

Chapter 10

The Birth Narratives and Secular History

It has been shown in the preceding chapter that there is nothing in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke which does not in itself look as though it could be historical. That conclusion will of course be denied by those who are opposed on principle to an acceptance of the supernatural, or else do not believe that the presumption which everywhere prevails against the acceptance of the supernatural has as a matter of fact been overcome in the case of the life of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. But if a man is once impressed with the evidence in favor of a supernatural origin of Christianity, he should find no special objection to those particular miracles that are narrated in the infancy narratives of the First and Third Gospels; and the non-miraculous elements of the stories also are by no means devoid of psychological and historical probability.

But if these narratives are thus not condemned by their own inherent qualities, how is it when they are compared with secular history and with the rest of the New Testament?

Under the former head – comparison with secular history – two points have been thought to offer difficulty. They are, first, the massacre of the infants at Bethlehem and, second, the census of Quirinius.

The former point can be dismissed very quickly. It is true that Josephus, our informant about Jewish history, says nothing about the massacre of the innocents; and it is also true that the passages in the works of historians that actually mention this event are so late and so likely to have been derived from the Gospel of Matthew as to possess little value. But the argument from silence is in this case altogether devoid of weight. No doubt, from our point of view, the massacre of young children would be a particularly atrocious form of murder, which would have to be mentioned in any detailed account of current events – even, perhaps, in Chicago! But in ancient times, when the exposure of infants was a common practice, which is alluded to, for example, in one of the non-literary papyri, in the most casual possible manner as an ordinary feature of the life of that day,¹ the murder of children would

1. See Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri*, 1910, p. 33.

probably not be regarded with any special horror. Moreover, we ought not to exaggerate the number of the infants who would be killed. If Bethlehem was a small village, as it probably was, then the number of male children in it under two years of age would not exceed perhaps twenty or thirty. In the orgies of blood and cruelty that marked the closing years of Herod's reign, the removal of a score of children in an obscure village might well escape the notice of our one historian. But even if Josephus knew of the incident, and even if he thought it in itself worthy of remark, there was in this case a special reason for his silence. The incident involved Jewish Messianic hopes; and without doubt Josephus purposely avoided the mention of such things in the history that he wrote for Roman readers. There is no reason, therefore, for supposing that if the massacre of the innocents had really happened Josephus would necessarily have included it in his historical work.

But something more positive needs also to be said. Although the massacre of the innocents is not directly attested by secular history, it is exactly in accord with what we know of the character of Herod in his declining years. Herod the Great was an able monarch, but in the last years of his reign he entered upon a career of cruelty that reached the verge of madness. His actions in putting to death his own children and his beloved wife, and his plan (interrupted only by his death) of butchering all the leading citizens of Jerusalem in the theatre, possess just exactly that quality of wild and useless bloodthirstiness which appears in the massacre of the innocents at Bethlehem. Never was a story more completely in character than this. In general we may say that the difficulty which has been found in the silence of secular history about the bloody deed at Bethlehem amounts to nothing at all.

Far more important is the other of the two objections which have been drawn from secular history against the truthfulness of our narrative – namely, the difficulty regarding the census of Quirinius.² At that point we have a problem which, despite a certain amount of light that has been shed upon it in recent years, has not yet quite been cleared up.

The account of the census to which exception has been taken is found in Lk. ii.1-5. In this account, verse I presents no real difficulty. When it is said that “in those days a decree went forth from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled,” that does not at all mean that a census was to be taken, in the modern fashion, in all parts of the Empire in the same manner and on the same day. On the contrary, the language of the verse is fully satisfied if we think only of the announcement by Augustus of a general

2. On this subject see especially W.P. Armstrong, art. “Chronology of the New Testament,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopædia*, i, 1915, pp. 645 f.

policy of enrolment for the Empire. It is not at all necessary to suppose that this policy was carried out in any uniform manner, or even that it was carried out in every one of the provinces and vassal kingdoms at all. In accordance with the wise Roman policy of adaptation to local circumstances, a large amount of liberty would naturally be allowed to the several administrators and vassal monarchs. In Egypt, where, because of the discovery of the non-literary papyri, our information is particularly abundant, we find a census being taken under a regular fourteen-year cycle; a census was also taken, we know, in Italy and in Gaul and other provinces; and the census in Judæa in A.D. 6 is mentioned not only by the New Testament but also by Josephus.³ In some provinces, indeed, modern historians have asserted that no census was taken. But it is quite unnecessary for our present purpose to discuss the question whether this assertion is correct: for Luke says only that the decree of Augustus was issued; he does not say that it was completely carried out. Certainly the issuance of such a decree is altogether in accord with Augustan policy; there is a great abundance of evidence to show that this emperor was greatly concerned with an inventory both of the material resources of the Empire and of its man power. The “decree” mentioned in Lk. ii.1, though not directly attested elsewhere, is quite in line with all that we know with regard to Augustus’ reign. There is not the slightest reason to think that it is not historical.

The real difficulty in the passage is found in connection with verse 2. This verse is to be translated as follows: “This happened as a first enrolment when Quirinius was governing Syria,” or “This became a first enrolment when Quirinius was governing Syria.”⁴ The expression is certainly peculiar; and the linguistic difficulty in it has been reflected in changes introduced by copyists. It is no wonder that conjectural emendations of so difficult an expression have been attempted in ancient and modern times; and the possibility that some primitive corruption has crept in cannot altogether be excluded. But since the best-attested text is not absolutely impossible, that text must be made the basis of our discussion.

The verse as it stands seems to distinguish the enrolment here referred to from one or more subsequent enrolments; it seems to mean that this enrolment was either the first that was made in the Empire as a whole or else the first among two or more that were made during the rule of Quirinius over Syria. Since in Acts v.37 the well-known enrolment under Quirinius in A.D. 6 is mentioned by this same writer, it is natural to think

3. For these facts, see the evidence cited by Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 645.

4. αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου.

that he is in our passage distinguishing an earlier event from that. Thus he seems to mean that there was an earlier enrolment under Quirinius as distinguished from the enrolment in A.D. 6. That earlier enrolment must apparently have taken place during the reign of Herod the Great. Herod is mentioned in Lk. i.5, and there is no evidence to show that he is regarded as having died in the interval between the time referred to in that passage and the time of the birth of Jesus. No doubt, therefore, Luke as well as Matthew regards the birth of Jesus as having taken place before the death of Herod in 4 B.C.; and since the birth of Jesus was connected with the census, the latter too must apparently have taken place at the same time.

The problem, therefore, if the narrative is to be regarded as accurate at this point, is to find room for a census during the rule of Quirinius over Syria and yet prior to the death of Herod the Great.

Some progress toward the solution of this problem has been made by the patient researches of recent years. It has been rendered altogether probable, on the basis of information quite independent of the Third Gospel, that Quirinius was actually legate of Syria at a time prior to his well-known legateship that began in A.D. 6. This former legateship of Quirinius is accepted by some scholars who are as far as possible removed from any desire of rescuing the trustworthiness of the Gospel according to Luke.

But the difficulty is that the former legateship of Quirinius apparently cannot be put quite early enough. Saturninus, we know, was legate of Syria from 9 to 6 B.C.; and Varus was legate from 6 B.C. until after the death of Herod in 4 B.C. The former legateship of Quirinius, therefore, cannot be put earlier than about 3-2 B.C. How, then, can a census under Quirinius have taken place, as the Lucan narrative seems to represent it as having taken place, in the days of Herod the Great?

With respect to this difficulty, two things may be said. In the first place, one may suppose that although the enrolment began during the reign of Herod, it was not brought to completion until after his death. In favor of this suggestion may perhaps be urged the very peculiar expression that is used by Luke. "This became a first enrolment," Luke says, according to one possible interpretation of his words, "when Quirinius was governing Syria"; or "This took place [that is, was brought to completion, was actually carried out] when Quirinius was governing Syria." Possibly the intention is to distinguish the earlier stages of the process of enrolment – during which earlier stages the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem took place – from the consummation or final carrying out of the decree, so far as Judaea was concerned, under the

(earlier) legateship of Quirinius. This solution of the problem is perhaps not quite impossible.

More probable, however, is the other suggestion that has been made in this connection – the suggestion, namely, that the rule of Quirinius in Syria which is here referred to is not his legateship, but a special commission of a military kind which he held during the legateship of Saturninus or Varus. There are some slight indications that Quirinius did hold such a special commission; and there is at any rate nothing that absolutely forbids us to suppose that he did so. The special commission of Quirinius might include expressly the duty of taking a census. Hence it might be possible for the author of the Third Gospel to speak of a census taken in Palestine in the closing years of Herod the Great as being the former of two enrolments under Quirinius.⁵

Our conclusion, then, is that although the problem of the enrolment has not as yet been fully solved, there is no reason to think that it might not be solved if our knowledge should become more complete than it is at present. Certainly the example of other places in which the Lucan writings were formerly thought to be inaccurate about matters of civil administration, but have now been vindicated in the most thoroughgoing way, should make the historian very cautious about asserting the presence of an error at this point.

Objection has indeed sometimes been raised not merely to the mention of Quirinius, but also to the manner in which the census is represented as being taken. A method of enrolment by which every man, wherever he should be living at the time, should have to go to his ancient ancestral home would, it is said, be quite impractical; it would involve the necessity of “a regular migration.”⁶

In reply to some such objections, Ramsay⁷ has appealed to an Egyptian papyrus document⁸ which directs that for the purposes of enrolment every person shall go from the place where he is residing at the moment to the place where his home is found. But of course the analogy is not quite complete. It is one thing for a man to go to the place where he owns a home and another thing for him to go, as is apparently meant in Lk. ii.4 f., to the home of his remote ancestry. It has often been suggested, indeed, that Joseph owned property in Bethlehem; and if so, that fact would provide a more obvious

5. It is probable that *πρώτη* could be used, instead of *προτέρα*, even where there were only two members in the series referred to. But the argument is not essentially changed if this enrolment is designated as the first among a whole series of enrolments in Palestine and not merely as the former of two enrolments under Quirinius.

6. “Eine wahre Völkerwanderung.” See Keim, *Geschichte Jesu von Nazara*, i, 1867, pp. 390 f.

7. “The Morning Star and the Chronology of the Life of Christ,” in *Expositor*, seventh series, v, 1908, pp. 19 f.

8. *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, iii, 1907, pp. 124-126.

official reason for this journey. We are by no means certain that the assumption of such an official reason is contrary to the language used by Luke. If the reason for the journey was Joseph's possession of property in Bethlehem, and the reason for his possession of property in Bethlehem was, in turn, his belonging to the family of David, then perhaps it was not inaccurate for the historian, omitting the immediate cause, to say simply that he went up to Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David.

On the whole, however, it seems better, rejecting the analogy of the Egyptian census, to regard this enrolment as taking place in accordance with a Jewish method by which family relationships determined the classification. There is no real absurdity in such a supposition; for it need not be assumed that all members of the Jewish people could trace their lineage so far back as could Joseph. In Joseph's family the tradition of Davidic descent was preserved from generation to generation; Bethlehem, therefore, retained its position for that family as the ancestral home and as the place to which recourse needed to be had in any tribal census. But in the case of other families, where only the nearer ancestry could be given, no such journeyings would be required. A census conducted by the tribal method would therefore not require a "regular migration" as Keim supposed.⁹

That a census should have been required in the dominions of Herod by Roman decree is altogether in accord with what we know of the thoroughly subservient position of this vassal king; but that Herod should have been allowed to carry out the decree by a method which would respect the customs of his people is also in accord with the Roman policy of adaptation to local circumstances. When in A.D. 6 a census was carried out in Judæa by the distinctly Roman method, discontentment and disorder were the result; but the earlier census, since it was not so obviously a foreign measure, did not arouse the hostility of the people.

Our treatment of the intricate question of the census has been of the most cursory kind. But enough, perhaps, has been said to show that if on the basis of a general examination we have come to have a high view of the trustworthiness of Luke-Acts, and particularly a high view of the trustworthiness of the infancy section, the difficulty about the census does not furnish any adequate reason why we should reverse that favorable estimate.

9. The narrative does not say that everyone went to the place where his family originated, but only that everyone went "to his own city" (Lk. ii.3). The reason why Bethlehem was Joseph's "own city" was that it was the home of his ancestors (verse 4); but that in all other cases the place of enrolment, the city to which a man belonged, was determined in the same way is not said.