

Quirinius?

By Dr. J. Smith

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke 2:3

Who was Quirinius? He is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew does not mention him at all. Matthew 2:1 says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the king. Herod's kingdom extended from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south. It was Herod who heard from the wise men that the king of the Jews had been born and who commanded that all the children of Bethlehem two years of age and younger were to be killed. But not a word is said about Quirinius.

So how does he factor into the story? He seems out of place. In fact the Jewish historian Josephus, who lived at the same time as Luke, tells us that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until about 10 years after the birth of Christ (*Antiquities* 18.1.1). So some have accused Luke of getting his facts wrong. That does not seem likely, for Luke himself tells us in chapter 1 that he was very precise, not to mention that the gospel of Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But then how do you solve a problem like Quirinius?

Some have argued that Quirinius had two terms of office: Luke mentions the first, and Josephus the second. Another solution is also possible, however, namely to treat this not as a problem of history but of translation. The problem of translation has to do with the Greek word *prōtē* in Luke 2:2. The NIV takes it as an attributive adjective: "This was the first census while Quirinius was governor of Syria." The NKJV takes it as a predicative adjective: "This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria." Both translations translate *prōtē* as "first."

There is another option, however, namely to translate *prōtē* as "before." For example, in John 1:15 John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." Taking this option, we could translate, "This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria." Two recent translations give this as an alternative translation in their footnotes, namely the ESV, and the 2011 NIV. The advantage of this translation is that it removes the historical problem: Luke no longer disagrees with Josephus.

But then you might ask, "Why would Luke tell us that this census happened before the time of Quirinius?" The answer is that there was another census which happened later, during the time of Quirinius, and that was a famous one, because the Jews rebelled against it. The rebellion was led by a Galilean, Judas of Galilee. You find it in the speech of Gamaliel, in Acts 5:37: "Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt." But his rebellion failed. Quirinius and his Roman troops put the rebels down. "Judas was killed," says Gamaliel, "and all who followed him were scattered."

Now keep in mind that Luke wrote his gospel during a time when Jewish resistance was on the rise again, just a few years before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. As soon as Luke mentions a census in the days of Caesar Augustus, his readers would think of *that* census in the days of Quirinius when Judas of Galilee rebelled against Rome. So Luke clarifies, "No, no, not that one; the census that I'm referring to happened *before* Quirinius. It was a different time, when Rome was at the height of its power and Caesar was Augustus. Back then people did not even think of rebelling." In fact he writes in verse 3, "*everyone* went up to be registered," even

the people of Galilee, for Joseph went too. Even though Mary was pregnant and the journey was difficult, Joseph did not resist the emperor's decree. No one did.

What is Luke's point in our passage? It is to highlight that Christ was born at the height of Rome's supremacy: no one resisted Caesar's will. Never was Israel less likely to produce a king. There's also a more subtle point: behind the apparent sovereignty of Caesar Augustus was the Sovereign Lord, who used the decree of Caesar to bring Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that the Son of David might be born there.

Have you ever wondered: if God wanted Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, why use Caesar's decree to get them there? Why not simply send an angel to command them to go? After all angels figure prominently in the stories of Jesus' birth—so why not in our passage?

God shows that he has at his disposal not only heavenly angels, those *faithful* servants who do his bidding, but also earthly rulers, godless rulers who do *not* recognize him. There's a supreme irony in our passage: God uses Caesar's decree to make sure that a new Son of David would be born in Bethlehem, so that this Son could become the ruler over the kings of the earth, also over Rome. Caesar may have his own ambitions, but little does he know that his decree actually promotes *God's* decree. Earthly rulers may think they think they direct the course of history, but "he who sits in the heavens laughs, the LORD has them in derision," says Psalm 2, and in our passage you see God's humour at work.

We may praise God for his surpassing wisdom, because he has outwitted the rulers of the earth and set his king on Zion's holy hill and given him a kingdom that will never fail. We may praise him for his goodness, because he did it for us, so that we might be part of the eternal kingdom of Christ.

