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The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2

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“There is one name that has caused more controversy than any other of the Roman phenomena in the New Testament, that of Quirinius, the governor of Syria,” says Sherwin-White.¹ He appears in the birth narrative of Luke: “Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1–2 *NASB*). The context suggests that Jesus was born in the midst of this census.

Certain other facts must be taken into account. Luke himself dates the birth of John the Baptist during the reign of Herod, king of Judea (1:5). Matthew states even more specifically that Jesus was born shortly before the death of Herod (Matthew 2). Finegan reasons that Herod died between March 12 and April 11, 4 B.C.² Hoehner narrows the date to the period of March 29 to April 11, 4 B.C.³ Jesus was thus born during or before the month of March, 4 B.C. (perhaps even during December, 5 B.C.). The census of Luke 2:1–2, therefore, probably took place during the year 5 B.C. in Judea.

Many questions have arisen since the early nineteenth century concerning this census and its connection with Quirinius. The problem is that Quirinius, as far as is known, governed Syria only during A.D. 6-7, and not at all in 5 B.C. Why then does Luke say that Jesus was born during a census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria?

According to Hayles,

it has been maintained by several scholars that this story is either fiction or a blunder; that the circumstances connected with it, which Luke relates, are contrary to history; and, in short, that the story is unhistorical and impossible, not in one way merely, but in several. It is urged that a general census of the Empire is a fabrication, that the local one under Herod an impossibility, that the enrollment requiring a return to one's own city quite improbable, and that any association of Quirinius with a census this early is completely anachronistic.⁴

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¹ IA. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 162.

² J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: University Press, 1964) 231.

³ H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 13.

⁴ D. J. Hayles, “The Roman Census and Jesus' Birth,” *Buried History* 9/4 (December 1973) 113.

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These objections to the veracity of Luke's account were set forth dramatically in Emil Shürer's political history of Palestine toward the end of the nineteenth century⁵ and since then have become the rallying point for arguments both pro and con.⁶ The bulk of this article will concern a fresh look at the problem, but first some of the popular attempts to solve it will be surveyed.

I. Proposed Solutions

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Some have claimed that Quirinius actually did not rule Syria in A.D. 6-7 but rather some eight to fourteen years earlier, and that the sources that give that date (especially Josephus) are in error.⁷ But this is an argument from silence, and since Josephus is usually accurate and is consistent with himself in his account of these things, this claim has gained little support.

Others have tried to amend the text of Luke 2:2. The view that this verse is a gloss has not been accepted, but some have proposed that the name Saturninus should be read in place of Quirinius.⁸ This is due to Tertullian's statement concerning proof of the birth of Christ: "There is historical proof that at this very time a census had been taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus, which might have satisfied their inquiry respecting the family and descent of Christ."⁹ The idea is that an early scribe assumed that Luke intended the well-known census directed by Quirinius in A.D. 6-7 and so changed the original name Saturninus to Quirinius. This has also found little support, since Saturninus ruled in 9-6 B.C.,¹⁰ yet Tertullian dates the birth of Jesus in the forty-first year of Augustus, or 3 B.C. There is also no real textual evidence for such a reading in Luke.

Some have suggested that while the census was ordered by Augustus in the days of Herod the Great, it was not made until A.D. 6-7, or that it was begun earlier but only finished under Quirinius.¹¹ But Joseph and Mary would thus have had no reason to travel to Bethlehem as early as 5 B.C. However, Luke says that the census was "taken" or "came to pass" when Quirinius was governor, not that it was "completed" then.

⁵ E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1890), 2. 114–143.

⁶ Each point is answered in Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 14–23; Hayles, "Census" 117–132; *Buried History* 10/1 (March 1974) 16–30.

⁷ G. Ogg, "The Quirinius Question Today," *ExpTim* 79/7 (April 1968) 231–232; cf. F. F. Bruce, "Quirinius," *New Bible Dictionary* (ed. J. D. Douglas; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 1069.

⁸ Ogg, "Question" 232.

⁹ Tertullian *Adv. Marc.* 4.19.

¹⁰ Finegan, *Handbook* 235.

¹¹ Ogg, "Question" 232.

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Another view holds that Luke 2:2 does not state that Quirinius was “governor” of Syria at the time of the census but only that he had a position of special responsibility that involved, among other duties, the conduct of a census.¹² It is alleged that Luke uses the word translated “governor” in 2:2 to refer also to a guide, auxiliary, prefect, procurator, or provincial legate (Luke 20:20; 23:4; Acts 7:10; 14:12; 15:22). This view proposes a special commission from Augustus—but if so, why is he called the ruler “of Syria”? Ogg contends that the phrase is “so definite and unambiguous that by it only the regular governor of the province of Syria can be meant.”¹³

Two final views, besides the common view that Luke was mistaken, will be discussed more fully below: (1) that Quirinius was actually governor twice over Syria, once about 8 B.C. and again in A.D. 6-7,¹⁴ and (2) that Luke 2:2 should be read as follows: “This census took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria.”¹⁵ These two views have garnered the most support from conservatives, and both have been defended by able scholars during the past century.

The crux of the matter seems to be two questions: (1) When was Quirinius governor of Syria? (2) When did the census of Luke 2:1–2 take place? We must not automatically assume that these two questions have the same answer. After considering a short history of the man Quirinius and his times, we will take up these two questions in order.

II. Publius Sulpicius Quirinius

Most of the information concerning P. Sulpicius Quirinius comes from two ancient historians, Josephus and Tacitus. Tacitus records the following:

At this time, Tiberius asked the senate to allow the death of Sulpicius Quirinius to be solemnized by a public funeral. With the old patrician family of the Sulpicii, Quirinius—who sprang from the municipality of Lanuvium—had no connection; but as an intrepid soldier and an active servant he won a consulate under the deified August, and, a little while later, by capturing the Homonadensian strongholds beyond the Cilician frontier, earned the insignia of triumph. After his appointment, again, as advisor to Gaius Caesar during his command in Armenia, he had shown himself no less attentive to Tiberius, who was then residing in Rhodes. This circumstance the emperor now disclosed in the senate ... In the rest

¹² Hayles, “Census” (March 1974) 29.

¹³ Ogg, “Question” 232.

¹⁴ W. M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915) 294-300.

¹⁵ Ogg, “Question” 232–233; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1969) 30 n. 1.

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of men, however, the memory of Quirinius awoke no enthusiasm, in view of his attempt (already noticed) to ruin Lepida [his wife], and the combination of meanness with exorbitant power which had marked his later days.¹⁶

Quirinius held high office as the reward of proven ability and hard work. He came from an undistinguished family and had no connection with the patrician family of the Sulpicii. He was governor of Crete and Cyrene and proved himself a very competent and successful soldier in campaigns against nomad tribes in the deserts of Cyrene.¹⁷ Because of this success he was given the command against the Homonadenses, who in 25 B.C. had captured and killed the Roman client king Amyntas. When Amyntas died, his kingdom passed to Augustus and became the new imperial province of Galatia.¹⁸

According to Hudson, Quirinius was appointed governor of Syria in order to conduct the war against the Homonadenses.¹⁹ Shürer agrees with this.²⁰ At any rate, between 12 B.C. and A.D. 1 he conducted the Homonadensian War.²¹ He was appointed consul in 12 B.C. Finegan believes that the resistance of the Homonadensians must have been broken by the time the network of Roman roads was laid out in the province of Galatia in 6 B.C.²² If so, the major part of the war must have been over by that date. Quirinius was highly successful in his mission. At least four thousand prisoners were taken, and he earned the distinction of a triumph.²³ The colony of Pisidian Antioch elected him *duumvir* in gratitude²⁴

In A.D. 2-3 Quirinius was advisor to Gaius Caesar in Armenia.²⁵ Nothing definite is known of him between those years, except that Bruce states that he was proconsul of Asia in 3 B.C.²⁶

Then in A.D. 6 Archelaus was deposed from the throne of Judea and Quirinius was sent by Augustus to become governor of Syria, to liquidate Archelaus' estate, and to hold a

¹⁶ Tacitus *Annales* 3.48.

¹⁷ E. C. Hudson, "The Principal Family at Pisidian Antioch," *JNES* 15 (1956) 106.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Schürer, *History*, 1. 352.

²¹ Finegan, *Handbook* 235.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hudson, "Family" 106.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Finegan, *Handbook* 236.

²⁶ Bruce, "Quirinius" 1069.

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census to determine the amount of tribute the new province might be expected to pay into the imperial treasury.²⁷ Josephus records the move thus:

Quirinius, a Roman senator who had proceeded through all the magistracies to the consulship and a man who was extremely distinguished in other respects, arrived in Syria, dispatched by Caesar to be governor of the nation, and to make an assessment of their property. Coponius, a man of equestrian rank, was sent along with him to rule over the Jews with full authority. Quirinius also visited Judea, which had been annexed to Syria, in order to make an assessment of the property of the Jews and to liquidate the estate of Archelaus. Although the Jews were at first shocked to hear of the registration of property, they gradually condescended, yielding to the arguments of the high priest Joazar, the son of Boethus, to go no further in opposition. So those who were convinced by him declared, without dispute, the value of their property.²⁸

Some rebelled, however, especially under the leadership of Judas the Galilean, saying that such a Roman census was downright slavery.²⁹ It was this uprising that gave birth to the Zealot party.³⁰ It is also this census and rebellion that is described in Acts 5:37: “Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he... perished, and all who followed him were scattered.”

It is important to note that when Quirinius became governor of Syria, Judea was made a province and put under the rule of Syria, so that Quirinius became responsible not only for Syria but also for Judea (with Coponius acting as his procurator). This governorship apparently lasted only two years (A.D. 6-7) and concluded his public career.³¹ He lived in Rome afterwards and died in A.D. 21.

III. When Was Quirinius Governor Of Syria?

It is certain that Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6-7. The question that concerns us here is whether he was ever governor of Syria before that—specifically, during the reign of Herod (before 4 B.C.). Shürer argues that he was governor twice:

But a war could not at any time be carried on except by the governor of that province in which or from which the war was being conducted. Quirinius must

²⁷ Josephus *Ant.* 17.13.5; Bruce, *History*. 30; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke LIX* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 401.

²⁸ Josephus *Ant.* 18.1.1.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bruce, *History* 30, 91.

³¹ Bruce, “Quirinius” 1069.

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therefore have been then governor of that province to which the war against them proceeded... We might have to do with the provinces of Asia, Pamphylia, Galatia, Cilicia, Syria. But of these the first three must be at once set aside, because they had no legions so that their governors could not carry on a war. And further, Cilicia was probably at that time only a part of the province of Syria; at least it was, as also Pamphylia and Galatia were, no consular province, whereas Quirinius led the war against the Homonadensians as one who had been consul. Now, one who had been a consul was never sent to a praetorian province, which was administered by one who had been a praetor. The only conclusion then that remains is that Quirinius at the time of that war with the Homonadensians was governor of Syria.³²

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The problem is that the governors of Syria from 12 B.C. to 4 B.C. are known, and Quirinius was not one of them. So Shürer makes Quirinius governor for the first time in 3-2 B.C.—which does not help our chronology at all, since Herod died in 4 B.C. and Jesus was born before his death.

Ramsay, however, on the basis of two inscriptions concludes that Quirinius did exercise a governorship of Syria about 8-6 B.C.³³ He suggests that both Quirinius and Sentius Saturninus (9–6 B.C.) were governors for Augustus in Syria at the same time with different duties.³⁴ Quirinius would have commanded the legions and military resources of Syria, while Sentius attended to politics.

Stauffer suggests that during this general time Quirinius was in charge of all campaigns and other affairs in the east.³⁵ In Syria he sometimes governed alone and sometimes aided by an imperial provincial governor. Says Stauffer:

It is evident that this division of power was in the nature of things, and Sulpicius Quirinius must be reckoned not only among the series of Syrian provincial governors, but also—and this chiefly—in the proud list of the Roman commanders-in-chief of the Orient. In this capacity he governed the Roman Orient like a vice-emperor from 12 B.C. to A.D. 16, with only a brief interruption (Gaius Caesar). In this capacity he carried out the *prima descriptio* in the East. Thus, he was in a position to begin the work of the census in the days of King Herod, to continue

³² Shürer, *History*, 1. 352.

³³ Ramsay, *Bearing* 292–300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³⁵ E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Knopf, 1960) 29.

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it without regard to the temporary occupancy or vacancy of the post of Syrian governor, and finally to bring it to a peaceful conclusion.³⁶

If this is true—and it may be—it would solve our problem. But most of it is supposition and conjecture.

There is some support from the statement of Tertullian that “at this very time a census had been taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus which might have satisfied their inquiry respecting the family and descent of Christ.”³⁷ Instead of being a mistake on Tertullian’s part, it may indicate that Quirinius and Saturninus were governing Syria at the same time.

Hayles concludes that “we are left with only one certain piece of information about Quirinius’ service in Syria—his legateship beginning in A.D. 6.”³⁸ An earlier governorship has yet to be documented.

IV. When Did The Census Of Luke 2:1-2 Take Place?

1. *The grammar of Luke 2:2.* If we set aside the question of whether Quirinius was governor in Syria during the reign of Herod and assume for a moment that his only rule and census were in A.D. 6-7, we may consider another solution that is currently gathering support.

Feldman, in his edition of *Josephus*, states that “Luke 2:2 can be vindicated only if we translate..., ‘This census was the first before that under the prefectureship of Quirinius in Syria.’”³⁹ This view has been adopted by Nigel Turner⁴⁰ and F. F. Bruce.⁴¹ The adjective *prStos* may mean “first” or “earlier,” “former,” and thus:

“First census” must be taken in its Hellenistic connotation as the first of two, and then we must expand the clause a little. “This census was *before the census* which Quirinius, governor of Syria, made.”⁴²

Some examples using other adjectives are John 5:36, “the witness which I have. is greater than (that of) John,” and I Cor 1:25, “the foolishness of God is wiser than (the wisdom of)

³⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

³⁷ Tertullian *Adv. Marc.* 4.19.

³⁸ Hayles, “Census” (March 1974) 24; cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke* 403.

³⁹ L. H. Feldman, ed., *Josephus* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1965) 19.3.

⁴⁰ N. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) 23-24.

⁴¹ Bruce, *History* 30 n. 1.

⁴² Turner, *Insights* 23; I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 104, appears to arrive at the same conclusion; but cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke* 401, who says that such a view is impossible because of the following participle and the word order.

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men." Turner says, "The evangelist is referring to a census, of which we know nothing [from extra-Biblical sources], held before that of Quirinius in A.D. 6."⁴³ Thus Luke recognizes that the well-known census under Quirinius took place in A.D. 6-7. He is not speaking of that one, however; the census of which he is speaking took place before (*prōtē*) that one.

This solution also throws light on the statement of Gamaliel in Acts 5:37 concerning "the days of the census," when Judas the Galilean rebelled. The census of A.D. 6-7 was the census that all Israel remembered, and they remembered Quirinius mostly because of that census that he directed. Sherwin-White states that Quirinius "was the first of the Jewish bugbears of the empire period."⁴⁴ They remembered him for his census, and Luke had purposely to distinguish between that census and the census during which Jesus was born.

The very word "first" indicates that there were at least two censuses in Judea. Josephus mentions only one, whereas Luke notes two (Luke 2:2 and Acts 5:37). BAG allows for *prōtos* to be used "without any thought that the series must continue."⁴⁵ But the only NT example cited is Matt 17:27: "Take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater." This passage does not apply to the question at hand since the one doing the counting has the means to stop the series after the first one, whereas the historian looks back and has to determine how many have already occurred. Luke would certainly have spoken of *the* census, rather than the *first*, if in fact he only knew of one. The obvious conclusion is that he knew of another *before* that of Quirinius.

Higgins⁴⁶ and Hoehner⁴⁷ suggest an adverbial use of *prōtos* to read: "This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria." But their example, John 15:18, uses the neuter *prōton* (which often has an adverbial meaning),⁴⁸ not *prōtos* or *prōtē* as here. Their view also has two other weaknesses: (1) It neglects the A.D. 6-7 census, which was so important in the history of Israel between A.D. 6 and A.D. 70 (cf. Acts 5:27); and (2) it fails to answer why Quirinius is mentioned at all. Why not give the name of the actual governor at the time of the census?

In conclusion, Luke 2:2 fits well both grammatically and historically when taken to mean that the census during which Jesus was born was the census *before* the well-known, later

⁴³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁴ Sherwin-White, *Roman Society* 170.

⁴⁵ BAG 733.

⁴⁶ A. J. B. Higgins, "Sidelights on Christian Beginnings in the Graeco-Roman World," *EvQ* 41/4 (October-December 1969) 200–201.

⁴⁷ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 21–22.

⁴⁸ BAG 733.

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census of Quirinius. The probability of such an earlier census during the reign of Herod will now be discussed.

Censuses were common in the Roman empire. A census of Roman citizens was held periodically under the republic and was conducted by Augustus in 28 B.C. and later.⁴⁹ According to Sherwin-White, "The census was taken in the three Gauls in 27 B.C. (Dio, 53.22.15, Livy, *Per.* 134), in 12 B.C. (Livy, *Per.* 138, ILS, 212, ii. 36), and in A.D. 14-16 (Tac. *Ann.* i. 31, 33, ii. 6)."⁵⁰ Census enrollments were made in Egypt every fourteen years. Evidence has been found of enrollments from A.D. 34 to A.D. 230.⁵¹ According to Ramsay, "Augustus was, in all probability, the originator of this system in Egypt."⁵²

In Cyrene exact information on the number and wealth of the inhabitants was available by 7 B.C.⁵³ Even in the more or less autonomous city-state of Apamea in Syria, Quirinius himself had a census taken.⁵⁴

Concerning the edict or "decree" of Augustus mentioned in Luke 2:1, Sherwin-White states:

Critics hasten to remark, correctly, that there never was a single census of the whole Roman empire. The assessment of the different provinces was undertaken at different and widely separated dates in the Principate of Augustus. But Luke has been misunderstood. A census or taxation-assessment of the whole provincial empire was certainly accomplished for the first time in history under Augustus. Now it was the way of Augustus to issue general explanations of the particular actions of the central government ... It is likely that Quirinius issued the instructions for the census of Judaea with an introductory edict of Augustus, explaining that whereas the welfare of the whole Empire requires that no man should pay more than his due, and that the census should be completed throughout all the provinces, this is now to be undertaken in Judaea at the same time as the revision of the census in Syria,—or in words to that effect ... His whole statement means that the general policy of Augustus was carried out piecemeal in Judaea.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Finegan, *Handbook* 236.

⁵⁰ Sherwin-White, *Roman Society* 169 n. 1.

⁵¹ W. M. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898) 132-136.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵³ Finegan, *Handbook* 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Sherwin-White, *Roman Society* 168-169; Hayles, "Census" (December 1973) 117-131, includes a full explanation of Rome's censuses.

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It is thus very likely that Augustus had a general policy of taking censuses of various territories and provinces at various times. We turn now to the application of this policy to Judea during the reign of Herod.

2. *A census under Herod.* Ramsay states that “the first enrollment in Syria was made in the year 8-7 B.C., but a consideration of the situation in Syria and Palestine about that time will show that the enrollment in Herod’s kingdom was probably delayed for some time later.”⁵⁶ This could bring the census to about 5 B.C.

Some have questioned whether Rome would try to take a census in Palestine while Herod was still reigning. Josephus indicates that serious problems developed during the latter part of Herod’s reign between Herod and Augustus. His responses to his family troubles (executing sons and changing his will) began to damage his reputation with Caesar.⁵⁷ In addition, in 8 B.C. Herod led an attack into Arabia to punish robbers who were Augustus’ subjects, and Augustus reacted strongly.

Caesar... grew very angry, and wrote to Herod sharply. The sum of his epistle was this, that whereas of old he had used him as his friend, he should now use him as his subject.⁵⁸

Apparently in Herod’s last days his kingdom came more and more under the direction and influence of Augustus. It would not be surprising therefore to find the emperor asking Herod to take a census for him in Judea. Augustus was probably anticipating Herod’s death.

As far as the manner in which the census was carried out is concerned,

Herod was naturally eager to avoid giving to the enrollment an entirely foreign and non-national character ... Obviously, the best way to soothe the Jewish sentiment was to give the enrollment a tribal character and to number the tribes of Israel, as had been done by purely national Governments.⁵⁹

Thus Herod avoided the strife and rebellion that attended the census of A.D. 6-7 under Quirinius, which was strictly foreign and was long remembered. Each person being registered had to return to his tribal home, exactly as Joseph went to Bethlehem.

⁵⁶ Ramsay, *Bethlehem* 174.

⁵⁷ Hayles, “Census” (March 1974) 25.

⁵⁸ *Josephus A nt.* 16.9.3.

⁵⁹ Ramsay, *Bethlehem* 186.

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The rule of Herod over the entire kingdom also solves another problem: That Luke was not thinking of the A.D. 6-7 census as the one of Christ's birth is shown by the fact that Joseph and Mary had to leave the territory of Antipas (Galilee) and go to Judea (directly under Roman control in A.D. 6 following the deposition of Archelaus) to be enrolled. This would have taken place only if there were one central authority over Palestine—such as only during the reign of Herod the Great, before April, 4 B.C.⁶⁰

V. Conclusion

Many censuses were taken in the Roman empire during the time of Augustus, and there is no reason why Herod might not have been asked to take one, especially in light of conditions near the end of his life. Since censuses were carried out locally, local customs were regarded and Palestine was a delicate area.

Quirinius may or may not have been governor of Syria at the birth of Christ in 5 B.C., but this is irrelevant since Luke 2:2 states that the census during which Jesus was born was the first one, *before* the more well-known one taken by Quirinius in A.D. 6-7. This first one was “in the days of Herod the king.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ H. R. Moehring, “The Census in Luke as an Apologetic Device,” *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (ed. D. E. Aune; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 149.

⁶¹ Brindle, W. (1984). “The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 27(1), 42–52.