

[STRAIGHT DOPE STAFF REPORT – 05/27/2002](#)

Dear Straight Dope:

Between the Staff Report on the Bible and the PBS series on Rome in the first century, a long-dormant question arises: What was the result of the census ordered by Augustus that was the reason Joseph and Mary were headed toward Jerusalem? Just how many Romans were there? What did the census accomplish, if anything? – Still not sure about the 2000CE Census, David E Romm

SDStaff Dex replies:

This is going to be a lengthy report that doesn't actually answer your question. Well, not your first two questions about the result and the population. No records from that census survived, so we do not know what it showed. Contrary to popular belief, we actually have very little documentation from ancient Rome. We have a few histories that were deemed worthy enough to be copied over the centuries and thus preserved (such as the works of Tacitus), but no one would bother to copy old tax records, and the original parchments are long since rotted away.

We can, however, answer your question of what the census accomplished: tax. And unrest.

Warning: If you believe that the New Testament has no errors and no inconsistencies, then please skip to Section 2. I wouldn't want you to have a coronary or anything, and there's no way that I can ride the fence on this one.

Section 1: Historicity of Luke's Account

Luke's famous account of the census (Luke 2:1-6) reads as follows:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David . . .

P. Sculpinius Quirinius was legate (governor) of Syria in the years 6 - 7 AD. He did order a census. However, the assumption that Jesus was born in the year of Quirinius's census (6 AD) leads to irreconcilable chronological problems in the subsequent events of his life. It is entirely unlikely that Jesus was born in the year of Quirinius's census; most scholars put Jesus' birth around 4 BC, a good ten years before Quirinius's census.

The remainder of Luke's account is also highly improbable (I'm being generous here), for a number of reasons:

- There was no census of "all the world" (read: the entire Roman Empire) declared by Augustus; at least, if there were, it's not mentioned in any Roman documents that we've uncovered so far. The census was of Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea — not Galilee (where Luke puts Joseph and Mary). Quirinius used the opportunity to also conduct a census of Syria.

- The notion that each male would have to register in the home town of a remote ancestor is unbelievable. The entire Roman world would have been turned upside-down. There would surely have been records of such widespread dislocations, and there are none. Augustus was arguably the most rational of the emperors, and would never have ordered such an irrational thing.
- Ancient census-takers wanted landowners to be connected to their land, for tax purposes. The census-takers traveled, not those being taxed.

So, almost all scholars agree that it is not reasonable to think that there was ever a decree that required people to travel for purposes of tax registration.

Why, then, do we have Luke's account? Luke wanted to report that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the City of David, in order to fulfill various prophetic interpretations. On the other hand, he also wanted to report that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, presumably for historic reasons. He thus reported the story of Joseph going to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and then returning to Nazareth where Jesus was raised.

Matthew does something similar, but has Joseph and Mary living in Bethlehem, then fleeing to Egypt until Herod died, then returning to Bethlehem, finding another Herod in place, and so moving to Nazareth (where there was actually a third Herod, namely Herod Antipas. One of the difficulties of describing any of this is that the whole damn family was named Herod.)

So Luke reported that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth. Why report a census? Well, there were riots after Herod's death in 4 BC and again at the time of the census in 6 AD, so it is possible that Luke (or his source) accidentally combined the two riots and the two dates. A ten year error is relatively slight for ancient authors, working without archives, without a standard calendar, and writing about a period around 80 years earlier.

Thus we speculate that Luke had "discovered" what he thought was a census at the time of Herod's death, and decided to use that event as the reason for Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to satisfy Hebrew prophecy.

ASIDE: The belief that Jesus was born in 1 AD originated in the 6th Century, when a monk in Italy named Dionysius Exiguus miscalculated the date in trying to reconcile different accounts. The calendar (that is, the "Christian Era") was set based on those miscalculations.

ANOTHER ASIDE: Most of the information about Quirinius' census comes from Josephus, who is reliable on some things, but not reliable on others. There are also some supportive ancient inscriptions. There is a small minority opinion that does not accept Josephus's account. They hold that the census described by Luke took place somewhere around 8 to 6 BC, under an earlier governorship by Quirinius from 4 to 1 BC (of which there is no outside evidence). This would mean that Luke's account was only off by a year or so, not by a decade.

OK, having cleared that up, now we're down to your (revised) question: what did Quirinius' census of 6 AD show?

Section 2: Quirinius' Census

For a variety of political reasons, the Emperor Augustus created a new province called Judaea, around the year 6 AD. At that time, Syria was governed by a legate, a person of senatorial rank, named P. Sulpicius Quirinius; the new province would be governed by a procurator (of lower, equestrian rank). It was common practice to take a census upon the creation of a new province, and so Quirinius ordered a census to be taken for Judaea. Note, as mentioned above, Judaea did not include the Galilee.

The purpose of the census was to estimate property for a new method of taxation. Tax was to be levied on every person — males, females, and slaves, exempting only children and the aged. We do not know the amount of tax; the three synoptic gospels record a poll tax at one denarius per person, around seventy years later.

There was also to be a tax on cattle, and a tax on land that would be paid from harvest produce.

The idea of a census aroused indignation throughout Judaea. The census itself was not so problematic as the tax that was to follow. It was viewed as Roman interference in private matters and in political affairs, and as the first steps on the road to enslavement by Rome. The dread of the census caused agitation and riots in a few cities. The High Priest Joezer tried to pacify the population, but was unsuccessful; shortly after, he was deposed by Quirinius and replaced.

Despite the unrest, the taxes were collected.

Tax collectors and census-takers were viewed as dishonorable and despicable (a sentiment that is echoed in the New Testament.) The Roman colonial rulers had short tenure, and tried to amass as great a fortune as possible in a short time; this led to bribery, corruption and ruthless tax collection. Quirinius himself only served as legate for two years.

The unhappiness with Roman rule continued to worsen, leading to the eventual revolt that ended with the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Alas, there is no surviving data as to what Quirinius's census showed. It would be wonderful if there were — imagine how scholars would love an account of the adult population, by city, at the time!

ASIDE: Interestingly enough, there are some Egyptian papyri that have survived, through accident of climate, so that we actually have some preserved tax records from Egypt under the Roman Empire. This gives us an idea of what sort of information might have been gathered. However, to confuse an already confused issue, Egypt was always a little odd within the Roman structure. The Ptolemies had set it up as a cash cow, and the Romans saw little need to change that; so it's never altogether safe to extrapolate from Egyptian records to what might have gone on in the rest of the Roman Empire.

There has been a lot of scholarly work written on the question of Quirinius's census, although it's probably not in your common or garden variety of library. So, we didn't answer your question in the way you hoped, but we hope this answer is satisfactory.

— SDStaff Dex, Straight Dope Science Advisory Board