



# “While Quirinius was governing Syria”: Towards the historical plausibility of Luke 2:2

 MAVIAEL DE OLIVEIRA\*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The present paper employs a historiographical comparative approach to evaluate the historical plausibility of the census found in Luke 2:2. Though there is no direct evidence of a census under Quirinius, in Judea, before the death of Herod other than Luke 2:2, nevertheless there is enough evidence to state Luke’s historical plausibility when the larger context is considered, i.e. the nature of roman censuses, the Egyptian census system, the accounts of Josephus, Herod’s relationship with Rome, the identity and career of Quirinius and a recent archaeological discovery of a roman weight standard in Herods’ Judea.

**Key words:** Census; Quirinius; Historicity; Luke.

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<sup>1</sup> Mestrando pelo Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS); Bacharel em História pela Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB) e em Teologia pela Faculdade Adventista da Bahia (FADBA). Pastor na Igreja Adventista de Bible Auditorium, Hong Kong. E-mail: maviaeoliveira@icloud.com.

**\*Autor correspondente**

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# “Quando Quirino era governador da Síria”: Pela plausibilidade histórica de Lucas 2:2

**Resumo:** O presente artigo emprega uma abordagem historiográfica comparativa que visa avaliar a plausibilidade histórica do censo de Lucas 2:2. Nenhuma evidência de um censo sob a supervisão de Quirino na Judeia antes da morte de Herodes pôde ser encontrada, contudo, há suficientes evidências da plausibilidade histórica de Lucas 2:2 quando considerado o contexto mais amplo no qual se encontra o registro do censo, i.e., a natureza dos censos romanos, o sistema censitário egípcio, os escritos de Josefo, o relacionamento de Herodes com Roma, a identidade e carreira de Quirino e a recente descoberta de um parâmetro romano de peso no território da Judeia.

**Palavras-chave:** Censo; Quirino; Historicidade; Lucas.

“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria” (Luke 2:1-2).

“Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. αὕτη ἀπογραφή πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου” ([ALAND, 2012](#)).

Scholars have tried, for the last two hundred years, to adjudicate between the accounts of Josephus and Luke on the census of Quirinius<sup>2</sup> which has produced a vast bibliography on the topic without satisfactory results.<sup>3</sup> What is clear from the extensive bibliography on the census of Luke 2:2 is that the question is still open for debate.

In a word, the problem is that Luke is the only first century source to make a direct mention of a Roman census in Judea, before the death of Herod the Great when Quirinius ([STEIN, 1993, p. 105](#))<sup>4</sup> was governor of Syria, at the same time that Josephus records a census under Quirinius but on AD 6-7 when Archelaus was exiled on AD 6-7 (Josephus, Ant. 18.1-6), therefore a decade after the birth of Jesus<sup>5</sup> and Herod's death.<sup>6</sup> Could the census of Luke 2:2 be historically plausible? It certainly is, as affirmed [Robert Stein \(1993, p. 105\)](#), a “crux interpretum”. The absence of direct multiple attestation of the census of Luke 2:2 will inform the focus of this study to the historical

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<sup>2</sup> “Some translations of the NT use the name Cyrenius, an Anglicized form of his Greek name, while others use the Latin form Quirinius. His full name is Publius Sulpicius Quirinius” (DOLLAR, 1992). Also Potter (1992, v. 5, p. 377).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the excursus in Schürer (1973, p. 400-427) has had significant impact onto the studies of the census of Quirinius reaching the conclusion that Luke was simply mistaken. Conversely, Ramsay (1905) has found enough evidence to vindicate Luke as historian. Others like Bart Ehrman (2012) prefer to concentrate on the argumentative function of the census and discredit its historicity altogether. For a list of the most important works on the census of Quirinius, see Dabrowa (2011, p. 137-142).

<sup>4</sup> The details of the historical difficulties this text poses will be dealt with further ahead.

<sup>5</sup> Most scholars maintain must have occurred between 4 and 6 BCE; see Smith (2000, p. 278-293).

<sup>6</sup> Herod the Great almost certainly died in Jericho on the spring of 4 AD. See Gabba (2008, v. 3, p. 127). Additionally, the lunar eclipse mentioned by Josephus and the remaining textual evidences point to his death on March 13 of 4 BCE. See Zeitlin (1964, p. 1-22).



plausibility of Luke's census rather than attempt to demonstrate its historicity. Thus the question we wish to deal with: Is it historically plausible for a Roman census to have taken place in Judea prior to Herod's death?

Though much has been written on the subject, the historicity of the gospels is still a crucial debate for there cannot be a complete separation between the gospels upon which the faith in Jesus is based and their historical nature.<sup>7</sup> The historical figure<sup>8</sup> Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of Kerugma are inseparable, contrary to what [Rudolf Bultmann's \(1970\)](#) demitologization affirmed. The historical reliability of the gospels is of immeasurable importance to Christianity; therefore, scrutinizing the historical plausibility of passages like Luke 2:2 gains amplified importance due to its potential to shed new light onto the text of the New Testament.

We shall hold that the degree to which a historical object of study can be known with any level of accuracy is better framed in terms of plausibility<sup>9</sup> rather than absolute certainty, due to the limited and sometimes fragmented sources as well as the natural impossibility of epistemological neutrality in matters of History. Nonetheless, an "incomplete description does not necessitate the conclusion that it is an inaccurate description" ([LICONA, 2018, p. 34](#)), and personal bias does not necessarily mean a dishonest historical approach.

There are at least three distinguishable trends among the scholarly works on the historicity of the census of Quirinius. (1) Luke is historically wrong; (2) there is not enough evidence to prove or disprove the historicity Luke's census; and (3) Luke's census can be or is historical. Among those that have posed a solid challenge to the historical accuracy of Luke's census, Emil Schürer has certainly been the most influential ([CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 2005, p. 1479](#)). His excursus of Quirinius in *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* ([SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 400](#)) has become the blue print for investigating the historical issues surrounding the census of Quirinius. Schürer's work has paved the way for [Bart Ehrman \(2012, p. 359\)](#) to argue that Luke deliberately fabricated the Bethlehem trip to make the Messiah be born in the city of David and for [Lataster \(2015\)](#) to deny that Jesus even existed. On the same basis [Daniel R. Schwartz \(1988, p. 640\)](#) has denied the historicity of the census of Quirinius as he sought to demonstrate that Luke, though pretending to be historical, was, nevertheless, primarily a theological work. Similarly, [Raymond E. Brown \(1986, p. 660-680; 1997, p. 32\)](#) has argued that pursuing Luke's theology is more profitable than chasing his historicity. It is precisely the emphasis on Luke's theology that has dominated the Lucan studies in the last century, as well expounded by I. [Howard Marshall \(1989, p. 54\)](#). A more moderate approach is sponsored by [Solomon Zeitlin \(1964, p. 1-22\)](#), [Edward Dabrowa \(2011, p. 137-142\)](#), [F. Haverfiedl \(1900, p. 309\)](#), [Lincoln H. Blumell, and Thomas A. Wayment \(2012, p. 53-81\)](#). They belong to the group of scholars that has not found enough evidence to condemn or acquit Luke as a historian. The last group is composed by those that try to somehow claim that Luke is entirely or partially right with regards to the census of Quirinius,

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<sup>7</sup> D. A Carson (1997, p. 807, emphasis his) argues that, unlike other religious faiths, Christianity has an irreducible historical character, while Caird categorically affirms that "Christianity in the first instance is neither a set of doctrines nor a way of life, but a gospel; and a gospel means news about historical events, attested by reliable witnesses, and having at its centre a historical person." See Edwards (2002, p. 494).

<sup>8</sup> Some of the most influential recent works on the "Historical Jesus" are Crossan (1995); Bart (2012); Wright (2003); Dunn (1985); Keener (2012). For a panoramic discussion of the "historical Jesus" debate, see Bond (2012, p. 14).

<sup>9</sup> We will agree with Rhoads (2011, p. 65) that "reconstructing history consists in establishing the most plausible rather than the absolute certain."



starting with Tertulian (Marc. 4.19)<sup>10</sup> who suggested that the governor in question was Sentius Saturninus.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the milestone for those who argue in favour of Luke was [Sir William Ramsay's \(1905\) Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? Ramsay \(1925\)](#) set himself on a journey to investigate Luke's historicity with an unfavourable mind of the evangelist's historicity, but ended his investigations advocating for Luke's historical accuracy.

From Ramsay's eloquent and detailed research, a great many attempts to resolve the historical riddle of Luke 2:2 have followed. [Wayne Brindle \(1984, p. 73\)](#) has found no historical argument to deny the historical impossibility of Luke 2:2, while [John Thorlev \(1979, p. 81-84\)](#) sees no reason to categorically denounce the census of Quirinius as a historical blunder. Likewise, [Sherwin-White \(1963, p. 162-171\)](#) tries to demonstrate that Luke was aware of the political landscape of the time he writes about, thus Luke meant what he wrote and it is arguably historical. [John H. Rhoads \(2011, p. 87\)](#), with a source criticism approach to Josephus, has favourably judged Luke, as well as [J. Duncan M. Derret \(1975, p. 81-108\)](#), who finds, especially on the Egyptian papyri, good evidences for the census of Quirinius in Herod's territory. [Lily Ross Taylor \(1933, p. 120-133\)](#) finds Luke right about the census, but wrong in connecting Quirinius with it, and, finally, [John M. Rist \(2005, p. 489-491\)](#) has even suggested that the reading of Quirinius is altogether mistaken as the author of Luke, or subsequent copies, confused Quirinius with Quintilius Varus, governor of Syria in the last days of Herod.

One last position to be considered is the ingenious solution sponsored by Mark Smith,<sup>12</sup> that places the birth of Jesus at AD 6, on the occasion of Archelaus' exile and the better documented census of Quirinius on AD 6-7 (Josephus, Ant. 18.1-6). Smith questions of the term "Herod King of Judea"<sup>13</sup> of Luke 1:5, and suggests that Archelaus could be the aforementioned king.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the term "Herod Ethnarch" was also found on coins issued under Archelaus ([BRAUND, 1992, v. 1, p. 368](#)).<sup>15</sup> The sponsoring of this position would mean the abandonment of the traditional chronology of the nativity and would require a number of odd adaptations to state its credence.<sup>16</sup> Tough seemingly interesting we should agree with [Ramos \(2016\)](#) that this "Herod the king" (Luke 1:5) was likely Herod the Great.

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<sup>10</sup> Tertulian affirms that the census that led Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was ordered by Sentius Saturninus and that the reading of Quirinius is mistaken; see Tertulian in Roberts; Donaldson; Coxe (1885, p. 378); McGovern (1906, p. 222).

<sup>11</sup> Sentius Saturninus was governor of Syria from 9 to 6 BCE; see Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 350).

<sup>12</sup> Smith (2000, p. 285-286) draws from external evidence to base his claims at the same time that he admits that the New Testament nowhere refers to Archelaus as Herod.

<sup>13</sup> Could the less precise term βασιλεύς be a reflection of the diminished political approval Archelaus had? (BALZ, H. R.; SCHNEIDER, G., 1990-1993, v. 1, p. 161). Josephus also makes use of the loose term βασιλεύς to refer to Herod. See Braund (1992, v. 1, p. 368); Derrett (1975, p. 83).

<sup>14</sup> Archelaus was the ruler of Judea from 3 BCE to AD 6. Dio Cassius calls Archelaus, Herod Palæstinus (Dio Cassius 55:6). Like his brother, Antipas is also called Herod. For a fuller discussion on Herod as a royal title see Derrett (1975, p. 84). Also Smith (2000, p. 285) claims that "eleven times Herod Antipas is referred to as Herod (Luke 3: 19; 8:3; 9:9; 13:3; 13:7 [twice]; 23:8, 11, 12, 15; Acts 4:27), four times as Herod the Tetrarch (Luke 3:1; 3:19; 9:7; acts 13:1)."

<sup>15</sup> See also Porter (1915, v. 3, p. 2079). Also Bledsoe (2016).

<sup>16</sup> The nativity accounts of Luke and Matthew places, beyond suspicion, Jesus' birth before the death of Herod the Great on 4 BCE. Additionally, Luke dates the beginning of Jesus' public ministry on the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Luke 3:1), therefore 28-29 AD when He was "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23). If Jesus was born in 6 AD then He would have been only 21-22 years of age when He was baptized by John. Does 21-22 count as close enough to "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23)? It seems hardly the case. See Marshall (1978, p. 133).

## A review of main arguments

In order to proceed with this investigation of the historical plausibility of Luke 2:2, I will structure our arguments after [Schürer’s \(1973, v. 1, p. 407-427\)](#) contentions as they seem to be the most lucid and poignant set of arguments against the historicity of the census of Luke 2:2. Shürer’s five contentions are: “I. History does not otherwise record a general imperial census in the time of Augustus;” “II. Under a Roman census, Joseph would not have been obliged to travel to Bethlehem, and Mary would not have been required to accompany him there;” “III. A Roman census could not have been carried out in Palestine during the time of King Herod;” “IV. Josephus knows nothing of a Roman census in Palestine during the reign of Herod; he refers rather to the census of AD 6-7 as something new and unprecedented;” and “V. A census held under Quirinius could not have taken place in the time of Herod, for Quirinius was never governor of Syria during Herod’s lifetime.”

For the sake of our argument we will deal with Shürer’s contentions in the following order: I, II, IV, III and V. Special attention will be paid to contentions III and V as we suspect that on those there could be found evidence to alter condition of stalemate that the census of Quirinius has reached ([SHERWIN-WHITE, 1963, p. 163](#)).

## There was no empire-wide census under Augustus

Luke starts his account of the census saying that Augustus Caesar was behind the census that would register (*ἀπογράφεσθαι*)<sup>17</sup> for taxation purposes ([SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 400](#); [DANKER; BAUER; ARNDT, 2000, p. 108](#)), “all the world” (*πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην*) (Luke 2:1). [Schürer \(1973, v. 1, p. 406\)](#) sees in *πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην* the equivalent Latin expression *orbis Romanos*, that, according to him, can only mean “the whole Roman empire . . . both Italy and the Provinces.” Such a hyperbolic expression refers only to the Roman world, as barbarian tribes were not counted.<sup>18</sup> In the other hand, [Marshal \(1978, p. 98\)](#) points out that the Latin equivalent of *πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην* is far from being the only option available as he quotes C. C. Torrey’s suggestion that the equivalent Semitic expression, “the whole land”, which refers to Palestine, is to be understood. This argument gains substance given the Semitic origin and scope of Luke’s sources.<sup>19</sup> It remains true that there is no evidence of a direct order from Augustus that the entire Roman empire should be taxed ([MORRIS, 2008, p. 98](#)), in fact there was never a universal, “single census of the Roman Empire” ([SHERWIN-WHITE, 1963, p. 168](#)), but that does not necessarily mean that Luke envisioned a simultaneous universal census by *πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην*.

To Brown, it is more plausible that by “all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1) Luke meant the general Augustan effort to organize the empire which was illustrated by the many censuses<sup>20</sup> in all the provinces that did not happen in a single event but a systematic reckoning

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<sup>17</sup> The verb *ἀπογράφεσθαι* could be translated as enroll or register for taxation purposes; see Lukaszewski; Dubis; Blakley (2011, Lk 2:1).

<sup>18</sup> Louw and Nida (1989, v. 1, p. 15) suggest that Luke 2:1 could be read as: “Emperor Augustus sent out an order that all the people over whom he ruled should register themselves for the census.”

<sup>19</sup> Though Luke’s audience seems not to have been primarily Jewish, there are reasons to believe that Luke shared a common source with Mark and Matthew, which can be said to have been, markedly, Jewish in origin and language. See DeMoss (2001, p. 91-92). Also Stein (1993, p. 27-28); Puskas; Crump (2008, p. 64); Carey (2010, p. 107).

<sup>20</sup> On the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, Augustus boasts of being directly responsible for three censuses on imperial provinces (*Res gest. divi Aug.* 8.2-4) on 28 BCE, 8 BCE and AD 14 see Teuff (2014, p. 75-90); Brown (1986, p. 670).



of data.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it could also be argued that what Luke envisioned was the fact that it was during the days of Augustus that all the provinces, underwent a census or taxation assessment (SHERWIN-WHITE, 1963, p. 168). If this argument is valid as a general trend of Augustus administration, it should also be noticed that Judea was not a province in the days of Herod the Great (SHERWIN-WHITE, 1963, p. 168), but a client kingdom (SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 884) and Herod called *rex socius* (KUGLER; HARTIN, 2009, p. 338).

Unquestionably, a single line: “in the days of Caesar Augustus” (Luke 2:1), does not suffice if the aim was to record a single census of the entire Roman Empire. But if Luke had in mind a general census that took place in the entire territory of Judea, or even a series of apparently disconnected provincial censuses that could have been perceived as a centrally orchestrated effort (BUTLER, 2000, p. 38), then it could be argued that there are evidences to support the historical plausibility of Luke’s census.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, *πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην* is more naturally read rhetorically than geographically. If so, “All the world” aims to introduce the census in Judea, not a universal Augustan census (SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 884). Furthermore, it would not have been unfitting for Luke to associate Caesar Augustus with the efforts of bringing order and peace onto Rome, as registered on the *Res gestae divi Augusti*.<sup>23</sup> Augustus takes pride in meticulously, registering his administrative actions, including three censuses/registrations of roman citizens (*Res gest. divi Aug. 8.2- 4*). Additionally, Augustus was responsible for the establishment of innovations to the roman fiscal system that included various censuses after the tumultuous last days of the republic (SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 883).

Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 400) correctly notices that more than Augustus’ administrative brilliance, the *Res gestae* proves nothing directly, about the census of Luke 2:2,<sup>24</sup> however, it does nothing to disprove it either. On the contrary, the highly organized Roman fiscal system and administrative principles laid by Augustus makes a census in the chaotic last years of Herod<sup>25</sup> seem historically plausible. Especially, when taken into consideration that a census of all provinces was definitely accomplished for the first time under Augustus (SHERWIN-WHITE, 1963, p. 169), though the inclusion of client kingdoms into this general policy is still to be historically attested.

## Nature of the imperial census

There were two kinds of census during the time of Augustus. The first was the *Tributum Soli*.<sup>26</sup> The second was the *Tributum Capitis*, which “included various kinds of personal taxes, namely, a property tax which varied according to a person’s capital valuation, as well as a poll-tax

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<sup>21</sup> “What Augustus did was to lay down the principle of systematic ‘enrolment’ in the Roman world, not to arrange for the taking of one single census” (RAMSAY, 1905, p. 120).

<sup>22</sup> Dio Cassius makes numerous references to the many censuses that were conducted or orders by Augustus. Augustus conducted a census of Italy (Dio Cassius 15.13:4), ordered a census in Gaul various times (Dio Cassius 13.22:5), he made himself liable to taxation and registration (Dio Cassius 14.35:1). For a larger discussion on the Augustan census, see Udoh (2006).

<sup>23</sup> After the civil war with Antony, there was much need for Octavian to organize the empire that now had only him as undisputed leader. See Saddington (2009, p. 303-325).

<sup>24</sup> Also Danker; Bauer; Arndt (2000, p. 108).

<sup>25</sup> See section “Herod’s last days.”

<sup>26</sup> That was a taxation on agricultural produce as well the very use of the land which could be paid with produce itself or money (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 40; SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 883).

proper at a flat rate for all capita" (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 402).<sup>27</sup> Given the nature of the censuses in the time of Augustus, considerations have to be made on how does the account of Joseph and Mary travelling to Bethlehem in order to fulfil their civil duties, compare to the general historical scenario.

Firstly, as Marshal (1978, p. 101) notices and Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 411-413) emphasizes, if read literally, the idea that every taxpayer in Syria should find their ancestral home<sup>28</sup> (Luke 2:3), to be registered, (ἀπογράφεισθαι), is simply unthinkable due to its impracticality and contradiction with Roman customs (MARSHALL, 1978, p. 101), which normally did not require tax-payers to travel but to register in their place of residence or where they owned portions of land (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 411). The normal procedure involved the head of the family reporting the relevant information to the censor about his household, including family members, slaves and land (MUNSON, 2002, p. 105). If the census of Luke 2:2 was strictly carried out in a Roman fashion, Joseph would not have had to travel (STEIN, 1993, p. 105), unless he had some taxable property in Bethlehem and Mary's presence no required, though not unreasonable.<sup>29</sup> Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 409) argues that, even though the Romans were known for adapting Roman practices to local customs, allowing a census to be taken based on ancestry would have been unintelligent. This line of reasoning, though rational, fails to appreciate the complex and violent, socio-political landscape of Herod's last days, as well as how diversely, censuses could have adapted to local customs. Perhaps the complexity and turmoil of Herod's last years, as well his wish to be presented as a Jewish leader, led him to allow a Roman census in his territory which was well adapted to local culture.<sup>30</sup> If that is the case, then Judea was no exception since "it was the habit of the Romans in the East to adapt their arrangements to the custom of the country" (RAMSAY, 1905, p. 146). Perhaps it could explain why the census that led Jesus to be born in Bethlehem was apparently peaceful whereas the census of AD 6-7 was marked by revolt (Acts 5:36-37; Josephus, Ant. 18.1).

## The Egyptian household census' system

The early third century census order of Vibius Maximus (Oxyrhynchus Box 3, B34, H5) (THOMAS, 1975, p. 201-221) stands as a challenge to the suggestion that a census based on ancestry could not have taken place, however impractical it may sound.<sup>31</sup> The order states that every 14 years, the inhabitants of Egypt (THOMAS, 1975, p. 215) should return to their homes (ἀπό των νομῶν) (Oxyrhynchus Box 3, B34, H5, Line 20-24) (THOMAS, 1975, p. 203) in order to register for taxation purposes. Such an attestation suggests greater regularity and frequency of censuses in the territory of a Roman province, Egypt, and probably to other parts of the region.

Ramsay (1905, p. 15) sees in the Egyptian fiscal system sound evidence that not only that there was a precedent on the Eastern part of the Roman Empire of census based on ancestry but that such system could be traced back to 23 BCE, year when Augustus was fully invested with

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<sup>27</sup> Rents on imperial as well as public properties were also liable for taxation. See also Schmitz (1992, v. 1, p. 883).

<sup>28</sup> *ἐαυτοῦ πόλιν* clearly refers to a place of origin or ancestry; see Robertson (1933, Lk 2:3).

<sup>29</sup> Elaboration for the reasons why Mary traveled with Joseph will be done on "the presence of Mary" section.

<sup>30</sup> Butler (2000, p. 38) argues that it was the Jewish custom to be counted through tribal identification, not place of residence.

<sup>31</sup> The order reads: "The prefect declares that as it is the time of the fourteen-year census, all [ἀπό των] νομῶν must return home special provision being made for those whose services are necessary at Alexandria"; see Thomas (1975, p. 215).



imperial powers. Such circumstantial argument must be taken with care since [Ramsay \(1905, p. 153\)](#) himself also notices that there are no records of house census prior to the 70 AD. However, the lack of direct evidence does not mean that the stable cycle of Egyptian censuses cannot be true retroactively, especially in the light of its origin.

Additionally, the argument for the cyclic stability of the Egyptian fiscus can be inferred from the "well-established Egyptian census bureaucracy from Ptolemaic times" ([DERRETT, 1975, p. 88](#)), which the Romans could have emulated and applied to the nearby provinces and client kingdoms that lacked systematized census procedures<sup>32</sup> which was the case of many provinces, including Syria and the kingdom of Judea. Therefore, had a census of Judea been ordered, it would be natural to use, as reference, the mechanisms and structure of the long-established Egyptian census.<sup>33</sup>

It is also noteworthy to mention that 14-year cycle of censuses we learn from Vibius Maximus order<sup>34</sup>, coincides with AD 6-7<sup>35</sup>, date of the more well-known census (Luke 5:36-37; Josephus, *Ant.* 18:1),<sup>36</sup> as well as the earliest date for Jesus' birth ([GABBA, 2008, v. 3, p. 127](#)). [Ramsay \(1905, p. 153\)](#) sees on the coincidence of those cycles a vindication of Luke, but [Schürer \(1973, v. 1, p. 413\)](#) affirms that even if we accept the regularity of Egyptian censuses and its applicability to Syria it would not prove that a Roman census was taken in Herod's territory. On that point we should look at the evidence for a possible Roman direct intervention in Herod's Judea on the section: Herod and Rome, of chapter 3.

Additionally, the third century jurist Ulpian says that, in the territory of Syria, boys were liable to registration from the age of fourteen (*Digest.* L 15,3) ([WATSON, 1998, v. 4, p. 446](#)).<sup>37</sup> Though Ulpian is a late source for the census here in question, it would be foolish to presuppose that two census systems, in Egypt and Syria, would have independently emerged. More plausible is to argue that Rome made use of an existing and efficient system to apply it to territories that lacked systematic censuses.

## The census as a theological device

It has been argued that Luke's census was a narrative device created in order for Jesus to fulfil the prophecies about the Messiah' place of birth. Trend that seems to reverberate in the current state of Lucan studies as [Marshall \(1989, p. 53\)](#) affirms that "the discovery of Luke as a theologian is the most outstanding feature of contemporary scholarship." Thus, it seems that the theology of Luke has superseded the evangelist's historicity. One of the most vocal proponents of Luke's

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<sup>32</sup> Egypt was extremely rich compared to Judea and with revenue comparable with that of Gaul (BOWMAN, 1996, p. 679).

<sup>33</sup> The Egyptian fiscal preparedness as opposed to that of Judea can be exemplified the fact that Egypt revenue was twelve times the revenue of Judea; see Bowman (1996, p. 679).

<sup>34</sup> For the date of Vibius Maximus order and the 14 year cycle see Thomas (1975, p. 202).

<sup>35</sup> This coincidence must not be overstated as the census of Quirinius of AD 6-7 was not regular in its nature but had the specific purpose to assess Judea that had just been annexed to the province of Syria. (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1-6). So Schürer is right when he claims that Josephus represents the census of AD 6-7 as being something unprecedented.

<sup>36</sup> We do not wish to argue that the census conducted by Quirinius on 6-7 AD was part of a regular census for it is clear that it was ordered under exceptional circumstances, namely, the banishment of Archelaus and the annexation of Judea as a roman province. See Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 416-420).

<sup>37</sup> See also Marshall (1978, p. 102).



unhistorical nature is Bart Ehrman, who sustains that the census of Quirinius was a deliberate fabrication to satisfy the prophecy of Micah 5:2.<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, [Daniel R. Schwartz \(1988, p. 637\)](#) has argued of Luke’s unreliability as a historian and his mainly theological agenda, presenting as evidence Zechariah’s praise to God, on his son’s circumcision, for “raising up for Israel a ‘horn of salvation’ in the house of David . . . a reference to Jesus, not to John” (Luke 2:69). Furthermore, [Schwartz \(1988, p. 638\)](#) points out as reinforcing his argument the scene of John “worshiping” Jesus when still in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:44). Later, John the Baptist’s lengthy description of the Christ’s superior character and the fleeting manner in which Jesus’ baptism is dealt with (Luke 3:16-22) which, when read alongside Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:14), that seems to emphasize John’s reticence to baptize Jesus.

Despite his reasoning for Luke’s theological agenda, [Schwartz \(1988, p. 639\)](#) admits that the inclusion of the original formulation “to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the remission of their sins” (Luke 1:77) at the scene of Zacharias addressing his son John, is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Where did Luke learn this new formula?

This line of reasoning would only make sense if Luke’s audience was well familiar with the Jewish sacred Scriptures, but that would be contrary to the evidences of Luke’s Christian audience ([STEIN, 1993, p. 27](#)).

Secondly, it appears to be a consensus among scholars that Luke as written in Ephesus ([SCHWARTZ, 1988, p. 643](#)) to an audience of urban gentile<sup>39</sup> Christians ([TRITES; LARKIN, 2006, p. 353](#)), that could be assumed as being an audience disinterested in the specific details of Jewish Scriptures. It could explain why “the gospel is noticeably lacking in Hebrew words, Palestinian colours and direct Old Testament citations” ([BROWN, 1993, p. 236](#)) and makes no direct or indirect reference that Micah 5:2 was being fulfilled ([STEIN, 1993, p. 104](#)). Also “the Greek of Luke is the best of the four Gospels, and it is likely that Greek was the evangelist’s native tongue” ([BROWN, 1993, p. 236](#)). Why would Luke include in his nativity narrative an unnecessary argument for his audience and a conscious fabrication that could be verified as untrue? Luke’s general concern with geographical and historical accuracy ([DESILVA, 2004, p. 356](#)) is at irreconcilable odds with Ehrman’s hypothesis. There is no doubt that Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem has prophetic significance, but does not mean that the events that surrounded it are well-thought fabrications to convince Luke’s, audience, of Jesus’ messianic character. We should conclude that there are enough internal evidences in Luke’s gospel to demonstrate that it was intended to be read as history and that the idea that the census was a fictional element of a plot to lead Jesus to be born in the right place is not plausible.

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<sup>38</sup> Barth Ehrman (2012, p. 569) is a vocal proponent that Luke was wilfully wrong about the birth place of Jesus: “It seems most likely that Luke, or his source, simply made it up to make sure that Jesus was born where the prophets—in this case Micah—indicated that the Jewish saviour would come from, Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2; quoted in Matthew 2:6).” He is part of a minority of scholars that have altogether denied the historicity of the gospels.

<sup>39</sup> Stein (1993, p. 26) lists nine of the most used evidences for a gentile audience of Luke and Acts: “(1) Luke’s avoidance of Semitic expressions (6:14; 8:54; 22:42; 23:45); (2) the substitution of non-Palestinian architecture (5:19; 8:16), weather, or geography (6:48-49) for Palestinian; (3) the substitution of the term ‘lawyer’ for the more Jewish ‘scribe’ (10:25; 11:52); (4) the use of Judea to describe Palestine in general (1:5; 4:44; 6:17; 7:17; etc.); (5) the explanation of Jewish customs (22:1, 7). Other reasons include (6) the omission of accounts dealing with specifically Jewish traditions or customs; (7) the extension of Jesus’ genealogy back past Abraham to Adam (3:38); (8) the references to the Jews in the third person (7:3; 23:51; Acts 10:39; 13:5; 14:1; 17:1; 21:11); and (9) the concern for the Gentile mission (Acts 10-11; 13:46-48; 18:6; 28:24-28).”



## Joseph did not have to travel and Mary did not have to be present

As we have already argued, the Roman provincial censuses did not necessarily require displacement. In a normal census, traveling would only make sense if the individual to be registered had taxable properties somewhere else than his place of residence. For this set of circumstances to apply to Joseph he would have had to own some kind of taxable property in rural or urban Bethlehem and the census of Luke 2:2 would have to be an adapted version of a Roman provincial census conducted in Judea, before or on 4 BCE, which was not a province until AD 6 on the occasion of Archelaus' banishment.<sup>40</sup> The former is practically impossible to demonstrate, but the latter could be argued in terms of historical plausibility.

That being said there is a set of circumstances which can explain why Joseph had to travel, why was Mary with him if he could have done it for her?

### The presence of Mary

Under a Roman census, Mary was not required to be with Joseph in order to fulfil her civil duties. In fact it has been labelled as "implausible tale, the very stuff of myth" (DERRETT, 1975, p. 87). However, we learn from Ulpian that "in the provinces of Syria men are bound to pay poll-tax from fourteen, women from twelve, in both cases up to sixty-five" (WATSON, 1998, v. 4, p. 446; cf. MARSHALL, 1978, p. 102).

Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 412) also argues that Luke implies the necessity of Mary travelling in order to pay taxes and that it was just unnecessary, however, this conjecture extrapolates what the text of Luke 2:5 allows to say.<sup>41</sup> What he probably did not contemplate are the circumstances on which Mary was pregnant. She was a "betrothed wife" (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:27; 2:4) (MORRIS, 2008, p. 100), apparently not a regular wife yet. Only her future husband received, besides her, an explanation of the supernatural origin of her pregnancy (Matthew 1:19-20) and it is presumable that a woman in such a vulnerable position would not feel comfortable or safe (STEIN, 1993, p. 107) in the absence of the only person that, besides her, was communicated with regards to that unique pregnancy (Matt 1:20). After all, Mary was still under the law that allowed an adulterous woman to be stoned or even burned (Deut 22:21; Lev 20:10; Gen 38:24) (MARSH, 2016), punishments that seem to have been in practice around Mary's time.<sup>42</sup> Such circumstance could, rather naturally, explain why Mary would choose to undergo such an inconvenient trip even if she did not have the legal obligation to.

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<sup>40</sup> Archelaus deposed several high priests in Jerusalem to serve his own political ends (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.339). He rebuilt the royal palace at Jericho and diverted water from *Neara* (a city he renamed "Archelaos" after himself; Josephus, *Ant.* 17.340). Josephus also tells us that Archelaus transgressed Jewish Law by marrying his brother's wife, Glaphyra (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.341) and behaved "savagely not only towards the Jews but also towards the Samaritans" (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.111). All those explain why Archelaus was summoned by Augustus to Rome and eventually ousted.

<sup>41</sup> The preposition *σύν* in relation with the proper name *Μαριάμ* does not necessarily express an obligation to be with; see Lukaszewski; Dubis; Blakley (2011, Lk 2:5).

<sup>42</sup> The story of the woman caught in adultery of John 8 seems to indicate that even if stoning was not normally practiced in the first century, it was present sufficiently present in the imaginary to be evoked when convenient.



## Could Joseph have known his ancestry?

Another challenge posed against the reliability of Luke's account is fact that Joseph knows exactly where to go when required to return to his ancestral home. It is quite reasonable to claim that among the illiterate, poverty-stricken Judea, most would not be able trace back their ancestry,<sup>43</sup> nonetheless, could Joseph have known where to go if required to return to his place of ancestry? [Joachim Jeremias \(1969, p. 275\)](#) has argued that Judaism of the Second Temple Period remained rather focused on ancestry and genealogies, which may help pave the way for Joseph to have been aware of his own genealogical origins. In that regard the affirmation, by Julius Africanus ([CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 2005, p. 918](#)) in a letter preserved by Eusebius<sup>44</sup> to Aristides (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.7.12),<sup>45</sup> affirms that Herod burned genealogical records in order for his non-Jewish origin to remain concealed, which suggests that public genealogies were somehow kept. Thus [Jeremias \(1969, p. 276\)](#) affirms that "even the simple Israelite knew his immediate ancestors and could point to which of the twelve tribes he belonged." The Israelites, and especially those of the tribe of Judah, or the "house of David," were particularly concerned with their origin for it was known that the Messiah would be a Davidic one ([STEIN, 1993, p. 505](#)). The post exile Israelites were keen in keeping their genealogies (Ezra 8:1-14; cf. Neh. 7:6-69; Ezra 2:1-67; Neh. 11:3-24). Given the general messianic expectation of the first century ([GUPTA, 2016](#)), it would not be surprising that even the lay Jewish would be interested in his/her ancestry.

[Bockmuel \(2011, p. 488\)](#) sums up the evidences pointing to the availability of genealogical records in first century Palestine:

Josephus repeatedly claims that public genealogical records were kept (e.g. C. Ap. 1.31; Life 6), a conviction that remained alive from the early Second Temple (Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:64) to the rabbinic periods (e.g. m. Qidd. 4.4; Gen. Rab. 98.8). It receives interesting resonance in Julius Africanus' early third-century affirmation that Herod the Great had destroyed the genealogical records of the house of David in order more easily to advance his own claim to kingship (in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.7). Oral genealogies are certainly plausible among priestly and other distinctive families.

There is no direct evidence that Joseph had any contact with genealogical documentation; however it is plausible to claim that he could have known where to go if he was required to return to his ancestral home.

## Josephus and Luke

The controversy between the contrasting accounts of Josephus and Luke, and the preference of some for former over latter, seems reasonable when the detailed and elaborate account of the

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<sup>43</sup> Such genealogical concern was certainly exacerbated among the priests, whose ancestry had to be verified as sons of priests in the temple at Jerusalem. Such records can be traced back at least to the Hasmonaean period but can be much ancient (GOODMAN, 2005, p. 770).

<sup>44</sup> For more information of Eusebius see McGiffert (1890, v. 1, p. 46).

<sup>45</sup> The relevant passage from Julius Africanus to Aristides as preserved by Eusebius reads: "Herod, inasmuch as the lineage of the Israelites contributed nothing to his advantage, and since he was goaded with the consciousness of his own ignoble extraction, burned all the genealogical records, thinking that he might appear of noble origin if no one else were able, from the public registers, to trace back his lineage to the patriarchs or proselytes" (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.7.12).



coming of Quirinius to Syria, his mission, who came with him, his function and when the census took place (Ant. 17.354, 18.1-10, 18.26) is compared with the fleeting Lucan mention of a census, during the days of Augustus and when Quirinius was "governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1-2). The literary contrast is clear.

To make the apparent incompatibility of Josephus and Luke even clearer, the nativity accounts of Luke and Matthew, when are read together, form a chronology of the birth of Jesus that is both before the death of Herod the Great on 4 BCE (Luke 2:1-2; Matthew 2:19-22) and during a census when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). Josephus, in the other hand, places a census of Quirinius a decade after the death of Herod Great (RHOADS, 2011, p. 65) on specific orders from Augustus to "take a census of property in Syria and to sell the estate of Archelaus" (Josephus, Ant. 17. 355)<sup>46</sup> which took place on "in the 37th year after the defeat of Antony at Actium" (Ant. 18.26),<sup>47</sup> therefore 6-7 AD. Lastly, Josephus records a popular revolt led by a certain Judas from Gamala claiming that "taxation was not better than slavery" (Josephus, J. W. 2.117-18; Ant. 18.4-23).

Luke's account of the census, in the other hand, starts with a decree from Augustus that "all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1)<sup>48</sup> associated with a time "when Quirinius was governing Syria" (Luke 2:2) and that registration was to be made in everyone's "own city" (Luke 2:3). Later in the book of Acts Luke also mentions a revolt led by a certain Judas from Galilee "in the days of the census" (Acts 5:37) (SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 884) after a levant led by a certain Theudas.<sup>49</sup> As it seems, Luke was aware of at least two census, one uneventful and another violent.

Hence, if the census of Luke 2:2 and Antiquities 18 are the same, then Josephus and Luke cannot be correct simultaneously. Given the relative historical reliability of both Luke and Josephus and their attention to political details, would there be any good reasons to prefer one over the other?

### Source criticism of Josephus

Rhoads' makes a case, on the basis of source criticism,<sup>50</sup> that there is enough internal evidences in the Josephan corpus to affirm that he, in arranging his sources (LEVINE, 1992, v. 1, p. 166), in order to construct a reasonable chronology, duplicated the accounts of a revolt led by a certain Judas that appeared to be active on the days near Herod the Great's death, during the funeral ceremonies and by the time to Archelaus' exile.

An insurgent named Judas, in the relevant timespan, appears three times. The first is called Judas son of Saripheus<sup>51</sup> who, accompanied by Matthias, stirred up the young people to tear down a golden eagle that Herod had erected and placed on the gate of the temple (Ant. 17.148-167) for it violated the second commandment (Exodus 20:4).

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<sup>46</sup> Archelaus was ousted and exiled to Vienne of Gaul; see Braund (1992, v. 1, p. 368).

<sup>47</sup> The battle of Actium took place on 31 BCE (PELLING, 1996, v. 10, p. 54).

<sup>48</sup> On the meaning of "all the world should be registered" see section "There was no world-wide census."

<sup>49</sup> Luke places the revolt of Theudas before that of Judas Galilee in 6 AD, conversely, Josephus places Theudas in the days of the procuratorship of Fadus from AD 44 to 46; see Donfried (1992, v. 1, p. 1012). Also Goodman (2005, p. 753). Additionally as Sweeney has pointed out Theudas could have been just a nickname and there could have been more than one Theudas; see Sweeney (2016).

<sup>50</sup> For an elaboration on the topic see Kugler; Hartin (2009, p. 38).

<sup>51</sup> Possibly a patronymic name, from Sepphoris in the region of Galilee; see Negev (1990, s v. Sepphoris; Diocaesarea).



The second Judas ([Josephus, Ant. 17.271](#)) was a bandit, caught with great difficulty after he assaulted Herod’s palace in Sepphoris ([NEGEV, 1990, s. v. Sepphoris; Diocaesarea](#)) and seized weapons with a group of local man. The assault took place when of the disturbances provoked by the death of Herod.<sup>52</sup>

The third Judas led a revolt against the Roman taxation led by Quirinius when Judea became part of the province of Syria ([Josephus, J. W. 2.117-118; Ant. 18.4-23](#)). Rhoads seems correct to affirm that those three accounts are very similar in multiple levels and that it is reasonable to say that Josephus may have duplicated the revolts of the eagle raid and the Sepphoris’ palace assault. Otherwise how could it be explained that “two insurgents against Herod were active within weeks of each other around the time of Herod’s death, both named Judas, both with connections to Sepphoris, and both nicknamed in connection with a famous father” ([RHOADS, 2011, p. 87](#)) if they are not indeed the same person, on events compatible with the “ten thousand disorders . . . like tumults” ([Josephus, Ant. 17.269](#)) followed by the death of Herod?<sup>53</sup>

## Towards the historical plausibility of Luke 2:2

Could a Roman census have taken place in Herod’s Judea? The answer for this question could bring light into the obscure question of the census of Quirinius since no other client king of Rome is so well documented than Herod the Great.<sup>54</sup> As [Enrich S. Gruen \(2005, p. 155\)](#) has expressed: “The extensive testimony of Josephus affords a more intimate glimpse into the affairs of Herod than we possess for any other dependent ruler. Herod has thus become the client prince par excellence, a prime exhibit for the relationship between Rome and vassal kings.” Hence our anticipation that the historical plausibility of a census during Herod’s lifetime may be discerned from his relationship with Rome.

Herod’s dependence on Rome can be observed from the beginning to the end of his, relatively stable, career as ruler ([LEVINE, 1992, v. 1, p. 161](#)). Three years after the chaos and violence that followed the death of his father on 37 BCE, he went to Rome in order to seek the second triumvirs ([BUNSON, 2002, p. 556-557](#)) support of his installation as king over his father’s territory.<sup>55</sup> On Autumn of the same year ([BUNSON, 2002, p. 556-557](#)), in Rome, Herod was made rex socius et amicus populi Romani of Judea ([BALZ; SCHNEIDER, 1990-1993, v. 1, p. 123, s. v. Ἡρώδης](#)).

Herod ascension to power and his retaining of his position as king was completely dependent on his relationship with Rome which informed his unwillingness to compromise his friendship with Rome, first with Antony, then with Augustus, at any and all costs ([SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 297](#)), for Herod was distinctively aware that, within Roman territory, no royal power

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<sup>52</sup> Josephus says that Herod captured this Judas who assaulted his palace at Sepphoris, however, it seems more likely that Josephus is conflating two accounts to fit his registers of “ten thousand disorders . . . like tumults” ([Josephus, Ant. 17.269](#)) because the attack on Sepphoris’ palace was likely to have taken place during the tumults that followed Herod’s death.

<sup>53</sup> Rhoads’ suggestions ought not to be accepted without reservations. What can be safely concluded is that Josephus, in spite of his historical value, should not be overestimated, whereas Luke, not ostracized. Sherwin-White (1963, p. 104) points to the necessity of reasonable criticism of Josephus given the arguable biases of a Jewish author recording the lives of governors and legates of Judea. Also Brindle (1984, p. 73).

<sup>54</sup> The term “the Great” “probably referred primarily to the fact that he was the oldest son of Antipater”; see Winstead (2016).

<sup>55</sup> Early on 40 BCE Herod flees to Rome to request the second triumvirs to confirm his father’s will to name him king of Judea, wish that was not observed as there were other claimants to Antipater’s throne; see Goodman (2005, p. 40).



could be exercised expect with the emperor's sanction, sometimes with the need of senate confirmation (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 316). Thus, Herod knew of his dependence upon his suzerain kingdom.

Such dependence could be exemplified when Herod gave a "great quantity of silver and gold" to Antony after the submission of Jerusalem (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.5) and by, when Herod, submissively attended when summoned before the triumvir to explain the death of Aristobulus,<sup>56</sup> which he managed to escape acquitted (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.62-67). After Actium, Herod did not waste time to show his allegiance to the victorious Octavian when he, with Didius, governor of Syria, prevented a group of gladiators joining the defeated Antony in Egypt for one last battle (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.195).<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, it can be surely ascertained that Herod took every opportunity he could to give proof of his loyalty to the emperor, with gifts and visits<sup>58</sup> as well as cities and temples built in honour of the princeps.<sup>59</sup>

Not even family matters were resolved without the permission of Augustus, which is, perhaps, best exemplified with the trial and execution, before Roman officials, of Alexander and Aristobulus, his sons in 7 BCE (LEVINE, 1992, v. 3, p. 168) and later, the imprisonment of Antipater overseen by Quintilius Varus,<sup>60</sup> governor of Syria and his execution after given permission from Augustus (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.187).

Moreover, that Herod was not allowed to mint gold or silver coins, but only bronze currency, highlights furthermore Herod's dependence in every matter, including finances (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 450).

## Herod's last days

The last few years of Herod were full of domestic violence, physical deterioration and distrust as manifest in the execution of many members of his household, including three of his

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<sup>56</sup> Aristobulus was the son of Mariamme, second wife of Herod. The young Aristobulus was named high priest at the age of 17 by the instigation of Alexandra, Mariamme's mother who found in Cleopatra of Egypt and ally to try to undermine Herod's power. Aristobulus was drowned at the orders of Herod who had to answer for this at Laodicea before Antony (Josephus, *Ant.* 15. 62-67; SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 298).

<sup>57</sup> Antony had a group of gladiators, training to celebrate his victory over Octavian, which never occurred. When they heard of the fate that fell upon Antony at Actium, they desired to meet him in Egypt, but were stopped by Quintus Didius with the prompt help of Herod. See Schürer (1973, v. 1, p. 301) and Josephus (*Ant.* 16.6-7; *J.W.* 1.386-398)

<sup>58</sup> "By late 30 B.C. he had already visited Augustus several times. Ten years later, in 20 B.C, Augustus returned to Syria, and Herod did not fail to pay his respects once again (*Ant.* XV 10, 3 [ . . . ]). In 18 or 17 B.C. Herod fetched his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, from Rome, where they had been receiving their education, and on this occasion, too, he was graciously received by the emperor (*Ant.* 15. 1 [ . . . ]). Later he was with Augustus once or twice more (in 12 B.C. and about 10 B.C.) (*Ant.* xvi 4, 1-5 [ . . . ] and 9. 1 [ . . . ]) Herod was also on friendly relations with Agrippa, the intimate friend and son-in-law of Augustus. Agrippa was visited by Herod when he was staying in Mytilene (23-21 B.C.). (*Ant.* XV 10,2 [ . . . ]). In 15 B.C. Agrippa himself went to Judaea and offered a hecatomb in the Temple in Jerusalem. The people were so charmed by this Roman friendly to the Jews that they accompanied him with blessings to his ship, strewing his path with flowers and admiring his piety. (*Ant.* xvi 2, 1 [ . . . ]); In the following spring (14 B.C.), Herod returned Agrippa's visit and, knowing that Agrippa intended to lead an expedition to the Crimea, even took a fleet with him to render him assistance. He met his noble friend in Sinope and after the business of the war had been attended to, traversed a large part of Asia Minor with him, everywhere distributing gifts and dealing with petitions (*Ant.* xvi 2, 2-5 [ . . . ]). His relations with Augustus and Agrippa were so intimate that flatterers asserted that Augustus liked him best after Agrippa, and Agrippa liked him best after Augustus (*Ant.* XV 10, 3 [ . . . ]; *B. J.* i 20, 4 [ . . . ]) (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 318).

<sup>59</sup> Herod rebuilt Samaria and renamed it Sebastos (Augustus' Greek name) in honour of Augustus. Likewise he "rebuilt the port city of Strato's Tower, renamed as Caesarea Maritima (also in honor of the emperor). There he built a palace, a theater, an amphitheater (whose ruins can be seen today), and a temple in honor of Augustus"; see Kugler; Hartin (2009, p. 338). To Lichtenberger (2009, p. 43-65), the importance of Herod's architectural ambitions are to be understood within the larger context of the Roman expectation that client kings were to be strong and Hellenistic in character to expand Roman culture and secure its borders.

<sup>60</sup> Antipater was found guilty of attempting to poison his father, which instead killed his uncle, Pheroras (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.93).



sons and a wife.<sup>61</sup> A strife with the Nabatean Syllaeus,<sup>62</sup> after he refused to submit to Herod's rule and the subsequent conflicts ([Josephus, Ant.16.271-285](#)), marred Herod's image with Augustus ([GRAF, 1992, v. 4, p. 971](#)). Such was the impact of Syllaeus's complaints to Augustus that an envoy sent by Herod to explain the situation to the emperor was not even received by him in Rome so Herod had to send a second embassy led by Nicolaus of Damascus who succeeded in recovering the emperor's favour ([Josephus, Ant. 16. 293-299](#)). The temporary rift between Herod and Rome went to the extent that Augustus threatened to treat Herod as a vassal and no longer as a friend ([Josephus, Ant. 16.9.3](#)).

As noted by Schmitz, it has been argued that such circumstance of political instability, internal struggle and the general state of affairs in Herod's last years would have provided the ideal scenario for Augustus to assess Herod's Kingdom for taxation purposes ([SCHMITZ, 1992, v. 1, p. 884](#)), though, as it should be made clear, there is no direct evidence of such a move by Rome, notwithstanding, the socio-political context certainly accommodates for Augustus to have a census taken before Herod's death.

If this is the case, then such a census would have been carried out, well adapted to the local culture and religion for Herod was not only a supporter of Rome, but wanted to be seen as a Jewish leader as well exemplified in the rebuilding of the temple,<sup>63</sup> his demand that Syllaeus should be circumcised before marrying Salome, his sister ([Josephus, Ant. 15. 410-423](#)) and the, later attested, attempts to hide his non-Jewish origin (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 1.7).

Herod exceeded in balancing his support for the Romans<sup>64</sup> with his, often seditious, Jewish subjects. Having carefully observed all the Torah instructions to rebuild the temple, including the absence of animal and human imagery, the architectural accommodations for Levitic chores and sacrifices ([LEVINE; ALLISON; CROSSAN, 2006, p. 165](#)) and himself not entering the parts of the temple where only priests were allowed, he then erected a golden eagle over the temple gate (Josephus, Ant. 17.149-54; J. W. 1.648-650). Likewise, he built pagan temples on non-Jewish cities, especially in honor of Caesar ([SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 305](#)). His apparent refusal to eat pork<sup>65</sup> and the order to plead allegiance to the emperor ([Josephus, Ant. 17.42](#)) demonstrate his abilities to navigate two very contrasting worlds, namely pagan Rome and Jewish Judea.

Such adaptation could well lodge a census to be taken on the basis of ancestry, which would be fit for a Jewish population<sup>66</sup> and could also explain why the census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was apparently uneventful while the famous census of Quirinius was far from peaceful ([GOODMAN, 2005, p. 751](#)).

Thus, we wish to express that Herod, though a shrewd and clever politician, was in every manner dependent on Rome. Despite the lack of direct evidence of a Roman census in Herod's Ju-

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<sup>61</sup> Usually, the literature labels the last few years of Herod, 13-14 BCE as the "third period" (LEVINE, 1992, v. 3, p. 161).

<sup>62</sup> Prior to the conflicts with Herod, Syllaeus had even attempted to marry Salome, Herod's crafty sister, plan that came to a halt after Herod required his to be circumcised (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.410-423). He was the son of Obodas III king of Nabatea and attempted to gain regional power, but ultimately failed and was executed by Augustus; see Graf (1992, v. 1, p. 374).

<sup>63</sup> The rebuilding of the temple and the earnest efforts put into it, which made the temple to become proverbial "Whoever has not seen Herod's building has not seen anything beautiful" (SCHÜRER, 1973, v. 1, p. 308).

<sup>64</sup> The archaeological records shine further light on the ambivalent nature of Herod's building program which aimed to serve his monotheistic Jewish subjects as well as pagan Rome; see Levine; Allison; Crossan (2006, p. 162); Levine (1992, v. 3, p. 169).

<sup>65</sup> This practice, and the tragedy of Herod's family relationships, is thought to be the cause of the alleged Augustan joke: "Better to be one of Herod's pigs than his sons"; see Keener (1993, Mt 2:16).

<sup>66</sup> It demonstrates how Second Temple Judaism valued genealogies.



dea, the relationship between the rex socius and Rome could reasonably accommodate a Roman census in Herod’s Judea had Caesar directly or indirectly demanded it.

## Who was Quirinius?

Reconstructing the life of Quirinius<sup>67</sup> is obviously met with the challenges of sparse documentation and often ambiguous references; however, he was a relatively well-known figure in the Roman Empire,<sup>68</sup> known as a military leader who enjoyed the trust of both Augustus and Tiberius Caesar.<sup>69</sup> He was instrumental in leading the military campaign against the Homonadenses<sup>70</sup> which shall constitute our focus for it happened between 5-3 BCE,<sup>71</sup> exactly the relevant time span. Could Quirinius have held an official position in Syria prior to the death of Herod?

Only imperial provinces had military facilities and “Syria held Rome’s principal military installation in the east. Three, later four legions were stationed there, a show of strength to Parthia and a garrison to intervene at need in Asia Minor and Palestine” (GRUEN, 2005, p. 154). Thus, Syria’s strategical position and the presence of legions would have made it the natural launching pad of a military offensive into Asia Minor.<sup>72</sup>

It seems out of question that Quirinius was involved in politico-military affairs in Syria before the death of Herod; nonetheless, the question that emerges from this point on is whether Quirinius was governor twice or his military command styled a “governorship.”<sup>73</sup> While Josephus says that after the campaign against the Homonadenses he was Quirinius was appointed δικαιοδότης<sup>74</sup> (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4) while Luke uses the less precise title of ἡγεμονεύω.<sup>75</sup> It should be noticed that Luke seems to be aware of proper official titles of the Roman administration<sup>76</sup> which raises the question why would he have made use of a more general term? Perhaps Luke

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<sup>67</sup> The term *quiris*, from which the name Quirinus, probably meant spear and was closely associated with the god of war, Mars. Quirinius’ success in warfare may have been the cause of his official name. See Bunson (2002, p. 464).

<sup>68</sup> Tacitus gives us his place of birth *Lanuvium* southwest from Rome and an honorary funeral held by Tiberius in the empire (Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.48), Josephus provides details of his arrival as governor of Syria on AD 6 (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.354; 18.1-10; 18.26) and Suetonius describes his quarrel with his wife Domitia Lepida (Suetonius, *Tib.* 49.1-2).

<sup>69</sup> He was appointed Consul under Augustus in 12 BCE (Dio Cassius 54.28.2), served under Tiberius as an official. See Bunson (2002, p. 464). He was granted the tutorship of Gaius when he travelled to the East, see Trites and Larkin, CSBC, 12:52. Later he was appointed δικαιοδότης by Augustus (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4).

<sup>70</sup> A “barbaric” tribe who revolted and killed Amyntas, a client subject of the Roman Empire. See Ramsay (1905, p. 269).

<sup>71</sup> Ramsay and Ramos (2016) corroborate in dating the war against the Homonadenses, no later than 5-3 BCE, but they entertain the idea that it might have been earlier. See Ramsay (1905, p. 275).

<sup>72</sup> Argue on the geography of the place.

<sup>73</sup> Clarke (1943, v. 3, p. 733) argues, on the basis of the possible translations of ἡγεμονεύω, that Quirinius’ presence in Syria could have been known or labeled a kind of governorship.

<sup>74</sup> Δικαιοδότης was the equivalent of *legatus juridicus*. “An imperial officer who served as the lieutenant of the emperor and fulfilled a variety of duties, political and military. [...] The position of legate in charge of an entire province was the chief source of aggrandizement for the rank. Known as *legati Augusti pro praetore*, these legates were appointed to each imperial province (with several exceptions) and controlled all troops within the province. Where there was more than one legion, the *legati* were answerable to the *legatus Augusti pro praetor*”; see Bunson (2002, p. 305-306). See also Rhoads (2011, p. 84).

<sup>75</sup> *ἡγεμονεύω*, could be commonly translated as governor or ruler, L&N adds that in the New Testament the term is restricted to governor of a roman province; see Louw; Nida (1989, v. 1, p. 478, s. v. ἡγεμονεύω). See also Swanson (1997, s. v. ἡγεμονεύω). And is notoriously ambiguous as it could mean from an official position or simply someone who held any high office; see Danker; Bauer; Arndt (2000, p. 433).

<sup>76</sup> Luke mentions the title proconsul (Acts 13:7; 18:12), governor (Luke 2:2, Acts 23:24; Acts 24:27) and emperor (Luke 2:1, Acts 25:10).



was not trying to tie up Quirinius with a census overseen by him, but use the name Quirinius as a time marker for his gentile audience.<sup>77</sup>

In 1764, near Tivoli, Italy, was found a marble inscription, known as *Titulus Tiburtinus*, with the honors of a Roman official with a remarkable career who lived in the reign of Augustus, and survived that emperor. He conquered a nation; he was rewarded with two *Supplicationes* and the *Ornamenta Triumphalia*, i.e., he gorgeous dress of a triumphing general, with ivory scepter and chariot, etc.; he governed Asia as *proconsul*; and he twice governed Syria as *legatus* of the divine Augustus.<sup>78</sup>

### “A Roman standard in Herod’s kingdom”

On the presence of the Roman fiscal presence in Judea during Herod’s lifetime, Leah Di Segni may have shed new light into the matter. In 2005, Di Segni published her analysis of an ancient bronze artifact dated to Herod’s time which was identified as a classical roman weight standard,<sup>79</sup> which, according to Di Segni, shows how Herod’s kingdom was dependent on Rome to a larger degree than previously thought ([DABROWA, 2011, p. 138](#)). The standard would have been used as measurement unit to assess how much an individual was due to pay on taxes, which lead Di Segni uses to reconsider altogether the common assumption that the inhabitants of Judea were not compelled to pay taxes to Rome ([DABROWA, 2011, p. 139](#)).

[Edward Dąbrowa \(2011, p. 141\)](#) ponders contrary to Di Segni and sustains that such an interpretation of a single artifact should not deter the academic community from withholding the view that there is no sufficient evidence to assert that there was a roman census in Herod’s Judea. He is perhaps right that an acceptance of Di Segni’s view would considerably challenge the current understanding of Herod’s relationship with Rome, however, being dissonant does not necessitate its incorrectness, especially when sided with sound evidences.

Consequently, we should uphold that Herod’s demonstrable dependence on Rome, the discovery of Marco Titius’s standard and the previously presented arguments should suffice to say that, despite of the lack of a multitude of evidences, the historical plausibility of a roman census in the last days of Herod would be rational.

## Conclusion

Schürer’s contentions are solid and compelling; nonetheless, affirming Luke’s historical error based on the lack of direct evidence is an extrapolation of what can be claimed on historical grounds. The same holds true for those who, following Tertullian, try to ascertain with precision, regardless of the cost, the historicity of the census of Luke 2:2. What is clear is that, simultaneous to the lack of direct evidence and absence of multiple attestations of the census that led Mary and

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<sup>77</sup> Ramsay (1905, p. 265) sponsors this idea that is deeply dependent of an exegetical effort to be properly clarified, which extrapolates the scope of this study.

<sup>78</sup> Initially thought to be to be a forgery, it was later identified as authentic (RAMSAY, 1905, p. 266).

<sup>79</sup> The standard reads: “(a)Μάρκου Τιτίου σύμβλημα μοδίῳ τέταρτον (b)Έτους βα(σιλέως) δλ μηνός Ξανδκού vac. δκ vac.” (DABROWA, 2011, p. 138).

Joseph to Bethlehem, the socio-historical circumstances of Judea during Herod's last years, makes the census, certainly possible.

Luke meant to record a census which was part of the Augustan administrative pattern, not a single universal one. The Romans respected and sometimes even adopted cultural and bureaucratic practices of conquered territories, which can explain why the census of Luke 2:2 was based on place of origin rather residence, additionally, the precedent of a census based on household existed in Egypt, the most lucrative and developed province near to Judea.

Surprisingly, Joseph, a humble first century Jewish carpenter, could possibly have known his ancestry through oral tradition or official genealogical records. Mary probably did not have to travel with Joseph to register for the census, but would she have a baby in the absence of the one person that knew or believed on the supernatural character of her pregnancy?

Finally, Herod's dependence on Rome, from the beginning of his rule to his death and the violence, paranoia and power struggle in his family, could very well accommodate for a census to have been taken before his death time when Quirinius was present as a military leader in the region. Additionally, the Marcus Titius' Standard, in spite of it being almost completely ignored by the academic community, does provide sound evidence that Herod was even more dependent on Rome than previously thought.

Thus we conclude that the socio-historical circumstances weight in favour of the historicity of Luke 2:2 despite the absence of uncontroversial evidence. The census of Luke 2:2 is, therefore historically plausible, though it cannot be proved.

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