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Survey

Celsus, a second century Middle Platonist philosopher read or heard about a Jewish writing, written somewhere in the first quarter of the second century A.D. This book turned out to be contrary to the gospel stories he heard from people in his environment. In brief, the Jewish writing stated that most of the gospel stories were fraudulent.

After an introduction and words about the methodology I have used, I wrote a chapter about the status quaestionis, the state of affairs concerning the research on my subject through the ages until now. This chapter is about the reason why Origen wrote his book against Celsus, where and when Celsus's book may have emerged, what the situation was of the Roman Empire, of Christianity (although this terminology still had to be discovered), and of social life in the second century A.D., but also about questions like: is it possible to track down why Celsus wrote his book? Which, if any, were the philosophical thoughts that caused Celsus to write? Why does Celsus use a speaking Jew in Origen's first two of eight books?

Origen turns out to write at the request of his friend Ambrose of Alexandria, in order to respond to Celsus's assault some eighty five years earlier. At first Origen refuses, wondering if it would not be much wiser to follow the behavior of Jesus in the presence of Pilate, and so to be silent. But from the moment Origen gives up his initial preference for being taciturn as a response to Celsus, many words of rebuttal flow from his pen. His style is brilliant and seemingly easy.

It is probable, but unprovable, that Celsus's book emerged in Alexandria, in the beginning of the sixties of the second century. Celsus came to see what he thought were the dangers of Christianity: the isolation and secretiveness the Christians searched, their threat to Roman "pietas" that was so essential for the stability of the Empire, the exclusion of all other gods (than Jesus and his Father).

The more Christian apologetics tried to present this "new" religion as no less than the culmination of Judaism, and to present the Jewish Bible as a wholly Christian book, the more determined Celsus became to write a work based on his own pagan convictions, in order to demonstrate that it was life threatening to become a follower of this philosophical lightweight, called Jesus. This Jesus never "showed" anything, he did not even have control over his most direct followers, performed his miracles by a kind of magic, was a bastard child, betrayed the people from which he arose, and died ingloriously on a cross.

Concerning Celsus's philosophical thoughts, Origen gives Celsus the mark of being an Epicurean. Celsus speaks out against God's individual providence. Platonism, according to Celsus, is not monotheistic, but neither is Christianity: Christians worship three gods, with an emphasis on Jesus.

Celsus believes that the God of the gospels is deemed to beget a son by breathing His Spirit into the womb of a woman, and to feel compassion for the suffering Jesus, his mother and his earthly father. He is supposed to feel harmed, when people worship daemons or angels, in short: He feels emotions, and that is far beyond Celsus's imagination. The Christian God is supposed to be visible in his so-called Son, and to have come down to the earth in the shape of this Son. Celsus says that, according to the Christians, God is supposed to have an adversary, called Satan, and to have sent his Son because of the sins of earthly people. These seem to be more than enough reasons for Celsus to try to call a halt to this utter madness. So, although Celsus does not mention his reasons to write in full, he takes up his quill and writes an attack on the supposed Son of this too emotionally and too humanly depicted God, doubtlessly hoping that it would not be too late to warn outsiders, in order that they would not fall into the trap of these followers of Jesus.

Who were these (first) Christians? In Celsus's view they were vulgar, uneducated people, not rhetorically educated at all, and refuting everything that Celsus esteemed. However, Celsus once admits that the Christian congregations were a mixed company in his time and had within them educated members, not just people with a low social status. There can be no doubt that the large quantity of manuscripts of ancient Christianity being found, rests on the fact that fairly early on Christianity became an institutionalized religion, and this led to the production and preservation of manuscripts. Despite the widespread illiteracy of the ancient world, there was a "literate culture" that Christianity was part of, and the impact of this literate culture has been underestimated. From Celsus's writing we must conclude that according to him the things Christians thought and did, and Christian convictions, were contrary to common sense, civilization and the right form of religion. Their religion and behavior were a total reversal of values.

In the second century in leading circles of highly educated pagan philosophers, Christianity must have been a known phenomenon. They knew (something about) Jesus, as Celsus knew about Christianity and was in contact with it. What he knew about Jesus, he mainly derived from the Jew whom he has speaking, as far as criticisms of Jesus are concerned, from the Old Testament, Plato, the canonical Gospels, Jewish sources, and not in the least the spoken word.

Concerning Platonism, necessary to understand Celsus's image of God: according to Celsus, in agreement with Plato, God is the Demiurge/Creator of all that is immortal, of the soul, and of the cosmos, and so God is the supreme God. This capacity to create is God's most important quality. The Christians think there is a superior God: the Father of Jesus. Thus, the Christians acknowledge two gods, and so does Celsus, the Demiurge and the cosmos. So in fact Celsus is not a strict monotheist,

although he never emphasizes that he acknowledges two gods, probably because he does not want to resemble the Christians.

God is still reigning, but not actively. He has created the world and has established powers to look after his creation. In this respect Celsus mentions providence, angels, daemons and heroes, all a creation of God as well, who make sure that all things are administrated according to God's will, and that whatever exists in the universe, keeps the law given by the supreme God. In this way God does not reign actively, but in an indirect way. God deserves to be worshipped every day, and so do daemons, other gods and sovereigns. Worshipping God's administrators only makes the worship of God more perfect, although Celsus is convinced that God in fact does not need any worship, for God is in need of nothing and God is without envy.

Celsus's ethical ideas are, as far as we can see, Platonic. Deceit and lying are permitted only under special circumstances; lamenting at court is prohibited to prevent judges from judging according to pity. Celsus accuses Jesus of corrupting a saying of Plato, when Jesus declares that "it is easier that a camel goes through the eye of a needle than a rich man into the kingdom of God." It is supposed to be a corruption of *Laws* 743 A: "if a man is superlatively good, it is impossible that he should be also superlatively rich." Goodness and wealth thus exclude each other. Celsus considers another statement of Jesus to be "old, worded very well previously, but they [the Christians] expressed it in a more vulgar way." It concerns the Christian conviction "not to resist someone who is doing you wrong; even if someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well." The essential thought here comes from Plato's *Crito*: repaying a crime or doing any person wrong is not permitted, not even if one suffers at the hands of someone else.

A clear picture has emerged that Celsus uses Plato as his most important source for philosophical matters like the soul, the cosmos, (the image of) God, the highest Good, evil, and ethics. In short, Plato is normative to Celsus in every respect, but in terms of what Celsus states about Jesus, Plato is most normative regarding his ideas about the image of God, evil and ethics. Celsus does not really attack Jesus in matters of the soul or the cosmos. Whereas the "highest Good" is rather the Platonic terminology, "God" is the terminology of Celsus and of Middle Platonism. The fact that people thought that Jesus was (a) god, that he could perform miracles, that he would have come down from heaven, that he had been conceived by God, that he would have risen from the dead, all those things were far beyond Celsus's thinking that had been shaped by Plato.

In Chapter 5 I have discussed all the relevant testimonials of Celsus about Jesus. I have divided them into 9 sections, about Jesus's parentage, Jesus's baptism, Jesus's stay in Egypt, his teaching, his contact with his disciples, Jesus and the Jewish law, Jesus and the prophecies, Jesus's appearance and character, Jesus's passion and resurrection.

As regards Jesus's parentage: according to Celsus, Jesus was not begotten by the Holy Spirit, but by a soldier named Panthera. Jesus made up the story about a virgin birth.

Celsus calls the story about Jesus's baptism fiction by Jesus as well, especially the words concerning the appearance of a bird.

Jesus has, according to Celsus, been in Egypt, but not as a baby, in order to escape from Herod's infanticide. Jesus hired himself out as a migrant worker on account of his poverty. There in Egypt Jesus became acquainted with some kind of magic, sorcery, and on account of this sorcery he performed his miracles and called himself God. According to Celsus, Jesus did not really master magic.

Celsus pictures Jesus not so much as a teacher: he rather juxtaposes Jesus over against Moses as a legislator, giving laws contradictory to those given by Moses, and so contradictory to those given by God Himself. According to Celsus, Jesus may have derived his words about the rich man directly from Plato. Celsus formulates the same judgement about Jesus's advice regarding the attitude towards an aggressor. He asserts plagiarism, a deterioration of the terminology and corruption of Plato's words. Celsus does not limit this vulgarity to Jesus: Christians in general suffer from a lack of civilized behavior, and as Jesus corrupted Plato's statement, so Christians corrupt Greek thought. Jesus also criticizes the one who is ambitious for power, and who claims wisdom or reputation. Celsus contrasts Jesus with Moses regarding the attitude towards enemies. For this purpose he quotes a statement of Jesus allowing the person who struck once, to strike once more.

Celsus paints Jesus's disciples as a group of beggars travelling about with Jesus. Jesus used to call his disciples μαθηταί, and Celsus adopts this terminology. After their life of beggary with Jesus they wrote the gospels, but just to tell stories they had invented, in contrast to those of Celsus, who can tell utterly different stories that are "true and not resembling what is written by the disciples of Jesus." We also find indications that Celsus considered Jesus a gang leader, and the disciples his subordinates. According to Celsus, Jesus's interaction with his disciples was an intimate one in an educational situation: they lived with each other, ate and drank with each other and shared everything. Celsus utterly disagrees with this lifestyle.

In my Chapter about “Jesus and the Jewish law” I discuss Celsus’s idea that Jews, led by Jesus, apostatized from other Jews. Celsus speaks about a *στάσις*, which mostly means “secession.” Jesus knowingly wanted this second rupture (after the “Exodus”). Celsus draws this conclusion on the grounds that Jesus put himself in his teaching in the opposite position to Moses, on the grounds that he misled the Jews, although the Jews did not mind being misled, and finally because Jesus wanted to found a state for himself. The origin of both Judaism and Christianity was due to rebellion against the state.

About prophets and prophecies: the general picture that appears from the discussion in this Chapter seems to be that Celsus is convinced that the Jews have had their prophets, and that the Jews of his day still rely on their prophecies. The prophets predicted a Son of God or Christ/Messiah who would come down to earth. Celsus takes into account that the Jewish prophecies are real prophecies, but he cannot accept Jesus as their fulfillment. To Celsus this one thing is at least certain: Jesus did not in any way answer to the image created by the prophets.

About Jesus’s appearance and character Celsus says: “the Christian cling to a view of Jesus being sent by God into the world, and the notion of incarnation.” But Jesus’s body has not been begotten the way a body of a god would have been, and his body was no different from any other body. This is so in terms of his size and physical looks, where Celsus deems him to have been small and ugly, and particularly with regard to his voice. Jesus did not possess a voice different from that of other people which might have been expected from someone with a divine spirit within, and in connection with the voice Celsus remarks that Jesus’s persuasiveness was not convincing. As to character, Jesus was a coward, which is best illustrated by the story of his passion. He did not do anything noble, as might be expected from a god, and he did not show any self-control. Jesus was jealous, as is illustrated by his expelling from his state the ones who would do the same miracles as he did. Not even after his death did Jesus become a god, in the same way as he had not been godlike when he lived.

Celsus was convinced that Jesus’s passion and death were a punishment imposed by the Jews. He mentions three reasons for this punishment, of which the most important is that Jesus deluded the Jews. The deceit consisted of founding a new religion and persuading Jews to follow him in this new religion. Jesus’s death was neither grievous nor painful, because, Celsus states cynically, “he was a god and he wanted it.” This is a way for Celsus to ridicule Jesus’s death. If he was a god, then he did not feel anything like pain or grief. But if he felt pain or grief being crucified, then he was not a god. Both Romans and Jews wanted to get rid of Jesus, the Romans for political reasons, the Jews because Jesus had deceived them.

A fact that renders Jesus's resurrection unreliable is that there were only a few witnesses, and they were from his own circle, so not objective. Celsus mentions "one woman and his own band of followers." It is not surprising that Celsus thinks Jesus appeared to the wrong people. He should have appeared to "all." The inevitable conclusion that emerges from all this is that Celsus did not believe in bodily resurrection, at least not in Jesus's case. According to him, the Christians should not do that either. He thinks the explanation for their belief is a misunderstanding regarding reincarnation. Celsus's arguments rely on a sense of justice: Jesus should have appeared to his hangmen. Celsus is not just interested in depicting the Christians as simple minds, deeper rooted motives regarding Jesus, like justice and self-control, also play an important part.

Next I discussed Celsus's opinion on Christology: we have to conclude that Celsus did not believe that Jesus was spirit or a daemon or an angel, or the Logos or God. But according to him these things are either obvious or not really important. What is really important and the aim of Celsus's writing, is to convince other people of the fact that Jesus was not the Son of God. The strong overall impression created from bringing this material together around the theme of Christology, is that according to Celsus, the Christians in principle handle the right (Platonic) notions (the supreme God is superior to the Demiurge), but they wrongly apply them to Jesus (who does not at all figure in the Platonic system, because he is not a god or God). Consequently, the distance between Celsus and the Christians turns out to be much smaller than we might have thought in the first instance. Up to now the emphasis was on the fact that the Christians did not meet the criteria that a Platonic philosopher handles, now the Christians handle the same criteria, but in the wrong way. In other words, already at this stage of their development the Christians use Platonic notions, which they, according to Celsus wrongly, apply to Jesus.

Finally, about Celsus's sources: Celsus's book about Jesus, based on the pamphlet of a Jew, was a warning in order to prevent still more people from the Jews (others did not bother him at all) to join the followers of this guru. This Jew must have written his polemic against Jesus between 105 and 130 as a response to Gospel stories he had heard or maybe seen. Celsus was one of the people who read this polemic, which can be very plausibly explained: probably Celsus lived in Alexandria (although Rome is not impossible, just less probable), also the place where this biography was published. He quotes it very frequently, putting the words he writes into the mouth of "the Jew," very probably the writer of this text.

Jesus's birth story does not appear before Matthew and Luke. The dating of these Gospels is not certain, but there is some consensus about the period between year 80 from the beginning of the

second century. Thereafter a special birth story of Jesus must have originated (think of Cyrus of Persia, Romulus and Remus), a story that received a Jewish reaction.

This Jewish biography was kind of a middle way between the gospels and Celsus's work: the gospel writers had written their texts, that would become the gospels. The Jew wrote, as a response, his version of the events surrounding Jesus, based on these gospels and oral tradition, and Celsus used the (text of the) Jew for his book. Celsus was stirred by the warning character of what his Jewish source had written, and tried to strengthen that aspect, according to his pagan, and sometimes philosophical, ideas. Later the writers of *Toledot Yeshu* extended this Jewish source text. The Jew whom Celsus mentions was a personification of a written Jewish source or perhaps the writer himself of this Jewish text.

This text had the following contours: Jesus was already described as a bastard child, because a certain Pandira/Panthera had impregnated his mother Miriam/Mary. The source text did contain the statement that Joseph descended from David, but that obviously did not play any part for Celsus, because this "carpenter" did not beget Jesus. Finally, of course, Panthera did not descend from kings: he was a foreigner. According to the source text Jesus spent a substantial part of his youth in Egypt, from about his fifth until his twenty-fifth year. He went there for reasons of poverty, together with at least his mother. In Egypt he came into contact with magic, although he probably kept this hidden, because magic was not "en vogue." The source text did not contain anything about Herod's infanticide. The story of Jesus, teaching in the temple at the age of twelve, cannot be historically true, if the tradition worded in the source text is reliable. Using magic or sorcery Jesus gave the impression that he could perform miracles, a process that brought him followers, who saw him as a guru. Perhaps Jesus called himself God, according to Celsus's source text.

This text, probably the first response to oral traditions that Celsus's Jew had heard of, mentioned Jesus's death upon a cross. It is not clear whether it mentioned the traditional names of Pilate and Herod, for example. *Toledot Yeshu* do so, but Celsus does not mention them, at least not in the story of Jesus's passion. No resurrection has been reported in the source text. Yet, it did report that Jesus's tomb which had been bought by one of his followers, was empty, because his corpse had been thrown into water, in order to have it disappear fully, and had gone with the stream, a story later fully told by *Toledot Yeshu*.

The Jew was, according to Origen, a fictional character, and here we have a good case to state that he is the personification of an anti-Christian Jewish tradition. Celsus seems to have been familiar

with gospel traditions, but there is no proof that he knew any of them in written form. His knowledge of

Jewish and Christian traditions was considerable, and it is likely that he used written sources, but not demonstrable. What we can conclude, is that he knew a written version of the LXX.

Celsus's Jew is the writer of, or the one who found, a Jewish source text that Celsus possessed, one that matches *Toledot Yeshu* reasonably. Given the foregoing, especially the fact that Celsus had a Jewish source text to refer to, it is plausible that Celsus possessed the early concept of the texts of *Toledot Yeshu*.