

WHAT DID NON-CHRISTIANS SAY ABOUT THE BIRTH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS OF NAZARETH IN ANCIENT HISTORY? STUDIES BASED ON CELSUS' *THE TRUE WORD* (THIRD CENTURY)

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Abstract

Investigations into ancient Christianity, despite enjoying a wide diversification of theoretical-methodological contributions and interpretative strands since the 19th century, have been largely focused on the constitution and consolidation of Christian faith formulas in dialogue with the surrounding culture in Ancient history. Much has been discussed about the symbolic components that came to constitute Christian religious experiences and the gradual adhesion of the Roman elites to the Christian movement. Contrary to this historiography, we seek to understand, from the position of the Neoplatonic philosopher Celsus, the impact that Christian narratives produced on literate non-Christian social groups. In other words, we are concerned with the reception of Christian discourses by non-Christian readers, such as Celsus. Our study, in this sense, is centered on the work of the Christian Origen of Alexandria, *Contra Celsum* (248/9), thanks to which we have access to Celsus' anti-Christian arguments. Thus, we inquire into the possible intentions and objectives of Celsus in questioning the Christian discourses about the divine birth and resurrection of Jesus.

Keywords

Origen; *Contra Celsum*; *The True Word*; Jesus of Nazareth; divine birth; resurrection.

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Resumo

As investigações sobre os cristianismos antigos, ainda que desde o séc. XIX tenham desfrutado de ampla diversificação de aportes teórico-metodológicos e vertentes interpretativas, têm se voltado, em grande medida, à constituição e consolidação de fórmulas de fé cristãs em diálogo com a cultura envolvente na Antiguidade. Muito se discute acerca dos componentes simbólicos que passaram a constituir as experiências religiosas cristãs e a gradativa adesão das elites romanas ao movimento cristão. Na contramão desta historiografia, procuramos compreender, a partir do posicionamento do filósofo neoplatônico Celso, o impacto que as narrativas cristãs produziram em grupos sociais não-cristãos letrados. Em outras palavras, ocupamo-nos da recepção dos discursos cristãos por leitores não-cristãos, como Celso. Nosso estudo, nesse sentido, está centrado na obra do cristão alexandrino Orígenes, *Contra Celso* (248/9), graças a qual temos acesso aos argumentos anticristãos de Celso. Assim, indagamos as possíveis intencionalidades e objetivos de Celso ao questionar os discursos cristãos sobre o nascimento divino e a ressurreição de Jesus.

Palavras-chave

Orígenes; *Contra Celso*; *Discurso Verdadeiro*; Jesus de Nazaré; nascimento divino; ressurreição.

Introduction

Jesus of Nazareth became a central character in Christian literature from the middle of the first century C.E., which also means that the construction of memories about Jesus served a variety of purposes and objectives, especially when we consider the temporal gap between Jesus, in Galilee, and the early writings about him.

To understand the interpolations and the creative potential of Christian authors in the process of literary creation of this character, we shall picture a ship gradually moving away from us towards the ocean, we can no longer clearly see details, nuances, and characteristics belonging to the vessel, since distance has transformed it into a mere diffuse point on the horizon until it disappears. Suppose, then, that after two decades, we are invited to narrate and describe it to audiences who have never seen it or approached it.

We would certainly add colors, dimensions, and shapes that were not present on the original ship. We would add traits or characteristics that come from our field of experience or from our more recent relationship with similar objects. Similarly, we understand the production of narratives about Jesus.

This is how memory works: it recollects, forgets, condenses, and interpolates feelings and experiences, which makes it fragile, vulnerable, susceptible to updating, re-signifying; in short, memory incorporates different garments depending on the stimuli of the social environment in which the subject is inserted, as David Lowenthal warns, “[...] The need to use and reuse the memorial knowledge, and to forget as well as recall, forces selection, distillation, distortion and transformation of the past, accommodating memories to the needs of the present” (1998: 77); after all, “[...] the past is filtered through everything that is subsequently learned from the original experience [...] the passage of time causes qualitative change of memory as well as its loss” (1998: 98).

Thus, Christian literature has the challenge of propagating the sayings and deeds of a subject whose life trajectory and social actions have become distant in time, since Christian writers are not eyewitnesses, as many believe. From the middle of the first century, the Christian literati combined elements of the political-cultural context in which they were inserted, sparse oral and written testimonies as well as expectations from different audiences, including Hellenized Jews, to compose a character

that met the various popular desires, in such a way that Christian literatures, initially, were addressed only to communities that followed the teachings of Jesus: it was an internal theme of Christians.

From the middle of the second century, due to the criticism and persecution to which many followers of Jesus were subjected, a vast combative and apologetic literature emerged, in which Christians defended and justified their myths to a non-Christian audience. A number of Christian thinkers have devoted themselves to create speeches that would answer the objections of non-Christian philosophers, rhetors, or sophists.

According to Jaeger (1985: 45), for example, the Christians of the first two centuries had to face the accusation of cannibalism, since in the Eucharist “comían la carne y bebían la sangre de su Dios”, of sexual immorality, of promiscuity, of incest, as described by Cornelius Fronto (100-166), tutor of Marcus Aurelius (*apud* Hargis, 1999: 12), in addition to being called atheists, since they did not venerate the gods consensually accepted by the Romans, they denied the divine honors to the emperor (Pliny, *Epistulae*, 10.96:5), in such a way that this ‘atheism’ (*impietas*) was conceived as political subversion by many Roman thinkers, such as Suetonius and Pliny the Younger, in addition to being censured based on the practice of a *pernicious superstition* (Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 38:1-3).

Historian Jeffrey W. Hargis argues that the refusal to worship the Greco-Roman gods was easily interpreted by many Romans as a tendency of the Christian movement toward anarchy and violence, especially in relation to the disqualification of the gods who maintain the peace and protection of the Roman *civitas*. Thus, the rise of this popular opinion may have stimulated the practice of informants to hand over Christians to local authorities, such as the Christians who were brought to the court of Pliny the Younger between 111 and 113 C.E., although very little is known about this religion.

We can state with some certainty that, until the middle of the second century, the persecution of Christians was not the result of imperial decrees, but rather of the population’s resentment of the lascivious and subversive character attributed to Christians. For Hargis (1999: 11), the driving force behind the oppression and execution of Christians seems to have arisen from popular resentment reported to local authorities.

With such accusations, many Christians came to be seen by many Romans as enemies of the gods, the Roman Empire, and the Romans themselves, to the extent that they were encouraged to renounce their presence in Roman venues, such as theater, amphitheater, circus, and baths as well as games in general not only due to being environments in which violent and libidinous themes circulated, but also due to constituting ritualistic practices of worship to Roman or foreign deities, as registered by the North African Latinist Tertullian, in *De Spectaculis* (24), written around 202 and 206, for whom Christians should remain pure, at a high level of moral perfection, separated from the ‘pollution’ of the world. Examples of this stance can be found in Book 8, in *Contra Celsum*:

Let us see what Celsus further says of God, and how he urges us to the use of those things which are properly called idol offerings [...] His words are, *God is the God of all alike; He is good, He stands in need of nothing, and He is without jealousy. What, then, is there to hinder those who are most devoted to His service from taking part in public feasts.* (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 8.21)²

Origen demonstrates how Celsus questions Christian exclusivism regarding the worship of divinity, since “God is the God of all alike,” meaning that the supreme deity cannot belong to a specific group or a specific lineage, much less be accessible to certain social groups and not to others. Moreover, note how Celsus had contact with a position defended and systematized by Tertullian at the beginning of the third century, which signals the resurgence of certain cultural practices or recommendations to Christian communities, as noted in Origen’s warning:

Let us now see on what grounds Celsus urges us to make use of the idol offerings and the public sacrifices in the public feasts. His words are, *If these idols are nothing, what harm will there be in taking part in the feast? On the other hand, if they are demons, it is certain that they too are God’s creatures, and that we must believe in them, sacrifice to them according to the laws, and pray to them that they may be propitious.* (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 8.24)

Celsus questions the prohibition of Christians from participating in public feasts and sacrifices, which implies, by extension, abstaining from participating in public celebrations dedicated to the gods, as Tertullian teaches. Furthermore, Celsus holds the thesis that even demons (*daimones*) belong to God, since all immortal beings are creations of God, while mortal beings are creations of the immortals (Origen, *Contra*

² In all quotations from *Contra Celsum*, we use italics to differentiate Celsus’ argument from Origen’s refutations. This is a methodology already used in the Portuguese version published by the Patristic collection.

Celsus, 4.52) which means that all religious activities must honor the supreme deity, whether they are dedicated directly to that deity or indirectly via lesser gods. Thus, for Celsus, Christians should not worry about participating in non-Christian services.

Since god is supreme and *κοινός* (common) to all, therefore everyone has equal access to this divinity by different intermediary agents (priests or even *daimones*). Thus, for Celsus, it is inconceivable that Christians seek to separate themselves socially and religiously from the social *corpus* to behave socially in an exclusive way. Furthermore, if the supreme god has no material needs or is unable to deal with human emotions and feelings, such as jealousy, how is it possible that the cults of intermediate gods could offend him?

From the middle of the second century, there was a different scenario in terms of the increase of followers of Christianity, as well as their literary maturation, a context in which apologetic and polemical literatures are inserted, given that, from 170 C.E. onwards, the feeling of threat of Christians to the common good intensifies, in such a way that many Christians were persecuted and killed by local political agents and adverse groups in various cities throughout the Roman empire, among whom were Polycarp in Smyrna; Sagares at Laodicea, Carpus and Papillae at Pergamum; moreover, in the summer of 180 C.E., groups of Christians were executed in Madauros and Scilly, North Africa (Hargis, 1999: 12). Origen offers us evidence of motivations for such public acts by contesting Celsus' position:

The first point which Celsus brings forward, in his desire to throw discredit upon Christianity, is, *that the Christians entered into secret associations with each other [...], secret, and maintained in violation of the laws. And his wish is to bring into disrepute what are termed the love-feasts of the Christians, as if they had their origin in the common danger, and were more binding than any oaths [...]* he babbles about the public law, alleging that the associations of the Christians are in violation of it [...] (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.1)

Origen reinforces this position by stating that Celsus had asserted that, in secret, Christians practice and teach what is convenient for them. They have a good reason for doing so: they are removing the death penalty that hangs over their heads. He compares this vulnerability to the risks that a Socratic runs in defense of philosophy (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.3). In such passages, Origen punctuates his opinion of the Christians of his time. Celsus' observation regarding the secret character of religious cults indicates their illegal status and subversive stance. It is a threat to the

social order; it must therefore be fought, since 'secret conventions' must be banned, as Pliny the Younger's Letter 96, addressed to Emperor Trajan suggests. To be considered acceptable, members of a society must participate in cults of gods that keep society stable and peaceful, such that the rejection of these gods implies the adoption of subversive practices.

Celsus, Origen, and the production of *The True Word*

Expounding on Celsus and his anti-Christian arguments is not an easy task, for we depend on the exercise of refutation undertaken by Origen in *Contra Celsum*. As for the biographical trajectory of Celsus, Origen offers us very vague information "[...] I do not congratulate that believer in Christ whose faith can be shaken by Celsus – who no longer shares the common life of men, but has long since departed [...]" (*Contra Celsum*, Preface, 4). It is not clear what Origen meant when he declares that Celsus "no longer shares the common life of men:" was he a wealthy man or a philosopher alien to social life?

Another aggravating factor: Celsus is a proper noun of Latin origin, very common in the imperial era, which raises doubts as to which Celsus is referring to: "And we have heard that there were two individuals of the name of Celsus, both of whom were Epicureans; the earlier of the two having lived in the time of Nero, but this one in that of Adrian [117-138], and later." (*Contra Celsum*, 1.8). Origen is also uncertain about his discursive productions: "I do not know, however, if he is the same who wrote several books against it." (*Contra Celsum*, 1. 68) or philosophical position: "But observe how, in his desire to subvert our opinions, he who never acknowledged himself throughout his whole treatise to be an Epicurean" (*Contra Celsum*, 5. 3). A hasty reading of this passage would allow us to deduce that Celsus was an Epicurean, but this may have been just a label attributed to Celsus to disqualify him from the Christians, since Origen himself, several times, associates him with Plato:

[...] Nay, he would not even quote the passage in the letters of Plato, [...] lest he too should be compelled by Plato, whom he often mentions with respect, to admit that the architect of this world is the Son of God, and that His Father is the first God and Sovereign Ruler over all things (*Contra Celsum*, 6. 47).

In addition to Origen demonstrating Celsus' adherence to Platonic thought, especially about the creation of the *cosmos*, the divinities, and the man, *Contra Celsum* also presents an erudite adversary, since he

demonstrates knowledge of canonical texts of the Jews (*Mishnah* and First Testament) as well as Egyptian, Persian, Indian, Greek, Roman, and Christian mythologies, among others.

According to historians Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed (2007: 89), Celsus wrote a critique of Christianity, entitled “The True Word” – *Ἀληθὴς Λόγος*, in which he defended the influence of classical mythologies on Christian discourses. The title suggests that Christians give false speeches, which indicates that Celsus had a certain knowledge of Jewish and Christian texts and teachings that enabled him to criticize Christian literary production and the actions of members of this faith community in such a way as to consider them a threat to the security of the Roman Empire and its political-administrative and military institutions.

While the first attacks against Christians by non-Christian groups focused on accusations of immorality, cannibalism, and atheism, Celsus’ work marked the beginning of an era of philosophical attacks, supported by The Scriptures. Celsus undertook, in an innovative way, attacks on the logic and philosophical borrowings of non-Christian belief systems, myths, and religious practices fostered by Christian priestly elites.

The work has been lost for unclear reasons till the date, but we can know it from the detailed refutation that was made by the Christian exegete Origen of Alexandria, who, between 248 and 249, wrote *Contra Celsum*. That is, if we conceive that Celsus wrote his narrative in the middle of the second century C.E., Origen’s response to Celsus’ polemic would have been realized after almost a century, at which time Origen had received the *The True Word* from Ambrose, as reported by Eusebius of Caesarea, in *Ecclesiastical History* (VI).

Although Hargis (1999: 22) considers that Celsus’ work dates from 178, it is more appropriate to suggest that it was written in the early third century C.E. for several reasons. If Celsus had written his work in the 170s, at the height of the polemics of immorality, cannibalism, and atheism against Christians, why did he not mention these accusations? Would Celsus have been a rare exception in his day? Apparently, when Celsus propagated his narrative, such anti-Christian retorts were not so relevant, which is more likely in the context of the dynasty of the Severus, more specifically after the rule of Septimius Severus (193-211).

Secondly, if Celsus wrote *The True Word* in the late 170s, why was there no Christian response to the attacks over the course of 70 years? Thirdly,

it is possible that Celsus' accusations against Christian proselytism are related to Septimius Severus' alleged decree of approximately 201/202, which forbade conversion to Judaism or Christianity, which instigated the persecutions of Christians from 193 to 211 to a wide extent (Hargis, 1999: 23). After this period, Christians enjoyed a certain peace.

In addition, the first decades of the third century were marked by imperial control over anti-Christian movements. However, after Septimius Severus, imperial policies allowed Christians to participate in public life, which aroused the antipathy of many non-Christians, such as Celsus. For these reasons, Hargis argues that it is possible to suggest that the date of creation is at least at the beginning of the third century.

Thus, from the perspective of Hargis (1999: 30), by characterizing his opponents as members of a small and segregationist sect, Celsus reacts to a large extent in a hostile way to the growth of the Christian community and to the social integration experienced by them from the third century onwards, to protect Roman society from the subversive character of this religious community.

Broadly speaking, we must consider that many non-Christians regard Christians as "social enemies." It is a recurrent practice in anti-Christian positions since the beginning of the second century and there was no reason to interrupt this line of reasoning, since Christianity had not yet become official and was suspicious to many people. Furthermore, the church did not have the status (wealth, building of temples, and a consistent discursive formation) that it would enjoy from the middle of the third century onwards, when Origen writes *Contra Celsum*.

According to Trigg (2002: 53), the work was written in an instable context—both political and economic—, since the Roman Empire was under threat of internal conflicts, external invasions (Goths, Franks, Vandals, and Alemanni), plagues, and inflation, which contributed to the creation of an apocalyptic scenario, elaborated by non-Christian thinkers, who blamed the emperor Philip the Arab (244–249), for his policy of connivance with Christians.

Ambrose, noticing the increase in attacks against Christians and the dissemination of Celsus' anti-Christian treatise, may have realized the imminent threat of persecution, which would have motivated him to ask Origen for an answer. Thus, for Trigg (2002: 53), the need to provide arguments against further persecution was probably more urgent than

any other need for evangelization or strengthening of newly converted Christians, who might be affected by Celsus' anti-Christian arguments. This explains, at least in part, Origen's efforts to present a detailed rebuttal of Celsus in eight books, one of his most extensive known works. Therefore, the discomfort with Celsus' discourse may be linked to the wave of hostility against Christians, fomented by the local elites adherents of Hellenic philosophies (Trigg, 2002: 61).

In 249, Philip the Arab was assassinated by the legions and Emperor Decius (249-251) began a series of persecutions against the Christians, accusing them of being merciless and lacking respect for the emperor. Decius persecuted, above all, Christian leaders and thinkers, such as Fabian, bishop of Rome, Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem, and Babylas, bishop of Antioch, who died in prison. Origen was also imprisoned and tortured, but not executed, probably due to having negotiated his conversion and allegiance to the emperor, which displeased many Christians, since "[...] an unequivocal death, by martyrdom, would have been better for Origen's posthumous reputation" (Trigg, 2002: 61).

In this context, it is assumed that Celsus and other polemicists began their attacks on communities that already had a certain relevance and specificity compared with other religious experiences. From the end of the second century, Christianity became more and more intellectually sophisticated and with a sense of mission, perhaps driven by initiatives such as that of Celsus, who required from Christians even more detailed and erudite arguments.

In summary, while the first attacks on Christians focused on immorality, Celsus' work marked the beginning of an era of philosophical attacks that were complemented with refutations based on The Scriptures; among his objects of criticism, we will highlight the reception of the narratives about the birth and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Birth and resurrection of Jesus as a philosophical problem for Celsus

It is reasonable to assume that *Contra Celsum* is a work written by Origen with the aim of responding to the "insults," i.e., to the counter-narratives or counterpoints presented by non-Christian groups regarding Christian texts. Thus, the basis of support for Celsus' arguments stems from a dynamic and conflictual literary environment, composed of at least three divergent groups: on the one hand, the Jews favorable to Jesus, who

defended that his birth was the result of divine intervention on an immaculate virgin, without the interference of a human father. On the other, Jews opposed to the former narratives about Jesus and non-Christian groups, who held that if Joseph was not his father, Mary was an adulteress and Jesus a bastard.

Broadly speaking, although one group treats the virginal conception of Jesus as a work and grace of God, others point to adultery: either with the consent of a sinful Jew – Joseph (since, according to Jewish law, Joseph should have dismissed her immediately and definitively); or from Mary's relationship with a non-Christian – Panthera, a Roman soldier, as can be seen below:

But let us now return to where the Jew is introduced, *speaking of the mother of Jesus, and saying that when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera* (στρατιώτου Πανθήρα τοῦνομα); and let us see whether those who have blindly concocted these fables about the adultery of the Virgin with Panthera, and her rejection by the carpenter, did not invent these stories to overturn His miraculous conception by the Holy Ghost (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 32).

In this excerpt, it is evident that Celsus used a well-known narrative from the Talmud that reports that Jesus was an illegitimate son of Mary by a Roman soldier named Ben Panthera – *yeshua ben pantera*, an epithet already widespread in Jewish society at the end of the first century (Jaffé, 2012: 581), which demonstrates that Celsus had access to this anti-Christian Jewish material. Added to this, note that Celsus claims to be aware of another Judeo-Christian dialogue, entitled *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus* (which no longer exists) testifying his contacts with Jewish arguments against Christianity³ (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4.52), also present in *Dialogue with Trypho*, by Justin of Neapolis and *Adversus Iudeos*, by Tertullian.

In our view, Celsus' purpose in accusing Mary of adultery is to disparage the belief in the virginal conception of Jesus as well as his status as Messiah descended from David, accepted without much reservation by Christians. Celsus writes at a time when many Christian authors are

³ According to Jaffé (2012: 09-12), a significant number of Christian authors strive to remove the virgin birth of Jesus from the charge of adultery, including: Ascension of Isaiah, 11:5; Ode to Solomon, 19.6; Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 30.6, Gospel of Thomas, 105; Acts of Pilate, 2.3, in addition to the Jewish texts, from which the narratives about Jesus as the 'Son of Panthera' were born, including Sabbath, 104b.

striving to construct the image of a 'virgin Mary' and relate it to the divine birth of Jesus, freeing it from the accusation of adultery.

To defend Christianity from such accusations, Origen points out that the construction of this version, that is, "the authors of this fable," elaborated it from clear interests and objectives: "to deny the miraculous conception (of Jesus) by the Holy Ghost," in such a way that the motivation for such a literary composition comes from the propensity of non-Christians to irresponsibly mock and distort Christian myths; hence Origen declares that:

I do not think it necessary to grapple with an argument advanced not in a serious but in a scoffing spirit, such as the following: *If the mother of Jesus was beautiful, then the god whose nature is not to love a corruptible body, had intercourse with her because she was beautiful; or, It was improbable that the god would entertain a passion for her, because she was neither rich nor of royal rank, seeing no one, even of her neighbours, knew her. And it is in the same scoffing spirit that he adds: When hated by her husband, and turned out of doors, she was not saved by divine power, nor was her story believed. Such things, he says, have no connection with the kingdom of heaven.* In what respect does such language differ from that of those who pour abuse on others on the public streets, and whose words are unworthy of any serious attention? (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.39)

In this excerpt, Origen declares that such 'insults' are common to Christian discourses, which signals a climate of distrust of the plausibility of Christian accounts. To defend against Celsus' attacks, Origen insists on the virginal conception of Jesus and refers to the Jewish texts (*Septuagint*), despite the hostility of many Jews to considering Jesus as the 'Son of God':

[...] as if the only event predicted were this, that [...] neither the place of His birth, nor the sufferings which He was to endure at the hands of the Jews, nor His resurrection, nor the wonderful works which He was to perform, had been made the subject of prophecy, he continues: *Why should it be you alone, rather than innumerable others, who existed after the prophecies were published, to whom these predictions are applicable?* And desiring, I know not how, to suggest to others the possibility of the notion that they themselves were the persons referred to by the prophets, he says that *some, carried away by enthusiasm, and others having gathered a multitude of followers, give out that the Son of God has come down from heaven* (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.50)

Notably, while Celsus questions the applicability, pertinence, or plausibility of Jewish prophecies about the life of Jesus, Origen relies on such prophecies, with which he questions the unbelieving attitude of many Jews. Origen reminds us, for example, of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:10-14), in which Emmanuel would be born of a virgin (Origen, *Contra*

Celsus, 1.33-34). The Alexandrian Christian, to support his refutation of Celsus refers to Matthew 1:18-25 and dialogues with the messianic movement, also outlined in 2 Samuel, 7; Micah 4:14; Ezekiel 34:23; Haggai 2:23, in which it will be via a king descended from David that God will save the 'chosen people'; therefore the hope of the worshippers of Yahweh rests in the wake of the Davidic lineage.

It can be seen that the authors of the Gospel of Matthew⁴, at least three centuries later, made use of Immanuel's prophecy to construct, in a literary context, the divine birth of Christ, making him to be born in Bethlehem, as Origen argues in the fragment below:

Now the Scripture speaks, respecting the place of the Saviour's birth—that the Ruler was to come forth from Bethlehem—in the following manner: And you Bethlehem, house of Ephrata, are not the least among the thousands of Judah: for out of you shall He come forth unto Me who is to be Ruler in Israel; and His goings forth have been of old, from everlasting (Mic 5:2). Now this prophecy could not suit any one of those who, as Celsus' Jew says, were fanatics and mob-leaders, and who gave out that they had come from heaven, unless it were clearly shown that He had been born in Bethlehem, or, as another might say, had come forth from Bethlehem to be the leader of the people (Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 1.51).

Origen's efforts to defend a supposed harmony and continuity of the Jewish texts to Christians with the prophecies are notorious. Thus, as to the place of birth, Matthew (2:1) and Luke (1:5) affirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Judea, for the purpose of relating him to the house of King David and to the prophecies of the so-called 'Old Testament' (Crossan, 2007), since *as the evangelists were writing long after the death of Jesus, they made intense scans of the Jewish scriptures, raising numerous prophecies [...] making them fulfilled in the trajectory of the life of Jesus* (Chevitarese, 2022: 16), a narrative process probably known and pointed out by Celsus, insofar as he questions the veracity of these reports with the Jewish communities.

From Origen's defense against Celsus' arguments in the excerpt above, we deduce that Celsus' accusation is based on Matthew's narrative sequence (more than Luke's), since only Matthew informs us that Jesus went to Egypt (Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 1.28). Furthermore, the identification of Jesus as 'the carpenter's son' (Mt 13: 55), present in the argument of Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 1.28), is omitted completely

⁴ The literary efforts of the authors of Mt stand out, which in 1:23 refers to Is 7:14 and in 4:15-16 cites Is 8:23-29.

by Luke, although both had contact with Mark, the first to declare that Jesus was a carpenter (Mk 6:3)⁵. We also recall that Matthew's editors were the first to attribute to Joseph the suspicion that Jesus' birth was the fruit of adultery (Mt 1:18-25).

Similar to Matthew, Luke narrates that Mary was married to Joseph, but only in Luke does the angel announce to Mary that she will conceive the "Son of God" by being covered by the shadow of the Holy Ghost (Lu 1: 35), so that in the Gospel of Luke the author presumes that Mary had told Joseph what had happened and he believed her words, thus there is no suspicion of adultery, nor a hostile attitude on the part of Joseph towards Mary, as in Matthew. Clearly, Matthew's narrative follows very distinct narrative components, which reinforces our position regarding the account with which Celsus would have dialogued to elaborate his counter-narratives. Thus, we maintain that Celsus' knowledge of the account of the birth of Jesus comes concretely from Matthew.

Finally, as to the alleged divine filiation of Jesus, Celsus doubts the exclusivity and veracity of such an account, since births conceived from the interaction between men and gods were not uncommon in ancient Eastern and Western literature (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 28), such as the character Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda; even though she has a human father, Tyndareus (*Odyssey*, III); Heracles (or Hercules), son of Zeus and Alcmene, a mortal woman, according to Diodorus of Sicily (*BH* 4:9:1-3, 6, 10:1); Theogenes of Thasos, son of Heracles and a mortal mother, according to Pausanias (*DG* II, 11:2-9); Alexander the Great, son of Zeus and a mortal, Olympias, according to Plutarch (*Life of Alexander*, 2:1-6, 3: 1-9); Octavius Augustus, son of Apollo and Atia, a mortal, according to Cassius Dio (*HR* 45 1:2) and Suetonius (*Life of Augustus*, 94: 1-11); Apollonius of Tyana, son of Proteos, god of Egypt, and a mortal, according to Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius*, 1: 4, 5-12). Such narratives compose, in general, *Hellenized models of divine births* (Chevitarese, 2022: 15).

Miracles, sublime gestures, great achievements, and unprecedented wisdom were expected of these subjects. Thus, historiography informs us

⁵ Our considerations about the Gospels are based on the dating and historical circumstances of the production of such texts. In this sense, historical studies advocate the following chronology: Mark (70 C.E.), Matthew (80 C.E.), Luke (90 C.E.), 1,2,3 John (90-110), as Chevitarese (2022) suggests, which differs substantially from the theological organization proposed by the Church for the composition of the Christian Bible.

that the concept of 'divine man' – which is not restricted to Jesus – was attributed to subjects who claimed to be capable of performing signs, marvels, wonders, and miracles. Such personages united the physical and metaphysical worlds. Origen, in *Contra Celsum*, offers us clues that there were other subjects, categorized as 'divine-man,' just like Jesus, and who attracted a large number of disciples by proclaiming themselves "sons of God," such as: Simon the magician of Samaria; Dositheus of Samaria; Judas and Theudas of Galilee (*Contra Celsum*, 6. 11)⁶. Concerning Simon,

But it has escaped the notice of Celsus that the Simonians do not at all acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God, but term Simon the power of God, regarding whom they relate certain marvellous stories, saying that he imagined that if he could become possessed of similar powers to those with which he believed Jesus to be endowed, he too would become as powerful among men as Jesus was among the multitude (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5. 62)

In the face of such inter-discursive relations, which corroborate the construction of a Matthean version of the virgin birth of Jesus, we infer that Celsus may have reminded Christian authors that the invention of the divine birth of Jesus results from a seam of narratives, since it is interpellated by popular narratives circulating in the Mediterranean basin. In this way, the plot fabricated by the Christians, although plausible to the ancient peoples, is not exclusive to Christian literature and Celsus does not hesitate to remind us of the debt of Christians to the surrounding culture.

As for the resurrection of Christ, as well as the canonical narrative of his birth, we consider it one of the basic presuppositions of the religious experiences of Christian communities and makes the movement of Jesus unique, since it is the resurrection that consolidates Jesus as a god and inserts him into a salvific plan, insofar as it is expected that the faithful "[...] would rise from the dead to receive the same life that Jesus received from God after the resurrection" (Miranda, 2020: 35). In this way, the resurrection of Christ is linked to the belief that the faithful, the "righteous" or the "saints," will be resurrected by God; therefore, it is assumed that the same agent who resurrected Christ, that is, God, will resurrect Christ's followers (Miranda, 2020: 32).

⁶ Celsus also reminds us of Antinous: "But as he next introduces the case of the favourite of Adrian (I refer to the accounts regarding the youth Antinous, and the honours paid him by the inhabitants of the city of Antinous in Egypt), and imagines that the honour paid to him falls little short of that which we render to Jesus" (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III, 36).

In *Contra Celsum*, however, Origen points out Celsus' criticism of the non-exclusivity of the idea of resurrection in the Christian movement. In fact, this is an idea widely spread not only among the Greeks and the Romans, but also among the late Jews, especially in apocalyptic texts and contexts (Hb 6:2; 11:19). Thus, the apparitions and forms of the resurrected Jesus, as they are presented in the New Testament accounts, are part of a common heritage shared in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin (Cavalcanti, 2020: 76). In other words, Celsus intends to warn audiences that the narrative of the "resurrected Jesus" has several elements in common with other mythological narratives widely known in the first centuries of the common era, as is shown in the following fragment:

The Jew continues his address to those of his countrymen who are converts, as follows: *Come now, let us grant to you that the prediction was actually uttered. Yet how many others are there who practise such juggling tricks, in order to deceive their simple hearers, and who make gain by their deception? – as was the case, they say, with Zamolxis in Scythia, the slave of Pythagoras; and with Pythagoras himself in Italy; and with Rhampsinitus in Egypt (the latter of whom, they say, played at dice with Demeter in Hades, and returned to the upper world with a golden napkin which he had received from her as a gift); and also with Orpheus among the Odrysians, and Protesilaus in Thessaly, and Hercules at Cape Tænarus, and Theseus. But the question is, whether any one who was really dead ever rose with a veritable body* (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2. 55).

Celsus, in this excerpt, highlights several characters involved in narratives of metamorphosis, popularly known by Christians as resurrection narratives, a demonstration that this is a recurring theme in Ancient cultures, including in the so-called 'New Testament'⁷, which makes it a debatable topic.

One of the stories that Origen claims to have been used by Celsus to correlate them with the resurrected Jesus, comes from Herodotus (484-420 B.C.E.), in *Histories*, in which he relates, from Egyptian priests, the meeting of the pharaoh Ramses II and the goddess Ceres [Demeter's

⁷ According to Miranda (2020: 24-28), the Greek terms for the resurrection are *anistemi/anastasis* and *egeiro/egesis*. While the term *anistemi* appears 108 times in the Greek New Testament to designate from its basic meaning: the action of rising, elevating, to the religious: returning to life or rising from the dead, the verb *egeiro* is more frequent, appearing 144 times, and is more focused on the idea of resurrection, which implies metamorphosis or change of state. This is the term used to refer to, for example, the resurrection of Jesus. For Miranda (2020: 28), [...] *anistemi* refers more to the return to life of people by the action of Jesus, or to speak of the eschatological resurrection (and not of the resurrected Jesus himself) as in *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, but the researcher warns that, depending on the author, such terms are interchangeable, as in *First Epistle to Peter* (1:3) and *Epistle to the Philippians* (3:10).

Roman name], in Hades⁸, “[...] there played at dice with Ceres, sometimes winning and sometimes suffering defeat. After a while he returned to earth, and brought with him a golden napkin, a gift which he had received from the goddess” (2.122). The descent into the infernal world and, consequently, the exit from the world of the dead is a theme often revisited by different characters in ancient mythology to describe processes of deification or acquisition of divine powers.

It is not, therefore, a common or extensive skill for most people. The mention of a pharaoh is not arbitrary in this case: the idea of complete resurrection (of body and soul), as also observed in the Gospels of Luke and John, resembles the idea of Egyptian resurrection and immortality, reserved for the pharaohs, who were conceived as a ‘god’⁹.

Celsus adds one more argument: “[...] the body of a god is not nourished with such food” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 70), a clear reference to the authors of the Gospels mentioned above, for whom Jesus is said to have fed on fish and honey. He adds: “the body of a god does not make use of such a voice as that of Jesus, nor employ such a method of persuasion” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 70), that is, a god does not need witnesses who could announce his next appearances in the condition of being resurrected, even less would he make use of matter to nourish himself. The use of eyewitnesses is a practice of Latin jurisprudence to attest to the veracity of what happened, which, for Celsus, would be dispensable in

⁸ According to Hellenic mythology, Hades is the god of the dead and also came to designate the place where the dead went.

⁹ According to Herodotus, another well-known resurrection narrative, present in Egyptian culture, deals with the ‘phoenix’ bird, revered especially in Heliopolis, where it symbolized the rising of the sun and the resurrection. According to Herodotus, the traditional Egyptian myth tells us that the phoenix migrated to Heliopolis and buried itself in the altar; from its ashes a new bird sprang (2:73). Although Herodotus’ narrative does not appear *ipsis litteris* in any Egyptian document, there are Egyptian paintings in material culture that show the phoenix as a shining bird; the egg was the symbol of birth and resurrection. We must remind, however, that since the Second Millennium B.C.E., Egyptian literature, with the myth of Isis and Osiris, reinterpreted by the Roman Plutarch in *Isis and Osiris*, informs us of the rivalry between the brother-gods, Osiris and Set, which culminates in the dismemberment of Osiris by his brother Set, and the subsequent resurrection of Osiris, by the actions of his sisters, Isis and Nephthys, which enabled Osiris not only to preside over the underworld and the judgment of the living by the weighing of the heart (as described in the *Book of Emerging Forth into the Light*, known as *Book of the Dead*), but also to ascend alongside Ra and maintain the eternal connection between the world of the living, of the dead and of the gods, analogous to Christian myths.

relation to a 'god.' Origen's response to such attacks is even more intriguing:

These are, indeed, trifling and altogether contemptible objections. For our reply to him will be, that he who is believed among the Greeks to be a god, viz., the Pythian and Didymean Apollo, makes use of such a voice for his Pythian priestess at Delphi, and for his prophetess at Miletus; and yet neither the Pythian nor Didymean is charged by the Greeks with not being a god, nor any other Grecian deity whose worship is established in one place. And it was far better, surely, that a god should employ a voice which, on account of its being uttered with power, should produce an indescribable sort of persuasion in the minds of the hearers. (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 70)

Origen, notably, equates the manifestation of Apollo of Delphi with that of Jesus of Nazareth, since both deities communicated with the voice and were recognized. It is evident from Origen's comparative analyses that Christian myths are not only supported by, but also result from, propositional dialogues with Hellenic mythology; the presence of common rhetorical *topoi* is notorious. From this point of view, Christian myths would not be strange to Roman audiences since they are narratives from a common cultural field shared in the ancient Mediterranean Basin.

Final considerations

We deal with two important historical subjects, Celsus and Origen, for the understanding of the historical circumstances and political-cultural environment of production of anti-Christian arguments based on Hellenic philosophies.

In investigating Origen's *Contra Celsum* (248/249), we turn our analysis to the reception of *The True Word*, written by Celsus (around 200), a Neoplatonic thinker, committed to the defense of Greco-Roman culture. Such an analysis gave rise to questions about the emergence of anti-Christian philosophical discourses from the end of the second century as well as the view of non-Christian philosophers on the Christian texts in circulation throughout the Empire, in view of their main categories of analysis, in such a way that it became clear that Celsus seems to be the spokesperson of a philosophical tradition that submits religion to rational criticism, as is explicitly observed in *Contra Celsum* (1.41 and 2.55).

Contrary to adopting a passive posture in the face of myths, Celsus, motivated by inquiries, tends to question the veracity of Christian myths

from the virgin birth of Jesus, the theme of the incarnation of Christ, his alleged miracles, until the supposed resurrection. From inter-discursive relations woven by both Celsus and Origen, we deal with the foundations of the controversies, with emphasis on the philosophical principles that legitimize the attacks against their opponents, and we witness the war of narratives in which they were involved.

We emphasize that Celsus, on the one hand, strives to delineate the points of contact between non-Christian mythologies – with emphasis on Egyptian, Greek, and Roman – and Christian mythologies to expose the non-original, unique, or exclusive character of Christian teachings, that is, the claim of Christian authors to the exclusivity or imparity of their narratives, for Celsus, it is unfounded and irrational, which makes Jesus bearing attributes similar to others, such as Asclepius. On the other hand, Origen strives to establish the similarities between Christian and non-Christian narratives as a way of gaining a certain credibility for emerging Christian movements in an attempt to deconstruct the non-Christian discourses that conceived them as a threat.

Thus, we hope to have aroused interest in the studies of Celsus and Origen and in the deepening of the questions briefly addressed in this article, which have only an introductory character.

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