

ART. II.—OUR LORD'S VIRGIN BIRTH AND THE  
CRITICISM OF TO-DAY—I.

“JESUS, the son of the carpenter Joseph and his wife Mary, was born in Nazareth.” These are the words with which Professor Otto Schmiedel commences his summary of the chief problems of the life of Jesus in an expansion of a lecture published last year, delivered to an audience composed chiefly of educated laymen. They are characteristic of many similar attempts to dismiss, by a short and easy method, the opening statements of the Gospel history, and they remind us of a similar pronouncement with which a famous French sceptic commenced his “Life of Jesus.” From the point of view of both biographers their statements are not surprising. A writer who lays it down as an absolute rule that a place in history should be denied to miraculous circumstances, or a writer who does his best to reduce as much as possible the significance of the miraculous powers attributed to our Lord, could scarcely be expected to look with favour upon the accounts of the Nativity given us in the New Testament. How far it was likely that the miraculous element in these accounts should have found a place in them, unless it was true, we shall try to consider later. But at the outset it may be observed that the opening narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke are questioned not only for their miraculous elements, but for their historical setting.

A claim, indeed, has recently been made to the discovery of “a key to the famous problem of the birthplace of Jesus” (“*Encycl. Biblica*,” Art. III., “Nazareth”). We are reminded that there was not only a Bethlehem-Judah, but also a Bethlehem of Galilee, not far from Nazareth. In the earliest form of the evangelical tradition, Jesus was said to have been born in Bethlehem-Nazareth, which really means Bethlehem-Galilee,<sup>1</sup> and the reference is to the Bethlehem mentioned in Josh. xix. 15. The tradition grew, and the title Bethlehem-Nazareth was liable to misunderstanding, so much so that two places—Bethlehem and Nazareth—were quoted as claiming the honour of the birthplace of Jesus. “Bethlehem” by itself was supposed to mean the southern Bethlehem—*i.e.*, of Judæa—and hence we may date the rise of our narratives in Matt. ii. and Luke ii. 1-20, “so poetic and so full of spiritual suggestion.” This reference to the poetic nature of the narratives may be left for subsequent consideration; but when

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<sup>1</sup> This attempt at identification is drawn out by reference to the Old Testament and the Talmud and Matt. xxvi. 69 (*cf.* with 71; John vii. 41); but it is admitted that the proof is not beyond dispute.

we turn to the article "Nativity," in the same volume, by Professor Usener, we are told that the problem as to the birthplace of Jesus cannot be solved, but is rather complicated, by a reference to Bethlehem of Galilee, and that it is quite as certain that the Bethlehem spoken of in the Gospels as the birthplace was the Bethlehem in Judæa, as it is that Nazareth was universally accepted as the home of Jesus. This looks at first sight like a direct contradiction of the statement in the first-named article, but it becomes evident that it is not really so when we are asked in each case "to go behind our present Gospels," and when it is maintained that the opening chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke, as we have them, are composed of interpolations and additions; the oldest written forms of the Gospel knew, and knew only, that Jesus was born at Nazareth, as the son of Joseph and Mary, and Luke commenced his Gospel with the baptism and preaching of John. So flagrant were the contradictions between St. Matthew and St. Luke that the Apocryphal Gospel, the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, was composed at the end of the second century for the purpose of solving them! It is no wonder that Dr. Zahn should ask in surprise, "What judgment would these theologians form of the history so inconvenient to them if the two narratives had agreed entirely in every particular, and had only differed from one another in outward expression? They would unquestionably maintain that they were not two witnesses . . . but only one single witness for the existence of the myth at the time of the Evangelist who first recorded it, if, indeed, he had not invented it entirely himself" ("Das Apostolische Symbolum," p. 58); and he rightly reminds us that, as it is, we have two historical works, designed for entirely different circles of readers, and derived in this, as in many other points, from entirely different sources. If, indeed, anyone wished to see what part is played by the most arbitrary and subjective opinions in the modern criticism of the early narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke, he could scarcely do better than read the three articles, "Mary," "Nativity," "Nazareth," in the same volume of the "Encyclopædia Biblica." Because, *e.g.*, in Matt. i. 18-25 no mention is made of Bethlehem, this section comes to us from a different and a later hand than that to which we owe chap. ii.; as so much has already been shown to be untenable in Luke i. and ii., "it will, perhaps, be the more readily conceded" that no historical value belongs to the episode of the shepherds, notwithstanding its great poetic beauty!

But to turn back for a moment from these reflections to the light which may be expected to dawn upon us from the

Bethlehem-Nazareth theory. If it is true, St. Luke is not only guilty, as we are so constantly assured, of a considerable historical blunder in his setting of circumstances, but also in a considerable geographical blunder, which, however, he shares in this case with the transmitters of "the earliest evangelical tradition." But some hypothesis, it is urged, is absolutely necessary, owing to those glaring contradictions of the Evangelists to which reference has already been made. The hypothesis in the present instance is based on another hypothesis—viz., that in the earliest form of evangelical tradition Jesus was said to have been born at Bethlehem-Nazareth = Bethlehem-Galilee, *i.e.*, the Bethlehem referred to above and mentioned in Josh. xix. 15, and possibly once elsewhere. There appears, however, to be no vestige of proof forthcoming as to why this should have been the belief, as is apparently maintained, of the earliest Christian circles. There was certainly nothing in the place traditionally to attract anyone to settle there, and so far as prophecy is concerned, it would probably be admitted that there was much more to point this early circle of believers to Nazareth, some six miles away from the Bethlehem in question. But then we are asked to take a further step, and to believe that this expression "Bethlehem-Nazareth" came to be misunderstood. At this we cannot well be surprised, and certainly its attempted identification with Bethlehem-Galilee somewhat confuses the ordinary reader to-day.

In consequence, however, of this misunderstanding, and as time went on, some said that Jesus was born at Nazareth, while others said that he was born at Bethlehem, the latter being taken to mean Bethlehem-Judah, as it had no explanatory addition. But if, as the same article maintains, it had been customary to speak of Bethlehem of Nazareth just as one might speak of Bethlehem-Judah, it is difficult to see why the distinction between the two should not have been maintained, or why the extinction of the "earliest Gospel tradition" should have been so easily effected. If it be urged that the reference to Bethlehem of Judah was the more likely to commend itself, since prophecy had fixed the birthplace of the Messiah in the city of David, we need not dispute it. But it must be remembered that in this same article we are asked to avoid exaggerating the influence of Old Testament prophecy on the traditional narratives of the life of Jesus, and that we are also told by the same writer (Art. "Joseph") that the author of the fourth Gospel apparently did not accept this tradition of Bethlehem-Judah, and that for him Nazareth marked the origin of Jesus. If, however, this fourth Gospel, as we are further asked to believe, was produced at some period shortly

before 140 A.D. (see Professor Schmiedel, "Encycl. Biblica," ii., Art. "John," 2551), it would seem, on this interpretation of St. John's words, that the tradition that the birthplace of Jesus was at Nazareth still had its adherents, and that it still formed part of the belief of a not unimportant section of believers. But if so, it is strange that before 132 A.D., at all events, Bethlehem of Judah and not Nazareth was regarded beyond all reasonable doubt in popular tradition as the birthplace of Jesus. "It is significant," writes Professor G. A. Smith, "that Bethlehem appears to have been chosen, along with the sites of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, for special treatment by the Emperor Hadrian. As he set up there (*sic*) an image of Jupiter and of Venus, so he devastated Bethlehem, and planted upon it a grove sacred to Adonis. This proves that even before 132 A.D. Bethlehem was the scene of Christian pilgrimage and worship as the birthplace of Jesus" (Art. "Bethlehem," "Encycl. Biblica," i.).<sup>1</sup> The truth is that Bethlehem of Judah became what it was, and what it is, for Christian hearts, not merely from the fact that prophecy had pointed to it, but from the additional fact that prophecy had been fulfilled in it.

But if St. Luke is guiltless of a geographical blunder in placing our Lord's birth at Bethlehem-Judah, we have still to consider the charge of an historical blunder in the setting of chap. ii. We naturally refer in the first place to Professor Ramsay's well-known and most valuable work, "Was Christ born at Bethlehem?" since it is not only recognised as indispensable in this inquiry by every English writer (*cf.*, *e.g.*, the commendation of the book and its results by Dr. Sanday in his famous article "Jesus Christ," Hastings' B. D., ii. 646), but is referred to as presenting us with the most likely solution of a difficult problem by Zöckler, in what we may call a corresponding article to that of Dr. Sanday in the new edition of Herzog's "Encyclopædia"; whilst H. Holtzmann, in his new edition of the "Synoptic Gospels" ("Hand-Commentar," i. 315), has discussed it from an adverse point of view. The word for "enrolment," Luke ii. 2, or its plural, was the word for the periodic enrolments which beyond all doubt were made in Egypt, probably initiated by Augustus. These enrolments were numberings of the people according to households, and had nothing to do with the valuation for purposes of taxation. But Egypt, says Holtzmann, is not Syria. In the first place, however, it is no unfair inference

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<sup>1</sup> Even in the fourth century comparatively few pilgrims visited Nazareth, which is strange if it ever had any appreciable reputation as the birthplace of the Lord.

that such enrolments would not be confined to any one part of the Roman "world," in which Palestine was included, but that they would rather form part of a deliberate and general policy under a ruler so systematic as Augustus. In the next place, Professor Ramsay not only makes it very probable that such enrolments were actually extended to Syria, but he rightly emphasizes the peculiarly delicate and difficult position of Herod, which bound him not only to comply with the imperial policy, but also to regard the prejudices and suspicions of the fanatical people whom he ruled. From this point of view it is a very fair inference that whilst Herod would obey the orders of Augustus, he would nevertheless conduct the enrolment on national lines, that he would give it a tribal and family character, to bring it as far as he could into accord with Jewish sentiment.<sup>1</sup> Here probably lies the true distinction between the first enrolment, which was one of a series, and *the* enrolment (mentioned in Acts v. 37), which was conducted after the Roman fashion, and became the cause, not only of indignation, but of rebellion; here, too, is the probable explanation as to why Joseph and the Virgin Mother left their home at Nazareth for Bethlehem: no necessity for the journey would have arisen if the enrolment had been conducted on Roman lines, inasmuch as in that case only a recognition of existing political and social facts would have been involved. So far, then, is St. Luke from confusing this enrolment of Herod's with the subsequent enrolment of 6, 7 A.D.—as not only Schmiedel, but Pfeleiderer, in the new edition of his "Urchristentum," would have us believe—a confusion which would involve a blunder of some ten years, that he carefully distinguishes between them, and explains at the outset that the Roman method was modified by the introduction of a numbering, not only of households, but of tribes. No doubt Professor Ramsay's theory is still not free from difficulties. It would seem, *e.g.*, that the first of the series of enrolments commenced in Syria about 9 B.C., a year which would be considerably at variance with the common reckoning of the year of our Lord's birth. Professor Ramsay, however, supposes that the enrolment which ought to have been made thus early, or at latest 8 B.C., was delayed for a couple of years on account of the peculiar circumstances of Herod, and the peculiar temperament of the people whom he was called upon to govern.

And here, in connection with recent important literature, it may be noted that Mr. Turner ("Chronology," Hastings'

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. to the same effect as to Jewish national feeling the remarks of B. Weiss in the last edition (1902) of his famous "Leben Jesu," i. 231.

B. D., i. 404) is in agreement with Professor Ramsay in the belief that St. Luke may well have been quite correct in his mention of a census (ii. 1). There is no improbability, he thinks, in the hypothesis of a census in Judæa somewhere within the years 8-5 B.C. Statistics of the resources of the Empire were, as he points out, a favourite study of Augustus, and if Herod (as, apparently, other client Kings) was bidden to supply them, he may well have been mindful of the susceptibilities of the Jewish nation, "and so, in avoiding the scandal caused by the later census (Acts v. 37), he avoided also the notice of history." But whilst Mr. Turner thus admits the probability of the census in Luke ii. 1, he regards the Evangelist as in error in the name Quirinius. He fully allows that Quirinius may have been twice Governor of Syria, not only at the great census (Acts v. 37) which he conducted, but also at an earlier period. But then he points out that this earlier period could not have coincided with the date of our Lord's birth, as Quintilius Varus came into office in the summer of 6 B.C., and was, apparently, still in office at the time of Herod's death, 4 B.C. But does St. Luke say that Quirinius was Governor, *i.e.*, Legate, of Syria? The term he uses is quite indefinite, and Professor Ramsay reminds us that it may simply mean "acting as leader," and may imply that whilst Varus in 6 B.C. was controlling the internal affairs of Syria, Quirinius was holding an extraordinary military command by his side, which might also have involved the control of foreign policy, just as Vespasian conducted a war in Palestine by the side of Mucianus, the governor of Syria, and was called by Tacitus *dux*—a title to which the word used by St. Luke of Quirinius might well correspond. Holtzmann dismisses this explanation of Ramsay's somewhat contemptuously, but he has nothing to say with regard to the analogous cases of a temporary division of duties in Roman administration, or to those quoted by Monsieur R. S. Bour, who is essentially in agreement with Ramsay in the proposed solution.

Since the publication of Professor Ramsay's book we have had, in the fourth volume of Dr. Hastings' "Dictionary," Dr. Plummer's article "Quirinius." In agreement with much that has been said above, Dr. Plummer points out that the word employed by St. Luke in ii. 2 is quite compatible with the belief that Quirinius held some military post in Syria even before Herod's death, and that he may have had some share in the census which was proceeding at the time of that event. In this connection he further points out that Justin Martyr refers to Quirinius at the time of the Nativity by a word equivalent to one holding the office of *procurator*, and not

by a word signifying *legatus*, as Quirinius afterwards became in 6 A.D. The only other place in which St. Luke uses the word employed in the phrase, "when Quirinius was Governor of Syria," is of a *procurator* (St. Luke iii. 1); and this fact adds weight to the supposition that whilst at the time of the enrolment Varus was actually *legatus*, Quirinius may have held some such command as that indicated above. But in any case, as Dr. Plummer wisely adds, if Christians were bent on inventing a reason for the birth at Bethlehem, it is not at all likely that they would have had recourse to Roman and heathen sources. It may further be observed that when we consider the proofs of St. Luke's correctness elsewhere throughout his two books, it is only fair to judge any difficulties which may remain in connection with the statement under consideration in the light of that correctness, especially when we remember that we are dealing with a field of history in which, as Bishop Lightfoot so well put it, there was beyond all others room for mistake and blunder—the administration of the Roman Empire and its provinces—and when we further bear in mind that for the age of Augustus our authorities are specially obscure and defective.

When we look into the narrative as it stands, whilst there is very good reason to believe that we owe its charm and simplicity, its modesty and reserve to the Virgin Mother herself, or possibly, as Dr. Sanday suggests, to one of the group of women mentioned in Luke viii. 3, xxiv. 10, it may be noted in passing, although it would be precarious to lay too much stress upon it, that the narrative is marked in some places by the language characteristic of a medical man (see, e.g., the instances endorsed by Dr. Zahn, "Einleitung," ii., p. 435, amongst others cited by Hobart). And if this is so, it is a fair inference that we are not only concerned with a careful and cultured writer, who had made it his business to trace the course of all things accurately from the first, but that he did not hesitate to include among these things the incidents connected with the birth of the Baptist and of the Christ, although by his very profession he would be inclined to accept some of those details with considerable reserve, unless he had some due assurance of their truth. The remarkable chapter in which Professor Ramsay endeavours to show that Mary herself is the primary authority throughout would only lose by quotation, and it should be studied in its entirety. The same view has, of course, been held by various scholars previously, but it may well be doubted if it has ever been previously presented with so much beauty and feeling. It is easy to assure us that the attempt to derive these fine touches belongs to homiletics rather than to historical research, but even if we may hesitate to endorse Professor Ramsay's condemnation

of the man who fails to catch the tone of a mother's heart in Luke ii. 19, 51 as one who deliberately shuts his mind against all literary feeling, we can fully agree with him that the historian who wrote like that believed that he had the authority of the mother herself (see the arguments to the same effect in Zahn, "Einleitung," ii., p. 404).

But if it is a woman who speaks to us in these chapters, it is also a Jewish, or rather a Jewish-Christian, woman, one who stands, as it were, upon the borderland between the Old Dispensation and the New, full of the hopes and blessings of Israel, and yet inspired with a grander vision of hope and blessing for the world. The language in which she gives expression to her hopes is not only moulded upon the Old Testament Scriptures, but it approaches, like the other canticles in the first two chapters of St. Luke, very nearly in style and phraseology to the Psalms of Solomon—*i.e.*, to a writing which comes to us as expressive of Jewish thought and feeling from some half-century or so before the Advent. But whilst this Jewish thought and feeling are thus assured, and this would be equally the case if we endorse the attempt to trace them back to the Greek-Jewish prayers of the Hellenistic synagogues—there is still considerable weight in the judgment: "a little less and these songs would be purely Jewish, a little more and they would be purely Christian." We are assured by Dr. Harnack that these songs are to be attributed to the genius of St. Luke; but if so we can only say that, apart from the improbability that the Greek Luke could have composed them (as Dr. Zahn so strikingly reminds us, "Einleitung," ii., p. 404), the third Evangelist may or not have been a painter, but that he was most certainly a poet, and that, too, a poet whose genius has achieved an influence which no other member of the world's list of poets has even distantly approached. It is not a theologian, but the French sceptic Renan, who can tell us of these canticles, which thus find a place in a book which he described as the most beautiful in the world, that never were sweeter songs composed to put to sleep the sorrows of poor humanity. It may here be well to note in passing that a determined effort has been recently made by Dr. Harnack and other writers to refer the *Magnificat* not to the Virgin Mother, but to Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> But apart from all questions of textual criticism, it still remains true that the words of the *Magnificat*, "the lowliness of His handmaiden," are most fitly and naturally connected with the words of Mary to the angel, "behold the *handmaiden* of the Lord"; so, too, the words, "shall call me blessed," with

<sup>1</sup> The arguments for and against this attempt will be found well marshalled in the article "Magnificat" in the new edition of Herzog.



the words of Elizabeth, "blessed is she that believed." Dr. Harnack suspects that the canticle was in the first instance attributed to Mary because the words, "all generations shall call me blessed," were considered inappropriate as referring to Elizabeth, and he sees, therefore, in these words only an imitation of the words of Leah (Gen. xxx. 13). But who can fail to contrast the limited scope of Leah's rejoicing circle with the ever-widening circle of "all generations" which shall call Mary blessed?

But a still bolder attempt is made to account for other words which are spoken by the Mother of the Lord. Only two verses even in Luke i., so we are told by Professor Schmiedel (Art. "Mary," "Encycl. Biblica," iii.), contain the idea of the Virgin birth clearly and effectively, and in the same volume (Art. "Nativity") we are informed by Professor Usener that to Hillmann belongs the merit (!) of having conclusively shown that the only verses in the third Gospel in which the supernatural birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary is stated are incompatible with the writer's representation of the rest of chaps. i. and ii.; these verses disturb the tradition: they are the fetters laid upon us by long habituation to a sacred tradition! What, then, is to be done with them? These two verses, Luke i. 34, 35, must be removed; they are interpolated by a redactor, they are an alien and irreconcilable trail into Luke's work, if it is to be regarded as an artistic unity! It is nothing to these writers that not a single shred of documentary evidence is quoted in support of this arbitrary treatment of the text: it is nothing to them that some of their own section of advanced critics are not agreed as to whether even in these two verses something should not be retained; the doubt of Mary is psychologically incredible, and the angel's answer illogical, so even Harnack asks us to believe (see Moffatt's "Historical New Testament," xxxviii., second edition).

If this is not subjective criticism, is there any criticism which can more justly be called by that name?

One thing at this point may surely be said, that if the early Christians had wished to create "clearly and effectively" (so Schmiedel) the idea of the Virgin birth, they would not have put such a restraint upon their inventive powers as to confine themselves to two verses, the introduction of which is so confusing and ineffective in the critics' judgment. Such a restraint would have been "psychologically incredible" when we contrast it with the inventive flights of an Apocryphal Gospel like the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, with its repeated and lengthy references to the details of the Virgin birth.

R. J. KNOWLING.

(To be continued.)