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POLEMIC ABOUT CREATION: THEOPHILUS' USE
OF CREATION THEOLOGY IN HIS TREATISE
TO AUTOLYCUS

This article aims to study why and how Theophilus from Antioch used creation theology in his polemic against Autolytus. Theophilus knew that non-Christians had criticized the Christian theology of creation and of God as creator. This criticism could have been raised by Autolytus if he was a real person or by other non-Christians if Autolytus was a strawman for Theophilus' criticism. To meet the criticism, Theophilus used catechetical material and material from the internal polemic among Christian Gnostics or Marcionites and the type of Christianity to which Theophilus himself belonged.¹ This shows that even if creation theology was not a common theme in second-century Christian apologetics, it was used with a polemic intention in catechetical, anti-heretical as well as in apologetic settings. These textual types are thus very close in content and polemical intention even if the addressees vary.

CREATION THEOLOGY IN SECOND-CENTURY APOLOGETICS

Interpretations of *Genesis* 1 are not common among second-century apologists. The only extended interpretation of Gen. 1 in an apologetic text from the second century is found in Theophilus' treatises addressed

1. The type of Christianity to which Theophilus belonged has been called "proto-orthodoxy" to indicate that this type of Christianity later was established as orthodoxy, cf. B. EHRMAN, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, New York, 2015, p. 7; B. EHRMAN, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, New York, 2003, p. 135-157.

to Autolycus. This is peculiar because the concept of God as one, good and almighty is a common theme in apologetic treatises. This could easily have led to discussions of cosmogony and cosmology, including interpretations of *Genesis* 1 and 2. It is not easy to explain this situation. The answer is not that creation was not a theme among Christian theologians in the second and early third centuries (*cf.* for example Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen). Nor was the situation that Christians were not attacked for their opinions about the creation of the world and human beings. This is obvious from Celsus' *Alethes Logos*, which includes a number of critical remarks about the Christian theology of creation (*C. Cels.* VI,49–63). Origen's replies to Celsus' criticism might give an answer to the question why creation was not a popular theme among the apologists: Thus, more than once (*C. Cels.* VI,49–63), Origen says that Celsus' criticism is misguided because what he criticizes is not the opinion of the Christians but of some heretics – probably Valentinian Gnostics. This answer indicates that the theology of creation was so contested among Christians themselves that it was a problem for most of the apologists to include the theme in their apologetic treatises. These were either directed at non-Christians or were instructions to Christians on how to argue when they discussed with non-Christians.² The setting of creation theology in the second and early third centuries was therefore heresiological or catechetical rather than apologetic. If this is true, it leaves us with the question why Theophilus then – as the only apologist – discusses God's creation of the world and its beings. Perhaps Theophilus hints at an answer to this question in his introduction to the second book of his treatise. Here, he says that Autolycus ended their previous discussion by claiming that Theophilus' teaching was foolish (*μωρία*). In the passage mentioned above, which Origen quotes from Celsus, Celsus had also called the Christians' teaching about the creation foolish. Theophilus may thus react to a concrete criticism of his theology of creation. This answer is valid even if Theophilus had never had an actual discussion with a pagan named Autolycus but constructed the setting for his treatise.

2. Concerning the question of addressees of early Christian apologetic treatises, see A.-C. JACOBSEN, "Main Topics in Early Christian Apologetics", in J. ULRICH, D. BRAKKE, A.-C. JACOBSEN (eds.), *Critique and Apologetics: Jews, Christians and Pagans in Antiquity*, Frankfurt am Main – New York, 2009, p. 106-108; A.-C. JACOBSEN, "Preface", *ibid.*, p. 13-17.