

## CELSUS - A GOOD SCEPTIC OF CHRISTIANITY

On the True Doctrine, Celsus, Translated by R Joseph Hoffmann, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987

Celsus was a Greek philosopher who wrote his *On the True Doctrine* in the sixties or seventies of the second century. He was bitterly opposed to Christianity. His book tells us much about what the cult was like then. We must remember that a man trained in critical thinking like a philosopher is the one to be listened to if a religion is getting a dressing down. And he wrote very early in the Christian history.

Celsus gives every sign of believing the Jewish account of a Jesus who was a scoundrel and who used sorcery and magic tricks.

Celsus stated that the Christian groups were extremely secretive and gave no reasons to converts as to why they should accept their faith as true (page 35, 53). This tells us that the gospels could not have circulated well even if these works had been out of the closet. And they were not distributed well when they were not used to convince would-be Christians.

Celsus did not believe much in the existence of Jesus - if at all - for he said that the Christians used stories about him when casting spells and that these were myths. He then stated that the virgin birth and death and return of Jesus from the dead were fables and eccentric beliefs (page 53-4). He also declared that when anybody asked for evidence they were invariably told the simple were the best and the wisdom of the world is evil and to believe without asking questions. Clearly then the Christians themselves were not satisfied with their own evidence.

On page 54, Celsus tells us that everybody has heard the fables of Jesus' virgin birth, crucifixion and his resurrection and states that Christians would die for these fables. He explains with these in mind that reason should be listened to before any of these are accepted. He said that Christians went after dullards. He had no need to say that unless it was true for it would have suited him better to accuse them of being too intelligent to sincerely believe what they say they believe. This shows that written testimony was not used to propagate the faith. There were no good gospels or commonly accepted ones. It is very important that the crucifixion is put down as a fable though unlike virgin births and resurrections it is possible. Celsus had no need to go that far unless he was sure Jesus never existed. For a critic of Christianity, it was enough to say that the virgin birth and resurrection were fairy-stories. But he even calls the death by crucifixion of Jesus a fable! He had to call that even though he would have argued, "Jesus was crucified and real gods do not get crucified." But no - he calls it a myth and argues that if it happened then Jesus was fake.

If Jesus' death was a fable then why does Celsus say that Jesus' death proved he was not a god? (page 65). The answer is that Celsus did not believe Jesus died because he believed Jesus never existed but that if Jesus had died on the cross he was not a god. He is refuting the Jesus story and when you do that you can talk as if you accept the story. It is the same as if a Christian who said the God Prometheus was proven not to be a god at all when he had to endure an animal eating his liver. Celsus did not attempt to refute Jesus' existence in detail for it is better to show cracks in the sect's doctrine than to try to prove their founder was a fable when all the Jewish and Roman records were destroyed. He is saying that Jesus' death proved he was not a god if he died. That is what he means.

Celsus said that Jesus had one genealogy (page 64) while there are two in the New Testament.

Celsus said that Jesus never did anything good (page 65) which implies that the gospels were censored in his day for they present him as good. Celsus could have been speaking in general and it is true that if Jesus lived he would have done good things but that cannot be remarked if he did nothing specially good. It is true that Jesus did absolutely nothing really impressive - he made sacrifices for religious ideas but none for people. He never sold his coat for the poor. The good he did was cheap for it was allegedly miraculous. A man who magically makes bread appear in the hands of the starving is not the same man as one who does the hard work to put bread there and the bread is made of his blood and his sweat and his tears.

Some would say Celsus' complaint that Jesus was not good was spiteful gossip for he ridiculed Jesus for being poor which made Jesus blameworthy (65). But what Celsus meant was that a God should have been able to avoid poverty instead of implying that everybody should be poor by being deliberately poor himself when he became Jesus.

Celsus said that Jesus said he saw the bird at his baptism (page 58). The gospels don't say that.

The Matthew gospel says that astrologers came looking for the baby Jesus, the new king, when he was born. They are called the Magi. King Herod heard about the child from them and butchered all the babies in the village where Jesus was

born in the hope of killing the new king. Celsus repeats some details of the story of the Magi and the Massacre of the Infants by Herod with intent to murder Jesus for he thought he was a rival king (page 58) as in Matthew's gospel. He asks if Herod did this why did it work but not the way he expected for Jesus survived but still never managed to become a real king? Celsus means that God failed to make Jesus a king so whatever saved Jesus from Herod it was not God. And Herod did win in the end. Jesus was never a proper king at all and certainly not one that God was looking after. It would make no sense for Celsus to say that Jesus should have become king when Herod unsuccessfully tried to prevent this so he means that Jesus was never a proper king at all. The if over Herod having massacred shows that there was no evidence for this event that would have shocked the world and been known if it had really happened.

Celsus wrote that Jesus was secretive and didn't like the public. This fits the early strata of gospel tradition and the hints that Jesus was a lot more obscure than they pretend. This shows Celsus' accuracy. Celsus says that after Jesus was tried and condemned he went into hiding to evade punishment. So Jesus apparently escaped after his trial and condemnation to death and went into hiding and was betrayed not by one disciple, Judas, but at least two but Celsus speaks as if the whole Twelve handed Jesus over (page 61). He wrote, "Would a divine being, a saviour as you call him, and son of the highest God, be betrayed by the very men who had been educated by him and who shared everything with him?" So Celsus does not know of the gospel tradition that only Judas betrayed Jesus. Celsus did not have free access to the gospels at least as we have them. Celsus had no need to exaggerate the number of traitors Jesus had. Why contradict the Church in such a matter? Some scholars would say that Celsus took care to find out the truth for the apostles did betray Jesus. They would take the fact that Jesus was crucified for making a claim to be king and they were his closest supporters and they were allowed to go about freely as proof that they had got their freedom for handing him over.

Celsus reported that Jesus participated in the Jewish animal sacrifices (page 61). And that he abrogated the law, circumcision and the feasts (page 61). None of that is in the gospels. However as a Jew Jesus must have had sacrifices done and as for the alleged abrogation that was a Christian lie. The gospels say he was careful to declare the law of God as in the Bible as infallible and right and cursed anybody who waters it down.

He knew that nobody really believed in Jesus as an infallible person when he was alive (page 65). Jesus must have been an alcoholic when he greedily drank bad wine on the cross (page 65).

The Christians had one mad woman and maybe another person as witnesses to the resurrection and no more (page 67). This seems to show that Celsus could not access the gospels for he could not confirm how many allegedly saw Jesus. When he was willing to concede that there were other witnesses and admit he was uncertain he was not just pretending that too few people saw the resurrection. He really thought that there were too few of them. If we were anything like modern Christian apologists, we would be saying that he must be depending on imperial records just like they say Tacitus was doing when he mentioned Jesus.

But we must remember that he could be referring to the John gospel which says Mary Magdalene left the tomb and bumped into Jesus and does not mention anybody with her. The Christian argument that it only mentions her but there could have been others and the gospel knows of them but does not bother mentioning them is far-fetched. It reads as if there was one witness only at this point so that is what it is saying. Why does Celsus seem to count her and maybe another? Probably he is suggesting the others were influenced by her to think they witnessed something too. Every tale seems to have "witnesses" who really are just on the bandwagon and nothing more who end up thinking they were real witnesses.

The Christians heavily relied on magic tricks to get followers (page 98). They even performed conjuring tricks with silks and stones. This implies that they had no apologetic books like the gospels with which to persuade people to join. If they had anything it was not the complete works.

The Christians had no common rule of faith so Celsus is surprised that they have anything at all in common though they did have a lot of disagreements (page 70).

Celsus said that Jesus could not move the stone of his tomb by himself when he had to send an angel to do it (page 90). The implication is that Jesus was only a man and not a proper god. The implication is that if Jesus wants to use facts to suggest [I wrote suggest not prove!] he rose from the dead then he should rise from the dead and move the stone himself and be seen doing so. This is a terribly good insight. Christians say Celsus is misrepresenting the gospels. But would he if people could go to them or their readers and see? Of course not! Celsus was not stupid. Celsus is not misrepresenting for he thinks that the allegedly risen Jesus was inside the tomb and the angel had to come and let him out. Celsus knew that if Jesus had been a supernaturally powered being and raised himself from the dead he could have left the tomb without the angel. Celsus is obliquely saying that Jesus was inferior to the angels though they might have come to help him. He would not have thought that the guards at the tomb saw Jesus so he did not know that the Matthew gospel said that the guards were there when the angel opened the tomb. Jesus would have opened the tomb himself instead of getting an angel to do it especially when there was no need for anybody to open it. The gospels say that the women came to get the tomb opened and when it was open when there was nobody about it would look better if the tomb had been opened by people who couldn't explain

how the body got out for the tomb hadn't been touched till they opened it. Celsus was right that the angel opening the tomb was absurd.

Celsus made no effort to refute the resurrection which was strange considering that he knew of sorcerers who could resurrect the dead and have them eating and drinking by pure trickery (60). This can only be explained by the Christians not having any details about the resurrection apart from the women's testimony. Celsus thought that since it was just a mad woman speaking of the risen Jesus and convincing others there was no need to delve into the resurrection subject. He denied the apostles claimed to be testators as well. The sorcerers claim to have occult powers so they would have been making it look like they raised the dead with these powers. So resurrections were common in the world in those days.

Celsus says that the Christians who adore one God and adore the man Jesus as divine and as important as God have a book from which he quotes this teaching. The quotation from it is not in the gospels (page 116). It is assumed that Celsus is using a Christian book. But he implies that it is a scripture of the Christians he is quoting. His polemic and condemnation is no use if it is just a book that no or some Christians esteemed as scripture so it was a general scripture for the official Church. Celsus is not quoting a Gnostic scripture relating to heretics because Gnostics did not tend to believe in one God and did not regard the person of Jesus as important. It was his teaching that they concern themselves about.

Celsus is evidence that even then in his day most of the historical material of the gospels was forbidden to the people by the Church. It is no use saying that things like his condemning Christians for having a material God proves that he is inaccurate. The scriptures do have such a God so Christians are teaching that God is matter when they declare the scriptures infallible though they claim to have a spiritual God. The word for spirit is breath and breath is invisible material and the Bible God is breath or spirit and when the Christians read it they pretend it means that God is a real entity but that doesn't have any parts or matter in it.

If Celsus had some preposterous reasons for rejecting Christianity that has no bearing on his presentation of what Christians believed. And his reasons are good and understandable enough if you assume what he assumed. For example, his argument that Jesus' death proved he was a fraud is right if the idea of a God of mysterious plots and blood atonement is wrong and he had a right to reject this sinister God. The Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, says that if a statue is a god it will be able to protect itself. Accordingly, Jesus then can't be a god or the Son of God for he was crucified. The Christian Church's own scripture says that! A person rejecting the Christian ideas, the idea of a God with bizarre plans and the idea that a crucified man can be divine or the son of God and the idea that this blood atones for the sins of the world, is understandable and does not make them stupid.

Celsus says the Christians do not believe in one God but make another God of Jesus. That is true though Christians deny it. There is no evidence of a misrepresentation in Celsus. God comes before Jesus for we can be more sure that God exists than that Jesus was what he claimed to be but the Christians see God through Jesus which is putting Jesus first and making an idol of him. If Jesus were God and could be worshipped as God and not as an idol we should be equally sure of both.

Celsus rejects the idea of bodily resurrection not because he stupidly thinks God cannot remake the body and make it live but because he thinks the idea is disgusting and God does not change nature (page 86). Celsus was a very intelligent man and there is no justice in saying, "Oh, he hated Christians and would say anything about them. Pay no attention to him." Who would want our bodies back the way they are now at the resurrection?

Whatever gospels existed then were kept largely private or differed a lot from our four if they were not. That shows that whatever went before was hidden or corrupt and cannot be considered as a reliable version of the Jesus story or taken to show that there was a Jesus.