

*MR. LEWIN AND PROF. BACON ON THE
PASSOVER.*

PROF. BACON'S paper on a subject of undying interest—the chronology of Paul—is well worth careful study but it is proposed in this place to touch only on one point, viz., his treatment of Mr. Lewin. Prof. Bacon differs from Mr. Lewin on an important chronological principle. That principle has been much discussed; and the view supported by Prof. Bacon was certainly familiar to Mr. Lewin, and rejected by him after full consideration. Yet the respected and learned American scholar apparently assumes that Mr. Lewin had not known of that view, and had unwittingly adopted a different and a false view. “There is, unfortunately, a very serious error in Lewin's determination of the incident of the Passover, which Prof. Ramsay seems not to have observed.” My fault would consist only in following with too much docility and too little inquiry the astronomical calculations of that excellent scholar and acute critic, which would be not a serious crime. My share, therefore, may be left out of this case as quite unimportant, and attention may be concentrated solely on the difference of opinion between the Yale professor and the Oxford scholar. So far as I am concerned, I have only to acknowledge gratefully Prof. Bacon's kind words about me, and to thank him cordially for his support and approval in some important points, and still more cordially for his criticism in others.

The first fault attributed to Mr. Lewin is, that he has “attempted to make the Passover full moon (astronomic) ‘the pivot of the whole year.’” The second fault is (roughly speaking) that he has generally placed the first day of

Nisan twenty-four hours too early: we may thus briefly state the practical outcome of the whole argument, as the proper scientific statement would be much longer.

With regard to the second fault, we remark in passing that, whereas Prof. Bacon assumes the point—that Mr. Lewin has placed the first of Nisan too early—as beyond question or discussion, Mr. C. H. Turner (in his admirable article on the “Chronology of the New Testament” in Dr. Hastings’ *Dictionary of the Bible*) comes to the diametrically opposite conclusion, holding that possibly, or even probably, Mr. Lewin places first Nisan too late. This divergence of opinion proves at least that Prof. Bacon is not justified in assuming, as self-evident and certain, that Mr. Lewin errs when he places first Nisan so early. There is reasonable ground for difference of opinion.

We also note that some attention to Mr. Turner’s article and arguments might have been expected in a paper printed eighteen months after that article appeared in the *Dictionary*; but the paper seems to have been delayed.

As to the first of Mr. Lewin’s errors, Prof. Bacon holds that no one “can read . . . Exodus xii. 1–6, and not see that the ‘pivot of the whole calendar’ is, of necessity, not the *full* moon of Nisan, but the *new* moon of Nisan.” We may be confident that Mr. Lewin had read Exodus xii., and knew the facts about the observation of the new moon, on which Prof. Bacon relies. But in truth the point of difference is a mere matter of expression; and the reason why Mr. Lewin chose his own form of expression was that we have first to look for the full moon next after the vernal equinox, and then to take the new moon immediately preceding (*see* p. 363), which gives the first Nisan; from that point of view the Passover full moon is the pivot of the whole year. Mr. Lewin did not mean anything more. If he has not been strictly accurate, it

is a mere verbal detail which does not really affect the question. We defend his general position; but he might differ from some of our views.

The foundation of the second charge lies in the assumption made by Prof. Bacon, that the Jews about A.D. 50-60 possessed no fixed calendar, but arranged their months according to purely empirical observation, beginning a new month only when a new moon had been actually observed and reported by eye-witnesses to the Sanhedrin.

Now what support has he for this assumption? When it is so essential to his purpose, he ought to be very careful both as to its accuracy and as to the convincing character of the arguments in its favour.

As usual with many British and some American writers, the only support which he deems it necessary to bring forward is contained in a quotation from a recent German work (*see* p. 361).

In the first place we observe that the opinion which Prof. Bacon quotes does not prove his assumption. The German professor speaks only of "the time of Jesus Christ"; Prof. Bacon applies the assertion to a year that he fixes as probably A.D. 58. The opinion of the German authority might be right, and yet the inference drawn from it as to the year 58 might be wrong. In what we have to say on this point we shall, therefore, restrict ourselves absolutely to the period 50-60 A.D., and express no opinion as to the facts that ruled during the lifetime of Christ. A change might quite possibly be made in the early years of our era.

1. The period 1-50 A.D. was one of rapid progress and wide-spread change in the arrangement of the calendar. The Julian reform of the calendar had come into force in the beginning of 45 B.C.; and convenience—one might almost say the necessities—of administration soon caused the general adoption in the provinces of the empire of the

principle underlying the new Roman calendar. The time of its adoption in many provinces, and especially in the eastern provinces, was during the reign of Augustus. That was the period when the unification and regulation of the provinces was in progress, and when growing intercourse and trade, as well as administrative convenience, demanded a certain uniformity in the calendar all over the Roman world. We say "a certain uniformity," for most eastern countries partly retained their own customs and names. Thus, *e.g.*, the year widely used in the province Asia began on 24th September;¹ but the months were accommodated in length to the Roman system, so that one could always render a date according to the Roman system into its correspondent according to the Asian system. Similarly in Syria the Macedonian calendar (which was commonly used) was partially assimilated to the Roman. Alongside of the reformed native system, too, the Roman calendar was known and used; and in inscriptions the dates are sometimes given by both systems.

We see, therefore, that change in the calendar was common at this period, and that the Roman calendar must have been familiar in every city of Palestine, Syria, and the East generally.

2. The Jews were now widely spread through the Roman world. They were numerous and often wealthy and influential in the eastern provinces and in Rome itself. Many of them went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover there, so that pilgrim ships were doubtless a

¹ The German authorities on the Asian calendar maintain that this system was universal in the province Asia; but the present writer has brought forward a series of facts pointing to the existence of a Lydo-Phrygian year beginning on 1st August, whose months coincided exactly with the Roman months (*Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, i. p. 204 f., reinforced in *Bulletin de Corresp. Hellén.* 1898, p. 240). This may serve as proof that the curt sentences, in which the Passover reckoning was assumed in *St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 289 f., concealed the work and thought of years on the subject of first century chronology.

recognised institution, and regulations for the safety and convenience of the pilgrims were made by the Roman government. But in spite of the number of pilgrims, there must obviously have been very many thousands of Jews in the various provinces who had to stay and celebrate the feast at home. Only a small proportion of them could find money and time to make the long, expensive journey, and abandon their business for weeks and months. The rest kept the Passover in their own homes far from Jerusalem.

Now it stands to reason that they would be desirous to celebrate the feast on the same day, wherever they were. The knowledge that all Israel was performing the same acts at one and the same time was essential to the effect and impressiveness of the ceremony. Without that uniformity it is safe to say that the marvellous unity of the Jewish race could hardly have been maintained. The circumstances of the Jewish Dispersion imperatively demanded a perfect uniformity; and it was the easiest thing possible to secure absolute uniformity.

The Roman calendar was everywhere known. Scientific knowledge was so far advanced that it was practically as easy then as now to get the calculations made beforehand, and fix the first of Nisan for each year, so that it should be known in time throughout the whole Jewish race over all the Roman world. Surely we are not bound to feel so confident that this easy and natural method, with its great advantages, was neglected by the Jews so late as A.D. 58. It was certainly adopted by them afterwards. Mr. Turner holds that they had adopted some pre-arranged system before A.D. 58.¹ So does Mr. Lewin. We believe they are right in this respect, and that Prof. Bacon has gone wrong.

Prof. Bacon assumes as the foundation of his system and his opposition to Mr. Lewin that the Jews were quite careless of uniformity, and followed an empirical procedure

¹ See the quotation given below on p. 436.

which made uniformity practically impossible. According to his view, even as late as the year 58 after Christ, no one knew what was to be the first day of Nisan until "witnesses of the moon" came to Jerusalem, and were examined by the authorities. If they appeared before the authorities by the time of the evening sacrifice, that evening was the "sanctification" of the new moon; but if they appeared a few minutes later, then there was "too little time for the 'sanctification' of the new moon"; and the ceremony had to be postponed. Moreover "a cloudy sky might produce further delay." Thus it was a matter of accident whether first of Nisan began, say, on Tuesday at sunset, or was postponed so as to begin on Wednesday at sunset.¹ Then when the Sanhedrin had fixed the first of Nisan, news could easily be conveyed to all Palestine in good time for every one to have his lamb ready on the tenth.

It seems really hardly credible that any one can seriously imagine that the first of Nisan was unknown in A.D. 58 until this tedious ceremony, with its chances and accidents, was performed. We are not denying that the ceremony may still have been performed as a religious survival: such rites last long. But we do affirm that plain reason makes it certain that the first of Nisan was already fixed long before and known to all Jews in the empire; and that the forms, if preserved, had no practical weight.

In contrast to this idea that the empirical method of determining the first of Nisan was still practised, Mr. Turner holds that "the Jews must before this have modified the method of simple observation by something in the nature of a calendar or cycle, and any such cycle no doubt deviated not infrequently from the results of simple observation."² We unhesitatingly agree with him in this,

¹ We need only advert to the other more serious possibility that in some few cases this would cause a doubt of a whole month.

² Hastings, *Dict.* ii. p. 420 and p. 411.

though we attach less value than he does to the argument by which he goes on to demonstrate that perhaps Mr. Lewin places the first of Nisan too late. We hold that Mr. Lewin's principle is by far the most probable one (though we fully confess the margin of uncertainty that remains in this and in almost all questions¹ of ancient chronology), viz., that an average of eighteen hours must be allowed between the strict astronomical new moon and the "sanctification." As Prof. Bacon says (p. 362), "according to the rabbis, $27\frac{1}{2}$ hours, at the most, would suffice"; and that gives Mr. Lewin's average very nearly. The reckoning of the good old German scholar Wurm required an average of at least 36 hours; Prof. Bacon takes it as obvious that he must be right; but we hold that Mr. Lewin was fully justified in agreeing with the rabbis and in setting his view aside.

Prof. Bacon himself acknowledges (p. 362) that eye-witnesses of the new moon had never been regarded as absolutely necessary. The old month was not allowed to last longer than the longest term of thirty days, but the new moon was then declared and sanctified, even though it had not actually been seen and reported by any witnesses. That admitted principle, then, needed only to be applied more commonly: the authorities would declare — if we assume that the old ceremony continued in full force — as they had always done, that the new moon had begun, even though circumstances had prevented eye-witnesses from coming forward.

We note in conclusion the curious divergence or result as to the date of the events described in Acts xx. 5 ff. I have argued that 57 is the only reasonably probable date. Prof. Bacon thinks (p. 366 f.) "we are shut up to a choice

¹ This has been stated very clearly and strongly in several places in *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* and must always be taken for granted, even where desire for brevity leads one to omit any explicit statement as to the uncertainty.

between the date 58 . . . or else the year 55." Mr. Turner holds that probability is against the three years 55, 58, 59, and that 56 and 57 are the only probable alternatives. As already stated, we see little reason for Mr. Turner's argument that "the Alexandrine cycle, which has prevailed in the Christian Church ever since the fourth century," has any claim to be reckoned as evidence of the probable Jewish procedure in the first century.

The uncertainty attaching to ancient chronology generally must be acknowledged to exist here. But the only method is to hold fast to the scientific principle, and to walk along the narrow path between the dangers and uncertainties on either hand as unswervingly and unhesitatingly as the pious Mohammedan does across Al-Sirat, which bridges with its spider-thread breadth the chasm between him and heaven.

In the second place, one cannot but regret that so experienced and able a scholar as Prof. Bacon should admit the principle that, in a case where the issues are so familiar, the deliberate judgment of a good and careful scholar like Mr. Lewin should be pronounced, without qualification or hesitation, an error, simply because the opinion of a German scholar on a review of the same familiar evidence is different from his. The truth is that, with all the learning of the work quoted by Prof. Bacon, its judgment and level-headedness in strictly historical questions are distinctly inferior to Mr. Lewin's; and I would venture to refer him to the criticism of it by Mr. Abrahams published in the *Proceedings of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology* for 1898-99, p. 34. The work is strongly biassed in all that concerns Roman Imperial history by a quite pre-Mommsenian and antiquated prejudice.

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