

THE NATIVITY: AN OUTLINE.

THE perusal of Prof. Ramsay's scholarly monograph, "Was Christ born at Bethlehem?" will doubtless suggest to many readers, as it has suggested to the present writer, the interesting task of reviewing the details recorded in the Gospels of the birth of our Lord. Apart from the main thesis of his book—the historic credibility of St. Luke—Prof. Ramsay's pages are so illuminative, so quickening in their stimulus, that it is scarcely possible for any one to rise from such a study without feeling that the story of the Nativity has been brought before him with more vivid actuality and clearness than it had ever been before. In spite of all that has been acquired by recent research and criticism, an atmosphere of vagueness and indecision rests on the opening chapter of the popular *Lives of Christ*. In the present state of controversy this is perhaps inevitable; indeed, it may be that human scholarship may never succeed in filling in with certitude the lacunæ which baffle industry and ingenuity in the ancient documents that have come down to us.

There are few things more strange and perplexing than these lacunæ. At the close of his sketch of the labours and crucifixion of Christ, Graetz stands at a loss before the remarkable fact "that events fraught with so vast an import should have created so little effect at the time of their occurrence at Jerusalem, that the Judæan historians, Justus of Tiberias and Josephus, who related to the very smallest minutiae everything which took place under Pilate, never mentioned the life and death of Jesus." But how much stranger, in our way of thinking, are those silences in the Gospel narratives regarding details, the remembrance of which, one cannot but believe, ought to have been as precious to the first Christians as the recovery of them would

now be to ourselves. When they see fit, the Evangelists can particularize with a significant minuteness—witness the “much grass” and the “green grass” which incidentally mark a season of the year, and help to throw light on a chronological problem—yet they omit from their story those two dates to which in every human life the heart of the bereaved survivor clings with tender remembrance. They tell us neither the year nor the day on which our Lord was born; they tell us neither the year nor the day of His Passion on the tree. No phrase slips from their pens to portray His earthly aspect to us: we cannot say whether He was “fairer than the children of men,” or whether He had “no form nor comeliness—no beauty that we should desire Him.” Whether in an age when portraiture was a familiar art any attempt was made by a devoted follower to secure a memorial of His lineaments, we can only conjecture; but if at any time a likeness of His humanity existed, painted on face-cloths for the dead, inscribed on glass or precious stone, pictured in mosaic, it has been lost to the world. When we reflect, too, how easy and natural it was among an unchanging Oriental people with long memories to preserve the tradition of the “holy places,” how can we account for the uncertainty which renders the identification of so many places associated with His presence, His miracles, His death, little better than conjectural? The Jerusalem of the days of Pilate may lie deeper beneath the wreck of war than the London of the Roman occupation, but fire and sword are not a sufficient explanation of even that portion of the problem.

It is all so strange, so alien to our natural feelings, so unlike what we imagine would have been the case with us, that we are bewildered till the question slowly shapes itself in our consciousness: What has been withheld from our knowledge is unnecessary; what if a Divine purpose was at work in the minds and hearts of the early believers, when

so much was allowed to lapse into oblivion and doubt? What if a wise Providence, conscious of the fetishism, the materialistic grossness, the superstition inherent in human nature, diverted attention from the natural and mortal details of the Saviour's life on earth, that men might the more easily fix their faith and hope on the risen and living Christ? All these silences and obliterations of memory seem to find their explanation in the words of St. Paul, whatever may have been the precise meaning he himself attached to them: "Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more."

Turning to the story of Bethlehem, it seems possible, without presumption, to recognise some symptoms of the operation of that Divine purpose in the remarkable diversity of opinion as to the date of our Saviour's Nativity. Far away back in the past the early Eastern Church founded a great feast equivalent to our Christmas; but it was a purely spiritual commemoration, and all considerations of historic literalness had been set aside. It was the festival of the Epiphany, and the date was the 6th of January. How completely it was raised above all reminiscences of the natural and earthly existence of our Lord is proved by the fact that it was the memorial not of a single, but of a four-fold Manifestation. In this one feast were included the Nativity, *i.e.* the epiphany of Christ in the semblance of mortal flesh; the appearance of His star or His manifestation to the Gentiles; His epiphany as the beloved Son in the baptism in Jordan; and the unveiling of His divinity as Lord of the elements when He changed water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana.

In the Western Church the observance of Christmas Day on the 25th of December has been traced as far back as the fourth century. That it was fixed at that time of the year with a view to counteract the unspeakable orgies of the ancient Roman *Saturnalia* has been somewhat short-

sightedly cast in the teeth of the Church of Rome; for be the results of controversy what they may on this special point, this at least is certain, that the selection of that date as the date of the Nativity of the Divine Babe "in the winter wild" has done more to Christianize the Western and Northern world than any one act in the history of Ecclesiasticism. Try to conceive what the world has owed during fifteen centuries to that vision of Bethlehem; picture the pity of heart that has been awakened, the benevolence that has spent itself in practical charity, the feuds that have been assuaged, the estrangements that have been set right by the influence of the "blessed time," the suffering and destitution that have been solaced and relieved, the spiritual lukewarmness that has been touched with coals from the altar; and try to conceive what our Northern winter would have been had the Festival of the Crib been assigned to a season of sunshine and flowers. It would now be impossible for us to realize that Christ was born in any month but one associated with snow lying deep, and bitter winds, and holly whitened with frost, and the cold straw of the manger warmed with the vaporous breath of gentle animals. Our good-will and warmth of feeling at Christmastide may be in some measure stimulated by physical cold and a sympathetic imagination, but these too may be numbered among the many ways in which God fulfils Himself.

Strangely enough the Nativity has been assigned to eight out of the twelve months of the year—December 25, February 1, April 5, 21, and 22, May 20, August 1, and more vaguely to September and October. Most of the popular modern writers appear to have adopted the 25th December, but in the presence of Prof. Ramsay's argument it is difficult to resist the conclusion that our Lord was born in one of the months of the Jewish summer. For consider the fact that it was in obedience to the edict directing the Jews to

enrol themselves, "every one in his own city," that Joseph and Mary undertook the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. These tribal gatherings for enumeration must have necessitated very careful arrangements, so that the population might be spared as much hardship and inconvenience as possible, and that agricultural work should not be interfered with. On the one hand, the dangers and delays of winter travelling would imperil the success of the census; on the other, reaping and harvesting would occupy the favourable portion of the year from April to July. Prof. Ramsay accordingly concludes that, if due weight be given to these considerations, "we may say with considerable confidence that August to October is the period within which the numbering would be fixed."

Without referring to another argument derived from the incidence of the "priestly periods," which suggests the 1st August as the probable day and month of the enrolment, it is interesting to note that the one clue to the season of the year indicated by St. Luke is in complete accordance with this August-October period: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." The flocks are sent out after the Passover, and brought in about October; in other words, this night-pasturing belongs to the hot season, when the sheep are indisposed to feed by day. It has indeed been objected that it is not certain that all sheep were brought under cover at night during the winter, and that these Bethlehem flocks were probably destined for Temple sacrifices, and may have lain out all the year round, seeing that they are mentioned as being in the fields in February, when the average rainfall is nearly at its heaviest. As, however, there does not appear to be any evidence that they did actually lie out in December, the presence of the shepherds "in the field" may fairly be regarded as confirming the period indicated as most suitable for the taking of the census.

But how if there were no such census—if St. Luke in an uninspired moment had set down a statement which may be described, and indeed has been described, as a complication of blunders in the first important episode in his record?

Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrolment, made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

What evidence is there that Cæsar Augustus issued a decree for a census of "all the world"? Even had such a census been decreed, how could it have extended to Palestine, which was not a portion of the Roman Empire? The first and only census and valuation of Palestine made by the Romans was carried out about A.D. 6-7, and is recorded by Josephus. Obviously St. Luke transferred this census, with the officer Quirinius who directed it, to a period from nine to twelve years earlier than its true date. What value, therefore, can we be expected to attach to the testimony of a historian who "imagined that Christ was born 'in the days of Herod the king' during a census held about ten or eleven years after the death of Herod?"

These are the chief questions and assertions to which Prof. Ramsay's monograph offers an answer so clear and so cogent that, if it does not establish St. Luke's historic credibility to demonstration, it establishes at least the presumption that in important statements he is accurate, and that we have as sound reason for counting on his trustworthiness as on that of any other great historian whose statements may occasionally stand beyond verification. It is impossible in this place to indicate the range of Prof. Ramsay's contention, the force of which lies in the massing of details. The recent discovery of census papers in Egypt gives countenance to the declaration that Augustus was engaged in an enrolment of the empire. The peculiar form

of tribal registration in Palestine is explained by the peculiar relationship of Herod and the kingdom to Augustus and the empire. That Quirinius held the *hegemonia* of Syria at the time specified is shown to be perfectly credible. I pass lightly from these matters, to which justice can be done solely by reading the book itself, and turn to the interesting point of the year to which the Nativity is assigned.

From a laborious examination of all the available historic evidence outside St. Luke, it is shown that the late summer of 7 or 6 B.C. are the only periods left available for this census. "Luke, however, gives additional information about the Saviour's life, which affords reasonable confidence that 6 B.C. was the year of Christ's birth." Here, too, the reader must refer to Prof. Ramsay for the series of ingenious calculations which justify his conclusion.

If we should find here sufficient proof to warrant us in regarding the date of the Nativity as falling somewhere between August and October in the year 6 B.C., shall we suffer any loss in natural sentiment or in spiritual devotion? There seems to be little reason to suppose so. The ancient Epiphany of the Eastern Church was, as has been pointed out, a commemoration freed from associations of historicity and literal anniversary. With ourselves the solemnity of the Crucifixion and the Christian joy of the Resurrection suffer no detriment or disparagement from the movable character of their observance.

Much has been written about the Star in the East and the adoration of the Magi; but these incidents, which are so closely associated with the birth at Bethlehem, do not seem to me to have been regarded by the ordinary layman, or indeed by many of the clergy, with that attention which one would naturally expect to find bestowed on them. To judge from the beautiful representations of artists and poets, one would suppose that comparatively few Christians had read the texts of St. Matthew and St. Luke with the intelli-

gence, the realistic imagination which they deserve. In how many of the pictures of famous artists do we not find the Magi—those mysterious regal strangers from the East—offering their costly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the radiant Babe cradled in the manger? Turn to the poets, and over and over again the lowly cattle-shed is the scene of the worship of the far-travelled, star-led wanderers. In Longfellow's poem they ride in through the gate and guard, and find nowhere any light save in the stable of the inn :

And cradled there in the scented hay,
In the air made sweet by the breath of kine,
The little Child in the manger lay;
The Child that would be King one day
Of a kingdom not human but divine.

Mrs. Browning describes the same scene, with the horned faces of the dumb kine turned "towards the newly born." Even Archbishop Trench speaks of these strange pilgrims as possible representations of Israel's scattered race sent to claim their part and right "in the Child new-born to-night." Yet if the record of St. Luke be read with that of St. Matthew, it is quite obvious that a seclusion of forty days—the term of Mary's "purification according to the law of Moses"—and the presentation of the Child in the Temple at Jerusalem must have preceded the visit of the Wise Kings, for was not their visit instantly followed by the flight into Egypt? It is true that in the cavern beneath the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem one is shown the place where the Magi knelt and paid their homage; but is it conceivable that those forty days of purification were spent in the rude shelter to which Mary was driven by the overcrowding of the inn? The travellers of the tribe of David who had come up for the census must have long since returned home, and it is a reasonable conjecture that in the city of David there were tribeswomen who were hospitable

enough to welcome the young mother and her Babe under their roof. When the Magi came, they found the Child and Mary, not in the stable, or cave, or the "strawy tent" of the poet, but in "the house." The phrasing in the first verse of the second chapter of St. Matthew does not in any way signify that the visit of the Magi was closely connected with the Nativity. The words "Now when Jesus was born" are more literally rendered, "Jesus having been born"; and it is worth noticing that while it was a *brepbos*, a new-born babe, whom the shepherds found in the manger, it was a *paidion*, a little child, who was presented in the Temple nearly six weeks later, and a *paidion* to whom the Wise Men offered their homage.

To how many myriads of children has the mysterious apparition of those Kings of the East and their guiding star been a marvel and a delight! Yet I wonder for how many of us was any attempt made to realize any of the incidents of their story. Pictures and poems had taught us that there were three of them, but no one ever told us that no number is stated, and no kingship is mentioned in the text. We could not discover anything about their personality, though we fancied them stately and grey-bearded. No one ever described to us their journey from the unknown region towards the dawn whence they had come. Our attention was not even directed to what they told Herod.

Herod privily called the wise men, and learned of them carefully what time the star appeared . . .

Then Herod . . . sent forth and slew all the male children that were in Bethlehem and in all the borders thereof, from two years and under, according to the time which he had carefully learned of the wise men.

They had seen His star then, not "in the East," but "in its rising,"¹ a year and more² before their arrival.

¹ *The Expositor's Greek Testament.* Matt. ii. 2 n.

² "According to the time learned of the wise men" may not imply that the star appeared two full years before; but see later.

How did it happen that they had set out so late, or taken so long a time on their journey? We never had occasion to perplex our elders by asking the question—a question which indeed no one can answer, though it seems interesting to point out that, if the Magi came from a great distance, six months, a year, or even eighteen months, may have been by no means an excessive length of time for the preparations for their journey and the journey itself.

Expedited by the power of Artaxerxes, Ezra took four full months to go from Babylon to Jerusalem. Are the Magi likely to have had similar facilities? They would, no doubt, have travelled more rapidly than the funeral car of Alexander, with its ornaments of massive gold, which it took eighty-four mules more than a year to draw from Babylon to Syria; but that slow procession nevertheless suggests the possibilities of the weary progress and the many delays incidental to ancient travelling in the East. Unfortunately Josephus has given no particulars of the journey of Queen Helen of Adiabene, on the banks of the Tigris, to Jerusalem fourteen years after the Crucifixion; but the journey is spoken of as a serious undertaking, which required "vast preparations," and her son escorted her "a great way." Towards the close of the thirteenth century, when the Persian Khan Arghun sent to China for a wife, the small fleet which conveyed the Princess Kukachin took twenty-one months to reach Ormuz. The Khan had died in the meantime—so had 600 of the mariners—but the lady continued her journey, and married his successor. At the speediest it is improbable that the Magi exceeded the ordinary caravan rate—from twelve to sixteen miles a day. Could we but divine their starting-point, we might trace their probable route along the immemorial trade roads; but though that is impossible, sufficient has been said to throw some explanatory light on the long interval between

the "uprising" of the sacred star in the East and their appearance in Jerusalem.

Regarding the character of that marvellous star speculation has exhausted itself in fruitless conjecture. The guiding light may have been a miraculous phenomenon, a rare planetary conjunction, one of those amazing conflagrations called "new stars"; all we are told is that they saw it in its rising, that it went before them, that it stood over the spot where the young child was, and that a period of little less than two years had elapsed between their first sight of the star, and the hour in which they "rejoiced with great joy."

Now if our Lord was born between August and October in the year 6 B.C., the star of the Magi must have been visible in the previous year, 7 B.C. And here we are met by a remarkable astronomical coincidence, which, if it cannot furnish a solid basis for a chronological argument, is at least supremely interesting. In May, October, and December of B.C. 7 there was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces, and a mediæval Jew has put on record the tradition (which may have been derived from the star-lore of the Chaldeans)¹ that the conjunction of these two planets in Pisces is a sign of the coming of the Messiah. These conjunctions were followed in March B.C. 6 by a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, which must have presented a singularly brilliant and beautiful appearance in the crystalline air of Eastern skies, and which could not have failed to excite the imaginations of seers who attributed the destinies of men and nations to the "shining rulers" of the night.

If we understand the word "star" to mean a single luminary, these coincidences lose something of their impressiveness; but, even so, Kepler has left us a curious

¹ *Dictionary of the Bible: Chronology of the New Testament*, C. H. Turner. (T. & T. Clark.)

conjecture which carries with it the authority of his reputation. Just as the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 1604 culminated in the conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars in 1605, and was associated with the sudden appearance of a new star, so, he surmised, the exactly similar conjunctions in the years 7 and 6 B.C. were associated with the phenomenon of a new star, and this new star was the celestial light which guided the Magi from the East. The new star that appeared in October, 1604, and faded away till it vanished in January, 1606, was of singular splendour. At its period of maximum brilliancy it outshone the glory of Jupiter, and "sparkled with the colours of the rainbow, like a many-faceted diamond." If one may venture to speak with some of the confidence of ignorance, it seems so little probable that there should be any connection between a conjunction of planets and the appearance of a *nova*, that one is slow to adopt the suggestion that, because a new star accompanied the conjunctions of 1604 and 1605, therefore a new star accompanied those of the years 7 and 6 B.C. Indeed, one might risk the audacity of hinting that, if a new star emphasized the brilliant conjunctions of 1604-5, it is more in keeping with the law of chances that a new star did not emphasize those of 7-6 B.C. Apart, however, from this speculation, and apart from the question whether the word "star" may be legitimately taken to mean a constellation or a grouping of planets, the coincidence of these conjunctions with the actual time of Christ's birth is a matter of deep interest.

And as to the flight into Egypt—does any one, in telling or reading the story, trouble himself to trace on the map the route taken, probably through the hills to Hebron, and thence perchance westward to the coast and the Gaza road?

At this point, again, one is struck at the way in which historical data appear to confirm the assignment of the

Nativity to the period August–October of the year 6 B.C. It may be taken as practically certain that Herod died about March, B.C. 4. Between the date of his death and that of the Nativity allowance must be made for the age limit fixed for the massacre of the Innocents, and for the sojourn of the Holy Family in Egypt. If the year 5 be tentatively allotted to the sojourn, and the last days of the year 6 to the flight, we have the years 6 and 7 as the two years in the course of which the Innocents were born.

Again, supposing the Magi to have reached Jerusalem after the presentation in the Temple—say about November, B.C. 6¹—and to have reported to Herod that the sign of the Messiah first appeared in the heavens in the May of the preceding year (7 B.C.); and supposing the savage king to have determined to make security doubly sure by putting the age limit of the massacre some months on the safe side—then here once more we should have the same approximate arrangement of dates and events.

Happily we do not need to attach any importance to these curiously interesting conjectures and calculations. In the vision of faith they count for nothing. It matters not whether Christ was born in December or an earlier month, in this year or in that. Still they do appeal to the realistic imagination in us all; and if they help to bring home to us more vividly the ever-beautiful and touching story of the birth of the Saviour of the world, the time spent on them has been well and wisely used.

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¹ One is strongly tempted to ask whether, in fixing the 6th January for the feast of the Epiphany, the early Eastern Church did not adopt the traditional, or perhaps even the actual, date of the visit of the Magi. We have seen that at least forty days must have elapsed between the Nativity and their arrival, but a much longer time may have intervened. The 6th January, as the date of their arrival in Bethlehem, would fall in with the time arrangement sketched out above.