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# Sacrifices, Laws, and Demons in Origen's Debate with Celsus The Political Consequences of a Spiritual Struggle<sup>1</sup>

Riemer ROUKEMA

Keywords: *Origen of Alexandria; Celsus, Platonic philosopher; sacrifices; demons; natural law; written laws*

1. Introduction; 2. Origen's references to Scripture for his view on the spiritual organization of the world; 3. The Christian attitude to gentile sacrifices to gods and demons; 4. Celsus's criticism of the Christian abstinence from sacrifices; 5. The political implications of Origen's controversy with Celsus; 6. Conclusion

## 1. Introduction

According to Origen of Alexandria (ca 185-254 CE), the world was full of spiritual, supernatural powers, good and evil, benevolent and malevolent, angels and demons. The question of the existence or non-existence of God which occupies many of our contemporaries was irrelevant to this great Christian scholar. Yet it was most important to him to distinguish sharply between the invisible, incorporeal and even incomprehensible Creator who is mere Spirit, “a simple intellectual being” (*intellectualis natura simplex*, in Rufinus's translation), and the spiritual powers created by him, rational beings (*rationabiles*, λογικοί), some of whom fell away from God in the beginning, according to his

1 Originally a paper for the conference The Political and the Demonic: Imaginations of Subject and Collectivity in Abrahamic Traditions, Münster, 9–11 February 2023.

work *On First Principles*.<sup>2</sup> Origen respects Scripture's overwhelming variety of names and designations for these powers without proposing a systematic hierarchy of spiritual beings as pseudo-Dionysius did in the fifth century CE.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is clear that he took their existence, their activities and their impact very seriously.

To a considerable extent, Origen's persuasion of the existence and influence of spiritual powers was formally in keeping with contemporaneous philosophical views. For example, in a second-century textbook on Plato, Alcinous explains that the Creator made seven planets which are gods (*θεοί*) and that there are other generated divinities, *δαίμονες*, that reign over the sublunary world.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, his contemporary Apuleius of Madaura extensively discusses the activities of the gods (*dei*) and *daemones* according to Plato.<sup>5</sup> We also find such persuasions in Origen's fragments of Celsus's work *Λόγος ἀληθής*, the *True Doctrine*, from around 180 CE. Celsus, a Platonic philosopher like Alcinous and Apuleius, held that "it is probable that from the beginning different parts of the earth were allotted to different overseers (*ἐπόπται*) and authorities (*ἐπικρατεῖαι*)" and that

- 2 Origen, *Princ.* I 1,4-7; I 5,1-5 (ed. John Behr, *Origen, On First Principles*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, 28-37, 90-105); *intellectualis natura simplex* in I 1,6, line 113.
- 3 Ps.-Dionysius Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia* 6-10 (eds. Günter Heil – Adolf Ritter, *Ps.-Dionysius Areopagita, De caelesti hierarchia*, Patristische Texte und Studien 36, De Gruyter, Berlin – Boston 2012).
- 4 Alcinous, *Didascalicus* 14-15 (ed. John Whittaker, *Alcinous, Didascalicus*, trans. Pierre Louis, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1990, 34-35).
- 5 Apuleius of Madaura, *De deo Socratis* 6-16; *De Platone* 11 (ed. Jean Beaujeu, *Apulée de Madaura, De deo Socratis*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1973, 26-37; 70-71).

nations have to live according to the will of these powers.<sup>6</sup> In Celsus's view, when Christians refuse to participate in sacrifices to the demons performed according to the local laws, they are not aware that "they are always associating with demons", viz. when "they eat food and drink wine and taste fruits, and drink even water itself, and breathe even the very air", all of which they receive from demons to whom the administration of these gifts has been allotted.<sup>7</sup>

Origen replied to Celsus in his apology *Against Celsus* (ca 248 CE). This paper deals with his reaction to Celsus's criticism of the Christian refusal to participate in the religious ceremonies of the cities of the Roman Empire, notably in the sacrifices to the Greek and Roman gods and demons, considered idols by the Christians. I will present and analyze the gist of the controversy on the spiritual organization of the world, the question of participation in the public worship of gods and demons, and the appeal to different laws that were considered authoritative.

## *2. Origen's references to Scripture for his view on the spiritual organization of the world*

With regard to my topic, it is striking that already in the preface to his work *Against Celsus* Origen inconspicuously touches upon the

6 Origen, *Cels.* V 25, lines 9-13 (Sources Chrétiennes 147; trans. Henry Chadwick, *Origen, Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1965, 283). For these *ἐπόπται* and an introduction to Celsus, see Horacio Lona, *Die »wahre Lehre« des Kelsos*, Kommentar zu frühchristlichen Apologeten, Ergänzungsband 1, Herder, Freiburg 2005, 42-50; 54-55; 64-67; 295-296; for the *ἐπόπται* see also Carl Andresen, *Logos und Nomos: Die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 30, De Gruyter, Berlin 1955, 197-198.

7 Origen, *Cels.* VIII 25, lines 1-4; 27, lines 14-17; 28, lines 5-13 (SC 150); trans. H. Chadwick, slightly adapted.

theme that would occupy him later on. In its preface he declares that someone who has received God's love manifested in Jesus Christ should not be shaken by Celsus's attack on the Christian faith. He then quotes Paul's words in Rom 8:35-37,

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered". No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Pausing after this passage, Origen notes that in the subsequent verses Paul adds another list of things that tend to separate people from Christ who are unstable in their piety, and continues his quotation from Paul (Rom 8:38-39),

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>8</sup>

In this list angels, rulers and powers deserve our attention, for they refer to the organization of the invisible world. Apparently, Origen understood that theoretically these angels, rulers and powers might separate Christians from the love of God, which implies that they belong to the forces that resist God and Christ. This is confirmed in Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, written circa five years before

8 *Cels.* Preface 3, lines 8-26 (SC 132), trans. Rom 8:35-39, *New Revised Standard Version*, National Council of Churches, Washington, DC 1989. In *Cels.* Preface 6, lines 1-3, Origen says that he wrote the preface after he had replied to Celsus's attacks put into the mouth of a Jew, i.e. after its first book (*Cels.* I 28-71, SC 132).



*Against Celsus* (ca 243 CE). There he explains that the first list (Rom 8:35-37) consists of human temptations in which Christians may be sure to conquer them, whereas the second sort of temptations (Rom 8:38-39) can only be overcome by Christ, “who disarmed the rulers and authorities, triumphing over them in himself” (cf. Col 2:15).<sup>9</sup> Next, Origen explains that in the second list of temptations “death” refers to the devil, “the last enemy of Christ to be destroyed” (1Cor 15:26), and that the angels, rulers and powers are those who, along with the devil, are destined for the eternal fire (Matt 25:41).<sup>10</sup> We perceive here Origen’s basic congeniality with the spiritual world of the New Testament.

Likewise, in his apology he also refers to Old Testament texts about angels, gods and demons. Six times he quotes there Ps 95:5 LXX, “All the gods of the nations are demons (δαιμόνια).”<sup>11</sup> Several times he quotes or alludes to Deut 32:8-9 LXX, a passage about God’s repartition of the earth among the nations according to the number of his angels, Israel being the Lord’s own portion and inheritance.<sup>12</sup> With reference to this passage he observes that Christians do not

9 Origen, *In Rom. comm.* VII 10, lines 1-25 (ed. Caroline Hammond Bammel, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes. Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins: Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes, Buch 1-3*, Aus der Geschichte der lateinischen Bibel, Herder, Freiburg 1990).

10 *In Rom. comm.* VII 10, lines 48-53; 64-70; 101-105 (ed. C. Hammond Bammel).

11 *Cels.* III 2; III 37; IV 29; VII 65; VII 69; VIII 3 (SC 136, 150). The Septuagint reads πάντες οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν δαιμόνια. The Hebrew term אֱלִילִים, “idols” (Ps 96:5 MT) is rendered as δαιμόνια, which is actually the diminutive of Celsus’s term δαίμονες. See Marcel Borret (ed.), *Origène, Contre Celse Tome V. Introduction générale, tables et index* (SC 227), Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1976, 383-385.

12 *Cels.* IV 8; V 10; V 29 (SC 136, 147). See Jean Daniélou, *Origène*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1948, 222-235, for a discussion of these angels of the nations in Origen’s works; for more ancient authors see Erik Peterson, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis: Studien und Untersuchungen*, Herder, Freiburg 1959, 51-63; Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban – Miruna-Irina Tătaru-Cazaban, “Les anges des nations dans le christianisme des premiers siècles I”, in *Archeus: Studies in the History of Religions* 19-20 (2015-16), 49-85.

worship angels and the sun, moon and stars, for according to Moses these have been allotted to the pagan nations, whereas Israel was to be God's own people, with which the Christians identified themselves later on.<sup>13</sup> In reply to Celsus's criticism of the Christian doctrine on the devil or Satan, Origen explains that this adversary (*ἀντικείμενος*) is the first of all beings who fell from the blessed state in heaven and was the cause of the expulsion of human beings from the divine (and heavenly) paradise. For this fall he refers to prophecies about the kings of Tyre and Babylon (Ezech 28:11-19; Isa 14:12-20). Origen identifies Satan with the destroyer (*ὁλεθρεύων*) in Exod 12:23, with Azazel in Lev 16:8, 10, with Belial in Judg 19:22 and 20:13 and with the serpent (*δράκων*) in Job 40:25 LXX.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as a matter of fact, Origen is also aware of the activities of God's angels like Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, who perform God's will in the world.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. *The Christian attitude to gentile sacrifices to gods and demons*

So, we see that formally Celsus and Origen could agree on the existence of divine, spiritual powers – demons or angels – who were active in the world and influenced humanity. Materially, however, their appreciations of this realm of spiritual beings were opposed to each other. This resulted in the existential and practical problem faced by Christians – which raised the exasperation of their non-Christian compatriots – viz. whether or not Christians could participate in the religious, sacrificial ceremonies devoted to the Greek and Roman gods and demons.

From apostolic times onward, the mainstream Christian policy toward so-called idol offerings (*εἰδολόθυτα*) was that Christians

<sup>13</sup> *Cels.* V 10 (SC 147); Deut 4:19-20.

<sup>14</sup> *Cels.* VI 42-44; VIII 25 (SC 147, 150).

<sup>15</sup> *Cels.* I 25 (SC 132); *Princ.* I 8,1 (ed. J. Behr).

should abstain from them. In this respect, these Christians agreed with the law-abiding Jews who rejected Hellenization and abhorred idol offerings.<sup>16</sup> According to Acts 15, the so-called Apostolic Council decided that gentile Christians were welcome in the Jewish-Christian church if, among other things, they abstained from matters polluted by idols (Acts 15:20, 29). Paul discussed the stance toward idol offerings in 1Cor 8-10 and concluded that participation in sacrificial ceremonies came down to having communion with demons (*δαιμόνια*; 1Cor 10:14-22). In comparison with the decision of the Apostolic Council, Paul's only concession was that, when a Christian bought meat at the market or was invited by a non-Christian for a meal, he did not need to check whether the food had previously been sacrificed to idols; however, in case the Christian was informed about its sacrificial provenance, he should abstain from it (1Cor 10:25-29). In Paul's view, idols were nothing, but the effect of idol worship, including the offering of sacrifices to the idols, was that its participants exposed themselves to demons, which was destructive for a Christian's communion with Christ (1Cor 8:4-6; 10:19-20). The fact that Paul devoted a lengthy exposition to this theme demonstrates that some Corinthian Christians did not see any spiritual danger in their participation in meals in which food was sacrificed to idols (1Cor 8:1-3, 7-13). Some Christians in Pergamum and Thyatira shared this view, according to Rev 2:14, 20, but in line with Paul, the freedom they took is severely rebuked there. The same rigorous position is found in the Didache, the apologist Aristides, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage and Cyprian of Carthage.<sup>17</sup> However, Justin and Irenaeus testify that "heretical" Christians like Basilides and Valentinians – traditionally

16 E.g. 1Macc 1:41-2:30; 2Macc 6:18-28; 4Macc 5:1-38; Herbert Danby (trans.), *Mishnah, Abodah Zarah*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1933, 437-445.

17 Riemer Roukema, "Paul's Admonitions on Idol Offerings (1Cor 8 and 10) in Patristic Interpretation", in *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010), 249-258.

dubbed “Gnostics” – deviated from the mainstream Christian view in that they saw no problem in participating in sacrificial ceremonies.<sup>18</sup>

Initially the dilemma for gentile Christians whether or not to participate in ceremonies in which sacrifices were offered to idols came up in their usual meals with colleagues, relatives and friends. Soon, however, the Roman authorities discovered that they could use sacrifices to the gods and the reverence to a statue of the emperor as tests to find out who were the obstinate Christians that refused to participate. Around 112 CE Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia, wrote to emperor Trajan that he ordered people who were declared to be Christians to invoke the gods, to make offerings of incense and wine to the emperor’s statue and to revile Christ. Those who were willing to do so were dismissed, others were executed or, if they were Roman citizens, sent to Rome, but Pliny also asked Trajan’s advice about what to do with these stubborn sectarians. Interestingly, Pliny added that there was a revival of visits to the almost deserted temples and of the offering of sacrifices, so that sacrificial meat was on sale everywhere, contrary to the recent past.<sup>19</sup> Owing to the spread of Christianity in Bithynia,<sup>20</sup> a rivalry between the pagan and Christian religions seems to have arisen there.

18 Justin, *Dial.* 34,8-35,6 (ed. Edgar Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1914, 130-131); Irenaeus, *Haer.* I 6,3; 24,5; 26,3; 28,2 (SC 264); Porphyrius, *Abst.* I,42,2-3 (eds. Jean Bouffartigue – Michel Patillon, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1977), see Christoph Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1992, 411-413.

19 Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96,3-6; 10 (Loeb Classical Library 59).

20 Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96,9 (LCL 59); cf. 1Pet 1:1.

4. *Celsus's criticism of the Christian abstinence from sacrifices*

Likewise, circa 70 years after Pliny's epistle to Trajan, Celsus also urged the Christians to partake in the public feasts in which sacrifices were offered to demons.<sup>21</sup> According to Origen's concluding book VIII of his apology Celsus argued,

If these idols are nothing, why is it dangerous to take part in the grand (public) banquet? And if there are demons of some sort, obviously these too belong to God, and we ought to believe them and sacrifice to them according to the laws and pray to them that they may be kindly disposed.<sup>22</sup>

Celsus's words "If these idols are nothing" remind us of Paul who stated that "an idol is nothing in the world" (1Cor 8:4). Celsus's reference to the laws that prescribe people to worship the demons and gods reminds his readers of his very first objection to the Christians, viz. that they make secret associations contrary to the laws.<sup>23</sup> In a fragment quoted by Origen in book V Celsus maintains that each nation should follow its ancestral customs (*τὰ πάτρια*), whatever they may be, since these customs have been established by the different overseers (*ἐπόπται*) to whom the nations have been allotted (*νενεμημένα*) from the beginning.<sup>24</sup> This obligation to keep to the traditional laws holds for the Jews, but also for nations like the Ethiopians, Arabians, Egyptians etc., even for the Scythians who practice cannibalism. All of them should observe their own laws, including the particular laws of worship. In spite of the divergences between these laws, Celsus

21 *Cels.* VIII 21, lines 6-9 (SC 150).

22 *Cels.* VIII 24, lines 4-7 (SC 150); trans. H. Chadwick, adapted. See H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 438.

23 *Cels.* I 1, lines 3-6 (SC 132).

24 *Cels.* V 25, lines 2-11 (SC 147), *νενεμημένα* derives from *νέμειν*, to distribute, assign, from which derives νόμος as well.

considered that there is still an encompassing bond between them, for which he invokes a saying attributed to Pindar, “*Νόμος* (i.e. law or custom) is king of all”.<sup>25</sup> Carl Andresen argued that in Celsus’s view this *νόμος* that encompasses the nations was identical with his idea of the “ancient *λόγος* which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men”.<sup>26</sup> This ancient *logos* is, of course, the *λόγος ἀληθής* of the title of his work. Celsus’s objection to the Christians was that they violate this ancient, true doctrine and deviate from the traditional laws of the nations from which they originated; traditional laws that, in his view, derive from a higher *nomos* corresponding with the ancient and true *logos*.

In reply to Celsus’s accusation Origen observes in book IV that it is wrong, even “an evil to suppose that piety (*εὐσέβεια*) is preserved by keeping the established laws of states in the common sense of the word”.<sup>27</sup> In book V he comes back to the debate on the different laws. Origen argues that someone who lives among the Scythians would be right in not obeying their bad laws; Scythians were considered impious, cruel and murderous people who even permitted parricide. More examples of ancestral laws that do not deserve to be respected, according to Origen, are the Persian ones that (allegedly) allow men to marry their mothers and daughters. Other nations hang people because this is considered a blessed death for them, or people seek purification in death by fire. Taurians sacrifice strangers to Artemis and Libyans sacrifice children. Origen asks Celsus how such laws could please

25 *Cels.* V 25, lines 12-14; V 34; cf. I 14, lines 27-32; VI 80 (SC 147; 132).

26 *Cels.* I 14, lines 27-29 (SC 132); C. Andresen, *Logos und Nomos*, 118-119; 189-200; also George Boys-Stones, *Celsus’ Theology: Ineffable Logos and Impersonal Providence*, in James Carleton Paget – Simon Gathercole (eds.), *Celsus in his World: Philosophy, Polemic, and Religion in the Second Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – New York 2021, 127-148.

27 *Cels.* IV 65, lines 22-24 (SC 136); trans. H. Chadwick.

the overseers.<sup>28</sup> These examples were commonplace in Antiquity.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Origen's attack on the respectability of ancient, ancestral laws not only regards customs of barbarian nations, but indirectly also the laws of Roman cities. He makes use of a Stoic distinction between God's law of nature and the written laws of the cities.<sup>30</sup> He maintains,

Where the written law does not contradict the law of God it is good that the citizens should not be troubled because of strange (ξένων) laws. But where the law of nature, that is of God, enjoins precepts contradictory to the written laws, consider whether reason (ὁ λόγος) does not compel a man to dismiss the written code and the intention of the lawgivers far from his mind, and to devote himself to the divine Lawgiver and to choose to live according to his word, even if in doing this he must endure dangers and countless troubles and deaths and shame.<sup>31</sup>

A few comments: first, the first sentence of this quotation means that there are written laws that correspond with the law of nature and

28 *Cels.* V 27 (SC 147); Origen's example of the Scythians already in I 1, lines 10-18 (SC 132).

29 See the footnotes at *Cels.* V 27 in M. Borret (ed.), *Origène, Contre Celse* (SC 147), 81; trans. H. Chadwick, *Origen, Contra Celsum*, 284.

30 *Cels.* V 37, lines 1-3 (SC 147); H. Chadwick, *Origen, Contra Celsum*, 293, translates [the law of nature] ὃν θεὸς ἂν νομοθετήσαι as "the ultimate law of nature, which is probably derived from God", likewise Paul Koetschau (trans.), *Gegen Celsus*, Bibliothek der Kirchenväter Reihe 1, Band 53, Köselverlag, München 1926, 488, "das Naturgesetz ..., das wohl von Gott herrührt". However, this nuance of probability is not what Origen means. The term νομοθετήσαι is an aorist potential optative, rightly translated by M. Borret (ed.), *Origène, Contre Celse* (SC 147), 111, as "dont on peut dire que Dieu est l'auteur". Other passages, even the following sentence, demonstrate that Origen certainly considers the law of nature to be inspired by God; see e.g. Riemer Roukema, *The Diversity of Laws in Origen's Commentary on Romans*, Free University Press, Amsterdam 1988, 30; 35; 53; 54; 62-63; 80-81.

31 *Cels.* V 37,3-11 (SC 147); trans. H. Chadwick, adapted.

that help citizens to discern which “strange laws” are impious and barbarian and which of them are not.<sup>32</sup> Second, to the divine law of nature Origen assigns a higher validity than to particular laws that have been codified in the cities. Third, the last clause of this passage refers to the persecutions that Christians suffered intermittently in the Roman Empire, but as yet Origen shies away from explicitly identifying the “written laws of the cities” as the laws of the Greek and Roman cities and of the Roman Empire. He leaves this conclusion to his opponents that might read this work, and undoubtedly it went without saying for Christian readers.<sup>33</sup>

In his apology Origen seems to take for granted what exactly was taught by the law of nature. However, in his *Commentary on Romans* he does state explicitly what was, more or less, prescribed by the natural law. In his comments on Paul’s obvious allusion to it in Rom 2:14-15 he explains that the law that is written in the hearts of the gentiles corresponds for example to the moral commandments of the Decalogue, like not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness, to honour your father and mother. He adds that perhaps it might even teach that there is one God, the Creator of all things, but, apparently, he is not sure about this.

32 In προφάσει ξένων νόμων (*Cels.* V 37, line 5) I understand πρόφασις in its causal meaning. Chadwick translates “the citizens should not be troubled by the introduction of strange laws”. I follow M. Borret (ed.), *Origène, Contre Celse* (SC 147), 113, who translates simply “de ne pas troubler les citoyens par des lois étrangères”. Cf. P. Koetschau (trans.), *Gegen Celsus*, BKV I, 53, 488, “so ist es richtig, ... die Bürger nicht mit neuen Gesetzen zu beunruhigen”.

33 *Cels.* V 37, lines 11-17. That Origen meant the opposition of the Roman authorities to the Christians was evident anyway, witness *Cels.* I 3; II 79; V 50 (SC 132, 147).



Origen holds that the natural law also corresponds to the laws in the Gospels, where everything refers to natural justice (*aequitas*), for which he alludes to a saying that is not found there, viz. that people should not do to others what they do not want to do to themselves; and he maintains that the natural law corresponds to the Mosaic law in its spiritual sense.<sup>34</sup>

In the lines following the passage from *Against Celsus* quoted above Origen elaborates his argument that obedience to God's law is better than the obedience to local laws that displease God. Obviously, this is also true – says Origen – for laws concerning the worship of God. Again, he does not borrow his examples from the Greeks and Romans but from the worship by barbarian nations like the Ethiopians, Arabians and Egyptians, which were also invoked by Celsus. Origen declares that Christians refuse to worship gods that they do not consider to be gods at all, since they believe in the Son of God, the firstborn of all creation.<sup>35</sup> One of his other arguments against the worship of barbarian nations is the divergence that exists among them. What should an Ethiopian do who had come to live among the Arabians? Should he risk death because of his own worship rather than break his ancestral customs?<sup>36</sup> So what is wrong, in Celsus's view, when Christians worship the Son of God who is virtue himself and comes from God?<sup>37</sup> At the end of this section in book V on the varying laws and the Christians' aloofness from public religious ceremonies, Origen agrees, nonetheless, with Celsus's quotation of Pindar, "*Νόμος*

34 *In Rom. comm.* II 7, lines 10-20, ed. C. Hammond Bammel, AGLB 16, Herder, Freiburg 1990; trans. Thomas Scheck, *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The Fathers of the Church 103, 131; see also R. Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 23. For Origen's reference to the Gospel cf. Tob 4:15, Matt 7:12; the "Western" text of Acts 15:20, 29.

35 *Cels.* V 37, lines 18-41 (SC 147); allusion to Col 1:15 in lines 36-37.

36 *Cels.* V 38, lines 1-24 (SC 147).

37 *Cels.* V 39, lines 12-15 (SC 147).

is king of all". However, he interprets this saying in his own way, not with regard to the different laws of the cities (as Celsus did), but as a reference to the law of nature which is respected by Christians and which they consider the law of God.<sup>38</sup>

We may conclude that by means of his various arguments Origen also, but implicitly, dismisses Celsus's persuasion that the local laws, including the varying religious traditions, had been established by different spiritual overseers and authorities to whom the nations had been allotted from the beginning. As far as mainstream Christians could see any truth in this view, they did not believe that such supernatural powers had been established by the true God, so they did not want to have any connection with them.

At the end of book VII Origen quotes a number of Celsus's critical questions to the Christians concerning the same theme. These questions might testify to a despair – whether feigned or authentic – on Celsus's part because of their unwillingness to give heed to his arguments. He asks,

Why should one not worship demons? Are not all things indeed administered according to God's will, and is not all providence derived from him? And whatever there may be in the universe, whether the work of God, or of angels, or of other demons, or heroes, do not all these

38 *Cels.* V 40 (SC 147). Interestingly, prior to Origen, Bardaisan of Edessa (154 – ca 222 CE) discussed the different and contradictory local laws in contradistinction to the law of Christ; he writes about the Christians, "the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of their Messiah"; in Hendrik J.W. Drijvers (ed.), *The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1965 – Gorgias Press, Piscataway, NJ 2007, 41-63, quotation 61.

things keep a law (*νόμος*) given by the greatest God? And has there not been appointed over each particular thing a being who has been thought worthy to be allotted power? Would not someone who honours God rightly worship the being who has obtained authority from him?<sup>39</sup>

Origen's initial reply to these questions is that Celsus does not take into account sin, for which he refers to Paul's particular concept of "the law of sin" (Rom 7:23; 8:2). He maintains that very often it is this law that is kept instead of God's law, and that this holds especially for demons.<sup>40</sup> However, Origen does consider that the divine Logos who administers the world may have appointed these demons for unpleasant tasks, just as executioners fulfil a necessary function in a city. Concluding book VII, Origen denounces Celsus's naïveté concerning the role of demons.<sup>41</sup> His more comprehensive answer is found in the eighth and last book of his apology.

##### *5. The political implications of Origen's controversy with Celsus*

At the beginning of book VIII Origen quotes another fragment of Celsus's *True Doctrine* which says that there is nothing wrong in worshipping several heroes and demons and gods, because all of them belong to the great God, so that this worship does not annoy him.<sup>42</sup> Origen's lengthy reply comes down to his argument that Christians are not willing to worship other gods than the true God of the Logos, Christ, who is superior to all laws on earth and is God himself.<sup>43</sup>

39 *Cels.* VII 68, lines 6-13 (SC 150); trans. H. Chadwick, adapted. See H. Lona, *Die »wahre Lehre« des Kelsos*, 427-429.

40 *Cels.* VII 69 (SC 150). R. Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 81-82.

41 *Cels.* VII 70 (SC 150).

42 *Cels.* VIII 2, lines 17-24 (SC 150). See H. Lona, *Die »wahre Lehre« des Kelsos*, 429-431.

43 *Cels.* VIII 4-6 (SC 150).

Further on Origen discusses more elaborately Celsus's real bone of contention mentioned in the introduction and quoted in my previous section, viz. the exasperating fact that Christians abstained from the public feasts in which sacrifices were offered to the demons and gods. In his reply, Origen contests the rationality (λόγος) of these feasts and argues that someone who prays always is continually offering bloodless sacrifices to God for which particular days are not necessary.<sup>44</sup> He refers to Paul who wrote critically about observing days, months, times, and years (Gal 4:10) and maintains that, although Christians also have their feast days, like the Lord's Day, Easter and Pentecost, in essence a pious Christian keeps them continually and not only on those particular days.<sup>45</sup> In any case Origen considers these Christian feast days more sacred than the public festivals that led to drunkenness and licentiousness.<sup>46</sup> Next, he quotes Celsus's argument that Christians should "sacrifice to the demons in obedience to the laws and should pray that they may be kindly disposed".<sup>47</sup> Origen's reply is based on Paul's discussion of idol offerings in 1Cor 8-10, for which I refer to my third section. In line with the apostle, he maintains that "even if idols are nothing, it is none the less dangerous to take part in the grand banquet of the idols" since thus one exposes oneself to demons.<sup>48</sup> As for the laws to which Celsus referred, Origen repeats his distinction between the inferior laws of the cities and the divine laws to which Christians wish to pay obedience.<sup>49</sup> In opposition to Celsus's exhortation to pray to the demons Origen advances "the Lord Jesus, the 'angel of the great

44 See Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 2009, 56-83.

45 *Cels.* VIII 21-22 (SC 150). Likewise Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* VII 35, 1-3 (SC 428).

46 *Cels.* VIII 23, lines 913 (SC 150).

47 *Cels.* VIII 24, lines 4-7 (SC 150); my translation, inspired by H. Chadwick.

48 *Cels.* VIII 24, lines 7-32; also VIII 30, lines 1-3; VIII 31, lines 5-9 (SC 150).

49 *Cels.* VIII 26, lines 8-13 (SC 150).

counsel' of God" who protects the Christians against the demons.<sup>50</sup> He agrees with Celsus that everything that grows on the earth and flowing water and the air is controlled by invisible farmers (γεωργοί) and governors (οἰκονόμοι), "so that the air is kept free from pollution" and gives life to those who breathe it. Yet he does not agree with Celsus that these invisible beings are demons, but calls them God's own angels. He holds the demons responsible for famines, droughts, pollution of the air, poor harvests, sometimes the death of animals and the pest, even though they may receive the power to cause such catastrophes due to a divine judgment, either for the conversion of people or as a test of those gifted with reason (λόγος). Origen quotes Ps 77:49 LXX as a proof text for God's incidental deployment of wicked angels, "He sent among them (i.e. the Israelites) ... anger and wrath and affliction, a mission discharged through wicked angels". Christians – Origen adds – do not feast with any of the demons but with the divine angels.<sup>51</sup> Patiently he replies to Celsus's opinion on why Christians should give thanks to the demons and render them firstfruits and prayers, and that the consequences of insulting them will be grave and the revenge of the gods will be severe.<sup>52</sup>

Later on, Origen quotes a similar passage from Celsus's polemics, which repeats that Christians should render due honour and worship to the demons that have been entrusted with things like marriage, the begetting of children, tasting fruits, partaking of the joys of life

<sup>50</sup> *Cels.* VIII 27, quotation in lines 7-8 (SC 150); cf. Isa 9:6 LXX.

<sup>51</sup> *Cels.* VIII 31, lines 20-36; VIII 32, lines 1-34 (SC 150). This interpretation of the role of wicked angels in Ps 77:49 in relation to conversion also in Origen, *In Ps. hom.* 77,7 (ed. Lorenzo Perrone, *Origenes, Die neuen Psalmenhomilien: Eine kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus 314*, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, Neue Folge 19, esp. 446 line 29-447 line 3).

<sup>52</sup> *Cels.* VIII 33-43 (SC 150).

and enduring evils.<sup>53</sup> Again Origen contests Celsus's view of life, and maintains that Christians refuse to obey such demons.<sup>54</sup> Once more he denies that these demons possess care of the things that have been created for our needs. For this reason it is not the demons that deserve our thankfulness, but God the Creator himself, as Christians express it in the Eucharist. Instead of the demons, Christians hold that angels have been appointed in charge of the fruits of the earth and the birth of animals, but the honour for this is due to God, not to the blessed angels.<sup>55</sup> In this context too Origen distinguishes between the different laws. Now he identifies them as the law or laws of God on the one hand and the laws of sin and the law of mammon on the other hand.<sup>56</sup> This implies that Origen fundamentally rejects Celsus's invocation of "the law" (*νόμος*) as something encompassing and evident, since Celsus did not see that a law or laws may also lead to evil.

Interestingly, Origen not only announces the ultimate destruction of the demons because in his own day Christians drive them out of statues and human bodies and souls, and their power is destroyed by martyrs, but he also expects that the world will probably (*εἰκότως*) be at peace with the Christians.<sup>57</sup> Thus he hints at the societal and political side of the debate on participation or non-participation in public festivals, their sacrifices and the worship of demons and gods according to the local customs. Although the political and societal acceptance of the Christians would last for another 65 years, Origen expects that this change would take place in due time. For his own time, he observes that the demons struggle against the Christians. When martyrs remain faithful to their confession of Christ, they conquer the demons and destroy their domination. However, Christians who give in to the

53 *Cels.* VIII 55,1-15 (SC 150). See H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 456-458.

54 *Cels.* VIII 55,16-29 (SC 150).

55 *Cels.* VIII 57,18-29; cf. 67,23-31 (SC 150).

56 *Cels.* VIII 56,1-5,29-37 (SC 150).

57 *Cels.* VIII 43,32-44,9 (SC 150).

authorities and deny their faith in Christ are subjected to the demons. In Origen's view this is reflected in the attitude of the judges who are distressed when Christians endure the outrages and tortures and are proud when they give in to the pressure to deny their faith.<sup>58</sup>

Celsus himself also touches on the political consequences of the behaviour of the Christians when he wonders why it is wrong to propitiate the powers (i.e. demons; ἄρχοντας εὐμενίζεσθαι) on earth, as well as human rulers (δυνάστες) and kings or emperors (βασιλείς) who owe their positions to the demons.<sup>59</sup> To Origen it would be unacceptable to propitiate other powers than the supreme God. He holds that, if this rule is obeyed, God's angels will be kindly disposed. Christians despise the favour (ἐξευμενισμός) of humans and kings or emperors if it must be obtained not only by virtuous behaviour, but also by renouncing the God of the universe. Origen is well aware of Paul's words about the authorities being ordained by God (Rom 13:1-2), which implies that one should not arouse the wrath of the emperor or another ruler so that they are led to apply blows, tortures and capital punishment. Yet Christians do not swear by the fortune or demon of the emperor as though it were a god, and if they are forced to do so, Origen maintains, they prefer death to giving in to such practices.<sup>60</sup>

Almost at the very end of Celsus's treatise and thus of Origen's apology we see the former's fear that, if everybody behaved as the Christians do, the emperor would be abandoned and the empire would fall to lawless and savage barbarians, so that both the Christian religion and true wisdom (expounded in Celsus's *True Doctrine*) would be erased. Therefore, Celsus appeals to Homer's verse, "Let there be

<sup>58</sup> *Cels.* VIII 44,15-24 (SC 150).

<sup>59</sup> *Cels.* VIII 63, lines 26-29 (SC 150). See H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 463-464.

<sup>60</sup> *Cels.* VIII 65; also 67, lines 18-23 (SC 150). Cf. R. Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 73-75; Marco Rizzi, "Romans 13 in Early Christian Exegesis", in *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010), 227-234.

one king, to whom the son of crafty Kronos entrusted it”, interpreted as the Roman emperor appointed by Zeus, the son of Kronos. Origen agrees with the wish “Let there be one king”, but holds that it is not Zeus but the God of Scripture who appoints and removes kings (Dan 2:21). Christians, however, were instructed to “honour the emperor” (1Pet 2:17), so that he would not be left alone. Contrary to Celsus, Origen expects that, if everyone were to do as the Christians do,

the barbarians would also be converted to the word of God and would be most law-abiding and mild. And all other worship would be done away and only that of the Christians would prevail. One day it will be the only one to prevail, since the Logos is continually gaining possession of more souls.<sup>61</sup>

In these words, Origen anticipates Celsus’s scepticism about the God of the Christians, if faith in him should get the upper hand. He quotes Celsus’s opinion that this Most High God would certainly not come down and fight for the Christians once they had convinced the Romans to neglect their former religious customs. For in the past this God had promised his help to the Jews, yet without providing it, and in Celsus’s own time the Jews had lost their land and the Christians were persecuted. Origen counters that, once the Roman Empire had turned to the God of the Christians, thanks to their unanimous prayers it would be able to subdue its enemies, on condition, however, that people keep God’s law. This was what the Jews did not, hence the loss of their own land.<sup>62</sup> As for the Christians, called “the salt of the earth”, even in times of persecution they live at peace, being encouraged by Christ who has overcome the world.<sup>63</sup>

61 *Cels.* VIII 68 (SC 150); trans. H. Chadwick. For Celsus, see H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 467-469.

62 *Cels.* VIII 69 (SC 150).

63 *Cels.* VIII 70, lines 5-18 (SC 150); Matt 5:13; John 16:33.



In agreement with Pindar's saying "Νόμος is king of all" Celsus piously wished that all people of Asia, Europe, Libya, both Greeks and barbarians, might unite under one law, although he considered its realization practically impossible.<sup>64</sup> Origen reacts that this is indeed what he expects, yet not in the near future of the Roman Empire but once "the Logos will have overcome the entire rational nature and will have transformed each soul to his perfection, when each person by the mere use of his freedom will choose what the Logos wills and will be in that state which he has chosen".<sup>65</sup> Here comes to light Origen's expectation of the *apokatastasis* of the whole world, for which he quotes Zeph 3:7-13.<sup>66</sup>

Celsus's final exhortation to the Christians reads that they should help the emperor and cooperate with him, including fighting in his army and supplying generals.<sup>67</sup> We see here the political purport of his treatise, which focused so intently on issues about faith in Jesus and on the organization of the spiritual world. Origen replies that Christians do help the emperors by praying for them and by destroying the demons that disturb peace and stir up wars. In doing so they are more

64 *Cels.* VIII 72, lines 1-5 (SC 150); see C. Andresen, *Logos und Nomos*, 190-192; H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 471-472.

65 *Cels.* VIII 72, lines 11-15 (SC 150); trans. H. Chadwick, adapted. See Riemer Roukema, "Die Liebe kommt nie zu Fall" (1Kor 13,8a) als Argument des Origenes gegen einen neuen Abfall der Seelen von Gott, in Wolfgang Bienert – Uwe Kühneweg (eds.), *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium 137, Leuven University Press – Peeters, Leuven 1999, 15-23.

66 *Cels.* VIII 72, lines 26-47 (SC 150); cf. Yves-Marie Duval, *Vers le Commentaire sur Sophonie d'Origène: L'annonce de la disparition finale du mal et le retour dans la Jérusalem céleste*, in Lorenzo Perrone – Paolo Bernardino – Domenico Marchini (eds.), *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium 164, Leuven University Press – Peeters, Leuven 2003, 625-639.

67 *Cels.* VIII 73,1-4 (SC 150). H. Lona, *Die >wahre Lehre< des Kelsos*, 473-474.

effective than soldiers who kill as many enemies as they can. Origen argues that Christians fight like priests who, like the priests of the gentile temples, are exempted from conscription and form an army of piety, even though their prayers are offered in secret. In general, he holds, they do more good to their countries than the rest of mankind by educating the citizens and teaching them piety.<sup>68</sup> Celsus insisted that Christians accept public offices for the sake of the maintenance (*σωτηρία*) of laws and piety.<sup>69</sup> Origen retorts by referring to those who by their humility are competent to take office in the churches, which constitute another sort of fatherland created by God's Logos. They rule the churches according to God's commandments. To Origen the reason why Christians avoid assuming public offices is that they are interested in the salvation (*σωτηρία*) of mankind, both of those within and of those outside the church. Thus, the former are instructed to live better every day, and the latter are invited to become familiar with the sacred worship of God, in order to be pervaded by God's law and to be united with his Son.<sup>70</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that formally Origen had much in common with Celsus, as far as the spiritual organization of the world is concerned, but materially they believed in different spiritual powers. Origen kept to the God of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, he kept to God's Logos manifested in Jesus Christ, and he considered the Greek and Roman gods to be demons from which Christians had to keep their distance. Therefore, in Origen's view, they could not participate

68 *Cels.* VIII 73,4-74,8 (SC 150).

69 *Cels.* VIII 75,1-3 (SC 150); cf. Plato, *Respublica* 425c, 3-4: ἐάν γε θεός αὐτοῖς διδῶ σωτηρίαν τῶν νόμων...

70 *Cels.* VIII 75,3-27 (SC 150).

in the public sacrifices that should warrant the unity of the Roman Empire and its protection against barbarian invasions. In fact, Origen perceived a spiritual struggle between God and the idols, God's angels and the demons, which had political consequences; for in the end – he believed – the Roman Empire would accept God's law and salvation through Christ, and thus it would be at peace with the Christians. In his day this was a most provocative perspective.

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the roles attributed to spiritual powers like demons, gods, and angels in Origen's debate with Celsus. Celsus held that Christians associated with demons when they ate food, drank water and wine, and breathed the air. Therefore, they should not hesitate to participate in sacrificial ceremonies to demons and gods according to the laws of the cities. Origen replied that Christians obeyed God's law of nature which might be different from the written laws. He considered the Greek and Roman gods to be idols that were, in fact, demons that did not deserve any worship by Christians. This religious and spiritual controversy had political consequences, as Christians did not recognize the demons to whom rulers and emperors allegedly owed their positions. Provocatively, Origen expected that in due time the Roman Empire would accept God's law and salvation through Christ and thus would be at peace with the Christians.

