

## 11. Jesus's Place of Birth and Genealogy: Fact or Fiction?

*“Luke says that, in the time when Cyrenius (Quirinius) was governor of Syria, Caesar Augustus decreed a census for taxation purposes, and everybody had to go ‘to his own city’. Joseph was ‘of the house and lineage of David’ and therefore he had to go to ‘the city of David, which is called Bethlehem’. That must have seemed like a good solution. Except that historically<sup>1</sup> it is complete nonsense, as A. N. Wilson in Jesus and Robin Lane Fox in The Unauthorized Version (among others) have pointed out. David, if he existed, lived nearly a thousand years before Mary and Joseph. Why on earth would the Romans have required Joseph to go to the city where a remote ancestor had lived a millennium earlier?” (Dawkins, 2006)*

*“Moreover, Luke screws up his dating by tactlessly mentioning events that historians are capable of independently checking. There was indeed a census under Governor Quirinius - a local census, not one decreed by Caesar Augustus for the Empire as a whole - but it happened too late: in AD 6, long after Herod's death. Lane Fox concludes that ‘Luke's story is historically impossible and internally incoherent’, but he sympathizes with Luke's plight and his desire to fulfil the prophecy of Micah.” (Dawkins, 2006)*

Before I look into the issues that Dawkins suggest exist in the Gospel of Luke and his accuracy as a historian, I would like to draw to your attention to the fact that of the 27 political people recorded in both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, 23 (or 85%) we have physical evidence for in either manuscripts, not written by Christians, coins, or archeologically discoveries. The Biblical Archaeology lists them all in the September/October 2017 issues and on their web site<sup>2</sup>. Luke was by all accounts, contrary to what Dawkins states and the scholars he sites, a very accurate historian.

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<sup>1</sup> If you doubt Luke was an accurate historian, all you have to do is compare his recordings of the death of Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12:20-23 and Josephus in Antiquities 19 8.2.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/new-testament-political-figures-the-evidence/#end01>

I will deal first with the census point, mentioned above by Richard Dawkins.<sup>3</sup> The commonly held view, supported by historical evidence, is as Dawkins says: that Quirinius ruled as Governor of Syria (which included Judea) from 6 AD to 9 AD, after the death of Herod, so on the face of it outside the time of the birth of Christ. Another census is mentioned in Acts 5:37, where Luke quotes the eminent Rabbi Gamaliel, teacher of Paul, about how another census sparked a riot. This is clear evidence and a different census from the one Luke mentioned in Luke 2:2, some 40 years later.

This following is from the Greek Testament (Alford, 1863), Luke 2:2:

*“αυτη απογραφη πρωτη εγενετο ηγεμονευοντος της Συριας Κυρηνιον”*

I translate this as: ‘this first census was performed of the ruler Quirinius’.

Now, we know from Acts of the Apostles (written by Luke) that Luke mentions the *other* census of Quirinius, so he can’t be mistaking the one in Acts for the one in Luke’s Gospel, the first part of his History of the chronicles Jesus’ life and teachings. There is clear evidence here, in the Gospel of Luke, of the priority of the traditional birth census.

There is a gap in the Roman records for the closing years of the first century BC concerning who was the governor at the time of the census. In the absence of a named governor in the extant historical records, how can we either support or reject Luke’s reporting?

To be a governor of Syria, you needed to be an imperial legate or soldier of the highest rank and to have been a Consul prior to that. At the time in question, Judea did still have a provincial (client) King and a Roman Procurator who was active on the ground. Governors always had command of the troops under their own geographical jurisdiction. It was only in the third century that this power was removed. The Hemonadenses were defeated by the governor, whose territory they occupied in the last years of the first century BC. No one disputes this governor was Quirinus, as he was awarded the Triumph for it and honoured in history forever more. Also, it’s really important to note, Tacitus (Book 3 of The Annals) could never have meant the second Governorship of Quirinus, which took place in 6 AD, as he also mentions that Tiberius was in exile

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ramsay/bethlehem.iv.vii.html> is a useful resource.

on the Island of Rhodes. By 2 AD, Tiberius had returned to Rome. It could not have been his latter governorship of Syria that Tacitus was referencing. Since Tacitus is talking only about Quirinius, the implication is nothing but clear: Quirinius is our missing Governor of Syria at the time of the birth of Jesus:

About the same time he requested the Senate to let the death of Sulpicius Quirinus be celebrated with a public funeral. With the old patrician family of the Sulpicii this Quirinus, who was born in the town of Lanuvium, was quite unconnected. An indefatigable soldier, he had by his zealous services won the consulship under the Divine Augustus, and subsequently the honours of a triumph for having stormed some fortresses of the Homonadenses in Cilicia. He was also appointed adviser to Caius Caesar in the government of Armenia, and had likewise paid court to Tiberius, who was then at Rhodes. The emperor now made all this known to the Senate, and extolled the good offices of Quirinus to himself, while he censured Marcus Lollius, whom he charged with encouraging Caius Caesar in his perverse and quarrelsome behaviour. But people generally had no pleasure in the memory of Quirinus, because of the perils he had brought, as I have related, on Lepida, and the meanness and dangerous power of his last years.”<sup>4</sup>

So we testimony from one of Rome’s finest historians to support the fact that Quirinius did have two terms as Governor of Syria. Zumpt adds the following information:

Under Emperor Augustus, Cappadocia was governed by King Archelaus. The territory had been enlarged to include some tribes who used to be under the command of King Amyntas (Strabo XIV, 4, 6). When Archelaus became mentally feeble, the Emperor appointed a guardian for a while, a procurator of aristocratic rank, and thus Archelaus continued to rule to the year 17 A.D. when he was summoned to Rome where he was accused by the Senate and died. His country was given a Roman knight as procurator (Tac. Ann. II, 42; Dio Cass. LVII, 17). From this, after a transitional period under Nero, a large province of Cappadocia developed to which Vespasian assigned legions and a consular governor. (Zumpt, 1869)

King Archelaus was another client king, as Herod was in Judea, who came under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Syria, who in turn took his authority from the Emperor. Strabo in Book 12, 6, 3 says that the Homonadenses were a

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<sup>4</sup> <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.mb.txt>

part of Cilicia. However, the part that this tribe occupied was part of the Syrian jurisdiction. Only the troops from that district could be used to defeat the enemy. This was Quirinius who won his Triumph, as Governor of Syria. We know that Saturninus was the Syrian Governor up to 6 BC and Varus to 4 BC. This places Quirinius as being Governor after 4 BC, to coincide with his defeat of the Homonadenses. The two governorships are mentioned in independent Roman histories of Tacitus, who as we have seen mentions the first and Josephus who mentions the second. Taking both of these Roman historians together, we can only conclude firmly that Luke reported both governorships correctly.

The Josephus reference is Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Chapter 1:

Cyrenius came himself into Judea, which was now added to the province of Syria, to take an account of their substance, and to dispose of Archelaus's money; but the Jews, although at the beginning they took the report of a taxation heinously, yet did they leave off any further opposition to it, by the persuasion of Joazar, who was the son of Beethus, and high priest; so they, being over-persuaded by Joazar's words, gave an account of their estates, without any dispute about it. Yet was there one Judas, a Gaulonite, of a city whose name was Gamala, who, taking with him Sadduc, a Pharisee, became zealous to draw them to a revolt, who both said that this taxation was no better than an introduction to slavery, and exhorted the nation to assert their liberty; as if they could procure them happiness and security for what they possessed, and an assured enjoyment of a still greater good, which was that of the honor and glory they would thereby acquire for magnanimity.<sup>5</sup>

Luke's is in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 5:37): 'After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.'

All scholars appear to be unanimous that this second census took place in 6 AD. It is hard to think the Tacitus reference can be to anything but the first census of Quirinius.

In the run up to Quirinius's first appointment, we know that around 9 BC, Sentius Saturninus succeeds Titius in Syria and governs for three years, to be succeeded by Varus. Varus stays until 4 BC, then not much is known until his death in disgrace in Germany. We in turn know Quirinius is appointed Governor

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<sup>5</sup> <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-18.htm>

of Syria in 6 AD. We get some very useful information from instructions enacted and put into practice by Augustus in the Cassius Dio Book 52<sup>6</sup>:

They should hold office not less than three years, unless they are guilty of misconduct, nor more than five. The reason is that offices held for only one year or for short periods merely teach the officials their bare duties and then dismiss them before they can put any of their acquired knowledge into use, while, on the other hand, the longer terms of many years' duration somehow have the effect, in many cases, of filling the officials with conceit and encouraging them to rebellion.

We know you could hold an Imperial Office for not less than three, but no more than five years; therefore *Varus could not have been governor* in the 12 years between 6 BC and 6 AD. One missing governor, L. Volusius Saturninus<sup>7</sup> ('legatus Syriae') is identified by a coin dated AD 4 or 5 from Antioch<sup>8</sup>. So this still leaves the dates from 4 BC to 4 AD still with no known governors after Varus and before Volusius. However, with a little bit of digging, we also know the end of the first governorship of Quirinius. He is appointed the senior advisor to the Emperor's son C. Caesar, who was being positioned to be the most senior Roman in the Orient by the time of 2 AD. M Lollius then follows as Governor of Syria. These dates are not disputed, so this leaves only the period from 4 BC to 1 BC for Quirinius to occupy the governorship.

Zumpt concludes:

When in mid 4 B.C. Augustus decided to act upon the testament of King Herod and to transfer the government of Judaea to Herod's son Archelaus, he also sent P. Sulpicious Quirinius to Syria as the new governor. The former governor, P.Q. Varus, had been greedy and chummy with Archelaus. Thus, Quirinius put Judaea in order according to Augustus's wishes, and in the year 3 B.C. he also conducted the war against the Homonadenses. When in 2 B.C. the emperor intended to send his heir to the throne, C. Caesar, to the Orient, he assigned the governor of

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<sup>6</sup> [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius\\_Dio/52\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/52*.html)

<sup>7</sup> Volusius existence is evidenced in Tacitus, Annals 13.30; 14.56. Pliny, Natural History 7.12, 48; 11.38.

<sup>8</sup> You can even buy the coin on line:

[http://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/zuzim/172/product/antiocheia\\_syria\\_l\\_volusius\\_saturninus\\_ae\\_vf\\_rare\\_and\\_important\\_see\\_notes\\_45\\_ce/309358/Default.aspx](http://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/zuzim/172/product/antiocheia_syria_l_volusius_saturninus_ae_vf_rare_and_important_see_notes_45_ce/309358/Default.aspx)

Syria, Quirinius, to be Caesar's responsible advisor. Quirinius stayed governor of Syria to about the end of 1 B.C. M. Lollius followed him to Syria as Caesar's advisor until the end of 2 A.D. Lollius's successor was C. Marcius Censorinus. It remains uncertain whether there was another governor of Syria between him and L. Volusius Saturninus. Thus, we can list the following governors of Syria around the time of Christ's birth:

C. Sestius Saturninus from	9 B.C.
O. Quíntilius Varus from	6 B.C.
P. Sulpicius Quirinius from	4 B.C.
M. Lollius from	1 B.C.
C. Marcius Censorinus from	2 A.D.
L. Volusius Saturninus from	4 A.D.
P. Sulpicius Quirinius from	6 A.D.
Q. Creticus Silanus from	11 A.D.

We have not only written testimony from the leading Roman historian of the times and the leading Roman/Jewish historian; we also have some archaeological support. The Lateran Museum of Christian Antiquities holds a fragment of marble discovered in 1764 near Tivoli that may shed some light on the matter. The inscription is that of a Roman official who lived during both the reign of Augustus and the following emperor. In return for conquering a nation he was rewarded with many baubles, gifts, titles, etc. Now, the important point here is that he twice governs Syria (Palestine was a dependent region of Syria) as Legatus to the now elevated deity, Augustus. This could only be Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, as he is the only one we know to have held the office twice.

Luke was also very clear that this was the first census, and therefore not the one from 6 or 7 AD that Dawkins cites. The Tivoli discovery was a stone's throw from the Villa of Varus; it would be natural to assume the artifact refers to Varus, then, not to the Quirinius of Luke. But this can't be so. The phrase 'div Augusti', or 'divine Augustus', appears on the artifact's inscription. This was a title given Quirinius after his death in 14 AD. Varus died in 9 AD, in disgrace after various military blunders, ending with his own head being delivered to Augustus.

Concerning the census itself, we know the Romans had a long history of conducting the census for their own administration. Servius was the Sixth King

of Rome who reigned from 575 BC to 535 BC. He establishes the first recorded Roman census. It was a census of Roman citizens, as they were the only people required for military service. The typical Roman census would involve the appointment of a censor who saw you in person. You could be an 'absente' if you were on government service. Zumpt mentions how Scipio the Younger noted that the setting up of colonies was very disadvantageous, as each citizen needed to go back to Italy to report in to the censor. By 204 BC, we know that censors attended to the absentees in the provinces in question. Dionysius (IV, 15) reminds us that the punishment for not attending in person was confiscation of your property, torture or imprisonment, and, to top it all, you could be sold into slavery.

By the middle of the first century BC, Julius Caesar had reformed the census as a much broader tool for taxation, general welfare provision for the poor, and the maintenance of the Roman State. The Tablets of Heraclea show the thrust of these reforms.

Emperor Augustus took these reforms further. With M. Agrippa he introduced a census after a 42-year gap, culminating in the re-establishment of the Lustrum sacrifice to mark the completion of it. Over 4 million heads of families were counted. This was a Census of the whole known world — well, Roman world anyway, the kind that Gospel referred to.

There is an interesting reference to the Augustinian Census from Cassiodorus, the Roman historian and servant of the Ostrogoth King Theodoric. This comes from the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Writing about how to settle a border dispute, Cassiodorus recommended they refer to the records of Augustus, who, as Luke told us, conducted a census of the whole Roman world (property as well as head count).

Cassiodorus is clear that the primary purpose of this census from Augustus was as a taxation tool and that a byproduct was the ability to determine rightful property. (He speaks of how it was used to determine land borders when the Nile had flooded and washed away obvious boundaries.) Luke just mentions the Augustine Census of Bible fame as a head count, with the only motive we can assume being a head tax or poll tax. Cassiodorus could not have lifted this from Luke. He gives substantially more information than Luke and

attests that the results of the Augustinian census were still available for inspection. Suidas, in his Lexicon from the tenth century, confirms both the head tax and the property tax element of the census. We have later confirmation of taxes being established in the provinces from non-Romans by Caligula. Dio Cassius 59, 22 tells us how Caligula was playing dice and running low of cash. He called for the census list of the Gauls.

According to Zumpt, Tacitus shows us that in some provinces', namely the Frisians, they did not adopt the Roman census, but paid in kind (in this case in animal skins).

Drusus, who was the most senior official at the time, the Governor of Gaul, was responsible for the running of this local collection. It is sensible to assume that the first census of Quirinius was in keeping with local custom, as it was with the Frisian people. The second census of Quirinius was for both head tax and property tax, spurring a Jewish revolt which is reported in the Bible, in Acts and in Josephus. Josephus never mentions the first census, as it was of the local custom and not that important, compared with the second census that triggered a rebellion. Zumpt concludes:

Luke wrote that Joseph went to Bethlehem because he was of the house and family of David. It appears that not the whole family of David had to assemble in Bethlehem. We cannot estimate the number of divisions which assembled at different times and in different places. But let us assume a small number, say fifty, and assume that each division was given about half a month to travel there and back and to be counted, it means that — barring any interruption — the entire census might have taken at least two years. However, it probably took much longer.

It is not surprising that the ancient authors did not mention Quirinius's censuses. Even if we had many and detailed records about the government of Augustus, they would probably not have mentioned them. It was actually an unimportant matter concerning a small country. Josephus, who did mention the second census, remained silent about the first because he did not mention Archelaus's reign at all. It would have been most practical to mention that census under Archelaus, even though it was begun under Herod.



Tertullian, in *Against Marcion* (Book 4, Chapter 19, verse 10), tells us that the census was started by Saturninus, who was governor of Syria from 9 BC to 6 BC: 'But there is historical proof that at this very time a census had been taken in Judaea by Sentius Saturninus, which might have satisfied their inquiry respecting the family and descent of Christ'.

He was living in the times when these censuses were still conducted and referred to them. With the impending death of Herod and the succession issues this would place on the Roman Empire, this census may well have taken a number of years to complete — indeed to the time of the Governorship of Quirinius. Certainly to complete a whole country would take a couple of years, as Zumpt has indicated.

Another bit of historical evidence of Jesus' birth narrative is supplied by the pagan writer Macrobius<sup>9</sup>, in his book II, Chapter 4, verse 11 in *The Saturnalia*: 'When he heard that Herod, King of the Jews in Syria, had ordered all boys under two to be killed including his own son, he said it was better to be Herod's pig than his son'. Herod would not touch an unclean animal. This is another important historical marker concerning the Massacre of the Innocents<sup>10</sup>. The fact of the matter is this appalling event would probably 'only' have meant the deaths of a handful to maybe a score of children in this small village in Judea, not the tens of thousands that have been reported down through the ages. By confirming its happening in Herod's time, by a pagan writer, who does not have any obvious Christian agenda, this is helpful in establishing the good probability of its happening in Herod's reign as explained by the Bible.

Matthew said that King Herod Archelaus was the next ruler of Judaea when Joseph returned from Egypt with Jesus safe from the killer Herod, father of

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<sup>9</sup> [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Macrobius/Saturnalia/2\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Macrobius/Saturnalia/2*.html) I have not found an accessible online English language translation; however, this is the Latin: '*Cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium*'.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 31:15-16 provides us with the prophetic announcement of this event. Rachel is presented as weeping for her children. Rachel was the wife of Jacob, the father of the nation of Israel.

Archelaus. Therefore the return could have been in mid-4 BC at the earliest, after Archelaus had returned from Rome to accept his appointment as client King. The fact that Christ was still called a baby infant (under 2 years old) by the Gospel account of Matthew 2:13-23 at this time suggests Jesus had just been born and or was still very young. This was at the time Quirinius was processing the first census in Judea.

Furthermore, concerning the census external to Rome itself, it is well known now that the Romans conducted many censuses throughout their Empire. Stanley E, Porter, in a Bible Dictionary entry, points out that between the years 33 AD and 34 AD, 257 or 258 censuses took place in Egypt. The edict of Vibius Maximus in 104 AD, which is inscribed on Papyrus 104 in the British Museum, says:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, the Prefect of Egypt declares: The census by household having begun, it is essential that all those who are away from their homes be summoned to return to their own hearths so that they may perform the customary business of registration and apply themselves to the cultivation which concerns them. Knowing, however, that some of the people from the countryside are required by our city, I desire all those who think they have a satisfactory reason for remaining here to register themselves before . . . Festus, the Cavalry Commander, whom I have appointed for this purpose, from whom those who have shown their presence to be necessary shall receive signed permits in accordance with this edict up to the 30th of the present month.

We also know, via Tacitus in Book 1 of his *Annals*<sup>11</sup>:

11. They raised their hands to the gods, to the statue of Augustus, and to the knees of Tiberius, when he ordered a document to be produced and read. This contained a description of the resources of the State, of the number of citizens and allies under arms, of the fleets, subject kingdoms, provinces, taxes, direct and indirect, necessary expenses and customary bounties. All these details Augustus had written with his own hand, and had added a counsel, that the empire should be confined to its present limits, either from fear or out of jealousy.

We know this enrolment would involve mass registration of people. Although Judea was not a Roman province at the time, this decree did encompass all that it

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/tac/a03040.htm>

reigned over. Roman custom was to enrol at your dwelling place, with your ancestral tribe. What Luke asserts was conducted at the instruction of Rome but under the auspices of its puppet, King Herod. It would more than likely be conducted according to the traditions of the Jews rather than the gentiles.

Appian's *Histories* (Book 5, circa 150 AD)<sup>12</sup> lists for us those whom the Romans appointed client kings — that is to say, those whose kingdoms the Romans viewed as part of the Empire. Luke is thus correct to use the expression 'whole world' (whole *Roman* world, that is), to which the enrolment would apply.

Dawkins thinks it extraordinary that the Holy Family would go back to their tribal home, despite the fact that this was the custom of the day. Household enrolments are now so embedded within the known papyri that it seems strange this is still a contested point. That these enrolments also were done in Syria and its extensions is evidenced in Ramsey (1898) on four occasions. Archaeology again comes to our aid: There is an inscription of a Roman soldier, Q Aemilius Secundus, uncovered in Apameia. It states his service under Quirinius, when a census was conducted. The number of people mentioned (114,000) suggests this is more a head count and not a valuation census. In his *Annals*, Tacitus, as a censor himself, confirms a head count (not a valuation type) census in 48 AD for Claudius.

Sir William Ramsay (Ramsay, 1898) concludes:

Any rational and scholarly criticism must accept the conclusion: There was a system of periodic enrolment in the Province Syria, according to a Fourteen-Years'-Cycle (in the modern expression — Fifteen-Years'-Cycle in the Roman form), and the first enrolment was made in the year 8 BC (strictly, the Syrian year beginning in the spring of 8 BC).

Justin Martyr, in Book 1, Chapter 34 of his *Apology* (circa 150 AD) actually recommends that his Roman audience check the records of Cyrenius if they don't believe the birth event:

Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judæa.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil\\_Wars/5\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil_Wars/5*.html)

Although we don't know the exact date of The First Apology of Justin Martyr, scholarly consensus does place it around 150 AD. His First Apology was written at the time of the reign of Antoninus Pius (138 AD – 161 AD), and in Chapter 46 he says: 'Christ was born 150 years ago under Cyrenius, and subsequently, in the time of Pontius Pilate, taught what we say He taught'.

It does seem incredible to think that if this was all fiction or a bad historical mistake, someone in antiquity would have raised their hand and said something.

Sir William M. Ramsey, in his celebrated book *Was Christ Born In Bethlehem?* notes as follows:

I hear, Oct. 2, that Messrs. Grenfell and Hunt have found a household enrolment paper a little older than AD 50. The date is lost, but the same officials are mentioned in it as in a document of the 6th year of [Tiberius], where the names of Claudius and Caligula are impossible. Hence the paper belongs to the census of AD 20, and proves conclusively my theory as to the origin of the Periodic Enrolments from Augustus. Much of the argument in chapter 7, printed when the Periodic Enrolments were traced with certainty only as far back as AD 92, is now confirmed so completely, that part of it is hardly necessary.

He also reminds us that the vast majority of Luke's histories (part one being the Gospel, part two The Acts of the Apostles) stack up and are corroborated by Roman and Jewish historians of the time and, of course, other Christian writers. Luke was careful and detailed. From whom, then, did he get the birth narrative? Well, Luke got the birth testimony from the mother of Christ. We know this because he writes it in Luke 2 and puts in two references as to his source. Luke 2:19 says, 'But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart'. Luke 2:51 says, 'Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart'.

The other inside track Luke had was from Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. In Luke 1:24-25 we hear her ponder, after Luke has given us the relevant narrative:

Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, 'Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people'.

So we can reasonably deduce that she was a contemporaneous source of the birth narrative, along with Mary. Luke 1:39-42 tells us the following:

Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'

This is all first-hand testimony.

Christ's death is another point we can use to investigate the only time period Quirinius could have been Governor of Syria. This is, of course, controversial, and there are many suggested dates that contradict my conclusion. The main opposition theories to my dating are listed in the following narrative.

- Luke 3:1 says the following: 'Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene...'. Romans took the date from the passing of the old Emperor to start the reign of the new one. This would mean August the 19<sup>th</sup> 14 AD, when Augustus died, to August the 19<sup>th</sup> 29 AD being the start of the Ministry of Jesus. However, we should remember that in the provinces, Tiberius had been joint Emperor for 2 years prior to that. This did not mean much for a Roman in Rome, but it meant something real in the Provinces. All the armies had to swear allegiance now to this joint Emperorship. For a subjected people, like the people of Judea, even with their client king, they had a new overlord with complete powers over everything, as one would expect from an Imperial Emperor. Hence I think we can bring this date back to 27 AD, as Luke would have understood it this way.
- We know from Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 4, Verse 2) that Pontius Pilate was called back to Rome and arrived back just after Tiberius had died:

But when this tumult was appeased, the Samaritan senate sent an embassy to Vitellius, a man that had been consul, and who was now president of Syria, and accused Pilate of the murder of those that were killed; for that they did not go to Tirathaba in order to revolt from the Romans, but to escape the violence of Pilate. So Vitellius sent Marcellus, a friend of his, to take care of the affairs of Judea, and ordered Pilate to go to Rome, to answer before the emperor to the accusations of the Jews. So Pilate, when he had tarried ten years in Judea, made haste to Rome, and this in obedience to the orders of Vitellius, which he durst not contradict; but before he could get to Rome Tiberius was dead.

- This was 37 AD. Josephus also tells us that Pilate lasted 10 years in Judea. Thus the start of his appointment was 27 AD. Pilate was Proconsul at the start of the Ministry of Christ, as attested to by Luke 3:1, quoted above.
- Luke 3:23 tells us: 'Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli'. This would suggest he is not 30 or 29, so 31 is the next obvious age to go for, but Luke was clearly not sure. So maybe 31-32 would be an acceptable understanding of what it means to be 'at about 30 years of age'. This would mean that if we say the start of the Ministry of Jesus was 27 AD, deducting 26 years gets us to 1 AD. There is no year '0', so taking away another 4 to 6 years gives us a birth date for Jesus some time between 6 BC and 4 BC. The census conducted by Quirinius fell towards the 4 BC date range, which is highly probable, as we know these matters took considerable time.
- Josephus (in Antiquities of the Jews, Book 17, Chapter 6, Verse 4) writes of an eclipse happening very shortly after the death of Herod in 4 BC: 'But Herod deprived this Matthias of the high priesthood, and burnt the other Matthias, who had raised the sedition, with his companions, alive. And that very night there was an eclipse of the moon'. Verse 5 is then devoted to describing Herod's terrible death.

This is the only eclipse Josephus mentions in his works. Modern calculations determine this was on the night/morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> of

March 4 BC<sup>13</sup>. So the birth of Jesus was before this date. Concerning the dating of Christ's birth, Kepler concluded 6 BC, the latter end of when the census could have started. The conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars happened then, with a spectacular super nova, akin to how the Star is portrayed in the birth narrative. Science, then, helps confirm the Birth Narrative. It also would seem to support the contention that the census was started under one Governor and finished under another, the former being Saturnalias and the latter being Quirinius.

- At the cleansing of the Temple in John 2:13-24, Christ responds to the question from the Jews about showing a sign of His majesty. Then the Jews say, in John 2:20: 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 15, Chapter 11, Verse 1) wrote that the King began this construction in the 18th year of his reign, or mid 20 BC. 'And now Herod, in the eighteenth year of his reign, and after the acts already mentioned, undertook a very great work, that is, to build of himself the temple of God...'

Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Chapter 16, Verse 4) was counting Herod's reign from the moment he conquered Jerusalem. Forty six years years later takes us to around 27 AD. If this conversation did take place in the Temple just before the Passover, this would have been in the spring of 28 AD of year one of the traditional three year Ministry of Christ.

There are many modern conventional claims that put the death of John the Baptist after 35 AD, and hence put the birth of Christ in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century in order for Jesus to be about 30 years old. I don't think these scholars have any warrant for doing this. It is said that the death of John the Baptist took place after the marriage of Herodias to Herod Antipas and after the defeat of Antipas with his battle against the Arabs in or around 35 AD. We know Herodias was born in the last decade of the 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> From the NASA data: <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/5MCLEmap/-0099-0000/LE-0003-03-13P.gif>

century BC. By about 30 AD, she would have been more than 40 years old. Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews Book 18, Chapter 5, Verse 4) tells us of her marriage to Herod the II and then of giving birth in or around 15 AD to Salome. So it would appear that their illegal marriage and adulterous relationship had maybe a decade and a half of history behind it. This would mean that connecting the marriage with the death of John the Baptist would be a mistake. He rejected the adulterous nature of the relationship irrespective of marriage anyway. The theory of a late marriage and the death of the Baptist after the war between Antipas and the Arabs has little to go for it.

Returning to the method of the census, it is also clear that it is highly likely that the move to one's original home town was correct, as recorded in the Judean census mentioned by Luke. Although this is conjecture, it's very possible, and it may well answer Dawkins's other point regarding why the Holy Family ended up travelling to a place they were not currently living.

As we have seen in the previous section concerning the prophecy of the Virgin Birth, we have both Isaiah and Micah<sup>14</sup> pointing to the Bethlehem area: the households of both Jesus' adopted line and that of his mother came from Bethlehem. To fulfil these prophecies, then, *they* had to be there as well.

I think it is important to note that Isaiah was understood as a prophet of great foresight: not only did he predict the Virgin Birth, but also the exact location of the start of Christ's Ministry, in Isaiah 9:1-2. This part of the scripture never seems to be challenged, perhaps because nothing supernatural is suggested. John does not even question it, as it is so obvious to someone steeped in the Jewish scriptures of the day that the Messiah would start his Ministry in Galilee, and that his birth would be in Bethlehem. To date, there is only one man who fits the bill: Jesus. This is shown in John 7:40-44:

Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, 'Truly this is the Prophet'. Others said, 'This is the Christ'. But some said, 'Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?' So there was a

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<sup>14</sup> Psalms 110:3 and 85:11 are also very suggestive of a Virgin Birth



division among the people because of Him. Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

However, when the Prophet Micah adds support to Isaiah's suggestion of a kingly arrival at En Rogel, just outside Bethlehem, and Micah names Bethlehem, as a Virgin Birth is suggested, this is how Richard Dawkins responds:

Shouldn't a literalist worry about the fact that Matthew traces Joseph's descent from King David via twenty-eight intermediate generations, while Luke has forty-one generations? Worse, there is almost no overlap in the names on the two lists!

Concerning this point, Mark W. Chavalas, in his entry in the Bible Dictionary (Freedman, 2000) under 'Genealogy', points out that ancient genealogies were designed to bolster political unity. Status was generated via kinship ties. As the politics changed, so did your genealogy to establish legitimacy. If we take a closer look at Matthew 1:1-17, we can see that it is an effort to link the line of Christ back to Abraham. This, as with most of the Biblical genealogies and those of the ancient world skips several generations. Interestingly, Jeconiah is included, although others around him are excluded, from Josiah to Jesus.

Why? Well, it would appear that Matthew wanted to make it very clear that the curse of Jeconiah — forbidding any of his descendants to sit on the Throne of David if they remained disconnected to the teaching of God — omitted Christ, as he was not actually descended from this line, although in Jewish law He was the lawful heir of Joseph, his adopted father. In 1:16, the word 'begot' is not used: 'Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus'. This refers to Mary alone. In Luke 3:23-38, the purpose of the genealogy is to link Christ back to Adam. This line is Mary's line and is naturally very different from Luke's. This is how Christian tradition always understood it. So, understood in their historical setting, the genealogies are only what is to be expected.

Dawkins also argues the following: 'In any case, if Jesus really was born of a virgin, Joseph's ancestry is irrelevant and cannot be used to fulfil, on Jesus' behalf, the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah should be descended from David'.

Dawkins is partly right, as it is Mary's ancestry that is the clincher in all of this. If you look back to the verses of Luke quoted in the prior section (Luke 1:26-

33 and 1:34-36), you will see that Mary does not jump up and down saying: 'How is this possible, as I am a virgin, I have known no man and what is more I am not of the Davidic line?' She knows that she *is* of the Davidic line, from Nathan (Luke's Gospel deals exclusively with Mary's ancestors) and not from Solomon (Matthew's Gospel dealing exclusively with Joseph's ancestors) and that the Covenant is physically fulfilled via her, a woman.

From the outset of the death of Jesus and the writings of the Gospels, the church has understood that with each Gospel that dealt with the genealogies (Matthew for Joseph's ancestors and Luke for Mary's) people have questioned how Joseph can be both son of Jacob and son of Heli? They understood the separate genealogy point, but questioned an aspect of how it was recorded. Ancient church tradition always understood the genealogies to reflect the lawful line coming via Joseph and the maternal line coming via Mary. Joseph was son of Heli by virtue of his marriage.

Julius Africanus (160 – 240 AD) reported it slightly differently in Eusebius HE 1.7.2-16. As this is very much an ancient text, less than a handful of generations removed from Jesus, it has great authority, yet it outlines a different schematic to explain the seeming difficulty.

But in order that what I have said may be made clear I shall explain the interchange of the generations. If we reckon the generations from David through Solomon, the third from the end is found to be Matthan, who begat Jacob the father of Joseph. But if, with Luke, we reckon them from Nathan the son of David, in like manner the third from the end is Melchi, whose son Eli was the father of Joseph. For Joseph was the son of Eli, the son of Melchi.

Joseph therefore being the object proposed to us, it must be shown how it is that each is recorded to be his father, both Jacob, who derived his descent from Solomon, and Eli, who derived his from Nathan; first how it is that these two, Jacob and Eli, were brothers, and then how it is that their fathers, Matthan and Melchi, although of different families, are declared to be grandfathers of Joseph.

Matthan and Melchi having married in succession the same woman, begat children who were uterine brothers, for the law did not prohibit a widow, whether such by divorce or by the death of her husband, from marrying another.

By Estha then (for this was the woman's name according to tradition) Matthan, a descendant of Solomon, first begat Jacob. And when Matthan was dead, Melchi, who traced his descent back to Nathan, being of the same tribe but of another family, married her as before said, and begat a son Eli.

Thus we shall find the two, Jacob and Eli, although belonging to different families, yet brethren by the same mother. Of these the one, Jacob, when his brother Eli had died childless, took the latter's wife and begat by her a son Joseph, his own son by nature and in accordance with reason. Wherefore also it is written: 'Jacob begat Joseph.' But according to law he was the son of Eli, for Jacob, being the brother of the latter, raised up seed to him.

Hence the genealogy traced through him will not be rendered void, which the evangelist Matthew in his enumeration gives thus: 'Jacob begat Joseph.' But Luke, on the other hand, says: 'Who was the son, as was supposed' (for this he also adds), 'of Joseph, the son of Eli, the son of Melchi'; for he could not more clearly express the generation according to law. And the expression 'he begat' he has omitted in his genealogical table up to the end, tracing the genealogy back to Adam the son of God. This interpretation is neither incapable of proof nor is it an idle conjecture.

This does not exhaust the possibilities of explaining the genealogies, but from the earliest time, this is how the church understood it.

Many modern commentators don't seem to grasp how genealogy was understood historically. For example, Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-9 tell us that if you only have daughters, the family name must go to a male member of the family. Mary and Joseph were in the wider Davidic family; he carried on the line of Heli, thus becoming a son of Heli. I am surprised that very little is made of the fact that the fulfilment of the Covenant is via a woman, other than to note that the Lord sometimes chooses the most unlikely witnesses to the unfolding of His plan at key moments. Female witnesses of the Resurrection spring to mind, whose testimony were not worth that of a man at the time, making their testimonies more incredible, yet at the same time more believable, as any redactor trying to strengthen his case would surely have removed the female parts of this story because they were less than second class citizens at the time,

as we know. Now we have the biggest of all the Jewish beliefs being fulfilled by a woman. As we know today, you are only a Jew if your mother is a Jew. The Davidic line could *only* come from His mother. God has a sense of humour, that is certain.

These historical points are clear. As we can see, the genealogy is specifically written in order to claim lawful, rather than biological, descent down the line on His father's side, and biological descent from His mother. But there is no 'begetting' with Mary — that is to say, no human father. Dawkins is just plain wrong on this matter: his assertion that the nativity narrative 'is historically impossible and internally incoherent' holds no water.