

Fresh Light on the Date of the Crucifixion.

BY THE REV. D. R. FOTHERINGHAM, M.A., F.R.A.S.,
Queens' College, Cambridge.

IT has long been recognized that the direct references in the Gospels are too slight and too scanty to afford a substantial foundation for an exact chronology of the life of Christ. Students have been obliged, therefore, to fall back on indirect methods; and a favourite plan in all ages has been to search for astronomical evidence with regard to the appearance of the Star of the Nativity, or the darkness that enshrouded the scene of Crucifixion. But the methods of modern astronomy differ widely from those pursued by the ancients, and there is reason to fear that in both these cases chronologers have sometimes been seriously misguided. To attribute the darkness to an eclipse of the sun would be an elementary error in astronomy. The moon was full at the Passover, and it is only at new moon that solar eclipses can occur. But, though not so unscientific, it is probably no less incorrect to look for planetary conjunctions (as many have done, from Kepler to Alford), in hope of finding an explanation of the Star of Bethlehem. The ancients directed their attention to the "Heliacal rising" of the planets—that is, their first appearance in the twilight of the dawn, after being lost for some weeks in the radiance of the sun—rather than to the aspects generally considered by modern astronomers. And certainly the words of the Wise Men, "We have seen His star *in the East*,"¹ are strongly suggestive of some such Heliacal rising of the star that led them first to Jerusalem, and thence to Bethlehem.² Here lies a new and untraversed ocean before us, inviting the adventurous critic to embark. But so far as the Crucifixion is concerned, we seem at last to be approaching as near to finality as astronomy is likely to lead us.

All idea of an eclipse having been discarded, it will be vain to look for any striking astronomical phenomena as a means of

¹ St. Matt. ii. 2.

² *Journal of Theological Studies*, x. 116.

fixing the date of the Crucifixion by reference to the darkness at midday. So we fall back on the ordinary rules for determining the lunar month and its adjustment to the day of the week and solar calendar. The Jews of the present day make use of an artificial calendar, like the Christian rule for finding Easter, that may be calculated many centuries in advance. Such calendars were not unknown in the time of Christ, but they were then disregarded by the Jews. The commencement of the month and year were settled by direct observation. Each month began when the thin crescent of the new moon could first be seen in the evening sky: each year, when the ripening barley gave notice of approaching spring. As a result, the Jewish month might contain either twenty-nine or thirty days, and the year either twelve or thirteen months. Precise determination was clearly impossible beforehand: but as soon as the moon, eagerly looked for, had been seen at Jerusalem, beacons blazed on the hills as darkness succeeded twilight, and messengers were despatched in all directions, with so much urgency that they were allowed sometimes even to profane the Sabbath, in order that all might know the new month had begun.

So the reconstruction of the Jewish calendar is simply a calculation of successive new moons, and the dates of their first appearance in the evening sky. When we have this, we shall have all that is needed. For it is certain that Christ suffered either on the fourteenth or on the fifteenth of Nisan (as to *which* of these we shall see later), and that this day was "Paraskeve," or Friday.¹ Any year, therefore, in which the fourteenth or fifteenth of Nisan fell otherwise than on Friday is clearly excluded from further consideration. It is a happy circumstance that astronomy not only narrows the uncertainty of the year, but also definitely decides once and for ever the still more engrossing question as to the exact day of the Crucifixion.

The times of the astronomical new moons may be calculated

¹ Matt. xxvii. 62; Mark xv. 42; Luke xxiii. 54; John xix. 14, 31, 42.

with certainty, but an element of uncertainty has been introduced into all previous chronologies by lack of precise information as to the interval to be allowed between the actual conjunction of the sun and moon and the first appearance of the crescent in the sky. The late Professor Salmon¹ allowed thirty hours as a rough estimate of the minimum age of the moon at its first appearance, while Wurm, as long ago as 1817, had estimated thirty-six. But both rules are really very rough indeed. The new moon has actually been seen, though not often, on the very day of its conjunction with the sun ; while on other occasions her appearance has been delayed for a longer period than even Wurm's law would suggest. It is necessary to measure the space between the luminaries in distance and direction, as well as in time, or the rough rules based on time alone may lead us far astray.

Mr. C. H. Turner, in his article in Hastings' "Bible Dictionary," was content to follow Salmon's approximation, and other chronologers seem to have adopted similar rules for themselves. But apparently all have overlooked a series of actual observations on the subject, carried out by Julius Schmidt (famous for his measurements of the lunar mountains), principally at Athens, during the years 1859-1879. These observations raise the matter at once from the level of conjecture to that of accurate knowledge ; while at the same time they illustrate the irony of the fate that has left Biblical critics searching blindly for information, which an astronomer already possessed without being aware of its full value. However, after lying neglected for so long, Schmidt's observations have at length been republished and discussed by Dr. J. K. Fotheringham,² and such definite rules deduced and expressed as will serve to reconstruct for modern use the lunar calendars of the ancient world. Some of my brother's results, with calculations applicable to Jerusalem in the time of Pontius Pilate, are thus

¹ "Introduction to the New Testament," p. 255.

² *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, May, 1910, vol. lxx., p. 527.

expressed in the *Journal of Theological Studies*,¹ from which this table is extracted :

A.D.		First of Nisan (Evening).			Fourteenth of Nisan (Morning and Afternoon).
27	...	March 28	...	...	April 11, FRIDAY.
28	...	" 16	...	...	March 30, Tuesday.
29	...	" 5	...	...	March 19, Saturday.
30	...	" 24	...	...	April 7, FRIDAY.
31	...	" 13	...	...	March 27, Tuesday.
32	...	" 31	...	...	April 14, Monday.
33	...	" 20	...	...	April 3, FRIDAY.
34	...	" 10	...	...	March 24, Wednesday.
35	...	" 29	...	...	April 12, Tuesday.

The question between the fourteenth and fifteenth of Nisan has been long debated. It has more than a chronological significance. Was the Last Supper, at which Christ sat with His disciples, so touchingly described by the four Evangelists, the great Paschal Supper of the Jews? So many have believed. Or can it be that Christ consumed no Paschal Supper at all that year, after all preparation made, because He was Himself the Paschal Lamb, Whose blood was to be shed for the sins of the world? Many have accepted this interpretation rather than the other. It seems to have been the general view of the ancient Church, of which the quartodeciman controversy is a reminder; and those who accept this view have reverently seen in the date of Christ's Passion, no mere accident of coincidence with the Temple Feast, but direct evidence of the predeterminate counsel of God. The Passover was more than a remembrance of deliverance from Egypt: it was the Feast of First-fruits.² On the sixteenth day of Nisan the first-fruits of the field were brought to the sanctuary, and there waved by the priest before the Lord, to consecrate the harvest. Not till this had been done could scythe or sickle be laid upon the standing corn. Now, if Christ suffered on the fourteenth of Nisan, He rose again on the sixteenth; and once more we may reverently see how, as the First-fruits of the Resurrection, He fulfilled the hidden symbolism of Mosaic Law.

¹ October, 1910, vol. xii., p. 120.

² Lev. xxiii. 10-12.

Still there are scholars, whose very names would entitle their opinion to respect, that have taken another view of the story of the Passion. But long as the controversy has been, it must be settled now. There was not a single year during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate in which the fifteenth of Nisan fell on a Friday! Whatever doubt may linger as to the actual year of our Lord's Crucifixion and Resurrection, it is all to the good that the question of the days on which these events occurred can be decided by the irrefutable evidence of astronomy. In the very dates of His death and Resurrection prophetic symbolism is doubly justified.

But if the theologian is content to rest here, the chronologer will wish to investigate further as to which of the three years (27, 30, or 33) in which Nisan 14 fell on a Friday was the actual year of the Crucifixion. By common consent the first of these may be dismissed as manifestly too early for the purpose. The choice is therefore narrowed down to one of two years only, either of which is astronomically possible, and it is in defence of the latter that the remaining paragraphs are written.

In the whole course of Christ's life there is only one positive date given by any of the Evangelists, and that date has been the subject of remarkable controversy. The commencement of St. John the Baptist's ministry is dated by St. Luke as the fifteenth year of Tiberius Cæsar.¹ It is curious to notice how the writer's evident desire to record the exact year has been misunderstood, the very simplicity of the phrase tempting us to a lawyerlike misinterpretation. The consequence is that the obvious meaning, which could hardly ever have been out of St. Luke's mind or the minds of his original readers, has been largely abandoned in favour of one less natural in itself, and essentially ambiguous in any case.

Tiberius succeeded Augustus on August 19, A.D. 14. According to different usages, there are three possible meanings that might be attached to St. Luke's phrase, "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar":

¹ St. Luke iii. 1: 'Ἐν ἔτει δὲ πεντεκαδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος.

- i. The period of 365 days from August 19, A.D. 28, to August 18, A.D. 29.
- ii. The year 28 (A.U.C. 781).
- iii. The year 29 (A.U.C. 782).

I have discussed these three methods of counting somewhat fully elsewhere.¹ It must suffice to remark here that the first is purely academic, and may certainly be rejected. The use of the second is comparatively rare; for the short remainder of the year in which a King ascended the throne was not called the "first year," but the "beginning" of his reign.² The third is the meaning to be accepted. So we may say with confidence that all for whom St. Luke wrote would certainly understand him to mean that St. John the Baptist's ministry began at some time or other during the course of the year 29.³ And that this was the Evangelist's own meaning I see no reason to doubt.

We have no statement as to the length of the period between the Baptist's appearance and our Lord's own Baptism. Apparently it was not very long; yet it was long enough for the Baptist's mission to attain considerable dimensions, and for his fame to spread through the whole land. Apparently, therefore, any part of the year 29 itself must be regarded as too early for Christ's Baptism. Remembering the tradition that connects the Baptism with the festival of Epiphany, we might possibly fix its date at the beginning of the next year (A.D. 30). It would be just as reasonable, however, to allow a longer time for the work of the Forerunner, and so postpone the opening of Christ's personal ministry—including His Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, the call of the first disciples, and the first Passover—to the opening months of the following year, or A.D. 31.

The length of our Lord's ministry has not been definitely decided. A few critics limit it to a single year, but the majority extend it to three or four. In St. John's Gospel it may

¹ "Chronology of the Old Testament," p. 11.

² *E.g.*, Jeremiah xxvi. 1.

³ According to customary Syriac use, the year might be reckoned from October.

apparently be measured, as a road is by milestones, by Christ's visits to the festivals at Jerusalem. These are six in number :

1. St. John ii. 13, 23	...	...	Passover, A.D. 30 or 31.
2. St. John v. 1	...	...	An unspecified feast.
3. St. John vi. 4	...	...	Passover, A.D. 32.
4. St. John vii. 2	...	...	Tabernacles, A.D. 32.
5. St. John x. 22.	...	...	Dedication, A.D. 32.
6. The Last Passover	...	...	A.D. 33 (April 3).

The sequence of events is quite clear, and the chronology would be equally clear if we could identify the unspecified feast with certainty. If it be Passover, then it must be that of A.D. 31, and our Lord's Baptism is thrown back to A.D. 30. But if it be a minor festival, then the commencement of our Lord's ministry can only be carried back to the beginning of A.D. 31. The question is complicated by an exceedingly minute point of textual criticism (*ἐορτή* or *ἡ ἐορτή*), with an interestingly even balance of MS. authority on either side. Into that attractive field we dare not wander now, but either reading or interpretation is quite consistent with the chronology proposed.

It only remains for us to consider briefly the alternative chronology that might be based on an earlier date for the Crucifixion, in the year A.D. 30 instead of A.D. 33. Those who wish to see the arguments ably and attractively marshalled may do so in Hastings' famous Dictionary of the Bible.¹ There Mr. Turner puts the case quite fairly between the two chronologies, and gives his adherence to the earlier. But the argument, learned and persuasive though it be, is vitiated by the fact that it leads him in the end to the choice of the year A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion, a date that is no longer astronomically tenable. When the choice is narrowed down to that between A.D. 30 and A.D. 33, it is by no means certain that he would reject the latter. It is necessary, however, that the claims of the earlier chronology should be considered.

If the Crucifixion occurred, as is astronomically possible, on April 7, A.D. 30, it is clear that even the hypothesis of a one year's ministry would hardly allow room for all that had

¹ I. 403. See also Dr. Wright's "New Testament Problems," p. 147.

occurred since the appearance of St. John the Baptist in A.D. 29. The mission of the Baptist must therefore be pushed further back, and in order to do this it becomes necessary to find a new (and, I think, unnatural) interpretation for St. Luke's phrase, "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar." It must be granted that St. Luke's reckoning by the years of the Imperial reign is anomalous. Rome was constitutionally a republic still. Senators, consuls, prætors, tribunes, and other officers, existed as of old. The empire was a sort of accident, explicable only by the fact that the Emperor either summed up in his own person all the most important offices of state, or directed and controlled the policy of those who held them. He was a pluralist in a high degree, but not a king. Now the Greeks were not trained in the niceties of the Roman constitution. Tiberius was *consul* five times, *imperator* eight times, *tribunus* thirty-nine; and many other offices he held, either at frequent intervals or for long periods. So, indeed, a Roman constitutionalist would speak. But a Greek or an Oriental would be satisfied with saying (contrary to all Latin usage) that Tiberius "reigned twenty-three years" (A.D. 14-37). Of course, this is the simplest expression, and in reality it comes nearest to the mark. And for my own part I feel no doubt that St. Luke was counting the reign thus, when he dated the appearance of St. John the Baptist in the fifteenth year of Tiberius.

But those chronologers who favour the earlier Crucifixion-date are driven by hard necessity either to impugn St. Luke's chronology or else to find a new interpretation for his words; and when a man holds so many offices as Tiberius held, it should not be difficult, for those who look, to find some office at all events that will meet their desire. Indeed, the wonder rather is that the office they have found should be one so obscure and uncertain. Many honours had been heaped on Tiberius during Augustus's lifetime, some of a complimentary nature, others involving the exercise of real power. Among these, but of the former class rather than the latter, were

certain imperial titles with regard to the provinces of Rome. The date is uncertain; indeed, the whole business is extremely vague. But on the supposition that the titles were conferred about the time of his return to Rome after the German and Dalmatian campaigns (A.D. 12), when he was accorded the honour of a triumph, the reign of Tiberius has been pushed two years further back. But surely, even at the moment, it would be impossible for anyone to regard such titular honours as the equivalent of imperial rule; and when St. Luke came to write his Gospel fifty years later the matter may have been forgotten altogether. No Welshman ever reckons the reign of a king from his proclamation as Prince of Wales, and no provincial of Rome could fail to distinguish between the standings of Augustus and Tiberius while the former yet lived.

The wish has been father to the thought. In some cases the desire to bring our Lord's age as near the exact "thirty"¹ as possible at His baptism, or in other cases to allow as much time as possible for the development of the Christian Church before the conversion (perhaps ante-dated) of St. Paul, has prevailed over the natural judgment of the critic. But in the end, both historical evidence and astronomical research seem to concur in warranting the full acceptance of that chronology which assigns the commencement of the Baptist's mission to the year A.D. 29, and definitely dates the Crucifixion of our Lord on Friday, April 3, A.D. 33.

¹ St. Luke iii. 23.

