

Did Luke make a mistake when he said Quirinius was the governor of Syria when the census affecting Jesus' birth took place?

There is no denying your question has proved difficult for Christian apologists. And I am not going to pretend that my explanation will satisfy every fine requirement. This fact does not bother me, because science too has apparent difficulties and contradictions and opposing schools of interpretation in many of its branches and theories. This does not put us off science as a great model for understanding our world. (e.g. some scientists dismiss the paranormal, others appeal to empirical observations to prove it, etc.) It adds to the colour and interest! Another general introductory comment is that Luke has a solid and recognised track-record of historical accuracy, admired by both Biblical scholars and secular historians and archaeologists alike. His dozens of historical and geographical asides in his narratives are all proven, or reasonable, apparently except this one on the nativity. That there is an alleged contradiction when he mentions Quirinius' timing (as opposed to Josephus') should therefore give us reasonable caution before writing this reference off as inaccurate.

The first fact to note is that Luke does not say Quirinius was the governor of Syria when the census affecting Jesus' birth took place. The Greek text reads that he was *hegemoneuontos* of Syria, which means he was in a position of authority. If Quirinius was the governor the word would be *legatus*. Now, it just so happens that Quirinius was in a position of authority in Syria on two separate occasions. The first time he led military action against the Homonadensians during the period between 12 and 2 BC. A Latin inscription discovered in 1764 adds weight to this idea that Quirinius was only in a position of military authority, but was not the governor.

Justin Martyr's Apology supports this view, writing that Quirinius was a "procurator", not a governor of the area of Judea. As Gleason Archer writes, "In order to secure efficiency and dispatch, it may well have been that Augustus put Quirinius in charge of the census-enrollment in Syria between the close of Saturninus' administration

and the beginning of Varus's term of service in 7 B.C. It was doubtless because of his competent handling of the 7 B.C. census that Augustus later put him in charge of the 7 A.D. census." Archer also says that Roman history records Quirinius leading the effort to quell rebels in that area at exactly that time, so such a political arrangement is not a stretch.

If Quirinius did hold such a position, then we have no contradiction. The first census was taken during the time of Jesus birth, but Josephus' census would have come later. This option seems to me to be entirely reasonable. It is noteworthy that Luke is aware of another census taken in 6 AD ([Acts 5:37](#)), which is why some translators read the Greek text at [Luke 2:2](#) as, "This census was the first of those which took place under Quirinius ..." Other translators read it, "This was the census which took place before Quirinius was governor ..."

My own personal opinion on this translation issue is that it is not necessary to read it that way to prove Luke's accuracy. Whether Luke is saying "the first census" or "before Quirinius ..." the fact is Luke does not call him the governor at the time of the nativity census.

We also know that [Caesar Augustus](#) ordered many censuses in his day. Records show that Roman-controlled Egypt had begun a census as early as 10 BC and it was repeated every 14 years.

And Augustus himself notes in his [Res Gestae](#) (*The Deeds of Augustus*) that he ordered three wide-spread censuses of Roman citizens, one in 28 B.C., one in 8 B.C. and one in 14 A.D. In between there are several other censuses that happened locally across Rome. Luke's account corroborates the idea of multiple censuses for Judea when he writes "This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria."

On another occasion, an enrolment of all the people of the empire happened to swear an oath of allegiance to Caesar. In Chapter 34 of [Res Gestae](#) Augustus also notes, "When I administered my thirteenth consulate (2 B.C.E.), the senate and Equestrian order and Roman people all called me father of the country, and voted that the same be inscribed in the vestibule of my temple".

[Josephus](#) also mentions a time, "When all good people gave assurance of their good will to Caesar". These types of tributes would also require an enrolment of individuals from across the empire. Orosius, a fifth century Christian, links this

registration with the birth of Jesus saying that "all of the peoples of the great nations were to take an oath". So, the fact that we have outside corroboration of the possibility of multiple censuses strengthens Luke's report of the events as he has written them.

Taking all of this together, we have at least three censuses in the area of Judea - one in 8 B.C., one starting around 2 B.C. and one in 6 A.D. The only point that is really in question, then, is whether Luke was mistaken in ascribing this census to the time when Quirinius was in the role of Syrian Governor. Since Quirinius wasn't governor of the Syrian province until after Archelaus was deposed, critics claim Luke misidentified the census as the smaller one, which happened some 8-10 years after Herod died. But I have already pointed out that Luke does not say Quirinius was governor when the nativity census took place, rather he was in a position of military authority.

I don't want to write an epistle. As I said, I am not claiming infallibility in this explanation. But it is reasonable. Luke is admired as one of the most reliable historians to come to us from the ancient world. This is not just the opinion of those who are Christian apologists. Luke's documents are studied in university departments of archaeology and antiquity for this very reason. On balance, I am confident that this supposed contradiction will turn out with all the other supposed contradictions to be no real contradiction.