

Alleged Errors in Luke

Dr. Norman Geisler

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Luke has been charged by the critics with containing significant historical inaccuracies in the nativity narrative of chapter 2.

The Worldwide Census. Luke 2:1-3 refers to a worldwide census under Caesar Augustus when Quirinius was governor of Syria. However, according to the annals of ancient history, no such census took place. In fact, Quirinius did not become governor in Syria until A.D. 6. It was commonly held by critics that Luke erred in his assertion about a registration under Caesar Augustus, and that the census actually took place in A.D. 6 or 7 (which is mentioned by Luke in Gamaliel's speech recorded in Acts 5:37).

A Possible Retranslation. F. F. Bruce offers another possibility. The Greek of Luke 2:2 can be translated: "This enrollment (census) was before that made when Quirinius was governor of Syria." In this case, the Greek word translated "first" (*protos*) is translated as a comparative, "before." Because of the construction of the sentence, this is not an unlikely reading. In this case there is no problem, since that census of A.D. 6 is well known to historians.

Recent Archaeological Support. The lack of any extrabiblical support led some to claim this an error. However, with recent scholarship, it is now widely admitted that there was in fact an earlier registration, as Luke records.

William Ramsay discovered several inscriptions that indicated that Quirinius was governor of Syria on two occasions, the first time several years prior to A.D. 6. According to the very papers that recorded the censuses, (see Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?*) there was in fact a census between 10 and 5 B.C. Periodic registrations took place every fourteen years. Because of this regular pattern of census taking, any such action was regarded as the general policy of Augustus, even though a local census may have been instigated by a local governor. Therefore, Luke recognizes the census as stemming from the decree of Augustus.

Since the people of a subjugated land were compelled to take an oath of allegiance to the Emperor, it was not unusual for the Emperor to require an imperial census as an expression of this allegiance and a means of enlisting men for military service, or, as was probably true in this case, in preparation to levy taxes. Because of the strained relations between Herod and Augustus in the later years of Herod's reign, as the Jewish historian Josephus reports, it is understandable that Augustus would begin to treat Herod's domain as a subject land, and consequently would impose such a census in order to maintain control of Herod and the people.

Third, a census was a massive project which probably took several years to complete. Such a census for the purpose of taxation begun in Gaul between 109 B.C. took 40 years to complete. Likely the decree to begin the census, in 8 or 7 B.C., may not have begun in Palestine until sometime later. Problems of organization and preparation may have delayed the actual census until 5 B.C. or even later.

Fourth, it was not an unusual requirement that people return to the place of their origin, or to the place where they owned property. A decree of C. Vibius Maximus in A.D. 104

required all those absent from their home towns to return for a census. Jews were quite used to travel, making annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

There is simply no reason to suspect Luke's statement regarding the census. Luke's account fits the regular pattern of census taking, and its date would not be unreasonable. This may have been simply a local census taken as a result of the general policy of Augustus. Luke simply provides a reliable historical record of an event not otherwise recorded. Luke has proven himself an amazingly reliable historian (see Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*). There is no reason to doubt him here.

Quirinius' Terms as Governor. Given Luke's statement that the census decreed by Augustus was the first one taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria, the fact that Quirinius became governor of Syria long after the death of Herod, in about 6 A.D., sounds like an error in the Gospel.

As noted, there is an alternate way to translate this verse which resolves the problem. Further, there is now evidence that Quirinius was governor of Syria on an earlier occasion that would fit with the time of Christ's birth.

Quintilius Varus was governor of Syria from about 7 to about 4 B.C. Varus was not a trustworthy leader, a fact demonstrated in A.D. 9 when he lost three legions of soldiers in the Teutoburger forest in Germany. Quirinius, on the other hand, was a noted military leader who squelched the rebellion of the Homonadensians in Asia Minor. When it came time to begin the census, in about 8 or 7 B.C., Augustus entrusted Quirinius with the delicate problem in the volatile area of Palestine, effectively superseding Varus by appointing Quirinius to a place of special authority in this matter.

Quirinius was probably governor of Syria on two separate occasions, once while prosecuting the military action against the Homonadensians between 12 and 2 B.C., and later, beginning about A.D. 6. A Latin inscription discovered in 1764 has been interpreted to the effect that Quirinius was governor of Syria on two occasions.

Gary Habermas summarizes the situation well:

(1) A taxation-census was a fairly common procedure in the Roman Empire and it did occur in Judea, in particular. (2) Persons were required to return to their home city in order to fulfill the requirements of the process. (3) These procedures were apparently employed during the reign of Augustus (37 B.C.-14 A.D.), placing it well within the general time frame of Jesus' birth. (4) The date of the specific taxation recounted by Luke could very possibly have been 6-5 B.C., which would also be of service in attempting to find a more exact date for Jesus' birth. [Verdict of History, 153]

Conclusion. There are three reasons to believe Luke is accurate in his account of Jesus' birth. First, there is the general rule of "innocent until proven guilty." A document from antiquity in proper custody that purports to be giving an accurate account (cf. Luke 1:1-4) should be accepted as authentic until it is proven not to be. This is known as the *ancient document rule*. This rule is used in law courts to establish authenticity of old documents.

Second, there are, as noted, plausible explanations that harmonize the record with historical evidence.

Third, Luke has proven himself to be a reliable historian even in the details. William Ramsay spent twenty years of research in the area Luke wrote about. His conclusion was that in references to thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands Luke made no mistakes! That is a record to be envied by historians of any era.

Sources

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