

Oakwood Bible Church, August 28, 2016

Reading the Gospels as History

Luke 1:4

... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

A Common View of the New Testament

“[The New Testament] is a work of crude carpentry, hammered together long after its purported events, and full of improvised attempts to make things come out right.”

– Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great* (2007), p. 110.



Richard Dawkins on the Gospels

“[T]he gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus’ life.”

– Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)



Two types of external evidence

1. We can look in non-Christian sources for confirmation of *major events* like the crucifixion.
Or,
2. We can look in the Gospels and Acts for *incidental allusions* that reveal the authors' knowledge of the setting and their truthfulness in recounting matters of detail.

The evidence of incidental allusions

- Non-Christian sources can confirm only the broad outlines of the Gospel story; we can expect no more
- But by examining how the Gospels deal with the details of contemporary history, we can test the *knowledge* and *honesty* of the four evangelists

The severity of the test

- We know a great deal about Palestine in the first century, largely thanks to the Jewish historian Josephus.
- The political situation was unusual and complex:
 - a double system of taxation,
 - a double administration of justice,
 - in some degree a double military command

Palestine from 6 BC to AD 44

- A single united kingdom under a native ruler,
- A set of principalities under native ethnarchs and tetrarchs,
- A country in part containing such principalities, in part reduced to the condition of a Roman province,
- A kingdom reunited once more under a native ruler,
- A country reduced wholly under Rome and governed by procurators dependent on the president of Syria

Comparison with the New Testament

- A single kingdom under a native ruler
- Matthew 2:1 (Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, ...)
- A set of principalities under native ethnarchs and tetrarchs
- Matthew 2:22 (But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, ...)

Comparison with the New Testament

- A country in part containing such principalities, in part reduced to the condition of a Roman province
- Luke 3:1 – Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ...

Comparison with the New Testament

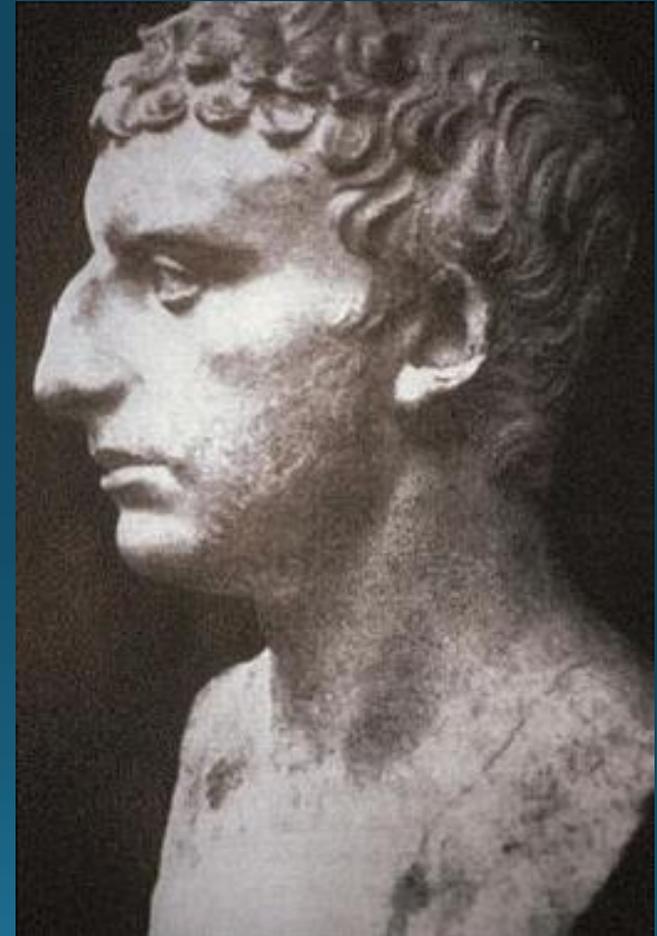
- A kingdom reunited once more under a native ruler
- Acts 12:1 – **About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.**
- A country reduced wholly under Rome and governed by procurators
- Acts 23:24 (Antonius Felix); Acts 24:27 (Porcius Festus)

Eight points of contact

- Matthew 17:24-27 – The temple tax and the *stater*
- Matthew 20:1-2 – The value of a *denarius*
- Mark 6:14-29 – John the Baptist's death
- Mark 7:31 – Geography of Palestine
- Mark 10:12 – The Jewish law of divorce
- Luke 20:21ff – The inscription on a *denarius*
- John 4:22 – The Samaritans and their temple
- John 5:2 – The pool of Bethesda

Flavius Josephus

- Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, was born around AD 37 and wrote *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* late in the first century.
- In his *Antiquities*, Josephus refers to numerous people named in the New Testament, including John the Baptist, Jesus, and James the brother of Jesus.



The temple tax and the *didrachma*

- Matthew 17:24-27 – Does Jesus pay the “two drachma” temple tax?
- ... and when you open its mouth you will find a *stater*. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.
- The *stater* has the value of *four* drachma – just enough to pay for both Jesus and Peter.



The value of the *denarius*

- In Matthew 20:1-2, Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard who hires unskilled workers at the rate of a denarius for a day's labor.
- In his *Annals* 1.17, the Roman historian Tacitus recounts a mutinous speech to some Roman soldiers in AD 14 in which it is suggested that they deserve a fair wage – namely, a denarius per day.

Josephus on John the Baptist: *Antiquities* 18.5.2

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man. . . . Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion. . . . Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.”

Comparing Josephus with the Gospels

- Mark 6:14-29 also tells the story of Herod Antipas's execution of John the Baptist.
- The reason, according to the Gospels, was *not* just Herod's suspicious temper or his fear of an uprising; it was because of John's disapproval of Herod's marriage to his brother's wife.
- Question: How should the Gospel writers know what Herod Antipas's motives were?

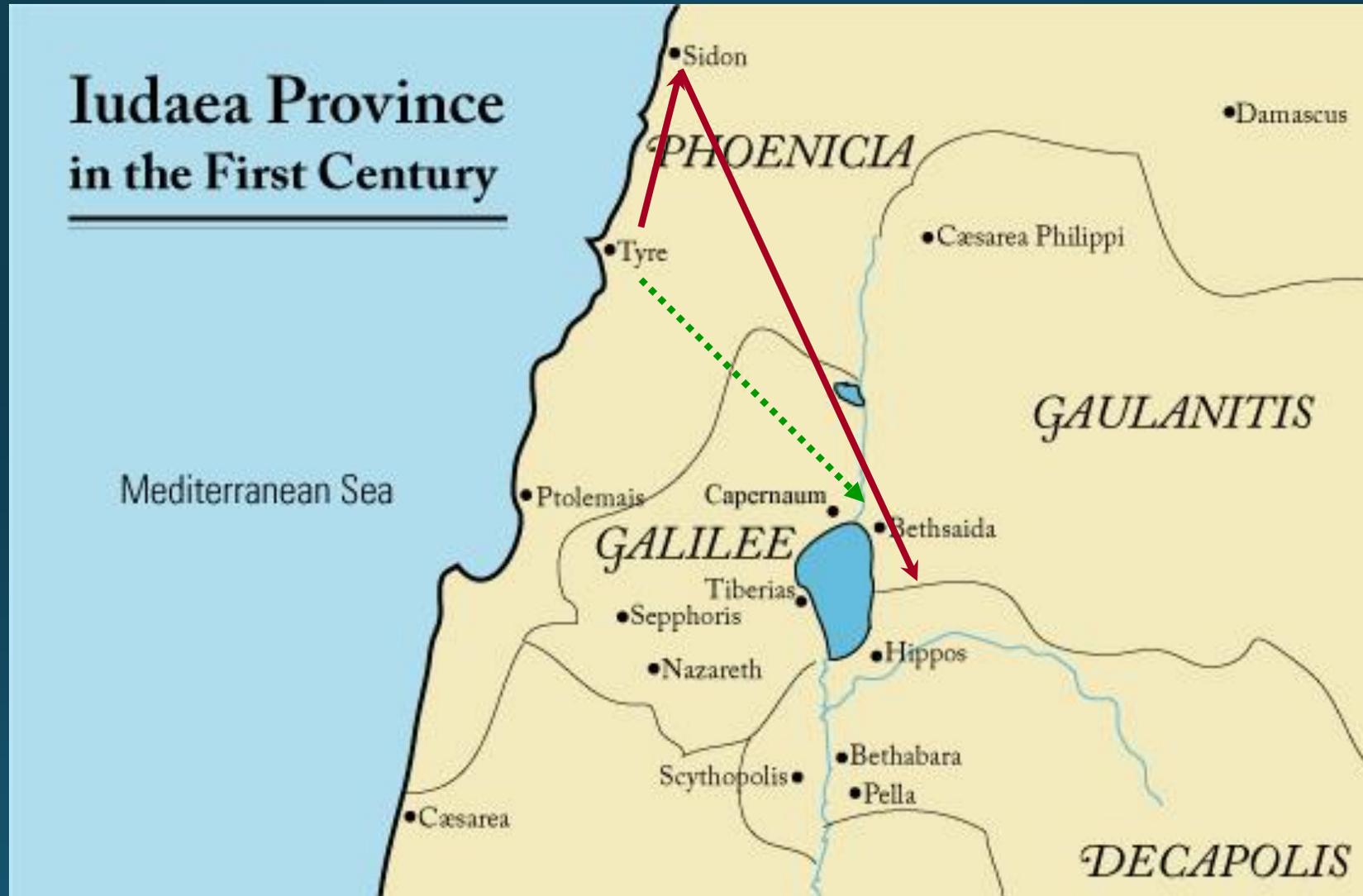
An interesting point

- Answer: "... and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, *Herod's household manager*, ..." (Luke 8:3)
- Jesus' followers had family in the higher ranks of Herod Antipas's employment.

The way from Tyre to Galilee

- Mark 7:31 – Then he [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

A glance at a map



A “critical” verdict

“Many interpreters have noted this awkward route as evidence that Mark was unfamiliar with the geography of Palestine and Galilee. . . . It seems difficult to believe that a person living in Galilee, who is educated enough to produce a gospel such as Mark, would be unfamiliar with the geographical relationship between Tyre and Sidon.”

—Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel* (2008), pp. 85-86.

A closer look at the geography



Mt. Meron, elevation 3,963 ft.



Jewish Law: Mark 10:12

... and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

- Jewish law made provision for a man to divorce his wife (Deuteronomy 24) but not for a woman to divorce her husband.
- Was Mark a gentile who here betrayed his ignorance of Jewish law? Or is he deliberately changing Jesus' teaching to make it relevant for a Roman audience?

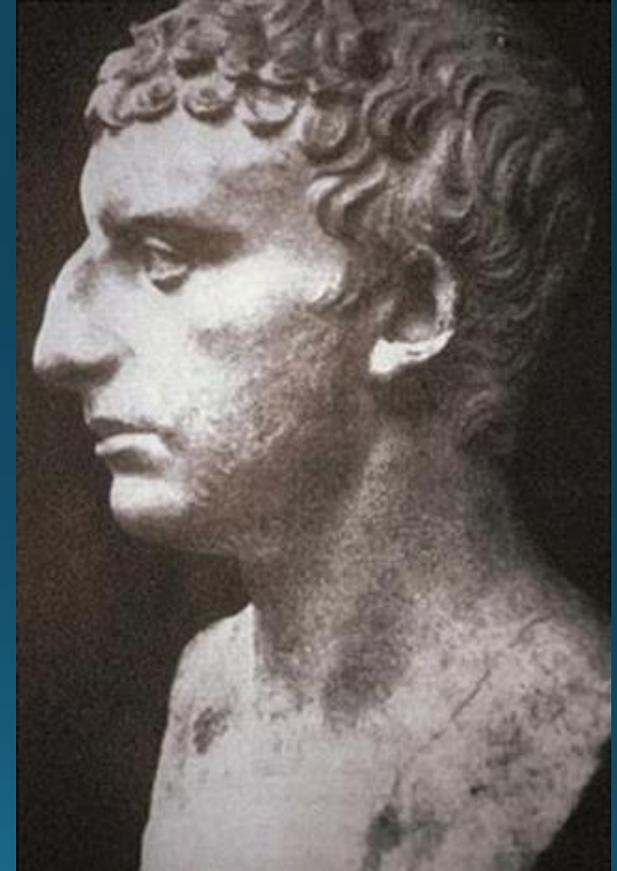
A critic states the objection

This sentence is generally regarded as an addition to Jesus' teaching that was made to address situations related to Roman legal practice whereby a woman could initiate divorce proceedings.

—John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 2 (2002), p. 295, note 12.

Josephus sheds some light

- Herodias “took it upon herself to confound the laws of our country” and divorced her first husband in order to marry Herod Antipas.
—Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.4
- Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, *the very place where Jesus was then teaching.*



Soldiers: Luke 3:14

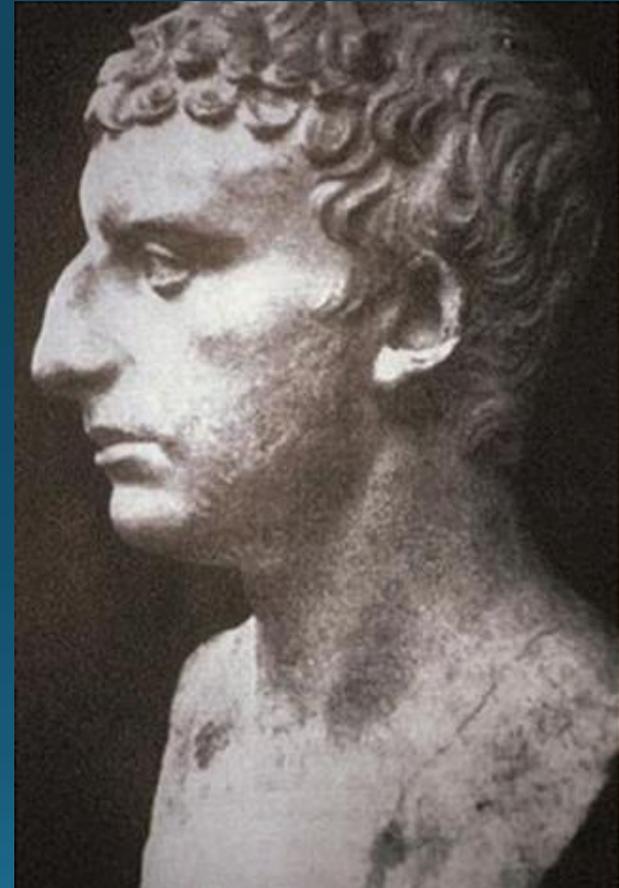
Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?”
And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

The Problem

Why does Luke depict these soldiers as men on active duty (στρατευόμενοι, “soldiering”) when the period of Jesus’ ministry was a time of peace in Palestine?

Josephus again!

- Herod Antipas was at war with his former father-in-law. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.1)
- Herod's soldiers would have to come down the Jordan river valley to reach his fortress at the corner of the Dead Sea, by the disputed border.



The *denarius*: Luke 20:24-25

“Show me a *denarius*. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”

They said, “Caesar’s.”

He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The image on the denarius



"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

—Exodus 20:4

The inscription on the denarius



AUGUSTUS TI CAESAR DIVI AVGVSTI F

"Augustus Tiberius Caesar, *son of the Divine Augustus.*"

"You shall have no other gods before me."

—Exodus 20:3

The Samaritans and their Temple: John 4:19-22

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ***You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.***"

Josephus yet again!

- The Samaritans were afraid that an insane Greek king, Antiochus IV, would attack them when he came to attack the Jews
- To appease him, they named their temple for the Greek god Zeus (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.5.5)



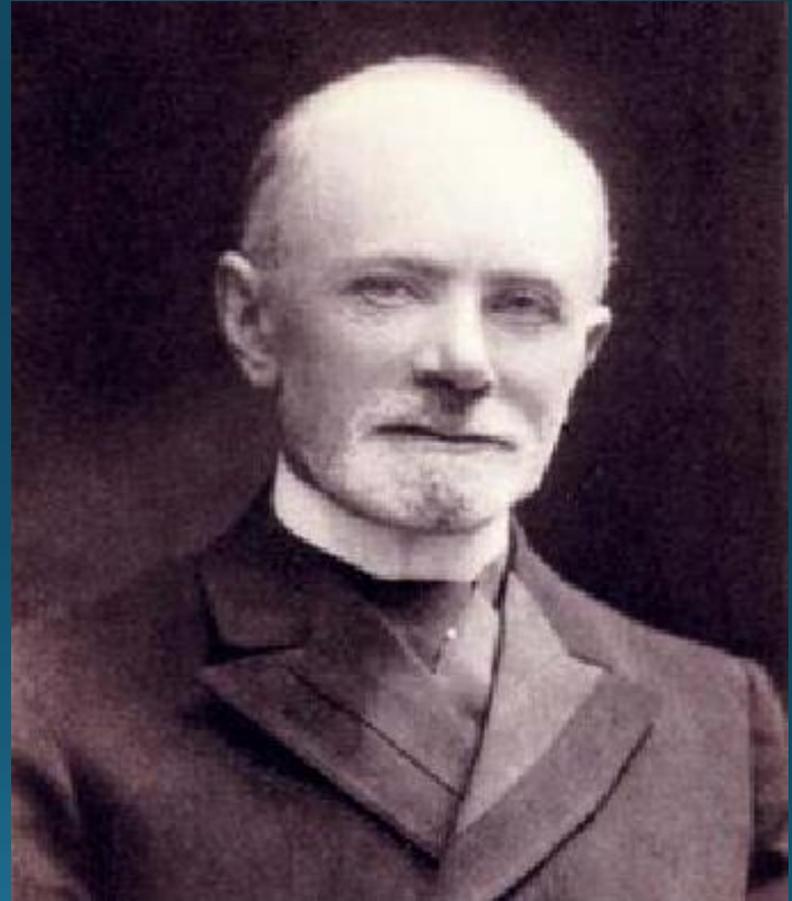
The pool of Bethesda: John 5:2

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.

Alfred Loisy on the pool of Bethesda

“The ancients who hoped to find in the source a Jewish symbol, and in the five porches an allusion to the five books of the Law, undoubtedly discovered the thought of the evangelist.”

—Alfred Firimin Loisy, *Le Quatrième Évangélie* (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1903), p. 386.



The pool of Bethesda

Archaeological work at the pool of Bethesda in 1956 revealed that it was located near the Sheep Gate, just as John said, surrounded by four roofed colonnades – and spanned across the middle by a fifth.

The Pool of Bethesda



A curious detour: Matthew 2:22

But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Since Herod the Great was dead, it was only natural that his eldest son, Archelaus, would take the throne. So why does this news cause Joseph to change plans and go into Galilee?

The news about Archelaus

- Herod the Great had died, and Archelaus had taken his place, not long before March of 4 B.C., when hundreds of thousands of Jews made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.9.3)
- As the feast approached there was a clash between some angry Jews in the Temple and a group of Roman soldiers in which some soldiers were killed.

The news about Archelaus

- In panic, Archelaus sent a troop of armed horsemen to surround the Temple, with orders not to let anyone outside go in and not to let anyone inside get out.
- He then sent in soldiers and slaughtered 3,000 Jews in the Temple.
- *Passover was canceled.*

Joseph's decision in context

- As Mary, Joseph, and Jesus made their way north from Egypt, they must have encountered distraught Jewish pilgrims carrying the news of Archelaus's massacre.
- Having fled Judea in order to escape from one homicidal king, Joseph understandably decided that going back into the domain of another homicidal king was not a good idea.

Pilate's Wife: Matthew 27:19

Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."

Isn't this a mistake?

Caesar Augustus had set up strict rules forbidding the wives of provincial governors in the Roman Empire to accompany their husbands; the wives had to stay behind in Rome.

The answer

- Although Augustus had initiated that rule, it ceased to be enforced after Augustus's death in AD 14.
- Tacitus (*Annals* 3.33-34) tells how Caecina tried to reinstate the enforcement of the rule by a speech in the Roman senate, but he was voted down.

The moral of the story

- The New Testament authors get these details right even though they are only incidental to their purpose.
- These writers are not setting out to write the history of Palestine in the first century. But they are *intimately familiar* with that history.

An historian sums it up

“It is evident that the entire historical framework, in which the Gospel picture is set, is real; that the facts of the civil history, small and great, are true, and the personages correctly depicted. . . .”

An historian sums it up

“... To suppose that there is this minute historical accuracy in all the accessories of the story, and that the story itself is mythic, is absurd.”

—George Rawlinson, *The Historical Evidences of the Truth of the Scripture Records* (New York: John B. Alden, 1884), p. 204.

What? You want *more* ...?

The sort of historical evidence that we have explored this morning can be found in many older works of apologetics, including:

- William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, Part 2, chapter 6
- G. F. Maclear, *Historical Illustrations of the New Testament Scriptures*
- Nathaniel Lardner, *Credibility of the Gospel History* (17 vols.)

historicalapologetics.org



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HISTORICAL
APOLOGETICS

Luke 2:1-2 on Quirinius and the census

- In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. This first taxation was made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
- Two problems:
 - There is no record that Caesar Augustus ever taxed the entire Roman empire
 - Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until about twelve years later

Looking closely at the Greek of Luke 2:1-2

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the *land* (οἰκουμένη) should be *registered* (ἀπογράφεσθαι). This first registration was *set in motion* (ἐγένετο) when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Careful attention to the Greek answers the objections.

- Luke uses οἰκουμένη to mean Judea (Acts 11:28)
- The registration (ἀπογραφή) is not a taxing *per se*.
- The verb ἐγένετο indicates that the initial registration was used as a basis for the taxation that was *made* or *set in motion* when Quirinius became governor a dozen years later. Luke uses this same verb in this fashion to indicate that something subsequently transpires (Acts 11:28)

Consequences of this reading

- Luke's passing mention of the census under Quirinius (Acts 5:37) does not have to be explained away.
- Luke's brief reference to the registration corresponds to an allusion in Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.2, to an oath of allegiance to Caesar in Judea near the end of the reign of Herod the Great—which would be taken at the time of a registration.
- There is no need to pre-date the governorship of Quirinius to 6 BC. All apparent chronological discrepancies disappear.