

## ORIGEN'S APOLOGY IN *AGAINST CELSUS* BOOK I

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### Introduction

Opposition in any forms against Christianity does not exclusively belong to the modern era. However, neither can we say that this phenomenon belongs only to the past. It is more accurate to say that opposition has *always* become inseparable part of the history of Christianity. In fact, opposition is one of the marks that all Christians must always bear and endure faithfully (see e.g. Jn 15:18-21). But as opposition always accompanies Christian faith, apology - defending the true Christian faith - has also become one of the pivotal practices in the history of Christianity. This practice helps believers to discern true Christian teachings from false teachings and to consolidate their faith. And as the kind of opposition against Christian faith often repeats itself in the history of Christianity, any coherent forms of defense for Christianity from great Christian thinkers can hardly become irrelevant for believers in different places and eras.

Among the early Church Fathers, Origen (AD 185-254) is perhaps one of the greatest apologists. His work *Against Celsus* has been deemed by many patristic scholars to be the most important apologetic work and the culmination of the ancient tradition of Christian apologetic writing.<sup>1</sup> In this book, Origen addresses his apology to a work entitled

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<sup>1</sup>See, among others, Henry Chadwick, "Introduction," in *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953), ix. Henri Crouzel, "The School of Alexandria and Its Fortunes," in *History of Theology I: Patristic Period*, ed. by Angelo Di Berardino and Basil Studer, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN:

'*The True Doctrine*,' which was written by a pagan philosopher by the name of Celsus. In other words, in *Against Celsus* Origen is not merely responding to a widespread attack against Christianity, but rather he is replying to a specific work by a specific author and dealing with specific topics. It is obvious that Origen conceives of his work as an apology. The idea that what he is doing is a defense for Christianity is already present in the very beginning of the book:

Our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ was silent when false witnesses spoke against him, and answered nothing when he was accused; he was convinced that all his life and actions among the Jews were better than any speech in refutation of the false witness and superior to any words that he might say in reply to the accusations. And, God-loving Ambrose, I do not know why you wanted me to write an answer to Celsus' false accusations in his book against the Christians and the faith of the churches (Preface, 2).

It is also noteworthy that *The True Doctrine* by Celsus is the first systematic and highly educated written treatise against Christianity by an ancient pagan who is well-informed about Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This document, however, does not survive. Much of Celsus' work is known through the reconstruction from the quotations by Origen in *Against Celsus*. Celsus wrote his treatise about A.D. 178, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and Origen's response did not appear until about seventy years later, during the reign of Philip the Arabian (A.D. 244-9).<sup>3</sup> As of who Celsus is, patristic scholars are undecided. Some scholars seem to strongly suggest that he is a friend of the second century

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The Liturgical Press, 1996), 175. Michael Frede, "Origen's Treatise *against Celsus*" in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagan, Jews, and Christians*, ed. by Mark Edwards et al. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 132.

<sup>2</sup>According to Michael Frede, since Celsus never refers to an earlier pagan written source, it might be the case that he is the first pagan author who composes a systematic work against Christianity. But, Frede also admits that it is actually hard to be sure that Celsus is the first one to write such a treatise. It is almost certain, however, that his treatise was followed by others, like by Porphyry, by Julian, by Hierocles; see Michael Frede, "Origen's Treatise *Against Celsus*" in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagan, Jews, and Christians*, 134-35.

<sup>3</sup>Chadwick, "Introduction," xiv; Michael Frede, "Origen's Treatise *Against Celsus*," 131.

rhetorician, Lucian of Samosata. But other prominent scholars, like Chadwick, prefer to say that we know nothing of Celsus except what can be inferred from the text of Origen himself. From Origen we learn that Celsus 'has already been dead a long time' (Preface, 4) when Origen started his work on *Against Celsus* and that Origen was not sure whether 'he is the same as the man who wrote several books against magic'.<sup>4</sup>

In this writing I will try to explain Origen's apology as expressed in *Against Celsus*, particularly in book I. Because of the limited scope, the discussion is focused on some issues that receive considerable place in book I; they are: (a) the rationality of the Christians; (b) the originality of the Christian faith; (c) the divinity of Jesus Christ. Before I discuss the three topics, in what follows, I will begin with the nature of the Celsus' attack against Christianity.

#### The Nature of Celsus' Attack

Henry Chadwick in his introduction to Origen's *Contra Celsum* gives an important remark that "Celsus is no second-century Voltaire."<sup>5</sup> What he means is that, unlike modern deists such as Voltaire,<sup>6</sup> Celsus is a theist, a believer in a divine being and supernatural phenomena. Almost in the same vein, Joseph Trigg reminds us that Celsus is no rationalist in the post-Enlightenment sense either.<sup>7</sup> Celsus believes in the reality of miracle, but not the kind of miracles that the Christians claimed or that Jesus performed. In Celsus' view, Jesus' miracles (if he had done any) had been done by the means of magic arts and not by the (true) divine power.

Such introductory notes are important observation in that unlike other popular slanders and mockeries in the second century, Celsus'

<sup>4</sup>*Against Celsus*, IV.36.

<sup>5</sup>Chadwick, "Introduction," xxii. Chadwick's conclusion is totally the opposite of an older view such as held by Williams Fairweather who names Celsus "the Voltaire of the second century." See W. Fairweather, *Origen and Greek Patristic Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), 108.

<sup>6</sup>Voltaire, however, always refers to himself as a 'theist', although many believe that he holds deism, see Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, Part I (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964), 36.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 53.

*True Doctrine* is an attack by an educated and religious pagan with a higher purpose in mind, namely, to apostatize Christians and bring them back to the true religion of paganism.<sup>8</sup> Celsus believes that there is a true ancient doctrine, such as belief in one God, respected and worshiped under different names not only by Greeks but also by the whole civilized mankind that is now being abandoned by the Christians. In Celsus own words: "There is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men."<sup>9</sup> He argues that, in place of this ancient doctrine, the Christians have adopted the Jewish doctrine instigated by Moses, who actually has duped them into belief that Moses' teaching is the one that is original. Celsus says,

Moses heard of such beliefs, beliefs current among the wise nations and among distinguished men, and thus received for himself a certain reputation for having divine powers. These doctrines he used in order to educate Jews. Yet none of what he taught can be considered original: ... Yet without rational cause, the goatherds and shepherds followed Moses, who taught them that there was but one God - deluded, apparently, by his rather naïve beliefs - and caused them to forsake their natural inclinations to credit the existence of the gods.<sup>10</sup>

Because of such a situation, Christians have to be reproached. According to Celsus, the errors of the Christians are threefold: (a) they take the idea of religion from the Jews, especially as told by Moses; and this may happen because (b) Christians do not give rational arguments for their belief but seem to rely on blind faith. According to Celsus, "Their favorite expressions are 'Do not ask questions, just believe!' and: 'Your faith will save you!' 'The wisdom of this world,' they say, 'is

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<sup>8</sup>For examples on the popular slanders and mockeries against Christianity in the mid-second century, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 556-62. Ferguson also explains that in the literature of the Roman upper classes in the early second century, they referred to Christianity as a "*superstitio*" in contrast to "*religio*."

<sup>9</sup>*Against Celsus*, I.14, see also I.24; cf. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, trans. by R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 55-56.

<sup>10</sup>Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 56; cf. *Against Celsus*, I.21, 22, 23.

evil; to be simple is to be good."<sup>11</sup> (c) They listen to Jesus, who "not long ago taught *new doctrines* and was thought to be a son of God" and therefore has "deceived many and caused them to accept a form of belief harmful to the well being of mankind."<sup>12</sup>

Given the nature of Celsus' attack, Chadwick affirms that many sarcastic things about Christianity that Celsus says are not so much destructive as a deep concern for the supposedly misguided Christians who need instruction to return to the old paths.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, following Robert Wilken, Trigg concludes that Celsus pursues "not simply a debate between paganism and Christianity, but a debate about a new concept of religion. Celsus sensed that Christians had severed the traditional bond between religions and a 'nation' or people."<sup>14</sup> It is Celsus' belief that, on the one hand, there is a true doctrine, of the greatest antiquity, held by the most ancient and pious races and the wisest men, and on the other hand, a new religion called "Christianity," which is a dangerous modern innovation, that if it is left unchecked, it will be disaster for the Roman Empire.<sup>15</sup>

When upon Ambrose's request Origen takes the task to write a response to Celsus' *True Doctrine*, he reminds his readers that, like Jesus Christ, the strength's of Christians' apology is not in arguments, but in their moral life.<sup>16</sup> This way of dealing with any assaults to Christianity seems to be common among early apologists because it is not unusual even for intellectual pagans in attacking Christianity to take issues about moral behavior. To find fault of moral behavior among Christians is the

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<sup>11</sup>Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 54; Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.9.

<sup>12</sup>Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 57; Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.26. Italics are mine.

<sup>13</sup>Chadwick, "Introduction," xxi.

<sup>14</sup>J. Trigg, *Origen*, 54. For Robert Wilken's view, see his book, *The Christians as the Roman Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 124.

<sup>15</sup>Chadwick, "Introduction," xxi-xxii; cf. C. Warren Hovland, "The Dialogue between Origen and Celsus," in *Pagan and Christian Anxiety* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 193-94.

<sup>16</sup>This, according to Michael Frede, partly explains why Origen was at first hesitant to write *Against Celsus*; see "Origen's Treatise *Against Celsus*," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagan, Jews, and Christians*, 141-45.

easiest way to undercut Christianity. The attack usually involves accusation that Christians are illegal society or not good citizens, while in the meantime the assault boast that pagan ethics is nobler, better, and higher than Christian moral teachings. Thus, for instances, Tacitus speaks of Christianity as "superstitious fanatics given to outpourings of enthusiasm" or "haters of humanity." Pliny reports to the emperor Trajan about rumors of Christian 'excesses' (immoral behavior). Still, according to Crescens, Christians are "both impious and atheistic." From the works of the early apologists, we also learn that Christians are often associated with various ignoble crimes.<sup>17</sup> No surprise, therefore, that Celsus assaults the Christians by saying that they are "secret society" and therefore "illegal" (I.1).<sup>18</sup> They (Christians) like to "perform their rites and teach their doctrines in secret" (I.3) because they are hypocrites. According to Celsus, unlike the great Greek philosopher, Socrates, who boldly faced the danger for the sake of philosophy, the Christians ran away from "trial and punishment."<sup>19</sup> Based on such accusations, Celsus is convinced that, in comparison with the other philosopher, the ethical teaching of Christianity is "commonplace" and "contains no teaching that is impressive or new" (I.4).<sup>20</sup>

In reply to Celsus, Origen believes that Jesus' silence before the accusers was because of His conviction that His life and actions were "better than any speech in refutation of the false witness and superior to any words that he might say in reply to the accusations."<sup>21</sup> In Preface chapter 2 *Against Celsus*, Origen affirms that although Jesus continued

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<sup>17</sup>See a short but helpful survey on pagans' attack on Christian morality in Joseph Hoffmann, "General Introduction," in *On the True Doctrine*, 12-24.

<sup>18</sup>The critique may also have to do with Celsus' disappointment of the Christians who did not want to help the emperor in fighting against the Rome's enemies, see *Against Celsus* VIII.73-74; Celsus, *The True Doctrine*, 125-26.

<sup>19</sup>Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 53. In the notes Hoffman explains that perhaps Celsus here refers to the so-called *institutum Neronianum*, mentioned by Tertullian (*Ad nationes* 1.7; *Apology* 5) and Sulpicius Severus (*Chronicles* 2.29). See 127, n. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Celsus even argues, for instance, that Plato in *Crito* has taught a better moral teaching than did Christ, see *Against Celsus* VII.58; *On the True Doctrine*, 113.

<sup>21</sup>Origen, *Against Celsus*, Preface, ch. 1.

to be accused, he remains silent. But this time His silence was because of a slightly different reason, Jesus believed that the life of His "genuine disciples" will defeat and refute the slanders and accusations. Therefore, Origen also believes that relying on the life of true Christians is enough response to Celsus' moral accusations.

After his introductory remarks about the importance of Christian moral behaviors, Origen moves to a counterattack against Celsus, first, for practical reason "that we may not appear to shirk the task which you [Ambrose] have set us;"<sup>22</sup> second, for the sake of those whom the apostle calls 'weak in faith';<sup>23</sup> and third, because of the political situation that Origen saw in his time, in which the outbreak of the Decian persecution was imminent, and the freedom of believers was threatened.<sup>24</sup>

When Origen embarks on the project of systematically refuting Celsus, as far as book I *Against Celsus* is concerned, he rather appears as a Biblical theologian than as a Platonic philosopher. Although the two seem to always go hand in hand throughout his treatise,<sup>25</sup> Origen's argument in book I is grounded most of the time in his erudition in the reading of Scripture. It is clear from the beginning, that Origen does not aim his apology to convince philosophical believers like himself, but rather for "those entirely without experience of faith in Christ, or those whom the apostle calls 'weak in faith'" (Preface 6). This at the same time may suggest that Celsus' work widely circulated among common believers and had caused worries among Church leaders at that time. But it may also have something to do with Origen's strategy of countering Celsus who claims to know everything about Scripture. In reply to Celsus' I-know-them-all attitude, Origen writes:

In reply to his claim, For I know them all, which he very boastfully dared to make, I have to say that if he had read the prophets especially, which are full of admitted obscurities and of sayings of which the meaning is

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3; word in the bracket is added.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

<sup>24</sup> See Chadwick, "Introduction," xv; cf. Michael Frede, 154.

<sup>25</sup> In *Against Celsus* IV.9, Origen writes, "Anyone who constructs a Christian philosophy will need to argue the truth of his doctrine with proofs of all kinds, taken from the divine scriptures and from rational arguments."

not clear to the multitude,...he would not have boasted in this way nor have said: For I know them all. Not even we, who have spent much time in the study of these books, would say, 'I know them all'. For we have a love for the truth. ... But perhaps after hearing the claim I know them all from some vulgar blockheads who were unaware of their own ignorance, he imagined that after he had been taught by such teachers he knew everything.<sup>26</sup>

It has to be admitted, though, that Celsus did know a lot of scriptural accounts. His work indicates that he knew, among other things, Moses, the names of God in the Old Testament, the rite of circumcision, the Gospel's accounts of Jesus, the words of the apostle Paul. But he misunderstood and used them in order to assault Christianity. Small wonder, therefore, if Origen feels the need to address his enemy with the very weapon that his enemy uses. Origen uses his expertise as biblical scholar, and if necessary, he uses his knowledge of philosophy.

In any case, Origen's refutation in *Against Celsus* can be succinctly put as follows: (a) to undermine Celsus' plausibility; (b) to point out the misrepresentations, partial use, and sinister conclusions made by Celsus; (c) to prove and substantiate the doctrines believed and practiced by the Christians; (d) to invite people to compare the stories of the Greeks with those of the Jews and the Christians and see which has better effect on the people.<sup>27</sup>

#### Apology (1): Defending the Rationality of the Christians

According to Origen, one obvious misrepresentation by Celsus is his mishandling of the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Cor. 3:18-19 ('If any man among you think himself to be wise, let him become foolish in this world that he may become wise; for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God'). Celsus twisted these verses to mean that for many

<sup>26</sup>Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.12; see also I.40.

<sup>27</sup>See Joseph Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 222; see also L. N. Fernando, "Origen's Use of Scripture in *Contra Celsum*," in *Origeniana Sexta*, ed. by Gilles Dorival and Alain le Boulluec (Leuven: University Press, 1995), 244, 247, 249.



Christians "Wisdom in this life is evil, but foolishness is good."<sup>28</sup> As the result, Celsus believes that Christians have been led astray into believing what they should not believe. They are "gullible people" that have been deceived by Jesus because they do not use their reason.

In response to this accusation, it is interesting to note that Origen does not first of all correct Celsus' misreading of Scripture, but rather he affirms the value of thinking rationally. Origen argues that philosophy or "the study of rational arguments" is indeed important - if not necessary - even in Christianity. Origen writes, "My answer to this is that if every man could abandon the business of life and devote his time to philosophy, no other course ought to be followed but this alone" (I.9). The reason is, according to Origen, because the Scriptures themselves contain profound rational matters; "For in Christianity, if I make no vulgar boasting, there will be found to be no less profound study of the writings that are believed; we explain the obscure utterance of the prophets, and the parables in the gospels, and innumerable other events or laws which have a symbolical meaning" (I.9).

However, what is more important for Origen is that faith (*pistis*) should gain more prominent place than reason (*logismos*) in theology and Christian life. Thus, according to Origen, to accept what is given by Jesus is more important than to be "enthusiastic about rational thought" (I.9); to be converted with simple faith is much better than to devote oneself to the study of rational argument (I.10); and to have faith that gives firm hope in life is much more meaningful than to undertake any other human activities (I.11). Origen is not saying that rationality has no place in Christian faith - Origen's own education is showing that - what he is saying is that the superiority of faith over reason should be maintained. Therefore, he adds in I.13 that despite the prominent place of faith, reason is needed: "Moreover, it is in harmony with scripture to say that it is far better to accept doctrines with reason and wisdom than with mere faith. That it was only in certain circumstances that the Logos

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<sup>28</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.9, 13; Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 54. In Celsus' complete attack, he combines the words of the Apostle Paul with other passages in the Gospel (e.g. Mark 10:15f; Luke 10:21) that emphasize the simplicity of faith.

wanted the latter, so that he might not allow mankind to be entirely without help..."

Thus, faith, for Origen, means to believe in God according to "the wisdom of God," which is "the foolishness of preaching," i.e. the preaching of Jesus Christ crucified (I.13). Celsus misunderstood this concept because he interpreted foolishness without qualification. Origen says, "We do not call foolishness a good thing without qualification, but only when anyone becomes foolish to this world" (I.13). Celsus, therefore, was also wrong when he said that the Christians were "gullible people because they did not follow reason and a rational guide" in accepting new teachings. In place of such an argument, Origen affirms that the Christians are guided by faith that involves trust and belief that contains firm rational confidence.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Apology (2): Defending the Originality of Christian Belief**

Next, Celsus directs his assault to the relation between Christianity and Judaism. In particular, he focuses on the issue of the originality of Moses' teaching. His main purpose is to uproot Christianity from its source. Origen is aware of this fact and says, "Therefore Celsus seems to have said these things not because they are true but out of mere perversity, with a view to impugning the origin of Christianity which depended on the Jews" (I.16). Later, Origen adds, "for he thinks he will more easily prove Christianity to be untrue if he can show its falsehood by attacking its origin in Judaism" (I.22). In other words, the issue of who plagiarizes who has become the next weapon of Celsus.<sup>30</sup>

Celsus thinks if Christians hold doctrines that are common to many nations of the world, then there must be an original source that purports to be the "true" [religious] doctrine.<sup>31</sup> What is that true original doctrine?

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<sup>29</sup>More complete explanation of Origen has to wait until book III, see especially III.38, 39. See also the explanation of Hovland, "The Dialogue between Origen and Celsus," 196-97.

<sup>30</sup>This issue seems quite common among the debate between Jews, Christians, and Pagans in early Christianity. See, for instances, Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, chapter 32; Tatian, *Address to the Greek*, chapter 40; Tertullian, *Apology*, chapters 7 and 8; Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*.

<sup>31</sup>Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 55.

And how does Celsus come to the conviction of which one is the original? The answer, according to Celsus, lies in the hand of the historians. Celsus writes, "The historians of the various nations have given us their accounts."<sup>32</sup> In other words, each nation has her own historians, including the Jews; "The prophets of the Jews and their great hero, Moses, wrote the history of their people in a way designed to favor their beliefs" says Celsus.<sup>33</sup> If that is the case, why does Celsus insist that those believe in the Mosaic history are "being led astray and deceived"? According to Celsus, Moses was guilty at least on two accounts: (a) Moses borrowed his teachings from the more ancient sources, that is, the Greeks and the Egyptians. As the result, none of what Moses taught can be considered original. Moses taught the creation of the world out of chaos, whereas Celsus, based on the teaching of the Greeks, seemed to believe that there were many chaotic conditions and therefore the world is uncreated or eternal.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Celsus argues that Moses had taught the rite of circumcision that actually came to the Jews from Egypt. Thus, none of what Moses had taught was original, much less came from God. (b) Moses contradicted "natural inclinations" to believe in many gods with many names by teaching that there was but one God. But later Moses taught the Jews to address that one God with different names (Most High, Adonai, Heavenly One, Sabaoth, etc.). Celsus took that fact as being inconsistent and "foolishness." The fact was, according to Celsus, the Jews themselves could not get away with the 'natural inclinations' to worship many gods as demonstrated in their angel worship and addiction to sorcery.<sup>35</sup>

In reply, Origen argues that Celsus' accusation is groundless. "If all historians gave an honest account of their respective nations," Origen marvels, "Why are we to disbelieve the prophets of the Jews alone?" (I.14). Why the Greeks and the Egyptians are more reliable than the Jews? After all, according to Origen, the external testimonies among

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Celsus refers to Critias' tale in the *Timaeus* (22), see 128, n. 8; see, Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 55-56; Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.19.

<sup>35</sup> Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 55.

the pagan themselves reckon the Jews worth including with the wise or the ancient. Other pagan teachers, such as Numenius the Pythagorean, who was probably a contemporary of Celsus, included the Jews among the nations that believe in God to be incorporeal and did not hesitate to quote the sayings of the prophets in his book (I.15). Moreover, the authoritative historian, Flavius Josephus, testified to the antiquity of Judaism (I.16). Therefore, for Origen, to deny the antiquity of the Jews is absurd. And with regard to Moses, he is not only not guilty, but also nobler than any pagan teachers in the following ways: (a) his laws are capable to transform those who study them; (b) his books are abundant with moral teachings and beneficial for both people with deep understanding and without deeper understanding (I.18).

Concerning the issue of monotheism and polytheism, Origen does not seem to address the issue head-to-head. Rather, he brings up the subject of the philosophy of names. At this point, when Origen still thinks that Celsus is Epicurean,<sup>36</sup> he attacks Celsus with Platonic idea of names. Thus, just like Plato reprimands Philebus for calling pleasure a god in his discussion and says that the name of gods is profound, Origen contends that we cannot go with just our "natural inclinations" in invoking God (I.25). Unlike the so-called gods in paganism, the names of God in the Old Testament are always associated with "a certain mysterious divine science that is related to the Creator of the universe" (I.24). The situation is totally different in paganism in which when one mentions the name of Zeus, for example, he or she will at once associates Zeus with "the son of Kronos and Rea, and husband of Hera, and brother of Poseidon, and father of Athena and Artemis, and the one who had sexual intercourse with his daughter Persephone" (I.25). What is it but an empty name? In Origen's view, there is no sense of mysterious principle in such a practice. The situation is different as when the Hebrew called God "Adonai" or any of the other names. The names invoke the deepest mystery about the true God.

In the issue of originality, therefore, Origen's reply contains not only the argument for the antiquity of the Jews, but also the argument

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<sup>36</sup>Chadwick points out that after V.3, Origen ceases entirely from referring his opponent as Epicurean and recognizes Celsus as Platonist; see Chadwick, "Introduction," xxvi.

for the profundity and solemnity of the teachings in the Old Testament (OT) - the very two characteristics of originality in religion. From Origen's philosophy of name argument, we see that he seems to believe in the special qualities of God's names in the OT or Hebrew language. In fact, Origen believes that Hebrew is a special language, and that the mere sounds of the name express the quality and characteristics of God (I.25).<sup>37</sup> In short, Origen counters Celsus' argument about originality by not merely turning to historical arguments, but moreover alluding to the profundity of a true religion.

### Apology (3): Defending the Divinity of Christ

Origen's defense on the divinity of Christ occupies the longest part of book I in *Against Celsus* (I.26-71). What Origen basically does is refuting Celsus' attack against Jesus point by point. Those points of Celsus, stated in rhetorical questions through the mouth of an imaginary Jew, can be succinctly stated as follow: (a) if Jesus is the son of God, why does the story of his birth is full of unsavory circumstances?<sup>38</sup> (b) Why is it only Jesus to be taken as the subject of the prophecies of the holy prophets?<sup>39</sup> (c) If Jesus claims to be a king, why is He so poor and needy

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<sup>37</sup> For helpful studies on Origen's philosophy of names see, among others, R. P. C. Hanson, "Interpretations of Hebrew Names in Origen," *Vigiliae Christianae* 10 (1956): 103-23; Naomi Janowitz, "Theories of Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius," *History of Religions* 30 (1991): 359-72.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Celsus says, "Is it not the case that far from being born in royal David's city of Bethlehem, you were born in a poor country town, and of a woman who earned her living by spinning? Is it not the case that when her deceit was discovered, to wit, that she was pregnant by a Roman soldier named Panthera she was driven away by her husband - the carpenter - and convicted of adultery? Indeed, is it not so that in her disgrace, wandering far from home, she gave birth to a male child in silence and humiliation?" See *On the True Doctrine*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> E.g., Celsus says, "When you were bathing in the Jordan near John, I understand you saw what looked like a bird fly towards you out of the air. Now let me understand what witnesses saw this wondrous event. And I should be most eager to know who hear the voice attesting that you are the Son of God? For I have so far heard only your voice, and have but your word for it. Now perhaps you will want to argue that we have the words of the holy prophets—that they bore witness concerning you. ... This being so, what is the difference between you and anyone else?" See *On the True Doctrine*, 58.

during His entire life?<sup>40</sup> (d) What is so unique with the miracles that Jesus claims to perform that distinguish Him from other sorcerers?<sup>41</sup>

In response to Celsus, Origen could simply say that Celsus has intentionally misrepresented the historicity of Jesus. But, as stated in the Preface, driven by those 'weak in faith', Origen refutes Celsus' accusation on the divinity of Christ with detailed arguments; thus

(a) Origen places side by side the Greek's concept of fame with the reality of Jesus' prominence. Jesus' obscurity and lowly birth, as the matter of fact, become the best reasons for taking His message seriously. Using the illustration of Themistocles in Plato, Origen undermines Celsus' argument by showing that even for Plato, fame could simply be a matter of one's ancestry as Plato wrote "From Themistocles, who was open-minded and saw that his home had also contributed to his fame, he received the answer: 'I would never have been so famous if I had been a Seriphian, nor would you have been a Themistocles if you had been a Seriphian, nor would you have been a Themistocles if you had had the good luck to be an Athenian'" (I.29). But Jesus, who is accused by Celsus for having "come from a village," the son of "a poor woman who earned her living by spinning," according to Origen, "has been able to shake the whole human world, not only more than Themistocles the Athenian, but even more than Pythagoras and Plato himself and any other wise men or emperors or general in any part of the world" (I.29). Origen continues, "Who, therefore, that does not give merely a cursory

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<sup>40</sup>E.g. Celsus says, "Why - though a son of God - do you go about begging for food, cowering before the threats of the people, and wandering about homeless? According to the Jews, Jesus collected around him ten or eleven unsavory characters - tax collectors, sailors, and the like, and these scurried about making a living as best they were able, usually through double dealing and in otherwise questionable ways." See *On the True Doctrine*, 58-59.

<sup>41</sup>E.g. Celsus says, "The sorcerers at least, for a few pence, make their magic available to everyone in the marketplace. They drive away demons, conquer diseases of all kinds, and make the dead heroes of the past appear - indeed sitting at long tables and eating imaginary cakes and dishes. They make things move about, as if they were alive - all illusion to be sure, but quite appealing to the average imagination. Now I ask you: As these men are able to do such wonderful things, ought we not regard them also as sons of God? Or ought we rather to say that they are the contrivances of evil men who are themselves possessed by demons? See *On the True Doctrine*, 59-60.

study to the nature of the facts, would not be amazed at a man who overcame and was able to rise above all the factors that tended to discredit him, and in his reputation to surpass all the distinguished men that have ever lived?" (I.30). In other words, the lowliness of Jesus that had become one reason for Celsus to mock Christianity, for Origen is the proof of His greatness. The widespread reception of the humble Jesus by various nations that Origen is aware of is enough evident for Christ's deity.

(b) Origen's most substantial argument in *Against Celsus* book I - perhaps throughout the rest of the book - seems to be his concept of prophecy.<sup>42</sup> With this argument, first of all, Origen points to Celsus' own inconsistency. Origen shows that Celsus does not speak for the Jews, because he overlooks the key verse in the OT concerning the prophecy of the coming Messiah by Isaiah (I.34). Not only that Celsus makes a mistake by claiming to put words into the mouth of the Jews because they accept the facts about the divine inspiration (I.36), the possibility for direct communication between God and his people (I.43), and the more historical probability of the events prophesized than the myths which Celsus has believed (I.44). Furthermore, Origen shows that Celsus has failed to grasp the nature of connection between Jesus and the Old Testament prophecies. Contrary to Celsus, Origen argues that it is Jesus who is the essence of the law and the messages of the prophets. Origen says, "Indeed, what is startling is that it is the evidence about Jesus in the law and the prophets who is used to prove that Moses and the prophets really were prophets of God" (I.45). Celsus also fails to understand that the prophecies about Jesus are not merely general prophecies about "son of God," but rather specific prophecies about Jesus' life on the earth. They encompass His birthplace (I.51), His family lineage (I.53), His death (I.54), His coming in two separate moments on the earth (I.56). In all this language, Origen demonstrates a strong historical continuation of the prophecies to their final climax and fulfillment in the person of Jesus.

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<sup>42</sup> For the importance of prophecy in Origen's apology, see Robert J. Hauck, *The More Divine Proof: Prophecy and Inspiration in Celsus and Origen* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

(c) Sometimes, Origen shows an agreement with the accusation of Celsus about Jesus. But he does so in order to show wonderful paradox in the life of Jesus. The fact about the disgraceful life of the disciples, whom Jesus gathered around Him, according to Origen, manifests the divinity of Christ. The spreading of their teachings to the multitude is in itself proof of the claim that their teaching is divine. And the life change of the disciples and the countless followers of Jesus afterwards are the other clear manifestation of the divine presence in Jesus and His messages. Still, Origen retorts Celsus' attack on Jesus' life as a mockery to "the blood of Jesus which was poured forth on the cross" (I.66). In Book I *Against Celsus*, Origen indicates the need to explain Christ's title as the 'son of God', the divine Logos, and the power and wisdom of God, but he saves it for another time and for the reason that this is "a matter for private investigation by believers" (I.66).

(d) Next, Origen takes up the issue of Celsus' assault on Jesus as miracle worker. Although Origen's answer in book I appears to be succinct, this topic actually plays important role in the whole book of *Against Celsus*.<sup>43</sup> In reply to the accusation that Jesus is a sorcerer, Origen demands sufficient proof of the similarity between what Jesus had been done and those who employed tricks (I.68). According to Origen, the distinct characteristic of Jesus as miracle worker compared to other sorcerers is in the fact that Jesus always combines miracles with profound spiritual teachings and moral reformation (I.69). In fact, the miracles that Jesus performed were only important because of the liberating truths that He wanted to proclaim. Things like this were absent from any sorcerers. Moreover, Jesus' own moral behavior was witness that he was far superior to other sorcerers (I.71). The combination of all these aspects - miracle, spiritual teaching, moral reformation and moral witness - according to Origen, serve still a higher purpose, namely, a gradual unfolding of the divinity of Jesus. Origen writes,

Jesus did this in order that his disciples might give themselves up to teaching men according to the will of God, and that the others, who have been taught as much by his doctrine as by his moral life and miracles the

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<sup>43</sup>For a comprehensive study of this topic, see Eugene V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).



right way to live, might do every action by referring to the pleasure of the supreme God. If the life of Jesus was of this character, how could anyone reasonably compare him with the behavior of sorcerers and fail to believe that according to God's promise he was God who had appeared in a human body for the benefit of our race? (I.68).

### **Conclusion**

*Against Celsus* is obviously not a dialogue since Celsus cannot engage in a rebuttal to Origen's arguments. Nevertheless, Origen has represented the position of his opponent quite objectively. His arguments demonstrate that he grasps the full thrust of Celsus' attack against Christianity. It is surprising that many of the issues that Origen deals with are still relevant even for many Christians today. Therefore, believers can draw a lot of lessons from Origen's apology - if not from the detailed issues, at least from the apologetic principles that Origen uses.

In three issues that receive considerable length of discussion in Book I, Origen has unveiled the falsehood of Celsus' accusation against Christianity. And at the same time, he makes clear and establishes the true Christian doctrines. On the issue of rationality among Christians, Origen explains that, far from being 'gullible believers', Christians have placed faith and reason according to their proper place and relation. Although Christians believe in truths that are foolishness according to the wisdom of the world that is not the same as saying that they do not use their reason in their belief. Concerning the originality of Christianity, Origen affirms the inseparable connection of Christianity with the Old Testament Judaism. And on the issue of Christ's divinity, in which Origen takes time to censure Celsus' accusations point by point, he emphasizes the divinity of Christ by highlighting the centrality of prophecy-fulfillment scheme in Scripture and the facts of Jesus' own moral life.