

## Josephus Misdated The Census Of Quirinius

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An enduring challenge for those reconstructing historical dates for the life of Jesus has been the date for the census of Quirinius because the Gospel-writer Luke and the first-century Jewish historian Josephus differ on its date. Luke, when read consistently with Matthew, dates the birth of Jesus to both the reign of Herod the Great (Luke 1:5, cf. Matthew 2:19-22) and a census under Quirinius (Luke 2:1-2). Josephus, on the other hand, reports that Quirinius conducted his census long after Herod's death, at the exile of Herod's son Herod Archelaus. So, either Luke or Josephus—at least as usually construed—must be wrong.

For more than a century, the consensus has grown in favor of the account of the census given by Josephus. In 1988, Daniel Schwartz of Jerusalem's Hebrew University declared, “[I]t seems fair to say that the scholarly consensus today, shared even by many conservative Christian scholars, is that Luke is wrong.”<sup>1</sup> For, as Luke Timothy Johnson asserts, “on the basis of exhaustive research, Luke's dates seem to be out of kilter: Quirinius and the census under him do not match the other dates.”<sup>2</sup> When faced with such conflicting accounts, reconstructing history consists in establishing the most plausible, rather than the absolutely certain, account of what really happened. The scholars who share this consensus find the Josephus account more plausible than the account provided by Luke.

Before offering a challenge to this consensus, significant evidence in its support must be admitted. First of all, while Luke's gospel refers to this census with only one sentence, Josephus relates a detailed narrative of the events surrounding the census: Quirinius was sent into the region on the twofold mission to take the census and to secure the property of Archelaus at the time of his exile. Second, Josephus asserts an explicit date for this census—in the 37th year from Caesar's defeat of Antony at Actium in 31 BC, that is, in AD 6 (*Ant.* XVIII, 26-28). Finally, Luke's one sentence *suggesting* that Quirinius was the governor of Syria at the time of the Jesus' birth adds a further complication since Josephus reports that Varus was governor of Syria from the last years of Herod the Great until after Herod's death and that Saturninus

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