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## 497TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.

MONDAY, MAY 3RD, 1909.

PROFESSOR E. HULL, LL.D., F.R.S. (VICE-PRESIDENT),  
IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read and confirmed, and the following candidates were elected Associates :—

Rev. H. J. R. Marston, Belgrave Chapel, London.  
Rev. J. H. Skrine, Oxford.

The following paper was then read by the author :—

*THE DATE OF THE NATIVITY WAS 8 B.C.*

BY LIEUT.-COLONEL G. MACKINLAY, LATE R.A.

**I**T is well to consider the practical usefulness of our subject, because the ready objection starts up, Dates are dry things, what possible difference can it make whether we know the exact date of the Nativity or not ?

At the beginning of the sixth century it was the custom among the peoples of the old Roman Empire to date events from the time of the persecuting tyrant Diocletian, but in A.D. 532 a Christian Abbot named Dionysius Exiguus\* suggested that it would be far better that the Nativity of Christ (as nearly as could then be found) should be taken as the epoch from which to count. His suggestion was agreed to and adopted by all the Christian nations of the world from that time to the present. It surely must be a matter of interest to all who date letters to know whether this starting point of modern time is correct or not.

But there are far more important reasons which appeal to the lover of Scripture, for if this date is found to be the true one, the speculations of the visionaries who assert that the Gospel narratives are mere myths must be overthrown, and the

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\* *A New Analysis of Chronology*, 1830, vol. i, p. 83, Rev. W. Hales, D.D.

consistency and truthfulness of the Scripture record will be demonstrated.

But some may say—Is it not hopeless to expect to find the exact date? Did not Scaliger\* write long ago, “*Diem vero definire unius Dei est, non hominis*”—to determine the true day of Christ’s Birth belongs to God alone, not man. Are not the best scholars still undecided about it? And is not the evidence somewhat contradictory? Have we not heard in some sermons that this date has not been revealed to us, possibly for some wise purpose. Therefore, may it not be unprofitable, vain, and even wrong to attempt to discover it?

To this it is replied, because Scaliger and others did not know the exact date of the Nativity, that is no reason why we should not find out if we can. We are nowhere told in the Scripture that the date of Christ’s Birth is hidden. On the contrary, two direct historical statements are given us in the Gospel of St. Luke, which enable us to find not only the year, but also the season of the year, and several indirect statements in the Bible also point to the same conclusion. There is also good historical evidence apart from the Scriptures, witnessing to the same result.

It is true that in the past there were difficulties in determining this date, and some of the evidence appeared to be conflicting; but these difficulties have disappeared with the modern increase in historical knowledge, which is founded on the examination and study of original documents and inscriptions discovered during recent years.

We now proceed to find, from different sources, the limits within which the Nativity must have fallen.

#### THE YEAR.

(a) *The Nativity was between 10 B.C. and 5 B.C. according to St. Luke and Josephus.*

We are told in Luke iii, 23 R.V., that Christ was “about thirty years of age” when He began His Ministry. No date before 10 B.C. would agree with this statement, even if the earliest year historically possible is assumed for the beginning of His Ministry.

The Nativity could not have been later than 5 B.C. because it must have been at least three and a half months before the death of Herod, in order to allow time for the forty days of

\* *Chronology, etc.*, vol. i, p. 93, Hales.

purification and for the departure to and stay in Egypt. Herod died shortly before Passover, 10th April, 4 B.C. This date rests on good historical evidence; Josephus states that an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before it, and modern astronomical calculations have shown that an eclipse of the moon visible at Jerusalem took place as stated.

(b) *The Nativity was between 8 B.C. and 5 B.C. (the special rule of Quirinius) according to St. Luke and Justin Martyr.*

The Evangelist (Luke ii, 2) and Justin Martyr\* both assert that Christ was born at the enrolment under Quirinius.

The Abbot Sanclemente, Zumpt and others have shown that Quirinius exercised high office as a general commanding troops engaged in war on the borders of Syria, and Prebendary H. Browne has shown that the time was between the years 12 B.C. and 1 B.C.† Sir W. M. Ramsay‡ has narrowed down this period within the limits about 8 B.C. to 5 B.C., and he has further shown that it was the Roman custom for a general engaged in a frontier war, as the direct representative of the Emperor, to rank superior to the ordinary governor who carried on his civil duties as usual. It is a strange historical fact that Quirinius was the ordinary civil governor in Syria at the next enrolment fourteen years later.

(c) *The Nativity was between 9 B.C. and 7 B.C., the ordinary rule of Sentius Saturninus according to Tertullian.*

Tertullian wrote,§ quoting records evidently existing in his time, "There is historical proof that at this very time (of the Nativity) a census had been taken by Sentius Saturninus." Saturninus ruled in Syria from 9 B.C. (some say from 8 B.C.) to 7 B.C.

Thus St. Luke and Justin Martyr asserted that the ruler at the time of the Nativity was Quirinius, while Tertullian stated he was Sentius Saturninus. This seeming contradiction is now explained, as it is now known that both ruled at the same time in Syria, each in his own capacity.

(d) *The Nativity was 8 B.C. (the first enrolment) according to St. Luke.*

It has now been demonstrated historically that Augustus initiated a periodic enrolment throughout the Empire every

\* *Apol.* I, 34, 46, and *Trypho*, 78.

† *Ordo Saeculorum*, 1844.

‡ *Was Christ born in Bethlehem?* p. 241, Sir W. M. Ramsay.

§ *Against Marcion*, Bk. IV, Ch. xix. Trans., Rev. P. Holmes, D.D.

fourteen years. The first one took place in Syria in 8 B.C. Mr. Kenyon and Mr. Bell\* have recently found an old order from the Prefect in Egypt dated A.D. 104, commanding all persons living at a distance to return to their homes for the then approaching census. The analogy with Luke ii, 1-3, is obvious.

#### THE TIME OF YEAR.

Not only is it possible to fix the year of the Nativity but the month; even the day of the month can be determined with a high degree of probability.

A definite time in the year had evidently been fixed for the enrolment by the authorities, as the condition of the Virgin Mary proves that the choice of the day was not left to individuals.

(e) *The Nativity was in warm weather, not in the winter.*

Lewin† well wrote: "The Nativity could not have been, as commonly supposed, in the winter for several reasons: (1) The shepherds and their flocks would not be in the open air during a winter's night. According to the Talmud cattle in Judæa were usually turned out at the Passover and brought back in October‡; (2) Mary, in an advanced state of pregnancy, would not have travelled with Joseph so far as from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the winter; (3) it is highly improbable that a census, which obliged persons to take distant journeys, should have been fixed for a winter month; a more natural time would be after harvest." We must remember that snow often lies heavily on the uplands of Judæa in the winter. In 1886 the son of Dr. Jessup of Beyrût was snowed up at Bethel as late in the year as the 10th April.

(f) *The first Enrolment, which fixes the date of the Nativity, was between August and October for the sake of convenience.*

Sir W. M. Ramsay points out that the authorities would select some time of year after the harvest and vintage had been gathered in, and before the time of ploughing, so that the people might be at leisure to come to the enrolment.

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\* *Luke the Physician*, 1908, p. 244, Sir W. M. Ramsay, who quotes *B. Museum, Papyri III*, p. 24, and *The Expository Times*, Oct., 1907, p. 41. Prof. J. H. Moulton.

† *Fasti Sacri*, 1865, p. 115.

‡ Sheep will not feed during the heat of the day in summer, and so they must be left to graze in the open fields at night. In winter they will feed by day and they are folded at night in Palestine for protection.

(g) *The first Enrolment was at the Feast of Tabernacles on account of the crowding of the inn at Bethlehem.*

Jerusalem was crowded three times a year at the great Feasts of Passover, Harvest and Tabernacles, when all male Israelites were ordered to appear before the Lord (Deut. xvi, 16). Bethlehem, only six miles distant, would also be crowded at those times. Enrolment by itself would not of necessity cause crowding, because many of the visitors would be sure to lodge with relatives whom they would find in their own village. But this crowding would be far more likely to happen if the Enrolment took place at one of the Feasts. The great Feast of Tabernacles is the only one of the triad which falls in the latter part of the summer, when the census must have been taken. The crowding at the inn, therefore, points to the probability that the Feast of Tabernacles was at hand.

(h) *The first Enrolment was on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, to suit the policy of Herod.*

As all male Jews were obliged to come to the Feast of Tabernacles, which is in the middle of the time of year most suitable for the census, it is almost certain that Herod would have ordered the enumeration to take place at that time, because that would obviate the necessity of a fresh journey being made on purpose, and of a fresh breaking into home routine on the part of the people. The linking of the census with a religious feast would render the new order palatable,\* perhaps almost popular, and the *beginning* of the Feast (20th September in 8 B.C.) would be far the best time to choose, because the Jews would then have no opportunity to assemble and grumble before they complied with the order; and then, having obeyed, their attention would be taken away from the census, as they would be quickly absorbed with their religious exercises.

(i) *Enrolment at the Feast of Tabernacles 8 B.C. specially suited the policy of Herod.*

It is almost certain from historical data that the year autumn 10 B.C. to autumn 9 B.C. was a Sabbath year, when no sowing of seed or pruning of vines or olives was allowed (Lev. xxv, 3-5). Consequently, in the spring and autumn of 8 B.C. the people would give the greatest attention to agriculture,

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\* *Tacitus Ann.*, VI, 41, states that the Roman census was enforced on dependent princes. *Livy, Epit.*, lib. 137, states that census taking often led to disturbances.

as their supplies of corn and wine must have fallen very low, because there had been practically no harvest or vintage in the previous year. When all the fruits of the earth had been safely gathered in, the Feast of Tabernacles 8 B.C. must have been a specially joyous season, and therefore specially suited to Herod's purpose. It is not at all likely therefore that he would have delayed the census to a later year.

In reviewing these reasons for supposing that the census and consequently the Nativity was at the Feast of Tabernacles, Sir W. M. Ramsay\* states: "This seems highly probable, and may even, I think, be regarded as approximating to certainty."

This opinion should give great force to the same conclusion for the date 8 B.C. drawn from the next line of investigation, which has been undertaken since Sir William wrote the words just quoted.

(j) *The Nativity was in the autumn of 8 B.C., because Zacharias was of the order of Abijah.*

The connection between these two events may not be at once apparent, but it is most interesting. There were twenty-four courses of priests (1 Chron. xxiv, 1-19). Each course served for a week (see 2 Chron. xxiii, 4, 8; 2 Kings xi, 5; 1 Chron. ix, 24, 25). We learn from Jewish records† that the first course, that of Jehoiarib, had just again begun their tour of service on the Sabbath day, the ninth of the fifth month, Ab., or 4th August, A.D. 70, when the Temple of Jerusalem was burnt by the soldiers of Titus. There is no reason to suppose that there was any break in the regularity of the sequence of the courses in the eighty years previous to that date, because the priests of that day were known to be most exact and punctilious in the performance of all their observances. Hence it is easy to calculate‡ when the eighth course, that of Abijah

\* *The Expositor*, Jan., 1908, p. 18, and also *Luke the Physician*, 1908, p. 243.

† The Talmud (Taanith, p. 29, and Erachim, p. 11).

‡ To find for instance when the course of Abijah began its duties in 9 B.C. proceed as follows.

The first course began, we are told, on 4th Aug., A.D. 70, therefore the eighth course should have begun after  $7 \times 7$  or 49 days later, *i.e.*, on the 22nd Sept., A.D. 70.

There are 78 years between 22nd Sept., 9 B.C., and 22nd Sept., A.D. 70. (It is always necessary to cast out one year in calculating from B.C. to A.D. *vice versâ*, as there is no year 0 in chronology.)

In those 78 years there are :—

$$78 \times 365 + \frac{78}{4} = 28,489 \text{ days.}$$

(1 Chron. xxiv, 10), began its duties during any of the years which could possibly have been the one just before the Nativity. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, belonged to the course of Abijah (Luke i, 5).

Table I states the dates of the first days of the course of Abijah during the years 10 B.C. to 7 B.C.; in other words it gives possible dates for the vision of Zacharias in the Temple (Luke i, 5-22).

TABLE I.

| B.C. | Dates for the vision of Zacharias. |                    |                  |  |
|------|------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--|
| 10   | [A] 25 February                    | [B] 12 August .... | [E] 28 December. |  |
| 9    | [C] 27 January ...                 | [D] 13 July ....   | [G] 29 November. |  |
| 8    | ... ..                             | [F] 14 June ....   | [I] 31 October.  |  |
| 7    | ... ..                             | [H] 16 May ....    |                  |  |

Each recurrence being 29 days earlier on each succeeding year, because  $365 - 168 \times 2 = 29$  days (30 days earlier when a leap year intervenes.)

After the vision Zacharias fulfilled his ministrations, and then departed to his house, when his wife Elizabeth conceived (Luke i, 23, 24); this would be on the seventh day from the beginning of the course of Abijah, or from the vision.

The Annunciation took place "in the sixth month" of Elizabeth's pregnancy (Luke i, 26-38). In Hebrew\* usage, in one instance, this expression indicates the first day of the month. In New Testament Greek, a like meaning is probable. The mention of the sixth month in Luke i, 26, just after the record of the completion of five months, supports this supposition.

(An extra day being added on every fourth (leap) year.)

The whole of one cycle of the twenty-four courses lasted for  $24 \times 7 = 168$  days.

If we divide the 28,489 days by 168 days we get a result of 169 complete repetitions of the courses with a remainder of 97 days.

If we had subtracted 97 from the 28,489 before the division by 168, we should, of course, have obtained a result without remainder. If therefore we subtract 97 days from the interval of 78 years taking it off the earlier end, i.e., counting from 22nd Sept., 9 B.C., we reach a date 28th Dec., 9 B.C., which must also have been a first day of a course of Abijah. Another first of Abijah was 168 days earlier, on the 13th July, 9 B.C. Hence all the other dates in Table I are readily found.

\* *The Portable Commentary on Exodus xix*, 1, p. 48. Rev. R. Jamieson, D.D.



For the sake of definiteness and simplicity we shall assume for the present that this is the meaning. Consequently the Annunciation took place  $7 + 29\frac{1}{2} \times 5 = 154\frac{1}{2}$  days, say 154 days after the first day of the course of Abijah when Zacharias had his vision. Hence we obtain Table II (in which the capital letters within square brackets refer to the same markings in Table I: thus [D], 14th December, of Table II, is 154 days later than [D], 13th July, of Table I).

TABLE II.

| B.C. | Dates for the Annunciation. |            |      |     |         |                       |
|------|-----------------------------|------------|------|-----|---------|-----------------------|
| 10   | ....                        | ....       | .... | [A] | 29 July | ....                  |
| 9    | [B]                         | 13 January | .... | [C] | 29 June | .... [D] 14 December. |
| 8    | ....                        | ....       | .... | [E] | 31 May  | .... [F] 15 November. |
| 7    | ....                        | ....       | .... | [G] | 2 May   | .... [H] 17 October.  |
| 6    | ....                        | ....       | .... | [I] | 3 April | ....                  |

The dates for John's birth, Table III, depend upon the dates in Table I. The birth must have been exactly, or about 41 weeks or 287 days after the vision to Zacharias. Thus [D], 26 April, 8 B.C., of Table III, is 287 days later than [D], 13 July, 9 B.C., of Table I.

TABLE III.

| B.C. | Dates for the birth of John the Baptist. |             |      |      |      |                   |
|------|--|-------------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| 10   | ....                                     | ....        | .... | .... | .... | [A] 9 December.   |
| 9    | [B]                                      | 25 May      | .... | .... | .... | [C] 9 November.   |
| 8    | [D]                                      | 26 April    | .... | .... | .... | [E] 11 October.   |
| 7    | [F]                                      | 28 March    | .... | .... | .... | [G] 12 September. |
| 6    | [H]                                      | 27 February | .... | .... | .... | [I] 14 August.    |

The dates for the Nativity, Table IV, depend upon the dates in Table II. The Nativity must have been exactly, or about 40 weeks or 280 days after the Annunciation. Thus [D], 20th September, 8 B.C., of Table IV, is 280 days later than [D], 14th December, 9 B.C., of Table II.

TABLE IV.

| Dates of the first days of the feast of Tabernacles. | B.C. | Dates for the Nativity. |                   |
|--|------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 October ... ..                                     | 9    | [A] 4 May ... ..        | [B] 19 October.   |
| 20 September ... ..                                  | 8    | [C] 5 April ... ..      | [D] 20 September. |
| 8 or 9 October ... ..                                | 7    | [E] 7 March ... ..      | [F] 22 August.    |
| 28 September ... ..                                  | 6    | [G] 6 February....      | [H] 24 July.      |

Inspection of Table IV informs us, that if the Nativity occurred at a Feast of Tabernacles—as Sir William Ramsay thinks may be regarded as approximating to certainty—then the year of the Nativity *must have been* 8 B.C.; because in none of the other years which are at all possible historically did the Feast of Tabernacles agree with the time for the Nativity, indicated by considerations connected with the date of the course of Abijah.

Remembering the difference of 29 (or 30) days in succeeding years, it is easy to see that, if Table IV had been extended two or three years more in both directions, the Nativity could not have occurred at a Feast of Tabernacles in any of the added years.

It is not claimed that this method above establishes exactly the day, 20th September, 8 B.C., for the Nativity, but it includes that day within narrow limits. It must be remembered that it is seldom possible to be certain which of two days was chosen for a new moon.

Had we taken the expression “in the sixth month” (Luke i, 26) to mean *any* day in that month, we see from Table IV that [D] would be extended for a month from the 20th September, 8 B.C., which would of course contain the whole Feast of Tabernacles. But if a month is added to all the other dates in Table IV none of them will contain any part of the Feast.

In other words, no date but 8 B.C. is possible for the Nativity (assuming that it must have been at the Feast of Tabernacles), even if we attach the ordinary meaning given to Luke i, 26, that *any* part of the month may be intended.

But we have previously found, see headings (g), (h) and (i) (p. 5), that the Nativity was on or about the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, 20th September, 8 B.C. Working backwards 280

days we reach the 14th December, 9 B.C., for the Annunciation. We notice that this agrees with Table II, in which the assumption was made that the Annunciation was at the very beginning of the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. We thus demonstrate, independently of any grammatical considerations, that the expression, "in the sixth month" (Luke i, 26), referred to the first day of that month.

Summarising our results by looking for [D], in each table we obtain :—

TABLE V.

| Summary of Dates.        |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Events.                  | Exactly or nearly.   |
| Vision of Zacharias .... | 13 July, 9 B.C. A week before the new moon of the fifth month, Ab. |
| Annunciation ... ..      | 14 December, 9 B.C. New moon of the tenth month, Tebel.            |
| Birth of John .... ..    | 26 April, 8 B.C. Full moon of second month, Zif or Jiar.           |
| Nativity ... ..          | 20 September, 8 B.C. Full moon of seventh month, Tisri.            |

Inspection of an astronomical table of new moons informs us that there was a (Jewish) new moon on 20th July, 9 B.C., when Zacharias went to his house after his week of service; this was at the beginning of the fifth month, Ab.; the months of Elizabeth's pregnancy thus commenced with the new moons, and it must have been very easy to note when the sixth month began, viz., at the new moon of the tenth month, Tebel, which was therefore the time of the Annunciation. We must remember that with the Jewish calendar of lunar months and no printed almanacs, the phases of the moon were carefully noted by every one in recording the flight of time. It follows naturally that both John the Baptist and Christ must each have been born just about the time of a full moon, for 40 weeks, or 280 days, are almost exactly the same as  $9\frac{1}{2}$  lunar months, which equal  $9\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2} = 280\frac{1}{4}$  days. John was born at the full moon of the second month, when the Passover had sometimes been kept (Numbers ix, 10, 11; 2 Chron. xxx, 2, 15), and Christ was born at the full moon of the seventh month, which always indicated the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. xxiii, 34).

This method of investigation\* has been partially followed by Lewin†, who accepts the facts that the twenty-four courses each served for one week and that a first course began on the 4th August, A.D. 70. He assumes, however (from other considerations), that the Nativity was in the year 6 B.C. He adduces no reason for concluding that the Nativity was at a Feast of Tabernacles; and he evidently does not consider that the expression "in the sixth month" (Luke i, 26) means the first day of that month. Because although his calculations for the first day of the course of Abijah is the same as that in [H], Table I, viz., 16th May, 7 B.C., he, nevertheless, makes the Annunciation to be in November (giving no nearer approximation) instead of 17th October, 7 B.C., *vide* [H], Table II; and he makes the Nativity to have been in August (he does specify the day) instead of 24th July, 6 B.C., *vide* [H], Table IV.

But if we accept the strong reasons which we have previously considered, that the Nativity must have been at a Feast of Tabernacles, we must conclude that Lewin's own calculations negative the supposition that 6 B.C. could have been the year of the Birth of Christ, because we see from Table IV that the Feast of Tabernacles in that year did not begin until the 28th September, which is a month later than any possible day for the Nativity according to his calculations.

The only possible objection to so early a date as 8 B.C. for the Nativity is the fact that Christ must have been thirty-two years of age when He began His Ministry, on the assumption, now generally accepted, that the Crucifixion took place at Passover, A.D. 29, and also that His Ministry lasted for three years and a half. The Evangelist (Luke iii, 23) states that Christ was then "about thirty years of age." Commenting on this passage Dean Alford‡ wrote, "this admits of considerable latitude, but only in one direction, viz., over thirty years." An age between thirty and thirty-one cannot be intended, because Christ, as we have seen, was almost certainly born at a Feast of Tabernacles, yet when He visited the Temple at the Passover in His boyhood, the same Evangelist (Luke ii, 41-42) describes Him as "twelve years old," not *about* twelve years old. Consequently

\* In the *Phoenix*, a collection of MSS. and printed tracts, 1707 (quoted in *The Christian Armoury*, Dec., 1903), the author endeavoured to find the time of year of the Nativity by this means. But he assumed that the first course of priests always began on the first day of the month Nisan, and he was evidently unaware that each course only served for a week.

† *Fasti Sacri*, p. 109. See also *Ordo Sæculorum*, p. 33. Rev. H. Browne.

‡ *The New Testament for English Readers* on Luke iii, 23.

the expression "about thirty" must mean an age some few *years* not *months* more than thirty.

The historical data available for determining the date of the Nativity are thus seen to be by no means scanty. There is considerable direct historical evidence, both Biblical and secular; the rulers of the day, Cæsar Augustus, Quirinius, Herod, and Archelaus, are all referred to in the sacred narrative, as was usual in ancient historical records. Various cycles or regularly recurring periods lend their aid: they are (1) The cycle of lunar eclipses, as one of them gives certitude to the date of Herod's death, which in its turn gives a limit to the possible date of the Nativity. (2) The cycle of Roman Enrolments every fourteen years. (3) The eight years' cycle of the shining of the Morning Star, as will be mentioned later on. (4) The seven years' cycle of the Sabbath year. (5) The annual cycle of the seasons which indicated times suitable and unsuitable for the census. (6) The annual cycle of the three great Feasts of the Lord, chiefly that of Tabernacles. (7) The woman's calendar of forty weeks. (8) The priests' courses of twenty-four weeks. (9) The forty days of the Purification. (10) The monthly cycle of the moon's phases is several times employed. (11) The week of seven days indicates the duration of each course of the priests; and (12) The daily cycle of day and night is made use of, for we are told that the Nativity occurred at night (Luke ii, 8, 11). Also we are helped in our search by considering (1) The difference of five months between the ages of the Baptist and his Master; (2) The customs of the people; (3) The policy of Herod; (4) The condition of the Virgin Mary on her journey to Bethlehem; (5) The arrangement of sheep at different seasons of the year; and (6) The meaning of one or two Greek grammatical expressions—all conspire to indicate 8 B.C. as the year of the Nativity. What other historical event in ancient, or even in modern history, is dated by such a quantity and variety of concordant evidence?

The foregoing arguments have not yet been controverted. No one has, however, criticised this chronology in any detail, with the exception of Sir W. M. Ramsay, who generously wrote in 1907 that the evidence in favour of the date 6 B.C. for the Nativity, which until then had generally been accepted as probable, "is distinctly slighter in character than that which supports the date 8 B.C." In 1908 he wrote again,\* "This date 8 B.C. may now be accepted provisionally (for the Nativity) as

\* *The Expositor*, Dec., 1908, and *Luke the Physician*, 1908, p. 246.

the only one which has all the evidence in its favour." Since he wrote these last words the line of investigation connected with the course of Abijah has been added. This strongly confirms the autumn of 8 B.C. and most probably the initial day of the Feast of Tabernacles as the date of the Nativity.

It is not unlikely that other lines of investigation may be found by other seekers to attest this date for the Nativity: on the other hand, it is possible that flaws may be found in some of the deductions in the preceding pages. At any rate it is hoped that this article may help to direct general attention to this subject now that so much data is at our disposal.

If this date is received as true, the reader of the Scriptures may perhaps find a practically fresh system of Bible study opening before him; because it will establish the trustworthiness of other methods by which the dates 8 B.C. for the Nativity and A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion were found without the aid of historical data other than those of a most general kind to which all agree.

The new methods depend upon a sound principle laid down long ago by Sir Isaac Newton that our Lord constantly alluded to things actually present in His teaching.

There are (it is believed) several allusions in the gospels to the actual periods of the shining of the Morning Star, during the time of Christ's life on earth; these cyclical periods are readily known from ordinary astronomical calculations, hence various gospel events can be dated, chief among them being the Nativity and the Crucifixion. There are also many allusions in the gospels to contemporary events connected with the Sabbath years A.D. 26-27, and one or two to the Sabbath year 10-9 B.C., hence another independent chronology is obtained.

These new methods both indicated 8 B.C. for the Nativity and A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion. Although this latter date agrees with that which is now generally thought to be probable, the date 8 B.C. found by the new methods for the Nativity was a good deal earlier than the date 6 B.C., which, until lately, had found most general acceptance. At first considerable disappointment was felt, and endeavours were made to see if the new methods would give results in accord with general opinion, but this they refused to do. Canon Sanday was then asked if any known historical data gave a positive denial to this early date. He most kindly replied, that he did not know of any, but he wrote that there are two historical points in favour of the date 8 B.C.: "(1) That it would probably suit the cycles of census

taking; (2) That it would bring the Nativity distinctly under *Sentius Saturninus*, which would agree with the express statement of Tertullian." Search was then made, with the result that *all* historical data were found to be in favour of 8 B.C.

It is thus hoped that attention may be directed to the new methods by which this date for the Nativity was first determined. If these methods are found to be reliable after further testing, they may perhaps be applied to the solution of other Biblical problems in the future.

If the date 8 B.C. is accepted for the Nativity, the concurrence of the evidence which is now found to point to only one date clears away any doubts which have in the past been cast upon the historical accuracy of St. Luke, and thus incidentally in our investigations we have the truthfulness of the sacred record brought before us in a marked manner—a very important point.

Rationalists and destructive critics are busy with careful study and thought; let the believer in the authority of the Bible search with reverent diligence, and he will find that truth and order, beauty and life will clothe even the dry bones of Scripture Chronology, and they will rise up a great army to contend for the truth of the word of God.

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#### NOTE.

It is impossible within the limits of a paper for the Victoria Institute to enter into all the historical points connected with the Nativity. They are considered more fully in the author's book, *The Magi, how they recognised Christ's Star*, which also finds the chief gospel dates by the new methods.

#### DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN felt sure that he expressed the unanimous feeling of the Meeting in saying that an extremely interesting statement had been put before them. Colonel Mackinlay had already shown himself as the astronomer of the Bible in his book *The Magi, how they recognised Christ's Star*, and he was now going on to be the chronologist.

One point was brought out quite clearly—that Christmas was at an entirely mistaken period of the year. They held that festival in the middle of winter, whereas the Nativity must have been at a time when the shepherds were tending their flocks in the field..

He could state from his own experience that the tableland of Bethlehem was exceedingly cold. When the party with which he was connected was coming back from an exploration of Palestine and Mount Sinai, they were at Jerusalem in the early days of January, and snow covered the whole country to a depth of two feet. They noted these things and wondered why Christmas, the commemoration of the birth of Christ, was placed at mid-winter. It was an anomaly that should be cleared up and the whole calendar should be revised.

Mr. J. TOWNSEND TRENCH observed that in the paper which had just been read to the members of the Victoria Institute, in support of the year 8 B.C. being the year of the Nativity of our Lord, reference had been made to the dates of two other important events, which are inevitably involved in judging the date of the Nativity, namely, the date of the commencement of our Lord's Ministry, and the date of the Crucifixion.

The dates propounded in the paper referred to are as follows :—

- (1) "*The Nativity*" (of Christ) "was in the autumn of 8 B.C." (page 202)—probably "20th September, in 8 B.C." (page 201)—and again "it is not claimed that this method above establishes exactly the day, 20th September, 8 B.C., for the Nativity, but it includes that day within narrow limits" (page 205).
  - (2) "Christ must have been 32 years of age when He *began His Ministry*, on the assumption now generally accepted, that *the Crucifixion* took place *at the Passover*, A.D. 29, and also that His Ministry lasted *three years and a half*" (page 207).
- "The historical data available for determining the date of the Nativity are thus seen to be no means scanty."
- (3) "If this date (for the Nativity) is received as true, the reader of the Scriptures may perhaps find a practically fresh system of Bible study opening before him, because it will establish the trustworthiness of other methods by which the dates 8 B.C. for the Nativity, and A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion, were found without the aid of historical data other than those of a most general kind to which all agree" (page 209), and further, "these new methods both



indicated 8 B.C. for the Nativity and A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion."

Thus they found that the author of the paper read, regarded those three important dates as being more or less linked together in the chain of evidence presented, and in the "practically fresh system of Bible study" which he advocated, of which he said (at page 209 of the paper) that "these new methods both indicated 8 B.C. for the Nativity and A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion."

He felt bound to draw the attention of the meeting to a *prophecy* in *Daniel* ix, 25, wherein is distinctly set forth and foretold *the precise year* of Christ's public entry into Jerusalem as her Prince or King, and of His almost immediately subsequent Crucifixion.

The language of the prophecy is perfectly simple. It fixes a certain starting point, then it gives the precise duration of time which is to elapse *from* the aforesaid starting point *up to* "Messiah the Prince."

The prophecy (*Daniel* ix, 25) runs thus:—"From the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem" (street and wall) "unto Messiah the Prince, shall be seven weeks and three score and two weeks"; or rather, 7 sevens and 62 sevens, that is, 69 sevens, that is, 483 prophetic or Babylonian years.

The Word of God in the Book of Daniel leaves no doubt whatever as to the precise length of the prophetic year.

Of course, to institute a comparison of that prophecy with the records of secular history, the first step was to convert those 483 prophetic years into historic or solar years, and they found that 483 prophetic years of 360 days each, were equivalent to 476 historic or solar years of 365 $\frac{1}{4}$  days.

The starting point of the count they found in *Nehemiah* ii, 1-6, the commission to *Nehemiah* having been issued 445 B.C., which, in counting the years elapsing to the Cross, must be read as 444 B.C., so as to avoid counting A.D. twice.

There is therefore only one year in the history of the universe when Daniel's prophecy could have been fulfilled.

|              |     |     |          |
|--------------|-----|-----|----------|
| Namely       | ... | ... | B.C. 444 |
| To which add | ... | ... | A.D. 32  |

—  
476 years.

And this gave with *unfailing certainty* the year date of the Crucifixion

as A.D. 32, that having been the time *God* appointed for the Crucifixion, as spoken by His servant Daniel.

He wished before he sat down, to draw their attention to Sir Robert Anderson's book (eighth edition) called *The Coming Prince*. Therein they would find the calculation set forth in full. (See pages 121 to 129.)

One thing was certain, and that was that in this case they were dealing with *fulfilled prophecy*, which could therefore be tested by history, and no date which would not fit, and fall in precisely with *God's predicted date*, could by any human possibility be the true date of the Crucifixion, and he had shown by quotations from the paper read, that it would be rather too late to affirm that this did not in any way affect the date of the Nativity or the date of the beginning of Christ's Ministry.

Sir ROBERT ANDERSON said that he had been much interested by his friend Colonel Mackinlay's paper, but could not accept his conclusions. At the Bar, and more recently in a position where he had to deal still more closely with evidence, he often found proof that it was easy to make out a clear case in support of a false issue if some salient fact were left out. And Colonel Mackinlay had left out the fact recorded in Luke iii that our Lord's Ministry began in the fifteenth year of Tiberius. Sir W. M. Ramsay, whom he had freely quoted, began life under the influence of the Tübingen school of criticism, and was thus led to give up the New Testament. But in the course of exploration work in Asia Minor he discovered that the Acts of the Apostles was the most accurate of ancient histories, and he was thus led to write a book in defence of the Gospel of Luke. Now even if that Gospel were treated merely as history the fact remained that the chronological statement of the 3rd chapter is one of the most definite in history, sacred or profane. It specifies the fifteenth year of Tiberius, and names seven different personages as holding certain specified offices in that year; and each of them in fact held the post assigned to him in the year in question. He was well aware of the nightmare system of exegesis, by which Scripture was always made to mean something different from what it says. But he had no patience with it. They were told that the fifteenth year meant really the twelfth year of his reign. But no historical statement, no coin, had ever been found in which the reign of Tiberius was reckoned in any but one way, and to suppose that the

Evangelist, writing for Romans, would discredit his work by such a fanciful conceit as was, in his humble judgment, sheer nonsense.

The fact remains then that while Scripture had nowhere given the date of the Nativity it had fixed with absolute accuracy the year A.D. 29 as that in which the Lord entered on His public Ministry; and thus, assuming that the Ministry lasted three and a half years, they could with certainty fix A.D. 32 as the date of the Crucifixion. This being so the question they were discussing there was purely academic, and it must be made subordinate to this definite and salient fact. If he began to discuss in detail the points raised by the paper, they would all lose their dinner. Moreover he had dealt with them exhaustively in his book which Mr. Trench had cited in such flattering terms. He could not conclude without expressing his surprise that a discussion of the date upon the Nativity should ignore the labours of the greatest of our chronologers, Fynes Clinton, whose dictum is definite:—"The earliest possible date for the Nativity is the autumn of 6 B.C., eighteen months before the death of Herod in 4 B.C. The latest will be the autumn of 4 B.C., about six months before his death, assumed to be in spring 3 B.C."

Professor LANGHORNE ORCHARD pointed out that not all the arguments brought forward in the paper might be thought convincing. Certainly, they were not all of equal strength. But while it was true (as had been remarked) that the strength of a chain was only that of its weakest link, it should be remembered that the author's reasoning consisted of several chains of argument, and the weakness of a single chain might not impair the strength of others.

The strongest arguments were those furnished by the cycles of Roman census-taking, the contemporaneous rule in Syria of Quirinius and Saturninus, the lunar eclipse which gives certitude to the date of Herod's death, and the strong probability that the enrolment took place at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. By these arguments, the author had made out a case not indeed of demonstration, but of considerable probability. The date 8 B.C. must be held to succeed as against 6 B.C. With regard, however, to the Crucifixion year, whether A.D. 29 be, or be not, the correct date, they would do well, in face of the criticisms of Mr. Townsend Trench and Sir Robert Anderson, to suspend judgment.

Canon GIRDLESTONE thought that the discussion had gone away from the real point, the date of our Lord's birth. Colonel Mackinlay laid no stress on A.D. 29 as the date of the Crucifixion. If his views were correct, then our Lord was on earth four more years than was usually supposed. The words about 30 years of age would then mean at least 34 years of age. This was a difficult point.

With regard to the date being about the Feast of Tabernacles, there was one little thing in favour of it, namely, that in the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, where they read that "the word was made flesh and dwelt among us," the word "dwelt" was literally "tabernacled" among us. This being the word, it seemed to fit in with the suggestion that He was born during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Lieut.-Colonel MACKINLAY.—Before replying to those who have spoken this afternoon, I should like to read a letter from Professor Burkitt, Norrisian Professor of Divinity, Cambridge. He writes: "My general opinions about the data in St. Luke that fix the year of the Nativity agree with what Professor Percy Gardner has written in *Encycl. Biblica* 3994 ff. (Art. Quirinius). I feel sure in my own mind that the evangelist's authority for introducing the name 'Cyrenius' was a misunderstanding of Josephus, *Ant.* xviii, 1.

"I also feel inclined to suspect the accuracy of the information about the course of Jehoiarib given in *Taanith*, but that is a matter that would need much further inquiry into the general accuracy of anecdotal (as distinct from customary) details in the Talmud, especially those which refer to the state of things before the destruction of the Temple.

"My scepticism, you will see, is not confined to what I find in the Bible.

"What you say about the time of year is very plausible, assuming the correctness of our authorities. But you will see from Professor Gardner's article that we differ too much in principle from you and from Sir William Ramsay to make discussion of details likely to be profitable."

Let us consider Professor Gardner's article in the *Encycl. Biblica*. He there states: "It is, however, pointed out that in a Roman census, every man reported at his place of residence; no instance is known to us in antiquity in which the citizens of a country migrated to the ancestral home of the family in order to be enrolled."

It is true that all were ignorant of any such instance (except in St. Luke's Gospel) when these words were published in 1903, but since that time Messrs. Kenyon and Bell *have* found an example of persons ordered to the ancestral home in order to be enrolled, as quoted on p. 200 of this afternoon's paper.

We thus see that Professor Gardner's theory of the historical untrustworthiness of St. Luke is supported on precarious negative evidence, which has since been destroyed by recent discovery, and yet Professor Burkitt still approves of Professor Gardner's deductions of six years ago!

Canon Girdlestone states and a gentleman writes, that if the Nativity were 8 B.C. and the Crucifixion A.D. 29 that Christ would have been about thirty-four years of age when He began His Ministry. It must be remembered, however, that there is no year 0 in chronology; A.D. 1 follows immediately after 1 B.C. Consequently, from autumn 1 B.C. to autumn A.D. 1 is only one year—not two years. It is easily seen, therefore, that if Christ were born in the autumn 8 B.C., and began His three-and-a-half-years' ministry in autumn A.D. 25, that He must then have been just thirty-two years, not thirty-four years of age. The same considerations apply to the remark of another correspondent, that if Christ were born 8 B.C. and died A.D. 29 He must have suffered at the age of thirty-seven. His age under our supposition was then only thirty-five-and-a-half years, as He was born in autumn and died in the spring.

Colonel Conder writes that Josephus dates the beginning of Herod's reign of thirty-seven years from his capture of Jerusalem, which was 37 B.C., because that historian states that the battle of Actium took place in the seventh year of his reign; this date is known to have been 2nd September, 31 B.C. There was a total eclipse of the moon on the 9th January, 1 B.C., visible at Jerusalem, whereas that of 13th March, 4 B.C., on which Whiston (whom all later writers have followed) relied, was only a small partial eclipse. Colonel Conder thinks that Herod died in the early spring of the year after this total eclipse, viz., in A.D. 1, at which time of year he states that fine weather often prevails on the Judæan mountains, rendering travel possible. He does not think that the action of the shepherds indicated hot weather, because sheep are kept in caves in Palestine, chiefly in winter. He believes that Dionysius Exiguus was more correct than modern chronologists who adopt

Whiston's view, and he draws attention to the fact that Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 180) believed the Nativity to have occurred in the 28th Augustus, or A.D. 1.

He thinks an erroneous gloss, "This taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria," Luke ii, 2, has crept into the text.

I would urge in reply that the words referred to in Luke ii, 2, occurs in all the oldest MSS. There is absolutely no textual reason to suppose that it is a gloss which has crept into the text. Colonel Conder states in his book, *The City of Jerusalem*, that Herod was recognised as King by Augustus in 40 B.C. Practically all modern chronologists agree that the eclipse of 4 B.C., not that of 1 B.C., was the one which shortly preceded Herod's death. Although February is often fine in Palestine, the weather in that month could hardly be sufficiently reliable to enable large numbers of people to travel over the mountains. If the Nativity took place in February, the death of Herod must have been some months later, hardly before the middle of the year, because he ordered the destruction of all infants of two years old and under, and from this fact we must judge that the king considered that the Nativity had taken place several months previously.

Luke iii, 1, 2, tells us that John began his ministry in the fifteenth year at Tiberius; no estimate places this later than A.D. 29. If Christ were born A.D. 1 He could therefore hardly have been much more than twenty-eight years of age when John began to preach, and barely twenty-nine years old when He Himself began His Ministry, and yet Luke iii, 23, assures us that He was then about thirty years of age. Dean Alford tells us this means *more* not *less* than thirty years of age.

In reply to our chairman it is generally allowed that our Christmas day was adopted in place of a heathen festival connected with the old Sun worship at the winter solstice.

My thanks are due to Canon Girdlestone for pointing out that the subject of the papers is the accuracy of the date 8 B.C. for the Nativity, not that of A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion. The date of this latter event is only referred to incidentally, and even if it differs from A.D. 29 by a very few years, the date 8 B.C. may still be supported by it, because Dean Alford tells us that the expression "about thirty years of age" admits of *considerable* latitude.

I grant, however, that if a date of say A.D. 33 or later could be *proved* to be the true date of the Crucifixion that Luke iii, 2, 3, would not support the early date claimed in this paper for the Nativity. In reply to Mr. Townsend Trench and Sir Robert Anderson that the fourteenth year of Tiberius can only indicate A.D. 29, I affirm that a very large number of eminent chronologists are of opinion that it indicates an earlier date, because it was no uncommon plan to date from a time of *joint* rule before the Emperor reigned alone. I quite agree with Sir Robert Anderson that the Ministry of our Lord lasted for three-and-a-half years; there are many good reasons in favour of this assumption. But if this be so, it is impossible that Christ's Ministry began A.D. 29 and *also* that the Crucifixion was A.D. 32.

For if A.D. 29 is fixed "with absolute accuracy" as the date of the beginning of Christ's Ministry, we are conducted, after three-and-a-half years, to some time *after* midsummer A.D. 32. As the Crucifixion was certainly at early springtime, it must consequently have been in the next year, viz., A.D. 33.

If on the other hand A.D. 32 is taken "with certainty" to be the date of the Crucifixion, the Ministry must have begun three-and-a-half years before the spring of that year, or in the autumn of A.D. 28 *not* A.D. 29. Sir Robert Anderson's assumptions therefore hardly seem to be consistent with each other. Elsewhere I have advocated the widely received date A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion, and I am prepared to discuss it, if desired, but the present occasion hardly seems suitable to enter into that subject.

Sir Robert Anderson lays stress on the definite dictum of Fynes Clinton that the earliest possible date for the Nativity is the autumn of 6 B.C.—but this eminent chronologer of a bygone day was ignorant of the evidence which has since become available through recent archæological research; the chief perhaps being the knowledge which we now possess of the regularly recurring enrolments throughout the Roman Empire every fourteen years. The actual dates of many of these enrolments are recorded on existing documents which have been discovered during recent years.

I quite agree with Canon Girdlestone in considering that the words in John i, 14, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us," support the suggestion that Christ was born at a feast of Tabernacles. But I had purposely avoided any typical or

spiritual allusions, and I had confined myself, for the sake of simplicity, to ordinary historical considerations. The Rev. J. Tuckwell and also Major-General Owen Hay suggest that people would *scatter* in going to their old homes in order to enrol: this might interfere with their *assembling together* at the feast of Tabernacles at Jerusalem. To this it is replied, Palestine is a small country; so small that any Jew could easily be present at his own town on the first day of the Feast, and also be present at the Temple at Jerusalem long before the close of the eight days of the feast. The Rev. Harrington Lees, M.A., also writes drawing attention to the fact that the northern Israelites at this period of the Nativity were of the *two* tribes not of the *ten*.\* Consequently after enrolment all would be near Jerusalem because the districts apportioned to Judah and Benjamin were surrounding that city.

On one occasion the Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem at the middle of the Feast of Tabernacles (John vii, 3, 8, 9, 10, 14). So others could have done the same in 8 B.C. after enrolment in their old homes.

Although it is now a year and a half since the majority of the arguments in favour of 8 B.C. have been published, no link in the evidence has yet been shown to be unreliable; on the contrary the fresh line of investigation connected with the courses of the priests has added further confirmation.

It naturally takes time to gain general acceptance for a date which has until now been in doubt: most people cautiously wait to see if any crushing argument can be brought against it. But the claims of this date are already attracting attention; for instance, the Rev. Canon Sanday, Oxford, writes, "I am at present working at other parts of the problem raised by the life of Our Lord; they are quite distant parts, and I am afraid it would involve a digression of a good many hours to form a deliberate opinion on the data which you lay before us so clearly. I am quite conscious that I must do so sooner or later." Other scholars besides Sir W. M. Ramsay have already pronounced a distinctly favourable judgment. Professor Flinders Petrie writes, "Many thanks for your paper, which seems very satisfactory." The Rev. T. Nichol, D.D.,

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\* *Luke the Physician*, p. 244, Sir W. M. Ramsay.



Professor of Biblical Criticism, University of Aberdeen, writes, "Taking your arguments as a whole, the convergence of so many lines of evidence is remarkable, and gives a high measure of probability to your conclusions," and the Rev. Chancellor Lias adds : "I think there can be little doubt that you have hit upon the true time of the Saviour's Birth."

It is therefore hoped that this subject will be further discussed in the future, because its investigation demonstrates the historic accuracy of the Gospels.