

The Census under Quirinius

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THE ENTIRE ISSUE OF THE CENSUS UNDER QUIRINIUS, recorded in Luke 2:1-5, has given biblical critics all the ammunition they need to prove that the Bible is inaccurate historically, and therefore, has no credibility as the "Word of God." Quirinius did not even become governor until 6 C.E. And scholars are quick to point out that the only historical evidence that exists for an "enrollment" by Quirinius, seems to be in 7 C.E., which is at least a decade too late for the birth of Jesus, as recorded by Luke.²

Honest students of this period of history, however, will have to admit that this subject is a complex one simply because this period of time was what some scholars themselves have come to call the "dark decade" *i.e.*, the time period from 6 B.C.E. to 4 C.E.³ Why is this? Because the ancient historians that scholars so heavily rely upon for this period, *i.e.*, Josephus, Velleius Paterculus, Cassius Dio, and other primary sources, are for some strange reason dismally lacking.⁴ Coupled with this is the confusion concerning the transition of power of King Herod and his successors. And to add more confusion, the date of Herod's death, which is usually placed in the 4 B.C. by the majority of scholars today (based mostly upon the confusing data of Josephus for this time), has now been challenged, and as we shall see, for good reason.⁵

1. Updated and revised by Paul R. Finch, March, 2005.

2. Biblical scholars themselves have done little to offer anything substantive other than mere apologetics. The argument is thus: since there is historical evidence that Quirinius was "twice" governor of Judea (See Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998], 302-6), and since Luke expressly uses the phrase "the first enrollment", we are thus obliged to believe that the census in which historians did find evidence for is a subsequent census from that of the one mentioned by Luke that historians simply have not been able to locate thus far.

3. Timothy Barnes, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 64 (1974), 22.

4. Although Josephus attempts to give good chronological benchmarks for the beginning of Herod's reign, such as the Battle of Actium, Olympiads, Roman Consuls, for some unknown reason, he stops cross-referencing with known benchmarks in the latter part of Herod's reign until the tenth year of Archelaus in 6 C.E. Also, there are two folia missing from Cassius Dio's manuscript for this very period.

5. W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of Herod the Great," *JTS* 17 [1966] 283-98; Ernest L. Martin, "The Nativity and Herod's Death," *Chronos, Kairos, Christos, Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin Yamauchi, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 85-92.

Background to Herod's Rule

Let us here recall some of the background to the subject. From the time of Judas Maccabee until the time of King Herod the Jews in Palestine were governed by a priestly family known as the Hasmoneans. This dynasty seemingly ended when Herod came to power. Herod was half Edomite and half Arab. So how could he become an accepted ruler to the Jewish people? Well, for one, he had to solidify his power in the eyes of the Jews by marrying one of the surviving descendants of the Hasmoneans. And this he did with Mariame. And it is through this marriage that he had two sons who could legally claim the right to carry on the Hasmonean rule. Yet, Herod had an older son by a his first wife Doris, who, in the eyes of the Jews, was a mere commoner. His name was Antipater, and he saw these two Hasmonean heirs as a threat to his own ambitions to become ruler of Judea.

Antipater devised a plot to concoct numerous false accusations against these two legitimate Hasmonean sons. Eventually Herod became convinced of their treachery and had them executed. When this happened things became very confusing, as far as how the succession of Herod is concerned.

One thing that we should note as a direct result of Herod's decision to execute his own sons was at this time that Augustus revoked Herod's award as being "Caesar's Friend." Scholars should have realized that this was a major change in the status of Herod in the eyes of the Roman government. This in fact demoted Herod to being of subject class. And that being the case, Herod could no longer exercise as a king of autonomy that he was used to in executing anyone of the noble establishment.⁶

Herod's Loss of Autonomy

We should further note that in the beginning of Herod's reign, he was able to conduct his affairs with virtually no Roman interference. This is apparent in the fact that he (and the Sanhedrin) executed Hyrcanus without permission from Rome. Again, he put to death Mariame and the sons of Baba without consulting Caesar. And even Herod's son Alexander admitted that Herod had power to execute him and his brother if he desired.

Why is this fact worthy of note? It is because once Herod was demoted by Caesar, he no longer had power to execute in regard to capital crimes of high ranking individuals. We can see this in the fact that when Herod wanted Alexander and Aristobulus executed he had to have Caesar's representatives in the province of Syria hear the case and the trial was held in Beirut rather than at Jerusalem. And it was these Roman officials who made the final decision — not Herod. When later Herod wanted Antipater tried for high treason, it was the Roman governor Varus who came to try the case — again, not Herod.

Now significant to the entire problem is the fact that when Alexander and Aristobulus were executed, Herod's son Antipater now became "co-ruler with his father and in no way different from a king" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.2). If this is not expressing clearly a joint rulership, then what is? This was in the year of 4 B.C.E. And it was after this time that Antipater schemed to kill his father. When Herod heard about Antipater's treachery, he recalled Antipater from Rome to have him tried. And even though Herod

⁶ Although this was due to mainly intrigues with the Arabs, and Augustus reconciled himself to Herod afterward, Herod was never restored to "Caesar's Friend."

was convicted of high treason and Herod could not execute him on his own, he had to send a request to Caesar for permission to execute him. Herod at this time changed his will and completely expunged Antipater's name from memory. It is assumed by many that shortly after this Herod died and was succeeded by Archelaus. Yet when Archelaus assumed power he was reckoned by Josephus as one who "had *long* exercised royal authority" (Josephus, *B. J.*, 2.26). This statement could mean nothing other than that Archelaus also reckoned his rule from the time that Alexander and Aristobulus were executed, namely, 4 B.C.E., while Herod was still alive.

The point to note is that obviously in 4 B.C.E. Herod's power in the eyes of Rome was greatly diminished and a total lack of stability in Judaea at this time is evident. The very fact that Augustus conducted a registration shortly thereafter shows that Caesar may have become concerned over the political stability of this region. Some scholars believe that no such registration could have occurred during Herod's rule for this would have been a direct interference with Herod's affairs. But rather than this being an objection, this, in fact, is a clear indication that an oath of allegiance was necessary at this time.⁷

Enrollment Does not mean Taxation

We should also note what Luke said and what he did not say. He said it was an enrollment, not a taxation. And also worthy of note is that this was not a local enrollment, but that this particular enrollment involved the entire Roman world. This places this special enrollment on a far a different level than those done in local regions for tax purposes.

What was going on at this time in the Roman world which would have demanded such an enrollment? Let us review the historical facts. In 27 B.C.E. Octavian received the title "Augustus." On the twenty fifth anniversary from this time Augustus Caesar received the award Pater Patriae. This occurred on Feb. 5, 2 B.C.E. Caesar himself wrote that "while I was administering my thirteenth consulship the senate and the equestrian order and the ENTIRE ROMAN PEOPLE gave me the title Father of my country" (Res Gestae, 6.35). And there is evidence found in the Paphlagonia inscription dated to 3 B.C. that an oath of obedience was taken by the inhabitants and that "the same oath was sworn also by ALL THE PEOPLE in the land at the altars of Augustus in the temples of Augustus in the various districts."⁸

In 27 B.C.E. the Senate and the Roman people gave their complete and absolute allegiance to Caesar and that was done by swearing an oath of allegiance and registering that fact. At Caesar's silver jubilee the people of Rome again renewed their oath of allegiance. Thus, when Caesar received his title as "Father of the Country" in February 2 B.C.E., the oath and registration had already been conducted and completed the year before.

Does Josephus mention this enrollment? Indeed, he does. Notice this amazing quote:

⁷ Such an oath of allegiance was also administered to the people of Judaea at the accession of Caligula to emperorship which also was prompted by a change in government (Josephus, *Ant.* 18,124). Professor Burkhill, writing in the revised Schurer, p. 376, states that "the oath of allegiance to the emperor which the people were obliged to take, presumably on every change of government, was mandatory already in the days of Herod." Emil Schürer

⁸ Lewis and Reinhold, *Roman Civilization*, 2:34, 35.

There was moreover a certain sect of Jews who valued themselves highly for their exact knowledge of the law; and talking much of their contact with God, were greatly in favor with the women of Herod's court. They are called Pharisees. They are men who had it in their power to control kings; extremely subtle, and ready to attempt anything against those whom they did not like. When therefore the whole Jewish nation took an OATH to be faithful to Caesar, and [to] the interests of the king, these men, to the number of above six thousand, refused to swear. The king having laid a fine upon them, Pheroras' wife (Herod's sister-in-law) paid the money for them. They, in requital for her kindness (for they were supposed, by their great intimacy with God, to have attained to the gift of prophecy), prophesied that God having decreed to put an end to the government of Herod and his race, the kingdom would be transferred to her and Pheroras and their children. Salome [Herod's sister], who was aware of all that was being said, came and told the king of them. She also told him that many of the court [of Herod] were corrupted by them. Then the king put to death the most guilty of the Pharisees, and Bagoas the eunuch, and one Carus, the most beautiful young man about the court, and the great instrument in the king's unlawful pleasures. He [Herod] likewise slew every one in his own family, who adhered to those things which were said by the Pharisees. But Bagoas had been elevated by them and was told that he should some day be called father and benefactor of the [new] king, who was to be appointed according to their prediction, for this king would have all things in his power, and that he [the king] would give him [Bagoas] the capacity of marriage, and of having children of his own" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.41-45).

How did Josephus know that there were over six thousand Pharisees who refused to take this oath unless there was some tally made and by their names was no signature. Orosius, living in the fifth century, stated from sources that he had available that [Augustus] ordered that a census be taken of each province everywhere and that all men be enrolled... This is the earliest and most famous public acknowledgement which marked Caesar as the first of all men and the Romans as lords of the world, a published list of all men entered individually... This first and greatest census was taken, since in this one name of Caesar all the peoples of the great nations TOOK OATH, and at the same time, throughout the participation in the census, were made apart of one society (bk 6.22, 7.2).

To be a citizen of Rome was a prized possession and people wanted some kind of credentials to vouch for the title (cf. Acts 22:25-28). These were recorded in the archives of their native cities.⁹ The registrations were checked and adjusted as to present circumstances every five years. And we have clear evidence that Augustus had official censuses in 28 and 8 B.C.E. (*Res Gestae*, 2.8). The next five year period brings us to 3 B.C.E. And these registrations required provincials to be "registered at his native city."¹⁰ 3 B.C.E. was not only a regular census year, but also coincided with the Oath of Allegiance to Augustus.

The year 2 B.C.E. was the glorious Silver Jubilee of "Augustus" and it was also the 750th anniversary of the founding of Rome. Roman officials from all over the Empire would be going to Rome for the celebrations. This means that the governors would leave their provinces while lesser officials remained to conduct business. This brings us to Quirinius who conducted the "enrollment." Luke says that he was governor. Yet, Quirinius was not officially a governor until 6 C.E. But it does seem probable that

⁹. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963), 147.

¹⁰. *Ibid.*, 148.

Quirinius may have been a provisional governor in 3/2 B.C. while the actual legate was away at Rome. Indeed, Justin Martyr called Quirinius the "procurator of Syria" (*Apology*, 1.34). The *Cambridge Ancient History* tells us that "Each province had its equestrian procurator who in the eyes of the provincials was almost as important as the governor himself."¹¹ Quirinius in the records seems to have been a "man-Friday" by all accounts. Tacitus said that his command in the war of the Homonadenses was a "special command." An inscription mentions him "as holding an honorary municipal office at Antioch-by-Pisidia."¹² He also became guardian of Gaius Caesar, the heir to the Empire when Gaius acquired residential authority at Antioch over the eastern provinces in 1. B.C.E.¹³ Tacitus also said that Quirinius was one who had "considerable talents for business."¹⁴ In 2 C.E. he married Aemelia Lepida, a descendant of Sulla and Pompey. This no doubt gave him much more political standing and in 6 C.E. he became legate of Syria upon the death of Archelaus, at which time Judaea was annexed. This change in government gave reason for Quirinius's second census of Judaea mentioned in Acts 5:37. This is why Luke distinguished the registration at the time of Jesus' birth as being the "first" one, while Quirinius was [provisional] governor of Syria which Justin Martyr said was actually while he was procurator.

But who was the actual governor at this time? The early Christian apologist Tertullian living in the late second century, who was by profession a lawyer and well acquainted with Roman governmental affairs, said that the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was conducted when Sentius Saturninus was governor of Syria (*Answer to the Jews*, 8). What's more, he said it occurred in the 41st year of Augustus, answering to 3/2 B.C.E. Indeed, the early Christian sources were nearly united in stating that Jesus was born in 3/2 B.C.E. The list includes Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Africanus, Hippolytus of Rome, Hippolytus of Thebes, and Cassiodorus Senator.¹⁵ This is strong testimony indeed because these sources were able to consult the vast libraries at their disposals to which modern historians no longer have access. But the next best thing to having access to these vital records is to accept the testimony of those who did!

Josephus tells us that Quintilius Varus had taken over the governorship when Antipater, the heir to King Herod, had returned from Rome to Jerusalem and that he succeeded "Saturninus as governor of Syria" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.89). But coins have been found which show that Varus was legate of Syria in the 25th, 26th, and 27th years of the Actian Era (6 to 4 B.C.E.). This is where historians trip up and conclude that they have proof that Herod must have died in 4 B.C.E. since Varus is shown to have been active in 4 B.C. But the answer is dangling right before their eyes. An inscription known as the Lapis Tiburtinus speaks of a governor of Syria during the time of Augustus who had been governor twice. Many have tried to identify this inscription with Quirinius in order to show that he held office before his 6 C.E. tenure. But professor Syme has shown that Quirinius is impossible.¹⁶ L. R. Taylor suggests that Titius is the subject of this inscription, but Syme has shown that Titius would have been much too old to receive the "ornamento trimphalia" given only after 12 B.C. Yet the inscription was found only

11. (vol. X, 216).

12. Sherwin-White, 165.

13. Tacitus, *Annals* 3.48.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 229.

16. "The Titulus Tiburtinus" in *Vestia Akten*, Munich:1972.

a stones through from Varus' villa in Tibur. The reason some scholars object to Varus is that the inscription refers to Augustus as divine which was bestowed on him at his death in 14 C.E.. whereas Varus died in 9 C.E.. But because Varus was defeated in Germany, he was never commemorated while Augustus lived. Yet, when Tiberius came to power who was Varus' brother-in-law, Tiberius went to the battlefield to bring back the fallen Varus' remains and his memory was restored as a defender of the Empire. Therefore, this objection is weak in the extreme.

With this missing piece of evidence the succession of Syrian Governors can now be restored as follows:

Titius	Q. Varus	S. Saturninus	Q. Varus	G. Caesar
13-7 B.C.E.	7-4 B.C.E.	4-2 B.C.E.	2 B.C.E.-1 C.E.	1-4 C.E.

We should also note that the War of Varus, for which there is not the slightest evidence that it occurred in 4 B.C.E., happened as a result of the uprising at Passover soon after Herod died in which 3000 worshippers lost their lives. In the summer and Autumn of 1 B.C.E. a full scale war broke out, causing Armenia also to rebel, as well as uprisings in Arabia. It took 3 legions to quell this uprising. Scholars have had to down play this uprising because Augustus would have received an imperial acclamation. He received one in 8 B.C.E. (14th) and the next one in 1 C.E.(15th). The war which gave Augustus "acclamation 15" must have occurred the previous year in 1 B.C.E.

The chronology of Josephus concerning Herod's reign has been squeezed to make it fit the eclipse of 4 B.C.E. But this eclipse was only partial and partial eclipses rarely make headlines in ancient sources. The Eclipse of Jan. 10, 1 B.C.E. not only was total, but allows for more time for the events between Herod's death and Passover recorded by Josephus. Indeed, many a scholar has seen this one fact as an insolvable problem. Professor Filmer and Ormond Edwards have shown that Josephus did not reckon inclusively and that the capture of Jerusalem was not in 37 B.C.E. but in fact in 36 B.C.E. This means that Herod's 34 year reign from that time comes to the year 2/1 B.C.E. Herod died probably in February, 1 B.C. It was only a month before this that the Magi visited the now 15 month old child Jesus. The actual birth of Jesus was in early fall of 3 B.C.E., during the time when Saturninus was legate of Syria as Tertullian says, Quirinius was procurator as Justin Martyr says, who carried out the Empire wide "enrollment" for Syria and Judaea.