

Celsus

by

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Luke wrote in the Book of Acts that Paul came to Ephesus and taught the people about Christ and many of the Greek speaking people responded favorably, but there were others who greatly resisted Paul's preaching. Among these was a silversmith by the name of Demetrius. He and his fellow craftsmen were making silver shrines to the goddess Artemis—in Latin called Diana. So Demetrius called his fellow craftsmen together and said,

Acts 19:25 ... "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 26 "You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods *at all*. 27 "Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence."

The incident describes two of the main reasons for the conflict between Christianity and the pagan religions. First, there was the economic interest that pagan businesses and guilds had consigned to the worship of the pagan gods. Second was the adoration and worship which many of them sincerely practiced. But there was a third reason for resistance to Christianity, and it was more prevalent because it had the force of law.

Roman law required that all its subjects honor the Caesar by burning incense before a statue of the emperor. In this act of homage they showed that they were loyal to the Empire. It was similar to an oath of allegiance that prospective citizens take today with the difference that Rome considered the oath to be vital and mandatory for all its subjects. Religious objections were to be subordinated to the demands of the state. But Christians, as well as Jews, saw this act of worship as

idolatry and refused to do it. For a time the law provided an exemption for the Jews, and since in the early days the Romans saw Christianity as a sect of the Jews the new faith enjoyed the same exemption.

Durant explains the Roman attitude this way,

Pagan civilization was founded upon the state, Christian civilization upon religion. To a Roman his religion was part of the structure and ceremony of government, and his morality culminated in patriotism; to a Christian his religion was something apart from and superior to political society; his highest allegiance belonged not to Caesar, but to Christ.¹

It is easy to see how the opponents of Christianity found it difficult to reconcile loyalty to Rome with belief in Christ. The two were mutually exclusive. For the pagans who did not convert to Christianity their point of view is revealed in the way they formed their arguments against the new faith.

Among these early opponents of Christianity was the Greek philosopher Celsus. He lived in the region of Adrian in the Second Century AD. He wrote a comprehensive attack on Christianity entitled *The True Word (or the True Discourse)* (Λόγος Ἀληθής), which today survives only in the work of the writer Origen called *Contra Celsum*.²

Many writers say that Celsus was an Epicurean, but Robert Wilken argues that Origen gradually changed his view about Celsus and began to say that he was a Platonist. However, close examination of Celsus' writing reveals him as eclectic. "Epicurean" was apparently a label to portray Celsus in a bad light. In Origen's day an Epicurean was regarded as an atheist who undermined society.³

¹ Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 647.

² Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, *Celsus*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celsus>, Mar. 25, 2013.

³ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 95.

Wilken says of Celsus,

He supports traditional values and defends accepted beliefs, but unlike Pliny⁴, he is not a politician or civil official. He approaches the institutions and mores of society as an intellectual prepared to offer philosophical and religious arguments in support of the traditional political and social order. His philosophical and religious ideas are not simply theoretical convictions; they are interwoven with the institutions, social conventions, and political structures of the Greco-Roman world.⁵

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* takes a similar view of Celsus,

Celsus' attitude is that of a detached pagan observer, interested in, but with no strong feelings about, religion. He praised the *Logos doctrine and the high Christian code of morals, but he objected to the exclusive claims of the Church. Making his own some of the Jewish objections to Christianity, he criticized much in biblical history for its miracles and absurdities, and expressed his repugnance to the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Objecting that Christians, by refusing to conform to the State, undermined its strength and powers of resistance, he made an impassioned appeal to them to abandon their religious and political intolerance.⁶

Celsus published his work in about the year 170 AD, or roughly one hundred ten years after the Gospels were

⁴ Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, 62 – 113 AD, Roman orator and statesman.

⁵ Ibid., Wilken, p. 94, 95.

⁶ Cross, F. L., & Livingstone, E. A. (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed. rev.) (314). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

published; therefore, any references to the gospels by him are important because of their antiquity. We can say this because it is evident that the fame, reception and credit to the Gospels must have been well established among Christians by this time to have made them subjects of criticism by one such as Celsus. As Paley wrote, quoting Chrysostom, “the Gospels, when written, were not hid in a corner or buried in obscurity, but they were made known to all the world, before enemies as well as others, even as they now are.”⁷

Celsus was one of the most virulent adversaries of Christianity. He used the Gospels as evidence for his arguments, not by denying the facts reported by the Gospel writers, but by drawing his own inferences from the incidents.

Paley said of this,

“Celsus, or the Jew whom he impersonates, uses these words, ‘I could say many things concerning the affairs of Jesus, and those, too, different from those written by the disciples of Jesus, but I purposely omit them.’”⁸

Concerning this passage it has been rightly observed, that if Celsus could have contradicted the apostles of Christ upon good evidence in any material point he would certainly have done it.

Paley says further,

“It is sufficient however to prove, that, in the time of Celsus, there were books well known, and allowed to be written by the disciples of Jesus, which books contained a history of him. By the term disciple, Celsus does not mean the followers of Jesus in general, for them he calls Christians, or believers, or the like, but those

⁷ William Paley, M.A., *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, pp. 166-67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, W. Paley, p. 167.

who had been taught by Jesus himself, i.e., his apostles and companions.”⁹

Origen replied to Celsus ¹⁰ and cites many of the references of Celsus to the Gospel record of the life of Jesus. Some of these references are as follows:

Celsus attempts to defame Jesus by slandering his mother with the statement, “. . .born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.” (B. 1, s. 28, p. 22.)¹¹

Celsus on this relation asks: “If the mother of Jesus was beautiful, then the god whose nature is not to love a corruptible body, had intercourse with her because she was beautiful.

“It was improbable that the god would entertain a passion for her, because she was neither rich nor of royal rank, seeing no one, even of her neighbours, knew her.” (B. I, 39)

In the above quotation, Celsus refers to the gospel passage wherein it says that Jesus was born of a virgin. He rejects the idea of a virgin birth and then repeats a

⁹ Ibid., W. Paley, p. 167.

¹⁰ Origen’s work entitled *Contra Celsum*.

¹¹ Compiled by Niall McCloskey from volume 4 of *The ante-Nicene fathers : translations of the writings of the fathers down to A.D. 325*, the Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., editors; American reprint of the Edinburgh edition, revised and chronologically arranged, with brief prefaces and occasional notes, by A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. Buffalo, Christian Literature Pub. Co., 1886-87.

tale circulated by other opponents of Jesus that Mary's husband put her away for adultery with a Roman soldier named Panthera.^{12 13} Durant says of this tale that it is "...by critical consent a clumsy fabrication."¹⁴

Nevertheless, the reference points out that Celsus knew at this early date of the gospels of Matthew or Luke.¹⁵ It further points out that Celsus had no doubt about the existence of the family of Jesus, a family that bore the outline of that described in the gospels. Nor does Celsus deny the existence of Jesus; rather, his testimony confirms it.

Celsus speaks of the star that appeared at the birth of Jesus, the wise men who visited the infant, and of Herod's massacre of the children. He also says that John baptized Jesus.¹⁶ (*Contra Celsus*, B. II. 4).

- It is significant that Celsus denies none of these historical facts. Further, in confirming that John the Baptist baptized Jesus he places them both together at the same time and place.

Celsus, impersonating a Jewish person, argues as if with Jesus, himself, "When you were bathing, *says the Jew*, beside John, you say that what had the appearance of a bird from the air alighted upon you. What credible witness beheld this appearance? or who heard a voice from heaven declaring you to be the Son of God? What proof is there of it, save your own assertion, and the

¹² Πάνθηρ, *panthera*, here, and in the Talmud, where Jesus is likewise called _____ is used, like the Latin *lupa*, as a type of ravenous lust hence as a symbolical name for μοιχεύει. So Nitzsch and Baur. But Keim (p. 12) takes it as a designation of the wild rapacious (πανθηρον) Roman soldier. The mother of Jesus was, according to the Jewish informant of Celsus, a poor seamstress, and engaged to a carpenter, who plunged her into disgrace and misery when he found out her infidelity.

¹³ Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). *History of the Christian church*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

¹⁴ Ibid., Will Durant, p. 559.

¹⁵ Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15. Luke 1:26-38.

¹⁶ Owen and Campbell, *The Evidence of Christianity, A Debate*, p 297.

statement of another of those individuals who have been punished along with you?” (B. 1, 41)¹⁷

Despite Celsus’ effrontery we may at least take away from this that the record shows that John the Baptist baptized Jesus, for this is the meaning of “bathing.” Celsus did not deny the fact of the baptism but that the Holy Spirit was present. In this Celsus does not deny that John the Baptist is a man of history and we must conclude that Celsus believed that the Jesus of the gospels was also.

In the quotations preserved by Origen we read that Celsus said that Jesus lived but a few years before him. As Campbell says, “It may also be observed that Celsus speaks of Christ as having taught and suffered recently, p. 21, and p. 282.”¹⁸

- We must ask the humanist who denies the historical actuality of Jesus that if Jesus is merely a myth of Christian imagination how is it that Celsus said that He, “...taught and suffered recently”?

Further, Campbell wrote, “As for the references to the gospels, we do not find that he (Celsus) quotes any of them by the name of the authors, but he speaks of the gospel, meaning, no doubt, the history of Christ, as being changed three or four times, p. 77 (referring to the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?¹⁹) He seems to speak of several of the evangelists, as agreeing to write Christ’s predictions, p. 89, and of things written by the disciples of Christ, p. 67. All which seem to make it evident that he had more than the book of St. Matthew in his hand: and though the greatest part of his references may be found there, yet there are also many of them in the other gospels.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., McCloskey.

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian Preacher’s Companion*, p. 108.

¹⁹ Author’s question. DLS.

²⁰ Ibid., Campbell, *The Christian Preacher’s Companion*, pp. 108-109.

Campbell further describes the similarities of the remarks of Celsus to the Gospels: “He quotes from the gospels such a variety of particulars, that the listing of them will almost prove an abridgment of the evangelists’ history: particularly,

that Jesus, who, he says, was represented as the

Word of God (i.e., the Logos), p. 79, and who was the author of the Christian name²¹, p. 21, (See John 1:1; Matt. 28:19)

and also called himself the Son of God, *ibid.*, (Luke 22:70; John 10:36)

was a man of Nazareth, p. 343. (Matt. 2:23; 21:11)

That he was the reputed to be the son of a carpenter, p. 30. (Matt. 13:55)

That his mother’s pregnancy was at first suspected, *ibid.*, (Matt. 1:18-25)

but that it was pretended that his body was formed in her womb by the Spirit of God; or, as he elsewhere expresses it, produced by a divine operation, p. 30. (Matt. 1:20)

And that to remove the carpenter’s prejudice, an angel appeared to him to inform him of this, p. 266. (Matt. 1:20)

That, when he was born, a star appeared in the east to certain Magi, who came to adore him, p. 31, 45. (Matt. 2:1-2)

The consequence of which was the slaughter of the infants by the order of Herod, hoping thereby to destroy Jesus, and prevent his reign, p. 45. (Matt. 2:16)

But that his parents were warned by an angel to fly into Egypt, to preserve his life, as if his Father could not have protected him at home, p. 51, and 266; (Matt. 2:13-15)

and that he continued in Egypt for a while, where, he says, he had an opportunity to learn magic, p. 22.

²¹ “name” here refers to the authority or religion.

- There is nothing in scripture indicating that Jesus learned “magic tricks.”
- Indirectly, Celsus confirms that Jesus worked miracles.

Campbell also cites many references of Celsus that the readers of the Gospels will recognize:

“He further represents it as pretended in those books that when Jesus was washed by John, the appearance of a dove descended upon him, and that a voice was heard from heaven, declaring him to be the Son of God, p. 31 and 106. (Matt. 3:14-17)

That he was vexed by a temptation, and the assaults of an evil spirit, p. 303. (Matt. 4:1-11)

- Celsus, in his own pagan way, confirms the Temptation of Christ.

He calls Christ himself a carpenter, p. 300, and insults his humble life, lurking from place to place, p. 47, gathering up ten or twelve poor men, publicans, and men that used the sea, of scandalous characters, and represents Christ as a beggar, p. 47;

- The gospels do not describe Jesus or his apostles as rich men, far from it. They are called simply what they were: a carpenter, fishermen, a tax collector and a zealot.
- Yet, Celsus in his contempt confirms the truthfulness of the gospel testimony concerning the occupations of the apostles and the Christ.

that he was sometimes hungry and thirsty, p. 55; speaks of his being rejected by many that heard him, and hints, though not very expressly, at an attempt to throw him down a precipice, p. 298. (Luke 4:28-30)

“He grants that he worked miracles, and particularly that he cured some sick people, raised some that were dead, and multiplied some loaves; but speaks of others

doing the like, p. 53. He also expressly mentions his curing the lame and the blind; and his raising the dead is mentioned a second time, p. 87. He lampoons the expression, 'Thy faith has saved thee,' p. 8.²²

Celsus admits that Jesus worked miracles but he adopted an argument similar to that of the Pharisees as recorded in the gospels. Wilken says concerning the miracles of Jesus that,

Celsus is, however, explicit. "It was by sorcery that he [Jesus] was able to accomplish the wonders which he performed ." (c. Cels. 1.6). Further, he says, "It is by the names of certain demons, and by the use of incantations, that the Christians appear to be possessed of (miraculous) power." (c. Cels. 1.6).²³

The practice of magic was a criminal offense in the Roman Empire and the word *magician* a term of opprobrium and abuse.²⁴

What Celsus wrote was not new. This line of attack was used by the Pharisees against Jesus because He healed on the Sabbath. Matthew records it this way,

Matthew 9:32 As they were going out, a mute, demon-possessed man was brought to Him. 33 After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, *and were* saying, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." 34 But the Pharisees were saying, "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons."

Jesus, himself, showed the futility of this line of reasoning,

Mark 3:22 The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by

²² Ibid., Campbell, *The Christian Preacher's Companion*, p. 110.

²³ Ibid., McCloskey.

²⁴ Ibid., R. Wilken, pp. 98-99.

Beelzebul,” and “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.” 23 And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 “If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! 27 “But no one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.

Jesus’ logic is unassailable. Further, the testimony of Celsus, although it was an attempt to discredit the power of Jesus, nevertheless, acknowledges the fact of the miracles.

Celsus “... hints at several things concerning the doctrine of Christ, and the manner of his preaching, taken especially from Matthew’s account of his sermon on the mount, particularly that he promised that his followers should inherit the earth; that if any strike them on the one cheek, they should turn the other, (B. VII. 58); that he declared, no man can serve two masters, (B. VIII. 15); and would have his disciples learn from the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field, not to be excessively careful about food and raiment, (B. VII. 18). He also refers to some other discourses of Christ, as his saying it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved p. (B. VI. 16).

“He observes that people did not, generally, pay attention to Jesus, and that he denounced woes upon his hearers for their obstinate infidelity, p. 107.

“He also says that his disciples in their writings pretend that he foretold all things that he was to suffer, (B. II. 15, 16, 20); and his resurrection, (B. II. 54); and likewise that deceivers would come, and work miracles,

and speaks of the author of these wicked works by the name of Satan, p. 89.

“He objects that Jesus withdrew himself from those who sought to put him to death, p. 62, and yet afterwards did not avoid death, knowing it was to come, p. 70. He speaks of his eating the flesh of a lamb, p. 340; and that he foretold to his disciples, they would give him up to his enemies; thereby making them wicked, though they were the companions of his table, p. 72.

“That before his sufferings he prayed in these words: ‘Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away,’ p. 75. That he was betrayed by his disciples, though robbers are faithful to their leaders, p. 62 and 66. That none of his disciples dared to suffer for him, p. 86, and that he professed to undergo his sufferings in obedience to his Father, p. 75, and said that ‘these things ought to happen,’ p. 332.

“That he was denied by one who knew him to be God, p. 71, to whom, as well as to the traitor, he had foretold what he would do, p. 72.

“It is intimated that he spoke of coming again with a heavenly host, p. 337.

“He speaks of Jesus as shamefully bound, p. 282; as scourged, p. 716; as crowned with thorns, with a reed in his hand, and arrayed in a scarlet robe, and as condemned, p. 81; as having gall given him to drink when he was led away to punishment, p. 174; as shamefully treated in the sight of the whole world, p. 282; as distended on the cross, p. 82. He derides him for not exerting his divinity to punish those outrages, p. 81; as taking no vengeance on his enemies, p. 404; as incapable to deliver himself, and not delivered by his Father in this extremity, p. 41; and as greedily drinking gall and vinegar, through impatience of thirst, p. 82 and 340.

“He observes it was pretended that when Jesus died upon the cross there was darkness and an earthquake, p. 94; that when he arose he needed an angel to remove the stone of the sepulcher, though he was said to be the Son

of God, p. 266. And according to some, one, according to others, two angels. came to the sepulcher to inform the women of his resurrection, p. 266. That after his resurrection he did not appear to his enemies, p. 98; but first to a woman from whom he had cast out demons, p. 94 and 104; that he appeared to a few of his disciples, showing them the marks of crucifixion, and appeared and disappeared on a sudden, p. 94, &c., and 104. And he says: We take these things from your own writings, to wound you with your own weapons, p. 106.

- Could anyone deny the existence of the gospels at this early date after considering the numerous quotations from them by the pagan Celsus?

“Beside all these circumstances produced from the gospels he speaks of Christ’s pretending that he should come again to burn the wicked, and to receive the rest to eternal life with himself, p. 175. He refers to the Christian doctrine of the fall of the angels, and their being reserved in bonds under the earth, p. 266.

Campbell concludes his references to Celsus by writing the following:

“It is observable that nothing is quoted by him from the Acts in his whole book; nor does he name St. Paul; but he quotes his epistles, particularly these words from the epistle to the Galatians, iv. 14: ‘The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world,’ p. 273, which Origen says is all that he had taken from St. Paul. However, he has also these words of 1 Cor. iii. 29: ‘The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God,’ p. 283, and ‘an idol is nothing’ (1 Cor. viii. 4), p. 293. But it is observable; in the first of these quotations, Celsus reproaches the Christians with their many divisions; and yet says that, however they differed, they agreed in using that expression. He seems also, p. 242, expressly to refer to 1 Cor. xv. 51, 52, and, 1 Thess. iv. 15-17, when he says that the Christians expected that they only should escape in the burning of the world, and that not only they who are alive when it happens, but those also who have been a long time dead.

“Upon the whole, there are in Celsus about eighty quotations from the books of the New Testament, or references to them, of which Origen has taken notice. And while Celsus argues from them, sometimes in a very perverse and malicious manner, he still takes it for granted, as the foundation of his argument, that whatever absurdities could be fastened upon any words or actions of Christ recorded in the evangelists, it would be a valid objection against Christianity; thereby in effect assuring us, not only that such a book did really exist, but that it was universally received by Christians in those times as credible and divine. Who can forbear adoring the depth of Divine wisdom, in laying such a firm foundation for our faith in the gospel history, in the writings of one who was so inveterate an enemy to it, and so unrelenting in his attempts to overthrow it?”²⁵

It is evident from the arguments that Celsus made in his attack upon Christianity that he did not regard Jesus to be a myth; quite the contrary, he shows his belief in the historical reality of Jesus and his works. Not only so, but he quotes the Gospels as representing the authoritative history of the founder of the religion, and the record of what Jesus allegedly did.

²⁵ Ibid., Campbell, *The Christian Preacher's Companion*, pp. 110-12.

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Below is a quote from J. W. Drane concerning the early attitudes of pagans and their opposition to Christianity:

Pagan Opposition to Christianity

It was not long before the popular media of the Roman world turned their attention to these followers of Jesus, describing their activities in lurid terms and portraying them not only as people with weird religious ideas, but people who were a threat to the safety and security of the Roman state:

*The Christians form among themselves secret societies that exist outside the system of laws ... an obscure and mysterious community founded on revolt and on the advantage that accrues from it ... They form a rabble of profane conspiracy. Their alliance consists in meetings at night with solemn rituals and inhuman revelries ... They despise temples as if they were tombs. They disparage the gods and ridicule our sacred rites ... Just like a rank growth of weeds, the abominable haunts where this impious confederacy meet are multiplying all over the world ... To venerate an executed criminal and ... the wooden cross on which he was executed is to erect altars which befit lost and depraved wretches (Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.17; 3.14; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4; 9.1–6).*

The Christians themselves naturally saw things differently. Far from worshipping ‘an executed criminal’, these men and women who were causing such social upheaval firmly believed that their Jesus was not dead, but was really and truly alive, and was with them wherever they went (Acts 2:32). This was perhaps the one crucial factor which ensured the lasting success of the whole Christian movement. Because they believed that Jesus was not dead, but alive, his first followers were prepared to take the most incredible risks in spreading their message. Beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and persecutions of all kinds—even death—

were commonplace in the life of the early churches (Acts 12:1–5; 2 Corinthians 11:23–27). But the spectacular results that accompanied their endeavours made even the suffering infinitely worthwhile.

Drane, J. W. (2000). *Introducing the New Testament* (Completely rev. and updated.) (14). Oxford: Lion Publishing plc.