

The *Alethes Logos* of Celsus and the Historicity of Christ

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With the advent of the so-called New Atheism, attacks of all kinds on the truth-claims of Christianity have increased both in number and agitation, though frequently unfettered by evidence. I intend to address what would be the most damning claim of all, if it were true, namely that Jesus of Nazareth never existed and was a convenient fiction contrived in second-century Gospels, characterized by Richard Carrier as “mythic biography.”¹ These claims had been advanced by Bruno Bauer and Arthur Drews in the late nineteenth century, and roundly dismissed.² The last gasp came in the 1970s from a Ph.D. in German literature; swiftly, and to my mind convincingly, rebutted by R. T. France.³ The position was eulogized in 1977 by historian Michael Grant, who wrote: “Modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars,” apparently laying the matter to rest.⁴ However, current popular authors have unearthed the argument

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¹ Richard Carrier, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn’t Need a Miracle to Succeed* (Lulu.com, 2009), 174.

² Bruno Bauer, *Christus und die Caesaren. Der Ursprung des Christenthums aus dem römischen Griechenthum* (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Eugen Grosse, 1877); Arthur Drews, *Die Christusmythe* (Jena: Diederichs, 1909). Both were decisively refuted (from differing perspectives) by F. C. Conybeare, *The Historical Christ* (London: Watts, 1914) and Maurice Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene: Myth or History?*, trans. Frederick Stephens (New York: Appleton, 1926).

³ G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1975); R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976).

⁴ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review of the Gospels* (New York: Scribner’s, 1977), 200; see also Morton Smith, “The Historical Jesus,” in R. Joseph Hoffmann and Gerald A. Larue, eds., *Jesus in History and Myth* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1986), 47–48, who describes the theory as “almost entirely an argument from silence.”

again,⁵ and it is now being advanced aggressively by those possessing scholarly credentials.⁶ Claims of a mythical Christ immediately awaken a range of quite reasonable questions. How does one account for the existence of the church in the first century?⁷ If Christ never existed, why were the leaders of the church, who would themselves have known the veracity of Christian truth-claims, willing to die for their belief in a resurrected Christ?⁸ Why were the worshippers so insistent in their belief that Christ was divine and had physically appeared after his death?⁹ Many of these mythicist claims have been specifically addressed in recent works focusing on the evidence in the New Testament, so I should like to approach the issue from a different angle.¹⁰ The claims of the mythicists are significantly deflated by works of early anti-Christian writers, particularly the hostile testimony to Christ's existence in the second-century author Celsus.

Celsus

Before we examine Celsus' writings, let us address a possible objection, namely that this source is dated. While it is common today to assume that the ancients were terribly unenlightened and unsophisticated, it is Celsus' very antiquity that gives the evidence such weight. He likely wrote in the 170s, when any second-century conspiracy

⁵ Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000); see also Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004).

⁶ Richard Carrier, "How Not to Defend Historicity," in *Bart Ehrman and the Quest of the Historical Jesus of Nazareth: An Evaluation of Ehrman's Did Jesus Exist?*, ed. Frank Zindler and Robert M. Price (Cranford, N.J.: American Atheist Press, 2013), 15–62.

⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; see also the discussion of his reliability in Stephen Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D.," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2, ed. H. Temporani and W. Haase (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1980), 1062–1068.

⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.56.20–24.

⁹ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–97; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

¹⁰ In addition to those more specifically-focused works listed above, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2014); and from a wholly different perspective, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

would have been easily identified and deflated.¹¹ These points would be made equally well by evidence from such similar authors as Porphyry of Tyre, one of the greatest pagan intellectuals of the late third century, Sossianus Hierocles, the governor of Bithynia, and the emperor Julian, a philosopher in his own right who had the resources of the empire to hand.¹² In short, they were all well-educated and well-placed to address the matter of Christ's non-existence, that is, if it was a viable argument to take up. However, given Celsus' chronological proximity to the supposed second-century conspiracy, I shall focus upon him.

One does not have to share Celsus' Christology to think that his statements are worthy of serious engagement. We know little about his life, but the positive assessment of his abilities by scholars should give pause to those who would dismiss his evidence. Stephen Benko has described him as "a man who relied not on rumors and hearsay evidence but on personal observation and careful study."¹³ Celsus attributed the falsehood of Christianity to the errors of origin, content, and transmission of the Christian scriptures.¹⁴ Celsus was broadly monotheistic, but believed different cultures manifested different expressions of divinity.¹⁵ Celsus' general approach consisted of his own

¹¹ For dating: *C. Cels.* 8.69; see also Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worral (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 48; R. Joseph Hoffmann, trans., *Celsus: On the True Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 29; Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), xxvi–xxviii.

¹² In another contemporary example of opposing Christianity without claiming a fictional Christ, Galen, the physician and friend of Marcus Aurelius, decried the stubbornness of Christians, but praised their virtue (Galen, *On the Pulse* 3.3; fragment of commentary on Plato's *Republic* preserved in Ibn Zura, *On the Main Questions Discussed between Christians and Jews*); compare with Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 91.

¹³ Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (London: Batsford, 1984), 148; see also John S. Whale, "Great Attacks on Christianity I: Celsus," *Expository Times* 42 (1930): 119 ("brilliantly equipped"); Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 94 ("a conservative intellectual"); Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 1101 ("a well read and educated Platonist").

¹⁴ Michael Frede, "Celsus' Attack on the Christians," in *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 234.

¹⁵ Contrasted as "qualitative monotheism" as opposed to the "quantitative monotheism" (strictly limited to one deity) of Judaism and Christianity, by Junno Jussi, "Celsus' Arguments against the Truth of the Bible," *Studia Patristica vol. 65: Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 181.

appeal to return to traditional religion, as well as his taking on the persona of a Jew chastising Christians for deviating from Judaism. His work *Alethes Logos*, or the *True Word*, described as “a noble attempt to defend the traditional values of Rome,”¹⁶ is preserved in large part in Origen of Alexandria’s response c. 245 CE, *Contra Celsum*.¹⁷ Celsus’ anti-Christian claims that relate to Christ’s historical existence break down into three areas which I will examine in turn: disreputable birth, low and ordinary life, and pointless death. Regarding the evidence from the New Testament authors, my primary interest here is not to debate the date of these letters (that is, were they genuine first-century documents, or second-century forgeries), but rather to demonstrate what Celsus was responding to from the early Christian community, as well as the continuity of these ideas in later authors.

Historical Birth

Christ’s birth, claimed to be of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 2; Luke 2), was treated as historical fact by Christians in the second century.¹⁸ Writing in approximately 150 CE, Justin Martyr, whom Andresen compellingly argued Celsus was responding to, held that Christ preexisted, was made flesh in a virgin’s womb, and was born as a man.¹⁹ In response, Celsus modified or repeated a version of events in which Christ was born via a soldier’s impregnation of Mary.²⁰ Celsus reflected the concern among Middle Platonists regarding the convergence of material and ideal. The idea that this could be fully combined in one divine/human person has been identified by Richard Wallis as the foundational contemporary philosophical objection

¹⁶ Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity,” 1101.

¹⁷ Origen’s reproduction of Celsus’ *Alethes Logos* has been deemed generally fair by K. J. Neumann, “Celsus,” in *Realencyclopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, third edition, vol. 3, ed. Johann Jakob Herzog and Albert Hauck (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910), 773, and Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, xxii–xxiii, although Robert Bader, *Der Alethes Logos des Kelsos* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1940), 10–24, has drawn attention to material that Origen had omitted.

¹⁸ The “Rule of Faith,” which owing to its citation as apostolic tradition by Irenaeus c. 180 (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1) and again by Tertullian twenty years later (*Prescription Against Heretics* 13) was likely circulating in the early second century, also includes Christ’s birth to the Virgin Mary via the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Justin, 1 *Apol.* 46.5; 63.10; 66.2; see also Carl Andresen, *Logos und Nomos: Die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1955), 308–311.

²⁰ *C. Cels.* 1.32.2–5.

to Christianity.²¹ He later again treated Christ as a historical figure, but not a divine one, when he stated: “The body of a god would not have been born as you, Jesus, were born.”²² Celsus criticized what he saw as the wobbly monotheism of Christianity, accusing Christians of worshipping both God and “this man who appeared recently.”²³ Celsus not only wrote of Jesus’ birth as historical, but held that it was Jesus himself who fabricated the story of the virgin birth.²⁴ In fact, Jesus’ mother “was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery.”²⁵ Celsus expounded upon this a little later, and added that “she had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera,”²⁶ a story which Eusebius of Caesarea reported was circulating among Jewish opponents of Christianity.²⁷

Celsus was followed in this by Porphyry of Tyre, who was praised as “a distinguished pagan intellectual,” and “the most learned and astute” of the anti-Christian writers.²⁸ Porphyry, the author of the work or collection entitled *Against the Christians*, written around the turn of the fourth century, supported Diocletian’s Great Persecution (303–313).²⁹ In addition to his polemic work or works, Porphyry authored *Philosophy from Oracles*, which compiled oracular

²¹ R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 104.

²² *C. Cels.* 1.69.15–16. Marcel Borret, ed., *Origène: Contre Celse*, t. 1, Sources chrétiennes 132 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 27, notes that this was the response of the Jew in Justin, *Dial.* 68.1. The text is that of Miroslav Marcovich, *Origenes Contra Celsum: Libri VIII* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), and the translation that of Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*.

²³ *C. Cels.* 8.12.2–6.

²⁴ *C. Cels.* 1.28.9.

²⁵ *C. Cels.* 1.28.12–13.

²⁶ *C. Cels.* 1.32.4–5; L. Patterson, “Origin of the Name Panthera,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1917): 79–80, demonstrated from inscriptional evidence that this was a common Latin surname among Roman soldiers, citing as examples *CIL* 7.18, 11.1421, and 13.7514.

²⁷ Eusebius, *Ecl. Proph.* 3.10.

²⁸ Andrew Smith, “Objections to Christianity on the Eve of the Persecution,” in *The Great Persecution*, ed. D. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 34; Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 126.

²⁹ Timothy D. Barnes, “Scholarship or Propaganda? Porphyry against the Christians and its Historical Setting,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London* 39 (1994): 60–65. For Porphyry’s support of the Great Persecution, see Elizabeth Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012); see also H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 282.

responses to support his assertions regarding the piety owed God, lesser divinities, and “divine men,” including both heroes such as Heracles and men of outstanding piety such as Jesus. Augustine wrote that in his estimation, the incarnation was Porphyry’s primary stumbling block.³⁰

Historical Life

Early Christians believed firmly in the historical life of Christ, and made frequent reference to it. Melito of Sardis (160–170) referred twice to Christ’s miracles, writing that he came for the purpose of healing the suffering, raising the dead, healing the lame, cleansing the leper, and bringing sight to the blind.³¹ Celsus in his turn ridiculed the limited impact of Christ’s life: “When he was alive he won over only ten sailors and tax-collectors of the most abominable character, and not even all of those.”³² He criticized the appearance of Jesus for not displaying evidence of the beauty that should accompany divinity, and being “little and ugly and undistinguished.”³³ Celsus attempted to defuse the impact of Christ’s miracles by claiming he did them through disreputable sorceries.³⁴ That Celsus was not merely responding to Christian claims rhetorically, but rather was basing his argument upon a historical Christ is shown by his writing of Christ: “However, he was a mere man, and of such character as the truth itself makes obvious, and as reason shows.”³⁵

This general strain of thought continued out to the third and fourth century. Porphyry, too, asserted that the evidence of Jesus’ life revealed him to have been merely a pious man mistakenly worshipped by ignorant Christians.³⁶ Celsus was also followed in this matter by Sossianus Hierocles, who wrote in approximately 305 CE while governor of Bithynia. Hierocles played a significant role in Diocletian’s

³⁰ Augustine, *De Civ.* 10.28.

³¹ Melito, *Peri Pascha* 72, 86. Melito is dated by Stuart Hall to approximately 160–170 CE.

³² *C. Cels.* 2.46.2–3.

³³ *C. Cels.* 7.75.

³⁴ *C. Cels.* 1.28; 1.68; 2.50; 8.41.

³⁵ *C. Cels.* 2.79.2–3.

³⁶ Porphyry, *frag.* 345F.22. Eusebius, *Dem. Evan.* 3.7.2 = Porphyry 345F, and in Latin, Augustine, *De Civ.* 19.23 = Porphyry 345aF; see also Digeser, *Threat to Public Piety*, 21, 164.

Great Persecution,³⁷ making polemical use of Philostratus' third-century *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written about the first-century wonderworker. Hierocles systematically paralleled Apollonius and Christ in his own work, the *Lover of Truth*, portraying Christ as a real man who pleased the gods, as had Apollonius of Tyana.³⁸ The Emperor Julian presented a multilayered engagement of Christianity, the sophistication of which at some points has been underestimated.³⁹ In the winter of 362–363, he composed his *Against the Galileans*, in which he treated the life of Jesus as historical. He pointed out that Jesus had been subject to Caesar, as he and his parents had had to register during the governorship of Cyrenius.⁴⁰ He wrote that in his lifetime he did not accomplish one worthy thing.⁴¹ Julian's counter to the miracles reported in the Gospels of Mark and John was to state that these miracles had indeed taken place, but were done among a contemptuously low class of people.⁴²

Historical Death

Early Christians set great store by the death and resurrection of Jesus. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3–4).⁴³ He continued on, listing the number of people who had had experiences of the risen Christ, culminating with himself (15:5–8).⁴⁴ Paul's letter emphasized that this was material that was circulated to him, and was dependent upon eyewitness testimony of people who were alive at the time of his writing, approximately 54–55 CE. This earlier creedal material which Paul was citing has been plausibly dated to within several years of the crucifixion. Gerd Lüdemann

³⁷ Lactantius, *De mort.* 2.2; 5.2.2, 12; 16.4; Timothy D. Barnes, "Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the Great Persecution," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80 (1976): 242.

³⁸ Eusebius, *C. Hierocl.* 2.2.

³⁹ See D. N. Greenwood, "Crafting Divine Personae in Julian's *Oration* 7," *Classical Philology* 109, no. 2: 140–49.

⁴⁰ Julian, *C. Gal.* 213a; see also Luke 2:2.

⁴¹ Julian, *C. Gal.* 191e.

⁴² Julian, *C. Gal.* 191e.

⁴³ Claims that Paul did not believe in a historical Christ are, to say the least, a profound misreading of this passage.

⁴⁴ See also Acts 9:1–6, 22:6–10.

writes, “The formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in 1 Cor. 15.3–8 falls into the time between 30 and 33 CE.”⁴⁵ Paul placed great weight on the historical death and resurrection of Jesus, writing that if he had not been raised from the dead, then their faith had all been in vain (1 Cor. 15:14).

Celsus also placed significance on the death of Jesus by crucifixion, seeing it as a historical event that opened up Christianity to ridicule. He dismissively referred several times to Christ’s suffering and death through crucifixion. Referring to this event, which again, he treated as historical, Celsus criticized Jesus for not helping himself while he still lived.⁴⁶ Celsus concluded that this was because he was ultimately unable to help himself.⁴⁷ He asked mockingly if while on the cross, Jesus called his blood divine ichor, as Alexander the Great had.⁴⁸ He also recognized the theological consequence of Jesus’ death, holding that Christians viewed him as Son of God because he was punished on the cross.⁴⁹ Porphyry followed this line, mocking Christians for worshipping a man who died for trickeries.⁵⁰ Porphyry’s view can be summed up by his sarcastic quotation of an oracle of Apollo referring to just judges condemning Jesus, who was publicly executed.⁵¹

Conclusion

As has been pointed out by others, the testimony of hostile witnesses is particularly valuable. As John Meier has noted, “such positive evidence within a hostile source is the strongest kind of evidence.”⁵² If Celsus, who would likely have wished Christ away from the Roman

⁴⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1994), 38. From another perspective, similar dating is held to by C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” *Expository Times* 101 (1990): 169; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, second edition, trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1977), 90.

⁴⁶ *C. Cels.* 2.55.16–19.

⁴⁷ *C. Cels.* 1.54.3.

⁴⁸ *C. Cels.* 2.36.1–3.

⁴⁹ *C. Cels.* 2.47.2–3.

⁵⁰ Porphyry, *frag.* 343F; Porphyry, *frag.* 343F = Augustine, *De Civ.* 19.23.

⁵¹ Porphyry, *frag.* 343F = Augustine, *De Civ.* 19.23.

⁵² Meier offers the example of Cicero and Catiline: “If Cicero, who despised Catiline, admitted that the fellow had one good quality—courage—among a host of bad ones then the historian correctly concludes that Catiline was at least courageous.” John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Vol. 3: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 198–199.

Empire if he could, testified to his existence, that in some ways is even more valuable than positive testimony from a Christian source. Ultimately, neither Celsus nor any of the polemicists who followed him could scientifically validate the existence of Christ, but at every turn when historical issues were raised, neither he nor they ever claimed that Christ was a myth. This would have been the simplest approach, surely, to insist that there was no birth of Christ, virgin or otherwise, no deeds, miraculous or otherwise, and no death, atoning or otherwise. This would have been devastatingly effective, had there been anyone for whom such an approach seemed credible.

