



Introduction

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According to the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews, the figure of Melchizedek comes on the scene in primeval history 'without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days'. Something similar is the case with Celsus, whose work the *Alēthēs Logos* appears in the second century as if from nowhere. Unlike Plato son of Ariston or Nicomachus son of Aristotle, we know nothing of Celsus' parentage; unlike Zeno of Citium or Antiochus of Ascalon we know nothing of his place of origin or base of operations. An important study of Celsus titles him *Celsus philosophus Platonicus*, but this last epithet which seeks to place him in a tradition is a modern scholarly deduction, rather than a label with which Celsus identifies himself in the fragments which have come down to us.¹ Even his nemesis Origen, whose *Contra Celsum* of 248–249 CE is our sole source for Celsus' text, seems to have been unable to identify which Celsus he was; Origen equates him *faute de mieux* with an Epicurean Celsus from the time of Hadrian (*Cels.* 1.8) – a conclusion now universally rejected, and which even Origen himself grew to doubt.² To use another analogy, Celsus arrives in history unheralded and full-grown, like Athene being born from her pater's pate.

¹ Frede 1994.

² The most widely used critical editions of Origen's *Contra Celsum* are Koetschau 1899 and Borret 1967–76: both follow the convention, also adopted in most translations, of italicizing or marking the text assumed to derive from Celsus.

Again, Celsus almost vanishes as suddenly as he appears. In antiquity, Christians tended to concentrate on Origen's response to Celsus, most strikingly so in the *Philokalia* of Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea, which contains about a seventh of the *Contra Celsum* but barely mentions Celsus. Even pagan critics of Christianity, who may have known something of his work, never mention him. Whether his attack laid the foundation for future attacks upon Christianity (such as those of Porphyry and Hierocles) or whether it simply reflected a set of attacks which had been developing in a variety of writings now lost remains a question. There is a sense in which Celsus' apparently detailed engagement with Christianity emerges from nowhere and does not lead anywhere, more akin to the language of the Basques than something which is obviously a part of a developing pagan discourse about Christians. Maximalist views of his influence which see him as the anonymous enemy lingering behind every later second-century or third-century apology can appear naïve:³ as noted, the bookish Origen seems to know nothing of him, and verbal echoes of his work in the likes of Theophilus or Tertullian are absent. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that he may have provided material for later polemicists, like Porphyry or Julian, and for Christian writers like Eusebius but they, like others, never explicitly mention his name. The shadow of his influence, then, can seem oddly pale, and insofar as he is known in antiquity at all, this may have been through Origen rather than directly through copies of the *Alēthēs Logos* about which late antiquity seems coldly silent.

In modern times Celsus has become a greater centre of interest as scholars concerned with, for instance, the

³ See in this volume Morlet's discussion of the views of Schwartz and Vermander; Lona 2005, 68, for an explanation of the tendency in scholarship (seen especially in the 1960s and 70s) to see Celsus behind much second- and early third-century apologetic writing, termed by him 'Pancelismus'.

beginnings of anti-Christian pagan polemic have sought to reconstruct his views and to investigate both their origins and their influence. The work that does exist has rarely been conducted in anything other than a piecemeal way, however, as emerges in one of the most recent volumes dedicated to the *Contra Celsum*, the Italian work edited by Lorenzo Perrone.⁴ The commentary on the Celsan fragments by Horacio Lona, though a welcome addition to the literature, is a work which reflects the broadly Christian concerns of its author, as well as the limitations of the commentary genre.⁵ This is seen in the fact that Lona is keener to extract the fragments and comment on them rather than reconstruct whatever system of thought Celsus may have been endeavouring to represent. Celsus has by and large not captured the attention of the world of classical scholarship, with Michael Frede and Heinrich Dörrie standing out as notable exceptions.⁶ Celsus has almost exclusively been the preserve of the patrological community; and in that context he has been viewed not unsurprisingly through an almost exclusively Christian lens.

Against such a background, our aim for this volume is to give a more joined-up account of Celsus and the world out of which he emerged. This is timely because the various areas pertinent to the investigation of Celsus – the study of second-century Christianity, of ancient Judaism, of the so-called Second Sophistic, and later Hellenistic philosophy – have in recent decades seen great changes. We are also privileged to have in this volume an array of scholars with expertise in early Christian studies, ancient Judaism, ancient philosophy and late antiquity more generally, a mix of disciplines never before brought together to discuss this subject; almost all the essays of the volume edited by Perrone, for example, were authored by students of ancient

⁴ Perrone 1998. ⁵ Lona 2005. ⁶ Dörrie 1967; Frede 1999.

religion with a broadly theological background. All of this makes a fresh engagement with Celsus in his world seem both necessary and exciting.

1 INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

As Origen's preliminary assessment shows, Celsus and his work are difficult to locate; the standard so-called introductory questions of date, provenance, purpose and sources are hard to answer.⁷ A number of the contributions to this volume touch upon these matters, and a necessarily very summary treatment of the main introductory questions will serve as a useful orientation to the study of Celsus.

1.1 Celsus' Title

We can take some comfort in the fact that Celsus indisputably entitled his work the Ἀληθῆς λόγος – the *True Word* or *True Teaching* (first mentioned by Origen in *Cels. praef.* 4). His emphasis in that title raises the question of whether it is primarily constructive or polemical. There may well be an implied polemic against a Christianity which identified Christ with 'the Word' who was with God and was God in the beginning (Jn 1.1–3), a theme prominent among Christian writers in Celsus' day; Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch and the anonymous author of the *Gospel of Truth*, for example, focus on this aspect of Christology.⁸ Celsus' title may therefore have implied that Christ was in fact a 'false Word'. More positively, the title probably also indicates a constructive agenda (as Josef Lössl stresses in his response in this volume), namely to propagate the 'supremely ancient teaching' (ἀρχαῖος λόγος) which has always been maintained by the wisest nations, cities and

⁷ See the excellent survey of material up to the mid-1990s in Le Boulluec 1998, and further Lona 2005, 11–70.

⁸ E.g. Justin, *1 Apol.* 13 and 63; Theophilus, *Autolyc.* 2.10, 22; *Gospel of Truth*, *passim*.

sages' (*Cels.* 1.14). Celsus' title derives from Plato's *Letter 7* (342a–b, quoted in *Cels.* 6.9), in a quotation whose content (and somewhat frustrated tone) must have resonated with Celsus:

It has come into my mind to speak at still greater length about this subject; for probably the things of which I speak would be clearer if I did so. For there is a true doctrine which meets anyone who ventures to write anything at all about such matters, of which I have often spoken before, but which seems to need stating now also.

Following Plato's lead, Celsus saw the 'true doctrine' as in need of restatement in his own day. As David Sedley argues in his chapter, however, Celsus' articulation of a theory of the ancient and true word goes back before Plato, especially to Heraclitus whose λόγος has always existed, and is common to human beings but often misunderstood or neglected by them in preference for private opinion (frags. B1, B2). This resonates very strongly with Celsus' contention that Jews and Christians are misguided in their claims to exclusive revelation. Origen maintains that 'although Celsus entitled his book *The True Doctrine*, it contains no positive doctrines, but just criticizes Jews and Christians' (*Cels.* 4.47). Celsus' allusion to the seventh *Letter*, however, implies that he is not just *against* Christianity but *for* something as well. (Indeed Origen maintains that Celsus 'promises to compose another treatise in which he has promised to teach those who are willing and able to believe the right way to live' (*Cels.* 8.76).) Hence the title, rather than the merely negative *Κατὰ τῶν Χριστιανῶν*.

1.2 The Purpose of the *Alēthēs Logos*

This question of Celsus' purpose in writing the *Alēthēs Logos* is a theme touched on by a number of the chapters in this volume. Just as Rowan Williams in his response notes the

possibility of Origen using Celsus as a ‘stalking horse’ to advance his particular views, so also some considered the possibility of Celsus using Christianity as his ‘whetstone’ (so Mark Edwards) for a similar end. This has precedent in the work of Lona, who calls the *Alēthēs Logos* a *Werbeschrift* as well as a *Streitschrift*.⁹ Such a view might envisage a varied audience of those looking for a *hairesis* to follow, and Lona himself suggests an audience of educated pagans with an interest in Christianity;¹⁰ Johannes Arnold, on the other hand, takes the audience at least in part to be Christians, whom Celsus is seeking to talk out of the error of their ways.¹¹ Perhaps in contrast, Gretchen Reydam-Schils’ chapter in the present book sees a classically learned audience, assumed to be able to pick up references to works such as Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Alternatively, it might be tempting to situate the *Alēthēs Logos* in a scholastic milieu like that of Plotinus a century later; there, Porphyry recalls that he himself composed various refutations of the *Book of Zoroaster*, and his colleague Amelius wrote forty volumes against the *Zostrianus* (*Vit. Plot.* 16). On this view, the audience and purpose would be largely internal. Such philosophical exercises, however, are probably not closely analogous to Celsus’ work. As Simon Goldhill rightly notes, Christianity is treated by Celsus as a serious threat, leaving the empire potentially vulnerable to ‘the most lawless and savage barbarians’ (*Cels.* 8.68). The particular targets of the neo-Platonic disputatiousness of Plotinus’ school probably did not inspire such anxiety. Similarly, although the *Alēthēs Logos* is not without humour, Celsus’ generally severe and urgent tone distinguishes him markedly from the satirizing

⁹ Lona 2005, 20–23, esp. 22. ¹⁰ Lona 2005, 52–54.

¹¹ Arnold 2016, 479. *Cels.* 8.73–75 may have been addressed to Christians in the second person, whether as *apostrophe* or as a closing address to a Christian readership. Lona argues that the appellative nature of this passage points to the *Alēthēs Logos* as having something of a protreptic aspect. See Lona 2005, 22; and for further comments on the varied nature of Celsus’ rhetoric, Edwards in this volume.

of Christians by his rough contemporary Lucian.¹² His sustained attack is also markedly different from the passing remarks in Marcus Aurelius and Galen.¹³ Loveday Alexander implies that Celsus aimed at the suppression of Christianity, and perhaps at a justification of the persecution of his day (*Cels.* 2.45 and 8.69), in her focus on the accusations of secrecy and subversion brought against Christianity in the beginning and end of the *Alēthēs Logos* (if Origen's presentation of Celsus' work is trustworthy).¹⁴

1.3 Celsus' Text

The parenthesis 'if Origen's presentation of Celsus' work is trustworthy' casts its shadow over any assessment of Celsus.¹⁵ While, then, the focus of this volume is Celsus and his world, engagement such as that of Lewis Ayres in the volume's first chapter, with the work in which Celsus is alone mediated to us, is unavoidable.¹⁶ Celsus is, after all, always 'Origen's Celsus'. It is necessary therefore to answer, however speculatively, the questions of how Celsus is mediated to us, and how accurately or inaccurately Origen presented his readers with his source, and whether something convincing can be reconstructed from what we have. Origen seems to imply that he followed Celsus quite closely. Indeed he had begun the work by conceiving that he would proceed by taking up major themes of Celsus' work but then decided to proceed according to the order of the *Alēthēs Logos* itself (*Cels. praef.* 6). Johannes Arnold in this volume and elsewhere, following earlier scholars such as Andresen, has argued that there are traces of a different order which can be discerned after Origen's rearrangement is unscrambled. Arnold helpfully highlights the numerous

¹² See North 2017, on Lucian's *Peregrinus*. ¹³ Gathercole 2017.

¹⁴ See *Cels.* 1.1 on Christians as a secret society, and 8.68 as noted above.

¹⁵ Chadwick 1965, xxii–xxiv, for a summary of earlier scholarship on this issue.

¹⁶ Lona 2005, 30: 'Der Platoniker Kelsos tritt erst durch sein Werk in Erscheinung und wird in ihm greifbar.'

ways in which Origen's mediation may have been a rather misleading one. The response to his chapter in this volume may question whether Origen had made a vast change at the end of Chapter 5, and whether some of his other proposed changes are too dependent upon Celsus pursuing a single, digression-free line of argument. On the other hand, whatever one thinks of Arnold's arguments, it is doubtful whether anybody else could offer a different rearrangement of Origen's structure which is more convincing. Indeed it is difficult to imagine anyone being brave enough to go over the whole question again for decades to come. Also in the present volume, Judith Lieu reminds us that such a text of Celsus is always one which is under the control of Origen, while Teresa Morgan argues that the presence of strong arguments by Celsus in Origen's work constitutes some evidence for reliable transmission, even if only at the level of detail rather than structure.

1.4 The Date of the *Alēthēs Logos*¹⁷

Further to the 'what' of Celsus' text is the complicated question of the 'when'. Several factors have been adduced as evidence for Celsus' date. The view that the plural 'those now ruling' (*Cels.* 8.71) must refer to a shared *imperium* of Marcus Aurelius and Verus (161–69 CE), or of Marcus and Commodus (177–80), has been widely criticized and now tends to be discarded as useful evidence.¹⁸ Similarly, the evidence of widespread persecution around 177–80 may be of value, but cannot stand on its own.¹⁹

The only indisputable *terminus ante quem* for the *Alēthēs Logos* is Origen's composition of the *Contra Celsum*, written 248–249 CE, just prior to the Decian persecution, and not long before Origen's death. Sébastien Morlet in this volume

¹⁷ See Rizzi 2018, 37–42.

¹⁸ Chadwick 1965, xxvii, notes that J. B. Lightfoot had already criticized this view.

¹⁹ See Chadwick 1965, xxvii–xxviii.

judiciously examines the possible impact of Celsus both on Athenagoras' *Legatio* (c. 177) and on Lucian's *Passing of Peregrinus* (post-165) which would provide a narrower window.²⁰ Alternatively, some of those possible points of contact may perhaps be accounted for by an apologetic tradition, as William Horbury allows, while being sympathetic to Morlet's conclusions.

A *terminus post quem* for the *Alēthēs Logos* is provided by some of the known historical figures from the second century, such as the reference to the cult of Antinous instituted after his death in 130 CE (*Cels.* 5.63), the *floruit* of Marcion (in 144 CE and beyond) and the followers of Marcellina (*Cels.* 5.62), a Gnostic teacher who flourished in the time of Anicetus (Bishop of Rome c. 157–68). Her activity is probably the most secure *terminus post quem* for the *Alēthēs Logos*. This comports with the common tendency to date Celsus in the 170s, as well as with Morlet's slightly earlier date in the 160s. Rizzi's scepticism about a date in the second half of the second century is probably not warranted, although his criticisms of an unreflective default to very narrow time frames certainly is justified.²¹

Dating Celsus' work is important not just so that we can insert it into our chronicle of early Christianity. Locating the *Alēthēs Logos* chronologically enables us to assess better the distance between the picture of Christianity (and Judaism) presented by Celsus on the one hand, and Origen's response – almost a century later – on the other. As Lewis Ayres helpfully remarks, the Christian world of Origen was very different to that which Celsus would have

²⁰ Grant 1955, 28–29, on the former; the latter places Peregrinus' death in 165 CE.

²¹ Rizzi 2018, 56–59, perhaps minimizes the evidence of Marcion through over-caution: e.g. knowledge of Marcion before 144 CE 'cannot be ruled out'. Similarly, although Marcellina is associated by Irenaeus with the Carpocratian *haeresis*, it is not implied that Marcellina was a contemporary of Carpocrates (who was active earlier, in the time of Hadrian). In any case, Eusebius' evidence for the chronology of Carpocrates cannot be pitted against that of Irenaeus, who was the source for Eusebius situating the beginnings of the Carpocratian Gnostics in the principate of Hadrian (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.7.9).

known:²² Christian *grammatikoi* like Origen barely existed in the mid- to late second century of Celsus' day. As we will see later, Teresa Morgan notes analogously that Christian theology in a systematic vein was only just beginning to develop in Celsus' probable time of writing. Situating Celsus in the right time frame also enables us to juxtapose Celsus with his contemporaries for comparative purposes. Galen's writings are then seen to have certain similarities with the *Alēthēs Logos* in their close connection yet distinction between Christianity and Judaism, a connection not evident in the earlier writings of Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius at the beginning of the second century. Judith Lieu also links Celsus' activity (via his Jewish figure) with the scholarly editorial practices of restoring an original historical account from a corrupt one, an activity also evident in a figure like Celsus' near-contemporary Marcion.

1.5 The Provenance of the *Alēthēs Logos*

Alongside the 'when' of Celsus, Philip Alexander's chapter raises the question of the place where he may have been active.²³ As Sébastien Morlet notes, we can probably leave aside the rather unlikely view of Vermader that the *Alēthēs Logos* was first composed in Athens, then came to Antioch then Alexandria in the 190s, then Carthage in 197, eventually landing in Rome at the beginning of the third century, as if on a Mediterranean cruise. It is, nevertheless, worth considering what the evidence is for an Alexandrian provenance, an assumption that is rarely probed. Presumably one of the most suggestive pieces of evidence is the theology of Celsus' Jew with his idea that the Logos is the son of God, something exactly paralleled in Philo (*Cels.* 2.31;

²² Noted by North 2017, 267.

²³ For a survey of some previous views of Celsus' provenance, and a proposal, see Goranson 2007.