

Archæology and the Virgin Birth.

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IT is a remarkable fact that one of the most controverted points of the Christian creed, the Virgin Birth of our Lord, should be a subject on which archæology has thrown of recent years considerable light. It is not, of course, true that the spade has produced any evidence bearing directly on the article of faith; such a suggestion carries its own refutation with it; but a good deal of material, bearing directly on the veracity and accuracy of one of the narratives on which the article is based, has been published during the last fifteen years, and it may not be unprofitable to combine this with the earlier material of the same character, and to state the conclusion which may reasonably be drawn from the whole available evidence.

St. Luke in his story of the birth of our Lord supplies certain points of contact with contemporary history; and it has been maintained with much insistence that, where his narrative can be tested in these matters by the use of other sources of information, he comes badly out of the process; the further conclusion is then triumphantly drawn that, if he is inaccurate in those comparatively trivial matters in which he can be tested, he is not a trustworthy authority for those other matters, of far greater importance from the religious point of view, which rest upon his statement.

This is the position which it is proposed to examine, in the light of archæological discovery, in this present paper.

The objections to St. Luke's narrative may be summarized under four heads as stated by Dr. Schürer:

1. No Imperial census under Augustus is known.
2. Under a Roman census Joseph and Mary would not have been obliged to travel to Bethlehem.
3. If an Imperial census had been ordered, it would not

have been enforced by Herod, who was a subject-King with control over the internal affairs of his own kingdom.

4. Quirinius was never Governor of Syria during the lifetime of Herod.

With regard to the question of an Imperial census under Augustus, the position has been completely changed by the discovery of census returns among the papyri of Egypt, which render it plain that such returns were made in the first century A.D. at intervals of *fourteen* years; the earliest known dates from A.D. 20, and others from the subsequent period are fairly frequent; the reference of Josephus to the census under Quirinius in A.D. 6-7, when Judæa had become part of a Roman province fits into the series, and some tax receipts on potsherds make it likely that the arrangement was earlier still; this would give 8-7 B.C. as the next earlier period for the enrolment, which, if inaugurated by Augustus, might well date from his assumption of the Tribunician power in 23 B.C., the beginning of his Imperial rule "in its most formal and complete sense." While the census returns refer to Egypt alone, an inscription of one Æmilius Secundus mentions a census under Quirinius at Apamea in Northern Syria, confirming St. Luke's assertion that the enrolment concerned the whole Empire (*πᾶσα ἡ οἰκουμένη*). We may reasonably conclude, then, that, so far from there being no evidence for an Imperial census, both papyri and inscriptions combine to confirm St. Luke's statement on that point, and to make probable a general enrolment in the Roman Empire in 8-7 B.C., a conclusion further borne out by the statement of Tertullian that the enrolment connected with our Lord's birth took place under Sentius Saturninus, who was Governor of Syria 9-6 B.C.

So far as the second objection is concerned, it may now be asserted that so far from the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem being unlikely, it has been recently shown to be quite in keeping with the regulations known in connection with such enrolments. A copy of the decree of Gaius Vibius Maximus, Governor of Egypt in the year A.D. 104, has been

discovered, which runs : " The enrolment by households being at hand, it is necessary to notify all those who for any cause whatsoever are outside their nomes (*ἐκστᾶσι τῶν ἑαυτῶν νομῶν*) to return to their own hearths (*ἐπανελθεῖν εἰς τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἐφέστια*) that they may also accomplish the *customary* dispensation of enrolment. . . ." This find shows that the order to return was not a novelty in A.D. 104, but " customary " (*συνήθη*), and so removes all inherent improbability in the particular detail of St. Luke's narrative.

Turning now to the next difficulty, that Galilee and Judæa were under the independent jurisdiction of Herod, the fact is admitted at once ; but we know that it was not unusual for a subject-King to put into practice in his own dominions a regulation which could only be enforced by the Imperial power within the limits of the provinces directly under Roman rule. Tacitus gives us an example, recording that Archelaus, subject-King of Cappadocia, having subdued a tribe of the Taurus range, the Clitæ, ordered them to take a census, Roman fashion (" nostrum in modum," Ann. vi., 41), a measure which drove them into fresh revolt. It would be a very natural means of gaining favour with the Imperial authority, and might doubtless find many a parallel from the subject-Princes of the British Raj in India. That Herod carried out such a census cannot be demonstrated, but all antecedent improbability of St. Luke's statement is removed ; and the theory also does away with two smaller difficulties : (1) It would be likely that the imitation census of Herod might be a year or two later than its prototype, the Imperial one, which would bring the date closer to that probable for the birth of Christ ; (2) if this census were taken by a " native King," the language of Josephus, who implies that the census of Quirinius in A.D. 7 was a novelty, would be justified ; for it would be the first *enforced* by a Roman governor.

Let us turn now to the last objection—viz., that Quirinius was not governor during the life of Herod the Great, but held office A.D. 6, and for the next few years.

In the first place the word used for " governor " by St. Luke

(*ἡγεμονεύοντος*), while it is generally applied to the head of a province, does not necessarily involve that idea—*e.g.*, Josephus speaks of one Volumnius, whom he styles, along with Saturninus, as *ἡγεμὼν τῆς Συρίας*, though Saturninus alone was *legatus Augusti pro prætorè*; and it might be that Quirinius held office in some form under Saturninus; it has even been suggested that he was sent into Syria for the very purpose of taking the census, with the rank of Imperial Legate.

But here archæology has come to the rescue; in 1763 there was dug up at Tivoli, the ancient Tibur, the fragment of an honorary inscription containing the titles and honours of an official whose name was lost; a careful comparison of the statements of the stone has led to the conclusion that the *one* person to whom they can apply is Quirinius; the conclusion is accepted by leading Roman historians and epigraphists like Mommsen, and by scholars who deny that it elucidates St. Luke's narrative like Schürer; but the last statement upon the stone, itself only half preserved, is that the man who is commemorated held the office of governor of Syria *twice*. The second governorship of Quirinius was that beginning A.D. 6—when was the former?

The period in which this can have taken place lies between 12 B.C.—the year that he held the consulship—and A.D. 6—his later administration of Syria; the years A.D. 1-6 are excluded by the fact that Quirinius is known to have been in Armenia for part of the time, and by the possible dates for his governorship of the province Asia, which followed his first period in Syria; the latest likely date for the Asian governorship is 3-2 B.C. We are therefore brought to a period preceding 3 B.C. for the first tenure of office in Syria. Now in 6-5 B.C., South Galatia was being pacified, and as we know that Quirinius gained two *supplicationes* (solemn acts of thanksgiving in honour of a general whose successes did not warrant the highest compliment of a triumph) for the subjugation of the Homonadenses, a mountain tribe in the Galatian province it is not unnatural to connect the two statements, and to suppose that the successful campaigns were carried on in the years 6-4 B.C. But the province of

Galatia, not being a frontier province, had no troops, and for this work the forces of the nearest frontier province had to be employed. That province was Syria, and for the purpose of military command, Quirinius would hold the title of governor of Syria (*legatus Augusti pro prætore Syriæ*).

Such, briefly, are the steps by which Professor Sir W. Ramsay leads to the conclusion that Quirinius was legate of Augustus in Syria before 4 B.C., entrusted, not with the internal affairs of the province, but with its military command, for the purpose of war against the Homonadenses, which he brought to a brilliantly successful issue; there is no serious difficulty in the way of accepting the conclusion that Quirinius was legate of Augustus in Syria some time between the years 9-4 B.C., during which period an enrolment took place in Herod's dominions, an enrolment which is declared by Tertullian to have taken place in Syria generally under the governorship of Sentius Saturninus.

Such is the fresh light which discoveries have thrown on the statements of St. Luke with regard to the circumstances of our Lord's birth; such discoveries do not demonstrate the truth of that account as a whole; they do not necessarily prove that St. Luke was right in his belief as to the peculiar nature of that birth; but they at least clear him from charges of carelessness and inaccuracy on points where his narrative can be tested, and go far to establish his credibility in other matters, which must depend for their acceptance on the character of the man who relates them.

