

## **AUGUSTUS AS CENSOR AND LUKE'S WORLDWIDE ENROLLMENT: ROMAN PROPAGANDA AND LUKAN THEOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS**

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*Abstract:* The commonly repeated assertion that the worldwide census recorded in Luke 2:1 finds no extra-biblical support is both factually and methodologically misinformed. The present study exposes the problematic pedigree of this claim and proposes an alternative, “imperial reading”, endorsing both the historical and the literary dimensions of Luke’s text and sensitive to official Augustan propaganda.

*Keywords:* Provincial Census. *Res Gestae*. Infancy Narrative. Hyginus. Luke’s Gospel.

### **Augusto como censor y la inscripción mundial según Lucas: propaganda romana y teología lucana desde los márgenes**

*Resumen:* La afirmación que se repite comúnmente es que el censo mundial registrado en Lucas 2,1 no encuentra apoyo extrabíblico, por lo tanto, es fáctica y metodológicamente mal informada. El presente estudio expone el problemático pedigrí de esta afirmación y propone una “lectura imperial” alternativa que respalda las dimensiones históricas y literarias del texto de Lucas, y es sensible a la propaganda oficial de Augusto.

*Palabras clave:* Censo provincial. *Res Gestae*. Narrativas de la infancia. Higino. Evangelio de Lucas.

### **Introduction**

The census recounted in Luke 2:1-5 is one of the most infamous and intractable cruxes in New Testament study. Despite immense energy and in-

genuity spent on the problem and to the dismay of many students of the Gospels, no satisfactory solution has been forthcoming. After several centuries of scholarship, however, one modest gain has at least been the formulation of a stable, accepted presentation of the difficulties: a list of what precisely demands or defies historical explanation in Luke's narrative of the census. It will appear deflating, therefore, for the confidence of *Bibelwissenschaft* as a consolidated, positive science, if I announce an intention here to problematize this handbook tradition of problematizing Luke's Gospel.

A remark made several decades ago nicely reveals either the interest or the regressive character of the present project. Citing Emil Schürer's enumeration of the five specific challenges facing the Lucan account – (i) the lack of a worldwide census, (ii) Joseph's implausible journey to be registered in Bethlehem, (iii) Rome's doubtful meddling in Herod's internal affairs, (iv) Josephus' alternative, conflicting account, and (v) the problematic date of Quirinius' tenure as Syrian legate – Horst Rudolph Moehring commented with easy conviction, "This is a formidable list of problems, and no one has ever come close to solving them all". He then continued:

The idea of a general census throughout the Roman Empire under Augustus has generally been given up – we know too much about the census pattern at that time for this idea to carry any more than rhetorical force. The other four points, however, are still defended today<sup>1</sup>.

Whether, in fact, we ever actually "know too much", as Moehring in full positivistic fashion pretends, may be seriously doubted. In any case, the purpose of this short study, admittedly pert, is very simply to reconsider the abandoned idea of a worldwide census. One might on this account construe my approach as yet another "defense" of Luke (or, worse, a defense of the "indefensible") and thus suspect some dubious apologetic enterprise (a thing haughtily disdained by Moehring); and it is true that Luke's credibility will emerge, in the end, less tarnished. Still, as Schürer's lists implies, the Lukan puzzle is much more intricate than this one isolated point and I wish to intone above all the more basic break this study attempts to make with a superannuated, hyper-skeptical, historicist paradigm. Whether or not in a less rigid, academic frame of mind a divide and conquer line of attack can finally clear Luke of all the various objections brought against him is a question that other studies must seek to answer. The point of this investigation is limited to exposing that the most *global* of all the misconceptions attributed to Luke is in fact an inherited misperception on the part of mod-

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<sup>1</sup> MOEHRING, "Census", 147. See SCHÜRER, *Geschichte*, 519–43.

ern critical scholarship: a striking lack of nuance in handling not only Luke but the Roman sources.

My analysis progresses in three steps. First, I provide a measure of historiographical perspective, not trudging through the endless, highly repetitive literature on this question, but rather highlighting a significant but forgotten 19<sup>th</sup> century exchange between David Friedrich Strauss and Philip Eduard Huschke that calls acutely into question the repeated scholarly assertion of no evidence or positive memory of a census of the *orbis romanum* is found in Roman sources. Next, building upon the distinct Roman-vs-Lukan perspectives brought to light through Huschke's retrieval of Hyginus' testimony to the census (*apud* Cassiodorus), I take a different route than Huschke and suggest an alternative interpretation of Luke 2:1 informed by the latest papyrological investigations and reconstructions of the provincial census. Finally, informed by the carefully crafted imperial ideology of Augustus' supposedly strictly conservative activities as *ensor*, notably in the *Res Gestae*, I situate this adjusted, perspectival manner of reading Luke's account of the census within its larger narrative context, i.e. the recognized Augustan (*goldene Zeit*) rhetoric and *synkrisis* of the infancy narrative. A brief conclusion will then identify some methodological implications.

## 1. Historiographical Orientation

The roots of Schürer's list of five formal objections to the historical accuracy of Luke's census account, a list adopted without demur by Moehring and the broader New Testament guild, can be easily traced back, in nearly the identical five-point form, to Philipp Eduard Huschke's monograph, *Ueber den zur Zeit der Geburt Jesu Christi gehaltenen Census*<sup>2</sup>. In this long-forgotten 125-page treatise, written in 1840 and rejected by Schürer a generation later, Huschke conveniently itemized and sought to answer the five critical objections found in §32 of the third edition of David Friedrich Strauss' *Leben Jesu*<sup>3</sup>. Strauss himself had actually offered a much less systematic presentation of the various issues; yet the first and most distinctly enumerated problem is clearly stated: the lack of external evidence attesting a general census in the time of Augustus.

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<sup>2</sup> HUSCHKE, *Census*.

<sup>3</sup> STRAUSS, *Das Leben Jesu*. For a larger view of scholars' many debates with Strauss, see LAWLER, *Strauss and His Critics*.

The first difficulty is that the ἀπογραφή (namely, the inscription of the name and amount of property in order to facilitate the taxation) commanded by Augustus, is extended to *all the world* πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. This expression, in its common acceptation at that time, would denote the *orbis Romanus*. But ancient authors mention no such general census decreed by Augustus; they speak only of the assessment of single provinces decreed at different times<sup>4</sup>.

Strauss' foregrounding of a conflict in the source material, diametrically opposing Luke's bold affirmation and the concerted (negative) witness of all ancient authors, is a less tangled point than the subsequent chronological and juridical objections and it carries an obvious rhetorical force – the manifest vulnerability of this first objection as an argument *ex silentio* notwithstanding. As the preface to his further discussion of the census, Strauss' opening move positions Luke immediately on the defensive as suspect of a colossal error, made party to the presumptively losing side in the ongoing *Bible vs. profane history* topos.

Strauss was obviously not the first to address the census question and his compressed interaction with earlier apologetic authors (e.g. Olshausen, Paulus, Kuinöl, Tholuck, Hoffmann) indicates the preexistence of a developed debate and tradition of scholarship around this point. Academic engagement with the subject of the census can, as a matter of fact, be pushed back at least as far as humanist authors like Erasmus and Calvin, while the learned treatises of baroque-era antiquarians, such as the illustrious Jakob (Voorbroek) Perizonius, whose erudite *Dissertatio de Augustea orbis terrarum descriptione et loco Lucae eam memorantis* in 1682 warrant special mention<sup>5</sup>. Of particular interest in Perizonius' treatment is the attempt to connect Luke's census and the so-called *breviarium totius imperii* (Suet. *Aug.* 101.4; cf. Dio Cassius 53.30), a kind of comprehensive statement of the resources in each of the provinces of the empire: a document reputedly written in Augustus' own hand as a sort of account of the family fortune made by the dying *paterfamilias* and *-patriae*. This older line of argument championed by Perizonius was not directly addressed by Strauss. It was accordingly taken up anew and pushed by Huschke, before being scuttled

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<sup>4</sup> Translation in STRAUSS, *Life of Jesus*, 200–201.

<sup>5</sup> The most easily accessible edition of this work is in the collected volume *Jacobi Perizonii Ant. fil. dissertationes septem quarum in I. De Constitutione Divine super ducenda defuncti fratris uxore. II De Lege Voconia Feminarumque apud Veteres Hereditatibus. III. De Variis Antiquorum Nummis. IV. De Augustea orbis Terrarum Descriptiones. V. De Aere Gravi, & de Nummis Consularibus VI. & VII. De Primis Gentium Antiquarum Regibus & Historia Romuli & Romanae Urbis Origine, agitur* (Leiden 1740).

by Schürer with the succinct claim that the *breviarium* demonstrates only an orderly imperial administration and does not demand or prove a census<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, the idea has quite recently been resurrected by two Roman historians, Claude Nicolet and Béatrice Le Teuff, who, in different ways, both (unaware, it seems, of Huschke or Perizonius' work) argue, partly on the basis of the *breviarium*, for the existence “un projet d'ensemble visant à connaître l'intégralité des territoires sous domination romaine” under Augustus, enacted through a coherent policy of census-taking<sup>7</sup>. Le Teuff, indeed, identifies the abundant indications of a “nouvelle fiscalité” as part of the Augustan reforms and thus declares quite clearly: “Il nous paraît indispensable de rouvrir la discussion et de poser à nouveaux frais la question d'un *census* général au tournant de l'ère augustéenne”<sup>8</sup>.

If this is the reopened, present-day state of the question, as Strauss himself conducted the conversation – with important, lingering consequences for subsequent New Testament scholarship – two main apologetic lines of defense are identified and answered. First is the question whether Luke's phrase *pasan tēn oikoumenēn* can, on the basis of certain passages drawn from various ancient sources, be convincingly interpreted as meaning only the land of Judea. This improbable lexical proposal is rejected – as Huschke himself, and later Schürer as well, agreed was right. The second, alternative apologetic approach countered by Strauss, accepts, by contrast, the notion of a worldwide census in the proper sense, arguing for its reality especially upon the witness of three ancient Christian authorities: Cassiodorus, Isidore, and the Suda.

Strauss found little in this second proposal to wrestle with in any detail, but Huschke's energetic post-Straussian attempt to rehabilitate the data forms a direct challenge to the conventional and categorical claim that no positive evidence whatsoever of the census exists for scholars so much as to consider. While not all of the data is of equal importance, Huschke's effort is not simply a risible exercise. Most significantly, he highlights that the context of the relevant passage in Cassiodorus's *Variae* 3.52.6 has nothing whatsoever to do with Luke or the birth of Jesus and never employs any exclusive terminology from the Gospel (as does the much later Greek Suda, for instance). The text is rather embedded in a short letter of King Theodoris to Consularis concerning a property dispute (cf. *Variae* 1.45; 2.40; 3.53).

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<sup>6</sup> SCHÜRER, *Geschichte*, 520.

<sup>7</sup> NICOLET, *l'Inventaire du monde*, esp. 103–29 and 181–99; and LE TEUFF, “recensements augustéens”, esp. 87–90.

<sup>8</sup> LE TEUFF, “recensements augustéens”, 75.

The key passage in question speaks openly of an Augustan census of the *orbis romanus* for the purposes of tax-collection.

*Augusti siquidem temporibus orbis romanus agris divisus, censusque descriptus est, ut possessio sua nulli haberetur incerta quam pro tributorum susceperat quantitate solvenda.*

Indeed, in the time of Augustus, the Roman world was divided into properties and delineated according to the census, so that property of no man should be considered unclear with respect to the amount that he would assume for paying taxes<sup>9</sup>.

To follow Huschke, Cassiodorus (or rather Theodoric) in the following sentence of the same letter even explicitly names his source as being “the author and scholar of measurements, Heron”. The manuscripts are corrupt here and evidently Hyginus [*Gromaticus*] is intended, one of one of the Latin *agrimensores* and authors from the time of Trajan; or, as more recent scholars suppose, perhaps two distinct authors sharing the same name and writing on the same subject of land surveying<sup>10</sup>.

The methodological issue that arises through appeal to these sort of sources is obvious and clearly stated by Huschke.

All diese Stellen sind nun allerdings aus später Zeit; aber dies hebt ihre Glaubwürdigkeit nicht auf, da nicht abzusehen ist, warum wir von ihnen eben so gut, wie von tausend andern Notizen, die wir über viel frühere Zeiten später Autoren verdanken, annehmen sollen, dass sie aus ältern guten Quellen geschöpft seyen<sup>11</sup>.

Fair-minded observers will acknowledge that Huschke's point and perspective is sound and the matter deserves at least a hearing. Cassiodorus, a senior administrator of the Gothic kings of the sixth century and major source for Ostrogothic Italy, compiled his *Variae* – a twelve-volume scrapbook-like compendium of papers gathered from his long career in civil service, including letters, proclamations, judicial decisions, *formulae* for appointments, administrative orders, edicts and the like – in order, as he says, to “educate uncultivated men who must be trained for the service of the state”<sup>12</sup>. An apologetic, propagandistic purpose clearly shapes the broad

<sup>9</sup> Translation in BJORNLI, *The Variae*, 162.

<sup>10</sup> For an introduction to the works of Hyginus 1 (*Gromaticus*) and Hyginus 2, see GUILLAUMIN, *Les arpenteurs romains* 1, 59–72; and Id., *Les arpenteurs romains* 2, vii–xxvi.

<sup>11</sup> HUSCHKE, *Census*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> See O'DONNELL, *Cassiodorus*, especially Chapter 3 on the *Variae*.

literary framing of the text, yet it is an apologetic purpose located largely in the prefaces and the manner of the materials' arrangement, thus essentially extraneous to the embedded, administrative matter. The apology is aimed, moreover, at defending the Gothic regime in Italy in the light of Justinian's reconquest. The *Variae* betray no interest in scoring theological points or addressing questions about the interpretation of the Christian scriptures. Indeed, the latest letters in the collection date from 537 and thus belong to the initial, secular phase of the statesman's career; while the *De Anima*, Cassiodorus' first explicit religious work, dated a year or two later, mentions the completion of the *Variae* in the preface. The composition of the *De Anima* itself traditionally marks a significant turn in Cassiodorus' occupations, a kind of "conversion" from public life into monastic retirement and the pursuit of Christian learning<sup>13</sup>. Prior to this turn, however, Cassiodorus is noted for being extraordinarily discrete, even silent, on matters of religion: a point of diplomatic skill in an age of high Arian-Orthodox tensions and an obvious strike against any too easy a dismissal of Cassiodorus' testimony to Augustus' census as a simple pious fraud.

Hyginus, for his part, belongs to a Roman imperial context that by the first decade of the second century faced the challenge of governing what was possibly the largest continuous geographical area ever to have been ruled by one central administration. The systematic gathering and recording of information required to maintain control over such a vast domain catalyzed the development of a significant Roman cartographic and land-surveying tradition that employed the professional services not only of Hyginus 1 and 2, but that likewise engaged other specialists, including his near contemporaries Julius Frontinus and Siculus Flaccus, all of whose writings were ultimately incorporated into the *Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum*<sup>14</sup>. Hyginus 1 (Gromaticus) himself is of special importance for he "cites the views of distinguished legal experts, refers to edicts of Augustus and the Flavian emperors, and mentions a previous work in which he had collected imperial decisions"<sup>15</sup>. Such recourse to official decrees resonates with the repeated advice of all the *agrimensores* that a surveyor should ever consult existing documentary evidence and archival records in order to register land distribution and *limes* with legal precision<sup>16</sup>. Appeal to an Augustan census' would thus be perfectly suited to Hyginus' professional expertise and gen-

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<sup>13</sup> See O'DONNELL, *Cassiodorus*, Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> See CAMPBELL, "Surveyors".

<sup>15</sup> *Ib.* 77.

<sup>16</sup> See *ib.* 88.

eral working methods, and the particular citation in question can hardly be suspected to be Cassiodorus' (or Theodoric's) interpolating addition. The explicit connection between land holdings and tax registration, finally, which is made in *Variae* 3.52.6, is a perfectly natural context for an appeal to an imperial census.

A close engagement with the gritty details of Roman administration is of manifest interest for handling the census question correctly. Here Le Teuff's attempt to insert the census within a larger view of Augustan fiscal and infrastructural reforms abroad is a step of major importance. This perspective plots the matter within its most obvious and original, juridical *Sitz im Leben*. Though Le Teuff's interest is not at all focused upon Luke, Huschke, whose focus was on Luke, was prepared to offer a similarly informed approach. Though openly confessing his Christian faith, he himself was not a theologian, but rather a student of Roman law, whose erudite work was patient and detailed. Among Huschke's many published titles we find no other religious themes, only high specialized subjects such as the following: *De privilegiis Feceniae Hispala senatusconsulto concessis* (*Liv. XXXIX.19*) *dissertatio* [1822]; *Ueber das Recht des Nexum und das alte römische Schulrecht: Ein rechtshistorische Untrsuchung* [1846]; *Gaius: Betrag zur Kritik und zum Verständnis seiner Institutionen, mit einer zugabe über die klagformeln in der Lex Rubria* [1855]; *Iurisprudentiae anteiustinianae quae supersunt* [1867]; *Die Lehre des römischen Rechts vom Darlehn und den dazu gehörigen Materien: eine civilistische Monographie* [1880]; and so on. Huschke's original intention, in fact, was, as he says, to write an extended monograph on Roman census procedures as such (which in 1847 he ultimately did, i.e. *Ueber den Census und die Steuerverfassung der Frühern römischen Kaiserzeit: Ein beitrag zur römischen Staatswissenschaft*). He reckoned that such an arcane work's pointed relevance for Gospel exegesis would simply be lost, however. This judgment was undoubtedly correct. Even so, his one focused attempt to influence exegesis did not get far, for the very generic problems that Strauss already raised are essentially the same that Schürer succinctly later repeats – as though Huschke's entire intervening contribution to the discussion was effectively null. The data is late and dependent upon Luke, Schürer blithely repeats<sup>17</sup>. It is impossible to say what if any role it might play, but it is worth at least observing in connection

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<sup>17</sup> Isidor and the Suda are summarily dispatched, but Cassiodorus poses a greater challenge for Schürer. "Cassiodorus endlich hat allerdings ältere Quellen, namentlich die Schriften der Feldmesser, benützt. Aber wer bürgt uns dafür, dass er den Notiz über den Census nicht aus Lucas herübergewonnen hat", SCHÜRER, *Geschichte*, 521. Ultimately, Schürer determines that even if the tradition is authentic,

with this brusque dismissal of the historicity of the census Schürer's complete theological and professional investment in Jewish rather than Greco-Roman history<sup>18</sup>.

Schürer's role as referee in judging Huschke's arguments and declaring them "unfortunate" (*unglücklich*) and all-around void of merit (*man-gendle Beweiskraft*) has been adopted as the definitive decision and become the handbook position on the question. Moehring's appeal to the authority of Schürer is characteristic in this regard. There is, from this widely accepted perspective, nothing more to say about the Luke's established error of imagining a worldwide census. Once the Third Gospel's historical claim is thus presented as a demonstrable dead end, moreover, scholarship must inevitably turn to alternative orders of analysis to explain Luke's story. Moehring, for instance, is very clear about the need for an analytic change of gears: "The historical inaccuracy of the passage which claims to be historical and stands so isolated in the midst of legendary materials demands", he says, "a concrete and specific reason for its inclusion in the Gospel"<sup>19</sup>. His answer is to cast the census as a Lukan apologetic device. Joseph Fitzmyer's commentary similarly makes the jump to a non-historical motivation: "It is clear that the census is a purely literary device used by him [Luke] to associate Mary and Joseph, residents of Nazareth, with Bethlehem"<sup>20</sup>. Many similar judgments could be cited.

The contemporary interpretative reorientation towards Luke's literary aims opens up important new perspectives; yet claims of simple Lukan fabrication and an exaggerated exclusivity about this literary approach are problematic. If any interest is accorded to the evidence and views of forgotten but highly informed authors like Huschke and a crack is allowed to open again in the door slammed-shut by Schürer, interpretative attention to Luke's editorial and theological interests need not simply displace all historical questions. We might ask, for instance, if it is possible to reconcile Augustus' census as Luke paints it – with its massive event character that sets the whole world in motion (a depiction that already touches Objection #2 of the five objections, Joseph's implausible journey to Bethlehem) – with the census

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it is of no interest because it is isolated – which sounds rather like the original objection to Luke.

<sup>18</sup> Schürer programmatically discounted classical history from theological interest for New Testament study; only the history of the Jewish people was of direct relevance for theology. See PFLEIDERER, "Erinnerung an Emil Schürer".

<sup>19</sup> MOEHRING, "Census", 8.

<sup>20</sup> FITZMYER, *Luke*, 393.

such as we find it in the isolated testimony of *Variae* 3.52.6, where it appears in the form of a career administrator's almost off-handed allusion: one more element in the complex, many-jointed apparatus of Roman civil administration. Huschke's effort to bring these (and many other) materials into harmony was perhaps a bit inflexible in bending the data to fit a particular, punctual understanding of Luke's report. The following two sections will propose a somewhat different and more flexible manner of addressing the question and bringing our sources into some form of convincing accord. Ultimately, the no-nonsense, bureaucratic perspective of Cassiodorus-Hyginus supplies not only a fascinating, if isolated Roman memory of the census. It provides a kind of neutral metric and modest middle term between more inflated and contrasting rhetorical treatments of the subject: Luke's formulation and the alternative imperial discourse we will confront in Augustus' own census propaganda.

## 2. Viewing the Provincial Census(es) from the Periphery

Egeneto de en tais hēmerais ekeinais exēlthen dogma para Kaisaros Augoustou apographesthai pasan tēn oikoumenēn (Luke 2:1)

If the assumption is not simply accepted that Luke 2:1 recounts an absolute fiction, what historical sense might be made of what the evangelist says? An integration of Luke's succinct report into the complex fabric of Augustus' imperial administration as we know it from a huge number of sources is not actually so difficult to imagine. Specifically, deepening awareness of the significance and character of the provincial census system allows us to consider Luke's seemingly inflated claim in a rather new light.

Augustus is known to have not only recommenced with the Roman census after the termination of the Civil Wars, an act hearkening back to Republican times. He also began the entirely new practice of taking a census of all the provinces, a bold gesture towards Rome's imperial future<sup>21</sup>. The dean of egyptologist-papyrologists, Roger Bagnall, together with W. Graham Claytor, comments in a very important recent article on "The Beginnings of the Roman Provincial Census":

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to NICOLET – LE TEUFF, see also LO CASCIO, "Census provinciale". For a collection of literary, legal, and epigraphic evidence on the provincial census see BRUNT, "Revenues", esp. 171–72.

The provincial census was one of the most durable and pervasive institutions of the Roman Empire. Although organized at the provincial level and marked by local variation, the institution was an emblem of imperial rule. *Luke's famous narrative of the nativity census, while problematic in detail, is important evidence for the provincial impression of the census as universal stemming from the direct command of the emperor.* The census reinforced imperial ideals, strengthening the notion that the emperor could “see everything and hear everything”, even when ruling from the Palace in Rome. It also of course aided imperial interests, such as the collection of revenue and the maintenance of social hierarchy. For most provincials, on the other hand, the census and closely related poll-tax were simply facts of life and burdens from which there was little chance of escape; for some the imposition of a poll-tax and regular censuses could have become a “potent symbol of subjection to Rome”. In short, the census was a common feature of the imperial experience and a key component of Rome’s control over provincial society<sup>22</sup>.

The acceptance of Luke’s account as representing a simplified, but not simply misguided provincial perception of a multi-hinged imperial policy carries a convincing and elegant explanatory power. Luke views a locally administered census, loosely aligned with similar initiatives in other regions, through the lens of a vast and unified imperial ideal. An intrusive innovation in south Syria is thus freighted with an exaggerated ecumenical importance and heightened attention to Augustus’ *imperium* – a view that is hardly a complete creation of Luke’s fantasy.

Centralized imperial supervision of the growing Roman state, like the building of Rome, was obviously not accomplished in a day, any more than the provinces themselves were all acquired or annexed at once or under identical conditions. In Egypt, the system of the provincial census appears to have started in 3 BCE, as attested by the papyri newly analyzed by Bagnall and Clayton. In Gaul it was much earlier, in 27 BCE, followed shortly thereafter by Spain, as Cassio Dio reports (53.22.5) and Livy confirms (*Periochae* 134, 138; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.31; 14.46; Cassius Dio 59.22.3)<sup>23</sup>. In Nabatea the census was in place at the latest by 1 BCE, as we know from the Babatha archives (CIS II,1 198)<sup>24</sup>. Despite these many scattered witnesses, the full extent and regularity of these censuses in the provinces unfortunately re-

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<sup>22</sup> CLAYTOR – BAGNALL, “Provincial Census”, here 637 emphasis added. See also RATHBONE, “Roman Taxation”, 86.

<sup>23</sup> On the census in Gaul and the Iberian peninsula, see LE TEUFF, “recensements augustéens”, 76–80.

<sup>24</sup> See COTTON, “Judean Desert”.

mains unclear<sup>25</sup>. When precisely and under what conditions the census was first introduced in Judea is also an intricate question that requires further study. Given the data from the neighboring regions of Egypt and Nabatea, however, it is not unreasonable to suspect a time around the end of Herod the Great's reign, as Luke suggests. Nabatea's particular status as a client kingdom, moreover, places it in a juridical condition very similar to Herodian Judea, which immediately disarms nearly the whole force of Objection #3 in Schürer's list.

Clusters of local ordinances and edicts in the different geographical regions will have set these various census operations in motion, cascading down through the organs of government and the imperial chains of command. While Augustus himself evidently oversaw the first census in Gaul, for instance, he later commissioned Germanicus to conduct the next enrollment of the Gallic population, a job he in turn passed on to Publius Vitellius and Gaius Antius Restio (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.6). The famous Syrian census in 6 CE, similarly, was carried out in the *polis* of Apamea by a military prefect and "on the orders of Quirinius" as we know from a preserved inscription (*iussu Quirini censum egi Apamena civitatis millium homin(um) civium CXVII* [CIL III 6687; ILS 2683]). "In Egypt, by comparison, the phrase κατὰ τὰ κελευσθέντα ὑπὸ ΝΝ τοῦ κρατίστου ἡγεμόνος (vel sim.) in census declarations submitted to local officials becomes common from 89 on, although the earlier censuses were probably likewise set in motion by prefectural edict"<sup>26</sup>. That Luke, who does not simply forget administrative middlemen like the Syrian *hēgemonos*, should nonetheless posit Augustus himself as the ultimate commander sitting atop of this enormous hierarchical machine is the most natural thing in the world. Figures like Quirinius, Herod, and the Egyptian prefects openly held their positions under direct imperial patronage, as the public representatives, administrators, and "friends" of Caesar. An inscription honoring the *equus* L. Volusenus Clemens mentions his part in the census of Sestinum, for example, making plain that he

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<sup>25</sup> "The scarcity of evidence on provincial censuses in the early Principate has left open the question whether the census was taken in all the provinces and at regular intervals", F. UDO, *To Caesar What Is Caesar's*, 209. "En dehors de la Gaule, de la péninsule Ibérique et de la Syrie-Judée, les traces d'éventuels recensements sous le règne d'Auguste sont beaucoup plus ténues. Quelques sources suggèrent que des opérations ont également été organisées en Pannonie et en Paphlagonie mais, étant donné leur caractère extrêmement allusif, il serait hors de propos de reprendre ici l'intégralité des démonstrations", LE TEUFF, "recensements augustéens", 82.

<sup>26</sup> CLAYTOR – BAGNALL, "Provincial Census", 639.

acted on Augustus' direct authority: *missus a divo Aug[usto]* (CIL, XI, 6011; ILS, 2691). The same thing is found in another honorary inscription celebrating another knight, T. Claudius Proclus, for his part in the Iberian census: *[ab imp(eratore)]/Caesare Aug[usto misso pro] /censore ad Lus[itanos]* (CIL, X, 680). As attested by papyrological records, moreover, an oath sworn by *Kaisar* formed a specific part of the census registration ritual in the early decades of Roman rule (at least in Egypt where the records are, as always, best preserved). From monumental epigraphy to the common man's concrete experience, the provincial census thus stood formally under the solemn auspices of the reigning *Princeps* in Rome<sup>27</sup>.

If Caesar's authority and presence made itself felt in everything from to oath-taking to the dates written on the census papers, there was also an important, but variable conjunction of these extra-Urban censuses with the local pre-Roman past. In Egypt, for instance, pre-existing Ptolemaic procedures of demographic registration were largely appropriated by the new Roman governors<sup>28</sup>. In Gaul, by contrast, pre-existing "local methods of population registration" were hardly in place and had to be established as part of larger process of erecting a provincial infrastructure (*formula provinciae*)<sup>29</sup>. The relative development, presence or absence, in the diverse provinces of a functional, pre-existing apparatus of demographic information-gathering will have thus strongly conditioned local perceptions of the Roman census, either as an invasive novelty (i.e. *opus novum et inadsuetum*, as we read of the census in Gaul on the so-called Claudian/Lyon Tablet [CIL, XIII, 1668, l. 77-78]) or as ultimately just "more of the same". The comparative smoothness of the transition in Egypt, for instance, where we hear of no special disturbances during the introduction of the Roman system in 3 BCE, may

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<sup>27</sup> This oath formula is attested in the Harthotes archive (12 CE); see CLAYTOR – BAGNALL, "Provincial Census", 640.

<sup>28</sup> In general, the "Romans perpetuated Ptolemaic methods of population registration, supplemented by ad-hoc arrangements", *ib.* 644.

<sup>29</sup> "Contrairement à d'autres territoires sous domination romaine, les Gaules n'étaient pas structurées sur une base civique, elles étaient composées de peuples. Rome a donc dû, dans un premier temps, créer ces cités, relais indispensables pour l'exercice de la justice et le recouvrement de l'impôt. Dans le cas gaulois, la rédaction de la *formula provinciae* fut rendue possible par ce premier recensement, qui a permis d'identifier les cités sujettes et de définir leur statut. Il est possible qu'une fois l'identification des sujets fiscaux achevée, l'administration romaine ait pu entamer dès 27 av. J.C. la délimitation des territoires civiques. Ces travaux, qui nécessitaient l'intervention d'un personnel technique qualifié, les *agrimensores*, se sont probablement déroulés sur plusieurs années", LE TEUFF, "recensements augustéens", 77.

be contrasted with the famously violent reception that the provincial census received in both Syria and Gaul, where the population was evidently less accustomed and dutifully submissive to a regular, compulsory appearance before the *laographoi*<sup>30</sup>. Small wonder, then, if the perception of the provincial census as an extraordinary event is registered precisely in a Syrian source like Luke, while leaving little trace in, say, Roman or Egyptian sources.

All in all, Augustus' census of the *orbis romanum* was a highly dif-fused affair, but at the same time a conglomerate event and a striking novum – though admittedly more striking in some places than in others<sup>31</sup>. It is precisely the incipient imperial behavior involved, the sudden universal range of Augustus' reach as a kind of self-appointed ecumenical *censor*, one part of the wider revolutionary development in Rome's relation to the peripher-ies connected with Augustus' rise to power, that Luke evidently appeals to and intones in his Gospel. *Ad hoc* as the imperial system was, certain patent and radical changes could be rightly globally comprehended as Augustan policy. While overly donnish objections continue unabated to insist that “contrairement à ce qu'affirmait l'évangéliste Luc, il n'y aurait pas eu de recensement global dans l'Empire”, it is also evidently (with proper quali-fications, of course) “tout à fait possible a regrouper l'ensemble d'opérations [under Augustus] sous le terme unique de *census* général”<sup>32</sup>. A more gener-ous interpretation of Luke is, therefore, both possible and entirely fitting. Pedantic objections should accordingly be retired and the text of Luke 2:1 may be interpreted and paraphrased as follows.

*en tais hēmerais ekeinais*

“Gradually, during the reign of Herod the Great (cf. Luke 1:5)”

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<sup>30</sup> On the see resistance to the census in Gaul, see LE TEUFF, “recensements augustéens”, 78.

<sup>31</sup> The broad situation of the census may be compared in some ways to the mas-sive adoption of Augustus' portrait in provincial coinage in the decades after Actium. This was a revolutionary change in and cooption of pre-existing and localized mone-yary cultures and numismatists have understandably sought to trace it to some cen-tralized directive (see *Roman Provincial Coinage* 39). No relevant universal decree is known, however, and the “revolution” itself takes places in different ways and at dif-ferent moments in the different provinces, the empire-wide process extending over several decades. Somehow, slowly, in the still-developing mechanics of Roman im-perial government, a coherent, comprehensive Augustan policy simply took effect.

<sup>32</sup> LE TEUFF, “recensements augustéens”, 75 and 87. It is revealing and strange that Le Teuff feels obliged to repeat this entrenched judgment of Luke while simul-taneously arguing for a new vision and a coherent, worldwide Augustan policy that coheres well with Luke's perspective.

*exēlthen dogma para Kaisaros Augoustou*

“the complex administrative machine of Caesar Augustus initiated a policy of distinct but loosely coordinated decrees”

*apographesthai pasan tēn oikoumenēn*

“to undertake censuses in the far-flung provinces and allied states of the empire, not just Rome as was the tradition”

The elaborated sense suggested above conforms to what we historically know; it fits perfectly with the impact Augustus’ innovative policy certainly made on at least certain observers, and it puts no special strains upon the Greek, which even appeals to a quite vague chronological window. If such a reading appears to undermine the punctual sense of *exēlthen dogma*, the word *dogma* can easily carry the sense of a general “policy” and not simply a punctual proclamation (cf. Andocides, *Against Alcibiades* 4.6; Democritus 5.19; Xenophon, *Ana.* 3.3.5). Indeed, a *dogma*, from *dokeō*, is fundamentally “what seems good”.

If *pasan tēn oikoumenēn* still feels exaggerated and one doubts Luke’s information about the wider Roman world, a brief comparison with Luke’s notice of the famine in Acts 11 is salutary. “Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world (*eph’ holēn tēn oikoumenēn*); and this took place during the reign of Claudius” (Acts 11:28). The formulation here is strikingly similar to the expression in Luke 2:1, while the absence of external confirmation for Luke’s claim of a worldwide famine presents more or less the identical historical problem. Yet, similar to the case of the provincial census, the papyrological evidence indicates that some such famine corresponding to what Luke describes, in fact, transpired, though not as a sudden simultaneous, universal catastrophe, but rather in a regionalized manner and in waves, with far reaching effects, however localized the original causes<sup>33</sup>. So, while Lukan discourse about the whole *oikoumenē* must be intelligently heard as a manner of evoking

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<sup>33</sup> See GAPP, “Universal famine”. “Now a failure of the harvest in one or two countries might easily affect the price of grain in the whole Mediterranean world... The general famine under Claudius, therefore, consisted in the general dearness of wheat, caused most probably by the conjunction of the Egyptian and the Syrian failures of the harvest. The Egyptian famine is clearly dated in 45, extending at least into the spring of 46, and possibly into the year 47. Before the markets of the world could recover from the effect of this shortage, the failure of the harvest throughout Judaea and Syria ether further raised the prices or delayed a return to a more normal cost of living”, 262.

events of empire-wide import, Luke's statements about the Roman *oikoumenē* are by no means wild fantasies or unreliable fictions, but rather informed perceptions from a first-century observer on the ground in the eastern provinces of the empire<sup>34</sup>.

### 3. Augustus and Christ

Luke is not alone in speaking about Augustus' census-taking activities. The emperor himself was quite keen to boast about his deeds on this front. What is remarkable is how the same historical critics, so unconditionally distrusting of Luke, so blindly swallow everything Augustus both says and, more significantly, *does not say* when it comes to his own self-reporting on his career as censor. Once a monumental text like the *Res Gestae* is appreciated for the immense and highly selective propagandistic construction that it is, however, a more generous assessment of Luke's view of the matter comes quickly into focus. New interpretative leverage is also thereby found for an "imperial reading" of his theological perspective of the census in the Gospel.

#### 3.1. Censorial Custodian of the *Mos Maiorum*

Luke's provincial perception of Augustus' census as a thing of immense, imperial magnitude is not at all outrageous. His view differs markedly, however, from the view of the Caesar-*censor* as he was seen and – more importantly – as he was made to be seen from the center in Rome. An uncomfortable tension, in fact, complicates Augustus' assumption of the *cura legum et morum* proper to the office of the Roman *censor*, a tension that helps explain why Augustan propaganda did not trumpet the *princeps*'s massive, novel expansions of his censorial power.

"L'importance de l'activité censoriale sous le règne du premier empereur ne fait pas débat."<sup>35</sup> To appreciate this it is important that the status of the Roman *censor* not be underestimated. It was not the work of a mid-dling functionary or a clerical official stalled mid-career. The *censor* was a

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<sup>34</sup> Obviously, a decision on the "we-passages" will affect one's estimate of Luke's information of the wider Roman world. On the possible second-century dating of Acts, see BACKHAUS, "Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte".

<sup>35</sup> LE TEUFF, "recensements augustéens", 75.

senior and sacred magistracy (*sanctus magistratus*), possessed of *maxima auspicia* and regarded as second only to the dictatorship<sup>36</sup>. Accordingly, Augustus' personal assumption of this office beginning in 19 BCE presents a calculated and very delicate political move; for the censorship

ne se présente pas comme un pouvoir secondaire. Ce qui la caractérise c'est son absolutisme : son contenu le plus évident, sinon le seul, est le pouvoir législatif. Elle dispense le prince de présenter ses lois au vote des assemblées populaires. Elle s'accorde mal avec le républicanisme, au moins apparent, de la constitution augustéenne. Elle s'accorde aussi peu avec la modération du nouveau régime qui a soin d'éviter tant les excès du césarisme que ceux du triumvirat *reipublicae constituendae*. Ce retour à l'absolutisme en 19 av. J.-C., moins de dix ans après l'abandon des pleins pouvoirs en 27 av. J.-C. est surprenant<sup>37</sup>.

The office of  *censor* was an absolute power, dangerously close to the fateful, dictatorial power that ultimately led to the fall of Augustus' uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar (49-44 BCE). For this reason, it was a hardly an indifferent matter how Augustus spun his interest in the censor's absolute power. In a real sense the censor's office took the place for him of the dictatorship that he shrewdly refused.

Three times in his *Res Gestae* Augustus boasts of making a *censum populi* (*tēn apoteimēsīn tou dēmou*) – in the years 28 and 8 BCE and 14 CE – ostentatiously noting also his dutiful performance of the ancient lustration rite, which the censor traditionally offered in the Campus Martius at the close of the census every fifth year. Nothing innovative or novel in his fulfillment of his role! This was a matter that exclusively concerned the Roman *populus* and their own immemorial customs. The sanctimonious notice of Augustus' work as censor appears suggestively early in the excessively long inscription, just after his opening account of selflessly saving the people from tyranny (§1-7). This privileged placement is hardly accidental. Augustus repeatedly intones how he rejected the people's offer of dictatorial power and this strategic boast of declining the people's grateful will to make him "overseer of laws and morals without colleague and with the fullest power", in order that he not accept thereby any power "contrary to the tra-

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<sup>36</sup> Plutarch's *Lives* provide many illustrative passages concerning the dignity accorded to the office of censor: e.g. "After his achievements in Greece and the war with Antiochus, Titus was appointed censor. This is the highest office (ἀρχὴ μέγιστη) at Rome, and in a manner the culmination of a political career" (*Life of Titus Flaminus* 18); cf. *Life of Aemilius Paulus* 38; *Life of Cato the Younger* 16; *Life of Camillus* 2, 14; etc.

<sup>37</sup> PARSİ-MAGDELAIN, "cura et legum morum", 373.

ditions of our ancestors" (§6) represents a rhetorically transparent move and a simultaneous obfuscation of his ultimate assumption (and massive, worldwide extension) of the Republic's two traditional censors' legitimate power. In this way Augustus' publicly shapes his holding of censorial power as a civil service entirely free of ambition and thus posing no danger to the received social order.

In connection with Augustus' carefully crafted self-presentation as the model citizen of the restored Republic and his option to present himself specifically as Rome's highly conservative *censor*, it is important to note that the office of censor was traditionally responsible not only for registering the people in their proper classes, but also and especially for supervising public morality (*regimen morum*) (cf. Cic. *De leg.* 3.3). This role derived from the censors' power to exclude persons from the lists of citizens and degrade the guilty as unworthy of various ranks. Among the sorts of crimes that might be *censored* (*animadversio censoria*) with a *nota* were private delicts like adultery and inordinate and luxurious living, as well as a whole range of public infractions (Valerius Maximus 2.9.2, 4). The censor it thus was who, at least notionally, watched over both the public and private life of all the people, charged not only to answer crime with official *ignominia*, but to actively maintain the *mos maiorum*.

In view of this expansive moral superintendence and given his much-advertised solicitude for a restoration of republican virtues, it is entirely correct to imagine that Augustus took very special interest in being identified with the office and activity of the censor, which entitled him to act in the guise of the moral guardian of the Roman people. Although Augustus first appointed two censors in 22 BCE – the first to hold the office since the time of the Civil Wars – the post was subsequently coopted personally by the *princeps* under his title *praefectura morum*. Playing censor clearly belonged to the very center of Augustus' political program and propaganda.

Against this background, Augustus' intrepid decision to extend his activity as censor out into the provinces must be reckoned as an imperial extension of the larger paternalistic and moralizing persona of the *pater patriae* (§35.24), yet an act of such immense innovation that it will have found no place in the official propagandistic transcript. The sensitive nature of the financial burdens associated with the provincial census triggered instead a different justification than appeal to Caesar's absolute authority as censor: the contributed money served the *pax romana*<sup>38</sup>. We thus find a re-

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<sup>38</sup> "La deuxième évolution notable qui se produit au tournant de l'ère augustéenne concerne la justification du prélèvement fiscal aux yeux des provinciaux.

sponse to the significant question: Why do we not find Roman court sources (in contrast to Roman administrators) celebrating the census that we find recorded in Luke's Gospel? Simple: Besides being a diffuse affair, it was better kept quiet. Augustus strained to present his wielding of the censor's *auctoritas*, not as a bold and ambitious activity extending far beyond that office's traditional bounds, but as in every way a highly conservative exercise of selfless civil service.

### 3.2. Christ and Caesar

Once this ideological Roman construction of the empire's *censor* is rightly appreciated it becomes possible to set Luke's version of the census in fruitful conversation with the projected Augustan self-image. Imperial readings of the Third Gospel attuned to this wavelength of Roman self-projection have become increasingly common in recent years and a multi-faceted Lukan *synkrisis* comparing and contrasting Christ and Caesar has emerged. The infancy narrative yields particularly rich material in this connection<sup>39</sup>. Building upon this useful body of work, I would here like to suggest very briefly two particular dimensions of a similar imperial reading of Luke 2:1. This exegetical angle of empire and the triangulation it affords allows us at once to valorize scholarship's literary turn in approaching the census, without simply thereby surrendering a strong commitment to the census as a real constellation of facts open to diverse perspectival presentations.

(1) The conservatism of Augustus' ideology of his activity as *censor*, with its strong undertone of a restoration of ancient republican virtue, strongly resonates with a notable feature of the nativity traditions as Luke presents them. We might designate this rhetorical-theological feature as a "Return to the Origins" motif<sup>40</sup>. Just as Augustus was presented as the one who re-

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Alors que l'impôt avait été jusqu'alors justifié en invoquant deux arguments – celui du droit du vainqueur, le fameux *victoriae praemium* évoqué par Cicéron dans les *Verrines*, ou encore l'argument de la continuité avec les régimes précédents, dans le cas de l'Asie par exemple – émerge au tournant de l'époque augustéenne un autre discours visant à présenter de manière positive le prélèvement fiscal. L'impôt est assimilé à une contribution commune que doivent verser les habitants des provinces pour bénéficier de la paix et de la sécurité que Rome maintient à l'intérieur des frontières de son empire. Dion Cassius va même jusqu'à parler d'utilité (ὠφέλεια) de l'impôt qui profite à tous les habitants de l'Empire", LE TEUFF, "recensements augustéens", 85.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, SCHREIBER, *Weihnachtpolitik*.

<sup>40</sup> On this motif, see GIAMBRONE, "Counting Backwards", esp. 198–202.

turned the Roman social order back to its republican foundations, particularly in and through his role as censor, so Jesus as the messianic Son of David, a participant in Caesar's great census, was associated with an idealized Davidic past.

Luke 2 deploys this motif of return to an earlier social order in close connection with Augustus' decree. A prime illustration is evoked by Fitzmyer's statement, cited above, that the census is a Lukan literary mechanism for ensuring that Jesus is born in Bethlehem. The evangelist himself would undoubtedly have preferred to call the census *God's* mechanism to achieve the same end through providential, historical means; but regardless, the interest in Bethlehem must be seen as a response to the prophecy of Micah: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic 5:2). As Raymond Brown rightly recognized failure of this text to be cited in Luke (in contrast to Matt 2:6) is not an argument against its influence here<sup>41</sup>. The text from Micah, moreover, activates a logic much deeper than moving the protagonists from point A to point B. It signals a kind of "rebooting" of the Davidic line, a return directly to the source, similar to the "fresh start" pictured in another messianic nativity text like Isa 11:1, where the growth of a shoot from the stump of Jesse pictures a new royal growth springing up from the roots. In accord with these perspectives, rather than being born in Jerusalem, metropolitan city of the line of Judean kings, the census brings Jesus to the place where it all began: "Bethlehem symbolically, spatially signals a kind of idyllic Davidic *Urzeit*"<sup>42</sup>.

Whether or not Joseph and Mary in fact traveled to Bethlehem as part of the provincial registration is a separate question and a topic for another day. If the recent work of Sabine Huebner is followed, Luke's account enjoys a real verisimilitude and is arguably less problematic on this front than

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<sup>41</sup> BROWN, *Birth of the Messiah*, 421–24.

<sup>42</sup> Luke's genealogy reinforces this rhetoric of return, by following Jesus' pedigree through Nathan, rather Solomon. "The remounting of Luke 3:23–38 backwards to David, bypassing all the kings who mar Matthew's sinner stained genealogy – Solomon, Ahaz, Manasseh and so on – to reach the son of Jesse directly, resembles Joseph's return not to Jerusalem, the decadent royal city, but to Bethlehem. This distinctly Lukan rhetoric of origins and new beginnings captures what is perhaps the decisive theological difference between Luke 3:23–38 and Matt 1:2–16. While Matthew trudges through the whole tainted, sordid history of sin (τὸν Σολομῶνα ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Οὐρίου, Matt 1:6), Luke – whose enormous hyperbaton simply makes Jesus directly the Son of God – hops over it all to reach back to the ἀρχή". GIAMBRONE, "Counting Backwards", 200.

many pretend<sup>43</sup>. Regardless, the exegetical observation here is merely that the evocation of Augustus' census in Luke 2:1, with the "return to Roman origins" rhetoric that the census topos might evoke for ancient readers, leads in Luke's rendition straight to Jesus' return to the House of David's origins. As such, through a subtle Lukan *synkrisis*, Jesus acquires some of the radiance of the Augustan age. Like Caesar in Rome, Jesus is the leader commissioned to restore the moral order and renew the foundations of the government of God's people.

(2) In presenting Jesus as a sort of rider upon official Augustan propaganda, Luke is hardly underwriting the imperial line, of course. On contrary! The scandalous overreach that Augustus worked hard to conceal in an official text like the *Res Gestae*, but which Luke's provincially oriented version of the census candidly unmasks, draws embarrassing attention to the implicit illegitimacy lurking in Caesar's worldwide intervention as censor. As such Luke's differential formulation relative to the official Roman report highlights a second, more contrasting and important element in the Lukan juxtaposition of Christ and the Caesar-censor.

That to Christ alone belongs universal lordship is a simple premise of the Gospel. Daniel's Four Kingdoms prophecy and the implicit superseding of Rome hover palpably in the background of the Annunciation of Jesus' royal destiny made by the Archangel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-38): "Of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33; cf. Dan 2:44). The competitive resonance of the prophecy with Jupiter's promise to Aeneas and Rome has not escaped notice: *imperium sine fine dedi* (Verg., *Aeneid* 1.179)<sup>44</sup>. While the explicit language of the *oikoumenē* does not appear again in the Gospel after the report of the census in Luke 2:1, any number of clues point to Jesus's appropriation of Augustus' claims as universal *sōtēr*<sup>45</sup>. In Acts, it finally becomes perfectly manifest that Christ's universal reign carries an explicitly *ecumenical* and divinely authorized scope: just the legitimacy that Caesar's worldwide pretensions was lacking. God "has fixed a day on which he will judge *tēn oikoumenēn* in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the

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<sup>43</sup> See HEUBNER, *Social World of the New Testament*, 31–50. Huebner identifies herself a papyrologist, not a New Testament scholar, and she finds New Testament scholarship on the census on the whole to be hypercritical and misguided. Determining whether her proposed solutions will prove too optimistic is an important task for future research.

<sup>44</sup> See SPROLL, "Imperium sine fine dedi." See also the interesting study of the idea of *Roma eterna* in PRAT, "Rome as Eternal".

<sup>45</sup> See SCHREIBER, *Weihnachtspolitik*, 63–83.

dead” (Acts 17:31). The worldwide mission in Acts provides a further evangelical counter-image to Augustus’ supposed claim upon the *oikoumenē*. This symbolically begins already at Pentecost, where the return of the representatives of worldwide Jewry to Jerusalem in Acts 2 – “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” – recalls the “rebooting” motif just discussed, rewinding the diaspora and resetting the worldwide community in Jerusalem, the original seat of universal messianic rule, rather than in the *urbs aeterna* of Rome. In the course of Luke’s two volumes, therefore, by the announcement of the εὐγγέλιον of “another king” named Jesus, the entire world is thus turned upside down (*tēn oikoumenēn anastatōsantes*) in a way “contrary to the decrees (*dogmatōn*) of Caesar” (Acts 17:6-7). The one who alone is “Kyrios of all” (Acts 10:36) represents an open challenge to Augustus’ ambitious decree positioning himself as absolute moral sovereign over all the peoples of the world<sup>46</sup>.

The theology that Luke implies through this implicit greater-than-Caesar Christology is clearly open to development in various directions. As one trajectory worthy of mention, however, perhaps Origen’s ancient contrast of Augustus’ worldwide census with the registering of Christ’s disciples’ names in heaven is not in the end a silly homiletical fancy or irresponsible reading of Luke<sup>47</sup>.

## Conclusion

Although curiously little account is ever taken of the fact and the contrary is often asserted, the difficulties of Luke’s narrative of the census appear to have been recognized from a very early date – so early, in fact,

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<sup>46</sup> On the anti-imperial subtext in Acts 10:36, see Rowe, “Imperial Cult”; and more generally ROWE, *World Upside Down*.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, Homily 11 on Luke: *Diligentius intuenti sacramentum quoddam videtur significari, quia in totius orbis professione describi oportuerit et Christum, ut cum omnibus scriptus sanctificaret omnes et cum orbe relatus in censum communionem sui praeberet orbi, ut post hanc descriptionem describeret quoque ex orbe secum “in librum viventium” [Rev 20:15], ut, quicumque credidissent in eo, postea cum sanctis illius “scriberentur in caelis” [Lk 10:20]: “cui est Gloria et imperium in saecula saeculorum. Amen [1 Pet 4:11]”*

that ancient solutions have now become a part of the problem<sup>48</sup>. The issue raised for early readers evidently concerned the chronology surrounding Quirinius the Syrian legate, however, not Luke's claim that Augustus' registered *pasan tēn oikoumenēn* in a census. Positivistic modern scholars have, on the contrary, made a hardened dogma out of the historical misinformation supposedly expressed in Luke 2:1. "There was no worldwide census under Augustus!" At the end of this study, it appears quite clear that this constantly repeated formulation of the problem with Luke's affirmation, a direct heir to the overly influential manualist judgment of Strauss-Schürer, is itself, in fact, very highly problematic in multiple ways.

The ancient world is transmitted to us in a lamentably fragmentary state, so that extreme caution is always required, particularly in drawing positive conclusions out of negative evidence. The blind privileging of certain types of highly ideological Roman sources (e.g. *Res Gestae*) and the unaccountable neglect of other compelling data points (e.g. Hyginus, the *breuiarium*, etc.), a stiff paradigm insensitive to what has been learned of the provincial census, and, not least, a strikingly stubborn scholarly attachment to the conviction of Luke's formal error, all lead to a lamentable interpretative cul-de-sac. A break with such outdated and unnecessary presuppositions and frank recognition, instead, of the inevitable perspectival distortions allows a sound and relatively simple historical synthesis of the sources as we have them. Indeed, accepting Luke's Gospel as a particular perspective on the policy of the census as it was seen from Roman Syria allows us to coordinate the formulation of Luke 2:1 with the large deposit of papyrological, inscriptional, and historiographical sources and the mosaic picture that there emerges, while taking account as well of official Au-

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<sup>48</sup> Tertullian's ascription of the census to Sentius Saturninus rather than to Quirinus (*Contra Marcionem* 4.19.10) is a tantalizing scrap of evidence that has understandably intrigued scholars and fueled various modern speculations and attempted solutions. Although diverse narratives might be advanced to explain Tertullian's claim – some quite clever and advantageous to Luke's reputation – it is hard not to suspect, particularly in the face of a manuscript tradition unanimously agreed in reading "Quirinius", that the change of names to Saturninus is itself, as A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE argued, already an ancient effort to address and resolve the problem. "If Tertullian is to be taken seriously he must be repeating a version which aimed, already in antiquity, at removing the contradiction posed by Luke", WHITE, *Roman Society*, 169. One might convincingly class this bit of revisionist data within the same basic framework of second- and third-century Christian Gospel scholarship as produced the harmonistic work on the genealogy of Jesus of Tertullian's fellow north-African, Julius Africanus. On this primitive Christian culture of Gospel scholarship in its Lukan connection, see GIAMBRONE, "A New Fragment".

gustan discourse. What emerges is a richer, historically responsible reading of Luke's theological and literary motifs.

If Luke 2:1 classically stands at the head of the historical-critical list of issues complicating the census, it is also a detachable issue. Without prejudging the more tangled chronological questions, then, which already troubled ancient readers, or the mechanics of the census' concrete execution in Judea, a more generous and intelligent perception of Luke's information and contextualized manner of expression, along with a less positivistic set of interpretative presuppositions, can only help ease what has been a long congested New Testament vs. "real history" knot. In this regard, for Lukan scholars who are keeping an eye upon recent work on Egyptian papyri, the advancing edge of scholarship is quite clear. An ongoing stream of newly published and analyzed texts is greatly enhancing our understanding of the Roman provincial census system, against which Luke's report must resolutely be seen. The relevance of the special Egyptian material has, of course, been recognized for generations, but with the considerable accumulation of new data new perspectives are also enabled and encouraged. Reformulations of the questions and problems as traditionally posed, if not yielding prompt answers, at least promise the possibility of some movement in the long stalemate.

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