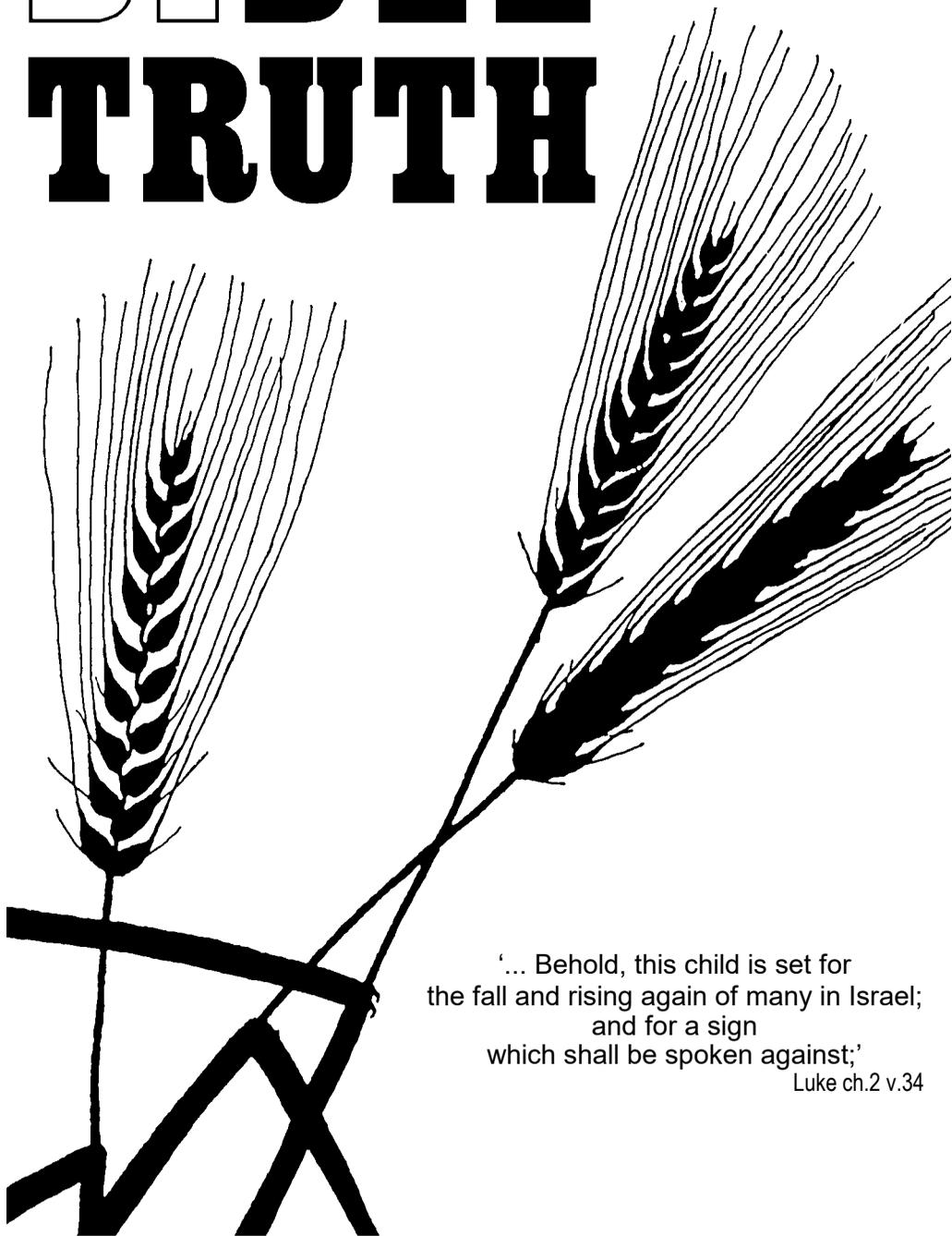


# BIBLE TRUTH

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'... Behold, this child is set for  
the fall and rising again of many in Israel;  
and for a sign  
which shall be spoken against;'

Luke ch.2 v.34

# ***WAS THERE A CENSUS?***

by Lynne Gray

(from *Latter Rain* N° 59)

‘And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.’ Luke ch.2 vv 1-3

Historians raise numerous arguments about this passage, some main objections being as follows.

- There is no record in the history books (especially the Roman ones) of this census having taken place, or the results from this census.
- Some historians say that Joseph would not have been forced to travel to Bethlehem for enrolment, and much less expected to take Mary with him.
- Some historians argue that a Roman census could not have been held in Palestine during the reign of Herod - Herod's reign and his life are dealt with later in this article.
- Because the historian Josephus does not mention this census, historians assume it did not take place - but there is another side to this argument.
- A census held under Quirinius (Cyrenius) could not take place in the time of Herod, since Quirinius was not yet governor of Syria at the time - this point also will be dealt with more fully later in this article.

Caesar Augustus was Roman emperor from 30 BC to 29th August AD 14. He reigned as absolute monarch over the Roman Empire. The background of all the New Testament is Roman and the area known as the Roman Empire would have been regarded as ‘the world’, thus a taxing of the whole world did not mean the whole world as we know it today, but the ‘known’ world of the Roman Empire.

The census would include, occupation, property and kindred which were recorded in the public registers of the city - it is the absence of this record that has caused so much misunderstanding and conjecture. The census probably took place for taxing rather than military reasons, as the Jews were exempt from military service.



GAIUS CARISTA[NIUS...]  
SON OF GAIUS, SERGIUS FRONTO  
CAESIANUS JUL[IUS...]  
OFFICER IN CHARGE OF WORKS, PONTIFEX,  
PRIEST, PREFECT OF  
PUBLIUS SULPICIUS QUIRINIUS THE DUUMVIR,  
PREFECT OF MARCUS SERVILIUS.  
BY THIS MAN, THE FIRST OF ALL [WITH A]  
PUBLIC DECREE OF THE DECEMVIRATE COUNCIL, THE STATUE  
WAS SET UP.

Commemorative inscription originally from the base of a statue of a certain Gaius Caristianus Sergius; it mentions one of his offices as the deputy management of a duumvirate held by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius (c. 51 BCE - 21 CE).

Found outside Pisidian Antioch in 1912. [i.e. c. 51 BC- 21AD]

Plaque mentioning Quirinius (Cyrenius). See Luke ch.2 v.2

At this stage ancient Syria was a tributary to Rome, although they nominally had their own king, in this case, Herod the Great.

It is interesting to note the importance placed in Rome's approved historians, such as Josephus, and the amount of accuracy attributed to them, both then and now. The argument generally runs that because Josephus does not mention this census taking place, then it did not happen. This, unfortunately, does not take into account the historical accuracy of both Josephus, as a historian, and Luke. Historians record events in the order of importance in which they, as observers and recorders, observe it. Josephus mentions many things in his works which are not mentioned elsewhere, but the authenticity of Josephus is not called into question, rather we are looking at the point of view of two excellent historians, Josephus whose allegiance and income came from Rome and Luke whose allegiance was to Jesus Christ and who was not dependent on his record keeping for his income. It is generally accepted that on the matter of Christian history pertaining to the areas in question, Luke has proved to be more reliable and trustworthy than Josephus.

An enrolment as described in the Gospel of Luke is extremely probable in light of Augustus's political manoeuvres - Augustus was working throughout for a more effective centralisation and organisation of his empire. For his purpose an enrolment would have been necessary. Many historians have now shown that during the first century AD a census was held regularly every 14 years or so, and that one was probably held at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Augustus was generally regarded as a wise ruler, a characteristic of Augustus's actions towards a subject people being that he gave consideration to their national customs. Since Augustus had the enrolment made through Herod, who ruled as king of the Jews, it goes without saying that the Jewish custom was followed in order to let the inhabitants go to their original native city for the taxing. Thus the statement is confirmed that everyone had to go into his own city to be enrolled. Joseph, born of the house of David, had to go to Bethlehem. An interesting aspect of a Roman census was that women also had to pay taxes, but it was not necessary for her to go in person. Joseph may well have been concerned that Mary's 'time' was near, or many other reasons may have precipitated the decision for Joseph to take Mary with him.

Interestingly a notice of C. Vibius Maximus, a prefect of Egypt (AD 104), which has been discovered shows that the manner of enrolment described by Luke agrees with what was also the custom in Egypt. All who are away from home are instructed to return to their ordinary abodes for the enrolment.

Herod the Great was not a king in the true sense of the word - he was only a vassal king under the overlordship of the emperor. Josephus relates that during the last years of his reign Augustus demanded an oath of fidelity from all Jews. It would be natural then to order a general taxing of the Palestinian inhabitants. Herod, though, would have had liberty with the arranging of the census under the guidelines of Jewish custom. The need for a census would have become more urgent with the advanced age and impaired health of Herod the Great - Augustus would have had to make preparations for the future of Palestine after the demise of Herod the Great.

Cyrenius/Quirinius as history records him, was Governor of Syria at a much later time than King Herod's rule, but it is recorded that he was Roman consul in 12 BC and thus would qualify him to be a governor of a Roman area. History has left a record of the governors from 12 BC to 4 BC but from 4 BC to AD 4 (which time incorporates the census and birth of Jesus) the names are not given. There is ample evidence to suggest that Cyrenius was governor of Syria twice.

Luke describes the taxing as the first and that it took place when Quirinius was Governor of Syria. The Greek word 'protos' means first but it also means 'before'. On translation of the Scriptures a different

meaning can be gained by inserting 'before' instead of 'first'. I.e. 'And this taxing was before Cyrenius was made governor of Syria' as translated in John ch.1 vv 15, 30 and ch.15 v.18.

With this application the Bible becomes aligned with recorded and accessible historical fact. We know that when Archelaus (the son of King Herod) was deposed and banished by Augustus in AD 6 Judaea was reduced to the status of a Roman province, governed by a prefect appointed directly by the emperor and responsible to him. The legate for Syria at the time of Archelaus's deposition was P. Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyrenius); he had the task of holding a census to determine the amount of tribute which the new province might be expected to pay into the imperial exchequer. Of significance here is the public's reaction to this taxation.

'After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.'

Acts ch.5 v.37

Josephus gives a much fuller account. According to him Judas of Galilee together with a Pharisee named Sadduk, raised the standard of revolt because they held it to be intolerable that tribute should be paid by the people of God to a gentile monarch; indeed, to acquiesce in such a state of affairs would be high treason to God, who alone was Israel's king. Of course, the reaction of the masses may also be attributed to the Romanness of the implementation - this time they did not have Herod to intervene for them, being conscious of their habits and customs as he was - this time they had the census and taxation instituted in the Roman way with no consideration to the Jewish customs and practices of the people, but with suppression and domination. Josephus at no stage mentions that this census was the first census - one would think that if it was the first, that alone would have been worthy of noting.

Archaeology frequently discovers evidence supporting Bible statements previously argued and contended against. This gives us the evidence needed to support the factualness of the Biblical accounts. Luke has been criticised by some people as having made a mistake, but this seems too simple an answer for a man as thorough an historian as Luke was. Through excavations at Antioch there has been the discovery of a fragment with a Roman inscription which produced the surprising fact that Quirinius had been in Syria once before his governorship, on a mission from the Emperor Augustus in

the days of Saturninus the pro-consul. At that time his assignment had been purely military. He led a campaign against the Homonadenses, a tribe in the Taurus mountains in Asia Minor. Quirinius established his seat of government as well as his headquarters in Syria between 10 and 7 BC, thus fitting much better than AD 6 and establishing the birth of Jesus as being around 7 BC.

It is always interesting, when it comes to the Bible evidence, that mankind would rather discredit first and believe later. With political historians, are they writing for professional gain, or their master's approval? In any case, they will be granted absoluteness in testimony far above that ever granted to the historians in the sacred writings. Perhaps we should start to analyse the incongruities of this analysis, and treat the historian with more suspicion, or at least widen our range of them, especially since archaeology continues to reveal evidence proving the Scriptures are correct, and showing us what the historian omitted.

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