

*THE PRESENT STATE OF THE CONTROVERSY
OVER THE PLACE AND TIME OF THE
BIRTH OF CHRIST.¹*

I DARE say you know that the birth of Christ, as a historical event, is beset with perplexities and uncertainties : by this I do not mean that He was supernaturally conceived, and that the introduction of the supernatural into the record of history produces doubt as well as belief, and uncertainty as well as assurance : it would lie in the very nature of the case that supernatural events should provoke both doubt and faith, and those persons who have decided that the supernatural has no place amongst the credibilities of a properly told history will at once dismiss all occurrences of this kind from the account, no matter how violently they may tear the record in detaching what they have decided to be incredible from what is, or may be, credible. But even apart from the problems introduced by the assumption of a supernatural element into the story, the record itself is full of difficulty ; one has only to rapidly run over some of the points at which the critical faculty takes offence—for example, that the Gospel of Mark knows nothing about the incidents of the birth of Christ ; granted that the explanation lies in the fact that the writer did not begin his history with the life but with the public consecration of the life, we can only be surprised at his silence. Perhaps the same thing may have to be said of the Fourth Gospel, though here we are at a later date, and it is therefore less likely that the writer can have been altogether ignorant of the Christian belief, which lands us in a dilemma that either he did not know or purposely did not allude to the birth of Christ.

¹ A popular lecture delivered to the Leeds Federation of the Free Churches at Batley, Oct. 2, 1907.

Either alternative is difficult; and even if we suppose a third hypothesis, namely, that there are such references in the Fourth Gospel,¹ but that they are obscure or perhaps obscured, it is not easy to see why obscurity should have been so much in request. There was no such reticence or intentional veiling to be detected in the writers of the early part of the second century. But it is when we come to the other two Gospels that the difficulties begin to multiply and to thicken. Matthew and Luke both have Infancy sections, but it reduces a harmonist to the last stage of despair to try and reconcile them. They did not derive their accounts from St. Mark, for at this point Mark has nothing from which to draw; and if, as is now generally conceded, Matthew and Luke have a second source from which they draw common matter (that is, such common matter as is not traceable to the Marcan original), then this second source, which we commonly call Q, had no infancy section, nor indeed any section earlier historically than the beginning of Mark. So we have unexpectedly stumbled upon another authority of very great weight, whose testimony is to be added to the silence of Mark or perhaps of John. But then this is not all: the accounts in Matthew and Luke do not overlap, except in so far as to say that Christ was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod. Even where they agree, as in that fact, they do not agree as to how Christ came to Bethlehem nor why He came to Nazareth. Matthew's account implies, at all events to the average reader, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because His mother lived there, and that He went to Nazareth because political necessity advised it. Luke brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem from political necessity of another kind, viz., the obligations of a census, and takes the family back to Nazareth by the natural home-going of

¹ In this connexion special attention should be paid to the Western reading in John i. 13 ("Who was born, etc.").

travellers who have accomplished what they came for. It is, as you know, the fashion to superpose the two Evangelists, so that each shall fill up the deficiencies of the other, Matthew bringing his STAR and his WISE MEN, and his MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS, and his FLIGHT INTO EGYPT, and his ANGELIC MONITORS; and Luke supplying the CROWDED KHAN and the ASTONISHED SHEPHERDS, and the PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE, and the AGED MEN and WOMEN SAINTS, as well as the allusions to the CENSUS and the Roman Government. It is also commonly said that the variation in the two accounts is due to the fact that Matthew gives Joseph's account and Luke gives Mary's, and that thus we have the matter attested by the two people who should know most about it, practically the final first-hand evidence on either side. But it seems to escape those who reason in this way that they have got rid of the discrepancy between Matthew and Luke by substituting for it a much more difficult discrepancy, viz., a want of consentaneity between Joseph and Mary, neither of whom seems to know the mind of the other or the events through which they passed together. For you see that even if Joseph had hid things in his heart as Mary is said to have done, neither of them could have made a secret of the reason why they came to Bethlehem, nor could they have had any doubt whether they went to Egypt or not. So we are much worse off for the supposition that we have two accounts, one derived from Joseph and the other from Mary. But it is when we come to Luke's account, taken by itself without any complication from comparison with parallel writers, that the difficulties become most intense, and in order to get a clear view of the question we must see how these difficulties arise. Luke tells us that Christ was born in the days of Herod the Great, and so does Matthew, and on this point there is no divergent opinion worth recording. But Herod the Great was dead in B.C. 4, and

therefore Christ was born about six years before the Christian era. This is not a very serious difficulty : it only means that the earliest investigators into the date of Christ's birth made a miscalculation. We are not bound by their error ; and although it sounds odd, at first, to say that Christ was born several years before Christ, it is quite certain, and we need not trouble to correct the Anno Domini reckoning and upset all the chronology of the world. And neither Luke nor Matthew is to be held responsible for errors of early chronographers ; perhaps this year ought to be called the year of grace 1913, but we can't alter it now.

But now come to the real point upon which the objecting critics have fastened. We are told by Luke (ii. 1) that Augustus Caesar issued a decree for taking an enrolment or census of the whole world, that is, of the Roman world, and that in consequence of this decree all the population in the kingdom of Herod were ordered to their native places, that a census or valuation, whatever it was, might be taken by the local officials, much as it would be taken in the present day in Turkey. In consequence of this political exigency, Joseph and Mary removed (at all events for a time) from Nazareth to Bethlehem ; and then Luke tells us further that Quirinius was governor of Syria when this census was first made. Now you will easily find out, from the pages of Josephus, that Quirinius came to Syria in the year A.D. 6-7 with the express purpose of making a census or valuation, that is, more than ten years after the death of Herod the Great ; Quirinius was also charged with the duty of winding up the affairs of Archelaus, the son of Herod, of whom you read in Matthew, who had been banished to the city of Vienne in Gaul, on account of his malpractices in his government. Josephus often refers to this census-taking under Quirinius, because it was the cause of one of the great outbreaks of the Jews against the Roman power,

under the leadership of Judas of Galilee. Luke speaks of this Judas as making revolt in the days of the taxing, and it is certain that this was a national movement which led to results of the greatest historical importance, and ultimately caused the ruin of the Jewish state, for these revolters under Judas of Galilee, when Quirinius came, were not Passive Resisters; they used all the weapons of the revolutionist, down to the burning of the custom-houses, and actual battle with Roman forces. You will see the difficulty of the situation. If Quirinius makes the enrolment or taxing or census, or whatever we like to call it, in A.D. 6-7, and if Jesus Christ is born in B.C. 6 or thereabouts, we shall have Luke in conflict with Josephus, unless it can be shown that there was an earlier census than that which we read about in Josephus, and that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria, and made two censuses. And it has been commonly supposed that Luke has made a bad historical mistake in his dating of Quirinius and his census; in which case his reputation as a historian is seriously damaged, (Professor Ramsay would say that Luke is not to be trusted any further if he made such a bad mistake; I should not like to treat my friends in that way); and since he not only says there was a census, but makes that census the ground of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, we should have doubts raised in our minds as to whether it is not a mistake to say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, when Luke gives a false or an impossible reason for his being there.

So we have to ask ourselves the question whether it is possible that Luke and Josephus were both right. Can it be that there was an earlier census than the one spoken of by Josephus, and that this one was also made by Quirinius? At first sight it looks very improbable. The whole action of the revolters whom Josephus describes implies that this was the beginning of a taxation which they held

to be incompatible with their liberty and with national ideas. If there had been an earlier census, we should expect Josephus to have mentioned it at the proper point of history, and if Quirinius had been in the country before on an imperial errand of this kind, he would have alluded to it in his description of the last years of Herod's reign. Moreover, we have a natural and healthy scepticism when people get over the difficulties of a historical contradiction by saying that things happened twice. But at this point we have to check ourselves. We must not say that things cannot happen twice when it is in their nature to happen, not merely twice, but many times. A census is not like an ordinary historical event: it involves periodicity. Take, for example, the census in our own country; it comes every ten years. If I said that an event happened in a particular year which was the year of the census, and you found reason to believe that it occurred ten years earlier than the particular year which I mentioned, you would at least give me credit for its being a census-year. So the first question into which we must look is the possibility of a periodic census. At first sight it seems extremely unlikely: there is not a trace of it in the history of the Roman Empire, although St. Luke says the census was world-wide, and the situation (if the veracity of Luke is to be maintained) almost requires a periodic census. Perhaps the first direction in which light would be looked for by a historical investigator is in the so-called indiction, a cycle of fifteen years, which we constantly find used for dating Greek MSS.; thus we find it stated that "this MS. was finished" in such a year "from the creation of the world, and in the eighth year of the Indiction," i.e., the eighth year of a particular cycle of fifteen years. (Chronologists of an imaginative turn have even calculated the year of the Indiction in which the world was created, and have put the number at the opening of the book of

Genesis!) An examination of these dates and of the allusions to them makes it pretty clear that it has something to do with taxation, but that it does not go further back than the year 312 A.D., when Constantine the Great settled the administration of the Byzantine Empire. Any references to the Indiction which imply an earlier date than 312 A.D. are easily shown to be forgeries. This does not help us much, except as we begin to reflect that at least it gives us some idea of what a census period would be like under the Roman Empire. Beyond that we are in the dark and at a loss from what quarter to look for light. The fact is that history and literature do not tell the whole story of the common life of a people. Suppose, for example, that at some future date, when our newspapers and magazines have gone to dust in consequence of the bad paper on which they are printed, and when our existing political organizations have been seriously modified by the arrival of the New Zealander, we were faced with the question, Did they take a census in England in the twentieth century? and did they make periodic valuations of the property of the people? Well, the census does not occupy a very wide space in the literature of the country, and in some future period of existence we might be hard put to it to prove that in a previous state of being we had been counted or taxed. I do not remember, at this moment, an allusion to it, say, in Thackeray or in Dickens; Mrs. Bardell does not fill up a paper for Mr. Pickwick. Happily for us the history of the Ancient World is constantly having revivals from the unexpected accessions of fresh material. It may be clay tablets from Babylonia, or similar monuments from the ruined cities of the ancient Hittites; it may be rock-inscriptions or funeral monuments from every corner of the ancient world: but most and best of all, the finds are the buried papyri that have been exhumed from

the mounds of Egypt or dissected from the wrapping of mummies or taken out of the stuffed interiors of sacred crocodiles. But although we have from this last treasure trove a wealth of documentary evidence as to the common life of the people, their wills, their lawsuits, their private letters, their bills (paid and unpaid), their invitations to dinner and the like, we never thought that there might turn up census papers of the districts from which the documents were recovered, because we did not realize with sufficient clearness that there had been a census taken at recurrent periods, certainly in Egypt, and therefore, with high probability, in the adjoining province of Syria. Perhaps we may make the case clearer to ourselves by putting it in the following way. Justin Martyr, in appealing to the Roman Senate in defence of the Christian religion, tells them that they can verify his statements about the birth of Christ by looking up the census papers. Whether Justin had any special reason or information upon which he acted when expressing himself in this way is very doubtful; it was probably a case of literary bluff! but even bluff requires a background, and he was probably drawing upon common knowledge of Imperial administration when he said that the papers were preserved; and if they were preserved at Rome, they were probably preserved in duplicate in the provincial registries, and that means (I know it will be a startling statement to some) that if papyrus had been able to withstand the climate of Syria as it has been able to live in the dry air and dry sand of Egypt, we should have had it well within the bounds of possibility that the actual census paper which Joseph filled up (supposing such to have existed) or the Government official filled up for him might be recovered. We are as near to definite knowledge as it is possible to be in a perishing world!

But you will ask me, have the census papers been found,

and do they throw light on the situation? The answer is that a great many such papers have turned up, described by the word "Enrolment," exactly as in the Gospel of Luke, and officially dated; and from the dates it is easy to see that they constitute a cycle of fourteen years. Just as in our own country, when the cycle of ten years is nearly run out, the Government pass a Census Bill and appoint enumerators, so in the various provinces of the Roman Empire, if we may judge from the state of things in the province of Egypt.

Now let us see what such a census paper would be like; I will try and translate one for you:—

To Dorion the Governor, and to the royal scribe, and to Didymus . . . and to the local communal secretaries from Thermoutharion the daughter of Thoonis, with her gentleman lodger Apollonius the son of Sotades. There are in my house on S. Lane St., Apollonius, the son of Sotades, and myself Thermoutharion, a freedwoman of the aforesaid Sotades. I am about sixty-five years old, of moderate stature, a honey-coloured complexion, a big face, and have a scar on my right knee.

And I, Thermoutharion, the afore-written, along with the same gentleman Apollonius, swear by the Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus that I have well and truly delivered the present list of those who live with me, and there is no other person living with me beyond the aforesaid persons, no foreigner, no Alexandrian, no freedman, no Roman, no Egyptian. If my oath is true, or the contrary, so help me God.¹

Given in the ninth year of Claudius Caesar, etc., in the Egyptian month Phaophi.

¹ I have used some slight freedom in making a popular rendering.

You see the lady is a householder, and the householder makes the census return, as with ourselves. The date is the month of October A.D. 48; and it belongs to a row of other documents which run in a cycle of fourteen years. Count back fourteen three times and you will come to the year A.D. 6, which is pretty conclusive for the census spoken of by Josephus. Count back another fourteen, and you will probably come to the birth of Christ. Count back another fourteen, and you may perhaps come to the first establishment of the census by Augustus, for the year 23 B.C. is the year of his great administrative reforms.

Perhaps it will be sufficient to say that we have documentary evidence for A.D. 20, none for A.D. 34, then again for A.D. 48, and for the years A.D. 90, 104, 118, 132, and so on. Possibly some of the gaps may be filled without my knowledge, but there seems no doubt about the fourteen-year cycle, and Mr. Grenfell gives us a very good reason for it. A boy became taxable at the age of fourteen; so if he was born before a given census they would be sure to catch him at the next census, otherwise he might behave like the young people who travel without proper railway tickets, because they are under twelve.

Now all of this seems to me very wonderful and very eye-opening. But now let us return to St. Luke. The difficulty about the taxation of Joseph's family having disappeared, there remains the difficulty of taking people to their own towns for registration, a very awkward, and, one would have supposed, a very unnecessary proceeding. I can quite understand that people would be sceptical; moreover, if you look at the Egyptian document which I read to you, you will see that the landlady protests there are no other people there, Alexandrians, Romans or Egyptians, which looks as though they might have been there, and does not lend itself to the supposition that they

had all been ordered away. They certainly could not order the Romans to go home. So perhaps you will feel, as others have done, a difficulty at this point; for myself I do not share it. My experiences in the East, under the Turkish Empire, which in many ways is governed like the Roman Empire, have taught me that a man can be sent home on very slight provocation. 'Has he got his certificate of travel?' 'Then send him home to get one,' and so on in other cases. So I have not stuck at the journey to Bethlehem as though it were impossible, as some people have done; but in any case the difficulty can be got rid of by observing what took place in Egypt. We have a fresh piece of evidence of the highest value in the new volume of British Museum papyri. It is a document issued in anticipation of the census in the seventh year of Trajan (i.e., A.D. 103-4, the seventh census after the one described by Josephus). In it the prefect requires all persons who may be residing away from their own districts (called *Nomes* in Egypt, but I cannot say their *own nomes*) to return at once, in view of the approaching census. Here is a bit of the document—

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt. Since the time is come for the house to house enrolment, it is necessary for all absentees on any ground whatever from their own districts to return to their own hearths, that they may both carry out the regular order of the enrolment and that they may also be able to attend to the cultivation of their allotments, etc., etc.

We could hardly have anything more illuminating than such a document as this. If the Prefect of Egypt made an order for people to return to their homes in anticipation of the census in the year A.D. 104, there is clearly nothing impossible in such a decree having been issued in Palestine, say in B.C. 7. There still remains a number of difficulties in connexion with Quirinius, and the possibility of his having made an earlier census for King Herod the Great;

but the difficulties as to the fact of the census have been removed and, in part, the difficulties as to the birth in Bethlehem.

Mr. Kenyon, of the British Museum, was the first investigator of this matter of the enrolment, and to him belongs the honour of the discovery of the census period. His observations, confirmed by those of two Continental scholars, were promptly seized by Professor Ramsay for a most vigorous defence of the trustworthiness of St. Luke in his book, *Was Christ born in Bethlehem?* While I should not like to express too close an agreement with Ramsay in that matter, and regard his judgement of St. Luke as altogether too flattering, it would be a worse error of judgment not to admit that by his researches into the value of the Lucan tradition he has accomplished more for the rehabilitation of the Christian documents than half a century of apologists.

Perhaps you will see the bearing of these researches if, after the event, you turn back and see what used to be said on the subject by the great critics before these investigations in Egypt had brought the new facts to light. Suppose we turn to Strauss and his great work "The Life of Jesus," a book which, however antagonistic it seemed to Christian beliefs, was a landmark in the history of progressive thought, a very learned work and full of just criticisms and acute observations. "The first difficulty is that the ἀπογραφή (namely the inscription of the name and amount of property in order to facilitate the taxation) commanded by Augustus is extended to *all the world* (πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην). This expression, in its common acceptation at that time, would denote the *orbis Romanus*. But ancient authors speak of no such general census decreed by Augustus; they speak only of the assessment of single provinces decreed at different times. . . . It is said, Augustus at all events attempted an equal assessment of the Empire by means

of an universal census : and he began the carrying out of his project by an assessment of individual provinces, but he left the further execution and completion to his successors. Admit that the Gospel term *δῶγμα* (decree) may be interpreted as a mere design, or, as Hoffmann thinks, an undetermined project expressed in an imperial decree, still the fulfilment of this project in Judaea at the time of the birth of Jesus was impossible.”¹ (It would be a moderate criticism of these statements to say that they are too strong.) He goes on to explain why Augustus would not have made a census of Palestine while Herod the Great was still ruling.

P. 154. “That Quirinius undertook a census of Judaea we know certainly from Josephus, who, however, remarks that he was sent to execute this measure . . . about ten years after the time at which, according to Matthew and Luke, Jesus must have been born.”

P. 155. “As little is to be admitted that some preliminary measure, in which Quirinius was not employed . . . took place during the lifetime of Herod, in reference to the census subsequently made by Quirinius, and that this preliminary step and the census were afterwards comprised under the same name. In order, in some degree, to account for this appellation, Quirinius is said to have been sent into Judaea in Herod’s time, as an extraordinary Tax-Commissioner,² but this interpretation of the word *ἡγεμονεύουτος* is rendered impossible by the addition of the word *Συρίας*, in combination with which the expression can denote only the Praeses Syriae.”

These objections have still to be faced.

On the same page (155) will be found a stronger statement of Luke’s incapacity. “He deals in manifest contra-

¹ Strauss, *Leben Jesu*. (George Eliot’s translation, 4th ed. pp. 152, 153.)

² If I understand the matter, the hypothesis here rejected is what Professor Ramsay now defends.

dictions, or rather he has an exceedingly sorry acquaintance with the political relations of that period, for he extends the census not only to the whole of Palestine, but also (which we must not forget) to the whole Roman world." "To get a census extending to Galilee, he must have imagined the kingdom to have continued undivided as in the time of Herod the Great." (The criticisms upon Luke's capacity as an historian and upon his acquaintance with political events begin to look ridiculous.) Strauss then goes on to explain how it was that Luke came to refer to the census when no such census occurred at the birth of Christ. It was due to the fact that he had to establish the birth in Bethlehem, which was required on other grounds.

P. 156. "As he set out with the supposition that the habitual abode of the parents of Jesus was Nazareth, so he sought after a lever which should set them in motion towards Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. Far and wide nothing presented itself but the celebrated census: he seized it the more unhesitatingly because the obscurity of his own views of the historical relations of that time veiled from him the many difficulties connected with such a combination."

Again, on p. 159: "Luke, with the help of the census, transported the parents of Jesus from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Now we know what is the fact respecting the census: it crumbles away inevitably before criticism, and with it the datum built entirely upon it that Jesus was born in a manger—for had not the parents of Jesus been strangers? etc." It would be more correct to have said that the adverse criticisms on Luke would "crumble away."

And now let us see what was said by another famous critic of the Gospel narrative, M. Renan. He tells us frankly that Jesus was born at Nazareth, a little town in Galilee, which had no celebrity before this day. And

he explains the Bethlehem legend, and the associated marvels, by the exigencies of a Messianic situation, and the requirements of prophecy. Thus, in speaking of the enrolment under Quirinius, he says: "It is at least ten years later than the time Jesus must have been born, according to Matthew and Luke, for the two Evangelists make Jesus to be born under the reign of Herod, but the enrolment under Quirinius did not take place until after the deposition of Archelaus, i.e., ten years after the death of Herod in the thirty-seventh year of the era of Actium. The inscription by which they used formerly to pretend that Quirinius made two enrolments is recognized to be a fabrication. Quirinius may have been twice legate of Syria, but the enrolment only occurred at his second legation. In any case it would have been only applied to the districts already reduced to Roman provinces and not to kingdoms and to tetrarchies, especially while Herod the Great was still alive. . . . The journey of the family of Jesus to Bethlehem has no historical element . . . Jesus was not of the family of David. If he had been, one could not imagine that his family would have been forced, by an official and financial operation, to go and register themselves in a place from which their ancestors had sprung a thousand years before."¹

The important points in the foregoing are the concession that Quirinius may have been governor of Syria twice (which is one of the points, however, that remain to be established), and the objection (which has now lost almost all its force) that the enrolment could only have occurred at the second legation. Without going further into the history of this much debated question, on which every one who writes on the life of Christ must say something, we can see the direction in which the solution of the problem

¹ Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, c. 2.

is tending, and what points yet remain to be cleared up. A fresh inscription, belonging to the period under discussion, or a fragment of official correspondence on Egyptian papyrus, might very well settle the points that are still in debate one way or the other. As far as we have gone, the evidence is running very strongly in favour of the belief that Luke has given us a correct historical background for his Gospel.

J. RENDEL HARRIS.

THE NEW SCHÜRER.

It is twenty-two years since the English translation of Schürer's monumental *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* was published in Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Much water has flowed under the bridges since then ; even since the issue of the third German edition in 1898, inscriptions, manuscripts, and papyri, have come in like a flood upon the historian. Fresh points of view have been urged by specialists in the internal and the external history of the period, and Dr. Schürer, with painstaking thoroughness, has not been slow to chronicle and estimate such contributions. The result is that we have now before us a fourth edition of the second volume (Leipzig, 1907, pp. 680), dealing with the internal conditions of the period. This covers §§ 22-30, which in the original English edition occupy the whole of volume i. and the first 218 pages of volume ii. (Division ii.). For the benefit of those who possess the latter, as well as for the sake of surveying some of Schürer's mature judgments upon the problems in question, it may be useful to notice a few of the more salient changes, in the way of addition or of alteration, which the learned author has introduced. These are usually