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## **Persuasive Rhetoric in Origen's Contra Celsum.**

Daniel Charles Headrick  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Daniel Charles Headrick entitled "Persuasive Rhetoric in Origen's Contra Celsum.." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Philosophy.

David Dungan, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

David Linge, James Fitzgerald

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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PERSUASIVE RHETORIC IN ORIGEN'S *CONTRA CELSUM*

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Daniel Charles Headrick  
August 2003

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jenney Ridley, who lovingly and exhaustively supported me all throughout my studies.

## **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank the Department of Religious Studies, which has provided me with three great years of education and intellectual stimulation. In terms of this thesis, the support of Professor David Dungan has been tremendously valuable. The amount of time he sacrificed to teach me Greek and to push me in the right intellectual direction is greatly appreciated. I want to thank Professor David Linge for his extraordinary friendship and the support he offered me during many difficult times.

Finally, a brief word of acknowledgment is due to Todd Reutzel. Todd introduced me to the wonderfully enigmatic world of Garamond and suffered heroically through the first 15 pages of this thesis.

### Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the philosophical and rhetorical elements of Origen of Alexandria's *Contra Celsum*. Herein, one can find to their delight three major themes of ancient argumentation: the argument from antiquity, the moral effect argument, and the argument from prophecy. The bulk of this thesis is the author's own exegesis of key passages in the *Contra Celsum*.

The major thesis advanced here is that the strategies of rhetoric used by Christian and non-Christian in late antiquity were quite similar, in fact, exactly the same in many cases. The interpretation of key textual passages in the *Contra Celsum* advanced here is offered as evidence of the alleged similarities in rhetorical strategies.

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## I. Introduction

The focus of this inquiry is on the philosophy, rhetoric and argumentative structure of Origen of Alexandria's *Contra Celsum*. The *Contra Celsum* was a massive polemical text written by Origen to refute the claims made by the Platonist philosopher Celsus in his attack on Christianity, a work entitled the ἀληθὴς λόγος, or *True Doctrine*. Origen's defense of Christianity presents a wealth of information about the status of Christian argumentation in the third century. While the primary subject of this thesis is the *Contra Celsum*, other representative texts of the first and second centuries will be used to better understand the history of argumentation and the kinds of persuasion used by Christian thinkers. The thesis advanced here is that the strategy of persuasion used by Origen was to present Christian belief and practice as normative and superior to Hellenistic culture and religion by appealing to a shared ground of common assumptions and beliefs between Greeks and Christians.

## II. Scholarship on Origen and Methodological Issues

One of the methodological problems of studying Origen is that many of his writings are filled with interpolations. His *Peri Archon*, for example, was translated from the original Greek into Latin by Rufinus of Aquileia, who admitted to toning down many of Origen's more controversial ideas. Fortunately, the *Contra Celsum* has survived in its entirety, with few of the corruption issues associated with his other writings, and is available in a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript and the *Philokalia*.<sup>1</sup> A recent English translation by Henry Chadwick is widely used by scholars. Despite the availability of the text and its importance for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian studies, there is a dearth of secondary literature on the *Contra Celsum*. There is, however, a sizable amount of secondary literature on Origen's exegesis of the Bible and his mystical theology. Most of this scholarship is rooted in a Christian theological perspective, usually focusing on Origen's tenuous relationship to Christian orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup>

There has been a resurgence of interest in the thought and legacy of Origen in the twentieth century especially. One of the major preoccupations of recent commentators has been the question of determining the extent to which Origen was compromised in his Christian authenticity by "outside" influences. Christianity is usually taken to be one thing, self-sufficient and pure, while the "outside" influences—Greek philosophy, culture and religion for the most part—are taken to be quite distinct and subordinate. These interpretations often assume that the Christian tradition is hermetically sealed and can only

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<sup>1</sup> See Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*. Cambridge: CUP, 1953. pp. xxix-xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Jean Danielou's *Origen*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955; Henri Crouzel *Origen*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989.

subsume and transform other cultures and ideas when it comes into contact with them.

Characteristic of this view is Jean Danielou's assessment of Origen:

“The genuinely biblical element [of Origen's exegetical method] mingles with a stream flowing from the culture of the time...The core of the problem, then, is to unravel the tangled skein and separate the main threads of *genuine* typology from the *temporary* accretions derived from the culture of the time.”<sup>3</sup>

The dominant metaphor here is the easily separable skeins of a rope, of which the less important strands, once unraveled, will reveal a pure and substantial core. Danielou's magisterial treatment of Origen was responsible for sparking much contemporary scholarship, so this observation concerns only one flaw in an otherwise helpful work. A much more dynamic view of cultural interaction is needed to understand early Christian literature.<sup>4</sup>

Such a preoccupation with the coherence and purity of systems led scholars like Danielou to make such theological claims at the end of his work that, for example, “There can thus be little point in asking whether every part of the system is logically coherent. The source of unity lies deeper than that, in Origen's intimate knowledge and eager love of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> The Origen presented here by Danielou is a masterful philosopher and theologian, uncontaminated by the parasitic influence of Platonism and Hellenism. Danielou argued that Origen somehow embodied all of the available categories because his intellectual and spiritual vitality was so complex and varied that a single category would only oversimplify matters. Undoubtedly there is some validity in this view, but it cannot be the

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<sup>3</sup> Danielou, p. 185.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Jonathan Z. Smith's *Drudgery Divine*, The University of Chicago Press, 1990 in which the Protestant biases of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on early Christianity are revealed as disguised anti-Catholic polemics. The obsessions with purity and originality pervade the works that Smith addresses here as well and are similar to much of the scholarship on Origen.

<sup>5</sup> Danielou, p. 314.

case simply because the alternative—Origen as non-Christian, as a compromised Hellene—is too horrible to fathom for modern thinkers.

Other scholars, like Henri Crouzel, saw Origen's work as a strictly Biblical enterprise. He has argued that Origen's intellectual processes began by "starting from Scripture and also using philosophic data and Hellenistic imagery."<sup>6</sup> It is quite unlikely, and probably philosophically untenable, that Origen would have been so self-conscious and wooden in his intellectual development, as to deliberately utilize "Hellenistic imagery" and "philosophic data" to supplement an already fully functional Christianity. Cultural fusion is a much messier process than this view of Origen piecing together ideas as if they were distinct areas.

A slightly more complex view of Origen's interaction with Hellenistic culture that takes us in more useful directions can be found in the work of Joseph Trigg, who has observed that Origen "does not always seem to have been aware...of the extent to which Platonism molded his understanding of the Christian life."<sup>7</sup> This seems to indicate that creating Christian language is a complex affair, informed by sometimes subconscious influences. The preoccupation with reconciling the supposed opposition between philosophy and theology in Origen's oeuvre is still present, even in Trigg's work.<sup>8</sup>

Even very recent commentators have devoted much energy to constructing an "orthodox" Origen by analyzing his relationship to philosophy, which usually turns out to mean that philosophy did not overtake Origen's Christianity. Mark Edwards has been one particularly astute analyst of Origen's relation to Platonism. He has argued in reference to Origen's interactions with Hellenistic philosophy that even "If Origen learned the use of

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<sup>6</sup> Crouzel, H. (1989). *Origen*. Edinburgh, T & T Clark.

<sup>7</sup> Trigg (1983), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> See Trigg's "Origen Man of the Church" in *Origenian Quinta*. Ed. by Robert Daly. Leuven University Press: Leuven, 1992. Pp. 51-56

allegory from the Platonists, the premises and eductions were his own.”<sup>9</sup> This may very well be the case—the point here is not to quarry with the exact relationship between Platonic philosophy and Christianity in Origen’s writings—but rather with the single-minded preoccupation with rescuing Origen from the clutches of his enemies. Edwards seems to assume that a case needs to be made for Origen’s intellectual autonomy from philosophy. Furthermore, the assumption still is retained in Edward’s work that a distinction between Platonism as such and a fiercely independent (read: Christian) Origen needs to be made. The tone of Edwards’ work and his predecessors often presupposes that “true” Christianity retains a pure, solidified essence, and derivations from this essence become derivations because they have been compromised by some parasitic influence. So, much of the secondary literature has been concerned with Origen’s relationship to some normative category of Christian orthodoxy. This will not be the focus of this thesis.

Instead of these disputes within Christianity, the focus here will be on the argumentative rhetoric in the *Contra Celsum*. By “rhetoric” I mean simply a “technique of persuasive discourse,”<sup>10</sup> which can permeate a text in explicit and implicit ways. I will not use it as a pejorative category, as it is often taken to mean in modern usage. Often the pejorative sense of “rhetoric” is a skeptical reading of a speaker’s words, for example, in the sense of a speech that contains much verbal artistry without any real underlying substance.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Edwards. “Christ or Plato?” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*. Ed. by Lewis Ayers and Gareth Jones. Routledge: London, 1998. pp. 11-25. Edward’s view of the distinction between Platonic and Christian allegorical methods in Origen is that in the latter case, participation in God is through “historical epiphanies” and in the former through analogical progression. Origen certainly believed in the historicity of the central elements in the Christian narrative (i.e. cross, resurrection, etc.) but this distinction seems to be drawn primarily to distance Origen from Valentinian or more generally Gnostic usage of the allegorical method, which are often taken to be imaginative repudiations of historical truths.

Instead, “rhetoric” should be taken to signify all the vast discursive techniques by which a writer is attempting to convince his audience of a particular point. There were, of course, rhetorical schools that produced handbooks of rhetoric, all of which had great influence on the style of Hellenistic literature—but the focus of this thesis will not be on the influence of particular rhetoricians on Origen. Rather, the focus will be on the general strategies of rhetorical argumentation employed by Origen to convince and persuade readers of his understanding of the Christian tradition. A survey of some thinkers who were writing prior to Origen will help give us some insight into the history of particular arguments used in the *Contra Celsum*. We will begin by briefly looking at the Jewish historian Josephus because his arguments concerning the antiquity of Judaism were very useful to Christian apologists. Then, a quick examination of Justin Martyr and Tatian will bring us up to the time of Origen’s *Contra Celsum*.

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<sup>10</sup> This definition is taken from Paul Ricoeur’s “Rhetoric—Poetics—Hermeneutics” in Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader. Ed. by Walter Jost and Michael J. Hyde. (New Haven: Yale, 1997) p. 62.

### III. Writers Before Origen

#### i. Josephus

Many themes in Christian apologetic literature of the second and third centuries can be traced back to the Jewish historian Josephus (37 ca-100 CE). Josephus had found it necessary to defend Judaism from the accusations leveled against it by the Greeks. The result of these polemical efforts was the *Contra Apionem*. Written after the *Jewish Antiquities* in 93/94 CE, the *Contra Apionem* was an attempt to establish the great antiquity (ἀρχαιολογίαν) of Judaism as a response to the anti-Judaism of Greco-Roman polemicists. The relevance of the *Contra Apionem* to Origen's work is in the argument from antiquity that Josephus employed, which Origen would later put to good use.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, the argument from antiquity was an argument about which civilization was oldest. The prevailing view in this period was that truth originated with the oldest human tradition. Thus, if Judaism could be established as the oldest tradition, then later traditions owed their participation in truth to Judaism. If his opponents argued that Judaism had borrowed ideas and practices from other cultures—like the Greeks—Josephus could turn around and say that since Judaism was older than these cultures, that the accusation was groundless.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon in relation to Origen, see Feldman, L. H. (1990). "Origen's *Contra Celsum* and Josephus' *Contra Apionem*: The Issue of Jewish Origins." *Vigiliae Christianae* 44: 101-135.

<sup>12</sup> Chadwick saw clearly enough that the proof from antiquity was absurd. Despite this negative appraisal, he cautioned that "from a strictly historical viewpoint our superior smile is a grossly unimaginative anachronism." From his *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. p. 14. It is hard to see how we would transcend our own contingency in evaluating the legitimacy of ancient assumptions. Certainly we begin with our own ethnocentric judgments because none of us start from neutral standpoints, but are we being "anachronistic" when we make judgments about the past? It seems to be the case that only if we replace ancient beliefs with our own and then make historical evaluations based on this transferal are we then guilty of "grossly unimaginative anachronism."

Josephus wrote the *Contra Apionem* in order to respond to the “malicious calumnies of certain individuals”<sup>13</sup> These individuals had argued that Judaism was much younger than Greek and Egyptian culture, and thus inferior. The key passage for our purposes comes in Book II of the *Contra Apionem*: “Each nation endeavors to trace its own institutions back to the remotest date [τὸ ἀρχαιότατον], in order to create the impression that, far from imitating [μιμεισθαί] others, it has been the one to set its neighbors an example of orderly life under law.”<sup>14</sup> Josephus is basically saying “See, everybody else is making this argument—so, the Jews get a shot at it too.” The influence of such ideas on Origen would be profound: he believed that Christianity was true in part because it could trace its origin through Judaism. However, if Judaism was not itself an ancient and well-established religion, then Christianity, by extension, would be discredited.

To prove the antiquity of Judaism, Josephus used a variety of historical sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish. One Egyptian historian by the name of Manetho was particularly useful. Josephus claimed that Manetho’s history “furnished us [i.e. Josephus and the reader] with evidence from Egyptian literature on two most important points: first that we came into Egypt from elsewhere, and secondly, that we left it at a date so remote in the past that it preceded the Trojan War by nearly a thousand years.”<sup>15</sup> Josephus uses an Egyptian historian to prove the antiquity of Judaism, but he simultaneously argues that the Jews were not Egyptian. The Jews had to be unique; to say that they were originally of Egyptian provenance would be the same as saying that Egyptian culture had created them.

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<sup>13</sup> Josephus. *Contra Apionem*. 1.1 in Loeb Classical Library: *Josephus* vol. 1. Ed. H. St. J. Thackeray. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926

<sup>14</sup> *Contra Apionem*. 2, 152.

<sup>15</sup> *Contra Apionem*. 1,104.



After arguing for the antiquity of Judaism, Josephus claimed that later outsider cultures simply borrowed their ideas from the Jews. Thus, derivative inklings of Jewish theology can be found in Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Plato and the Stoic philosophers, all of whom had borrowed heavily from Moses.<sup>16</sup> These other cultures who had borrowed from Judaism were too elitist; they had crudely “addressed their philosophy to the few.”<sup>17</sup> Josephus contrasts this with the universalism and integrated vision of the Jewish lawgiver, Moses, who “implanted this belief [i.e. the unification of belief with practice] concerning God... to all future generations.”<sup>18</sup> So, Judaism was the oldest tradition—as established by Manetho and others—and later cultures borrowed ideas from Judaism.

This view of Moses as a global legislator who created lasting norms for all cultures had a richer and more exaggerated history in earlier Jewish historians. For example, Artapanus viewed Moses as the inventor of Greek *and* Egyptian religion (an odd claim to be sure), as well as singing and poetry, astrology, the science of hermeneutics, and Egyptian hieroglyphs.<sup>19</sup> The wide observance of a day of rest and dietary restrictions, for example, are also given as proofs of Jewish influence on Greeks and Barbarians alike.<sup>20</sup> Despite the Jews’ isolation from their co-religionists, Josephus maintained that their beliefs and practices were in part the global paradigms for all cultures. Of course, these paradigms were corrupted by malice and ignorance on the part of the non-Jewish “borrower,” but they still served as the eternal moral exemplars for the world.

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<sup>16</sup> *Contra Apionem* 2.168

<sup>17</sup> *Contra Apionem* 2.169

<sup>18</sup> *Contra Apionem* 2.169-170

<sup>19</sup> See Droge, pp. 26-27. Many of the techniques and themes of Jewish polemics in this period were taken from Egyptian sources like Hecataeus of Abdera. Hecataeus had claimed an Egyptian origin for Greek philosophy in that the Greek philosophers came as ‘tourists’ to Egypt to gather wisdom.

<sup>20</sup> *Contra Apionem* 2.282. ‘Barbarian’ (βάρβαρος) was Josephus’, and any Greek’s term for a non-Greek because their language sounded like “bar-bar” to the untrained ethnocentric ear of the Greek thinker.

Christian apologists found Josephus' arguments about the antiquity of Judaism very useful for their apologetic enterprises. Just as Josephus had appropriated Egyptian historiographical polemics, the Christians would, in turn, use the Jewish arguments for their own purposes. There is nothing unusual or ironic about the fact that Jews and Christians alike adapted the same historical material for their own quite specific purposes. Texts have a way of ending up in a variety of people's hands who then decide to put them to use in their own idiosyncratic ways. Now, let us look briefly at Justin Martyr and Tatian as precursors to Origen.

## ii. Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) was one of the first Christians to respond to the growing attack on Christian belief and practice during the second century. He was born in Flavia Neapolis in Samaria<sup>21</sup> and converted to Christianity ca. 130 CE. While traveling in Ephesus he studied the philosophy of the Pythagoreans, the Stoics, the Peripatetics, and finally the Platonists, which he took up whole-heartedly. He remained convinced of the full truth of Platonism until, by his own account, he encountered an old man on a beach who convinced him that Platonism was an inadequate source of truth because it lacked the revelation found in the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The revelation of the prophets in the Old Testament concerning Christ convinced Justin to blend this new "philosophy" of Christianity with his already established knowledge of the Stoic's *logos* theology and Platonism.

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<sup>21</sup> *1 Apology 1 St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*. Trans. by Leslie William Barnard. New York: Paulist Press, 1997. For a concise and excellent overview of Justin's life and apologetic strategy, see Chadwick, H. (1993). Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity. *The Early Church and Greco-Roman Thought*. E. Ferguson. New York, Garland Publishing, Inc. **8**: 23-45.

<sup>22</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* 3-10

The revelation that the Christians believed was in the Old Testament was recounted to Justin by this mysterious old man, who claimed that “long before the time of those reputed philosophers, there lived blessed men who were just and loved by God, men who spoke through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>23</sup> Justin’s identity as a Christian was in part strongly shaped by Hellenistic philosophy, but his conversion was confirmed by the prophecies he found in the writings of the Jews. The Christian use of Old Testament prophecies was a vitally important component of Christian argumentation in the early Church. Its most explicit formulation was already embedded in the New Testament Gospels. The liberal sprinkling of references to Psalms and Isaiah was widely used as a technique of persuasion for potential proselytes. Justin claimed to be mightily impressed by this proof, but it certainly helped that in Christianity, he thought he had found confirmation of his Platonic convictions. In fact, of all of the Greek apologists of the pre-Constantinian era, Justin was probably the most optimistic about the compatibility of Hellenistic philosophy with Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

Many of the themes developed by Justin would be utilized and expanded by Origen, so it is worthwhile to give a brief overview of Justin’s contribution to Christian apologetic literature. His two *Apologies*, which were addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius<sup>25</sup> around 156<sup>26</sup>, were written to defend Christianity from Roman aspersions and to plea for recognition and clemency from the Roman authorities for Christian believers.

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<sup>23</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* 7

<sup>24</sup> See Chadwick (1966), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *1 Apology* 1

<sup>26</sup> See Grant, Robert M. *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 52-53. The *First Apology* was probably occasioned by the martyrdom of Polycarp. Grant believed that the two apologies were actually one, and were only separated later.

The rhetorical strategy behind Justin's presentation of Christian belief was to appeal to the common ground between the Christians and his opponents. He realized that a fideistic assertion of belief, without analogy or rational argumentation would be completely unpersuasive. To accomplish this, Justin compares Christian stories with those of the Greeks in order to suggest that the Christian stories are not really so odd and dangerously novel as the Greeks had claimed. He also attacks the Greek stories for their immorality. For example, to lessen the apparent offence occasioned by the Christian belief that God has a son, Justin would simply show how the belief that the gods had children was prevalent in Greek mythology. The Christian belief that God had a son was nothing "new or different" when compared with the Greek belief that Jupiter had many sons, who, despite their divine parentage, were given to wanton acts of human licentiousness.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Christ's suffering as a divine being is hardly scandalous in light of the indignities suffered by Bacchus, Asclepius and Hercules.<sup>28</sup> His virgin birth is no novelty when compared with the virgin birth of Perseus to Danaë.<sup>29</sup> Even the miracles of Jesus should not cause offence if one recalls the miraculous healing stories of Asclepius.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to comparing Christian stories to those of the Greeks, Justin made good use of the argument from antiquity. Here is a typical passage demonstrating a strong reliance on this argument:

Whatever things we say as having been learned from Christ, and the prophets who came before him, are alone true, and older than all the writers who have lived, and we ask to be accepted, not because we say the same things as they do, but because we speak the truth; and [secondly] that Jesus Christ alone was really begotten as Son of God, being His Word and First-begotten and Power, and becoming man by His will He taught us these things for the conversion and restoration of the human race;

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<sup>27</sup> *1 Apology* 21

<sup>28</sup> *1 Apology* 22

<sup>29</sup> *1 Apology* 22

<sup>30</sup> *1 Apology* 22

and [thirdly] that before He became a man among men some, under the influence of the wicked demons already mentioned, related as real occurrences the myths which the demons had devised through the poets, in the same manner as they have caused to be fabricated the scandalous reports against us and impious deeds, of which there is neither witness nor proof—we shall bring forward this proof.<sup>31</sup>

Justin here seamlessly weaves the proof from prophecy with his understanding of historical truth, suggesting that the truth of the prophetic passages, at least in part, is attested to by their provenance in a most ancient past. He did not rest his argument on the Christian reading of the Septuagint alone—such an appeal would have seemed too partisan. Instead, he presents the Greek poets as third-party witnesses to Christianity, with the implicit suggestion to the non-Christian reader being that these are more objective witnesses to Christianity than the Judeo-Christian literature.

The bulk of Justin's appeal to non-Christian prophetic sources relied on the so-called Sybilline oracles. Justin's belief in the Stoic doctrine of the *logos* gave him reason enough to incorporate non-Christian stories. The *logos spermatikos* doctrine held that every human is born with certain notions implanted in their mind, a kind of seminal reasoning that helps direct philosophic and spiritual inquiry. With this in hand, Justin can argue that "Whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated according to their share of logos by invention and contemplation."<sup>32</sup> Truth springs from one source—the divine logos. Hence, whenever Plato and the Greeks speak anything that is laudable, it is "the property of us Christians."<sup>33</sup>

Such a universalistic reading of human knowledge was well suited to the goals of Christian argumentation. It established the idea that what Christians believed in was essentially nothing new, but a perennial expression of divine and ancient truth. Of course,

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<sup>31</sup> 1 *Apology* 23

<sup>32</sup> 2 *Apology* 10

the Crucifixion and Resurrection as central components of the Christian story were in some sense new, because they were recent events—but even these were prophesied by ancient texts, and the truth they embodied was ordered and planned from the beginning. The Greeks had probably misunderstood Judeo-Christian beliefs, but they nonetheless had limited access to some revelatory truths. All of this was directed towards a complex argument that combined Justin's *logos* theology with various apologetic techniques, the aim of which was to demonstrate that Christianity was no mere novelty.

The novelty of Christian belief is a dangerous possibility always lurking in the apologetic literature, and Justin attempts to lessen this possibility by claiming that the Christian doctrine of creation is quite similar to Plato's theories about the origin of the cosmos, and Christian eschatological belief is simply a reiteration of the Stoic doctrine of a cataclysmic conflagration.<sup>34</sup> The rhetorical program of forcing a common ground of shared mythology and assumptions between Christianity and Hellenistic culture is an attempt to get rid of any hint of novelty within Christianity. The implicit rhetorical question here is "Why persecute us since our stories and beliefs have so much in common with yours?" Justin is no Joseph Campbell, blithely combining myths into syncretistic narratives that embody perennially occurring psychological truths. This is the case because, for Justin, even more so for Origen, there is no deep affinity between the core revelations of Christianity and Hellenistic thought. The observation of each apparent affinity is actually intended to temporarily disarm the skeptical reader, for whom the charge of novelty was a powerful indictment of unwarranted Christian belief. Christian stories are similar to Greek stories formally, but unlike the latter, the former are edifying. If Jupiter is brought up as a point of

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<sup>33</sup> 2 *Apology* 13

comparison to a Christian story, he will later be eviscerated as a parricide.<sup>35</sup> Bacchus and other gods are derided for their sexual immorality and contrasted unfavorably with the Christian deity:

“We are not persuaded that He [i.e. Jesus] ever was goaded by lust for Antiope, or such other women, or of Ganymede, nor was He delivered by that hundred-handed monster whose aid was obtained through Thetis, nor, on this account, was anxious that her son Achilles should destroy many of the Greeks because of his concubine Briseis. We pity those who believe these things, and we recognize those who invented them to be demons.”<sup>36</sup>

Justin’s Platonic conception of God as impassible, eternal and uncreated gave him ample resources for attacking the anthropomorphism of the Greco-Roman pantheon. His attack on Greek anthropomorphism is not simply a project in deconstruction; he adds to his critique what he sees as a substantive charge, namely that Jesus was morally pure, while the Greek gods were blatantly immoral. To wit, he juxtaposes a moral Christ with an immoral Jupiter in what emerges as a kind of moral litmus test for “true” deity. Justin maintains that Jesus, unlike the Greek gods, was not sexually impure, and furthermore, Jesus’ miraculous birth was certainly not the product of sexual intercourse.<sup>37</sup> So, Christian revelation was not a complete novelty and it contained much that was morally edifying, unlike the Greek myths.

Many of the assumptions that Josephus had made in the *Contra Apionem* surface strongly in Justin’s *Apology*. Primarily because “Moses is more ancient than all the Greek writers” Justin argues that all that is good and true in Greek philosophy owes its origins to the prophets and the logos.<sup>38</sup> The demons are the worst of thieves since they plagiarized

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<sup>34</sup> 1 *Apology* 20

<sup>35</sup> 1 *Apology* 21

<sup>36</sup> 1 *Apology* 25

<sup>37</sup> 1 *Apology* 21

<sup>38</sup> 1 *Apology* 44

Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth in the myth of Perseus and applied other Scriptures to Hercules and Bacchus.<sup>39</sup>

Justin Martyr was defending Christianity against the charges that it was a mere novelty. He did this by showing the similarity between Greek and Christian stories. However, in order to show why the Christian stories were preferable, he argued that they were morally superior. The Greek stories, replete as they were with incest and murder at the hands of the gods, were self-evidently inferior to the piety of Christian Scriptures. This was a quite traditional line of argumentation and one will not be surprised to find it used quite frequently by Origen in his *Contra Celsum*.

### iii. Tatian

Justin's pupil Tatian (120-173) had a less pacific view of the compatibility of Hellenistic thought with Christian belief. Tatian's writings exhibit a marked disdain for Greek religious ideals. His *Oratio ad Graecos* (*Exhortation to the Greeks*) is of a genre similar to Justin's work by the same title, but its approach to Greek culture and philosophy is quite different. The general argument of the *Oratio ad Graecos* is that Greek religion and culture is immoral and inferior to the Christian tradition.

There is very little reflection of the *logos spermatikos* in Tatian's writing. Instead of showing the inklings of truth in other traditions, he harshly derides the Greek philosophers for gluttony, arrogance and general immorality.<sup>40</sup> His technique is to ask rhetorical questions that reveal the absurdity of Greek mythology: "Why should I reverence gods who take bribes and are angry if they do not get them? Let them keep their fate: I have no wish to worship

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<sup>39</sup> 1 *Apology* 54



planets.”<sup>41</sup> He attacks Homer’s *Iliad* on the basis that Helen is absurdly honored by the Greeks, even though she was an adulteress.<sup>42</sup> Tatian, like Justin before him, uses the moral critique of religion to good effect and denies the use of allegory to his opponents.<sup>43</sup> The Christian belief in the Incarnation is not “nonsense” when compared with Greek myths, which are not only immoral but hopelessly anthropomorphic fantasies. The Greek audience is warned to “not allegorize either your stories or your gods [μηδὲ τοὺς μύθος μηδὲ τοὺς θεοὺς ὑμῶν ἀλληγορήσητε ], for if you try to do so your conception of divinity is subverted not only by us but also by yourselves.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Oratio ad Graecos* also uses the argument from antiquity frequently. To buttress this argument, Tatian employs a convoluted chronology intended to show that Christianity, through Judaism, had legitimate claim to the most antique culture. In this vein, Tatian argues: “But in regard to my present point, I am most anxious to make it *absolutely clear* that Moses is not only older than Homer but is older even than the writers before him, Linus, Philammon, Thamyras, Amphion, Orpheus, Musaeus...”<sup>45</sup> Here we can see that Christianity can be proven through the antiquity of Moses and Judaism. By Tatian’s time, it was apparently sufficient to state the fact of Judaism’s antiquity, since people like Josephus had already done the gritty historiographical work. With Justin Martyr and Tatian, we can see the formulation of a coherent Christian apologetic tradition. The primary theme of their works—the superiority of Christianity vis-à-vis Hellenistic culture—features strongly in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*.

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<sup>40</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos* 2-3

<sup>41</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos* 10

<sup>42</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos* 10

<sup>43</sup> For a useful discussion of these issues, see Dawson, D. (1992). *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>44</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos* 21.2

#### IV. Origen of Alexandria's *Contra Celsum*

##### i. Date of Celsus' *True Doctrine* and Origen's *Contra Celsum*

Origen (184/5-254/5 CE) probably wrote the *Contra Celsum* in the last years of his life, in or around 248 CE under the reign of Phillip the Arab.<sup>46</sup> The pagan philosopher Celsus had written his *True Doctrine* in the last portion of the 170's, even though there is some disagreement on this issue.<sup>47</sup> It is entirely unclear what specifically occasioned the writing of the *True Doctrine*, since we only know about it through Origen. It is also unclear whether or not Origen was the first Christian to respond to Celsus, even though he probably was the first to explicitly and systematically respond point by point.

##### ii. What is known about Celsus

Celsus was a Platonist philosopher who had an impressive and wide-ranging knowledge of Christian belief and practice. This knowledge was apparently no affectation; he was apparently able to make a more devastating critique of Christianity than his less-informed predecessors. Celsus' critique was unique in some sense because of the level of sophistication of his treatise and the fact that he had read some of the New Testament gospels and probably portions of Genesis. Later Christians thought he was an Epicurean. Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, labeled Celsus an "Epicurean," which was a classic

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<sup>45</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos* 41.1 italics added

<sup>46</sup> See Eusebius EH 6.36.1-3.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Hargis (1999) pp. 20-23 for a discussion of the evidence surrounding this dating. There is some meager internal evidence for dating which would point to the Decian persecutions in 178. Hargis however, argues for c. 200 as the date primarily because Celsus did not, in his view, capitalize on the anti-Christian rhetoric that was more popular in the 170's. He posits that the absence of such a critique indicates that the specific criticisms had probably faded by that time, having been replaced by

term of abuse by both Christian and Greek thinkers alike.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly much of this was intended for rhetorical effect, but there probably was some initial confusion on Origen's part as to the exact philosophical leanings of Celsus early in his response. Origen began the *Contra Celsum* with the assumption that his opponent was an Epicurean, but it is clear in later books that he abandoned that position, realizing the Platonist leanings of Celsus.

Very little is known about Celsus outside of interpretations of contexts within the *Contra Celsum*. Our only access to his *True Doctrine* is from what Origen himself quotes from the *Contra Celsum* itself. It is fortunate that Origen quotes his opponent's words at length, but we cannot be sure if it was verbatim. We know he summarized quite a few passages, but there is no compelling reason to think that he systematically misrepresented Celsus' words. Despite these problems, at the very least, we know that Celsus was seen as a "pagan" intellectual of Platonic pretensions.<sup>49</sup> He is generally thought to be a Platonist, at least in part because he quotes Plato throughout his attack on Christianity, and his arguments often rely implicitly on a Platonic framework. Despite this Platonic background, Celsus is generally not viewed as a profound philosopher. For example, Michael Frede has argued that "there is no reason to suppose that he [i.e. Celsus] was a philosopher of any significance" and that the *True Doctrine* "must have seemed in many regards rather

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other ones. This is still an argument from silence, and one could simply argue that Celsus, seeing himself as a philosopher, simply had a different set of problems with Christianity than his contemporaries.

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius. EH.6.36.2. Such labeling had apparently become *de rigueur* by the fourth century. Chadwick notes that calling someone an "Epicurean" in Late Antiquity was tantamount to using the term "Fascist" today. See "Introduction" in *Contra Celsum*, p. xxvi.

<sup>49</sup> The term pagan, from the Latin *paganus* meaning 'country-dweller' or 'rustic' is generally a pejorative term of Christian apologetic provenance. The more cumbersome locution "non-Christian" or the imprecise adjective "Greek" are at least more felicitous choices because they do not come from a position of Christian theological criticism. For a defense of using the term 'pagan', see P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (1999) pp. 4-5. They argue, unconvincingly I think, that the term 'pagan' "despite its strong pejorative connotations... appears as the least unsatisfactory term to describe the adepts of non-Judaeo-Christian religions in the Greater Mediterranean in antiquity." They reject 'heathen', derivative of *e0qniko/v* as being more strongly pejorative.

uninformed and unsophisticated.”<sup>50</sup> He may not have been a profound philosopher, but he was the only non-Christian of the period that we know of who took enough pains to read some Christian literature quite thoroughly and devise a critique.

The sophistication of Celsus’ polemic is due in part to his rhetorical skills and education, but the real power of his attack is due to his knowledge and familiarity with Christian and Jewish Scriptures. Celsus does not mention the popular criticism against Christianity circulating in the second century; there is no reference to bacchanalian orgies, cannibalism, incest or the other catalogue of stereotypes we find in the extant literature of that time period.<sup>51</sup> Celsus must have seen that these critiques would not have lasting power beyond rhetorical effect, so his polemic engages in a critique, among other things, of Christian Scripture. His knowledge of Judeo-Christian texts included the Epistle of Barnabas, the Book of Enoch, Matthew and Genesis—a limited reading to be sure, but nonetheless an advance on his predecessors’ knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

Some scholars think that the 2<sup>nd</sup> century apologists had read Celsus’ *True Doctrine* and were replying to it indirectly in the apologetic literature. This may be the case, but there is little clear evidence to substantiate this beyond imaginative readings of innuendo and suggestion internal to the texts. The *Contra Celsum* was the first direct and sustained response to the specific charges of Celsus’ attack, but it was written nearly 80 years after Celsus’ *True Doctrine*. It is not clear how much damage the *True Doctrine* had on the efforts of Christian missionaries, but clearly it was taken seriously enough by Origen that he devoted eight books to respond to the charges.

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<sup>50</sup> See the rather dismissive account of Frede in [Apologetics in the Roman Empire](#) (1999), pp. 154-55.

<sup>51</sup> See Simmons, Michael Bland. “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition” in [The Early Christian World](#) v. 2. ed. By Philip F. Esler. London: Routledge, 2000. p. 845.

<sup>52</sup> See Esler, p. 846.

### iii. Origen's Training and The Purpose of the *Contra Celsum*

Origen had received excellent training for responding to Celsus' *True Doctrine*. He was appointed head of the catechetical school at Alexandria ca. 206 due to his reputation as a polymath.<sup>53</sup> Concurrent with the beginning of the persecutions under governor Aquila between 206 and 211, Origen began to teach Christian doctrine to potential proselytes.<sup>54</sup> He apparently had a considerable amount of freedom to learn and teach a variety of non-Christian sources to his pupils since the school did not have a fixed curriculum. From Porphyry we have the testimony that Origen had studied under the renowned non-Christian Ammonius Saccas, from whom he "benefited greatly" despite the fact that, as Porphyry notes, he had "apostatized to an audacious and barbarous creed [i.e. Christianity]."<sup>55</sup> We also know that the catechetical school included a great deal of extra-Christian material in its curriculum, which helped Origen deal effectively with a Hellenistic author.

Adolf von Harnack's view of the catechetical school in Alexandria was that it was the nerve center of Christian rationalism, so capable of persuading non-Christians that it "overthrew polytheism by scientific means, while at the same time it conserved anything of

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<sup>53</sup> Eusebius thought it was around 203, see *Hist. Eccl.* 6.3.3. For a discussion of the later date and Origen's education specifically, see Roelof van den Broek "The Christian 'School' of Alexandria" in Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East. Ed. By Jan Willem Drijvers and Alasdair A. MacDonald. Leiden: Brill, 1995, pp. 39-47. For a discussion of the purpose of the Alexandrian school, see Robert L. Wilken "Alexandria: A School for Training in Virtue" in Schools of Thought in the Christian Tradition. Ed by Patrick Henry. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, pp.15-30.

<sup>54</sup> Van den Broek, p. 44

<sup>55</sup> Eusebius. *Hist. Eccl.* 6.19.6-7 Mark Edwards notes that Porphyry's purpose here is to show that Origen's "instruction in Greek philosophy was so perfect that he deserved to be called a greek; hence his adherence in his maturity to the Christian faith could be deemed by rhetorical licence an apostasy" p. 173 in "Ammonius, Teacher of Origen." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. Vol. 44, No. 2. Incidentally, Edwards' larger purpose here is to argue that Ammonius was *not* Origen's teacher, a view that only Heinrich Dörrie has advanced. For a discussion of Ammonius Saccas in detail, see Frederic M. Schroeder "Ammonius Saccas" in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* Part II, Vol. 36.1, pp.493-526.

value in Greek science and culture.”<sup>56</sup> It would be very difficult to determine and then demonstrate the causal links between the reception of the *Contra Celsum* among Hellenistic readers and any subsequent conversion to Christianity. Harnack saw the apologetic literature coming out of the Alexandrian school as successful presumably because it employed more rational means of argumentation than non-Christian polemics. It is a warranted inference to suggest that the increased level of conversions in the third century had much to do with Christian interaction with Greek culture and learning—Justin Martyr being a prime example.

The purpose of writing such a voluminous response to this recently deceased critic of Christianity was, on the surface, a simple issue of responding to the request of his wealthy patron Ambrose.<sup>57</sup> Ambrose was a former Valentinian Christian who had been converted by Origen<sup>58</sup> and was his primary patron, supplying him with seven stenographers to whom he dictated the voluminous *Contra Celsum*. Origen once referred to Ambrose as “God’s taskmaster,” indicating that he received Ambrose’s patronage ambivalently.<sup>59</sup> One can surmise that Ambrose’s purpose in commissioning the *Contra Celsum* was to provide the Christian community with a learned and authoritative response to a dangerous critic of the faith.

Origen’s preface is replete with disclaimers about the purpose and necessity of the *Contra Celsum*. He notes that Jesus was “silent when false witnesses spoke against him” since “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

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<sup>56</sup> Qtd. In Wilken (1984), p. 16. The source was Harnack’s treatment of Origen in the *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*.

<sup>57</sup> *CC* Preface, 1

<sup>58</sup> See Eusebius, EH. 6.18.1.

<sup>59</sup> From the *Commentary on John*, Book V, qtd. in Crouzel, p. 13.

accusations.”<sup>60</sup> Presumably, the moral example of Jesus in the gospels makes formal argumentation seem like so much sophistry. It would seem that Origen has precluded rational argumentation. But he clearly gives it a major role in his own defense of Christianity, because—as he tells us—some weaker Christians are in need of it.

Origen claimed that Celsus’ *True Doctrine* was a poorly written and intellectually vacuous text, so obtuse that it could not even be characterized as fallacious in philosophical terms.<sup>61</sup> What he meant by this latter point was that to even commit a logical fallacy in philosophy was suggestive of some skill, and that Celsus could not even attain to such a minimal requirement. Despite this *ad hominem* attack, it is not clear that Origen truly thought Celsus was “uninformed and unsophisticated.” Writing an eight-book response to Celsus—a laborious, time-consuming, and expensive endeavor to be sure—would not have been the best way to demonstrate the judgment that Celsus was a weak opponent. The difficulty here may be in the reader’s eagerness to take the surface meaning of Origen’s rhetoric at face value. It is one thing to disarm an opponent by *ad hominem* attacks; it is quite another to go on *ad nauseum* against that opponent, expending great energy in the process while simultaneously maintaining that the opponent is unworthy of any substantive response. The reader also must not forget that the only source for the *True Doctrine* is the *Contra Celsum* itself, which means that Origen had the prerogative to edit the order and flow of Celsus’ own argument.

So, the *Contra Celsum* was born of a disagreement between a Christian and a Greek philosopher. On one side we have Celsus who thought “It makes no difference whether one calls the supreme God by the name used among the Greeks, or by that, for example, used

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

among the Indians, or by that among the Egyptians.”<sup>62</sup> On the other side we have Origen who believed that the Incarnation meant that God’s salvific power was available to all human beings. It was this particularism of Christian belief—the idea that God had been incarnate in only one human being—which scandalized Celsus. The theological disagreement between Origen and Celsus was about the means by which divinity was expressed to human beings. Celsus sees in Origen and the Christian movement a strong arrogance about truth, exemplified by their belief that there is only one God. His complaint is that in Christianity, a jealous and unjustifiably arrogant monotheism has arisen that threatens the very social fabric of the Roman Empire.

The genre of the *Contra Celsum* is generally considered to be that of the so-called apologetic kind. The genre had a considerable heritage in the second century with Justin Martyr, Clement, Tatian, and Theophilus, but Origen was the first to write an apology specifically addressing a particular text written by a specific author. The word “apology” is derived from the noun *apologia* (ἀπολογία) and is cognate with the verb *apologeîn* (ἀπολογεῖν) which mean “a speech of defense” and “to make a defense” respectively.<sup>63</sup> The usual setting for a formal *apologia* was the courtroom<sup>64</sup>, and in some sense the apologetic nature of the *Contra Celsum* resembles a courtroom setting. Propositions are presented and systematically rebutted with lengthy argumentation and presentations of evidence; but of course the “court” here is the implied reader of the text. As Frede has noted, Origen used

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<sup>61</sup> CC Preface, 5

<sup>62</sup> CC 1.24 cf. 5.41

<sup>63</sup> The editors of *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*. (1999) defined apologetic as “the defence of a cause or party supposed to be of paramount importance to the speaker.” P. 1

<sup>64</sup> See Frede’s discussion, pp. 136-7.



the verb *apologeîn* five times in the opening preface of the *Contra Celsum*, thus signaling the overtly apologetic structure of the text.<sup>65</sup>

The *Contra Celsum* is in many ways quite different from Origen's other works, in large part because it is a polemical text meant to answer the charges of a non-Christian. Its tone and content are, accordingly, dramatically different from a homiletical discourse or a mystical excursus. This is not to say that the *Contra Celsum* does not feature many kinds of non-literal readings—which so characterize the other texts.<sup>66</sup> However, the purpose of these readings is different. They are aimed at lessening the offence of Scripture's surface meanings and at seizing the interpretative terrain from Celsus. The tone of the *Contra Celsum* is not the pious setting of a homily, but the public defense of Christian ideas against the cultural opponents of Christianity.

Early in Book I, Origen says that he is writing his response to Celsus not so much for Christians—except those “weak in faith”—but for “those entirely without experience of faith in Christ.”<sup>67</sup> There are several elements in the text that implicitly support this claim. One can reasonably assume that a believing Christian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century was not the primary target audience of the *Contra Celsum* because the subject of the text was a response to an anti-Christian polemic written by a Greek intellectual. Furthermore, the arguments in the text presuppose a lack of familiarity with Christian doctrine and theology on the part of the reader. Another factor here is that Origen continually compares and contrasts Christianity

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>66</sup> I take “literal” to mean not the objective meaning of a text, given to any reader despite their leanings, but a highly contingent reading of a text that is taken by the reader to be the clear meaning, the “surface” meaning. What the text *really* means will rarely be the focus here; rather we will be interested in looking at what Origen and Celsus took the text to *really* mean. Such readings were contested and just as historically contingent as the readers themselves. As we will see for Origen, “literal” names the most basic, often superficial account of a text's meaning. But literal meanings often have plenty of non-literal elements like figurative speech and metaphorical language.

with Hellenistic culture and religion. This seems to imply that the intended audience was educated non-Christians. All of these factors help substantiate the claim that the *Contra Celsum* was a defense of Christianity meant to proselytize Greek intellectuals. It is also quite likely that it was written to justify Christian belief and practices to the governing elites in the Roman Empire.

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<sup>67</sup> CC Preface, 5.

## V. Argumentative Structure of the *Contra Celsum*

The structure of the *Contra Celsum* consists of quotations from Celsus' *True Doctrine* and Origen's response to each quotation. The result is a rather rambling apologetic *tour de force* in which each major criticism of Christianity by Celsus is addressed, sometimes with considerable overlap between sections. The division of the books was apparently not planned out in a rigorous way at all; rather, it seems most likely that Origen simply ended each book when the physical end of the scroll on which he was dictating the response had been reached. The lack of systematic planning is also seen in Origen's gradual realization that his opponent was not an Epicurean. As he penetrated into the core of the arguments, he found himself revising previous assessments that he had not carefully planned out before.

Origen's debt to the apologists of the second century was quite significant, but his own style and intellectual skills were different from his predecessors in many ways. Thus, we will find that with one major exception, the structure and logic of the arguments employed in the *Contra Celsum* owed their provenance—if not their particular expression here—to the earlier apologetic literature and a vast panoply of Hellenistic sources. An examination of the rhetorical techniques of the *Contra Celsum* can lead us to a more nuanced view of how Christian discourse was manufactured and what the major presuppositions of that discourse were.

Essential to Celsus' assault on Christianity was his belief that the most egregious error committed by Christians was their misanthropic and arrogant rejection of a program of ancient truth. This august truth emerges as uniform and totalizing in Celsus' vision: "There is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginning, which has always been

maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men.”<sup>68</sup> The primary objective of Celsus’ critique was to portray Christianity as a faddish religion, contrasted unfavorably with a Hellenistic culture steeped in great antiquity and buttressed by traditional mores. In direct contrast to the purported novelty of Christianity, Celsus claims that he has “nothing new to say, but only ancient doctrines.”<sup>69</sup>

This “ancient doctrine” was basically a Platonist account of divinity, which held that God is “good and beautiful and happy, and exists in the most beautiful state.”<sup>70</sup> Implicit within this doctrine was a rejection of Christian Incarnational theology since, if God “comes down to men, He must undergo change, a change from good to bad, from beautiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune...Accordingly, God could not be capable of undergoing this change.”<sup>71</sup> Celsus believed that the Christians—with their belief that God had become flesh in Jesus—were foolish because the eternal God could not become flesh. At the heart of Celsus’ critique was a strong revulsion towards Christian anthropomorphism that was embodied in the Christian belief that Jesus was divinized human flesh. Origen countered this by arguing for a divide between Christ’s human and divine elements.

#### **i. Argument from Antiquity**

Celsus’ emphasis on a perennially reoccurring ancient truth was a good occasion for Origen to use the argument from antiquity. We have of course seen this theme in many varieties in the writers surveyed above, but since our focus is on the *Contra Celsum*, it will be helpful to clarify its presuppositions and implications for Origen’s discourse. For Origen,

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<sup>68</sup> CC 1.14

<sup>69</sup> CC 4.14

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

the argument from antiquity presupposed that truth arose purely and completely in a most antique past, and that if one could trace one's own culture back to that past then one had the right to claim intellectual and religious supremacy. The implicit presupposition behind the proof from antiquity is that in the halcyon days of great antiquity, truth was singular and pure, unvarnished by outside influences. All later formulations of truth were, at best, weaker derivations.

Origen's debt to Josephus' *Contra Apionem* is clear in the passages where the proof from antiquity is a salient feature. Christian apologists had long adapted this theme used by Josephus to fit their own polemical agendas in order to argue that Christianity was the expression of great antiquity, hence responsible for all that was good and true in later traditions. This general observation has been amply reflected in the historiographical writing about the period, but there have been few detailed analyses of the development of the antiquity argument in Origen.<sup>72</sup> The origin of the tradition was not, as it might be supposed, with Josephus, rather it can at least be traced back to the Egyptian historians before the Common Era. Philosophically, it might find its intellectual genesis in Hesiod's notion of a golden age that gave way to increasingly unsophisticated and depraved periods of history.

Regardless of its provenance, by the time of Celsus' *True Doctrine*, it clearly was a well-established polemical device that was generally taken for granted. When Celsus describes Christianity as a late-breaking religious tradition, as a novelty and an innovation on a sacred and received body of truth, he is claiming that Christianity is vastly inferior to ancient Greek culture. Both Origen and Celsus claimed that their own culture was more ancient. As a result, Origen's problem with Celsus' assertion that an ancient doctrine existed

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<sup>72</sup> See Droge, p. 8

was not at all about the internal merits of the argument itself since he clearly agreed with Celsus that such doctrines do exist. Rather, his disagreement arose due to Celsus' exclusion of the Jews and the Christians from the list of people who received these ancient doctrines. Origen's usage of the argument from antiquity is concurrent with his realization that if Celsus would not admit the Jews into the exclusive circle of people who have access to truth, then the Christians were ruled out as well. For both thinkers then, the judgment was the same: to arrive late on the scene of history within an already existing culture was tantamount to being subordinate to that culture, and thus inferior.

By the time of the *Contra Celsum*, Origen believed that the historiography concerning the antiquity of the Jews was so solid and well established that he could simply refer to the authoritativeness of previous historians' work as proof of his argument. The apologists of the second century had stabilized the argument so well that by Origen's time he thought it was "superfluous to quote them here"; instead he simply refers the reader to the unquestioned witness of Josephus' *Contra Apionem* and even Tatian's *Oratio ad Graecos*.<sup>73</sup> Celsus frustrates Origen's attempts to make the antiquity argument by separating Judaism from Christianity. If the Christians had really nothing to do with Judaism then they could not use the antiquity of Judaism to support their own religious claims.

The effectiveness of Celsus' attack on the vulgar novelty of Christianity can be seen early in Book I when Celsus describes Jesus as the organizer of the Christian movement, emphasizing that it was only "a very few years ago [that] he [that is, Jesus] taught this doctrine and was considered by the Christians to be son of God."<sup>74</sup> Why should we believe

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<sup>73</sup> CC 1.16

<sup>74</sup> CC 1.26

in Jesus and his religion if he was so recently alive? Origen's response will be that despite Jesus' recent activity, the meaning of his life's work embodied ancient truths.

The argument from antiquity is spread rather sporadically throughout the *Contra Celsum*. Despite this, there is a rather predictable pattern that begins to emerge in those sections: Celsus will accuse the Christians of plagiarizing some Hellenistic idea or practice and Origen will counter with the claim that the antiquity of Christianity—via Judaism—precludes plagiarism. Naturally it is the Greeks who were guilty of such borrowing. For example, Celsus thinks that the Christians had “misunderstood the doctrine of the Greeks and barbarians” concerning conflagrations and floods, and that Moses had merely taken Deucalion's flood and used it in his own account.<sup>75</sup> Origen's strategy here, as elsewhere, is simply to claim that even though “Celsus has read widely and shows that he knows many stories, he failed to give attention to the antiquity of Moses...”<sup>76</sup>

To say that Moses is earlier than any Greek thinker is to say that any truth in Greek culture is a derivation from the fount of Mosaic wisdom. This means that the establishment of truth is contingent upon the demonstration of antiquity. Contemporary Christians who trace their own late-breaking understandings of the tradition back to the earliest possible period are also presupposing that truth is purest in its earliest historical expression, and that the accumulation of history only takes us farther away from that pure origin. The theology of history implicit here is perhaps of a species with Hesiod's account of a golden age in a remote antique past, which later cultures can only hope to imitate in their inevitable decline from truth.

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<sup>75</sup> CC 4.11

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* cf. CC 5.15 where Origen alleges that the doctrine of a world-conflagration was “probably” borrowed from the Hebrews by the Greeks. CC 6.43 wherein Origen counters Celsus' claim that the notion of Satan was stolen from the Greek poets. See also 6.47; 7.28

Celsus also claims that Moses took the story of Phaethon and applied it to the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, which Origen counters simply by observing that once again, Celsus had “failed to notice the evidence of Moses’ antiquity.”<sup>77</sup> Disparaging the cultural and philosophical integrity of Judaism was damaging enough to Christian identity, but Celsus was aware of an even more dangerous argument. He saw clearly enough that to disassociate Christianity from Judaism was to remove the historical and theological basis for Christian belief. Not surprisingly, then, he argues that the “Christians also add certain doctrines to those maintained by the Jews, and assert that the Son of God has already come on account of the sins of the Jews, and that because the Jews punished Jesus and gave him gall to drink they drew upon themselves the bitter anger of God.”<sup>78</sup> The power of Celsus’ argument rests in its strategy of dissociating Christianity from Judaism, thus destroying the premises of the argument from antiquity. Insofar as this strategy could work, it would have shaken the entire foundation of Christian apologetics, which explains Origen’s vehement opposition to it.

Such a devastating critique could not go unanswered, but it put Origen in a difficult position. He had to argue for a basic historical continuity between Judaism and Christianity, while simultaneously distancing Christianity from living Judaism. Instead of arguing for basic affinities between contemporary Judaism and Christianity, Origen simply reaffirms the anti-Judaism of early Christianity that Celsus had observed. One clear example of anti-Judaism in the *Contra Celsum* is Origen’s usage of the myth of deicide: “I challenge anyone to prove my statement untrue if I say that the entire Jewish nation was destroyed less than one

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<sup>77</sup> CC 4.21. Celsus has to stretch the narrative slightly to make the comparison: Phaethon, Helios’ son chartered his chariot to close to earth almost causing a conflagration, but there is no narrative of judgment on human evil.

<sup>78</sup> CC 4.22



whole generation later on account of these sufferings which they inflicted upon Jesus.”<sup>79</sup> So, even though there are clear and vitally important connections between Judaism and Christianity, those connections do not mean that contemporary Jews are better off than Christians. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the *Contra Celsum* is superficial, because it is predicated almost wholly on texts.<sup>80</sup>

The arguments about antiquity are perhaps the least enlightening examples of philosophical argumentation in the *Contra Celsum*. We have already observed that both Origen and Celsus shared many of the same presuppositions, namely that their own culture could lay claim to an antique provenance and thus have an exclusive hold on truth. When accusations of cultural theft or plagiarism occur, they are merely reversed and hurled back at the accuser based on the proof from antiquity. The predictable structure emerges in a typical example: take Celsus’ view of the ancient Jews, who “were totally uneducated and had not heard of these things which were sung in poetry *long before* by Hesiod and thousands of other inspired men.”<sup>81</sup> The Jews had crafted a dubious and childish story about humans being physically formed by God and a crafty serpent who easily leads them into deception, all of which is guilty of “making God into a weakling right from the beginning” and most

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* cf. 4.32

<sup>80</sup> Peter J. Gorday has argued that despite the appearance of anti-Judaism in the *Contra Celsum*, Origen was “eirenic in his view of Judaism” (p. 333). See his “Moses and Jesus in *Contra Celsum*” in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*. Ed. by Charles Kannengiesser and William Petersen. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1998. pp. 313-336. It is likely that Origen’s view of Judaism was more pacific than his predecessors, and certainly many of the vehemently anti-Judaic Christians afterwards. The overwhelming textual evidence seems to suggest that this view of Judaism, was still, as I said above, a view of a “textualized” Judaism. That is to say, a Judaism that one encounters in the Old Testament as interpreted by Christians.

<sup>81</sup> CC 4.36 Italics added.

offensive.<sup>82</sup> Origen's response is by this point *de rigueur*, he finds it amusing that Celsus could ignore the clear and distinctly evident fact that Moses lived "long before the Trojan war."<sup>83</sup>

The argument from antiquity had many concomitant themes as have already been seen with the second century apologists. Recall the popular assertion, first made by Egyptian historians, then picked up by the Jews and Christians, that the Greek philosophers had brought back ancient wisdom to Greece from Egypt after their stint as Egyptian tourists. Origen's rare usage of this particular theme surfaces in a classic example of a Christian appropriation of a non-Christian text. In response to Celsus' belittling of the serpent character in Genesis 3, Origen attempts to dispel its absurdity by comparing it to Plato's *Symposium*.

To do this, Origen allegorizes Plato. He wants to show that the Genesis narrative is not as absurd as Celsus had supposed, and he does this in two basic ways. First, he argues that Plato had borrowed heavily from Moses for his own philosophical purposes. Secondly, he claims that the surface literal meaning of Plato's text is quite absurd. Surface meanings in general are the kinds of shallow readings that only superficial readers are prone to make. Origen imagines that the surface meaning of the birth of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* would make anybody

"ridicule the myth and make a mock of so great a man as Plato. But if they could find Plato's meaning by examining philosophically what he expresses in the form of a myth, they would admire the way in which he was able to hide the great doctrines as he saw them in the form of a myth on account of the multitude, and yet to say what was necessary for those who know how to discover from myths the true significance by their author."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> CC 4.39

The “great doctrines” hidden so expertly in Plato’s text are veiled references to the Garden of Eden and the serpent. By delving past the superficial covering of the text, Origen is claiming that Celsus’ mistake was in not thinking as deeply as Christians do about their own texts. If Celsus could go deeper, he would see all the rich allusions that Plato had made to Moses’ writings. How did Plato gain access to Moses’ wisdom? Origen thinks that Plato had traveled to Egypt and perhaps read the Pentateuch there. “It is not clear” he comments “whether Plato happened to hit on these matters by chance, or whether, as some think, on his visit to Egypt he met even with those who interpret the Jews traditions philosophically.”<sup>85</sup>

The proof from antiquity was an investment in the weight and authority of traditionalism. A.H. Armstrong has noted that for Origen and many of his co-religionists, the weight and authority of tradition was a strong determinant of truth. He cautions modern readers that they might miss this point because, as he puts it, “We are too deeply affected by a sense of historical relativity to accept the teaching of any traditional authority as absolutely definitive and all-sufficient...”<sup>86</sup> Whether or not the argument from antiquity seems quaint and foolish to us today, it certainly was a powerfully persuasive argument for Origen and Celsus.

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* cf. CC 6.19 where Plato is alleged to have borrowed “the words of the *Phaedrus* from some Hebrews.”

<sup>86</sup> A.H. Armstrong, *op cit.* p. 431. Cf. Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson. Blackwell: Oxford, 1995. Hadot writes “Philosophers of the modern era, from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, refused the argument from authority and abandoned the exegetical mode of thinking. They began to consider that the truth was not a ready-made given, but was rather the result of a process of elaboration, carried out by a reason grounded in itself. After an initial period of optimism, however, in which people believed it was possible for thought to postulate *itself* in an absolute way, philosophy began to become more and more aware...of its historical and especially linguistic conditioning” (p. 76). It is not clear that you find anything so strongly formulated in the *Contra Celsum*—Origen certainly accepts the weight of his Christianized reading of the Jewish tradition, but the notion of a simple acceptance of a ‘ready-made truth’, while possibly implicit in some passages, is hardly pervasive.

## ii. Moral Effect Argument

Another major argument in the *Contra Celsum* is what I'm calling the "moral effect" argument, which has several components. For Origen, the argument arises to give a criterion of judgment to properly adjudicate between Christian and non-Christian truth claims. It is a rather expansive category of argumentation, ranging from the reasons for why one might believe in such things as the historicity of miracles, the divinity of Jesus, to basic judgments concerning the more general truth of philosophy and religion.

Origen realized that to simply hurl Christian beliefs at a non-believer as if it were self-evidently true, without any arguments or reasons, would be woefully inadequate for his polemical purposes. He had to give reasons that would count as such in non-Christian settings. Accordingly, he argued that the basic difference between Greek and Christian religion was fundamentally a moral issue. He believed that pagan divination and miracles certainly do occur, but they have no *telos*, no moral goal that believers can follow after in the hopes of spiritual reformation. Jesus' ministry and miracles were true and exceptional because they were directed towards a unitary and clear objective: the complete moral reformation of human beings. Non-Christian miracles serve no clear moral purpose. In fact, they are often morally destructive.

The moral effect argument was very important for Origen's defense of Jesus against Celsus' aspersions. Celsus was very dubious about the Christian claim that Jesus was divine. When confronted with this skepticism, Origen argued that

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Instead, one finds Origen struggling to make the received truths intelligible to a non-Christian audience, and in formulating these, he makes them in some sense his own.

“if any man were able to deliver souls from the flood of evil and from licentiousness and wrongdoing and from despising God, and were to give as a proof of this work one hundred reformed characters...could one reasonably say that it was without divine help that this man had implanted in the hundred men a doctrine capable of delivering them from evils of such magnitude?”<sup>87</sup>

One should not take it for granted that Jesus was divine. A likely proof of this divinity was the increased morality brought on by Jesus’ activities. Of course, it seems unlikely that Origen and Celsus would have agreed on the presence of moral reformation in Christians’ lives, but Origen thought it was obvious.

Celsus prompts this response again when he has a hypothetical Jew<sup>88</sup> cast doubt on Jesus’ divinity by alleging that many other religious charlatans had claimed to be a “son of God.” Origen admits that many people had claimed to be divine, but very few people *currently* worship these so-called messiahs. Simon Magus was one person who had made such extravagant claims, “but now of all the Simonians in the world it is possible, I believe, to find thirty, and perhaps I have exaggerated the number.”<sup>89</sup> The assumption here is that if Simon Magus truly were divine, then he would have had a more pragmatic moral effect on people.

Precisely what aspersions did Celsus cast on Jesus? One thing that Celsus found distasteful was Jesus’ willingness to associate with people of ill repute. Celsus accuses Jesus of being a leader of “infamous men...the most wicked tax-collectors and sailors” to which Origen agreed that Jesus had in fact called sinners to his ministry, but he saw nothing

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<sup>87</sup> CC 1.26

<sup>88</sup> Throughout Books I and II, Origen has chosen the sections of Celsus’ *True Doctrine* wherein Celsus presented a Jew as a mouthpiece for his polemic. It is effective because Celsus is attacking the perceived disparity between Christianity and Judaism, and having a textual Jew make the charges must have seemed more damaging to the Christians from Celsus’ perspective. Origen exploits this device when Celsus has the Jew say things that are unlikely utterances from a representative of Judaism.

<sup>89</sup> CC 1.57

intrinsically wrong with that since it is especially sinners that need moral reformation.<sup>90</sup> In fact, what better way to show Jesus' power than to lead such wicked men like the disciples to "the purest moral character"?<sup>91</sup> It is likely that Origen is implicitly critiquing Celsus' elitism here, since Celsus' tastes were offended by Jesus' involvement with people of questionable character. Origen brilliantly reveals the hypocrisy of Celsus' critique by appealing to similar examples from the Greek philosophical tradition.

For example, Socrates had led his disciple Phaedo out of dire moral straits. Xenocrates' successor Polemo had led a most depraved life before converting to philosophy.<sup>92</sup> Why should these men be so very different from the disciples of Jesus in that regard? After all, philosophy is only useful insofar as it helps other humans. Origen argued that all philosophy "should be approved on the ground that its doctrine in those who persuaded them had the power to change men from such evils although they had previously been gripped by them."<sup>93</sup> There are few such examples in philosophical history of dramatic moral reformation, especially when compared with the many examples found in the Gospels.

So, we have seen how the moral effect argument served as a criterion for judging the claims about Jesus' divinity and the pragmatic utility of philosophy. Let us briefly examine how Origen also extends the argument to Greek religion. Celsus wondered why the Christians saw Jesus as so exceptional. After all, a god becoming human in Greek religion was not especially unique. Why should one worship the Christian god as if he were unique when you had so many older and better deities like Asclepius, Dionysus or Heracles?

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<sup>90</sup> CC 1.63

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> CC 1.64

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

Origen responds by arguing that the Greek gods had done much less to help humanity when compared with Jesus: “What work as great as his [i.e. Jesus] has been done by Asclepius, Dionysus and Heracles? Can they support their claim to be gods by proving that there are people who have been reformed in morals and have become better as a result of their life and teaching?”<sup>94</sup> The answer to these rhetorical questions is a resounding “no.” The Greek myths, on Origen’s reading, are simply immoral catalogues of human, all too human sin. Indeed, the Greek stories are so distasteful that one must use allegorical readings to make them less offensive. Who would not want to seek “refuge in allegory” after reading of “divine sons” who “castrate their divine fathers?”<sup>95</sup> It is in Greek mythology that one can read that “A father has sexual intercourse with his daughter.”<sup>96</sup> None of these stories can be seen as morally helpful. Origen is saying, “Who is edified by these stories?”

Origen’s disgust with Greek mythology was not shared by Celsus. Celsus viewed the divine births of the Greek gods Perseus, Amphion, Aeacus and Minos as “evidence of their great and truly wonderful works for mankind,” and he wonders “what have you [i.e. the Christians] done in word or deed that is fine or wonderful?”<sup>97</sup> Origen predictably claims that Celsus was in fact wrong about the deeds of the Greek deities. He claims that even if such deeds had been done, they would pale in comparison with the good deeds of Jesus.

Presented with such arguments, many non-Christians would undoubtedly have agreed with the critique of the Greek deities that Origen advanced in the *Contra Celsum*, but not with the implications that he drew from it—namely, that Christianity was better. The

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<sup>94</sup> CC 3.42 cf 7.6, where Pythian Apollo is derided for not using his clairvoyance “for the conversion and healing and moral reformation of men.”

<sup>95</sup> CC 4.48

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Origen does not mention the Jewish analogue to Greek incest, namely in Genesis 19:30-38—wherein Lot’s daughters, apparently convinced that they are the last living survivors of divine destruction, entice their father into drunken procreation.

philosophical critique of “superstitious” and anthropomorphic religion that he employs already had a long history by the time he was writing.<sup>98</sup> Plato had famously banished Homer from the Republic for the immorality and anthropomorphism of the gods depicted in his poetry.<sup>99</sup> The Platonic critique of anthropomorphism was based upon the belief that God, being completely incorporeal, was separated from the world of materiality and becoming. Another integral component of Platonism was the belief in divine immutability, which complemented the emphasis on incorporeality, since the highest divinity, being necessarily spiritual, could not come into being or pass away.

The Platonic god could not, in short, be human in any way shape or form. This lends itself naturally to a strong suspicion of anthropomorphizing divine beings; hence the notion of a Zeus coming down to the human realm and procreating with women would have been anathema to many philosophers, and not just to Christians and Jews. This appropriation of the Platonic evaluation of divine incorporeality by Christians was an important step towards establishing persuasive discourse since this bridged the gap between Christians and philosophically minded Greeks.

The Christian usage of the traditional critique of licentiousness and immorality in Greek mythology was not aimed at denying the existence of the gods—as some contemporary readers might suspect. Instead of being denied their existence, the gods were demoted to the status of demons. The social institutions that were organized around them—the cultic practices, the mantic frenzies and divine afflatus of the oracles—were all reinterpreted as the immoral fabrications of very real demonic forces. We have already seen

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<sup>97</sup> CC 1.67

<sup>98</sup> See Attridge, Harold W. “The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire.” In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, 1978, pp. 45-78. Also see Veyne, P. (1988). Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.



the subordination of the Greek gods to daemons in the writings of Justin and Tatian, and Origen is simply following the apologetic tradition. So, Origen had plenty of material to draw upon when he wanted to critique Greek religion. But he does not merely lambaste the Greek stories for their immorality; he thinks there are additional reasons for looking elsewhere for one's edification.

At one point in the *Contra Celsum*, Origen proposes a *tabula rasa* to sympathetic readers who are interested in deciding between Christian and non-Christian stories. "Let us compare them all with one another," Origen proclaims, "and consider the *aim* which those who caused them to be written had in view, and resulting *help* or *harm*, or neither, to those who were the recipients of the supposed benefits."<sup>100</sup> It looks like Origen assumed that after reflecting on this question, the hypothetical reader here would agree that the Christian stories were clearly more beneficial than the Greek stories. Origen is saying that reasonable people would agree that Christian stories were clearly aimed at helping readers, while Greek stories were not. Origen clearly believes that there are convincing and salient truths about Christianity that will just thrust themselves upon the reader, despite that reader's predispositions.

Another way in which Celsus attempted to discredit Jesus' divine status was to disparage him as a false magician, as nothing more than a cheap miracle maker. When Celsus claims that Jesus was a mere sorcerer, it should be clear by now that Origen has a ready response. He argues, "But in fact no sorcerer uses his tricks to call the spectators to moral reformation...nor does he attempt to persuade the onlookers to live as men who will

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<sup>99</sup> Plato *The Republic* 398a

<sup>100</sup> CC 8.47 italics added.

be judged by God.”<sup>101</sup> Celsus repeats this accusation of sorcery many times throughout the text, and Origen’s response is always the same; sorcerers are not interested in inducing moral reformation in people.<sup>102</sup> Many men claim to be messiahs and sons of God; many perform miracles as proof of such claims; but the trustworthiness of Jesus should be apparent to all by virtue of the fact that “Christ and his disciples bore fruit not in deceit but in the salvation of souls.”<sup>103</sup> The moral effect argument is used to systematically trump any argument that Celsus made concerning the dubious character of Jesus and the nature of Jesus’ miracles.

Now, Origen and Celsus were not skeptical about the possibility of miracles occurring; they were more concerned with what purpose the miracles served.<sup>104</sup> Origen does not remain agnostic concerning the occurrence of miracles; rather he offers a criterion for *preferring* Christian miracles to non-Christian ones. The Christian miracles, simply put, help morally reform people, while non-Christian miracles serve very little purpose. Disputes often arise in the *Contra Celsum* about miracles, and they generally revolved around two types of questions: what was the cause of a given miracle and how does one *know* the cause? The cause of Christian miracles is the power of the Christian God; while the non-Christian miracles arise from the malevolent workings of daemons. We have the answer to our first

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<sup>101</sup> CC 1.68

<sup>102</sup> cf. CC 2.32; 2.49; 8.41

<sup>103</sup> CC 2.50

<sup>104</sup> It would be anachronistic to project our own naturalistic arguments against the so-called miraculous into the minds of the late antique thinker. To seriously question the historicity of a miracle *only* on the grounds of its physical probability based on an understanding of natural law would have never really occurred to Origen or Celsus. For this period, instead of reading “miracles” as non-natural interventions of the divine into an all-too natural world, we should get rid of the dichotomy between nature and an overlying structure called “supernature” that somehow gives an account for inexplicable phenomena that emerge from outside our causative explanations.

question about the causes behind miracles. Now, how does one *know* that this is indeed the cause?<sup>105</sup>

Celsus attacked Jesus' miracles by suggesting that it was difficult to know if any trustworthy witness of the miracles truly existed. Commenting on the transfiguration, Celsus wonders "What trustworthy witness saw this *apparition*...? There is no proof except for your word and the evidence which you may produce of one of the men who were punished with

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<sup>105</sup> There was some disagreement about the reliability of sense perceptions and general epistemological questions in the Hellenistic era. Pyrrho, the founder of skepticism, held that true knowledge was impossible because the nature of the world is indeterminate. Indeterminacy resulted not from any inherent flaw in our sensory and cognitive apparatuses, but from the general lack of availability of facts themselves. As a result, we should be "unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not" (see Aristocles, qtd. in The Hellenistic Philosophers. Vol. 1 trans. and ed. by A. A. Long and D.N. Sedley. Cambridge: CUP, 1987: p. 14.) Skeptical philosophers' epistemologies differed most substantially from the other Hellenistic schools in their conclusion that no determinate reality exists waiting to be discovered; there is no intrinsic structure of the universe from which one can derive truth, and no criterion of giving our sense perceptions the foundations we so desire.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, gave much more credence to the possibility of knowledge by arguing that our sense-perceptions are *always* true, but our judgments about them are not (See Lucretius, *ibid.* pp. 78-79.) The *kanon* for determining truth was a combination of sensations, preconceptions (*prolepsis*), and feelings (*pathos*), all of which were needed to decide the nature of truth (See Diogenes Laertius, qtd. in *ibid.* p. 87.) The notion of a 'preconception' here is perhaps the most fundamental *kriterion* for truth; the Epicureans thought they had gotten past the impasse of the epistemic problematic by admitting from the start that we all begin our inquiries with certain given categories (i.e. preconceived notions) which guide the inquiry along the way. Otherwise, one would always be searching for the most determinative and bedrock foundation behind the starting point of an epistemic issue.

The Stoics, following the lead of Epicurus on epistemological issues, were the philosophical school which Origen found most expedient for advancing his own epistemic views. They had a much more optimistic view concerning the possibility of obtaining true knowledge. A paradigmatic example can be found in the philosopher Zeno, for whom sense-perception—which had been so thoroughly problematized by the Sceptics—emerged as a reliable basis for "scientific knowledge" (See Sedley and Long, p. 254.) The Stoics held that knowledge came about by virtue of a self-authenticating impression on one's mind, via the process of "an object (τὸ φαινόμενον) which, through the senses, produces an impression (φαντασία) on the soul (Hauck, p. 241.)

This comes about through the faculty of assent humans have in their cognitive makeup, what the Stoics called the *phantasia kataleptike* (καταληπτικὴν φαντασίαν). The *phantasia* is itself its own criterion of truth; there is no other ground of knowledge besides this self-evident epistemic principle. Accordingly, one cannot help but give one's assent to propositions or the existence of physical realities when these impressions come to the mind so forcefully, bearing their own validation with them. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that every impression was as self-evidently true as the *phantasia kataleptike*; indeed, there are many *false* impressions that can arise just as easily. Many Stoics, for example, thought that the kinds of perceptions people had of dreams and prophetic phenomena should be treated rather skeptically (See Hauck, p. 242 ff.)

you.”<sup>106</sup> Origen’s response indicates the extent to which he was familiar with the Stoic and Academic debates on epistemology. He admits that it is indeed virtually impossible to establish “any story as historical fact” to such a high degree as “complete certainty”<sup>107</sup> Lacking this highest degree of epistemic certainty, one cannot possibly hope to even prove the occurrence of the Trojan War, for example. The Trojan War itself undoubtedly took place, but the account of the war was interwoven with references to fantastic deities. Deities are, of course, notorious for their reluctance to submit themselves to the test of empirical verifications.<sup>108</sup> Must one, as the Skeptics and Stoics argued, withhold assent completely from such stories? Is there no epistemic warrant at all for giving one’s assent?

Origen was, of course, emphatically not a disciple of Pyrrho, or wholly a Stoic on epistemic issues.<sup>109</sup> His strategy for addressing the trustworthiness of sense perception is to subordinate it to a kind of moral epistemology, what he called the “divine sense.” The “divine sense” is the sense impression of truth given *only* to men of virtue.<sup>110</sup> This is the sense in which Origen is more of a Platonist than a Stoic epistemologically speaking—for the Platonists held that true knowledge, moving from the realm of becoming to the realm of being, was available only to the man of virtue. In other words, men of virtue can see more clearly. They can penetrate more effectively into the perception of truth. This can be called

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<sup>106</sup> CC 1.41

<sup>107</sup> CC 1.42

<sup>108</sup> But perhaps not, for it seems as if one of the central implications of the moral effect argument is that the veracity of the Christian account of Jesus’ divinity can be verified by appeals to empirical evidences, like the moral reformation brought about by the efficacious work of said divinity.

<sup>109</sup> For an overview of the influence of Stoic thought on Origen, specifically epistemological issues, see Henry Chadwick, “Origen, Celsus and the Stoa”, *JTS* 48 (1947), pp. 34-48. John M. Rist, “The Importance of Stoic Logic in the *Contra Celsum*” and “Beyond Stoic and Platonist: A Sample of Origen’s Treatment of Philosophy (*Contra Celsum* 4.62-70)” in *Platonism and its Christian Heritage*. London: Variorum, 1985, pp. 64-78. Ronald E. Heine, “Stoic Logic as Handmaid to Exegesis”, *JTS* v. 44, (1993), pp. 90-117. Robert J. Hauck “They saw what they said they saw: sense knowledge in early Christian polemic”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 81 (1988), pp. 239-249.

<sup>110</sup> See Hauck, p. 245.

“moral epistemology” simply because it links knowing with being moral. So, to answer Celsus’ question about who was trustworthy enough to verify a miracle of Jesus, Origen has to hold that the disciples and the gospel writers were trustworthy enough because they were men of virtue.

### iii. **Argument from Prophecy**

The proof from prophecy is periodically used to substantiate a myriad of potentially implausible events narrated in the Gospels. Origen viewed this proof as a “very powerful” argument<sup>111</sup>, in fact, the “strongest argument confirming Jesus’ authority.”<sup>112</sup> Origen’s reliance on the proof is in stark contrast to Celsus’ casual rejection of it. Celsus reduced it to the level of a mere interpretative squabble between Christians and Jews. His disdain is palpable when he describes the disagreement about the meaning of prophecy as nothing more than a “wrangle with one another about the shadow of an ass.”<sup>113</sup> This pejorative comment was meant to suggest that there was an aura of triviality about the Jewish-Christian interpretative debates—but for Origen, of course, a great deal more was at stake.

Origen does not stake his entire argument for miracles on his morally based epistemological convictions; he occasionally relies upon the proof from prophecy.<sup>114</sup> Naturally, this is brought in to argue for Jesus’ divine status, but it arises as a response to Celsus’ charge of sorcery against Jesus. “The miracles which he did” Origen comments, were “not by sorcery as Celsus thinks, but by a divine power foretold by the prophets.”<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>111</sup> CC 2.28

<sup>112</sup> CC 1.49

<sup>113</sup> CC 3.1-4

<sup>114</sup> See Henry Chadwick “The Evidences of Christianity in the Apologetic of Origen” in Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church. Hampshire, England: Variorum, 1991. pp. 331-339.

<sup>115</sup> CC 8.9

miracle of the virgin birth is defended by Origen on similar grounds. Celsus had attempted to debunk the virgin birth as a deceit constructed by Christians to cover up the fact that Jesus' birth was the fruit of an adulterous liaison between Mary and a Roman soldier.<sup>116</sup>

Origen rejects such aspersions out of hand, claiming instead that the virgin birth was part of a carefully scripted divine plan which had been clearly prophesied in the Old Testament.<sup>117</sup>

We have already seen some skepticism from Celsus about the Christian readings of Old Testament prophecy, but we have yet to flesh out the systematic meanings and purposes of the proof from prophecy. The demonstration of this proof relied upon the unveiling of Christian meanings in a Jewish text, namely readings that purported to show that Jesus of Nazareth was the subject matter of a variety of different prophecies. If these readings could be established as persuasive, then the Old Testament could be seen as an authoritative witness to central Christian claims.

As a persuasive technique, the proof from prophecy was apparently quite successful. It seems to have been an integral component in Justin Martyr's conversion, and features prominently in his apologetic writings.<sup>118</sup> The power of prophecy was certainly something that Origen believed in, and pointed to consistently in the *Contra Celsum*. He had argued as early as Book I that

A man coming to the gospel from Greek conceptions and training would not only *judge* that it [i.e. the truths of Christianity] was true, but would also *put it into practice* and so prove it to be correct; and he would complete what seemed to be lacking judged by the criterion of a Greek proof, thus establishing the truth of Christianity. Moreover, we have to say this, that the gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself, and which is more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical argument. This more divine demonstration the apostle calls a 'demonstration of the Spirit and of

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<sup>116</sup> CC 1.32 Celsus alleges that the male adulterer was a certain Panthera, which might indicate a Jewish polemical source.

<sup>117</sup> CC 1.33-34

<sup>118</sup> See Chadwick, H. (1993). Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity. *The Early Church and Greco-Roman Thought*. E. Ferguson. New York, Garland Publishing, Inc. **8**: 23-45.

power'...*because of the prophecies and especially those which refer to Christ, which are capable of convincing anyone who reads them...*<sup>119</sup>

This is an extraordinary passage because it so succinctly summarizes Origen's polemical presuppositions. There is in Christianity, Origen believed, something that transcended the merely "dialectical" truths of Hellenistic philosophy. Truth was not something that one merely progressed towards through analogy and abstract intellectual feats, but something that a thinker lived and embodied through a life of virtue. The hypothetical person with this philosophical training might "judge" Christianity to be true by "putting it into practice" but Christianity is not so narrow as to commend itself only to a person so carefully trained. Truth commends itself to "anyone" who approaches the central proof of Christianity, namely the prophecies of Christ found in the Old Testament.

Later in Book I, Origen describes the proof from prophecy as the "strongest argument confirming Jesus' authority" insofar as it establishes that he "was prophesied by the prophets of the Jews, Moses and those after him and even before him."<sup>120</sup> Origen even claims that Celsus ignores the power of the prophecies because "he is *unable to reply to the argument.*"<sup>121</sup> A strong statement to be sure, but why such confidence? Is Celsus' truly struck dumb by the clarity of the Christian reading of the Old Testament? This does not seem likely; Celsus continually presses Origen in other passages about the plausibility of the Christian usage of Jewish material. Origen even admits that some Jews had pressed him on these very readings, wondering where the Christians get the title "son of God" from the prophetic material.<sup>122</sup> But the arguments went beyond semantics in many cases, for Origen

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<sup>119</sup> CC 1.2 italics added.

<sup>120</sup> CC 1.49

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Italics added.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

saw the combined authority of the prophetic materials as an overwhelming argument. Why then, did the Jews resist seeing it?

Celsus observed that many have been perplexed by this question: “If the prophecies of Jesus possessed by the Jews were so clear, why then, when he came, did they not accept his teaching and change to the superior doctrines which Jesus had shown to them?”<sup>123</sup> The answer, Origen speculated, was the result of a profound recalcitrance towards seeing the obvious nature of truth, brought about by the Jews’ stubborn attitudes. It is hard to tear oneself from these fixed habits, Origen argued, harder still when those habits are of a religious kind.<sup>124</sup> The image here is startling not only for its ominous foreshadowing of later developments in Christian anti-Judaism, but also for its stark polarization of Christians and Jews. The picture of Christians is of a group of enlightened readers, open to reason, willing to listen to new ideas when they are backed up by proof. Jews, on the other hand, are stubborn traditionalists, blind to the truth because of their resistance in seeing the truth of Christianity.

While the majority of the passages in which Origen discusses Judaism are restricted to Biblical Judaism, there are a few passages where he tells us that he has had multiple discussions with Jews about Biblical interpretation. Before a long section on prophecy, Origen reminisces about a time when he had “a discussion with some Jews, who were alleged to be wise”<sup>125</sup> about the reasons for believing in the historicity of Moses and Jesus. Concerning these two exemplars of Judaism and Christianity, Origen claims that “Both of them have the testimony of nations,” but outside of that, the Jews “have no proof about

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<sup>123</sup> CC 1.52

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> CC 1.45



Moses...indeed what is startling is that it is the evidence about Jesus in the law and the prophets which is used to prove that Moses and the prophets really were prophets of God.”<sup>126</sup> No grounds for the historicity of Moses then, except for the witness provided retrospectively by the stories about Jesus. It is odd that for most of his polemic, Origen has relied upon the antiquity of Judaism to “prove” Christianity. Now the tables have turned: it is the Jews who need Christian witnesses to demonstrate the truth of their own religion.

Celsus’ assertion that Christianity was not the fulfillment of Judaism was a continuous thorn in Origen’s side. If Christianity is not the fulfillment of Judaism, then the prophecies of the Old Testament were all false. Of course, one need not only attack the Christian readings of prophecies, one could look at the differences between the Christian New Testament and the Jewish Bible. Celsus’ knowledge of the New Testament armed him with a powerful critique of the disparity between Jesus’ teachings and the teachings found in the Old Testament. One of the clearest examples is worth quoting in full:

“If the prophets of the God of the Jews foretold that Jesus would be his son, why did he give them laws by Moses that they were to become rich and powerful and to fill the earth and to massacre their enemies, children and all, and slaughter their entire race, which he himself did, so Moses says, before the eyes of the Jews? And besides this, if they were not obedient, why does he expressly threaten to do to them what he did to their enemies? Yet his son, the man of Nazareth, *gives contradictory laws*, saying that a man cannot come forward to the Father if he is rich or loves power or lays claim to any intelligence or reputation, and that he must not pay attention to food or to his storehouse any more than the ravens, or to clothing any more than the lilies, and that to a man who has struck him once he should offer himself to be struck once again. Who is wrong? *Moses or Jesus?* Or when the father sent Jesus had he forgotten what commands he gave to Moses? Or did he condemn his own laws and change his mind, and send his messenger for quite the opposite purpose?”<sup>127</sup>

Celsus’ sees a fundamental disparity between the Christian claims of continuity with Judaism, and the altogether different realities of the Old Testament. Whereas previous cultural

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

opponents of Christianity had not been generally familiar with the key texts of the Christian religion, Celsus brings to his polemic a much more sophisticated understanding of the basic claims of those texts. In seizing upon this potential disparity, Celsus was attacking the very foundation of Christianity.

Origen's response to this is not to suddenly proclaim the novelty of Christianity vis-à-vis Biblical Judaism—that would have undermined his own position—but rather to argue that Celsus had fatally misinterpreted the Scriptures. Celsus' error was in thinking “that in the law and the prophets there is no deeper doctrine beyond that of the literal meaning of the words.”<sup>128</sup> Origen's understanding of the multivocality of Scripture, enforced by the Pauline notion of a dichotomy between the “letter that kills” and the “spirit gives life” is prominent in his rebuttal.<sup>129</sup> Celsus was obviously reading the text on its most superficial level of meaning, exhibiting the danger of the “letter that kills” by taking the surface value of the text. If one attends closely to the passages under consideration, one will see that the “literal interpretation is impossible.”<sup>130</sup>

When the Psalms writer says, for example, that “Every morning I killed all the sinners on earth, to destroy from the city of the Lord all the workers of iniquity”<sup>131</sup>, Origen suggests that it would have been impossible for such an event to take place, given the absurd logistics required in executing such massive carnage. This is symptomatic of Origen's larger strategy; he knows better than to defiantly affirm the literal meaning of the text because of the moral offense that would result from such readings, so he is pushed to find some deeper, in his terms, “spiritual” meaning to the text. If Origen sees an argument leading to the

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<sup>127</sup> CC 7.18 italics added

<sup>128</sup> CC 7.18

<sup>129</sup> See II Cor. 3.6

<sup>130</sup> CC 7.19

establishment of a possible disparity between Judaism and Christianity he averts disaster through his program of allegorical and non-literal interpretations. Origen must stress continuity with Judaism, but he cannot stress it at the expense of having Christianity appear just like Judaism, or on an equal footing. Non-literal readings are an argument for that continuity by virtue of establishing, for example, that Jesus did not promulgate laws that contradicted Moses' dictums. Celsus is well aware of the remarkable ambivalence displayed by Christians towards Jews: he notes that the Christians "originated from Judaism...they cannot name any other source for their teacher and chorus-leader. Nevertheless they rebelled against the Jews."<sup>132</sup>

Despite Celsus' separation of Christianity from Judaism, he has few kind words for the Jewish religion. He echoes the anti-Judaic writers' theme that the Jews had been of Egyptian extraction, hence copiers of another culture. He sees both the Exodus event and the early Christian movement as dual examples of Jewish misanthropy insofar as the Jews' actions had "led to the introduction of new ideas" by "revolting against the Egyptian community" and later the Romans.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, the Jews "never did anything of importance" and "were of no significance or prominence whatever."<sup>134</sup> Nonetheless, despite the Jews adherence to "worship which may be very peculiar...[it] is at least traditional."<sup>135</sup> This strong traditionalism is the lynchpin of Celsus' evaluation of religious truth. Insofar as Celsus could separate Christians from Jews, he had automatically discredited them, since "it

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<sup>131</sup> Ps. 100.8

<sup>132</sup> CC 5.33 See Wilken, Robert. The Christians as the Romans Saw Them. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. pp.112-117 for a discussion of Celsus' critique of Christianity's apostasy from Judaism.

<sup>133</sup> CC 3.5

<sup>134</sup> CC 4.32

<sup>135</sup> CC 5.25

is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning.”<sup>136</sup>

If Celsus was foolish for reading too superficially in the Old Testament, then he was undoubtedly ignorant for ignoring the power of prophecies in those same texts. The ambiguity of phrases in Isaiah 53 such as “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” could now be heard as unambiguous prophecy fulfilled in Jesus to the ears of Christians. Where contemporary Christians saw Jesus as the obvious subject matter of this passage, the Jews saw a figurative device for talking about Israel as a nation. Origen is amazed at the Jews’ wayward readings that precluded seeing prophecies about Jesus in the text. “Who is this if not Jesus Christ?” Origen wonders. For Origen, the Jews’ resistance to this reading is symptomatic of a more general stubbornness to ascend from the bodily, literal level of the text, to the ethereal heights of spiritual readings.<sup>137</sup>

Origen would have to face a more effective critique than this. The apostles and the earliest Christians were Jewish, and yet by Celsus’ time, most Christians were not Jewish. Celsus wonders if wayward Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century had “left the law of their fathers...and...deserted to another name and another life”?<sup>138</sup> Origen was well aware of the potential problem this might cause, and he is eager to avoid the charge of novelty that would wrest Christianity from its antique Jewish moorings. Jesus had hinted at such an abrogation, but he knew his followers were not ready. This is why he enigmatically promised them “I have still many things to say to you,”<sup>139</sup> where “many things” signifies the purging of the

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> For Origen’s account of the different levels of interpretation of Scripture, see his *Peri Archon*, Book IV, Chapters 1-3.

<sup>138</sup> CC 2.1 “Another name” here meaning the name of Jesus, presumably the instigator of the Christian novelty.

<sup>139</sup> John 16:12, qtd. in CC 2.2

overly literal reading of Torah by the cleansing fire of the spiritual interpretation. This “literal” reading resulted in the Jews’ adherence to their many festival and dietary observances. Were not the early Jewish followers of Jesus too attached to their traditional understanding of Judaism? Origen describes the Jews as habituated to this surface reading, which in turn generated surface observances—but the time was coming when that would all be transcended.

Habits can, after a long duration, become something like a fixed nature.<sup>140</sup> Had the Jewish habits of observing the literal level of Torah become something like a second skin, a skin that is at one with the “bodily” or *somatic* reading of Scripture? Origen’s account purports to explain the Jewish readings as a habituated stubbornness, one that cannot penetrate into the readings of the Old Testament like the Christians. They can only “read them superficially and only as stories.”<sup>141</sup> But while the Jewish apostles of Jesus could be forgiven for their observance of the “literal” law, later generations—on Origen’s reading—would be shown less mercy. Since the Jews “did not comprehend the divinity within him [i.e. Jesus],” they would be “entirely forsaken and possess nothing of those things which from antiquity they have regarded as sacred, and have not even any vestige of divine power among them.”<sup>142</sup>

Why is there no longer any remnant of God’s providential guiding of the Jews? “Because they were very ignoble people” we are told, “and although they committed many sins they did not suffer for them any comparable calamities to those caused by what they had

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<sup>140</sup> Origen’s ontological account of free will being hardened by habitual acts is an instructive analogue to this notion. See *Peri Archon* 2.6.5

<sup>141</sup> CC 2.4

<sup>142</sup> CC 2.8

*dared to do to our Jesus.*<sup>143</sup> Deicide accounts for the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the scattering of Jews into the Diaspora, and their persecution under foreign rulers. Despite these clear examples of anti-Judaism, it would be inaccurate to call Origen anti-Semitic.<sup>144</sup> After all, Origen had learned Hebrew and continuously interacted with living Jews in a friendly intellectual environment.

All of these arguments and themes in the *Contra Celsum* were brought about because Celsus realized that the problem with the Christian usage of the proof from prophecy was that many Jews did not agree with the readings of Scripture that the Christians claimed supported the proof. Celsus found the readings forced as well. Origen's response is to appeal to the Christian's deeper, more spiritual readings of the Old Testament. If these deeper readings were adhered to faithfully, then they could reveal the true prophetic meanings of many Old Testament passages. Even though Origen claimed to have placed great weight on the proof from prophecy, it is simply not featured as prominently and as frequently as the antiquity and moral effect arguments are.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Italics added.

<sup>144</sup> "Anti-Semitic" is often taken to name either a highly virulent hatred of Jews and Judaism, or a modern racial view of Jews, nefariously popularized by the Nazi movement. These are not mutually exclusive of course. The latter view—racial theorizing—would be anachronistic for this period. Perhaps other thinkers, Christian and non-Christian alike, could be described as anti-Semitic because their rhetoric, and often their violent action, displayed a level of virulence so high that it went beyond the "casual" anti-Judaism that many Christians seemed to exhibit after the split between Judaism and Christianity.

## VI. Conclusion

There is a certain artificiality in selecting and then naming three “arguments” in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*. He certainly did not begin his polemic by spelling out precisely which arguments would be deployed, and in what fashion. One of the tasks of modern exegetes is to tease out the strains of argumentative discourse that one can find in a text like the *Contra Celsum*. We seek to make order out of disorder, to name what has previously gone unnamed. We have analyzed and detailed the argument from antiquity, the moral effect argument, and the proof from prophecy. What remains is a brief evaluation of the persuasiveness of these arguments and an assessment of the work as a whole.

All three arguments had a rich history even before Origen decided to use them in his polemic, and they would have an even richer future after Origen died. Of the three, the argument from antiquity seems the weakest. To base one’s view of truth on the perceived antiquity of the culture from which one gathers certain ideas makes a dubious assumption, namely that the older one’s cultural heritage is, the more sound one’s grasp of truth is. But why should we assume this? Why should we assume that just because a given culture is older that it has a more secure grip on “truth” than we do? The apologists never answer this. It may very well turn out that this view is warranted in certain contexts, but it should never be taken as an *a priori*.

The moral effect argument is important and widely used today. At its simplest exposition, it posits that one should believe in a given religion because the practitioners of that religion are morally superior to the practitioners of other religions. One would like to know if there were a way of adjudicating between the rival moral claims of a given tradition,

such that this argument could lay claim to a kind of objectivity. To say that one is morally superior is to open up a variety of other questions, such as the exact nature of what is moral and so on. That is just another way of saying that this argument is not open and shut, it relies upon the exposition of other points in other related arguments.

The proof from prophecy, at least as Origen construed it, only became a proof once one had entered into the deeper, more spiritual realm of Christian hermeneutics. That is to say, one could only see the Christian readings of the prophecies once one had embraced Christian ways of reading the Old Testament. No wonder then that Celsus was so perplexed by the proof: he simply saw no reason in entertaining such readings. Outsiders like Justin Martyr and many others were, of course, persuaded by the proof from prophecy to convert to Christianity. For someone like Celsus, who already had a low opinion of Judaism, the proof from prophecy must have sounded like so much Christian mythmaking.

The *Contra Celsum* as a whole is a vast, rambling discursus on a whole set of fascinating, yet tangential topics. Its tangential nature is perhaps its key impediment to real coherence. Origen was undoubtedly a polymath for his time, as witnessed by the ease with which he tackled a diverse and challenging set of topics. Many of these topics strayed outside of Christian life and literature. Despite the polymathic nature of the *Contra Celsum*, it lacks the focus and power of Origen's other works—the *Peri Archon* especially. It is more like a rambling and occasional encyclopedic survey of Christian argumentation than it is a concentrated exposition on a specific topic. However, this weakness is at once its greatest strength. The lack of editing, the rambling discursive nature of the text, and its cyclical, often repetitive themes all give it a kind of freshness that make for a fascinating



anthropological read. The *Contra Celsum*'s unwieldy nature is perhaps the main reason why it has been so historically neglected by the Christian church.

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### **Vita**

It has been argued that Daniel Charles Headrick's undergraduate career was mercurial. His first love was art history, but he found it too ahistorical. He dabbled in the science of politics for a brief time, but was soon lured away by the siren call of philosophy and religious studies. He took his B.A. in Religious Studies in 2000, and at the tender age of 21 he entered the Religious Studies graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Daniel received a M.A. in Philosophy (special track: Religious Studies) in 2003.

Having plumbed the depths of early Christian literature, he has moved on to other loves, loves that dare not speak their collective name.