

Restoration Quarterly

HISTORICAL STUDY

The Theology of Redemption In Theophilus of Antioch

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- 129 The Underlying Unity of Hebrews
JAMES THOMPSON
- 137 Religion Is Born in a City
PAT E. HARRELL
- 142 Authority and Tenure of Elders
EVERETT FERGUSON
- 151 Psalm 77: A Study in
Faith and History
PAT GRAHAM
- 159 The Theology of Redemption in
Theophilus of Antioch
JAMES D. TABOR
- 172 Book Reviews

I. INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem. To attempt to say anything about Theophilus' understanding of redemption as reflected in his three books *To Autolycus* is to immediately face the limitation of a lack of data. Like other Greek Christian apologists Theophilus does not even directly mention Jesus. Terms such as the cross, the blood, or the atonement are thus wholly lacking. This lack of data can be viewed in at least two ways. It might be said that Theophilus does not mention such areas because of the nature of an apologetic work to a pagan. For example, in New Testament passages such as Acts 17:22-31 or 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, where one has a summary of early Christian preaching to pagans, the elements of monotheism, repentance, resurrection, and judgment are stressed while nothing is said of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. Yet one would not conclude from these that Luke and Paul had no such emphasis in their theologies. On the other hand, it can be argued, Theophilus does discuss man's sin, God's grace, salvation, and eternal life in his work to Autolycus, with ample opportunity to cover the area of the atonement—yet he does not. Rather he expresses salvation in terms that are very close to Hellenistic Judaism. Thus one must begin by facing two rather opposite ways of viewing the lack of data on this subject.

Despite problems of data and interpretation Theophilus deserves investigation. His position in early Christianity is intriguing. According to Eusebius he is the sixth bishop of the



important city of Antioch.¹ Eusebius says he was "renowned" and calls his three books to Autolytus "an elementary treatise." He is said to have written against both Marcion and Hermogenes as well as to have composed other books on "instruction."² We know nothing but the names of the bishops between Ignatius and Theophilus. Theophilus, then, serves as a point of comparison with Ignatius as well as an indication of Christianity in Antioch in the late second century. What we can understand about Theophilus has implications on later figures around Antioch as well as the christological controversies.³

Methodology of the Paper. The main body of this study will consist of detailed exegesis of a number of relevant passages in the *Ad Autolytum*. The intent will not be to draw up a systematic theology of Theophilus regarding redemption but rather to see how he touches on the subject in a variety of contexts. Following the exegetical section some comparisons will be made with the Apostolic Fathers and Justin. Finally, some rather tentative conclusions will be attempted.

Definitions. In this study the word "redemption" is being used as a heading in its most general sense, i.e., *salvation*, rather than its more restricted meaning of expiation. The questions to be asked under this heading are: How is man viewed before God? How does a man come to God? What are the motivations involved? What is the basis of one's salvation? What are the rewards and possibilities? What is the nature of the judgment?

II. SELECTED PASSAGES

1.2 . . . just so, the ears of the heart and the eyes of the soul are potentially capable of beholding God. For God is seen by those who are capable of seeing him, once they have the eyes of the soul opened. All men have eyes but some have eyes which are hooded by cataracts and do not see the light of the sun. . . . So you also, O man, have cataracts over the eyes of your soul because of your sins and wicked deeds.

¹The others are Euodius (*H.E.* III. 22); Ignatius (III. 22); Heros (III. 36. 15); Cornelius (IV. 20); and Eros (IV. 20).

²*H.E.* IV. 20 and 24.

³Perhaps Paul of Samosata. See Robert M. Grant, *After the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 145.

. . . God does not become visible to those who do such things unless they first cleanse themselves from all defilement.⁴

Man, then, is to blame for his blindness to God and his separation from Him. This is a common idea in the Bible (Isaiah 59:2-10; cf. James 4:8).

For Theophilus there are two stages to "seeing God"—first, in this age by repenting and obeying him, then at the resurrection when immortal.⁵ Theophilus is dealing here with the former. But how does one cleanse oneself in order to see God? Is this done simply by repentance and acknowledgement of monotheism as in the Old Testament (or Hellenistic Judaism)? Or might it involve baptism, i.e., becoming a Christian? The language is from the fragment in 2 Corinthians (7:1), but perhaps Theophilus is merely using the language. As the passage stands it is good Hellenistic Judaism.

1.3. You will say to me, then: "Is God angry?" Certainly: he is angry with those who do evil deeds, but good and kind and merciful toward those who love and fear him. He is the instructor of the godly and the father of the righteous, but the judge and punisher of the ungodly.

This theme is found often in Theophilus. It fits well into both Old and New Testament thinking as well as that of the second century apologists. Here both the words and thought seem to reflect Romans 1:18-32 (compare Wisdom of Solomon 14:22-31) and 2:6-11.⁶

1.7. You speak of him, O man; you breathe his breath; you do not know him. This has happened to you because of the blindness of your soul and heart, but if you will you can be cured. Deliver yourself to the physician, and he will couch the eyes of your soul and heart. Who is the physician? He is God, who heals and gives life through Logos and Sophia. . . .

If you know these things, O man, and live in purity, holiness, and righteousness, you can see God. But before all, faith and the fear of God must take the lead in your heart; then you will understand these things. When you put off what is mortal and put on immortality, then

⁴The translation used is Robert M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch: Ad Autolytum* (Oxford, 1970).

⁵This will be covered in more detail under 1.7.

⁶Compare 1.14, where there is a definite allusion to Romans 2:6-11. More generally, compare 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, which is in the context of the parousia.

you will rightly (*kata axian*) see God. For God raises up your flesh immortal with your soul; after becoming immortal you will then see the Immortal, if you believe in him now.

Theophilus speaks of "seeing God" on two levels. Man, who is blind through sin, is to deliver himself to the physician for healing. The Physician here is God (cf. *Ad Diognetum*, 9.6). There seems to be the idea here that God does for man what man can not do for himself. The elements of faith and fear of God are stressed. These are important later in I.14. Faith and fear of God leads to healing by God, to be followed by a pure and righteous life. Understanding and knowing seems to be equated with "seeing God." There is at least the structure here for Christian conversion: 1. Pagan turning to God in faith and fear; 2. Delivering oneself to the Physician; 3. Living a life of purity. The question (as in I.2) is just what does this "healing" involve? Might it be Christian baptism or is it simply repentance? It seems to be close to the idea of cleansing in I.2. Sin is the cataract and it must be "couched" by the Physician.

Theophilus, however, also speaks of a further element. Those who have been healed and are living in purity are to "rightly see God" when made immortal at the resurrection. Then the immortal will see the Immortal. Yet this is conditioned upon faith in God now. The idea of truly seeing God after the resurrection is a frequent one in the New Testament (1 John 3:2-3). This whole idea of the resurrection is of first importance in Theophilus. He comes back to it again and again.⁷ It is an important part of his understanding of man's redemption.

I.14(a) Do not disbelieve, then, but believe. I too did not believe that resurrection would take place, but now that I have considered these matters I believe. At that time I obtained the sacred writings of the holy prophets, who through the Spirit of God foretold past events in the way that they happened, present events in the way they are happening, and future events in the order in which they will be accomplished. Because I obtained proof from the events which took place after being predicted, I do not disbelieve but believe, in obedience to God. If you will, you too must obey him and believe him, so that after disbelieving now you will not be persuaded later, punished with eternal tortures.

⁷See I. 8,13,14; II. 15,26 and especially 27.

Belief here is belief in the general resurrection of all men (I.13) which he had just sought to prove. It is possible that in his reference to the prophets telling of past, present, and future events he at least alludes to Christian use of the Old Testament in seeing Christ and his career foretold. This is very common in Justin's writings.

Belief is used here specifically of belief in the resurrection—but is more generally equated to "obedience." The threat of eternal punishment is again expressed for the pagan who will not believe.

I.14(c). If you will, you too must reverently read the prophetic writings. They will be your best guides for escaping the eternal punishments and for obtaining the eternal benefits of God. For he . . . will examine everything and will judge justly, rewarding each one according with what he deserves. To those who with endurance seek imperishability through good works, he will give eternal life, joy, peace, rest, and the totality of good things. . . . But to the unbelieving, who despise and disobey the truth but obey unrighteousness, . . . there will come wrath and anger, tribulation and anguish, and finally eternal fire will overtake such men.

Since you made this request, my friend, "Show me your God," this is my God. I advise you to fear him and believe him.

This is the most complete statement in Book I relating to the subject at hand. This section is most interesting because of its strong dependence upon Romans 2:7-8. These verses occur in a special section of Paul's argument in Romans. Wayne Meeks says:

Apart from the passing mention of "the gospel" and "Jesus Christ" in 2:16, there is nothing in 1:18-2:29 which cannot be found in Jewish sources contemporary with Paul—only the conclusion to which he drives the logic of these statements is un-Jewish. Paul has one essential point to make: there is now in God's eyes no more distinction between Jew and Gentile. Therefore details of the argument are not to be pressed. If he speaks for the moment as if the final judgement were based entirely on man's works—flatly contradicting the main point he is leading up to in Chap. 3—that is only a concession in order to make the point that, even within the terms of common Jewish interpretation of God's judgement, there is finally no distinction between the status of those who have and those who have not the Torah.⁸

Theophilus then takes this very section of Romans and, leaving

⁸*The Writings of St. Paul*, ed. by Meeks (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 72.

out Paul's point in using this Jewish kind of thinking, applies it directly to his reader as a threat of God's judgment. He had previously introduced this line of thinking in I.3. Now he brings Book I to a close with the same thought. That this is in fact a summary of his whole point in Book I is shown by his last sentence—he is saying: I have shown you why you cannot see God (because of your sins); you had better repent and believe in him or you will be punished. As in I.7 he places final emphasis on fearing God and believing him.

The main points he makes in Book I related to this paper might be summarized as follows:

1. Unbelievers are blinded and cannot see God because of their wickedness and sins.
2. God will punish such men in righteous judgment—then they will be persuaded.
3. They may escape wrath by faith and fear of God; delivering themselves to the Physician (God) who can heal them and cleanse them. Then they can see God and live a life of purity and righteousness.
4. Those who endure in righteousness will then be made immortal at the resurrection and will truly see God (if they believe now). Those who refuse to believe and live wickedly will suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

There is nothing specifically Christian, then, in Theophilus' argument in Book I. There might be room for Christian ideas of salvation through Christ under point three (i.e., how is one healed and cleansed?), but this is not brought in. As in Luke's account of Paul before Felix (Acts 24:25) Theophilus "argues about justice, self-control and judgment to come." It is not clear whether Autolytus "trembled" at this or not! The entire book is very close to Wisdom of Solomon 14:12-15:6. His points are in complete harmony with Hellenistic Judaism.

In Book II one finds the elements in the theology of Theophilus that lend themselves most to a Christian interpretation. Almost all of these come out seemingly at random as he expounds on the beauty of the *Hexaemeros*.

II. 14. And as in the sea there are some islands . . . so God gave the world, which is agitated and tossed by sins, certain assemblies (*sunagōgas*) called churches, in which as in havens with good mooring places are the teachings of truth. In these will take refuge those who

wish to be saved, when they are lovers of truth and want to escape the wrath and judgement of God . . . there are other islands rocky and waterless and barren . . . I mean of the heresies which destroy those who approach them. For they are not guided by the word of truth . . .

Here, quite in contrast to Book I, we find Theophilus advocating some sort of "orthodox church" with the right teachings and the "word of truth." Those who wish to escape the judgment of God must there find mooring.⁹ He seems to be saying there is no salvation outside the church. Presumably this would exclude both Jews and Christian heretics—and most certainly pagans. Here then much more is required for salvation: One must be in the church—which implies some sort of faith in Christ and baptism.

II. 16. Furthermore, those created from the waters were blessed by God so that this might serve as a pattern of men's future reception of repentance and remission of sins through water and a bath of regeneration (*loutrou paliggenesias*), in the case of all who approach the truth and are reborn and receive a blessing from God.

This passage deserves extended comment. The language is based in part on Acts 2:38 and Titus 3:5. Men who repent are thus received by God (forgiven) and regenerated in water baptism, being reborn and blessed of God. This adds considerably more to the picture.

Just as Theophilus has two "stages" or phases of "seeing God" he also appears to have two levels of "rebirth." In II.15 he says: "But the moon wanes every month and virtually dies, for it exists as a type of man; then it is reborn (*anagennatai*) and waxes as a pattern of the future resurrection." The "rebirth" at baptism is a foreshadowing of the future "rebirth" at the resurrection. This kind of thinking is common in the New Testament.

It was noted under I.2 that Theophilus' admonition to Autolytus to "cleanse himself" so he could see God might include water baptism. Theophilus seems to consistently connect some kind of cleansing (in one's initial reception by God) with a response of holy living. It is possible that in II.17 this same emphasis on baptism and holy living occurs: "For those who repent of their iniquities and live righteously take flight in soul

⁹ See *Hermetica* VII.2. for the image of salvation as a harbor; and 1 Timothy 1:19 for the idea of heretics being tossed on the sea and shipwrecked.

like birds, minding things above and taking pleasure in the will of God." The expression "minding things above" is from Colossians 3:2, which speaks of being "raised with Christ" in baptism (cf. 2:12-13). It is striking that Theophilus can couple the very Jewish expression from Ezekiel 18:21-23 about repenting and living righteously with allusions to baptism. However, this kind of thinking is not out of keeping with the views of second century Christians on baptism—or probably the New Testament, for that matter.¹⁰

II. 17. They (wild animals) were not originally created evil or poisonous, for nothing was originally created evil by God; everything was good and very good. The sin of man made them evil, for when man transgressed they transgressed with him. . . . Whenever man again returns to his natural state (*to kata phusin*) and so no longer does evil, they too will be restored to their original tameness.

Theophilus places emphasis here on man's free choice and responsibility in the fall, but this is brought out much more strongly in II.27. What deserves comment here is his view of the future—when man will return to paradise (his natural state) and no longer sin—with all nature thus being restored. The idea of paradise being restored is taken up again in II.26. Both Isaiah 11 and Romans 8:19-23 seem to agree with this kind of link between man and nature.

II. 24. God transferred him out of the earth from which he was made into paradise, giving him an opportunity for progress (*aphormēn prokopēs*) so that by growing and becoming mature and furthermore having been declared a god, he might also ascend into heaven (for man was created in an intermediate state, neither entirely mortal or entirely immortal, but capable of either state; similarly the place paradise—as regards beauty—was created intermediate between the world and heaven) possessing immortality.

Here and in II.27 Theophilus gives us his most complete statements regarding man's salvation. In this section he is speaking of man's possibilities before the fall. He could have obeyed God (cf. II.25) and grown and finally become a god (immortal), ascending to heaven. Man in fact did not attain to this and was cast out of paradise for punishment and expiation of his sin for a fixed period of time until he might be recalled (II.26). Theophilus,

¹⁰See for example: *Barnabas* 11:1,8,11; *Hermas Mandate* IV. 3. 1; Justin, *Apology* I, 61; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:12-14; Ephesians 5:26-27.

then, is not saying that man alone can now attain this state. Only the "first Adam" was given that opportunity for progress.

II. 27. God therefore made him neither immortal nor mortal, but, as we have said before, capable of both. If he were to turn to the life of immortality by keeping the commandment of God, he would win immortality as a reward from him and become a god; but if he turned to deeds of death, disobeying God, he would be responsible for his own death. For God made the man free and self-powered. What man acquired for himself through his neglect and disobedience, God now freely bestows upon him through love and mercy when man obeys him. For as by disobedience man gained death for himself, so by obedience to the will of God whoever will can obtain eternal life for himself. For God gave us a law and holy commandments; everyone who performs them can be saved and, attaining to the resurrection, can inherit imperishability.

Theophilus repeats his previous point (II.24) about man in the beginning being free to choose either immortality (through progress, etc.) or death. Man, however, turned to death. But now if man will return and obey, God will freely bestow upon him eternal life once again. This sounds very Pauline. The language is certainly from Romans 5:18-19, but Theophilus is not entirely clear here. In Paul man can obtain life because of the "obedience of one man" (Christ), but Theophilus says "by obedience to the will of God whoever will can obtain eternal life for himself," i.e., by keeping the law and commandments. Theophilus seems to be seeking to combine Romans 5:18-19 with Matthew 19:25 (if you will enter into life, keep the commandments).

II. 34. The God and Father and Maker of the universe did not abandon mankind but gave a law and sent holy prophets to proclaim and teach righteousness to the human race . . . and that thus a person who acts righteously may escape the eternal punishments and be judged worthy of receiving eternal life.

This section is rather striking. If Jesus is even included here, he is seen as simply "one of the prophets." Since the negative golden rule (Acts 15:20-Codex Bezae) is mentioned, he probably is including the apostles and prophets of the New Testament as well as those of the Old. His concluding statement is very close to statements in Book I as well as the end of II.27. He seems to leave little room for Jesus, baptism, or the church.

III. SOME COMPARISONS

Before a discussion of some of the problems which have been raised in Theophilus, it will be helpful to look briefly at some of the other Christian writers of the second century and attempt some comparisons.

1 *Clement*. Although this letter was written to Christians at Corinth (not to a pagan for apologetic purposes), some interesting points can still be made by way of comparison.

Clement speaks quite freely of redemption in Christ:

Let us fix our gaze on the Blood of Christ, and let us know that it was precious to his Father, because it was poured out for our salvation, and brought the grace of repentance to all the world. (7.4)

... and therefore we who by his will have been called in Christ Jesus, are not made righteous by ourselves, or by our wisdom or understanding or piety or the deeds which we have done ... but through faith. ... (32.3-4)

However he can also quote from Isaiah 53 and rather than stress the concept of atonement conclude: "You see, beloved, what is the example which is given to us, for if the Lord was thus humble-minded, what shall we do, who through him have come under the yoke of his grace?" (16.17)

Of course Clement places great emphasis on obeying God and keeping the commandments. At times he sounds quite like Theophilus:

Since then all things are seen and heard by him, let us fear him, and leave off from the foul desires of evil deeds, that we may be sheltered by his mercy from the judgements to come. (28.1)

In general, the world of Clement seems to be rather close to that of Theophilus. Clement uses the Old Testament very heavily; he emphasizes fear and obedience to God; he stresses repentance; he talks of the resurrection. When he does talk of the work of Christ, he speaks in terms of Jesus bringing light, knowledge, and showing the true example as well as mentioning the concept of blood atonement and justification by faith.

2. *Clement*. This early Christian sermon seems to be close to Theophilus in many ways. Although he mentions Jesus, he often sounds theologically very similar:

So then brethren, if we do the will of the Father, if we keep the flesh pure, and if we observe the commandments of the Lord, we shall obtain eternal life. (8.4)

He means this (i.e., Jesus in Luke 16:10-12): keep the flesh pure, and the seal of baptism undefiled, that we may obtain eternal life. (8.6)

But if even such righteous men as these (Noah, Job, and Daniel) can not save their children by their own righteousness, with what confidence shall we enter into the place of God, if we keep not our baptism pure and undefiled? Or who shall be our advocate if we be not found to have pious and righteous works? (6.9)

When he does mention Jesus, it is always as the bringer of truth, life, knowledge and immortality. Jesus' sufferings serve as an example for us in our dedication.¹¹

This sermon also places emphasis on repentance, baptism, the resurrection, and being of the true church.

Ignatius. In the letters of Ignatius there is no lack of references to Jesus' death for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection. Often the incarnation is included in this grouping.¹² Some examples:

For when you are in subjection to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that you are living not after men, but after Jesus Christ, who died for our sake that by believing on his death you may escape death. (*Trallians* 2.1)

My spirit is devoted to the cross, which is an offense to unbelievers, but to us salvation and eternal life. (*Ephesians* 18.1)

Let us then persevere unceasingly in our hope, and in the pledge of our righteousness, that is in Jesus Christ, who bare our sins in his own body on the tree. ... (*Philadelphians* 8.1)

Ignatius also put stress on obedience, subjection to the authority of the church, true teachings, etc. He says: "Now he who raised him from the dead will also raise us up if we do his will and walk in his commandments and love the things which he loved, refraining from all unrighteousness, covetousness, ... (*Phil.* 2:2) Of the "Apostolic Fathers" he would appear to be the most removed from Theophilus in general theology.

Didache. The *Didache* is especially interesting in that when it speaks of the body and blood of the Lord no reference is made at all to his death for our sins. Rather the emphasis is upon life and

¹¹ See 1:4-7; 20:5.

¹² See *Mag.* 11; *Trall.* 9; *Smyrneans* 1; *Eph.* 7:2; 18.2.

knowledge and immortality that came in Jesus. This seems to be a frequent theme in the "Apostolic Fathers."¹³ Of course the *Didache* places strong emphasis on morality and righteous living. The document is so different in makeup from Theophilus that it is difficult to make comparisons. However, there is nothing that appears to be at odds.

*Justin.*¹⁴ Justin is an interesting figure for comparison with Theophilus since he, too, wrote apologetic works. Justin states repeatedly that Christ saves us by his death on the cross and by his resurrection.¹⁵ In baptism one receives remission of sins by the blood of Christ.¹⁶ He repeatedly applies Isaiah 53 to Christ (as well as other Old Testament prophecies).¹⁷ This does not appear to be his whole understanding, however, of Christ's work. Justin sees Jesus as teacher. The demons had led the human race astray, but with the coming of Jesus light and truth have been restored.¹⁸ This is not merely an ethical sort of decision that man makes. Rather Christ imparts to men illumination and power which enables them to conquer the demons.¹⁹

Like Theophilus Justin makes great use of the Old Testament. He stresses the resurrection and often threatens the righteous judgment of God. He emphasizes righteous living.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As has already been noted, Book I of the *Ad Autolyicum* fits completely into the world of Hellenistic Judaism. There is nothing directly Christian about the lines of argument taken or the theology of salvation expressed; however, it is clear that Theophilus was a Christian. The central problem can be illustrated best from the sections II. 24, 27, and 34 (as well as what has been

¹³ See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1969), pp. 163-166, for a list of passages.

¹⁴ See especially E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* (Jena, 1923), pp. 250-278.

¹⁵ By his blood he cleanses believers (1 *Apol.* 32; *Dial.* 13,40,54); he suffered for our sins (1 *Apol.* 56,63; *Dial.* 103); he began a new race (*Dial.* 137); by rising again he conquered death (1 *Apol.* 63).

¹⁶ *Dial.* 54, 115.

¹⁷ *Dial.* 111.

¹⁸ 1 *Apol.* 13.

¹⁹ *Dial.* 121.2; 8.1.

said from Book I). Both I.14 and II.24 contain direct references to passages in Romans, yet in both cases Paul appears to be seriously misused. Why doesn't Theophilus have clear statements about Jesus' death for man's sin or justification by faith? Is it because of the nature of his work (an apology)? Or is it because he thought of redemption more in terms of merit and man's obedience? R. M. Grant has remarked in some unpublished comments on Theophilus:

Theophilus does not mention here (i.e., II.26) or elsewhere redemption through Christ; this silence is not necessarily due to the apologetic character of his work (against Loofs, 62-63), but may be related to his doctrine that salvation comes through repentance and obedience.²⁰

It cannot be said that Theophilus would have denied such formulas as "Christ died for our sins" or "Through Christ we are counted righteous." That is not the point. What is to be noted is that time and time again (in incidental ways) there is an emphasis on repentance, obedience, and keeping the commandments as the way to salvation. It might be said that this was Theophilus' *tendency* in his understanding. These same elements are certainly found in the New Testament. Passages such as Matthew 5:19-20; 7:13, 21; 19:17 come to mind. And even Paul can be quoted in this vein (1 Cor. 7:19; 6:9; 2 Thess. 3:14). Paul is not always so "Pauline" (i.e., Protestant Lutheran!). It is true that Theophilus is writing an apology. This might account for *some* lack of exposition regarding redemption in Christ (but compare Justin!). But the point still seems to be that when Theophilus talks of man being reconciled to God it is in rather Jewish terms. He is most comfortable in Romans 1:18-2:29! One must also be careful in drawing conclusions about second century Christianity in general with reference to the understanding of redemption. Even though there are many passages that echo the formulas of Christ's death for man's sin, the favorite themes for exposition seem to be by and large those such as obedience, keeping one's self pure from the world, repentance, the wrath and judgment of God, and the resurrection. So perhaps Theophilus is not too much different in his own tendencies. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions because of the lack of other materials written by Theophilus. The conclusion of this paper is that he fits rather well into the Christianity of his time and geographical location.

²⁰ Unpublished commentary, p. 124.