

Preface

ONLY A CENTURY AFTER the apostles, the growing Christian movement appeared similar in many ways to its present-day forms. It displayed great religious vitality. Many followers of the Nazarene maintained steadfast commitment to his lordship, this during a period of sudden, unexpected persecutions. Yet in other ways, it differed greatly. While there was a common commitment to certain core beliefs and associated worship traditions, as attested in Clement's "rule of our tradition," Irenaeus's "canon of truth," and Tertullian's "rule of faith," it engendered at the same time a wide spectrum of theological forces unique to that age.¹ Truly, a distinctive type of Christianity flourished in the age of the early Christian apologists. Not surprisingly, distinctive strains of exegesis pervaded that period. But today, these distinctive habits of exegesis of that distant apologetic age lie forgotten and hidden behind our own anachronistic assumptions. Along with introducing the general shape of one of these strains of ancient apologetic exegesis, its recovery is the aim of this study. Much of our literature discounts the exegesis of Theophilus and other early Christian apologists as a mysterious disgrace. But by probing their culture, we rediscover a forgotten form of exegesis.

We might assume that a forgotten form of exegesis is only a secondary matter for our understanding of early Christianity. But this assumption would lead us astray. In reality, Scripture and exegesis of it are tightly and inseparably tied to the Christian message. At the beginning of his best-selling volume, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Robert Louis Wilken discusses how extensively early Christianity transformed Western civilization. As one of his generation's foremost specialists on early Christianity who has invested a lifetime of scholarship on the intellectual world of the early church, Wilken would know. After considering aspects of early Christianity which powered its wide cultural impact, he writes, "But what has impressed

1. ¹ *Clem.* 8.2; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.1; 2.28.1; 3.12.6–7; Tertullian, *Apology* 47.

me most is the omnipresence of the Bible in early Christian writings.² The Bible profoundly shaped early Christian life and thought, and changed the intellectual flow of Western culture.

Unfortunately, while Scripture was central in the experience of the early church, its function in the age of the early Christian apologists who lived only a few generations after the days of Jesus himself remains either little understood or else, typically misunderstood. Modern critics tend to forget significant realities of that age. The extant writings of Theophilus of Antioch, bishop of the capitol city of the eastern province of the Roman Empire a century after the apostles, can serve as vehicles for exposing these forgotten realities. Expose them we must, for current literature often misunderstands or dismisses second-century exegesis. My thesis is that when we look behind anachronistic views of ancient genre, literacy, and rhetoric, we discover a hidden Theophilus and a forgotten form of second-century exegesis.

Notice that I do not claim that the distinctive mode of exegesis practiced by Theophilus and other second-century apologists who dialogued with Greco-Roman pagan religionists was employed by every single early Christian apologist in a monolithic sense. As my argument unfolds, it will become clear, particularly in chapter 4, that the intended audience of the apology makes all the difference in the world. But Theophilus's audience was unavoidable and addressed by numerous other Christians. We shall see that while his exegesis was only one of several pervading the early apologetic age, it was nonetheless important, even essential, in the face of Greco-Roman religious pressures.

Second-century Christians responded to challenges from their pagan neighbors by defending their faith through protreptic writings. The ancient protreptic genre consisted of exhortation to abandon an inferior philosophy or manner of living in order to adopt a superior one. The protreptic genre is foreign to our modern age, but it was common in late antiquity. While specialists may acknowledge the protreptic genre of various early Christian writings, they often fail to consider seriously ancient expectations about protreptic writings. As a result, they import historically-dubious theological criticisms that misunderstand the actual purposes of ancient protreptic writings. They also fail to discover the biblical justifications that early Christians constructed for their protreptic efforts. So in chapter 2, I examine functional dynamics of Scripture in this now largely-forgotten genre. To this end, I demonstrate that Theophilus intentionally withheld soteriology from *Ad Autolyicum*, which is presently a disputed point in scholarly

2. Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, xvii.

literature. Present-day confusion on this point owes to modern blindness to an ancient genre that may be unfamiliar to modern eyes but was most prominent in the apologetic age. Concerning this point, it may seem that I perform theological renovation of *Ad Autolyicum*, but that impression is false. Rather, I merely call scholarship to give up rash and anachronistic theological judgments of Theophilus and other early apologists, and take a more historically appropriate “agnostic” view of soteriology in their pro-treptic writings in light of their genre. I also will show Theophilus’s own carefully-constructed exegetical and theological justifications for his pro-treptic writings. There was a very specific intent that shaped the ways that the early Christian apologists used Scripture, but it is one that is only seen when we take seriously a now-forgotten literary genre.

In Gospel studies, James D. G. Dunn and others have broken through an impasse produced by the blindness of our own highly-literate, modern world to the pervasiveness of illiteracy in late antiquity and to the great memory abilities of oral cultures. But unfortunately, this sensitivity has not penetrated much into studies about patristic exegesis. In chapter 3, I show what such a sensitivity reveals about the function of Scripture in the apologetic age, the age of the early Christian apologists beginning in the late first century but whose heyday was the second century. In this regard, we shall see several insights about how Scripture functioned amid the high illiteracy of that apologetic age. For one thing, we will find that even though Theophilus himself likely could read and write, he used Scripture in ways that resonated powerfully for those many illiterate members of his flock. We will also find that much of the time, he retrieved biblical passages by memory. Thus, he modeled a life fixated on Scripture even for those who could not read. We will also discover subtle indications that his biblical arguments rested *mainly* on portions of Scripture that he did *not* quote, portions that only those who habitually carried their Bibles not between the covers of a book, but rather in their memories, would recognize. In short, we will find that the majority of his uses of Scripture remain hidden from readers who must rely on written texts. In Theophilus’s writings, quoted biblical phrases are only the “tip of the iceberg.” The great mass lies beneath. We shall see some examples of what lies below the surface. By these examples of powerful biblical arguments based on passages that are not quoted at all, but which come automatically to the minds of those who retrieve Scripture by memory, I will expose biblical dynamics in the largely-oral culture of the apologetic age, dynamics powered not by biblical quotations, but rather, by allusions and reminiscences. Like a “mouse that roared,” these seemingly insignificant uses of Scripture, largely ignored in much of the literature about patristic exegesis, often resound more loudly than the more prominent quotations.

In so doing, I will also provide a call for further research in a new direction, even if space does not allow a complete survey all of the plenteous allusions and reminiscences in Theophilus's writings. The culmination of these examples of "what lies below the surface" will be a comprehensive treatment of the Book of Job in Theophilus's extant works. This comprehensive treatment of Job will serve as a capstone for this chapter, a programmatic example of taking orality and memory seriously in studies of the apologetic age.

Present-day scholars of patristic exegesis are starting to avoid anachronistic errors of prior research partly by remembering the rhetorical world of late antiquity. While this remembrance may seem quite familiar in the eyes of NT scholars, it is nonetheless fresh and exciting to present-day patrologists.³ This approach is sorely needed for investigating early Christian apologists such as Theophilus. Like some of his fellow apologists, he has often been regarded as a disorganized writer who did not understand very much of Christian teaching. But this typical view of him is the very opposite of historical reality. I argue in chapter 4 that despite prior claims of scholarship, there was a masterful coherence running throughout every section of *Ad Autolyicum*, built upon ancient judicial rhetoric in which Scripture played an absolutely essential and most central role. And his use of ancient rhetoric was inseparably intertwined with his use of Scripture in a way that may be unique to the apologetic age. Although his particular use of ancient rhetoric in essential concert with Scripture formed only one of several exegetical strains in that age, it may have been among the most prominent.

This study will unfold cultural features underlying the connections between Scripture and Theophilus's protreptic moves, his orality, and coherence. These cultural features obviously touched others besides Theophilus himself. They extended beyond his lifetime and beyond the city of Antioch. They were the coinage of late antiquity. It would be difficult to maintain that other apologists living in that age of high illiteracy did not also participate in the protreptic, largely-oral, and rhetorical world described herein.

I will also deal with media through which Theophilus accessed Scripture when I discuss his use of biblical anthologies and testimonia in a later chapter. To my knowledge, we have yet to see any published scholarship

3. However, this rhetorical-critical approach is nonetheless indeed healthy and alive in NT studies, and is by no means overworn. Fresh examples of this approach continually emerge even in fairly recent NT scholarship, as seen for example in Litfin's 1994 volume, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, and Long's 2008 contribution, *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul's Apology*.

Within patristic scholarship, the emergence of this new portrait of patristic exegesis is truly still ongoing, as evidenced for example by Greer and Mitchell's 2007 volume, *The "Belly-Myther" of Endor*, as well as by the focus on ancient epideictic rhetoric in Mitchell's 2002 book on Chrysostom's use of Pauline Scripture, *Heavenly Trumpet*.

focusing on Theophilus's use of biblical testimonia. We shall see that his fairly sparse use of these tools confirms insights in chapter 3 about Scripture's function in the highly-illiterate world where Theophilus served. While his elders often leaned on biblical anthologies and testimony sources, he was of a new generation that found little need for them.

In this regard, I will also describe a new electronic computational approach that overcomes the practical limitations of the manual methods which have been employed until now for comprehensively detecting use of testimonia and testimony sources in ancient writings. Manual methods are practically-speaking unable to discover many of the more obscure biblical testimonia collections. There are simply too many sections of the hundreds of ancient Jewish and Christian works that must be examined in order to find all of the patterns of Scripture usage that may indicate that writers used a testimonia collection. In connection with Theophilus of Antioch, over four hundred treatises must be examined.⁴ There are dozens of thousands of treatise sections that must be examined, each one for over a thousand combinations of biblical passages used in combination. Besides exact matches of Scripture use, near-matches, plus or minus a few verses, are also important. In the end, hundreds of millions of Scripture use comparisons must be made for any investigation approaching comprehensiveness.⁵ The sheer mass of these necessary comparisons overwhelm manual methods. As a result, truly comprehensive searches for all testimonia traditions influencing a writer are rarely, if ever, done. However, this new electronic approach, using custom software and a massive database of biblical references, can accurately perform the hundreds of millions of necessary comparisons in a reasonable amount of time. This electronic computational approach ushers in a new era in biblical testimonia studies.

4. For the specific treatises, see the appendix section, "List of Treatises Searched by the Application for Computerized Testimonia Searches (ACTS)."

5. These numbers are discussed in more detail prior to the discussion of this new electronic method.