Quirinius—Luke 2:2

Wilbur N. Pickering, ThM PhD

It has been alleged that Luke's reference to Quirinius in Luke 2:2 is an error. If that were the case, it would be the only error in the dozens of historical references that Luke made. It is clear that Luke interviewed Mary, Jesus' mother, because several times he wrote that she treasured things in her heart. Such an interview would have been an obvious thing for him to do. Mary had been personally inconvenienced, and to a considerable extent, by Caesar's decree, and she would have had a vivid memory of all relevant factors at that time. If she told Luke that Quirinius was officiating, that was the fact, and of course Luke had access to other witnesses and the whole episode was recent history in his day.

Joseph undertook a very inconvenient and expensive journey from Natsareth to Bethlehem. He would only have done so if he considered that he had no viable alternative. It follows that Caesar's decree was a fact, and in force at that time. How could Luke possibly have been mistaken on the subject of Quirinius?

Quirinius, 51 BC – 21 AD, was an able Roman military commander. During his life he was a senator, a consul, a duumvir and a legate. He is famous for his campaign against the Homonadensians, a nomadic people in Cilicia. Cilicia bordered Syria on the north. The campaign occupied roughly 12-2 BC, and Quirinius would have used Syria as his base of operations. He had the confidence of the emperor and may very well have been given a variety of jobs during that decade. In Luke 2:2 Luke did not use the noun 'governor'; he used the verb 'to govern/administer/officiate'. In those days a census took a lot of time, and could be a fussy undertaking. Whom should the emperor choose to run the show in Syria? Of the people available, who was better qualified than Quirinius?

Conclusion: Luke informs us that Quirinius was administering the census in Syria at the time of Jesus' birth. I see no reason to doubt his statement. I see no reason whatsoever for alleging that Luke wrote an historical error.