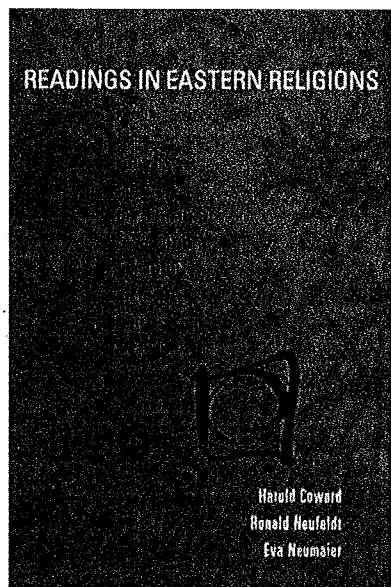


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A Jew in Celsus' *True Doctrine*?

An examination of Jewish Anti-Christian polemic in the second century C.E.

LINCOLN BLUMELL

Summary: One of the major obstacles to presenting a more balanced assessment of Jewish-Christian relations in the 2nd century C.E. is the virtual absence of Jewish literary sources for the period. Though Jews figure prominently in the writings of the 2nd century Church Fathers and later Christian Apologists, it is becoming increasingly evident in scholarship that these texts portray Jews in a tendentious manner, often reveal more about Christian self-definition than they do about either Jews or Judaism, and tend to talk at Jews more than they talk with Jews. Nevertheless, there is one oft-neglected work that might help to remedy these problems and contribute to a better understanding of Jewish perceptions of Christianity in the 2nd century. There is reason to believe that embedded within Celsus' *True Doctrine* are authentic Jewish arguments against Christianity. This article presents a source-critical analysis of Celsus, analyzing the nature of Celsus' debt to 2nd-century Jewish sources and their significance for Jewish-Christian relations at that time.

Résumé : La présentation nuancée des relations entre Juifs et Chrétiens au second siècle de l'ère commune rencontrer un obstacle majeur : l'absence de sources littéraires juives de cette période. Même si les écrits des Pères de l'Église et des apologistes chrétiens mettent en scène des Juifs, il est clair pour les spécialistes que cette présentation est faite de

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façon biaisée, qu'elle parle plus de l'auto-compréhension des Chrétiens que des Juifs ou du judaïsme et, enfin, qu'elle parle aux Juifs plus qu'elle ne parle d'eux. Toutefois, une œuvre peu étudiée, le Discours vrai contre les chrétiens de Celse peut régler ce problème et contribuer à une meilleure compréhension des perceptions des Juifs du second siècle envers le christianisme. Il est raisonnable de croire que l'ouvrage de Celse contient des arguments authentiques contre le christianisme et qui proviennent du judaïsme. Cet article présente, sous la forme d'une critique des sources, une analyse de l'ouvrage de Celse. Il analyse en quoi ce dernier est tributaire de sources juives du second siècle. Il présente enfin la signification de ces sources pour les relations entre Juifs et Chrétiens à cette époque.

Introduction

A survey of Christian literature from the first four centuries of the Common Era reveals the extent to which Christians had a proclivity to write about Jews and Judaism (Kraus and Horbury 1995: 1-51; Williams 1935). Of the numerous treatises written, some take the form of a dialogue in which a Christian and his Jewish interlocutor debate the merits of their respective positions and argue why their particular claims are better than their opponents.¹ But at least since the pioneering work of George Foot Moore at the beginning of the 20th century, a growing suspicion has emerged within scholarship concerning the accuracy of these treatises, specifically regarding their portrayals of Jews and Judaism and their alleged objections to Christianity (cf. Juster 1914: 53-54; Moore 1921: 197-254). Although these dialogues depict Jews as autonomous characters, the apologetic nature of these writings combined with the tendency of most of the Jews in them to eventually succumb to the Christian position casts some doubt over their alleged authenticity. To access the Jewish side of the debate and balance out the picture one would hope to be able to turn to a Jewish source or discover some traces of a Jewish literature *adversus Christianos* to see how Jews were portraying Christians and what arguments they were employing against Christianity. However, there is next to no definitive evidence that such a literature existed.² Though ancient Christians periodically refer to Jewish slanders and some even asserted that Jewish anti-Christian writings were in circulation, there is no firm evidence for a Jewish literary source directed against Christianity in the first few centuries of the Common Era.³

Given the one-sided nature of the evidence it might appear that Jews did not engage in dialogue and debate with Christians; however, a number of sources, both primary and secondary, suggest otherwise (Simón 1948). Tertullian, in his *Adversus Iudaeos*, refers to a recent Jewish-Christian debate and uses it as the pretext for his treatise (*Adv. Iud.* 1.1). Origen frequently refers to debates he had with Jews while living in Caesarea (*Contra Celsum* 1.45,

1.55, 2.31; *Epistula ad Africanum* 6; *Homiliae in 1 Reges* 1.10). Even the anti-Christian writer Celsus refers to periodic disputes between Jews and Christians in his late 2nd-century treatise *True Doctrine* (Origen, *Cels.* 3.1-4, 4.23, 6.29).⁴ While these references are helpful since they reveal that Jews and Christians were in contact, the shortcomings of these references are that they are often very terse, say little about the exact nature of the debate, and almost always render details about the Christian side of the dispute to the exclusion of the Jewish. Consequently, we know a considerable amount about the types of arguments Christians employed against Jews and Judaism, while we know comparatively little about Jewish objections and arguments against Jesus and Christianity. This problem is compounded further by the fact that Christians do not figure prominently in the writings of the rabbis (Goldstein 1950: 22-23).

One oft-neglected source may partially help to remedy the problem posed by the paucity of Jewish material. As mentioned above, Celsus in his *True Doctrine* shows knowledge of debates between Jews and Christians. Although his treatise does not exist independently, large blocks of it survive in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, where Origen quotes from the work in order to refute it.⁵ In the part of Celsus' treatise corresponding to Books One and Two of *Contra Celsum*, Celsus invokes the character of a rhetorical Jew to attack Jesus and then his Jewish followers.⁶ Though Celsus and his Jew periodically raise similar objections, they each bring forth very different arguments, which suggests that Celsus was actually drawing on authentic Jewish material in this section of his treatise. For example, Celsus himself primarily objects to Christian exclusivity and its failure to participate in pagan forms of religiosity, and he attempts to refute Christian doctrines through the aid of neo-platonic reasoning. On the other hand, Celsus' Jew primarily raises objections to the Christian portrayal of Jesus, its conception of the Messiah, and its interpretation of scripture.⁷ Furthermore, distinct echoes of many of the arguments Celsus' Jew raises against Jesus and the Christians can be subtly detected in later Jewish literature and in contemporary Christian literature where similar polemic is attributed to Jews. All this is not to say that Celsus did not occasionally colour the Jewish arguments and package them to fit in with his overall polemic, but it does suggest that there are compelling reasons to believe that embedded within Celsus' *True Doctrine* are authentic Jewish arguments against Christianity from the latter part of the 2nd century.

The authenticity of Celsus' Jewish polemic

While scholarship has tended to downplay the authenticity of Celsus' Jew and his objections to Christianity, the pendulum is beginning to swing in the opposite direction as some studies are taking seriously the possibility that Celsus employed genuine Jewish arguments in his polemic.⁸ Objections to the authenticity of Celsus' Jewish arguments are based primarily on Ori-

gen's assurances and on his repeated insistences that Celsus' Jew was merely "an imaginary character" and that a real Jew would never have held the views and said the kinds of things Celsus' Jew did (*Cels.* 1.28, 34, 44, 49, 55, 67, 2.1, 28, 34, 53). But what is most important is not whether Celsus' Jew was a real person or an "imaginary character," but whether the objections and arguments Celsus adduces through his Jew are plausible Jewish arguments. Despite Origen's repeated protestations otherwise, there are compelling reasons to believe that Celsus' Jew marshals genuine Jewish objections of some currency in the late 2nd century C.E.

When Origen composed *Contra Celsum* in 248 C.E. he had been residing in Caesarea for fifteen years and had become accustomed to the type of Judaism that was predominant in that region.⁹ Celsus, on the other hand, seems to have been familiar with a kind of Judaism somewhat foreign to the world of Origen in mid-3rd century Caesarea. While determining the provenance of Celsus' work is difficult, it appears that it was composed outside of Palestine with the most probable locations being either Rome or Alexandria: Rome because of Celsus' intimate knowledge of Gnosticism and because of his patriotic self-presentation as a defender of the empire and its institutions (*Cels.* 5.54, 6.24-64, 74, 7.2, 18, 8.71); or Alexandria because of his familiarity with Egyptian religion and frequent references to a certain Dionysus, an Egyptian musician (*Cels.* 3.17, 19, 6.41, 8.58). This suggests that the type of Judaism Celsus was familiar with, and consequently represented in his treatise, was that of the Diaspora. As Nicholas De Lange has suggested:

Celsus' acquaintance with Judaism, which is surprisingly thorough in some respects, is with a rather hellenized and syncretistic form of the religion, and Origen, by opposing Celsus' words with statements about the more exclusive Judaism of the rabbis, attempts to ridicule Celsus' knowledge of Judaism. (de Lange 1976:41)

Origen's views of what formed "normative" Judaism when he composed *Contra Celsum* were based primarily on his experience with the Jews in Palestine and not in the Diaspora.¹⁰ Therefore, when Origen balks at the authenticity of Celsus' Jew and the arguments he marshals, it may be because he was unfamiliar with the kind of Judaism Celsus was depicting.¹¹ Accordingly, Origen's assurances alone may not be very good grounds for dismissing the authenticity of Celsus' Jew.

It is also likely that Origen's repeated challenges to the authenticity of Celsus' Jew are a rhetorical tactic to belittle Celsus, his arguments, and his purported knowledge of Judaism by gainsaying the authenticity of his objections.¹² Furthermore, on more than one occasion Origen contradicts himself when he mocks Celsus' Jew by declaring that a real Jew would never have made such objections, known such things, or held such views. In Origen's extant writings outside of his *Contra Celsum* he occasionally refers to Jews who allegedly believed in some of the same things he ridicules Celsus' Jew for believing.¹³

The other objection most commonly marshalled against the authenticity of Celsus' Jewish arguments is that Celsus' Jew does not seem to have had a very good grasp of the Old Testament (Hargis 1999: 36-39). Though he cites general arguments from scripture, he never gets into the minutiae of a scriptural attack. On this front, even Origen is a little surprised that he never raises the objection to the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, given that it was Origen's experience that this was a very common Jewish line of attack (*Cels.* 1.34). That Celsus' Jew does not seem to be well versed in the scriptures likely says more about Celsus and his knowledge of the scriptures than it does about the nature of Jewish arguments against Christianity in the late 2nd century. From a survey of the extant pieces of the *True Doctrine*, Celsus did not have a very good working knowledge of the Hebrew Bible/Septuagint and this appears to have been his biggest handicap in articulating Jewish objections against Christianity (Burke 1986: 241-45; Hullen 1932: 59). But while Celsus may not have been able to recapture the specifics and nuances of the scriptural argument, he is often able to capture the essence of many of them.

Celsus' inability to detail the specifics of the Jewish scriptural argument may suggest another important point, namely, that Celsus was not relying on a written Jewish source for this polemic. While some scholars have maintained that Celsus must have relied on a Jewish literary source for the polemic contained in Books One and Two of *Contra Celsum*, this view seems untenable, not least because Celsus lacks any specific details of a scriptural argument that might plausibly be contained in such an account, but even more so because Celsus never refers to such a document.¹⁴ Although Celsus reports that he was familiar with a Christian treatise, the *Controversy between Papius and Jason*, in which a Jewish Christian tried to show to his Jewish interlocutor that the prophecies concerning the Christ applied to Jesus, Celsus never refers to any comparable Jewish treatise (*Cels.* 4.52). Therefore, Celsus' Jewish attack likely came from his intimate knowledge of existing Jewish polemic against Christianity that he gleaned from his familiarity with Jewish-Christian disputation (*Cels.* 3.1-4, 4.23, 6.29).

Celsus' Jewish polemic against Jesus and Christianity

In Book One of *Contra Celsum* Celsus begins his attack on Christianity with a flurry of eclectic charges, and it is not until almost midway through the first book that Celsus introduces the figure of a Jew to attack the character of Jesus.¹⁵ According to Origen, Celsus does this by presenting a Jew as having a conversation with Jesus and refuting him. The opening salvo is indicative of the types of arguments raised in the first two books:¹⁶

... he [Jesus] fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin; ... he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning ... she was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery ... after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wan-

dering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus ... because he was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on this account gave himself the title of God. (*Cels.* 1.28)¹⁷

The first objection that is raised is to Jesus' alleged virgin birth. Though this is not pursued through a refutation of the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 that was used to bolster the virgin birth (Matt. 1:23), Celsus' Jew marshals other non-scriptural arguments to attack this claim. He begins by challenging the character of Jesus' mother by presenting her as a low-born spinner who was guilty of the crime of adultery. To buttress this claim he reports that her husband drove her out because of her infidelity and then, in a later passage, goes on to assert that the real father of Jesus was "a certain soldier named Panthera" (*Cels.* 1.32).¹⁸ While this is the first instance in any extant literature where the name "Panthera" appears in connection with an attempt to undercut the virgin birth, this patrilineal designation of Jesus will reappear in later Jewish writings.¹⁹ In the very next century, Jesus will be identified as "Yeshua ben Pantera" or "Yeshu ben Pantiri" in the *Tosefta* (*t. Hul.* 2.22-24).²⁰ In fact, the accusation that Panthera was the real father of Jesus became such a prominent Jewish charge in the 4th century that both Eusebius and Epiphanius felt compelled to address it. Eusebius argued that the Panthera story was a misunderstanding of scripture and was made with slanderous and defamatory intent by "those of the circumcision" (*Eclogae propheticae* 3. 10), while Epiphanius argued that Panthera was actually the paternal grandfather of Jesus (*Panarion* 78.7.5).

That the virgin birth was a particular point of attack for Jews can be seen from Origen's rebuttal of this accusation where he makes a protracted defense of the Christian reading of Isaiah 7:14, even though it is never specifically raised by Celsus' Jew, and remarks that this was a distinctively Jewish attack (*Cels.* 1.34). Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* provides further evidence that the virgin birth was a focus of Jewish anti-Christian polemic, as the debate over the alleged virgin birth is central and is raised on four separate occasions, although neither the infidelity of Mary nor the name of Panthera is ever brought up (*Dial.* 43, 50, 63, 67). In the *Acts of Pilate*, an apocryphal 2nd- or possibly 3rd-century text, the charge that Jesus was born out of fornication is put on the lips of the Jewish mob when they beseech Pilate to have Jesus crucified (*Acts Pil.* 2.3).²¹ While the story is hardly credible as history, it is interesting that the accusation is put on the lips of the Jewish crowd and may suggest that this was a prominent Jewish accusation in the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E.²² Likewise, the emergence of infancy gospels in the 2nd century, such as the *Proto-evangelium of James*, may have been in part an attempt to rebut allegations that Jesus was born of fornication, given their heavy emphasis on the chastity and virginity of Mary. Celsus, by accusing Jesus' mother of adultery and buttressing

this claim with a reference to Panthera, seems to have been drawing directly upon pre-existing Jewish polemic that attacked the reality of the virgin birth.²³

Closely tied to the objection to the virgin birth was the charge that Jesus lacked divinity since he had a mortal father. However, this issue was not only important for Celsus' Jew, but was especially important for Celsus and played a major part in the later books of *Contra Celsum*.²⁴ But while the objections of both Celsus and his Jew share some similarities, there are also many key differences in the types of arguments employed to contest Jesus' divinity.²⁵ While Celsus never raises an objection to Jesus' divinity based on the crucifixion, for his Jew this is an important argument against the divinity of Jesus and was perhaps telling of the Jewish position. That God, or even his son, should come to earth and suffer and then be punished as a common criminal by being crucified seemed incomprehensible (*Cels.* 2.9, 16). As Celsus' Jew chidingly argues:

If you think you provide a true defense by discovering absurd justification for those doctrines in which you have been ridiculously deceived, why may we not think that everyone else as well who has been condemned and come to an unfortunate end is an angel greater and more divine than Jesus? ... Anyone with similar shamelessness could say even of a robber and murderer who had been punished that he, forsooth, was not a robber but a god; for he foretold to his robber-gang that he would suffer the sort of things that he did in fact suffer. (*Cels.* 2.44)

That a divine being should undergo such an ordeal seemed hardly sensible to Celsus' Jew, and likely to many other Jews who did not sympathize with the Christian position.

However, the major piece of evidence Celsus' Jew marshals to contest the divinity of Jesus, which does not appear elsewhere in the treatise, was that when Jesus as a god came to earth, he had been completely rejected and disbelieved by the Jewish people. Not only does he point out that some of Jesus' very own apostles betrayed, denied, and even abandoned him, but also that the Jewish nation at large had never recognized him (*Cels.* 2.9, 18, 20-22). As Celsus' Jew exclaims, "O most high and heavenly one, what God that comes among men is completely disbelieved?" (*Cels.* 2.74). Furthermore, he argues, had Jesus truly been divine he would have assuredly been recognized and acclaimed by the nation of the Jews, but as it was, there were hardly any who acknowledged him as such (*Cels.* 2.30, 33). Thus he concluded that Jesus was no more than "a mere man" (*Cels.* 2.79).

Another major charge, often found alongside objections to Jesus' divinity, was that of "magic"; Jesus was a "sorcerer" who became adept with "certain magical powers" during his sojourn in Egypt (*Cels.* 1.28). While the charge of magic is scattered throughout Celsus' treatise, it is most prominent in books one and two of *Contra Celsum* in the mouth of Celsus' Jew (Gallagher 1982: 49). The express purpose of such a charge was to undermine Jesus' alleged divinity by arguing that his miracles, which lent credibility to divine

claims, were actually accomplished through magical powers.²⁶ That both Celsus and his Jew raise this accusation against Jesus does not necessarily imply that Celsus was simply inserting this charge into his Jew's mouth without any basis, as there are many reasons why the charge of magic might have been a distinctive part a Jewish polemic.

As is apparent from Origen's rebuttals to many of Celsus' charges, Christians frequently employed the example of Jesus and his wonder working as not only a proof but also as a defense for their claims. For example, the only extant fragment of Quadratus' apology from the beginning of the 2nd century focuses specifically on the alleged miracles performed by Jesus (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.3). Even the gospels, as Morton Smith has shown, tend to depict Jesus as a miracle worker or possibly a magician; at least this is what an outsider might have perceived (Smith 1973: 224–26). Given the heavy emphasis on Jesus' miracle working in early Christianity it might not be surprising for non-Christians, even Jews, to view Jesus as either some kind of genuine miracle worker or to regard him as nothing more than a magician. Though the gospels never put the direct charge of sorcery into any Jew's mouths, it might be alluded to on various occasions.²⁷

In the first non-Christian Jewish reference to Jesus—by Josephus in book eighteen of his *Jewish Antiquities*—Josephus identifies Jesus as a “wonder worker” (*Ant.* 18.63).²⁸ About 50 years later in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin claims that the Jews who first witnessed Jesus' many miracles charged him of practicing “magical arts” and considered him a “magician” (*Dial.* 69). Even in rabbinic literature, where Jesus and his disciples do not figure prominently, when they are depicted it is commonly in the guise of “enchanters and sorcerers” (Urbach 1979: 115–16). In the earlier uncensored edition of *b. Sanh.* 43a it is alleged that “Yeshu” was punished because he practiced “sorcery.”²⁹ Though this is a late reference, William Horbury has persuasively argued that the reference was to Jesus and that the Jewish charge of magic was older than its immediate context in the Talmud (Horbury 1982: 19–61).³⁰ Furthermore, given the strong injunction in Deuteronomy 18:9–14 against the practice of various magical arts including “sorcery,” and the fact that accusations of “sorcery” and “magic” were widespread throughout the ancient world, it might not be that surprising that non-Christian Jews would come to view Jesus as a sorcerer. Thus when Celsus' Jew accuses Jesus of magic and compares his miracles to the kinds of tricks performed by Egyptian magicians, Celsus was likely presenting an authentic Jewish accusation (*Cels.* 1.67–68).

The last substantial objection marshalled directly against Jesus that is put on the lips of Celsus' Jew was that Jesus was not the “Christ” because he did not fit the expected qualifications. This is a significant point of attack for Celsus' Jew because unlike the charge that Jesus was a sorcerer and lacked divinity, which reappears throughout the entire treatise in the mouth of both Celsus and his Jew, Celsus never addresses the messiahship of Jesus and

reports only later on in his treatise that this was a key point of debate between Jews and Christians (*Cels.* 3.1–4).

The initial objection raised against the messianic claims of the Christians was that the prophecies they employed to prove Jesus' messiahship could actually be applied to numerous other individuals. As Celsus' Jew asserts, “Why should you [Jesus] be the subject of these prophecies rather than the thousands of others who lived after the prophecy was uttered?” (*Cels.* 1.50). A little later on, he goes on to assert, “But some thousands will refute Jesus by asserting that the prophecies which were applied to him were spoken of them” (*Cels.* 1.57). In the last instance he declares, “the prophecies could be applied to thousands of others far more plausibly than Jesus” (*Cels.* 2.28). Though there is definite hyperbole with the use of the term “thousands,” the main point of the argument is well taken and two related issues appear most prominent on this front. First, based on Celsus' objections, it appears that Jews were taking grave exception to the Christian interpretation of scripture. Second, it was the debate over the nature of the Christ that was the focal point of the scriptural debate. While this is significant for Celsus' account because he nowhere else contests Jesus' claims on this basis, there are other examples where Jews challenge Jesus' messiahship through the use of scripture. Already in the New Testament there are examples where Jews dispute the Christian interpretation of scripture concerning the Christ (Acts 12:2; 18:28). Closer to the time of the composition of Celsus' treatise in the 2nd century, Justin's Jewish interlocutor Trypho echoes similar sentiments when he charges that Justin's interpretation of scripture to prove the Christ was both “contrived” and “blasphemous” (*Dial.* 79).

Moving from this general attack, where Celsus' Jew asserts that the Christian hermeneutic is flawed, he begins to raise some substantive objections to the messianic character of Jesus. His first explicit objection is that Jesus could not have been the Christ because he never became king nor acted in a regal manner but lived a disgraceful life wandering about from town to town in destitution (*Cels.* 1.61). Later on he asserts “the prophets say that the one who will come will be a great prince, lord of the whole earth and of all nations and armies. . . . But they did not proclaim a pestilent fellow like him” (*Cels.* 2.29). Thus, he argued, Jesus had utterly failed to live up to the normal messianic expectations; he had never become a recognized king, and he had hardly subdued other nations.³¹ Though Celsus' Jew does not get into the specifics of a scriptural argument, he aptly recaptures its general essence.

Implicit in these objections to the messiahship of Jesus was the absurdity that the “Christ” should die as a common criminal by being crucified. As unthinkable as it had been for Celsus' Jew to imagine a crucified divinity, it was equally inconceivable to imagine a crucified Christ (*Cels.* 2.44). Once again, this same objection can be detected in other literature. In 1 Corinthians 1:23 Paul laments to his Corinthian disciples how a crucified Christ was

a major "obstacle" or even a "scandal" for many Jews. In the synoptic accounts of the passion, Jesus' Jewish adversaries are depicted as mocking him as the alleged "Christ, the king of Israel" as he hung on the cross and died (Mk. 15:32; Matt. 27:42; Lk. 23:35-37). Later, Justin's Trypho expresses severe consternation at the doctrine of a crucified Christ and exclaims, "For we cannot come so far as even to suppose any such thing" (*Dial.* 90). Thus, Celsus' Jew's repugnance at and opposition to such a messianic conception is echoed in other literature and suggests that at the end of the 2nd century the belief in a crucified Christ was just as incomprehensible to most Jews as it had been previously.³²

The last major piece of evidence that Celsus' Jew marshalled against Jesus being the Christ was that there was no evidence that he was resurrected (*Cels.* 2.78). He seems at this point rhetorically to concede that Jesus could be the Christ, even if he were crucified, if his resurrection could be proven. But since he has not appeared, nor is he likely to make himself manifest, there is no proof of his resurrection and hence no proof that he was the Christ. While the credibility of the resurrection is primarily used at this point to contest the messiahship of Jesus, it also functions at a secondary level to challenge the miraculous story of the empty tomb.

This is significant given that objections to the resurrection appear to have been part of a distinctively Jewish polemic. The Gospel of Matthew seems to have been purposely defending the authenticity of the resurrection by deflecting Jewish accusations that the resurrection did not occur and that the disciples simply stole the body. Matthew reports that "the chief priests" and "the Pharisees" asked Pilate to station guards at the tomb "lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, 'he is raised from the dead'" (Matt. 27:64). By reporting that Pilate deliberately stationed guards at the tomb to ensure that Jesus' disciples would not steal his body, Matthew was attempting to lend credibility to the resurrection. In the *Gospel of Peter*, written sometime during the 2nd century, the same story is repeated but with more exaggeration as Jewish "elders" and "Scribes" now accompany the Roman soldiers and camp out at Jesus' tomb; if the placement of Roman soldiers at the tomb could not deflect the accusation that the disciples stole the body then the addition of Jewish guards may have helped (*Gos. Pet.* 8: 29-33). Finally, at the end of the 2nd century, at about the same time that Celsus' *True Doctrine* was composed, Tertullian was aware of the distinctly Jewish accusation that the disciples had stolen the body and faked the resurrection. He reports that some Jews claimed, "This is he [Jesus] whom his disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said he had risen again...." (*De spectaculis* 30).³³

Celsus has appropriately placed the objection to the empty tomb into his Jew's mouth since there is compelling evidence from other sources that this was a part of a pre-existing Jewish polemic against Jesus. But while Celsus' Jew never charges that Jesus' body was stolen, he does contest the resurrection in a slightly different way.³⁴ He argued that the testimony of those who

allegedly witnessed the resurrection was not convincing since "he [Jesus] appeared secretly to just one woman and to those of his own confraternity" (*Cels.* 2.70). Celsus directly challenges the resurrection by attacking the credibility of the witnesses. Not only were they immediate followers of Jesus, but in the case of his disciples they were a band of "infamous men" who were liars and fabricated "fictitious tales" (*Cels.* 1.62, 2.26, 46; cf. Justin, *Dial.* 8). By specifically referring to a "sole woman" as a witness of the resurrection, Celsus' Jew can further undercut the resurrection since a women's testimony may not have generally been taken as valid in contemporary Judaism, given the evidence from the Mishnah (*m. Roš Haš.* 1.8).³⁵

The last of the major arguments that is put on the lips of Celsus' Jew is directed at Jesus' Jewish followers, both past and present. They are accused of apostasy since they had forsaken their ancestral laws:

... deluded by Jesus, they have left the law of their fathers, and have been quite ludicrously deceived, and have deserted to another name and another life.... What was wrong with you, citizens, that you left the law of our fathers, and, being deluded by that man who we were addressing just now, were quite ludicrously deceived and have deserted us for another name and another life? (*Cels.* 2.1)³⁶

That this was an authentic Jewish charge and that Celsus was drawing on pre-existing Jewish polemic can be demonstrated from one important feature of this argument. Celsus' Jew specifically accuses "Jewish" Christians and not "Gentile" Christians of apostasy. Though Celsus never directly says this, Origen specifically reports in his reply that Celsus addresses this charge only to "Jewish believers" and actually mocks him for this since in Origen's experience it was the Gentile believers and not the Jewish believers who did not follow all the ordinances of the Law (*Cels.* 2.1). However, here as elsewhere, Origen has missed the main thrust of the argument: a Jew would not charge a Gentile of apostasy from the Law since they never had the Law in the first place. The inference that Celsus' Jew is presenting an authentic Jewish accusation can be drawn from the fact that he correctly accuses only Jewish Christians of apostasy when by the end of the 2nd century the majority of Christians would have been Gentiles.³⁷ The crux of the argument for Celsus' Jew was that while Jewish Christians claimed to adhere to the Jewish scriptures, they had failed to understand them and had abandoned its laws.³⁸

Conclusion

The remains of Celsus' *True Doctrine* preserved within Origen's *Contra Celsum* are very important. Not only do they represent the first extant polemical work written by a pagan critic of ancient Christianity but they also contribute to our understanding of the emergence and engagement of Christianity with the larger Roman world in the 2nd century. But on another front, they may also be of some importance for elucidating Jewish sources in the 2nd century and their significance for Jewish-Christian polemics. Based on the foregoing

analysis, there are compelling reasons to believe that Celsus exploited previously existing Jewish polemic in his invective against Christianity and that this polemic is contained primarily within books one and two of Origen's *Contra Celsum*, where Celsus places his attack in the mouth of a Jew.

Celsus' Jewish polemic, which is by no means exhaustive, may render some of the principal Jewish issues of contention with Christianity in the 2nd century. First, his polemic reveals that Jews were taking grave exception with many of the Christian claims about Jesus, such as his alleged virgin birth, divinity, and miracle working. While Jews may have combated such claims through the use of scripture, Celsus shows that Jews were also employing other non-scriptural arguments to contest these allegations. In the case of the virgin birth, charges of infidelity and the personage of "Panthera" figure prominently, and in the case of Jesus' alleged divinity the absurdity and incomprehensibility of a crucified divinity combined with Jesus' general failure to convince the Jewish nation of such claims are foremost. To rebut Jesus' miracle working the charge of magic was invoked and his miracles are downgraded by reducing them to the sorts of feats accomplished through vulgar sorcery. Second, Celsus shows that Jewish objections to the messiahship of Jesus were central and that this was an argument waged on two fronts, through a general attack on Jesus' qualifications and through a scriptural attack over the specific nature of the Christ. Jesus did not live up to the expected messianic hope and his death on the cross only confirmed this for Celsus' Jew, and the fact that Jesus only appeared to a close group of untrustworthy individuals after his resurrection hardly served as either proof of his messiahship or of his resurrection. On the scriptural front, Celsus' Jew never marshals any thorough attack but he is able to capture the essence and the key points of the scriptural assault; the Messiah was not to suffer and die but to come in great power. This insight is particularly significant because it shows that disputes over scriptural interpretation and fulfillment of prophecy with regard to the Christ were prominent at the end of the 2nd century. Last, Celsus reveals that Jews were accusing Jewish Christians of apostasy from the law by forsaking its prescribed commandments.

The Jewish objections just listed do not represent the entire range of arguments brought forth by Celsus' Jew against Jesus and his followers, but only the more prominent charges that have a central place in books one and two of *Contra Celsum*. While it is likely that these issues accurately reflect authentic Jewish objections to Christianity and that most of them are drawn from pre-existing Jewish polemic, it must also be acknowledged that Celsus probably filtered and even tailored some of them. While this makes our reconstruction of Celsus' treatise less than ideal, his work still helps to partially fill the void of relevant Jewish sources since it represents a different type of evidence than that provided by the Church Fathers.²⁹

While this paper has referred to "Celsus' Jew" throughout, this has been done for rhetorical convenience and not because it is being argued that Cel-

sus was employing an actual Jew for his polemic. In fact, it is impossible to determine whether Celsus' Jew was a real person, a conglomeration of many Jews, or simply an imaginary figure employed solely to further Celsus' assault on Christianity. What is most important is not the actuality of Celsus' Jew but the arguments he adduces, and whether they plausibly represent authentic Jewish polemic. Given that many of these arguments can be detected in other literature where they are attributed to Jews, are usually unique to books one and two of *Contra Celsum*, and when they do reappear in the remainder of Celsus' treatise are typically fashioned and articulated in different terms, there is a strong probability that Celsus drew heavily on pre-existing Jewish polemic when he put his arguments into the mouth of his Jew.

Notes

- 1 I.e., *Dialogue with Trypho*, *Controversy of Jason and Papiscus*, *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*, *The Altercation between Simon the Jew and Theophilus the Christian*.
- 2 The absence of anti-Christian Jewish sources might be the inevitable result of the eventual triumph of Christianity. Works that were threatening to Christianity were sometimes destroyed; hence Porphyry's *Against the Christians* along with other such writings were periodically consigned to the flames (Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.9.30; Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.36).
- 3 While Eusebius mentions the circulation of Jewish letters directed against Christians in which Jesus and his followers were reviled (*Commentarius in Isaiam* 18), there is no surviving evidence for them. The earliest Christian reference to a Jewish anti-Christian text that can be substantiated is to the *Toledoth Yesu* ("Genealogy of Jesus") when Agobard, the 9th-century Archbishop of Lyon, refers to it (Krauss and Horbury 1995: 12-15).
- 4 As for the late 2nd-century dating of *True Doctrine*, there are only three vague references in the entire *Contra Celsum* that may help to secure this date. In the first Origen says that Celsus had been dead "for a long time" (*Cels. Pref.* 4); however, it is impossible to determine an exact date from this. In the second reference, Celsus refers to the active persecution of Christians (*Cels.* 8.69). In the final reference Celsus refers to the "ones now ruling" (*Cels.* 8.71). Although an earlier generation of scholarship confidently dated the composition of Celsus' treatise to the year 178 C.E., recent scholarship is much more cautious and dates the treatise to the last third of the 2nd century or even the beginning of the 3rd century (Rosenbaum 1972: 102-11; Hargis 1999: 20-24).
- 5 *Against Celsus* (*Contra Celsum*) is more accurately titled *Against the So-Titled True Account of Celsus* (*Cels.* 2.47). It is currently the *communis opinio* of scholarship that Origen accurately reproduces Celsus' *True Doctrine* with little alteration. In the preface of *Contra Celsum* Origen claims to have addressed every point raised by Celsus (*Cels. Pref.* 3). Later on Origen says that he has tried to preserve the order of Celsus' work by addressing each issue in the order it was raised (*Cels.* 1.41).
- 6 In Book One of *Contra Celsum* Origen deals with Celsus' objections to Jesus' public career, his baptism, and gathering of his disciples. In Book Two Origen deals with Celsus' objections having to do with the arrest, condemnation, and execution of Jesus, although Book Two begins with an attack on Jesus' Jewish followers.
- 7 Baumgarten (1990: 42) has argued, "The distinctive format with the characteristically Jewish outlook support the notion that Celsus has contributed little to the sections preserved in Books I & II of Origen's response."
- 8 Ernst Bammel (1986: 265-66) gives a concise summary of the differing scholarly positions up to 1986. For more recent scholarship that contests the authenticity of Celsus' Jewish argu-

- ments, see Hargis 1999: 36–39; Triggs 1998: 58. For recent scholarship that takes the opposite position see Baumgarten 1990: 37–44; Setzer 1994: 147–51; Wilson 1994: 278–81.
- 9 Origen's *Contra Celsum* was composed sometime around the middle of the 3rd century. Though Origen refers to some of his previous works in his *Contra Celsum* such as his commentaries on specific books of the Bible, these references do not provide a concrete reference for dating the work but only reveal that *Contra Celsum* was written sometime during the later years of Origen's life when he had already composed many of his biblical commentaries (*Cels.* 4.37, 39; 6.49, 51, 60). The only solid piece of evidence available for the date of the work comes from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius in which he assigns the date of *Contra Celsum* to sometime during the reign of Philip the Arab (244–249 C.E.; *Hist. eccl.* 6.36.1–3). Eusebius also says that Origen was supposed to have died shortly after the persecution of Decius sometime in 253/4 C.E. (*Hist. eccl.* 6.39, 7.1) Michael Frede (1999: 131) has argued that there are no solid grounds for rejecting Eusebius' dating of Origen's *Contra Celsum*. In the preface to Henry Chadwick's (1980: xiv) translation of *Contra Celsum* he has offered an even more precise date for the work based on a reference at 3.15 that he believes refers to the events of the year 248 C.E., when the Arabian emperor Philip was faced with three usurpers.
 - 10 It is difficult to know how much Origen actually knew about Jews from first hand experience prior to his move to Caesarea. Origen grew up in Alexandria where there had been a notable Jewish community at least up until the revolt of 115–117 C.E., but it is doubtful that this community was still thriving in the late 2nd or early 3rd century. If Origen had had close contact with Jews while he was in Alexandria then he never reveals this in his writings. Joseph Triggs has argued that prior to coming to Caesarea Origen derived most of his knowledge about Jews and Judaism from the works of Philo of Alexandria (Triggs 1998: 11–12).
 - 11 With respect to Origen's rejection of Celsus' Jew Stephen Wilson has asserted (1995: 280): "That some of the views ascribed to Celsus' Jew were not shared by Origen's Jewish contemporaries, as he frequently claims, is probable, but this may only be because Celsus' Jew represents a form of Judaism not known to him.... There is no reason to suppose that figures like Celsus' Jew did not exist some seventy years earlier (perhaps in Origen's day too) and in other places than Caesarea."
 - 12 Origen employs a similar tactic by repeatedly challenging Celsus' knowledge of Plato and also by pejoratively referring to him as an "epicurean" (*Cels.* 1.8, 10, 2.21, 2.43, 2.60, 3.35, 4.9, 8.0, 4.4, 4.36, 7.4, 7.5, 7.42).
 - 13 Origen is baffled that Celsus' Jew can quote Euripides and is stunned at his knowledge of Greek mythology (*Cels.* 1.69, 2.34). Although Origen says that he has never met a Jew who believed that the *logos* was the "son of God" as does Celsus' Jew (*Cels.* 2.31), Philo, whose writings Origen certainly knew (*Cels.* 6.21; *Commentarii in evangelium Matthaei* 15.3), accepted a form of the teaching but does not call the *logos* the "only-begotten of God" but instead the "firstborn of God" (*De agricultura* 12; *De confusione linguarum* 28; *De somniis* 1.37). Origen also mentions in *De principiis* 1.3 that he once met a certain "Hebrew" who told him that the six-winged seraphim in Isaiah 6 represented "the only-begotten of God and the Holy Spirit," although never states whether this "Hebrew" connected the six-winged seraphim with the *logos*.
 - 14 Marcus Lods (1941: 1–33) argued that Celsus' Jewish source hostilely portrayed the life of Jesus from his birth to his baptism. But the various types of evidence he employed (*Dialogue with Trypho*, *Acts of Pilate*, rabbinic material) cannot be used to prove the existence of an earlier written source. Morton Smith (1978: 78) seems to suppose that Celsus relied on a written Jewish source though he never explicitly says this: "How closely Celsus followed his Jewish source from I.28 to the end of II is uncertain. He probably left out much that he thought was of exclusively Jewish interest, and he may have added arguments to appeal to his Gentile readers."

- 15 Celsus begins by charging Christians with holding secret meetings contrary to the law, with practicing magic, and with generally lacking any intellectual capacities (*Cels.* 1.1, 6, 9, 12–13). In *Cels.* 1.14–25 Celsus attacks the Jewish race as a prelude to his assault upon Christianity.
- 16 It is worth pointing out at this point that Celsus' Jew never charges the Christians with committing "abominations" although this was a typical accusation against Christians in the 2nd century. It is also interesting that Justin's Trypho does not pursue this line of argument and even defends the Christians by saying that such stories are "not worthy of account" (Justin. *Dial.* 10).
- 17 For convenience's sake all quotes of *Contra Celsum* are taken from Henry Chadwick's translation.
- 18 It appears that Celsus' Jewish source knows of the account of Jesus' birth contained in Matthew's gospel, although he never directly refers to it by name. This may be significant given that patristic writings attest to a Hebrew version of Matthew (Papias in Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.6; Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.1.1; Origen in Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.4; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 3.246; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.13.1; Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 3; *Epistulae* 20.5). That Celsus' Jew apparently knows of the Gospel of Matthew is not implausible given that Justin's Trypho was apparently familiar with Christian documents (*Dial.* 10).
- 19 Whether "Panthera" is a play on the Greek word "parthenos" from Isaiah 7:14 (quoted in Matt. 1:23) or a reference to an actual figure is not certain, but it does appear to be a deliberate Jewish attempt to undercut the claim of some Christians that Jesus was born of a virgin. Morton Smith has pointed out an inscription from Bingerbrück Germany that refers to a certain "Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera" who was a Sidonian archer and who was transferred to Germany from Sidon in 9 C.E. For Smith this shows that the name Pantera was in use at the start of the first century in Palestine (Smith 1978: 60–61). Another possible explanation is that the Greek means "panther" and as panthers are believed to have been promiscuous, so it was intended to imply promiscuity on the part of Jesus' mother (Goldstein 1950: 37–41).
- 20 A modified and harsher account of the events surrounding Jesus' birth will be picked up in the various editions of the *Toledoth Yeshu* that will identify "Yoseph Pandera" as the real father of Jesus (Goldstein 1950: 147–65).
- 21 Commenting on this passage in the *Acts of Pilate* Felix Scheidweiler has asserted (Schneemelcher 1991: 501): "When Celsus about 178 wrote his polemic against the Christians, the charge the Jews brought against Mary had already become adultery. This more extreme form of the Panthera story must, however, have been preceded by the milder charge of premarital relationships."
- 22 Problems surrounding Jesus' birth can even be detected as early as the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus is referred to by the unusual designation "son of Mary" (Mk. 6:3), suggesting the ambiguity surrounding his birth and a subtle challenge to his teachings (Van Aarde 2001: 105–10). Oscar Cullman, commenting on the emergence of the infancy Gospels in the 2nd century has noted (Schneemelcher 1991: 417): "An answer had also to be given to Jewish attacks based on the older accounts of the virgin birth. The Jews had spread abroad the idea that Jesus was the illegitimate child of a soldier named Panthera. In the face of such slanders, at which Matthew already seems to hint, the virgin birth through Mary had to be demonstrated more palpably by means of a special narrative. The discreet allusions in Matthew and Luke no longer sufficed."
- 23 Celsus' Jew raises other less prominent objections to the virgin birth. For him it was absurd that God should have a child by means of a mortal woman since to believe so was to suppose that God had "sexual intercourse" and had a "corporeal body" (*Cels.* 1.39).
- 24 Celsus had a major issue with the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and considered it shameful and hardly worth refuting because it was so ridiculous (*Cels.* 4.2). Celsus' chief reason for rejecting the incarnation was that it required that God change and that it was

- only the nature of humans, and not the divine, to undergo change and alteration (*Cels.* 4.14). He also chided the Christians that he was more of a monotheist than they were because he believed in only one supreme God while the Christians apparently believed in a form of ditheism (*Cels.* 8.12). Yet, while Celsus totally rejected the incarnation, he did not have any objection, at least in principal, to a man becoming divine, although in the case of Jesus he felt that he was hardly deserving of the divine designation (*Cels.* 7.53).
- 25 While Celsus points to the problems posed to monotheism by Jesus' apparent divinity, surprisingly Celsus' Jew never raises this issue (*Cels.* 8.12).
- 26 Magical powers for Jews were concomitant with idolatry and belief in a power apart from God (Urbach 1979: 98-99).
- 27 At Mark 3:22 and Matthew 12:24 the "scribes" (Mark) or the "Pharisees" (Matthew) accuse Jesus of performing exorcisms through the power of "Beelzebul," a charge that seems to imply some sort of sorcery. At John 8:48 a group of Jews level a similar charge at Jesus: "The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'"
- 28 Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63 is a difficult passage to accurately assess given that there is almost no doubt that certain elements of it reflect the hand of a later Christian redactor. Nevertheless, Josephus' statement that Jesus was a "wonder worker" appears to have been an authentic part of the original *Testimonium Flavianum* (Whealey 2003: 18-43, esp. 26).
- 29 The Munich Manuscript adds "the Nazarene" making it a clear reference to Jesus. However, this passage is not found in the later (censored) editions of the Talmud and is only found in the printed editions of the Talmud that precede the Basil edition.
- 30 While there is some dispute as to whether this passage originally referred to Jesus, William Horbury has persuasively argued that it did refer to Jesus and that the charge of magic at *b. Sanh.* 43a is older than its immediate context (Horbury 1982: 19-61).
- 31 To rebuff this allegation Origen retorted by claiming that there would be two advents of the Christ, the first in humiliation and the 2nd in great regal power (*Cels.* 1.56).
- 32 In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, reported to have taken place in the mid-3rd century under Decius, Pionius in his final exhortation to his followers encourages them not to have anything to do with the Jews because they only considered Jesus a crucified criminal and not the Christ (*Mart. Pion.* 13).
- 33 Interestingly Origen does not directly mention that Jews spread the story that the body of Jesus was stolen but only reports, commenting on Matthew 28:15 ("this story [the stolen body] has been spread among the Jews to this day") and other verses that contain the phrase "to this day," that it means until the end of the world (*Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* 32.396; *Homiliae in Isaiam* 7.5). That this accusation gradually lost force as a Jewish charge can be seen in Jerome's commentary on Matthew where he comments on Matthew 28:15 and instead of saying anything about the Jews he uses the verse to show how money for sacred purposes was misappropriated and is an example that should not be followed by Christian clergy (*Commentarii in evangelium Matthaei* 28.14).
- 34 Baumgarten (1990, 43) has argued that the reason Celsus never conceded that the body of Jesus was stolen was because that would give up too much ground and potentially rebound: "A flat denial, together with a charge of hallucination or outright deception was much stronger and effective."
- 35 While the Mishnah was compiled ca. 220 C.E., it doubtless contains earlier material, although just how old certain strands of the material are is difficult to determine. Nonetheless, the fact that the Mishnah prohibits women from serving as witnesses suggests that about the same time as Celsus was composing his treatise the prohibition was generally accepted by Jews.
- 36 Celsus directly levels this charge against the Christians later on in his treatise (*Cels.* 3.5, 5.33). But in the later references there is no deliberate distinction made between "Jewish" and "Gentile" Christians.
- 37 Lending further credence to the Jewish nature of this charge is the fact that the charge of forsaking the law can be detected in early Christian literature. In Acts it is reported

that Paul came under severe attack from Jewish quarters for allegedly teaching Jews to abandon the law and later in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* the same accusation is leveled (Acts 21:28; Justin, *Dial.* 10).

- 38 In a rather ingenious follow-up to the initial charge of apostasy, Celsus' Jew charges that while Jesus' followers had departed from the Law, Jesus actually "kept all the Jewish customs, and even took part in their sacrifices" (*Cels.* 2.6). It is difficult to determine whether this astute observation was made by Celsus or was part of a pre-existing Jewish polemic. Nevertheless, it was an attempt to draw a distinction between the actions of Jesus and his later followers by pointing out that Jesus largely kept the ordinances of the Law while his Jewish followers had apostatized by forsaking it. This insight is especially important because it is the first time anyone drew a deliberate distinction between the actions of Jesus and his later followers with respect to the Law and in some ways preempted modern scholarship on this front.
- 39 Despite Celsus' preference for Judaism over Christianity (*Cels.* 5.25), he still disliked it and attacks it (*Cels.* 1.14-25).

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