

November 29, 2020 | The Christmas Timeline

Luke 2:1-3 | God's Sovereignty in Man's Decrees

Throughout this series, we'll look at four perspectives surrounding the Christmas story: history, Jesus' parents, shepherds, and a few faithful Jews. Each point of view will help illustrate a fundamental principle we should dwell on during this Christmas season.

Today, we'll be looking at the meta-standpoint of history. History tells us a great deal about the story of Christmas. Whether it's the first Christmas or the two-thousand and twentieth Christmas, God's sovereignty—His control—over the events of our world have eternal consequences. Meaning that everything from the momentous moments to the mundane moments, God is at work to accomplish His will. And, as we'll see, even the seemingly accidental acts of history turn out to be the predestined acts of destiny.¹

READ: Luke 2:1-3 (ESV)

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when² Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

People in the first century would've needed two questions answered about Jesus. Luke took it upon himself to answer these questions. Now, bear in mind, while we may be able to answer these questions quickly, they were some of the biggest problems many people had about Jesus during the beginnings of Christianity.

- First, where was Jesus born?
- Secondly, why would Mary give birth in Bethlehem being from Nazareth?

The answer to that first question would've been a surprise to many in the first century. Though Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and though many assumed Nazareth was also his birthplace, His *actual* birthplace was Bethlehem. This makes Christ's birth in accordance with several OT

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 203.

² Garland, David E., *Luke*, The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Clinton E. Arnold, Editor, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2011), p. 117-118, argues that the mention of Quirinius was to provide a chronological signpost for the first-century reader. Quirinius' census in AD 6 was a seminal moment in Jewish history that sparked the fires of rebellion and ultimately led to the Temple's destruction in 70 AD. Luke didn't want the rather mundane census, which prompted Joseph and Mary's trip to be confused with this later one. So, Luke used *πρῶτος* (*prōtos*), which is usually translated as "first" but can just as easily be translated as "before." And translating *prōtos* as "before" clears up the apparent historical inaccuracy of Luke's chronology as Herod the Great was alive for Jesus' birth but died in 4 BC, and Quirinius didn't take power until 6 AD. Green (1997), p. 124-125, also agrees with this conclusion.

prophecies regarding the promised Messiah (cf. Ps. 89:3-4; Isa. 9:7; 11:1; 55:3; Mic. 5:2). Additionally, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, who was also born in Bethlehem (cf. 1 Sam. 20:6; 2 Sam. 7:12-16). And while it would've been unusual for Romans to force anyone to go back to the place of their birth for a census, it wasn't unheard of, especially in cases where someone lived in one place but owned land in another area.³ In all likelihood, Joseph may have had some property or assets in Bethlehem which required such an inconvenient trip at such an inconvenient time.

The plainest OT prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace comes in the Book of the prophet Micah roughly seven hundred years before Matthew 2:1.⁴

READ: Micah 5:2 (ESV)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

You must understand that the facts surrounding Jesus' birth were not widely known (cf. Jn. 6:41-42; 7:25-27, 40-44). In fact, this lack of information about Bethlehem being Jesus' birthplace is one of the biggest reasons behind Jewish unbelief during Christ's earthly ministry. The unbelieving Jews at this time deduced that Jesus couldn't be the Messiah since they knew, or, instead, they *thought* they knew, where he had been born and where he grew up. He was from Nazareth in Galilee. At some point, His family migrated to Capernaum. An entire region could attest to the fact that Jesus grew up in those two places. You could say he was both Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus of Capernaum. But they would've never called him Jesus of Bethlehem. They thought Jesus had no connection whatsoever to the "House of Bread."⁵

For this reason, Christ's origin was the main point of contention for Christian apologists who were defending the validity of Christ's work.⁶ Furthermore, this is why both Matthew and Luke allocated a significant portion of their writings to recount the birth narrative as we have them today. The Evangelists wanted to ensure there was no misunderstanding about Christ's earthly

³ Bock (1994), p. 204.

⁴ Phillips, John, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids; Kregel Publications, 2005), p. 74.


⁵ Piper, John, 'Bethlehem: House of Bread,' April 8, 1981, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/bethlehem-house-of-bread>, [accessed November 28, 2020].

⁶ Köstenberger, Andreas J., *John*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2004), p. 242.


origins. The fact that the little town of Bethlehem is now synonymous with the Christmas story is a testament to their efforts.

So, where was Jesus born? He was born in Bethlehem because Joseph was from Bethlehem being of the household of king David and because the Scriptures foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Now, the answer to the second question—*'Why would Mary give birth in Bethlehem being from Nazareth?'*—is far simpler to answer than the first: the Roman Empire told them to. Yes, as we just mentioned, there was a biblical reason for the city of Bethlehem being the birthplace of the Messiah. But there is a far more pragmatic reason for why Joseph and Mary made the trip at all. They didn't make the trip because they were following OT prophecies about the Messiah. They made the trip because of government interference.

Given the recent regulations due to this pandemic, isn't it ironic that we know all too well how disruptive Government interference can be to our lives? Here in our passage, Mary was towards the end of her pregnancy. They had been awaiting this unique birth for months. And then, right towards the end of her term, an official decree is issued that they'd have to take a last-minute trip to Joseph's hometown. There would've been no other reason that could've convinced these two parents to travel so close to the due date as Bethlehem wasn't just over the ridge. That city was well over eighty miles south of Nazareth.⁷  This journey would've taken them anywhere between three to four days!⁸

And they made this trip because a guy, Caesar Augustus, who lived all the way in Rome, made a decree which resulted in a census all for tax purposes. Now, while we do not know of such a census in Galilee apart from the biblical account, we see a census held in Egypt (which was in a province that included Israel) every fourteen years.⁹ In fact, over 250 years' worth of census data has survived since that time. So the census was a common occurrence at this time.

But, think about this for a moment. The city of Rome is, as the crow flies, over 1,400 miles from Israel.  Yet, God used this seemingly tedious and bureaucratic process to fulfill biblical prophecy. What's remarkable about this is that Caesar Augustus was an extraordinary human being in his own right. Yet, all of his accomplishments pale in comparison to the effects his census had on history.

⁷ "Journeys of Mary and Joseph Map," <https://www.biblestudy.org/maps/the-journeys-of-mary-and-joseph.html>, [accessed, November 27, 2020].

⁸ Phillips (2005), p. 75.

⁹ Morris, Leon, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 1988), p. 98.

Here are some quick facts about Gaius Octavian, Caesar Augustus. <INSERT PICTURE>

- Augustus means "majestic one," which speaks more of his popularity with the people than his own pride as this was a title given to him by the Senate after uniting the Roman Empire.¹⁰
- Rome's first Emperor.¹¹
- Took the throne at 18 in 44 BC after his great-uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar, was inexplicably assassinated in the Senate.¹²
- He entered his rule during a power struggle that wouldn't be finalized until 31 BC when he defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra, bringing Egypt and all of Syria, including Israel, under Roman law.
- Historians unanimously agree that he brought stability to the Roman world never before seen. In fact, it is for this reason that his 45-year reign is romantically referred to as the "Golden age of Rome." His accomplishments are too many to name, but here are a few:
 - o He established standard taxation throughout the Roman Empire, which ended private exploitation at the local level.
 - o He personally financed the building of roads, which many are still in use today.
 - o He founded the first-ever postal service and both a firefighting and a policing force.
- Now, whether or not he was actually "good" is still up for debate, as, at the very least, Augustus was, by all definitions, a dictator. And many dictators after him, such as Genghis Khan, Napoleon Bonaparte, and even Adolf Hitler, are often likened to Caesar Augustus.¹³

So, we can all agree that Caesar Augustus was an extraordinary human being in his own right. However, all of those accomplishments and fame mean very little when you consider that the beginnings of the Christmas story can be summed up like this:

A Roman emperor 1,400 miles away makes a decree which sends a couple 80 miles from their home when the wife is at full-term in her pregnancy. This results in the birth of a

¹⁰ Garland (2011), p. 117.

¹¹ General Editors, "Caesar Augustus," 2020, *The National Geographic Society*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/caesar-augustus/>, [accessed, November 28, 2020].

¹² Zavada, Jack, "Who Was Caesar Augustus?" September 14, 2020, *Learn Religions*, <https://www.learnreligions.com/caesar-augustus-first-roman-emperor-701063>, [accessed, November 28, 2020].

¹³ Greenfield, Peta and Alex Gendler, "History vs. Augustus," July 17, 2018, *TED-Ed*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrcmojhFmzY>, [accessed, November 28, 2020].

baby boy in a town called Bethlehem, which was a city they should not have been and would not have gone to if it weren't for the government's interference (cf. Lu. 2:1-3).

Here's my point in all of the historical mumbo-jumbo: under the hand of a sovereign God, even the aimless shift of history is, in fact, the purposeful movements of destiny. God uses the decrees of men to accomplish His sovereign will. Who would've guessed that a census would be the primary means by which an OT prophecy would be fulfilled?! Only Luke mentions this historical connection. Meaning, He, more than the other Gospel writers, wishes to situate the Christmas story in a *secular* context. Luke wanted to show that even the Roman Emperor is controlled by a divine plan and driven by a divine purpose.¹⁴

Augustus will be remembered for many things but he will be forever immortalized for this specific taxation and census. It won't be for the roads he built, though they will carry the Gospel later. It won't be for uniting the civilized world, though that made the Gospel spread far more rapidly and easily than it would've been able to otherwise. It will be for this particular decree. Caesar Augustus will be forever remembered because of the boring, tedious, and bureaucratic proceedings and procedures. This alone stands as Augustus' most outstanding contribution to history all because of the significant impact it had on the Christmas story.

No doubt, historians would disagree with me on this point. They would instead choose to focus on a great many other things about this Caesar Augustus. However, the actual point of interest from both an eternal and historical perspective is Jesus Christ. And all those who had a part, no matter how small, will be forever remembered for their specific connection to the Messiah's story. "Bethlehem may be a little town, and the baby may have a humble birth, but God's presence behind the birth makes this event one of the greatest in all history."¹⁵ Little actions of great men have greater significance to an even greater God.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Government officials are nothing more than the unwitting servants to a divine purpose.

Augustus was the sovereign ruler of the civilized world. Joseph and Mary were peasants on the outer rim of the Roman Empire; they had no choice but to obey; they were subservient to Caesar and his decrees. However, there was one who was above even Caesar. And though

¹⁴ Morris (1988), p. 99.

¹⁵ Bock (1994), p. 201.

Augustus thought himself above it all, he was nothing more than a pawn to the Almighty's divine purpose.¹⁶ He was the unwitting agent of an all-knowing and all-powerful God.¹⁷

Simply put, the Heavenly Father wanted His Son to be born in Bethlehem, so He appointed Caesar Augustus to be the ruler of the known world.¹⁸ And so, within the first few sentences of the Christmas story, we have been presented with two worlds. There is the world of Octavian, Caesar Augustus, and then there is the world of divine purpose. And there is little doubt that the former is subservient to the latter.

God used Caesar Augustus to fulfill his will. Caesar was indeed over the whole of the Roman Empire, but God was over the whole of the infinite universe. The great Caesar Augustus, first Emperor of Rome, and leader during the golden age of the first republic, was nevertheless subservient to the Ancient of Days in the same way that Joseph and Mary were subservient to Caesar Augustus. God used Augustus to bring Jesus Christ, the Savior, into our world in accordance with the Scriptures.

The irony in all of this is that there were many who thought that Augustus was the savior of the world. In fact, there is a statue at Myra in Lycia depicting Caesar Augustus which has the following inscription: "Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world..."¹⁹ Yet the whole world could not be more wrong. Augustus was a great man, but he was far from being the savior of the world. That title went to a carpenter's son who turned out to be God Himself! All that Caesar did was tax the world. All that the Christ did was save the world. What's more, Caesar Augustus was known both then and now for his reign of peace, yet under his reign, the true Prince of Peace would be born.²⁰ The real Emperor of Peace was Jesus, not Octavian. This is fortunate because the peace that Augustus brought was seriously deficient, whereas the peace that Christ brought was eternally sufficient. Gaius Octavian, Caesar Augustus was the tyrant of the ancient world. Jesus Christ was the Savior of the whole world.

So, take heart dear Christian. As God turns the world, so too is He directing your life. The only question is will you be an unwitting servant, or will you be the willing servant.

¹⁶ Garland (2011), p. 117.

¹⁷ Bock (1994), p. 203.

¹⁸ Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997), p. 121-122.

¹⁹ Green (1997), p. 125-126.

²⁰ Bock (1994), p. 203.