

LUKE IN CONTEXT: THE WORLD OF JESUS IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Texts: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2.1-2; NRSV).

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (Luke 3.1-2; NRSV).

Luke, more than any other gospel writer, is careful to place the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the ministry of Jesus in proper historical context. This is not surprising, since Luke's narrative about Jesus is the only gospel that highlights the methodology used for the composition of his work (see Luke 1.1-4). Robert Stein reminds us of the *Sitz im Leben*, or “setting in life,” for Luke's story of the good news about Jesus.¹ First, there were the events themselves that took place or “were fulfilled among us.” Second, there were those “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” who orally passed along to others what they had seen. And third, by the time of Luke's writing in the late 50s or early 60s, some already had “undertaken to set down an orderly account” of these events, and Luke carefully investigated all of this to write his “orderly account” for the most excellent Theophilus.² So to tell this fascinating story about the salvation of the world, Luke puts the good news of Jesus in its appropriate global context.

¹See Robert H. Stein, “Luke 1.1-4 and *Traditionsgeschichte*,” *JETS* 26/4 (December 1983): 421-430.

²In his introduction, Luke uses two different Greek words that are translated “orderly account” by NRSV: *diegesis*, a noun, meaning “record, of a literary account” (only Luke 1.1 in NT), and *kathexes*, an adverb, meaning “in sequence, narrative sequence” (cf. Luke 8.1; Acts 3.24; 11.4; 18.23). Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago, 2009), 96, 182.

Luke had the option of selecting from a wide array of contemporaneous occurrences for the birth and the work of Jesus, but he chose to emphasize the Roman emperor, or the world's ruler, at each point in time. For the birth of Jesus (ca. 4 BC), Luke tells us that it occurred after the Emperor Augustus, who ruled from 27 BC to AD 14, issued his decree for the regular enrollment of the people under Roman rule in the various provinces.³ And for the beginning of the ministry of Jesus (ca. AD 27), Luke indicates that this took place in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, who was the adopted stepson of Augustus and ruled from AD 14 to 37.⁴ It is of interest that the names of Roman emperors appear only in Luke's writings in the New Testament. In addition to these references to Augustus and Tiberius in Luke 2.1 and 3.1, he refers to Claudius by name in Acts 11.28 and 18.2.⁵ Luke evidently does not want to be misunderstood by his benefactor, Theophilus, to whom he writes. Perhaps this is because of the out of the ordinary episodes from the ministry of Jesus that Luke plans to narrate. These are not Greek or Roman myths that he is talking about. These are real events that happened in real places in real time.

Luke is quite precise with his contextual information. Joseph and the pregnant Mary went from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of the census, or registration, ordered by Augustus

³See George B. Caird, "Chronology of the NT," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 1 (Abingdon, 1962), 600-601.

⁴Tiberius held some imperial power as co-princeps with Augustus from AD 12 until the death of Augustus in AD 14.

⁵Several writers as well as Luke use the title "Caesar" (*Kaisar*, translated "emperor" by NRSV) without the name (see Matthew 2.17, 21; Mark 12.14, 16, 17; Luke 20.22, 24, 25; 23.2; John 19.12, 15; Acts 17.7; 25.8, 10, 11, 12, 21; 26.32; 27.24; 28.19; Philippians 4.22).

that was carried out by Quirinius who was governor of Syria, which at that time included Judea.⁶

And the rustic John appeared in the Judean wilderness as the predecessor to Jesus and his ministry during “the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias.”⁷ According to Luke, this occurred when “Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene.”

Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea AD 26 to 36. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, ruled as tetrarch over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. Philip, son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, ruled from 4 BC to AD 34 as tetrarch over Ituraea and Trachonitis. And Lysanias, possibly a descendant of an earlier king named Lysanias, governed the territory around the town of Abila that was northeast of Mount Hermon and west of Damascus, or Abilene, as tetrarch.⁸

Luke also adds that the appearance of John and the beginning of the ministry of Jesus coincided with “the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.” Annas ben Seth served as high priest in Jerusalem beginning in AD 6 but was deposed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus in AD 15. Joseph Caiaphas, a son-in-law of Annas, was high priest from AD 18 to 36, but Annas “continued to wield great power as the dominant member of the hierarchy, using members of his

⁶On the problems associated with Luke’s mention of the census under Quirinius and what Josephus says, see F. F. Bruce, “Quirinius,” *The New Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans, 1962), 1069; cf. Wayne Brindle, “The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2.2,” *JETS* 27/1 (March 1984): 43-52; and John H. Rhoads, “Josephus Misdated the Census of Quirinius,” *JETS* 54/1 (March 2011): 65-87.

⁷See “What Was the Fifteenth Year of Tiberius?” The Daniel 9.24-27 Project: The Framework for Messianic Chronology (Akron, PA: Associates for Biblical Research), online at: <www.biblearchaeology.org/research/the-daniel-9-24-27-project/4363-what-was-the-fifteenth-year-of-tiberius>.

⁸See Samuel Sandmel, “Lysanias,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 3 (Abingdon, 1962), 193; Kenneth W. Clark, “Abilene,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 1 (Abingdon, 1962), 9.

family as his willing instruments.”⁹ This is why Luke uses an uncommon expression, *epi archiereos ‘Anna kai Kaiapha* (“at the time of the high priest Annas and Caiaphas”), singular not plural, that indicates the true state of affairs with Caiaphas as the official high priest and Annas still exercising considerable influence.¹⁰ With such exactness, Luke begins his “orderly account” by connecting the time of the ruling authorities to the time of the birth and the work of Jesus. This is perfectly understandable. Craig Keener notes, “It was customary to begin historical narratives by dating them according to the years of rulers and officials, when possible, both in Greco-Roman and Old Testament historiography.”¹¹ Of course, critical scholars have challenged the accuracy of some of Luke’s statements, but reasonable explanations for the veracity of Luke’s details have been offered. The point to be made, however, is that Luke takes great care to relate the events he narrates to the Roman emperors and the region’s governing authorities who were appointed by Rome.

Why does Luke so situate his good news about Jesus? In his gospel, Luke portrays Jesus as redeemer of both Jews and Gentiles. Luke’s outlook is universal or worldwide. According to Lewis Foster, by using the names of the emperors, “Luke lifted the narrative out of the provincial scene in Judea to the universal significance that he wanted. The gospel is not for the Jews alone, but the whole world is its field of concern.”¹² This global perspective is noticed in Luke’s choice

⁹David Miall Edwards, “Annas,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition, Volume One (Eerdmans, 1979), 128.

¹⁰See Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1951), 135.

¹¹Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (IVP Academic, 2014), 187.

¹²Lewis Foster, *Luke*, Standard Bible Studies (Standard Publishing, 1986), 41-42.

of Old Testament passages that speak of God’s salvation for “all flesh” and “all peoples,” for Gentiles as well as for Israel (see 2.14, 29-32; 3.4-6). And it is seen in Luke’s reports about the Samaritans whom Jesus views in a more favorable light than do others (see 9.51-56; 10.25-37; 17.11-19). Luke certainly emphasizes the role of Jerusalem and Judea in his narrative,¹³ but in his gospel he lays the groundwork for his story in Acts where the Lord’s witnesses will spread the good news “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8).

Another reason Luke spotlights the Roman context for the life of Jesus is the apologetic purpose for his narrative. He stresses that the Roman authorities, primarily Pilate, believed Jesus to be innocent of any political wrongdoing (23.4, 14, 20, 22; cf. 23.47), but the Jewish leaders appear as those who approve of insurrection and seek unjustly to accuse Jesus of being a political agitator (20.20, 26; 23.2, 5, 18f., 23, 25). This apologetic concern—the defense of the innocence of Jesus—will be continued by Luke in the book of Acts where he defends the innocence of the apostle Paul in his preaching of the good news about Jesus. Perhaps, though, the chief reason why Luke refers to Augustus and Tiberius is, as stated before, that Luke presents his narrative as real history. His account was not an invented myth. The birth and the compassionate deeds of Jesus happened in Judea and Galilee and were seen by eyewitnesses who told others what had happened. As Luke summarizes, “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10.38).

Luke’s gospel vividly captures the compassion of Jesus and his feelings of sympathy for others. We see the Lord’s compassion when, during his arrest, he heals the severed ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest (22.51), and when, during his trial, he turns to look at

¹³Luke refers to Jerusalem 32 times in his gospel and 62 times in Acts, which is roughly two-thirds of all uses of Jerusalem in the New Testament.

Peter (i.e., to acknowledge him) after Peter had denied him three times (22.61). We also see, but we do not fully comprehend, the Lord's compassion beyond measure when, on his way to Golgotha and stumbling under the weight of the crossbeam, he encounters those, including the women, who "were beating their breasts and wailing for him." But Jesus tells them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when . . . they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us'" (23.26-31). And we see the Lord's greatest compassion of all when, after the soldiers had nailed him to the cross, he prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23.32-34).

This perspective by Luke that underscores the inexhaustible compassion of Jesus follows his theme of God's love and concern, as expressed through Jesus, for the downtrodden, the forgotten, and the outcasts of society—the sinners and the Samaritans, women and children, and for many individuals. We see the special help of the Lord for Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary (chapter 1). We see sympathetic encounters of Jesus with the centurion, the widow of Nain, and the sinful woman (chapter 7). We see Jesus helping Legion and Jairus (chapter 8) and healing a boy with a demon, a crippled woman, and the man with dropsy (chapter 14). We see the Lord visiting the home of Zacchaeus, the tax collector (chapter 19), comforting the penitent criminal on the cross (chapter 23), and patiently encouraging the forlorn Cleopas and his companion (chapter 24). This is good news in action in the real world—the world of Jesus, the world of his earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, and the world of his early followers. Luke portrays his story about Jesus as a remarkable history that takes place in a particular place at a particular time.

But, more than that, this story by Luke about the salvation of the world contains a greater message that transcends time and history. This is a message that only God, the Creator of all

things, can bring about. It is to a world controlled and ruled by the uncaring and often ruthless Caesars and Herods that God sends his Savior, his humble King, to the city of David to be born among the animals in a stable. And it is to a world where the princes of discord (i.e., the princes of Judea, Galilee, Iturea and Trachonitis, and Abilene) maneuver for power that God sends his Prince of Peace, presented first to shepherds, revealed as a compassionate healer and teacher, and then displayed as a spectacle on a cross but afterward raised from the dead. It is to their world, but it is also to our world that this Savior has come. Listen to the word of God from the angel Gabriel to Mary: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1.31-33). By putting his story about Jesus in the context of the world’s rulers, Luke draws us in to a powerful contrast. The reign of the rulers of this world will come to an end. But God’s King will reign forever, and his kingdom will never end! As David Tiede says, “Luke’s view of truth and history are thoroughly theological.” It is “not literary fiction.” It is “about a historical person.” And because “Luke’s story of Jesus emphasizes the fulfillment of the [Old Testament] scriptures, it is not surprising to find the narrative full of scriptural allusions . . . that advance Luke’s claim that Israel’s heritage legitimates Jesus as the Messiah and Savior promised by God.”¹⁴ According to the context set by Luke, God brought this about for all time during the time of Augustus and Tiberius (cf. Galatians 4.4).

¹⁴David L. Tiede, “Luke: Introduction,” *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 1954.

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