

DETACHING THE CENSUS AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF LUKE 2:1-7¹

David J. Armitage
(djarmitage.research@gmail.com)

Summary

This paper offers an alternative approach to Luke 2:1-7, assuming for argument's sake that Luke's presumed chronology agreed with modern reconstructions in placing Quirinius' census some years after Herod's death. It is proposed that, on this basis, a coherent reading of the text is feasible in which the reference to Quirinius marks 2:1-5 as a digression, bounded by distinct transition markers, describing events several years after Jesus' birth. This digression, which claims that Joseph and Mary registered in Bethlehem in AD 6, despite having resided in Nazareth for several years, emphasises the family connection to Bethlehem and therefore to David.

1. Introduction

The association in Luke 2:1-7 of the birth of Jesus with a census, identified with reference to Quirinius, is widely regarded as problematic.² Josephus (*Ant.* 18:1) links Quirinius with a census following the banishment of Archelaus in AD 6 whilst Luke 1:5 places

¹ I am grateful to Professor Roland Deines and Dr David Wenham for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

² The secondary literature concerning the census could already be described as 'voluminous' over a century ago: see Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (ICC; 4th edn; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910): 46. For an annotated select bibliography starting with works in the early twentieth century see Joel B. Green and Michael C. McKeever, *Luke-Acts and New Testament Historiography* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994): 112-17. Seven approaches to the problem in recent scholarship are surveyed by Stanley E. Porter, 'The Reasons for the Lukan Census', in *Paul, Luke and the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. A. Christopherson et al. (JSNTSup 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002): 165-88, esp. 167-71.

the birth narratives in the time of Herod the Great, who died in around 4 BC. It has therefore been widely supposed that the Lukan account is misleading here and that the association of Jesus' birth with Quirinius' census is impossible.³ Others, noting that Luke seems at least to be attempting credible history, have proposed a reference to an earlier – otherwise unattested – census. One version of this proposal associates the hypothetical census with an earlier deployment, absent from extant records, of Quirinius to Syria.⁴ Alternatively, some have suggested that a different governor responsible for this earlier census has been misidentified as Quirinius.⁵ Still others have argued that Luke actually describes a census *before* the famous example overseen by Quirinius.⁶ A difficulty with all proposals of an earlier census, besides lack of corroborating evidence, is that a census initiated by the Romans in Herodian Judea is hard to reconcile with the degree of independence which the Romans are widely thought to have extended to client kingdoms.⁷

This paper offers an alternative construal of the text, adopting, for the sake of argument, the following assumptions:

³ The Lukan census account is 'dubious on almost every score' according to Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (updated edn; New York: Doubleday, 1993): 413; cf. Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991): 49; François Bovon, *Luke 1* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002; tr. from German, 1989): 83.

⁴ For a careful review of Quirinius' career, showing the difficulty of this interpretation, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Anchor Bible 28; 2nd edn; New York: Doubleday, 1981): 402-3.

⁵ E.g. J. W. Jack, 'The Census of Quirinius', *ExpTim* 40 (1929): 496-98. This option is now rarely defended. The standard chronology is reaffirmed by Edward Dąbrowa, 'The Date of the Census of Quirinius and the Chronology of the Governors of the Province of Syria', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 178 (2011): 137-42. A related proposal, arguing that Quirinius *completed* a census initiated under another administrator, does not clearly reflect what the text actually says (as noted by Wayne Brindle, 'The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2', *JETS* 27 [1984]: 43-52, esp. 44).

⁶ For positive evaluations of this view see for example John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989): 101-2; David E. Garland, *Luke* (ZECNT 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011): 117; Brook W. R. Pearson, 'The Lucan Censuses, Revisited', *CBQ* 61 (1999): 262-82, esp. 279-82; Porter, 'Reasons', 173-76. This approach is however seen as 'grammatically offensive' by James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015): 70; cf. Plummer, *Luke*, 50; Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 401. As Pearson ('Censuses', 282) observes, though, the Greek *is* strange, and grammatical considerations alone cannot therefore be decisive.

⁷ On the possibility of earlier *Herodian* censuses – perhaps incorporating Roman features – see Pearson, 'Censuses'.

1. As per the critical consensus, Quirinius was associated with the AD 6 census, and there was no Roman enrolment in Judea during Herod the Great's reign.
2. Luke *knew* that Quirinius' census significantly post-dated the reign of Herod the Great.⁸
3. In structuring his account Luke *assumed* (perhaps unconsciously) that his readers also were aware that Quirinius' census post-dated Herod's reign.⁹

These assumptions, taken together, are incompatible with the standard interpretation of Luke 1–2, where Herod's reign and a Roman census are simultaneously taken as chronological indicators for Jesus' birth. This interpretation is so firmly established that the impossibility of combining these assumptions may seem self-evident. The proposal here, however, is that approaching the passage with these assumptions in mind actually leads to an alternative reading with its own distinctive coherence. In this reading, Luke 2:1-5 constitutes a digression, presumably concerned with definitively establishing Joseph's Davidic credentials, in which the narrative horizon jumps forward from the time of the birth narratives to the time of the census of Quirinius. In 2:6, following this digression, Luke recommences his description of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, emphasising place rather than time, since temporal parameters for this event have already been established in Luke 1:5.

2. Key Exegetical Steps

This proposal depends on the following nine exegetical steps, which are explored in greater depth in section 3:¹⁰

⁸ Luke's awareness of aspects of the AD 6 census is apparent in Acts 5:37. Edwards (*Luke*, 71) expresses puzzlement as to why, in Acts, Luke discusses a census that accords well with the picture in Josephus when the one in the gospel is less readily integrated with other sources. Acts 5:36-37 does of course have its own historical incongruity: the attribution of leadership of an insurrection to a Theudas is chronologically incompatible with Josephus' reference to the Theudas whose uprising was crushed by Cuspius Fadus (*Ant.* 20:97-98).

⁹ Luke 1:3 ostensibly addresses the gospel to an individual: Theophilus. Whilst the gospel was surely not intended for Theophilus alone, the possibility arises that Luke regarded his primary addressee as knowledgeable, designing his text accordingly.

¹⁰ Translations are the author's own.

1. The time frame for the birth narratives is taken to be definitively determined by the reference in Luke 1:5 to ‘the days of Herod the King’.
2. In conformity with wider Lukan usage, ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις (‘in those days’) in Luke 2:1 is taken to refer to the temporal setting most closely preceding it in the text. The temporal frame is therefore established by 1:80, such that ‘those days’ in 2:1 indicates the time when John the Baptist was growing up in the desert. The census is therefore placed within the period of John’s maturing – a context compatible with the AD 6 date typically assigned to Quirinius’ census.
3. The distinctive Lukan transitional phrase ἐγένετο δέ¹¹ is taken in 2:1 to function in a way found elsewhere in Luke–Acts, marking transition from narrative background (here the generalised statement about John’s childhood) to a specific narrative sequence that takes place against that background (in this case the description of the census).
4. Luke 2:2 is taken to describe the enrolment as ‘the first census, while Quirinius was governor of Syria’,¹² and it is assumed for argument’s sake that Luke presumed (even if ill-advisedly) that his readers were broadly familiar with the relevant chronology, including the gap between Herod’s rule and Quirinius’ census. Given this assumption, the statement in 2:2 represents a direct and deliberate indicator to Luke’s readers that he is departing from the central narrative thread (the birth accounts of John and Jesus), and embarking on a digression concerning later events.
5. Following Carlson, τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν (‘his own town’) in Luke 2:3 is taken at face value: Joseph’s journey in 2:4 takes him back to his own original home town, and not a town with which his connection was merely historical.¹³ The reading here differs from Carlson’s

¹¹ ἐγένετο δέ is regularly left untranslated in English texts; it can be rendered as ‘it happened that’.

¹² Syntactical considerations favouring this interpretation are outlined by Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996): 304-5. It is probably fair to say that exploration of alternatives has been largely driven by historical rather than syntactical uncertainties. Cf. George Ogg, ‘The Quirinius Question To-day’, *ExpTim* 79 (1968): 231-36, esp. 234.

¹³ Stephen C. Carlson, ‘The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: Κατάλυμα in Luke 2.7’, *NTS* 56 (2010): 326-42, esp. 336-38; cf. Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (London: T&T Clark, 2004): 28, 188, n. 9.

scheme, however, in proposing that the return to Bethlehem for the census followed a few years' residence in Nazareth, and was not associated with Jesus' birth.

6. In 2:5, οὔση ἐγκύω¹⁴ is treated as circumstantial (qualifying ἐμνηστευμένη¹⁵) rather than attributive (qualifying Μαριάμ [Mary]). The dual participial phrase (τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ οὔση ἐγκύω) is not taken to describe Mary's condition during the census journey; rather it recognises her as the same Mary described in Luke 1, who was pregnant during the time of her betrothal to Joseph. This statement, moreover, facilitates the transition out of the digression concerning the census and back into the main narrative line by reintroducing the theme of Mary's pregnancy and leading into the description of the birth in 2:6-7. The time reference of the perfect participle ἐμνηστευμένη is ambiguous because the lexeme can be used flexibly in relation to both the event of betrothal, and the state of betrothal.
7. In 2:6 the distinctively Lukan transitional phrase ἐγένετο δέ is taken to mark resumption of the main narrative following a digression, as in Luke 3:21, where a digression likewise describes events subsequent to the main narrative focus. This 'resumptive' usage also occurs elsewhere in Luke–Acts.
8. The claim in 2:6 that the baby was born to Mary when she was in Bethlehem is taken to emphasise place rather than time, since Luke has already explicitly placed the birth narratives in the time of Herod and not the time of Quirinius' census.
9. κατάλυμα ('accommodation') in 2:7 is taken to refer not to a commercial inn, but to a room within a private house, as suggested by Bailey and Carlson.¹⁶ As Carlson proposes, it could here designate temporary (and possibly cramped) accommodation provided for Mary and Joseph within a family residence in Bethlehem following their marriage, but prior to their acquisition of a home of their own.¹⁷ οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι in 2:7 consequently describes lack of space within that room for childbirth and postnatal care of mother and child rather than unavailability of

¹⁴ οὔση: present active participle of εἰμί ('I am'); ἐγκύω: 'pregnant'.

¹⁵ Perfect passive participle of μνηστεύω ('I betroth').

¹⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 28-33; Carlson, 'Accommodations', 331-34.

¹⁷ Carlson, 'Accommodations', 338-39.

any lodging space. This lack of space would account for their relocation, when Mary went into labour, to the main living area, which, as Bailey points out, would probably have incorporated an area for animals to be kept at night, and therefore at least one manger.¹⁸ On this reading Mary and Joseph could already have been resident in Bethlehem for some time before the birth, for reasons entirely unconnected with any census.

In light of the steps detailed above, one might render Luke 1:80–2:7 as shown below. A chronological shift in 2:6, moving back from the time of the census to the late Herodian period, would be a logical inference for a reader who had already internalised a Herodian date for the birth narratives (as detailed in 1:5), but who also supposed that Quirinius' census occurred substantially later.

^{1:80} The child grew and was strengthened in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. ^{2:1} As it happens, it was during that time that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the Roman world ² (this was the first registration, when Quirinius was governor of Syria), ³ and everyone went – each into their own town – to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went up: out of Galilee, away from the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to David's town (which is called Bethlehem) because he was from the house and family of David; ⁵ he went to be registered with Mary (she who was his betrothed when she was pregnant).

⁶ Now, it transpired that the days were completed for her to give birth when they were in that place, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a feeding trough, because there was insufficient space for them in their lodging place.

This sequence of events depicted by Luke could then be as follows:

1. Towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great, Mary – who is from Nazareth – encounters an angel who foretells Jesus' birth.
2. Mary visits Elizabeth in the Judean hill country, then returns home.
3. Although already found to be pregnant whilst betrothed, Mary marries Joseph – a man from Bethlehem – who initially takes Mary to his family home.
4. Jesus is born in Bethlehem; because of space restrictions in their quarters, Mary and Joseph place the baby in a feeding trough in the main living area.
5. The family subsequently relocate to Nazareth, establishing there a home of their own.

¹⁸ Bailey, *Jesus*, 28-31.

6. Several years later, when Quirinius is governing Syria, an enrolment is announced, so Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, because this remains the location of Joseph's family home, and he needs to register in connection with property there.¹⁹

On this reading Luke's digression concerning the census is not a chronological marker for the birth stories, nor does it serve a narrative function in explaining how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem.²⁰ Rather, it emphasises to his readership – who may be very familiar with the connection of Jesus with *Nazareth* – that the family association with Davidic Bethlehem was substantive and officially recognised.

3. Analysis

3.1 Luke 1:5 – Time Frame for the Birth Narratives

Luke 1:5 provides a chronological marker for events leading up to the birth of John the Baptist, placing the priesthood of his father Zechariah in the days of 'Herod the King'. This designation should, given the lack of further qualification, be taken to refer to Herod the Great. Derrett's suggestion that Luke here actually refers to Archelaus is problematic: an otherwise unqualified reference to 'Herod the King' most naturally indicates the most famous individual for whom the

¹⁹ The claim that Joseph would not have needed to report to Bethlehem, especially given a merely ancestral connection, goes back at least to D. F. Strauss (see Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 99). Various rationales for such a journey have nonetheless been suggested. Edwards (*Luke*, 69) suggests that a Roman census in the Herodian period might have incorporated enrolment in one's birth place 'in deference to Jewish custom'. Attention has been drawn to Egyptian census practices, which could apparently involve relocation (see discussion in Brown, *Birth*, 549). On the current proposal, Joseph's journey may be more understandable: the reconstruction assumes that Joseph had previously been resident in Bethlehem, and could have retained property interests there, perhaps liable to forfeiture through failure to register (cf. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 101; see also Mark D. Smith, 'Of Jesus and Quirinius', *CBQ* 62 [2000]: 278-93, esp. 289-90). The objection that residents of Antipas's tetrarchy would scarcely have travelled to Roman-ruled Judea for tax registration (so Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1–9:50* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994]: 905; Brown, *Birth*, 550) has less force if the possibility that Joseph still had property interests in Bethlehem is granted. Josephus connects Quirinius' enrolment to property in *Ant.* 18.2. On possible links between the Lukan census and property registration see Porter, 'Reasons', 183-87.

²⁰ Contra Johnson, *Luke*, 51; Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 393. The importance for Luke of placing Jesus' birth in a particular geopolitical context would also be diminished. (For variations on this theme see, for example, Bock, *Luke 1–9:50*, 199, 203; Edwards, *Luke*, 66; Brown, *Birth*, 415.)

designation could be fitting.²¹ Moreover, Luke elsewhere appears to be careful with rulers' titles (correctly identifying Herod Antipas, Lysanius, and Philip as tetrarchs in Luke 3:1, for instance). According to Josephus (*Ant.* 17:317; *J.W.* 2:93), Archelaus was granted only the rank of ethnarch, with elevation to kingship contingent on his performance.

In Luke's account, Zechariah's angelic encounter in the temple is closely followed by Elizabeth conceiving a child. Mary's meeting with the angel follows in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (Luke 1:26, 36). Whilst the angel does not, in Luke's retelling, specify the timing of Mary's miraculous conception, nothing in the passage suggests any delay. Indeed, when Mary then visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth pronounces a blessing not only on Mary but on ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου – 'the fruit of your womb' – implying that the pregnancy is already underway. The pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary thus overlap, tying the births of both John and Jesus to the late Herodian period.

3.2 *Luke 2:1 – ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις*

It is proposed here that ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις in Luke 2:1 refers *specifically* to the *broad* time frame established in Luke 1:80: it locates the events of Luke 2:1-5 during the period when John the Baptist was growing up in the wilderness.²² In Luke–Acts this precise phrase is used five times (once in a quotation from Joel), and on three occasions the words occur in a different order: ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις. These instances are tabulated below (omitting Luke 2:1), indicating for each the time reference implied.

²¹ J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'Further Light on the Narratives of the Nativity', *NovT* 17 (1975): 81-108, esp. 83-84. Cf. the critique of Derrett in Brown, *Birth*, 548. Reference to Archelaus in Luke 1:5 has more recently been defended by Smith, 'Jesus and Quirinius'. Smith proposes that *Matthew's* chronology is suspect, rather than Luke's: Luke, he proposes, is generally knowledgeable about geography and chronology (284-85), whereas Matthew's account is so driven by literary and theological concerns that historicity is virtually irrelevant. Smith's dismissal of Matthew's chronology is challenged by Porter, 'Reasons', 178.

²² Bock agrees that ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις in 2:1 refers back to 1:80, but construes this with reference only to the time of John's birth, and not the wider frame encompassing John's time in the wilderness (Bock, *Luke 1–9:50*, 202).

Phrase Verse Referent of ‘those days’

ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις

Luke 4:2	The forty days when Jesus ate nothing, described earlier in the same verse
Acts 2:18	‘The last days’, introduced in the preceding verse
Acts 7:41	The days when the Israelites complained against Moses, described in the preceding two verses
Acts 9:37	The days when Peter was resident in Lydda, described in verses 32-35 (verse 36 introduces Tabitha)

ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις

Luke 5:35	The days when the bridegroom’s guests will fast, specified earlier in the same verse
Luke 9:36	The days when the disciples kept silence about the transfiguration; implicit contrast with later days when they did discuss what happened
Luke 21:23	The days of vengeance specified in the preceding verse

With the exception of Luke 9:36, the time frame of these instances of ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις and ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις is established within the immediately preceding verses.²³ (In Luke 9:36 the phrase serves a different purpose; it does not concern chronology, but the contrast between the initial and later reactions of the disciples present at the transfiguration.) Given Luke’s wider usage, it is therefore reasonable to interpret ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις in Luke 2:1 with respect to the immediately preceding context – Luke 1:80 – notwithstanding the subsequent allocation of these verses to different chapters. Luke thus introduces in 2:1 events occurring *at some point* during the period when John was growing up; there is no necessary link to the time of the birth narratives themselves.

Should it be thought implausible that Luke would suddenly jump forward in time in his narrative before returning to the central narrative thread, one may compare the unambiguous occurrence of this phenomenon in the following chapter. After describing John’s baptising and preaching in Luke 3:1-18, Luke jumps forward, in 3:19-

²³ Edwards (*Luke*, 67) regards Luke’s use of ‘in those days’ as a Hebraism. Alternatively, a rhetorical function is suggested by Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): 125. He characterises the phrase as a solemn introduction, signalling ‘events of eschatological import’. Whilst such overtones may be present, actual time reference need not thereby be excluded.

20, to John's arrest and imprisonment. Verse 20 concludes with John locked up in prison. Verse 21 recounts the baptism of Jesus by that same John. The possibility of such narrative 'flash-forwards' should therefore not be disregarded when considering Luke's narrative organisation.

3.3 *Luke 2:1 – ἐγένετο δέ*

Regular use of the phrase ἐγένετο δέ is a distinctive feature of Luke–Acts,²⁴ virtually always marking transition points in the narrative.²⁵ Three broad (potentially overlapping) categories of transition are distinguishable. Firstly, there are transitions between separate narrative sections, including transitions from accounts of teaching to accounts of action.²⁶ Secondly, the phrase marks the beginning of a specific narrative, following provision of relevant background information.²⁷ Thirdly, the phrase is used where the main thread of a narrative is resumed following a digression (sometimes very brief).²⁸

In the usual reading of Luke 2:1–7, ἐγένετο δέ in 2:1 signals transition to a new narrative section: the first category suggested above. This interpretation is reinforced by the chapter division, and by the insertion before 2:1 in many translations – and indeed some Greek editions – of a heading approximating 'The birth of Jesus'.²⁹ The

²⁴ The phrase is common in LXX Genesis (forty-eight instances), infrequent in LXX Exodus (six occurrences), and occurs once in each of LXX Joshua, Ruth, 2 Samuel, and Isaiah. There are two instances in LXX Job. In the NT it occurs only in Luke–Acts (seventeen instances in Luke and twenty in Acts).

²⁵ καὶ ἐγένετο also regularly occurs as an introductory phrase or transition marker in Luke–Acts (e.g. introducing a narrative section in Luke 5:12). However, this combination also frequently occurs *within* narrative sections (e.g. Luke 9:33; 22:44; 24:15). Only in Acts 5:7, in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, does ἐγένετο δέ function like this within a Lukan narrative. Even here it marks a transition in the story. On the use of ἐγένετο in Luke–Acts see Plummer, *Luke*, 45.

²⁶ See Luke 5:1; 6:1, 6, 12; 8:22; 9:28, 51; 11:14, 27; 18:35; 22:24; Acts 8:1; 9:19, 43; 11:26; 16:16; 19:1, 23; 22:17; 28:17. Acts 5:7 may be included in this category, although it links two sections within one broader narrative.

²⁷ See Luke 1:8; 16:22; Acts 8:8; 9:37; 10:10; 22:6; 28:8. Acts 15:39 could be placed in this category or in the first, depending on whether the preceding verses, concerning Paul's travel plans, are construed as background information for understanding the break with Barnabas.

²⁸ See Luke 3:21; 9:37; Acts 4:5; 9:32; 14:1; 23:9. This usage is clearest in Luke 3:21, where Luke resumes the story of John's baptising following a digression about his eventual arrest, and in Acts 23:9, where the narrative is resumed after a digression about Sadducean and Pharisaic beliefs.

²⁹ E.g. NRSV ('The Birth of Jesus'), NASB ('Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem'), UBS4 ('The Birth of Jesus').

reading proposed here, however, places ἐγένετο δέ in the second category: it leads into the specifics of a narrative section after relevant background information is provided. Hence Luke 2:1 should not be separated from Luke 1:80, since the latter provides the temporal framing for the former (indicated by ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις in 2:1).

The continuity between 1:80 and 2:1 presupposed here, and the resultant broadening of the time frame of 2:1, may not seem the most natural reading. Discerning what is ‘natural’ here is however challenging precisely because of the great weight of tradition associated with this text, where 2:1 constitutes a grand, portentous, introduction to the birth narrative of Jesus. The modern reader invariably arrives at 2:1 already ‘knowing’ that it sets the scene for Jesus’ birth, and a deliberate (‘unnatural’) effort is therefore needed to read the text in a different way. The suggestion here is that if 1:80–2:1 is read without a prior commitment to the idea that it contains a new chronological marker for the birth of Jesus – something that is *not* signalled at this point in the passage, notwithstanding the conventional section headings – it may naturally and straightforwardly be taken to open up a wider time frame, potentially encompassing events in AD 6.

3.4 Luke 2:2 – Census Chronology

The proposal advanced here accepts the interpretation of Luke 2:2 in which the registration described in 2:1 is identified as ‘the first [πρώτη] enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria’.³⁰ The most obvious referent – as attested by Josephus, at least (*Ant.* 18:1) – is the census apparently supervised by Quirinius in AD 6. Corroborating evidence for an earlier census (a possibility which can nonetheless not be excluded) is lacking.

Suggestions that Luke’s use of πρώτη in 2:2 points rather to a census ‘before’ the one overseen by Quirinius cannot, in the absence of additional external evidence, definitively resolve the problem. Indeed, the exegetical significance of this word may be rather different: it implies, together with the reference to Quirinius, that Luke 2:2 parenthetically addresses the implicit question ‘*which* census?’ This suggests an assumption by Luke that his primary audience will have some knowledge of ‘famous enrolments’, such that he can specify which one he means with reference to Quirinius. He is thus not

³⁰ Cf. Wallace, *Grammar*, 304-5.

providing information about Quirinius, but *appealing to knowledge* about him. The possibility consequently arises that he assumed (rightly or wrongly) that his initial readership would understand that events associated in his narrative with the census of Quirinius simply could not have happened during Herod's reign, and that they would therefore recognise in the reference to Quirinius a signal of a shift in the temporal frame of the discourse, away from the main narrative about the births of John and Jesus. Given a knowledgeable 'assumed reader', Luke 2:2 could thus directly and deliberately indicate a (temporary) shift in focus to later events.

3.5 Luke 2:3 – τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν

According to Luke 2:3 the census required enrolment in one's 'own town': each went εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν. As Carlson notes, this phrase has frequently been discounted with respect to Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, largely because Luke 2:39 states that Joseph and Mary 'returned' (ἐπέστρεψαν) to 'their own town – Nazareth' (εἰς πόλιν ἑαυτῶν Ναζαρέθ).³¹ Consequently, a merely genealogical connection to Bethlehem has often been assumed: Joseph was from the Davidic line and all such men supposedly had to go to Bethlehem. It is difficult, though, to envisage how such an enrolment strategy could have worked in practice; moreover, evidence that such a criterion applied in censuses at that time is lacking.

Carlson suggests that Luke 2:3-4 should be taken at face value; Bethlehem, then, would be the home town of Joseph's family.³² He assumes that Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem with Joseph at the time of the census, and while they were there – prior to Jesus' birth – Mary and Joseph were married, and were provided with a room within Joseph's family's home.³³ Subsequently, they relocated to Nazareth – Mary's home town – establishing a home for themselves there. Since Nazareth then became the town with which this family was most memorably associated, it could with hindsight be designated πόλιν ἑαυτῶν in Luke 2:39.

The interpretation suggested here draws on Carlson's reconstruction, whilst differing in important respects. In particular, it

³¹ Carlson, 'Accommodations', 337-38.

³² Carlson, 'Accommodations', 336.

³³ Carlson, 'Accommodations', 339.

operates on the basis that there was no census at the time of Jesus' birth. Mary's presence in Bethlehem would have been primarily for the marriage ceremony. On this understanding she need not have travelled with Joseph whilst betrothed to him, an element that some have found problematic in the traditional account.³⁴ Rather, she could have travelled in the same manner presupposed on her journey to visit Elizabeth. Following the marriage, they would have been temporarily accommodated within Joseph's family home³⁵ before travelling at a later date to Nazareth, where, for whatever reasons, they had decided to establish their own home.³⁶ Around ten years later, on this reconstruction, a census affecting Judea was decreed, and Joseph, with Mary, visited Bethlehem to register, because this remained his family base despite his own residence in Nazareth in the intervening period. There was perhaps still some property there to which he aimed to establish official title. On this reading, Luke's motivation for introducing the census story would have nothing to do with the chronology of the birth narratives, but everything to do with formal and official authentication of the Davidic connections of Joseph's family. This would also incidentally explain why Jesus of *Nazareth* had been born in *Bethlehem*: not because of the coincidental timing of a census, but simply because it was the home town of Joseph's family.

3.6 Luke 2:5 – Μαριάμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ οὔσῃ ἐγκύῳ

In interpreting Μαριάμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ οὔσῃ ἐγκύῳ in Luke 2:5, key questions concern the semantic relationship between the two participial phrases, and the meaning – especially the time reference – of τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη. On the standard interpretation, τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ οὔσῃ ἐγκύῳ describes the *condition* of Mary *at the time of the*

³⁴ See §3.6.

³⁵ On the κατάλυμα see §3.9. Carlson ('Accommodations', 339) notes how ancient Jewish marriages 'were initiated by a betrothal ... and finalized by a "home taking" ... in which the bride is taken to the husband's house'.

³⁶ Cultural connections and interchange, including resettlement, between Judea and Galilee are now widely presumed. Deines, for example, suggests that 'at least part of the immigrant population of Galilee had strong, though also conflicted, Judean roots and interests' (Roland Deines, 'Jesus the Galilean', in *Acts of God in History*, ed. Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts [WUNT 317; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013]: 51-93, esp. 91). A decision by Joseph to establish a home in Nazareth, despite being from Bethlehem, is thus not implausible.

census.³⁷ Both participles are treated as attributive, standing in co-ordinated rather than subordinating relationship.³⁸ The meaning, on this reading, can then be paraphrased as follows: ‘Joseph went there to register with Mary, who was betrothed to him *at that time*, and who was also pregnant *at that time*.’³⁹ As already noted, some have questioned whether Joseph could have legitimately travelled with a woman to whom he was merely betrothed and not yet married. Indeed, a number of ancient manuscripts add γυναίκι (‘wife’) after αὐτῷ.⁴⁰ This is widely regarded as a scribal interpolation, intended to soften an otherwise puzzling – even shocking – description of Mary’s condition at the time of the journey.⁴¹

The proposal here, in contrast, is that the two participial phrases are integrally linked, such that οὔση functions circumstantially in relation to ἐμνηστευμένη.⁴² The phrase as a whole then serves not to describe

³⁷ An alternative construal of οὔση, also compatible with the traditional reading, treats it as circumstantial, operating with *causal* force. This is defended by Edwards (*Luke*, 72), following Plummer (*Luke*, 53): Mary accompanied Joseph *because* she was pregnant.

³⁸ Whilst a co-ordinated relation between the participial phrases is entirely possible, this could have been made more perspicuous by the simple expedient of interposing καί. Were *both* participles articular this would also lead unambiguously to identification of both as attributive, in co-ordinate relation.

³⁹ On use of attributive participles as equivalent to relative clauses see BDF §412; use of the article for this construction is described as ‘not absolutely necessary, but desirable’.

⁴⁰ This reading occurs in various Greek manuscripts (notably Alexandrinus, but not Sinaiticus or Vaticanus) and is reflected in the Vulgate and part of the Syriac tradition. Some Old Latin texts, and the Sinaitic Syriac, omit any reference to betrothal: Mary is just ‘his wife’. This conforms the story (in its standard formulation) more closely to Matt. 1:24-25, where Joseph takes Mary as his wife before Jesus’ birth, albeit without then consummating the marriage.

⁴¹ On potentially scandalous implications of ἐμνηστευμένη here, possibly encouraging scribal emendation, see Edwards, *Luke*, 72; Bovon, *Luke* 1, 85. Acceptance of ἐμνηστευμένη, without γυναίκι, as the more difficult reading is advocated by Green, *Luke*, 124, n. 15, amongst others. Some have attributed the reference to betrothal, rather than marriage, to non-consummation of the marriage during the pregnancy (e.g. Bock, *Luke* 1–9:50, 205-6; Garland, *Luke*, 120). Bock suggests that this implicitly emphasises the virgin birth. The approach outlined in this paper allows ἐμνηστευμένη to be taken at face value (as it is by Carlson, ‘Accommodations’, 339-40).

⁴² Given this interpretation, the comma which NA28 introduces after ἐμνηστευμένη would be more appropriately positioned after Μαριάμ. Another Lukan instance where an articular attributive participle is qualified by a circumstantial participle, to make a more precise point about a certain identification, is found in Acts 14:3. Here Paul and Barnabas speak boldly for the Lord (ἐπὶ τῷ κυρίῳ) – that is, for ‘the one *bearing witness* (τῷ μαρτυροῦντι) to the word of his grace, *by giving* (διδόντι) signs and wonders to be done through their hands’. μαρτυροῦντι is a present participle

Mary's condition at the time of the census, but to reintroduce her as that same Mary described in Luke 1, reminding the reader of her unique position in the narrative,⁴³ and also (following the digression about the census) refocusing attention on the circumstances of Jesus' birth. This reading can be paraphrased thus: 'Joseph went there to register with Mary – that same Mary, you will recall, who whilst betrothed to him was pregnant.'⁴⁴ This sentence naturally leads back into the account of the birth itself, which on this reading is *not* a simple narrative continuation of verses 1-5.

The time reference of the perfect participle ἐμνηστευμένη is ambiguous; this is bound up with the semantics of μνηστεύω, in particular the way that the *event* of the betrothal ceremony results in the *state* of 'being betrothed'. To illustrate: Deuteronomy 20:7 stipulates that a man pledged to a woman but not yet married should not fight in battle. The LXX deploys the perfect form μεμνήστανται: the man 'has been betrothed'. The implication is that he has previously passed through a betrothal ceremony. Where this requirement is picked up in 1 Maccabees 3:56, the condition of those exempted from military service is described using the present participle μνηστευόμενοις. In this context the verb necessarily refers to the state of betrothal and not the betrothal event; otherwise only those who were actually in the middle of a betrothal ceremony would be excluded from military service. This example demonstrates the flexibility of this terminology in relation both to the event of betrothal and the condition of being betrothed.

Use of μνηστεύω in the perfect tense may in principle indicate either a *present* state of betrothal, derived from a ceremony that is now in the

functioning attributively, and δίδόντι (also a present participle) qualifies μαρτυροῦντι, explaining the means by which the Lord confirmed the word. Septuagintal examples of such dual participial constructions can be found in 1 Macc. 8:6, describing the manner in which Antiochus the Great advanced against the Romans (articular aorist participle qualified by present participle), and in LXX Song 8:5, where an articular present participle is qualified by two circumstantial participles (one perfect and one present) specifying the circumstances and manner in which the beloved comes up from the wilderness.

⁴³ Edwards (*Luke*, 71) describes the description of Mary in Luke 2:5 as 'slightly redundant'. He proposes, however, that it is included because the previous mention of Mary's condition and status was so much earlier in the text.

⁴⁴ On this interpretation the circumstantial participle qualifies the preceding participle with reference to time, but the meaning may be best described just as 'attendant circumstance'. (Sharply distinguishing these nuances is not possible; cf. W. W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* [London: Macmillan, 1889]: §846.)

past, or a *past* state of betrothal, concluded either through marriage or breaking of the engagement. The ambiguity is particularly acute for participial forms, given the non-availability of a pluperfect participle. Luke 2:5 could mean, in line with the traditional reading, that Joseph travelled with ‘Mary – the one who had been through a betrothal ceremony with him, and who was at the time of the journey still in the resulting state of betrothal’. It could also mean, however, that Joseph travelled with ‘Mary – the one who had *formerly* been in the state of betrothal to him – but at the time of the journey was no longer in this state (since by then they were married)’. This second option is intelligible in the context of the present proposal precisely because it is qualified by the reference to Mary’s being with child during that earlier betrothal period.

Mary’s pregnancy is described using a present participle: οὔση ἐγκύω. On the traditional reading of this passage, the present tense of οὔση operates within a time frame set by ἀνέβη ... ἀπογράψασθαι.⁴⁵ Mary’s pregnancy is thus depicted as a present circumstance at the time of the journey prompted by the census. Since the alternative proposal here takes οὔση to function circumstantially relative to ἐμνηστευμένη, the temporal significance of οὔση ἐγκύω is established with respect to that participle. Mary is thus reintroduced as the one who previously was pregnant whilst simultaneously betrothed (that is, in the *state* of betrothal) to Joseph. On this reading, at the time of the census, both the betrothal and the pregnancy were in the past, the former concluded through marriage and the latter through the birth of the child, which Luke only now proceeds to describe.

3.7 Luke 2:6 – ἐγένετο δέ

Lukan usage of ἐγένετο δέ as a transitional marker has already been discussed in connection with the instance of the phrase in Luke 2:1. Whilst it regularly marks a transition between narrative sections, it may also introduce a specific narrative following the description of the context for that narrative, and can moreover mark the resumption of a narrative following a digression. The traditional reading of Luke 2:1-7 places ἐγένετο δέ in 2:6 in the second category: it marks the transition between background information explaining the presence of Mary and

⁴⁵ Temporal reference of participles is established relative to the controlling verb; see Wallace, *Grammar*, 614-15.

Joseph in Bethlehem and the account of the birth itself. The reading proposed here, however, sees in ἐγένετο δέ in 2:6 an indicator of resumption of the main narrative following the digression. Luke 2:6-7 is, to be sure, closely linked to 2:1-5, but the key factor in common is simply the location.

The clearest example of Luke's use of ἐγένετο δέ in resuming a main narrative, after a future-oriented digression, is in Luke 3:19-21. Luke 3:1-18 describes John's ministry of baptising, preaching, and exhortation. The focus then jumps to John's criticism of Herod the Tetrarch, who responded by imprisoning him. In 3:21, however, attention returns to the time before John's imprisonment – a transition utilising the phrase ἐγένετο δέ. This resumptive force is often captured in English translations using 'Now', signalling a return into the narrative present.⁴⁶ If one accepts, for argument's sake, the central assumption of this paper – that Luke expected his readers to know that Quirinius' census post-dated the reign of Herod in which he had placed the birth narratives – a logical corollary is likewise to understand ἐγένετο δέ in Luke 2:6 as introducing the resumption of the main thread.⁴⁷ It is precisely the reintroduction of the birth story that signals to such 'knowledgeable' readers that the temporal frame has shifted back. The following paraphrase attempts to capture this idea more clearly: 'During the census of Quirinius (which of course was substantially later than the reign of Herod the King), Joseph registered in Bethlehem with Mary – you will remember that she was the one who was pregnant during the betrothal period. Now, it was actually in Bethlehem that her baby was born (back in the time of Herod, of course).'

3.8 Luke 2:6 – *Emphasis on Place rather than Time*

According to Luke 2:6 the birth of Jesus happened ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ: 'while they were there'. If Luke 2:1-5 is taken to set the scene chronologically for the birth, locating it at the same time as the census, and using the census to account for the presence of Mary and Joseph in

⁴⁶ E.g. ESV, NASB, NRSV.

⁴⁷ In English, such relative temporal shifts are often emphasised using pluperfect verbs. Both ἐγένετο and ἐπλήσθησαν ('were completed') in Luke 2:6 are aorist (the former in a formulaic expression). On the use of the aorist in Greek to express relative time see BDF §324; cf. Goodwin, *Syntax*, §58. BDF further asserts (§347) that the Greek pluperfect, unlike Latin, German, and English, was *not* typically used for relative time.

Bethlehem at the time of the birth, ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ will clearly be taken to emphasise how the birth coincided with the events just described: ‘Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the census, and during that episode, which took them to that place, the baby was born.’ If on the other hand 2:1-5 is seen as a way of establishing more definitively Joseph’s connection with Bethlehem, ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ functions to emphasise the connection of the birth of Jesus with that same important location: ‘Joseph’s home town was Bethlehem, as shown by his registration in the census of Quirinius, and the birth of Jesus also happened at a time when they were in that very location.’ The phrase has sufficient semantic openness to accommodate both of these interpretations; in itself, it leaves undetermined whether the protagonists were present in the specified location on more than one occasion. Context and assumptions should be seen as determinative here; the phrase does not require the proposed interpretation, but it does allow for it.⁴⁸

3.9 Luke 2:7 – οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι

The traditional identification of the κατάλυμα in Luke 2:7 as a commercial inn is interwoven with the notion that it was the census that brought them there at the time of Jesus’ birth. In this view, Mary and Joseph hurried to Bethlehem in the final stages of Mary’s pregnancy, and on arrival, having no significant relationships in the town, were obliged unsuccessfully to seek residence at the inn. The problems with this account, not least that such a scenario is almost inconceivable in the social milieu of first-century Judea, have been rehearsed with particular clarity by Bailey.⁴⁹ Implicit in such formulations of this story is a narrow window for registration, hence the frantic journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Given the communication systems of the time, however, it is difficult to imagine how any census could apply the rigid

⁴⁸ Luke uses ἐν τῷ εἶναι to position events in space or time on three other occasions. Luke 5:12 describes a healing carried out by Jesus ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐν μιᾷ τῶν πόλεων (‘while he was in one of the towns’). The reason for locating the episode like this is unclear, although Luke then explains how increasing crowds led Jesus to seek rural solitude. No further chronological markers are provided; the focus appears to be place more than time. In Luke 9:18 the disciples ask Jesus a question ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν προσευχόμενον κατὰ μόνας (‘while he was praying alone’); here the interest is clearly in timing: location is irrelevant. Luke 11:1 also describes an interruption during Jesus’ prayer, but with a highlighting of place, albeit in an obscure fashion: ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐν τόπῳ τινὶ προσευχόμενον (‘while he was praying in a certain place’).

⁴⁹ Bailey, *Jesus*, 25-37.

deadlines that this scenario suggests.⁵⁰ If, however, there was a wider window for registration, it is harder to understand why Mary and Joseph would have chosen such an unpropitious time to travel.

Supposing, instead, that the *κατάλυμα* was a small room in a private house, markedly different options emerge, especially if, as Carlson proposes, οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος indicates lack of space in that room for the birth and postnatal care of a baby, rather than lack of a room *per se*.⁵¹ Removal from the story of the fully occupied inn opens up the possibility of a more leisurely arrival in Bethlehem, in the firm expectation of accommodation with relatives, and perhaps even in Joseph's family home. Moreover, as Carlson suggests, this provides a possible setting for the marriage of Joseph and Mary, who could then have established themselves for an extended stay in private lodgings – the *κατάλυμα* – attached to the family house while they awaited the baby's birth. On the usual reading of Luke 2:1-5, this sojourn in Bethlehem coincided with the census registration window; if, however, Mary and Joseph were residing with Joseph's relatives, the census is no longer actually necessary as a reason for their presence in Bethlehem.⁵² If Bethlehem was Joseph's home town (as Luke 2:3 implies), it would have been a logical location for their marriage and for their early married life.

Since, in this reconstruction, the census is superfluous as an explanation of why Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a chronological dislocation between Luke 2:1-5 and Luke 2:6-7 is possible. The implications of reinterpreting *κατάλυμα* as a room in a private house rather than a commercial inn are thus potentially significant not just for understanding Luke's depiction of the birth scene, but for making sense of the function of the census in Luke's narrative. He uses it not to explain how Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, but to demonstrate that they genuinely belonged there.

⁵⁰ On extended periods for registration see A. J. Kerr, 'No Room in the Kataluma', *ExpTim* 103 (1991): 15-16, esp. 15; Pearson, 'Censuses', 275.

⁵¹ Carlson, 'Accommodations', 334-36.

⁵² It is striking that Carlson, whilst accepting that the birth took place at the time of the census, constructs a summary account of the presence of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem which does not refer to the census at all (Carlson, 'Accommodations', 342). Bailey's defence of his interpretation of *κατάλυμα* likewise includes a reconstruction of events in which the census is not even mentioned (Bailey, *Jesus*, 25-37).

4. Discussion

The reading of Luke 2:1-7 outlined above differs radically from standard approaches to the text, placing the journey to Bethlehem for the census several years after Jesus' birth. The claim here is not that the traditional reading is syntactically flawed, but that there is *another* feasible reading of the text which departs from the standard reading by drawing different inferences from internal and external contextual indicators. Certainly, the syntax does not demand the reading offered here; it may nonetheless permit it. Indeed, the primary concern of this paper has been to set out an alternative interpretative *possibility* without necessarily asserting that this option has a higher *probability* than others. Evaluating relative probabilities here is by no means straightforward; Marshall's judgement concerning the census question – 'no solution is free from difficulty' – still stands.⁵³

The traditional interpretation, in which Jesus' birth coincides with the census, is very ancient. The Protevangelium of James and other related apocryphal infancy narratives link the birth chronologically to the census.⁵⁴ Justin Martyr deploys the connection in an apologetic context, claiming that Jesus' birth was actually recorded in the census registers.⁵⁵ Eusebius also takes the connection for granted.⁵⁶ The interpretation offered here would thus require that the passage was misunderstood from an exceptionally early stage. This may seem highly improbable. However, if, as hypothesised here, Luke wrote in a way that assumed his primary readership (Theophilus?) was familiar with a chronology in which Quirinius' census post-dated the rule of Herod the Great by several years, very early misreading of the text would not be inexplicable. All it would take would be the appropriation of the text by readers less historically knowledgeable than Luke's anticipated audience. Luke's assumption that his readers could orient themselves properly to his narrative using his chosen historical markers and therefore understand the significance of the internal transition markers would no longer be justified. What is more, instead of those external historical markers shaping the interpretation of the text, the

⁵³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 104.

⁵⁴ Prot. Jas. 17.1; Ps.-Mt. 13:1.

⁵⁵ Justin, 1 Apol. 34 (see also Dial. 78).

⁵⁶ Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.5.2.

text would itself have become for Luke's readers the primary source of knowledge about those markers, especially as the text was increasingly acknowledged as authoritative and incorporated within a collection of literature that dominated the literary and historical horizons of its readers. The function of the markers as external reference points for the proper interpretation of the text would have been lost.

Telling the story of Jesus' birth without reference to a census does of course also have a venerable history, going back at least to the gospel of Matthew. It was suggested above that Luke's digression concerning the census could have been intended to establish more definitively the Davidic connections of Joseph and therefore of Jesus himself. Matthew likewise seeks to establish the family connections of 'Joseph, son of David' (Matt. 1:20), but he adopts a genealogical strategy (Matt. 1:1-17) and evidently sees no need to refer in addition to the administrative ratification in a census (whenever it occurred) of Joseph's Bethlehemite credentials.

The approach to Luke 2:1-7 offered here, which assumes for the sake of argument that Luke's basic chronology corresponded to the contemporary critical consensus, and that he anticipated a readership who would share that chronological framework, produces markedly different results to most other approaches to the census conundrum, locating the crux of the problem not within Luke 2:2 but at the boundaries of Luke 2:1-5. This proposal clearly cannot definitively establish Luke's accuracy in relation to the historical markers referenced in Luke 2:1-5. It might, however, demonstrate the possibility that the predominant critical views of the timing of Quirinius' census, and of the most natural interpretation of Luke 2:2, need not entail the view that Luke was mistaken in his chronology. His prime error here, if it might be called such, would in fact be an overly generous estimation of the historical literacy of his readers.