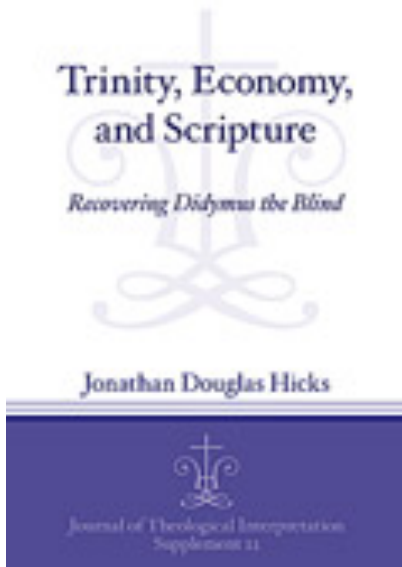


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**Jonathan Douglas Hicks**

***Trinity, Economy, and Scripture: Recovering Didymus the Blind***

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In this book, a revision of a doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Otago under the supervision of Christopher Holmes and Murray Rae, Jonathan Douglas Hicks aims to recover the theology of Didymus the Blind (d. 398) for the modern church by exploring the links between Didymus's scriptural ontology and his exegetical practices. By attending to a close reading of two Didymean texts, *De Trinitate* and *Commentary on Zechariah*, Hicks endeavors to demonstrate that a better reading of Didymus's exegetical literature can be achieved through a study of the broader theological principles concerning Scripture and the Trinity that are articulated in *De Trinitate*.

In the book's introduction, Hicks announces his intention to produce a "theologically-motivated recovery," focusing on how Didymus's theology informed his reading of Scripture, and thereby offer the modern church "a more coherent vision about the practice of reading Scripture in and for the community of faith" (4). This task, Hicks proposes, is best accomplished by allowing Didymus's dogmatic and exegetical writings to inform one another. Hicks locates his work in continuity with T. F. Torrance's recovery of a patristic scriptural ontology, which he extends to include an emphasis on its participatory dimension, and with Henri de Lubac's analysis of the senses of Scripture, which he takes as a guide for making sense of Didymus's occasionally ill-defined exegetical method.

In chapter 1 Hicks makes a robust defense of Didymus's authorship of *De Trinitate*. The most successful part of this chapter is Hicks's argument for dating *De Trinitate* to between 384 and 429 CE, drawing on the text's internal characteristics as well as its reception history to refute the recent proposals of Panayiotis Tzamalikos and Istvan Perczel to redate the text to the late fifth century or beyond. Likewise compelling is Hicks's argument in favor of an Alexandrian, rather than Antiochene or Cappadocian, provenance. Hicks then proceeds to weigh arguments for and against Didymean authorship; though Hicks concludes that "the weight of the evidence points in favor of Didymus' authorship" (69), the question of Didymean authorship continues to hang over the project throughout, as will be discussed further below.

Chapter 2 analyzes how *De Trinitate* extends the unity and distinction characteristic of the eternal identities of the Trinitarian *hypostaseis* to their activities in the world. In *De Trinitate*, the *hypostaseis* of the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct on account of their respective generation and procession from the *hypostasis* of the Father (that *De Trinitate* idiosyncratically describes the coming forth of the Son and the Spirit as from the Father's *hypostasis* and not his *ousia* is defended by Hicks as merely a different understanding of *hypostasis* centered upon the idea of "actual existence"); the Father, then, "is known only in relation to these *hypostaseis*" (89). These eternal distinctions are then reflected by the differentiated activities of each of the divine persons, even as they act with a unity of will and power. Thus, even as *De Trinitate* speaks of the inseparability of all the actions of the Trinity, it can also differentiate with respect to how the divine persons "do the same activity differently" (106; see *Trin.* 1.36.4). There is, therefore, a consistent "distinction-in-unity" that characterizes both the identities and activities of the three *hypostaseis* of the Trinity.

In chapter 3 Hicks analyzes how *De Trinitate* links its conception of the divine economy with its ontology of Scripture. While *De Trinitate* asserts divine incomprehensibility, it nevertheless allows for humans to gain knowledge of God through a divine gift that is "inherently participatory" (117). Hicks shows that *De Trinitate* characterizes the Trinitarian activity in salvation as both inseparable and differentiated, tracing how *De Trinitate* conceives of the three *hypostaseis* creating humans in the *imago Dei* and, after the fall, restoring it through the waters of baptism, ethical and intellectual sanctification, and, ultimately, deification. By extension, the human authors of Scripture are those who "participate in the saving activity of God to which they testify" (154), as the prophets and apostles are described in *De Trinitate* as conversant with the Spirit of God, having their minds illumined and their lives sanctified. Likewise, the proper interpretation of Scripture requires reading it within the context of participating in God's saving activity. Hicks endorses this scriptural ontology for the church today, even as he expresses

hesitation concerning how *De Trinitate* seems to presuppose the possibility of moral perfection in this life.

Chapter 4 examines the theme of moral sanctification in Didymus, shifting away from *De Trinitate* to focus on *Commentary on Zechariah*. Hicks first provides context for this discussion by examining Didymus's understanding of the virtues. Among the virtues, contemplative virtue is both inseparable from and superior to moral virtue; for Didymus, the soul struggles against the allure of the passions to instead pursue the virtues, which have at their "gravitational center" true contemplation of the Son (194). These ideas are then traced through several key passages in *Commentary on Zechariah*, with Hicks arguing that the Son in his humanity both exemplifies virtue and enables Christians to progress in the virtues on account of their participation in him. Indeed, the incarnation offers a means by which human changeability can be reconciled with divine constancy; reverence and obedience to God open a pathway to, ultimately, possession of God himself. While Hicks is careful to defend Didymus against the charge of being a "proto-Pelagian," he concedes that Didymus shares Pelagius's optimistic and, indeed, "overly-realized" view of moral perfection.

In chapter 5 Hicks considers Didymus's development of the themes of illumination and the contemplative life through a close reading of *Commentary on Zechariah*. For Didymus, contemplation involves three distinguishable stages: contemplating first God's providential care for the world, then the incarnation of the Son, and, finally, the Trinity itself. Hicks is most interested in how Didymus suggests that "material embodiedness presents an obstacle to complete receptivity of this latter-most vision of God" (210), with full, participatory contemplation of the Trinity possible only in the eschaton, when the soul is restored to its preexistent glory. Supplementing his argument with evidence from Didymus's *Commentary on the Psalms*, Hicks demonstrates that Didymus denies the materiality of the Son's ascended body, as in the age to come there will no longer be a need for the Son's assumed humanity to continue its mediating and paideutic work of illumination. Hicks then relates this back to Didymus's ontology of Scripture, charging that Didymus's Christology thus distorts his hermeneutics insofar as the preliminary, corporeal senses of Scripture are, like Christ's material body, merely given subordinate, if not provisional, status with respect to the higher spiritual senses.

Chapter 6 attempts to synthesize all that has come before through an analysis and an evaluation of Didymus' interpretation of Zech 3 in *Commentary on Zechariah*. For Didymus, Zechariah's vision of Joshua the high priest's encounter with Satan and the angel of the Lord is ultimately about spiritual warfare and the need for Christians to resist temptation and to learn from Christ and his virtues. In his creative theological critique of this interpretation, Hicks begins by evaluating the content of Didymus's literal sense.

Hicks affirms Didymus's efforts to read the Old Testament narrative in light of the one economy of Scripture, affirming with Didymus that "the Trinitarian economy must be brought into conversation with the plain sense of the text" (259), even as he challenges Didymus's account of human perfection with respect to Joshua the high priest. Likewise, with respect to the text's higher sense, Hicks endorses Didymus's christological interpretation insofar as it moves from the revealed mystery of Christ's assumption of our humanity to the need for human participation within that mystery; on the other hand, he registers concern with Didymus's marginalization of material embodiedness, with respect to both the incarnation and human life on this earth.

The book then concludes with an epilogue restating some of its key findings with respect to the strengths and weaknesses of Didymus's understanding and interpretation of Scripture. Following Didymus, Hicks argues that modern Christian preachers should remember that "Trinitarian readings of the OT are therefore not only a permissible area of exploration for the Christian interpreter; the confession of the Nicene faith demands that such readings proceed" (277). Likewise, with respect to the homiletical task of bridging the worlds of the text and of the modern audience, Hicks endorses Didymus's view that "the question about the relation between meaning and application could never arise because the deepest meaning of every text in Scripture was Christ himself" and that "to discover Christ at the center of the Scriptures is to find oneself at the joyful place where true spirituality, theology, and exegesis meet" (278).

In sum, Hicks's book is a closely argued and thoughtfully articulated demonstration of how Didymus the Blind's exegetical writings can be better understood in light of the theological commitments presented in *De Trinitate*. Hicks is to be commended for his creative synthesis of major themes in the texts under examination, as well as for his robust engagement with secondary literature and the minutiae of textual variants and differences in scholarly translations. Still, Hicks's insistence on Didymean authorship of *De Trinitate* creates issues at times; for instance, when Hicks asserts that "Didymus' position on the activities of the *hypostaseis* undergoes development or clarification between his writings of [*De Spiritu Sancto*] and *DT* [*De Trinitate*]" (100), one immediately wonders if this is not better interpreted as further evidence that the texts have different authors; at the very least, an explanation of why this development occurred would be helpful in fending off such criticism. Likewise, Hicks asserts that "if in *DT* Didymus raises, as a polemically useful point, the idea that the saints are sinful, the theme plays a very meager role in his anagogical exegesis" (261); again, one is left to wonder how, if the moral perfection of the saints is such a significant feature of Didymus's exegetical corpus, this squares with Didymean authorship of *De Trinitate*. This gets at what is perhaps the most significant problem with Hicks's work: by keeping a near-exclusive focus on *De Trinitate* in the first half of the book, then shifting to a near-exclusive focus on

*Commentary on Zechariah* in its second half, the work does not feel as integrated as it could perhaps be if passages from *De Trinitate* and *Commentary on Zechariah* appeared alongside one another throughout each chapter. Beyond this, Hicks's evaluation of Didymus's interpretation of Zechariah does not engage much with the issue that Didymus does not really wrestle with the text's apocalyptic genre and the implications of that genre for interpretation. In any event, despite these potential shortcomings, Hicks's work is very much a worthy contribution to the Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements series, creatively synthesizing some key elements of the texts under examination and challenging modern Christian interpreters of Scripture to recover the best aspects of this ancient church father.