

'Messiah the Prince'

by Sir Robert Anderson

Sir Robert Anderson's sermon explores the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts regarding the birth of Christ and their significance in affirming His messianic identity.

Topics: "Messiah Prophecy", "Biblical History"

Description

Sir Robert Anderson emphasizes the importance of treating the writings of the evangelists with the same fairness and scrutiny as secular historians, highlighting the meticulous accuracy and significance of details like the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem during the taxing of Cyrenius. The narrative in Luke's Gospel is not merely a historical account but a crucial element in establishing the fulfillment of prophecies regarding the Messiah. By examining historical and biblical evidence, it is affirmed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the first taxing of Cyrenius, providing a solid foundation for the Christian faith and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Transcript

JUST as we find that in certain circles people who are reputed pious are apt to be regarded with suspicion, so it would seem that any writings which claim Divine authority or sanction inevitably awaken distrust. But if the evangelists could gain the same fair hearing which profane historians command; if their statements were tested upon the same principles on which records of the past are judged by scholars, and evidence is weighed in our courts of justice, it would be accepted as a well-established fact of history that our Savior was born in Bethlehem, at a time when Cyrenius was Governor of Syria, and Herod was king in Jerusalem. The narrative of the first two chapters of St. Luke is not like an ordinary page of history which carries with it no pledge of accuracy save that which the general credit of the writer may afford. The evangelist is treating of facts of which he had "perfect understanding from the very first;" (Luke 1:3) in which, moreover, his personal interest was intense, and in respect of which a single glaring error would have prejudiced not only the value of his book, but the success of that cause to which his life was devoted, and with which his hopes of eternal happiness were identified.

The matter has been treated as though this reference to Cyrenius were but an incidental allusion, in respect of which an error would be of no importance; whereas, in fact, it would be absolutely vital. That the true Messiah must be born in Bethlehem was asserted by the Jew and conceded by the Christian: that the Nazarene was born in Bethlehem the Jew persistently denied. If even today he could disprove that fact, he would justify his unbelief; for if the Christ we worship was not by right of birth the heir to David's throne, He

is not the Christ of prophecy. Christians soon forgot this when they had no longer to maintain their faith against the unbroken front of Judaism, but only to commend it to a heathen world. But it was not forgotten by the immediate successors of the apostles. Therefore it was that in writing to the Jews, Justin Martyr asserted with such emphasis that Christ was born during the taxing of Cyrenius, appealing to the lists of that census as to documents then extant and available for reference, to prove that though Joseph and Mary lived at Nazareth, they went up to Bethlehem to be enrolled, and that thus it came to pass the Child was born in the royal city, and not in the despised Galilean village.[1]

1. Bethlehem, "in which Jesus Christ was born, as you may also learn from the lists of the taxing which was made in the time of Cyrenius, the first Governor of yours in Judea." -- Apol., 1., § 34.

"We assert Christ to have been born a hundred and fifty years ago, under Cyrenius." -- Ibid., § 46.

"But when there was an enrollment in Judea, which was then made first under Cyrenius, he went up from Nazareth, where he lived, to Bethlehem, of which place he was, to be enrolled," etc. -- Dial. Trypho, § 78.

And these facts of the pedigree and birth of the Nazarene afforded almost the only ground upon which issue could be joined, where one side maintained, and the other side denied, that His Divine character and mission were established by transcendental proofs. None could question that His acts were more than human, but blindness and hate could ascribe them to Satanic power; and the sublime utterances which in every succeeding age have commanded the admiration of millions, even of those who have refused to them the deeper homage of their faith, had no charm for men thus prejudiced. But these statements about the taxing which brought the Virgin Mother up to Bethlehem, dealt with plain facts which required no moral fitness to appreciate them. That in such a matter a writer like St. Luke could be in error is utterly improbable, but that the error would remain unchallenged is absolutely incredible; and we find Justin Martyr, writing nearly a hundred years after the evangelist, appealing to the fact as one which was unquestionable. It may, therefore, be accepted as one of the most certain of the really certain things of history, that the first taxing of Cyrenius was made before the death of Herod, and that while it was proceeding Christ was born in Bethlehem.

Not many years ago this statement would have been received either with ridicule or indignation. The evangelist's mention of Cyrenius appeared to be a hopeless anachronism; as, according to undoubted history, the period of his governorship and the date of his "taxing" were nine or ten years later than the nativity. Gloated over by Strauss and others of his tribe, and dismissed by writers unnumbered either as an enigma or an error, the passage has in recent years been vindicated and explained by the labors of Dr. Zumpt of Berlin.

By a strange chance there is a break in the history of this period, for the seven or eight years beginning B.C. 4.[2] The list of the governors of Syria, therefore, fails us, and for the same interval P. Sulpicius Quirinus, the Cyrenius of the Greeks, disappears from history. But by a series of separate investigations and arguments, all of them independent of Scripture, Dr. Zumpt has established that Quirinus was twice governor of the province, and that his first term of office dated from the latter part of B.C. 4, when he succeeded Quinctilius Varus. The unanimity with which this conclusion has been accepted renders it unnecessary to discuss the matter here. But one remark respecting it may not be out of place. The grounds of Dr. Zumpt's conclusions may be aptly described as a chain of circumstantial evidence, and his critics are agreed that the result is reasonably certain.[3] To make that certainty absolute, nothing is wanting but the positive testimony of some historian of repute. If, for example, one of the lost fragments of

the history of Dion Cassius were brought to light, containing the mention of Quirinus as governing the province during the last months of Herod's reign, the fact would be deemed as certain as that Augustus was emperor of Rome. A Christian writer may be pardoned if he attaches equal weight to the testimony of St. Luke. It will, therefore, be here assumed as absolutely certain that the birth of Christ took place at some date not earlier than the autumn of B.C. 4.[4]

2. Josephus here leaves a gap in his narrative; and through the loss of MSS., the history of Dion Cassius, the other authority for this period, is not available to supply the omission.

3. Dr. Zumpt's labors in this matter were first made public in a Latin treatise which appeared in 1854. More recently he has published them in his *Das Geburtsjahr Christi* (Leipzig, 1869). The English reader will find a summary of his arguments in Dean Alford's *Greek Test.* (Note on Luke 2:1), and in his article, on Cyrenius in *Smith's Bible Dict.*; he describes them as "very striking and satisfactory." Dr. Farrar remarks, "Zumpt has, with incredible industry and research, all but established in this matter the accuracy of St. Luke, by proving the extreme probability that Quirinus was twice governor of Syria" (*Life of Christ*, vol. 1. p. 7, note). See also an article in the *Quarterly Review* for April 1871, which describes Zumpt's conclusions as "very nearly certain," "all but certain." The question is discussed also in Wieseler's *Chron. Syn.* (Venables's trans.) In his *Roman history*, Mr. Merivale adopts these results unreservedly. He says (vol. 4., p. 457), "A remarkable light has been thrown upon the point by the demonstration, as it seems to be, of Augustus Zumpt in his second volume of *Commentationes Epigraphicae*, that Quirinus (the Cyrenius of St. Luke 2.) was first governor of Syria from the close of A. U. 750 (B. C. 4), to A. U. 753 (B. C. 1)."

4. The birth of our Lord is placed in B. C. 1, by Pearson and Hug; B. C. 2, by Scaliger; B. C. 3, by Baronius, Calvisius, Suskind, and Paulus; B. C. 4, by Lamy, Bengel, Anger, Wieseler, and Greswell; B. C. 5, by Ussher and Petavius; B. C. 7, by Ideler and Sanclementi (*Smith's Bible Dict.*, "Jesus Christ," p. 1075). It should be added that Zumpt's date for the nativity is fixed on independent grounds in B. C. 7. Following Ideler, he concludes that the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred in that year, was the "Star" which led the Magi to Palestine.

The dictum of our English chronologer, than whom none more eminent or trustworthy can be appealed to, is a sufficient guarantee that this conclusion is consistent with everything that erudition can bring to bear upon the point. Fynes Clinton sums up his discussion of the matter thus. "The nativity was not more than about eighteen months before the death of Herod, nor less than five or six. The death of Herod was either in the spring of B.C. 4, or the spring of B.C. 3. The earliest possible date then for the nativity is the autumn of B.C. 6 (U. C. 748), eighteen months before the death of Herod in B.C. 4. The latest will be the of B.C. 4 (U. C. 750), about six months before his death, assumed to be in spring B.C. 3." [5] This opinion has weight, not only because of the writer's eminence as a chronologist, but also because his own view as to the actual date of the birth of Christ would have led him to narrow still more the limits within which it must have occurred, if his sense of fairness had permitted him to do so. Moreover, Clinton wrote in ignorance of what Zumpt has since brought to light respecting the census of Quirinus. The introduction of this new element into the consideration of the question, enables us with absolute confidence, adopting Clinton's dictum, to assign the death of Herod to the month Adar of B.C. 3, and the nativity to the autumn of B.C. 4.

5. *Fasti Romani*, A. D. 29.

That the least uncertainty should prevail respecting the time of an event of such transcendent interest to mankind is a fact of strange significance. But whatever doubt there may be as to the birth-date of the Son

of God, it is due to no omission in the sacred page if equal doubt be felt as to the epoch of His ministry on earth. There is not in the whole of Scripture a more definite chronological statement than that contained in the opening verses of the third chapter of St. Luke. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness."

Now the date of Tiberius Caesar's reign is known with absolute accuracy; and his fifteenth year, reckoned from his accession, began on the 19th August, A.D. 28. And further, it is also known that during that year, so reckoned, each of the personages named in the passage, actually held the position there assigned to him. Here then, it might be supposed, no difficulty or question could arise. But the evangelist goes on to speak of the beginning of the ministry of the Lord Himself, and he mentions that "He was about thirty years of age when He began." [6] This statement, taken in connection with the date commonly assigned to the nativity, has been supposed to require that "the fifteenth year of Tiberius" shall be understood as referring, not to the epoch of his reign, but to an earlier date, when history testifies that certain powers were conferred on him during the two last years of Augustus. All such hypotheses, however, "are open to one overwhelming objection, viz., that the reign of Tiberius, as beginning from 19th August, A.D. 14, was as well known a date in the time of Luke, as the reign of Queen Victoria is in our own day; and no single case has ever been, or can be, produced, in which the years of Tiberius were reckoned in any other manner." [7]

6. Luke 3:23. Such is the right rendering of the verse. The Revised Version renders it: "And Jesus Himself, when He began to teach, was about thirty years of age."

7. Lewin, *Fasti Sacri*, p. 53. Diss., chap. 6: The joint-principate theory of the reign of Tiberius, elaborately argued for by Greswell, is essential with writers like him, who assign the crucifixion to A. D. 29 or 30. Sanclementi, indeed, finding "that nowhere in histories, or on monuments, or coins, is a vestige to be found of any such mode of reckoning the years of this emperor," disposes of the difficulty by taking the date in Luke 3:1 to refer, not to John the Baptist's ministry, but to Christ's death. Browne adopts this in a modified form, recognizing that the hypothesis above referred to "falls under fatal objections." He remarks that "it is improbable to the last degree" that Luke, who wrote specially for a Roman officer, and generally for Gentiles, would have so expressed himself as to be certainly misunderstood by them. Therefore, though the statement of the evangelist clashes with his conclusion as to the date of the Passion, he owns his obligation to accept it. See *Ordo Saec.*, §§ 71 and 95.

Nor is there any inconsistency whatever between these statements of St. Luke and the date of the nativity (as fixed by the evangelist himself), under Cyrenius, in the autumn of B.C. 4; for the Lord's ministry, dating from the autumn of A.D. 28, may in fact have begun before His thirty-first year expired, and cannot have been later than a few months beyond it. The expression "about thirty years implies some such margin." [8] As therefore it is wholly unnecessary, it becomes wholly unjustifiable, to put a forced and special meaning on the evangelist's words; and by the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar he must have intended what all the world would assume he meant, namely, the year beginning 19th August, A.D. 28. And thus, passing out of the region of argument and controversy, we reach at last a well-ascertained date of vital importance in this inquiry.

8. As Dean Alford puts it (*Gr. Test.*, in loco): "This *hosei tpiakonta* admits of considerable latitude, but only in one direction, viz., over thirty years."

The first Passover of the Lord's public ministry on earth is thus definitely fixed by the Gospel narrative itself, as in Nisan A.D. 29. And we are thus enabled to fix 32 A.D. as the year of the crucifixion.[9]

9. "It seems to me absolutely certain that our Lord's ministry lasted for some period above three years" (Pusey, Daniel, p. 176, and see p. 177, note 7). This opinion is now held so universally, that it is no longer necessary to set forth in detail the grounds on which it rests; indeed, recent writers generally assume without proof that the ministry included four Passovers. The most satisfactory discussion of the question which I know of is in Hengstenberg's *Christology* (Arnold's trans., §§ 755-765). St. John mentions expressly three Passovers at which the Lord was present; and if the feast of John 5:1 be a Passover, the question is at an end. It is now generally admitted that that feast was either Purim or Passover, and Hengstenberg's proofs in favor of the latter are overwhelming. The feast of Purim had no Divine sanction. It was instituted by the decree of Esther, Queen of Persia, in the 13th year of Xerxes (B. C. 473), and it was rather a social and political than a religious feast, the service in the synagogue being quite secondary to the excessive eating and drinking which marked the day. It is doubtful whether our Lord would have observed such a feast at all; but that, contrary to the usual practice, He would have specially gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate it, is altogether incredible.

This is opposed, no doubt, to the traditions embodied in the spurious *Acta Pilati* so often quoted in this controversy, and in the writings of certain of the fathers, by whom the fifteenth year of Tiberius was held to be itself the date of the death of Christ; "by some, because they confounded the date of the baptism with the date of the Passion; by others, because they supposed both to have happened in one year; by others, because they transcribed from their predecessors without examination." [10]

10. Clinton's *Fasti Rom.*, A. D. 29.

An imposing array of names can be cited in support of any year from A.D. 29 to A.D. 33; but such testimony is of force only so long as no better can be found. Just as a seemingly perfect chain of circumstantial evidence crumbles before the testimony of a single witness of undoubted veracity and worth, and the united voice of half a county will not support a prescriptive right, if it be opposed to a single sheet of parchment, so the cumulative traditions of the Church, even if they were as definite and clear as in fact they are contradictory and vague, would not outweigh the proofs to which appeal has here been made.

One point more, however, claims attention. Numerous writers, some of them eminent, have discussed this question as though nothing more were needed in fixing the date of the Passion than to find a year, within certain limits, in which the paschal moon was full upon a Friday. But this betrays strange forgetfulness of the intricacies of the problem. True it is that if the system by which today the Jewish year is settled had been in force eighteen centuries ago, the whole controversy might turn upon the week date of the Passover in a given year; but on account of our ignorance of the embolismal system then in use, no weight whatever can be attached to it.[11] While the Jewish year was the old lunisolar year of 360 days, it is not improbable they adjusted it, as for centuries they had probably been accustomed to do in Egypt, by adding annually the "complimentary days" of which Herodotus speaks.[12] But it is not to be supposed that when they adopted the present form of year, they continued to correct the calendar in so primitive a manner. Their use of the metonic cycle for this purpose is comparatively modern.[13] And it is probable that with the lunar year they obtained also under the Seleucidae the old eight years' cycle for its adjustment. The fact that this cycle was in use among the early Christians for their paschal calculations,[14] raises a presumption that it was borrowed from the Jews; but we have no certain

knowledge upon the subject.

11. "The month began at the phases of the moon...and this happens, according to Newton, when the moon is eighteen hours old. Therefore the fourteenth Nisan might commence when the moon was 13d. 18h. old, and wanted 1d. 0h. 22m. to the full. [The age of the moon at the full will be 14d. 18h. 22M.] But sometimes the phases was delayed till the moon was 1d. 17h. old; and then if the first Nisan were deferred till the phases, the fourteenth would begin only 1h. 22m. before the full. This precision, however, in adjusting the month to the moon did not exist in practice. The Jews, like other nations who adopted a lunar year, and supplied the defect by an intercalary month, failed in obtaining complete accuracy. We know not what their method of calculation was at the time of the Christian era" (Fasti Rom., vol. 2., p. 240); A. D. 30 is the only year between 28 and 33 in which the phases of the full moon was on a Friday. In A. D. 29 the full moon was on Saturday, and the phases on Monday. (See Wurm's Table, in Wiesler's Chron. Syn., Venables's trans., p. 407).

12. Herod. 2:4.

13. It was about A. D. 360 that the Jews adopted the metonic cycle of nineteen years for the adjustment of their calendar. Before that time they used a cycle of eighty-four years, which was evidently the calippic period of seventy-six years with a Greek octaeteris added. This is said by certain writers to have been in use at the time of our Lord, but the statement is very doubtful. It appears to rest on the testimony of the later Rabbins. Julius Africanus, on the other hand, states in his Chronography that "the Jews insert three intercalary months every eight years." For a description of the modern Jewish calendar see Encyc. Brit. (9th ed., vol. 5., p. 714).

14. Browne, Ordo saec., § 424

Indeed, the only thing reasonably certain upon the matter is that the Passover did not fall upon the days assigned to it by writers whose calculations respecting it are made with strict astronomical accuracy,[15] for the Mishna affords the clearest proof that the beginning of the month was not determined by the true new moon, but by the first appearance of her disc; and though in a climate like that of Palestine this would seldom be delayed by causes which would operate in murkier latitudes, it doubtless sometimes happened "that neither sun nor stars for many days appeared." [16] These considerations justify the statement that in any year whatever the 15th Nisan may have fallen on a Friday. [17]

15. See ex. gr. Browne Ordo saec., § 64. He avers that "if in a given year the paschal moon was at the full at any instant between sunset of a Thursday and sunset of a Friday, the day included between the two sunsets was the 15th Nisan; "and on this ground he maintains that A. D. 29 is the only possible date of the crucifixion. As his own table shows, however, no possible year (i. e., no year between 28 and 33) satisfies this requirement; for the paschal full moon in A. D. 29 was on Saturday the 16th April, not on Friday the 18th March. This view is maintained also by Ferguson and others. It may be accounted for, perhaps, by the fact that till recent years the Mishna was not translated into English.

16. Acts 27:20. Treatise Rosh Hashanah of the Mishna deals with the mode in which, in the days of the "second temple," the feast of the new moon was regulated. The evidence of two competent witnesses was required by the Sanhedrin to the fact that they had seen the moon, and the numerous rules laid down for the journey and examination of these witnesses prove that not unfrequently they came from a distance. Indeed, the case of their being "a day and a night on the road" is provided for (ch. i., § 9). The proclamation by the Sanhedrin, therefore, may have been sometimes delayed till a day or even two after

the phases, and sometimes the phases was delayed till the moon was 1d. 17h. old [Clinton, Fasti Rom., vol. 2., p. 240]; so that the 1st Nisan may have fallen several days later than the true new moon. Possibly, moreover, it may have been still further delayed by the operation of rules such as those of the modern Jewish calendar for preventing certain festivals from falling on incompatible days. It appears from the Mishna ("Pesachim") that the present rules for this purpose were not in force; but yet there may have been similar rules in operation.

17. See Fasli Rom., vol. 2., p. 240, as to the impossibility of determining in what years the Passover fell on Friday.

For example, in A.D. 32, the date of the true new moon, by which the Passover was regulated, was the night (10h 57m) of the 29th March. The ostensible date of the 1st Nisan, therefore, according to the phases, was the 31st March. It may have been delayed, however, till the 1st April; and in that case the 15th Nisan should apparently have fallen on Tuesday the 15th April. But the calendar may have been further disturbed by intercalation. According to the scheme of the eight years' cycle, the embolismal month was inserted in the third, sixth, and eighth years, and an examination of the calendars from A.D. 22 to A.D. 45 will show that A.D. 32 was the third year of such a cycle. As, therefore, the difference between the solar year and the lunar is 11 days, it would amount in three years to $33 \frac{3}{4}$ days, and the intercalation of a thirteenth month (Ve-adar) of thirty days would leave an epact still remaining of $3 \frac{3}{4}$ days; and the "ecclesiastical moon" being that much before the real moon, the feast day would have fallen on the Friday (11th April), exactly as the narrative of the Gospels requires.[18]

18. The following is the scheme of the octaeteris: "The solar year has a length of $365 \frac{1}{4}$ days; 12 lunar months make 354 days. The difference, which is called the epact or epagomene, is $11 \frac{1}{4}$ days. This is the epact of the first year. Hence the epact of the second year = $22 \frac{1}{2}$ days; of the third, $33 \frac{3}{4}$. These $33 \frac{3}{4}$ days make one lunar month of 30 days, which is added to the third lunar year as an intercalary or thirteenth month (embolismos), and a remainder or epact of $3 \frac{3}{4}$ days. Hence the epact of the fourth year = $11 \frac{1}{4} + 3 \frac{3}{4}$ = 15 days; that of the fifth year = $26 \frac{1}{4}$; of the sixth, $37 \frac{1}{2}$, which gives a second embolism of 30 days with an epact of $7 \frac{1}{2}$. The epact, therefore, of the seventh year is $18 \frac{3}{4}$, and of the eighth = $18 \frac{3}{4} + 11 \frac{1}{4}$ = just 30, which is the third embolism with no epact remaining." -- BROWNE, Ordo Saec., § 424. The days of the Paschal full moon in the years A. D. 22-37 were as follows; the embolismal years, according to the octaeteris, being marked "E":

A. D

22 ... 5th April

23 ... 25th March

24 ... 12th April

25 ... 1st April

26 ... 21st March

27E ... 9th April

28 ... 29th March

29E ... 17th April

30 ... 6th April

31 ... 27th March

32E ... 14th April

33 ... 3rd April

34 ... 23rd March

35E ... 11th April

36 ... 30th March

37E ... 18th April

This, moreover, would explain what, notwithstanding all the poetry indulged in about the groves and grottoes of Gethsemane, remains still a difficulty. Judas needed neither torch nor lantern to enable him to track his Master through the darkest shades and recesses of the garden, nor was it, seemingly, until he had fulfilled his base and guilty mission that the crowd pressed in to seize their victim. And no traitor need have been suborned by the Sanhedrin to betray to them at midnight the object of their hate, were it not that they dared not take Him save by stealth.[19] Every torch and lamp increased the risk of rousing the sleeping millions around them, for that night all Judah was gathered to the capital to keep the Paschal feast.[20] If, then, the full moon were high above Jerusalem, no other light were needed to speed them on their guilty errand; but if, on the other hand, the Paschal moon were only ten or eleven days old upon that Thursday night, she would certainly have been low on the horizon, if she had not actually set, before they ventured forth. These suggestions are not made to confirm the proof already offered of the year date of the death of Christ, but merely to show how easy it is to answer objections which at first sight might seem fatal.

19. Luke 22: 2-6

20. Josephus testifies that an "innumerable multitude" came together for the feast (Ant., 17., 9, § 3); and he computes that at a Passover before the siege of Jerusalem upwards of 2, 700, 200 persons actually partook of the Paschal Supper, besides the foreigners present in the city (Wars, 6., 9, § 3).

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