

# A Question of Origins

The Application of Ethnoracial  
Categories to Jews and  
Christians in *Contra Celsum*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	4
II. The Counterhistorical Exodus Tradition.....	8
III. Celsus’s Ethnoracial Arguments.....	16
IV. Origen’s Counterarguments.....	29
V. Conclusion.....	37

## THESIS ABSTRACT

Origen wrote *Contra Celsum* in response to *The True Doctrine* by Celsus, a polemic against the Christians, but Celsus's attack on the Christians actually begins with the Jews. Calling on a counterhistorical exodus tradition that stretches back hundreds of years, he claims that the Jews were originally Egyptians who rebelled, left Egypt, and created new religious practices. This had serious ramifications, according to Celsus, and his use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos* are crucial to understanding what these ramifications were. *Genos* and *ethnos* were both terms that identified groups in antiquity, and could be defined by any number of physical or social characteristics. Additionally, they could refer both to groups that were fixed and unchangeable, or groups that were fluid and could change. Their relevance did not lie in their exact meaning, therefore, but rather how they functioned, and for Celsus they functioned as both fixed and fluid, depending on the situation. They are fixed when he wants to criticize the Jews for rebelling, because he finds it unacceptable that they simply turned their back on their ancestors' (the Egyptians) traditions, yet they are fluid enough to allow the Jews to become a separate *ethnos*. In both cases, though, the defining characteristic of Celsus's *ethnos* and *genos* is religious practice; this allows them to separate from the Egyptians and form their own group, even if they were not supposed to do so. Thus, Celsus presents the Jews as having abandoned the religious practices of the Egyptians for new ones and becoming inferior to every *ethnos* that did follow the traditions of their ancestors.

Celsus's aim is not really to criticize the Jews, however, but instead the Christians, and according to him, they are even worse because they did to the Jews what the Jews did to the Egyptians: they broke away and started new practices. This means that

they rebelled against the traditions of a group who in turn created their own traditions by rebelling against those of another group. Furthermore, because the Christians have actively spread everywhere and are not really even linked to one another by religious practice, they are worse than the inferior *ethnos* of the Jews, who at least still have unique customs. To Celsus the Christians are not an *ethnos* at all, and they do not fit into the established societal order.

Origen did not want to answer Celsus's accusation because he felt that it missed the point; being Christian should be about theology and belief, not fitting in as a *genos* or *ethnos*, and defending the Christians against Celsus by directly responding to his points would mean giving the paradigm he insisted upon too much attention. In addition, answering Celsus was a difficult task for Origen because it required him to defend the antiquity of the Jews, the ancestors of the Christians, while still arguing that the Christians were justified in breaking away from them. It was a necessary task though, to prevent possible unrest directed toward the Christians that could lead to persecutions. He accomplishes it by using the same conception of *genos* and *ethnos* fixity/fluidity as Celsus did, agreeing that fixity and antiquity were important, and claiming that the Jews were a group that had both, but in the case of the Christians allowing that fluidity could be (and should be) acceptable. Origen is also opportunistic regarding the defining trait of *genos* and *ethnos*, and he changes it based on the situation. For the Jews, their language shows that they were never Egyptian and so could never have abandoned Egyptian tradition, and for the Christians it is their belief in Jesus as the Messiah which proves that they are the rightful heirs to Jewish tradition. So the Christians reap the benefits of Jewish legitimacy, but still have their break from the Jews justified. While Origen's argument is

rather ingenious, *Contra Celsum* is still a good example of both the difficulty for Christians of defending against ethnoracial attacks, and the inevitability and necessity of doing so.

## A QUESTION OF ORIGINS

### I. Introduction

In the late second century C.E., the Greek philosopher Celsus wrote a polemic against the Christians. It was titled *The True Doctrine*, and while it attacked Christianity from a variety of philosophical and historical angles, the overriding message was that the Christians, as a group, did not belong in society. Little is known about Celsus or the circumstances surrounding his book's composition, but for some reason, it appeared in Rome in the middle of the third century C.E. and gained some popularity. Although the emperor at the time was tolerant of Christians, their position within the empire was always tenuous, and so a Christian named Ambrose saw in *The True Doctrine* the potential instigation of persecution against the Christians. Luckily, Ambrose had a solution: he had been the patron of the prominent Christian theologian Origen when the latter had moved from Alexandria to Rome. Origen had moved again, to Caesarea, but Ambrose still provided support, so he sent Origen *The True Doctrine* and asked him to write a response.<sup>1</sup> The work that Origen produced, *Contra Celsum*, is one of the classic examples of Christian apologetic writing, and "the culmination of the whole apologetic movement of the second and third centuries."<sup>2</sup> Even today, it stands as a testament to the

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<sup>1</sup> Trigg, Joseph W. *Origen*. London: Routledge, 1998. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Origen. *Contra Celsum*. Ed. and trans. H. Chadwick. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1953. From Chadwick's introduction, ix.

struggles that early Christians underwent as they searched for their place in the ancient world.

Celsus's attack on the Christians as social outcasts in *The True Doctrine* actually begins with the Jews. Calling on a counterhistorical exodus tradition that stretches back hundreds of years, he claims that the Jews were originally Egyptians who rebelled, left Egypt, and created new religious practices. This had serious ramifications, according to Celsus, and his use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos* are crucial to understanding what these ramifications were. *Genos* and *ethnos* were both terms that identified groups in antiquity, and could be defined by any number of physical or social characteristics. Additionally, they could refer both to groups that were fixed and unchangeable, or groups that were fluid and could change. Their relevance did not lie in their exact meaning, therefore, but rather how they functioned, and for Celsus they functioned as both fixed and fluid, depending on the situation. They are fixed when he wants to criticize the Jews for rebelling, because he finds it unacceptable that they simply turned their back on their ancestors' (the Egyptians) traditions, yet they are fluid enough to allow the Jews to become a separate *ethnos*. In both cases, though, the defining characteristic of Celsus's *ethnos* and *genos* is religious practice; this allows them to separate from the Egyptians and form their own group, even if they were not supposed to do so. Thus, Celsus presents the Jews as having abandoned the religious practices of the Egyptians for new ones and becoming inferior to every *ethnos* that did follow the traditions of their ancestors.

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When his]Ambrose asked him to refute Celsus's argument that the Christians did not really belong in society, Origen was perplexed. He did not want to answer this accusation because he felt that it missed the point; being Christian should be about theology and belief, not fitting in as a *genos* or *ethnos*, and defending the Christians against Celsus by directly responding to his points would mean giving the paradigm he insisted upon too much attention. In addition, answering Celsus was a difficult task for Origen because it required him to defend the antiquity of the Jews, the ancestors of the Christians, while still arguing that the Christians were justified in breaking away from them. It was a necessary task though, to prevent possible unrest directed toward the Christians that could lead to persecutions. He accomplishes it by using the same conception of *genos* and *ethnos* fixity/fluidity as Celsus did, agreeing that fixity and antiquity were important, and claiming that the Jews were a group that had both, but in the case of the Christians allowing that fluidity could be (and should be) acceptable. Origen is also opportunistic regarding the defining trait of *genos* and *ethnos*, and he changes it based on the situation. For the Jews, their language shows that they were never Egyptian and so could never have abandoned Egyptian tradition, and for the Christians it is their belief in Jesus as the Messiah which proves that they are the rightful heirs to

Jewish tradition. So the Christians reap the benefits of Jewish legitimacy, but still have their break from the Jews justified. While Origen's argument is rather ingenious, *Contra Celsum* is still a good example of both the difficulty for Christians of defending against ethnoracial attacks, and the inevitability and necessity of doing so.

The first chapter is devoted to the counterhistorical exodus tradition. I will examine in some detail the exodus stories of Manetho, a third-century B.C.E. Egyptian author, and Apion, a first-century C.E. author who is also Egyptian (specifically, Alexandrian), as they appear in Josephus's *Against Apion*. The analysis of various versions of the exodus story and their similar themes in Peter Schafer's book *Judeophobia* will frame the discussion of the similarities between Manetho and Apion, despite differences as well. The basic storyline and sequence of events suggests that the two share some common source. I will also explore the implications of this tradition and the commentary that it makes on the Jews.

The second chapter, because Celsus sees the identity of the Jews as so crucial to the identity of the Christians, will first demonstrate how Celsus portrays the Jews, in order to show how his conception fits with the exodus tradition from Chapter 1. It will then lay out his use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos* and how he uses them in his particular version of the tradition. The arguments about the function and meaning of race and ethnicity in Denise Kimber Buell's *Why This New Race* will guide me in this part of the discussion, and ultimately we will determine why the Jews do not fit into Celsus's ethnoracial conceptions, why the Christians do not fit in, and the relationship between the two groups in this context.

The third chapter will address Origen's response to Celsus. It will look at both Origen's extreme reluctance to write *Contra Celsum*, because he was more interested in the faith of the Christians than in their status as a *genos* or an *ethnos*, but also his obligation to write it, due to the threat of persecution that writings such as *The True Doctrine* presented. Then, Origen's argument regarding how the Jews, and then the Christians, actually do fit in will be examined, along with Origen's use of *genos* and *ethnos* to do this. I will finish by comparing Origen's presentation of the Jews with that of the Christians, and looking at the implications of this comparison.

## **II. The Counterhistorical Exodus Tradition**

The biblical account of the exodus from Egypt has a modern life as an archetypal story of redemption and freedom from oppression, as evidenced by, for example, Martin Luther King's famous final speech. In this context the story's veracity hardly matters; instead, a reading like King's places emphasis on its symbolic value. However, since well before the story became universalized in this way, it has had another life as an actual historical document, and therefore in antiquity its accuracy (and the accuracy of the Hebrew Bible as a whole) was strongly contested for polemical reasons in the form of very different tellings of the exodus story that portrayed the Jews as outcast, rebellious Egyptians before they left Egypt. Most current scholarship identifies a tradition and link these stories to each other by common themes, and while the various themes are important to understanding the stories, it is the actual events within the stories that truly connect them.

### **Scholarship on the Counterhistorical Exodus Tradition**

Funkenstein presents the dispute over the true story of the Exodus as a battle between a Jewish history and anti-Semitic “counterhistories,” not because the biblical version is objectively true and the other versions are not, but because the biblical version functions as a history and the other versions function to undermine that history.<sup>3</sup> According to Funkenstein, counterhistories are a particular kind of polemic.<sup>4</sup> While he lists several defining features, what is relevant for the exodus counterhistories I will work with is that they claim the true version of the Exodus is essentially the opposite of what the Jews believe it to be based on the biblical version that functions as their history of the event. In other words, these stories challenged Jewish identity by directly contradicting a story that was a fundamental part of the Jewish tradition.<sup>5</sup>

While the discussion so far may seem quite specific to the Jews, Celsus ultimately frames his argument against the Christians (and against the Jews, of course) with an exodus counterhistory, so in this chapter I put him into context by developing some ideas about the sources he might have drawn upon for his version. I will examine two specific authors, Manetho of Heliopolis from the third century B.C.E. and Apion of Alexandria from the first century C.E., but I do not suggest that Celsus necessarily used their work specifically. Rather, I believe that all three are loosely tied together as part of a larger counterhistorical exodus tradition, and although the individual stories differ in details and in focal points, as we will see, they share basic elements.

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<sup>3</sup> Funkenstein, Amos. *Perceptions of Jewish History*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> One of Funkenstein’s criterion for a counterhistory is that it is created as a contradiction, but it is not clear to what extent this is true for the accounts I analyze in this chapter. Whatever the answer is, though, the point is that they function to contradict; I am not sure that their intentionality has bearing on their effect.

This tradition that I will lay out undoubtedly encompasses many authors, and it was likely transmitted orally as well as by the written word. There must have been countless versions of the exodus story that circulated but were never recorded. My choice of Manetho and Apion, then, is not an attempt at a comprehensive study of the tradition, but instead a representative study that is reasonable in terms of textual availability, and allows the most convenient entry point into the scholarly discussion. We can read both stories in Josephus's *Against Apion*, in which he refutes a variety of anti-Semitic claims from numerous sources (the scope of the work is less specific than its name implies).<sup>6</sup> His presentations do have shortcomings. Manetho's story is lengthy, and Josephus claims that it is a full, direct quotation, though it is possible he may be copying it from other Jewish authors instead.<sup>7</sup> Apion's story, on the other hand, is quite short, and Josephus is admittedly paraphrasing, so it is likely that there are parts missing and no longer extant.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Josephus provides a lot of information comparatively, because without *Against Apion* these accounts would not exist anywhere.

In addition to their accessibility, these two stories are especially relevant to a great deal of current scholarship, which is based on the idea that the counterhistorical exodus tradition may have two stages. The first is the Egyptian expulsion story stage of which Manetho is a key example. The second is the Alexandrian anti-Semitic stage with which Apion, given that he lived in Alexandria during the first half of the first century C.E., would almost certainly have been associated. The scholarly argument is as follows. Before the specifically exodus-related tradition developed, there was an Egyptian

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<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica...Josephus

<sup>7</sup> Stern, Menahem. "Manetho." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. 2nd ed. 2007.?

<sup>8</sup> Schafer, Peter. *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997. 28.

expulsion tradition. The basic outline of the story involved foreigners coming to Egypt and taking over, with an emphasis on outlawing Egyptian religious practices, before being driven back out by the Egyptians.<sup>9</sup> Manetho originally wrote a story like this, and then the association with the Jews and the Exodus that is found in what Josephus calls Manetho's account was actually added by a later, Alexandrian editor.<sup>10</sup> Anti-Semitic sentiment is most likely to have come out Alexandria because of the negative attitude toward the Jews that existed in the city and led to, among other incidents, the riots of 38 C.E.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, there are two major themes in the counterhistorical exodus tradition: impiety, which is a disrespect for Egyptian religious practice, and *misanthropia*, a “refusal of intercourse with other people.”<sup>12</sup> These can also be found in Manetho's story, which further associates him with the exodus tradition, but the explanation for this is that the two themes are not actually specific to the Jews or the exodus tradition; they are part of the original expulsion tradition.

Schafer takes issue with this idea of two stages for several reasons. First, there is at least one exodus story that applies the impiety and *misanthropia* themes with the Jews dating to before Manetho.<sup>13</sup> Second, the association with the Jews in Manetho's story occurs throughout, not just in one or two obvious places that could have been added later.<sup>14</sup> Third, if the anti-Semitic elements of Josephus's presentation of Manetho's account were actually added by someone in Alexandria near the beginning of the first

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 136.

<sup>12</sup> Schafer, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Hecataeus was a Greek author who lived during the time of Alexander the Great. See: Stern, Menahem. Ed. and trans. *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Schafer, 20.

century C.E., then surely the impiety and *misanthropia* themes would have been widely known and used in that time and place. Apion's story, however, written in early first century Alexandria, does not exhibit either theme.<sup>15</sup> Schafer therefore suggests that the division into two stages is problematic, that the two themes may be older than the first century, and that they may not have originated in Alexandria.<sup>16</sup>

### **Manetho, Apion, and the Counterhistorical Exodus Tradition**

Schafer's argument shows that Manetho and Apion might be closely related; they are not necessarily from two different stages of development. Unfortunately, he does not take the next step and offer any thoughts on if, how, or to what extent Manetho and Apion relate to each other. In fact they do, though not on account of the themes found in them, but rather the actual events. Thus there is a specific tradition broader than either Schafer or those he opposes will acknowledge, covering a wider range of both time and location. A more detailed analysis of Manetho and Apion will explicate Schafer's arguments outlined above, as well as demonstrate my own. Manetho's story begins with an invasion of Egypt by "Shepherd-kings:"

There was a king of ours (the Egyptians) whose name was Timaus. Under him it came to pass, I know not how, that God was averse to us, and there came, after a surprising manner, men of ignoble birth out of the eastern parts, and had boldness enough to make an expedition into our country, and with ease subdued it by force, yet without our hazarding a battle with them. So when they had gotten those that governed us under their power, they afterwards burned down our cities, and demolished the temples of the gods, and used all the inhabitants after a most barbarous manner; nay, some they killed, and led their children and their wives into slavery.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus. *Against Apion*. Trans. William Whiston. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999. 14:75-14:76.

The most noticeable feature of this passage is that it seems to contain a good deal of information, yet it is vague enough that it is difficult to form many solid conclusions. Who are these “Shepherd-kings”? They are barbarians, certainly not from Egypt, but also not from anywhere else in particular, just “the eastern parts.” The circumstances under which they came to power are also unclear, but whatever the details, the sense of the passage is that the Shepherd-kings are wanderers, not attached to any particular place, who seem to have come upon Egypt and brutally taken it over before the Egyptians had time to respond. They also have little respect for Egyptian religion, as evidenced by the destruction of the temples. Despite the lack of specifics, however, we do learn later that the Shepherd-kings, after a long battle with the Egyptians, are defeated, expelled, and ultimately end up settling in Jerusalem, certainly suggesting a strong connection with the Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Manetho’s story then continues with a second act. Hundreds of years in the future, King Amenophis of Egypt decides to send tens of thousands of people with leprosy and other diseases to work in quarries, to separate them from the rest of the population and cleanse the nation. After a long period of hard labor, they ask the king to be given their own city, still separate from everyone else, and they are granted it, but at that point it is too late and a revolt has started:

But when these men were gotten into it, and found the place ripe for a revolt, they appointed themselves a ruler out of the priests of Heliopolis, whose name was Osarsiph, and they took their oaths that they would be obedient to him in all things. He then, in the first place, made this law for them, that they should neither worship the Egyptian gods, nor should abstain from any one of those sacred animals which they have in the highest esteem, but kill and destroy them all; that they should join themselves to nobody but to those that were of this confederacy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 14:85-14:90

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, 26:238-26:239

Here we find the themes of impiety and *misanthropia* very clearly laid out. The disdain for Egyptian religious beliefs and practices reflects impiety, and the insistence to be insular and cut themselves off from those who were not a part of their “confederacy” is exactly what Schafer describes with the *misanthropia* theme.<sup>20</sup> However, while these themes are important to Schafer’s argument, I would like to focus on other aspects of the story, specifically that the people under the leadership of Osarsiph are first ostracized because of their health conditions, and only afterwards do they revolt and turn against Egyptian religious practice. Furthermore, Osarsiph enlists the help of the Shepherd-kings from Judea in the revolt, becomes their leader as well, and leads everyone out of Egypt.<sup>21</sup> Given that the Shepherd-kings’ settlement in Jerusalem is meant to relate them to the Jews, we can surmise that their involvement with the Egyptian outcasts is meant to suggest that the group Osarsiph leads out of Egypt is, or at least becomes the Jews. This sequence of events, not the impiety and *misanthropia* themes, will provide Manetho’s connection with Apion and Celsus.

We noted previously that Apion’s story as presented by Josephus is much shorter than Manetho’s, and so there is a danger of reading too much into it because significant portions may be missing. Still, Schafer does raise a good question regarding Apion’s claim that Moses “thought himself obliged to follow the customs of his forefathers.” This is difficult to reconcile with a leader who preached religious disobedience since Moses is also from Heliopolis in this version, and “forefathers” here must therefore refer to Egyptian ancestors.<sup>22</sup> What Schafer does not mention, though, is the section of Apion’s

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<sup>20</sup> Schafer, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Schafer, 29.

story that involves Moses climbing Mt. Sinai and bringing down the laws to the Jews.<sup>23</sup> So his story of the Jewish exodus does include a break from Egyptian customs, just as Manetho's did, though apparently at a different point in the story.

Furthermore, we learn from Josephus of Apion's claim that Moses "brought the leprous people, the blind, and the lame out of Egypt."<sup>24</sup> In both Manetho and Apion, therefore, there is a group of people with leprosy and other health issues that are ostracized from the rest of Egyptian society. In both stories, this group ultimately abandons Egyptian religious practice *in response to* their new status as outsiders. We should also give consideration to Josephus's analysis: he links Manetho and Apion by suggesting that Apion would have read Manetho's account, and he addresses both in his book as two authors involved in a larger effort to question the antiquity of the Jews.<sup>25</sup> Josephus is not unbiased by any means, but if nothing else, there must be a reason Josephus would know of both.

The counterhistorical exodus tradition from which Celsus's story would later arise starts at least with Manetho in the third century B.C.E. and was still accessed much closer to Celsus's time, by Apion in the first century C.E. It characterizes the Jews as Egyptians with physical illnesses who are ostracized, then rebel, and then change their religious practice. Thus, the story attacks the Jews on two levels: not only is Jewish practice bad because it is not traditional, descending instead from Egyptian practice, but the Jews created it for a bad reason. Even though they were separated from Egyptian society, it happened for logical reasons, namely their physical maladies. So they were still obligated to uphold Egyptian customs, and they chose not to do so. Not only are the Jews outcasts,

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<sup>23</sup> Josephus, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

but they are unworthy even of pity because they brought that status upon themselves. This would have been ideal polemical material for someone like Celsus to draw upon because of the virulent anti-Semitism that it encouraged.

### **III. Celsus's ethnoracial arguments**

Several related difficulties present themselves when one attempts to study Celsus's *The True Doctrine*. One is an issue of source: namely, that there is no manuscript entitled *The True Doctrine* from which we can read. Instead, we read it in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, which is an unfriendly reply to *The True Doctrine* and offers a great number of direct quotations from it for the sole purpose of refutation. The contents of *Contra Celsum* are certainly valuable, because without Origen there would be virtually no knowledge of Celsus or his writing, but there are also serious limitations. Origen generally quotes a line or two and then interprets it before responding, without really explaining his interpretation or contextualizing the quotation, so even if we assume that all of the quotations are completely accurate, we have to wonder if they really mean what Origen says they do. Furthermore, without this context it is impossible to determine how Celsus originally organized his argument, and how much of *The True Doctrine* is actually quoted in Origen (though even with more context it would likely still be difficult).

Of course, this has not stopped scholars from trying to reconstruct *The True Doctrine* in its entirety. One such scholar, R. Joseph Hoffmann, did so in English in 1986, and cites several previous attempts, one dating back to 1873, as touchstones of his work. If the fact that recreating the entire text has enticed scholars for such a long period of time is a testament to a fascination with the mysterious nature of *The True Doctrine* that transcends very different eras of scholarship, then it is also a testament to the difficulty of

such a task and the reality that no definitive end can ever be reached. However, Hoffmann does not try to disguise this, admitting that he does not even try to guess the layout of Celsus's original, and also acknowledging that there are so many paraphrases and omissions that only about 70 percent of *The True Doctrine* is extant in *Contra Celsum*.<sup>26</sup> These two comments, comprising most of the information he gives regarding the actual reconstruction of the text, underscore our inability to really know what Celsus wrote.

Hoffmann also indirectly brings up another difficulty with reading Celsus, this time one of historical knowledge. Quite simply, we do not know who Celsus is. He is likely not the same the Celsus who was a philosopher and lived during the time that Nero reigned, in the middle of the first century C.E., because Origen says that he lived during Hadrian's reign (around 130 C.E.), if not after, and equates him with another Celsus, and Epicurean, who wrote polemics against magicians.<sup>27</sup> Many scholars think that Origen is misidentifying him here, and that he is separate from these two; they estimate that he wrote around 160 or 170 C.E.<sup>28</sup> Trigg, on the other hand, allows that Origen may in fact be right, so it is a question certainly up for debate.<sup>29</sup> In any event, there is no definite answer, so it is not possible to look elsewhere to find more clues about Celsus's philosophy, arguments, or context. This is especially true if he did in fact write in the later part of the second century, because there is no record of him outside of Origen, who would then have misidentified him in that case anyway.

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<sup>26</sup> Celsus. *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*. Trans. Joseph Hoffmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. From Hoffman's introduction, 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Celsus. From Hoffman's introduction, 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

So we can see the confusion that comes with trying to determine what Celsus really said, or who he really was. The way I plan to address this issue is to avoid any specific conjectures about the context of Celsus, and instead analyze only what comes down to us through Origen, and is present in the text itself. While we must acknowledge the limitations that are inherent in such an approach, our lack of a full text or the context for the text likely make it the best, most accurate approach.

All of that said, while 70 percent of the book scattered across *Contra Celsum* and potentially out of context might not make it possible to recreate *The True Doctrine*, textual study and educated guesswork can bring out a lot of themes and ideas that were found in Celsus's original. It is important to realize that he wrote to slander Christianity; he dedicates much time to pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions, real or imagined, in Christian doctrine and writing. For example, he took issue with the worship of Jesus, which he sees as absolutely ridiculous because Jesus could not possibly have been worthy of worship. The story he tells about Jesus via Origen birth illustrates this perfectly:<sup>30</sup>

He says that '(Mary) was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery.' Then he says that 'after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wondering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus.'<sup>31</sup>

Celsus is making a point here of drawing attention to the seeming incongruence. Jesus is revered by Christians, yet he came from a modest, or in Celsus's understanding, shameful birth. This does not make sense to Celsus, who believes that important people should be

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<sup>30</sup> His disrespect for Jesus is reminiscent of his disrespect for Moses, who he also believes is not worthy of the veneration he receives.

<sup>31</sup> Origen, 1:29

noble and royal, and it is the kind of short, specific argument that comes up again and again in *Contra Celsum*.

In the context of *The True Doctrine*, then, Celsus's attack on the Christians that we will examine here, the one based on the counterhistorical exodus tradition, is just one of many anti-Christian arguments that share the trait of derivation from older polemical traditions of various kinds. It is unique, though, in its incorporation of anti-Semitic themes, which are present mainly to indict the Christians on the same charges that the exodus tradition brings against the Jews: aside from their practices lacking legitimacy because of what they actually are, they also lack legitimacy because the Christians artificially created them, and in doing so they abandoned the practices of their ancestors, the Jews. Since Celsus believes that every person should fit into a legitimate group, and groups can only be legitimate if they have always followed the traditions of their ancestors, this is a major problem, because the Jews and the Christians do not fit in a positive way. In this chapter, after showing Celsus's use of the exodus tradition, I will explore his reading of Jewish and Christian history, the space that the Jews and then the Christians occupy in his worldview, and how the two groups relate to each other, based on his use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos*.

### **Genos**

In the third book of *Contra Celsum*, Origen lays out Celsus's understanding of Jewish history. According to Origen, Celsus says that "the Jews were Egyptian by race, and left Egypt after revolting against the Egyptian community and despising the religious customs of Egypt."<sup>32</sup> Celsus also claims that "a revolt against the community led to the

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<sup>32</sup> Origen, 3:5.

introduction of new ideas.”<sup>33</sup> There are several important points here. The first is the sequence of events that Celsus describes. While he includes few details, we can see in the second quotation that there was a revolt, followed by “the introduction of new ideas.” Furthermore, we can infer from the first quotation that these new ideas refer mainly to “religious customs;” the Jews would presumably need new ones if they were so strongly opposed to those of the Egyptians. Looking back to the counterhistorical exodus tradition from the first chapter, therefore, we see that Celsus’s story fits in nicely. True, he does not give a reason for the original revolt, which in Manetho’s and Apion’s stories was the separation from Egyptian society for health reasons, but the core aspects are still here. There is a revolt, and it *leads to* the new customs and a departure from Egypt.

There is also a key aspect of Celsus’s story that he emphasizes more strongly than either Manetho or Apion. In their stories, we learned that the Jews were originally “Egyptian.” Here, Celsus says that they are “Egyptian by race (*genos*).” There may not be a distinction; “Egyptian” may have meant “Egyptian by *genos*” for Manetho and Apion. However, by using the word *genos*, Celsus makes explicit a connection between *genos* and religious custom that was at most only implied by his predecessors. This connection is not intuitive today, because we can see the etymological relationship between *genos* and genealogy, and the latter is generally defined by descent and ancestry exclusively. As Buell points out, though, *genos* in antiquity could also be defined by a variety of characteristics, such as a common goal, language, or even the climate of the area in which a group lives.<sup>34</sup> Of all the traits Buell lists, however, “religious practice” may be the most common: “when writing about ‘others,’ religion is often singled out as a site of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Buell, Denise Kimber. *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 38.

ethnoracial difference.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, in Celsus’s exodus story the Jews separate themselves from the Egyptian *genos* via religious practice.

Even though religious practice defines *genos* in Celsus’s story, he does not separate ancestry or heritage from *genos* completely. In fact, the idea of *genos* as something permanent and unchangeable, something one is born with, helps Celsus’s argument considerably. On the one hand, it reinforces the egregious error the Jews committed. In a when tradition and lineage were so crucial to identity, turning one’s back on these was the ultimate offense. On the other hand, the aura of permanence that surrounds *genos* ensures that the Jews are always tainted. No matter what they do, no matter how they argue, they will always have Egyptian ancestors in their history. There is a contradiction here, however. If Celsus accepts the conception of *genos* as permanent so that it will work against the Jews, how can he also allow that the Jews were able to disassociate from the Egyptian *genos* via religious practice? To find an answer to this question, we need to take a closer look at Celsus’s use of *ethnos*.

### **Ethnos**

In the first book of *Contra Celsum*, Origen quotes Celsus directly comparing the Jews to a variety of other groups:

Hear Celsus’s words: ‘There is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men.’ And he would not speak of the Jews as being ‘a very wise nation’ on par with ‘the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, Persians, Odrysians, Samothracians, and Eleusinians.’<sup>36</sup>

Several terms here require our attention. The first is “ancient doctrine,” which neither Origen nor Celsus attempts to explicate. However, we do see Origen suggest in the same chapter that nations can have “similar doctrines” or have “their own doctrine.” In the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Origen, 1:14.

context of a certain nation's "doctrine," the word seems to be specific, referring to whatever practices or beliefs are held by that nation. It does not seem, however, that the shared "ancient doctrine" is something specific, even though Origen uses the same word. If there were certain practices or beliefs to which Celsus was referring, it is likely that Origen would address them. Instead, "ancient doctrine" is left purposely vague, and so what is important about the doctrine must be not what it contains, but rather the very fact that it is ancient. The wording of Celsus's quotation supports this: if it has "existed from the beginning," and these wise nations have "always" held it, then it follows that the nations have held it from "the beginning," and therefore these nations have "existed from the beginning" just like the doctrine itself. These nations, therefore, are totally original and have no precedent. They are wise nations because they have always existed, since the beginning of time.

The second term we need to examine further is "nation," which is actually Chadwick's translation of the Greek word *ethnos*.<sup>37</sup> This translation is misleading because the modern term "nation" is strongly associated with political allegiance, whereas *ethnos*, like *genos*, can actually be defined by a number of different traits (Buell 38). For Celsus here, the crucial characteristic of an *ethnos*, aside from its possession of the "ancient doctrine," is wisdom; as we can see in the quotation, the Jews do not have the "ancient doctrine" and therefore cannot be counted as a "wise nation." Again, wisdom is not defined by either Origen or Celsus, but based on his argument a little later on in the book, Origen assumes that wisdom is a reflection on the quality of a nation's "doctrines."<sup>38</sup> We also learn that Origen considers Moses to be the author of the Jewish

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Origen, 1:16.

doctrines, which means that “doctrines” are associated with the Torah and thus with religious beliefs or practices.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Celsus views the Jews as a lesser *ethnos* because they lack antiquity, and they have religious practices that are not “wise” like those of other nations.

We see from all of this analysis, therefore, that both *genos* and *ethnos* defy our English translation. The use of the word “race” for *genos* implies ancestry or lineage, a trait that of course can never be changed. Likewise, the translation of *ethnos* as “nation” suggests a political arrangement that is impermanent and could easily change at any time. When the two terms are understood in this way, *genos* and *ethnos* contrast considerably, and are even opposite in some ways. This creates a hierarchy, because if we assume that *genos* is meant to imply a permanent status and *ethnos* is meant to imply an at least potentially temporary status, we also assume that *genos* is foundational to the identity of the Jews in a way that *ethnos* is not. I do not believe that this is how Celsus intended to use these words, however.

### **Genos and Ethnos**

For Celsus, *genos* and *ethnos* are closely related and that he uses them in very similar ways. At some point in the past, the Jews separated from the Egyptian *genos* by revolting and then instituting new religious practices. Then, by Celsus’s time, the Jews were an inferior *ethnos* because they lacked antiquity and there was something wrong with their religious practice. Both of these shortcomings, of course, can be traced to their original revolt against the Egyptians. So Celsus uses both terms to present his understanding of Jewish history, but he also uses them for more: both *ethnos* and *genos*

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

are categories of exclusion. More specifically, they both serve to distinguish the Jews unfavorably *on religious grounds*. The first event after they revolted against the Egyptian *genos*, and in fact the direct result, was new religious customs, and the reason that the Jewish *ethnos* is different from all of the other *ethnos* is that their religious practice is not justified by the ancient doctrine. That Celsus does this is hardly surprising; as we have seen, religion was a common factor that was cited in the ancient world when differentiating between both *ethnos* and *genos*, and it was understood to produce especially strong connections between those who shared a common one.<sup>40</sup> What is important is that using both *genos* and *ethnos*, Celsus portrays the Jews as a group that has always been inferior because of their religious practices. He uses the two terms because they function in a certain way, rather than because of their definition or connotations.

Using *genos* and *ethnos* primarily for their function was common in antiquity. Buell's suggests that since *ethnos* and *genos* were inexact terms and were defined in a variety of ways, it is appropriate to use them interchangeably.<sup>41</sup> Even as they were clearly flexible, though, the idea that they were both fixed categories also persisted.<sup>42</sup> Thus, ethnicity and race were categories of exclusion if one claimed that they could not be changed, or they were categories of inclusion if they could be. Buell refers to this phenomenon as "ascribed/achieved" or "fixed/fluid," but instead of viewing it as an either/or situation, sees it as a spectrum.<sup>43</sup> Views on *ethnos* and *genos* can therefore be on

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<sup>40</sup> Buell, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Buell, 42.

one side or the other, or somewhere in between. I will argue that the latter is the case for Celsus.

We briefly addressed the apparent contradiction in Celsus's use of *genos*. Although he certainly relies on its being understood as fixed and unchangeable in one sense, he also acknowledges that the Jews were able to break away from the Egyptian *genos*, which can only mean that it is not completely fixed. Thus, Celsus's use of the term falls somewhere in the middle of Buell's fixed/fluid spectrum. Understanding Celsus's conception of *genos* in this way also demonstrates just how much he values function over definition: *genos* is fixed when he needs to show that the Jews can never really escape their Egyptian ancestry, yet fluid when he wants to shun them as rebels and needs to explain why they exist as completely separate from the Egyptians.

Celsus's use of *ethnos* also exists somewhere in the middle of Buell's spectrum. The whole idea of the "ancient doctrine" is an appeal to fixity; all of the legitimate *ethnos*, unlike the Jews, have always existed since the beginning of time. They are an *ethnos* and have always been that same *ethnos*. Celsus also allows the term to be fluid, however. The Jews are an *ethnos*, yet they have not always been that particular *ethnos* since they once belonged to the Egyptian *ethnos* (the Egyptians are an *ethnos* as well as a *genos*) (cite). Again, we can see that Celsus's uses the term in either a fixed or a fluid sense depending on what function he needs it to serve.

Celsus's use of the counterhistorical exodus tradition therefore has a different focus than Manetho and Apion. Whereas various incriminating details were important to them, Celsus is more concerned with the general arc of the story, and with discrediting the Jews via the broader concepts of *genos*, *ethnos*, and religious practice. He does this

for a specific reason, however: he wants to bring to hold Christians accountable for exactly the same argument, but with a connection to the Jews instead of the Egyptians. Although by Celsus's time Christians had had many complaints leveled against them (and Celsus co-opted many of them), he probably felt that the application of an older tradition that was more widely known would be the most effective.<sup>44</sup>

### **Genos, Ethnos, and the Counterhistorical Exodus Tradition**

In the third book of *Contra Celsum*, Origen quotes Celsus making a clear attempt to apply the criticisms of the counterhistorical exodus tradition to the Christians:

In his next remarks Celsus imagines that 'the Jews were Egyptian by race, and left Egypt after revolting against the Egyptian community 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 led to the introduction of new ideas.'<sup>45</sup>

There are two important elements to this story. The first is the idea that via the Christians, the Jews have been in a sense paid back for what they did wrong, and they too have had to suffer through a rebellious group in their midst. It is a final insult to the Jews, since comparing them to the Christians was certainly not a compliment. The second element is the reading of Christian history, and the origins of the Christians are basically identical to those of the Jews.

If we extrapolate Celsus's claim here, we envision a Christian exodus story, as it were, that involves a group of Jews being ostracized in some way, then revolting against the Jewish community, and finally breaking away from the traditional religious customs and forming their own. This is an ingenious attack on the Christians by Celsus, for several reasons. It insinuates that the Christians are bad in the same way that the Jews are

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<sup>44</sup> Frede, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Origen, 3:5.

bad, which of course is a very unflattering comparison, and even more so, it has two layers. Not only are the Christians illegitimate because they abandoned their traditional religious customs, but the customs they were abandoning belonged to a group that was already illegitimate to begin with. Finally, as noted earlier, by making this claim, Celsus is able to give his argument the support of a tradition that stretches back hundreds of years, well before the time of Jesus. This makes it a much harder argument to ignore.

Given the presentation of the story here, we can also infer that Celsus remains consistent in his views on *ethnos* and *genos*. If this is the case, then it would seem that his issue with Christianity cannot be, as Hoffmann claims, that they are a “religious association” masquerading as a nation, because as we saw earlier Celsus took no issue with religion as a basis for an *ethnos* or *genos*.<sup>46</sup> Instead, the problem is that Christianity introduces a new wrinkle to the narrative. Unlike the Jews, who only formed as a group and separated themselves from the Egyptians, the Christians went a step further by forming a group, separating themselves, and then actively seeking out new converts from other *ethnos* and *genos*.

The Christians open goal of proselytizing forces us to question if they even fit into the *ethnos/genos* paradigm. Celsus has this to say about the subject: “‘When they were beginning,’ he says, ‘they were few and were of one mind; but since they have spread to become a multitude, they are divided and rent asunder, and each wants to have his own party. For they want this from the beginning.’”<sup>47</sup> What Celsus is suggesting here is that the Christians, after undergoing the same “exodus” from the Jews as the Jews did from the Egyptians, the Christians were initially “of one mind,” meaning they were an *ethnos*,

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<sup>46</sup> Celsus. From Hoffman’s introduction, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, 3:10.

albeit an illegitimate one. Once they began searching for and gaining members from outside of their group, however, the connection they all had was severed in some way, meaning that Christians as a whole were no longer an *ethnos*. Thus, Hoffmann is actually correct, at least in the sense that Celsus defines an *ethnos* as a group with a greater connection than just basic religious beliefs.

What is this greater connection? If we compare Celsus's conceptions of the Christians and the Jews, who he does view as an *ethnos*, we see two differences. First, the Jews have a stronger connection to each other, in that they leave Egypt and all go to live in Judea. They come from the same place and go to the same place, all as a group. Christians, on the other hand, start out in the same place but end up spread out everywhere and incorporating people who were not initially associated with them. Second, returning to Buell's idea of the importance of religion in defining ethnicity and race, she says that "religious practices (especially sacrifices) both produced and reinforced kinship."<sup>48</sup> Celsus likely felt that while the Jews did share religious *practice*, including sacrifice, and were therefore closely linked by it, this vast array of Christians from so many different places did not. They had no characteristics that mark them as a distinct *ethnos*.

By applying the counterhistorical exodus tradition to the Christians, Origen not only assigns to them the criticisms that the tradition (tainted religious practices, a lack of antiquity), but he presents them as even worse because they are twice removed from legitimacy. Additionally, he points out that while the Jews keep themselves as a distinct group and have unique customs that they observe, even if these customs are flawed, the Christians do neither. Instead they endanger the social order by allowing anyone to join

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<sup>48</sup> Buell, 42.

them. Thus, Celsus demotes the Christians even farther than the Jews, portraying them not as an inferior *ethnos*, but instead, not as an *ethnos* at all, a group that lurks on the edge of society as a potentially serious threat.

#### **IV. Origen's counterarguments**

When Ambrose needed a response to Celsus, Origen was clearly the right choice. Origen grew up in Alexandria, in a church that had “radical demands for Christian commitment” (Trigg 4). At the same, it seems that only his father was Christian; his mother was Jewish and instilled in him a love for Hebrew Scripture.<sup>49</sup> But to go along with his vast knowledge of Hebrew Christian Scripture, he was also well attuned to the strong Gnostic tradition of Alexandria, and he also mastered the study of Greek literature and philosophy. Finally, he was a voracious reader of Philo, and during his days in Caesarea, he was regularly in communication and debate with the Jewish community there.<sup>50</sup>

In the preface, Origen expresses disdain for the project and criticizes those who need an explanation as to why Celsus's claims are untrue:

Accordingly I have no sympathy with anyone who had faith in Christ such that it could be shaken by Celsus (who is no longer living the common life among men but has already been dead a long time), or by any plausibility of argument. I do not know in what category I ought to reckon one who needs written arguments in books to restore and confirm him in his faith after it has been shaken by the accusations brought by Celsus against the Christians.<sup>51</sup>

In this passage, Origen declares that “faith” should be separate from “arguments.” He finds it abhorrent that there are people who would let Celsus's argument against their

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<sup>49</sup> Krauss, Samuel. *The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Georgia Press, 2007. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Trigg, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Origen, 5.

faith sway them, and then would need an argument supporting their faith to reassure them. The debate over the legitimacy of faith should not affect that faith; as Origen says earlier, the “mere facts” should be enough for unshakeable faith.

Origen takes this one step farther in the next chapter when he discusses the dangers of “impressive doctrines in Greek philosophy” that he quotes Paul as calling “vain deceit:” “But Celsus’s arguments appear to me to have no deceit at all, not even vain deceit such as that in the opinions of those who have established philosophical schools and have received exceptional mental ability in that respect.”<sup>52</sup> Origen defines “deceit” here as arguments that are very convincing but ultimately untrue, and “vain” as arguments based in philosophical traditions, because human created these traditions, and it is vain to assume that human reasoning is superior to faith in Christ. So Celsus, at least to Origen, is unconvincing and his arguments do not “resemble the ideas of those who have founded philosophical sects.”<sup>53</sup> Not only is Celsus wrong to subject Christian belief to reasoning, then, but his reasoning is unfocused and inconsistent anyway.

Unfortunately for Origen, he does not get what he wants. Rather than debate belief and theology, he must debate social status. Celsus argues in several sections of *The True Doctrine* that Christians do not fit into society because they are not like other groups, and Origen, in order to refute him, attempts to show that they do fit in. By responding in this way though, he actually agrees to justify the Christians based on reasoning, contrary to his statement in the preface. Perhaps the biggest obstacle Origen

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Hoffmann, in the introduction to his English reconstruction of *The True Doctrine*, asserts that Celsus borrowed ideas from Platonism and Stoicism, among other philosophical schools, and was also a student of history and religion (29). Origen may reference this amalgam of ideas when he says that Celsus lacks philosophical inconsistency.

faces, though, is the incorporation of the Jews into Celsus's argument against the Christians. He cannot deny the relationship between the Christians and the Jews, and therefore that Christian legitimacy is in part dependent on Jewish legitimacy. So he needs to defend Jewish antiquity, yet also demonstrate why the Christians Origen walks a very fine line throughout *Contra Celsum*. On the one hand, he needs to effectively make an argument, as we have seen, that legitimizes Christians via the legitimacy of Jews. At the same time, he struggles to downplay the relationship between the two, because he does not want to associate them too much, and he wants Christianity to stand alone. Hence, when Celsus mocks Christians and Jews for fighting over what he sees as a trivial issue, the question as to whether or not Jesus is the Messiah that had been prophesied, Origen responds by claiming that in fact, far from a minor disagreement, it is a crucially important point. So he puts Christianity in the almost contradictory position of being both clearly opposed to the Jews, yet also relying on them as their only connection to credibility. Origen is able to get away with it here, because he simply refuting Celsus point by point and does not necessarily need a coherent argument himself. Ultimately, though, Origen was in a tough spot because he was arguing within a framework that was designed to exclude the Jews and the Christians.

From the beginning, when Origen responds to Celsus's claims about the "ancient doctrine," his acceptance of Celsus's framework is evident:

It is therefore worth while asking him why ever he believed in barbarian and Greek stories about the antiquity of the people whom he mentioned, while it is only this nation whose histories he regards as untrue. If all historians gave an honest account of their respective nations, why are we to disbelieve the prophets of the Jews alone? If 'Moses and the prophets wrote much about their own people which is biased in favor of their own doctrine,' why may we also not say as much of the compositions of the other nations also?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Origen, 1:14.

We might first note what is missing here, that is, a rebuttal of the very concept of an “ancient doctrine.” This suggests that he agrees with Celsus insofar as they both believe that legitimate *ethnos* should have the antiquity that “ancient doctrine” references. Now that Origen has accepted this, however, he has to prove that the Jews do in fact have the doctrine. He does this by first suggesting that an unbiased reading of Jewish writing attests to their antiquity, and then claiming that the only reason Celsus does not accept this is an unfounded assumption that they are “biased.” If one is to believe the writings of other *ethnos* with no outside proof (he points out later that many different *ethnos* give testimonies that contradict one another), there is no reason to then not believe the Jewish writings. The Jews have the antiquity that all “wise nations” should have, and they have the same proof that they all have. The Jews, for Origen, are a “wise nation” with the “ancient doctrine.”

To support his claim that the Jews have this “ancient doctrine,” Origen must also address Celsus argument regarding the Egyptian origins of the Jews. He does so in a similar vain to his previous argument:

In this way also we may establish that those who came out of Egypt with Moses were not Egyptians. If they had been Egyptian, their names must have been Egyptian, because in each language names are of the same type as the vernacular. But it is obvious that they were not Egyptians from the fact that the names are Hebrew (for the Bible is full of Hebrew names even of the in Egypt who gave such names to their sons). If so, then clearly the assertion of the Egyptians is false that those who were driven out of Egypt with Moses were Egyptians; and it is perfectly clear that they were descended from Hebrew stock according to the history recorded by Moses, and that they spoke their own language which they also employed to give names to their sons.<sup>55</sup>

This passage relates to our discussion of *ethnos* and *genos* in the previous chapter.

Looking more closely at Origen’s definition of *genos*, we see he believes that “if they had

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<sup>55</sup> Origen, 3:8.

been Egyptian, their names must have been Egyptian, because in each language names are of the same type as the vernacular.” Since “being” Egyptian for Origen must mean having Egyptian ancestry, because that is how he presents Celsus’s argument elsewhere, we see that he is actually making a connection between ancestry and language.

Essentially, he argues that because the Jews had Hebrew names, and therefore spoke the Hebrew language, they could not have been Egyptian by descent. Part of *genos* for Origen, at least in this particular instance, is language. So we have an example of Buell’s point that *genos* is not necessarily just about ancestry or lineage.

This focus on language and naming is critical to Origen, because *genos* is not the only important theme here. It is equally necessary for Origen to demonstrate that the Jews were always a separate *ethnos*, even when they lived among the Egyptians. Thus, the last sentence, where Origen says that the Jews “spoke their own language which they also employed to give names to their sons,” uses active words to describe the ways in which the Jews were separate from the Egyptians. They were always *actively*, instead of just by virtue of ancestry, different from the Egyptians.

In other words, there are two ways in which Jewish legitimacy could be questioned. The first, which Celsus uses, is to suggest that the Jews are descended from the Egyptians. Origen not only claims that this is not true, but goes farther. He also claims that even when the Jews occupied the same geographical area as the Egyptians, and could have potentially started following Egyptian traditional practices, thus becoming Egyptian in some sense, they did not. They remained separate from the Egyptians because of their actions and practices. What is fascinating about this argument is that Origen has made both of these points using language. Language for Origen proves

both that the Jews did not descend from the Egyptians, and also that they never followed the practices of the Egyptians. I would suggest that language is therefore an important part of Origen's definition of both *ethnos* and *genos* in this context, and furthermore, that he does not use either term in an exact sense. In fact, there are other instances in *Contra Celsum* where we clearly see him conflate the terms.

It follows from this that Origen, like Celsus, uses *ethnos* and *genos* as general ways to distinguish between groups, without concern for exact definition. This means that Origen's ethnoracial conceptions can be located, again like Celsus's, somewhere on Buell's fixed/fluid spectrum, in that he recognizes the possibility of fluidity but puts value on fixity. Of course, he differs from Celsus on the antiquity of the Jews, but here he again accepts Celsus paradigm, and again he implicitly blames Celsus's claim that Jews do not fit this paradigm on his refusal to take the Jewish historical writings at face value, or maybe even to read them at all. Origen's entire argument is based on the biblical exodus account, and he feels if Celsus were to treat the Jews fairly and accept their writings, instead of accusing them of bias or looking elsewhere for information about Jewish history, he would have to agree.

There is yet another nuance in Origen's argument, though; he does not address is the question of religious customs. Remember Celsus's claim to this effect: the Jews create new religious customs after becoming ostracized, revolting, and rejecting their traditional religious practice. It could be that he avoids it because he afraid that although he argues that a fair reading of the Bible will disprove Celsus, the story of the Passover offering that is found in the Bible could actually be used to argue that the Jews did create

new religious practice. However, I think a more convincing scenario is that Origen misreads Celsus.

We saw earlier how Celsus bought into the anti-Semitic exodus tradition, but also that his focus within that tradition was that while you could create an ethnos based on religion, it was illegitimate if that religion did not trace back to the “ancient doctrine” and the “beginning of time.” In Origen’s response, however, he focuses on all of the other aspects of the story, on the details. He spends time showing how it cannot be true that the Jews rebelled or were originally Egyptians, but does not broach the key question of whether the Jews are a legitimate ethnos *as defined by original religious practice*. He could easily have made this argument if he wanted to, and he could have done it by again citing the Bible. I think that his choice not to reflect an intentional avoidance of what part of the tradition is important to Celsus, and furthermore, this avoidance stems from an attempt to respond not just to Celsus but to the whole Exodus tradition. In the stories presented by Manetho and Apion, and so undoubtedly in other stories and oral traditions as well, the major problem with the Jews was that they were a wandering people who were not really the same type of group as others, and the fact that they had revolted against their original culture and left it underscored this point. For Celsus, on the other hand, they are the same type of group, they are an *ethnos*, but their unoriginal religious customs make them illegitimate.

The focus of the debate between Origen and Celsus is not the Jews, however, but the Christians, and it is there that we now turn. Since Celsus claimed that the two narratives were essentially the same, we can apply the same points that we deduced from the discussion about the Jews. This analysis will not only allow us to determine where

Origen believed that the Christians fit into Celsus's paradigm, but also what he believed to be the differences between the Christians and the Jews.

When we examine the four points of Celsus's story, we see that Origen must acknowledge that the Christians originally descended from the Jews, but he disputes the other three points, beginning with the idea of revolt:

If a revolt had been the cause of the Christians existing as a separate group (and they originated from the Jews for whom it was lawful to take up arms in defence of their families and to serve in the wars), the lawgiver of the Christians would not have forbidden entirely the taking of human life.<sup>56</sup>

Just as he did in his argument regarding the Jews, Origen appeals to the religious writings of the group he is defending, this time the Christians. While he does not reference Christian scripture or oral tradition explicitly, that is the only plausible source for his belief that Jesus disallowed the taking of human life. He needs to make the point that his source is the authoritative one, because Celsus gives authority to very different sources, and as we have seen they led to radically different conclusions.

We should also address the parenthetical note that Origen adds; he suggests that although, as descendents of the Jews, it would have been acceptable to separate using force, their teaching and their practice have advanced past that somehow. Additionally, it seems that the fact that the Christians could have revolted but chose not to puts them on an even higher plane. At the same time, the passage causes difficulties, which I would like to discuss more later.

Both Celsus and Origen agree that the debate between the Jews and the Christians essentially comes down to whether or not Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. For Origen, this does not mean that Christians have no respect for Jewish religion:

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<sup>56</sup> Origen, 3:7.

Accordingly, neither Jews nor Christians make any mistake in believing that the prophets spoke by divine inspiration, although they are wrong in holding the mistaken opinion that the prophesied Christ is still awaited, whose identity and origin have been proclaimed in accordance with the true meaning of the prophets.<sup>57</sup>

Origen makes an interesting move here, because he not only shows that the whole basis for Christian belief is a respect for Jewish religious custom, but he also demonstrates why, according to him, the Christians had to break away from that custom. The reason is that, in fact, the Christians are the ones who truly understand the prophets and the Jewish religious writings, not the Jews. So Origen here has identified the key theme of religious originality.

## **V. Conclusion**

The Christians did not fit into Celsus's view of the way society or societies should be organized. It does not take much of a logical step from here to conclude, as we saw Hoffmann assert earlier, that Celsus saw the Christians as a threat to the established order. At the time that Origen wrote *Contra Celsum*, this was a dangerous viewpoint as far as the Christians were concerned, because the Roman Empire was facing a variety of internal and external threats, and some blamed the Christians, who were being treated in a relatively favorable manner by the emperor (Trigg 53). As a result, there was a concern that sentiments like those of Celsus could lead to renewed persecution and it was for this reason that Origen's Roman patron, Ambrose, sent him *The True Doctrine* and asked him to respond to it. As we have seen, Origen was reluctant to do so, arguing that it was best to ignore Celsus and his arguments. We have also seen, however, that Origen's reluctance was based on his disdain for those who would question their beliefs after reading Celsus, which was not Ambrose's primary concern. Perhaps, since he was in Caesarea, in

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<sup>57</sup> Origen, 3:4.

Palestine, Origen was less attuned to the possibility of persecution than was Ambrose, who lived in Rome. Given his attitude, though, it is equally possible that he was well aware of the possibility, but could not take a writing by a long-dead author that he had never read before seriously as a threat, and only wrote *Contra Celsum* so as not to insult his patron.

Origen's response to Celsus is that first, the Jews have antiquity, and second, that the Christians are the ones who have the real claim to this legacy because they correctly understand Jesus to have been the Messiah. Notice how he keeps the Jews inside of Celsus's paradigm until the rise of Christianity, at which point they are cast aside in favor of the Christians, who carry on as a group also inside that paradigm. However, as compelling as Origen's arguments are, and the importance of *Contra Celsum* attests to this, more than anything else it demonstrates how important it was for early Christians to be accepted like other groups, yet how difficult it was for them to gain that acceptance.

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