

## A pagan critique of Christianity

Below are excerpts from *The True Doctrine*, an early critique of Christianity written by the 2nd-century Greco-Roman philosopher Celsus. The original work is lost, but Celsus is heavily quoted (and refuted) in a later defense of the faith written by Origen, a prominent Christian theologian.

It is by the names of certain demons, and by the use of incantations, that the Christians appear to be possessed of miraculous power. And it was by means of sorcery that Jesus was able to accomplish the wonders which he performed; and foreseeing that others would attain the same knowledge, and do the same things, making a boast of doing them by help of the power of God, he excludes such from his kingdom.

In adopting opinions we should follow reason and a rational guide, since he who assents to opinions without following this course is very liable to be deceived. Certain persons [Christians] who do not wish either to give or receive a reason for their belief, keep repeating, "Do not examine, but believe!" and, "Your faith will save you!" Such also say, "The wisdom of this life is a bad thing, but foolishness is a good thing!"

Miracles were performed in all countries, or at least in many of them. Aesculapius conferred benefits on many, and foretold future events to entire cities, which were dedicated to him, such as Tricca, and Epidaurus, and Cos, and Pergamus; and along with Aesculapius, Aristeeus of Proconnesus, and a certain Clazomenian, and Cleomedes of Astypalaea. The Dioscuri, and Hercules, and Aesculapius, and Dionysus, are believed by the Greeks to have become gods after being men. But the Christians cannot bear to call such beings gods, because they were at first men, and yet they manifested many noble qualities, which were displayed for the benefit of mankind, while they assert that Jesus was seen after His death by his own followers. He was seen indeed, but was only a shadow! Their Jesus after his death appeared only to the members of his own troop.

Where do they hope to go after death? To another land better than this. . . . What they say of a land which is much better and more excellent than this, has been borrowed from certain divine ancient writers, and chiefly from Plato, who in his *Phaedon* discourses on the pure land lying in a pure heaven. . . . Their ridiculous teaching on the subject of the resurrection is derived from what they have heard on the doctrine from Plato, jumbled and misconstrued; they uphold this doctrine in order that they may see and know God. After they have been utterly refuted and vanquished, they still, as if regardless of all objections, come back again to the same question, 'How then shall we see and know God? how shall we go to Him?' They expect to see God with their bodily eyes, to hear him with their ears, and to touch him sensibly with their hands, because they believe the Divine Being is corporeal in his nature, and possesses a body like a man.

Seeing you are so eager for some novelty, how much better it would have been if you had chosen as the object of your zealous homage some one of those who died a glorious death, and whose divinity might have received the support of some myth to perpetuate his memory! Why, if you were not satisfied with Hercules or Aesculapius, and other heroes of antiquity, you had Orpheus, who was confessedly a divinely inspired man, who died a violent death. . . . What saying equal to these did your god utter under suffering? But you have . . . set up as a god one who ended a most infamous life by a most miserable death. How much more suitable than he would have been Jonah in the whale's belly, or Daniel delivered from the wild beasts, or any of a still more monstrous and portentous kind! Choose Jonah rather than Jesus as your god; Daniel rescued from the lions is more worthy of your adoration than Jesus.

Why is he sometimes present, and sometimes absent? What is the business which takes demons away from place to place? Those who crucified your God himself, suffered no harm for doing so; those who inflicted death upon Jesus suffered nothing afterwards through so long a time. Of those whom you load with insults, you may in like manner say that they voluntarily submit to such treatment, and therefore they bear insults with patience; yet these gods severely punish the scorner, so that he must either flee and hide himself, or be taken and perish.