

ONCE MORE: QUIRINIUS'S CENSUS

by
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In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) (Luke 2:1–2, NIV)

Luke's brief attempt to situate Jesus' birth chronologically continues to be problematic, not least for those of us with a high view of Scripture.² Some critics, in fact, say that "Luke has thoroughly confused the facts,"³ others that "there is in fact no alternative but to recognize that the evangelist based his statement on uncertain historical information,"⁴ and still others (more recently) that "attempts to reconcile [this text] with the facts of ancient history are hopelessly contrived."⁵ The catalogue could easily be extended. In what follows we will see whether these conclusions are warranted, paying particular attention to the most significant problems raised and to the various solutions proposed—most notably, to two quite popular alternative translations suggested. In the end, some problems will remain, but the postscript will not be nearly as pessimistic as these aforementioned would have us believe, though the way forward will be seen to lie most likely with archeology and not grammar.

PROBLEMS

The difficulties this text raises can be initially summarized and

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²See, e.g., Ben Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 67; Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 14; Jerry Vardaman, "Jesus' Life: A New Chronology," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 61. Vardaman, in fact, calls "[t]he knotty question of Quirinius...the major historical problem of the New Testament."

³Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), p. 30.

⁴Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, 4 vols., rev. and ed. Geza Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1973–87), 1:426.

⁵John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2009), 1:213.

then discussed along the following two lines:⁶ (1) There is no record nor apparent possibility of a census of the kind Luke describes; (2) There is no record that Quirinius was governor of Syria at the time Luke describes.

Luke's description of the census is difficult for three reasons. First, there is no record of a singular, empire-wide census instituted by Augustus.⁷ Second, a Roman census would have required Joseph to register not at his ancestral home in Bethlehem but in the principal city of his "taxation district,"⁸ presumably somewhere in Galilee. (Not to mention, Mary would not have been obliged to go with him.⁹) Third, Roman censuses were not administered in client kingdoms, such as Herod's was.¹⁰

Further, Quirinius's involvement with such a census is difficult for two reasons. First, Luke describes Jesus' birth and this census as taking place during Herod the Great's reign (1:5; cf. Matt 2:1)—a reign ended by Herod's death in March/April of 4 B.C.¹¹ Second, Luke

⁶Cf. Darrell Bock's similar summary in *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 904; also B. W. R. Pearson, "The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (April 1999): 263.

⁷Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:407. Schürer also adds, "Josephus characterizes [Quirinius's] census of A.D. 6/7 as something entirely new and unprecedented among the Jews" (p. 419; cf. also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, updated ed., Anchor Bible Reference Library [New York: Doubleday, 1993], pp. 552–53). However, this is (1) an argument from silence and (2) built on a debatable presupposition. That is, Schürer assumes that were Rome to have taken a census at the time Luke describes the results would have been identical to those occurring after the census of A.D. 6. Hoehner, among others, challenges this, suggesting that it was not only a census that caused such a stir, but it was also the combination of several other factors, factors not present at the time of Luke's census, not least Judea's loss of client status (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 18; cf. also Pearson, "The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," pp. 269–70).

⁸Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:407; also pp. 411 and 403, esp. n. 15; cf. also I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 101.

⁹"The particulars needed, as may be concluded from the analogy of the earlier Roman censuses, could be supplied by the father of the family" (Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:412). Contra vv. 4–5: Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσήφ...ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαρτῶμ.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 413. Sherwin-White: "A provincial census in Judaea in the time of the kingdom is an impossibility" (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* [reprint of 1963 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], p. 163, n. 4).

¹¹Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 547; Harold Hoehner, "The Date of the Death of Herod the Great," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 101–11; Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.167. For an alternative date for Herod's death, see, e.g., A. E. Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?" *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 1–29. Were Steinmann correct and were Herod to have died in 1 B.C., the conclusion drawn below would not be fundamentally altered (see, esp., *ibid.*, pp. 17–18). For this alternative, see also Ernest L. Martin, "The Nativity and Herod's Death," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and*

describes both events as also taking place during the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The juxtaposition of these two details “has caused,” as Schürer notes, “the greatest difficulties even to the defenders of Luke,”¹² for Syrian gubernatorial records indicate that Quirinius was not governor during this time.¹³

PROPOSALS

Proposed solutions come in a variety of forms.¹⁴ These too are helpfully discussed along the two lines enumerated above.

Support for Luke's census generally takes the following form. First, extant records point to censuses both in Roman provinces¹⁵ (with some taking place regularly and, presumably, involving non-Roman

Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 85–92, esp. p. 90.

¹²Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:420; cf. also Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, pp. 18–19; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 906.

¹³Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:420. This leads Bart Ehrman to conclude, “If Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, then Quirinius was not the Syrian governor” (*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], p. 127).

¹⁴What is more, not a few of these solutions assume that what needs solving is (1) how Luke could have made the mistake it is presumed he has made and/or (2) how the statement, though a historical inaccuracy, fits Luke's narrative purpose (see, e.g., T. P. Wiseman, “There Went Out a Decree from Caesar Augustus...” *New Testament Studies* 33 [1987]: 479–80; Horst R. Moehring, “The Census in Luke as an Apologetic Device,” in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wikgren*, ed. D. E. Aune, *Novum Testamentum Supplements*, no. 33 [Leiden: Brill, 1972], pp. 144–60; Mark D. Smith, “Of Jesus and Quirinius,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 [April 2000]: 278–93; Robert Harry Smith, “Caesar's Decree (Luke 2:1–2): Puzzle or Key?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7 [December 1980]: 343–351; John M. Rist, “Luke 2:2: Making Sense of the Date of Jesus' Birth,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 [October 2005]: 489–91; cf. also the two views noted in Stanley Porter, “The Reasons for the Lukan Census” in *Paul, Luke and the Graeco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Alexander J. M. Wedderburn*, ed. Alf Christophersen et al., *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series*, no. 217 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], pp. 170–71; also p. 178). For a number of reasons, not least those mentioned below, it seems best to treat Luke as innocent until demonstrably proven guilty. For a defense of this approach, see, e.g., I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989), esp. pp. 21–52.

¹⁵Paul Maier suggests Augustus's three well-known censuses, recorded in his *Res Gestae*, may have involved Roman citizens living in Roman provinces (“The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life,” in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989], p. 114; cf. *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*, trans. P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore [reprint ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1970], pp. 22–23). Schürer, though disagreeing that Roman citizens were involved, does admit, “[I]n the time of Augustus censuses were taken in many provinces” (*History of the Jewish People*, 1:411).

citizens¹⁶) and even occasionally in client kingdoms.¹⁷ Second, extant records indicate that Rome at times accommodated local customs in such censuses.¹⁸ Third, extant records indicate that Herod's relationship with Augustus had turned sour near the time of the census, making his client status a less formidable obstacle.¹⁹

¹⁶E.g., there is record of censuses taken in Gaul (27 B.C. and 12 B.C.), Cyrene (7 B.C.), and Egypt (9 B.C.) (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, pp. 14–15; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], p. 305), along with Sicily (Maier, "The Date of the Nativity," p. 114).

¹⁷E.g., Apamea (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 305; Maier, "The Date of the Nativity," p. 114; Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 16; Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, 1st American ed., trans. Richard and Clara Winston [New York: Knopf, 1967], p. 27); Nabatea (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 16; Marshall, *Luke*, p. 101; Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, pp. 26–27) and Palestine (i.e., Samaria; Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 16; Pearson, "The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," p. 266, esp. n. 12). Further, Tacitus is thought to refer to one such incident involving Archeleus the Younger (no relation to Herod's son, Archeleus), a ruler of Cappadocia (*Annals* 6.41; cf. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity," p. 114 and Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 16). On this, however, Brown is surely correct in noting that Cappadocia was at this time a Roman province (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 552; cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 2.42), making the analogy less useful. Brown also notes that there is nothing in Tacitus's text that demands a Rome-imposed taxation (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 552). Rather, Tacitus refers to Archeleus's taxation as operating "in Roman fashion" (cf. also Marshall, *Luke*, p. 101; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:414; Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 162, n. 4). Still, as Pearson notes, this Cappadocian parallel raises more questions than it answers ("The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," pp. 272–73).

¹⁸Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 15; W. M. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of St. Luke* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), pp. 186–87; D. J. Hayles, "The Roman Census and Jesus' Birth: Was Luke Correct? Part 1: The Roman Census System," *Buried History* 9 (December 1973): 126. Brown permits this as a possibility (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 549). Perhaps this is further supported by Rome's other specific accommodations to Jewish customs, namely tax exemption every Sabbath year (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.202–10) and freedom of special religious observances (e.g., "Sabbaths and...their other rites," *Antiquities* 14.241–43; cf. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 905, n. 9). Some suggest that an Egyptian papyrus (A.D. 104) provides a parallel, for it speaks of citizens returning to their home towns for census purposes (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 15; Marshall, *Luke*, p. 101). Schürer, however, points out that the reference to $\kappa\alpha\tau' \omicron\iota\kappa\iota\omicron\nu$ denoted one's place of residence and work (*History of the Jewish People*, 1:412–13), not place of ancestry. And Brown adds that it undoubtedly involved property taxation (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 549; see also p. 396). This leads Marshall to suggest that Joseph had property in Bethlehem for which he was liable (*Luke*, p. 101; cf. Matt 2:11; though cf. Luke 2:7 and Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 549).

Further, Brown (*ibid.*, p. 396) and Hoehner (*Chronological Aspects*, pp. 15–16) suggest that Mary's obligation to register is not implausible, especially if the tax was a poll, not property, tax, since women were liable along with men in this case (cf. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 102; also Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, p. 403, n. 12). If Luke merely intends to say Mary went with Joseph, not that she too was liable to taxation, this detail is even less difficult (cf. Bock's suggestions, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 905).

¹⁹Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.290. Cf. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 17; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 305; Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* pp. 178–85; also Porter, "The Reasons for the Lukan Census," p. 177. Brown demurs,

Support for Quirinius's involvement as Syria's governor (which is admittedly the most difficult matter²⁰) generally proceeds (sometimes simultaneously) along the following two lines, which will be first listed and then more fully discussed below: (1) Extant records indicate Quirinius served in several official capacities, (perhaps) even in Syria, before his well-known Syrian governorship in A.D. 6; (2) Textual and grammatical evidence allows for other readings of Luke's text, readings which do not demand that Quirinius's governorship in Syria be contemporaneous with Herod's reign or Christ's birth.

First, it is generally acknowledged that were Quirinius to have previously served as governor of Syria, this service could not have taken place during the time Luke describes (i.e., during Herod's lifetime and the time of Jesus' birth).²¹ This is indicated by Josephus, who clearly states that P. Quinctilius²² Varus was governor in Syria until after Herod's death,²³ which occurred, as noted, in March/April of 4 B.C. Therefore, some suggest that a census begun by Varus was then completed by and, thus, associated with his successor, which is presumed²⁴

arguing that Caesar's threatened demotion was never realized (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 551). Similarly, based on Herod's client status, Barnett alternatively suggests that this ἀπογραφή was the "machinery" established to facilitate, not taxation, but a "nation-wide oath taking" to Caesar ("Apographē and apographesthai in Luke 2:1-5," *Expository Times* 85 [September 1973]: 378; cf. idem, *Jesus & The Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], pp. 98 and 107, n. 30; somewhat similarly, Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* p. 179). In fact, Barnett lists other texts that use ἀπογραφή similarly (*Antiquities* 12.31; Heb 12:23; Justin, *Apology* 1.34), though only the second is completely devoid of tax (or other remunerative) implications. And, he lists two other texts which speak of such an oath-taking (*Antiquities* 17.42; 15.369), though neither seems to prove something as formal or as empire-wide as Barnett must and Luke does suppose. Also, Barnett's view works best if πρώτη is translated *before* and not *first*, as the latter would imply more of a connection between this and the well-known registration in A.D. 6, a registration which was for tax purposes. However, as will be seen, this translation is not to be preferred.

²⁰Cf. Stein: "The heart of the problem...is the dating of the census within the rule of Quirinius. It is the date, not the existence of the census, that is problematic" (*Luke*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993], p. 105). Hoehner calls this the most "formidable objection" (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 18).

²¹Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:423; cf. Luke 3:1, 23.

²²Alternatively, his *nomen* could be spelled: Quintilius (Rist, "Luke 2:2: Making Sense of the Date of Jesus' Birth," p. 489, n. 3).

²³Josephus records Herod's death in *Antiquities* 17.191 and then describes Varus's role in settling Herod's affairs in *Antiquities* 17.221, 250, 286, 299 (cf. also Tacitus, *History* 5.9; cf. Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:257-58). C. Sestius Saturninus preceded Varus (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.280; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:257; Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 169), presumably serving from 10/9-7/6 B.C.

²⁴The records are incomplete (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 302; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:258). And, despite Ramsay's certainty (*Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* p. 228), Quirinius's double-legateship of Syria is not a foregone conclusion. For instance, Schürer (*History of the Jewish People*, p. 258),

to be Quirinius.²⁵ Others suggest that Quirinius held some other office at the time of Jesus' birth,²⁶ a tenable hypothesis especially since Quirinius's precise capacity at this time is unknown.

Here, however, it should be said that for either of these to work Luke's record must be read somewhat less than obviously. That is, in the former, Joseph and Mary's registry does not technically occur during Quirinius's reign.²⁷ And, in the latter, Quirinius is not technically Syria's governor.²⁸ The latter is slightly less difficult since ἡγεμονεύοντος (ἡγεμών) can refer to offices other than governor (or

Sherwin-White (*Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 164) and Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 550), among others (e.g., Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 907 and Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 304), question the relevance of the Lapis Tiburtinus to which Ramsay appeals, since the twice serving legate (a) is unnamed (though found near Varus's Roman residence) and (b) is not clearly said to have served twice in Syria. On this second point, Sherwin-White counters by providing other inscriptional evidence indicating that *iterum*, in the Lapis Tiburtinus, modifies *Syrian*, not *legatus*; thus, whomever the inscription describes, this one did indeed serve twice as governor of Syria (*Roman Society and Roman Law*, pp. 163–64, n. 5). And, returning to the first point, what further points away from the inscription's referring to Quirinius is the geographical implausibility of his governing Syria while simultaneously waging war in the Taurus mountains. Because of this, many scholars suggest that were Quirinius to have served as governor during this time, it would have been in Galatia (Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 551; Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, pp. 164–65, n. 1).

²⁵Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 908. It is here often noted that censuses were giant undertakings, surely taking several years to complete (e.g., a 40-year-long census in Gaul; see Maier, "The Date of the Nativity," p. 115). A variant of this protracted census view is that offered by Stauffer who suggests that in 7 B.C. Luke's "apographa... began" and in "A.D. 7 the work of the census was completed with the *apotimesis*" (*Jesus and His Story*, p. 31). However, Luke's use of ἀπογραφῆς in his description of the A.D. 6 census points away from this (Acts 5:37), as does Josephus's use of both terms in his description of this census (*Antiquities* 18.2–4; cf. also *Jewish War* 7.253). Further there is some difficulty in supposing that citizens of Antipas's Galilee would be liable in A.D. 6 to taxation in a neighboring Roman province, namely Judea. Galilean liability, even were Joseph to have owned land in Bethlehem (Judea), still seems more likely were all of Palestine still under Herod the Great's rule (cf. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 905; also Barnett, "Apographē," p. 379, who makes a slightly different point).

²⁶E.g., a special census commission (i.e., a *legatus ad census accipiendos*) (Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:424; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 908; Ramsay, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 248), a procuratorship (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 304; cf. Justin, *Apology* 1.34), a generalissimo of the East (Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, p. 29) a *maius imperium* (Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:425) or the governor of Asia (Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* pp. 232–33). On this final suggestion, it is to be noted that, like Syrian gubernatorial records, the Asian records are also incomplete, happening to have a lacuna for the period under question (*ibid.*, p. 232).

²⁷Cf. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 554; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:422; also George Ogg, "Quirinius Question To-day," *Expository Times* 79 (May 1968): 232, who says this makes ἐγένετο = ἐτελέσθη.

²⁸Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:420, 424; Ogg, "Quirinius Question To-day," p. 232.

legate) (cf. 3:1).²⁹ Still, by using πρώτη Luke seems to indicate that another census occurred that too could be modified by ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου. Thus, the first office must not be too distinct from the second or the present logic of the verse cannot be sustained.

Second, those solutions involving textual and grammatical evidence suggest either one of the following understandings of πρώτη in Luke 2:2:³⁰ (1) πρώτη, normally a superlative, could be a comparative and thus render a translation: "This census was *before* [the census] which Quirinius, governor of Syria, [made]"³¹; or (2) πρώτη could be adverbial and thus render a translation: "This census took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria."³² Both are quite promising for in both the difficulty of Luke's reference to Quirinius is mitigated, since either allows for something other than a reference to a census taken at the time of Jesus' birth under the oversight of (governor) Quirinius.³³

Here too, however, problems arise. Five will be registered, some more significant than others. First, often when a demonstrative pronoun stands adjacent to an anarthrous noun (αὕτη ἀπογραφῆ), the anarthrous noun predicates the demonstrative; this is especially the case when a numerical indicator is present, as there is here (cf., Luke 1:36: οὗτος μὴν ἔκτος ἐστίν).³⁴ What this means is that it is unlikely ("almost impossible"³⁵) that Luke meant "*this* census" instead of "this was the census." As such, αὕτη is the subject and ἀπογραφῆ is the predicate nominative.³⁶ Second, if ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας

²⁹Cf. also Acts 23:24, 26, 33; 24:1, 10; 26:30 (Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* p. 229). Brown admits a more general reference, such as "held office," is "possible" (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 395).

³⁰See discussion in Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 21; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 395.

³¹Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 304. Hoehner suggests the following alternative translation: "This census was before that [census] when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 21). Among those advocating this position is F. F. Bruce (*New Testament History* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1980], p. 32, n. 1).

³²Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 305. Among those advocating this position are Hoehner (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 21), Barnett ("*Apographē*," p. 379, esp. n. 13) and Pearson ("The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," pp. 278–82, esp. pp. 281–82).

³³As Hoehner notes, Luke's reference translated this way would accommodate either Quirinius's well-known governorship and census in A.D. 6 or his hypothesized governorship and census in 3–2 B.C. (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 22).

³⁴BDAG, s.v. "οὗτος," p. 741; cf., e.g., Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 304–5. While in some MSS (e.g., A, C, W) ἀπογραφῆ is articular, these represent a less probable reading, a reading not followed in either NA²⁷ or UBS⁴.

³⁵Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 304.

³⁶Cf. BDF, p. 152 (§292); contra, e.g., Michael Wolter, "Erstmals unter

Κυρηνίου is a genitive absolute, as many suggest, then it is likely to be “unconnected” grammatically to the rest of the sentence,³⁷ seeming to rule out both suggestions since both (a comparative and adverbial sense) require such connections.³⁸ Third, were πρώτη being used comparatively,³⁹ as the first option suggests, one would expect the genitive of comparison (Κυρηνίου) to immediately follow πρώτη as in other cases of implicit comparison (e.g., John 5:36; 1 Cor 1:25), rather than being separated from it by four words.⁴⁰ Fourth, if πρώτη is used adverbially, as the second option suggests, this demands it be treated akin to πρό (cf. John 15:18).⁴¹ However, in texts where πρώτος denotes πρό a few other phenomena seem to normally occur: (a) a genitive immediately follows πρώτος and (b) the verb modified by πρώτος can be supplied following the genitive to create a parallel clause, as is the case, for instance, in many English translations of John 15:18: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before [πρώτον] *it hated you*” (ESV; cf. also NASB, NRSV, NKJV).⁴² By contrast, in Luke 2:2, πρώτη stands several words removed from Κυρηνίου, and Κυρηνίου does not sustain the same relationship with ἐγένετο that αὕτη does (e.g., “This was the census before Quirinius *was*”⁴³ or “This was the census taken before Quirinius *was taken*[!]”). Fifth and finally, both proposals must plausibly explain why Luke referred to Quirinius

Quirinius! Zum Verständnis von Lk 2,2,” *Biblische Notizen* 102 (2000): 39.

³⁷Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 655. Granted, such constructions, Wallace says, “usually” stand at the beginning of a sentence, but this is not absolutely necessary, as Wallace’s own examples demonstrate (cf. John 5:13, et al.). Cf. A. T. Robertson, who notes that in the New Testament “[t]he most frequent use of the idiom [i.e., the genitive absolute] is when the substantive (or pronoun) and the participle stand apart with no syntactical connection with any part of the sentence” (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], p. 1131).

³⁸Cf. Stein, *Luke*, p. 106; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:422.

³⁹As many note, in the period of the New Testament, the domains of the comparative and the superlative adjective overlapped (BDAG, s.v. “πρώτος,” p. 893; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 303; Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 21).

⁴⁰Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 304, also p. 299; cf. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 21; Ogg, “Quirinius Question To-day,” p. 233; also Schürer, who suggests what the Greek would look like if this is what Luke intended (*History of the Jewish People*, 1:422).

⁴¹Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 305.

⁴²Cf. Shepherd of Hermas, *Vision* 2.4.1: “Ὅτι, φησίν, πάντων πρώτη ἐκτίσθη (“Because, he said, she was created before all things *were created*”); John 1:30: ὅτι πρώτος μου ἦν (“Because he was before *me* [I] *was*”). This seems to be what BDAG means when commenting on these texts: “As a rule the later element is of the same general nature as the one that precedes it” (s.v. “πρώτος,” p. 893).

⁴³This works only if “was” in this case refers to Quirinius’s governorship, not existence. In any event, the syntax is strained.

at all.⁴⁴ For instance, it is suggested that Quirinius is mentioned in a context describing a census since he was later involved with a notorious census.⁴⁵ However, this fails to explain why in an apparent attempt to helpfully situate his narrative chronologically, Luke would make such an unhelpful chronological point. Why not rather refer to the regnal year of Augustus, Herod's death or something more precise, as he does in a similar situation later (cf. Luke 3:1).⁴⁶ More likely are those who suggest that Luke refers to the census before Quirinius's (supposed) governorship following Varus (6–4 B.C.). On this reading, "Luke is...stating that just before Quirinius was governor of Syria in [4/]3–2 B.C.^[47] there was a census in Herod's domain."⁴⁸ This would be a much more helpful comment.

PROSPECTS

Here we may gather up the evidence to present a composite picture: (1) Luke's census is not a historical impossibility.⁴⁹ Rather at all points, historical analogies can be drawn.⁵⁰ (2) Quirinius was not the official governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth. The Syrian records and the current accepted chronology of Jesus' life simply prevent this conclusion. However, Quirinius's personal chronology is not fully known, particularly around the years of Jesus' birth. Thus, it is not impossible that he held another office at the time which Luke appropriately describes with ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας, a description as we saw which could also appropriately describe the office from which he took his well-known census. In short, it is most likely under this otherwise unattested office that Quirinius officiated over what Luke

⁴⁴Schürer asks, "Why does he not name the governor under whom it did take place?" (*History of the Jewish People*, 1:421). Brown puts this question to Barnett's view (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 552), though he seems to miss Barnett's point. That is, in Barnett's theory Quirinius is mentioned because he too took an ἀπογραφὴ; however, his involved tax liability while this earlier one that Luke describes simply involved an oath to Caesar (Barnett, "Apographē," p. 378). (N.B. In this case, Luke's remark is not intended to be a specific chronological locator as much as it is a point of interest.)

⁴⁵E.g., Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 22.

⁴⁶Pearson's point about significant events being used for time-keeping in a limited-literacy culture works ("The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," p. 277); however, it does not show why Quirinius's A.D. 6 census would be used to situate Luke's census, which occurred nearly a decade earlier.

⁴⁷Cf. Hoehner's chronological reconstruction (*Chronological Aspects*, p. 20).

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁹As I. Howard Marshall notes, "The character of the census described by Luke is far from impossible, and hence many recent writers are prepared to admit that Luke's description of a census reflects historical reality" (*Luke*, p. 102; cf. Hayles, "The Roman Census System," pp. 130–31).

⁵⁰See, e.g., Porter's similar conclusion, "The Reasons for the Lukan Census," pp. 187–88.

describes. To say more would go beyond the present evidence; to say otherwise, would, as we saw, strain the syntax. As such, I. Howard Marshall is probably right when he suggests that Luke's full vindication lies buried somewhere, waiting to be unearthed.⁵¹ Until then, Luke's historiographical track record (well-documented in other places⁵²) and the implausibility of such a monumental miscalculation, especially considering his method of and purpose for writing (cf. Luke 1:1–4),⁵³ should forestall the rather premature conclusions noted initially. Moreover, for those of us with a high view of Scripture, the fact that Luke's record is indeed part of Scripture suggests that these conclusions are not only premature but are, in the end, simply wrong. Further evidence will only demonstrate this more conclusively.

⁵¹If the "recently discovered coin" to which Walter Liefeld and David Pao refer is that coin mentioned by John McRay (*Archaeology and the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], p. 154), as their parenthetical reference shortly after implies (*Luke*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], p. 75), then this evidence only proves that Quirinius may have been governor of Syria in 12/11 B.C. This, coupled with the inscriptional evidence Vardaman further adduces (cf. Vardaman, "Jesus' Life," pp. 61–64), would solve the problem of a census overseen by Quirinius at the time of Jesus' birth only if one is also willing to accept the reconstructed chronology of Jesus' birth Vardaman proposes.

⁵²Cf. Hayles, "The Roman Census System," pp. 116–17; idem, "The Roman Census and Jesus' Birth: Was Luke Correct? Part 2: Quirinius' Career and a Census in Herod's Day," *Buried History* 10 (March 1974): 30.

⁵³Cf. Liefeld and Pao, *Luke*, p. 75.