

ORIGEN AND JUSTIN: THE DEFENSE AGAINST ACCUSATIONS OF SORCERY

A Research Paper

Submitted to Dr. Rex Butler and Dr. Adam Harwood
of the
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
HIST9418: Orthodoxy & Heresy in the Early Church
in the Division of Theological and Historical Studies

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April 13, 2023

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Introduction

In the days of the early church, a debate arose between philosophers and Christians regarding the treatment of the supernatural in contemporary practice. This conversation is often personified by Origen's response to Celsus, a Roman philosopher who accused Christians of practicing sorcery and other taboo rituals. In this discourse between philosophy and Christianity, Celsus is often viewed as the rationalistic side of the argument while Origen represents the mystic. However, it is to be noted that Celsus believed in many supernatural practices.¹ Therefore, the argument between the two recognized camps is not rational vs mystic but rather a disagreement regarding from what source the supernatural occurs. Celsus, in true philosophical form, believed that inspiration and miracles were the result of man's self-reflection and enlightenment while Church Fathers such as Origen and Justin Martyr asserted that God is the source of all miraculous occurrences. In summation, the argument between philosophy and Christianity in the second century was not regarding whether or not the supernatural occurs but rather from what source it is derived.

The purpose of this paper is to explore both Celsus's accusations of sorcery within Christian practice and the defense against such accusations in the writings of Justin Martyr and Origen. My hypothesis is that Justin and Origen neither shied away from the miraculous in their arguments nor denied accusations of sorcery considering the inherently supernatural aspects of the Christian faith. Furthermore, I aim to prove that both Origen and Justin reported miraculous occurrences in early Christian practice that were attributed to God and not to the efforts of man.

¹ Robert John Hauck, *The More Divine Proof: Prophecy and Inspiration in Celsus and Origen* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 9, 78.

The Context

In the modern content, a debate is most often viewed as an immediate exchange of ideas, a conversation in which parties involved respond immediately to one another in real time. However, a debate can also be conducted through published works. The debate regarding early Christianity was a slow-moving process in which contemporary thinkers responded to the arguments of others through their written works. The debate between Justin, Celsus, and Origen occurred without any of the party encountering one another and took place over a nearly one-hundred year timespan.

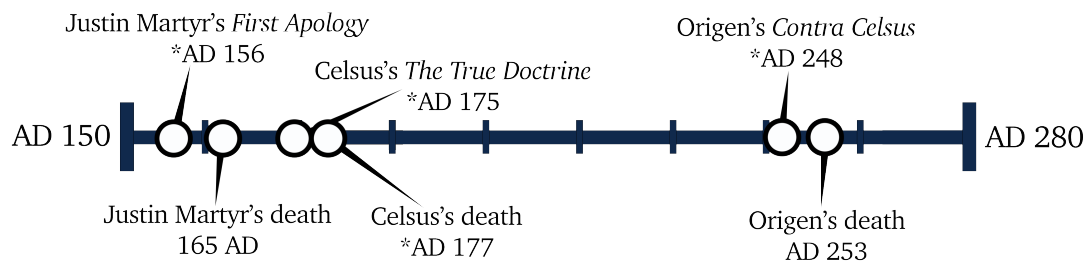
Framing the Debate

Justin was a Syrian by birth and taught in Rome according to the records of the historian Tatian.² As a lover of philosophy and a resident of Rome, it is arguable that Justin and Celsus were, at the very least, aware of one another. Celsus's work, *Λόγος Ἀληθείας (True Doctrine)*, is believed to have been written in response to Justin Martyr's *First Apology (1 Ap.)* and *Second Apology (2 Ap.)*.³ However, Justin was martyred under emperor Marcus Aurelius in AD 165. before Celsus published *The True Doctrine* between 170 and 180. Approximately seventy-five years passed before Origen published *Contra Celsus* in 248, a response to Celsus's polemic against the Christian faith.⁴

² J. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 5–6.

³ Hauck, 101.

⁴ Jesse S. Arlen reported that Origen wrote *Contra Celsus* at the request of Ambrose, a wealthy patron. Jesse Siragan Arlen, "The Debate Over the Theory of Names in Origen's *Contra Celsum*." *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall 2018): 60.



*dates are approximate.

The framing of this exchange of ideas on a timeline, then, suggests that the purpose of each author was not to argue among themselves but to influence their respective communities and, potentially, the greater populace. Each of the aforementioned works served to inform the public rather than to merely respond to an individual. These writings, therefore, were the effort of each author to influence the minds of the people within their culture. Each author's purpose in writing reached beyond a mere desire to participate in a debate.

Sorcery, Philosophy, and the Graeco-Roman Culture

At the turn of the third century, magic and the supernatural were commonplace in the lives of Roman citizens and other surrounding cultures. Though the practice of sorcery was condemned by Rome, Judaism, and the Bible, the utilization of magical incantations, objects, potions, and practitioners were sought by the elite, common citizens, and slaves alike.⁵ Magic was used for the purpose of personal gain, often viewed as seeking the approval and help of the gods.⁶ However, human mediators would be sought to carry out these magical requests. Though the practice of sorcery for profit was condemned publicly in Roman culture, it was

⁵ David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 378 ; Jan N. Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic, and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays I* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 201–02.

⁶ Merrill Chapin Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 124; Aune, 379.

simultaneously supported privately.⁷ The struggle, therefore, in this context was the differentiation between the works of God and the works of man.⁸

The forbiddance of sorcery by the Roman Empire was not a result of a lack of belief in the potential power of magic but quite the opposite. Mark Harding suggested that emperors such as Augustus forbade the use of witchcraft in response to the threat that it presented to the empire.⁹ Knowledge of the occult and the power that accompanied it could be used to usurp the emperor, therefore, such practice was outlawed. In the public sphere, any practices that were outside of one's accepted practice and were viewed as odd were denounced as witchcraft or sorcery.¹⁰ The accusation of witchcraft, therefore, was used as a whistleblower technique to draw the ire of the people and the government onto unsavory groups or religions.

Under the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161), Christianity enjoyed a period of tolerance and little persecution despite existent laws against the practice of the fledgling religion.¹¹ In those years, Rome became a more polytheistic society which tolerated multiple faiths and practices.¹² Justin and Celsus lived in Rome during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, co-emperor from 161 to 180. Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic and an absolute believer in the power of

⁷ Bremmer, 200–02.

⁸ Bremmer, 216–17.

⁹ Mark Harding, *Early Christian Life and Thought in Social Context* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 188–89.

¹⁰ B. Sanjeeva Maheshe Mendis, “Magic Vs Belief: Early Christianity,” *Muallim Journal of Social Science and Humanities* Vol. 6, No. 4 (October 2022): 68.

¹¹ Irwin Edman, *Marcus Aurelius and His Times: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1945), 242.

¹² Tenney, 67.

reason.¹³ During the rule of Marcus Aurelius, Christians were persecuted ruthlessly and reasoning against Christian thought was popularized.¹⁴

Philosophical reasoning, which has been viewed as a threat to Christianity in the first through third centuries, was an asset to the spread of the faith. Philosophers such as Justin Martyr used philosophy to explain the relationship between the supernatural God and the natural world. Philosophers such as Celsus, however, viewed Christianity as the antithesis of rational thought. Philosophy partially represented the attempt of man to explain the unexplainable by means of reason. Philosophy centered on the natural order as the primary explanation for existence.¹⁵ The tendency to ascribe to this school of thought was growing in popularity during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In those days, philosophy was being manipulated to either critique or defend Christian thought. Therefore, the stage was set for Justin to write an apologetic for the Christian faith that leaned on philosophical reasoning, which prompted Celsus to retort twenty years later, and led to the writing of *Contra Celsus* in the third century.

¹³ Edman, 3–10.

¹⁴ On the other hand, the socio-political context of the day created a context in which Christianity, a monotheistic and simplified religion, was primed for success. The various cultures contained in Rome consisted of wildly varying, complex systems featuring regional gods and odd practices. Moreover, Christianity boasted a simple explanation for interaction between the supernatural and natural worlds. Robert Knapp, *The Dawn of Christianity: People and Gods in a Time of Magic and Miracles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 11–12; Edman, 247.

¹⁵ Anthony Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 20–21.

The Debate

Justin's Assertions

Though they were addressed to Antoninus Pius, Justin Martyr wrote his *Apologies* to a pagan audience.¹⁶ Justin relied on the philosophical idea of wisdom, which was used to create and sustain all of existence, and equated it with the Logos, Jesus Christ (John 1:14). By this manner, Justin was able to insert Jesus into the philosophical conversation. Bernard Green wrote, “He reached out to a non-Christian readership, confident that the reasonableness of the human mind reflected the rationality of God whether in Christian preacher or pagan reader.”¹⁷ Misconceptions regarding the practice of Christianity abounded in the Roman culture and Justin sought to correct such misunderstanding. Justin’s writings serve as evidence that accusations of sorcery were present prior to those of Celsus in the later second century.

Edwin R. Goodenough suggested that Justin’s apologetic method was centered around pointed attacks and criticisms from the public and the Roman government.¹⁸ Christianity was criticized for angering the gods and the empire by refusing to participate in emperor worship. Additionally, Christianity was looked down upon because its participants were mostly lower class citizens and slaves who were already rejected by the upper echelon of society. Christians

¹⁶ Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 83; David E. Nyström argued that Justin’s intended audience was, in fact, recently converted pagans who possessed rudimentary knowledge of Christianity. Additionally, the books that are often referred to as *First Apology* and *Second Apology* are at times also labeled as a collected work: *Apologies*. Nyström argued that *1 Ap.* was Justin’s intentional published work while *2 Ap.* was collected from the proverbial “cutting room floor” of *1 Ap.* and published by Justin’s followers following his death. In either collected form, the purpose of Justin’s *Apologies* was an attempt to correct misconceptions within the empire regarding Christian practice. David E. Nyström, *The Apology of Justin Martyr* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 11–14; 58.

¹⁷ Green, 83.

¹⁸ Edwin R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr: An Investigation into the Conceptions of Early Christian Literature and its Hellenistic and Judaistic Influences* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968), 101–02.

were accused of deplorable acts such as performing murderous rituals and hosting wild orgies.¹⁹ However, like sorcery, such rituals were practiced in secret by many members of Roman society. Goodenough observed that Justin wrote with the knowledge that those who were accusing Christians of these evil deeds were guilty of such themselves.²⁰

With *Apologies*, Justin sought to untangle the web of lies that was being weaved in the public perception of Christians and their practices. Curiously, as Goodenough observed, Justin did not make the effort to directly refute the accusations made towards Christians.²¹ For example, in response to accusations of neglecting their societal obligations, Justin pointed out that Christians, like all other citizens, pay their fair share of taxes.²² Concerning emperor worship, Justin stated that Christians had abandoned the worship of idols be they stone statues or human dictators.²³ Justin's apologetic strategy was not to deny the accusations of the critics outright, but rather to state the practices of Christians in truth.

Justin stated that those who had turned to Christ had turned from the common practices of sorcery that were prominent in society. He wrote, "We who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God."²⁴ It is clear that Justin differentiated between "magical arts" that were common in every day practice in Rome and miraculous occurrences that were associated with Christianity. Justin also used Simon the magician (Acts

¹⁹ Goodenough, 102.

²⁰ Goodenough, 103.

²¹ Goodenough, 102.

²² *1 Apology* 17.

²³ *1 Apology* 35.

²⁴ *1 Apology*. 14.

8:9-24) as an example of those whom Christians were to avoid: those who sought to do “magic” in the name of Jesus for their own personal gain or notoriety and, in doing so, have led others astray from proper knowledge of God.²⁵

In defense of the faith, Justin asserted that Christianity was rational. The Christian faith was under scrutiny for being an irrational pursuit and inadequate as a system of belief.²⁶ By equating the terms “reason” and “logos” with Christ, Justin connected all things good and beneficial to Jesus.²⁷ Justin conveyed that Christ serves as the source of all truth and “right reason,” asserting that truth and proper reason cannot be known apart from him.²⁸

Justin confirmed that the practice of Christianity was an interaction with the supernatural. In *1 Ap. 30* and *Dialogue with Trypho 69*, Justin argued against Jesus’s miracles being labeled as “magical.” He wrote that the defense against such accusations is found in the testimony of those who witnessed Jesus and the wonders that he performed.²⁹ These chapters serve as evidence that there were those who accused Jesus of merely “appearing” to be the Son of God and illegitimate as deity.³⁰

Travis W. Proctor observed that Justin’s most convincing argument against accusations of sorcery are within his reasoning for the ritual of exorcism. Proctor interpreted that Justin viewed

²⁵ “And he, by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe, and to assert that some other being, greater than He, has done greater works.” *1 Ap. 26* in Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1*, 451.

²⁶ Goodenough, 105.

²⁷ Nyström, 85.

²⁸ Nyström, 86; *2 Apology 9*.

²⁹ Hauck, 105; *1 Apology 30*.

³⁰ *1 Apology 30*.

exorcism as a primary role of Jesus’s earthly ministry. Moreover, he considered the practice to be legitimately continued in the present day for the purpose of furthering the Gospel.³¹ Justin wrote:

For numberless demoniacs throughout the whole world, and in your city, many of our Christian men exorcising them in the name of Jesus Christ... have healed and do heal, rendering helpless and driving the possessing devils out of the men, though they could not be cured by all the other exorcists, and those who used incantations and drugs.³²

According to Proctor, Justin differentiated between the legitimate practice of exorcism and the “magical” duplication of such a proceeding according to methodology. The Christian exorcist relied on prayer and petitioning to God while the sorcerer relied on magical items and incantations.³³

Justin’s defense of Christianity against accusations of taboo practices such as sorcery was born out of the need to provide an apologetic to a culture that misunderstood the religion. To accomplish his goal, Justin utilized a method that explained appropriate and popular Christian practice in a manner that was more explanative than defensive. However, prior to the late second century, a written critique of Christianity was unknown to the world.

Celsus’s Accusations

Multiple second century writers and historians mentioned Christianity in their works, including Marcus Aurelius, Tacitus, Lucian, and others, though most of their references to the faith were part of a larger narrative and not a direct critique. The writings of Cornelius Fronto, a prominent Roman politician, and Celsus, a little-known philosopher, were the first known formal

³¹ Travis W. Proctor, *Demonic Bodies and the Dark Ecologies of Early Christian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 108.

³² *2 Apology* 6.

³³ Proctor, 108–09.

polemics against Christianity.³⁴ Both the works of Fronto and Celsus were lost to history save their extensive quotations in other compositions from the same era.³⁵ In the case of Celsus's *True Doctrine*, it is survived by Origen's inclusion of a large portion of the text in his work *Contra Celsus*.³⁶

Celsus wrote *True Doctrine* during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180).³⁷ Celsus's polemic against Christianity is characterized by his absolute loathing for what he perceived as the irrational nature of the faith. In his view, Christians accepted faith in Jesus and misconceptions about God “without any rational cause.”³⁸ He believed that Christians operated in secret and took advantage of the gullible and the uneducated.³⁹ Celsus did not make accusations concerning the immorality of Christian practice such as those reported by Justin Martyr, rather, he preferred to place his argument on the philosophical plane.⁴⁰ R. Joseph Hoffman reported that Celsus's aim was to expose the “true character” of Christians.⁴¹

According to the study of Celsus's analytical discourse, R. Joseph Hoffman characterized Celsus as an “eclectic” and a “dabbler” in both Platonism and Stoicism.⁴² Celsus is also

³⁴ R. Joseph Hoffman, “General Introduction,” in Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 11–12; Jakob Engberg, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich, eds., *In Defense of Christianity: Early Christian Apologetics* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 202.

³⁵ Engberg, 202.

³⁶ Hoffman, 29.

³⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 2: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 89–90.

³⁸ Mike Aquilina, *Villains of the Early Church and How They Make Us Better Christians* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2018), 95; Hoffman, 35.

³⁹ Aquilina, 35.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, 30.

⁴¹ Hoffman, 35.

⁴² Hoffman, 29–30.

remembered as a physician and the author of his only surviving work *De Medicina*, a textbook of second century medicine.⁴³ Historian Philip Schaff called *True Doctrine* “loose,” “light-minded,” and “superficial.”⁴⁴ He observed that it was Celsus’s analytical thinking that made him incapable of comprehending faith in Christ. Schaff wrote, “[*True Doctrine*] is full of heathen passion and prejudice, utterly blind to any spiritual realities, and could therefore not in the slightest degree appreciate the glory of the Redeemer and of his work.”⁴⁵ In the world of philosophy, the intellect, what can be known and explained, is often the obstacle of belief in God, the supernatural, or the miraculous.

Despite his opposition to Christianity and its beliefs, Celsus was no slouch in his research. In *True Doctrine*, Celsus displayed an extensive knowledge of Jewish tradition, Old and New Testament Scriptures, and Christian practice. In his argument, he used that knowledge as a weapon against his chosen target, Christians. John Granger Cook wrote, “He read the NT through the lens of a conservative Roman intellectual and Platonist philosopher who was both concerned with the stability of the imperium and with a defense of the intellectual consensus that sustained against monotheism.”⁴⁶ Celsus viewed his purpose as one for the greater good of society.

Though Celsus did not specify allegations of immorality toward Christians, he did accuse them of sorcery.⁴⁷ By his interpretation, the practice of Christianity was similar to occult

⁴³ Aquilina, 94.

⁴⁴ Schaff, 90.

⁴⁵ Schaff, 90.

⁴⁶ John Granger Cook, “Celsus,” in *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries Volume 3: From Celsus to the Catacombs: Visual, Liturgical, and Non-Christian Receptions of Jesus in the Second and Third Centuries CE*, Chris Keith, ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 28.

⁴⁷ Schaff, 93.

practices that involved the reading of special documents, usage of enchanted objects, the invoking of names, and communication with entities of an otherworldly nature.⁴⁸ According to Celsus, Christianity was no different from contemporary pagan cults. Robert John Hauck wrote, “For Celsus, all of the spiritual leaders of Christianity, from Moses to current teachers, are involved in sorcery in some form.”⁴⁹ This understanding instigated Celsus’s indictment of Christianity.

Celsus centered his attack on the person of Christ, the central figure of Christian belief. The miracles of Christ were viewed as the proof of Jesus’s divinity and, therefore, to negate the validity of his miracles would succeed in revealing Jesus as a hoax.⁵⁰ Like Moses, Jesus was a sorcerer who had deceived hoards of people into mass misconceptions about God.⁵¹ In order to accomplish this task, Jesus relied on his magical training that he received while living in Egypt and on his associations with demons.⁵² He then trained his disciples to do the same. Even Jesus’s resurrection was a mass delusion perpetrated by a master magician who called himself God.

Celsus wrote:

Perhaps you will point to those tricks about which your disciples boast: those cures and resurrections, or feeding the crowds with but a few loaves (and having some left over to boot!). Monstrous tales, to be sure. But let us say for the sake of argument that such things were actually done by you. Are they then so different from the sort of things done

⁴⁸ *On the True Doctrine* 1.

⁴⁹ Hauck, 81.

⁵⁰ David Neal Greenwood, “Celsus, Origen, and Julian on Christian Miracle-Claims.” *The Heythrop Journal* Vol. 57, No. 1. (January 2016): 100–01.

⁵¹ *On the True Doctrine* 2.

⁵² Hauck, 82.

by sorcerers—who also claim to do wonderful miracles, having been taught their tricks by the Egyptians. The sorcerers, at least, for a few pence, make their magic available to everyone in the marketplace.⁵³

Celsus argued that the works of Jesus and other Christians were no different from that of sorcerers and, moreover, that sorcerers had the wherewithal to perform such acts in order to make a profit.

Though Celsus is often viewed as the rationalist in an argument against the mystic, that is not the case. Celsus did not argue whether or not supernatural events occur. Rather, he questioned by what power and for what purpose such acts were performed. When Celsus questioned the occurrence of miracles, he asked whether they really happened or if they only appeared to have transpired.⁵⁴ This reasoning contradicts the rationalistic thinking that is often associated with Celsus as the philosophic representative. The opposing side of the philosophical approach to faith is evidenced in the response of Origen.

Origen's Answers

Origen was a prolific writer but, unfortunately, most of his original works were lost to history. However, much of his work did survive in translations and fragments. Tony Lane divided Origen's writings into four categories: biblical theology, systematic theology, practical theology, and *Against Celsus*.⁵⁵ The latter, in a category of its own, is the most poignant example of Origen's philosophical prowess. Lane observed that a growing hostility toward philosophy is observed in Origen's writings while, paradoxically, the theologian also displayed greater

⁵³ *On the True Doctrine* 2.

⁵⁴ Hauck, 81.

⁵⁵ Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 20.

absorption of philosophical ideas.⁵⁶ Origen's philosophy remained a topic of debate for centuries and he was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Constantinople in AD 553. Yet, he remains "the single most influential father of Greek theology."⁵⁷

Jason M. Scarborough noted that Origen did not write *Contra Celsus* with the church in mind.⁵⁸ Unlike Justin, Origen did not address his work to any authority figure and wrote that his intended audience were those who were foreign to the faith.⁵⁹ Origen did not feel the need to write an instructional apology and viewed the greatest apology of Christianity as the Christian life itself.⁶⁰

Origen and Celsus agreed on the idea that "there is something in man superior to the earthly part, which is related to God" and that "those in whom this part is healthy always long for him to whom it is related."⁶¹ Jesse Siragan Arlen observed, "Both Origen and Celsus subscribed to a form of monotheism that included one supreme God."⁶² Both authors believed that a power, called God, exists outside of the individual, and can be known. However, the two disagreed upon how that power can be discovered by the individual. Celsus supported that God is discovered through the knowing of the self and the exercise of rational thought. In Origen's understanding,

⁵⁶ Lane, 20–21.

⁵⁷ Lane, 21; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli credited Origen as the Father of Patristic Philosophy and for bringing Christianity out of the realm of the irrational. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Ethos and Logos: A Second-Century Debate Between 'Pagan' and Christian Philosophers," *Vigilae Christianae* Vol. 69, No. 2 (2015): 124.

⁵⁸ Jason M. Scarborough, "Origen and Celsus: Exegesis and Apologetics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* Vol. 62, No. 1 (2009): 47.

⁵⁹ *Contra Celsus II*, 16; *V*, 18.

⁶⁰ Scarborough, 47.

⁶¹ *Contra Celsus I*, 8.

⁶² Arlen, 60.

there is an aspect to the pursuit of knowledge that is unknowable apart from supernatural revelation from God.⁶³ In addition to their shared belief in one supreme God, both men accepted the existence of “intermediary beings” who were greater than man but lesser than God.⁶⁴

Celsus presented various “heroes” whom he considered to be competitors to Jesus, “men believed among the Greek to have become gods.”⁶⁵ Among these competitors, Celsus inserted the Egyptian god Antinoos. In his retort, Origen dismissed the possibility of miracles performed by or in the name of these gods except for Antinoos. Trevor W. Thompson observed that, in the case of Antinoos, Origen did not dismiss the supernatural occurrences associated with this god.⁶⁶ Thompson wrote, “Origen accepted the miracles as real and attributes them to the work of a [demon] present in Antinoöpolis.”⁶⁷ The case of Antinoos suggests that neither Origen nor Celsus denied the possibility of miraculous occurrences but merely disagreed upon the source from which they are derived.

Origen argued that the performance of miracles by Jesus, his disciples, or any Christian were not for the benefit of the performer but for the glory of God.⁶⁸ As previously stated, magicians and sorcerers of the day used their magic in order to gain personal notoriety or gain.

⁶³ John Clark Smith, *The Ancient Wisdom of Origen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 231–37.

⁶⁴ Arlen, 60.

⁶⁵ *Contra Celsus III*, 4.

⁶⁶ Trevor W. Thompson, “Antinoos: The New God: Origen on Miracle and Belief in Third-Century Egypt” in Tobias Nicklas and Janet E. Spittler, eds., *Credible, Incredible: The Miraculous in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 144–45.

⁶⁷ Thompson, 145.

⁶⁸ Celsus claimed that Jesus chose vile men as his disciples to do his bidding. Contrarily, Origen wrote: “What absurdity, therefore, is there, if Jesus, desiring to manifest to the human race the power which he possesses to heal souls, should have selected notorious and wicked men, and should have raised them to such a degree of moral excellence, that they became a pattern of the purest virtue to all who were converted by their instrumentality to the Gospel of Christ?” *Contra Celsus I*, 68.

Celsus stated that the performance of miracles for any reason other than personal gain would be for naught.⁶⁹ But Origen declared that miracles performed by Christ or Christians served to make God known and to edify potential believers.⁷⁰ Origen reasoned:

There would indeed be a resemblance between [Jesus and magicians], if Jesus, like the dealers in magical arts, had performed His works only for show; but now there is not a single juggler who, by means of his proceedings, invites his spectators to reform their manners, or trains those to the fear of God who are amazed at what they see, nor who tries to persuade them so to live as men who are to be justified by God.⁷¹

Robert Somos identified the logical formula that Origen used to assert that Jesus did not perform his miracles by means of magic:

1. Jesus performed acts which can be qualified as miraculous acts.
2. Miraculous acts either have a magical origin or do not have a magical origin.
3. Persons inspired by magical power do not use their capacities for the ethical improvement of the listeners.
4. Jesus's miraculous acts improved his followers's ethical conditions.
5. Ergo: Jesus performed miraculous acts not of magical origin.⁷²

With this reasoning, Origen suggested that the exercise of miracles served a purpose outside of the self, a concept that Celsus did not accept.

Sedina Miroslav suggested that the defense of Christianity against Celsus's accusations of sorcery was one of the primary foci of Origen's *Contra Celsus*.⁷³ The foremost fallacy on Celsus's behalf was his misunderstanding of the function of invoking names in Christian tradition. Celsus argued that the use of names for divine beings was arbitrary, varying from

⁶⁹ *On the True Doctrine* 2.

⁷⁰ *Contra Celsus I*, 68.

⁷¹ *Contra Celsus I*, 68.

⁷² Robert Somos, "Strategy of Argumentation in Origen's *Contra Celsum*," *Adamantius* Vol. 18 (2012): 208.

⁷³ Sedina Miroslav, "Magical Power of Names in Origen's Polemic Against Celsus." *Listy filologické / Folia Philologica* Vol. 136, No. 1/2 (2013): 25.

culture to culture.⁷⁴ He purported that the same results could be attained by replacing the names of “Christ” or “God” with “Zeus” or any other non-Christian deity.⁷⁵ Origen’s response claimed that Celsus viewed the incantation as the person, or human, controlling the supernatural entity through repetition of names and phrases. Origen retorted that the Christian invocation of names was not to control God but to ask him to use the believer; “not my will, but thine (Luke 22:42).”⁷⁶

For Celsus, calling upon the name of Christ or any other deity required a substantial amount of spiritual maturity. “Origen, on the contrary,” Miroslav wrote, “defends the real impact of uttering of Jesus’s name, which, according to him, has its power regardless of a degree of our theological knowledge.”⁷⁷ To prove his point, Origen illustrated that the names of God function identically despite their use in foreign languages.⁷⁸ For this reason, Origen asserted that even the “simplest person” can perform exorcisms.⁷⁹ The power in the names of God, then, lies not with the person who invoked them but with the entity whose name is being called. God’s response to those who call upon his name is not dependent upon the spiritual knowledge of the individual but their faith, as in the case of Abraham (Gen. 15:6).

In further response to Celsus’s “theory of names”, Origen accused Celsus and other philosophers of conforming to polytheistic Roman customs while also worshipping the supreme

⁷⁴ Arlen, 60.

⁷⁵ *Contra Celsus I*, 24.

⁷⁶ *Contra Celsus I*, 6.

⁷⁷ Miroslav, 25.

⁷⁸ *Contra Celsus I*, 24.

⁷⁹ *Contra Celsus VII*, 4; Proctor, 109.

God.⁸⁰ This arbitrary theory of names permitted this behavior since any reference to a divine being was considered a reference to God. Origen opposed this understanding and stated that the names of God are not symbolic but rather iconic.⁸¹ He used the example of the Hebraic language, which revealed the names of God, and wrote:

We say that the name Sabaoth, and Adonai, and the other names treated with so much reverence among the Hebrews, are not applicable to any ordinary created things, but belong to a secret theology which refers to the Framer of all things. These names, accordingly, when pronounced with that attendant train or circumstances which is appropriate to their nature, are possessed of great power....⁸²

The names of God are not symbolic, as Celsus would attest, and were not established by human convention, but are rather iconically connected to the one true God.

The method employed by Origen to refute the accusations of Celsus is one of rhetoric rather than defense. As a student of philosophy and a theologian, Origen sought to dismiss his opponent's indictments by means of sound reasoning.⁸³ Unexpectedly, Origen confirmed some of Celsus's criticisms of Christianity, such as their evangelization of the lower class, thus admitting that not all of Celsus's claims were false.⁸⁴ Celsus faulted Christianity for being the faith of the lower class and the uneducated.⁸⁵ Rather than repudiate such assertions, Origen confirmed them with pride. Origen wrote, "As only a very few individuals devote themselves earnestly to study, what better method could be devised with a view of assisting the multitude, than that which was

⁸⁰ Arlen, 63.

⁸¹ Arlen, 63.

⁸² *Contra Celsus I*, 24.

⁸³ Lane 20-21; Hauck, 107.

⁸⁴ Somos, 203.

⁸⁵ *Contra Celsus I*, 9.

delivered by Jesus to the heathen?”⁸⁶ In other words, what better ministry could there be to the uneducated than to educate them with the Gospel?

His openness to accept some criticism put Origen in a unique position to present the erroneous nature of Celsus’s more damning denouncements. For example, Origen wrote, “Celsus, moreover, unable to resist the miracles which Jesus is recorded to have performed, has already on several occasions spoken of them slanderously as works of sorcery.”⁸⁷ He then noted that the same Gospels which recorded the miraculous works of Jesus and the disciples simultaneously forbade the practice of magic. Regarding Jesus’s disciples, Origen asked, “Then how can it be believed that *magicians* exposed themselves to such hazards to introduce a doctrine which forbade the practice of *magic*?”⁸⁸ Origen exposed the logical fallacy that those who practiced magic, and used it to gain a following, also forbade the use of magic. In this manner, Origen sought to refute Celsus not by means of the denial of sorcery but by the recognition of the proper source and application of supernatural works.

Conclusion

Justin, Celsus, and Origen emerged from philosophical backgrounds and yet represent the two paths of belief possible in regard to Christian faith. Justin and Origen recognized that God, who is beyond the self, supernaturally works within the lives of those who believe. On the other hand, Celsus acknowledged the capability of the self to find God by his own effort. All three parties recognized the existence and the potential of miraculous occurrences and yet differed on

⁸⁶ *Contra Celsus I*, 9.

⁸⁷ *Contra Celsus II*, 48.

⁸⁸ *Contra Celsus I*, 38; Emphasis mine.

their understanding of whence such events transpire. Neither Justin nor Origen denied Celsus's accusations of sorcery but rather redirected the means by which miraculous works were performed by giving the credit to God. The discourse between these three men represented the quandary of that era regarding the supernatural that continues into modernity: is it of man or of God?

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