

Irony and heroism: on the fragment of Origen's treatise "Contra Celsum" 7.53-58

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Abstract

In the article we investigate the Christian – pagan polemic of Origen's treatise "Contra Celsum" in fragment 7.53-58, where the problem of the correlation of irony and heroism reveals the contrast between false and true deeds, for which divine honours are given. The irony that Celsus uses to attack Christians serves as a kind of "divide" that marks a contrast between pagan ideas about heroism, as a principle of deification of people, and the principles on which, from Celsus' point of view of, Christians consider Jesus to be God. A special subject of the article is Celsus' reflection on the ironic motive of the Book of Jonah, the story of the gourd (Jonah 4, 5-11), and the salvation of the prophet Daniel from the lion's den (Dan. 6, 16-23). Origen's response to Celsus' speech shows a certain similarity to the text of a pagan author in structural, stylistic and lexical aspects. Such factor reveals a rhetorical content of the response of Origen. In the field of rhetorica, Origen uses irony against his opponent: pagan heroes and philosophers now appear funny or not serious enough, whereas the Old Testament prophets are revealed as genuinely great and as a source of miracles. In light of this, Origen's response to Celsus replaces Celsus' ironic allusion to the gourd story from the fourth chapter of the Book of Jonah with the first verse of the second chapter, which opens the episode of Jonah's stay in the belly of the whale. An analysis of this substitution, based on the hermeneutic principles of Origen, shows the role of Biblical irony as a specific aspect of the spiritual meaning of the sacred text. It is hypothesized that the essence of this specificity is the creation of a contrast that sets any feat of any person in the light of the historical life of Jesus Christ, who completely and exceptionally realized God's providence. This reveals a pattern or principle of going beyond the limits of human virtue to the sphere of divine being. To compare any feats with the earthly life and the death of the Saviour renders the opposition of ironic and heroic no longer a contrast between false and true: any heroism, even the exploits of the Old Testament prophets, becomes ironic / ridiculous. Thus Origen's Christian irony is not only an instrument of rhetorical discourse, but a philosophical and literary device that allows transcending, or elevating to an unattainable level, the heroism of the life and death of the Saviour.

Keywords: *humour, early Christianity, irony, heroism, Origen, Contra Celsum, antiquity Celsus, Logos Alēthēs, rhetoric, Sophistic*

1. Introduction

The well-known Greek opponent of Christianity of the second century, Celsus, was not only a philosopher, but also a writer wielding a skilful pen. In his literary work *The True Doctrine* Celsus initiated an attack on Christianity criticizing and ridiculing Early Christian beliefs and doctrines. The Christian theologian and exegete Origen (185 – 254), in his polemical treatise “*Contra Celsum*”, gives his pagan opponent an adequate refutation. As we will see, Origen opposes Celsus not only from the height of his theological and philosophical knowledge, but also with a deep understanding of literary genre and style. In this regard, the analysed fragment of the treatise *Contra Celsum* seems especially important for the study of the Christian reception of ancient rhetoric, and in particular satire and irony¹.

Until quite recently, researchers of ancient laughter did not pay attention to this passage. Kurdybaylo writing on Jonah’s gourd and its early Byzantine interpretations (Kurdybaylo 2021) notes the ambiguity of replacing the episode of the story about the gourd from Jonah’s book with the episode of the swallowing of the prophet by the whale. It is hypothesized that Origen intentionally avoids an ironic sense of this episode in the Bible.

In Origen’s treatise *Contra Celsum* we examine the fragment 7.53-58 because it shows a remarkable case of the Christian-pagan polemic of the époque of Second Sophistic. The fragment contains a rather large passage of Celsus’ *The True Doctrine* in which we are able to see the rhetoric skill of the opponent of early Christianity as well as the irony he uses. Also the fragment displays Origen’s detailed response to his opponent, in which the early-Christian apologist not only employs irony for polemic, but also provides an important reflection of irony in terms of the Christian theology and ideology.

2. Speech of Celsus (*Contra Celsum* 7.53)

In the Fragment of Origen’s treatise *Contra Celsum* 7.53-58, which in the series *Sources Chrétiennes* is called *Héros et sages comparés à Jésus* (Borret 1969: 138), there is a very interesting case in which the issue of irony is addressed in relation to the Biblical prophets Jonah and Daniel. Origen quotes Celsus, who sarcastically proposes to Christians some “candidates” who are more suitable for the deification for Christians than the person of Jesus Christ:

How much better it would have been for you, since you conceived a desire to introduce some new doctrine, to have addressed your attentions to some other man among those who have died noble deaths and are sufficiently distinguished to have a myth about them like the gods. For example, if Heracles and Asclepius and those who since early times have been held in honour failed to please you, you had Orpheus, a man who, as all agree, possessed a pious spirit (ὄσιω χρησάμενον πνεύματι) and also died a violent death. But perhaps he had been chosen by others before you? At any rate you had Anaxarchus who, when cast into a mortar and while he was being beaten with great violence, nobly showed contempt for the punishment, saying “Beat on, beat the pouch of Anaxarchus, for you are not beating him.” The utterance is surely one of some divine spirit. But some natural philosophers have preceded you in taking him for their master. What about Epictetus then? When his master was twisting his leg he smiled gently and calmly said “You are breaking it.” And when he had broken it he said “Did I not tell you that you were breaking it?” What comparable saying did your God utter while he was being punished? If you had put forward the

¹ An in-depth review on the Early-Christian reception of laughter is undertaken in a recent monograph by Halliwell, S. *Greek laughter: A study of cultural psychology from Homer to early Christianity*. Cambridge University Press 2008. Although trying to consider all possible Christian works of the first five centuries that relate to the problem of laughter, the author skips Origen’s treatise “*Contra Celsum*”.

Sibyl, whom some of you use, as a child of God you would have had more to be said in your favour. However, you have had the presumption to interpolate many blasphemous things in her verses, and assert that a man who lived a most inexpressive² life and died a most miserable death (τὸν δὲ βίῳ μὲν ἐπιρρητοτάτῳ θανάτῳ δὲ οἰκτίστῳ) was a god. A far more suitable person for you than Jesus would have been Jonah with his gourd (ἐπὶ τῇ κολοκύντῃ), or Daniel, the one from wild beasts (Δανιήλ ὁ ἐκ τῶν θηρίων),³ or those of whom stories yet more incredible (τερατωδέστεροι) than these are told.⁴

(Chadwick 1980: 439-440 / Borret 1969: 138-140)

The main idea of Celsus in the passage is clear: there are some characters in history who are more suitable for deification than Jesus. The ironic style of Celsus' speech, which can be traced throughout the passage, is noteworthy. We see that the pagan apologist rhetorically plays up the theme of heroism, using the example of certain ancient characters whom he "offers" to Christians for deification. The gospel principles of virtue, focused on the suffering and sacrificial death of the Saviour, are played out by Celsus in ironic offers to Christians to accept as gods other, more "worthy" sufferers and martyrs. Celsus realizes that his 'offer' is not suitable for Christians, who believe that "a man who lived a most inexpressive life and died a most miserable death was a god." Celsus demonstrates the absurdity he sees in such a choice by Christians in the transition to a new ironic level – the conclusion offered in a burlesque form that Christians would find more suitable than Jesus "Jonah with his gourd (ἐπὶ τῇ κολοκύντῃ), or Daniel, the one from wild beasts (Δανιήλ ὁ ἐκ τῶν θηρίων)" (Cels. 7.53.20 Chadwick 1980: 440 / Borret 1969: 138).

In listing alternative candidates for deification instead of Jesus Christ, Celsus constructs a certain hierarchy of three tiers, or levels, according to authoritative status, the characters and the credibility of the stories about them. The top tier includes the divine heroes: Hercules, Asclepius and Orpheus, who are well-known from numerous stories about them, authoritative for pagans. On the second tier Celsus puts Anaxarchus and Epictetus, whom he counts as wise men worthy of legends. The third is Sibyl, whom, according to Celsus, Christians call the "divine child". And finally, at the end of Celsus listing come "Jonah with his gourd and Daniel, who is from the beasts", as elements of the Christian 'epic'. Celsus puts these characters at the bottom of his hierarchy, they are presented ironically, as absolutely unauthoritative, and their stories are seen as incredible and full of fiction.

Thus, in the rhetorical structure of the passage *Contra Celsum* 7.53, the following hierarchy is revealed:

² ἐπιρρητοτάτῳ. Celsus uses here a superlative form of the adjective ἐπιρρητος, which stressed an extreme state of lacking of expression. We prefer to translate it literally, as "a most inexpressive". In the H. Chadwick' translation it is put as "a most infamous". Greek-English lexicon by Henry Liddell & Robert Scott translates ἐπιρρητος as "exclaimed against", "infamous" (<http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.25:4:109.LSJ>).

³ H. Chadwick translates Celsus' utterance about the prophet Daniel adding the participle "escaped" ("Daniel who escaped from wild beasts"). We prefer to cite this utterance of Celsus according literal meaning of the Greek text in order to preserve the rhetorical sound of the phrase.

⁴ Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 7.53 (Chadwick 1980: 439 – 440 / Borret 1969: 138 - 140). The text of *Contra Celsum* we shall reproduce from two publications: 1) English text – Chadwick H. (1980) *Origen: Contra Celsum*. London. Cambridge University Press; 2) Greek text – Borret, M. (1969) *Origene Contre Celse*. Tome IV (Livres VII et VIII). Trad. par Marcel Borret. Sources Chrétiennes 150 Paris: Éditions du Cerf (further - SC).

Table 1. Celsus' hierarchy of the characters

LEVELS	CHARACTERS	STORIES ABOUT CHARACTERS	STATUS OF CHARACTERS
1 (top)	Hercules, Asclepius, Orpheus	Authoritative	Divine heroes
2	Anaxarchus, Epictetus	Authentic, authoritative, but insufficient for the status of myths about heroes	Virtuous, courageous people
3	Sibyl	Texts corrupted by Christian interpolations	“child of God”(?) ⁵
4 (bottom)	Jonah, Daniel	Fiction about miracles, <i>τεραπωδέστεροι</i>	despicable, comic

3. Origen's answer (*Contra Celsum* 7.54-58)

Origen accepts the challenge of Celsus both: 1) ideologically (doctrinally) – as a criticism of the earthly deeds of the Saviour, and 2) on a rhetorical aspect, as a mockery of the Biblical prophets Jonah and Daniel. Regarding the story about the gourd, which in the Book of Jonah has a genuinely ironic aspect, Origen must express his position not only as a rhetorician, but also as an exegete. Thus Origen, answering Celsus, has two goals: the first – and main one – is an apology for Christ, we shall call it “ideological”, and the second – an apology of Jonah with Daniel, which can be called “rhetorical”.

3.1. The rhetorical aspect of the fragment

In the Origen's answer we find a lexical likeness to the speech of Celsus. Origen's response has the same structure as Celsus' speech but another hierarchical order of its levels.

The first three heroes who are held in high esteem by Celsus: Hercules, Asclepius and Orpheus, Origen considers as “despicable”. Hercules, according to the exegete, by force, like a robber, took a bull from a farmer and while being cursed by the owner of the animal (7.54.5 Chadwick 1980: 440 / Borret 1969: 140). Orpheus is a mythmaker “even worse than Homer”. Origen doubted whether the sort who made up the “wicked stories” about the gods possessed “a pious spirit” and lived a good life. He rather deserved to be expelled from the state of Plato before Homer⁶ (see: 7.54.10-15 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 140)⁷.

⁵ “τοῦ θεοῦ παῖδα” — Celsus apparently puts in this naming an ironic sense.

⁶ Origen makes here an allusion to Plato's *Republic* (book III and X), where Homer and other poets were criticized for writing myths improper of gods and for their inability to educate citizens. According to Plato, there is no place in the Ideal State for Homer and other poets, because their art based on imitation rather than on real knowledge.

⁷ In this response Origen omits Asclepius, probably because he mentioned this character earlier several times. For instance, in the third book of *Contra Celsum* he compares the story about Heracles' effeminate bondage to Omphale with the tale of Asclepius who was killed by their Zeus with a thunderbolt. Both facts are considered as absurd: it is ridiculous for Heracles to wear women's clothing, as well for Asclepius to be killed by Zeus for the “crime” of healing people. To Origen's mind this is an indicator of the fiction of pagan heroic stories (see: Chadwick 1980: 141, 157, 265).

The next group of characters, i.e. the philosophers Anaxarchus and Epictetus, are seen by Origen as not entirely without respect. Anaxarchus, according to Origen, can be called a hero on account of the story of his fearless response to the Cypriot tyrant Aristocleon. However, this is just one story about a brave act. Origen allows himself to call Anaxarchus the “courageous” (*δι' ἀρετήν*), but he sees no reason to call him “god” (see: 7.54.20 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 140). Origen says the same about Epictetus (see: 7.54.25 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 142).

In this way, the Christian apologist says that, if the stories about the sages are true, they are poor in facts about heroic life. These stories do not have as much impact on people as the power of “Jesus’ miraculous words and works”, which “to this day convert (*ἐπιστρέφουσιν*) not only some of the simple people but also many of the more intelligent” (7.54.25-30 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 142). A very interesting idea is provided here, that story not only *talks about* a character, but also *presents* a character in its expressive mode. The Alexandrian thinker begins to refute the statements of Celsus about the “inexpressive” (*ἐπιρρητοτάτος*) life of Jesus Christ for a witness to divinity and edification. The development of this motive will be discussed below.

In the passage about Sibyl, we cannot clarify what Origen thinks about this prophetess. He does not criticize her nor does she place among Biblical prophets. Origen refuses to call her “child of God”, which, according to Celsus, is a name given to her by Christians. Origen also observes that Celsus does not cite any evidence that Sibyl’s prophecies were corrupted by Christians (See: 7.56.5 Chadwick 1980: 442 / Borret 1969: 144).

Origen’s answer to Celsus about Biblical prophets, reveals the lexical connection of Origen’s statements about Jonah and Daniel with the similar statements of his pagan opponent: instead of Celsus’ burlesque “*Ἰωνᾶς ἐπὶ τῇ κολοκύντρῃ*” (Jonah with his gourd), Origen offers a similar verse of the Septuagint: “*ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τοῦ κήτους*” (in the womb of the whale); instead of Celsus’ “*Δανιήλ ὁ ἐκ τῶν θηρίων*” (Daniel, the one from wild beasts) (7.53.20 Chadwick 1980: 440 / Borret 1969: 138), Origen offers: “*Δανιήλ, ἀναβάντα ἀπὸ τῶν λεόντων*” (Daniel, who went up⁸ from the lions) (7.57.15 Chadwick 1980: 443 / Borret 1969: 146).

From the above analysis of the rhetorical structure of Celsus’ speech and Origen’s response, this lexical correction is clear: if Celsus argues from serious-authoritative to ridiculous-fiction, then Origen follows the opposite semantic line, from ridiculous to serious. This explains the replacement of Celsus’ allusion to the ironic episode about the gourd from chapter 4 of the Book of Jonah with a heroic story of the whale from chapter 2. The three-day stay of Jonah in the belly of the whale, characterized by Origen as “*τετραστίως ποιήσαντα καὶ παραδόξως*” (the portentous and incredible feat) (7.57.10 Chadwick 1980: 442 / Borret 1969: 146), emphasizing the heroism of Jonah and the reality of this episode, was described in the Septuagint. The same applies to Celsus’ second ironic statement, about “Daniel who is from the wild beasts” (7.53.20 Chadwick 1980: 440 / Borret 1969: 146-148). In Origen’s expression “*Δανιήλ, ἀναβάντα ἀπὸ τῶν λεόντων*” (7.57.15 Borret 1969: 146), we can see an intentional contrast with Celsus’ burlesque “*Δανιήλ ὁ ἐκ τῶν θηρίων*” (7.53.20 Borret 1969). Origen uses the participle of the verb *ἀναβαίνω* —go up, mount,⁹ i.e. Daniel’s salvation from lions (not from wild beasts like in Celsus’ version) is ascent, elevation. Here we can understand both the rise of Daniel from the pit and his ‘elevation’ over the power of the Babylonian king. In both cases, a heroic motive is deduced.

Thus Origen transforms the comic, derogatory vocabulary of the statements of Celsus in the fragment *Contra Celsum* 7.53.20 into a serious, heroic one. The expressions of the pagan

⁸ In Chadwick’s translation – “who went free”. I translate more literally.

⁹ See the lexicon of Henry Liddell & Robert Scott, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.4:2:25.LSJ>

author are brought in line with the text of the Septuagint, which demonstrates the historical authenticity of the events associated with the Biblical prophets, as well as the greatness of their exploits. At the same time, Origen tries to maintain a general stylistic relevance to the text of Celsus, using the ironic perspective that his opponent adopted. The rhetorical structure of Origen’s answer to Celsus’ speech can be traced in the following table:

Table 2. Origen’s hierarchy of the characters

LEVELS	CHARACTERS	STORIES ABOUT CHARACTERS	STATUS OF CHARACTERS
1 (bottom)	Hercules, Asclepius, Orpheus	Non-edifying and / or comic	Comic (Hercules), inventors of vulgar stories about the gods (Orpheus)
2	Anaxarchus, Epictetus	“Heroic” uneventful (Poor by “heroic” facts)	Courageous people, but not deserving deification
3	Sibyl	Texts unspoiled, authoritative, but not sacred	Prophetess
4 (top)	Jonah, Daniel	Sacred texts	Prophets, true heroes who performed amazing deeds, but not worthy of deification

Thus in the answer of Origen to Celsus, the place of the true heroes in the hierarchy of rhetorical discourse is taken by the Old Testament prophets Jonah and Daniel. Instead of the *comicality* of Jonah and Daniel, which his pagan opponent emphasized, Origen demonstrates the *heroism* of the Biblical prophets. In addition, we see a certain gradation in the historical assessment of the characters: Origen finds the pagan myths harmful; if the stories of sages are useful, then they contain few facts carrying a good inspiration; the Sibyl’s prophecies are unspoiled, but not sacred; and the stories of the Biblical books of Jonah and Daniel are certainly true and amazing.

It should be noted that, with regard to Jonah, the replacement of verses in the response of Origen (the story of the gourd converted into the episode with the whale) may well have not only a rhetorical, but also an exegetical meaning. Let us recall two rules of Origen’s theory and practice of interpreting scripture: the first – there is nothing superfluous in Scripture. The entire sacred text, to the last word, is to be interpreted. All Scripture has a spiritual meaning (De princ. IV. 1,6; 1,7; 2; 2 5 Koetchau 1913: 301-305, 314-315, etc.)¹⁰ Secondly, those places where there is no obvious connection between the literal and the spiritual meanings (“inconsistencies”, “stumbling blocks” of Scripture) are subject to special spiritual interpretation (De princ. IV. 2,9 Koetchau 1913: 321). From the first rule, we can conclude that for Origen, the episode with the gourd in the Book of Jonah (like this book itself, with its ironic plot) could not be rejected as inappropriate to the Word of God, i.e. as not sacred. The second rule implies that Origen in his answer to Celsus excluded the verse about the gourd as not corresponding to the discourse of polemics with the Gentile, as a special element of the sacred text that requires a special, spiritual interpretation. In this case, we can assume that Origen does not ignore the ironic motive of the episode with the gourd, but takes it out of the context of

¹⁰ For example, a well-known passage from De principiis. IV. 1.7: “The divine inspiration of holy Scripture, which extends throughout its entire body, is not believed to be non-existent because the weakness of our understanding is not able to trace out the obscure and hidden meaning in each single word, for the treasure of divine wisdom is hidden in the paltry and inelegant vessels of words.” (Behr 2017: 479).

rhetorical controversy that does not correspond to it. In addition, we may assume that Origen makes this replacement because he recognizes the irony of the plot with the pumpkin (seriously understood, of course) as a special level of the inspired text. In this case, Jonah's pumpkin appears to Origen to be a symbol that separates Biblical irony (a special spiritual meaning) from other aspects of the sacred text, as well as from the profane reading of Biblical irony that the pagan Celsus demonstrates.

3.2. The ideological (conceptual) aspect of the fragment

Origen begins to develop the main ideological (conceptual) line of the fragment – the apology for Christ – after mentioning the characters of the first group (Hercules, Asclepius and Orpheus), whom he does not consider at all as suitable to compare with the Saviour. The comparison begins with the second group of characters, the philosophers Anaxarchus and Epictetus, who suffered for their beliefs. Let us recall that, after citing the heroic sayings of these sages, Celsus rebukes Christ for saying nothing like this while he was being punished (7.53.15 Chadwick 1980: 439 / Borret 1969: 138). In response to that reproach, Origen reveals the greatness of Christ's silence under the scourge, in which he displays courage and patience of a much higher order than Celsus' philosophers (See: 7.55.5-10 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 142). Origen remarks that the silence of Christ also testifies to His meekness – a virtue that is not reflected in the proud utterances of Celsus' sages. It is the meekness of the Saviour where reveals His perfect courage as a remoteness from the wrath and wickedness of His tormentors:

Accordingly, it was not consistent with the character of him who by his courage was silent under the scourge and who by his meekness endured all the outrages inflicted by those who mocked him, that he should have been led by any mean cowardice, as some think, to say: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."¹¹

(Chadwick 1980: 441-442 / Borret 1969: 144)

Origen reveals the Gospel's "prayer for the Cup" as the complete self-denial of the Saviour Jesus Christ (of his own will) fully accepting circumstances sent forth by Providence (the will of the Father)¹² (Chadwick 1980: 441-442 / Borret 1969: 144).

Thereafter, discussing the prophecies of Sibyl, allegedly distorted by Christian interpolations, Origen remarks that Celsus here and many times in other places in his work characterizes Christ's life as "most inexpressive life" – "ἐπιρρητότατος βίος" (7.56.5-10 Borret 1969: 144). At this point, Celsus uses the superlative of the adjective ἐπίρρητος, which indicates an extreme state of lack of expression¹³. In this word, which is quite rare in Ancient Greek literature¹⁴, Celsus apparently refers to the silence of Christ, which he mentioned earlier, and represents this silence as a sign of the absence of heroism, in reference to the gospel testimonies of the sufferings of the Christian God. To Celsus, the silence of Christ is obviously an example of an extreme inexpressiveness of the historical testimony about Christ's life, the life that has nothing to say, the "ἐπιρρητότατος βίος." Thus the "a most inexpressive life" of Christ, according to Celsus, is a life that does not correspond to the canon of heroic legends, or a life not suitable for myth.

¹¹ Matt. 24,39.

¹² Origen gives a more detailed interpretation of the "prayer for the Cap" in his work «An Exhortation to Martyrdom» (see: Origen. An Exhortation to Martyrdom 29 trans. Rowan A. Greer. Paulist Press. N.Y. 1979. P. 60 – 61. Exh. mart. 29) (Greer 1979 : 60 - 601).

¹³ See note 6.

¹⁴ Liddell & Scott's Lexicon finds the use of the adjective ἐπίρρητος in the Ancient Greek texts only thrice. We could not find the superlative ἐπιρρητότατος in ancient texts through any dictionary bases.

We saw above that Origen did not leave unanswered this sophisticated aspect of Celsus' criticism. If Origen simply pushes myths about divine heroes into the sphere of fiction, now he finds that stories about philosophers are poor and lacking in expressive facts, unable to have a good effect on readers / listeners. The "amazing" "deeds and words of Christ", on the contrary, are filled "with divine power that to this day converts (ἐπιστρέφουσιν) not only some of the simple people but also many of the more intelligent" (7.54.25-30 Chadwick 1980: 441 / Borret 1969: 142). Origen thus criticizes the stories of philosophers precisely for their "lack of expression", indicating in them that what Celsus put into the expression "ἐπιρρητότατος βίος". At the same time, Origen reveals the potential of the Gospel as a testimony of the amazing works of the Saviour and the teachings of Christ¹⁵. The Gospel, according to Origen, has factual credibility and real power to transform people's lives. Origen reveals the expressive effect of the Gospel in the example of the experience of "this day", in the expressive power of Gospel which in the present days turns the hearts of very different people to Christ. This Origen's thought about the expressive power of the Gospel can be read in the terms of the philosophy of myth of A.F. Losev, as "the more real myth" in which entire expressive potential of myth is most fully revealed¹⁶.

In addition, Origen observes that Celsus' reproach to Christ for the "miserable death (θάνατον οἰκτίστον)" can be applied to Anaxarchus, Socrates and many other heroic personalities. Origen finds that the reason that Celsus does not notice anything positive in the life and death of Jesus Christ is the action of some spirit that "was overthrown and conquered by Jesus, that it may no longer have burnt-offerings and blood." These bloody sacrifices are the nourishment of this spirit, which "used to deceive people who seek for God in earthly images and do not look up to the real and supreme God" (7.56.15-25 Chadwick 1980: 442 / Borret 1969: 146).

In the passage *Contra Celsum* 7.57, Origen completes the ideological line of the fragment about the superiority of the earthly life of Jesus Christ to all possible deeds and virtues, even over the "extraordinary and miraculous deeds" of the Old Testament prophets, which is an evidence of the Saviour's uniqueness and exceptional divinity. Previously we saw that Origen in his answer to Celsus, on the one hand, reproduces the content structure of his opponent's speech, while on the other, changes the rhetorical hierarchy of this structure. Now, approaching the issue of comparing the life of Jesus Christ with Biblical characters, the prophets Jonah and Daniel, Origen, in contrast to Celsus, is reasoning seriously:

He wanted us to regard Jonah as a god rather than Jesus; he prefers Jonah who preached repentance to the single city of Nineveh before Jesus who preached repentance to the whole world and had more success than Jonah. He wanted us to regard as a god the man who performed the portentous and incredible feat of spending three days and three nights in the belly of the whale (Καὶ τὸν μὲν ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τοῦ κήτους ἑτραστίως ποιήσαντα καὶ παραδόξως ἑτρεῖς ἡμέρας καὶ τρεῖς νύκτας)¹⁷. But him who accepted death for mankind, to whom God bore witness by the prophets, Celsus would not regard as worthy of the second place of honour after the God of the universe, the position given to him on account of the great deeds which he did in heaven and on earth.

(7.57.5-10 Chadwick 1980: 442-443 / Borret 1969: 146)

¹⁵ Here we take only one aspect of the consideration of the Gospel by Origen – the testimony of the works and teachings of Jesus Christ, which is opposed to the stories of the exploits of philosophers. Origen has a complete doctrine of the Gospel, very extensive and deeply developed. See: Molland E. *The Conception of the Gospel in the Alexandrian Theology*. Oslo: I kommissjon hos J. Dybwad, 1938. P. 85-164.

¹⁶ This potential includes: *person, history, miracle and word*. (See: Losev. 1994: 195 and further). On the analogies of the teachings of Origen with some aspects of the philosophy of A.F. Losev, see: (Prikhodko 2017: 134-145).

¹⁷ Jonah 2,1.

Thus Origen, contrasting Jonah and Daniel with Jesus, speaks of the inaccessibility of the earthly deeds of the Saviour, even for Biblical prophets. Here, Origen emphasizes the heroic feats of Jonah and Daniel, translating the ironic style of Celsus into a serious line. But we note that further on in Cels. 7.57.10, in the repeated opposition of Jonah to Christ, Origen nevertheless reproduces the ironic motive of “flight from God” from the Book of Jonah:

And it was because he fled to avoid preaching the message that God had commanded him that Jonah was swallowed up by the whale (κατεπόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ κήτους). But it was because Jesus taught what God wished that he took death for mankind (τὸν ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων θάνατον ἀνέδεξατο).
(7.57.10 Chadwick 1980: 443 / Borret 1969: 146)

That because of his flight from God, Jonah “was swallowed up by the whale (κατεπόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ κήτους. In opposition to that, Christ “accepted death for mankind (τὸν ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων θάνατον ἀνέδεξατο)”. In the perspective of the life and death of Christ, the life of a prophet completely loses its heroism. The contrast between the “swallowing” of Jonah by the whale and the “acceptance” of death for human beings by Christ is emphasized in the corresponding verbs: “κατεπόθη”, denoting a descending action, to which is opposed the verb “ἀναδέχομαι” which means an ascending, self-sacrificing action.

A similar contrast is made when comparing the prophet Daniel with Jesus Christ:

He next says that Daniel, who went up¹⁸ from the lions (Δανιήλ, ἀναβάντα ἀπὸ τῶν λεόντων), ought to be worshipped by us rather than Jesus, who trampled down the fierceness of every opposing power (ἦπερ τὸν Ἰησοῦν, τὴν ἀγριότητα πάσης δυνάμεων ἀντικειμένης καταπατήσαντα) and gave us “power to walk upon serpents and scorpions and all the might of the enemy”¹⁹.
(Chadwick 1980: 443 / Borret 1969: 146)

We have already discussed the Origen’s adjustment of Celsus concerning Daniel, in which a heroic motive is traced. Here Origen skilfully includes another semantic register, in which the rise of Daniel from the lions’ den no longer heroizes, but distances the prophet from the feat of Christ, “who trampled down the fierceness of every opposing power and gave us power to walk upon serpents and scorpions and all the might of the enemy”. In this case, the “raising” of Daniel from the lions’ den, transmitted by the participle from the verb ἀναβαίνω, creates a contrast with the reverse, descending action – “trampling the fierceness of every opposing power”, denoted by the participle from the verb καταπατέω – trample, flout. In this case, heroism is indicated by a downward action – “trampling the power of the enemy” and contrasts with the upward action of “raising from the lions”. Therefore, the superiority of the deed of the Saviour contrasts with the deeds of the prophets in both ascending and descending lines of meaning. In this contrast, one can also see a certain irony which emphasizes the insignificance of the acts of the prophets in the light of the deeds of Jesus Christ.

Origen closes his revision of Celsus with a statement about the inapplicability of ordinary, rhetorical irony to the prophets Jonah and Daniel. The irony of Celsus regarding Biblical prophets is associated with the inability of the pagan philosopher to judge righteous people:

Then although he has no other examples to mention, he says *Or men of whom stories yet more incredible than these are told*, so that he pours abuse at the same time on Jonah and Daniel. The spirit in Celsus did not know how to speak well of righteous men.
(7.57.20 Chadwick 1980: 443 / Borret 1969: 146-148)

¹⁸ Instead of Chadwick’s “went free”, we translate “ἀναβάντα” more literally, as “went up”.

¹⁹ Luke 10, 19.

4. Conclusion

In the fragment of *Contra Celsum* 7.53-58, we analyse the rhetorical component of Celsus' speech and Origen's response to it. We found that Celsus in 7.53 reasoned from the serious to the ridiculous, leading the "pretenders" to the divine status according to the three degrees of the status of the heroes and the degree of reliability of the stories about them. Origen, accepting the rules of this rhetorical discourse, builds his answer in the contrary direction, from ridiculous to serious, "reversing" the rhetorical hierarchy of Celsus. In Origen's answer, the comic personages for Celsus, the Old Testament prophets Jonah and Daniel, are endowed with heroic traits, and the ironic element is transferred to Celsus' heroes: Hercules, Orpheus and Asclepius. In this context, it becomes clear that the replacement of the verses of the Book of Jonah, which Origen makes in his answer to Celsus, is because the episode about the whale from chapter 2 of the Book of Jonah is more suitable for reflecting the "heroic" aspect of the prophet's story than the story with the gourd from chapter 4.

On the one hand, we can conclude that "heroism", which is understood by a pagan audience as a sign of "divinity", is used by Origen to make sense of Jesus Christ. Thus the life and death of the Saviour are displayed as an example and testimony of His divinity which has the power to turn human hearts to the true God. But on the other hand, Origen withdraws the Gospel from a discourse on heroes and gods: the life of Christ cannot be compared with pagan myths; stories of philosophers fade before the expressive power of the Gospel. The very heroism of the life of Jesus Christ is "transcended". This heroism rises to unattainable heights, but at the same time it is so close to human life that can be a real model for it.

Regarding the rhetorical discourse of Celsus and Origen we sum up that Celsus uses the principles of irony and heroism, ridiculous and serious, as a rhetorical manifestation of the contrast of false and true. Origen repeats this trick regarding the appreciation of the virtues of the characters who are considered by Celsus, with the exception of Jesus Christ. When comparing any feats with the earthly life and the death of the Saviour, the opposition of the ironic and heroic no longer displays a contrast between false and true: any heroism, even the exploits of the Old Testament prophets, becomes ironic / ridiculous. In this way, Origen invents a new rhetorical instrument which allows the uniqueness of heroism of Jesus Christ to be revealed, using a deep potential of irony

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Appendix

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