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THE NATIVITY CENSUS: WHAT DOES LUKE ACTUALLY SAY?

By JOHN THORLEY

The first two verses of Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel are amongst the best known of the whole Bible, and historically amongst the most controversial. Luke refers to a census decreed by Augustus, of which we appear to have no other record, and implies that P. Sulpicius Quirinius was governor of Syria at some time around 6–5 B.C., the possibility of which has been much debated. This is all very odd, particularly since Luke is usually so careful with political background, if not with exact chronology, and is clearly trying in his account of the Nativity to place the event in its historical context, as well as to explain why Jesus was born in Bethlehem and not at the family home in Nazareth. One must assume that the details about the Nativity which Luke gives did at least make some sort of historical sense to his earliest readers, and yet the versions which we read so frequently can hardly be said to do so. But what exactly does Luke say? If we are to doubt the accuracy of his statements we should first be certain that we understand precisely what it is that he is saying.

Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις, ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου, ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, says Luke (2:1). The New English Bible translates: 'In those days a decree was issued by the Emperor Augustus for a general registration throughout the Roman world.' 'In those days' refers back to the previous chapter where Luke has given an account of the birth of John the Baptist and the Annunciation to Mary, dated only by the preface 'In the days of Herod king of Judaea'. We can, however, date the Nativity fairly accurately from details which Luke himself gives later in Chapter 3, where he says that Jesus was 'about thirty years old' (3:23) when he began his ministry, probably in A.D. 27 or at the latest A.D. 28.¹ The Nativity therefore took place around 5 B.C., a date which does, of course, accord well with Matthew's account, since Herod died soon after this in 4 B.C.

Now it is true that we have no record of any census decreed by Augustus across the Roman world (πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, all the civilized, or settled world) at this time, nor for that matter at any other time, though there was in fact a census of Roman citizens in 8 B.C. But is this in any case what Luke is actually saying? Luke says ἀπογράφεσθαι (present infinitive), not ἀπογράψασθαι (aorist

infinitive). Referring later to the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (2.4–5) ‘to be registered’, Luke *does* use the aorist infinitive to describe the *one* event for which they went to Bethlehem. Why, then, the present infinitive for Augustus’ decree? Whatever the reason, it was not an accidental or loose usage. There was in fact a tendency in Koine Greek to use the aorist infinitive (and subjunctive or imperative) rather than the present, even when the sense strictly demanded the present according to classical usage;² when the present was used its repetitive, continuing, or generalizing function was always strongly felt. Presumably the ‘general’ registration of the New English Bible is an attempt to indicate the force of the present infinitive, but in fact this translation gives a spatial, distributive force which in effect simply reinforces the phrase ‘throughout the Roman world’, whereas the Greek usage is essentially temporal in aspect. What Luke is surely saying is that Augustus decreed that registration for census purposes, practised for some centuries in Italy and more recently employed in several provinces, should *be extended* until it embraced all parts of the Roman world, presumably including client kingdoms such as Judaea.⁴ Perhaps the position of *πάσαν* might also be cited in support of this interpretation: Augustus decreed, not that a census should be held throughout the *whole* Roman world, which would tend to imply one great census for the whole area taken at one time, but that the census system should be extended to include *all* the Roman world, each part taken separately, over a period of time. The difference in emphasis between the attributive (‘whole’) and predicative (‘all’) uses of *πᾶς* is often slight, though here perhaps significant.

αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου, Luke continues. The New English Bible offers ‘This was the first registration of its kind; it took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria’. Why ‘of its kind’? Luke does not say this, and whatever this census was, it was certainly not the first of its kind in any absolute sense. It may have been the first census in Judaea, but if this is what Luke was saying he would surely have been aware of an ambiguity in stating that it took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria, since Quirinius was also governor of Syria in A.D. 6, when he was again responsible for taking a census in Judaea on its annexation as a Roman province. Luke himself refers to this event in Acts 5:37, and he can hardly have been unaware of Quirinius’ involvement, nor indeed can he have believed that the Nativity took place on the occasion of the census in A.D. 6. Most translations in English and in other languages do indeed suggest

that Luke is at the very least guilty of historical vagueness. In English only two versions incorporate into their texts another interpretation which allows that Luke was being far more specific: the Revised Version of 1881 says 'This was the first enrolment made when Quirinius was governor of Syria'; and the New International Version of 1973 has 'This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria'. To put it more fully, what Luke is actually saying is that this was the *first* census to take place while Quirinius happened to be governor of Syria, thus distinguishing it from the *second* census made when Quirinius was similarly governor of Syria in A.D. 6. Luke's Greek surely allows no other sensible and unambiguous interpretation. It might be objected that if Luke had meant the first of two censuses he would have written *πρότερα*. But in Acts 1:1 Luke uses *πρώτον* in exactly this way; and indeed *πρότερος* was never obligatory in this sense. It must be said that several commentators have acknowledged this interpretation as a possible meaning of the Greek text, and the translators of the New English Bible inserted it as a footnote. But it would seem that of the two interpretations only the one favoured by the Revised Version and by the New International Version is really admissible in the light of Luke's own knowledge of the census under Quirinius held in A.D. 6.

Let us then attempt a more precise translation of these two verses along the lines indicated above. Perhaps:

And about that time it happened that a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that the census should be progressively extended to all parts of the Roman world. This was the first census to take place when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

It is still quite possible that Luke is wrong, and that there was no such decree and no census in Judaea around 5 B.C., or if there was a census that Quirinius was not governor of Syria at the time. We certainly have no confirmatory evidence for any of these statements from other sources. The most we can say is that Augustus did carry out several provincial censuses in the first twenty years of his reign, and in 8 B.C. he held a census of Roman citizens; he may therefore conceivably have made a decision at that time to extend the census across the Roman world, as Luke states. Quirinius was certainly governor of Syria in A.D. 6, and it is just possible that he may have been governor previously at some time during the years 7–5 B.C., though the evidence from other sources is controversial.⁵ But whether he was right or not we have perhaps established more clearly what Luke believed and what he was trying to

say. He tried to specify the census of the Nativity by referring to the decree of Augustus which he believed gave rise to the census, and to the odd coincidence that according to his information it was the first of two censuses which took place while Quirinius was holding the governorship of Syria. Until we can prove conclusively that Luke was wrong, perhaps we should at least allow that he may yet prove not to have misled Theophilus.

NOTES

1. The exact date has been long debated, and depends partly on the difficult question of the length of Jesus' ministry and on the date of the Crucifixion (most probably A.D. 29 or 30). Luke says (3:1) that John began to preach 'in the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius', and implies that the baptism of Jesus followed soon after. But this 'fifteenth year' could be counted from A.D. 13, when Tiberius became co-regent with Augustus, or A.D. 14 when Augustus died. Moreover, the years could be counted from 1st January rather than the anniversary of Tiberius' accession. A.D. 27/8 is in any case not likely to be very far out.

2. Examples from Luke's own writing are 1:17 (ἐπιστρέψαι), 5:32 (καλέσαι). See also E. G. Jay, *New Testament Greek* (London, 1958), p. 101. The tendency was already there in Classical Greek, where the aorist infinitive was frequently used for the present after an aorist main verb.

3. From Luke's own writing e.g. 5:15 (ἀκούειν, θεραπεύεσθαι).

4. We know that client kingdoms did hold censuses; see Tac. *Ann.* 6.41.

5. For a discussion of some of the problems and key references see R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 397–401. To put the matter briefly, if Quirinius was governor of Syria at the time of the Nativity, then he must have held the office for a short time between C. Sentius Saturninus (probably c. 9–6 B.C.) and P. Quinctilius Varus (probably c. 6–4 B.C.). Josephus (*AJ* 17.5.2) has Varus directly succeeding Saturninus in the post, but we know that Quirinius was in the area at some time between 12 B.C. and A.D. 2, when he subdued the Homanadenses, a mountain tribe in south-east Asia Minor, but neither the date of this action nor the post which Quirinius held at the time are known. Luke's Gospel (probably c. A.D. 60 if one accepts the 'early' dating—see e.g. J. A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust The New Testament?* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 71 ff.) is certainly earlier than Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* (A.D. 93–4), and was probably at least drafted within living memory of the Nativity. It must also be said that Josephus' account of the years leading up to Herod's death in 4 B.C. is essentially a history of Herod and his family, and Roman officials appear only insofar as they contribute to that theme. Luke may therefore be correct, whilst Josephus has omitted a brief governorship of Syria which did not impinge on his story. It has alternatively been suggested that Quirinius might have held military command in Syria whilst one of the known governors retained civil control. However, it still remains possible that Luke has simply made a mistake; perhaps he confused the names Quirinius and Quinctilius (though the former is a cognomen and the latter a nomen), and thus wrongly assumed that Quirinius held the governorship twice. The case must remain open.