

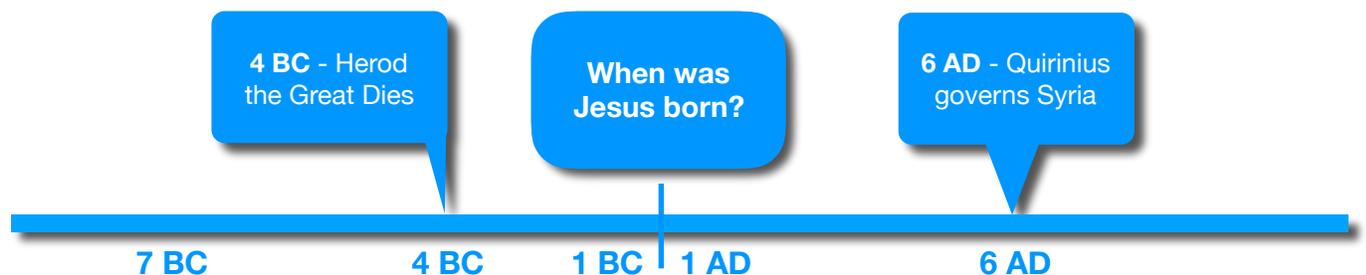
When Nobodies Change the World: Two Christmas Babies Part 3 Luke 2

The genius behind the movie *Forrest Gump* is that a nobody who, by all social standards had some serious disadvantages, repeatedly impacted world events. The movie retells recent history by inserting a fictional character into these events.

When we truly consider the larger historical picture, Jesus' birth is truly amazing. Luke's Gospel gives us some solid historical markers in the story. These markers are helpful and help us consider God's timing in the history of redemption. Of course, there are some who consider the story of Jesus to be on the same level as *Forrest Gump*, that is fiction. They say the Gospel of Luke got it wrong.

Historical Timing:

Did Luke get it wrong? Luke appears to say that Jesus was born when Herod the Great was king of Judea (Lk 1:5) and Quirinius was governing Syria (Lk 2:2). Some scholars argue that Luke got his facts wrong based on Josephus' account (*Antiquities* 17.342-344, 355; 18.1-4). Josephus was writing around the same time as Luke. According to Josephus' account, Quirinius was not governor until 10 years after Herod died. Herod died in 4 BC and Quirinius was not the Governor of Syria until about 6 AD, and he conducted a census then. That census started a revolt among the Jews (referenced in Acts 5:37).



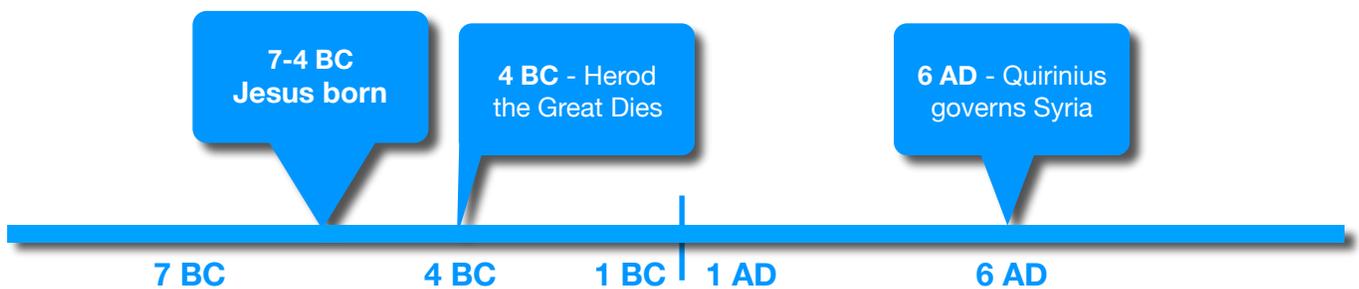
What DOES Luke say?

- Luke 2:1-3 tells us it was during the reign of Caesar Augustus - 27 BC to 14 AD.
- Herod was king of Judea. Herod was Rome's client king in Judea from 37 BC - 4 BC
- Herod died in 4 BC. So, Jesus had to be born before 4 BC - see Matthew 2.
- Quirinius was *ruling* in Syria. The Greek verb Luke uses (ἡγεμονεύω) can refer to many administrative duties in Roman government.
 - Quirinius possibly held an official position alongside Saturninus in the Syrian-Palestine area at the time of Jesus' birth. He was moved into a "Governor" position after Herod died and Herod's son, Archelaus was removed from power in Judea (approximately 6 AD).
 - The census conducted in 6 AD was not the only one. Ancient sources show that Rome conducted frequent censuses both throughout the empire and regionally. Thus, Luke

could have easily been referring to an earlier census while Quirinius was stationed in Syria-Palestine as an official in the Roman government, but not yet in the position of “Governor.”¹

- The best solution is that Luke says this was the “first registration,” and the Greek adjective for “first” can in this context be easily translated as “before,” to render the sentence, “This registration was before Quirinius governed Syria.”² (see John 1:15)
- Luke states Jesus “*was about* thirty years of age” when He began the ministry (Lk 3:23). His ministry was about three years in length and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea from 26-36 AD.

Combining Matthew’s data and Luke’s data with other ancient sources, we can estimate Jesus was born between 7 BC and 4 BC. His crucifixion was between 26 AD and 29 AD.



What’s The Point?

We see clearly in Luke the convergence of historical forces that set the stage for Christ’s arrival. Here’s the quick points:

- Rome had only recently (63 BC) occupied the land of Israel.
- Rome’s power unified (not always in a positive way) the Mediterranean world.
- Travel and communication were improved across the empire.
- Koine Greek was the common language that most everyone could speak across cultural boundaries. Thus, the New Testament was written in koine Greek, which made it accessible.
- Now that Israel was under Rome’s control, it was connected to the whole Mediterranean rim. This set the stage for the church to spread.

Other factors:

¹ For good discussions on Luke’s reliability see: John H. Rhodes, “Josephus Misdated The Census of Quirinius,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54.1 (March 2011) 65-87 and John Lawrence, “Publius Sulpicius Quirinius and the Syrian Census,” *Restoration Quarterly* 34 (1992) 193-205. Ancient sources like Josephus and Luke do not give us enough details to truly compare the data for a clear picture of the timeline, at least not the way modern Westerners would prefer it.

² David E. Garland, *Luke* in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* vol. 3, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 117-118.

- Caesar Augustus was considered the “first” Roman Emperor. Under his reign, Rome’s imperial cult took on full force, and Roman emperors were then considered divine.
- It was during his reign that the King of kings was born.
- The majority of people living under Roman rule were living in polytheism, oppression, and poverty.
- Diaspora - This word means “disperse” and refers to the many Israelites who fled their homeland because of the persecution and oppression of Roman occupation in Israel. They set up synagogues in cities all around the Mediterranean Rim.
- The synagogues would be the network used by the first Christians, who were Jewish, to spread the gospel.

Paul, one of those Jewish Christians, said, *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Gal 4:4).

In the midst of all these forces of history converging, two “no-bodies” are called by God to bring His Son into the world. Mary and Joseph were no one special. They were just two peasants surviving in volatile times. But they were called to do something extraordinary and difficult. *They obeyed.*

The Census & Shame – Luke 2:1-5

While our culture looks for technicality in writing and history, the ancient world did not approach history in the same way. Luke is intentionally drawing contrast between Caesar Augustus and Jesus.

- Luke is making it clear that only Jesus is truly the Son of the Most High.
- Luke uses “Augustus” as a proper name instead of like it was intended, as a title that meant “majestic” and had divine connotations (2:1).
- Augustus was on the throne in Rome, but his reign was over by the time Luke wrote his Gospel.
- Jesus was born to sit on the throne of David, and His reign will never end (Lk 1:32-33).
- Augustus presumes he has worldwide power, but the baby in the manger has universal power.

The decree that “the whole world should be registered,” simply meant Caesar at some point put in a policy that registrations take place for tax lists to be made. This does not necessarily mean that the entire Roman Empire was engaged in an empire-wide census at the time of Jesus’ birth. These registrations occurred all over the empire at various times. Augustus could have made this decree 15 years before Jesus’ birth and it would still fit with Luke’s text.

This was the registration *before* Quirinius was ruling in Syria - again, the Greek word *prōtos* can be translated as “before” as it is in John 1:15. Syria was the way Romans referred to the whole region known as Syria-Palestine. This region included Israel. Interestingly, Quirinius was apparently named after the Roman war god, Quirinius, and his census in 6 AD sparked a violent

revolt in Israel. The Jews considered the Roman census as a dishonor and a statement that Jews were slaves in Rome's eyes.

Mary & Joseph's Choices Blend with World History:

Consider the situation. Mary was pregnant out of wedlock, while she was betrothed to Joseph. This triggered social dynamics our culture does not fully appreciate. Mary's pregnancy brought dishonor on her and her family. Her pregnancy brought dishonor on Joseph and his family. Further, it brought dishonor on the village of Nazareth. Their betrothal was a legal affair brokered between Mary's family and Joseph's family. This arrangement would have been presented to the entire village for ratification under the village leader. Their betrothal and marriage was a town-wide affair. Her pregnancy disrupted the entire village.

Imagine how frightening this time must have been for Mary. She accepted and obeyed God's will, knowing full well that others would not accept it.

Joseph, also, obeyed God's will despite this shame. He was told by an angel that Mary's pregnancy was an act of God, not an act of a man. Yet, who would believe them? Certainly, Mary and Joseph told their family and village the situation, but the families and village likely did not fully trust their claims given the circumstances. Mary had been away for three months in Judea visiting Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56). Did she engage in immorality on her journey? Was Joseph being a fool? Were they lying in an attempt to protect their honor? Certainly, their family and village were saying and asking, "The Christ is not supposed to come this way! Why would God use these nobodies to bring the Christ into the world?"

Joseph embraced the shame and ridicule to follow God's will. He demonstrated what it means to "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Christ."

Luke states, "All went to be registered, each to his own town" (Lk 2:3). This statement does not necessarily mean that everyone picked up and moved back to their hometown. This means that those traveling or had migratory lifestyles, went to their town of residence. This is not describing a mass migration. The reality is that Joseph probably could have been registered in Nazareth. Given the situation in Nazareth, Joseph and Mary were bringing disruption to the village. They were suspect. Since Joseph had family in Bethlehem, he could legally register there, and get Mary and himself out of Nazareth for a time, until the social pressure subsided. This was likely a semi-forced, semi-voluntary ostracism for Joseph and Mary. They would find family and support in Bethlehem. This would also explain why they remained there for about two years after Jesus' birth (Matthew 2). *Caesar Augustus' decree and the social norms of the culture converge to bring about the fulfillment of Micah 5:2, that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem.*

"Joseph 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," Luke's word order and phrases here would catch the attention of those familiar with Scripture. Luke uses the Greek word "city." This was not a technical designation of size as it is today. There was not as much classification in the ancient world between the terms "town" and "city." The phrase that is attention grabbing was that Joseph went to the "city of David," which most would expect Luke

to say was Jerusalem. The prophet Micah was contrasting the kings of his day (Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) who were centered in Jerusalem with the Messiah who would come. They put their trust in military might and political power, whereas the Messiah would come from lowly Bethlehem where David was born. The nation's true deliverer would come from humble settings.

Joseph and Mary were nobodies with some serious disadvantages in their culture. Depraved men ruled their lives from Rome and in Syria and in Judea. Depravity, oppression and violence were everywhere. Yet, 700-year-old prophecies which spoke of a better day, a day of deliverance that would come from a Messiah born in Bethlehem, were being fulfilled through them.

God decided to use nobodies from nowhere to give everyone everywhere the opportunity to be delivered from brokenness and truly live. No government program or human institution can bring about true transformation in our lives. Only the Messiah truly delivers.

The Nativity: Reality vs. Legend - Luke 2:6-20

The imagery of Jesus' birth has been highly romanticized and glamorized over the centuries. The real story is better than the glamorized version.

They Were Not Rushed

Joseph and Mary go to Nazareth. The text does not indicate how many months pregnant Mary was at that point. Luke 2:6 states, "And while they were there..." In other words, the text does not paint a picture of Joseph rushing into Bethlehem desperately searching for a place to stay. The Greek indicates they were there for some time before the birth occurred.

The "Inn"

Joseph would only have to mention his lineage as the son Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi (Luke 4:23-24) and related family in the village of Bethlehem would welcome them into their home. There would not have been a commercial inn in Bethlehem. The Greek word here means "guest room." Often, the guest room was the "upper room" on homes (see Luke 22:11 - the last supper). Someone of higher social rank was likely already in the guest room, so the family members who welcomed Joseph and Mary had to make room for them downstairs, and in the section of the home where the animals were kept. Thus, the manger, a feeding trough, became the crib for Jesus. The place where the animals were kept was often the lowest place in the home. The animals would be held on the ground floor, the family were on the main floor above the animals, and the guest room was above the main floor. The guest room was higher and therefore honored the guests. Jesus, however, was born in the lowest level. This irony accentuate the humbling circumstances into which Jesus was born.

The Manger

Animals often lived in the home. The animal section of the home was separated from the main section by a manger. The manger was a feeding trough. Most mangers were made of stone

because stone was more available than wood. They were also heavy enough so that livestock could be tied to them. This is referenced by Jesus when He healed a woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17). The synagogue ruler confronts Jesus for healing (working) on the Sabbath. Jesus counter-challenges with the fact that everyone on the Sabbath, even the synagogue ruler, “looses” their ox from the manger and leads it away to water. Likewise, Jesus makes the point, should not the woman bound to a long-term illness not be “loosed” from that heavy burden on the Sabbath? Jesus’ challenge would not make sense if the ox was kept in a barn separate from the house where it had freedom to move and get its own water. The synagogue leader could not deny that he waters his ox on the Sabbath, and he would have been ridiculed if he attempted to claim he left his animal in the house all day.

Isaiah 1:2-3 convicts Israel for its rebellion against God. Isaiah uses the metaphor, “*The ox knows its owner, the donkey it’s master’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*” The manger was a place to feed and tether the animal. Isaiah likens God to the manger, a rock and a place of nourishment. God’s people, like a stubborn donkey, had pulled away from the safety and nourishment of God. Now, in Jesus Christ, the “manger” had come in a manger.

The Savior of the world was laid in a stone trough, wrapped in swaddling cloths. He laid His head where cattle ate and drooled. He would later be laid on a stone slab in a tomb, wrapped in burial cloths. From both stones, Jesus would rise up and bring the good news of the kingdom of God to the world.

Swaddling Cloths

The norm was to wrap every baby in swaddling cloths. This is a practice not used in modern American society. It is a process of tightly binding the child’s limbs. The ancient writer, Pliny, laments about the practice as a “severer bondage than that of any domestic animal,” and “the child begins its life with punishment” (*Natural History* 7.2-3). The purpose of swaddling is debated, but it may be seen to “provide strength and security and to ensure a straight, strong, healthy body” to the baby.³

Jesus came into this world, fully experiencing life. He is not aloof to your experiences. He is not up in heaven completely clueless about our situations. He fully embraced what it means to be human. He fully assumed humanity and all its weaknesses. By fully assuming humanity, He was able to fully save humanity. The only question is how humans will respond to that offer of salvation.

The Angels

When the angel of the Lord appeared, “the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they are filled with great fear” (Luke 2:9-14). Being in the presence of holiness is a fearful experience for

³ Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Kindle edition, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992) loc. 4962.

us as flawed and fallen humans. Garland notes that the glory of the Lord is associated with awe-filled events in Scripture, like the giving of manna to the Israelites (Exod 16:10) and the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod 24:16-17). The prophet Habakkuk stated the earth will be filled with God's glory in the end times (Hab 2:14). Garland also observed that when Jesus was born, the Lord's glory did not appear in the Temple in Jerusalem, nor does it show around the infant Jesus.⁴ *The glory of the Lord appears to nobodies, shepherds in a field. This display points to the fact that the Lord's presence and glory will not be limited to a piece of real estate in Jerusalem, but that the good news is for everyone. Thus, this good news is for all the people* (Luke 2:10).

The "good news" was a Greek word familiar to the original audience from Roman propaganda. This word was used to announce the birth of heirs to the emperor or his ascension to the throne, but now this world will be redefined by Jesus' gospel. Luke pits world rulers against the world's Redeemer.⁵ The angels clearly identify Jesus as the Savior, the Christ, and the Lord. The shepherds will relay this proclamation to Mary and Joseph when they see them.

The angel that speaks was suddenly accompanied by the heavenly host and praising God. The host of heaven is a military arrangement. This is God's army, but instead of attacking and bringing judgment, they bring a message of peace and power.

"Peace on earth, goodwill to men"

This expression has donned many Christmas cards. However, this may not be an accurate translation of what the angels said. The King James translation is where this originates. However, the Greek is grammatically difficult to translate. The best translation is, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those with whom He is pleased." (see NLT, ESV, NASB, and RSV) This declaration parallels what is happening in heaven and on earth. God is glorified in heaven, and His people (i.e. those with whom He is pleased) have peace. The cliché translation indicates that peace is universal to all humanity, and this can misconstrue the picture here. While the peace is available to all humanity, it is not automatic. The peace is for those with whom God is pleased. These are people who are like Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, and He came up out of the water, the Father spoke from heaven over Him saying, "This is My Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). This was the same Greek word used in this text. Those with whom the Lord is pleased are those who have a relationship with Him. They have surrendered their lives to Him, because He has given them forgiveness and reconciliation.

Shepherds

Shepherds were **not** considered especially honorable because of their trade. They could be a nuisance and a source of conflict when they did not control their flock. Often they would have to

⁴ Garland, *Luke*, 122.

⁵ Ibid., 122, 125-126.

negotiate with village leaders for grazing rights in return for meat and wool. They were also nobodies on the social ladder of the world. God chose them to be witnesses to the birth of Jesus.

The shepherds receive the third birth announcement in Luke, and it follows the pattern of the other two: 1) Appearance of the angel; 2) Fear among the human(s); 3) Word of reassurance; 4) Divine message including the child's name (and / or title); 5) Giving of a sign. The only element missing for the shepherds is that they do not question the angel. They are never given the chance.

God's messengers, angels, who certainly outrank the shepherds, came and shared the great news of Jesus' birth with these men. The shepherds then become messengers like the angels, to share the great news (Luke 2:17-18). The angels praise God over the news (Luke 2:13-14), and after the shepherds see Jesus in the manger, they too praise God (Luke 2:20).

Mary

When the shepherds found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, they reported what the angels had said to them (Luke 2:17). The other onlookers (probably neighbors and Joseph's relatives) marveled, but Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). The language here is describing the fact that Mary is still learning the scope of what all this means. She is putting together what the shepherds report with what Gabriel had told her. While the onlookers are simply marveling over Jesus, she is learning and growing in her understanding of Jesus.

The Star and the Wise Men

Luke mentions neither the wise men nor the star. The Gospel of Matthew provides this information. The wise men (magi) arrived in Jerusalem looking for the king of the Jews. They explained that they saw "his star rise in the east" and that they came to pay homage to him (Matthew 2:1-2). This suggests that they did not "follow" the star from their homeland. If they had, then they would have gone straight to Bethlehem. Instead, they came to Jerusalem, because the natural assumption is that the king would be born in the capital city. They saw it rise at a certain time, and they planned a trip to come see the king to which this star referred. There are often changes in the stars and sky when God takes major actions in redemptive history. This is another meaning behind Psalm 19:1-6, "*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork.*"

Matthew notes that after they discover in Jerusalem that Bethlehem was the place of the Messiah's birth. Herod tells them to travel there, find the Messiah, and report back. The text states, "After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Matthew 2:9-10). This text indicates that the star they originally saw, reappeared after their trip to Jerusalem. Thus, they rejoiced over it.

The wise men only followed the star for about two or three hours, because that is about how long it took to travel the almost six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. As the story reveals later,

these things took place as much as two years after Jesus' birth. Herod attempted to wipe out the Christ child by sending soldiers into the region to slaughter male children "who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men" (Matthew 2:16).

The Take Away

The story of Jesus' birth is a story of cosmic and historical forces converging, setting the stage for change across all of creation. In the midst of it, there were nobodies like Mary and Joseph and shepherds. God used them to bring about this monolithic moment in the history of the universe. These nobodies were obedient to God. These nobodies were surrendered to God's will. The result is that 2,000 years later, we still sing for joy on this day.

What if we all surrendered and got obedient to Christ in our lives? The first step is to surrender to Him as Lord and Savior and begin a relationship with Him. He died on a cross to pay the penalty we deserve for our sins. He was wrapped in burial cloths and laid on a stone slab in a tomb. On the third day, He rose again victorious over our sin and victorious over death! Now, He offers forgiveness and new life to any who would surrender their lives to this truth. Then we become part of His kingdom.

When we are part of God's kingdom, we are part of something that is of cosmic proportions. While we can feel like nobodies in the big scheme of things, God can and will work in anyone to impact the world. What will God do through you? Whose life will be changed through your surrender and obedience to God? Your family? Your friends? Your neighbors? People on the other side of the planet? Let us rejoice and leap for joy over what God has planned for our lives! For by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not of our own doing; it is a gift of God, not a result of works so that none of us can boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them! (Eph 2:8-10)