

Getting to Know Your Bible

Is Luke's Account of the Census under Quirinius Historically Accurate?

Few Biblical passages have received as much critical scrutiny as Luke 2:1-2. Is the census Luke describes historical? Or is this an egregious chronological error on Luke's part? The basic opposition to the historical credibility of Luke's record is as follows.¹ Certain scholars note that Quirinius is not known to have governed Syria until AD 6, ten years after Herod the Great dies and the date Luke sets as Christ's birth. Further, it is often noted that no record of so large a census exists, which makes the event unlikely. However, such observations do not give us a full representation of the facts, nor a compelling theory of the facts. There are, in fact, good reasons to accept Luke's account.

The Grammatical Reason:

It is often assumed that the census Luke mentions is the census that Josephus (a first-century Jewish historian) claims to have occurred in AD 6. However, Luke mentions of this census as well as his knowledge of its date (Acts 5:37), which makes it clear that Luke, being aware of the census of AD 6, has another census in mind that occurs during the time of Herod the Great. The text itself seems to support this view above all others. The Greek adjective *protê*, translated "first," can also carry a comparative force, translated "former," and can take on an adverbial meaning. If this is the case, then Luke is mentioning a census prior to the AD 6 census under Quirinius; Luke, as well as his readers, has at least one other census in mind and is specifically focusing on the "former" one. Furthermore, there is grammatical support for *prote* to be translated "before." The verse would then read

¹For a typical critical view, see Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament* 2 ed. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 109.

"This was the census *before* Quirinius..."² Thus there are grammatical reasons that point to the historical credibility of Luke's claim in 2:1-2.

The Historical Reason:

While there is a lack of any extra-Biblical references to this census that Luke mentions, the general practice of registering provinces periodically fits perfectly with what historians know about the reign of Augustus, the emperor from 27 BC to AD 14 who would have ruled over Quirinius, a governor. One cannot simply argue that the census did not occur because only Luke mentions it, especially when Luke is proven to be precisely accurate about other historical current events of his time. Quirinius, while not being governor in name, may have exerted some form of governing of the Syrian Province and hence had a role to play in the supposed census. A number of scholars note this possibility since historical records show that he did conduct military activities in the region during the time of Herod the Great (king of the region from 37-4 BC). While the explicit data is lacking, there are a number of good historical reasons for accepting Luke's account of events.

Sources Used (good for further study):

Barnett, Paul. *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999.

Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 1:1-9:50*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994.

² The ESV has this as an alternate translation in the footnotes.