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REPUTATIONAL CONSTRUCT OF JESUS IN CELSUS' *ALĒTHĒS LOGOS**

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Celsus' polemics against Christians and his portrayal of Jesus in *True Doctrine* have been addressed by several scholars in the past, and the standard studies are primarily those by Pierre de Labriolle, Robert L. Wilken, and John Granger Cook.[1] I do not seek in this article to replace these excellent studies, but rather to conceptualize Celsus' portrayal of Jesus as a deliberate construct of negative reputation, an approach developed by the prominent American sociologist Gary Alan Fine. I will argue that various insights stemming from the Fine's model can be helpful as an appropriate way to interpret the portrait of Jesus in Celsus' *True Doctrine*. In this perspective, his writing is not only a polemic but also a cultural object that enters into a web of social relations and the politics of memory. I perceive Celsus as a reputational entrepreneur, who tries to influence social structures and relationships. In his portrayal, he interacts with the cultural and social assumptions and perceptions of the ancient Mediterranean culture on divinity, magic, class, and status in order to delegitimize Jesus as a pitiful charlatan of a shameful origin who could not possibly be a god as Christians claim. He presents Jesus as someone that no decent and educated person should even be interested in.

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[1] De Labriolle 1948; Cook 2000; Wilken 2003.

1. Theoretical Framework: Historical Reputations

The theoretical framework for the study of negative reputations was outlined by the already mentioned American sociologist, Gary Alan Fine, in his authoritative publication *Difficult Reputations*,[2] which has already been applied in the context of the study of antiquity.[3] He defines reputation as "a socially organized persona; an organizing principle by which the actions of a person (or an organization viewed as a person) can be linked into a whole."[4] Reputation is not an opinion that individual forms about someone else, but a *shared* and *established* image of someone. In this sense, reputation is "shorthand for the way a person is conceptualized".[5] Reputation can apply to both individuals and collectives and these can be closely linked. A reputation scandal of a prominent personality who represents the organization in the social perception directly impacts the reputation of the organization as a whole and can diminish its value and credibility.

Fine divides reputations into three groups. The first group consists of unambiguous or consensual reputations, where there is a consensus on how a historical figure is conceptualized. Fine summarizes that consensually negative reputations arise when society perceives that historical figure has violated their shared canonical values.

The second group consists of reputations which are contested. These are historical reputations that are either still in the process of being formed and refined or being reassessed either by new information or by a change in social values.

The third group consists of subcultural reputations, i.e., those that vary from group to group. Some historical figures have more than one reputation depending on the groups of people who remember them. Unlike contested reputations, these are not reputations that are openly challenged in society but are merely viewed differently by different groups.

The reputation of historical figures can be based on objective facts, such as significant actions that society remembers. These significant acts tend to be remembered especially when they correspond to shared social values. However, reputation can also arise in response to the functional needs of society and can be fabricated. For example, negative reputations can serve to accentuate the boundaries of societal values.

[2] Fine 2001.

[3] Cf. e.g., Sampley 2016; Thatcher – Keith – Person – Stern 2017.

[4] Fine 2001, 2.

[5] Fine 2001, 7.

The activity of creating, preserving, protecting, or, conversely, challenging reputations is connected to *reputational entrepreneurs* as any reputation must be created through someone other than the reputation holder. Typical examples may include journalists, historians, and biographers.

Fine bases his analytical model for the study of historical reputations on the recognition of four distinct dimensions of reputation.[6] The first two belong to the realm of culture and both precede and condition any construct of historical reputation. These include historical facts related to the personality whose reputation is in question and the social and cultural world in which the historical reputation will operate. The other two dimensions belong to the realm of communication between the reputational entrepreneurs and recipients of particular reputations. Reputational entrepreneurs attempt to control the memory of historical figures through ideological agenda, narrative facility, and institutional placement.[7] However, the reputational entrepreneur must always keep in mind the other side of the communication – the addressees for whom the particular reputation is constructed. For them, such a reputation must be plausible and compelling within their own cultural context. Only a compelling reputation has the potential to establish itself in the collective memory of a particular group or the society as a whole and thus fulfil its role.

I would like to suggest that several aspects of this theoretical approach can be fruitfully applied to the portrait of Jesus in Celsus' *True Doctrine*. However, because this portrait is part of a more complex polemic that illuminates Celsus' intentions, we must begin with a discussion of *True Doctrine* and its critique of the Christians.

2. Celsus and His *True Doctrine*

The *True Doctrine* (Ἀληθὴς Λόγος) by the Greek philosopher Celsus was primarily written as a polemic with Christianity.[8] Its text has not survived and can only be reconstructed from the extensive quotations in the Origen's eight-volume response *Contra Celsum* (Κατὰ Κέλσου).[9] Eusebius states that Origen wrote a de-

[6] Fine 2001, 17–23.

[7] Fine 1996, 1159.

[8] Not everything in *True Doctrine* come across as a direct polemic. Some parts can be read as instructive or parenetic discourse, but even these were likely part of his rhetorical and polemical goals. See Reydams-Schils 2021.

[9] All the translations from Origen's *Contra Celsum* are taken from the Henry Chadwick's translation, see Chadwick 1953. A maximalist reconstruction of the Celsus' *True Doctrine* is

fense against the "false testimony" and "accusations" of Celsus towards the end of his life.[10] This was done on commission from his friend and patron, Ambrose (*Cels. praef.* 1.4). However, we do not know much about the "historical Celsus". Origen notes in the preface that Celsus is long dead (*praef.* 4), and later writes that he was an Epicurean and lived during the reign of Hadrian or sometime later (I,9). We also learn of an Epicurean Celsus from Lucian of Samosata, who dedicates to him his work *Alexander the False Prophet*, and also mentions a book against magicians written by him. Lucian situates this Celsus during the reign of Commodus.[11] Yet, Origen is not quite sure whether the Epicurean Celsus who wrote books against magic is identical with the author of *True Doctrine* (I,68). He notes that this Celsus is more sympathetic to Plato (IV,56.83, VI,1.8.47) and this claim is also often repeated by scholars, who describe him as a Middle Platonist, or an eclectic close to Platonism.[12] Wilken suggests that Origen may have invented his Epicureanism to simplify his criticism, as Epicureans were known for being atheists.[13]

However, Thonemann tones down the exaggerated skepticism of scholars distinguishing between the Epicurean Celsus and Celsus the author of *True Doctrine*. He points out that "it is characteristic of polemical works such as the Alexander or True Doctrine for the author to freely (and inconsistently) adopt whatever philosophical persona best suits his argument."[14] Instead, he emphasizes the close verbal parallels in two passages from Lucian in which he refers directly to Celsus (*Alex.* 13.60).[15] The author of *True Doctrine* would be therefore the same Celsus who flourished during the reign of Commodus. It would also seem likely that Origen was right when he claimed that Celsus "concealed" his Epicurean views (*Cels.* I,8; III,22). He might have done so in order to make his polemic compelling to a wider audience, including those sympathetic to Christians.

offered by Hoffmann 1987. A more modest reconstruction, adhering to Origen's quotations, is provided by Lona 2005. For a recent attempt to reconstruct the original structure of the *True Doctrine* on the basis of an ancient oration, see Arnold 2016.

[10] Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* VI,36.

[11] Lucian, *Alex.* 1.17.21.23.61. His work against magic was also known to Origen, who mentions it in *Cels.* I,68, but does not know whether it is written by the same Celsus. Also, Galen addressed one of his letters to a certain Epicurean Celsus (*Lib. Prop.* 19).

[12] See Chadwick 1953, xxiv–xxvi; Frede 1994, 5191–5192; Cook 2000, 17–22; Lona 2005, 27–30.

[13] Wilken 2003, 94–95. See also Bergjan 2001.

[14] Thonemann 2021, 63.

[15] Thonemann 2021, 64.

The setting of Celsus in the reign of Commodus is consistent with other information we have regarding his dating.[16] Celsus is familiar with ancient authors and figures (e.g., Epictetus in VII,53, or Marcion's and Marcellina's followers in V,62), which we can historically situate in the mid-second century.[17] Grant further points out that in addition to repeated references to the threat of capital punishment for Christians (especially I,3), Celsus mentions the *active* seeking out of Christians in persecution (VIII,69), which started only during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. This can be inferred from the fact that Trajan rejected active searches for Christians and Hadrian and Antoninus Pius did not recommend them. Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, had authorized this practice by official decree since at least the time of the persecution of Gallic Christians in 177.[18] At that time, he already reigned jointly with Commodus, to which the enigmatic reference about "*those* who now reign over us" (VIII,71) may refer, as some suggest.[19]

2.1 What Is the True Doctrine?

Celsus was a man of great cultural and religious insight. In the extant portion of the *True Doctrine,* he repeatedly refers to Plato, Herodotus, Homer, Heracleitus, Hesiod, Aristotle, Pherecydes, Empedocles, Euripides, and Pindar.[20] He is also well prepared for his attack on Christianity. He freely refers to texts of both the Old and New Testaments, as well as to some Christian apocryphal writings.[21] He was also familiar with some of the forms of early Christian Gnostic groups.[22] Surprisingly, however, he does not know or does not respond to early Christian apologists.[23] It is clear, then, that he bases his criticism not just on various

[16] See the survey of the discussion on dating in Borret 1976, 122–129; Cook 2000, 22–24; Lona 2005, 54–55.

[17] Frede 1994, 5190; similarly Borret 1976, 123.

[18] See Grant 1988, 136. This incident is recorded by the local Christians of Lyons and Vienne in a letter to the Phrygian Christian communities, cited by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V,1,4–2,8. See also Ramelli 2015, 135–136.

[19] Chadwick 1953, xxvi–xviii. For a critique of this connection, see Rosenbaum 1972; Arnold 2016, 3.

[20] Cook 2000, 24; Lona 2005, 48–50.

[21] Cf. Lona 2005, 35–36.

[22] Hoffmann 1987, 41–42.

[23] Grant 1988, 138. However, Carl Andresen argues that Celsus knew Justin Martyr's theology of history from his *Apology*. See Andresen 1955, 345–372.

hearsay, but on first-hand knowledge. This leads Horacio Lona to suggest that Celsus gained access to the texts and other information through contact with a Christian school where Christian education and open discussion took place.[24]

Celsus writes his *True Doctrine*[25] as an exposition of the true character of Christian doctrine and the source from which it derives (I,12). The title of his work comes from his conservative belief that it is necessary to defend against Christians the old and true doctrine that was known among wise men and nations throughout history:

> Between many of the nations there is an affinity in that they hold the same doctrine ... There is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginnings which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men (I,14).

Among these nations and communities, Celsus includes the Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, or Indians, as well as great sages such as Linos, Mousaios, Orpheus, Homer, Hesiod, Zoroaster, and Pythagoras.[26] The emphasis on ancient doctrine in Celsus probably stems from Plato's idea of the "golden age" of philosophers' rule (*Tim.* 21a), when people were not corrupt, society was less complicated, and the sages had immediate access to divine inspiration.[27] Although the Greeks themselves had received this old doctrine from the barbarians, they were better able to appreciate and apply it to life than the barbarians (*Cels.* I,2). But this wisdom identified with the *true doctrine* has its practical, i.e., political, dimension, which is realized in the Roman Empire, in its laws, religion, society, and government. The *true doctrine* is therefore crucial to the coherence and life of civilized society by establishing unity across the many diverse cultures and peoples of the vast empire. As Frede notes, the willingness with which Celsus acknowledges the many nations and sages who participate in the *true doctrine* undoubtedly has a political dimension that reflects the political situation.[28] It

[24] Lona 2005, 37–40. On Christian schools, see Markschies 2007, 43–109. Goodman considers the possibility that Celsus himself may have been a Christian apostate (Goodman 2021, 357–358).

[25] I distinguish between the *True Doctrine* (the title of the book) and the *true doctrine* (the doctrine).

[26] For a more detailed description, see Frede 1994, 5194–5196.

[27] More on the ancient discourse about this old doctrine, see Borret 1976, 29–33; Andresen 1955, 108–145; Frede 1994, 5196; Lona 2005, 84.

[28] Frede 1994, 5201–5202.

is from this position that Celsus conducts his critique of Christianity, viewing Christians as those who do not derive their doctrine from the ancient and *true doctrine*, and thus as a natural threat to the stability of the empire. They do not recognize the common gods, the divine order embodied in the laws of society, and above all the divine authority of the emperor. Hence, Celsus' aims to prove that the Christian doctrine is false.

2.2 Criticism of Christians

Celsus wants to convince his readers that in contrast to the proper philosophy of the *true doctrine,* Christians do not base their doctrine on reason and evidence, but on blind irrational faith and false claims about Jesus. The emphasis on belief as opposed to reason as a typical feature of Christians is stated right at the beginning of his polemic:

> some do not even want to give or to receive a reason for what they believe and use such expressions as "Do not ask questions; just believe", and "Thy faith will save thee" (I,9).

The way in which Celsus presents Christian doctrine suggests that he is not writing primarily for Christian readers whom he might wish to convince of the deceptiveness of their beliefs, since his bitter depictions of Christians would hardly be convincing for them. Yet, as Lona suggests, the addressees are likely to be educated people who have already had some contact with Christian teachers or have had some personal experience with Christians. Those approaching the Christian doctrine from the outside might have been discouraged by Celsus' treatment, and possibly those who already were sympathetic to the new faith might be brought back to the *true doctrine*.[29] It is clear from Origen's preface, however, that Celsus' book was known among Christians and made some of them question their faith (*praef*. 4).

Celsus' criticism of Christians is mostly severe and seeks to create a negative impression of Christians as a dubious secret group of uneducated frauds.[30] For example, he claims that some Christians say:

[29] Lona 2005, 52–54.

[30] On the matter of secrecy, see L. Alexander 2021, 258–263.

> Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly (III,44).

He accuses Christian teachers of being like other charlatans, parasitic on the ignorance of the gullible (I,9). They persuade young men, slaves, and the foolish by their dubious tricks in the marketplaces (III,50), and secretly in private houses when they find themselves alone with children or "foolish women". In doing so, they are said to avoid contact with educated people and instead subtly persuade the uneducated to disobey their elders and learned (III,55). He sums up the activity of these teachers with the parable:

> The man who teaches the doctrines of Christianity is like a man who promises to restore bodies to health but turns his patients away from attending to expert physicians because his lack of training would be shown up by them (III,75).

At times, Celsus' presentation of Christians turns into open mockery, which no doubt served his purpose of showing the arbitrariness of their doctrine:

> And everywhere they speak in their writings of the tree of life and of resurrection of the flesh by the tree – I imagine because their master was nailed to a cross and was a carpenter by trade. So that if he had happened to be thrown off a cliff, or pushed into a pit, or suffocated by strangling, or if he had been a cobbler or stonemason or blacksmith, there would have been a cliff of life above the heavens, or a pit of resurrection, or a rope of immortality, or a blessed stone, or an iron of love, or a holy hide of leather (VI,34).

He also reproaches Christians for associating with persons of the worst reputation, when, besides the foolish and gullible, they attract criminals, to whom they offer remission of their sins (III,59).

Celsus goes on to liken Christians to various notoriously dubious groups in Greco-Roman society that might have aroused negative prejudices in his audience – for example, the begging priests of the Great Mother Cybele, the soothsayers and servants of Mithras and Sabazius, the worshippers of Hecate or other "demons" (I,9). Also, he likens them to forbidden Bacchic cults (II,34; III,16; IV,10).

According to Celsus, the reason why Christians appeal only to the unwise and wicked is that their teachers are themselves very uneducated and rustic (III,55). This, according to him, is the reason that they are wrong on many basic issues because they do not understand them, which he illustrates by comparing the

content of Christian doctrine with the teachings of the Greek philosophers, who better expressed *true doctrine* without claiming its divine origin (V,65; VI,1).[31] Therefore, he sees the Christian doctrine as very unoriginal in many of its claims, and accuses Christians of clumsily adopting the teachings of others. This leads him to fundamental reservations about their theology. Moreover, he shows that in those points in which Christians are different, their explanations are false.

Among his many criticisms, his critique of the Christian idea of god and the worship of lesser deities plays an important role. The fact that Christians reject a hierarchy of lesser deities is something Celsus would be willing to understand theoretically, but even this is not true of Christians, because they are not consistent in their monotheism as

> they worship to an extravagant degree this man who appeared recently and yet think it is not inconsistent with monotheism if they also worship his servant ... when they call him son of god, it is not because they are paying very great reverence to god, but because they are exalting Jesus greatly (VIII,12.14).

Celsus claims that Christians place Jesus above god himself (VIII,15). However, the hierarchy of deities is a divinely ordered structure corresponding to the divine order of providence (VII,68).[32] This hierarchy has its representation in the political order of society, and if Christians reject the lesser deities, this can cause disfavor of these deities toward them, which in turn can threaten society (VIII,35). It is the political implications of the Christian doctrine that Celsus sees as an important threat when he points out the potential consequences:

> For, if you overthrow this doctrine,[33] it is probable that the emperor will punish you. If everyone were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent him from being abandoned, alone and deserted, while earthly things would come into the power of the most lawless and savage barbarians, and nothing more would be heard among men either of your worship or of the true wisdom (VIII,68).

[31] For instance, he argues this about the idea of the highest good (VI,4–5), the creation of the world (VI,49–50), and conception of immortality (VII,28).

[32] For Celsus' conception of god, see Andresen 1955, 93–96; Frede 1994, 5206–5208; Cook 2000, 100–101; Boys-Stones 2021.

[33] By this doctrine, he means Homer's famous political rule (*Il.* II,205): "Let there be one lord, one king, to whom the son of crooked-counselling Cronos hath vouchsafed the scepter and judgments, that he may take counsel for his people" (trans. A. T. Murray, LCL 170).

Belief in one supreme god (whatever one calls him, see V,41) corresponds in the political system to allegiance to the emperor. Celsus finds in Jesus' statement "No one can serve two masters" (*Matt*. 6:24) the essence of the problem, namely that Christians serve Jesus and not the emperor. Thus, they are alienating and separating themselves from the whole of human society (VIII,2). Wilken notices a similar accusation already in Tacitus, who explains that the persecution of Christians is motivated for their "hatred of the human race" (lat. *odio humani generis*).[34] Janssen shows how this accusation was related to the belief that Christians were hostile to the *res publica Romana*.[35]

Here also lies Celsus' problem with Christians' unfaithfulness to the *true doctrine*. He sees the Christian doctrine to be inherently disruptive, rebellious, and opposed to the order of Roman society. He describes the Christian doctrine as the result of a twofold apostasy from the *true doctrine*. Origen summarizes this as follows:

> Celsus imagines that the Jews were Egyptian by race, and left Egypt after revolting against the Egyptian community (στασιάσαντας πρὸς τὸ κοινὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων) and despising the religious customs of Egypt. He says that what they did to the Egyptians they suffered in turn through those who followed Jesus and believed him to be the Christ; in both instances a revolt against the community (στασιάζειν πρὸς τὸ κοινόν) led to the introduction of new ideas (III,5).

If Christianity has its origin in a double rebellion (στάσις) against the established order (κοινός), it is not surprising that this is, according to Celsus, its essential quality:

> In the beginning there were only a few of them and they were of one mind. But as their numbers increased, they began to divide and split again, and each wanted to have his own independent position. This they sought from the very beginning (III,10).

Thus, the apostasy does not end with Jesus, but continues, even to the point that "they only have one thing still in common, so to speak, if indeed they have that – the name" (III,12).

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[34] Tacitus, *Ann*. XV,44. See Wilken 2003, 118. The same accusations had been made against the Jews before by Hecataeus of Abdera, Menetho, or Diodorus Siculus, cf. Schäfer 1998, 163–179.

[35] Janssen 1979, 154–155. See also Ramelli 2015, 133–135.

Celsus knew about several Christian – mainly Gnostic – groups and thus his claim, though with some exaggeration, is based on experience (V,60–62). The reason for this division, however, according to him, is the foundation on which Christianity stands, namely *rebellion* (στάσις, III,14). In this context, Arnaldo Momigliano[36] refers to the Roman political wisdom that Cassius Dio puts in the mouth of Maecenas, the advisor of the emperor Augustus:

> Do you not only yourself worship the Divine Power everywhere and in every way in accordance with the traditions of our fathers but compel (ἀνάγκαζε) all others to honor it. Those who attempt to distort our religion with strange rites you should abhor and punish, not merely for the sake of the gods (since if a man despises these, he will not pay honor to any other being), but because such men, by bringing in new divinities in place of the old, persuade many to adopt foreign practices, from which spring up conspiracies, factions, and cabals, which are far from profitable to the monarchy (*Hist. Rom*. LII,36; trans. E. Cary, LCL 83).

Christians are thus seen by Celsus as a dangerous element disrupting the stability and cohesion of the Roman *societas*. Celsus regards Christianity as a disrupting element of the traditional hierarchy of society, nature, and morality. Therefore they are a dangerous foreign superstition posing a threat to the Roman Empire.[37] The practical consequence of these attitudes is that they jeopardize the prosperity of the whole by refusing to pay homage to gods, daimons and kings (*Cels.* VIII,55–67),[38] while at the same time by not participating in the laws in the broad sense they isolate themselves from society, do not serve the empire in maintaining justice and protection against enemies by serving in the army, and do not participate in the governance of the state (VIII,72.73.75). In the Roman Empire, the relationship between the sacred, religious, and political was closely intertwined, and Christians rebelled against these ties.[39] A few decades

[36] Momigliano 1986, 287–288.

[37] As Seneca aptly describes: "Religion does honor to the gods, while superstition wrongs them (*religio deos colit, superstitio violat*)" (*De Clem.* II,5,1, trans. J. W. Basore, LCL 214). See Benko 1980, 1107–1108; Martin 2004, 130–135.

[38] This is parodied by Tertullian in his *Apologeticus*, where he describes, "they take the Christians to be the cause of every disaster to the State, of every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!'" (*Apol*. 15,1–2; trans. T. R. Glover, LCL 250).

[39] Lanfranchi 2014.

before Celsus, Aristides expressed his belief in the superiority of the political establishment of the Roman Empire to all earlier powers and kingdoms in his speech *On Rome* (Εἰς Ῥώμην). He justifies this by the harmonious organization of public affairs, beginning with a just emperor, actively involved people in offices and institutions, to the army ensuring peace and order (§28–39.107). For the benefit of the empire, everyone must be obedient and participate in the collective harmony of the whole world, which, thanks to the divine providence of Rome, is one family (§102).[40] Christians function in such a system as disruptors and the undesirable element, just as Celsus describes them in his critique. Instead of living together in harmony and participating in the common good, they do the opposite – they disintegrate the empire from within.

3. Celsus' Jew and Celsus' Jesus

Having outlined some aspects of Celsus' critique of Christianity, we can now return to his presentation of the person of Jesus. Celsus presents Jesus through the polemics of an anonymous Jew who accuses him of many fabrications, deceptions, and misinterpretations of Jewish prophecies. Scholars argue over whether Celsus in this section is actually based on a non-extant polemical text by a Jewish author, or whether this Jew is a fictional character, as Origen already thought (I,28.32.71).[41] Origen argues that if he was a real Jew who knew the Bible, he would in fact use better arguments (I,34.49; II,28) and not cite illustrations exclusively from Greek mythology. For this reason, Origen ironically refers to him as φιλομαθής τις Ἕλλην (I,67).[42] On the other hand, as several scholars have convincingly demonstrated, even if Celsus fabricated the Jew, he was undoubtedly drawing on some knowledge of Jewish tradition, including

[40] For the text see Oliver 1953.

[41] Maren Niehoff, for example, argues that Celsus here relies on a written polemic by an Alexandrian Jew writing after the Jewish revolt of the early 2nd century CE. See Niehoff 2013; similarly Carleton Paget 2017; P. Alexander 2021. Other scholars, however, tend to see the Jew as a literary fiction, see, e.g., Cook 2000, 27; Lona 2005, 172–177; Arnold 2016, 214–220, 341–364. Assessing the authenticity of this Jew may also be related to our assumptions about the degree of creativity of Celsus as an author. That is, whether he might have been able to create such a persona, or whether he must have incorporated another source.

[42] However, Niehoff points out that Origen's ironization of the Jew and his attempt to prove that he was not a real Jew but a failed literary fiction may have served his own rhetorical interests (Niehoff 2013, 158–159).

the polemical one against Christians.[43] This seems probable also in view of the fact that Celsus' Jew differs from the views stated by Celsus himself in several places.[44] However, even the individual pieces of information given by the Jew are not without contradictions, which indicates more than one source.[45] Celsus' dependence on some Jewish anti-Christian sources (oral or written) seems likely, given his considerable knowledge of both Judaism and Christianity. Although I am rather skeptical about the possibility of recovering such sources.

To understand the function of Celsus' Jew, it is important to see what frames this section. The introduction of Celsus' Jew is preceded by the theme of the apostasy of Moses' followers from the Egyptians and the ancient true doctrine, and by the apostasy of Jesus' followers from the Jews (I,27). This accords with his stated aim of instructing Christians about "the source from which they came" (I,12). The third book then begins with Celsus' assessment of the foolish quarrels between Christians and Jews (III,1), which I think, the addresses of the Jew perfectly illustrate.[46] Alexander notes that Celsus' philosophy of religion assumes that every religion relates to a particular nation and its people (V,25). However, since Christianity is not associated with any particular nation, they must be viewed as a form Judaism, from which they have apostatized.[47] This recognition, then, most likely led Celsus to the vexing relationship between Jews and Christians. As Arnold suggests, the utilization of the Jew enabled Celsus to conduct a direct and indiscriminate *ad hominem* criticism against Jesus without being directly connected with it. By doing so, Celsus convinces his readers that he has first-hand knowledge of the "foolish quarrels" between Jews and followers of Jesus (III,1), through which he demonstrates the unphilosophical and

[43] See Lods 1941; Blumell 2007. The closest parallels to the traditions of Celsus' Jew come from late Jewish texts such as Talmud, Tosefta or *Toledot Yeshu*. However, as Alexander points out, at least the tradition of Jesus' father named Panthera is ancient and Jewish (P. Alexander 2021, 332–333, 340). See also Carleton Paget 2017, 213–217, 219–221.

[44] Most apparently in the question of the resurrection, compare II,77 and V,14. Cf. Bammel 1997.

[45] For these contradictions, see Carleton Paget 2017, 221–223.

[46] Celsus characterizes their dispute as about "the shadow of an ass" (III,1), which undoubtedly implies his very low assessment of the nature of the dispute. Elsewhere, he caricatures them as clusters of bats, ants, frogs, or worms gathering in a filthy corner to bicker (IV,23). Also notable is the claim, not directly based on the Gospels, that Jesus was killed by the Jews (II,9), which on the one hand again devalues Jesus' divine claim, and on the other hand shows the barbaric nature of their conflict.

[47] P. Alexander 2021, 346–350.

lowly nature of both these groups.[48] The practice of *prosopopoeia* (or *ethopoeia*) serves this function very well. As Aelius Theon describes in his *Progymnasmata*, when engages in *prosopopoeia*,

> one should have in mind *what the personality of the speaker is like*, and *to whom the speech is addressed* (...) Different ways of speaking would also be fitting by nature for a woman and for a man, and by status for a slave and a free man, and by activities for a soldier and a farmer (...) and surely, each subject has its appropriate form of expression (*Progym*. 115–116).[49]

In the application of *prosopopoeia*, the author is supposed to start from the perception of the personality of both the speaker and the addressees and adapt the speech to their nature. I find Arnold's observation convincing, especially when we consider the difference between the *ad hominem* attack in the predominantly 2nd person singular of Celsus' Jew and Celsus' philosophical polemic in the rest of *True Doctrine*.[50] While in the rest of *True Doctrine* Celsus polemicizes with Christian doctrine, which he regards as philosophy – albeit poor and false – a personal controversy over fabricated biographical data with the son of a destitute infidel spinner and a Roman soldier was certainly unworthy of his status and education.[51] Similarly, in the second book, Celsus' Jew appeals to the false Jewish origins of Christianity. While this section can be seen as a polemic against the Jewish-Christians, I believe it should rather be seen in the context of Celsus' philosophy of religion as described by Alexander. That is, as a polemic against Christians over Jesus' claims to divinity, which Celsus understands as a revolt against Judaism. In that sense, it is a natural continuation of the polemic from the first book, both in form and content.

As suggested in the introduction, I argue that this "portrait of Jesus" can be fruitfully seen as an attempt to establish the "true" narrative of his life in

[48] Arnold 2016, 342–343. In considering the reputation of the Jews and their rebellious nature, it must also be borne in mind that in the last decades before Celsus, the Jews led a total of three revolts against Rome.

[49] Translation from Kennedy 2003, 47–48. Italics added.

[50] While the style is different, there are many topical parallels between the polemic of the Jew and Celsus in the rest of *True Doctrine*, see Arnold 2016, 342–364. Celsus' Jew is also prominently concerned with Jesus' biography, not teaching.

[51] Origen also regards this form of criticism of Jesus as "nothing worthy of a philosopher's grey hairs" (I,28).

the collective memory of his addressees.[52] Using an exemplary quarrel between Jew and Jesus and his followers, Celsus sought to shape Jesus' reputation in the milieu of the Roman Empire. The portrait of Jesus that emerges in this way is especially remarkable when contrasted with the societal values of educated Greco-Roman society.

Celsus' *True Doctrine* is, most likely, directed primarily at the more educated strata of mainstream non-Christian society. Thus, in the Fine's classification, his profile of Jesus is best grasped as a construct of *subcultural* reputation. However, as Lona points out, at least some of the addressees Celsus had in mind may have had some experience with Christians and their teaching,[53] and thus, to some extent, this construct can also be seen as an attempt to *challenge* Jesus' reputation among his followers or sympathizers. Fine suggests that negative reputations can serve to draw boundaries in society and to isolate phenomena that are considered dangerous or destructive.[54] It is clear from the description of Celsus' criticism that he considers Christians a serious threat. By constructing a negative reputation of Jesus, Celsus was thus able to effectively draw the boundaries of acceptable beliefs, among which Christians do not belong. Celsus' Jesus in not the son of god as Christians claim, but a poor insignificant villager of doubtful origin and a fraud with whom no decent and virtuous person would like to have anything to do. And Celsus no doubt hoped that such a portrait would effectively dissuade any respectable and virtuous person from doubtful Christianity.

Celsus through his Jew emphasizes that he will speak of Jesus only within the limits of what his disciples wrote down in the Gospels, despite the fact that, he could "say much about what happened to Jesus which is true, and nothing like the account which has been written by the disciples of Jesus" (II,13).[55] This might suggest that among his implied audience there were indeed sympathizers of Christian doctrine, for whom he can gain certain credibility by this delineation. As Fine points out in the first dimension of his analytical model, the use of a shared body of historical information is a key prerequisite for the persuasiveness of any reputation. Although Celsus could portray the "true Jesus"

[52] Lona shows that Celsus' portrait of Jesus can be meaningfully conceptualized as a biography in a form of *vituperatio* as he progresses sequentially from a description of Jesus' origins to his ministry and death (Lona 2005, 173–175).

[53] Lona 2005, 52–54.

[54] Fine 2001, 8.

[55] See also Celsus' boasting that he knows everything about Christian doctrine in I,12.

from other sources, this would likely make his reputational construct less credible to potential readers and listeners. On the other hand, this declaration may also serve to gain more credibility for his non-Christian readers, who would be informed of his deliberate strategy of exposing the historical truth about Jesus from the pious fables of his disciples. And by this, he convicts his Christian opponents of their fabrications and lies (II,26), because he claims that the real Jesus was "a mere man ... as the truth itself makes obvious and as reason shows" (II,79). It is thus a strategy that may earn him some sympathy from both listeners sympathetic to the Jesus as well as those indifferent to him. What both of these potential audiences have in common is a shared social and cultural world of Hellenism, the institutions of the Roman Empire, and cultural values and traditions. It is these values that Celsus repeatedly appeals to and conducts his polemic from within this perspective. Origen hopelessly accuses Celsus of a lack of understanding of the matter from a Christian perspective. This is, however, not Celsus' concern; his aim is to present how nonsensical the doctrine sounds from the perspective of his social and cultural world.

3.1 The Origin of Jesus

Celsus finds the idea of incarnation scandalous.[56] It is therefore not surprising that Celsus, through the Jew, accuses Jesus of fabricating (πλασαμένου) the story of his virgin birth (I,28). He writes that maybe if his mother had been beautiful, or rich, or noble, perhaps god would have had intercourse with her, though nature prevents him from loving a perishable body (I,39). But this was not the case with Jesus' mother, who was a common woman from a Jewish village spinning wool for a living (I,28). Not only her village origin but, as Lona points out, the manual activity of the poor "spinner" (χερνῆτις) accentuates her lowly origins.[57] This is related to the idea of social stratification in the Roman Empire, in which individual offices were measured by traditional criteria of descent, wealth and excellence. Consequently, different deeds and lifestyles were expected of representatives of each social class. If the mother of Jesus is described as a nameless, poor woman working with her hands, this is a profile

[56] See *Cels.* IV,2.3.6.14.

[57] Lona 2005, 98. Aristotle denotes χερνητικός as those who have so little fortune that they cannot indulge in leisure (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1291b25–26). Susan Treggiari considers spinning to be the last resort for poor women who did not want to work in prostitution (Treggiari 1979, 68–69). On women's manual labor in the Roman Empire see Eichenauer 1988.

of a person of low status that does not provide the conditions for great deeds, however virtuously she might have lived.

Instead of the supernatural origin invented by Jesus, Celsus' Jew narrates a completely different story:

> She was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery ... after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way, she secretly gave birth to Jesus (I,28).

A little further, he adds that "she had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera" (I,32).[58] The mother of Jesus, then, was not only of low status, but was not even virtuous. Celsus may have based this narration on some hints in the Gospels such as *Mark* 6:3 or *John* 8:41.[59] However, it is likely that he is drawing on some Jewish polemical tradition here, since the mention of Jesus' father Panthera is well known in Jewish sources.[60] The reference to a secret (σκότιον) birth underscores the illegitimacy of such a child.[61] The fact that Jesus' mother was unfaithful to her husband is one of the greatest offenses in terms of cultural values of the time, because she puts her relatives to shame by her actions.[62] The infidelity of a woman (especially one of lower social status) was constitutive of her public image and was associated with the worst stereotypes.[63] Susan Treggiari demonstrates that a woman's adultery had the worst reputational impact on her children.[64]

Celsus, through his Jew, further mentions that while also Greeks have their myths about the divine origin of certain heroes (Perseus, Amphion, Aiakos, Minos), these are at least told credibly, even if Jews (as Celsus' Jew claims) do not believe them (I,67). The story of Jesus' virgin birth is therefore both fictious and unconvincing as "the body of a god could not have been begotten in the manner in which you, Jesus, were begotten" (I,69). Gods do not come

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[58] On Panthera, see Cook 2021.

[59] Cf. also Tertullian, *De spect.* 30,6; *Acts Pil.* 2:3–6; *Prot. Jas.* 11–16.

[60] Cf. Lods 1941; Norelli 1998; Schäfer 2007, 15–24.

[61] Lona 2005, 99, referring to Homer, *Il.* VI,24; Plutarch, *De Iside*, 366c. See also *LSJ*, 1615, *s. v.* σκότιος: "παῖς σκότιος, *bastard*".

[62] Female fidelity as a virtue is strongly and often emphasized on Roman epitaphs, see Knapp 2011, 50–79.

[63] See e.g., Seneca, *Contr.* I,2; Ovid, *Am.* II,2,50, and especially Juvenal's satire *On Female Depravity* (Juvenal, *Sat*. 6). For more, see Lendon 2011; Treggiari 1991, 311–319.

[64] Treggiari 1991, 312.

from fornication, but neither do they have a human body like Jesus had. Celsus takes Jesus' "humanity" as further evidence that he could not have been a god. The gods do not eat food as Jesus did (I,70), including drinking vinegar and gall (II,37). Also, his blood was quite ordinary, and not like the divine ichor flowing in the veins of the blessed gods (I,66; II,36),[65] and his voice with which he spoke and persuaded people was also quite ungodly (I,70). Jesus' humanity thus contradicts the generally accepted assumption about gods from myths and philosophy to which Celsus appeals.

Celsus' Jew also considers the story of Herod's massacre of the infants as another of Jesus' fabrications. Here he asks, "why also when you were still an infant did you have to be taken away to Egypt lest you should be murdered? It is not likely that a god would be afraid of death" (I,66). Celsus also rejects Jesus' genealogy, in which his lineage is inferred both from the first man and the kings of the Jews. Pointing to the low origin of Jesus' mother, he doubts that the carpenter's wife could know anything about her genealogy (II,32).

A person's origin tells quite a bit about him. That is why ancient biographies began with a description of the hero's origins. As we see, Celsus, through the mouth of a Jew, tries to show that Jesus' origins are quite shameful.

3.2 The Ministry of Jesus

Celsus, through the Jew, frames the beginning of Jesus' ministry with a remarkable elaboration of the motif of the flight into Egypt (*Matt*. 2:13–23):

> Because he (Jesus) was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of god (*Cels.* I,28).

First of all, we see the recurring motif of poverty and manual labor, which was characteristic not only for the livelihood of Jesus' mother, but also for Jesus himself. It thus emphasizes both the low origin and the low status, which he

[65] Homer, *Il.* V,340: "Forth flowed the immortal blood of the goddess, the ichor, such as flowed in the blessed gods; for they eat not bread neither drink flaming wine, wherefore they are bloodless, and are called immortals" (trans. A. T. Murray, LCL 170).

takes over from his mother.[66] More important, however, is the idea that Jesus learned magical practice in Egypt, which he further elaborates when he likens Jesus' miracles to

> the works of sorcerers (τὰ ἔργα τῶν γοήτων) who profess to do wonderful miracles, and the accomplishments of those who are taught by the Egyptians who for a few obols make known their sacred lore in the middle of the market-place and drive daemons out of men and blow away diseases and invoke the souls of heroes ... and who make things move as though they were alive although they are not really so, but only appear as such in the imagination (I,68).

According to Celsus' Jew, Jesus is not a god, but a deceiver, charlatan, and sorcerer (γόης).[67] In this case, too, he may have been drawing on the Gospels, in which Jesus is identified by his opponents as demon-possessed (*Mark* 3:20–35; *John* 7:20, 8:48, 10:20).[68] However, the key framework is the concept of magic and magicians in Greek and Roman society. Magic was one of the phenomena generally known and widespread throughout the empire, but the relationship of individual people and social classes to it varied greatly. Magicians, sorcerers, healers, or exorcists are all different terms for individuals[69] who offered specialized services to the general public, which gave them a certain popularity and social prestige. The popularity of magicians was great, especially among the common people, but also among the rich and powerful, to whom they offered all sorts of services in return for money. They provided amulets, healing magic formulas and potions, incantations or spells against someone, or, conversely, spells that produced charming effects (to win someone's affection), or for their own benefit and prosperity.[70] Magicians were also known to communicate with the realm of demons, spirits and gods and to prepare all sorts of rituals. Also, their activities

[66] E.g., Seneca writes that the poor was incapable of any virtue besides that of enduring poverty (*De beat. vit.* 22).

[67] As mentioned in the introduction, Celsus was probably also the author of a book against magicians (*Cels.* I,68 and Lucian, *Alex.* 21). This interest may have led him to the figure of Jesus, or at least influenced his argument.

[68] Cf. Smith 1978, 21–44.

[69] On the terms μάγος, γόης, and μαγεία and their development, see Graf 1996, 24–57; Bremmer 2008.

[70] Various cases of magical "healing" practices are mentioned by Pliny, *Natur. hist.* XXVIII, 11–13; cases of harmful magic are mentioned in *Natur. hist.* VII,2.

have at times attracted unwanted attention from political authorities, including repeated persecution, banishment from cities, and even the death penalty.[71]

However, it is the perception of magic and magicians in the Roman Empire that is crucial to our analysis, not their practice. This perception varied among people. Pliny the Elder, for example, refers to the general popularity of magic when he laments the almost universal belief in the various magical healing powers of plants and other practices and rituals (*Natur. hist.* XXVIII,1). In contrast to this stands the skepticism of some intellectuals, who regarded magic as a deceitful effort by con artists to make money at the expense of gullible and simple people. Lucian ridicules this credulity in his satires *The Lover of Lies* and *Alexander the False Prophet*, in which, however, he caricatures not only common people but also learned philosophers. Tychiades, on his return from the learned Eucrates, evaluates the fantastic fables he has heard as follows:

> There you have it, Philocles! After hearing all that at the house of Eucrates, I am going about like a man who has drunk sweet must, with a swollen belly, craving an emetic (*Philops.* 39, trans. A. M. Harmon, LCL 130).[72]

Magicians and charlatans were rewarding subjects for satires and stories not only for Lucian. Apuleius, in his *Metamorphoses*, gives the story of a certain Chaldean named Diophanes, who made great money out of people by his frauds, but at one point, when he was distracted by a young man, he mistakenly confessed to his cheating (*Metam.* II,13–14). Similarly, Pliny the Elder, who generally regards magicians as propagators of terrible lies (*Natur. hist.* XIX,26), tells how the emperor Nero dabbled in magic, and how he finally saw that it was nothing but lies and deception (*Natur. hist.* XXX,5–6). Philostratos describes the episode when his hero Apollonius of Tyana saves the inhabitants of Hellespont from the deception of the Egyptians and Chaldeans who want to use their misfortune in an earthquake to enrich themselves (*Vit. Apoll.* VI,41). These stories are only small examples of the way magic and magicians were perceived in the Roman Empire. As Kimberly Stratton demonstrates, in the time of the Second Sophistic, a functional discourse

[71] See, for example, the expulsion of magicians and astrologers from Rome by Agrippa in 33 BC (Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* XLIX,43), or the episode of the attempted coup of Marcus Scribonius Libo Drusus, after which the magicians were expelled and some even executed (Tacitus, *Ann.* II,32; Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* LVI,25; LVII,15). Cf. Dickie 2001, 186, 191–192.

[72] Pliny the Elder notes that those philosophers who read the works of Democritus admiringly cannot bear that the same Democritus was the author of the magical books, and so they deny his authorship (*Natur. hist.* XXX,2).

of μάγοι and γόητες as synonyms for impostors gradually emerges. This label is used for any opponents seeking a stake in the social structure of power.[73] Even before her, Peter Brown had shown that in early Christian polemics with pagan opponents, the accusation of magic served primarily to control power in society. Those in power used their opponents' association with magic to delegitimize them.[74] Associated with this label was a set of stereotypes such as willingness to commit any kind of fraud and immorality for profit; foreign (mostly "oriental") origin associated with bringing in undesirable foreign influences; no respect for the human body, which stemmed from the magicians' need to secure ingredients, including some organs and parts of the human body; impurity stemming from the failure to distinguish between good and bad magic and a general association with occult power; irrationality, and criminality. Richard Gordon sees the concept of magic and the discourse associated with it in the Roman Empire as a summation of everything different from experienced customs and traditions. The sorcerer and charlatan, according to Gordon, is the term for *the transgressive other*.[75] In this sense, the person marked with the label μάγος/γόης is the embodiment of the inversion of shared social values. The linking of this pejorative label with the explicit emphasis on the Egyptian origin of Jesus' witchcraft (γοητεία) further emphasizes the already mentioned stereotype of an alien and therefore unwanted influence. Matthew Dickie convincingly shows that by the first century BCE, the Egyptian temples had replaced Persia and Babylon as the home of magic in the general perception of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean.[76] Thus, at this time it was believed that if one learned anything in Egypt, it was probably magic. This reputation was spread by Egypt's wandering sorcerers, diviners, and healers throughout the Mediterranean, and already Cicero regarded magic as an "Egyptian madness" (*De nat. deor.* I,16). Lucian, in his *Lover of Lies,* tells of the famous Egyptian magician and scholar Pankratus, who could animate objects to perform human actions (*Philops.* 33). Or about a certain Pythagorean Arignoth, who drove a sinister demon out of his house by means of Egyptian books and incantations (*Philops.* 29–31). Similarly, Apuleius writes of Zatchlas, a leading Egyptian prophet, who raised a young man to testify to the circumstances of his death (*Metam.* II,28–30).[77]

[73] Stratton 2007, 108–141.

[74] Brown 1970.

[75] Gordon 1999.

[76] Dickie 2001, 196.

[77] Cf. Bremmer 2017, 198–202.

Thus, when Celsus' Jew refers to Jesus as a sorcerer and charlatan who learned the art in Egypt, it is by no means a neutral designation, but rather an intentional attempt of placing his activities within the generally understood cultural frameworks and negative stereotypes associated with such designation.[78] Magicians were seen as amoral, anti-state, unholy elements whose activities were considered ridiculous, dangerous and dishonest by many people. Celsus does not make the theological distinction between "pagan" magic and "Christian" miracles that would later be important to apologists. Therefore, he also naturally posits the question: should we also consider other magicians, if they perform the same acts as Jesus – i.e., healing, casting out demons, selling sacred knowledge – "sons of god"? Or is it more likely to conclude that all these are the deeds of evil, demon-possessed people? (*Cels*. I,68). Celsus admits that the stories Christians tell about Jesus' miracles could be true. However, such deeds, according to Celsus, do not testify to Jesus' divine power as these are usually done by magicians, not gods. On the contrary, he notes that Jesus himself foresaw that his followers would be joined by others performing similar miracles to his. These "malefactors and charlatans" (κακοὶ καὶ γόητες) are, however, according to Jesus, coming from Satan.[79] Celsus thus points out Jesus' hypocrisy:

> Nevertheless, being compelled by the truth, he both reveals the deeds of others and proves his own to be wrong. Is it not a miserable argument to infer from the same works that he is a god while they are sorcerers (γόητας)? Why should we conclude from these works that the others were any more wicked than this fellow, taking the witness (μάρτυρι) of Jesus himself? (II,49).

Jesus is, therefore, a liar and deceiver by origin and action, and therefore his testimony (μαρτύρια) is worthless. Another troubling issue of Jesus' ministry that Celsus mentions are his followers:

> Jesus collected round him ten or eleven infamous men, the most wicked tax-collectors and sailors and with these fled hither and thither, collecting a means of livelihood in a disgraceful and importunate way (I,62).

[78] Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 69,7, and Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* I,43 deal with similar criticisms.

[79] This probably refers to texts like *Mark* 13:22 and *Matt*. 24:23–24.

Despite the fame that Jesus' disciples enjoyed among Christians, Celsus neither names them nor gives their exact number, though he seems to have the Twelve in mind. He probably takes the occupations of tax-collectors (τελώνας) and sailors (ναύτας) from the Gospels, which mention tax-collector Matthew (*Matt.* 9:9), or Levi (*Mark* 2:14), and the fishermen (ἁλεεῖς) Simon and Andrew (*Mark* 1:16–20). Publicans and tax collectors (τελώνης) had a bad reputation, chiefly because they were said to collect more money than they had to and to take the profits for themselves.[80] Cicero, for example, states:

> Now in regard to trades and other means of livelihood, which ones are to be considered becoming to a gentleman and which ones are vulgar, we have been taught, in general, as follows. First, those means of livelihood are rejected as undesirable which incur people's ill-will, as those of tax-gatherers and usurers (*Off.* I,42 §150; trans. W. Miller, LCL 21).

The reputation of the sailors into whom Celsus maliciously transforms the Galilean fishermen was no better. They were stereotypically associated with pleasures, prostitution, and corruption.[81] According to Celsus, however, they were not just any sailors and tax-collectors, but the *worst of them* (τοὺς πονηροτάτους), and, in *Cels.* II,46, he describes them as people of "the most doubtful character". With this "band of vagabonds", Jesus secretly fled from place to place, earning his livelihood with "shame and toil" (αἰσχρῶς καὶ γλίσχρως). Their whole existence is depicted as doubtful. This is by no means the life of the king, who Jesus believed himself to be, but rather of one who "go about begging so disgracefully, cowering from fear, and wandering up and down in destitution" (I,61). This image of Jesus and his group may be remotely based on the stories of Jesus sending the Twelve out without money or sustenance (*Mark* 6:7–11), and the story of the plucking of the ears of grain on the Sabbath (*Mark* 2:23).[82] Celsus, however, cherry-picks only some aspects from these stories to create

[80] Cf. Cicero, *Pro. Rab. Post.* 11,31–32; Dio Chrysostomos, *Orat.* 14,14. This reputation was probably so widespread that an honest tax collector was so rare that a certain Sabinus had a statue erected with the inscription ΚΑΛΩΣ ΤΕΛΩΝΗΣΑΝΤΙ ("to an honest tax collector", see Suetonius, *Vesp.* 1).

[81] Plutarch, *De tuen. sanit.* 25. Cicero, for example, regards the Carthaginians as amoral because of the abundance of their ports and the unrestrained life it entails (*De lege agr.* 2,95). See also Wade 2014. On the underclass leisure culture in ancient Mediterranean port cities and the integral role of sailors in it see Rauh – Dillon – Davina-McClain 2008.

[82] Cook 2000, 35; Lona 2005, 113.

an unflattering picture of Jesus and "his band". This picture of Jesus' disciples thus complements Celsus' picture of Jesus belonging to the lowest levels of society.

The overall impression is reinforced by the fact that exactly this kind of suspicious individuals betrayed Jesus:

> No good general who led many thousands was ever betrayed, nor was any wicked robber-chieftain, who was captain of very bad men, while he appeared to bring some advantage to his associates (*Cels.* II,12).

Jesus could lead his disciples neither as a good leader through authority and honor, nor as a leader of robbers through profit and gain. This betrayal only underscores the bad reputation of both Jesus and his disciples.[83] In the case of his disciples, Celsus' Jew claims that after Jesus' death they "invented the statement that Jesus foreknew and foretold all that happened to him" (II,13), which was to cover their shame at being deceived by Jesus (II,44). However, the whole idea that Jesus knew in advance of his death is, according to Celsus, ridiculous and completely untrustworthy. If Jesus knew about it, why would he not have prevented it? If in his lifetime he predicted that one disciple would deny him and another would betray him, why did these disciples not fear him as a god enough to deny and betray him? But if we grant that Jesus foretold this as a god, and thus it must have been fulfilled, does this mean that he led his own disciples astray so that they would betray him and thus be sinful and wicked? This means that Jesus behaved either like an evil friend or an evil god (II,16–20). Celsus, then, argues that this is a completely unconvincing story that his disciples made up in order to deceive other people for their own benefit (II,55). Despite this tragic and unconvincing account of Jesus, Celsus sees a remarkable paradox in the behavior of the Christian followers of his generation:

> When those who were living with him at the time, who heard him speak and were taught by him, saw that he was being punished and was dying, they did not die with him, or for his sake, nor were they persuaded to despise punishments. But they even denied that they were disciples. Yet now you die with him (II,45).

In a similar way, Celsus finds it utterly nonsensical that while Jesus convinced almost no one during his lifetime, Christians now convince many (II,46).

[83] Lona 2005, 130.

3.3 The Death of Jesus

Celsus also focused his criticism on the death of Jesus. Just as he was disgracefully born, and as he wandered shamefully and scandalously through life, while spreading "great lies" (τὰ μεγάλα ψευσάμενον, II,7), so he also died. Celsus objects Jesus' all-too "human" behavior during his last days. Celsus' Jew first recalls the manner in which he was captured:

> when we had convicted him, condemned him and decided that he should be punished, was caught hiding himself and escaping most disgracefully, and indeed was betrayed by those whom he called disciples (II,9).

Celsus describes his hiding and fleeing from punishment in a "most disgracefully" way. Yet, if he was a god, he need not fear pain and harm (II,23). However, Celsus struggles with the fact that Jesus "utters loud laments and wailings and prays that he may avoid the fear of death, saying something like this, 'O Father, if this cup could pass by me'" (II,24; cf. *Matt*. 26:39). What kind of god fears pain and death? What kind of god has to hide and run, and yet is caught in the end anyway? If he were truly a god, he would not have had to flee, would not have been led away in bonds, or at least would not have been betrayed and abandoned by his fellows (*Cels.* II,9).

But the problems with his ungodly behavior are piling up:

> Why, if not before, does he not at any rate now show forth something divine, and deliver himself from this shame, and take his revenge on those who insult both him and his Father? (II,35).

Jesus' weakness and shameful ungodly behavior did not end with his arrest. Jesus was crucified like the worst of scoundrels, and even when nailed to the cross, he "rushed greedily to drink and did not bear his thirst patiently as even an ordinary man often bears it" (II,37). So again, Jesus does not appear as a god, but rather as a weak man. Another criticism of Celsus later in the book continues in the same vein, in which he accuses Jesus of speaking in an unheroic and ignoble manner even as he was dying. He compares Jesus to great men who in their noble heroic deaths despised their tormentors and displayed composure and courage in the face of pain, such as the Greek philosophers Anaxarchus and Epictetus (VII,53).[84] Diogenes Laertius, for example, records Anaxarchus' bravery as follows:

[84] On noble death in the antiquity, see VAN HENTEN 2012.

> But he, making light of the punishment, made that well-known speech, "Pound, pound the pouch containing Anaxarchus; ye pound not Anaxarchus." And when Nicocreon commanded his tongue to be cut out, they say he bit it off and spat it at him (*Lives*, IX,58–60, trans. R. D. Hicks, LCL 185).

In this context, Celsus asks what similar speech Jesus made before his death, probably alluding to his anguished cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Mark* 15:34). How Celsus imagined the possible response of god can be found later on, where he compares Jesus' impotence and defeat on the cross with a powerful man who came into conflict with Jews before, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar:

> Is it not ridiculous that when a man was angry with the Jews and destroyed them all from the youth upwards and burnt down their city, in this case they were annihilated; yet when the supreme god, as they say, was angry and wrathful and sent His Son with threats, he suffered such indignities? (*Cels.* IV,73).

If a *man* was able to punish Jews in such a manner, the idea of a *god* who acts like Jesus is all the more absurd. According to Celsus, Jesus had his last chance to prove his divinity on the cross, where, presumably in allusion to Apollonius of Tyana, he could at least suddenly disappear (II,68).[85] Instead, Jesus dies on the cross, just like murderers and thieves, proving that in his case he was not a god but a "one hated by god and ... a wicked sorcerer" (I,71). In Celsus' representation, Jesus is far from resembling anything close to a god, or even a noble and virtuous man.[86]

Celsus considers the idea of the resurrection of the body to be as barbaric and lowly as the Christians themselves (VIII,49). It is not surprising, then, that he sees Jesus' resurrection as another unreliable story that has its origins in a fictional fable about Jesus' prediction of his own resurrection (II,54). He compares this story with the Greek myths of the "miracle tricks" of Zalmoxis, Pythagoras, Rhampsinitus, or Orpheus, who were said to have descended into the underworld and returned among the living.[87] Celsus' Jew also regards these stories as mere myths and sees no difference between them and the story of Jesus. One can assume that, like in I,67, he at least considers them to be convincingly nar-

[85] Apollonius, according to Philostratus' account, suddenly disappeared from the courtroom at the end of the trial (*Vit. Apoll.* VIII,5).

[86] Cook 2000, 50.

[87] See Lona 2005, 159–161.

rated. However, the same cannot be said of the resurrection of Jesus, where the only witnesses are "a hysterical female ... and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery" (II,55). He rather proposes an alternative explanation of their experience of "resurrected" Jesus:

> (They) either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars (II,55).

The story of Jesus' resurrection is therefore, according to Celsus, an unconvincing fable told by unreliable witnesses who may have been hallucinating or may have made it up for their own benefit. If Jesus really wanted to convince anyone of his divine power, he should first of all have shown himself to his opponents and judges (II,63).[88] He adds ironically that after his death, Jesus no longer had to fear any man (II,67). But instead, Jesus remains hidden from everyone, revealing his divinity in secret to only one woman and a handful of those who accompanied him. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that "when he was being punished, he was seen by all; but by only one person after he rose again" (II,70).

In Celsus' presentation, Jesus' death is thus consistent with his scandalous birth and his dubious life. Jesus was born a poor wretched man to a poor unfaithful village woman, lived accordingly having wandered shamefully with his band until he finally died as a criminal. At the end, he sought to avoid his punishment by hiding, but he was trapped by the treachery of his disciples, and then disgracefully endured his punishment and died without any honor. After that, those whom he deceived with his lies, themselves invented more lies about his predictions of their own death and resurrection, so that they could persuade the weak-minded and foolish to spread the doctrine for their own benefit.

Conclusion

In this study, I have focused on the way the Greek philosopher Celsus portrayed the person of Jesus to his readers and listeners. Following Gary Alan Fine, I have approached this portrait of Jesus as an intentional construction of a negative reputation and have focused on the process by which he outlines

[88] See also similar argument in MACARIUS, *Monogenes*, III,25.

Jesus and the circumstances of his life in the context of the Roman Empire, its society and values.

We have seen that Celsus, while declaratively drawing on a shared body of information about Jesus written down by his followers interpreted and subjected these to critical scrutiny to reveal the "true nature" of these stories behind the pious fabrications of Jesus and his disciples. The most important factor for Celsus' reputational construct, however, is the social and cultural world in which he set the figure of Jesus. The narratives of Jesus' birth, public ministry, teaching, arrest and execution are measured against the values and ideals of contemporary Hellenistic culture. Likewise, he measures Christian doctrine against the teachings of the philosophers and poets who had co-created the whole of the culture in which both Celsus and his addressees lived. He does not delve into the theological debates of Christians, but rather focuses on his primarily non-Christian readers, showing them how unconvincing and scandalous the stories about Jesus really are. Christian stories lack logic and credibility because they are fabrications created to cover up what really happened. Jesus' mother, Jesus himself, and his disciples are all presented as persons on the lower level of the social hierarchy, from whom ancient society did not expect spectacular destinies, let alone divine qualities. Even less so when Celsus is able to "discover" from the tiny hints in the Gospels the true nature of Jesus' scandalous conception, his Egyptian training in the magical arts, the deliberate lies and deceptions he used to convince people of his divinity, and his dubious association with a band of tax collectors and sailors who eventually betrayed him and handed him over to death. Jesus not only did not manifest himself as a god, but he did not meet the standards for living a virtuous man. His insignificant story, like that of many other charlatans and impostors, ends disgracefully when he dies without honor on the cross, betrayed by his disciples whom he was unable to convince of his divinity. In addition, he shows how his disciples invented various lies about him for their own benefit, such as his predictions of his own death and resurrection. This is, then, the story of the "son of God" and the "great teacher" who is the originator of false Christian doctrine as "uncovered", or rather produced by Celsus.

In the first section, I outlined the contours of Celsus' critique of Christians, which were intended to serve a better understanding of Celsus' intention in constructing Jesus' scandalous reputation. He depicts Christian doctrine as a religion for the weak-minded and gullible. However, Celsus sees the real problem with the Christians in their nature, for he regards *rebellion against the established order* (στασιάζειν πρὸς τὸ κοινόν, *Cels.* III,5) as their essential quality. They do not recognize the common gods, the divine order embodied in the laws of society, and, above all, the divine authority of the emperor. They therefore function as

disruptors of harmonious coexistence, and instead of participating in the common good, they disintegrate the empire from within.

Gary Alan Fine points out that reputation can also arise from a functional need of society, and such a need can include the singling out of undesirable phenomena for society. Celsus as a reputational entrepreneur serves primarily this goal. For his educated readers, he seeks to portray Christians and their doctrine as unconvincing, illogical, and ridiculous superstition, but also a potential threat to traditional society. And since Celsus, through his philosophy of religion, views Christians as apostates from the Jews, and since, as Fine shows, the reputations of individuals and groups interact, it is logical that in an effort to prove the falsity of Christian doctrine, he focuses on the inventor of that doctrine and seducer of the Jews, Jesus. From the extant texts, we do not know the extent of the response Celsus elicited from his readers and listeners or how convincing his reputational construct was.[89] Based on the fact that the patron Ambrose commissioned Origen to write a polemic against his book several decades later, it can perhaps be inferred that his book had some resonance.[90]

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[89] Moret shows that Celsus' work may have been known to Lucian, Porphyry, Hierocles, Julian and perhaps also Marcus Aurelius and Galen. Besides, it is possible that it was also known to Christian apologists (MORET 2021). See also PICHLER 1980, 60–85.

[90] This study results from research funded by the Czech Science Foundation under grant GA19-02741S "Transmission and Transformation of Ideas: Hellenism, Early Judaism and Early Christianity" (Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences).

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Summary

This article builds upon the theoretical framework for the study of negative reputations developed by the prominent American sociologist Gary Alan Fine and conceptualizes the portrayal of Jesus in his work *True Doctrine* as a deliberate construct of negative reputation. Celsus is seen as a reputational entrepreneur portraying Christians and their doctrine as an unconvincing, illogical, and ridiculous superstition for the weak-minded. Since the reputations of individuals and groups interact, it is rational that he has also targeted the inventor of this doctrine, Jesus, to prove the falsity of Christian doctrine. He measures the narratives of Jesus' birth, public ministry, teaching, arrest, and execution against the values and ideals of contemporary Greek culture on divinity, magic, class, and social status and depicts Jesus as an insignificant "wicked sorcerer" who died disgracefully, being abandoned and betrayed by his own followers.

Keywords: Celsus; Reputation; Jesus; True Doctrine; Gary Alan Fine; Magician

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