

weekly inauguration of the Sabbath. In the Christian Liturgy of the Western Church, it has for centuries past opened the daily office of Matins. From the Roman Breviary it passed on to the Book of Common Prayer. St. Benedict wishes this introductory Psalm to be said *cum antiphona*, or preferably to be sung—*aut certe decantandus* (Holy Rule, ch. ix). In another chapter (xliii) he directs that the *Venite* should be recited *omnino subtrahendo et morose*—quite slowly and leisurely. And certainly on big festivals, one of the joys afforded by the recitation of the Divine Office in choir, is to lift up one's soul in the elaborate and unforgettable strains of the *Venite exultemus Domino, acclamemus Petrae salutis nostrae!*

The second part of the psalm has also its timely reminder. It brings back to the memory of those who are about to recite the Divine Praises the fact that these in themselves mean nothing unless they be accompanied by a life of loyalty and fidelity to God. Otherwise He could repeat of us what He said of the Jews: *Populus iste labiis me honorat, cor autem eorum longe est a me.*

THE DATE OF OUR LORD'S BIRTH

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AT first sight it seems odd that the date of the Nativity of our Lord should be in any doubt, since we have grown accustomed to reckoning all other events from that as starting-point. And if only the sixth century monk, Dionysius Exiguus, to whom we owe our present system of reckoning, had been correct in his calculations, there would of course be no problem. Unfortunately he was wrong. It looks as though his calculation was based on the two passages of St. Luke (iii, 23 and iii, 1), which seem to state definitely that our Lord was thirty in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar. Since Augustus died in the year 767 A.U.C., it would seem to follow that the fifteenth year of Tiberius began in the year 782, so that if Dionysius misunderstood *incipiens* as implying that the fifteenth year of Tiberius saw the beginning of our Lord's thirtieth year, it would be natural to deduce that he was born in the course of the year 753 A.U.C.—which thus became what we call B.C. 1. (B.C. 1 and not A.D. 1, presumably because most of the year occurred before the Nativity.)

Whatever else is certain, we can state categorically that this conclusion is wrong. The account of the Nativity given us in Matthew ii, makes it clear that our Lord was born before Herod died, an event which occurred in the year 750 A.U.C. The evidence for this date is to be found in two passages of Josephus (*Ant.* xvii, 8, 1, *BJ.* i, 33, 8), which inform us that Herod died 37 years after his recognition by

the Triumvirate at Rome, in the year 714 A.U.C. (*cf. Ant. xiv, 14, 5*) and 34 years after his actual assumption of power (in 717 A.U.C. *cf. Ant. xiv, 16, 4*): (It must be remembered that in reckoning dates, the ancients counted in the *terminus a quo* so that 34 years from 717 A.U.C. = 750 A.U.C.).

It is clear then that our Lord was born not later than 750 A.U.C. and if we turn to Luke ii, 2, we find a piece of evidence which may help us to determine the date a little more precisely. In this well known passage, St. Luke appears to inform us that the Nativity took place at a time when a census of the Roman Empire was being held, a census which was carried out in the period when "Cyrinus" (Gk. κυρηνίος = Quirinius) was governor of Syria. Do we know when this was? The argument by which it is established is complicated and too long for adequate discussion here; but the outlines are as follows. We know from Tacitus (*Ann. iii, 48*) that a certain P. Sulpicius Quirinius was consul under Augustus, that he afterwards fought a successful war against a people called the Homonadenses, and accompanied a member of the Imperial family on a mission to Armenia. We know from Josephus (*Ant. xvii, 13, 5*) that a certain Quirinius was governor of Syria at the time when Archelaus was deposed from the Jewish throne and Judaea was turned into a Roman province. Now the date of this latter event is 759 A.U.C., and cannot therefore be the date of the Nativity. At the same time, we know, both from the passage in Josephus and from Acts v, 37 that a (presumably famous) census was carried out on the occasion of the provincialisation of Judaea, in 759 A.U.C.

At first sight, the non-Christian historian might well be pardoned for suggesting that St. Luke is at fault in his Gospel in suggesting that the Nativity took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria, at the time of a census. The difficulty seems to be increased by the evidence of Josephus (*Ant. xvi, 8, sqq.*), which seems to make it impossible for Quirinius to have been governor of Syria before the death of Herod, for the narrative as given by Josephus implies a succession of Roman governors of Syria during the later years of Herod's life, which would leave no gap between M. Titius, Sentius Saturninus and Quintilius Varus, governor at the time of Herod's death.

Various attempts have been made to resolve the difficulty. Lagrange (*S. Luc. ad loc*) suggests this rendering of the Greek text in Luke ii, 2: "This census took place *before Quirinius was governor of Syria*," taking πρώτη with the genitive in a comparative sense—possible, though rare, Greek. If we accept that rendering then the passage is useless for dating the Nativity. Ramsay (*The Bearing of Recent discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915) p. 293) suggested that Quirinius must be regarded as co-governor with one of the known

governors, perhaps Sentius Saturninus. But this is a solution which does not commend itself to the historian who finds such a position quite unprecedented in Roman practice.

The solution which seems most reasonable is to take the words of St. Luke at their face value and to suppose that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria and that on each occasion a census was carried out in Judaea. What further evidence is there to support such a view? First of all, let us look again at the Tacitus passage referred to above. We are there informed that Quirinius was consul "under Augustus." Actually, as we know from other sources, his consulship fell in the year 742 A.U.C. We also know that the mission to Armenia referred to in the same passage occurred in the year 754. It follows that the Homonadensian War took place at a time between these two dates. From the evidence of some inscriptions discovered in the territory of the Homonadenses, it seems most natural to place the campaign or campaigns of Quirinius against them at some time prior to 748. For these inscriptions are the remains of milestones set up in that year, and the obvious inference is that after pacifying the country the Romans proceeded to build roads through it, connecting the different strong-points which it was their habit to establish in conquered territory.

We may claim then to have narrowed down the period within which Quirinius fought the Homonadensian War to the years 742-48. I have argued elsewhere (*Klio* xxiv, 1: pp. 82-86) for the view that he was governor of Syria at the time, that he was, in fact, appointed to that office in order to fight the war. There remains the difficulty of the dating of the governorships of the Roman officials referred to by Josephus and in particular to the date of M. Titius. Here again it will be necessary to refer readers for a more detailed discussion to an article in the *Journal of Roman Studies* (Vol. XXIV (1934), pp. 43 sqq.), in which I have shown how Josephus, through a misunderstanding of his sources, has misled later scholars (including Mommsen) into thinking that the province of Syria was successively held by Titius, Saturninus and Varus during the years 742-48. It is, I have argued, quite certain that there is room for Quirinius between Titius and Saturninus, and the evidence of the inscriptions mentioned above, taken together with the evidence of St. Luke, strongly suggests that Quirinius did succeed Titius as governor of Syria. Since it is equally certain that Saturninus became governor of Syria not later than 746 A.U.C., it seems probable that the Nativity should not be dated later than that year.

There is an interesting passage in Tertullian which supports the view that Saturninus succeeded Quirinius as governor of Syria. In his writings against the heretic Marcion (*Adv. Marc.* iv, 9: Migne *PL* ii, 434 C), he says: *sed et census constat esse actos sub Augusto tunc in Judaea per Sentium Saturninum*. In an earlier passage (*Ib.* iv, 7: *PL* ii,

399 B) he refers to the census under Augustus, *quem testem fidelissimum dominicae nativitatis Romana archiva custodiunt*. The two passages taken together strongly suggest that Tertullian had reason for thinking that the records of the census were to be found at Rome under the name of Sentius Saturninus. It is a natural deduction from this suggestion that, since the census is associated in Luke with the name of Quirinius, the actual work of carrying out the registration, begun by him, was completed by Saturninus, who would be responsible for despatching the census lists to Rome where they would be entered as having been completed under his authority. In other words, it looks as though the year of our Lord's birth is the year which saw Saturninus succeed Quirinius in Syria. That year would seem to be most probably 746 A.U.C. On the ordinary reckoning this is the year we call 8 B.C.

How does this date square with the other chronological indications given in the Gospels? Let us take first of all the passage in Luke iii, 23, *Jesus erat incipiens quasi annorum triginta*. It should be noticed that St. Luke does not say that Jesus was precisely thirty, as Dionysius Exiguus seems to have thought. A reasonable translation would be "a man in the thirties." How old he was will depend on the meaning of "the fifteenth year of Tiberius." As was said above, the most natural reckoning would suggest the year 782 and that calculation is the one I myself accept. I believe that our Lord was nearer forty than thirty when he was baptized and began his Public Life, and that he was in his fortieth year when he was crucified. Others, quite legitimately, argue for a slightly earlier date. Father Sutcliffe, for example (*A Two Year Public Ministry* pp. 143 sqq.), argues with considerable force for a date about a year earlier. But on any tolerable system of dating our Lord will be several years over thirty when he begins his Ministry.

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