

TOTEM

Tidsskrift ved Afdeling for Religionsvidenskab
og Arabisk- og Islamstudier, Aarhus Universitet
Nummer 25, efterår 2010
© Tidsskriftet og forfatterne, 2010

(THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF EUROPE)

**INTERACTION BETWEEN THE RELIGIONS:
JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

*Theophilus of Antioch's Ad Autolyicum –
an innovative response to pagan hostility*

af Søren Søndergaard Jensen,

stud. mag. ved Afdeling for Religionsvidenskab
og Arabisk- og Islamstudier

Indhold

1. Introduction	2
2. History of research	3
3. Analysis of Ad Autolyicum	5
3.1. Hostility towards the Christians.....	5
3.2. Theophilus' defence.....	7
4. Ad Autolyicum's context and purpose?	10
5. Conclusion	11
6. Bibliography	12

1. Introduction

In the study of early Christianity, important matters to consider are why Christians were subject to hostility and persecution in the first three centuries CE in the Roman Empire, and how they reacted upon this. In order to give proper answers to these questions all available sources need to be taken into consideration. In this regard Theophilus of Antioch and his three books named *Ad Autolyicum* has been somewhat disregarded. This could seem strange. He was a child of the second century (he died sometime after 180¹), hence he lived right in the middle of the period. And he was a bishop in Antioch, which indicates that he must have had some status among Christians. And finally in *Ad Autolyicum* he discusses issues concerning the contradictions between Christian and pagan² religion and thought.

Therefore in this paper I will analyse Theophilus' *Ad Autolyicum* to see what it can tell us about the relationship between Christians and pagans in the Roman Empire.

In the first paragraph I will present some of the main contributors to the specific history of research about Theophilus by examining their approaches to him. In the second paragraph I will analyse *Ad Autolyicum* by suggesting a new perspective. Thus I will

¹ See Engberg 2007, 159.

² To a large extent, I will be referring to non-Christians by using the term 'pagan', fully aware of the etic implications of the term. Thus, however the use is unknown in the ancient world, it seems suitable in a modern perspective to grasp all what is non-Christian.

analyse the evidence for hostile attitudes towards Christians that are contained in *Ad Autolyicum*. And I will analyse how Theophilus respond to the hostility. In the final paragraph I will discuss what his response tells us about the texts' purpose. And in connection hereto what the response tell us about his relationship to the Greco-roman society that he inhabit.

2. History of research

As indicated above, the direct interest in Theophilus of Antioch has been remarkably limited in the field of Second-Century apologetics (Rogers 2000, 1). Rich Rogers was the first to write a monograph about Theophilus (Rogers 2000). Before him, Robert M. Grant contributed to the understanding of Theophilus, as his *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* contained four chapters about him (Grant 1988). Most recently Jakob Engberg has made Theophilus the prime focus of his analysis in the article *Theofilus* (Engberg 2006).

Rogers strongly emphasises that, despite their disagreements, Theophilus and his addressee Autolyucus must have had a friendly relationship (2000, 6). And he takes Theophilus to be an “erudite pastor” (ibid., 183) and an “educationally minded bishop” (ibid., 6 f.). In this perspective he takes *Ad Autolyicum* to be “missionary literature”, which contains a “protreptic theology” that is a theology “designed to recruit converts” (ibid., 21). Hence, in Rogers point of view, the polemical aspects of *Ad Autolyicum* are “seldom more than propaedeutic” (ibid.). Thus he finds the term ‘apologetic’ too imprecise for Theophilus, and is more inclined to see him as a theologian and teacher (ibid, 20 f.).

In this frame Rogers investigates which kind of theology Theophilus was teaching. His starting point is to be found in the following observation:

While Bentivegna is correct in saying that Theophilus' *Ad Autolyicum* does not promote any readings *about* Jesus per se, a good case can be made that he promotes the teachings *of* Jesus (Ibid. 17).

In this statement Rogers draws the attention to the problem of the absence of Jesus in *Ad Autolyicum*, which plays a major role in the research on Theophilus (see below). This is a problem that can be overcome, according to Rogers; one just has to stop looking for Jesus, the person, in *Ad Autolyicum*, and start looking for Jesus' teaching.

As Rogers, Grant explicitly draws the attention to the absence of Jesus in *Ad Autolyicum*. He sees the “silence in regard to Jesus” as the “most surprising feature of Theophilus’ theology” (1988, 164). In spite of this, Grant searches for Jesus in *Ad Autolyicum*, as did Rogers. Thus he considers:

Second, what did Theophilus think about the life and work of Christ? He says nothing directly, but gives an account of Adam in *Ad Autolyicum* 2.24-25 that seems to refer to Christ (ibid., 171).

Grant seems to be so surprised by the fact that Theophilus does not mention Jesus, that he can hardly believe it. He takes for granted that Jesus is to be found somewhere between the lines.

Although Grant and Rogers agree on the fact that it is possible to find Jesus in *Ad Autolyicum*, they differ on how they value Theophilus’ intellect. By and large Grant disregards his level of education, e.g. when he claims that Theophilus “is no student of literature, though he tries to give the impression that he is one” (ibid., 149). His judgement of the overall structure of *Ad Autolyicum* goes along the same line. For instance, Grant takes book III to be “independent of the others and does not presuppose their contents” (ibid., 144). Elsewhere he has suggested that the content of *Ad Autolyicum* originally had occurred in an alternative order, and that the major block of exegetical material on Genesis in book II must have existed separately (Grant 1970).

When it comes to conflict between Christians and the Roman state, Grant emphasises how much Theophilus insisted on loyalty to the emperor and how little he speaks about persecution of Christians (1988, 144 f.). Thus Grant seems to downplay the polemic side of *Ad Autolyicum* as did Rogers.

To a great extent Engberg marks a new stand on how to interpret *Ad Autolyicum*. Engberg takes his point of departure in claim that one should not deal with what is not in *Ad Autolyicum*, e.g. Jesus, as do Rogers and Grant (Engberg 2006, 153 ff.). Moreover one should deal with what Theophilus wrote about (ibid, 157).

In regard to *Ad Autolyicum*’s somewhat incoherent structure, Engberg goes against Grant’s attempt to reconstruct the real structure of the content. By and large Engberg takes the current structure for granted (ibid., 167 ff.). However he agrees with Grant that the major block of exegetical material in book II must have existed separately (ibid., 172 f.).

Although Engberg's perspective is different than those of Grant and Rogers, to some extent he ends up with the same outcome as Rogers. Not the theological implications of *Ad Autolyicum*, to which he pays no attention, but when it comes to what kind of practice *Ad Autolyicum* might subscribe to. On this matter he states:

Thus Theophilus' books bring us close to one of presumably thousands of "missionary" and "defensive" conversations between Christians and non-Christians, which might have been a significant context of the apologetic literature (ibid., 166).³

Although they disagree on whether or not to use the term *apologetic* about Theophilus' work, both Engberg and Rogers agree that *Ad Autolyicum* must have occurred in a *missionary* context.

At this stage we can point out at least four trends in the history of research. Firstly scholars before Engberg have tried to show that Theophilus deals with Jesus in *Ad Autolyicum*, despite the fact that nowhere he mentions Jesus. Secondly the scholars have emphasised the incoherent structure of *Ad Autolyicum*. Thirdly Rogers and Grant have been highlighting the friendly relationship between Theophilus and Autolycus and it has been emphasised how little he speaks of persecution of the Christians. Thirdly Engberg and Rogers have been inclined to term Theophilus' work missionary.

3. Analysis of Ad Autolyicum

In this paragraph we will draw attention to an aspect that has been less regarded in the history of research, namely the evidence for pagan hostility towards Christians that *Ad Autolyicum* contains. Firstly we will look at how and why pagan hostility towards Christians manifested itself, according to Theophilus. Secondly we will analyse Theophilus' response to the hostility.

3.1. Hostility towards the Christians

In the very beginning of *Ad Autolyicum*, Theophilus refers to an attack that Autolycus has made on him. It is described in this passage,

³ My translation into English.

Since you, my friend, have attacked me with empty words by boasting of your gods of stone and wood, forged and cast and moulded and painted – which *neither see nor hear*, for they are *idols* and the *works of men's hand* [Ps. 113: 12-14] – and furthermore you call me a Christian as if I were bearing an evil name, I acknowledge that I'm a Christian (I.1.).⁴

Theophilus claims to have been oratorically attacked (κατέπληζάς) by Autolyucus; an attack that among other things is said to be based on Theophilus bearing the Christian-name. The charge of being referred to as a 'Christian' is known to us in other sources, e.g. in the Roman provincial governor Pliny's famous letter to Trajan, and the Emperor's rescript. In the letter, Pliny speaks of how Romans seek out people who are said to be Christians. And, when captured and put on trial, the Christian-name is said to play an essential role in the interrogation (XCVI).⁵

Also Theophilus knows of persecution of Christians. In the last passage of *Ad Autolyicum* Theophilus explicitly refers to pagan persecution of Christians. Thus he states that "in addition, they [the Greeks] have persecuted those who worship him [God] and daily do persecute them" (III.30).

In Book III Theophilus refers to charges against Christian lifestyle and virtues. He states that "[t]hey said that our wives are the common property of all and live in promiscuity, that we have intercourse with our own sisters, and – most godless and savage of all – that we partake of human flesh" (III.4). Here the Christians are claimed to be facing the charges of cannibalism and immoral sexual behaviour, including the charge of incest.

Finally, a charge against the Christians of being adherents to a relatively new religion is to be detected in *Ad Autolyicum*. Theophilus explicitly refers to it in this passage:

They also say that our message has been made public only recently, and that we have nothing to say in proof of our truth and our teaching; they call our message *foolishness* [I Cor. I:18] (III.4).

The Christian message is accused of only having been made public 'recently'. The Greek word here is πρόσφατος, which also can be translated as 'fresh' or 'new'. The term is also

⁴ I am using Grant's translation of *Ad Autolyicum* (Theophilus 1970).

⁵ I am using Radice's translation of *Letters and Panegyricus* (Pliny 1969)

to be found in the opening chapter of book III. In this chapter Theophilus accounts for his intention with the book by stating that he will prove to Autolytus “the antiquity of our writings”, because Autolytus is “fancying that our scriptures are new [προσφάτους] and modern” (III.1.).

In scholarship this charge is known as the ‘charge of novelty’ [nyhedsanklage], which was put forward because the relatively young age of the Christian faith was seen as a threat to the old traditions of Rome (Ulrich 2006, 37 f.).

3.2. Theophilus’ defence

Now let us turn to the question of how Theophilus’ responded to the hostility.

As for the specific charges of cannibalism and obscure sexual behaviour, his defence is based on counterattacks. This is the case in III.15:

Consider, therefore, whether those who learn such teachings can live promiscuously and be united in unlawful intercourse or most godless of all, partake of human flesh, when we are forbidden even to witness gladiatorial shows lest we should become participants and accomplices in murders. And we are not allowed to witness the other spectacles, lest our eyes and ears should be defiled by taking part in the songs which are sung there.

Here, Theophilus turns the accusations against the Christians into counter-arguments against pagan lifestyle. Christians, bound by the law of the Hebrew Bible, are forbidden to attend gladiatorial shows and other spectacles. How come that it is the Christians, and not the non-Christians, who are said to have an amoral lifestyle, Theophilus seems to be asking. Elsewhere he argues in a similar way. He makes the claim that it is not the Christians who are to be called the cannibals, but the Greeks, because the instances of cannibalism is recorded among Greek writers (for instance in III.3).

As to Theophilus’ defence against the charge of being adherent to a new faith, the case does not seem to be as clear cut. His response is not limited to specific passages or chapters, but seems to be more exhaustive. To begin with one could go to the above cited passages. To start with III.4, the continuation of the cited passage goes like this:

I marvel especially in your case. In other matters you are diligent and investigate all subjects, but you listen to us with indifference. For if you could, you would not hesitate to spend even the night in libraries (III.4).

Theophilus claims that if Autolyucus would listen to the Christians he would not hesitate to find out more about them in libraries. The content of this passage becomes clear when one takes into consideration that Autolyucus in III.1 is said to be counted among *historians* (συγγραφεῖν). Thus in III.4 Theophilus urges Autolyucus to study the matter, as he tends to do, by investigating all subjects in libraries, in other words: as a true historian would do it. What is noteworthy is that Theophilus seems to locate the discussion of the age of the religions in the specific enterprise of historical writing. This presumption is supported by a passage in III.23:

In order for us to give a more accurate demonstration of periods and times, by God's help (...) I shall begin, then, from the recorded genealogies, starting from the first-formed man.

This passage functions as a prelude to the chronicle where he lengthily accounts for the history of the world from Adam until his own day (III.24-27). His aim is to provide a more *accurate* (ἀκριβεστέραν) demonstration by going back to the time of God's creation of man. He emphasises that the accuracy will be engineered by *recorded* (ἀναγεγραμμένων) genealogies.

As Peter C. Bouteneff has pointed out, the world chronology seems to be of utmost importance to Theophilus (Bouteneff 2008, 72). This can be seen in the great extent, to which he emphasises historicity and facticity in his account (see *ibid*). Once and again he emphasises this in various ways. For instance in these passages:

The man who loves truth, however, pays no attention to defiled language but *examines* [ἐξετάζει] *the fact behind the word* to see what it is and what it means (I.1).

I wish to provide for you, through the present treatise, *a more accurate* [ἀκριβεστερον] *proof* concerning the pointless labour and pointless religion in which you are confined (II.1).

All of them [the prophets] were *consistent* with one another and with themselves, and they described events which had previously occurred, events in their own time, and events which are now being fulfilled in our times (II.9).

God made man on the sixth day but revealed his formation after the seventh day, when he also made paradise so that man might be in better place and a finer location. *Facts prove the truth of these statements* (II.23).⁶

In these passages terms like ἐξετάζω, which actually means to ‘examine well’, and ἀκριβής, which means ‘exact’ or ‘accurate’, occur. The passages illustrate how deeply engaged Theophilus is in showing that his account and statements actually are true. Not only does he respond to the charge of being adherent to a new religion by entering Autolyicus’ field of history writing, he does it extensively and with great enthusiasm.

That this chronology is so important to Theophilus could offer some explanation to the issue of the overall structure of his work. As we recall, the structure of *Ad Autolyicum* has been seen as something incoherent in the history of research. The major block of exegetical material in book II.11-32, the scholars claim, previously must have occurred independently and at a later stage been placed in a new context. Book III, as well, is claimed firstly to have been written as an independent book (see above).

If, however Theophilus in *Ad Autolyicum*, to a large extent, is occupied to meet the charge of being adherent to a new faith by establishing a Christian chronology, the large exegetical block in book II must be of the utmost importance to him. In these chapters (II.11-32), Theophilus discusses and comes up with positive answers in favour of the reliability of the genesis account, which contains the ultimate starting point of his chronology, namely God’s creation of the world. It is correct that the treatment of the exegetical material ends somewhat abrupt with the events that followed right after the deluge. In the chapters to come from II.33 until III.15, Theophilus delivers outbursts against Greek culture and arguments in favour of the Christians. But then in III.16 ff. again he takes up the question of the events surrounding the deluge. These considerations combined with other issues lead to his final account on the world history from Adam until his present day.

What now seems to be evidential is that the genesis exegesis (II.11-32) is deeply interrelated with the content of chapter III.16-23, because they all together count as the proof for the reliability of the Christian accounts for the earliest events in the history of man. This proof is decisive to Theophilus because it ensures that his chronology (III.24-27) is trustworthy.

⁶ My italics in all examples.

4. *Ad Autolyicum's* context and purpose?

What the analysis has shown is that *Ad Autolyicum* bear witness of several pagan charges against the Christians. As has been noted above the charges, to which Theophilus refers, are typically for what the Christians were facing in the Roman Empire in the first 3 centuries CE. What seems remarkable is the way, in which Theophilus reacts upon the hostility. In order to qualify this claim one could compare *Ad Autolyicum*, to another apologetic work, more or less contemporary, namely the *Apology of Tertullian*.

Compared to one another, there is a striking similarity in the way, in which Theophilus and Tertullian respond to specific charges of amoral behaviour, e.g. as shown above, Theophilus turns the accusation of being cannibals into a counter-accusation against the Greeks. In his *Apology*, Tertullian acts very much in the same way. An example is in II.5-8⁷ where he is responding to an accusation against the Christians of being baby killers. He promptly raises the question of why not the Romans are to hunt them down. In this way he turns an accusation of baby killing into a counter-accusation against the Romans of being inconsistent in their judgments and political practice.

What is noteworthy, however, is that Theophilus seems to expand his defence, whereas Tertullian stays at the level of referring Roman charges and offering counter-accusations. As shown above, it is urgent for Theophilus to create his own sufficient and comprehensive world history. This idea, or something similar, does not occur in Tertullian's *Apology*. And interestingly enough, the idea does not seem to occur in the apologetic tradition in general.⁸

Therefore it might be beneficial to look in other directions. This is exactly what Francis Young has done. By referring to Droge Young places *Ad Autolyicum* in the context of *archaiologia*, which means the scholarship concerning antiquities and origins (Young 1999, 97). He does this by paying special interest to the feature of Theophilus' enterprise of wanting to find things' origin, ultimately the world's origin but also the origin of more particular things.⁹ This means that his work shares features with the works of prominent non-Christian figures like the Jewish historian Josephus, the Greek historians Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Diodorus Siculus and Hesiod, and the Roman writer Varro (*ibid.*, 97 f.).

⁷ I am using Rendall's translation (Tertullian, 1966).

⁸ This is at the impression one gets when comparing modern secondary accounts like Edwards et. al. 1999 and Ulrich 2006.

⁹ E.g. agriculture, cities and wars (see Young 1999, 98)

Following this line of argument one could say that Theophilus to a large extent operates in a clearly non-Christian field of historical writing. Here his emphasising on consistency and accuracy should be taken into consideration. For not only does he operate in the field of historical writing, he also seems eager to fulfil the standards of this discourse properly.

But a fact that also needed to be considered, is that on the one hand he wants to play alongside pagan historians, but, on the other hand, wants to undermine their chronologies by presenting one that is more ancient and accurate. This issue raises the question of what the wider purpose of *Ad Autolyicum* is. As we recall, Rogers and his reconstruction of Theophilus' *protreptic* Theology emphasises what he thinks to be the missionary purpose of the book. Along the same line we find Engberg (see above). It seems likely that *Ad Autolyicum* was designed to convert non-Christians to the Christian message. With *Ad Autolyicum* in hand Christians were capable, not only of creating a historical work equal to those of non-Christians, but also of defeating the non-Christian chronologies.

However, in a wider sense, the fact that Theophilus takes up a genre, which is 'non-Christian' shows how bound the Christians were to their Greco-roman context. Being pressed by different charges Theophilus resorted to the tools of his time and society. This could point to, that what is also at stake in *Ad Autolyicum*, is a Christian desire to be acknowledged as a reliable part of the society. This is to suggest that the concept of 'mission' might not be the only suitable perspective, in which *Ad Autolyicum* is to be seen. Moreover *Ad Autolyicum* can also be seen as a Christian attempt of position oneself and offer self-esteem to Christians in a hostile Greco-roman society.

5. Conclusion

In the history of research concerning Theophilus of Antioch some scholars have emphasised what he did not deal with, namely Jesus. In this paper it has been shown beneficial to take another point of departure, namely by focussing on the evidence for pagan hostile attitudes towards Christians in *Ad Autolyicum*. Thus it has been shown that Christians, according to Theophilus, were meet by pagan persecutions and hostility because of their name, and because of assumptions of cannibalism and amoral behaviour and because the Christian faith was said to be new. Hereby Theophilus attests the general

picture of pagan hostility towards Christians in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries CE.

Further the paper has shown that Theophilus' way of coping with the hostility was to offer specific counter-arguments to specific charges, which also follow a well-known pattern in the history of early Christianity. But in addition he came up with a remarkable different response, namely that of creating a full and comprehensive world chronology, which was intended to be capable in outdoing similar pagan history writings by following their standards. This response shows how dependent Theophilus was on the Greco-roman society that he inhabited. Thus what seems open for discussion is if 'mission' is fully suitable to describe what is at stake in *Ad Autolyicum*. Moreover it seems worth considering seeing *Ad Autolyicum* as an attempt to position oneself in society, or an attempt to come to terms with the society.

In sum it seems reasonable to describe Theophilus of Antioch as an example of a Christian, who, when met by specific standard charges, came up with an apparently remarkable answer. This draws attention to two matters. Firstly, how important it is to take all available sources into account in order to get the widest possible understanding of the relationship between the Christians and pagans in the Roman Empire. And finally how important it is to keep focus on the problems that has occupied the ancient writer, in order not to be led astray by modern prejudices.

6. Bibliography

Ancient sources

Pliny

1969 *Letters and Panegyricus*, translated by Betty Radice, Havard University Press, London

Theophilus of Antioch,

1970 *Ad Autolyicum*, translated by Robert M. Grant, Oxford University Press, London

Tertullian

1966 *Apology*, translated by Gerald H. Rendall, William Heinemann LTD, London

Secondary literature

Bouteneff, Peter C.,

2008 *Beginnings*, Baker Academic, Michigan

Engberg, Jakob

2006 “Theophilus”, in: Jakob Engberg et al., eds., *Til forsvar for kristendommen*, Forlaget ANIS, København, 153-185

Edwards, Mark et. al.

1999 “Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World”, in: Edwards, Mark et al., eds., *Apologetics in the Roman Empire – Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1-13

Grant, Robert M.

1970 “Introduction”, in: Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum*, translated by Robert M. Grant, Oxford University Press, London, ix-xxv

1988 *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia

Rogers, Rick

2000 *Theophilus of Antioch- The Life and Thought of a Second-Century Bishop*, Lexington Books, Lanham

Ulrich, Jörg

2006 “Apologeter og apologetik i det 2. Århundrede”, in: Jakob Engberg et al., eds., *Til forsvar for kristendommen*, Forlaget ANIS, København, 15-61

Young, Frances

1999 “Greek Apologists of the Second Century”, in: Edwards, Mark et. al., eds., *Apologetics in the Roman Empire – Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Oxford University Press, New York, 81-104

Dictionary

Jones, Henry S.

1961 *Liddell & Scott A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford