes them through philosophical reasoning, and ultimately reorients them toward Christian theological and moral formation into knowledge.

III. Negotiating Greco-Roman Discourses of Knowledge

One of the most striking features of the lectures is the frequency with which Didymus appeals to what is already "known," "obvious," or (as noted above) accepted through "common conception." Such appeals function pedagogically by establishing shared intellectual ground between the teacher and the students. Read through the lens of Remus's sociology of knowledge, "common conception" represents more than abstract reasoning; it reflects socially embedded structures of intelligibility already operative within elite educational culture. Didymus repeatedly appropriates these shared assumptions and reorients them toward Christian theological and moral formation.

Aristotle occupies a particularly important role in this process because Aristotelian conceptuality provided one of the shared intellectual languages through which knowledge could be organized, clarified, and authorized within the classroom. Aristotelian categories, therefore,

functioned not simply as borrowed philosophical terminology but as culturally authoritative intellectual tools recognizable within the social world of late antique *paideia*. Their pedagogical effectiveness depended precisely upon their shared intelligibility within elite educational discourse. Aristotelian logic and philosophical categories remained authoritative intellectual tools, but their legitimacy was redefined through scriptural exegesis and theological instruction.

Besides Aristotle, the lectures preserve evidence of other direct philosophical engagement. Though many examples could be given, in one instance, Didymus recounts an exchange with a "Greek" who challenged Christians to demonstrate from Scripture that the soul is intelligible rather than corporeal.[11] Didymus responds philosophically by arguing that intelligible realities can be described through bodily metaphors without themselves being bodily. This passage is important because it demonstrates Christianity actively participating in elite intellectual discourse rather than rejecting philosophical reasoning.

Read sociologically, these philosophical discussions scattered throughout the lectures functioned not merely as intellectual ornamentation but as mechanisms of epistemic formation. Didymus appropriates culturally authoritative philosophical categories already embedded within elite educational culture and reorganizes them within a Christian symbolic universe. The lectures, therefore, preserve the active negotiation through which Greco-Roman structures of intelligibility were incorporated into, transformed by, and subordinated to Christian modes of knowing.

IV. Knowledge, Moral Formation, and Mimetic Pedagogy

In the lectures, knowledge is never merely cognitive information but a morally embodied mode of existence formed through pedagogical practice. As Richard A. Layton has emphasized,

[11] *Comm. Ps.* 34.8–22.

Didymus's pedagogy is fundamentally mimetic: students are formed through the imitation of scriptural exemplars and through gradual moral transformation within the interpretive community of the classroom.[12] Knowledge, therefore, depends upon ascetic formation and ethical progress.

This relationship between epistemology and moral transformation appears throughout Didymus's treatment of Psalm 35. Expounding the statement that the lawbreaker "did not want to understand how to do good," Didymus explicitly rejects deterministic anthropology and insists upon moral freedom: human beings "all have the same nature," and individuals become virtuous or wicked according to what they "choose or reject." Understanding itself possesses an ethical dimension. One cannot separate intellectual knowledge from moral disposition because moral corruption distorts the capacity for proper understanding.

In the same discussion, Didymus develops this connection further in his treatment of "virtue," "wisdom," and "spiritual progress." All knowledge and all virtue is a "quality," he explains, and both admit of growth, increase, and perfection. Beginners in wisdom remain capable of error and reproval, but those who attain perfected wisdom have been altered "for the goal."[13] Knowledge, therefore, exists not as static possession but as cultivated transformation of the soul. As Didymus states elsewhere in the lecture, virtue and knowledge are activities and exist by being practiced. Knowledge is thus fundamentally participatory and ascetical.

This developmental model structures the pedagogy of the lectures themselves. From the perspective of Remus's sociology of knowledge, moral formation is inseparable from epistemic formation because communities sustain worlds of meaning not merely through ideas but through

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[12] R. A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria: Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship* (Urbana and Chicago, 2004).
[13] Ps 35:1 (LXX) where Didymus interpreted the Greek εἰς τὸ τέλος as "for the goal."

embodied practices, habits, and forms of life. The classroom, therefore, functioned not simply as a site of textual interpretation but as a space of ascetic and epistemic transformation through which students were formed into specifically Christian knowers.

V. Ordering Knowledge: Scripture, Science, and the Christian Symbolic Universe

The lecture on Psalm 35 also provides the clearest evidence of how Didymus reorganizes the intellectual world of late antiquity within a Christian symbolic universe. Didymus does not reject Greco-Roman intellectual disciplines. Rather, he relocates them within a hierarchically ordered structure of intelligibility grounded ultimately in the divine Logos.

This appears most clearly in his claim that "there is truth, for example, in grammar, geometry, and in other sciences."[14] The statement is remarkable because it demonstrates that classical disciplines retain genuine epistemic legitimacy within Didymus's Christian framework. Grammar, geometry, mechanics, and philosophy possess truth because creation itself is rationally ordered and therefore capable of mediating intelligibility.

Didymus illustrates this principle through the example of a mechanical "clock."[15] A mechanic constructs the "clock" according to technical knowledge and rational proportion. Another observer may subsequently gain knowledge from the object itself and thereby receive, through the constructed artifact, knowledge of its maker. The analogy reveals a deeply participatory understanding of knowledge. Created realities mediate intelligibility because they bear within themselves the rational order by which they were fashioned.

The analogy is especially significant from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge because knowledge is mediated through intelligible structures that preserve and communicate the

[14] *Comm. Ps.* 235.12–20.
[15] Either a "water-clock" or a "sundial."

rationality of their maker. The created object becomes a pedagogical intermediary through which rational order is transmitted and appropriated. Knowledge, therefore, emerges not as isolated cognition but as participation within an intelligible and meaningful world.

Didymus extends this participatory epistemology further through his doctrine of "truth." The sciences contain genuine truth, yet all truth ultimately derives from and participates in the Logos, who is himself "the original and total idea of truth." Human beings participate in truth just as "wax receives the imprint of a seal."[16] Truth therefore exists both cosmologically and pedagogically: the world bears intelligibility because it derives from divine reason, and the classroom mediates participation in that intelligible order through scriptural interpretation and disciplined instruction.

The same logic structures Didymus's extensive use of metaphor and allegory. Scripture speaks simultaneously on multiple levels because intelligible realities transcend purely material description. Christ may therefore be simultaneously a shepherd, lamb, vine, door, temple, and high priest. Such multiplicity does not produce contradiction because intelligible reality exceeds material categories. The pedagogical task of exegesis is to train students to perceive this deeper symbolic coherence.

Here, the lectures reveal not merely theological interpretation but the construction of a Christian symbolic universe in which philosophy, science, morality, and scriptural exegesis become integrated within a unified order of truth. The sciences remain authoritative not independently of Christianity, but insofar as they are incorporated into a Christianized structure of knowledge grounded in creation, Scripture, and the divine Logos.

VI. Conclusion

[16] *Comm. Ps.* 235.24–25.

Didymus the Blind's *Lectures on Psalms* preserve one of the clearest surviving witnesses to the social production and transmission of Christian knowledge in late antiquity. As the earliest extant Christian lecture series, the Tura lectures reveal not only the exegetical content of fourth-century Christianity but also the pedagogical mechanisms through which knowledge was conveyed, authorized, negotiated, and internalized within the classroom. The lectures preserve not merely what Didymus taught, but how Christian intellectual culture reproduced itself through practices of interpretation, repetition, moral exhortation, philosophical reasoning, and communal instruction.

Throughout the lectures, Didymus repeatedly appeals to what is "known," "self-evident," or accepted through "common conception," while simultaneously redefining those assumptions through scriptural exegesis and theological instruction. Aristotelian categories, grammatical methods, and philosophical discourse function not merely as borrowed intellectual tools but as shared structures of intelligibility embedded within late antique *paideia*. Didymus appropriates these culturally authoritative forms of knowledge and reorganizes them within a Christian symbolic universe grounded in Scripture and the divine Logos.

The lectures also reveal that knowledge itself is inseparable from moral and spiritual formation. Knowledge is not abstract cognition but cultivated participation in truth through ascetic practice, virtue, and pedagogical formation. The classroom, therefore, functioned not merely as a site of textual interpretation but as a mechanism of epistemic and moral transformation through which students were formed into specifically Christian knowers.

Read through the lens of Remus's sociology of knowledge, Didymus's lectures reveal Christianity not simply as a doctrinal system but as a socially embodied and pedagogically transmitted world of meaning. By repositioning Scripture within the educational role

traditionally occupied by Homer and the classical literary canon, Didymus participated in the construction of a distinctively Christian *paideia*. The Tura lectures preserve the practical classroom processes through which that Christian intellectual world was constructed, authorized, inhabited, and reproduced within late antique society.