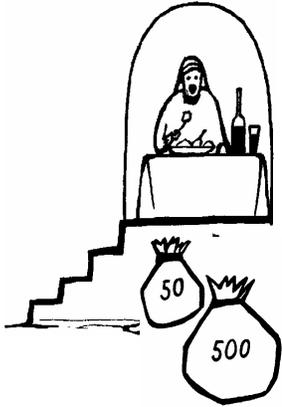


## CAN WE REALLY BELIEVE IN –

### 2: THE CENSUS OF LUKE 2?



We probably all recognise the familiar words of Luke's Gospel: "...it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...when Quirinius was governor of Syria" And it is typical of Luke that he places such a census in an historical context (Lk.2v1-5).

It therefore becomes one of the biggest challenges to the reliability of his birth account because no evidence exists that any single, universal Empire-wide census was ever taken during the time of Augustus.

Another apparent difficulty is that although Quirinius was governor of Syria (and thus of Judea) and *did* conduct a census, he was not appointed until AD 6. Jesus on the other hand, was born some time before the death of Herod the Great, who died in Jericho in March-April of 4 BC.

The third obstacle is that a Roman census did not require people to travel back to their ancestral homes in order to register, yet this is precisely what we are told Joseph had to do.

Yet Luke is adamant that his Gospel is an authoritative account based on eye-witness interviews (Lk.1v1-4). So what are we to make of this apparent contradiction which has moved some people to dismiss his entire account as being untrue?

First of all the wording of Lk.2v1 is actually very general and doesn't claim that the Emperor Augustus ordered one huge census of his realm all at the same time. If we realise this then it is easy to see that what Luke is saying is that various parts of the Empire were subject to various censuses during the reign of Augustus and that at this point ("in those days") the Emperor decided to extend this census to every part of the Empire, including such client states as Judea.

And this is something that we know that he did:- *A census or taxation-assessment of the whole provincial empire...was certainly accomplished for the first time in history under Augustus.* (A.N. Sherwin-White: Historian) In other words Augustus did indeed order an Empire-wide census, but not all at one time in one simultaneous and all-embracing census.

Secondly, although it is true that Quirinius was most probably only once governor of Syria and conducted a census in AD 6, Luke knows this, as he demonstrates in Acts 5v37: "Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt." So he cannot have confused this later head count with the one held at the time of Jesus' birth and yet he still makes reference to Quirinius' census in connection with the birth of Jesus.

Once again it is instructive to go back to the text and to see what Luke actually wrote. His precise wording in 2v2 is unusual: "this was the *first* [Greek: *prote*] census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria."

*Prote* can indeed mean *first*, which gives us our familiar translation and has Luke saying that this was the *first* census taken whilst Quirinius governed Syria. But grammatically it is possible (although not easy) to take *prote* to mean *prior to*, or *before*.

In which case Luke is not linking this census with Quirinius but rather saying that this was a census undertaken by someone else *before* the famous one of 6 AD and for example a census was taken of Judea between 9 – 6 BC by Sentius Saturninus. (There appears to have been a general 14 year cycle of censuses throughout much of the Roman empire).

There is in fact actually some evidence that Quirinius *may* have governed Syria twice, the first occasion being between either 10-7 BC or between 3-2 BC, and if so then Luke would be quite correct in saying that the census under which Jesus was born was Quirinius' first. An inscription [Lapis Tiburtinus] speaks of Quirinius as being governor "for the second time" in Syria. However, does this mean a governor twice in Syria or simply twice a governor, but only one of those times being in Syria?

Or are we to understand that the census began before Quirinius became governor of Syria but that it lasted into his governorship and so was completed by him and was thus credited to him?

Or may we go back to the apparent face value reading of 2v2, i.e. that a census was begun by Quirinius, but realise that it may have been a census which he had actually set in motion *before* he was governor? For example another inscription [Lapis Venetus] indicates that whilst a consul Quirinius initiated a census in around 11-12 BC, which at least included parts of Syria.

Around the time of Jesus' birth, Herod was a sick man and his power was on the wane. Quirinius had been made consul (a high ranking and very powerful imperial administrative post) in 12 BC and was serving in the East. It is not at all impossible that Herod could have been compelled to organise a census by Quirinius acting as the Emperor's agent, prior to an anticipated change over of power on Herod's death.

As a client king, Herod (and any subsequent ruler), had to be confirmed in their position by Rome and they could be dismissed at any time. So Rome would certainly want to know the exact state of the country before she decided who might rule it on her behalf. As it was, Herod's kingdom was divided amongst three of his sons – none of whom were called "king," and eventually Judea was ruled directly by Roman procurators, the most notorious of whom was of course Pontius Pilate.

In conclusion, Luke's words in 2v2 – "This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria" can be understood in one of five ways:-

1. That the census under which Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem was ordered by Quirinius in 6 AD, on the only occasion when he was governor of Syria. (Unlikely, in that the date of his appointment and the date of Jesus' birth do not tie up).
2. That the census under which Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem was a census held *prior* to the famous one ordered by Quirinius as governor of Syria.
3. That Quirinius did in fact serve two terms as governor of Syria, the first dating from either 10-7 BC or 3-2 BC, (as some scholars

believe) and that it was during his first governorship that he ordered the census described by Luke in the Gospel.

4. That a census was ordered by the Emperor Augustus, which began before Quirinius was appointed governor of Syria but which lasted up to and into his governorship and for which he was credited.
5. That Quirinius himself ordered a census via Herod but in his capacity as consul and prior to his later appointment as governor of Syria.

Lastly, although it is true that Romans did not tend to require their subjects to travel to their family homes for a census, (although for example in AD 104 a census issued by the Roman prefect of Egypt *did* instruct people to return to their homes to register), this was definitely how Jews conducted such head counts. It is quite possible that the Romans were willing to let Herod conduct the census along Jewish traditional lines. In this way they both mollified a client king – although Herod had no choice as to the census being held, he could at least decide how it should be conducted - and it helped ensure the cooperation of his prickly subjects.

After all the Romans were simply interested in the results of the census, not in how the information was gained. All that mattered for them was that it would be accurate.

This may also explain why the census in Luke's Gospel apparently passed off peacefully, whilst the thoroughly Roman census referred to by Gamaliel in Acts 5, led to violence.

Before being too ready to dismiss Luke's account of the census, let's remember that he had met and spoken with the people who were actually there at the time. That's more than any of us can say!

**Can we believe in the Census as described by Luke?**

**Yes.**