

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B. A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,

VICAR OF STRADBROOKE, SUFFOLK;

Author of "Home Truths," etc.

ST. LUKE. VOL. I.

LONDON:

WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET.
CAVENDISH SQUARE

IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

MDCCCLVIII.

LUKE II. 1-7

<p>1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.</p> <p>2 (<i>And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.</i>)</p> <p>3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.</p> <p>4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the <i>city</i> of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and line-</p>	<p>age of David:)</p> <p>5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.</p> <p>6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.</p> <p>7 And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.</p>
--	---

WE have, in these verses, the story of a birth,—the birth of the incarnate Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Every birth of a living child is a marvellous event. It brings into being a soul that will never die. But never since the world began was a birth so marvellous as the birth of Christ. In itself it was a miracle:—"God was manifest in the flesh." (1 Tim. iii. 16.) The blessings it brought into the world were unspeakable:—it opened to man the door of everlasting life.

In reading these verses, let us first notice *the times when Christ was born*. It was in the days when Augustus, the first Roman emperor, made "a decree that all the world should be taxed."

The wisdom of God appears in this simple fact. The sceptre was practically departing from Judah. (Gen. xlix. 10.) The Jews were coming under the dominion and taxation of a foreign power. Strangers were beginning to rule over them. They had no longer a really independent government of their own. The "due time" had come for the promised Messiah to appear. Augustus taxes "the world," and at once Christ is born.

It was a time peculiarly suitable for the introduction of Christ's Gospel. The whole civilized earth was at length governed by one master. (Dan. ii. 40.) There was nothing to prevent the preacher of a new faith going from city to city, and country to country. The princes and priests of the heathen world had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Egypt, and Assyria, and Babylon, and Persia, and Greece, and Rome, had all successively proved that "the world by wisdom knew not God." (1 Cor. i. 21.) Notwithstanding their mighty conquerors, and poets, and historians, and architects, and philosophers, the kingdoms of the world were full of dark idolatry. It was indeed "due time" for God to interpose from heaven, and send down an almighty Saviour. It was "due time" for Christ to be born. (Rom. v. 6.)

Let us ever rest our souls on the thought, that times are in God's hand. (Psalm xxxi. 15.) He knows the best season for sending help to His church, and new light to the world. Let us beware of giving way to over anxiety about the course of events around us, as if we knew better than the King of

kings what time relief should come. “Cease, Philip, to try to govern the world,” was a frequent saying of Luther to an anxious friend. It was a saying full of wisdom.

Let us notice, secondly, *the place where Christ was born*. It was not at Nazareth of Galilee, where His mother, the Virgin Mary, lived. The prophet Micah had foretold that the event was to take place at Bethlehem. (Micah v. 2.) And so it came to pass. At Bethlehem Christ was born.

The overruling providence of God appears in this simple fact. He orders all things in heaven and earth. He turns the hearts of kings whithersoever He will. He overruled the time when Augustus decreed the taxing. He directed the enforcement of the decree in such a way, that Mary must needs be at Bethlehem when “the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” Little did the haughty Roman emperor, and his officer Cyrenius, think that they were only instruments in the hand of the God of Israel, and were only carrying out the eternal purposes of the King of kings. Little did they think that they were helping to lay the foundation of a kingdom, before which the empires of this world would all go down one day, and Roman idolatry pass away. The words of Isaiah, upon a like occasion, should be remembered, “He meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so.” (Isaiah x. 7.)

The heart of a believer should take comfort in the recollection of God’s providential government of the world. A true Christian should never be greatly moved or disquieted by the conduct of the rulers of the earth. He should see with the eye of faith a hand overruling all that they do to the praise and glory of God. He should regard every king and potentate,—an Augustus, a Cyrenius, a Darius, a Cyrus, a Sennacherib,—as a creature who, with all his power, can do nothing but what God allows, and nothing which is not carrying out God’s will. And when the rulers of this world “set themselves against the Lord,” he should take comfort in the words of Solomon, “There be higher than they.” (Eccles. v. 8.)

Let us notice, lastly, *the manner in which Christ was born*. He was not born under the roof of His mother’s house, but in a strange place, and at an “inn.” When born, He was not laid in a carefully prepared cradle. He was “laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn.”

We see here the grace and condescension of Christ. Had He come to save mankind with royal majesty, surrounded by His Father’s angels, it would have been an act of undeserved mercy. Had He chosen to dwell in a palace, with power and great authority, we should have had reason enough to wonder. But to become poor as the very poorest of mankind, and lowly as the very lowliest,—this is a love that passeth knowledge. It is unspeakable and unsearchable. Never let us forget that through this humiliation Jesus has purchased for us a title to glory. Through His life of suffering, as well as His

death, He has obtained eternal redemption for us. All through His life He was poor for our sakes, from the hour of His birth to the hour of His death. And through His poverty we are made rich. (2 Cor. viii. 9.)

Let us beware of despising the poor, because of their poverty. Their condition is one which the Son of God has sanctified and honoured, by taking it voluntarily on Himself. God is no respecter of persons. He looks at the hearts of men, and not at their incomes. Let us never be ashamed of the cross of poverty, if God thinks fit to lay it upon us. To be godless and covetous is disgraceful, but it is no disgrace to be poor. A mean dwelling place, and coarse food, and a hard bed, are not pleasing to flesh and blood. But they are the portion which the Lord Jesus Himself willingly accepted from the day of His entrance into the world. Wealth ruins far more souls than poverty. When the love of money begins to creep over us, let us think of the manger at Bethlehem, and of Him who was laid in it. Such thoughts may deliver us from much harm.

NOTES. LUXE II. 1-7.

- 1.—[*Cæsar Augustus.*] This is that Octavius who, after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, took the government of the Roman Empire into his own hands, and was, properly speaking, the first Cæsar, or Roman Emperor.

[*The world*] Some think that the Greek word so translated is specially applied in the New Testament to Judæa and the countries surrounding it. There is no sufficient proof of this. It cannot be taken in this limited sense in Acts xvii. 31, and Rev. xii. 9, and need not be so taken here.

[*Taxed.*] The word so translated might be equally well rendered “enrolled.” It is so in the margin. In the only other place in the New Testament, where it is used, it is translated “written.” (Heb. xii. 23.)

- 2.—[*This taxing was first made, etc.*] There is a well-known difficulty connected with this verse, which calls for a few remarks. According to uninspired writers, Cyrenius or Quirinius, as he is called by Latin authors, was not governor of Syria, until eight or ten years after Christ was born. How can this be reconciled with St. Luke’s statement? The following explanations have been given.

Some say that the name of Cyrenius has got into the text by mistake, and that we ought to read instead of it, either Quintilius or Saturninus, who were the two governors preceding Cyrenius. But it is a most unsatisfactory proceeding to alter texts, in order to meet difficulties. In the present case there is no warrant for the alteration.

Some say that the explanation is to be found in the word translated, “was made,” and that it ought to be rendered, “took effect.” The sense would then be, that “this enrolling, or taxing, though ordered now, only first *took effect* when Cyrenius was governor.”

Some say that the word translated, “first,” should have been translated, “prior to,” or “before.” The sense would then be, “this taxing was *before* that made under Cyrenius.” For such a translation there is authority in John i. 15 and 30.

Some say that there were two taxings, in both of which Cyrenius was officially concerned, though not exactly in the same capacity on both occasions,—and that St. Luke was

aware of this, and expressly inserts the word “first,” to show which of the two taxings he meant. In favour of this view, it must be remembered that St. Luke was infinitely more likely to be correct about a matter of fact, than any uninspired historians, and that we have no right to assume, where he differs from them, that they are correct, and he incorrect. Moreover, it is a striking fact, that Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, distinctly asserts three times that Christ was born under Cyrenius. Wordsworth says that, “the researches of Zumpt have enhanced the probability that Quirinius, who was governor of Cilicia, was also governor of Syria at the time of the nativity.”

- 3.—[*All went to be taxed.*] Quesnel remarks, “Augustus imagines that he is busied in advancing the glory of his name, and the lustre of his reign. And yet his orders, by means of others more powerful and absolute than his, become subservient to the accomplishment of prophecies, of which he is altogether ignorant,—to the birth of a king whom he will never know,—and to the establishment of a monarchy, which will subject his and all others to itself. This is what happens in all ages, and men take no notice of it.”

On this taxing being a fulfilment of Genesis xlix. 10, Watson observes, “Nothing can be more strikingly in proof that the sceptre was departing from Judah, and the government of Herod was rather nominal than real. Julian the apostate objected to Christ’s claim, that He was by virtue of this very enrolment born one of Caesar’s subjects, not knowing how truly this illustrated the ancient prophecy of Jacob, that his birth and the departing of the sceptre from Judah should be coincident.”

- 4.—[*Lineage.*] The word so translated is rendered in the only other places where it is used, “kindred,” or “family.” (Acts iii. 25. Ephes. iii. 15.)

- 7.—[*Her first-born Son.*] The words so translated are more emphatic in the Greek language, They would be rendered more literally, “her Son, the first-born one.”

[*Wrapped Him in swaddling clothes.*] On this expression, the Fathers, and most Romish writers, have built the idea that our Lord’s birth was a childbirth without labour or pain. Such an idea is, to say the least, an unprofitable conjecture. There is nothing mentioned here which a mother, in Mary’s position, in an Eastern climate, might not have done for herself without aid. There is no need of imagining and inventing miraculous circumstances in our Lord’s incarnation, beside those which are fully revealed.

[*A manger.*] The word so translated is rendered, “a stall,” in the only other place where it is used in the New Testament. (Luke xii. 15.) It admits of considerable doubt whether the common idea that our Lord was laid in the trough out of which cattle feed, is really correct. There is no certain proof that the expression means anything more than that he was “laid in the stable, because there was no room in the house.” Some think that this manger was one of those hair cloths, out of which horses, in those countries, are fed. There is strong reason for supposing that the whole transaction took place in a cave, such as many which are to be found in Judæa.

[*No room in the inn.*] One fact should be carefully noted here, which is often entirely overlooked. In the providence of God the birth of Christ was attended with as much publicity as a birth could possibly be attended with. It took place at an inn, and an inn crowded with strangers from all parts. Imposture was thus rendered impossible. The event was patent to many witnesses, and could never be denied. The Son of God was really incarnate, and literally and really born of a woman, like any of ourselves. Had the birth taken place quietly at Nazareth, or in some private house at Bethlehem, in thirty years time the whole event would probably have been denied.