

Text: Lk 2.1-4, Mt 2.22-23, Mt 2.12-18

Proposition: The challenges to the Christmas story cannot overthrow the truth of its message.

Last week we started our Christmas series, *The Defense of Christmas*.

Our objective is *apologetic*, that is, to offer a defense for the Christmas record.

Our first message offered some defense of the Gospel writers. Their names are not part of the actual text of the Gospels in the Bible, but strong historical tradition tells us who these writers were.

The particular point we defended last time was the independence of their writing, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which gave us four unique accounts that bolster one another as we compare and contrast their message. (Our message only dealt with a small amount of what we could say in defense of the authors.)

Today I want to turn our attention elsewhere. Another aspect of the Bible that unbelievers attack is its historical record. In the last two hundred years, we hear criticisms of the Biblical record which imply the authors were ignorant, enthusiastic, or embellishing their accounts with incorrect historical data.

- If they were ignorant, they didn't know what they were talking about.
- If they were enthusiastic, they let their enthusiasm carry them away to make up history on the fly.
- If they were embellishing (a polite word for lying), they deliberately distorted the story to make their points.

In each case, the reader would have reason to mistrust the accuracy of the Bible. Some have no problem with this, they say the Bible is "spiritually true" it doesn't have to be *actually* true. What do you think of that?

The fact is, if the Bible has errors in minor matters of fact, one has to wonder if it also has errors in major matters of doctrine. So the accuracy of the record is very important.

Today, we are going to take a look at a few parts of the Christmas story that show just how accurate Matthew and Luke were. The passages we look at will encourage our faith in the Christmas story, and indeed, in the whole New Testament.

A caution:

- Accuracy on a few points of historical detail cannot *prove* the accuracy of the whole.
- However, when we can confirm the accuracy of a few points, we enhance the credibility of the whole.

We will look at three separate details in the Christmas record, so I will read various texts individually. Let's start with this proposition:

Proposition: The challenges to the Christmas story cannot overthrow the truth of its message.

I. The Census (Lk 2.1-4)

A. The issue of concern involves the date of our Lord's birth

1. The actual date is not that important in itself
2. The actual birth is the important thing
3. However, Luke gives specific details that define the date of birth quite precisely
 - a. Before the death of Herod
 - b. After the census of Quirinius

B. The problem: Quirinius was governor of Syria about ten years after the death of Herod

One unbelieving scholar discredits Luke's gospel over these details:

1. "Nothing is known in history of a general census in the time of Augustus;
2. "In a Roman census Joseph would not have had to travel to Bethlehem, but would have registered in the principal town of his residence, and Mary would not have had to register at all;
3. "No Roman census would have been made in Palestine during Herod's reign;
4. "Josephus records nothing of a Roman census in Palestine in the time of Herod, rather the census of A.D. 6-7 was something new among the Jews;

5. "A census held under Quirinius could not have occurred during Herod's reign for Quirinius was not governor until after Herod's death."¹

C. The answers

1. Augustus, census, and taxation

- a. Augustus regularly ordered censuses
- b. Augustus was the first to order a tax assessment of the entire empire
- c. Compliance varied according to various factors (local custom, change of administrations, etc.)

2. Travel for census taking

- a. Jewish property laws attached people to property within tribal allotments
- b. Joseph, a descendant of David, would be connected with property in Bethlehem
- c. Mary may also have been connected to property, nevertheless, given her condition, he would not wish to leave her behind

3. Taxation of territory under Herod

- a. First, though Herod had some autonomy, there is precedent in other similar domains for Roman taxation of vassal kingdoms
- b. Second, around 8/7 BC, "Herod came into disfavor with Augustus and was treated as a subject rather than a friend"²
- c. As Herod aged and his sons jockeyed for power, it would be prudent for Augustus to assess the kingdom in preparation for division among the sons

- 1) Herod changed his will three times before his death

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, "Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ: Part 1: The Date of Christ's Birth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130, no. 520 (1973): 340–41.

² Hoehner, 343.

2) "It must also be noted that Augustus was well aware of the situation in Palestine because each time Herod changed his will and each time he wanted to get rid of one of his sons, he had to ask the emperor's permission. Therefore, a census within the last year or two of Herod's reign would have been reasonable, and in fact, most probable."³

4. Josephus and records of a census

- a. First, this is an argument from silence – the census may have been rather uneventful, thus not deemed worthy of comment by Josephus
- b. The later census in AD 6/7 was controversial – some rebelled, which prompted more official attention

5. Quirinius and the governorship

- a. Luke is aware of historical details – he mentions the census of AD 6/7 in Acts 5.37
- b. Luke clearly states (with Matthew) that the births of John the Baptist (Lk 1.5) took place in the days of Herod
- c. Possible solutions
 - 1) William Ramsay thinks that Quirinius was governor twice
 - 2) A remote possibility: there was more than one Quirinius⁴
 - 3) It is possible to translate our verse, "This census was before that [census] when Quirinius was governor of Syria"

There are many interesting details left out in this discussion, and there are some facts that remain unknown, but it is quite clear that Luke is well aware of the historical situation. His description stands the tests of sceptics.

³ Hoehner, 348.

⁴ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christmas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 50.

II. Nazareth (Lk 2.1-4; cf. Mt 2.22-23)

A. Did Nazareth actually exist in the 1st century?

At first glance, this may seem like a strange claim. But some make a vehement argument that Nazareth didn't exist during the first century.

1. The logic of the claim: If Christians made up Nazareth, they also likely made up Jesus
2. The main basis of the claim: primarily an argument from silence
 - a. "Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the writings of Josephus, or in the Talmud. It first shows up in the Gospels."⁵ (Ehrman argues for Nazareth, but says, ultimately, it doesn't matter.)
 - b. Others have made the same claim, but even the rationalist wiki says it is a false argument

B. Briefly, evidence for the existence of Nazareth in the 1st century

1. James Strange of the University of Florida found a list of priests who were relocated after the destruction of the temple (AD 70) – one of the priests moved to Nazareth
2. Archaeologists found 1st century tombs near Nazareth (Jewish law required cemeteries to be outside city limits)
3. Remains of a 1st century house discovered at Nazareth – of course the speculation is, "was this the house of Jesus?"⁶
4. The evidence of archaeology points to a small town, maybe 400 or so people, during the 1st century – it wasn't a much noticed place

John 1.46 Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

⁵ Bart Ehrman, "Did Nazareth Exist?," The Bart Ehrman Blog, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://ehrmanblog.org/did-nazareth-exist/>.

⁶ Owen Jarus, Live Science Contributor | March 1, and 2015 10:35am ET, "Jesus' House? 1st-Century Structure May Be Where He Grew Up," Live Science, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.livescience.com/49997-jesus-house-possibly-found-nazareth.html>.

III. Slaughter at Bethlehem (Mt 2.12-18)

A. The slaughter of the innocents is one of the most moving parts of the Christmas story

1. The wise men depart without telling Herod, enraging him
2. The angel warns Joseph to flee, he goes to Egypt
3. Herod orders the execution of every male baby in Bethlehem, two years old and under
4. Only after Herod dies do Joseph, Mary, and Jesus return, moving to Nazareth to live in an obscure place
5. These movements fulfilled three specific prophecies, as Matthew notes

B. The problem: no record of Herod giving such an order

National Geographic, Dec 2008, p. 42: "Herod is best known for slaughtering every male infant in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. He is almost certainly innocent of this crime."⁷

- Well, was he or wasn't he?

C. The problem answered

1. The action is consistent with what we know about Herod
 - a. Herod's paranoia
 - 1) Herod had ten wives and many sons, all vying for the throne
 - 2) Among the sons, there were plots, poisonings, etc.
 - 3) Herod himself put to death three of his sons and his favorite wife because of his suspicions
 - 4) He drowned his brother-in-law, one of the priests

⁷ cited in Gordon Franz, "The Slaughter of the Innocents: Historical Fact or Legendary Fiction?," Associates for Biblical Research, December 8, 2009, <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/12/08/The-Slaughter-of-the-Innocents-Historical-Fact-or-Legendary-Fiction.aspx>.

- 5) He killed several uncles and cousins as well⁸
- 6) Several modern psychologists diagnosed Herod as either a paranoid schizophrenic or Paranoid Personality Disorder⁹

A Christian psychologist, Bruce Narramore was asked his opinion: "Well, do you think he was a paranoid schizophrenic?" Bruce laughed and said, "No, he was a jerk!"¹⁰

b. Plausibility of Herod's action

- 1) In 7 BC, he executed 300 military leaders he suspected
- 2) The same year he executed a group of Pharisees who predicted to the wife of his younger brother that the authority would transfer to her husband rather than Herod's sons
- 3) Killed one of his sons, Antipater, just five days before Herod's own death
 - a) Prompted Augustus to remark, "It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."
 - b) One later historian of antiquity thought this death was the same time as the slaughter of the innocents¹¹

2. In our day such an event would be horrifying, the "news of the day" on CNN, but in the first century, why does Josephus, historian of the Jews, not mention it

- a. He may have heard about it, but the numbers probably were not significant: Bethlehem small, how many babies are we talking about? Out of 1500 people, perhaps only a dozen or so¹²

⁸ Paul Maier, "Truth or Fiction: Did Herod Really Slaughter Baby Boys in Bethlehem?," Desiring God, December 22, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/truth-or-fiction-did-herod-really-slaughter-baby-boys-in-bethlehem>.

⁹ Franz, "The Slaughter of the Innocents: Historical Fact or Legendary Fiction?"

¹⁰ Franz.

¹¹ Franz.

¹² Maier, "Truth or Fiction."

- b. He may not have known about it – there are other significant events Josephus didn't record, and his information on Herod appears to be from a friend of Herod¹³

"I see not one iota of evidence here it could not have happened. And therefore, again, there is no reason to doubt the account as far as I am concerned. To be sure, Luke hasn't heard about it. Remember, Matthew and Luke don't copy from one another when it comes to the Nativity. And that is good, because this way they can hit it from different angles. I think it really happened."¹⁴

Conclusion:

Why take the time to talk about details like this?

1. Unbelievers read books that have information like this. (Even outdated books!) They seize on these points to discredit the whole, no matter how illogical their argument is.
2. Christians worry when they hear the challenges of unbelievers... "How can I answer them, I know the Bible is true?"

We need to remember that we don't have to prove every detail of archaeology – in time, archaeology may find facts that vindicate the biblical record.

But even if not... We need to be able to show that the Bible is consistent with what we do know about history. That means unbelievers cannot overthrow the Bible with attacks such as these.

The meaning of Christmas is the foundation of the faith. But challenges to the Christmas story don't overthrow its message.

¹³ Franz, "The Slaughter of the Innocents: Historical Fact or Legendary Fiction?"

¹⁴ Maier, "Truth or Fiction."