

Chapter 30

Celsus of Pergamum: Locating a Critic of Early Christianity

by Stephen Goranson

A *lēthēs Logos* of Celsus, preserved in large part with Origen's response in *Contra Celsum*, is the most significant extant second-century literary attack on Christianity. Celsus attacked Christianity not only for philosophic reasons, but also because he was alarmed about social consequences of the spread of Christianity. His book was occasioned by Christians refusing to honor the cults of the Roman Empire, avoiding military service, and even seeking martyrdom (for Greek text, see Borret 1967–76; for English translation, see Chadwick 1953). To understand fully Celsus' experience of Christians and his view of this threat to society as he perceived it, one would need to know where he lived. Rome, Alexandria, and Caesarea Maritima have all been proposed as Celsus' residence. But, as this paper will show, these three cities are quite improbable; the evidence strongly indicates that Celsus lived in Pergamum in Asia Minor.

In the following sections, first, we briefly consider whether and how it matters where Celsus lived. Then, we show that Rome, Alexandria, and Caesarea as proposed homes for Celsus are each highly improbable. Finally, the converging evidence points to Pergamum.

WHY LOCATE CELSUS?

Celsus wrote *Alēthēs Logos* most probably during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, 161–180 (Borret 1967: I, 15–21; Chadwick 1953: xxiv–xxviii; Rosenbaum 1972: 102–11; Burke 1981: 49–57; Grant 1988: 136), perhaps in 178, near the end of the Stoic-influenced emperors. Origen responded with his *Contra Celsum*, which he wrote in 248 or 249 in Caesarea (Nautin 1977: 375–76). Celsus and Origen wrote at different times and in different places. In various passages Origen depicted a different social reality than Celsus. Consider the following example: Celsus delivered some of his condemnation of Christianity via a fictitious Jewish character. Because this Jewish interlocutor of Celsus quoted from a play of Euripides, Origen declared that Celsus' Jew was an unpersuasive creation, because “Jews are not at all well read in Greek literature” (Origen, *Contra Celsum* [hereafter cited as *Cels.*] II, 34). Probably, in this case, both Celsus and Origen honestly related their experience. While the Jews Origen knew may not have attended such theatre productions, clearly in some times and locations Jews did, as shown, for instance, by an inscription in the theatre in

Miletus in Asia Minor, designating certain seats for the Jews. The inscription, located on good fifth-row seats, dates from the late second or early third century (Schürer 1986: III, 167–68) — that is, a time between Celsus and Origen. Another inscription in the odeum at Aphrodisias in Caria identifies the seats of certain Jews (Seager and Kraabel 1983: 181). The question whether Jews would know such a play as Euripides' *Bacchae* was also a matter of discussion among various excavators of Sepphoris, where a mosaic of Dionysius was uncovered near the theatre. For instance, Batey (1991) suggested that Jesus of Nazareth saw in Sepphoris a production of *The Trojan Women* by Euripides; but I am skeptical of his claim (Goranson 1992).

In another instance, Origen also criticized Celsus for failing to note that some Christians still observe Jewish law, and, in a manner of speaking, informed the deceased Celsus, as if he should have known, that they are called Ebionites; again, what Origen assumed as common knowledge may not have applied in the time and location of Celsus (*Cels.* II, 1). Though the term gradually evolved from a generic Hebrew usage, Irenaeus of Lyon is the first Greek writer known to use the term “Ebionite” as a heresy name (e.g., in *Adver. Haer.* V, 13), writing in ca. 190, that is, between the time of Celsus and Origen.

A recent study makes an interesting case for a later date (circa 200) for the book by Celsus (Hargis 1999: 20–24). I mention it here not because I found that argument persuasive (I did not), but because, though this study stresses the possible importance of dating the work, it ignores the geography of Celsus, hence missing the possible importance of regionalism — a concept explored in the Galilee by Eric Meyers. It may be worth noting that Origen himself, though he tried to place Celsus philosophically and theologically, also ignored the geographic location of Celsus, offering no explicit speculation about this matter which might have been helpful to historians.

CELSUS OF ROME?

Rome has been presented in several studies as the home of Celsus. For instance, Williams declared,

“He was, as it seems, a Roman lawyer,” whose residence in the city of Rome is “almost certain” (Williams 1935: 79; further arguments for Rome: Keim 1873; Chadwick 1953: xxviii; Borret 1976: V, 137–39; Patrick 1892: 3–9). According to Bauer, because Celsus wrote of “the great church” (*Cels.* V, 59) and “those of the multitude” (*Cels.* V, 61), Celsus could not have learned about the orthodox Christian church “anywhere but in Rome” (Bauer 1971: 50, nn. 30 and 148). However, Bauer offers no other supporting evidence for Rome (Burke 1981: 15–16). Rome may have been a convenient place to learn of such groups as Marcellians, Valentinians, and Mithraists, but this provides only a weak argument, as these groups are all found elsewhere as well.

There were some Roman officials named Celsus, e.g., Celsus Iulius Aquilla, another Asia Minor native (Friesen 1993), who became governor of Asia Minor, and for whom the Library of Celsus in Ephesus is named. But our Celsus, unusually, provides no fuller name nor title; so this provides no help. If Celsus were an employee of the emperor, he surely would have named his benefactor. Below, we will consider the hypothesis that our Celsus can be identified with another contemporary Celsus — who is also known only by that single name.

The main argument for Rome seems to be the patriotism of Celsus. Celsus did appeal to Christians to “help the emperor...and cooperate with him...” (*Cels.* VIII, 73). Yet Celsus demonstrates no firsthand knowledge of Roman realia. Though highly literate, he never quotes any Latin authors nor shows any interest in Latin culture. In fact, Celsus is a Hellenist to a chauvinist degree. He asked Christians to cooperate with the Romans and “their” — note, not “our” — “customary honors” (*Cels.* VIII, 69). Celsus did not bother to distinguish between “the Persian or Roman emperor” in his explanation of the importance of the hierarchy of daemons who help maintain civilization if they are not “insulted” (*Cels.* VIII, 35). Christians, Celsus recommended, “ought to pay formal acknowledgment to them, in so far as this is expedient” (*Cels.* VIII, 62). It becomes apparent that Celsus regarded the Romans as useful in preventing barbarians from destroying “true” — that is, Hellenistic — culture.

We are allowed a rare glimpse of Celsus' emotions, as he seems to sigh: "Would that it were possible to unite under one law the inhabitants of Asia, Europe and Libya, both Greeks [Hellenes] and barbarians even at the furthest limits" (*Cels.* VIII, 72). Celsus is no enthusiast for Rome; Hellenes, not Romans, serve as the antithesis to the barbarians. In his geographic list, the priority of Asia, I suggest, is not without significance. It is not Europe, with Rome (and Greece itself!), that Celsus regarded as the source of this imagined spread of Hellenic civility, nor is it Libya (i.e., Africa), including Alexandria. Rather, his pleasant dream began in Asia. That this dream did not begin in Greece accords with Glucker's conclusion that Celsus was "most unlikely to have been an Athenian" (Glucker 1978: 144). For a parallel case where the order of terms appears to be significant, compare Hippolytus of Rome, writing ca. 225:

Such is the true doctrine [*alēthēs logos*] I regard to the divine nature. O ye men, Greeks and Barbarians, Chaldeans and Assyrians, Egyptians and Libyans, Indians and Ethiopians, Celts and ye Latins who lead armies, and all ye that inhabit Europe and Asia and Libya (*Refutation of All Heresies* X, 30; trans. Roberts and Donaldson 1886: V, 152; Greek text, numbered X.34.1, in Marcovich 1986).

Hippolytus, writing in Rome, placed Europe first; Celsus, of whose location we inquire, placed Asia first.

Keim argued that Celsus lived in Rome. Chadwick argued against Keim's presentation that our Celsus was the same individual as the Celsus mentioned by Lucian, dismissively writing, "...cannot one picture Origen's opponent arm in arm with [Lucian] the Samosatene? They lived at the same time, and even in the same place." (Chadwick 1953: xxv). Though Chadwick does not explicitly name this proposed place, it is not the one Keim intended. As we shall see, our Celsus may, indeed, have walked together with Lucian, not in Rome, but in Pergamum. Celsus was not a resident of Rome.

CELSUS OF ALEXANDRIA?

"Kelsos von Alexandria" — such is the listing for Celsus in the reference work, *Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike* (Dörrie 1969; additional arguments for Alexandria, Chadwick 1953: xxix; Borret 1967–76: 139–40). Though no ancient writer refers to him this way, many modern scholars have sought his home there. He could have learned of Gnostic groups in Alexandria — though, again, not only there. He shows some interest in Egyptian religion, but what he described was available from historians, and Herodotus in particular. Celsus never claimed that he visited Egypt, and he provides no eyewitness accounts of Egypt. In fact, in the extant text of Celsus, he nowhere claims to have traveled at all and may have been disinclined or unable to travel; in any case, nothing requires his presence outside Pergamum. Celsus is aware of Jewish Logos theology (*Cels.* II, 31), which may suggest the name of Philo of Alexandria to modern readers, but Celsus shows no acquaintance with Philo or Aristobolus, as Origen noticed (*Cels.* IV, 51). Celsus had read Aristo of Pella, who could be his source in this case (*Cels.* IV, 52). Celsus mentioned an Egyptian musician named Dionysius, who tells him philosophers are immune to effects of magic (*Cels.* IV, 41). That Celsus identified this acquaintance as an Egyptian suggests that he was *not* his neighbor in Egypt.

Williams remarked that Celsus' book must have been well known, since he imagined the text traveling from Rome to Alexandria, where Origen would encounter it (Williams 1935: 80). In fact, Origen did *not* encounter it there. Origen did not know of *Alēthēs Logos* until he had moved to Caesarea, where his patron Ambrose sent it to him (*Cels.* Preface, 1 and VIII, 76, the latter asking if Ambrose will "search out and send" an additional treatise of Celsus; on Ambrose, see Trigg 1983 and Nautin 1977). Apparently, neither had Clement of Alexandria heard of it, which would be difficult to conceive if Celsus had attacked Christianity in his city. Origen had already written *Exhortation to Martyrdom* at Ambrose's request when Ambrose — who Origen had converted from Valentinian Gnosticism — was still in Alexandria. But it was only *after* Ambrose

moved to Nicomedia in Bithynia in Asia that he wrote to Origen that Celsus' book was a threat to the faith of his Christian neighbors. Celsus' book is first attested not in Alexandria, but in Asia.

CELSUS OF CAESAREA?

According to Frend, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius "the Christians were being challenged on their own ground, by Celsus, probably in Caesarea in Palestine..." (Frend 1965: 268). Again, it is necessary to recall that Origen was unaware of the book *Alēthēs Logos* and uncertain about the identity of Celsus when he was sent the book. If Celsus had lived in Caesarea, Origen was a sufficiently diligent student that he would have learned about him.

Palestine is suggested as Celsus' home primarily because he wrote of prophets in Phoenicia and Palestine who "wander about begging and roaming around cities and military camps" and

pretend to be moved as if giving some oracular utterance... Blessed is he who has worshipped me now! But I will cast everlasting fire upon all the rest' ... they then go on to add incomprehensible, incoherent, and utterly obscure utterances, the meaning of which no intelligent person could discover; for they are meaningless and nonsensical, and give a chance for any fool or sorcerer to take the words in whatever sense he likes (*Cels.* VII, 9).

(By the way, it may be noted that usage of Hebrew in some amulets, not limited to Palestine, may have appeared to some as especially opaque). But Celsus rhetorically linked these prophets with the earlier prophets in Judaea (*Cels.* VII, 8). Origen questioned whether Celsus really had first-hand knowledge of these prophets, especially because Celsus claimed that, upon examining them, the prophets supposedly admitted that they were frauds, and thereafter Celsus gave no details elaborating on such a coup (*Cels.* VII, 11). According to Burke, "all [Celsus] is trying to do is characterize the OT prophets by contemporary examples from the same geographic area. This becomes clear if one follows his argument from the beginning of book VII..." (Burke 1981:

183–85). Even though Burke correctly perceived the literary nature of this description, he then reverted to the widely-held but misconceived view that the passage indicated Celsus was familiar with the area. In this case, Origen's protest of ignorance of Celsus most likely is valid. Furthermore, Celsus certainly demonstrates no knowledge of Semitic languages, which would make long-term residence in Palestine, or any lands eastward, unlikely. In any case, no other evidence supports Caesarea.

CELSUS OF PERGAMUM

As it happens, the disdain Celsus felt for such "begging priests" and "scoundrels" appeared earlier and more believably when Celsus specified, as especially unreasonable people,

begging priests of Cybele and soothsayers, worshippers of Mithras and Sabazius, and whatever else one might meet, apparitions of Hecate or of some other daemon or daemons (*Cels.* I, 9).

This conglomeration of groups would more likely be encountered in Asia Minor than in Palestine.

Additionally, other groups and places mentioned by Celsus were found in Asia. Celsus refers to places where "gods are to be seen in human form" (*Cels.* VII, 35); they are in Boeotia, Greece, and Cilicia. Celsus also refers to miracles of Aristaeas the Preconnesian, in northern Asia, and "a certain Clazomenian," (i.e., from near Smyrna; *Cels.* III, 3). In a favorable reference to Asclepius foretelling the future, Celsus named cities dedicated to him (*Cels.* III, 3); these cities are in Greece and Asia Minor, e.g., Pergamum. Angel worship plays a prominent role in Celsus' condemnation of Jews and Christians; this practice is attested in Asia Minor (*Cels.* I, 26 and V, 6; see Burke 1981: 139–40; Johnson 1975; Kraabel 1968). Celsus is the only source for a group of Sibyllists (*Cels.* V, 61); since such a group is otherwise unattested, they cannot be surely located, but Phrygia (the birthplace of Montanism) was home to many "wandering prophets," who expected, and hoped for, an end to the world — the sort of people that worried Celsus.

Celsus knew of Christian martyrdoms (*Cels.* VIII, 6 and 52; Frend 1965: 268–302). During his time Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna. In Pergamum, Carpus and his companions were burned alive. After Carpus refused to honor the emperor, according to the *Acta Carpi*, a woman named Agathonike rushed forward and joined him. According to this account, the crowd cried, “It is a terrible sentence; these are unjust decrees” (Musurillo 1972: 29). While this account cannot be considered entirely reliable, it may be sufficiently accurate to help us understand the occasion for Celsus’ book. As Bigg observed, while Marcus Aurelius was wondering at the dogged persistence of the Christians, Celsus was asking whether the breach could be healed (Bigg 1913: 314).

A contemporary of Celsus, Melito of Sardis, wrote an apology to Marcus Aurelius. As excavations at Sardis have shown, particularly at the large synagogue, the Jewish community there prospered, having been settled in Sardis for many generations. Many of the synagogue donor inscriptions proudly refer to their status as citizens of Sardis, along with other titles indicating various government offices. Melito spoke quite harshly of the Jews, and he clearly fought an uphill battle in his attempt to show his minority community of Christians as good citizens. This is the sort of conflict between Jews and Christians that Celsus reflects (Seager and Kraabel 1983; Wilken 1976). Though Celsus shows no great affection for Judaism, he apparently was familiar with a society in which Jews played a role he found acceptable — unlike the Jews in Palestine (and North Africa and Cyprus), who seemingly had not given up revolution. Celsus’ view of Christianity makes sense in Asia Minor. Pergamum, in particular, presents a highly plausible home for Celsus; it was a cultured city and seaport that once had a famous library. As noted by Josephus (*Antiquities* XVI.10.22 [247–55]), the Jewish community there had good relations with Rome since Hasmonean times.

An important question is whether our Celsus is identical with the Celsus to whom Lucian dedicated *Alexander the False Prophet*, a story about a false oracle in Abonoteichus in Asia. Alexander is presented as abusing the honorable Asclepius cult.

In favor of the identification is the fact that the two are contemporary writers named Celsus, whose interests included oracles, magic, and Christianity. The only difficulty in the identification is that our Celsus appears to be a middle Platonist, whereas Lucian commends Epicurus to his friend, making Celsus appear to some readers to be an Epicurean. Clay, however, cautioned that Lucian modifies actual characters in these works (Clay 1992); and, in any case, Lucian imputes no more Epicureanism to Celsus than to himself. Further, Celsus may have changed his philosophic preferences since his earlier book on magic (Lucian, *Alexander*, 21; *Cels.* I, 68, a book with evident parallels in book 4, 28–42 of Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*), perhaps written in the time of Hadrian (*Cels.* I, 8.). Galen of Pergamum also corresponded with a Celsus, listed as an Epicurean in the account of Galen’s library (Mueller 1891: 124). Many writers have argued against identity (e.g., Chadwick 1953: xxiv–xxvi; Burke 1981: 60–67; Frede 1994). Many others have argued for identification (e.g., Keim 1873: 275–93; Hoffmann 1987: 30–32; Schwartz 1973; for further bibliography, see Pichler 1980).

Schwartz alluded to the possibility (in a note, within parentheses, and with a question mark) that Celsus could have lived in the province of Asia or Syria (Schwartz 1960: 144, n. 2). Stern made a similar brief observation (Stern 1980: 2, 224–5). If the two contemporary authors named Celsus are identical, this would provide additional indication of the residence of our Celsus in Pergamum. Though he spent years in Rome, Galen was born and died in Pergamum and had served as physician in the Pergamene Asclepius temple. And Lucian shows interest in the Asclepius cult in *Alexander*, the book dedicated to Celsus.

Pergamum was dedicated to Asclepius, which Celsus notes; in fact, his most favorable comments concerning any cult pertain to Asclepius (*Cels.* III, 3; III, 24; III, 43; VII, 53). In accord with the hypothesis mentioned above, our Celsus may have been acquainted with Galen of Pergamum, who had served at the Asclepius temple. The book that Lucian dedicated to Celsus — our Celsus — was precisely about the abuse of an Asclepius cult in Asia, and this type of abuse by soothsayers was what our

Celsus had written about in his book on magic — a book acknowledged by Origen and Lucian. Like both Galen and Lucian, Celsus berated Christians for privileging faith over reason (Wilken 1984).

Pergamum experienced a cultural renaissance and rebuilding, financed by Hadrian, in the second century. Besides the above-mentioned martyrdoms, Pergamum had a theatre, a Panathenaea observance when the “robe of Athena ... is seen by every spectator” (*Cels.* VI, 42), numerous Cybele statues (*Cels.* I, 9), and many other features reflected in Celsus’ attack on Christianity (Koester 1998). Celsus’ patriotic viewpoint on Pergamum

is practically the opposite of that found in the anti-Roman *Apocalypse of John*, which is starkly disapproving of the mainstream Pergamene society. Much more so than Rome, Alexandria, or Caesarea, Pergamum is the plausible setting for Celsus. On the geographic location of Celsus, the evidence presented here certainly suggests we can better understand the concerns of Celsus, given recognition of his place in the society of Asia Minor. Surely, Celsus provides one of the most important sources on second-century Christianity. The realization that he encountered Christianity in Asia Minor will help clarify that history.

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