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"THE BIRTH-DAY OF CHRIST."

BY W. PRESCOTT UPTON.

THE joyous festival thus described in the Prayer Book has been celebrated by the vastly greater number of Christians on December 25 for the past fifteen centuries, although there is no absolute certainty as to the exact year, let alone the precise day, of the Nativity. There was not always this agreement, for in the latter part of the fourth century the Western Church used December 25, but the usual day in the East was January 6. We have some light on the way in which the change of the Eastern custom took place.

The renowned John Chrysostom preached a sermon at Antioch while he was still Bishop of that city, on December 25, A.D. 386. He compliments them upon the devotion with which such numbers of them are celebrating the feast, although "it is not yet the tenth year since this day has been manifested to us" (*Opera*, ii. 351 ff. : edit. Montfaucon). He says that December 25 "has been known from the beginning by those who inhabit the West. . . . We have received this day from those who have an accurate knowledge of these things and inhabit that city," to wit, Rome, where the archives contained, or were supposed to contain, certain evidence. "For they that dwell there," proceeds Chrysostom, "observing it from the beginning and from old tradition, sent us the knowledge of it."

A happy compromise was soon effected. The date December 25 was taken for the Nativity, while January 6 was regarded as the day of the Epiphany, or rather more correctly in the plural "the Epiphanies," for it was taken as the general commemoration of all the important manifestations of our Lord. To-day perhaps we have most in mind the Epiphany to the Wise Men, although it can hardly be possible that this really took place until after the Presentation. In the Early Church, however, the "Epiphany" or manifestation at the Lord's Baptism was regarded as peculiarly important, and seems to have overshadowed other events.

Whether rightly or wrongly the idea was general if not universal in the earliest ages of the Church, that the Lord was baptized on the (thirtieth) anniversary of His Birth. At the root of this belief, we need have no doubt, lay the difficult verse, Luke iii. 23, which, though it has a decided vagueness for most of us, had a significance in ancient days which we miss through being so much the creatures of cities and almanacks, that very few of us give heed to the most elementary facts about the heavenly bodies. It was far otherwise in the times when two or three different calendars might be used in a mixed community, and well understood. I have myself seen this system at work in the three years which I spent at Salonica during the War. There the city was itself Greek, a large proportion of the inhabitants were Jews, and it had not long passed out

of Turkish domination. People of very moderate education could tell the date not only in both varieties of the solar calendar, the Julian and the Gregorian, but also in the Mahometan purely lunar calendar, and in the Hebrew soli-lunar reckoning. Amongst us, however, we should look on a man as rather a prodigy who could tell the time by the sun, or the Hebrew date by looking at the moon; yet both of these are easily performed with practice.

The allusion to "thirty years" would have suggested a well-known "cycle" of the sun and moon. Thirty years measured by the sun are 10,957 days. Thirty years measured by the moon are 371 "lunations" or new moons, which come to 10,955 days and about 20 hours, so that in 30 years the moon returns to very nearly the same dates in the solar calendar for its phases. It was therefore natural that when people paid attention to the heavenly bodies and widely understood (what is a mystery to most moderns) the main principles of calendars, the words "about thirty years" were read much more precisely than we take them.

The consequence of this general belief that the date of the Baptism (or "Epiphany") had also been the "Birth-day of Christ," was that the rearrangement of the Eastern festivals was greatly facilitated. The Western date was indeed consecrated to the actual Nativity, but the Eastern date being now assigned only to the "Epiphanies" was not felt to be relegated to an inferior position. This politic adjustment of the matter was no doubt largely responsible for the swiftness with which the change was effected throughout the conservative East; yet it would seem likely that Chrysostom's conviction that the Western was the more accurate tradition, must have been very widely shared to secure the new usage such easy progress. For though the heretical Armenians down to the present moment hold the Nativity date January 5, and though as late as the tenth century the Church of Jerusalem still maintained that Christ was born on the Epiphany, it would appear that by the middle of the fifth century the only other churches holding out for January 5/6 were Alexandria and her dependencies. From Cosmas Indicopleustes, however, it appears that by about A.D. 530 Alexandria had fallen into line.

So much for the history of the general adoption of the present Nativity and Epiphany dates. Our thoughts now naturally turn to asking why these particular days should originally have been selected. Various explanations have been offered, but none of them is wholly satisfactory, as is proved by the fact that rival theories still have their advocates.

First there is Chrysostom's assertion that the West had observed December 25 "from the beginning," which though made in good faith cannot really be substantiated, seeing that the only festivals which the Church can be proved to have observed "from the beginning" are Sundays, Easter and probably also Whit-Sunday. The occurrence of December 25 as the Nativity in the "Philocalian Calendar" of 336, may fairly be pleaded to show that by the time of Chrysostom the festival might well have been of immemorial

usage in the Roman Church, and in matters of this sort that would have passed as tantamount to “from the beginning.” In matters of doctrine, of course, the Fathers were much more punctilious in carrying their vouchers back to the Apostolic Age itself.

Some scholars hold that the Nativity was first computed to December 25 by Hippolytus, the earliest systematic chronologer of the Roman Church, who wrote about 225. I hold that though he was acquainted with the date he did not devise it. I believe that both Nativity dates were known to Clement of Alexandria, a good thirty years before Hippolytus (*Stromateis*, i. 21). The point is a knotty one and too large for discussion here, but I think the dates have not been recognized hitherto in Clement because exact attention has not been paid to the peculiarities of the Egyptian “Sothic Calendar” used by him, and by the Basilidian and Valentinian Gnostics, the results of whose interesting and instructive computations have been preserved to us by Clement.

The next method of accounting for Christmas Day is by far the best known and most widely accepted. With us to-day the winter solstice is on December 22, but about the Christian Era it was on December 24, so that December 25 was then the first day on which the sun began to return on his upward path through the signs of the Zodiac, bringing back light and life from the death of winter. It was thus the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” (*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*), or the “Day of the New Sun.” It is confidently held that Christians adopted this day from the heathen, and the assertion seems to be lacking nothing for acceptance *except proof!* Heathen winter festivals there were, of course, in plenty, but there seems no evidence at all that the heathen observed the precise day December 25, *before* Christians did so. This being the case, the heathen might have “borrowed” from the Christians, for such stealing of thunder was not perpetrated only on one side; or, what is a much more reasonable suggestion than either, both parties might have “borrowed” from Nature. We have to remember that the return of the sun from the winter solstice is not an event in which the “heathen,” as such, had any peculiar proprietary rights. If a day was to be chosen for the celebration of the “Birthday of Christ,” there could be no happier choice than that which was (for us in the northern hemisphere) the “Birthday of the Sun.” Those who are enamoured of this solution do not have any clear idea of its implications. December 25 would only have been selected as the “Birthday of the Sun” when the solstice fell as late as December 24, which it had ceased to do by the end of the first century. Those who make Christmas an imitation of a heathen festival go a long way towards proving Chrysostom’s optimistic view that it had been “observed from the beginning” by those who followed the most accurate tradition. Thus do extremes meet.

Another suggested borrowing is deserving of much more respectful consideration. The Jews have a festival of the “Dedication of the Temple and Altar” (cf. John x. 22) in commemoration of the cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C., and

it is held on the anniversary, the 25th day of the ninth Hebrew month called Kislev or Chisleu, which is coincident in the main with December. The chief objection here is that there is no tradition of the adoption, which we should surely have found had it been the real connection between the two festivals. It is, however, worthy of special notice that in the year 5 B.C., which the margin of the Authorized Version (rightly, I believe) determines to have been the year of the Nativity, the Hebrew date "Kislev 25" fell on December 24/25, that is to say it began at sunset on December 24, and ended at sunset December 25. Nor is this all, for if the year 5 B.C. did not contain the extra month "Ve-Adar" (which has to be brought in every three years or so to keep the Hebrew Calendar true to the sun as well as to the moon) the Hebrew date "Kislev 25" had *also* fallen on the Julian date January 5/6, in that year 5 B.C.

The fact is remarkable as offering a possible solution for both the Nativity dates, whereas the alleged borrowing of the "heathen" festival, even if it can account for December 25, cannot make any suggestion as to January 5/6, and thus ignobly shirks the difficult half of the problem. My own opinion is that "Ve-Adar" *was* inserted in 5 B.C., but I am not so sure on the point that I can dismiss the possibility that in 5 B.C. "Kislev 25" did fall twice in the Julian year, to wit on January 5/6 and on December 24/25, and may thus explain both the Eastern and the Western Nativity dates.

There remains, however, for consideration a method of computing (at least roughly) the Nativity of our Lord, which may be precarious, and certainly has been used with indifferent success by very eminent men, but at least has the merit of working upon the only data supplied to us by Holy Scriptures for determining the question.

St. Luke records that Zacharias was "of the course of Abia" or Abijah, the eighth of the priestly courses at the Temple. He implies that the Annunciation was in the "sixth month" after the end of that particular ministration of the Course of Abia at which the Angel appeared to Zacharias, and that the Nativity is to be placed nine months later than this (Luke i. 5, 9, 23-6, 36; ii. 6). Therefore it is reasonable to hold that, if we could know the date of that ministration of the Course of Abia in the Temple, then by adding on to it fifteen months, we must come at least reasonably close to the exact date of the Nativity. The data are too vague to justify the assertion that they would prove the day of Christ's Birth, but they certainly supply the materials for a very interesting investigation, if only we can ascertain the date of the ministration in question.

Now the death of Herod the Great (though even this is sometimes called in question) was in the year 4 B.C., and occurred in the first few days of the Hebrew month Nisan, if we say on March 31, 4 B.C., we cannot be more than a day or two out (Josephus, *Antiq.*, XVII. vi. 4; viii. 1). The Nativity, therefore, cannot have been

later than the winter of 5-4 B.C., though, of course, it may have been earlier. This, therefore, must be the first point of departure. The Nativity not later than the winter of 5-4 B.C., brings us to seek for a ministration of the Course of Abia, about fifteen months earlier, namely in the autumn of 6 B.C. Have we any clue to the exact date of this ministration? The answer is that we have, and this from a source which can have had no possible collusion with Christian tradition.

Towards the end of the Siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Temple was accidentally set on fire and destroyed on the ninth or tenth day of the fifth Hebrew month, called “Ab.” This date corresponds with the Julian day, Sunday, August 5, A.D. 70, which till sunset was “Ab 9,” and at sunset changed to “Ab 10.” This date is not in dispute.

Now the Babylonian Talmud embodies a Jewish tradition that the Course of Jehoiarib had just entered upon its ministration when the catastrophe occurred. The Babylonian Talmud is a late compilation, but of one thing we may be very certain, the tradition it sets forth was not devised with any view to helping Christians to determine the date of the Birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it leads us to a result which is to say the least of it, thought-compelling. For, once granted the definite date of the ministration of any single course, and then it is but a matter of simple arithmetic to determine the dates at which any and every course fulfilled its ministration at any previous time connected by a regular succession with the courses of A.D. 70. The method is quite easy to understand.

The priestly courses were twenty-four in number (1 Chron. xxiv. 4, 18) amongst which Jehoiarib was the first, and Abijah the eighth in order. They served for one week and entered their ministration on the Sabbath Day (2 Kings xi. 4-9). Accordingly, if the Jewish tradition may be relied upon,¹ the Course of Jehoiarib must have entered its ministration on the Sabbath before the firing of the Temple, that is to say on the evening of Friday, August 3, A.D. 70. That being granted our way is clear to find out the exact week in the autumn of 6 B.C. that the Course of Abia was ministering in the Temple, which, as we have seen, is the latest possible ministration at which the Vision can have been vouchsafed to Zacharias.

From A.D. 70 back to 6 B.C. was but 75 years—not “76” as we might incautiously calculate if we forgot that no year intervened between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1. In these 75 years were 19 leap-years, including 1 B.C. and 5 B.C., both of which naturally were such, as 1 B.C. was four years behind A.D. 4, the first leap-year in the

¹ Some will see a striking confirmation of it in the fact that calculating strictly from this date, it appears that the Course of Jehoiarib was also on duty, but just closing its ministration, when Solomon's Temple was burnt on Ab 9, 586 B.C. The coincidence is all the more striking as it is only of recent years that this burning was definitely fixed to 586 instead of Usher's “588.” It requires the assumption that the courses were resumed in Zerubabel's Temple with strict and exact knowledge of what course should have been in ministration, but for the introumission of seventy years.

Christian Era. Or to put it more correctly, they were respectively 44 and 40 years after 45 B.C., the year when the reformed Julian Calendar first operated. The 75 years with 19 intercalary days are 27,394 days.

The cycle of the 24 priestly courses took 24×7 or 168 days; and 163 of these 168-day cycles amount to 27,384 days, or exactly ten days less than the 75 Julian years.

Hence it follows that the Course of Jehoiarib which entered its ministration on the Sabbath, August 3/4, A.D. 70, must also have entered on Sabbath, August 13/14, in the year 6 B.C.

Then as the Course of Abia was the eighth course, it must have entered 7×7 or 49 days later than the first course (1 Chron. xxiv. 10). That is to say, we arrive at the conclusion that the Course of Abia entered its ministration at the Temple on Friday evening, October 1, and, having accomplished its ministration, was succeeded by the next course on the evening of Friday, October 8, 6 B.C.

We have then the Hebrew day running October 8/9, as the first day of the departure of Zacharias from the Temple. Computing six months from this we reach in the Julian Calendar, the date April 8/9 for the Annunciation. Here, however, we have to bear in mind that the "month" familiar to Zacharias, Elizabeth and Mary, was not that of the *Julian*, but of the Hebrew Calendar, in which six months are only 177 days. Coming down, therefore, but 177 days from the date October 8/9, we reach the date April 2/3, 5 B.C., for the Annunciation, by remembering that 5 B.C. was a leap-year.

From the Annunciation we have then to compute nine Hebrew months, which are 266 days, to the Nativity. Adding 266 days to the date April 2/3, 5 B.C., we come to a remarkable result, for we reach exactly this date for the Nativity.

(Sunday-Monday) December 24/25, 5 B.C.

The coincidence is surely too striking to be the result of blind chance. It does not prove the date of our Lord's Birth, but it certainly does point to the method whereby the now received date was computed. I say certainly because it also solves the Eastern Nativity date.

I have obtained my result by attention to the fact that we must use not Julian but Hebrew "months" in the computation. The point seems pretty obvious, though it has been overlooked by such men as Gresswell and Wieseler, who therefore reach conflicting results, and both alike fail to arrive at the traditional date.

Now supposing that a similar mistake had been made by early calculators, the use of the Julian Calendar would bring the fifteen months from October 8/9, 6 B.C., to January 8/9, 4 B.C., which most people might think near enough to the "Eastern" date to account for it.

I am not content with this and offer what I believe to be the true solution. If the computation was made on the Egyptian

Sothic Calendar, the “fifteen months” would not be 443 days as on the Hebrew, or 458 days as on the Julian, but precisely 455 days, or twelve days more than the Hebrew computation. Adding twelve days to December 24/25 is not difficult to those who have memory of “Twelfth Night,” and it brings us to precisely the Eastern date for the Nativity, January 5/6.

I therefore venture to submit that the true explanation of the Nativity dates is that they were computed from the data furnished by the ministrations of the Course of Abia. One computation, in my opinion correctly, proceeded according to the Hebrew Calendar and produced December 24/25 as the Nativity date. Another worked on the Egyptian Calendar, and therefore came to January 5/6. I think we can hardly be wrong in holding that the former calculation was made in Rome, and the latter at Alexandria. Thus originated the Western and Eastern Nativity dates.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST. By J. Gresham Machen, D.D.,
D.Litt. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd. 15s.

The experiences of a reviewer to-day are very varied. The last work dealt with by the writer appears to be from the pen of a Presbyterian. It was certainly nothing if it was not unorthodox, and the author was at pains to show that it was not necessary that we should believe in the Virgin Birth. How far the opinions expressed are his own convictions it is not easy to determine. But if they are, then his treatise shows that men who are virtually Unitarians consider themselves justified in remaining in the ministry of orthodox churches. However, it is a welcome diversion to take up such an elaborate, scholarly treatise as Dr. Machen's which embodies in substance, though not in form, the Thomas Smyth Lectures which were delivered by the author at Columbia Theological Seminary in 1927, while it contains, too, certain special studies which have appeared from time to time in *The Princeton Theological Review*. The result is a careful study of the New Testament narratives and of a considerable body of Theological literature dealing with this important question—indeed we cannot remember having seen, in recent years, any work dealing so fully and frankly with the subject. It is not too much to say that no ministerial library will be complete without this volume, which is furnished with an Index. Dr. Machen, by the way, is Professor of the New Testament in Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, U.S.A. S. R. C.

The Rev. H. Montague Dale, B.D., has written a thoughtful essay on *Worship and Communion* (S.P.C.K., 1s. 6d. and 2s. 6d. net) in which he considers these important aspects of religious life in relation to the present situation and the needs of to-day. The study of psychology has opened many lines of fresh thought in regard to worship, and these are carefully analysed. The place of the Holy Communion is set out clearly, and some of the mistakes concerning the Eucharistic Sacrifice examined and exposed.