

A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS
VIII. God's Validation Of Messiah's Birth
(Luke 2:1-7)

I. Introduction

- A. The Luke 2:1-7 record of Christ's birth contains some statements that various scholars have argued show that the passage is historically inaccurate, implying that the Gospel of Luke is not divinely inspired Scripture.
- B. However, a thorough study of the facts involved as verified in secular history support the credibility of the passage and show God's sovereign work to fulfill prophecy. We view that passage for insight and edification:

II. God's Validation Of Messiah's Birth, Luke 2:1-7.

- A. Various scholars claim that there are major inaccuracies in Luke 2:1-5 KJV with the following arguments:
 - 1. There is no known general census in the time of Emperor Augustus in secular records as is allegedly implied in Luke 2:1. (Harold W. Hoehner, Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, 1979, p. 14)
 - 2. In a Roman census, Joseph allegedly would not have needed to travel to Bethlehem, but register in the principal town of his residence, in Nazareth of Galilee, Ibid.
 - 3. The Romans allegedly would not have conducted a census in Palestine in Herod the Great's time as he was favored by the Roman Emperor Augustus so that Herod would have conducted his own census, Ibid.
 - 4. Josephus records the census of A. D. 6-7 as something new that infuriated the Jews into revolting amid riots, allegedly implying that there would not have been a census in Herod's time, Ibid.
 - 5. Secular records show Quirinius was governor of Syria as stated in Luke 2:2 KJV a decade after Herod the Great died (Ibid., p. 13-14), but Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5 imply that Christ was born during Herod's reign, a discrepancy that allegedly discredits the accuracy and divine inspiration of the Gospel of Luke.
- B. However, each of these charges can be reasonably answered (as follows):
 - 1. Augustus was the first Roman emperor in history to order a census of the whole Roman Empire, though censuses "were taken at different times in different provinces" of the Roman Empire, Ibid., p. 15.
 - 2. Roman law required property owners to register for taxation in the district where their land was located, and as "the Jews' property was the property of the fathers' estates the Romans would comply to the custom of laying claim to one's family estate in order to assess for taxation," Ibid.
 - 3. Though Herod usually conducted his own census, in 8/7 B. C., he fell out of favor with Augustus, so it is very likely that Augustus would then want to conduct his own census of Herod's realm, Ibid., p. 16-17.
 - 4. The census by Quirinius in A. D. 6-7 was different from former Roman censuses since it called for landowners to register in the land where their land was situation rather than returning to their ancestral lands, what led the Jews to riot since it looked like a Roman effort to "break down the national fiber of the Jews," Ibid., p. 18. Luke wanted to distance his readers from thinking that that riotous census was meant in Luke 2:1 to explain why Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to their ancestral home of Bethlehem under the former, more-culturally-sensitive and peaceful census by Emperor Augustus.
 - 5. The word "first" (*protos*) in Luke 2:2 KJV is better translated "before" (Ibid., p. 21) like it is in John 15:18 (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 207) to fulfill Luke's effort to distinguish the census in Luke 2:1 from the one under Quirinius in A. D. 6-7 in order to explain why Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem!
- C. Thus, Luke 2:1-7 actually reveals God's vast sovereignty in fulfilling prophecy and caring for His people:
 - 1. God arranged for Herod to fall out of favor with Emperor Augustus before the Luke 2:1 census occurred so that Augustus would directly control the census in Herod's realm under the initial Roman practice of peacefully respecting the Jews' adherence to the role of their forefathers!
 - 2. Under this older kind of Roman census, Joseph and Mary would need to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and that so God could fulfill Micah 5:2 that predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
 - 3. Also, God needed to provide the older kind of Roman census to protect the infant Jesus, Mary and Joseph from the harm in their long journey that many Jews suffered in the later riotous kind of census!
 - 4. Since the huge relocation of Jews for the census under Augustus flooded the "khan" in Bethlehem to where there was no room there for Mary to give birth to Jesus, God provided a stall and manger, Lk. 2:6-7.

Lesson: The Luke 2:1-7 record is not only verified from secular history, its events show God's sovereign hand to protect and sustain Joseph, Mary and Jesus while also precisely fulfilling Biblical prophecy on Messiah's birth.

Application: May we believe the Luke 2:1-7 record as divinely inspired Scripture and rest in God's sovereign rule.