Didymus the Blind: An unknown precursor of Louis Braille and Helen Keller

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Abstract. The present study presents the case of Didymus the Blind, worthy author, philosopher and theologian of the 4th century AD. Blinded by ophthalmia at the age of four years, Didymus succeeded in achieving great learning in the philosophical and natural sciences. He began his education by using a system which was remarkably like Braille, that is reading letters engraved into the surface of wood by touch and subsequently furthering his knowledge by listening. This learning process of Didymus the Blind appears as the precursor of Louis Braille who invented the educational system of reading embossed dots by touch. Like Didymus, Braille lost his vision in infancy (at three years of age). Another parallel of Didymus' career and written works is found in the example and achievements of Helen Keller.

Didymus the Blind, an eminent theologian of the 4th century and a student of Origen was born in Alexandria in 309 AD. He was of Greek descent. At the age of four, as the monk PallADIUS (ca. 368–430) writes, he was afflicted by ophthalmia and lost his sight. Thanks however to his superhuman diligence, he succeeded in achieving the highest scientific education and in so doing became the most prolific and famous scholar of the age. He was appointed to the position of Director of the Theological School of Alexandria where he taught for over fifty years, until his death in 395 or 398 [1-4].

Didymus had a profound command of the philosophic, scientific and theological theories of his time. The main sources of his material were Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic.

He chiefly concerned himself with philosophy, in addition to poetry, rhetoric, astronomy, grammar, geometry, music and mathematics [3, 5, 7]. It is also known that he concentrated his attention on medical topics and was influenced by Hippocratic theories, although there are indications that his oeuvre is influenced by Galen's writings too [6, 8].

Further, it is interesting to note that Didymus' lessons were followed not only by the students of the Theological School of Alexandria, but that other listeners also converged en masse from all corners of the city and from other countries of the East, especially to hear and follow Didymus' famous lectures [6, 9].

Numbering amongst his pupils were the most renowned scholars of his
age, Greeks and Latins, as for example St. Jerome (340–420), the ecclesiastic author Tyrranius Rufinus (ca. 340–410), Palladius and others.

At a young age Didymus became a monk and continued to live beyond the environs of Alexandria as a recluse. He was a fervent exponent of orthodox dogma and a supporter of St. Anthony, Athanassius the Great and other orthodox bishops in the battle against the Arian heresy.

Didymus was a most prolific author and his output, in spite of his blindness handicap can be considered extraordinary and unbelievable. He must not be confused with Didymus of Alexandria, Secretary of the Alexandrian School and critic (63 BC–10 AD) who was another extremely prolific author. Many of Didymus' works had been lost but were discovered during the Second World War at Toura, Egypt and were published under the title *Footnotes of Toura* [8, 10]. Actually his works were far greater in number and a large part of them had been lost. His writings can be generally divided into the dogmatic and the interpretive, the latter representing...