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# Preaching Christ Crucified: Origen's Apologetic Strategy in *Contra Celsum*

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# **Preaching Christ Crucified: Origen's Apologetic Strategy in**

## ***Contra Celsum***

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HAB Capstone Thesis

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## INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In an ancient account of Christian martyrdom, the letter of the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium tells of the death of Polycarp. When this bishop of Smyrna was brought before a Roman official, the following exchange took place:

The proconsul said: “I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind [about professing to be a Christian].”

But [Polycarp] said: “Call them. For repentance from the better to the worse is not permitted to us; but it is noble to change from what is evil to what is righteous.”

And again he said to him, “I shall have you consumed with fire, if you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.”

But Polycarp said...“Come, do what you will.”

And when he had said these things and many more besides...the proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the arena to proclaim three times: “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.”

When this was said by the herald, the entire crowd of heathens and Jews who lived in Smyrna shouted with uncontrollable anger and a great cry: “This one is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice nor to worship.”<sup>1</sup>

Roman statesman Pliny the Younger has also left behind a record of the treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire. When Christians were brought to trial before him, Pliny would ask them first, if they were Christians; and then, if they were, to denounce Christ and honor the emperor and the Graeco-Roman gods (*Epistulae* 10.96.3). He wrote this about those who refused to reject Christ:

If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished.<sup>2</sup>

Fed to lions and other wild beasts, executed at the hands of their own government for simply bearing the name of “Christian” – such were the dangers that have informed the modern-day

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. Shepherd Jr. 1970:153

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Walsh 2006:278

understanding of the early Christian experience. Indeed, despite the long, complex history of Christianity, the stories of martyrdom and persecution are the defining feature of its beginnings. And it is true that Christians in the Roman Empire faced the threat of governmental action against them, as Pliny's comments show, and even sustained periods of persecution. De Ste. Croix identifies three "phases" of Roman persecution: "The first ends just before the great fire at Rome in 64; the second begins with the persecution which followed the fire and continues until 250; and the third opens with the persecution under Decius in 250-1 and lasts until 313..."<sup>3</sup> He places the deaths of apostles like Stephen and James in the first phase; the famous Neronian persecution recorded by Tacitus (*Annales* 15.44) in the second phase, and the persecutions led by the emperors Decius and Diocletian in the third phase.

There is, however, more to the story of early Christianity beyond these notable periods of violence. As De Ste. Croix describes, Christian persecution can be tracked from the early 1<sup>st</sup> to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. In those 300 years, Christians certainly did not face constant persecution and "there were also quite long periods during which the Christians enjoyed something like complete peace..."<sup>4</sup> Thus, while the vivid stories of Christians being fed to the lions and otherwise executed by Roman officials may loom the largest in modern understanding of the early Christian church, they are only one aspect of a complex clash between Christianity and its surrounding Roman culture. There is simply much more nuance to discover in the first centuries of Christianity's existence.

This thesis aims to take part in that discovery by looking away from the popular stories of Christianity's tumultuous beginnings and towards the interim periods of relative peace between persecutions. Indeed, in following De Ste. Croix's timeline, there is a noticeable gap between

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<sup>3</sup> De Ste. Croix 2006:106

<sup>4</sup> De Ste. Croix 2006:107

Nero's persecution in 64 AD and Decius' in 250 AD. How were Christians interacting with the Roman Empire in those roughly 200 years? While a complete answer to that question is far beyond the scope of this thesis, much insight can still be gained by examining one particular part of the clash between Christians and the Roman Empire. To that end, this thesis will examine the works of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century philosopher Celsus and the Christian apologist Origen. Celsus' *Λόγος Ἀληθείας* (ca. 175 AD), a treatise attacking Christianity, and Origen's *Contra Celsum* (ca. 250 AD), an answer to Celsus' attacks, preserve for modern readers a profound look into the beliefs of Christians and Graeco-Romans in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman Empire. Celsus' treatise is the most substantial extant work against the Christians. In it, he displays his deep disdain for Christianity by criticizing nearly every aspect of the faith. This thesis will focus in particular on his criticisms of Christian doctrine, the Christian God, and Christian people. Celsus finds essentially nothing to be praised in Christianity, zealously and thoroughly deconstructing many of its teachings. Because he addresses so many aspects of Christianity, Celsus' treatise allows modern readers to understand the complex set of complaints that Graeco-Romans like Celsus had about Christianity.

The thoroughness that Celsus displays in his attack on Christianity is equally matched by Origen's point by point refutation of his arguments. Indeed, it is only due to Origen's extensive citation of Celsus' words that the *Λόγος Ἀληθείας* remains in such a great quantity today. Just as Celsus' work reveals much about Graeco-Roman thought, Origen's stands as an important demonstration of early Christian thought. In combatting Celsus' attacks and promoting Christianity, his work is a significant look into the beliefs of Christians before the Biblical canon was officially closed and the creeds of the Church were written. However, the value of Origen's work goes even beyond the content. Origen employs a fascinating and nuanced apologetic

strategy in his answer to Celsus. This thesis argues that Origen, although clearly arguing against Celsus' criticisms, actually employs the very kind of arguments for the Christian faith that Celsus had criticized in his treatise. As such, Origen's apologetic strategy, as exemplified in the preface and Book 1 of *Contra Celsum*, did not show that Celsus' criticisms of Christians were incorrect, but proved that these criticisms were founded in truth. In particular, I will show how a focus on the common man, the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, resonances with Graeco-Roman philosophy, and the belief in the historical incarnation of Jesus - all things which Celsus criticizes - can be found explicitly in Origen's work.

In order to unfold Origen's response to Celsus' work, the chapters of this thesis will be as follows. The remainder of the introduction will examine the religion of the Graeco-Roman world to provide a background for this specific interaction between Origen and Celsus. Chapter 1 will explore the lives of Celsus and Origen, with special attention to their similarities and differences. Chapters II and II will be, respectively, analyses of Celsus' arguments against Christianity and Origen's apologetic strategy in answering him. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the many intriguing questions that are raised by Origen's strategy in the *Contra Celsum*. The most obvious is: Why would Origen undertake such a large project of answering Celsus so thoroughly if he does not seem concerned to prove his criticisms wrong? Further, an analysis of Origen's argument also reveals his own understanding of the power of God and the role of man in spreading the Christian message. Thus, the following can also be asked: Does Origen believe that any apologetic effort at all can effect change in the unconverted? Finally, Origen's impressive work has implications for how modern Christians ought to approach their own apologetic battles. The last question, then, is: Should Christians today imitate the unique strategy employed by

Origen in his defense against Celsus? This thesis aims to provide insight into all three of these questions through the course of its analysis of Origen's *Contra Celsum*.

Before turning to Celsus and Origen, however, it will be helpful to get a sense of the broader context in which they were writing. In particular, it is important to look at the broader *religious* atmosphere of the Roman Empire that sometimes sparked the violence described in Polycarp's martyrdom and Pliny's encounters with Christians. In both of these examples, there is explicit mention that Christians were executed because they would not denounce their religion and properly recognize the gods of the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> So, although political and even economic concerns were tightly bound up with public Roman religion, the primary battleground between Christians and the Empire was the question of religious beliefs and practice. The first major component of the religion in the Empire is what Case describes as a "complete syncretism" of different religious movements. She writes:

The absence of the particularistic attitude in Roman religion made it inevitable that many cults would freely appropriate features from others, until it became difficult for an observer to draw lines of sharp demarcation between them. While certain gods retained their distinctive characteristics, the tendency to fuse the attributes and functions of one with another made rapid progress during the later centuries of the Empire.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Christian belief in the one true God that demanded complete devotion from his followers would have stood in stark contrast to the divided attention of Roman religious practice. Van Andringa gives a more in-depth look at this mix of religious allegiances in Rome during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. He notes that religions in Rome displayed a mix of provincial and imperial influences. Arguing against the idea that there was a distinct line between local gods and Roman

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the excerpt from Pliny cited above does not make mention of the second part – that Christians must turn back to the Roman gods once they denounced Christ. However, later in the letter, Pliny writes (trans. Walsh 2006:278): "Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods after me...I ordered to be acquitted" (*Epistulae* 10.96.5). Thus, only Christians who "called upon the gods after" Pliny could be cleared of their charges.

<sup>6</sup> Case 1930:56

gods, he suggests that the gods of the Roman Empire were assimilated into those local communities. He writes: “Rather than focusing on ‘indigenous’ and ‘Roman’ gods, the point was to worship familiar gods and cults whose power was guaranteed by municipal investiture, gods who also established a connection with Rome and were adapted to their times, the situation of individuals and their place in society.”<sup>7</sup> It seems that cities throughout the Empire retained their own local identity by continuing to worship their own gods, yet at the same time integrated some Roman gods and practices into their existing religion. In this way, they could honor all those who ensured the prosperity of that community: the local deities and the human government providing a stable environment in which to worship those deities. As Van Andringa concludes: “The populations of the empire knew that peace and happiness depended as much on divine benevolence as on the emperor’s immense powers.”<sup>8</sup> As Christians became more prominent in the Empire and rejected a polytheistic concept of the divine, they were thus rejecting the goodwill of those gods towards their people.

Moreover, Christians also rejected devotion to the emperor, the other guarantor of the Empire’s prosperity. The worship of Roman emperors started with Augustus, although this dimension of Roman religion developed slowly. Initially, as Wissowa describes, worship of Augustus was not standard across the Empire: “Private persons and individual communities...established temples and shrines to the emperor, created priests for him and founded *collegia* for his cult without further ado.”<sup>9</sup> Wissowa goes on to note that these sporadic pockets of worship for the emperor were still subjugated to worship of local deities. Moreover, Augustus himself was hesitant to establish cults which were dedicated to worshipping him.

Suetonius records this in his biography of Augustus in *De Vita Caesarum*:

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<sup>7</sup> Van Andringa 2011:88

<sup>8</sup> Van Andringa 2011:94

<sup>9</sup> Wissowa 2003:347

Templa, quamvis sciret etiam proconsulibus decerni solere, in nulla tamen provincia nisi communi suo Romaeque nomine recepit. Nam in urbe quidem pertinacissime abstinuit hoc honore; atque etiam argenteas statuas olim sibi positas conflavit omnis exque iis aureas cortinas Apollini Palatino dedicavit. (*Divus Augustus 52*)

He still accepted temples in no province, although he knew that it was customary that they be dedicated even to proconsuls, unless [they were dedicated] commonly with his own name and with the name of Rome. For even in the city he abstained from this honor most stubbornly; and he even melted all the silver statues once established for himself and from these he dedicated golden tripods to Apollo on the Palatine.<sup>10</sup>

So, while Augustus was worshipped in certain places throughout the Empire, this type of religious devotion was not the primary one. This changed, however, after Augustus' death when he was deified. His deification did not signal a new standard practice in Rome. Subsequent emperors were not universally deified, with the Julio-Claudian emperors promoting themselves as gods to an inconsistent degree.<sup>11</sup> For example, Caligula was persistent in his push to be honored as a god, though this never became reality for him.<sup>12</sup> It was not until Domitian, however, that a living emperor made it mandatory for the Roman people to recognize and worship him as a God. Wissowa notes that prayers and votive offerings were offered to the emperor as part of this worship and were performed for many different reasons: on January 3<sup>rd</sup> as part of a general prayer for the imperial house; every year to mark the continuation of an emperor's rule; when the emperor was ill; when he left for war; and many other such instances.<sup>13</sup> A mark of loyalty among those living in the Empire was to participate in these religious rites. Herz points out that "the emperor and his well-being were an indispensable precondition for the well-being of the

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<sup>10</sup> Translation by author

<sup>11</sup> Jones 1980:1024-1032

<sup>12</sup> Jones 1980:1027

<sup>13</sup> Wissowa 2003:349

empire as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> To promote the well-being of the emperor through worship of him was done in an effort to guarantee the health of the entire Empire.

Domitian’s successors did not continue to demand to be recognized as a god. Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius were all deified only after their deaths.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in these first 175 years or so of the Empire, it is clear that there were varying degrees of emperor worship due to the varying characters of the emperors themselves. Despite this variation, it is clear that emperor worship was now securely part of the Roman religious ideology. Whether in life or in death, the emperor was to be honored. When Christians came on the scene, however, they refused to take part in honoring the emperor and were thus guilty of refusing to do their part in ensuring the success of the Roman Empire as a whole.

The Christian refusal to participate in this public worship reveals much about their ideology. Tertullian argues that while Christians do pray for their rulers and should hope for their continued prosperity, it would be a dishonor to the true God to regard emperors as deities (*Apologeticum* 29-35). Christians agreed that the emperors were essential factors in promoting the safety and strength of the Empire; they just would not go so far as to call them “gods” because of their role in doing so. Essentially, honoring the emperor and respecting his authority was a good thing insofar that it honored the one true God. To be thankful to God for a good ruler and to entreat God for that ruler’s continued success was an acceptable way to regard the emperor. To credit the goodness and success of an emperor to the man himself, however, was to disregard God’s hand in their rule and to elevate him above his rightful status. This attitude results from the Christian understanding of “where their true authority lies,” as Williams puts it.

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<sup>14</sup> Herz 2011:312

<sup>15</sup> Jones 1980:1035-1041

He writes: “It is God’s authority, not the emperor’s, which motivates submission.”<sup>16</sup> In all parts of life, Christians are subject to God’s authority. It is not surprising therefore that this belief caused them problems in a society whose ruler had not only great earthly power, but was also viewed as a god.

The Christians’ place in the religious atmosphere of the Roman Empire was thus quite precarious. They rejected both major components of traditional religion: the Graeco-Roman gods and the emperor. In doing this, they were rejecting all the benefit that came from proper devotion to these two protectors of the Empire. Moreover, their scorning of public religious practice had major political implications and eventually led to the violence seen in Polycarp’s and Pliny’s narratives. As Rives describes, although the private religion of those in the Empire, such as Christianity, was largely uncontrolled, Roman officials “seem[ed] to have drawn a line at the point where these private pursuits began to affect people’s public identities or where private religious specialists began to acquire independent social power.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, once Christians became so ubiquitous and began to cease from public religious ritual, they were both abdicating their responsibility in seeking favor for the Empire through devotion to its gods and challenging the power of the earthly authorities who oversaw public religion. In these ways, Christianity was truly counter-cultural in the Roman Empire during its beginnings. It is this atmosphere of contention over religious practice that defined the time period in which Celsus and Origen wrote. With this background in mind, this thesis will now turn to the specific part each of these two men played in this clash between Christianity and the Empire.

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<sup>16</sup> Williams 2014:145

<sup>17</sup> Rives 2000:258

## CHAPTER ONE: CELSUS AND ORIGEN

The backgrounds of Celsus and Origen are in themselves quite interesting and in those backgrounds, one can already begin to see the core of their debate on Christianity. They shared a common time in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a common location in Alexandria, and were both learned men well-versed in the philosophy of their time period. Despite all of these similarities, however, they had diametrically opposite views on Scripture and the claims it made about God. This divergence on the question of Scripture ultimately informs the entire debate that plays out in the *Λόγος Ἀληθείας* and *Contra Celsum*. For this reason, an in-depth examination into the lives and beliefs of these men is crucial for understanding their works.

### Similarities: Time, Place, and Platonism

The first important element of Celsus' and Origen's backgrounds is when they lived. Both men lived in the 100 years between 150 and 250 AD. They were therefore alive and integral parts of the growing intellectual dialogue between Christianity and its culture. Pliny the Younger and other writers early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century have little reaction to Christianity beyond dismay and suspicion. As exemplified in Pliny's letter to Trajan, the hesitations about Christianity in these earlier works stemmed mainly from the perceived disruption that Christians created in Roman society. The zeal of those following this religion, combined with their abandonment of the traditional Roman religious rites, caused frustration for those people in the Empire observing their newly-Christian neighbors. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> century continued, however, the reaction to Christians "changed dramatically" as the attacks against Christianity transformed into detailed intellectual critiques.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hoffmann 1987:24-25

Celsus was among these writers who sought to undo the budding doctrine of the Christians with a more philosophical approach. However, nothing is known about Celsus except what he says about himself in his treatise and what Origen writes about him. Indeed, Wilken points out that Origen himself seemed hesitant about Celsus' identity.<sup>19</sup> Despite this scanty knowledge, the date of the *Λόγος Ἀληθής* can be estimated relatively confidently. Origen makes two comments that serve as the starting point for a discussion of when Celsus was writing his work. The first comes in the preface to *Contra Celsum*. Here, Origen writes that Celsus was οὐδὲ κοινοτέραν ζωὴν ζῶντος ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἔτι ἀλλ' ἤδη καὶ πάλαι νεκροῦ (Praef. 4), "was no longer living the common life among men but was already dead for a long time." Origen's *Contra Celsum* has been dated to around 250 AD, as will be discussed later, so in light of this comment in the preface, Celsus' treatise can be dated to a vague many years before 250 AD.

Origen's second comment, however, provides a much more definite time period. In 1.8, he writes: Δύο δὲ παρειλήφαμεν Κέλους γεγονέναι Ἐπικουρείους, τὸν μὲν πρότερον κατὰ Νέρωνα, τοῦτον δὲ κατὰ Ἀδριανόν, καὶ κατωτέρω. "But we have heard that there are two (men named) Celsus the Epicurean, the first during the time of Nero, but this one during the time of Hadrian and following." Thus, Origen believes Celsus to have lived during the reign of the emperor Hadrian (117-133 AD) and later. From these first two statements by Origen, then, Celsus wrote no earlier than 117 AD but had been dead for many years by 250 AD.

This still leaves a wide gap in which scholars must fill in the pieces. Chadwick provides a good overview of the debate in modern scholarship concerning a more exact date for Celsus' *Λόγος Ἀληθής*.<sup>20</sup> Chadwick essentially presents two main groups of arguments for Celsus' date. The first of these main arguments for Celsus' date contends that the Celsus of *Λόγος Ἀληθής*

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<sup>19</sup> Wilken 2003:94

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxiv-xxix

fame is the same Celsus mentioned by Greek satirist Lucian in *Alexander the False Prophet* and in a letter written by Greek philosopher/physician Galen. *Alexander the False Prophet* is a satire written specifically for a friend of Lucian's named Celsus, who seems to be an Epicurean.<sup>21</sup> So, by name and by epithet, this could very well be the same Celsus. In addition, Keim, the most prominent proponent of this opinion, points to the fact that the Celsus in both Lucian and Origen is said to have written books against magic.<sup>22</sup> Galen similarly mentions a letter he had written to Celsus the Epicurean, who had also written books against magic.<sup>23</sup> If the Celsus in these two works is the same Celsus of Origen's, then the lifetimes of both Lucian and Galen can give even further indication of when this Celsus lived and wrote. Lucian was born in 120 and his extant works date at least until 169.<sup>24</sup> Galen was born in 130 and was writing at least around 170.<sup>25</sup> Assuming that Celsus, as a friend of these men, was around the same age, then it seems reasonable to say that he too was writing around 170 AD.

However, as with any question of dating an ancient writer, there are serious objections to the identification of Origen's Celsus with the one mentioned by Lucian and Galen. The major objection to this is that while Celsus is called "Epicurean" in all of these works, his actual words recorded in the *Contra Celsum* lead many to the conclusion that he is not Epicurean at all, but a Platonist. Chadwick writes unequivocally that "his philosophy is that of Middle Platonism, and with Epicureanism he betrays no affinities at all."<sup>26</sup> Wilken agrees with Chadwick's matter-of-fact conclusion.<sup>27</sup> Hoffmann, while not nearly as certain, does admit that "epicurean opinions are

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<sup>21</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxiv

<sup>22</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxiv

<sup>23</sup> Hoffmann 1987:30

<sup>24</sup> Hoffmann 1987:25

<sup>25</sup> Wilken 2003:69, 83

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxv

<sup>27</sup> Wilken 2003:95

not in bold relief in the passages cited in the *Contra Celsum*...<sup>28</sup> In his in-depth analysis of Celsus' philosophical leanings, Bergjan notes that Origen identifies Celsus as an Epicurean in the first four books of the *Contra Celsum* and then ceases to do so from Book 5 on.<sup>29</sup> This leads Bergjan to conclude the following: "The identification of Celsus with an Epicurean is a structuring motif developed in the introductory part of *Contra Celsum* and indicating a main topic of criticism."<sup>30</sup> That is, as Origen deals with Celsus' critiques about the Christian view of God's providence, he interprets Celsus as having an Epicurean understanding of the topic. Since Celsus, like the Epicureans, did not believe that the gods interfere in the lives of mortals, Origen associates him with this group.<sup>31</sup> But, when Origen moves on to Celsus' later arguments that do not concern the nature of God's involvement with mortals, he abandons this epithet. Thus, the consensus of scholars is that Origen's identification of Celsus was merely a shorthand way of describing one particular aspect of his philosophical thought, and that Origen's Celsus is not the one of Lucian's and Galen's works.<sup>32</sup>

Having effectively nullified this first main argument for dating Celsus, Chadwick is left only with the second way, which looks at two additional passages in the *Contra Celsum*. The first of these is found in 8.69, in which Origen quotes Celsus who seems to allude to the persecutions of the Christians. Celsus writes: "While in your case, if anyone does still wander about in secret, yet he is sought out and condemned to death."<sup>33</sup> Keim and Neumann have proposed that this statement refers to the persecution of Christians in 177 carried out by Marcus

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<sup>28</sup> Hoffmann 1987:32

<sup>29</sup> Bergjan 2001:181

<sup>30</sup> Bergjan 2001:204

<sup>31</sup> Bergjan 2001:202-203

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Chadwick 1980:xxvi: "As Dr W. R. Inge has observed, "Epicurean" was then a term of abuse, like Fascist or Bolshevik now."

<sup>33</sup> Trans. Chadwick 1980:505

Aurelius.<sup>34</sup> The second passage is 8.71 where Celsus uses the phrase οἱ νῦν βασιλεύοντες, “those ruling now.” As Chadwick points out, scholars argue that Celsus is referring to a time when there were two rulers at Rome. This happened twice during Marcus Aurelius’ reign (161-169 and 177-180). Both Keim and Neumann believe that the 177-180 estimation is the best for the date of Λόγος Ἀληθείας.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Chadwick concludes that Celsus wrote the Λόγος Ἀληθείας sometime between 177-180. Hoffmann and Wilken agree with this, with the former estimating “the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century” and the latter “around 170 AD.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, a date of about 175 AD seems to be the consensus for the date of Celsus’ treatise.

At about the same time that Celsus was composing the Λόγος Ἀληθείας, Origen was born in Egypt (185 AD). Unlike Celsus, very much is known about Origen’s life. Danielou identifies three major sources for his life: Book VI of Eusebius’ *Church History*, the first book of the *Apologia* written about Origen by Eusebius and Pamphilus, and a speech made by Gregory of Neo-Caesarea, a student of Origen.<sup>37</sup> He was born into a Christian family and his father, who was martyred in 202, saw to his education in Greek literature and the Christian Scriptures. With this good education and with persecutions forcing Christian teachers into hiding during the year 206, Origen began to teach in secret at house churches in Alexandria. He soon became the

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<sup>34</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxvi; Hoffmann 1987:33. Keim and Neumann argue this in combination with the comment in 8.71 about there being two rulers currently in Rome. If Origen truly meant that there were at that time two emperors in Rome, this significantly narrows down the options for when Celsus was writing. Then, considering the persecutions that were occurring, the time can be narrowed down even further to Marcus Aurelius’ persecution.

<sup>35</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxvi-xxvii. Chadwick does note two scholars who object to this understanding of the phrase οἱ νῦν βασιλεύοντες. Firstly, Lightfoot is unconvinced that Celsus specifically refers to two emperors when using this phrase. Another scholar, Funk, takes issue with Keim and Neumann’s opinion that the persecution Celsus alludes to in 8.69 can be identified with the persecution of 177. However, Chadwick easily dismisses these objections. Regarding Lightfoot, the word νῦν seems to indicate that Celsus meant to emphasize the fact that, at the time he was writing, there were indeed multiple rulers. Regarding Funk, Chadwick believes that he too easily dismisses the evidence that Celsus was indeed referring to the persecution of 177.

<sup>36</sup> Hoffmann 1987:32; Wilken 2003:94

<sup>37</sup> Danielou 1955:3-4

official successor of the famous Clement of Alexandria at a catechetical school. Danielou describes this school in the following way:

[Origen] now realized that there was scientific work to be done on the Bible and that for that purpose secular learning was indispensable. The school he was going to found would thus have to be one in which secular studies could be pursued as a preparation for the scientific study of the Bible, the crown of the whole structure. It became in fact a university, offering an introduction to the whole field of learning.<sup>38</sup>

In the founding of this school, Origen's passion for studying and his recognition of the importance of study to the Christian life is clearly on display.

Although his time at the Alexandrian school came to an end in 230, Origen did not withdraw from his commitment to studying and teaching the Bible. He moved to Caesarea, where he lived until his death in 253 or 254. In Caesarea, he founded another school, preached nearly every day, and also became a prolific writer. Along with his doctrinal works such as *De Principiis*, he was one of the first to write commentaries on the Bible. According to Haykin, Origen wrote almost 300 books of commentaries on the Old Testament alone. But, there is also evidence of commentaries on the New Testament books of Matthew and John, as well as all of Paul's letters.<sup>39</sup> It was also during this time that he wrote the *Contra Celsum*, with an exact date of 248 AD being the most reasonable estimation. Eusebius dates it to this period and Chadwick notes that internal evidence confirms his date.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, beyond *Contra Celsum*, relatively little of this large corpus remains today. Despite this, it is still abundantly clear that Origen had a great dedication to studying, interpreting, and teaching the Scriptures throughout his whole life.

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<sup>38</sup> Danielou 1955:14

<sup>39</sup> Haykin 2011:77

<sup>40</sup> Chadwick 1980:xiv-xv. He notes three pieces of evidence: 1) Origen's comment in 3.15 that Christians had been enjoying a long period of peace, which indicates that it was written before the Decian persecution of 250 AD; 2) Origen refers throughout the *Contra Celsum* to commentaries he had already written, with the latest one being written sometime between 244-247 AD; and 3) Origen indicates in 3.15 that peace for the Christians was likely to come to an end, probably referring to the events beginning in 248 AD that sparked the Decian persecution.

In addition to their shared time period of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Celsus and Origen were likely living in the same place. As already noted, Origen was born in and spent a significant portion of his life in Alexandria. As with the dating of these two men, Origen's location is much more definite than Celsus'. While there is no definite evidence that Celsus lived in Alexandria, Chadwick and Niehoff provide convincing arguments for why he can be reasonably located here. Chadwick gives three reasons in support of Alexandria as Celsus' home. Firstly, Celsus quotes, or at least shows familiarity with both Egyptian mythology and "the Logos-theology of Hellenistic Judaism."<sup>41</sup> This theology was developed by Philo of Alexandria and continued on in that location. Secondly, Origen often complains that Celsus confuses Gnostic teaching with what was becoming the orthodox teaching of Christianity. Chadwick argues that in Alexandria, unlike Rome, the distinction between Gnosticism and the more widely-accepted Christian teachings was blurred to such an extent that Celsus was more likely to be mixed up.<sup>42</sup> And finally, Celsus gives an in-depth explanation in 6.22 of a Mithraic mystery, a cult which was flourishing in Alexandria at that time.<sup>43</sup> Niehoff similarly notes Celsus' familiarity with Philo's philosophical legacy in Alexandria, while adding that Celsus' Platonic beliefs "best fit an Alexandrian context."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, while Celsus cannot be located in Alexandria without any doubts, there is much evidence to suggest that this was the case.

Considering the sophisticated nature of Celsus' and Origen's works, it is unsurprising that they were both located in Alexandria. As Hinge and Krasilnikoff describe, this city was "the centre for communication of scientific and scholarly achievements as well as religious novelties,

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<sup>41</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxviii

<sup>42</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxix

<sup>43</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxix

<sup>44</sup> Niehoff 2013:154

digression and development.”<sup>45</sup> Alexandria was home to the famous Library and Museum, which were the epicenter of scholarly learning on a range of subjects including philosophy, religion, and mathematics. MacLeod writes that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, “the Library possessed over 400,000 mixed scrolls with multiple works, plus another 90,000 single scrolls.”<sup>46</sup> While these large numbers were not consistent throughout all of antiquity, due most notably to the fire in 1<sup>st</sup> century BC that destroyed the library, MacLeod goes on to say: “For the seven hundred years, [from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC] until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, as many as a hundred scholars at a time came to the Library to consult this collection, to read, talk, and write.”<sup>47</sup>

This environment of intellectual opportunity and diversity is the one in which Celsus and Origen would have lived. The scope of the Library made it a natural place for a wide collection of different ideologies. Indeed, “by the beginning of the Common Era, Alexandria was a place where what could be known of Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish and Greek thought was strenuously collected, codified, systematized, and contained.”<sup>48</sup> It should be added here that Christian thought would soon be added to the dialogue within the city, evidenced by Clement’s and Origen’s school there. Therefore, Celsus and Origen would have had available to them a wide array of different philosophical, religious, and cultural ideas. Indeed, their works are proof that they were making their own contributions to the interaction that was occurring between the scholars living and studying there. With all this in mind, it is clear that the dialogue between Celsus and Origen was one outcome of a greater exchange of ideas in ancient Alexandria.

Their shared location also helps to explain a third commonality between Celsus and Origen: the Platonist influence clearly displayed in their works. As already alluded to, scholars

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<sup>45</sup> Hinge and Krasilnikoff 2009:10

<sup>46</sup> MacLeod 2000:5

<sup>47</sup> MacLeod 2000:5

<sup>48</sup> MacLeod 2000:8

agree, by extrapolating from his arguments in *Λόγος Ἀληθείας*, that Celsus was undoubtedly a Platonist, with some identifying him specifically as a Middle Platonist.<sup>49</sup> Some examples from *Λόγος Ἀληθείας* that demonstrate his Platonist ideas have been enumerated by Freeman. He writes that Celsus believed in “a Supreme Good or God, who exists as a transcendental being above all things and beyond all emotions.” In addition, his criticism of the lack of serious philosophical thought among Christians results from his adherence to the Platonist idea that one can only know God through reason and philosophy. And finally, Celsus’ problem with the Christian worship of Jesus as a god seems to stem from his belief that, although there were intermediaries between humans and God, none of these intermediaries were God himself.<sup>50</sup> Beyond these specific examples, Chapter 2 will demonstrate that Celsus, when comparing Christianity to Graeco-Roman philosophy, pays special attention to how Christianity appropriates and ultimately denigrates the noble philosophy of Plato. Celsus’ consistent efforts to show the superiority of Platonist thought over Christianity therefore reveals his adherence to this particular philosophy.

Similarly, scholars have pointed out the numerous Platonist aspects of Origen’s thought.<sup>51</sup> Ramelli states unequivocally that Origen was a “Christian Platonist,” while Kenny notes the following Platonist ideas in Origen’s writings: the existence of human souls before birth, the “blessedness” awaiting all beings after death, and the resurrection of the body in spherical form.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, his Platonist leanings were so strong that he conflicted with bishops in his local community and was banished from their fellowship until his death.<sup>53</sup> This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Origen’s relationship to Platonism. It is not surprising that he was influenced by this philosophy due to the time and place in which he lived. What is so notable,

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<sup>49</sup> Hoffmann 1987:32; Watson 1992:165; Freeman 2009:171

<sup>50</sup> Freeman 2009:171-173

<sup>51</sup> Kenny 2006; Chadwick 1980; Edwards 2012; Ramelli 2009

<sup>52</sup> Ramelli 2009:239; Kenny 2006:111

<sup>53</sup> Kenny 2006:111

however, is that the Platonist aspects of his writings are so immediate that they caused conflict with his contemporaries and given him a legacy as a “Christian Platonist.” This seems to indicate that when he came to Celsus’ own work, he would have shared a common philosophical language with him.

### Difference: Scripture

It is clear, then, that Celsus and Origen had many significant things in common. However, their opposition on the question of Christianity demonstrates that there were still fundamental differences between them. Of these differences, none is more important than their view of the Christian Scriptures. Knowing the dates for Celsus’ and Origen’s lives and works allows us to evaluate what access each would have had to Christian Scriptures. This is significant especially when considering Celsus’ stated purpose in writing the *Λόγος Ἀληθείας*: “...I have undertaken to compose a treatise for [the Christians’] edification, so that they can see for themselves the true character of the doctrines they have chosen to embrace and the true source of their opinions.”<sup>54</sup> Celsus, in other words, aims to show the mistaken understanding that Christians have about the things they have been taught. Scarborough writes this about Celsus:

His efforts are twofold. He begins his refutation [of Christianity] by first attempting to discredit Christianity at its genesis, and only then moves to address it in virtue of its social and historical implications. Thus, it is to the Scriptures themselves that Celsus first turns.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Scarborough argues that Origen’s “perspective, much like his opponent’s, begins and ends with the Scriptures.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, what Celsus and Origen knew of Christian Scripture and

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<sup>54</sup> Trans. Hoffmann 1987:54

<sup>55</sup> Scarborough 2009:49

<sup>56</sup> Scarborough 2009:50

the conclusions they draw from that basic knowledge is of utmost importance to understanding their conversation about Christianity.

To answer the question of what Celsus and Origen knew of Scripture, I will first look at the history of those Scriptural writings. The formation of the Christian canon was a long and complicated process. Indeed, even today, the different denominations of Christianity do not agree on what books belong in the Bible. My intention is not to enter into the complexities of this history, but only to gain a general idea of the state of the Scriptures at this time. Firstly, a couple of basic dates. The Septuagint, or the Greek translation of the Hebrew writings now called the Old Testament, was composed by Alexandrian Jews around 285 BC.<sup>57</sup> As such, Bruce notes, the Christian church was armed with a sacred book from its first beginnings.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, this is clear just from reading the multitude of references by New Testament writers to the Old Testament writings.<sup>59</sup> It can be confidently said, then, that the Septuagint would have been a well-established source of Christian teaching even by the time Celsus entered the scene in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

The trickier question is what Celsus and Origen would have known about the writings that now make up the New Testament. Shelley provides a helpful timeline of the development of the New Testament from 100-400 AD.<sup>60</sup> Firstly, the New Testament as it is known today did not appear until the second half of the 4th century AD - well past the time this thesis considers.<sup>61</sup> However, Shelley gives snapshots of what collections of writings that Christians had in both 100 and 200 AD, the bookends of Celsus' lifetime. Except for the collection of Paul's letters in the

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<sup>57</sup> Lamarche 1997:18

<sup>58</sup> Bruce 1988:43, 55

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 3:3; Ephesians 6:2-3; multiple Old Testament passage cited in Hebrews 1:1-5:7; and many more

<sup>60</sup> Shelley 2008:67

<sup>61</sup> The canonical New Testament contains the following 27 books: 4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline epistles, 9 non-Pauline epistles

late 1<sup>st</sup> century, from 100-150 there is no evidence that Christians had collected their writings into a single religious book. Despite the lack of such a collection, there are extant Christian writings that quote from the Gospels and Paul's letters, showing that these writings were known and used by Christians. By 150 AD, Matthew, Mark, and Luke were gathered into one collection. Shelley continues his timeline by citing evidence from a church in Rome. This evidence shows that in 200 AD, 23 of the 27 modern canonical New Testament books were used for teaching the congregation. The four Gospels, as well as Acts and most of Paul's letters, were included in this list at the church in Rome. Interestingly, the next benchmark date comes in 250 AD with the list of books that Origen had in his personal library. He had 21 of the modern canonical books, again including the four Gospels, Acts, and most of Paul's letters.

Considering this timeline, it seems that the Gospels, Acts, and many of Paul's letters were the modern canonical books that were accepted and taught even at the very beginnings of the Christian church. It is for certain that Origen had familiarity with the books listed above, since they came from his own library. Moreover, as Martens writes, "Few commentators and homilists in the early church cultivated scholarship of the Christian Scriptures—the law, prophets, gospels, and apostolic writings—as exuberantly as he did."<sup>62</sup> In other words, Origen's very legacy is one of deep and extensive Biblical knowledge. Unsurprisingly, the same cannot be said as certainly for Celsus. In view of the timeline of Christian canon, it is reasonable to believe that Celsus would have had an awareness of various Christian writings. At the very least, Celsus must have known the content of the four Gospels, as these show up in nearly every early collection of Christian Scripture.

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<sup>62</sup> Martens 2012:2

There is however, more convincing evidence of Celsus' knowledge of Scripture in his own work. His criticisms about Jesus, including the prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament and stories of his life in the New Testament, are a major focus of his work. The connection of Old Testament prophecies to the person of Jesus and the events of Jesus' life are taught primarily in the four Gospels, so Celsus surely had familiarity with these books. His own words also lead to this conclusion. For example, he writes: "Let us not omit this: The writings of the disciples contain only those facts about Jesus that put a flattering face on the events of his life."<sup>63</sup> Similarly, he says: "Everywhere they speak in their writings of the tree of life..."<sup>64</sup> In both of these examples, Celsus admits to his own personal reading of Christian writings, specifically those about Jesus. Thus, despite living at the same time that the Biblical canon was being formed, Celsus most likely would have read the widely-distributed Christian writings. As Young writes, "Despite the superficiality and childishness of some of his criticisms, despite his hollowness and ridicule, it must be confessed that he was truly a man of genuine learning."<sup>65</sup> That is, whether or not Celsus' treatment of Christian teachings was valid, there is no question that he knew them well.

It is important to note that, since Celsus and Origen lived before the Christian canon had officially been closed, they likely read early Christian, non-canonical texts. As Rordorf writes, "The history of the formation of the New Testament canon is simultaneously the history of the progressive elimination of non-canonical or 'apocryphal' writings."<sup>66</sup> There is quite a large extant collection of early Christian writings, some of which were even formerly counted among New Testament lists. Harris identifies five such writings that could have been canon: The Epistle

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<sup>63</sup> Trans. Hoffmann 1987:37

<sup>64</sup> Trans. Wilken 2003:96

<sup>65</sup> Young 1944:194

<sup>66</sup> Rordorf 1997:69

of Barnabas, The Didache (concerning the teaching of the Twelve Apostles), 1 Clement, Apocalypse of Peter, and The Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps most pertinent to a discussion of Celsus and Origen are the Nag Hammadi writings found in Egypt in 1945. This was a collection of 13 codices containing 50 individual documents, including Plato's *Republic* and "dozens of noncanonical texts."<sup>68</sup> Many of these texts are Gnostic in origin, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, and more. What is so significant about the Nag Hammadi writings is that places noncanonical works unquestionably in Egypt, where Celsus and Origen both lived. Indeed, the circulation of noncanonical Christian texts in this part of the world can simply be seen as part of the diverse set of influences that Celsus and Origen would have been in contact with in Alexandria.

Regardless of what Celsus and Origen knew as Christian Scripture, it is clear that they had wildly different estimations of it. Celsus' major criticisms of Christianity, especially those concerning the Christian God and Christian doctrine, could have only been made in reaction to what he learned from their writings. Although there are certainly instances when Celsus criticizes Christian ideas that did not ultimately become orthodox,<sup>69</sup> many of his main points of attack would still be valid against the Christianity of today. Celsus' disbelief in and arguments against the divinity of Jesus, the Christian claims of universal truth, the resurrection of Jesus, and more all demonstrate his great familiarity with orthodox Christian teaching. Moreover, his consistently low opinion of that teaching reveals that he was not at all persuaded by Christianity. His work, therefore, is born out of this fundamental disbelief in the teaching of Scripture.

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<sup>67</sup> Harris 2009:17

<sup>68</sup> Harris 2009:245

<sup>69</sup> As discussed above, Chadwick notes that Origen often complains of Celsus' confusion of Gnosticism with what he understood to be correct doctrine. He cites the following passage in support: 5.61-65, 6.24 ff., 7.25, and 8.15 (Chadwick 1980:xxix).

Origen's work, however, is subject to his belief that Scripture was true. Indeed, this is something he makes quite clear at the very beginning of his work, which will be discussed at length later in this thesis. What is important to notice at this point is that Celsus' and Origen's differing views on Christianity – a difference that is all the more significant in light of their shared time, place, and philosophy – are a result of their opposite views of Christian Scripture. Because of this, it can rightly be said that their conflict over Christianity is fundamentally a conflict over the truth of Christian teaching. Celsus' work is a great elaboration on why the claims that Christians make are false, while the apologetic strategy Origen employs in his work is ultimately aimed at demonstrating the truth of those claims. With this framework in mind, Celsus' and Origen's works can now be evaluated.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHEREVER ONE FINDS A COMPANY OF FOOLS...

In order to properly analyze Origen's strategy in the *Contra Celsum*, it is necessary to look at Celsus' own treatise first. The *Λόγος Ἀληθείας* is reasonably dated to around 175 AD, as discussed previously. In this work, Celsus undertakes a comprehensive critique of Christianity that touches on many different features of the new faith. Due to the fact that his writing is only preserved today within Origen's work, it is not possible to read Celsus' treatise as a cohesive document. However, some reconstructions have been made by Bader, Glöckner, Keim, and Hoffmann.<sup>70</sup> The first three scholars attempt to reconstruct the order of the *Λόγος Ἀληθείας*, while Hoffmann's arranges the fragments thematically. Though I will not be using the themes that Hoffmann identifies,<sup>71</sup> the fragmentary nature of what remains of the treatise lends itself to this kind of analysis. Thus, I will follow his strategy in my own analysis of Celsus' work. Celsus focuses his critique on three principle elements of Christianity: its doctrine, its God, and its followers.

One preliminary note should be made. Because the only source of Celsus' treatise is in Origen's work against Celsus, it is reasonable to ask how objectively Origen records passages from *Λόγος Ἀληθείας*. Scholars seem to be divided on their assessment of how reliable Origen is in his use of Celsus' own words. Both Somos and Chadwick discuss the varying opinions on the question, with neither coming up with a definitive answer.<sup>72</sup> Somos notes that earlier scholars (roughly in the first half of the 20th century) tend to be highly critical of Origen's transmission, seeing his citation as selective and inaccurate. On the other hand, later scholars give Origen much more credit in general due to the thorough nature of his work.

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<sup>70</sup> Hoffmann 1987:44

<sup>71</sup> Hoffmann identifies 10 different themes, which I believe can be consolidated to only 3 while still capturing a complete picture of Celsus' opposition to Christianity.

<sup>72</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxii-xxiv; Somos 2012:200-201. Unfortunately, many of the scholars they cite do not write in English and could not be consulted directly.

Despite the lack of scholarly consensus, it is possible to examine passages from *Contra Celsum* in which Origen actually comments on the extent to which he cites Celsus. Chadwick provides a helpful overview of these instances and lists 24 different times either when Origen admits to omitting or abbreviating Celsus' words or when he has clearly summarized Celsus' words. A good example of the former comes in 7.27, as Origen refutes Celsus' attacks on how Christians describe God. After referencing a few words from Celsus, he writes:

ἀνατρέπειν ἐθέλει τὰ μὴ τεθειμένα ὑφ' ἡμῶν, ἅπερ περισσὸν παραθέσθαι ἢ τὴν ἀνατροπὴν αὐτῶν. Εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἃ λέγει ἡμᾶς φάσκειν περὶ θεοῦ ἐλέγομεν, καὶ πρὸς αὐτὰ ἴστατο, ἀναγκαῖον ἦν ἡμῖν τὸ τιθεῖναι τὰς λέξεις αὐτοῦ καὶ κατασκευάζειν μὲν τὰ ἡμέτερα λύειν δὲ τὰ ἐκείνου· (7.27)

As he endeavours to overthrow notions which we do not maintain, it is superfluous to quote these remarks or to give them any refutation. If we said what he maintains we affirm about God, and if this had been the object of his attack, it would have been necessary for us to quote his words and to argue in support of our doctrines and demolish his.<sup>73</sup>

As in many other sections of *Contra Celsum*, Origen omits words of Celsus when he finds the task to be “superfluous.” That is, when Celsus' attacks are specious in Origen's eyes, he does not even bother to note them. He gives them no attention because he does not believe them to be worthy of any. As he says in the latter part of the section just cited, only when Celsus actually engages with what Christians say does Origen undertake to refute his words.

The second group of passages in which Origen seems to misrepresent Celsus' words are those in which he is clearly summarizing Celsus instead of giving direct quotations. For example, in 2.7, Origen deals with Celsus' comments about Jesus. He writes:

Δεικνύτωσαν δέ, ποῦ κἂν ἔμφασις λέξεως ἀπὸ ἀλαζο νείας προφερομένης παρὰ τῷ Ἰησοῦ εὐρίσκεται. . . Ἐλεγχέτω δέ τις, τίνα ἐνεύσατο, καὶ παραστησάτω μεγάλα καὶ μικρὰ ψεύδη, ἵνα δείξῃ τὰ μεγάλα ψευσάμενον τὸν Ἰησοῦν. . . Τίνα δὲ καὶ τὰ ἀνόσια τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ἀπαγγελλέτω καὶ μάλιστα ὁ παρὰ τῷ Κέλσῳ Ἰουδαῖος. (2.7)

<sup>73</sup> All passages from *Contra Celsum* in which Origen's words are cited translated by Chadwick.

I challenge anyone to show where there can be found even a suggestion of a saying uttered by Jesus from *arrogance*...I challenge anyone to prove what lies he told; and let him give an account of great and small lies, that he may prove that *Jesus told great lies*...And let Celsus' Jew in particular tell us what were the *profane* actions of Jesus.<sup>74</sup>

The sections before and after 2.7 each discuss different critiques made by Celsus, which Origen does quote. So, it is clear that 2.7 is meant to stand alone as Origen handles a specific line of attack from Celsus' work. However, he clearly does not introduce a unified passage from Celsus, but instead just alludes to Celsus' arguments that Jesus was arrogant, told lies, and performed profane actions. In most other sections, such as 2.8, Origen explicitly writes phrases such as φησὶ δὲ, "But [Celsus] says" when he seeks to refute him. Thus, because he does not cite him directly yet still discusses a specific argument, he must only be summarizing what Celsus wrote.

Taking the conclusions of scholars into account, as well as these instances of Origen's clear omission of Celsus' text, there seems to be good reason to find Origen's transmission reliable. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, even though there are many passages in Origen in which he does not quote Celsus directly, he quotes him far more often than not in his eight book refutation. Nearly every section of the book considers a chunk of Celsus' words and those sections that do not are frequently a continuation of Origen's discussion of a passage introduced in preceding sections. Secondly, sections like 2.7 in which Origen is summarizing Celsus' words are not strikingly different from those in which he does. That is, Celsus' arguments that Origen only alludes to are thematically similar to his quoted arguments. Again, using 2.7 as an example, Celsus is surely dismissive of the Christian God - a fact which this chapter will show clearly.

Thus, sections like this in which Origen alludes to Celsus' accusations about Jesus are not out of

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<sup>74</sup> Throughout this thesis, all citations from *Contra Celsum* in which Origen quotes Celsus' words directly will have Celsus' words in italics. For this specific citation, note that Celsus puts his critiques in the mouth of a Jew during some portions of his work. As such, Origen refers to τῷ Κέλσῳ Ἰουδαῖος, "Celsus' Jew", in this section since he is answering critiques that came in that section of Celsus' work.

line with the overall tone and content of Celsus' actual words. Thirdly, the fact that Origen does not shy away from mentioning when he is not willing to reference Celsus directly seems to indicate that he is not attempting to mislead his readers. He is not trying to truncate Celsus' words so that his own arguments can appear stronger. He is transparent about why he does not quote Celsus in certain places and thus does not seem to have nefarious intentions. Finally, I stand with Chadwick's estimation that "perhaps too much energy" has been spent on trying to sort out the reconstruction of Celsus' text and thus how faithfully Origen transmits it.<sup>75</sup> In the end, the benefits of studying Celsus through Origen's text far outweigh any reservations modern readers ought to have. Seeing that Celsus' work is the most substantial one that remains of Graeco-Roman opinion about Christianity, Origen's transmission should be appreciated far more than suspected.

Origen's thorough citation of Celsus' text has preserved for modern readers a work of rich and varied attacks on Christianity. Celsus' opposition to Christianity is deep-rooted. He does not simply find its teaching unpersuasive; his words betray his profound distaste for nearly every aspect of it. This complete condemnation has been frequently noted by scholars.<sup>76</sup> Hargis writes: "The *True Doctrine* contains no hint that Christianity was tolerable in any form, whether social, mythical or doctrinal; Celsus' goal...was the elimination of Christianity altogether."<sup>77</sup> This is a bold estimation of Celsus' intent, but it does not seem to be far from the truth. This chapter will explore the numerous examples which have led so many to recognize that Celsus would have happily "wished Christ away from the Roman Empire..."<sup>78</sup> There are three main aspects of Christianity that Celsus attacks again and again: its doctrine, its God, and its followers. The

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<sup>75</sup> Chadwick 1980:xxii

<sup>76</sup> Hargis 2001:61; Scarborough 2009:49; Greenwood 2014:712; Young 1944:196

<sup>77</sup> Hargis 2001:61

<sup>78</sup> Greenwood 2014:712-713

criticism of these essential elements of Christianity constitutes the heart of Celsus' treatise and best demonstrates his wholly negative opinion of the faith.

Looking first at Celsus' judgment of their doctrine, he presents two main issues with it: one, that it is unoriginal; two, that it is absurd. Regarding Christianity's unoriginality, Celsus often seeks to show that Christianity is not putting forth any new ideas by pointing out the similarities between their recycled ideas and popular non-Christian ones. Not only did this comparison suggest that Christianity was only a mere copy of a more substantive ideology, but it allowed Celsus to combat the arrogance of this infant faith. Christianity has claimed from its beginnings that its message was the only true one. Its God was the only God; its religion was for all men. In short, Christians believed that their religion had an exclusive claim to truth and a universal applicability to the lives of men. This idea of Christian exclusivism and universalism is described by Scarborough in his discussion of Origen's *Contra Celsum*: "It is with the Christian faith, Origen argues, that history becomes historic for the first time. Celsus has not only misread the Scriptures, but even more egregiously misreads the course of human events they narrate."<sup>79</sup> Christians believed that, without the doctrine found in the Scriptures, human existence – individually and in general – would not fully be understood. With this being the case, Christianity must necessarily be the only religion that holds true at all times for all men – including those men who existed before the religion started in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. For Celsus, however, this was incredibly presumptuous for a religion that had existed for less than 200 years. As such, his efforts to demonstrate the unoriginality of the Christian faith not only showed the superiority of existing Graeco-Roman ideas, but it also deconstructed the Christian claims to universalism.

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<sup>79</sup> Scarborough 2009:54

There are many passages in Celsus' treatise that demonstrate this opinion about Christianity's unoriginality. Two passages in particular, however, serve as paradigms for how Celsus makes this attack on Christianity. The first passage is a prime example of Celsus' efforts to list the particular examples of those who have already put forth the ideas Christians were just beginning to formulate. In a discussion on the worship of Jesus, he writes:

... παραπλήσιον ἡμᾶς οἴεται πεποιηκέναι τόν, ὡς φησιν ἡ Κέλσος, ἀλόντα καὶ ἀποθανόντα θρησκεύοντας τοῖς Γέταις σέβουσι τὸν Ζάμολξιν καὶ Κίλιξι τὸν Μόψον καὶ Ἀκαρνᾶσι τὸν Ἀμφίλοχον καὶ Θεβαίοις τὸν Ἀμφιάρεωκαὶ Λεβαδίοις τὸν Τροφώνιον. (3.34)

I emphasize that the Christians worship a man who was arrested and died, after the manner of the Getae who reverence Zamolxis, or those Sicilians who worship Mopsus, the Aracarnanians who worship Amphiloclus, or the Thebans who worship Amphiaraus and the Lebadians who worship Trophonius.<sup>80</sup>

In this instance and in other places, Celsus will enumerate other people or races that share characteristics with Christianity. He does this when discussing many different claims of Christianity. He points out that there have been many other magicians (in addition to Jesus) that have gained influence among the common people, that a variety of races claim that their most ancient ancestors were born from the earth, that Christians are hardly the first to argue that their God and their laws are the only true ones among all that exist, and that many religions have prohibited idolatry.<sup>81</sup> In all of these instances, Celsus names specific examples of other individuals or groups that put forth ideas that Christians were only beginning to teach. Hargis articulates well how Celsus' method in passages like this ought to cause people to question their exclusivist claims: "If a doctrine or myth is similar to those belonging to other philosophies or religions, how can it claim to be the only valid one? Contrary to the claims of Christians about

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<sup>80</sup> All passages from *Contra Celsum* in Chapter II in which only Celsus' words are cited translated by Hoffmann.

<sup>81</sup> *Contra Celsum* 3.3; 4.36; 5.25, 33-34, 41; 7.62

their uniqueness, Christianity was just another religion.”<sup>82</sup> A similarity to even one other religion would be effective in bringing Christianity down from its self-erected pedestal and back into the crowd of other religions. Celsus, however, is remarkably thorough in his efforts to put Christianity in its place. He not only points out many different aspects of Christianity that can be found in earlier cultures and religions, but he names those predecessors to the point of exhaustion. In this way, he is able to make it abundantly clear that Christians cannot sensibly tout a unique doctrine.

Another passage demonstrates Celsus’ second strategy in exposing the unoriginality of Christianity. He spends much time comparing Christian belief to Platonic thought in an effort to show the superiority of the latter, which of course predated Christianity. For example, Celsus indeed thinks that Christians discuss many of the same things that Plato does in his philosophy. For example, he compares the Christian idea of God to the Platonic one. More specifically, he wonders what kind of god it is that is said to “come down” to earth as Christians believe Jesus did. This is completely strange to Celsus, who writes:

Ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθὸς ἐστὶ καὶ καλὸς καὶ εὐδαίμων καὶ ἐν τῷ καλλίστῳ καὶ ἀρίστῳ· εἰ δὴ ἐς ἀνθρώπους κάτεισι, μεταβολῆς αὐτῷ δεῖ, μεταβολῆς δὲ ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ εἰς κακὸν καὶ ἐκ καλοῦ εἰς αἰσχρὸν καὶ ἐξ εὐδαιμονίας εἰς κακοδαιμονίαν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ἀρίστου εἰς τὸ πονηρότατον. Τίς ἂν οὖν ἔλοιτο τοιαύτην μεταβολήν; (4.14)

God is that which is beautiful and happy and exists within himself in the most perfect of all conceivable states. This means that God is changeless. A god who comes down to men undergoes change - a change from good to bad; from beautiful to shameful; from happiness to misfortune; from what is perfect to what is wicked. Now what sort of a god would choose a change like that?<sup>83</sup>

Celsus points out here that both Christians and Plato had ideas of a singular “God” beyond the various gods of Graeco-Roman mythology. However, the God of the Christians, due to his

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<sup>82</sup> Hargis 2001:42

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Chadwick 1980:192. Chadwick cites two passages in Plato from which Celsus is likely pulling this doctrine of God (*Republic* 381B,C; *Phaedrus* 246D).

purported incarnation, ultimately shows himself to be no god at all. His ability and even desire to change from “perfect” to “wicked” is directly against the very essence of God. As Watson writes: “The whole Platonic scheme of things depended on the clear distinction between the two worlds, the world of intellect and the world of sense, the *kosmos noëtos* and the *kosmos aisthētos*. The Christian notion of God’s activity was a disastrous denial of this distinction.”<sup>84</sup> In particular, the incarnation, in which God himself is said not only to live among humans but to become human himself, is the height of blasphemy against the way God actually is according to Platonist thought. Thus, Christians are not only copying Platonist doctrine, but totally destroying the essence of it. The fact that men believe in Christianity is so distasteful to Celsus because it wrongfully boasts of its eternal and original truth when they are only really insulting actual truth.

In addition to the unoriginality of Christianity, Celsus frequently seems simply bewildered by it. Although he is clearly familiar with what Christians teach, he sees their doctrine as completely absurd. This opinion is made no clearer than when he considers the Christian teaching of the resurrection of Jesus. As Chadwick remarks, “perhaps no doctrine was so peculiarly nauseating to him as the Jewish-Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body.”<sup>85</sup> Celsus’ discussion of the resurrection comes in the portion of his work in which he puts his criticisms in the mouth of a Jew. In the sections where the Jew is speaking, Celsus imagines a dialogue between a Jew and a Christian. The Jew essentially interrogates the Christian, asking him question after question so that he will explain the intricacies of Christian belief. Celsus’ attack against the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection comes during this interrogation, with the Jew first asking the following: Τίτι οὖν προσήχθητε ἢ διότι προεἶπεν, ὡς ἀποθανῶν ἀναστήσεται; (2.54) “Is your belief based on the ‘fact’ that this Jesus told in advance that he

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<sup>84</sup> Watson 1992:167

<sup>85</sup> Chadwick 1948:83

would rise again after his death?” From this opening question, Celsus systematically attempts to discredit the truth of this Christian claim. He focuses primarily on the absurdity of these claims in order to effectively carry out this criticism.

Celsus first makes a comment about how the Christian resurrection story is similar to many other Graeco-Roman stories about resurrection. This comment echoes the explicit statements he makes about the unoriginality of Christian doctrine. After touching on those other similar stories, he turns his attention back to the Christian story itself:

Ἄλλ' ἐκεῖνο σκεπτέον, εἴ τις ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀποθανὼν ἀνέστη ποτὲ αὐτῷ σώματι· ἢ οἴεσθε τὰ μὲν τῶν ἄλλων μύθους εἶναι τε καὶ δοκεῖν, ὑμῖν δὲ τὴν καταστροφὴν τοῦ δράματος εὐσχημόνως ἢ πιθανῶς ἐφευρῆσθαι... (2.55)

But quite apart from these risings from the dead, we must look carefully at the question of the resurrection of the body as a possibility given to mortals. Doubtless you will freely admit that these other stories are legends, even as they appear to me; but you will go on to say that your resurrection story, this climax to your tragedy, is believable and noble...

Celsus' main complaint in this passage is that, despite the clearly legendary character of stories of resurrection, Christians still believe theirs to be not only true, but “noble.” And they do this while at the same time denying the truth of other resurrections. But even beyond this contradiction, their belief in Jesus' resurrection necessarily demonstrates their belief that resurrection can occur at all. As Celsus says, “we must look carefully at the question of the resurrection of the body as a possibility given to mortals.” The implication seems to be that it is foolish of Christians to focus so intently upon the resurrection of Jesus when the resurrection of the dead may not even be possible. This resurrection is the triumphant end of all the Gospels and occupies a major place in the letters of today's New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 15). If the resurrection did not even happen in the first place, Christians are left with many inherently false

claims in their writings. Celsus is therefore rightly bewildered by the Christian commitment in believing in the truth and nobility of an impossible event.

Even beyond the inherently hollow nature of their teachings on Jesus' resurrection, however, Celsus clearly discounts the evidence Christians give in support of Jesus' resurrection.

He continues with the following, immediately following the passage just cited:

ἢ οἴεσθε τὰ μὲν τῶν ἄλλων μύθους εἶναι τε καὶ δοκεῖν, ὑμῖν δὲ τὴν καταστροφὴν τοῦ δράματος εὐσχημόνως ἢ πιθανῶς ἐφευρῆσθαι, τὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ σκόλοπος αὐτοῦ φωνήν, ὅτ' ἀπέπνει, καὶ "τὸν σεισμὸν" καὶ τὸν σκότον; Ὅτι δὴ ζῶν μὲν οὐκ ἐπήρκεσεν ἑαυτῷ, νεκρὸς δ' ἀνέστη καὶ τὰ σημεῖα τῆς κολάσεως ἔδειξε καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ὡς ἦσαν πεπερονημέναι, τίς τοῦτο εἶδε; Γυνὴ πάροιστρος, ὡς φατε, καὶ εἶ τις ἄλλος τῶν ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς γοητείας, ἦτοι κατὰ τινα διάθεσιν ὄνειρώξας καὶ κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ βούλησιν δόξη πεπλανημένη φαντασιωθεῖς, ὅπερ ἤδη μυρίοις συμβέβηκεν, ἢ, ὅπερ μᾶλλον, ἐκπλήξαι τοὺς λοιποὺς τῇ τερατεῖα ταύτῃ θελήσας καὶ διὰ τοῦ τοιούτου ψεύσματος ἀφορμὴν ἄλλοις ἀγύρταις παρασχεῖν. (2.55)

Doubtless you will freely admit that these other stories are legends, even as they appear to me; but you will go on to say that your resurrection story, this climax to your tragedy, is believable and noble. (This is of course, notwithstanding his cry from the cross). I suppose you say that the earthquake and the darkness that covered the earth at the time of his death prove him to be a god, and that even though he did not accept the challenge to remove himself from the cross or to escape his persecutors when he was alive, yet he overcame them all by rising from the dead and showing the marks of his punishment, pierced hands and all, to others. But who really saw this? A hysterical woman, as you admit and perhaps one other person - both deluded by his sorcery, or else so wrenched with grief at his failure that they hallucinated him risen from the dead by a sort of wishful thinking. This mistaking a fantasy for reality is not at all uncommon; indeed, it has happened to thousands. Just as possible, these deluded women wanted to impress the others - who had already the good sense to have abandoned him - by spreading their hallucinations about as "visions."

Celsus does not give any consideration to the evidence Christians bring forth about Jesus' resurrection. After mentioning two different pieces of evidence in a dismissive tone, the darkness and Jesus' appearing to his followers, he immediately sets out to undercut the second part. He paints a picture of the "hysterical" women that Jesus appeared to and accuses them of spreading this delusion among others. When comparing Celsus' presentation of the events after Jesus'

death to what the Bible records, it is hard not to see his version as a caricature of what Christians actually believed. As the gospels record it, the women that were among Jesus' followers went to his tomb in order to anoint his body for burial (Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8). Upon their arrival, however, an angel appeared to them and told them of Jesus' resurrection. This encounter with the angel, as Matthew writes, caused the women to fear and rush back to the disciples. The gospel account, then, does not portray the women as hysterical or unduly emotional. They were simply mourning their dead teacher and were frightened after an unexpected visit from the angel. However, Celsus' version of these women presents them as totally out of their minds with grief or due to Jesus' sorcery. In his version of the story, the women are untrustworthy messengers, running around under some delusion and wickedly trying to convince others that what they had seen was true. By presenting the scene after Jesus' resurrection as one of hysteria and chaos, Celsus seems to be attempting to draw out the inherently absurd nature of this Christian belief. The implied question seems to be this: How could anyone believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead and appeared to his followers when it is far more likely that these women were simply deluded by their grief? In short, there were much more likely explanations for this event and it would be foolish to believe the Biblical account of an actual bodily resurrection and an actual appearance from an angel.

Celsus, however, is not finished in his criticism of the Christian resurrection story. He goes on to point out the absurdity of Jesus' own supposed actions after he rose from the dead. He writes much about this, but his criticism is best shown by the following statements: ὅτε μὲν ἠπιστεῖτο ὢν ἐν σώματι, πᾶσιν ἀνέδην ἐκήρυττεν· ὅτε δὲ πίστιν ἂν ἰσχυρὰν παρεῖχεν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστάς, ἐνὶ μόνῳ γυναιῶ καὶ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώταις κρύβδην παρεφαίνετο (2.70). "When he was in the body, he was disbelieved but preached to everyone; after his resurrection, apparently

wanting to establish a strong faith, he chooses to show himself to one woman and a few comrades only.” Celsus cannot understand why Jesus was said to be so secretive when he rose from the dead. As the gospels record, Jesus only appeared to his own followers before ascending into heaven. Celsus wonders why he did not appear to more people, such as those who actually killed him, in order to prove that he had truly been raised from the dead. Indeed, as he says in the passage just quoted, Jesus’ actions were simply backwards. Before his death, he persisted in preaching to countless people in a multitude of places, although he was largely disbelieved by those people. Then, after he was publicly killed, he did not bother to show himself alive to such a great amount of people. In other words, when he would have surely been believed, having clearly risen from the dead, he is secretive and quiet. In Celsus’ eyes, there is no logic to Jesus’ actions.

Throughout all of these passages, Celsus highlights the absurdity of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Not only do Christians believe this particular resurrection while discounting all others, their evidence for it is empty and their claims about Jesus’ own actions are illogical. This estimation of Christian doctrine is consistent throughout Celsus’ work, no matter what particular aspect he is focusing on. But, it is especially notable that he thinks so little of the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection due to the central place this holds in Christian doctrine. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as discussed before, make up the heart of the gospel stories and are written about extensively in Paul’s letters. Thus, if Celsus dismisses the resurrection of Jesus so easily, then it is no surprise that other, less central elements of Christianity are just as distasteful to him.

In addition to Celsus’ criticisms concerning the doctrine of Christians, he also has quite a low opinion of the Christian God. Just as with their doctrine, Celsus has a multi-faceted criticism of their God. More specifically, Celsus sees this God as not only evil, but highly incompetent

and weak. Freeman points out both sides of Celsus' low view of God, first discussing God's seemingly evil nature:

One of Celsus' major concerns is that Jesus is the messenger of a malevolent god. God had already shown that he can be destructive of his creation – Celsus cites the tower of Babel and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now Jesus brings the message that the majority of humankind will suffer eternal punishment at the judgment with only an elect few being saved.<sup>86</sup>

Freeman later goes on to cite instances where Celsus questions the power of a God who cannot even protect his own people when they are persecuted and who is in a seemingly never-ending struggle with the devil.<sup>87</sup> This two-sided understanding of God – that he is overall incompetent, but performs what actions he can in an evil manner – underlies all that Celsus says about the Christian God.

Numerous examples can be found to demonstrate Celsus' opinion, but one passage in particular serves as a prime example of that opinion. Writing about the Christian refusal to worship the images of gods, he alludes to Christians who actually smash the images of Graeco-Roman gods in service to their own God. However, he goes on to point out this foolishness of serving their particular god, writing:

Οὐχ ὀρᾶς οὖν, ὦ βέλτιστε, ὅτι καὶ τὸν σὸν δαίμονα καταστάς τις οὐ βλασφημεῖ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσης γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης ἐκκηρύττει καὶ σὲ τὸν καθωσιωμένον ὥσπερ ἄγαλμα αὐτῷ δῆσας ἀπάγει καὶ ἀνασκολοπίζει· καὶ ὁ δαίμων ἦ, ὡς σὺ φῆς, ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ παῖς οὐδὲν αὐτὸν ἀμύνεται;

τὸν δὲ σὸν θεὸν παρόντα κατατείνοντες καὶ κολάζοντες οὐδὲν οἱ ταῦτα δράσαντες πεπόνθασιν ἀλλ' οὐδὲ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐν τοσοῦτῳ βίω. Τί καινὸν ἐξ ἐκείνου γέγονεν ᾧ πιστεύσαι ἂν τις ὡς οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος ἄνθρωπος γόης ἀλλὰ θεοῦ παῖς; Καὶ ὁ πέμψας ἄρα τὸν υἱὸν ἀγγελμάτων τινῶν εἵνεκα οὕτως ὠμῶς κολασθέντα, ὡς συνδιαφθεیرهσθαι καὶ τὰ ἀγγέλματα, περιεῖδε καὶ τοσοῦτου χρόνου διελθόντος οὐκ ἐπεστράφη. Τίς οὕτως ἀνόσιος πατήρ; (8.39,41)

Does this good Christian fellow not see that I might do the same without fear of reprisal to an image of his god? You are banished from land and sea, bound and

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<sup>86</sup> Freeman 2009:173

<sup>87</sup> Freeman 2009:174

punished for your devotion to [God] and taken away to be crucified. Where then is your God's vengeance on his persecutors?

I would call your attention to the fact that the men who tortured your god in person suffered nothing in return; not then, nor as long as they lived. And what new developments have taken place since your story proved false - something that would encourage someone to think that this man was not a sorcerer but the son of God? What are we to think of a god so negligent that he not only permitted his son to suffer as cruel a death as this Jesus did, but who allowed the message he was sent to deliver to perish with him? A long time has passed since then, and nothing has changed. Is there any human father so ruthless as your god?

In the first part of this passage, Celsus points out that the Christian God is not doing what Christians claim he can. That is, they are willing to die for a God who they claim is all-powerful, but yet this God does not save them from death in response to this devotion. Celsus initially does not provide any explanation for why God does not save them, but simply points out that he is not there for his people. As he continues, however, he starts to provide possible reasons why their God is silent. The first reason he implies is that God is too incompetent to carry out his plans all the way. He calls God "negligent" for "allowing the message [Jesus] was sent to deliver to perish with him." Because of his negligence, Celsus writes that God simply allows evil to happen to his people. This idea of negligence seems to imply that the Christian God does not merely allow evil to come upon people, but that he is unable to prevent evil from happening. Instead of actively protecting Christians from the persecution they face, his attention is elsewhere. In short, he is incompetent *because* he is negligent. This passivity and weakness thus provides one possible reason for why God has not stepped in to spread the message of Christianity and to ensure the safety of its followers.

The second reason that Celsus offers is much more prominent in this section and his work as a whole: that God does not protect his people because he is evil. Celsus alludes to the fact that God allowed Jesus to die a cruel death. But, even beyond the cruelty of his death, it was senseless for multiple reasons: those who killed Jesus have suffered no punishment in turn,

Jesus' message "perished with him," and "nothing has changed." This last reason is vague, but Celsus probably is implying that the followers of Jesus are suffering crucifixion and other horrible deaths just as he did. In this way, nothing at all has changed for those preaching the Christian message. Celsus ends this line of attack by calling God a "ruthless father." This description is extremely powerful and telling. Comparing God to human fathers only serves to emphasize the cruelty of God even more. "Ruthless" is not at all the description that a father ought to earn for themselves and was far from the concept of fatherhood that can be found in other Roman literature.

One prime example of this is in Livy's description of Romulus in *Ab Urbe Condita*. After founding Rome and building up the power of the infant city, Romulus is taken up by the gods and given a place among them. Livy's account is as follows:

subito coorta tempestas cum magno fragore tonitribusque tam denso regem operuit nimbo ut conspectum eius contioni abstulerit; nec deinde in terris Romulus fuit...deinde a paucis initio facto, deum deo natum, regem parentemque urbis Romanae saluere uniuersi Romulum iubent; pacem precibus exposcunt, uti uolens propitius suam semper sospitet progeniem (*Ab Urbe Condita* 1.16.1,3)

Suddenly a storm rose up with a great crash and with thunder and covered the king with a cloud so dense that it hid his view from the assembly; no longer was Romulus on the earth... Then, with the deed having begun by a few, all the men entreated that Romulus be hailed a god, born from a god, king, and parent of the Roman city; they requested peace with their prayers, so that, being graciously willing, he would always preserve his own offspring.<sup>88</sup>

Livy portrays Romulus as a great leader, notable for his piety, his success in war, and his willingness to pursue peace instead of war if possible.<sup>89</sup> He is held up as an *exemplum* in Livy's work and, as Stem points out, Romulus' character "represents the origins of the Roman national character, and so his characterization has tremendous significance for Livy's depiction of the

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<sup>88</sup> Translation by author

<sup>89</sup> Mineo 2015:145

greatness that national character came to achieve.”<sup>90</sup> In short, Romulus was loved by his contemporaries and was a paradigm of a great Roman even when Livy wrote in the late Republic. It seems reasonable then to generalize his merits as father of Rome to describe Roman fatherhood in general.<sup>91</sup>

As Livy records, the assembly of Romans who watched Romulus disappear in a cloud eventually call him not only a god and king, but a parent. With this title of parent, they entreat Romulus to protect the Roman people who are his *progeniem*, his offspring. There are two important lessons here about Roman expectation of their fathers. Firstly, by connecting the idea of parenthood to the great character and deeds of Romulus shows that only this impressive resume alone deserved the title of “parent.” Secondly, the fact that the Roman people sought Romulus’ help on the basis of their standing as his offspring indicates that they expected parents to be gracious to their children. This same expectation can be seen explicitly in the imperial period as well. Peppard writes that “Augustus and his successors established the emperor's role as father of the Empire, the *paterfamilias* of a large family. Roman authors regarded the image as befitting Augustan stability, and they hoped it would portend continued imperial *clementia*.”<sup>92</sup> Augustus and other emperors, like Romulus, were father figures whose *clementia*, “compassion,” was hoped for on the basis of their role as fathers.

Therefore, the picture of Roman fatherhood, seen through Romulus and historical evidence of the honors given to the Roman emperors, is strikingly different from the description that Celsus gives of the Christian God. Unlike Romulus, God’s incompetence prevents him from being great. Moreover, God did not help his offspring – his own son and Christians themselves –

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<sup>90</sup> Stem 2007:437-438

<sup>91</sup> Moreover, Suetonius records in *Divus Augustus* 58 that Augustus was also given the title of *pater patriae*, “father of the fatherland,” continuing the association of fatherhood with political leadership

<sup>92</sup> Peppard 2011:66

but instead allows them to suffer persecution and even death. God's inability and seeming unwillingness to protect his people is extremely significant in light of the tension between Christians and the Roman Empire. As discussed in the introduction, Christians were openly ranking their allegiance to the emperor lower than their allegiance to their God. For Celsus, however, this shift in loyalty was incomprehensible. Indeed, it was a shift from something beneficial to something harmful; from a benevolent father to a "ruthless" one. It is true that not every emperor lived up to the ideal of Romulus or Augustus. However, putting one's hope in the emperor was at least founded in the possibility that such great men could lead and have compassion on their people. With the Christian God, however, any hope placed in him was completely unfounded. He had showed no benevolence towards his own son and was continuing his cruelty towards Christian followers. In this way, Celsus is implying that the emperor was in fact superior to the Christian God. This is an impactful critique on Christianity, which teaches the superiority of God over any mortal ruler, and on Christians themselves, who were abandoning traditional worship of the emperor for that God. Thus, Celsus' comment about the the ruthlessness of God at the end of this passage is a serious condemnation of the nature of that God.

Celsus' other comments about the Christian God focus on the idea of his weakness and incompetence. In a section in which he discusses Jesus' actions on earth, he takes Christians on their own terms and allows their belief that Jesus himself was God. Thus, his comments in this passage reveal even more about his opinion of the Christian God. He writes:

Πῶς δ' ἐμέλλομεν τοῦτον νομίζειν θεόν, ὃς τὰ τε ἄλλα, ὥσπερ ἐπηκούετο, οὐδὲν ὧν ἐπηγγέλλετο ἐπεδείκνυτο, καὶ ἐπειδὴ ἡμεῖς ἐλέγξαντες αὐτὸν καὶ καταγρόντες ἠξιοῦμεν κολάζεσθαι, κρυπτόμενος μὲν καὶ διαδιδράσκων ἐπονειδιστότατα ἐάλω, ὑπ' αὐτῶν δὲ ὧν ὠνόμαζε μαθητῶν προῦδόθη; Καίτοι θεόν, φησὶν, ὄντα οὔτε φεύγειν ἐνῆν οὔτε δεθέντα ἀπάγεσθαι, ἥκιστα δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν συνόντων αὐτῷ καὶ

παντὸς ἰδίᾳ κεκοι νωνηκότων καὶ διδασκάλῳ χρωμένων σωτῆρα νομιζόμενον καὶ θεοῦ τοῦ μεγίστου παῖδα καὶ ἄγγελον ἐγκαταλείπεσθαί τε καὶ ἐκδίδοσθαι. (2.9)

How can you regard him as a god when as a matter of fact he was not eager to make public anything he professed to do? After he had been tried and condemned and it had been decided that he should be punished, where did we find him?

Hiding – trying to escape. And was he not even betrayed by those whom he was silly enough to call disciples? If he was a god, is it likely that he would have run away? Would he have permitted himself to be arrested? Most of all: Would a god – a savior, as you say, and son of the Most High God – be betrayed by the very men who had been taught by him and shared everything with him?

Celsus cites many different things that show Jesus' weakness: his efforts to hide from his punishment, his ultimate capitulation to the authorities, and his inability to persuade his followers to remain loyal to him in his death. These three aspects of the Christian God's weakness seem contradictory at first glance. How could Jesus be condemned for both hiding and allowing himself to be arrested? If he had gone into hiding, how was he then arrested?

Presumably, Celsus is referring to the time Jesus spent praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before being arrested (Matthew 26:36-46).<sup>93</sup> This time of private prayer with only his disciples as company could be interpreted as "hiding." Then, having been unsuccessful in this attempt to hide since Judas – his disciple and betrayer – knew his location, he allowed himself to be arrested.

Thus, Jesus can truly be said to be weak in all of these ways. In short, the entire story of his death demonstrates his utter incompetence. He was not persuasive enough to keep his men loyal to him, he could not hide adequately enough, and he surrendered immediately to the Romans. A true god would never have been in danger of death in the first place and, if he was, would not be so hapless in the face of it. In this way, Celsus shows clearly his opinion that the Christian God was a highly inadequate excuse for a god.

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<sup>93</sup> In general, this sequence of events – Jesus' time of prayer before his arrest, his betrayal, and his arrest – can be found in every Gospel: Matthew 26:36-56, Mark 14:32-52, Luke 22:39-53, and John 18:1-14.

Just as with his opinion on Christian doctrine, Celsus complains about nearly every aspect of the Christian idea of God. This god is inherently evil and unable to do all those great things that Christians claim he can do. And, just as his opinion about the absurdity of Jesus' resurrection – the heart of Christianity – shows his disregard for Christian doctrine as a whole, his particular emphasis on God's evil nature and incompetence hits on the foundation of what most Christians believed about God at this time and the understanding of God that prevails today.<sup>94</sup> If God is not the loving father who has the power to create the entire world and affect the events in that world, then what are Christians left with? Only a ruthless being just as subject to the powers of evil as humans are. This is hardly a god worthy of praise and Celsus' arguments lead clearly to this conclusion.

Finally, Celsus' last major criticism concerns their followers. As with all of his criticism, his comments about Christians themselves are varied but exhibit the same disdain for the group. Primarily, Celsus focuses on the Christians' lack of heritage, their ignorance, and the evil they spread throughout society. His mentions of their ignorance and stupidity do sometimes constitute their own arguments, but often they are reserved for side comments as he focuses on other distasteful parts of Christianity. For example, in the midst of a discussion on Jesus, Celsus writes: "Taking its root in the lower classes, the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: nay, one can even say it spread because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents" (1.27). In these comments, one can hear echoes of earlier polemics against Christians. Before his systematic and philosophical treatment of the religion, most literature concerning the Christians

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<sup>94</sup> The most notable exception in this case being the Gnostics: "The basic belief of the Gnostics was what we call dualism, that is they believed that the world is ultimately divided between two cosmic forces, good and evil. In line with much Greek philosophy, they identified evil with matter. Because of this, they regarded any Creator God as wicked. Creation by a deity, they felt, was not so much impossible as it was indecent. Their own Supreme Being was far removed from any such tendency to 'evil,'" (Shelley 2008:51). Most Christians, however, still believed in the essentially good nature of God despite his creation of the world.

focused on rumors and first-hand observations. Despite this change, Celsus often makes comments like the one just cited, which essentially amount to insults containing half-truths. That is, he does not go on to prove that Christianity “spread because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents,” but that does not stop him from using this insult to attack the religion. Indeed, Hargis’ description of pre-Celsus polemics can rightly be used to characterize these statements from Celsus himself:

Although the general population undoubtedly knew some basic truths about Christians – that they refused to worship other gods, for example, or that their religion originated with a Jew named Jesus – pagan reaction was dominated by the belief that Christians were involved in bizarre and immoral behavior. There was little if any informed public opinion about Christianity during this period.<sup>95</sup>

Hargis views all of the anti-Christian polemic as an effort to show how Christianity was separate from, and thus inferior to, Graeco-Roman culture and ideas.<sup>96</sup> While Celsus is generally sophisticated in his attempt to set Christianity apart from the superior Graeco-Roman beliefs he held, there are still instances in which he resorts to ad hominem attacks of Christian people in order to make his points.

Celsus’ more well-rounded opinions of Christians are found elsewhere, as he complains about the Christian efforts to spread their message among people in the lower class of society.

He writes:

Ἄλλ' ὀρῶμεν δὴ πού καὶ τοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς τὰ ἐπιρρητότατα ἐπιδεικνυμένους καὶ ἀγείροντας εἰς μὲν φρονίμων ἀνδρῶν σύλλογον οὐκ ἂν ποτε παρελθόντας οὐδ' ἐν τούτοις τὰ ἑαυτῶν καλὰ τολμήσαντας ἐπιδεικνύειν, ἔνθα δ' ἂν ὀρῶσι μειράκια καὶ οἰκοτρίβων ὄχλον καὶ ἀνοήτων ἀνθρώπων ὄμιλον, ἐνταῦθα ὠθυμένους τε καὶ καλλωπιζομένους. (3.50)

They would not dare to enter into conversation with intelligent men, or to voice their sophisticated beliefs in the presence of the wise. On the other hand, wherever one finds a crowd of adolescent boys, or a bunch of slaves, or a

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<sup>95</sup> Hargis 2001:15

<sup>96</sup> Hargis 2001:3

company of fools, there will the Christian teachers be also - showing off their fine new philosophy.

Celsus' tone here is highly sarcastic, mocking the "fine new philosophy" of the Christians and caricaturing Christian teachers as overzealous and unsophisticated. Moreover, Celsus paints a picture of Christians as strategic in their efforts to spread their message. It's almost as if he believes they have nefarious motives in reaching the people that they do. He goes on, writing:

σφᾶς δὲ μόνους ὅπως δεῖ ζῆν ἐπίστασθαι, καὶ ἂν αὐτοῖς οἱ παῖδες πείθωνται, μακαρίους αὐτοὺς ἔσεσθαι καὶ τὸν οἶκον ἀποφανεῖν εὐδαίμονα· καὶ ἅμα λέγοντες ἐὰν ἴδωσί τινα παριόντα τῶν παιδείας διδασκάλων καὶ φρονημωτέρων ἢ καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν πατέρα, οἱ μὲν εὐλαβέστεροι αὐτῶν διέτρεσαν, οἱ δ' ἰταμῶ τεροὶ τοὺς παῖδας ἀφηνιάζειν ἐπαίρουσι, τοιαῦτα ψιθυρί ζοντες, ὡς παρόντος μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τῶν διδασκάλων οὐδὲν αὐτοὶ ἐθελήσουσιν οὐδὲ δυνήσονται τοῖς παισὶν ἐρμηνεύειν ἀγαθόν, ἐκτρέπεσθαι γὰρ τὴν ἐκείνων ἀβελτηρίαν καὶ σκαιότητα, πάντη διεφθαρμένων καὶ πόρρω κακίας ἠκόντων καὶ σφᾶς κολαζόντων· εἰ δὲ θέλοιεν, χρῆναι αὐτοὺς ἀφεμένους τοῦ πατρὸς τε καὶ τῶν διδασκάλων ἰέναι σὺν τοῖς γυναιόις καὶ τοῖς συμπαίζουσι παιδαρίοις εἰς τὴν γυναικωνῖτιν ἢ τὸ σκυτεῖον ἢ τὸ κναφεῖον, ἵνα τὸ τέλειον λάβωσι· καὶ ταῦτα λέγοντες πείθουσιν. (3.55)

These Christians claim that they alone know the right way to live, and that if only the children will believe them, they will be happy and their homes will be happy as well. Now if, as they are speaking thus to the children, they happen to see a schoolteacher coming along, some intelligent person, or even the father of one of the children, these Christians flee in all directions, or at least the more cautious of them. The more reckless encourage the children to rebel. These Christians also tell the children that they should leave their fathers and teachers and follow the women and their little chums to the wooldresser's shop, or to the cobbler's or to the washerwoman's shop, so that they might learn how to be perfect. And by this logic they have persuaded many to join them.

This passage fills out Celsus' view of Christians in an important way. Not only do Christians hang around the dregs of society and spread their message among them, which he finds bad enough in itself, but they also actively encourage others to abandon the teachings of their fathers. As Hargis notes, this proselytizing was "a serious breach of social norms." He continues: "Just as Christians were rebels from approved religions, from governmental authority, and from established tradition, they were also rebels against the most ancient of social structures, the

family.”<sup>97</sup> The activity of Christians therefore had the serious consequence of upsetting the acceptable social structures. They were evangelizing primarily by seeking out the weaker members of society – women, children, and slaves – which was tantamount to “undermining...pagan homes in order to make converts.”<sup>98</sup> It would have been contemptible enough if Christians converted Roman men, who in turn brought their new faith to their families. In that scenario, the social norms of Roman society would have at least been retained.<sup>99</sup> Instead, Christians were usurping the authority of a father to convert their wives, children, and slaves, upsetting the common religion and societal structure in one act.

In addition to proselytizing itself, Christians only sought to make converts because they believed their doctrine was the only true one. As already discussed in this chapter, that claim is laughable to Celsus, making it even more frustrating that they spread it throughout society trying to convert people to the Christian faith. Taking these passages together, Celsus’ primary issue with Christians is not simply that they are unintelligent and believe false doctrine. Rather, it is that they insist on trying to persuade others to believe this doctrine and only target the basest of society because they know how hollow their teaching actually is. Their very existence is troublesome, but their evangelizing only spreads this trouble throughout society.

A related complaint that Celsus makes is that the main goal of Christian evangelism is to bring sinners into the faith. This is so bothersome for Celsus because this is exactly the opposite goal from most other religions. He writes:

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<sup>97</sup> Hargis 2001:27

<sup>98</sup> Hargis 2001:27

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Saller 1999:184. In this article, he describes what it meant for a Roman man to be *pater familias*: “The *pater*’s power included several dimensions of authority: (1) his *potestas* over his children (and his wife if in *manus*), (2) his *potestas* or *dominium* over his human chattels or slaves, and (3) his *dominium* over the family’s property.” Therefore, the father in ancient Rome would have been invested with great authority over his entire estate and household, including children, slaves, and often his wife. He was *sui iuris*, as Saller also points out, meaning that he had individual freedoms and power that his household would not have had. So, for a Christian to bypass the father is their proselytizing was to bypass the figure in the family through whom all other authority funneled.

Οἱ μὲν γὰρ εἰς τὰς ἄλλας τελετὰς καλοῦντες προκηρύττουσι τάδε· ὅστις χεῖρας καθαρὸς καὶ φωνὴν συνετός, καὶ αὖθις ἕτεροι· ὅστις ἀγνὸς ἀπὸ παντὸς μύσου, καὶ ὅτῳ ἢ ψυχῇ οὐδὲν σύννοιδε κακόν, καὶ ὅτῳ εὖ καὶ δικαίως βεβίωται. Καὶ ταῦτα προκηρύττουσιν οἱ καθάρσια ἀμαρτημάτων ὑπισχνού μενοι. Ἐπακούσωμεν δὲ τίνας ποτὲ οὗτοι καλοῦσιν· ὅστις, φασίν, ἀμαρτωλός, ὅστις ἀσύνετος, ὅστις νήπιος, καὶ ὡς ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν ὅστις κακοδαίμων, τοῦτον ἢ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ δέξεται. Τὸν ἀμαρτωλὸν ἄρα οὐ τοῦτον λέγετε, τὸν ἄδικον καὶ κλέπτην καὶ τοιχωρύχον καὶ φαρμακέα καὶ ἱερόσυλον καὶ τυμβωρύχον; Τίνας ἂν ἄλλους προκηρύττων ληστής ἐκάλεσε; (3.59)

I think anyone may see that the summons to join the other mysteries is rather different, however. It runs: Come forward, whoever has a pure heart and a wise tongue, or else, whoever is free of sin and whose soul is pure - you who are righteous and good - come forward. In the mystery religions, such talk is typical, as is the promise that membership brings about a sort of purification from sins. But the call to membership in the cult of Christ is this: Whoever is a sinner, whoever is unwise, whoever is childish - yea, whoever is a wretch - his is the kingdom of God. And so they invite into membership those who by their own account are sinners: the dishonest, thieves, burglars, poisoners, blasphemers of all descriptions, grave robbers. I mean - what other cult actually invites robbers to become members!

This argument falls right in line with his disdain for how Christians constantly hang around the lowest classes of society. It's not simply that Christians are unintelligent and insistent on spreading their false message throughout society. Celsus also complains of the bad character of Christians. Indeed, all that he says about Christians can be traced back to this fundamental problem with them. How could one expect unrighteous men not to engage in such disreputable activities as the Christians did? Their doctrine can only attract bad men, and it is no surprise that their activities are just as corrupt and troublesome.

Another major argument that Celsus makes against the Christians is that they are disruptive and dangerous to the very structure of society. There are two major aspects to his complaint: one, that they had no connection to ancient tradition; and two, that their attitude towards human government makes it impossible for any state at all to stand. Celsus demonstrates the Christians' lack of tradition by comparing them to the Jewish people. He writes:

Ἰουδαῖοι μὲν οὖν ἔθνος ἴδιον γενόμενοι καὶ κατὰ τὸ ἐπιχώριον νόμους θέμενοι καὶ τούτους ἐν σφίσις ἔτι νῦν περιστέλλοντες καὶ θρησκείαν ὁποῖαν δὴ, πάτριον δ' οὖν, φυλάσσοντες ὅμοια τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις δρῶσιν, ὅτι ἕκαστοι τὰ πάτρια, ὁποῖά ποτ' ἂν τύχη καθεστηκότα, περιέπουσι. Δοκεῖ δ' οὕτως καὶ συμφέρειν, οὐ μόνον καθότι ἐπὶ νοῦν ἦλθεν ἄλλοις ἄλλως νομίσει καὶ δεῖ φυλάττειν τὰ ἐς κοινὸν κεκυρωμένα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅτι ὡς εἰκὸς τὰ μέρη τῆς γῆς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἄλλα ἄλλοις ἐπόπταις νενεμημένα καὶ κατὰ τινὰς ἐπικρατείας διειλημμένα ταύτη καὶ διοικεῖται. Καὶ δὴ τὰ παρ' ἑκάστοις ὀρθῶς ἂν πράττοιτο ταύτη δρώμενα, ὅπη ἐκείνοις φίλον· παραλύειν δὲ οὐχ ὅσιον εἶναι τὰ ἐξ ἀρχῆς κατὰ τόπους νενομισμένα. (5.25)

Now, as to the Jews: they became an individual nation and made laws according to the custom of their people. They still maintain these laws among themselves to the present day and observe certain rites and practices which, though peculiar, have a grounding in ancient tradition. They are, in this regard anyway, no different from the rest of mankind: each nation follows its customs and laws, whatever they happen to be. This situation seems to have come to pass not only because certain people decided to think in a certain way and then went about devising ways to protect their social conventions, but also because from the beginning of the world different parts of the earth were allotted to different guardians, and, its having been apportioned in this manner, things are done in such a way as pleases the guardians. For this reason it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning.

Both the Jews and the Christians have “peculiar” practices in Celsus’ eyes. He says so explicitly of the Jews here and his comments about the Christians were observed above. Despite this, Celsus makes clear in this passage that strange practices do not necessarily cause a group to be dangerous. He could very well have despised the Jewish practices as much as the Christian ones, but in this passage the Jews are looked on much more favorably because they are not disconnected from tradition. Their practices are “grounded in ancient tradition” and they can rightly be called a “nation” with its own customs. Moreover, the Jewish people, being located in a specific part of the world, were appointed “guardians” to whom they show devotion. They are not only people with consistent character and traditions, but with an actual physical origin. In contrast, the Christians have none of these things. At the time of Celsus’ treatise, Christianity would have only been in existence for 150 years or so. And while that stretch of time gave them

an opportunity to generate customs, the Jewish and Roman people had been in existence far longer than 150 years. Even more, in that time, Christianity had already split into numerous different sects, a fact which Celsus does not hesitate to criticize.<sup>100</sup> And finally, Christians could not point to a central place of origin, with followers scattered throughout the Roman world.

It is quite significant that Celsus criticizes Christians' disconnectedness from ancient tradition by comparing them to the Jewish people. As will be discussed next, he also criticizes Christians for their rebellion against the Jews and their subsequent disruption of Roman society. However, it could be argued that these rebellious activities of the Christians made them just like the Jews. By the time Celsus was writing, there had already been two major Jewish rebellions that had to be suppressed by the Roman Empire. The first, occurring in 66-72 AD, resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem, while the second, in 132-135 AD, ended with bloody massacres of the Jewish rebels.<sup>101</sup> The fact that Celsus, despite this similarity, still commends the Jewish people shows how significant it was that Christians did not have a long heritage. Even a people who had rebelled against governmental authority could find some redemption if they were, in fact, an established people, like the Jews. In other words, being grounded in tradition afforded a people group some forgiveness for other flaws. Christians, however, could not find any redemption. They were both without a tradition and rebellious. As Celsus goes on, he expands on the disruptive activities of the Christians. But, it is important to see that his complaint about their rebellion could just as easily be applied to the Jewish people if it were not for this first passage. That is, Celsus' further comments about Christianity's rebellious nature only add more condemnation to an already damning criticism about Christianity's lack of tradition.

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<sup>100</sup> cf. 5.63, 64: "Christians, it is needless to say, utterly detest each other; they slander each other constantly with the vilest forms of abuse, and cannot come to any sort of agreement in their teaching. Each sect brands its own, fills the head of its own with deceitful nonsense, and makes perfect little pigs of those it wins over to its side. Like so many sirens they chatter away endlessly and beat their breasts..."

<sup>101</sup> Wells and Barrow 1935:142-15, 229

Celsus next argues that Christians have no tradition in part because they rebelled against the Jewish people, forsaking any ties they had to an established religion. Celsus writes the following after the passage just cited:

ἐρήσομαι δὲ αὐτούς, πόθεν ἤκουσιν ἢ τίνα ἔχουσιν ἀρχηγέτην πατρίων νόμων. Οὐδένα φήσουσιν, οἳ γε ἐκεῖθεν μὲν ὄρμηται καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ τὸν διδάσκαλόν τε καὶ χοροστάτην οὐκ ἄλλοθεν ποθεν φέρουσιν· ὅμως δ' ἀφεστήκασιν Ἰουδαίων.  
(5.33)

I ask them where they came from, or who is the author of their traditional laws. “Nobody,” they say, though it is the case that they originated from the Jews. Nor can they name any other source for their teacher and chorus-leader. Yet are they Jews? No - they rebelled against the Jews.

Celsus clearly recognized that Christians could claim some grounding in the Jewish tradition. However, he cites two reasons why this was no longer possible for them. One, in his experience, Christians did not even connect themselves to the Jewish people. Even when trying to articulate their origins, they did not claim Jewish descent. And two, Christians “rebelled” against the Jews. While Celsus does not specifically explain what he means by “rebelled,” some assumptions can be drawn based on the familiarity with Christianity that he displays in his treatise. Although he has some wild ideas about the nature of Christian gatherings, it is clear that he knows enough about those practices - and about Christian doctrine - to have a reasoned opinion about them. Because of this, it can be assumed that Celsus knew that Jesus, the central Christian figure, had risen up among the Jews and yet had multiple conflicts with them throughout his life. It can also be assumed that Celsus understood that the followers of Jesus had imitated his example and upheld his differences of opinion with the Jews. Even if these assumptions are incorrect, the fact remains that Celsus understood the Christians as breaking away from the Jewish people. For a new religion whose novelty alone was distasteful to Celsus, this only added ammunition for his attacks.

For all of these reasons, Celsus has a much better estimation of the Jewish people than the Christians. He even goes so far as to imply that the Christians were an “impious” people. He says that “it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning” (5.25). If it is a wicked thing to abandon ancient customs, as the Christians did with the Jews, how much more is it to then proceed to actively disrupt the customs of other people like the Romans, with whom Christians had no connection? He writes elsewhere that Christians, speaking to the Roman youth, “say that their elders and teachers are fools, and are in reality very bad men who like to voice their silly opinions” (3.55). Celsus in this same passage complains that Christians, as they work as simple “workers, cobblers, [and] laundry workers” make rounds throughout the city and in “private houses” trying to persuade young men to abandon the traditions they had always known (3.55). In this way, they are not only without their own customs but they also actively encourage others to live in the same way. Indeed, the Christians already rebelled against the Jews; why would they not continue to sow dissent among the Romans?

In addition to this more abstract argument about the danger of Christianity, Celsus explicitly criticizes the danger that they pose later in his treatise. He writes:

οὐ χρή ἀπιστεῖν ἀνδρὶ ἀρχαίῳ, πάλαι προειπόντι τό· Εἷς βασιλεύς, ᾧ ἔδωκε Κρόνου παῖς ἀγκυλομήτεω. Καὶ ἐπιφέρει· Ὡς, ἂν τοῦτο λύσης τὸ δόγμα, εἰκότως ἀμυνεῖται σε ὁ βασιλεύς. Εἰ γὰρ τὸ αὐτό σοι ποιήσειαν ἅπαντες, οὐδὲν κωλύσει τὸν μὲν καταλειφθῆναι μόνον καὶ ἔρημον, τὰ δ' ἐπὶ γῆς ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀνομωτάτοις τε καὶ ἀγρίω τάτοις βαρβάροις γενέσθαι, καὶ μήτε τῆς σῆς θρησκείας μήτε τῆς ἀληθινῆς σοφίας ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἔτι καταλείπεσθαι κλέος. (8.68)

It is not wise to disbelieve the ancient sage who said ‘Let there be one king: one to whom the crafty Kronos gave the power.’ Overturn this axiom and you will know how swiftly punishment can be dealt! If everyone were to adopt the Christian’s attitude, moreover, there would be no rule of law: the legitimate authority would be abandoned; earthly things would return to chaos and come into the hands of the lawless and savage barbarians; and nothing further would be heard of Christian worship or of wisdom, anywhere in the world.

It was not only the actions of the Christians in breaking away from the Jews and causing dissent among the Roman people, but their very doctrine on human government that vexed Celsus. Baciu describes this doctrine of Christianity well, writing: “Being against the premise of making the sovereign a god, the Christians did not hesitate to remind that the emperor is a common person whose power is given by God and whose life has a final end.”<sup>102</sup> Unlike the common inhabitant of the Roman Empire, for whom the emperor, as their highest mortal authority, worked in tandem with divine authority to ensure the prosperity of the Empire, Christians subjugated the emperor to the sovereignty of God. As such, any conflict between Roman rule and the commandments of God led Christians to forsake their human government for the divine. Celsus, as evidenced in the passage above, perceived this as a slippery slope: “If everyone were to adopt the Christian’s attitude, moreover, there would be no rule of law...” To adhere to the rule of an invisible God was tantamount to complete lawlessness, for any breach of human law could be justified by reference to that God. Even more, this lawlessness would destroy the very stability of civilization that allowed the Christian message to be spread. In this way, Christian teaching essentially was a danger not only to the Roman Empire specifically but to the peace that any great civilization like Rome ensures.

Throughout all of Celsus’ work, he demonstrates the deep and varied problems he had with Christianity and its followers. The three major parts of any religion – deity, doctrine, and followers – are all deeply flawed when it comes to Christianity. In short, there was no redeeming aspect to this new faith. It is no surprise, then, that Celsus’ work seems to have made quite an impact on early Christians to the extent that Origen was urged to write his refutation 75 years after Celsus wrote *Λόγος Ἀληθείας*. If readers agreed with Celsus’ arguments, they could only

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<sup>102</sup> Baciu 2013:113

come to the conclusion that Christianity is totally and completely empty. Thus, when Origen wrote *Contra Celsum*, he was faced with quite a serious challenge to the Christian faith.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE POWER OF JESUS MANIFEST

Considering how extreme and thorough Celsus is in his attack of Christianity, one would expect to find an equally zealous defense for the Christian faith in Origen's *Contra Celsum*. It would seem that to counter such an offensive would require an apology that aimed to distinguish between true Christianity and Celsus' perception of Christianity as much as possible. This type of defense, however, is not what it is found in Origen's *Contra Celsum*. While Origen does indeed attempt to refute Celsus' work, he does so not by providing a picture of Christianity that directly undermines Celsus' false understanding. Instead, Origen actually confirms much of what Celsus criticizes about Christianity. In the course of his argument, Origen proves that Celsus has the correct understanding of Christianity to a great extent. This surprising method of answering Celsus' work is hinted at even in the preface of *Contra Celsum* and is then more fully demonstrated in Book 1. In particular, Origen confirms that Celsus' opinions on four significant aspects of Christianity are founded in truth: the consistent evangelizing of the lower classes of society; the common practice of interpreting Scripture allegorically; its unoriginality; and the birth, life, and death of Jesus. Origen's discussion of these four things demonstrates that Celsus had a true understanding of what Christians believed. Celsus was right and Origen did not hesitate to confirm this fact. Still, his work is called *Contra Celsum* ("Against Celsus") for a reason. Despite his confirmation of much of Celsus' opinion, Origen is still in opposition to it. This chapter therefore will explore how Origen is able to confirm the truth of Celsus' statements, yet still show him to be wrong about Christianity. As just noted, the preface of *Contra Celsum* gives Origen's readers a first look at this strange mix of confirmation and opposition. After analyzing this introduction to his strategy, this chapter will focus on each of the four aspects of Christianity listed above in Book 1 in order to observe this strategy on full display.

## Preface: Real Defenses and True Christians

Origen's preface, although only 6 brief sections, gives much insight into his beliefs and the framework in which he is writing his work. Most of his preface is concerned with his explanation for why he has even written the *Contra Celsum* despite his initial misgivings in doing so. He opens the preface bluntly, writing:

Ὁ μὲν σωτὴρ καὶ κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ψευδομαρτυρούμενος μὲν "ἐσιώπα" κατηγορούμενος δὲ "οὐδὲν ἀπεκρίνετο", πειθόμενος πάντα τὸν βίον ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὰς ἐν Ἰουδαίῳ πράξεις κρείττους γεγονέναι φωνῆς ἐλεγχούσης τὴν ψευδομαρτυρίαν καὶ λέξεων ἀπολογουμένων πρὸς τὰς κατηγορίας· σὺ δ' ὦ φιλόθεε Ἀμβρόσιε, οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως πρὸς τὰς Κέλσου κατὰ Χριστιανῶν ἐν συγγράμμασι ψευδομαρτυρίας καὶ τῆς πίστεως τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν ἐν βιβλίῳ κατηγορίας ἐβουλήθης ἡμᾶς ἀπολογήσασθαι, ὡς οὐκ ὄντος ἐναργοῦς ἐλέγχου ἐν τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ πάντων γραμμάτων κρείττονος λόγου, τοῦ τε τὰς ψευδομαρτυρίας ἀφανίζοντος καὶ ταῖς κατηγορίαις μηδὲ πιθανότητα εἰς τὸ δύνασθαι τι αὐτὰς ἐνδιδόντος. (Praef. 1)

Our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ was silent when false witnesses spoke against him, and answered nothing when he was accused; he was convinced that all his life and actions among the Jews were better than any speech in refutation of the false witness and superior to any words that he might say in reply to the accusations. And, God-loving Ambrose, I do not know why you wanted me to write an answer to Celsus' false accusations in his book against the Christians and the faith of the churches. It is as though there was not in the mere facts a clear refutation better than any written reply, which dispels the false charges and deprives the accusations of any plausibility and force.<sup>103</sup>

From the very opening of Origen's preface, he makes two things clear. Firstly, he has been commissioned to write this refutation by a man named Ambrose. He did not undertake this project because of some desire within himself, but did so in order to please and help others he knew. Secondly, he shows that the primary example that he follows in his own life is Jesus. This commitment to the primacy of Jesus (and the Scriptures which attest to his life) is clear throughout the entire *Contra Celsum*. Moreover, the connection that Origen makes between his

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<sup>103</sup> All passages from *Contra Celsum* in Chapter III, whether it is Origen's citation of Celsus or Origen's own words, are translated by Chadwick, unless otherwise noted.

own work and the life of Jesus echoes the rhetoric employed by the apostle Paul in many of his letters. Lim discusses this statement made by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:9: “as dying, and behold, we live.” Paul writes this paradox in the midst of a long list in verses 6:3-10 describing the sufferings he was facing in his ministry and the resiliency he had through them. He describes himself as “dying” because he faced “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger” (v. 4-5). However, he yet was living by “the Holy Spirit” and “the power of God” (v. 6, 7). Lim argues the following about this passage:

The crucial point that Paul is making here is not that God delivers him from death, although that is no doubt true, but that he is the bearer of the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus, the resurrection power of God, may be made manifest in him (cf. 2 Cor. 4.10-11). The fact that Paul continues to live to carry on his apostolic mission testifies to God's power at work within him in this eschatological age.<sup>104</sup>

Paul's rhetorical strategy in this passage, therefore, is to align his own sufferings with that of Jesus in order to make a larger point about God himself. Like Jesus, who was crucified then rose to life again, Paul sees his own process of “dying” through his various trials as only a step toward his own renewed life. By making this comparison, he is able to emphasize that God has the power to bring people back to life, whether literally, after a physical death, or metaphorically, after a series of great hardships brings them close to death.

Origen also employs this strategy in the opening passage of the preface, comparing himself to Jesus in order to argue for a greater truth: that the facts of Christianity are self-evident. In other words, they need no further explanation to convince someone that Christianity is true. To demonstrate this, Origen immediately draws an analogy between his own position and Jesus' before his death. Just like Jesus and the false witnesses at his trial, Origen was faced with “false accusations” from Celsus. Like Jesus, the things Origen was teaching about God provoked attack

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<sup>104</sup> Lim 2009:150

from those who did not believe. With these commonalities in mind, Origen concludes that, following Jesus' example, he too should remain silent in the face of false accusation. If Jesus thought that his actions should speak for themselves, why should Origen not think the same thing about the "mere facts" of Christianity? In this way, Origen is able to show his belief that the actual facts upon which Christianity rests are a better refutation than his own words.

One preliminary note should be made before proceeding in this analysis of the preface and Book 1. Chadwick here translates τοῖς πράγμασι as "facts," a word which is very much a modern concept. The word "fact" indicates something that can be tangibly, empirically proven. No such concept existed in the ancient world. The Greek word translated by Chadwick as "fact" is τό πρᾶγμα, most literally rendered as "that which has been done" (Liddell & Scott). In this sense, the use of the word "fact" is anachronistic. A πρᾶγμα was something that was, at the very least, likely to happen and did not, therefore, necessarily have empirical evidence.<sup>105</sup> However, I have chosen to follow Chadwick in using this idea of "fact" for two reasons. Firstly, Chadwick's *Contra Celsum* is a highly respected translation of Origen's work and one which I will use throughout this chapter. It is thus a natural decision to follow his lead in using the word "fact." Secondly, I contend that, when Origen refers to the facts of Christianity, he believes them to be true without a doubt. He does not believe that the story of Jesus at his trial before his crucifixion "probably" happened or that Jesus "probably" rose from the dead. Rather, the teaching in Scripture was factual truth for Origen. My remaining analysis of the preface and Book 1 of *Contra Celsum* aims to show that Origen's entire apologetic strategy hinges upon this belief.

The tension between a written refutation and the testimony of a life lived, which Origen presents in his opening passage, is the focus for most of the preface. As he continues from his

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. Woodman 1979. As Woodman notes in this article, "...ancient historians were regularly far more concerned with probability than reality..." (81).

opening statement, he reiterates the tactic that Jesus took at his trial before he was crucified. He essentially asks why, if Jesus was truly God and could have easily proven his innocence by pointing to what he had done in his lifetime, he did not speak up at his trial. He was silent when he could have easily refuted any of the charges against him. Origen sees himself as being in the same position. He could speak against Celsus by writing a refutation of his arguments or he could be silent and let the evidence of Christianity speak for itself. He makes it clear that the latter option is the better one. As he goes on to write: Τολμῶ μὲν οὖν καὶ φημι ὅτι ἦν ἀξιοῖς ποιήσασθαι ἡμᾶς ἀπολογία ὑπεκλύει τὴν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἀπολογία καὶ τὴν ἐπιφανῆ τοῖς οὐκ ἀναισθητοῖς δύναμιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (Praef. 3). “I would therefore go so far as to say that the defence which you ask me to compose will weaken the force of the defence that is in the mere facts, and detract from the power of Jesus which is manifest to those who are not quite stupid.” This is a strong statement and shows Origen’s almost extreme opinion of written defenses of the Christian faith. He thinks it is actually a mistake to undertake such a project because it is destructive to what is the best kind of defense.

Despite this view, Origen obviously found some purpose for writing a refutation of Celsus’ work. He first gives a weak reason, saying that he simply did not want to back away from the task: Ὅμως δ’ ἵνα μὴ δοκῶμεν ὀκνεῖν πρὸς τὸ ἐπιταχθέν ὑπὸ σοῦ, πεπειράμεθα ὑπαγορεῦσαι κατὰ τὴν παροῦσαν δύναμιν πρὸς ἕκαστον τῶν ὑπὸ Κέλσου γεγραμμένων τὸ φανὲν ἡμῖν ἀνατρεπτικὸν τῶν πιστῶν οὐδένα δυναμένων σεῖσαι λόγων αὐτοῦ (Praef. 4). “Nevertheless, that we may not appear to shirk the task which you have set us, we have tried our best to reply to each particular point in Celsus’ book and refute it as it seemed fitting to us, although his arguments cannot shake the faith of any true Christian.” Here, Origen makes it seem like his only motivation in continuing on with this project is simply to please those asking him to write a

refutation of Celsus. Based on later comments, however, this acts as only a secondary motivation to a nobler one. Before looking closer at his primary motivation, it is important to notice in the quotation above that Origen creates a dichotomy between a true Christian and an implied false Christian. This distinction plays a significant role in his preface and sets him up to give a stronger reason for why he wrote the *Contra Celsum*.

Origen goes on to define what makes a “true Christian” by using examples from the book of Romans. Specifically, in chapter 8, the apostle Paul discusses the resiliency of Christians which comes from being loved by God. Origen cites these famous verses from the end of Romans 8:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,  
“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)<sup>106</sup>

Origen draws two conclusions from this passage. One, he argues that Paul does not include written argument in the list of things that normally separate men from God. Rather, tribulation, distress, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword are listed by Paul as dangers for Christians. The implication seems to be that true Christians would not be so shaken by Celsus’ argument that they would be separated from the love of Christ. No, true Christians surely could endure the attacks of Celsus’ pen when they stare down the sword each day. This implied sentiment is made explicit in the second conclusion that Origen comes to from Romans 8. In citing the second list in this passage - “death nor life, nor angels nor rulers,” etc. - he says that only true Christians like

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<sup>106</sup> All Scripture passages taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Paul, the apostles, and “anyone like them” (Praef. 4) can make this boast. That is, only those secure enough in the love of God to face even death can call themselves true Christians. As such, he concludes the following: Τοίνυν οὐ συνήδομαι τῷ πιστεύσαντι εἰς Χριστόν, ὡς δύνασθαι σαλευθῆναι αὐτοῦ τὴν πίστιν ὑπὸ Κέλσου...ἢ τινος πιθανότητος λόγου (Praef. 4). “I have no sympathy with anyone who had faith in Christ such that it could be shaken by Celsus...or by any plausibility of argument.” Taking all of this together, a true Christian simply would not be affected by Celsus’ arguments because the love of Christ would make them strong enough to withstand far worse.

With this definition of a Christian in mind, Origen gives a second motivation for writing *Contra Celsum*, which is a much stronger one. He writes:

Οὐκ οἶδα δ' ἐν ποίῳ τάγματι λογίσασθαι χρῆ τὸν δεόμενον λόγων πρὸς τὰ Κέλσου κατὰ Χριστιανῶν ἐγκλήματα ἐν βίβλοις ἀνα γραφομένων, ἀποκαθιστάντων αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ κατὰ τὴν πίστιν σεισμοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ στηῆναι ἐν αὐτῇ. Ὅμως δ' ἐπεὶ ἐν τῷ πλήθει τῶν πιστεύειν νομιζομένων εὐρεθεῖεν ἄν τινες τοιοῦτοι, ὡς σαλεύεσθαι μὲν καὶ ἀνατρέπεσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν Κέλσου γραμμάτων θεραπεύεσθαι δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς πρὸς αὐτὰ ἀπολογίας, ἐὰν ἔχη χαρακτῆρά τινα καθαιρετικὸν τῶν Κέλσου καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας παραστατικὸν τὰ λεγόμενα, ἐλογισάμεθα πεισθῆναί σου τῇ προστάξει καὶ ὑπαγορευσαί σου πρὸς ὃ ἔπεμψας ἡμῖν σύγγραμμα· (Praef. 4)

I do not know in what category I ought to reckon one who needs written arguments in books to restore and confirm him in his faith after it has been shaken by the accusations brought by Celsus against the Christians. But nevertheless, since among the multitude of people supposed to believe some people of this kind might be found, who may be shaken and disturbed by the writings of Celsus, and who may be restored by the reply to them if what is said is of a character that is destructive of Celsus’ arguments and clarifies the truth, we decided to yield to your demand and to compose a treatise in reply to that which you sent us.

The curious nature of Origen’s preface is especially shown in this passage. While he personally is opposed to relying on written arguments at the expense of the facts themselves, he does not want to leave Celsus completely unanswered. And since the facts of Christianity clearly were not sufficient to persuade Celsus and other “people supposed to believe,” he sets out to write the

*Contra Celsum* because those who asked him to do so believed that Christians would be helped by it. As he says, these people “may be restored by the reply” to Celsus’ work. And so, even though he does not have much confidence in it, he wrote this refutation in case his written words may be enough to help those “shaken” by Celsus.

Here again, Origen sounds much like the Apostle Paul. His perplexity over the fact that many Christians had been wounded by Celsus’ words recalls Paul’s comments at the beginning of Galatians. Paul writes this in Galatians 1:6-7: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” And later, in 3:1-6, after reminding them of the true “gospel of Christ,” he writes:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith – just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

Paul is asking this of the Galatians: If you have truly understood the gospel and received the Holy Spirit, how can you be so easily led away by false teaching? The implication, echoing the discussion of Romans 8 above, is that true Christians – those who believe the true gospel – would not stumble over falsehoods. This is precisely the point that Origen makes, and precisely the tone he has in making it. Both men were exasperated that supposed “Christians” were so weak in adhering to their religion and both were stern in their rebuke of those Christians. Even more, despite their harsh words for their audiences, they continue on to present the truth to them, with Paul preaching the true gospel to the Galatians and Origen producing the *Contra Celsum*. Thus, for both Paul and Origen, the main goal of their work was to reiterate true Christian

teaching. However, they both accomplished this goal by first scolding the weakness of the Christians who allowed themselves to be led astray from that teaching.

Even this brief look at Origen's opinion on written refutations and his motivation for writing the *Contra Celsum* signals to readers the curious nature of his work. Indeed, who would expect him to open his written refutation by questioning the effectiveness of such a refutation? In this way, Origen presents a paradox to his readers: despite rejecting the power of a written defense, he himself writes quite a comprehensive written defense against Celsus. This paradox only previews the greater paradox of his apologetic strategy as a whole: that Origen finds much that is truthful in Celsus' arguments, while still writing an entire work devoted to deconstructing those very arguments.

More importantly, the preface previews the rest of the *Contra Celsum* in another way. As he makes abundantly clear, Origen argues that the facts of Christianity are themselves, with no additions, enough to persuade men that this was the true faith. However, this belief in the power of Christianity clearly did not play out in reality with Celsus and those "shaken" by his work. In response to this seeming failure of the power of the facts of Christianity, Origen is bewildered. As already quoted, he had "no sympathy with anyone who had faith in Christ such that it could be shaken by Celsus...or by any plausibility of argument" and he did not know how to "reckon one who needs written arguments in books to restore and confirm him in his faith after it has been shaken by accusations brought by Celsus against the Christians" (Praef. 4). Origen's comments here demonstrate a crucial fact: the unbelief of Celsus and others did not cause Origen to question at all the truth of Christianity. In general, the unbelief of men did not signal a weakness in Christianity, but only a flaw in the men who did not believe. This idea is only confirmed in another comment of Origen's quoted before: "I would therefore go so far as to say

that the defence which you ask me to compose will weaken the force of the defence that is in the mere facts, and detract from the power of Jesus which is manifest to those who are not quite stupid” (Praef. 3). The truth of Christianity is “manifest to those who are not quite stupid” – therefore implying a condemnation of those who do not believe.

It is this commitment to and unwavering belief in the facts of Christianity that informs all of Origen’s apologetic strategy. When he finds in Celsus’ work much that is true about Christianity, he does not hesitate to point out and even endorse that truth. His focus, rather, in refuting Celsus is to deconstruct all the arguments and conclusions Celsus builds upon those facts. Though those who already do not believe the facts of Christianity are hard to win to the faith, perhaps Origen’s written arguments may make some progress toward that end. With this framework in mind, it is necessary to turn to Book 1 to see the fleshing out of Origen’s apologetic strategy.

### Book 1: Confirmation and Opposition

As discussed before, there are four aspects of Christianity that Origen addresses in Book 1 and which display his apologetic strategy most clearly. These four aspects are: the Christian proselytizing of the lowest people in society; the allegorical interpretation of Scripture; Christianity’s unoriginality; and the birth, life, and death of Jesus. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the Christian evangelization of the lowest class of society occupies much of Celsus’ work. He views Christians as unintelligent people who spread their false and rebellious doctrine throughout Rome like a virus. Even more, they are energetic in their evangelizing to no real end because their doctrine is ultimately false. In light of this critique, one would expect that Origen, in an effort to defend the Christian faith, would try to give examples of how Christians do think

deeply about their faith and have well-founded reasons for their beliefs. Indeed, Origen himself is a prime example of this. He was steeped in Christian doctrine, writing prolifically about it, preaching it, and teaching it to others in his school in Alexandria. However, this is not his primary strategy.

Instead, Origen explicitly acknowledges the Christian outreach to those unfamiliar with any schooling. In 1.9 of *Contra Celsum*, he cites the following complaint from Celsus' work:

Ὡς γὰρ ἐν ἐκείνοις πολλάκις μοχθηροὶ ἄνθρωποι ἐπιβαίνοντες τῇ ιδιωτείᾳ τῶν εὐεξαπατήτων ἄγουσιν αὐτοὺς ἢ βούλονται, οὕτως φησὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς Χριστιανοῖς γίνεσθαι. Φησὶ δὲ τινὰς μηδὲ βουλομένους διδόναι ἢ λαμβάνειν λόγον περὶ ὧν πιστεύουσι χρῆσθαι τῷ "Μὴ ἐξέταζε ἀλλὰ πίστευσον" καὶ "Ἡ πίστις σου σώσει σε." Καὶ φησιν αὐτοὺς λέγειν· "Κακὸν ἢ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ σοφία ἀγαθὸν δ' ἢ μωρία." (1.9)

*For just as among [other religious cults] scoundrels frequently take advantage of the lack of education of gullible people and lead them wherever they wish, so also, he says, this happens among the Christians. He says that some do not even want to give or to receive a reason for what they believe, and use such expressions as 'Do not ask questions; just believe', and 'Thy faith will save thee'. And he affirms that they say: 'The wisdom in the world is an evil, and foolishness a good thing.'*

This passage echoes those which were discussed in Chapter 2 concerning Celsus' low opinion of Christian followers. In response to this accusation, Origen does not shy away from the fact that Christians do indeed call "gullible people." He writes the following:

Λεκτέον δὲ πρὸς τοῦτο ὅτι εἰ μὲν ἴόν τε πάντα καταλιπόντας τὰ τοῦ βίου πράγματα σχολάζειν τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν, ἄλλην ὁδὸν οὐ μεταδιωκτέον οὐδενὶ ἢ ταύτην μόνην. Εὐρεθήσεται γὰρ ἐν τῷ χριστιανισμῷ οὐκ ἐλάττων, ἵνα μὴ φορτικόν τι εἶπω, ἐξέτασις τῶν πεπιστευμένων...Εἰ δὲ τοῦτ' ἀμήχανον πῆ μὲν διὰ τὰς τοῦ βίου ἀνάγκας πῆ δὲ καὶ διὰ τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀσθένειαν, σφόδρα ὀλίγων ἐπὶ τὸν λόγον ἀπτόντων, ποία ἂν ἄλλη βελτίων μέθοδος πρὸς τὸ τοῖς πολλοῖς βοηθῆσαι εὐρεθείη τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῖς ἔθνεσι παραδοθείσης; (1.9)

My answer to this is that if every man could abandon the business of life and devote his time to philosophy, no other course ought to be followed but this alone. For in Christianity, if I make no vulgar boasting, there will be found to be no less profound study of the writings that are believed...However, if this is impossible, since, partly owing to the necessities of life and partly owing to human weakness,

very few people are enthusiastic about rational thought, what better way of helping the multitude could be found other than that given to the nations by Jesus?

In this passage, Origen acknowledges that Christians may be uneducated for two different reasons: one, “the necessities of life”; and two, “human weakness.” Both things hold men back from a life of study, which alone can result in the kind of sophistication that Celsus finds lacking in Christian people. Moreover, Origen makes it clear that the “multitude” is still pursued by Christians despite their ignorance. As he asks, why would they not teach the common multitude about Jesus when doing so would bring them much benefit? Thus, Origen confirms both aspects to Celsus’ complaint about Christians: one, that they are uneducated; and two, that they actively seek out other uneducated people in order to convert them.

Despite the fact that Celsus’ observations were accurate, Origen continues by showing how Celsus still does not understand the whole truth. Origen’s criticism is subtle at first, but then is made explicit in 1.10. As already mentioned, Origen cites two reasons why Christians are not able to “abandon the business of life” and devote themselves to study: the “necessities of life” and “human weakness.” Indeed, these two burdens simply discourage men from being interested in serious study at all. As Origen writes, “very few people are enthusiastic about rational thought” (1.9). In this description, Origen implicitly criticizes Celsus’ arguments by attributing Christians’ lack of study not to something essential to Christianity but to the general conditions of human life. He does not say that it is the necessities of a specifically *Christian* life or the weakness of *Christians* that cause them to scorn study and rational thought. Instead, it is the unavoidable nature of humans that turns people away from these things. By generalizing from Christians to all people, Origen is able to begin a subtle undermining of Celsus’ harsh ideas about Christians. Though his observations about them may be true, the simplicity he dislikes is not due to their faith but to the essential nature of humans.

Origen continues on in this deconstruction of Celsus' argument in 1.10, where he makes this subtle critique more explicit. He writes:

Τίς γὰρ προτραπεί ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν καὶ ἀποκληρωτικῶς ἐπὶ τινα αἵρεσιν ἑαυτὸν φιλοσόφων ῥίψας ἢ τῷ εὐπορηκέναι τοιοῦδε διδασκάλου ἄλλως ἐπὶ τοῦτο ἔρχεται ἢ τῷ πιστεύειν τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην κρείττονα εἶναι;...ἀλλ' ἀλόγῳ τινί, κὰν μὴ βούλωνται τοῦτο ὁμολογεῖν, φορᾷ ἔρχονται ἐπὶ τὸ ἀσκηῖσαι, φέρ' εἰπεῖν, τὸν στωϊκὸν λόγον, καταλιπόντες τοὺς λοιπούς, ἢ τὸν πλατωνικόν, ὑπερφρονήσαντες ὡς ταπεινοτέρων τῶν ἄλλων, ἢ τὸν περιπατητικὸν ὡς ἀνθρωπικώτατον καὶ μᾶλλον τῶν λοιπῶν αἱρέσεων εὐγνωμόνως ὁμολογοῦντα τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ. (1.10)

But, even if they do not admit it, in practice others do the same. What man who is urged to study philosophy and throws himself into some school of philosophers at random or because he has met a philosopher of that school, comes to do this for any reason except that he has faith that this school is better?...Even though they do not want to admit it, it is by unreasoning impulse that people come to the practice of, say, Stoicism and abandon the rest; or Platonism, because they despise the others as of lesser significance; or Peripateticism, because it corresponds best to human needs and sensibly admits the value of the good things of human life more than other systems.

Origen's point here is that all men dive into religions or philosophical schools in an unthinking way, on feeling alone. Even those who choose to pursue thought and rational study only do so after irrationally choosing what they believe. As he says, people choose the system they believe "corresponds best to human needs and sensibly admits the value of the good things of human life." That is to say, people don't ensure that they can provide reasonable arguments for their beliefs before they form those beliefs – no matter if it is Christians or followers of a different religion or philosophical school. For all men, it is the belief that comes first and not reason. This dynamic between reason and faith will be examined further as Origen's discussion of this topic continues. However, at this point, it is important to see that Origen has already dealt a significant blow to Celsus' argument by simply pointing out that he does not address this tendency in all men to scorn rational study. If Origen is right in his assessment of human nature, then Celsus looks as if he is only criticizing Christians because he dislikes them. As Chadwick notes, "There

is an emotional heat apparent in his dogged insistence on the anti-cultural nature of Christianity.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, though Celsus rightly observes the relative ignorance of Christians, his conclusions are shallow and unfounded in the complete truth of the situation. His emotional reaction to Christians causes him to “shut his eyes to the fact of a rational Christian theology.”<sup>108</sup> In short, he saw what he wanted to see about Christians and did not take care to form well-reasoned conclusions about them. It is therefore Celsus in the end who is unthinking and believes what is actually false. Indeed, Celsus’ emotional reaction proves the very point Origen makes in this section: that all men choose to believe – or disbelieve – a “system” based on their feelings about it.

In addition to pointing out Celsus’ irrational response to Christian practice, Origen works to undermine Celsus’ argument by pointing to the benefit that Christianity brings to the uneducated. He first asks, in the quotation cited above from 1.9: “What better way of helping the multitude could be found other than that given to the nations by Jesus?” Although the “multitude” cannot all be educated, they can all hear about Jesus. He continues this sentiment as 1.9 goes on, writing:

Καὶ πυνθανόμεθά γε περὶ τοῦ πλήθους τῶν πιστευόντων...πότερον βέλτιόν ἐστιν αὐτοῖς ἀλόγως πιστεύουσι κατεστάλθαι πως τὰ ἥθη καὶ ὠφελῆσθαι διὰ τὴν περὶ τῶν κολαζομένων ἐπὶ ἁμαρτίαις καὶ τιμωμένων ἐπὶ ἔργοις χρηστοῖς πίστιν, ἢ μὴ προσίεσθαι αὐτῶν τὴν ἐπιστροφήν μετὰ ψιλλῆς πίστεως, ἕως ἂν ἐπιδῶσιν ἑαυτοὺς ἐξετάσει λόγων; (1.9)

Moreover, concerning the multitude of believers...is it better that those who believe without thought should somehow have been made reformed characters and be helped by the belief that they are punished by sin and rewarded for good works, or that we should not allow them to be converted with simple faith until they might devote themselves to the study of rational arguments?

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<sup>107</sup> Chadwick 1966:24

<sup>108</sup> Chadwick 1966:24

Here, Origen builds his argument from the fact that Christianity improves the lives of its followers. Christians have “reformed characters” and are “helped” by their faith. Thus, he asks: In light of this, is it not better to bring them to faith even if it is in relative ignorance? That is, it is better to improve the lives of the ignorant with faith than to reserve that faith only to the learned. While the faithful may very well respond only with “Do not ask questions; just believe” and “Thy faith will save thee” when asked about their beliefs – just as Celsus complains (1.9) – their improved lives will be worth it. Thus, in this example, there is a clear difference in Origen’s and Celsus’ opinions. To Origen, faith adds greater value to a man’s life than reason. As such, if someone had to choose between the two, faith should be preferred.

If someone is able to pursue reason, however, Origen does not just dismiss faith altogether. This nuance to Origen’s argument causes him to differ even more from Celsus. Not only does Celsus implicitly argue for the superiority of reason over faith by criticizing irrational Christians, he also makes a clear statement to this effect. In 1.9, Origen cites these words written by Celsus: “After this he urges us to *follow reason and a rational guide in accepting doctrines* on the ground that *anyone who believes people without doing so is certain to be deceived.*” Thus, reason alone should be the basis on which men “accept doctrines.” Origen, however, still argues that there is value in having faith even in combination with reason. Van Winden articulates Origen’s stance well in his discussion of 1.11:

Origen adds: "In respect of these matters a man who not only believes, but also uses reason in considering these questions, will declare the proofs that suggest themselves to him which he may discover as the result of an exhaustive inquiry". Obviously Origen aims here at the possibility of founding faith on reasonable arguments (*ἀπόδειξεις*). This can be done by the man who has *πίστις μετὰ λόγου* [“faith along with reason”], or, as it is said here, *ὁ μὴ πιστεύων μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ λόγῳ θεωρῶν* [“one not believing alone, but also considering with reason”]. The

importance of this observation is obvious. Origen points out that the Christian faith fulfils the Greek requirements of rationability.<sup>109</sup>

Once a man has faith, then reason should be added so that he can “declare” or fully explain those things that are suggested to him by faith alone. Faith, therefore, is an essential and prior step towards a sophisticated rational understanding of any religious or philosophical system. In this way, faith is preferable to reason for both foolish and learned men. The former benefit more from faith alone than from reason alone; the latter benefit from acquiring faith first in order to guide what they should apply their reason to. This conclusion therefore completes Origen’s second method of undermining Celsus’ arguments about Christian evangelization of common men. Not only does Origen point out the weakness of those arguments by showing the human weakness of all men, he also deconstructs Celsus’ presumptions about the superiority of reason over faith.

These two methods of opposing Celsus on this particular topic are prime examples of Origen’s overall apologetic strategy. The nuanced argumentation he displays in considering Christian evangelization can only come about as a result of his initial agreement with Celsus. Origen is not ashamed of the fact that Christians seek to convert all men – ignorant and educated. This fact on its own ought to be an endorsement of Christianity to all men who know it. Celsus errs, therefore, in thinking that Christian evangelization is an inherently evil aspect of the faith. Origen’s strategy, therefore, of first confirming Celsus’ facts but then opposing his arguments demonstrates that Celsus is simply drawing the incorrect conclusions from the facts that he has. If he truly understood those facts, he would say with Origen that even simple men ought to believe in Christian teaching.

Origen’s apologetic strategy is next revealed through an examination of his treatment of Celsus’ complaint about the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. This Christian method of

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<sup>109</sup> Van Winden 1966:211

understanding their teachings is one that Celsus often attacks in his treatise. He mentions several different Christian teachings which tend to be interpreted allegorically and is greatly scornful of all these attempts. Of the creation of Eve from Adam, he argues that the only way this story makes sense is allegorically and “in its literal form is only fit for the ears of old women” (4.36).<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the story of Noah and the ark is “nothing more than a debased and nonsensical version of the myth of Deucalion” and a story “for the hearing of small children” (4.41).<sup>111</sup> He lists many stories of this type and Origen records his final conclusion about Christian allegories:

Ἐπὶ πλεῖον δ' ἐξέτεινα τὸν λόγον βουλόμενος παραστήσαι μὴ ὑγιῶς εἰρηῆσθαι τῷ Κέλσῳ ὅτι οἱ ἐπιεικέστεροι Ἰουδαίων καὶ Χριστιανῶν πειρῶνται πως ἀλληγορεῖν αὐτά, ἔστι δ' οὐχ οἷα ἀλληγορίαν ἐπιδέχεσθαι τινα ἀλλ' ἀντικρυς εὐηθέστατα μεμυθολόγηται... ἅπερ εἰ ἀνεγνώκει, οὐκ ἂν ἔλεγεν· Αἱ γοῦν δοκοῦσαι περὶ αὐτῶν ἀλληγορίαι γεγράφθαι πολὺ τῶν μύθων αἰσχίους εἰσὶ καὶ ἀτοπώτεραι, τὰ μηδαμῆ μηδαμῶς ἀρμοσθῆναι δυνάμενα θαυμαστῇ τινὶ καὶ παντάπασιν ἀναισθήτῳ μωρία συνάπτουσαι. (4.50, 51)

I have ventured upon an extended discussion from a desire to show that Celsus is incorrect when he says that *the more reasonable Jews and Christians try somehow to allegorize them, but they are incapable of being explained in this way, and are manifestly very stupid fables...* But if he had read [Christian allegories] he would not have said: *At any rate, the allegories which seem to have been written about them are far more shameful and preposterous than the myths, since they connect with some amazing and utterly senseless folly ideas which cannot by any means be made to fit.*

What is most interesting about this statement is that Celsus sarcastically labels those who interpret Scripture allegorically as “reasonable.” The Christian Scriptures by their very nature are absurd and the only reasonable way in which someone can believe them, Celsus argues, is if they read them allegorically. Despite this, he still finds fault with even these reasonable Christians. Instead of their allegories disguising the absurdity of their teachings, they only serve to highlight

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<sup>110</sup> Trans. Hoffmann 1987:80

<sup>111</sup> Trans. Hoffmann 1987:80

the silly nature of those teachings. So, while allegory may be the next logical step for Christians if they already believe in the absurd things they do, it still does not give them any more respectability in Celsus' eyes. Once someone has already committed himself to believing in Christianity, he has already proven himself to be a fool. All that he does after he first believes is equally contemptible.

Origen's response to Celsus' criticism of Christian allegorization provides the next example of the great extent to which Origen confirms Celsus' complaints about Christians. Indeed, Origen makes it abundantly clear by two different methods that Christians truly do interpret Scripture allegorically: one, by providing an explicit justification of the practice; and two, by utilizing this type of interpretation throughout Book 1. Origen's justification of allegory comes when he addresses Celsus' accusation that the story of the dove descending to Jesus after his baptism cannot be confirmed as historical fact.<sup>112</sup> In response to this accusation, Origen writes: Πρὶν ἀρξώμεθα τῆς ἀπολογίας, λεκτέον ὅτι σχεδὸν πᾶσαν ἱστορίαν, κἂν ἀληθὴς ᾖ, βούλεσθαι κατασκευάζειν ὡς γεγενημένην καὶ καταληπτικὴν ποιῆσαι περὶ αὐτῆς φαντασίαν τῶν σφόδρα ἐστὶ χαλεπωτάτων καὶ ἐν ἐνίοις ἀδύνατον (1.42). "Before we begin the defence, we must say that an attempt to substantiate almost any story as historical fact, even if it is true, and to produce complete certainty about it, is one of the most difficult tasks and in some cases impossible." He next uses multiple examples from Greek mythology, such as the Trojan War and the Oedipus saga, to demonstrate the difficulty of this task. The truth of the Trojan War, for example, is hard to prove because "it is bound up with the impossible story about a certain Achilles..." and many others (1.42).

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<sup>112</sup> This story can be found in all four Gospels: Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34

Because of the nearly impossible nature of proving a story to be historical fact, Origen concludes that

Ἄλλ' ὁ εὐγνωμόνως ἐντυγχάνων ταῖς ἱστορίαις καὶ βουλόμενος ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν καὶ ἐν ἐκείναις ἀνεξαπάτητον κρινεῖ, τίσι μὲν συγκαταθήσεται τίνα δὲ τροπολογήσει, τὸ βούλημα ἐρευνῶν τῶν ἀναπλασασμένων τὰ τοιαδί, καὶ τίσιν ἀπιστήσει ὡς διὰ τὴν πρὸς τινὰς χάριν ἀναγεγραμμένοις. (1.42)

Anyone who reads the stories with a fair mind, who wants to keep himself from being deceived by them, will decide what he will accept and what he will interpret allegorically, searching out the meaning of the authors who wrote the fictitious stories, and what he will disbelieve as having been written to gratify certain people.

His discussion of finding historical fact in fantastic stories sets up a general principle for Origen. Although it is impossible to verify historical fact in every story, there is still value in those stories since men can seek out a higher meaning that the author intended them to discover.

Origen soon applies this general principle to his interpretation of Scripture. As he continues in 1.48, he discusses these verses from the book of Ezekiel as a demonstration for why men should interpret Scripture allegorically: “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1). And further, Origen cites Ezekiel’s words after he sees the image of the throne of God and a figure sitting in it: “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking” (Ezekiel 1:28). These verses certainly tell a fantastical story and Origen’s interpretation of it is allegorical through and through. A literal understanding of these verses would be that the sky actually was torn open and Ezekiel truly looked at God on his throne. Origen, however, argues that what Ezekiel saw was only a vision. After noting that visions themselves are not that outlandish of an occurrence, for they are just like dreams, he says:

Ἐγὼ γὰρ οὐχ ὑπολαμβάνω τὸν αἰσθητὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῶχθαι καὶ τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ ἀνοιγνύμενον διηρηῆσθαι, ἵνα ἀναγράψῃ τὸ τοιοῦτον Ἰεζεκιήλ. Μὴ ποτ' οὖν καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ σωτῆρος τὸν φρονίμως ἀκούοντα τῶν εὐαγγελίων τὸ ὅμοιον ἐκδεκτέον, κἂν προσκόπτῃ τὸ τοιοῦτον τοῖς ἀπλουστέροις, οἱ διὰ πολλὴν ἀπλότητα κινουσι τὸν κόσμον, σχίζοντες τὸ τηλικούτον σῶμα ἠνωμένον τοῦ παντὸς οὐρανοῦ. (1.48)

For I do not imagine that the visible heaven was opened, or its physical form divided for Ezekiel to record such an experience. Perhaps therefore the intelligent reader of the gospels ought to give a similar interpretation also in respect of the Saviour, even if this opinion may cause offence to the simple-minded, who in their extreme naivete move the world and rend the vast, solid mass of the entire heaven.

Origen's interpretation here signals very clearly that he did not take this story literally. He is even sarcastic and dismissive of “simple-minded” and “naïve” people who believe that these words from Ezekiel represent a true, historical event. Instead, he advocates that readers of the Scriptures – whether in books like Ezekiel or the gospels – be “intelligent” and apply allegorical interpretation in circumstances in which the use of literal interpretation would force one to “move the world and rend the vast, solid mass of the entire heaven.”

Origen only rounds out this commitment to allegorical interpretation as 1.48 comes to a close. The last point he makes is that there is a “divine sense” which a “blessed” man acquires on earth. As proof, he cites verses from Scripture that support the idea that each of a man's senses - sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch - has a physical and spiritual dimension. For example, he writes that "Χριστοῦ εὐωδία" λέγει εἶναι "τῷ θεῷ" Παῦλος, καὶ ἀφῆς, καθ' ἣν Ἰωάννης φησὶ ταῖς χερσὶν ἐψηλαφηκέναι "περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς" (1.48) – “Paul speaks of a ‘sweet savour of Christ unto God,’ and a sense of touch in accordance with which John says that he has handled with his hands ‘of the Word of life.’”<sup>113</sup> Origen therefore saw himself to be on the side of the apostle himself in employing allegory in reading Scripture. Just as Paul understood there to be a spiritual dimension to life, so also does Origen understand the multilayered meaning

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<sup>113</sup> Origen cites the Bible verses 2 Corinthians 2:15 and 1 John 1:1.

in Scripture. He would be ignoring an apostolic mandate, in essence, if he naively avoided allegorical interpretation simply because it confused or offended the “simple-minded,” as he says above.

Taking all of this together, it is clear that Origen overwhelmingly confirms the Christian practice of employing allegory in interpreting their Scriptures. On this topic especially, he is bold in showing Celsus’ observations to be factual. This is due to his commitment to using allegory himself. This zealous attitude towards allegory, however, constitutes Origen’s implicit opposition to Celsus. The latter views the allegorization of Scripture as yet another reason to dislike the practices of Christians. His comment cited above seems to indicate that it is not allegory itself that he opposes. Rather, it is the Christians’ mishandling of allegory that vexes him. Recall his words:

The more reasonable Jews and Christians try somehow to allegorize [the stories in Scripture], but they are incapable of being explained in this way, and are manifestly very stupid fables...At any rate, the allegories which seem to have been written about them are far more shameful and preposterous than the myths, since they connect with some amazing and utterly senseless folly ideas which cannot by any means be made to fit. (4.50, 51)

In other words, Christians incorrectly use the only type of interpretation suitable for their “stupid fables.” In this way, their use of allegory is for Celsus yet another sign of Christian foolishness. In stark contrast, however, Origen views this as a sign of maturity and sophistication. As mentioned several times already, it is the “simple-minded” who refuse to move beyond literal interpretation. The implication, therefore, is that those with a more complex intellect who are able to employ allegory.

McCartney’s analysis of Origen’s opinion fleshes out his thoughts on the balance between literal and allegorical interpretation. As McCartney argues, Origen indeed views allegory as a more mature form of interpretation. However, it can only be more mature for

someone to interpret allegorically if he already interprets Scripture at a simpler level. Thus, Origen is not completely dismissive of literal interpretation, as his strong statements in 1.48 might suggest. Indeed, McCartney writes: “At least three positive values to the literal meaning are mentioned by Origen in *Contra Celsum*—(1) the Bible contains true and important history, (2) the literal meaning has an edifying value for the simple, and (3) the literal has an apologetic value in attracting study.”<sup>114</sup> Taking each of McCartney’s three points in turn, though Scriptural stories are sometimes hard to prove as historical fact, Origen does believe many to be actual history, especially the stories of Jesus. Literal interpretation is thus the only appropriate kind for those particular stories. Likewise, literal interpretation is the best kind for those who cannot attain to anything higher. This is the same dynamic seen with the Christian evangelization of common men. Just as an ignorant faith is better than a lack of faith, so literal interpretation of Scripture is better than scorning the interpretation of Scripture altogether. And, finally, literal interpretation is an important first step towards further study, as this gives men solid footing in reading Scripture before reaching a more mature level. In all three of these ways, literal interpretation is absolutely vital for Christians although it is truly a simpler version of interpretation than allegorical. It is quite clear, then, that Origen counts allegory as something admirable about Christian interpretation and not a further condemnation of it as Celsus does.

The next major criticism in Celsus’ work that Origen engages with in Book 1 is the charge of Christianity’s unoriginality. Celsus argues that whatever good Christianity does offer - which is not much - can be found in a better form in other philosophical or religious systems. He talks specifically about the similarities that Christianity has with Greek philosophy and Graeco-Roman religion. Origen records the following comments from Celsus concerning Christianity’s

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<sup>114</sup> McCartney 1986:287-288. Note that McCartney identifies these reasons in the following sections of *Contra Celsum*: 3.43, 1.17-18, 7.60.

relationship with Greek ideas (Celsus' words in italics): Παρέθετο γὰρ πλείονα μάλιστα Πλάτωνος ὁ Κέλσος, κοινοποιῶν τὰ δυνάμενα ἐλεῖν τινα καὶ συνετὸν ἐκ τῶν ἱερῶν γραμμάτων, φάσκων βέλτιον αὐτὰ παρ' Ἑλλησιν εἰρηῆσθαι καὶ χωρὶς ἀνατάσεως καὶ ἐπαγγελίας τῆς ὡς ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἢ υἱοῦ θεοῦ (6.1). "For Celsus has quoted several passages especially from Plato, comparing them with extracts from the holy scriptures such as could impress an intelligent person, saying that *these ideas have been better expressed among the Greeks, who refrained from making exalted claims and from asserting that they had been announced by a god or the son of a god.*" This complaint recalls much of what was observed in Chapter 2. Not only were Christians merely copying the ideas of its predecessors, they were doing so while pretending their faith was the only truth. Celsus especially focuses on Christian similarity to, and destruction, of Platonic doctrine. Celsus sees Christian imitation of Platonism as most egregious since Christian doctrine destroys the noble teachings of Plato. Therefore, Celsus' arguments against Christian doctrine undermined the Christians claims to eternal truth in two ways: one, it was illogical to claim that such a young religion held truth when its more ancient predecessors did not; and two, these claims were an insult to greater doctrines like Platonism.

Origen too finds resonances between Christianity and its Greek philosophical predecessors, and seems highly disinterested in arguing against this fact. Indeed, Chadwick calls Origen's response to Celsus on this point "remarkable." He writes: "He simply accepts the proposition without demur. So far from Christianity being the worse for that [similarity to Graeco-Roman thought], it is evidence in its favour."<sup>115</sup> Origen argues that this connection between Christianity and Graeco-Roman ideas is one merit of Christianity in two ways. He first

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<sup>115</sup> Chadwick 1966:104

explains why there are similarities between the two by applying a specific section of Scripture.

While not quoting it directly, he alludes to the following passage from the book of Romans:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16)

Written by the apostle Paul, this puts forth the idea that all men who do what is righteous do so according to God's law. Even if a man has never heard of that law, Christians contend that the sense of right and wrong common to all humans is implanted by God into their hearts. In the same way, Origen argues, certain ideas of philosophy and religion are placed in the minds of men. He considers a passage from Celsus in which the latter compares the Christian prohibition against idolatry to this saying from Heraclitus: "Those who approach lifeless things as gods act like a man who holds conversation with houses" (1.5). While Celsus would have seen this fragment of Heraclitus as proof of Christianity's unoriginality, Origen argues: Οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ τούτου λεκτέον ὅτι ὁμοίως τῷ ἄλλῳ ἠθικῷ τόπῳ ἐγκατεσπάρησαν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἔννοιαι, ἀφ' ὧν καὶ ὁ Ἡράκλειτος καὶ εἴ τις ἄλλος Ἑλλήνων ἢ βαρβάρων τοῦτ' ἐνενόησε κατασκευάσαι (1.5). "I would reply in this instance also, as in that of the other moral principles, that moral ideas have been implanted in men, and that it was from these that Heraclitus and any other Greek or barbarian conceived the notion of maintaining this doctrine." He also points to Herodotus' record of the Persians' disbelief in idolatry, as well as statements from Zeno in Plato's *Republic*, as additional examples of Greek accordance with the teachings of Christianity. Origen therefore makes a simple argument: the principles of Christianity - from God himself - existed before any philosophical system of man was articulated.

Origen continues to acknowledge Christianity's similarities with Greek thought in other sections of Book 1, explicitly confirming Celsus' complaints about these very similarities. As he continues, however, he shows this connection between Christianity and Greek ideas implicitly by using Greek ideas to support the truth of Christian ones. For example, in 1.32-33, he discusses the virgin birth of Jesus and Celsus' ridicule of that particular aspect of Christian doctrine. In particular, Celsus thinks the whole idea of the virgin birth is thoroughly false and Jesus was actually the result of his mother's affair with a Roman soldier. Origen, however, dismisses this story, and tries to show the reasonableness of the concept of a virgin birth. He writes:

ἄρα ὁ κατα πέμπων ψυχὰς εἰς ἀνθρώπων σώματα τὸν τοσαῦτα τολμῆ σοντα καὶ τοσοῦτους διδάξοντα καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς χύσεως τῆς κατὰ τὴν κακίαν μεταστήσοντα πολλοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐπὶ τὴν πασῶν αἰσχροτέραν γένεσιν ὄθει, μηδὲ διὰ γάμων γνησίων αὐτὸν εἰσάγων εἰς τὸν τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίον; Ἡ εὐλογώτερον ἐκάστην ψυχὴν κατὰ τινὰς ἀπορρήτους λόγους –λέγω δὲ ταῦτα νῦν κατὰ Πυθαγόραν καὶ Πλάτωνα καὶ Ἐμπεδοκλέα, οὓς πολλάκις ὠνόμασεν ὁ Κέλσος–, εἰσκρι νομένην σώματι κατ' ἄξιαν εἰσκρίνεσθαι καὶ κατὰ τὰ πρότερα ἦθη; (1.32)

Would He who sends souls down into human bodies compel a man to undergo a birth more shameful than any, and not even have brought him into human life by legitimate marriage, when he was to do such great deeds and to teach so many people and to convert many from the flood of evil? Or is it more reasonable (and I say this now following Pythagoras, Plato, and Empedocles, whom Celsus often mentions) that there are certain secret principles by which each soul that enters a body does so in accordance with its merits and former character?

He even later cites “Zopyrus, Loxus, or Polemo” in 1.33, who are philosophers who put forth this same idea that a soul of a great man must have a suitable body. For example, Misener writes this about Loxus' theory:

The blood is the seat of the soul. The signs given by the whole body and its parts vary with the swiftness or inertia of the blood, its fineness and coarseness... When the blood is copious it causes the body to be large and ruddy...but it constricts, dulls, and intercepts the keenness of the intellect and the senses. If the blood is fine and small in quantity it produces a weaker body...[but] it nourishes the intelligence and stimulates its keenness.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Misener 1923:10

In short, one's soul, contained in the blood, has a direct correspondence with the constitution of the body. As such, all men with a certain admirable quality must have the same type of blood which in turn indicates the nature of their soul. Origen picks up on the similarity of this teaching with what Christian Scriptures teach about Jesus. He writes:

τῆ οὖν μελλούσῃ παραδόξως ἐπιδημεῖν τῷ βίῳ καὶ μεγαλοποιεῖν ἔδει γενέσθαι σῶμα οὐχ, ὡς οἶεται Κέλσος, ἀπὸ Πανθήρα μοιχεύσαντος καὶ παρθένου μοιχευθείσης... ἀλλ' ὡς καὶ προφητῶν προεῖπον, ἀπὸ παρθένου, κατ' ἐπαγγελίαν σημείου γεννώσης τὸν ἐπώνυμον πράγματος, δηλοῦντος ὅτι ἐπὶ τῆ γενέσει αὐτοῦ μετ' ἀνθρώπων ἔσται θεός. (1.33)

Then for a soul that was to live a miraculous life on earth and to do great things, a body was necessary, not, as Celsus thinks, produced by the adultery of Panthera and a virgin)...but, as the prophets foretold, the offspring of a virgin who according to the promised sign should give birth to a child whose name was significant of his work, showing that at his birth God would be with men.

Just as with Loxus, Origen argues that such a great man like Jesus could only have one possible nature. His signs and greatness among men were so beyond the average that the only explanation was that he had a supernatural birth and character. It was simply not possible that such a great man would be the result of adultery between his mother and a common Roman soldier named Panthera, as Celsus had earlier charged (1.32). In this way, Origen draws a direct link between Graeco-Roman thought and Christian thought.

Origen's defense against Celsus' complaints of Christianity's unoriginality certainly lacks much obvious opposition. He confirms every suspicion that Celsus had about Christian claims to universal and eternal truth by simply upending the temporal viewpoint with which Celsus was observing Christians. Just because Christians came on the scene chronologically after Plato, Loxus, Heraclitus, and others did not mean they were copying their ideas. Instead, Christians were fully articulating an eternal truth that God revealed only partially to Plato and others. In this way, Origen's opposition actually comes through his commitment to upholding the

facts about Christianity. Celsus truly identified these facts, but he did not know what to make of them. Only a Christian like Origen, with the full teaching of Scripture, could accurately understand the implications of such facts. As Scarborough describes:

Throughout the *Contra Celsum*, Origen endeavors to answer what he sees as the malformed hermeneutic informing Celsus' *True Doctrine*. His perspective, much like his opponent's, begins and ends with the Scriptures. As he argues, even the most learned of the Greeks, though surpassing many in their possession of human wisdom, nevertheless erred in their religious practice.<sup>117</sup>

Both Origen and Celsus “begin and end with the Scripture” – that is, they are both starting from the same set of facts. However, it was Origen’s task to push back against the “malformed hermeneutic” that caused Celsus to draw the absolutely wrong conclusions about Christianity. Origen’s interaction with Celsus’ opinion of Christianity’s unoriginality, with its complete reversal in perspective, thus provides readers with one of the best examples of how Origen can still refute Celsus while still showing him to be right to a great extent.

Finally, Origen’s apologetic strategy can be seen clearly as he discusses Jesus and attempts to refute Celsus’ many criticisms about him. More specifically, Origen focuses on two aspects of Celsus’ complaint about Jesus: his low place in society and the persuasive effect he has on those around him. While not specifically discussed in Chapter 2, Celsus’ opinion of Jesus is just as critical as his opinion of the Christian God. Often, he applies his criticisms of God to Jesus himself, even though he personally does not believe the Christian claims that Jesus is a god.<sup>118</sup> He writes this of the Christians’ savior:

Ἄλλως μὲν οὖν παντελῶς θνητὰ ταῦτα καὶ οὐδ' ὅσα λέγειν, ὅτι δὴ ὁ μέγιστος θεός, βουλόμενός τι ἀνθρώπους ὠφελῆσαι, τὸν ἀντιπράσσοντα ἔχει καὶ ἀδυνατεῖ. Ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ παῖς ἄρα ἠττᾶται ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου, καὶ κολαζόμενος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ διδάσκει καὶ ἡμᾶς τῶν ὑπὸ τούτῳ κολάσεων καταφρονεῖν, προαγορεύων ὡς ἄρα

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<sup>117</sup> Scarborough 2009:50

<sup>118</sup> This dynamic was seen in Chapter 2, in the discussion of Celsus’ argument that the Christian God is weak and incompetent.

ὁ Σατανᾶς καὶ αὐτὸς ὁμοίως φανεῖς ἐπιδείξεται μεγάλα ἔργα καὶ θαυμαστά, σφετεριζόμενος τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόξαν· οἷς οὐ χρῆναι βουκοληθέντας ἀποτρέπεσθαι πρὸς ἐκεῖνον, ἀλλὰ μόνῳ πιστεύειν ἑαυτῷ. Ταῦτα μὲν γε ἐστὶν ἄντικρυς ἀνθρώπου γόητος, ἐργολαβοῦντος καὶ προφυ λαττομένου τοῦς ἀντιδοξοῦντάς τε καὶ ἀνταγείροντας. (6.42)

At all events these notions are entirely of mortal origin, and it is blasphemy to say that when the greatest God indeed wishes to confer some benefit upon men, He has a power which is opposed to Him, and so is unable to do it. The Son of God, then, is worsted by the devil, and is punished by him so that he may teach us also to despise the punishments which he inflicts on us. He declares that even Satan himself will appear in a similar way to that in which he has done and will manifest great and amazing works, usurping the glory of God. We must not be deceived by these, nor desire to turn away to Satan, but must believe in him alone. This is blatantly the utterance of a man who is a sorcerer, who is out for profit and is taking precautions against possible rivals to his opinions and to his begging.

This passage is a good example of both aspects of Celsus' criticism of Jesus. Firstly, Celsus scoffs at the weakness of Jesus. He refers to the Christian teaching of the existence of the devil, a being who opposes all the efforts of God. The supposed existence of such a creature and the idea that he can hinder God's actions is "blasphemous" to Celsus. Just as observed in chapter 2 in Celsus' discussion of God the Father, who allowed his son to die, the weakness of God leads to his incompetence. He puts forth the same idea here that the weakness of God, and specifically that of the Son of God, causes him to be "worsted by the devil."

This passage also shows Celsus' opinion that Jesus is just like a magician because he performs miraculous deeds. Even worse, Celsus argues that Jesus does this in order to "profit" himself – gathering followers for himself and taking followers away from his "rivals." The implication of Celsus' argument here is that Jesus was nothing more than a sorcerer who tricked others into believing he was a god through his magical powers. He even argues that Jesus visited Egypt and "returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God" (1.28). Gallagher is very helpful in drawing out the significance of this accusation from Celsus. He writes that magic for Celsus "bore the stigma of illiteracy and

immorality. Belief in, or practice of ‘garden-variety’ magic tended to provoke doubts about one’s character and abilities. To put it simply, common magicians could not be philosophers.”<sup>119</sup> On a basic level, Jesus’ magical powers provoke a general suspicion of his character. However, there was something deeper at work for Celsus. If Jesus was truly a magician, he could not simultaneously be a serious philosopher introducing a serious doctrine to his followers. Instead, Jesus was “illiterate” and “immoral” and began a religion whose followers, even to Celsus’ day, were still believing an absurd doctrine and continuing the treacherous practices of their founder.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that Celsus also criticizes Jesus’ background as well. In two sections of Book 1, Origen addresses Celsus’ complaint about this using his specific type of apologetic strategy. Starting with 1.28-1.30, Origen handles the following words from Celsus:

Μετὰ ταῦτα προσω ποποιεῖ Ἰουδαῖον αὐτῷ διαλεγόμενον τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐλέγχοντα αὐτὸν περὶ πολλῶν μὲν, ὡς οἶεται, πρῶτον δὲ ὡς πλασαμένου αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐκ παρθένου γένεσιν· ὀνειδίζει δ’ αὐτῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ἐκ κώμης αὐτὸν γεγονέναι ἰουδαϊκῆς καὶ ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἐγχωρίου καὶ πενιχρᾶς καὶ χερνήτιδος. (1.28)

After this [Celsus] represents the Jews as having a conversation with Jesus himself and refuting him on many charges, as he thinks: first, because *he fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin* ; and he reproaches [Jesus] because *he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning*.

In response to these comments, Origen makes it very clear what his opinion is in his first statement after citing the passage from Celsus. He says: Ταῦτα δὲ πάντα τῷ μηδὲν δυναμένῳ ἀβασάνιστον εἶναι τῶν λεγομένων ὑπὸ τῶν ἀπιστούντων ἀλλὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐξετάζοντι δοκεῖ μοι συμπνεῖν τῷ θεῖον γεγονέναι καὶ ἄξιον τῆς προρρήσεως περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ υἱὸν εἶναι τὸν Ἰησοῦν (1.28) “In my judgment, however (and I cannot allow anything said by unbelievers to pass unexamined, but study the fundamental principles), all these things are in harmony with the fact that Jesus was worthy of the proclamation that he is son of God.” “All

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<sup>119</sup> Gallagher 1980:45-46

these things” that Origen refers to includes not only Jesus’ low birth, but his supposed magical powers. Origen does not explicitly agree with Celsus on the facts of Jesus’ life in this comment. However, his agreement is implicit. In order to refute Celsus’ claims, he argues that “all these things are in harmony” with a belief in Jesus’ divinity. The only way he can make that argument is if he acknowledges that Celsus was right to some extent about Jesus. Origen certainly does not confirm the wild claims that Celsus makes about Mary’s affair with a Roman soldier that caused her to become pregnant with Jesus (1.32), or Jesus’ magical powers, or other related claims. However, Origen confirms the heart of Celsus’ criticism that Jesus came from an unremarkable background and had an influence on others that could not be easily explained. This confirmation of the basic outline of Jesus’ life continues as Origen discusses more of Celsus’ criticisms.

Before he turns to more confirmation, however, Origen makes a fuller analysis of Celsus’ arguments than his one comment already cited. He writes the following concerning Jesus’ low birth and his surprising ability to overcome that status:

Εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖον ἐξετάζοι τις τὰ κατὰ τὸν τοιοῦτον, πῶς οὐκ ἂν ζητήσαι, τίνα τρόπον ἐν εὐτελείᾳ καὶ πενίᾳ ἀνατεθραμμένος καὶ μηδεμίαν ἐγκύκλιον παιδείαν παιδευθεὶς μηδὲ μαθῶν λόγους καὶ δόγματα, ἀφ’ ὧν κἂν πιθανὸς γενέσθαι ἐδύνατο ὁμιλεῖν ὄχλοις καὶ δημαγωγεῖν καὶ ἐπάγεσθαι ἀκροατὰς πλείονας, ἐπιδίδωσιν ἑαυτὸν διδασκαλίᾳ καινῶν δογμάτων, ἐπεισάγων τῷ γένει τῶν ἀνθρώπων λόγον τὰ τε Ἰουδαίων ἔθη καταλύοντα μετὰ τοῦ σεμνοποιεῖν αὐτῶν τοὺς προφήτας καὶ τοὺς Ἑλλήνων νόμους μάλιστα περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ καθαιροῦντα; (1.29)

If one were also to inquire further into the circumstances of such a man, how could one help trying to find out how a man, brought up in meanness and poverty, who had no general education and had learnt no arguments and doctrines by which he could have become a persuasive speaker to crowds and a popular leader and have won over many hearers, could devote himself to teaching new doctrines and introduce to mankind a doctrine which did away with the customs of the Jews while reverencing the prophets, and which abolished the laws of the Greeks particularly in respect of the worship of God?

Whereas Celsus views the circumstances of the birth of Jesus as an indictment against him, Origen makes this well-reasoned argument for Jesus' birth to be a sign of his greatness. He makes the simple observation that it is easier for men born with advantage to become well-known and influential. Those like Jesus, however, are simply not expected to be able to have the intelligence and effect that he actually did. The fact that he was able to overcome these things and influence as many people as he did is remarkable and signals that there is some greater power at work in Jesus. Celsus believes this to be magic; Origen the power of God. For who else but a god could accomplish so much after starting with so little? In this way, Origen draws a completely different conclusion about these facts than Celsus does.

Origen next turns to Celsus' comments about Jesus' death. Origen views even Jesus' death as a sign of his greatness, while Celsus sees it as further evidence of Jesus' baseness. Celsus in the following passage is directly arguing against the Christian claim that Jesus was the Logos (cf. John 1). However, in the midst of this discussion, he mentions Jesus' death with great scorn:

Μετὰ ταῦτα Χριστιανοῖς ἐγκαλεῖ ὡς σοφίζομένοις ἐν τῷ λέγειν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι αὐτολόγον, καὶ οἶεταί γε κρατύνειν τὸ ἔγκλημα, ἐπεὶ λόγον ἐπαγγελλόμενοι υἱὸν εἶναι τοῦ θεοῦ ἀποδείκνυμεν οὐ λόγον καθαρὸν καὶ ἅγιον ἀλλὰ ἄνθρωπον ἀτιμώτατα ἀπαχθέντα καὶ ἀποτυμπανισθέντα. (2.31)

He next charges the Christians with being *guilty of sophisticated reasoning, in saying that the Son of God is the Logos Himself*. And he thinks that he strengthens the accusation, because *when we declare the Logos to be the Son of God, we do not present to view a pure and holy Logos, but a most degraded man, who was punished by scourging and crucifixion*.

Not only did Jesus not live up to the title of “Logos” that Christians gave him, but he was a “degraded man” who died by crucifixion. This manner of execution was especially disgraceful in Roman culture. In his thorough analysis of crucifixion in the Empire, Aubert describes who was usually condemned to death by this method, what crimes warranted such an execution, and the

stigma of crucifixion. While this kind of death was reserved mostly for slaves, Aubert notes that freeborn people were also subjected to it for crimes such as poisoning, military disobedience, insurrection/rebellion, and more.<sup>120</sup> He notes that Jesus was probably condemned to crucifixion due to rebellion and even cites Celsus' comments about Jesus' seditious actions in *Contra Celsum* 2.12 in support of this conclusion. With all of this background in mind, Aubert writes this: “[Crucifixion’s] primary purpose is to emphasize the victim’s final and irrevocable rejection from the civic and international community and the total denial of any form of legal protection based on rights guaranteed...to any legal status above slavery.”<sup>121</sup> Crucifixion was therefore a complete legal and societal condemnation upon the accused. It was of course a loss of legal protection as the Roman government itself would carry it out. Aubert’s analysis shows, however, that crucifixion was also a sign of the accused’s total ostracization from the “civic community.” In other words, it stripped the accused of their identity as a Roman citizen. And so, Aubert concludes from this fact that crucifixions occurred in order to “remind the rest of the community of the importance of belonging to it.”<sup>122</sup> Considering all of this, it is not surprising that Celsus views Jesus’ death as one element that “degrades” his supposedly “pure and holy” character.

In contrast, Origen views Jesus’ death as yet further evidence of why he should be honored and worshipped by Christians. In 1.30, after reiterating the many ways that Jesus was exemplary, Origen implies that even his death on the cross was not enough to nullify the things that made Jesus great. He says:

Καὶ Θεμιστοκλεῖ μὲν ἢ τινι τῶν ἐνδόξων οὐδὲν γέγονε τὸ ἐναντιούμενον τῇ δόξῃ·  
τούτῳ δὲ πρὸς τοῖς εἰρημένοις, ἰκανῶς δυναμένοις ἐν ἀδοξίᾳ καλύψαι ἀνθρώπου  
ψυχὴν καὶ πάνυ εὐφυοῦς, καὶ ὁ δοκῶν ἄτιμος εἶναι θάνατος σταυρωθέντι ἰκανὸς  
ἦν καὶ τὴν φθάσασαν δόξαν καὶ προκαταλαβοῦσαν ἐξαφανίσει καὶ τοὺς, ὡς

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<sup>120</sup> Aubert 2002:24-35

<sup>121</sup> Aubert 2002:23

<sup>122</sup> Aubert 2002:36

οἶονται οἱ μὴ συγκατατιθέμενοι αὐτοῦ τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ, προεξαπατηθέντας ποιῆσαι τῆς μὲν ἀπάτης ἀποστῆναι καταγνῶναι δὲ τοῦ ἀπατήσαντος. (1.30)

To Themistocles or any of the other eminent men nothing happened to militate against their fame; but in the case of Jesus, besides the points I have mentioned which have sufficient influence to hide a man's character in ignominy even if he were a most noble person, his death by crucifixion which seems to be disgraceful was enough to take away even such reputation as he had already gained, and to make those who had been deluded (as people who do not agree with his teaching think) abandon their delusion and condemn the man who had deceived them.

Origen makes the point that even those who stuck with Jesus up until his death abandoned him because of his “disgraceful” crucifixion. In other words, most people - even some who followed Jesus - were turned away by the low nature of his death. Presumably, the only ones who stayed faithful to Jesus was the small group of apostles and others described in the Biblical book of Acts. Thus, Origen's point is that despite Jesus' birth, despite his strange deeds, and even despite a death that caused his own followers to abandon him, he is still worshipped by Christians. His name is still famous, his people still die for him, and the faith that he inspired is robust enough to warrant such a complex philosophical response from Celsus. This continued influence of Jesus beyond his death only serves to further convince Origen that his beliefs are true.

All aspects of Jesus' life, therefore, serve as another point on which Celsus and Origen agree yet conclude wildly different things. His birth, life, and death all cause Celsus to dismiss Jesus and are evidence enough that Jesus is certainly not any god at all. In his opinion, a god would not even descend to earth, let alone live in such mean circumstances.<sup>123</sup> The entire narrative of Jesus' incarnation and life is simply absurd and illogical. On the other hand, Origen's faith is affirmed at every stage of the story about Jesus' time on earth. The humbleness of his entire life only serves to magnify for Origen the hand of God in all the events that took

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<sup>123</sup> Recall Watson's assessment of Celsus' opinion about the incarnation from Chapter 2: “The whole Platonic scheme of things depended on the clear distinction between the two worlds, the world of intellect and the world of sense, the *kosmos noētos* and the *kosmos aisthētos*. The Christian notion of God's activity was a disastrous denial of this distinction” (Watson 2002:167).

place. On this point especially, as Celsus' and Origen's logic can be traced step-by-step through Jesus' life, it is clear how they differ so much despite starting with the same essential narrative about Jesus.

Origen also exhibits this same strategy when addressing Celsus' critiques about the type of people who followed Jesus. In 1.62-1.64 of *Contra Celsum*, Origen discusses the following statement from Celsus: δέκα εἶπεν ἢ ἑνδεκά τινας ἐξαρτησάμενον τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἑαυτῷ ἐπιρρήτους ἀνθρώπους, τελώνας καὶ ναύτας τοὺς πονηροτάτους, μετὰ τούτων τῆδε κάκεισε αὐτὸν ἀποδεδρακέναί, αἰσχρῶς καὶ γλίσχρως τροφὰς συνάγοντα... (1.62). "Jesus collected round him ten or eleven infamous men, the most wicked tax-collectors and sailors, and with these fled hither and thither, collecting a means of livelihood in a disgraceful and importune way." This passage can be included in Celsus' critiques of Jesus himself, as an indictment of the character of such a man who calls "infamous men" to follow him. Moreover, this echoes the complaints considered in Chapter 2 in which Celsus demonstrates his disbelief that Christians purposely call sinners to faith instead of righteous men. In this context, however, Celsus is primarily dealing with this general trend in Christianity in terms of Jesus' own life. As such, 1.62-1.64 should be considered as part of Celsus' generally low opinion of Jesus himself.

As Origen interacts with Celsus' statement, he demonstrates the same pattern of confirmation and eventual opposition to it. Firstly, Origen acknowledges that Jesus did indeed call "infamous" and "wicked" men. That is, he did gather around himself simple men with no intelligence or righteousness to speak of. Of those disciples whose professions are mentioned, there were sailors and fishermen and tax-collectors. Even more, Origen says: Οὐ γὰρ ἢ εἰς τὸ λέγειν δύναμις καὶ τάξις ἀπαγγελίας κατὰ τὰς Ἑλλήνων διαλεκτικὰς ἢ ῥητορικὰς τέχνας ἦν ἐν αὐτοῖς ὑπαγομένη τοὺς ἀκούοντας (1.62). "For in them there was no power of speaking or of

giving an ordered narrative by the standards of Greek dialectical or rhetorical arts which convinced their hearers.” One can almost envision Celsus nodding along to this assessment of Jesus’ disciples. Of course these mean and wicked men had none of these skills. Celsus thus would use this only as further evidence of Jesus’ own poor character, since he has gathered men around him who are not only unrighteous but unintelligent. Moreover, the fact that these men had influence among the people is further proof of the treacherous means used by Christians to persuade men of their religion. He would not say that the power of their message overcame their personal weaknesses, but only that they had hoodwinked those with whom they interacted.

Origen, on the other hand, offers a different interpretation of the simple nature of Jesus’ disciples and the influence they gained after Jesus’ death as they spread the message of Christianity. He writes:

δὲ τίς βλέπων ἀλιεῖς καὶ τελῶνας... τεθαρρηκό τως οὐ μόνον Ἰουδαίοις ὁμιλοῦντας περὶ τῆς εἰς τὸν Ἰησοῦν πίστεως ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσι κηρύσσον τας αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνύοντας, οὐκ ἂν ζητήσαι, πόθεν ἦν αὐτοῖς δύναμις πειστικῆ; Οὐ γὰρ ἡ νενομισμένη τοῖς πολλοῖς. Καὶ τίς οὐκ ἂν λέγοι ὅτι τὸ "Δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου, καὶ ποιήσω ὑμᾶς ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων" δυνάμει τινὶ θεία ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ ἐπλήρωσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς; (1.62)

If anyone saw fisherfolk and tax-collectors...who with great courage not only spoke to Jews about faith in Jesus but also preached him among the other nations with success, would he not try to find out the source of their persuasive power? For it is not that which is popularly supposed to be power. Who would not say that Jesus had fulfilled the saying, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” by a certain divine power in his apostles?

Origen believes that Jesus should actually be praised for the kind of men he chose as followers. Since the Christian message came with so much “persuasive power,” it was natural for the ones to whom the disciples were preaching to ask where that power came from. If the disciples were accomplished and educated orators, others would believe that the power of their message came from the skill of the disciples. In other words, the source of their power would be from man, not

from God. This, however, is not consistent with greater Christian understanding. Hauck, in his analysis of prophecy and revelation in Origen's and Celsus' works, writes the following: "Origen contests the ability of the soul to make its own way to the knowledge of God, and asserts that the soul is rather in a spiritual struggle from which it cannot extricate itself without help."<sup>124</sup> Hauck continues: "Origen speaks of what is required for knowledge of God in varying ways. He often calls it simply 'divine grace,' or 'superior inspiration,' and it includes the indwelling of, or participation in, the Holy Spirit."<sup>125</sup> This analysis from Hauck reveals something crucial about Christian thought. Belief in Christianity is not something that men can gain by themselves. Instead, they are "extricated" from unbelief only by God's own help and begin to know God when they are given that knowledge by God's further activity in their lives. With this in mind, it would be foolish to say that those who preach the Christian message are bringing men to belief without God's help. The best delivery of the Christian message is powerless unless God's power supplements it.

Therefore, Jesus' choice of disciples prevents those to whom they were preaching from becoming confused by the true source of their power. The simplicity and baseness of his disciples allow men to see only the power of God within them. But, more importantly for considering the differences between Origen's and Celsus' conclusions, Jesus' choice shows his own wisdom. It demonstrates the fact that Jesus anticipated that the source of Christianity's power would be confused unless it was delivered by uneducated men. This is almost a completely opposite evaluation of Jesus' choice of followers than what was observed in Celsus' arguments and an undermining of those arguments. Celsus was simply wrong about Jesus' choice of followers because he did not have the full understanding of the power of God. In this

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<sup>124</sup> Hauck 1989:206

<sup>125</sup> Hauck 1989:208

way, Celsus certainly is right about the type of men Jesus chose, but his conclusion is found greatly wanting.

Even beyond this, Origen continues to refute Celsus' indictment of Jesus' choice of disciples by making two additional critiques. The first of these critiques concerns Celsus' omission of evidence that would seemingly support his point. Origen cites a famous comment from the apostle Paul in the letter now called 1 Timothy in which he describes himself as "the chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). If this was indeed true about one of the most notable Christians ever, why did Celsus not use him as an example to support his comments about the followers of Jesus? Origen offers this explanation of the omission:

Εἰκὸς γὰρ ὅτι ἐώρα δεῖσθαι αὐτῷ ἀπολογίας τὸν περὶ Παύλου λόγον, πῶς διώξας τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πικρῶς ἀγωνισάμενος κατὰ τῶν πιστευόντων, ὡς καὶ εἰς θάνατον παραδιδόναι ἐθέλειν τοὺς Ἰησοῦ μαθητάς, ὕστερον ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον μετεβάλετο, ὡς "ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ μέχρι τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ πεπληρωκῆναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ" ... (1.63)

[Celsus] probably saw that he would have to explain the history of Paul, how he persecuted the church of God and fought bitterly against the believers, so that he even wanted to deliver to death Jesus' disciples, but afterwards was so profoundly converted that from Jerusalem to Illyricum he had fully preached the gospel of Christ...

Origen essentially accuses Celsus of purposely not mentioning Paul because doing so would actually prove Origen's interpretation correct. As Origen indicates here, Paul truly was living sinfully in the eyes of Christians. In actively seeking to kill Christians, he was extremely "infamous" and "wicked." Thus, his later conversion is one major proof that Jesus was actually wise in choosing unrighteous men as his followers. For though those followers may be the chief of sinners, they are still able to be converted by the great message of Christianity. The apostle Paul thus serves as an affirmation of Origen's understanding of Jesus' wisdom in choosing his followers.

The next critique that Origen makes about Celsus' argument is that Christianity is not alone in its ability to be criticized for the kind of people it attracts. He writes: Εἰ δ' ἐπὶ τῷ προτέρῳ βίῳ ὀνειδίζειν μέλλοιμεν τοῖς μεταβαλοῦσιν, ὥρα καὶ Φαίδωνος ἡμᾶς κατηγορεῖν καὶ φιλοσοφήσαντος, ἐπεὶ, ὡς ἡ ἱστορία φησὶν, ἀπὸστέγους αὐτὸν μετήγαγεν εἰς φιλόσοφον διατριβὴν ὁ Σωκράτης (1.64). "If we were going to reproach people whose lives have changed on the ground of their past, we could well attack Phaedo the philosopher, since, as the story goes, Socrates led him out from a house of ill-fame to study philosophy." He goes on to give more examples of philosophers in the Greek tradition who either came from disreputable origins yet still found success in philosophy, like Xenocrates' successor Polemo, or who encouraged their followers to turn from licentiousness to philosophy, like Chrysippus. Looking more deeply at one of these philosophers helps to clarify Origen's point. Polemo presided over the Platonic Academy for nearly 40 years in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>126</sup> Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius records the story of Polemo's change from a wild youth to a serious philosopher (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 4.3). As a wealthy young man, he wasted his time spending money and trying to gratify his every desire. Having stumbled drunkenly into the Academy during Xenocrates' lecture on self-control, he was inspired to change his ways and "became so industrious that he surpassed all the other students."<sup>127</sup> The example of Polemo makes Origen's point quite well, for Polemo followed a path that many Christians would have. At first, he was uneducated and focused only on base desires. However, having been enlightened by a powerful message, he is "converted" to a life of philosophy. The implication is that Christians are just like Polemo and Jesus just like Xenocrates, who is to be admired for so positively influencing wayward men. Origen therefore subtly challenges Celsus' opinion about

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<sup>126</sup> Dillon 2003:156

<sup>127</sup> Dillon 2003:156-157

the superiority of Platonism. If the Academy is among those philosophical schools that are willing to enlighten such base men, what validity is there to Celsus' arguments that Christianity is inferior to Platonism because of the very same practice? Overall, then, Origen is still able to effectively oppose Celsus' arguments that Jesus – and his followers after him – did seek to enlighten common people.

With each of these four aspects of Christianity, Origen displays his apologetic strategy. He is consistent with his approach to Celsus: always confirming his facts, yet always opposing his conclusions. In this way, Origen's strategy fleshes out the opinions he put forth in his preface. There, he makes it clear that the best refutation of Christianity is not the written one; it is the one that looks to the evidence of the faith itself. Origen's written refutation is consistently subject to this belief. Though he wrote against Celsus, he does so in such a way that gives primacy to the facts of Christianity. He does not apologize for these facts, he does not try to explain them away. Instead, he embraces and endorses them, using them to show the great merits of Christianity. It is only with this piece in place that Origen proceeds to refute Celsus in words and to try to persuade his readers of Celsus' errors. If anyone who reads Origen's work is persuaded by his endorsement of Christianity and comes to believe his message, it is only because he was shown the facts of the faith more clearly. It would not be because of Origen's great rhetoric and argumentative skill; it would through his ability to disentangle the facts from erroneous conclusions and let them stand on their own.

## CONCLUSION: TO KNOW NOTHING BUT JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED

This thesis has provided a glimpse into the great clash between early Christianity and its Graeco-Roman neighbors. The multiple different factors of this interaction – theological, philosophical, social, and more – are all on full display in the writings of Celsus and Origen. It is a privilege for readers today, whether Christian or non-Christian, to have the Λόγος Ἀληθής. There is simply no other work like it in its comprehensive and unrelenting commitment to deconstructing the claims of Christianity. Celsus' views on Christianity's doctrine, God, and followers challenge the very core of Christian belief. In a Western world so familiar with Christianity, Celsus' 2<sup>nd</sup>-century, Graeco-Roman, Platonist perspective is extremely valuable.

In a similar way, Origen's apologetic strategy benefits modern readers greatly. While at first reading, it may not seem that Origen truly seeks to counter Celsus' claims, this thesis has demonstrated that he does quite the opposite. It is true that Origen confirms much of Celsus' criticisms about Christians' evangelization of the lower classes of society, their common practice of interpreting Scripture allegorically, Christianity's unoriginality, and their belief in the incarnation of God. However, through the acknowledgement of the truth of those facts, Origen is able to bring to light the erroneous nature of Celsus' conclusions about Christianity. In this way, Origen is able to effectively oppose Celsus' treatise even though his initial confirmation of it perhaps surprises his readers when they first come to the *Contra Celsum*.

Despite the surprising nature of his strategy, I would argue that it is one that ought to be imitated. As discussed at the end of Chapter 3, Origen was unapologetic about the facts of Christianity and, in the *Contra Celsum*, works hard to clarify and endorse those facts. He meticulously strips away the layers of falsehood with which Celsus had adorned the facts of Christianity and attempts to reveal their truth. However, there is one question still to be asked:

Where do these facts receive their power from? Or, rather, what made Origen so confident in these facts that he was zealous to make them clear to his audience even if it meant confirming such an opponent as Celsus?

The answer to these questions lies in Scripture – an appropriate place to find answers for Origen’s beliefs. In 1.13 of *Contra Celsum*, Origen discusses verses from what is now 1 Corinthians that I believe are the cornerstone of his apologetic strategy. While Origen does not cite this entire passage, he alludes to the main ideas laid out by the apostle Paul in the following verses:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

The teaching of this passage essentially lays out what the interaction is between Christianity and an unbelieving world – exactly the interaction this thesis has been exploring through the examples of Origen and Celsus. And Paul’s response to an unbelieving world is precisely that which Origen imitates. All men hear the same words about Christianity. The “word of the cross” and Jesus’ death on it is clearly laid out to everyone. There are no questions, in other words, what the facts of Christianity are. Chief among those facts are that Jesus died on the cross and

rose 3 days later, but Celsus and Origen’s interaction shows that all other facts about Christianity are easily known.

In response to these facts, however, there are two reactions: belief and disbelief. Celsus and Origen are proof that Christianity produces either one of these two starkly contrasting reactions. Some men, on encountering Christianity, are completely repulsed by it – as Celsus was. Others, however, are completely attracted to it – as Origen was. As this passage from 1 Corinthians frames it, Christianity is either foolishness or wisdom. And, ultimately, the reaction of an individual to the facts of Christianity depends on the power of God himself. As Paul writes in verses 20-21: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” As this Scripture teaches, it is God alone who makes men see that the “wisdom of the world” is foolish and that the supposed “folly” of the Christian message is actually wise. In other words, without this activity of God, no man would believe. “For,” as Paul says in verses 22-24, “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Jews and Greeks – essentially all unconverted people – seek for truth in signs, in philosophical wisdom, in any number of things. They certainly would not seek it in the foolish message of Christians if it was not for God calling them and making them see his “power” and “wisdom” in that message. It was this unwavering belief in the power of God that led Paul to “preach Christ crucified” despite the opposition that message brought. And it was the same belief in Origen that led to his unique apologetic strategy. He deeply understood the teaching of this passage in 1 Corinthians. As he writes in 1.13, *Αὐτόθεν γὰρ κηρυσσόμενος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐσταυρωμένος μωρία ἐστὶ*

κηρύγματος: “For it is manifest that the preaching of Jesus Christ as crucified is the foolishness of preaching.” He understood that the preaching of Christ crucified – and all the other truths that adorn this central doctrine – was folly to the world. He read Celsus’ Λόγος Ἀληθῆς and saw in him a Greek seeking wisdom and only finding folly in the Christian message. Like Paul, he did not rush to obscure the facts of Christianity since they had not persuaded Celsus in the first place. Indeed, he did the exact opposite. Recognizing the blindness of Celsus to Christian truth and relying on the power of God, he was unashamed and bold in proclaiming the truth of Christ crucified and of all those aspects of Christianity discussed in this thesis. For what else but the power of God could persuade Celsus?

As such, modern Christians find in Origen a man totally convinced by the facts of Christianity, totally reliant on the power of God, and totally unashamed in preaching about what he knew to be true. In this way, Origen is a great encouragement to all Christians and an inspiration to any Christian apologist. If Christians truly do believe in the power of God and the activity of God in lives of men, what better way to live out that belief than to be unapologetic in proclaiming the truth of Christianity? It would have been easy for Origen to capitulate to Celsus’ attacks. It is no doubt that Celsus presented many opportunities for Origen to apologize for Christianity and water down its message. Origen, however, never did so. If he could do so in the face of such an attack as Celsus’, what then should stop Christians from following his example? For, indeed, Origen is right to point out in his preface the teaching of Romans 8:38-39: “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,” – including the attacks of men like Celsus – “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Christians, then,

should follow in the footsteps of Paul and Origen who did not hesitate to preach about this Christ whose power is never absent from the message that Christians proclaim.

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