

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. V.

DECEMBER, 1925.

No. 12.

When was Jesus Born?

P. E. KRETZMANN, St. Louis, Mo.

The beginning of the Christian era, and therefore the supposed year of Christ's birth, was first fixed by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk, who lived in Rome at the beginning of the sixth century. He was greatly interested in computations pertaining to the church-year and did much toward establishing a uniform practise with regard to the celebration of Easter. He placed the birth of Christ in the year 754 a. u. c. (after the founding of the city of Rome). Even before his time several of the Popes of Rome had tried to determine the date of Christ's birth. It is said that Pope Julius I (336—352) had the imperial archives of Rome searched for the exact date of the birth of Christ, and it has been established beyond a doubt that Pope Liberius fixed the celebration of Christmas for December 25. By the middle of the sixth century, then, the date of the birth of Jesus was generally accepted to have been December 25, 754 a. u. c.

In an article in *Lehre und Wehre* of December, 1902, the writer shows that the computation of Dionysius Exiguus was undoubtedly erroneous. Using chiefly chronological tags from the Bible, all of which render the year 754 a. u. c. altogether improbable, the essayist finally concludes that the year 750 a. u. c. is the correct year of Christ's birth and that the Christian era should therefore be moved back four years. This idea was held quite generally among orthodox theologians about two decades ago.

But in the mean time, evidence was brought forth which indicated that a further correction in the computations must be made in order to harmonize facts from secular history with the Scriptural account. Work has been done chiefly by Sir William Ramsay, but subsequently also by Robertson, Deissmann, McKinley, and others, and the difficulty may now be said to have been solved with a reasonable amount of certainty. The argument proceeds

from four points of departure: the time of the vision of Zacharias in the Temple, the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, the first census of Augustus, and the death of Herod. Of these arguments the first is rather precarious, since it is based upon the date when Zacharias was supposed to have been on duty in the Temple, when "he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course," Luke 1, 8, namely, that of Abia. Even if the alleged Jewish records were always reliable, the latitude in the matter, according to the Bible account, is so great as to make the element of conjecture disproportionately great. But the other lines of argument are decidedly worth considering.

If we begin with the relation of Herod to the time of Christ's birth, we have a number of facts to consider. In the first place, it is clear that Herod the Great was still ruling in Palestine; for Matthew writes: "Now, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod, the king." Matt. 2, 1. Moreover, some time must be allowed between the birth of Jesus and the death of the cruel tyrant. The Magi clearly left their home in search of the new-born King only after His birth had actually taken place. Matt. 2, 2. 3. The journey from the East to Jerusalem occupied some time, even if we assume that the men traveled with all speed. Some time must be allowed for the consultation with the priests, as it was arranged by Herod. Matt. 2, 4 ff. Then, again, Herod may well have allowed a week or two for the Magi to return to Jerusalem before he staged the slaughter of the innocents. And, finally, to take only one more Scripture tag at this point, a further period of time must be figured before the death of Herod, since Joseph and Mary were evidently in Egypt for some time, for they were to remain in Egypt until they should receive word, Matt. 2, 13, and they did stay there until after the death of Herod, Matt. 2, 15. The conclusion seems safe, then, that the death of Herod did not take place in the same year in which Jesus was born, especially since he himself allowed a possible total of two years between the time of the birth of the Child and the time when he slew the children of Bethlehem.

To these facts, deduced from the Bible, we may add certain others from fairly reliable historical sources. In the first place, Herod the Great died thirty-seven years after he was made king of Judea and the other Palestinian provinces, at the beginning of April in the year 750 a. u. c., or shortly after the eclipse of March 12, 750. In the second place, about the year 746 a. u. c. Herod fell into disgrace with Augustus, a fact which made certain

embassies from him to the Roman court necessary. (Cp. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVI, 9, 3.) This fact must be kept in mind also in connection with the next point.

We have next to consider the matter of the census, of which Luke writes: "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria." Luke 2, 1. 2. The two difficulties here encountered are those pertaining to Cyrenius, or Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, and the census itself. It has been known since 1764 that Quirinius was governor of Syria from 6 to 9 A. D. But it has more recently been established that, whereas Sentius Saturninus was civil governor of Syria from 9 to 7 B. C., to be followed by Quinctilius Varus, yet Quirinius was military legate, not only of Syria, but also of Cilicia and other provinces in the Taurus region of Asia Minor, the date 10 to 7 B. C. having been definitely established in this connection. (Cp. *American Journal of Archeology*, IV, 1924, 436.) He was evidently in charge of the armies of the East, chiefly in conducting the war against the Homonadenses, but also in acting as the special lieutenant of the emperor in the affairs of Syria and the neighboring provinces. (Cp. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* chap. XI; Robertson, *Luke the Historian*, 128.)

But how about the census itself? It was generally alleged that Luke had made a mistake in speaking of an enrolment by households which extended throughout the Roman Empire. But the facts are that we now have incontrovertible evidence of a periodic census in the Roman Empire beginning with the time of Augustus, the period being fourteen years. In an edict by Gaius Vibius Maximus, governor of Egypt, 104, A. D., we read: "The enrolment by households being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who for any cause are outside their homes to return to their domestic hearths, that they may accomplish the customary dispensation of enrolment and continue steadfastly in the husbandry that belongeth to them." (Robertson, *Luke the Historian*, 125 f.; Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 4. Aufl., 231 f.) Deissmann, who is certainly not too conservative in his evaluation of Bible material, says at this point: "Es handelt sich um eine der alle vierzehn Jahre stattfindenden Volkszählungen zum Zwecke der Feststellung der Kopfsteuer oder sonstiger personaler Verpflichtungen." It has been proved that an enrolment was made in the year 90 A. D., also one at the time of Nero in 61—62 A. D., extending a year or two beyond. A fragment found by Grenfell and Hunt, dated the

sixth year of Tiberius, 20 A. D., shows conclusively that periodic enrolments were in use at that time. A papyrus has also been discovered ordering an enrolment in Egypt 23 to 22 B. C. (Cp. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* chap. VII.)

If we, now, add to this material the evidence found in Luke's writings, we find that he refers to a census in Acts 5, 37, at about the time when Archelaus had been deposed from his position as king, or ethnarch, of Judea and Samaria, and the so-called first general enrolment, of Luke 2, 1, the former being the census of 6 A. D., the latter that of 9 to 8 B. C.

But there is still some other material which cannot be disregarded at this point. We know that John the Baptist was approximately six months older than Jesus. But we read of him in Luke 3, 1, 2: "Now, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness." Since Tiberius was coregent of Augustus from 11—12 A. D. till 14 A. D., it follows that the fifteenth year of this emperor would be 26—27 A. D. Shortly afterward we are told that Jesus Himself began to be about thirty years of age, Luke 3, 23, the *ᾠσεὶ* of the Greek expressing about what our phrase "He was in His early thirties" would state. An additional tag is found in John 2, 20, which refers to about the same time in the public ministry of Jesus, His first Passover, shortly after He had begun to preach in public. The Jews there remark: "Forty and six years was this Temple in building." Since the Temple of Herod was begun in 20—19 B. C., this fact would again make the date 26—27 A. D.

The situation, then, comes down to this. The *terminus a quo* is the year 9—8 B. C., when Augustus actually sent out the decree commanding an enrolment throughout the empire, and the *terminus ad quem* is the year 4 B. C., the year of Herod's death. That we must go beyond the latter date a matter of some two or more years seems to follow from the various factors enumerated above. But that we cannot go all the way back to 8 B. C. in fixing the date of Christ's birth is also apparent from a number of points. In the first place, the decree could reach the territory under Herod's jurisdiction only via the legate of Syria, who transmitted it to the *rex socius*, this being the standing of Herod in the Roman

Empire. The sending of messengers bearing a copy of the decree naturally consumed much more time than a similar transaction would occupy to-day. After Herod had received the text of the document at Jerusalem by way of Antioch, there was still some delay. As Ramsay points out (*Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* chap. IX), his conclusions being based partly upon Josephus and partly upon other sources, Herod at this time sent two embassies to the court of the emperor, for he was not at all willing to accept the census, a mark of servitude and degradation in rank, without some form of protest. When his petition went unheeded the first time, he sent a second embassy announcing his compliance with the emperor's wishes. All this, of course, took time, very likely more than a year. The year 8—7 B. C., which ended with April 17, 7 B. C., may practically be eliminated in our discussion. The only thing that remains is for us to conclude that the year 7 B. C. itself is the year during which the enrolment in Palestine was carried out, and if we desire to abide by the result of the search instituted in the fourth century, we could accept December 25 of that year as the date of Christ's birth.

It would follow from this, interestingly enough, that Jesus was fully thirty-three years old when He entered upon the work of His public ministry, early in 27 A. D., that He died at Easter-time in the year 31, when He was fully thirty-six years old, and that the formal establishment of the Christian Church took place on Pentecost Day of that year.
