



[Luke 2:1-4](#)

A census is ordered by the emperor Augustus

Date: 1st CE

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Luke

Reference:

2:1-4

Commentary:

This passage, which opens the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, begins the birth narrative of Jesus. It is because of the census ordered by Augustus, we are told, that Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph, make the journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, in order to register at Joseph's family's home town. This passage has long been discussed in terms of the historical questions that it raises, particularly whether such a census was even a likely reality. For instance, Emil Schürer (*The History of the Jewish People*, volume 1, p. 399-427) argues that 1) Augustus never ordered such a census – this would be extremely unlikely in a client-kingdom like that of Herod the Great; 2) Quirinius governed Syria after the reign of Herod the Great (who died in 4 BCE), beginning in 6-7 CE; and 3) Roman census practice would not likely have required Joseph to report to Bethlehem. These objections have also been repeated by many others. Was Luke simply wrong, then, or is he being mis/over-interpreted by those who want to take historical accuracy as his primary intention here, not fully comprehending his reasons for mentioning the census in the first place? Whether or not Luke's information is accurate, Philip Esler argues that the fact that he includes these details suggests that among Luke's audience there were people specifically interested in Christianity's position "in the context of Roman history," and the fact that Luke has Jesus's parents dutifully trek to Bethlehem to obey the imperial order suggests that the author does not necessarily see Christian discipleship as being in direct conflict with the Roman empire (Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 201-202).

There are numerous discussions of the difficulty posed by the Luke's mention of the census (see, for instance, Darrell Bock, *Luke*, volume 1, p. 202-204, and Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, volume 1, p. 399-405). Firstly, while there is no solid evidence for an empire-wide census during Augustus's time, confusion is possible, as there is evidence that he was keen on organising the financial affairs of the empire, and registered its resources (see Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 53.30, who narrates that while gravely ill, Augustus gave his records to his co-consul Calpurnius Piso). Perhaps Luke was merely referring to such a policy, which required the provinces to register. This seems unlikely, however, as Luke is very specific about the requirements for people to go and register themselves, and this is quite different from a financial census – unless of course he was himself unclear on the issue. Secondly, Josephus's account in [Jewish Antiquities XVIII.1](#) of the census under Quirinius in Judea (6-7 CE) does not suggest a registration as closely associated with Roman rule as Luke's account makes out during the time of either Herod the Great or his son, Archelaus. However, John Nolland (*Luke 1-9:20*, p. 100) posits that the oath of loyalty to Caesar and Herod's government that Jewish people had to swear in the later part of Herod's reign (see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVII.3) might provide an explanation, albeit an extremely slender one. Thirdly, Quirinius's role as the governor of Syria is attested quite firmly in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII.1 and also a Latin inscription as occurring later than Luke states. There have been various attempts to suggest that perhaps he had two governorships (based on a broken Latin inscription [for details of both inscriptions, see John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, p. 100-101], but the name is missing, and so not clearly referring to Quirinius), however, the evidence is dubious. Nolland does not see so much of a problem with Joseph having to report to Bethlehem. He concedes that in the census of 6 CE the residents of Galilee would not have been included, but suggests that people with ancestral links to Judea might have wanted to ensure that they registered out of fear of their links with Judea might be nullified if they didn't (*Luke 1-9:20*, p. 101). This is by no means certain, however.

Scholars who are sympathetic to Luke's wider theological aims, and less concerned with his historical accuracy, note that the mention of the census has deeper significance. One suggestion is that it forms part of the Gospel's assertion of Jesus's supreme authority. Pyung-Soo Seo discusses the fact that John the Baptist's birth narrative



(Luke 1:5-25, 57-80) is introduced as happening in the days of “King Herod of Judea” (Luke 1:5), whereas we are told in this passage that Jesus’s birth comes during the time that “Quirinius was governor of Syria,” and a census was taken by order of Augustus. For Mikeal Parsons (*Luke*, p. 50-51), Luke’s mention of the census is a challenge to imperial propagandism which stated that Augustus, the “son of a God” brought peace to the world, citing *Aeneid* VI.792, in which Aeneas’s father prophesies about the coming of Augustus, the “son of God,” and Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*, which also speaks of a Roman Messiah-like figure (the precise identity of this figure is very uncertain). Parsons argues that Luke’s audience would have been familiar with such ideology, and so by introducing Jesus’s birth narrative with a mention of Augustus, therefore, the author presents Jesus as symbolically taking the place of Augustus as the saving son of a, rather, *the only* God. It must be noted, however, that Augustus and Jesus are very different saviours – Augustus’s military victories and attempts at stabilising the Roman state with laws etc., do not offer the same type of salvation that Jesus does. The Gospels make clear that Jesus’s salvation is from sin, offered in order to make one right with God and provide entry to the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, Jesus does not fulfil the expectations of the Jewish Messiah, as he does not liberate Israel from its oppressors, so interpretations which see the Gospel writers as using Jesus to subvert the emperor’s significance and authority (and that of the Roman empire more broadly) should not be pushed too far. Indeed, as mentioned above, there is some reason to argue that the Lukan author actually understood Christianity and the empire to be not entirely incompatible. This said, it is perhaps no coincidence that while John’s prominence is described in the context of the limited Judean territory of the client king Herod, Jesus himself is figuratively linked to the wider influence of the emperor Augustus (see Pyung-Soo Seo, *Luke’s Jesus in the Roman Empire*, p. 23-27). The Roman-associated authority figures – client king, governor, and emperor – are therefore perhaps utilised by Luke in order to map the relative importance of the Gospel’s two most central figures. John, who despite being a righteous teacher and baptiser respected by the mass populous and, we are told by the Markan author, even Herod Antipas (Mark 6:20), is ultimately only the forerunner to Jesus, whose authority extends to all people, both Jew and Gentile, within and beyond the oikoumenè of Augustus (see Luke 2:10, 32, which attests Jesus as the “good news” and the “light for revelation” for Israel and ?????? ?? ???, “for all people”).

Bibliographical references: Mikeal C. Parsons, [Luke](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015)
Joseph A. Fitzmyer, [The Gospel According to Luke](#) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981)
Pyung-Soo Seo, [Luke’s Jesus in the Roman Empire and the Emperor in the Gospel of Luke](#) (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015)
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Philip F. Esler, [Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)
Darrel L. Bock, [Luke](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994)
Schürer, Emil, [The History of the Jewish People in the age of Jesus Christ 1](#) (Edinburgh : Bloomsbury T&T Clark , 1973)

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