Robert M. Grant is the master of the six-page seminal essay. I am not. But in his honor I tried for once to emulate both his critical good sense and its formidable formal expression. I thought it might help that I was focusing on a single sentence in Origen’s *contra Celsum*. I was mistaken.

The manner of the death of Jesus, as narrated in the gospels, especially Matthew, elicited from Celsus (in the name of his “Jew,” and directed toward Jewish-Christians) this head-wagging critique. The statement is part of a longer quotation from Celsus, but Origen thought the wording of this particular sentence important enough to quote again in 2.58. Right before our quotation the anti-Christian polemicist had trotted out the stories of other ancient heroes and gods (οἱ ἡρώικαὶ ἱστορίαι [2.56]) who had died and then supposedly risen, as part of the larger argument seeking to falsify Christian claims on the grounds that Jesus had faked both his divine birth and his resurrection. Celsus then names the topic for scrutiny: Αὐτὸ τὸ ἐκείνο σκεπτέων, εἰ τίς ὁ ἀληθῶς ἀποθανὼν ἀνέστη ποτὲ αὐτῷ σώματι (“But the point to be examined is whether anyone who actually died ever rose bodily”). Hence before critiquing the accounts of the resurrection (which he will famously do by attributing them to “hysterical women”) Celsus has a preliminary
charge: Jesus never really died, and hence never rose from the dead before being seen.\(^4\) Whether Jesus really died depends entirely upon how one assesses the historical reliability of the gospel accounts of his death, especially when compared with other literary compositions, i.e., the Greek myths on the one hand, and the Jewish scriptural accounts on the other.\(^5\) Celsus’ rhetorical question insists that the Christian cannot have it both ways, i.e., deem the stories of those others μῖθοι while insisting their own narratives are something more, or something else.\(^6\) Celsus and Origen, who as literary elites share the same παιδεία, use the same toolbox when it comes to testing narratives—μῖθοι and διηγήματα—for whether or not they are historically accurate.\(^7\) Chiefly, as the passage itself sneeringly indicates, it comes down to whether an account can be demonstrated πιθανός, “persuasive.”

Celsus’ carefully worded riposte seems deliberately open to various interpretations. Some of the translation decisions involved are illustrated by a glance at the divergent renderings of Chadwick and Borret:

Or do you think that the stories of these others\(^8\) really are the legends which they appear to be, and yet that the ending of your tragedy is to be regarded as noble and convincing—his cry from the cross when he expired, and the earthquake and the darkness?\(^9\)

\(^4\) As Origen agrees: Ο γὰρ ἀληθῶς ἀποθανὼν εἰ ἀνέστη, ἀληθῶς ἀνέστη (c. Cels. 2.16).

\(^5\) The method of σύγχρος is common both to Celsus’ charge and to Origen’s defense (see c. Cels. 1.18; cf. 8.47–48).

\(^6\) Origen makes the same argument in 1.31 about the historicity of the death of Jesus on behalf of others: Απεγέρτον εώς οἱ βουλόμενοι ἀπεσταίν τῷ Ἱσσοῦν ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων ἀποτεθηκέναι τρόπῳ σταυροῦ, πότερον οὐδὲ τὰς ἐλληνικὰς παράδειξεν καὶ βαρβαρικὰς πολλὰς ἱστορίας περὶ τοῦ τινας ὑπὲρ τοῦ κοινοῦ τεθηκέναι καθαριτικὰς τῶν προκαταλαβόντων τὰς πόλεις καὶ τὰ ἔθνη κακῶν; ἢ ἐκεῖνα μὲν γεγένητο οὐδὲν δὲ πιθανὸν ἔχει ὁ νομιμότατος ἀνθρώπος πρὸς τὸ ἀποθανεῖν ἐπὶ καθαρίσει μεγάλου δαίμονος καὶ δαίμονον ἄρχοντος, ὑποτάξαντος ὅλας τὰς ἑπὶ γῆν ἐλληνικὰς ἀνθρώπων νυμφῶν; On the charge of inconsistency, see 8.47: ἀποκληρονομικὸς τὰ μὲν σφετερα παραδεχόμεθα τοῖς δ’ ἀλλότροις ἀπεσταίν.

\(^7\) See Robert M. Grant, The Earliest Lives of Jesus (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 70, on how in contra Celsum Origen was facing down “an opponent whose way of looking at [the gospel stories] was much like his own.”

\(^8\) Zamolxis, Pythagoras, Rhampsinitus, Orpheus, Protesilaus and Heracles, all previously named as figures who falsified their deaths so as later to be regarded as risen (c. Cels. 2.55).